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FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

HISPANIC/LATINO ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

LGBTQ PHILOSOPHY

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This issue on “Identity and Solidarity” has two parts. The first part comprises a set of five papers on that theme. Three of the papers are drawn from a session titled “Black and Asian Solidarities” organized by Audrey Yap and held at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Central Division. The remaining two are drawn from a session titled “Asian American Identity: A Focus on the Immigrant Experience” organized and chaired by Dien Ho and held at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division. Both sessions were arranged under the auspices of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies in the wake of the recent wave of anti-Black and anti-Asian violence in 2020. This issue thus reflects that recent history and its contents seek to situate those events in a larger social and historical context, namely, that of US-led global white supremacy.

The second part of the issue is a deep and wide-ranging conversation between the editors, A. Minh Nguyen and Yarran Hominh, along with Arnab Dutta Roy, a scholar of modern world literature and postcolonial and decolonial studies, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnamese American author and academic Viet Thanh Nguyen. This ninety-minute conversation took place via Zoom on March 14, 2023, and was transcribed by Vivian Nguyen and Brent Robbins. It touches not only on themes central to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s writings but also on a variety of other issues: the value of philosophy and Nguyen’s philosophical influences; Asian American culture, identity, and politics; whiteness, racial capitalism, and the politics of respectability; the challenges and possibilities of the academy; the inherent multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity of the critical studies of race and ethnicity; three waves of Asian American Studies; Edward W. Said and Orientalism; Ocean Vuong and On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous; Maxine Hong Kingston and the complexities of coming to terms with one’s identity and culture; Milan Kundera, so-called minority writers, and the novel of ideas; growing up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and San Jose, California, and how Nguyen’s upbringing and early life affect the kinds of writing that he engages in; his refugee experience and new memoir A Man of Two Faces and the dominant narrative of the grateful refugee in resettlement; the importance of narrative for shaping the ways in which people see the world and engage with the world, history, misrepresentations and omissions, corrective representations, and the functions of art; the use of humor in working through trauma; the pain of writing and the process of writing; the relationship between Nguyen’s academic work and creative work; cancel culture and its discontents; Everything Everywhere All at Once; Ke Huy Quan and the Academy Awards; the HBO adaptation of Nguyen’s The Sympathizer; and what it was like for students in Southwest Florida to read this 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel around the time Hurricane Ian hit them. Central to that conversation was thus that larger context of global white supremacy in which the aforementioned set of papers situates our recent history. And it is of course that larger context that raises the difficult questions of identity and solidarity with which this issue deals.

A key part of that context, as the papers in this issue identify, is the way in which white supremacy mobilizes intra-minority racial conflict for its own purposes. Whiteness protects itself through a divide-and-conquer strategy. It creates and emphasizes differences between racialized minority groups in order to set them against each other. On the differences, for example, as Claire Jean Kim and many of the papers in this issue note, a dominant form of Asian American minoritization functions along a dimension of foreignness, whereas a similarly dominant form of African American minoritization functions along a dimension of inferiority. Thus anti-Asian oppression historically takes the form of exclusion justified by fear of and grudging respect for “the model minority,” whereas anti-Black oppression takes the form of state-sanctioned violence. (Of course, these are generalizations that also draw on white supremacist stereotypes even as they are real differences between the groups.) A central part of the assimilationist drive behind the model minority myth involves taking one’s place in the American racial order. And that requires participation in anti-Black violence. Attempts to foster solidarity (and ways of conceptualizing solidarity) among racially minoritized groups should therefore take this conflict into account.

The accounts of interracial solidarity offered in this issue reflect this conflict in at least two related ways. The first is practical and political. Solidarity is not just an attitude or simply a state of affairs. It is a practice and a process, something that must be built and continually maintained...
through collective action. That practice requires certain virtues, both epistemic and ethical/political. One that many of the contributors to this issue emphasize is attention. Céline Leboeuf argues that part of the way white supremacy functions to set racialized minority groups against each other is that proposed solutions to the problems that one group faces often exacerbate problems that another group faces. For example, one “solution” proposed to address an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes is increased and intensified policing. Yet increased and intensified policing—even if it were to help reduce anti-Asian hate crimes—would support and further entrench the essentially anti-Black institution of the police. A kind of intersectionally informed attention to how racist social structures set up and reinforce these conflicts is necessary for coming up with solidaristic practices and policies (for example, Leboeuf writes, addressing homelessness and mental health) that could properly address the problems that people suffer under white supremacy.

Another form that this attention might take is attention to forms of internal heterogeneity within racialized groups. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’s notion of “heterogenous commonality,” Emily S. Lee argues that paying that kind of attention (e.g., to the internal heterogeneity of the group “Asian American women”) may help us think of interracial solidarity in different ways. For if racialized groups are internally heterogenous, as intersectionality theorists argue, solidarity across racial divides becomes much more similar to building solidarity and community within a racialized group. There is no general problem of interracial solidarity, though of course there may be particular contextual and historical difficulties in building solidarities between particular racialized communities. Solidarity across as well as within groups becomes a matter of finding and building “heterogenous commonalities.” One way that such work occurs, Lee reminds us, is by refusing to equate certain races with certain classes (as does the model minority myth, for instance, in figuring Asian Americans as upwardly mobile) and paying attention to the different class identities within racial categories: the intersections between race and class.

We should keep in mind, however, as Tracy Llanera reminds us, that what are often taken to be virtues may be politically or morally ambiguous and our relationship to them may be ambivalent or conflicted. Llanera argues in her paper that resilience should be understood in that way. Resilience is often taken solely as a virtue, as an admirable human quality or a positive feature of human agency that different forms of oppression build in the oppressed. Resilience enables people to continue on and survive in the face of their challenges and sufferings. While Llanera doesn’t want to deny that resilience is in this way a good thing for an individual or a group to possess, something to be honored and valued, that it is necessary to survive the depredations of racialized capitalism reveals its dark side. Resilience is only necessary under conditions of injustice, as Llanera so well describes, drawing on her own experience as a Filipina philosopher both in the Philippines and in the Global North. Llanera argues further that focusing on resilience’s positive side can obscure how it can be weaponized. Applauding resilience may function to obscure the need for structural change. It can be—and often is—taken as an individual solution to structural problems. This ambivalence is very well captured in the Tagalog folk wisdom that Llanera cites:

Ang tao ay kawayan ang kahambing
Sumusuko’t umaayon sa hangin ng hangin
Hindi sumasalungat kundi nagpupupay
Upang hindi mabakli ang sariling tangkay

To a bamboo, a man can be compared—
If it surrenders its will to the whipping wind
It does not oppose it, but in obedience it gives praise
That it may preserve its bough from a shattering fate.

The second aspect of the accounts of solidarity that responds to intra-minority racial conflict is metaphysical: the question of identity. Tina Rulli, responding to a recent shift in discourse from POC (“People of Color”) to BIPOC (“Black, Indigenous, and People of Color”), argues that the identity category “Asian American” is a model for thinking about identity in a more general sense, insofar as it does not pick out pre-existing and fixed cultural or racial commonalities, but seeks to build political power through creating an identity category that enables certain kinds of political action. Identity categories serve political purposes, for Rulli. In that way, like other political phenomena, they are subject to change. What they do is provide a central organizing term that allows for Collins’s “heterogenous commonality”—a way of recognizing similarities and differences jointly. Rulli turns this “political, not metaphorical” point into a call for solidarity on the basis of POC as a whole. One recognizes, in political psychologist Efrén Pérez’s words, that “one’s unique identity as Black, Asian or Latino is nested under a broader POC category.” What people of color have in common, for Rulli, is that they are subject to white supremacy. And so, for Rulli, the term “POC” better expresses that basis for solidarity and resistance than the term “BIPOC.” Indeed, Rulli argues, the use of “BIPOC” is liable to erode solidarity. It is worth emphasizing that this point of Rulli’s can hold true in general even if one thinks that in many contexts it may be important to center the particular and particularly violent forms of oppression and domination that Black and Indigenous people face in the contemporary United States.

Youjin Kong defends intersectionality against recent criticisms leveled at it: that intersectionality fragments and divides instead of building full-throated unity and commonality in the way that some critics think essential to a left politics. Kong argues that such criticisms rely on what she, following Elizabeth Spelman, calls a “pop-bead” metaphysics of identity. On that metaphysics, each identity category is an additional “bead” that is “popped” onto a necklace that is the sum of those identities. Kong claims that to operate according to this metaphysics is to conceive of identity in a fixed and static way. This is contrary to the conception of identity that best underlies intersectionality analysis, on which identity is not fixed but fluid. Identity is fluid precisely because it is not just something that one has but also something that one does. Identity is a starting point for praxis. It is not best conceived as a limitation on how one sees the world and what one does. That is, Kong argues, identity shifts according to how one is situated in...
relations of power and how one acts on the basis of those relations and to change those relations.

To illustrate this conceptual point, Kong draws on the example of the Black and Asian Feminist Solidarities group, a collaboration between Black Women Radicals (BWR) and the Asian American Feminist Collective (AAFC). That collaboration foregrounds both the intra-minority conflicts between Black and Asian American communities and the histories of solidarity and community building that have accompanied those conflicts. AAFC, Kong notes, drew on those histories in order to define a way of being Asian American that is centered on resistance to oppression and solidaristic identification while recognizing and rejecting the insular and white-serving forms of Asian American identity captured in the concept of “the model minority.”

The papers and conversation in this issue exemplify a broad conception of philosophy as universal while arising from and speaking to situated problems and issues. Philosophy practiced in this way partakes in the challenges and the possibilities raised by the theme of “Identity and Solidarity.” It takes identity as a starting point without being limited by it, and seeks universality through something akin to solidarity, through speaking to and across differences to find and to build “heterogenous commonalities.” In that way, the theme of “Identity and Solidarity” not only comprises a particularly important pair of political concepts to be theorized for us today in light of the particular social and political challenges we face. But it also defines a larger methodological problematic for philosophical inquiry engaged with the world and its problems.

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NOTES


ARTICLES

The Future of Black and Asian Solidarities

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in harassment and violence against Asian Americans, and with it, a powerful protest movement. At the same time, millions of Americans took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Both responses belie the power of racialized hatred in the United States. Yet, if we look at the forms of oppression that Black Americans and Asian Americans experience, one notices striking differences. Police brutality, for instance, affects more Black Americans than Asian Americans. Similarly, harmful tropes about Blacks and Asian Americans differ: Black Americans are negatively portrayed as lazy or violent while Asian Americans, though touted as “model minorities,” remain caricatured in TV and film and experience the psychological downstream effects of their status as “model minorities.” These differences between the Black and Asian oppressions raise pressing questions: Should we combat these oppressions separately? Or can we form solidarity across these groups? What would be the basis for such solidarity? To shed light on the future of Black and Asian solidarities in the United States, I want to bring to the table three thinkers: Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and Diane Fujino. Young helps bring out the differences between the forms of oppression Asian Americans and African Americans face. Lorde teaches us the importance of coalition-building. And Fujino’s work highlights the particularities of Black and Asian solidarities.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in harassment and violence against Asian Americans, and with it, a powerful protest movement. At the same time, millions of Americans took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Both responses belie the power of racialized hatred in the United States. Yet, if we look at the forms of oppression that Black Americans and Asian Americans experience, one notices striking differences. Police brutality, for instance, affects more African Americans than Asian Americans. Similarly, harmful tropes about Blacks and Asian Americans differ: Black Americans are negatively portrayed as lazy or violent while Asian Americans, though touted as “model minorities,” remain caricatured in TV and film and experience the psychological downstream effects of their status as “model minorities.” These differences between Black and Asian oppressions raise pressing questions: How do we combat them? Separately? Or can we form solidarity across these groups? What would be the basis for such solidarity? To shed light on the future of Black and Asian solidarities in the United States, I want to bring to the table three thinkers: Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and Diane Fujino. First, Young helps bring out the differences between the forms of oppression Asian Americans and African Americans.
Americans face. Second, Lorde teaches us the importance of coalition-building. Third, Fujino’s work highlights the challenges in forging Black and Asian solidarities.

PRESENT: RACIALIZED OPPRESSION IN ITS MANY FORMS

To elaborate on the differences between Asian American and African American experiences, I here appeal to Iris Marion Young’s classic essay “Five Faces of Oppression.” According to her, oppression is a structural phenomenon. This implies that power is not necessarily concentrated in the hands of one individual or group of oppressors. Rather, our institutions and everyday relations serve to oppress different social groups. According to her, oppression can consist of violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. For Young, whenever a social group experiences any one of these facets, that group is oppressed. Thus, social group X may be subject to violence while social group Y may encounter cultural imperialism. Still, both groups would count as oppressed. While she leaves open the possibility that hers is not an exhaustive list, it offers a fruitful starting point to examine the similarities and differences between the oppression of Asian Americans and African Americans.

Let me begin with violence since this facet of oppression has come to the forefront in recent discussions of African American and Asian American experiences. In particular, I would like to focus on two types of violence: the use of excessive and sometimes fatal force by police officers and hate crimes. As I noted above, African Americans face greater violence at the hands of African American police officers than Asian Americans do. According to one source, “the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans was much higher than that for any other ethnicity, standing at 38 fatal shootings per million of the population as of March 2022.”

Of course, this data does not imply that Asian Americans live free of violence. One form of anti-Asian American violence that has garnered increased attention is hate crimes. By this term, I mean crimes that originate in a bias due to discrimination against an individual based on their perceived belonging to an oppressed social group. As the federal government defines it, “hate crime laws include crimes committed on the basis of the victim’s perceived identity or disability.” Although on average the incidence of hate crimes against African Americans is higher than that against Asian Americans, the reported number of hate crimes against Asian Americans rose by 7 percent from 2019 to 2020, with 116 reported simple assaults and 47 reported aggravated assaults. During the same period, the rate of hate crimes against African Americans rose by 40 percent. The uptick in hate crimes against Asian Americans at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the biased and hateful associations made between the illness and Asian descent.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present more detailed statistics, the above-mentioned numbers already indicate that the patterns of violence against African Americans and Asian Americans vary in kind and have evolved differently over time.

Let me now turn to another face of oppression discussed by Young: cultural imperialism. Young writes:

“To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm.”

For example, heteronormativity upholds that only heterosexuality is normal and casts other forms of sexuality as deviant. First, heteronormativity erases the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals, and then it condemns their sexual and/or romantic lives as abnormal.

African Americans and Asian Americans both face cultural imperialism in the United States today. Yet, the shape that this aspect of oppression takes is different. Consider stereotypes of both races. Stereotyping is a useful entry point as it is a significant manifestation of cultural imperialism. When a dominant social group imposes its cultural values, it marks other social groups as deviant and reduces individuals to tropes. More specifically, let us zero in on stereotypes about Black and Asian masculinity. As many Black thinkers, ranging from Frantz Fanon to George Yancy, have said, Black men are stereotyped as hypersexual and primitive. Susan Bordo, in her work on masculinity, emphasizes that with this stereotype comes the association between Black masculinity, sexual excess, and large genitals: “White Europeans have performed the same projection onto racist stereotypes of the overendowed black superstud.” By contrast, Asian male bodies are stereotyped as feminine. Indeed, in “From ‘Little Brown Brothers’ to ‘Queer Asian Wives,’” C. Winter Han observes, “[e]arly European writings about the ‘Orient’ were filled with the sexual politics of colonization that marked ‘Oriental’ men as feminine while at the same time constructing European men as masculine.” He adds that “[c]ontemporary media products also achieve the feminization of Asian male bodies by often juxtaposing a large white male body with a small Asian male body, thus using the smaller Asian man to highlight the masculinity of white men.” The framing of white masculinity as normative casts both Black and Asian masculinity as deviant: “While on the surface, the way that black male bodies and Asian male bodies are portrayed in popular media may represent polar opposites, they both help to mark white male bodies as the ‘norm’ by which others are compared.” Thus, we see that stereotypes about Black and Asian masculinities originate in white cultural imperialism.

While I cannot examine each face of oppression within the space of this paper, one point emerges from this discussion: there is overlap between the faces of oppression that African Americans and Asian Americans are subject to. Nonetheless, my analysis has also revealed that within each category, the experiences of these races diverge. What unites the Asian American and African American studies is an emphasis on the intersectionality of their experiences and the need for solidarity and coalitions.
American experiences is the positioning of whiteness as dominant. Both Blacks and Asian Americans are cast as Others and are vulnerable to violence, cultural imperialism, and other types of oppression. Even seemingly “positive” stereotypes—think of the trope of Asian Americans as “model minorities”—originate in white domination and are harmful. Not only do experiences of oppression differ, but the called-for responses to these different experiences may also lie in tension with one another. As I shall soon explore through Diane Fujino’s research, the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans has fueled a call for greater policing. At the same time, Fujino argues that an increased police presence can harm Blacks because they already face disproportionate police violence. How, then, can we build solidarity across oppressed social groups that face different forms of oppression? Should each social group only fight for its own freedom?

**FUTURE: FREEDOM, SOLIDARITY, AND NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES**

To respond to these questions, we need to take the argument a step further and study a second feminist theorist: Audre Lorde. In her 1981 address “The Uses of Anger,” Lorde contends, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” Lorde’s point is this: enjoying freedom, in a true or authentic sense, depends on others’ having freedom too. In her talk, directed at a feminist audience, she claims that when feminists sow divisions between themselves—for example, when white feminists only attend to issues relevant to them—they fail to recognize aspects of their own lives that others embody. Specifically, Lorde says that when we fail to recognize others, when we silence their concerns, we both contribute to their oppression and risk furthering our own oppression. For instance, Lorde explains that if she were to dismiss Black lesbians who, unlike her, choose not to become mothers, she would be dismissing a part of herself: “if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own.” Lorde concludes that we need to recognize the interrelations between different forms of oppression. And as a corollary, we must combat not only the forms of oppression that affect us but also those that affect others.

Let me add that this is a point made by other Black feminists, such as bell hooks. While Lorde, in “The Uses of Anger,” worries about white feminism’s failures, hooks takes aim at Black male authors who focus exclusively on dismantling racism without heeding the ways different forms of oppression coalesce. As a result, many of these thinkers become complicit in sexism or classism, to name a few forms of oppression. Commenting on hooks’s works, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson writes, “On hooks’s view, the struggle against oppression cannot be piecemeal but instead must grapple with the matrix of all types of oppression.” Thus, for both hooks and Lorde, liberation, when not combated in a spirit of solidarity, alienates us from one another.

To return to Asian American and African American experiences, Lorde’s point is all too salient. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Asian Americans were freed from oppression while African Americans were not. In such a situation, I submit that Asian Americans would be vulnerable to racism. Why? If Black Americans are still subordinated, then given the history of racialization in the United States, this would imply that whites would still enjoy racial privilege. If white domination persists, then by the same token, Asian Americans would risk seeing their oppression reappear. For example, if whiteness were to remain enshrined as the culturally dominant way of understanding society, then Asian Americans would not truly be free from cultural imperialism and thereby from oppression. And by the same token, African Americans would not be free either. In this case, according to Lorde’s logic, only when we dismantle all racial hierarchies in the United States will all oppressed groups enjoy freedom.

Thus far, I have claimed the following. First, Black Americans and Asian Americans are both unfree in the United States today, as both races face various forms of oppression. Second, based on the empirical research I have cited, their shackles, to borrow Lorde’s expression, differ from one another. Third, if Asian Americans were to be liberated and Blacks were not, or vice versa, then neither group would be truly free. If these claims are correct, then fighting oppression and forging intergroup solidarities go hand in hand. Yet, how do we forge solidarities when groups have different experiences of oppression? Here, I will ground my argument in the work of Diane Fujino.

One of Fujino’s starting points is the observation that treating anti-Asian and anti-Black racism separately neglects intersectionality—the fact that certain groups experience multiple forms of oppression. We cannot neatly separate individuals using racial categories alone since they may belong to multiply oppressed social groups. For example, treating these forms of racism separately would disregard any overlap between the oppressions of LGBTQ Asian Americans and LGBTQ African Americans. Consequently, we would not recognize the common experiences that these groups share and thus the preexisting bases for Black and Asian solidarities. On this point, the experience of “coming out,” while fraught with difficulties for individuals of any race, can be especially trying for members of racial minorities. This is supported by evidence that non-White individuals are less likely than Whites to come out to parents and more likely to experience depression. In this example, treating African American and Asian American oppressions as neatly separate would prevent us from understanding the commonalities in these groups’ experiences of anti-LGBTQ oppression and the solidarity that they could forge from their shared experiences. More generally, if we neglect intersectionality and overlook similarities between Black and Asian American experiences of oppression, then we are left with an impoverished understanding of Black and Asian solidarities.

Building on this observation, Fujino makes a noteworthy point about policy. She asserts that taking intersectionality into account implies prioritizing the experiences of the most vulnerable groups. She rightly points out that we should shun any idea of “oppression Olympics”—that is, the ranking of different groups as more oppressed than
others. Nevertheless, we may need to organize our activism in a way that recognizes intersectionality and starts with those groups that are most disadvantaged. Take the case of sexual violence. This is a form of violence that affects Black and Asian women, among other populations. As we know, Black trans women are a particularly vulnerable population. According to the Human Rights Campaign’s 2020 report on violence against trans and gender-non-conforming individuals, the “epidemic [of anti-trans violence] disproportionately impacts Black transgender women, who comprise 66% of all victims of fatal violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people.”

And as the shooting of six women of Asian descent in 2021 in Atlanta demonstrates, sexual and racial violence also come together for Asian Americans. If we take Fujino’s point on board, then forging Black and Asian solidarities would involve bringing to the fore and finding solutions to these different forms of sexual violence. This is not to disregard other types of oppression and the need to combat them. However, it is to say that these instances of violence are especially alarming and demand our attention.

In sum, when we take intersectionality into account, we gain a better sense of the vulnerabilities of groups that are multiply oppressed.

In addition to intersectionality, Fujino contends that we need to consider the structural nature of oppression—a point that dovetails with my earlier discussion of Young. For Fujino, when we think of oppression in structural terms, we can better understand the sources of different forms of oppression and better appreciate the challenges in combating them. Instead of targeting instances of oppression piecemeal, we can grasp their underlying logic and craft more sophisticated solutions to them. Consider the cases of police brutality against African Americans and military interventions in Asian countries.

With regard to police violence, let me return to a problem that I alluded to earlier: the tension between addressing hate crimes and leaving certain communities vulnerable to police brutality. Commenting on the idea of hate crimes, Fujino claims, “the narrative of ‘hate crimes’ fosters a problematic focus on the individual—their attitudes, feelings, bigotry—and thus erases the structural violence of policing, militarism, White supremacy, racialized heteropatriarchy and more that fuel individual attacks.” If we focus on addressing anti-Asian hate crimes by increasing police and thus better targeting individual perpetrators of such racism, we risk solidifying an institution—the police system—that harms African Americans more than any other race. This is a point to which some Asian Americans have become increasingly sensitive. As The New York Times has recently reported, there is a growing rift between older Asian Americans, who favor increasing police presence in areas affected by anti-Asian hate crimes, and younger Asian Americans, who want to find solutions outside of traditional policing, such as addressing homelessness and mental health issues. The question raised, then, is how to protect marginalized groups from violence while acknowledging the realities of police brutality. While there is no easy answer to this question, the point is that by thinking of violence against Asian Americans structurally rather than at a surface level, we can recognize the broader context of these forms of violence and the probable effects of different solutions to them.

On a similar note, Fujino suggests that US militarism is another institution that perpetuates racism. She shows that military interventions may be linked to violence against Asian Americans by appealing to the work of Christine Ahn, Terry Park, and Kathleen Richards. In “Anti-Asian Violence in America Is Rooted in US Empire,” these authors explain that military interventions in Asian countries have destroyed lives, torn families apart, and impoverished communities. They add that “Asian women are particularly harmed by US militarism and foreign policy—economically, socially, and physically.” For example, prostitution around US military bases in Asian countries has recently been linked to the exploitation and exoticization of Asian women overseas. These phenomena have had implications in the United States: “as the US military steadily reduced its troop presence in Asia, camp town establishments, facing social upheaval and economic uncertainty, began sending their madams and sex workers to US domestic military sites through brokered marriages with US servicemen.” This argument helps make sense of the Atlanta shootings. Instead of focusing on the bigotry and sexual repression of one individual, we need to step back and examine the conditions that lay the ground for such tragedies.

These observations about US militarism not only shed light on anti-Asian sentiment but also relate to my earlier points about police brutality. All in all, we need to target structural issues when dismantling racial oppressions. Racism—whether anti-Black or anti-Asian—is not merely a matter of individual hatred or bias; rather, it is sustained by institutions.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF BLACK AND ASIAN SOLIDARITIES

Let me conclude by reviewing some of the main points of this paper. To begin, by drawing on Young, I described how Asian Americans and African Americans experience forms of oppression that are both similar and different. For example, both groups face cultural imperialism, but the tropes about Asian Americans and those about African Americans diverge. Moreover, by appealing to Lorde, I claimed that we ought not to treat these forms of racism separately. Instead, we should think that the freedom from oppression of one group is connected to the freedom from oppression of another group. Finally, using Fujino’s work, I have argued that part of the task of resisting these forms of racism will lie in prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable groups and recognizing the structural nature of oppression. Thus, the future of Black and Asian solidarities will lie in greater attention to intersectionality and structural racism. To be sure, we will face challenges in building coalitions since anti-Black and anti-Asian oppressions differ. But this is no excuse to abandon solidarity; rather, the need to combat race-based forms of oppression becomes all the more pressing.

NOTES
2. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 64.
Let me begin with a broader picture of hate crimes in the United States. As much as the current focus is on anti-Asian American hate crimes in the wake of COVID-19 and the horrible naming and handling of the pandemic by the former president of the United States, I recognize that Asian Americans do not represent the predominant recipients of hate crimes. In 2019, “58 percent of reported hate crimes were motivated by anti-Black bias, while a far smaller proportion, 4 percent, were motivated by anti-Asian bias.” Yet, there is a tendency in the United States to focus on intra-minority conflict. Intra-minority violence comprises about 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes. This paper aims for developing solidarity among minority groups to work to counter such strategies of divide and conquer. This paper explores the intersectionality of race and class as the lens to better understand the intra-minority conflict and aims toward developing a heterogenous commonality among identity groups. Keeping in mind that the experience of one marginality does not guarantee understanding the experience of another marginal position, how can we promote recognizing our internal heterogeneity or heterogenous commonality?

**INTRODUCTION**

Considering the recent reports of increased rates of hate crimes, especially violent hate crimes, against Asian Americans, I am motivated to think about intra-minority conflict. I focus on intra-minority conflict because the videos that dominate incidences of violence against Asian Americans feature a young black male. White men still perpetuate the majority of the violence against Asian Americans, about 75 percent. Yet, there is a tendency in the United States to focus on intra-minority conflict. Intra-minority violence comprises about 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes. This paper focuses on intra-minority conflict because the videos that dominate incidences of violence against Asian Americans feature a young black male. White men still perpetuate most of the violence against Asian Americans, about 75 percent. Yet, there is a tendency in the United States to focus on intra-minority conflict.

This focus coheres with a history in the West of promoting images of African American men as violent. I focus on this intra-minority conflict because 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes constitute intra-minority violence. I aim towards more solidarity among minority groups to work towards countering such strategies of divide and conquer.

**PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS**

Let me begin with a broader picture of hate crimes in the United States. As much as the current focus is on anti-Asian American hate crimes in the wake of COVID-19 and the horrible naming and handling of the pandemic by the former president of the United States, I recognize that Asian Americans do not represent the predominant recipients of hate crimes. In 2019, “58 percent of reported hate crimes were motivated by anti-Black bias, while a far smaller proportion, 4 percent, were motivated by anti-Asian bias. About 14 percent were motivated by anti-Latino bias.” And although Stop AAPI Hate’s numbers list that, in 2020, the number of self-reported incidents of racially motivated attacks was 9,081, these numbers were from 2019 to 2020.
and comprised 16.6 percent of the physical assaults for this time. Asian Americans are still not the primary targets of hate crimes in the United States. Again, I note this—not to diminish the significance of the increased number of anti-Asian hate crimes—but to provide perspective, especially since within this paper, I focus on intra-minority conflict.

Second, let me say that I am ashamed of Soon Ja Du's shooting of fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins—what most people attribute as the final spark for the LA riots of 1992. I was in college during this event. I grew up cashiering at small Korean grocery stores in predominantly Black neighborhoods in New York City, so I claim some awareness of the circumstances Ms. Du experienced. I am sure Ms. Du experienced much stress with financial and safety concerns. But I am still ashamed. As Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong writes, "I am ashamed that Du got off with a light sentence of community service. I am ashamed of the store clerks who followed black customers around, expecting they'd steal, for not trying harder to engage with their adopted neighborhood." Daniel Haggerty describes shame as about the self. He writes, "[W]ith shame, we experience . . . an evaluation of our character . . . in the eyes of our community." David Kim firmly establishes the possibility of feeling shame not because of any act committed by the self, but because of a pre-existing suppressive social order. Shame intricately links with one's community's standing in the greater society. Minority existence is representative existence. Group identity overdetermines individual identity, or minority identities share a linked fate. Hence, the actions of another Korean American woman represent me, and so, I feel shame for Ms. Du's actions. To be clear, I am not concerned that I might have behaved similarly to Ms. Du; I never owned a gun, nor do I have any intentions of owning a gun. Nevertheless, Ms. Du's action represents me. I am distinctly aware that because Ms. Du is an Asian American, she received such a light sentence; an African American woman or man would not have gotten off so lightly. I am not saying that I wish Ms. Du received a harsher sentence. This is to admit the social structural inequities of this country’s legal system.

Keeping these two preliminary contexts in mind, intra-minority conflict, specifically between Asian Americans and African Americans, or between Asian Americans and Latin Americans, exists. Minorities enact 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes. This paper focuses on this 25 percent and so I begin by recognizing this tension, perhaps even aggression felt towards one minority by another.

I have felt intra-minority conflict. As I said, I grew up working in small grocery stores in economically challenged areas of New York City. I distinctly felt the tension from African Americans. These are not African American academics—these are African Americans who struggle economically. My experiences with this population group have not been entirely tense, but there have always been some aggressive tones. Currently, I feel tension from some of my Latin American male students. Again, not all, but a few every year while teaching at my current institution, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, I sense the questioning of my ability to know, especially philosophical knowledge, or perhaps just my position of authority. I am not sure if it centers around gender or race. Most likely, it combines both. Like so many people with intersectional identities, certainty is a luxury.

To be clear, this sort of intra-minority tension exists even within one minority group, from African Americans against African Americans, as pointed out by Audre Lorde, and among Asian Americans. Is the tension a result of the social structural situation where tokenism prevails, competitively positioning one minority against another? Or does the tension arise because of the suppressive social order about one's group identity, so that a minority subject desires distance from their own identity group as Kim suggests? I do not know.

With these preliminary thoughts, I do not mean to de-emphasize the unacceptable numbers of anti-Asian hate crimes or provide excuses for the anti-Asian hate crimes. But I do not, sweeping and easily, vilify those who have committed anti-Asian hate crimes. Rather, I consider the constraints of the current social structural situation, the history, and the consequent positioning of the various minority groups with and against each other. In other words, I focus on positioning Asian Americans as the scapegoats.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Anti-Asian violence may be about xenophobia. In our historical times, in metropolitan areas, along with xenophobia, there is also xenophilia, as an exhibition of cosmopolitanism in all its capitalistic and cultural sense. But in considering intra-minority conflict, rather than fear of or desire of the foreign, I treat intra-minority conflict as an intersectional conflict between race and class.

Intersectionality studies forwarded the necessity of an intersectional lens in discussions of race. An intersectional lens facilitates perceiving the competitive positioning of oppressions both intra and intergroup. Aimee Carrillo Rowe writes that “the ‘race to innocence,’ a politics based in a hierarchy of oppression, compels us to invert in our particular marginality through the erasure of our complicity in oppressing others.” Without awareness of the intersectionality of oppressions, those who experience one oppression can be positioned in contrast and in competition with those who experience other oppressions overlooking Maria Lugones’s analysis of the intermeshedness of oppressor oppressed conditions. Yen Le Espiritu explains the history in which Asian American women’s advancements followed from the detriment of Asian American men. Within the context of the racist de-masculinization of Asian American men, Asian American women gained feminist advances. In this case, proliferating racism served as an entryway for feminist concerns. Sumi K. Cho explains further that, historically, Asian American women have been situated against white women and African American women. Cho’s work illustrates the competitive positioning of women of color. Racism ultimately undercuts feminist possibilities by challenging coalition building among women of color and women in general. Dominant groups do not only activate these strategic intersectional uses of racism and sexism. Members of marginalized groups—because of the intermeshedness of the oppressor oppressed condition—slip into employing such strategies as well.
Most of the analysis on intersectionality centers on the intersections between race and sex. Focusing on the recent episodes of intra-minority hate crimes targeting Asian Americans calls for attending to the intersections between race and class. For at the heart of the aggression on Asian Americans from other minorities lies the achievement of a certain class status by Asian Americans in the United States.

This intersectionality involves the visibility of race, where the visibility of Asian American embodiment is still predominantly associated with the foreign. This foreignness does not only circumscribe an association with evil, or a fear of difference, but about who is deserving, who has a right to the benefits of this country. Hence, the astuteness of the earliest Asian American movements’ strategy of challenging perceptions that Asian Americans are all foreigners. I must admit that challenging this perception of Asian Americans as foreigners feels especially urgent. Although I am an immigrant, because I came to the United States as a child, the United States comes closest to any sense of home for me. I tried living in South Korea, after college in my attempts to find myself, in some authentic sense, and I felt even more like a foreigner there. 11 So I call the United States home, even as I do not feel completely at home. Reading about the recent refugee crisis, Hannah Arendt’s work on the importance of citizenship for recognition as human, and George Takei’s biography during the Japanese Internment depicting the power of state intervention, the condition of statelessness leaves me with existential fear. So challenging perceptions of Asian Americans as foreigners loom exigent.

The intersectionality encircling anti-Asian hate crimes also hinges on a perception that all Asian Americans occupy a certain class status. The model minority myth promotes the stereotype that all Asian Americans fare well economically. This perception does not accurately depict all Asian Americans, especially considering the breadth of the identity group Asian Pacific Islander, where at least three specific identity groups—the Hmong, Cambodians, and Laotians—have the lowest average household incomes in this country, lower than Latin Americans’ and African Americans’ average household incomes.12 These statistics do not deny that some Asian Americans enjoy economic security. But positioning all Asian Americans as economically successful is essentializing. I do not accept that some sort of merit-based economy actually functions. Nor do I affirm the capitalistic drive of more is better. So Asian American movements challenge the model minority myth, that all Asian Americans fare well economically.

Looking more closely at the intersection between race and class, consider that for Black Americans, their hypervisible embodied identity leads to a ready association with the lower economic classes, a view that the African American community aims to dispel. Whereas the visibly embodied identity of Asian Americans leads to ready associations with the higher classes. Both close associations are essentialistic and lead to unhelpful overdeterminations and stereotypes. Hence, following Patricia Hill Collins and my earlier work articulating the difference between race and class—let us remember all oppressions are not the same.13 In this framework of intersectionality, as some of the early critics made clear, to speak about intersectionality is to challenge conceptions of oppressions as similar. Clearly, we need to challenge conceptually collapsing a particular race with a particular class.

These two misguided perceptions, the positioning of Asian Americans as foreigners and the model minority myth, these intersections of race and class are at the heart of anti-Asian violence. Contra the slogan that “we are all in it together,” some of us fared better than others during the pandemic. With the pandemic’s nickname as “the Chinese flu,” for people struggling with the difficulties of the pandemic, they may feel justified in directing their frustration by scapegoating Asians, whether American or not. But underlying this immediate trigger for this instance of venting (cathartically or not) on Asian Americans lies this intersectionality between the race-based positioning of Asian Americans as foreigners and the class-based myth that all Asian Americans hold economically advantageous positions.14 These two misguided perceptions serve as the social structural lens or norm for blaming Asian Americans for the pandemic.

As earlier mentioned, minorities also internalize these perceptions, these frameworks for some sort of felt justification for blaming Asian Americans for the current pandemic. Minorities internalize dominant narratives about other minorities, even if they recognize that dominant narratives about one’s own minority identity group can be incorrect. As José Medina makes clear, sensitivity to the functioning of one marginality does not necessarily provide any insight into the functioning of other marginal experiences.15

TOWARD HETEROGENOUS COMMONALITY

There is clearly a need for better relationships among Asian Americans and other minority groups. I am not laying blame. Segregation exists among the different minority groups from both social structural inequalities as well as cultural and individual limitations in language and choices. Such segregation has sedimented into disinterest. I can only be responsible for myself and my community. I can begin with acknowledging the Asian American communities’ desire to be white, and capitalistic desires that situate us competitively, so my personal economic advantage is juxtaposed against another’s lack.

Recognizing the intersectional domains of intra-minority conflict, let me end with the hopeful speculations of the possibility of Collins’s notion of “heterogeneous commonality.” Regarding African American women, Collins writes:

Shared group location is better characterized by viewing Black women’s social location as one of a heterogeneous commonality embedded in social relations of intersectionality. Despite heterogeneity among African American women that accompanies such intersections, differences in Black women’s experiences generated by differences of age, sexual orientation, region of the country, urban or rural residence, color, hair texture, and the like
Collins is critical of the notion of intersectionality alone serving to theorize group identity. As such, she grounds the ideas of intersectionality within standpoint theory. Anna Carasthisis applies Collins’s work on conceptualizing groups as a heterogeneous commonality onto the coalition-building work among Latin American lesbian women. Collins and Carasthisis forward recognizing the internal heterogeneity of groups as a bridge to think about relations between women of color. Carasthisis more specifically writes, “if identity categories are coalitions—constituted by internal differences as much as by commonalities—then this changes how we think about the political task of coalitional organizing. The emphasis shifts from forming coalitions across group differences to recognizing that groups are already internally heterogeneous.” For, after all, the process of determining what is common and what is different relies upon our focus, our project at hand. I wrote the following in an earlier article articulating the internal heterogeneity even within one group identity, in this case Asian American women:

Membership in a group has been metonymically conditioned; groups may prioritize certain group features, and de-emphasize or not accept other features. . . . The difficulty does not lie solely in the question of intentional attempts at exclusion. [There are] difficulties of determining which identities and which differences matter at any one time—for these decisions guide the projects of the group. Because of the malleability of delineating differences depending on the project at hand and the current circumstances, the question of which differences matter and do not matter remains up for negotiation.

Beginning with acknowledging the internal heterogeneity within one group identity such as Asian Americans can serve as the bridge to conceptualize the commonality with another group identity such as African Americans or Latin Americans. One can acknowledge this while recognizing that our internal heterogeneity is not simply a source of conflict and inability to work together but a source of strength in diversity. Identity groups are already incredibly diverse. Admitting such diversity and difference can serve as the framework to think about heterogenous commonality to conceptualize intragroup heterogeneity—towards envisioning forging alliances for minorities marginalized and oppressed in the United States and guarding against the strategy of divide and conquer.

Envisioning the possibility of recognizing our heterogenous commonality, in acknowledging the existence of intra-minority conflict in instances of minorities participating in anti-Asian hate crimes, my hope is that through coalition-building work, we recognize our heterogenous commonality.

NOTES
2. Yam, "Viral Images."
3. Yam, "Viral Images."
8. For example, many Asians do not like the Japanese because of the history of their occupation in so much of Asia. Of course, the tension between women is so well known that they have been parodied.
9. David Kim writes, "In the catalogue of anti-Asian social realities, classic biology-invoking racism has been profound. But this has typically been combined with or inflected by a deep sense that Asian American women and men are cultural outsiders or otherwise foreign, alien, or un-American, with related concerns about their being inscrutable, unassimilable, or a sullying threat to the nation’s values. This is xenophobia, and for critical purposes, it can be unmoored from its etymological link to fear and conceptualized instead as civic ostracism, produced by agents of institutions, on account of the perceived cultural otherness of its target." See Kim, "Asiatic American Philosophy and Feminism," in The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy, ed. Kim Q. Hall and Ásta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 140–41.
10. Kim writes, "For Asian American women, there is often a shift from xenophobia to a xenophilia in which they are regarded in terms of a positive alterity, an exotic otherness. The sense of otherness is permeated by many historically specific sexual paradigms in which the idea of Asian women's different 'looks' and bodies is mingled with an imagined psychology of demureness, passivity, and willingness to please. See Kim, "Asian American Philosophy and Feminism," 141.
13. Sumi K. Cho writes, "Asian Pacific women are particularly valued in a sexist society because they provide the antidote to visions of liberated career women who challenge the objectification of women. In this sense, the objectified gender stereotype also assumes a model minority function as Asian Pacific women are deployed to 'discipline' white women, just as Asian Pacific Americans in general are used against their 'nonmodel' counterparts, African Americans." See Cho, "Asian Pacific American Women and Racialized Sexual Harassment," in Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women, eds. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 64.
14. Camisha Russell writes that "Collins briefly traces the history of this problematic of black gender norms, identifying it in the work of both W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier, who considered deficient gender ideology among African Americans a factor in, but not the primary cause of, African American poverty and political powerlessness." See Russell, "Black American Sexuality and the Repressive Hypothesis: Reading Patricia Hill Collins with Michel Foucault," in Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy, eds. María del Guadalupe Davidson,

15. The DACA recipients have voiced a similar situation, a situation I completely understand and empathize with.


18. But these ready associations of a particular race with a particular class are not completely true to reality. I know it isn’t about reality but the pervasiveness of the perception. Hence, why so much of my early work analyzes how much perception is not simply about a relation to truth, a vehicle for simply receiving information, but that perception structurally holds two sources of bias: 1) perception focuses on that which one already knows (or believes one knows); and 2) perception cannot see one’s own positionality, one’s own situatedness in the world.

19. Specifically, José Medina writes, “a heightened sensitivity with respect to one kind of insensitivity does not at all guarantee any special sensitivity with respect to other forms of insensitivity. In other words, what is learned in one context of injustice or as a result of certain experiences of oppression should not be assumed to be immediately transferable to other contexts of experiences of oppression.” See Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201, emphasis in original. See also Trina Grillow and Stephanie Wildman, “Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms),” in *Critical Race Feminism*, ed. Adrien Katherine Wing (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 49.


21. Anna Carastathis attributes Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw with this insight to conceptualize identity groups as coalitions. Carastathis writes, “the integration of all aspects of our individual identities is crucial to achieving the internal balance missing in one-dimensional political movements.” See Carastathis, “Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013, Special Issue on Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory): 942.


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Recreating Asian Identity: Yellow Peril, Model Minority, and Black and Asian Solidarities

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**ABSTRACT**

Does intersectionality divide marginalized groups (e.g., women) along identity lines (e.g., race, class, and sexuality)? In response to the criticism that intersectional approaches to feminist and critical race theories lead to fragmentation and division, this paper notes that it relies on an ontological (mis)understanding of identity as a fixed entity. I argue against this notion of identity by engaging in a detailed case study of how Asian American women experience their Asian identity. The case study demonstrates that identity is lived not as a pre-given static object but rather as a fluid and flexible process: what Asian identity means varies according to how this identity is related to the dynamics of power. I propose a tripartite taxonomy of identity-power relationships exhibited in Asian American women’s lives, in which identities are 1) constructed by and 2) used to reproduce power as oppression, as well as 3) used to build power as resistance. In particular, I explore Black and Asian feminist solidarities to show that those at the margins recreate their identities and, in doing so, build positive forms of power such as resistance and solidarity. The criticism that intersectionality leads to fragmentation does not hold, as it is grounded in a flawed notion of identity that fails to consider how identities are actually lived in their changing relationships to power—especially how marginalized groups, such as women of color, build solidarity to resist oppression by recreating their identities, rather than being fragmented into smaller and mutually exclusive subgroups.

**INTRODUCTION**

Intersectionality—the idea that racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination are not separate but intersect and operate together—has gained tremendous popularity in feminist and critical race theories over the last few decades. However, in more recent years, there has also been a “mushrooming intersectionality critique industry.” In this paper, I examine and respond to recent critiques of intersectionality. Specifically, I analyze the notion of identity implicitly assumed in the critiques and propose an alternative notion by engaging Asian identity.

The paper begins by analyzing two major critiques of intersectionality: the infinite regress critique and the incommensurability critique. Both critiques take intersectionality to fragment marginalized groups (e.g., women) along identity lines (e.g., race, class, and sexuality). Underlying this interpretation, I argue, is the metaphysical assumption that identity is a fixed entity. This is a misunderstanding of identity that neglects how identity is actually lived by marginalized groups.

I explore several cases of Asian American women’s experiences of “Asian” identity in the US context, including growing anti-Asian racism amid COVID-19, internalization of the model minority myth, and Black-Asian feminist solidarities. Using this case study, I demonstrate that identity is less like a fixed object but more like a fluid process, where its meaning changes according to how it is related to power. I identify and discuss three characteristic types of the identity-power relationship shown in Asian American experiences: construction of identity by power-as-oppression, reproduction of power-as-oppression, and creation of power-as-resistance through reconstruction of identity. The third type of identity-power relationship is presented where Asian American women build solidarity with Black women to challenge structural white supremacist patriarchy and construct a new identity as a feminist “we.” Given that the underlying notion of identity as a fixed entity fails to reflect marginalized groups’ experiences, especially how they reshape their identities as starting points of...
solidarity praxis, the critiques of intersectionality do not hold.

**FRAGMENTATION CRITIQUES: IDENTITY AS A FIXED ENTITY**

Let us take a closer look at the two strands of critique. The first claims that intersectionality incurs an infinite regress, that is, “the tendency of all identity groups to split into ever-smaller subgroups.” The association of intersectionality with infinite regress has become so influential that it has been examined by many intersectional scholars. This strand of criticism interprets intersectionality as impeding generalizations about group interests (of, for example, women) or even about subgroup interests (of, for example, women of color, Black women), as there is “a potentially endless list of hybrid positions or cross-cutting groupings that can be yielded (such as [B]lack working class, lesbian, young, poor, rural, disabled and so on).” As the regress goes on, there would be no group, and the individual would become the only cohesive unit of analysis.

Another line of critique is that intersectionality results in the increase of incommensurable identities. Naomi Zack contends in her oft-cited critique that intersectionality does not help to make feminism inclusive but rather fragments women into multiple discrete identities. According to Zack’s interpretation of intersectionality, each specific intersection of race and class represents a distinct kind of identity mainly because intersectionality rejects the additive analysis. Black working-class women, for example, are not the women in the white feminist sense who are in addition Black and in addition working-class. Instead, Zack claims that intersectionality construes Black working-class women as having their own gender identity, which is distinguished from those of women of other races and classes such as white middle-class women’s gender identity. This way, different intersections are reified as “different kinds of female gender [that] may be perceived to be so distinctive as to be virtually incommensurable.”

Zack argues that the multiplication of women’s discrete identities reinforces the exclusion of women of color: once the identities of women of color become incommensurable with those of white women, life situations of women of color are understood as a problem belonging only to their own identities, rather than a problem that “women” face. This way, intersectionality causes “de facto racial segregation,” which fixes women of color at their specific intersection and merely allows them to create their own feminisms while keeping the status quo dominance of white feminism intact.

In sum, in both types of critique reviewed here, intersectionality is interpreted as a matter of division or fragmentation. The infinite regress critique is the claim that every time different identity categories (such as race, class, sexuality, etc.) are factored in, women are fragmented into even finer subgroups. The incommensurability critique is the claim that these subgroups end up having irreconcilably different identities. As each intersection of race and gender (e.g., Black women, white women) or of class and gender (e.g., working-class women, middle-class women) is reified as a distinct identity, women, the critics argue, are fragmented along the lines of race and class.

The interpretation of intersectionality as fragmentation, however, relies on a problematic understanding of identity. It assumes a view close to what Elizabeth Spelman calls the “pop-bead metaphysics,” where each identity category, such as race, gender, and class, is analogized as a bead that can be popped into other beads to form a necklace—one’s identity as a whole. While Spelman’s metaphor is originally intended to illustrate the relationship between the beads/identities, I use it to describe the characteristics of each bead/identity. As a metaphysics of identity, the pop-bead view makes the following two flawed assumptions.

First, it assumes that (racial/gender/class/etc.) identity is already given as a thing that does not change. For example, the bead labeled “Asian” exists even before someone lives as an “Asian” in specific sociohistorical contexts through interactions with other people, communities, and society. This means that the “Asian” identity stays the same regardless of what the subject does with this identity and what relationships they build with the power dynamics of society. That is, identity is a fixed entity that remains the same across all contexts and occasions. One’s having “Asian” identity is like taking a pre-made, unchanging bead labeled as such, and thus, it remains the same whoever takes it.

This characteristic of identity makes it possible to put people in stable distinct groups according to their identities. If “Asian” identity is a fluid and flexible process, as I will show later, different people—or even the same person—who live as “Asian” may experience or build different narratives of what it means to be “Asian.” During this meaning-making journey, they may find commonalities/intersections as well as differences/tensions with those who live with other racial identities. (I will explain this in detail in Section 3 of the case study). In contrast, according to the pop-bead metaphysics, racial groups are clearly demarcated from one another in the same way that the bead labeled “Asian” is an ontologically different entity from other beads labeled “Black,” “Latinx,” and so on.

This is the view of identity that the criticisms of intersectionality rely on (see Figure 1). The infinite regress critique can be put as follows: women, or the group of people who possess the bead labeled “woman,” are divided into smaller groups according to whether they insert this bead into those labeled “Asian,” “Black,” or “White.” In a like manner, Asian women are further divided into smaller subgroups once different class identities are popped into the “woman” and “Asian” beads that they have. And the same goes for sexuality, disability, age, and so on. The incommensurability critique is the claim that the end products—namely, the sum of identity categories analogized with pop-bead necklaces—are mutually exclusive. Although Asian women and Black women have the same bead labeled “woman,” as it is inserted into two ontologically distinct entities, namely, the two beads labeled “Asian” and “Black,” respectively, it ends up constituting necklaces that are “so distinctive as to be virtually incommensurable.”
2. Reproduction of oppression: There is a tendency that marginalized groups, in order to survive in an oppressive society, conform to the meaning of their identities as constructed by the oppressive structure. This survival strategy reproduces the power of oppression.

• Section 2 examines how living up to the name of “model minority” has been a tactic for many Asian Americans to blend into the white-dominated US society.

3. Resistance to oppression: By reshaping and redefining their identity as a center of resistance to structural injustice and transformation towards a just society, marginalized groups create new forms of power as solidarity and empowerment.

• Section 3 discusses Asian American efforts to break up the acquiescent model minority stereotype and to speak up against racism. I focus on how Asian American feminist movements redefine what it means to be Asian and build solidarity with Black feminists to dismantle the oppressive structure.

CASE STUDY: EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN IDENTITY

THREE TYPES OF IDENTITY-POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Contrary to the critics’ static view, identity is experienced in a fluid and flexible process. I argue that the critics are so preoccupied with the abstract inquiry of how women would be divided by the intersection of identities that they neglect what women who exist at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, such as women of color, are actually doing with their identities. To demonstrate this point, the following sections engage in a case study. I analyze different ways in which Asian American women experience their Asian identity and show that what it means to be Asian varies according to how it is related to the dynamics of power. The term “power” is used here to refer to two distinct forms: the negative form of power as structural oppression and the positive form of power, such as solidarity and empowerment, that resists oppression. I maintain that what an identity—especially a marginalized racial, gender, or other group identity—is and means changes depending on the way in which the identity is linked to the negative and positive forms of power. The charge of fragmentation is a misunderstanding of intersectionality, which is grounded in a misunderstanding of identity that fails to consider how identities are actually lived in their changing relationships with power. There are at least three different types of relationships between identity and power:

1. Construction by oppression: By this term, I refer to cases in which the power of structural oppression is manifested in constructing meanings of an identity.

   • In Section 1 below, I discuss what it means to be Asian during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intersecting structure of xenophobic, racial, and gender oppression operates to attach the “yellow peril” label to Asian bodies.

   • I was emptying my trash into a public trash can at a rest stop and a man walked towards me asked me where my mask was, shoved me back and said if anyone should be wearing a mask it is people like you. He mocked by pulling his eyes back to resemble slant eyes and bowed to me. (Marin County, CA)

   • I got into the elevator (mask on) so I could get my mail from the lobby. The elevator door opened on the 1st floor and she gets out of the elevator and looks me up and down and goes, “You f**king Chinese people, you’re not going to get away with this, we’re going to get you.” (Portland, OR)

In the racist rhetoric underlying these incidents, Asian means “diseased,” “dirty,” and “dangerous”: Asians are “evil aliens” who have brought the virus to the US and spread it. As such, Asians in the US (either US-born or immigrant) are not fully accepted as Americans, no matter how hard they try to be exemplary minorities hoping for acceptance (see the next section). That is, Asian Americans
are seen as “perpetual foreigners,” who are not part of America at best, and “yellow perils,” who pose a threat to America at worst.

Xenophobic racism is not the only form of oppression that operates here to shape Asian identity to mean the yellow peril/perpetual foreigner. It intersects with other axes of oppression, such as gender and age, to exacerbate racist attacks on women and elders, who are often seen as “easy targets.” In January 2021, eighty-four-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee, who went for a morning walk in his San Francisco neighborhood, died after being violently shoved to the ground. Two months later, eight people, including six Asian women, were killed by a gunman who attacked Asian-owned spas in Atlanta, Georgia. Asian women have also reported two times more hate incidents than Asian men to the Stop AAPI Hate initiative. Executive directors of the initiative suggest several factors that make Asian women more vulnerable to hate incidents. One is the sexist stereotype that “women are not going to fight back, are more vulnerable, less likely to respond, and so when people feel like they have a license to [harass someone], they [are going to] go after people who may appear to be vulnerable.” This is especially the case for Asian women, who are racialized-sexualized as docile and shy. COVID-19 has been used as a rhetoric for perpetrators to inflict and justify harassment and misogyny against Asian women, who they think are weak and less likely to stand up for themselves. Other explanations for the gender disparity in COVID-related hate incidents include unequal caregiving responsibilities under patriarchy. The housework that women are expected to do, such as grocery shopping, takes them outside the home and makes them more vulnerable to racial harassment on the streets.

In sum, the power of racism, xenophobia, sexism, and ageism is manifested in constructing the Asian-as-yellow-peril identity. The location of Asian American women at the intersection of racial and gender oppressions shapes their multilayered experiences of being Asian during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. ASIAN AS MODEL MINORITY: NOT SPEAKING UP AGAINST RACISM

In their influential book Myth of the Model Minority, Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin point out that the “model minority,” which seems like a compliment, is in fact an oppressive and damaging label that puts pressure on Asian Americans to conform to the white-dominated racial order. Calling Asian Americans “model minorities” enables whites to differentiate themselves from people of color and to disparage other people of color (especially Black and Latinx people) as “problem minorities” that do not attain as high educational or career achievements as do the model minorities. The stereotype also sustains the myth that all Americans of color can achieve the American dream just like the “model” minorities, who work hard and do not challenge the status quo of racial hierarchy that has whites at the top but are eager to assimilate into it. To keep the “top subordinate” title and avoid racial hostility, Asian American communities have often conformed to the “success-driven, assimilationist Asian” stereotype. This conformity is expressed in the form of Asians’ attacks on other Asians who speak up for change. Chou and Feagin discuss the case of an Asian American student organization in a large US university. The organization published a report on problems faced by Asian American students on campus and made suggestions on how the university could better address their needs, such as hiring an Asian American mental health counselor and ensuring more Asian American representation in student government. The report drew positive responses from the university administration and other students of color. However, this student organization was accused by fellow Asian American students of “making Asian Americans look bad.” As one member of the organization recalled, “[T]hat was the most hurtful because a lot of the criticism came from our own community. . . . [P]eople were saying, ‘Why do you have to rock the boat?’ People saying, ‘Why are you looking for trouble? Why are you seeing things that aren’t there? I’ve never experienced racism. It must not exist.’”

This case illustrates how the identity of “model minorities who do not cause a ruckus” has been embraced and internalized by many Asian Americans. For Asian American students, as Chou and Feagin note, “fear of white backlash trumped even modest actions to bring campus change.” Taking the model minority identity to be “their ultimate ticket into gaining social acceptance,” the students hoped that the actions for change would not “ruin it for the rest of them.” This kind of acquiescence may be understood as a survival technique that individual Asians employ to protect themselves from white retaliation. However, it ultimately contributes toward maintaining the root cause of such retaliation—that is, the racist structure of US society—by discouraging Asian communities from subverting it. Here, the power dynamics surrounding the Asian identity can be put this way: the power of structural racism operates to forge the Asian-as-model-minority identity and is reinforced through Asians’ conformity to this meaning of being Asian.

3. ASIAN AS CRITICAL RACE FEMINIST: BLACK AND ASIAN SOLIDARITIES

As it turns out during the pandemic, embracing the acquiescent model minority identity and not speaking up does not protect Asians against hate and violence. Asians who have denied the existence of racism as a structure can no longer downplay it as they become more publicly scrutinized and vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks in their everyday lives.

The growing critical awareness of racism creates room to denaturalize and deconstruct the “Asian = apolitical” identification and to reconstruct Asian identity in a way that means active engagement in anti-racist politics. Asian American feminist movements, among others, have built cross-racial solidarity with other communities of color to oppose racial and intersecting injustice.

Black and Asian Feminist Solidarities, a collaborative project between Black Women Radicals (BWR) and the Asian American Feminist Collective (AAFC), is an example of such solidarity. As part of this project, BWR and AAFC co-hosted a panel discussion titled “Sisters and Siblings in the
Struggle” on April 30, 2020. The participants had a critical conversation on the following aspects:

Between the histories of xenophobic racism, medical experimentation and surveillance, prejudice in (and out) of the public health system, the violence of white capitalist heteronormative patriarchal supremacy and more, Black and Asian American communities are disproportionately experiencing the detrimental impacts of [COVID-19]. In New York and across the nation, there is an increase of xenophobic racism and violence against Asian Americans. Reports have shown that in states and cities such as Louisiana, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Michigan that the majority of those who are infected and dying from [COVID-19] are Black. While there are well-documented tensions between Black and Asian American communities, there is an equally long history of Black and Asian solidarities and community building both in the United States and abroad. How can Black and Asian American feminists engage in a critical dialogue on the impacts of COVID-19 in their respective communities? What can we learn from the long history of solidarity between our communities? More importantly, how can we continue to build Black and Asian feminist solidarity in this moment?28

This example of solidarity presents two important points that are relevant to our discussion. First, Asian feminists who work toward cross-racial feminist solidarity create new narratives of what it means to be Asian. They reject the version of Asian identity authorized by the dominant power—i.e., the model minority identity that has drawn “hostile boundaries against other nonwhite groups while ‘protecting and serving’ white supremacy”—and redefine their Asian identity as a starting point of solidarity with other feminists of color, to subvert the intersecting structure of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. By recreating Asian identity, Asian feminists challenge the negative form of power as structural oppression and wield new forms of power as solidarity, resistance, and liberation.

Second, solidarity among feminists of color suggests that the fragmentation criticism of intersectionality fails to reflect the actual experiences of women of color and other multiply oppressed groups. As examined earlier, the criticism presupposes the notion that identity is a fixed, static thing, like a pop-bead or some other pre-made/pre-given object, that stays the same whoever has it in whatever contexts. One implication of this pop-bead metaphysics is that two or more individuals either have identical identities or distinct identities. So the criticism of intersectionality for fragmenting women unfolds as follows: Black women and Asian women have the same beads labeled “woman,” which are popped into two different beads labeled “Black” and “Asian” each and end up constituting two distinct necklaces (i.e., “Black woman” and “Asian woman”); this way, once race is factored in and the intersectionality of gender and race is considered, women are fragmented along racial lines into distinct—and virtually incommensurable—subgroups.

This is an incorrect understanding of identity and intersectionality. As the case here shows, identities and solidarities of women of color are not an either-or matter. That is, it is not the case that either Black and Asian women have the exact same identity as “woman” (and thus solidarity is possible) or they have completely different identities as “Black” and “Asian” (and thus solidarity is impossible). Rather, their solidarity becomes possible when they recognize tensions as well as similarities between Black and Asian communities within the oppressive structure and transform themselves. This is the process that Allison Weir calls “transformative identification.” Weir writes:

Transformative identification involves a recognition of the other that transforms our relation to each other, that shifts our relation from indifference to a recognition of interdependence. Thus identification with the other becomes not an act of recognizing that we are the same, or feeling the same as the other, or sharing the same experiences. . . . [Instead,] this kind of identification transforms our identities: through identification with the other we transform ourselves, and we construct a new “we”: a new identity.30

Weir discusses three kinds of identification that the process of transformative identification involves: identification with feminist ideals, identification with each other, and identification with feminists as a resistant “we.”31 In the case at hand, Black and Asian women create cross-racial solidarity by dedicating themselves to, or identifying with, critical race feminist ideals of challenging white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. They identify with each other and identify with themselves as a “we,” that is, “sisters and siblings in the struggle” who fight together against intersectional oppression. Given that women of color are transforming themselves and constructing a new identity as a feminist “we,” the criticism that intersectional analyses and practices fragment women into smaller, mutually exclusive subgroups is misplaced.

CONCLUSION: IDENTITY AS A FLUID PROCESS

Thus far, I have explored some of the ways in which Asian identity is related to negative and positive forms of power. I have proposed a tripartite taxonomy of identity-power relationships as exhibited in Asian women’s lives (see Table 1): 1) As exemplified by anti-Asian hate amid COVID-19, the power of intersecting oppressions—including racism, xenophobia, and sexism—constructs Asian identity to mean the yellow peril. 2) The Asian-as-model-minority identity, which many Asian Americans have internalized to avoid racial hostility, conforms to the status quo racial order and is thus used to reproduce the power of oppression. 3) Breaking the stereotypes and pejorative labeling, and redefining Asian as an identity with liberatory potential, Asian feminist movements create new positive forms of power such as resistance and solidarity.
Table 1. The View of Identity (e.g., "Asian" identity) as a Fluid Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity-Power Relationship</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Construction by oppression</td>
<td>Asian = Yellow Peril</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reproduction of oppression</td>
<td>Asian = Model Minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Resistance to oppression</td>
<td>Asian = Critical Race Feminist</td>
</tr>
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Taken together, the cases of Asian women’s experiences demonstrate that identity is “fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power.” Identity is not experienced in a way that the fragmentation criticism pictures it to be. It is not that identity such as Asian is already there, as if it were some tangible object like a bead and thus having Asian identity were like possessing the pre-given thing. Identity is situated in a fluid process, in which the subject navigates at least three different relationships with power. Asian identity—what it is and what it means to have this identity—is being made as the subject lives as Asian through these changing relationships between identity and power. In short, the cases collectively show that the view of identity as a fixed entity does not hold in actuality, and therefore, the criticism of intersectionality that relies on this flawed view of identity cannot hold as well.

The view of identity as a fluid process could provide a clearer picture of intersectionality. Insofar as Asian identity is lived through the fluid process of meaning change, that Asian race and female gender are “intersecting” indicates that race and gender are experienced together as an interrelated, multilayered process in Asian women’s lives, rather than that Asian women are reified into one fixed intersectional location. In this regard, multiply and intersectionally marginalized groups, such as Asian women and Black women, are not divided into discrete incommensurable identities. Instead, these women may join each other during their respective journeys of navigating identity-power relationships, in order to build solidarity—that is, in order to deconstruct the meanings of their respective identities as constructed by white supremacist patriarchy, redefine Black and Asian identities as “center[s] of meaningful social change,” and create a new common identity as a critical race feminist “we.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


NOTES


3. In this paper, the term “Asian” will be used interchangeably with the term “Asian American” to mean Asian in the US. We will use these terms in their broadest sense to encompass diverse Asian populations in the US: Asians of different citizenship statuses (e.g., US citizen at birth, foreign-born naturalized citizen, and foreign-born non-citizen), Asians who identify themselves as “American,” as well as those who do not.


15. Stop AAPI Hate, “Two Years and Thousands of Voices.”


22. Stop AAPI Hate, “Two Years and Thousands of Voices.”

23. Stop AAPI Hate, “Stop AAPI Hate National Report: 3.19.20–8.5.20.”
What Does Black and Asian American Solidarity Look Like?

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ABSTRACT
I advocate for Black and Asian American solidarity, using the debate over shifting language for our unified identity, from POC to BIPOC, as a frame for understanding the risk of dissolving solidarity. The Black and Asian American experiences are distinctive. Does difference in experience undermine the possibility for solidarity? The big tent of Asian American can be instructive for how to forge solidarity despite differences. Asian Americans organized in the 1960s to bring diverse ethnic groups together under a shared identity for the sake of increased political power. Likewise, Black and Asian Americans share the common experience of living under White supremacy, even though this oppression manifests differently in our lives. Indeed, White supremacy functions to create tension between our respective communities. But solidarity is still possible if we attend simultaneously to the differences of our experiences and social capital while recognizing the common source of our oppression and the rich history of our shared activism.

The occasion for this essay was an invitation in the summer of 2021 to participate on a panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Central Division to discuss "Black and Asian Solidarities." At the time, the COVID-19 pandemic was dominating our lives, leaving its heaviest burdens with communities of color. African Americans died from the disease at a rate more than double that of White Americans. Asians and Asian Americans were scapegoated for the pandemic, with a steep rise in reported hate crimes and harassment. That past spring, the Atlanta spa murders, in which six of the eight victims were Asian, and the murder of four Sikh Americans in Indianapolis put Asian and Asian American communities on high alert. Black Americans continued to be harassed and murdered by the very state that should instead protect them. The nation was still reeling from the brutal murder of unarmed Black citizen George Floyd by the police a year before. That spring, Daunte Wright, also unarmed, was shot and killed during a traffic stop. There were 203 documented killings of Black citizens by the police in 2021. Communities of color in the United States were in crisis.

In this same period, shifting linguistic conventions signaled cracks in the foundation of interracial solidarity. BIPOC became the en vogue moniker among those in the know. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color replaced People of Color, a decades-long term of solidarity coined by Black activists in the 1960s and adopted in the '90s by various communities of color to decenter Whiteness, replacing "non-white" and "minorities." People of Color, POC, signifying a unified, big tent coalition of non-white minorities, is now considered by some as inappropriate for the times.

The move to BIPOC was motivated by the concern that POC was being used too broadly and nonspecifically, and the particular and severe oppression of Black and Indigenous Americans was obscured under the large umbrella. POC elided these differences and, in doing so, could function as a tool for promoting a diversity palatable to Whites. A board meeting—or a philosophy department—could boast of its diversity credentials without having a single Black or Indigenous member. In contrast, BIPOC, it was proposed, would center the experiences of Black and Indigenous people. The rise of BIPOC—not just the acronym but the sentiments behind it—suggests that we are no longer standing tightly together.

The threat to POC solidarity is more than merely linguistic. A rise in anti-Asian hate crimes spurred a call for more policing in Asian communities. Increased policing threatens Black Americans, who are disproportionately stopped, harassed, arrested, and killed by the police. Hmong American Officer Tou Thao’s role in the murder of George Floyd was a catalyst for many Asian Americans to interrogate the anti-Black racism in their families and communities. Asian and Black Americans were being pitted against one another on another front as well. The United States Supreme Court recently heard two cases challenging the use of race in college admissions on the alleged grounds that Asian American students were denied admission due to affirmative action for Black and Latinx students.

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22. Wendy Lu, “This Is What It’s Like.”
What is the state of the rainbow coalition? Are we still standing together? Or are our interests too often in opposition to one another? Is the united identity of People of Color still worth fighting for? Or do we need to stand apart to achieve justice? Perhaps American racism, in its many forms, makes it impossible for us to stand together in solidarity anymore.

I reject this thesis. Now more than ever is the time for Blacks and Asian Americans to stand in solidarity. But simply insisting on it without attending to the differences of our experiences is superficial and hollow.

In what follows, I make the case for Black and Asian American solidarity despite the considerable differences in our experiences. The tenor of my thought is not merely or even particularly philosophical. It is political and historical. But knowledge of politics and history is perhaps what is missing in the lost sense of interracial solidarity. My primary focus is on Black and Asian relations, although my concerns generalize to the broader coalition of People of Color. My goal is to make sense of the possibility for solidarity among communities often intemingly put into conflict with one another. I argue that solidarity is only possible when we can simultaneously attend to a pillar of commonality in our experiences while acknowledging and honoring the different ways White supremacy manifests in our lives.

The concept of solidarity offers a puzzle in practice. Solidarity is standing in unity despite differences. The word “solidarity” connotes—indeed, it requires—these differences, for we do not need solidarity from those who are exactly positioned as we are. We need solidarity and allyship from others to achieve political power. Solidarity signals strength in a coalition of people with different experiences and social power. But in practice, solidarity can be challenging. The ever-present differences and diversity in social capital among those standing together can threaten to undermine common fellowship.

The puzzle of solidarity despite differences recurs in a fractalized form in the Asian American experience itself. Asian American is a broad, politically conceived coalition of diverse communities who share little else in common with one another than having recent ancestry on the Asian continent. Asian American was coined during the creation of the Asian American Political Alliance in 1968 by Berkeley graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, who were inspired by the Black Power and American Indian Movements of the time. But prior to its ascendence, people falling under the category did not identify as sharing much in common. People were Japanese American, Chinese American, Filipino American, and so on. Many of their countries of origin were political enemies or rivals. But in the US context, Asian American gave diverse and divided communities a pole to organize and unify around. The term itself was a catalyst for political power.

To this day, we can challenge Asian American as a big umbrella term itself; it echoes problems similar to POC and BIPOC. Asian American includes about fifty ethnic groups with more than one hundred different languages. While providing a nexus of political power for small minority communities, aggregate claims about Asian Americans paper over important differences and oftentimes in damaging ways. Asian Americans as a whole have a higher median income than the national median. But this fact masks the reality that the wealth is not equally distributed among subgroups. The disparities can be attributed to differences in education level and immigrant histories. Indeed, Asian Americans are the most economically divided racial or pan-ethnic group in the US. Moreover, in the US context, East Asians are centered, often obscuring the representation of other Asian groups. For instance, the unique experiences of South Asians, who endure colorism and Islamophobia, are oftentimes rendered invisible by the American conception of Asian American.

Yet despite the vast differences, as political scientist Karthick Ramakrishnan says, what unites Asian Americans is a “history of exclusion” with successive bans on communities becoming US citizens, first the Chinese, then Indians, then Japanese and Koreans. To this day, one thing Asian Americans experience in common is the status as perpetual foreigners. We are asked where we really come from. Our status as and allegiance to America is always under suspicion. In the mildest cases, this is experienced as a repeated, exhausting microaggression. In its most pernicious form, it has manifested in concentration camps, immigration exclusion, travel bans, and violent hate crimes. These experiences unite us. There can be solidarity around a core issue of marginalization despite deep differences among communities.

Just as Asian Americans can stand in solidarity together despite significant differences between them and their experiences of oppression, so too can Asian Americans and Black Americans stand together in solidarity if we identify the pillar of commonality in our experiences. That common pole has always been living as non-white in a system of White supremacy.

But finding unity in that fact can easily escape us. White supremacy manifests differently in Asian and Black lives. These differences often veil what we have in common. This is not by accident. Whiteness in the US has always been defined in opposition to Blackness. And it is this Black-White logic of White supremacy that also shapes the Asian American experience as often explicitly in opposition to Blackness.

Political scientist Claire Jean Kim’s work illuminates and details this logic. Kim challenges the view that there is a racial hierarchy in the US that orders the races along a single dimension, with Whites on top, Blacks on the bottom, and Asians and others in the middle. She rejects a “single scale of status and privilege” while acknowledging that Asian Americans have been racialized relative to Whites and Blacks and not independently of the White-Black binary. Kim suggests that a two-dimensional field of racial positions can better capture the multiple dimensions of racial hierarchies and posit that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated relative to Whites and Blacks on two distinct axes. The axes are those of superiority/inferiority and insider/foreigner. White supremacy puts Whites in the superior position when it comes to innate abilities...
and culture and Blacks in the most inferior position. White supremacy grants Asians “relative valorization” compared to Blacks, where Asians are seen as culturally or racially better than Blacks, although inferior to Whites. But at the same time, Asians are seen as ineradicably foreign and unassimilable on those same racial and cultural grounds. Thus, despite the racist inferiorization of Black Americans, African immigrants were granted naturalization rights half a century before Asians, who were denied immigration to the US or naturalization for much of the late 1800s through the 1950s. Inferiority and un-assimilability are separable and distinct dimensions of racism. Asians, Blacks, and Whites stand in a triangulated position along the two dimensions, with Whites seen as superior insiders, Blacks deemed as inferior insiders, and Asians as foreigners, racially superior relative to Blacks. This triangulation served the purpose, Kim says, of ensuring, post-slavery, that Asians would be “a cheap and plentiful labor supply while hindering the permanent formation of a second degraded caste seeking inclusion in the polity.” In brief, Asian Americans filled a labor gap left by Black emancipation, but it was in the interest of Whites to ostracize them from full citizenship status and use them as a wedge for further denigration of Black Americans.

Our communities’ positions in this field of racialization define the character of our oppression. Often this positioning makes it seem that Asian Americans have less in common with our Black compatriots than we do. If we fall prey to that misconception, we can see all the differences and none of the commonalities.

The key is in learning that our oppression has the same source even if our experiences of it are vastly different. The model minority myth offers a vivid example. Asian Americans are often called the model minority, a designation intending to set us apart from other non-whites. But this “honorable” is no praise at all. It is a racist tool of oppression. It implies that the relative prosperity of Asian Americans is due to their work ethic and cultural emphasis on education and signals the failure of other minorities to live up to American ideals. Indeed, the moniker came on the scene at the same time the Black Power Movement was fomenting as a way of undermining their civil rights efforts. The message sent: Stop complaining about racism; see, the Asians have prospered on hard work alone. Further, it implies a false analogy between our communities’ arrival stories in the US; unlike immigrant groups, most Black Americans’ ancestors were brought here against their will and faced centuries of disadvantage, death, and discrimination. At the same time the myth denigrates Blacks, it confines Asian Americans. It sends a tempting message to Asian Americans that if we are obedient, silent, and do not rock the boat, we will be granted an honorary status. It is an indecent proposal of proximity to Whiteness.

Where does this leave Black and Asian solidarity? Again, solidarity is about togetherness despite differences. Only focusing on the difference leads to the dissolution of solidarity into siloed factions. BIPOC is a step in the direction of dissolution. Only focusing on commonality results in superficial solidarity that is not sustainable. POC without attention to the diversity of our experiences risks this ill. Solidarity can only be maintained if we can see our united cause in our disparate experiences as racial minorities in the US. To stand in solidarity, we must attend to difference and unity simultaneously.

On the side of difference, we need to do the work of learning how White supremacy affects each of us differently. We need to disaggregate racism as some unified concept into its particular manifestations in the lives of differently raced people. The shift to BIPOC is instructive here. BIPOC doesn’t do the necessary work. On its own, it is an example of lazy activism. It highlights difference without data. People can still use the acronym broadly and crudely without educating themselves about the particular oppressions that various minority groups face. For instance, we often lack statistics on how various institutions and practices affect Indigenous people. Centering Indigenous people when discussing issues without actually knowing how they are affected allows us to pose as if we’re addressing their issues when in fact we are not doing that work.

On the other hand, understanding racism as a field of positions with more than one axis of oppression means it’s not always appropriate to center only Black and Indigenous people. BIPOC used to discuss state-sanctioned violence fails to center Latinx people who are killed by the police at a rate nearly double that of Whites. BIPOC would be inapt to use in referring to the spike in violence that Asian Americans are enduring in a racialized pandemic. BIPOC is the wrong term for discussing the experiences of Asians, Latinx folk, and those racialized as Middle Eastern, who are seen as perpetual foreigners and the targets of xenophobia. Understanding racism as multidimensional is not compatible with a racial dialogue that centers the experiences of only some marginalized groups.

On the other hand, the oppression of Black and Indigenous Americans in total is often and regularly the most severe. In attending to our differences, those of us with relative privilege must focus attention on their causes. We cannot insist on a unified POC if we are not doing the work to lift up the most marginalized communities in our midst. We do not earn solidarity if we do not show up for them, leaving their needs obscured or neglected. We must build and maintain solidarity around a shared experience of oppression while always acknowledging our differences in social capital. And Asian Americans must be especially attuned to the ways in which we are used by White supremacy and tempted with proximity to power. We should never forget that the offer of relative valorization is not an offer of equality and that it comes at the cost to solidarity with our Black and Brown compatriots.

On the side of unity, we must learn about our shared history. There is a strong, robust, decades-long tradition of Black and Asian solidarity. The media would have you think we are mostly at odds. When people think of Black and Asian relations, they often recall the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the murder of Latasha Harlins by Soon Ja Du. Or the debate about affirmative action in college admissions, where Asians have been depicted as the victims of a policy intended to help Black and Latinx students. That our interests are opposed, that we are at odds with one
another, is the dominant narrative. That is a narrative mostly written and disseminated by a White media.

But that is not an accurate picture. We should educate ourselves, each other, and others about the Bandung Conference in 1955, where representatives of twenty-nine African and Asian countries came together in Bandung, Indonesia, to advocate for peaceful coalition and decolonization during the height of the Cold War. We should learn about and elevate the status of Asian and Black civil rights leaders who worked in solidarity. Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, and Martin Luther King, Jr. came together to denounce the Vietnam War, jointly playing a pivotal role in the American peace movement. We may learn briefly of Malcolm X in our history classes—he, too, is pushed to the margins. But how many know of Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American political activist who spent time in the Japanese American concentration camps after Pearl Harbor, joined Malcolm X’s Organization for Afro-American Unity, and was by his side when he was assassinated? She worked tirelessly for Japanese American reparations, African American rights, and even Puerto Rican independence. What about Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American philosopher who worked as an activist in Detroit for the Black Power Movement? We should celebrate our joint accomplishments. The pivotal Supreme Court case Loving vs. Virginia about a marriage between a White man and a Black woman, which won the right to interracial marriage, was supported by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Japanese Americans Citizens League. And more generally, Asian Americans owe their own advancement of civil rights to the tireless and deadly work of Black civil rights activists.¹⁹

Some of these histories have not been made visible and prominent. That, too, is intentional. A history of solidarity between Black and Asians is a threat to White supremacy. But they combat the narrative that Asian and Black interests are at odds with each other. We have a rich history of solidarity. Imagine how things would look if both our communities knew that and celebrated these alliances. The May 19 Project (Kochiyama’s birthday) is working to promote the history of AAPI people in solidarity with other communities.²⁰

We must become literate in the history of racism more generally. We must have a complex understanding of White supremacy and all of its tentacles. Understanding the various manifestations of White supremacy allows us to be more critical and perspicacious witnesses and advocates. For example, with the recent rise in violent anti-Asian hate crimes is a media narrative suggesting that the main perpetrators of these crimes are Black men. This is due to a viral video of a Black man attacking Asian elders in the Bay area. But the majority of hate crimes against Asians or any group are perpetrated by White men.²¹

Literacy in White supremacy has enabled Asian American activists to adopt nuanced critiques of White supremacy. Knowing our history and the history of White supremacy tells us that redlining in real estate placed Asian Americans and Black Americans in proximity to each other contesting over scarce resources. The tension between our communities was by design and it distracts from the main source of disadvantage—White control over the lives of People of Color. The same literacy enables us to take sophisticated approaches to the problem. While some are calling for more police presence in Asian neighborhoods, Asian American activists recognize that the solution cannot be in more policing, which brings danger to communities of color. In San Francisco, Asian, Black, and Latinx community members stood up alongside their elderly Asian neighbors, volunteering to escort them to the local grocery store and ensure their safety.²² This is a vivid example of how a shared understanding of White supremacy and the varied ways it manifests for different groups can enable us to act in solidarity.

When we are literate in the history of White supremacy, we are not fooled by its many guises. Take affirmative action in college admissions. The issue has been framed as one in which Asian Americans are the victims of programs aimed at benefiting underserved Black and Latinx students. The main plaintiffs in the case are White conservatives with a history of challenging race-based policies, who have convinced some Asian Americans to their side.²³ But when we know our history, we know we are being used to serve White interests. As Kim says,

> The valorization of Asian Americans as a model minority who have made it on their own cultural steam only to be victimized by the "reverse discrimination" of race-conscious programs allows White opinion makers to lambast such programs without appearing racist—or to reassert their racial privileges while abiding by the norms of colorblindness. It allows them to displace what is fundamentally a White-non-White conflict over resources (higher education, jobs, businesses, contracts) onto a proxy skirmish between non-Whites, thus shifting attention away from the exercise of White racial power.²⁴

When we know how this logic works, we cannot be fooled. Framing the debate as a conflict between non-Whites hides the preferential treatment of mostly White legacy students and children of donors.

Next, our solidarity must be visible. There is so much worry about virtue signaling and slactivism. But there is value in visible, audible, and present solidarity for one another. We must ensure our solidarity is not superficial. True solidarity is costly. To stand together requires taking risks and doing hard work. But making that work visible is still important. People cannot know they are supported if they cannot hear you. When Asians for Black Lives show up at rallies and protests in support of police reform, we make our solidarity visible. Black citizens decrying the anti-Asian hate crimes reminded us that we are not alone.

There is still a need for an identity as People of Color, and I hope this identity is possible and sustainable if we do the work. We cannot afford to be divided. POC is itself a powerful identity above and beyond a particular racial or ethnic identity. We have evidence to support this claim. Political psychologist Efren Pérez found in a survey of
African American, Latinx, and Asian Americans that stronger identification with the POC label indicated stronger support for Black Lives Matter and support of DACA. He also found that this "identifying as a ‘person of color’ means viewing oneself as an interchangeable member of a shared group, where one’s unique identity as Black, Asian or Latino is nested under a broader POC category." He also found that this shared solidarity decreases under test conditions where differences in group oppression are made salient, for instance, when it is explicitly stated that the legacy of slavery cannot be compared to the hardships of undocumented immigration. This suggests that our solidarity depends on seeing each other in a common cause. As I’ve suggested here, we can do that all the while attending to our different experiences and needs.

At times it may seem there are cracks in the coalition of People of Color, and we may need to go our separate ways here, we can do that all the while attending to our different experiences and needs.

NOTES
14. African naturalization was allowed under the Naturalization Act of 1870. People from various Asian countries were denied immigration to the US under several different exclusion acts from 1875 to 1965, and naturalization was not allowed until the 1940s.
24. Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 117.
26. Pérez, “‘People of Color’ Are Protesting.”

The Ambivalence of Resilience
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ABSTRACT
This paper claims that human resilience is ambivalent. Resilience is the ability to withstand and recover from adversity and return to efficient, everyday functioning; in the media, the term "resilient" is used frequently as a term of commendation for COVID-19 health-care workers, typhoon survivors, victims of racism, and adjunct faculty. I argue that the resilience of these groups should neither be uncritically celebrated nor completely rejected. What...
I. INTRODUCTION

There is something discomfiting about referring to certain groups of people as resilient. Resilience refers to the ability to withstand and recover from adversity and return to efficient, everyday functioning. Say you’re a frontline in a world being ravaged by COVID-19. When you can perform your work well in the face of death and despair, being praised for your resilience can bring up bewilderingly difficult feelings. On the one hand, the compliment applauds your well-earned heroism; on the other, it confirms your wretched fate.

Many of my Filipino family members and friends in the health sector have had a rough ride in the global pandemic. Being resilient in their jobs is praiseworthy. Faced with chronically stressful, dangerous, and sometimes hostile circumstances, that a nurse in intensive care can keep working is exemplary. That she can find room for joy and hope while risking her life every single day is extraordinary. But being congratulated for one’s resilience in these conditions is also patronizing. That health-care workers are expected to cope more easily with trauma, or that they even have to demand better pay and safer working conditions from their employers, is the social consequences of being seen as resilient. Indeed, the pernicious rhetoric of migrant Filipino health-care workers as resilient heroes has been around for decades. As Joy Sales points out:

By the 1990s, 10 percent of the national GDP came from migrant remittances and the economy became increasingly dependent on labor export. Part of this process was the commodification of Filipino migrant workers and their branding as “ang bagong bayani” or the country’s “modern-day heroes.” Employers around the world have praised Filipino workers for their “resiliency” and work ethic. Meanwhile, these workers remain underpaid, underemployed, and disposable. For example, Filipinos comprise about 1% of the US population, yet they represent 7% of healthcare workers (about 150,000 people), and as of August 2020, 30 percent of the 193 registered nurses who have died from COVID-19 are Filipino. These statistics reveal a dark underbelly to the “heroes” narrative: Filipino labor is essential, but their lives are not.

The rhetoric of resilience sweetens oppression into virtue. In being typecast as resilient, health-care workers are gaslit into compliance and needless sacrifice when their suffering could be eased even in times of emergency by, for a start, paying them well and being firm about public vaccination mandates. Filipino health-care workers (mostly women), along with other historically oppressed and marginalized groups and cultures, have had to endure the ethnocentric condescension and the intergenerational harm that accompanies being seen as a member of a resilient group. Understandably, the word “resilient” can trigger discomfort, suspicion, and resistance in people who receive them as compliments, especially when the praise is given by those who have not had to suffer the same level of hardship, neglect, or misfortune.

In this picture, human resilience appears ambivalent. This may appear confusing, given how human resilience is usually depicted in popular books as an unqualified good. As John Stuhr points out, the current market treats resilience as “a mental toughness strategy; an emotional power; a spiritual strength; or a hard-won wisdom…. Some identify resilience as an art. Others claim it is a science. All of these books approach resilience as a key component of happiness and well-being.” I hope to make sense of this disjunct and explore the ambivalence of human resilience. The idea of resilience, of course, is ubiquitously engaged in psychology and trauma studies, feminist and gender studies, climate and development studies, and political ecology. However, with the exception of pragmatism, feminist political philosophy, and philosophy of education, it remains underexplored in philosophy. This paper is an attempt to engage the idea of resilience philosophically. The resilience I am interested in is the ability of vulnerable individuals and groups to cope, survive, and rebound from systematic adversity; in the media, the term “resilient” is frequently used as a term of commendation for COVID-19 health-care workers, typhoon survivors, victims of racism, and adjunct faculty. I argue that the resilience of these groups is ambivalent in character and should neither be uncritically celebrated nor completely rejected. At stake in this interpretation is a better understanding of how to recognize, honor, and respond to the plight and fortitude of resilient individuals and groups. Part I of the paper talks about the features that lend human resilience a positive valence. Part II shows how these positive aspects are tied to its negative aspects. Part III applies my insights on resilience in terms of migrants and groups of people as resilient. Part IV concludes by accounting for the ambivalence that results in misrecognizing or taking human resilience for granted, framed in the Philippine academic context.

II. THE UPSIDE OF RESILIENCE

Being ambivalent about something means simultaneously having opposed and contradictory attitudes about it. Critical theorists, for instance, have recently interrogated the ambivalence of the politics of recognition, pointing out that recognition carries features that are grounds for both optimism (as recognition can affirm a person’s individual being and self-realization) and deep suspicion (as recognition can entrench uneven, one-sided, or inescapable relations of dependence). My hunch is that human resilience should be understood in a similar
manner. Like the politics of recognition, human resilience is ambivalent. The upsides and downsides of being a resilient person cohabitate in a tense, complex, but unsurprisingly natural way.

A positive feature of human resilience is that it is hard-won. It results from facing something difficult or strenuous or from surviving challenging experiences. Persons discover that they are resilient if, in the face of a moral challenge or a tragedy, they bend and do not break. An image that captures the idea of human resilience, one familiar to the Filipino consciousness, is that of a bamboo swaying in the wind. As folk wisdom in Tagalog goes:

Ang tao ay kawayan ang kahambing
Sumusuko’t umaayon sa hagupit ng hangin
Hindi sumasalungat kundi nagpupugay
Upang hindi mabakli ang saniling bangay

To a bamboo, a man can be compared—
It surrenders its will to the whipping wind
It does not oppose it, but in obeisance it gives praise
That it may preserve its bough from a shattering fate.

The wind is a force of nature, independent of and external to our human existence. A human being must learn to move with its blasts, or yield if needed, to grow hardly and elegantly. Resilience is a quality of character you come to acquire when you learn how to dance with the wind. It is a beautiful, compelling image, but hardly visible to anyone in the midst of a thunderstorm or a never-ending monsoon.

The view of resilience as earned is hardly controversial. Pragmatist philosophers, for example, think of human resilience as an outcome, whether their accounts treat it as a disposition, an adaptive process, a form of wisdom, a virtue, a feature of communities, a moral value, or an amoral concept. The consensus that resilience is produced by overcoming adversity illuminates why, in my view, the idea lends itself well for describing the lived experience of vulnerable or marginalized groups and their struggle for social amelioration. Not only do resilient persons and groups recognize that they can rely on their developed capacities in future crises, but their existence in the world also confirms and justifies how we can distinguish who’s wrong and who’s right in the fight for social justice.

Indeed, another positive aspect of human resilience is the clarity it brings in our evaluation of oppressive conditions and systems. It initially seems that resilience can be used as a description for just about any group or social structure that manages to have some kind of staying power. One could say that racists and Filipino nurses are equally members of resilient groups: both have a necessary role to play in keeping the wheels of the neoliberal agenda turning. But both White supremacy and capitalism can be better understood as part of the dominant global milieu, responsible for legitimizing and weaponizing the norms and social practices that the rest of us have to follow. The people who benefit from the privilege of their whiteness, and those who control more than 90 percent of the world’s resources, do not struggle in the way that members of vulnerable groups do; the status quo not only ensures the survival of the former but also predicates their continued existence and success. Unlike the case of historically oppressed people, the endurance of hegemonic identities and groups in our global society is not exceptional. In short, we need to separate the idea of resilience as a product of resistance against oppression from the resilient features in our social life that are supported and enabled by oppressive systems. The former is what we ought to honor and admire; the latter is what we destroy and rebuild from.

III. WEAPONIZING RESILIENCE

The fact that human resilience is earned, and that its existence participates in orienting our understanding and response to oppressive conditions and systems, are reasons for its recognition and celebration. But the affirmative aspects of resilience are married to its negative aspects; in short, the rewards and costs of human resilience are intertwined. What is worth drawing attention to is how the charge of human resilience can be hermeneutically shaping: it can enable a particularly damaging sense of expectation from resilient individuals and groups.

The most damaging aspect of resilience is the fact that it can be weaponized by persons and institutions in power. Resilient persons are resourceful and are adept at bouncing back from continuous, sustained, and systematic exposure to harms and challenges. Their endurance, I claim, further endangers the lot of already oppressed persons and groups. Exploiters of resilience can turn the earned self-protective capacity of medical workers, asylum seekers, and sexual abuse survivors into a distraction or an excuse for neither accounting nor correcting harms or injustices. Worse, resilient persons who fall prey to the hero narrative may come to believe that their oppression is something they ought to be grateful for, since it has transformed them into stronger or better versions of themselves. Put differently, parading certain people and groups as resilient can be a way of controlling them and keeping their revolutionary energies at bay. The political and psychosocial harms stemming from the weaponization of the term inspired Vinita Srivastava to host the Don’t Call Me Resilient podcast. In her article in The Conversation, she states:

I believe we should always celebrate resilience: the human ability to recover or adjust to difficult conditions. But for many marginalized people, including Black, Indigenous and racialized people, being labelled resilient—especially by policy-makers—has other implications. The focus on resilience and applauding people for being resilient makes it too easy for policy-makers to avoid looking for real solutions.

Like Srivastava, I think that the exploitative praise of human resilience does not entail that we reject what is valuable about it. There is something deeply amiss in failing to acknowledge the strength and courage of individuals and groups that deserve this recognition. But our awe and acknowledgement of human resilience are not enough. While it makes sense to take pride in human resilience, we should also be cautious of the sociopolitical function...
it performs and question whose interests this compliment truly serves.

To summarize my argument: the positive and negative aspects of human resilience stand in direct relation with each other, making it absurd to celebrate the good without accounting for the bad. Our task is to learn how to live with the ambivalence of human resilience. What is at stake in doing so is our capacity to authentically honor the complexity and endurance of resilient individuals and groups and at the same time mitigate the risk of their continued exploitation. More importantly, the ambivalence of resilience can expose the structural conditions that compel people to become resilient in the first place. As Srivastava puts it, we need to be "in search of solutions for those things no one should have to be resilient for."

IV. RESILIENCE IN THE GLOBAL NORTH
My resilience as a Filipina philosopher matters. Being reminded of the ambivalence of my condition shores up tense, conflicting, and sometimes violent feelings. In the next paragraphs, I translate how my analysis of human resilience as ambivalent undergirds my lived experience as a "world"-traveling Filipina philosopher. In this section, I apply my insights on resilience in relation to the challenges of academia in the Global North.

Becoming American can still be arguably cast as an aspiration for many Filipinos today, a dream borne by the lingering shadow of American colonialism and cultural imperialism. In the Manila of the '90s where I grew up, entering the US was like traveling to Filipino Mecca. I remember my jealousy as a ten-year-old kid, when a friend with money said she spent most of her summer in America-h while I spent mine baking deep brown in the hot provincial winds of Cabiao, Nueva Ecija; I remember my mother's boasts when we were granted multiple entry B1/B2 US travel visas, her face beaming: "we don't look poor and we don't look like TNTs." I was nineteen when I first set foot in California and met extended relatives I didn't even know existed; more of them have moved to the US since then. The mantra behind Filipino intergenerational immigration is this: life is always better there than here. I regret not questioning this claim when I left the Philippines at twenty-six, a decision I made in haste out of opportunity and quiet desperation.

I am not an American. My US immigrant petition was approved during the editing stage of this paper, in Australia, where I lived close to ten years, I am a permanent resident. That I am considered as a Filipina whose existence is judged as “acceptable” or even “desirable” in these two rich countries leaves a bittersweet taste. The ambivalence of my story of resilience looks like this: every step I take, in embassies, college rooms, and philosophy seminars, where doors have been jackhammered open by outsiders before me, feels simultaneously like a boon and a burden. That my professional circumstances allow me to move to different places for work is seen by other Filipinos as enviable. But in this picture, the standard of achievement is set so low that it keeps surprising me when what I accomplish surpasses what I have been engineered to hope. That I could even aspire to be a philosophy professor or publish books with non-Filipino presses did not cross my mind until I was in my thirties; philosophers bred in lower middle-class Manila just didn’t have ambitions of that sort. My capacity to dream about what I can do as a scholar was so constrained that I owe much to the grace of feminist philosophers and philosophers of color for expanding my imagination. A reward of my resilience is a good sense of understanding how much hardship I can take. When people complain about the bad practices of academia in the Global North, I look back at my experience of teaching and research in the Philippines and think, “Oh, this? This is easy,” knowing that the conditions and pay would be worse if I returned home. A cost of this resilience is this nagging, lonely feeling that, given the privileges I have earned and enjoy now, I have no choice but to succeed. But success is a strange, metamorphic beast in academia: I struggle to articulate what the goal of a Filipina philosopher success story is even supposed to be.

This conundrum leads me to my point about resilience and politics in academia. One story that stuck with me is Professor Emerita Ruth Millikan’s recollection about teaching philosophy for the first time, shared in a meeting of the UConn Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP). Not having had a woman philosophy professor in the 1960s when she was doing her PhD, she realized she didn’t know how to inhabit this role. She had to compose her version of a woman philosopher on her own while she taught classes filled with male students. Fortunately, being the “first of its kind” in academic philosophy is becoming rarer globally, owing to the resilience of non-traditional philosophers who had to be the first. Indeed, the reward of collective resilience has something to do with discovering that we aren’t just being resilient for ourselves, but that our resilience is linked to the resilience of others. This reward is tied to its cost: the recognition that we are bound together by our multifarious experiences of being kept out of the academy. The scourge of academia, after all, is rooted in its exclusionary practices across disciplinary ranks and traditions. But when we meet persons whose lifeworlds intimately intersect with ours, we experience the joys of respect and friendship and become part of unique projects of self-creation. María Lugones mentions this phenomenon in her description of “the experience of outsiders’ to the mainstream of, for example, White/Anglo organization of life in the US and stresses a particular feature of the outsider’s existence: the outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less ‘at home.’” In light of rarely feeling at home anywhere in academia, Lugones recommends that women of color willfully (and playfully) “travel: that we learn to navigate these spaces skilfully and creatively, and in the spirit of learning, understanding, and loving. It is for this reason that groups like the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies are valuable to me. Our hard-won resilience in academia has a collective aspiration: we’re all interested in creating a future where relations of equality and respect are at the forefront. And while that remains out of our reach, we adapt to a resilient form of living, one that allows us to cohabit worlds that are not designed for our success and to engage in the various processes of transforming them.
V. RESILIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE PHILIPPINES

So far, I have highlighted how being resilient in academia can give rise to simultaneously opposing sentiments, mostly in the spectrum of pride and resentment, coupled with experiences of loneliness and camaraderie. I’ll end this essay by taking up a challenging question: What happens when this resilience is misrecognized, taken for granted, or deliberately ignored? Interestingly, the misappropriation or neglect of resilience can give rise to more ambivalent responses, ranging from feelings of vindication to deep disappointment. Take, for instance, colleagues or students who are convinced that your place in academia is rooted in your being brown and a woman. Never mind how impressive your CV is or how well you teach; the essential bit is the shade of your skin and gender preference. You’re proven right in knowing that our social ills remain as monstrous and damaging as ever, and you are also damned for your continued participation in the academic industry. I have nursed wounded egos of friends and mentees, including my own, who have had to deal with this prejudice.

This dissatisfaction is resonant in the academic markets of the Global North, where the catchwords of “diversity,” “equality,” and “inclusion” can take on pernicious forms. But the academic spaces in the Global South have their own malaises, too; in the Philippines, it takes the shape of invalidation, dismissal, and erasure of women’s voices. One reason I left my country is that my future in philosophy seemed stunted there, given the resentment and misogyny against Filipina philosophers. Now that I’m in a less precarious situation, I’m committed to exposing and addressing the factors that have pushed me away, knowing that they continue to harm other women like me. I’m an active member of Women Doing Philosophy (WDP), an organization that aims to create and claim spaces that promote the scholarly, professional, and personal flourishing of Filipina philosophers. Academic philosophy in the Philippines is toxic to women. But instead of recognizing our serious and ongoing concerns, the Philosophical Association of the Philippines (PAP) is failing to respond appropriately to gender-based trauma and to support the well-being of Filipina philosophers. PAP’s response to WDP’s initial refusal to collaborate in February 2021—a decision based on the traumatic experiences of our members in PAP conferences, which include sexual harassment—is to ignore and delegitimize the existence of WDP. Even with 124 members globally, with more than twenty-five public philosophy projects in the last three years, and with most members working in Philippine academic institutions, Women Doing Philosophy is not mentioned by the PAP organizers in their call for papers, in the program of the event “On the Philippine Gender Turn and the Anthropocene” (November 2021, funded by a Hypatia Diversity Grant), or in this recent assessment of gender-based philosophical and activist discourses in the Philippines, as if their Filipina colleagues weren’t at the brink of staging an academic revolution. This negligence is inexcusable. Why discount the voices of hurt and angry women in the Philippines? Why is their activism excluded from the narrative of feminist philosophy being crafted by the PAP? Why are feminist philosophers in positions of power complicit in their silencing? Except for a few, why are men who recognize what’s wrong in the culture of philosophy in the Philippines so quiet?

Circling back to the beginning of this essay: while being called resilient can be discomfiting, not being recognized as such is as equally disturbing—a confirmation of just how much and how deeply ambivalence structures resilience.

NOTES

10. See Parker and Keith, eds., Pragmatist and American Philosophical Perspectives on Resilience.
11. Of course, resilience as a description is not exclusive to members of historically marginalized groups; one could aptly use the adjective “resilient” to describe any individual or collective that can survive or recover from a personal tragedy or a natural disaster. We shouldn’t begrudge others of its use. What this paper is concerned about is how this term is deployed in a ubiquitous and uncritical manner in our sociopolitical milieu and in relation to members of these vulnerable groups.
12. See “Resilience | With David Bather Woods, Serene Khader, Mark Neocleous, and David Westley,” Forum for Philosophy, March

14. For more writings on the topic of resilience, see Resilience: The Brown Babe’s Burden, the first collection of writings by Filipina philosophers (in progress, under contract with Routledge).

15. Srivastava, “Listen to ‘Don’t Call Me Resilient.’”


17. TNT is abbreviation for the Filipino phrase “tago ng tago” (or “always hiding”), a label for illegal Filipino aliens in the United States who are eluding immigration authorities.


Viet was born in Ban Mê Thuột, Việt Nam (spelled as Buôn Mê Thuột after 1975) and came to the US with his family as a refugee in 1975, and was initially settled in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, one of four camps that were set up for Vietnamese refugees. After earning a PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1997, Viet moved to Los Angeles for a faculty position at the University of Southern California, where he is currently serving as University Professor, Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature. Prior to gaining prominence as a creative writer, Viet was already a noted academic with influential publications in areas of American Literature, Ethnic Studies, and Asian American Literature and Cultures. Some of his notable academic publications include Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America (Oxford University Press, 2002) and an edited collection titled The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives (Abrams Press, 2018), which features essays by displaced writers from a wide range of locations, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chile, Ethiopia, Hungary, Iran, Latvia, Mexico, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Viet’s debut novel, The Sympathizer, a spy novel set during the Vietnamese refugee crisis of the 1970s, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel also won many other prestigious awards, including the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature in Fiction from the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from an American Author from the Mystery Writers of America, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Viet’s other notable works of fiction include a collection of short stories titled The Refugees and a second novel, The Committed, which is a sequel to The Sympathizer. In his memoir, A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, a History, a Memorial, which is set to be released in October 2023.
Viet reflects on his own life journey as a creative writer, an educator, an academic, an activist, a family man, and a refugee, connecting personal events to larger historical trajectories of colonization, refugeehood, and nationhood. Viet’s writings, both creative and academic, are a poignant meditation on the complexities of coming to terms with one’s identity and culture, especially in the face of current global problems such as the climate crisis, mass immigration, mass displacement, war, and colonialism. His fictions highlight in fundamental ways that the modern stories of immigration and exile are never monolithic. As his novels and short stories reveal, the process of arriving in a new country and starting a new life can be relatively smooth for some. For others, such as the protagonist of The Sympathizer, it could be a process filled with the horrors of violence, loss, and unthinkable tragedies. In this long-form interview, which we conducted via Zoom on March 14, 2023, at 4:45–6:15 p.m. EST, Viet offers a detailed glimpse into his life and everyday experiences as an educator, a thinker, a writer, an activist, and a human being, reflecting not only on what it means to survive in the current US political climate as a refugee, a person of color, and a member of an ethnic minority, but also on what it takes to build and foster communities of resistance and solidarity dedicated to empowering—and improving the lives of—the most vulnerable and disenfranchised in our society.

CONVERSATION

Minh: Where did you grow up and what was it like, Viet?

Viet: I came to the United States in 1975 and settled first in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, lived there for three years, and then moved to San Jose, California, where I grew up from 1978 to 1988, and then I left my parents’ home and became a young adult. Those thirteen years in Harrisburg and San Jose would be how I would define my growing up. In Harrisburg, I had a happy childhood because I didn’t realize what was actually taking place with my parents’ refugee experience and the entire context of race and war that would eventually become major concerns for me. I was somewhat oblivious to the context of a refugee camp and being a refugee and the fact that we were resettled first through Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, which I’ve finally written about in the memoir I just finished. I talk more in the memoir about being a refugee in the context of settler colonialism and indigeneity, things that I was not thinking about as I was growing up. 1978 to ’88 in San Jose was a deeply influential period for me because then I became conscious of myself as an other, watching my parents struggle to survive as refugee shopkeepers living a very difficult existence, hit by violence, worried about all the relatives that they left behind in Vietnam that they were sending money home to because it was obviously a difficult time in Vietnam, as well. I gradually became aware of all these issues around labor, around religion because my parents are deeply Catholic, and I, despite being sent to a Catholic school, came out an atheist. And politics, anti-communist politics, politics of the war in Vietnam that the United States and Vietnamese refugees were still fighting in their imagination. All of that would lead to the emotional damage that would become my material as a writer.

Minh: Congratulations on the completion of your memoir. I look forward to reading it.

Arnab: That memoir sounds amazing. I do look forward to reading it as well. How did you end up in your current interdisciplinary academic niche? How do you see the relationship between your academic work and your creative work? In particular, does your storytelling serve any pedagogical purpose?

Viet: I became an English major first in college because I deeply loved literature and reading, but I never thought about becoming a professor or becoming a writer until I also became an ethnic studies major. Ethnic studies is inherently interdisciplinary, and obviously the reason why is because it is responding not as much to a disciplinary problem as it is to a historical, political, cultural problem, which is identity, ethnicity, or race. Those types of issues need to be addressed in an interdisciplinary way. For me, interdisciplinarity becomes crucial because it is a methodological response to a world that has been fragmented and divided by the impact of colonization. Fragmented and divided not only in terms of national borders, racial borders, and ethnic borders, but also in terms of disciplinary borders. Singular disciplinary approaches have limitations in addressing a global system of colonization and oppression, which has an interest, I think, in doing things like creating a discipline of English, which is fascinating and beautiful, but also obviously may have certain unquestioned kinds of national and disciplinary assumptions. Becoming interdisciplinary was, number one, absolutely necessary for me to understand what it was to be an Asian American or a person of color or so-called minority in the United States. Then when I started to grapple more seriously with the legacy of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath, it was also obvious to me that I could not address my questions and obsessions purely through a disciplinary approach. My book Nothing Ever Dies is a mélange of different kinds of disciplinary tactics that I undertook. Honestly, to be interdisciplinary for me means to be sort of an amateur in a lot of these disciplines with the hope that the assortment of amateurish approaches would add up to a greater whole than the individual parts, and I hope that I was able to achieve that in Nothing Ever Dies. None of the disciplines that are deployed in that is as deep as a disciplinary specialist could be, but the whole assortment I felt gave me a larger picture of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath and memory.

I never wanted to become a professor. That was not something that I was aware of growing up. The word “professor” was never mentioned in my house. I wanted to
be a writer as a kid, but I became a professor because it was my day job. That was my way of paying the bills, and it still is. I prefer to keep my life separated in this way because being a professor as a day job can be challenging. It’s got all the typical problems that having a day job would entail. Being a writer, in contrast, is my passion. Because it’s not tied to an employer or something like that, I don’t have any of the usual day job complaints that many people have, including writers who are doing that as their profession, for example, as creative writing professors. I never want to go down that road. But being a writer and being committed to the importance of storytelling has been important for me as a teacher and a public lecturer because I think most people outside of academia respond to stories. Academics may think they (academics) don’t respond to stories. They respond to theories and philosophies and arguments and so on. But in fact, I think a lot of academics secretly do respond to stories, and most people outside of academia do prioritize stories. Storytelling becomes a great method, for me, of persuasion. I can use storytelling to advance arguments and theories and philosophies in ways that are not academically structured but would hopefully deliver a philosophical conclusion to my audience at the end of the story, whether the audience are my students, whether the audience is a general public of some kind.

I do believe that academic argumentation can be delivered narratively. I differ from a lot of my colleagues in this way. Nothing Ever Dies, for example, is a book that was written as a narrative. I wrote that book in a very linear fashion, from beginning to end, telling the story and structuring the book in a way in which, contrary to the usual academic fashion, the entire argument is not put at the beginning, but instead the argument reveals itself as the narrative goes along. Hopefully, that makes the book compelling to read from a narrative point of view.

**Yarran:** Viet, you’ve already said a little bit about this, but would you expand a little more on how your upbringing and early life affect the kinds of writing that you engage in, whether creative, academic, or otherwise?

**Viet:** I think of the early reading that I did in the San Jose Public Library because I didn’t own any books of my own. We were too poor for that, or my parents had other concerns besides books. The immersion that I had in the San Jose Public Library was a deeply intellectual and emotional experience for me as a child and an adolescent, and it imprinted on me a certain passion for narrative, for poetry, for images, and for beauty. Looking back on it, it was very clear, obviously, that almost everything I was reading was not about people like me. Most of it was about white people. Most of it was about Europeans. In retrospect, I don’t actually have a problem with that because I think that those writers that I was encountering were not writing with someone like me in mind, and that’s perfectly fine. Their works still spoke to me through the beauty and power of their voices and their art. One of the things I’ve carried away from that experience now as a writer is, of course, that I believe in narrative and beauty and art, but I also believe that I don’t have an obligation to try to speak to certain audiences. If I, as a young Vietnamese refugee boy, could respond viscerally to Philip Roth or to Balzac or to William Makepeace Thackeray, then people who are English or Jewish or Russian should be able to respond to my works, too, even if I’m not writing for them. I absolutely believe in that. I also believe that it is important to have books and narratives featuring people like you or like me. The content of it does matter, but the art of it should transcend the content as well. That’s one of the biggest takeaways as I reflect back upon the impact of that self-education I had in the library and in literature.

**Minh:** Was your family supportive of your personal, academic, and professional journeys, including your ambition and aspiration to become a writer?

**Viet:** I’m lucky that my parents were a little bit liberal in regards to education. They prioritized high standards in educational accomplishment for my brother and me, and my brother set that standard very high by going to Harvard and Stanford. That was just supposed to be what we were supposed to do in our family, and I was the failure because I went to my last choice college. But they were liberal in the sense that they didn’t make me become a doctor or a lawyer. They did not throw a fit when I became an English major, and my older brother helped out a lot by saying, “Tell them you’re still doing pre-med,” and then telling me to do pre-law when I quit pre-med, and so I was able to hold them off. But then when I said, “I’m going to get a doctorate in English,” they were actually okay with that because it was still a doctorate. They weren’t thrilled, but they were still okay with that. But the expectation was always that I had to get a job, so there was intense pressure on me to find a job as a professor, which is not an easy thing to do.

I never did tell them that I was going to become a writer. That was going too far. It was way too hard to explain that to my parents because there are no degrees. There’s no job. I couldn’t say someone was going to hire me as a writer. I did that on my own. I did it secretly, and I think the first inklings that my parents had that I was doing this kind of stuff was when some of my early short fiction was translated into Vietnamese. I remember I brought home to my parents a story that is in The Refugees as “The Other Man.” It had a different title when it was first published. But “The Other Man” had been translated into Vietnamese, and so I brought the story home and gave it to my father, a businessman, deeply Catholic, culturally conservative. “The Other Man” is about a Vietnamese refugee man...
who comes to San Francisco in 1975 and discovers he's gay, and there's explicit sex in the short story. My father never mentioned that short story to me again. The next inkling they had of my writerly ambitions was when The Sympathizer was published, and I brought it home. He was very proud of that book. He wanted me to take a photograph of him holding the book, and he's been proud of all my books since then. I don't think he's read them, but I don't think that's necessary. They've already suffered enough. Why make my parents read my books, too? But the thing is, I think they've accepted the writerly identity, and it doesn't hurt that The Sympathizer won the Pulitzer Prize. That solved all my problems, any credential problems with my career as a writer, for my parents.

Arnab: I’ll actually be teaching “The Other Man” next week in my class. So this is amazing. A speculative question: If you had not pursued writing or academia, what would you have done as a profession?

Viet: I would be an unhappy, depressed, and alcoholic lawyer at this point.

Minh: Like the protagonist of The Sympathizer, you are a big fan of whiskey, is that right?

Viet: Whiskey, yes. Thankfully, I've cleared my desk for this video interview. I did have a bottle of whiskey right here as of last night.

Yarran: What would you change about the profession of writing and academia, in particular your disciplines, and how might we go about actualizing that change?

Viet: I think what I would change about the nature of academia, and it also affects writing because so much American writing is carried out in academia, is the corporate nature of the university. I'm at a university that is intensely focused on its endowment, its fundraising, its hospital system, its real estate, its political influence, and so on. The work of intellectuals in general but also very specifically the work of humanists and artists is either window-dressing in a system like this or highly marginalized or both. I think there's a distinct relationship between the corporatization of American academia and this outcome where intellectual work, the humanities, and art is undervalued. The solution? I don't know if there is a solution. I think that the American university system is completely embedded in the operations of American capitalism. I don't see a way of undertaking this radical transformation. I think that potential solutions would probably have to take place alongside and outside and within the university in incremental ways in terms of collective education, free education, projects like that. I try to think of what my life would be like if I resigned or retired from academia, and I think that there's great nobility in teaching, for example, and I would like to continue that but outside of academia and with other kinds of projects. Again, within academia, simply because of the way that the university has become so deeply entrenched within corporate relations, I'm very pessimistic that we can change that part of it.

Yarran: To follow up quickly, you mentioned earlier the importance of narrative for shaping the ways in which people see the world and engage with the world. I wonder what you think of that as a role that you like teaching outside of the academy. First, I wonder in what forms you have engaged in that activity. Second, do you think that narrative in general is a form of doing that outside of the academy?

Viet: I think that the narrative work, for me, takes place outside of the academy in the times when I go out and engage with non-academic audiences. I give a lot of public lectures, and I've written a lot for magazines and newspapers. Narrative is a really important strategy in both those cases in terms of telling stories that ultimately try to present arguments and persuade people. The academic thinking that we're all engaged in has been very important to formulating some of these ideas, but most people don't want to hear academic arguments delivered in an academic way. Narrative becomes a vehicle for trying to carry out my pedagogical work outside of the academy. For example, when I give public lectures to audiences of a few hundred to several hundred people in Idaho or Minnesota or Virginia, where I’m going tomorrow, I feel that for forty-five minutes or an hour and a half, I have this audience. Most of them haven’t gotten up and walked out on me. They'll listen, right? They'll listen.

I tell jokes, and I tell stories. I get them comfortable and then deliver the punches that narrative allows me to do. Over the last several years, the lectures have started off with my refugee experience and my parents and so on and so forth and worked their way through representation and Asian American issues and the Vietnam War and ended up with a critique of the American dream as a euphemism for settler colonialism. I’m telling people in all these different places, including West Point, where I also had to go give one of these lectures, that this is a country that's built on democracy and freedom and also on genocide, enslavement, war, and colonization. I think that’s kind of an accomplishment. I don’t think most Americans in many of these places hear that, especially from someone like me, a Vietnamese refugee who they expect to come out there and give them a narrative of gratitude or rescue. My lectures and the other stuff that I write for newspapers and magazines are designed to give a different narrative to unsettle settler colonial assumptions that become so embedded that many of us who are Vietnamese refugees or Asian Americans are wrapped up in that.

Minh: A follow-up question, please. Have you ever been cancelled or been close to being cancelled?

Viet: No idea.

Minh: That means you haven’t?

Viet: I think that, for example, when The Committed was published, it was reviewed on the front cover of The New York Times Book Review by Junot Díaz, whose writing I greatly admire. I tweeted about it, and then people got mad because Junot Díaz had been cancelled. Therefore, me accepting the endorsement of Junot Díaz was therefore
I remember, though, when I was a kid, one of the books that I picked up in the San Jose Public Library and really loved was Voltaire's Candide. That's philosophy masked as a fable, and it totally worked. I was probably twelve or thirteen or even younger when I read that book. Obviously, I didn't get it, most of it, but I was entertained by it. Looking back upon something like that as I wrote The Committed, I see part of what I'm doing in The Sympathizer and The Committed is carrying out a Candian story with my narrator. I was convinced that novels could be vehicles for philosophy, and that's not an original thought. Look at Dostoevsky and those other major influences on me. I think people, in general intelligent readers, are perfectly capable of engaging with philosophy when it's expressed in a narrative fashion, for example. That was the part of the commitment behind The Committed, and in The Committed, the philosophy is more explicit than it is in The Sympathizer. I think The Sympathizer is a very philosophically driven novel, but most of that philosophy is sublimated behind action. In The Committed, I wanted to make the philosophy a little more explicit because it is a novel that is about a deeply traumatized person whose life has been shaped by philosophical ideas, who has to rebuild himself and therefore engage with his own philosophical foundations and question them. I felt that there was a narrative reason in The Committed for there to be an explicit discussion of certain philosophical and political ideas. Some American readers, I think, reacted by saying, “Why is there so much philosophy in this novel? It feels like a graduate seminar.” This was from book reviewers. They weren’t quote, unquote “average” readers. They were book reviewers who were perplexed by the appearance of philosophy in a novel. This is, to me, an indication of how middlebrow American literary culture is that even specialists have a hard time grappling with the presence of philosophy in a novel, whereas the French, who, I assume, would be offended by the novel because it’s very critical of French stuff, were like, “no problem.” There was never a question from French audiences about the philosophy in the novel. They were perplexed by the fact that I didn’t like Johnny Hallyday, their French rock icon.

For me, writing The Committed, it’s a novel about gangsterism and crime and about philosophy as a form of action. That’s where I find philosophy to be really powerful. It is about ideas, obviously, but to me, the most important philosophy that I engage with is the philosophy that thinks about the implication of ideas into our everyday lives where they manifest as action—not necessarily as graphically entertaining as gangster shootouts, as it is in The Committed. But going back to the Karl Marx idea, here’s somebody who wrote incredibly dense philosophical work that would then lead to mass revolutions and millions of people dead. That’s real action right there. That’s where I
find philosophy to be really alive or present in the works of people like Sartre, Fanon, Kristeva, and so on.

Minh: Would you consider your novels to be novels of ideas in the tradition of people such as Milan Kundera?

Viet: I hope so. I hope other people think so, as well. I think part of the problem here is that within the culture of the United States, a writer like me is seen first and foremost as a minority writer, a Vietnamese refugee writer, an Asian American writer, and therefore assumed to be writing about those adjectives versus writing about the non-marked issues that occupy the so-called “great novelist,” whether they’re great American novelists or they’re great European novelists. The great American novelist can write about America, and the great European novelist can write about ideas. You brought up Kundera. No one has a problem calling him a novelist of ideas, but when was the last time a so-called minority writer was called a novelist of ideas?

We’re supposed to be writing about our identity and our trauma and all that. All of which is important, but to me part of the project of my own writing is to argue implicitly and sometimes explicitly, which is when people got annoyed, that there are ideas at stake in these so-called identity issues that have been placed upon us and that some of us willingly take up. The memoir is very explicit about this. In fact, the memoir is called A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, a History, a Memorial because it’s partly about me and my family but also about the history and the ideas and so on. To a certain extent, the memoir gives an explanation about why it is that a Vietnamese American novel is also a novel of ideas so long as the novelist can reject the framing that is placed upon the novelist by a racist white supremacist society that doesn’t believe a refugee can write about America, that instead, a refugee can only write about being a refugee. I think, for me, I’m definitely a writer of ideas but also a writer of identities and a writer of action. None of these things is irreconcilable for me.

Arnab: The theme of this special issue is “Identity and Solidarity,” two concepts central to Asian and Asian American studies and to the ethnic studies disciplines more generally. How have those two concepts played a role in your work and in your life?

Viet: Identity and solidarity have been absolutely crucial to my own intellectual, political, artistic development so far as identity and solidarity work dialectically with each other. Obviously, I don’t think solidarity is possible without identity, and identity by itself, without solidarity, is a deeply problematic place to be. For me, growing up in San Jose, my only identity was a confused one, being a Vietnamese refugee who knew he was different but didn’t have a political language for talking about that difference. I think that is still true today for many people. People without a political consciousness, without a sense of solidarity, without a sense of history treat their identities in ways that can be deeply reactionary and, by being reactionary, can affirm the very histories that produce their identities as negative identities in the first place.

Coming to Berkeley as a student and becoming an Asian American was really crucial for me. That’s an identity, a deeply politicized, historicized identity. But I chose to become an ethnic studies major instead of an Asian American studies major because I also believed in solidarity. I believed that if being an Asian American was important, it was also because it was important in relationship to other so-called minority populations in the United States. In fact, the first ethnic studies course I took was Intro to Chicano Studies, which was actually very important for me because I grew up in San Jose, California, a city with a very large number of Latinos, including friends of mine. Identity in relation to solidarity has always been one of the most crucial dialectics of my life. I think that dialectic is still important because you still see, I still see people with very explicit identity commitments who don’t have a sense of solidarity and who are themselves therefore vulnerable to reactionary sentiments, like racism against other populations that they should have a greater sense of solidarity with. So I think our ongoing task always has been, in the era of colonization and hopefully decolonization, that we both have to develop politicized identities but always in relationship to solidarity with other politicized identities.

The relationship to questions of cancellation and censorship and power is, I think, also clear because when we look at the current political climate and cultural climate of the United States and Florida, where you all are at, or at least two of you, the rhetoric around cancellation is itself deeply ahistorical because you could argue the whole history of colonization has been one of extremely violent cancellation by those in power, including now the cancellation of the histories of colonized cultures, and all that enforced with physical and symbolic violence. The cultural efforts, the civil society efforts of colonized peoples to bring to light and to hearing what has been done to them and what is still being done to them is a fairly soft response to the hard history of violent cancellation that’s already been practiced. The anti-wokeism efforts, the anti-cancellation efforts on the part of conservatives and some liberals is a deeply strategic or a highly naïve response that doesn’t acknowledge this longer history of colonization. I think deeply strategic or highly naïve because it depends on who’s carrying out these programs. I think your governor, Ron DeSantis, is deeply strategic. I think he knows what he’s doing, but I think there’s a lot of people who are just naïve and are just accepting the rhetoric of wokeism and
cancelation without understanding this longer history of colonization.

If we have this dialectical relationship between identity and solidarity, we can bring out this history and say that affirming our identities today is not simply an effort at cancelation. It’s, in fact, a deeply political and programmatic effort at decolonization. I think that someone like DeSantis isn’t exactly wrong when he says that this political movement for what he calls cancelation and wokeness is a threat to his vision of the United States. It is a threat to his vision of the United States. It is a fairly significant and mortal battle that we’re engaged in. So long as we understand that it’s not simply a superficial political struggle but, in fact, is a political struggle and cultural struggle over the very meaning of this nation.

**Yarran:** I want to phrase this more as an invitation. I’d like to invite you to say or to talk about what you think is most exciting about Asian and Asian American studies at the moment, particularly thinking about identity and solidarity. Instead of asking, “What directions do you think Asian and Asian American studies should take in the future?” I’d like to ask you to note some directions that are occurring at the moment that you want to emphasize as speaking to those issues of identity and solidarity that you’ve just mentioned, especially with our current political climate.

**Viet:** I think that we’re in what might be called a third wave of Asian American studies. I think the first wave would be obviously inaugurated by 1969, 1968, and the beginning of an Asian American movement that would lead to Asian American studies. The second wave would be the theorization of Asian American studies that was inaugurated in the 1990s. The third wave has been relatively recent, probably in the last decade to two decades, because the first two waves were defined by a commitment to the nation and to citizenship, not an unproblematic commitment or an untheorized commitment but a commitment nevertheless to those frameworks. I think the third wave has been much more cognizant of the limitations of nationalism and citizenship, including, especially in the United States, monolingualism with a focus on English, a claiming of the country, a claiming of the language, and so on. All of which are important. But the third wave of Asian American studies has been much more open and committed to international Asian American studies or a recognition of how Asian American studies is carried out in Asian countries but also a recognition that Asian American studies is itself US-centered and therefore vulnerable to American nationalism, exceptionalism, and imperialism in its very methodologies. Therefore, a third wave of Asian American studies has to be multilingual, comparative, international, multinational, and so on. I think that is where a lot of the exciting work has been done and is being done.

For example, at my university, Asian American studies is now mostly transpacific Asian American studies. All of my graduate students end up doing Asian language study, and a lot of them go do fieldwork in Asia as a part of their Asian American studies work so that the transpacific turn in Asian American studies is indicative of all these concerns from the third wave. Another element of a third wave in Asian American studies is the awareness and focus on settler colonialism and indigeneity. If you think about the fact that Asian American studies is at least partly born from the work of Orientalism and Edward W. Said, and that work is completely based in a critique of colonization that includes Palestine and settler colonization there, then Asian American studies if it’s to be true to that intellectual genealogy has to engage with a very broad definition of the Orient and its relationship to places like Palestine and to settler colonization. The other dimension of settler colonization that’s also really crucial is that Asian Americans become citizens and settlers. What does that mean for us to claim equality, liberation, justice, and so on as citizens when all that is built on settler colonial projects either within the United States or in the Pacific Islands?

What does it mean for those of us who are refugees to engage in that same kind of narrative, that we reject, for example, the kind of warfare that the United States carried out overseas and then come here and become citizens, and continue to participate in settler colonial violence domestically and the ongoing work of the military-industrial complex? The third wave of Asian American studies has very productively complicated originary notions of how important the United States is as a frame for an Asian American studies project.

**Minh:** My next question has to do with pain. Your works of fiction, whether one thinks of your novels or short stories, often speak to experiences of pain: the pain of war, the pain of loss, the pain of adjusting to a foreign land, the pain caused by racism and xenophobia, the pain of leaving loved ones behind, etc. As a writer, how do you prepare yourself, psychologically and emotionally, to embody, to speak to, to represent such myriad experiences?

**Viet:** I think that, for me, all those questions about confronting pain and trauma, both of the personal kind but also the collective and historical kind, are inseparable from the pain of writing. To become a writer, in my case, was fairly painful. It did involve about thirty years of living with the challenges and the hardships of being a writer. I’m not complaining about that, but I think for me it’s true that learning the art and all of the various technical aspects of writing was a very difficult experience. So was the experience of living with rejection and obscurity and disappointment and all that. Enduring all of that was inseparable from confronting the pain and the trauma of the content of my writing. These two things were inseparable. I had to go through all of that pain of learning to become a writer in order to confront the pain and the trauma of the histories that I wanted to deal with. The discipline of becoming a writer, I think, is related to the discipline of being able to confront the pain and the trauma. It’s only by doing both things at the same time that I could write a book like *The Sympathizer* and then eventually write a book like the memoir I just finished, *The Sympathizer* and *The Refugees* are about confronting the pain and trauma of the collective historical experience of being Vietnamese either in Vietnam or in the diaspora. But the memoir I just finished is about confronting the individual pain and trauma within my own family, which was really hard to do. I couldn’t have done it thirty years ago, and it took the thirty years of
writerly discipline to be able to confront the internal issues within my family and myself.

Finally, I think that it helps to have a sense of humor. I don’t know if I could have done these things without developing a sense of humor. No one who knew me as a college student, for example, would have said, “Viet has a sense of humor,” certainly not in the next decade. Part of learning the narrative art has been also learning the comic art of satire and self-satire, and that’s obviously manifested in The Sympathizer, which then became the preparatory ground for me to be able to write a memoir, where I’m dealing with the very painful subjects within my own family, and which I obviously treat very seriously but also treat with a lot of humor. People sometimes read The Sympathizer, and they’re surprised that I could write a novel about war and violence and torture and war crimes and so on and still make it kind of funny. They’ll read the memoir, and perhaps they’ll think, “Wow, writing about mental illness and domestic disturbances and things like that, and you’re still cracking jokes?” Well, one of the ways by which I could try to absorb all the pain and trauma is to also laugh at it, laugh at them, or laugh at myself at the same time.

Minh: A follow-up, please. You talked about the pain of writing. On average, how many hours a day do you devote to writing? What’s your writing routine if any?

Viet: One thing I tell writers is that you do have to put in the hours to be a writer. I say 10,000 hours because I think that’s not an inaccurate figure. But it doesn’t matter whether you do these hours every day or whether you simply do them over twenty years or thirty years, whenever you can. That was my solution to it. I don’t write every day because I can’t, because I’m a teacher and a professor. That affects the writing, but I did put in all those hours eventually. That’s the writing routine, and again, that’s part of the discipline. For The Sympathizer, I did write every day. That was a very ecstatic and unique moment in my life, but every other book I’ve written has been written in the fragments and the margins of a life that’s also committed to the profession of professing and also the life of parenting and the personal obligations as well.

Arnab: Your works of fiction highlight many different stories of immigration. For some of your characters, the process of immigrating to the United States is relatively smooth (though not easy by any means). For others, such as the protagonist of The Sympathizer or the short story “Black-Eyed Women” (from The Refugees), it is a process filled with the horrors of violence, loss, and unthinkable hardships. As a writer, what do you want readers to take away from reading about such diverse experiences?

Viet: I would want the readers to be moved in some way. I think about my own readerly responses to short stories or novels or poems that I’ve loved, and my reactions have always been threefold. First, I’ve been transported in some way by the narrative or the image. Second, I’ve been emotionally moved in some way. Third, I’ve been provoked to think in some way about what I’ve just read. I hope that those three things are all elements of what readers take away from the stories or from the books. Now, not every reader is going to take those elements away. Some readers will not like what it is that they encounter, and I think that’s fine, too, because I’m also fine with this idea that if I’m committed to a certain notion of my art at the aesthetic and political levels, I’m also committed to this idea that art provokes. It doesn’t just move. It doesn’t just make us feel better. It doesn’t just offer us a reflection. Art can really also annoy or anger us and unsettle us, and not everybody is going to react positively to such an experience. I think that, as a writer, I’m perfectly comfortable with this idea that some readers, I think some minority of readers is going to have a negative reaction to the work.

Yarran: Your stories are a poignant reflection on the complexities of coming to terms with one’s identity and culture. Your characters often clash, struggle, grapple, compromise over what it means to be an American in a society that largely sees you as different, foreign, or othered. Your characters often struggle over the question of how to belong, whether to assimilate fully or hold on to distant cultural values and practices. As a refugee, did you yourself ever experience some of these struggles or conflicts and did these experiences play a role in shaping the complex themes of identity and culture in your works of fiction?

Viet: I think about one of my teachers, Maxine Hong Kingston, whose work I encountered when I was a teenage college student, and how my encounter with her work was initially one of befuddlement. I didn’t understand what I was reading, but I spent thirty years periodically returning to her work because I teach it and because I think of her work as being important to me precisely because it did befuddle me. It led me to come back continually to deal with the complexities of what she was doing. In relationship to my own work and its impact on readers, I hope for some of that same impact. Now, if readers are immediately compelled and entertained, that’s great. But if readers are also sort of put off initially, that’s also fine because maybe the coming-to-consciousness that you’re talking about is sometimes a very delayed process. Sometimes a work can increase our level of consciousness precisely because it already speaks to us. I get a lot of responses from readers who don’t have to be persuaded, but the work does mean something to them because it gives them a heightened understanding or heightened
insight into some kind of problem that’s meaningful for them, like the problem of being Asian American or being a Vietnamese refugee and so on.

But I also hope that the coming-to-consciousness issue might be there even for readers who initially reject or hate the work because maybe they are unsettled by being confronted with an idea or form that they didn’t expect, either in general or from someone like me. That’s also my hope for when I go give public lectures or write public essays and so on. The idea of coming to consciousness and the role that my work plays in that is a complex one because I think there’s multiple audiences, multiple kinds of readers for this work. That’s why I think that I’m willing to allow my work to be a negative influence on some people because sometimes the negative influence is more powerful and more provocative than the positive influence.

I think, for example, about Samuel Beckett, whose plays I’ve seen. Honestly, I don’t understand them. I don’t get it. But talking about writing as philosophy, his work is deeply philosophical, and the impact of the work has been such that I’ve never forgotten it. There’ve been many novels that I’ve seen deeply entertained by and liked, but I’ve totally forgotten about them. Beckett’s work, however, as confounding as it is, including moments where I’ve fallen asleep watching his plays, still affects me, and I continue to come back and grapple with it. That’s sort of the high standard that I have in mind for my own work. I would like novels like The Sympathizer and The Committed to entertain people, but I am perfectly okay with them provoking people in a negative way, too, in the hopes that the negativity will stay with them and force them to confront that negativity at some point later on.

Yarran: Funny that you described it in that way because my initial response to The Sympathizer, at least the first half of it, was I was annoyed by the character’s voice. I couldn’t get inside the narrator’s head. It was only with the really overtly satirical scenes in the second half of the novel with the scenes of the filming of the movie that I started to be able to approach the novel in a slightly different way. By the time I got to The Committed, my mindset towards the characters had changed with the kind of dialectic through the acting of the narrative. In my own experience of those two novels, there was that kind of initial alienation, I guess one could say, about particularly various things about the voice of the narrator but then coming back to it through that kind of unreliability and recognizing that unreliability. So, yeah, thank you.

Viet: Going back to the cancellation issue, we do live in an age in which, I’m not saying this about you in particular, but we do live in an age in which a lot of readers want to feel comfortable in their reading. They want to have difficulties explained to them, aesthetic difficulties or political difficulties and so on, because they don’t want to be unsettled. But one function of art is not to explain itself, and I think that, in some ways, The Sympathizer and The Committed, for example, have didactic elements in them, very deliberately so. In other instances, I refuse to be didactic and explain why certain things are being said or done. Some readers are coming into the work, again not talking about you in particular, and they want to have their worldview affirmed in some way, and it isn’t. It’s dislodged, and they want the comfort of an explanation. Novels don’t always offer that. I think that is, to me, symptomatic of some of the debates around cancellation because sometimes people want to cancel something because they’re unhappy. They’re unsettled. They want an explanation, and it’s not forthcoming in a way that’s pleasing to them. Instead of trying to grapple with the work as art or philosophy and so on, they just refuse to countenance its continuing existence in their world.

That is carried out by people of different ideological backgrounds. I can safely say that that is also carried out by people within my general ideological universe. I disagree when that’s being done because there is an irreconcilability between political orthodoxies and what it is that art and philosophy sometimes need to do, which is to reject orthodoxies of all kinds. Unfortunately, cancellation is oftentimes a manifestation of orthodoxical impulses from people of all kinds of different backgrounds.

Minh: Let’s talk about history and representation. History plays a prominent role in your works of fiction, whether one thinks of representations of the Vietnam War (the American War) or the Fall of Saigon. Do you see your writings as doing important work in educating readers about such historical events? In other words, do you see your writings as trying to undo the damage caused by misrepresentations and omissions on the part of mainstream American media that often amount to jingoistic, propagandistic, and Orientalizing portrayals of such histories?

Viet: Oh, absolutely. I think that the collective work that I’ve done from Asian American literature with my first book through the Vietnam War and refugee experience and colonization is all meant to counter dominant misrepresentations. That being said, I think that fictional work that only does that is kind of boring. I just think that the language around “representation matters,” misrepresentation, corrective representation has a dimension of treating art as if it’s performing a function of affirmation, which is important but is also far from enough for what art should be doing. That’s why I think that I keep returning to the issue of my hope that my writing not only does that work of counter-representation against dominant misrepresentation but also counters the counter-impulse,
the corrective impulse, the impulse for therapy, the impulse for amelioration that people who have been traumatized by misrepresentation often feel.

Art that only does that, that only offers a positive reflection back to the people who have been negatively misrepresented, is quite insufficient and, again, boring. If we use the metaphor of the mirror to say that we’ve been misrepresented, we’ve been distorted, and therefore we have to offer a positive mirror, that’s a dangerous metaphor because when we hold up a mirror, even to people who have been negatively misrepresented, we shouldn’t be just trying to give them a positive self-reflection. This is why I think that, for example, some Vietnamese readers don’t want to read my work, whether they’re communist or anti-communist, because the mirror that the fiction holds up to them is not a mirror of positive reflection. It’s a mirror that shows all the dimensions of our human faces, from all the beauty to all the ugliness at the same time, and, again, there are a lot of readers out there who don’t want to see the ugliness. They just want to see the beauty.

Minh: So art can play a corrective critical function, and it can be entertaining, nonboring, in your sense?

Viet: Absolutely. But again, I’m just trying to emphasize that the corrective and representational parts, as important as they may be, are themselves insufficient to an artistic project because what’s the impulse behind correcting the representation? It’s to offer a truer representation. But is a truer representation only the positive? No, I think a truer representation is, in fact, something that reveals that we are neither victims nor villains. We’re neither angels nor demons. We’re all these things in one subject, one subject as an individual, one subject as a collective or a community. Again, a lot of people who have been damaged by misrepresentation don’t want to confront that more complex level of representation.

Arnab: On March 1, 2023, you delivered the 18th Annual Anne and Loren Kieve Distinguished Lecture at Stanford University. Sponsored by the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE), it is titled “Speaking for an Other.” Would you give us a sense of what that lecture is about, especially in relation to future directions of your work? Does the theme of “Speaking for an Other” tie in any way to issues of identity and solidarity?

Viet: The lecture at Stanford was a foreshadowing of the memoir that’s coming out. There are two dimensions here that I’ll highlight. One is that it’s titled “Speaking for an Other” because the talk highlights the ethical and artistic problems of speaking for an other, whether that is because we assume the role of a spokesperson through the act of representation, whether it’s the act of giving a talk, writing an essay, or writing a novel. It’s ethically and politically problematic and complicated to speak for others, even if that action is necessary to engage in this work of counter-representation that we just talked about. A lot of decolonizing literature and so-called minority literature is caught in this problem of speaking for an other. We need our writers to speak for us, for others, ourselves as others, but what happens when that action of speaking for an other is potentially negative or a betrayal of the people that we’re speaking about?

I think that’s always been the case. It’s especially the case when we are dealing with fiction or memoir, both of which I’ve now engaged in. I used that talk to shift the terrain for me from just the broadly political terrain of speaking for an other, whether the other’s Vietnamese or Asian American, for example, to the very personal dimension of speaking for another who is my mother. That is also speaking for another as well. What happens when our work is not just in a potentially fraught relationship with the larger community but with intimates, people who are very, very close to us? One of the conclusions that I reach in the memoir is that sometimes the other is someone who is too close to us. We could imagine that other as someone who is, for example, part of a community that is right next to ours or a nation that’s right next to ours, but the other is someone who, too close to us, is oftentimes the people we love. What happens when we speak about them? How fraught is that action? I think, for me, the talk and the memoir grapple with the relationship between the need to speak a truth, which is hopefully what we do as writers and philosophers, and what happens if that truth is also taken as a betrayal by the others we are speaking about or speaking for.

Finally, the talk was also about this question of identity, which is, what if the other is within us? How do we know that we even understand ourselves? I think a lot of my work is concerned with that question. Sounds pretty obvious in relation to The Sympathizer and The Committed. In fact, to write this memoir, I had to write the memoir in the voice of the Sympathizer. In other words, in writing The Sympathizer, I had to create a whole persona to approach this complicated history of the war and its aftermath, and then to write my memoir, which I didn’t want to do. I had to use another persona that I had created in order to talk about myself. The novels and the memoir are deeply related in a formal and philosophical sense because they’re all about self and otherness when the self and the other are within us. Treating myself and the other not as simply these vastly huge political and cultural positions but also as positions of internal difference. The novels and the memoir are about individuals confronting the otherness within themselves, and so part of the memoir is about how much I know and don’t know who I am. For example, the memoir talks about the unreliability of my own memory when it comes to
writing about my mother and about how her mental illness was so deeply traumatic for me that I had to contain it and forget huge portions of my own life and my mother’s life in order to just cope with her otherness, the fact that she herself was other to herself because of her mental illness, and then the deep impact it had on our family. Writing the memoir was actually really, really difficult because it was precisely about trying to confront this otherness that I had buried within my own self.

Yarran: I was struck by part of your final response to Arnab’s last question when you brought up writing for your mother in your memoir and the way in which you had to adopt the narrator’s voice in The Sympathizer. Ocean Vuong does something remarkably similar in On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous, for similar reasons and perhaps with similar intentions: simultaneously to be able to write of that person that you care about and to hold them at some distance so as not to impose on them. I want to ask you about that connection. If you have any thoughts that you’d care to share, I’d love to hear them.

Viet: I think Ocean engages in some fictionalization of some autobiographical experiences in that novel, possibly for the reasons you indicate, although I think he’s also said it’s not an autobiographical novel. For me, the memoir is purely a memoir. Gina Apostol, who read the memoir in draft form, thinks I am theorizing through the Mother as an Other. Sounds about right to me.

Minh: Is there a sequel to The Committed? Or is this the end?

Viet: There has to be. There has to be a season three of The Sympathizer TV series if we make it that far, but no more. No more. I fantasize that after the third novel in The Sympathizer Trilogy, I can be done with the war in Vietnam. I’ve written many books about this topic now: war, aftermath, memory, colonization. I would like to be freed from those things. I don’t know if it’s going to happen. I would like to write about other things, and we’ll see what happens after the third novel in The Sympathizer Trilogy. But the third novel in The Sympathizer Trilogy does continue the excavation into war and colonization.

Minh: Do you have a title for it yet? A tentative title?

Viet: The Sacred.

Minh: The Sacred?

Viet: As in, is nothing sacred? And the answer is, no, nothing is sacred.

Minh: Oh, I see. Very good.
**Minh**: Talking about television and film, did you think the Oscars got it right this time?

**Viet**: Also, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was produced by A24. A24 is producing this TV series as well. I just had a publicity meeting with HBO and A24, and this is right before the Oscars. The A24 publicity person for this TV series is also the one who did the *Everything Everywhere All at Once* publicity campaign. I think the Oscars did get it right, surprisingly right. I was a little bit cynical in advance that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* would take home some of the trophies, but it took home so many trophies. Hopefully, it does indicate a shift in Asian American representation in front and behind the camera. We’ll just have to wait and see, and we’ve been hoping for a while. First, we had *Flower Drum Song*, then we had *Joy Luck Club*, and then we had *Crazy Rich Asians*, and the progress seemed to be so incremental and slow. Then this movie just came down and kicked all the doors open, we hope. We hope. I think the real measure is whether Ke Huy Quan gets major leading man roles with this.

**Minh**: What do you think about Ke Huy Quan’s acceptance speech in which he shared that his journey to the US started on a boat and that he spent a year in a refugee camp?

**Viet**: Honestly, I was in a bar when his speech came on, so I couldn’t hear his speech, but I could see him emote the entire time. He seems like a great guy, and I’m so happy that he won. I did read some of the highlights afterwards, and I’m very proud of him that he foregrounded being a refugee and the boat experience. At the same time, he did conclude that portion of his speech with an invocation of gratitude to the American Dream. Much of my work complicates that narrative. I think that there still remains a lot to be written about the movie and the placement of its actors and the whole issue of the awards and everything because I’m quite aware that awards are partly about art but also partly about a lot of other things, about politics, society, and culture. Not to take away from Ke Huy Quan, but the narrative of the grateful refugee is something that America understands.

**Minh**: Okay, thank you, Viet. Just to let you know, this is Viet’s spring break. Thank you very much for taking out ninety minutes of your time—I know you have young children—to share your reflections, your experiences, your thoughts about the past, the present, the future, everything everywhere all at once. Thank you so much, Viet, and good luck with everything. I look forward to the publication of your memoir.

**Viet**: Well, thank you, everybody. Thank you, Yarran and Arnab, for your questions, very detailed, very thoughtful questions. I appreciate all the care that all of you took, including Minh, obviously, for initiating this interview. I look forward to seeing it in *APA Studies on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies*. Never thought I’d be in conversation with philosophers, so it’s pretty awesome for me to see that happen. Thanks, again!

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This conversation was edited for clarity and length. We would like to thank Viet very much for participating in it. Many thanks to his Chief Author Assistant / Executive Assistant Titi Nguyen for arranging the interview and our Editorial Assistants / Research Assistants Vivian Nguyen and Brent Robbins for recording and transcribing it. In addition to Vivian and Brent, Nhi Huynh provided comments and suggestions on this piece, for which we are grateful.

**NOTES**


**SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION**

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philosophy, and Asians and Asian Americans doing philosophy in its various forms), related work in other disciplines, literature overviews, reviews of the discipline as a whole, timely book reviews, and suggestions for both spreading and improving the teaching of Asian philosophy in the current curriculum. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies. One way the dissemination of knowledge of the relevant areas occurs is by holding highly visible, interactive sessions on Asian philosophy at the American Philosophical Association's three annual divisional meetings. Potential authors should follow the submission guidelines below:

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ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow The Chicago Manual Style.

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4) **Submission deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

5) **Guest editorship:** It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of APA Studies depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality journal, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.
EDITORS’ INTRODUCTION

Barrett Emerick
ST. MARY’S COLLEGE OF MARYLAND

Ami Harbin
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Susan J. Brison first published Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self in 2002. This issue celebrates its twenty-year anniversary and the publication of its second edition. It is not an exaggeration to say that Aftermath changed the way that many people think about what philosophy is and how it can be practiced. Brison recounts her experience of sexual assault and attempted murder, providing a profoundly rich analysis of violence, the nature of the self, what it means to experience trauma, and how to recover from trauma in community with others. It also makes the case for doing philosophy in a way that is deeply personal, starting from the lived experience of a particular person and thereby helping to illuminate similar experiences for others. We are honored to have been able to edit this issue and pay tribute to such an important and valuable work.

In October 2022, the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy held its conference at Oakland University in Michigan, and asked participants to consider the concept of aftermath, broadly construed. Speakers presented on the topic as considered and/or overlooked in discussions in the history of philosophy, and many focused on how feminist philosophical scholarship has taken up the concept over time. Brison presented the keynote address. Following the conference, the call for papers for this issue was shared, welcoming submissions from conference participants, as well as any others. Two of the authors in this issue were part of that conference program.

In what follows readers will find six anonymously peer-reviewed essays that were inspired by Aftermath, followed by a reflection from Brison.

In “Aftermath’s Aftermath: Brison’s Methodological, Pedagogical, and Disciplinary Contributions,” Ann Cahill explores the transformative role Aftermath has played for the discipline, as well as the profound impact it often has on students when working through it together in class. In particular, Cahill puts Aftermath in conversation with the work of Merleau-Ponty, arguing that Brison’s methodology avoids some of the ablest pitfalls that can be found in his work. Cahill goes on to explore two insights that emerge from that approach. The first is that our ways of thinking impact our experiences and the meaning we make from them. The second is that legal processes can interfere with the way that those who experience trauma or violence attempt to engage in such meaning-making.

In “Temporality, Hermeneutical Injustice, and Freedom After Rape,” Danielle Tumminio Hansen argues that dominant scripts of what counts as rape create circumstances where many people who survive rape are unable to name it as such, since their experiences do not fall within the bounds of those very limited scripts. An inability to name an experience as rape can create further distress for survivors. At the same time, one’s body can know one has been raped, even without the ability to name the experience. Employing Miranda Fricker’s conception of hermeneutical injustice, Tumminio Hansen argues that the process of acknowledging one’s own experience of rape starts by tempering the hermeneutical power of the rape script and prioritizing the wisdom of the body.

In “Bodies Under Threat: Trauma and Motivated Ignorance,” Karyn L. Freedman describes Brison’s Aftermath as prescient: it pointed towards an account of trauma’s embodiment that would in the years following its publication come to be seen in a shift away from a psychological towards a neurobiological conception of trauma in neuroscience and trauma theory. Freedman notes that there are good reasons to reserve the notion of trauma for the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain that result from a central nervous system under threat, and for those types of events in which such changes occur. Freedman then asks the question of why the neurobiological model has failed to gain widespread and mainstream purchase, and argues that such persistent ignorance ought to be regarded as motivated. The perpetuation of dominant but false narratives about the realities of sexual violence—a historically gendered phenomenon—results in tangible benefits for those who have committed sexual violence at the expense of losses to survivors. Misconceptions of the effects of traumatic events undermine the credibility of those who endure such experiences and contribute to unjust social relations within communities and between individuals.

In “Narrative Care: A Political Method of Survivor Self-Making and Communal Critique,” Miranda Young considers the significance of survivor narratives following experiences of sexual violence. In particular, she examines the construction of narratives within the contexts of oppressive social norms which shape and constrain the survivor’s self-understanding. Young argues for the importance of narrative care in the process of establishing survivor
narratives: “a practice of self-making through narrating, listening to, and treating survivor stories with care.” The paper outlines three tools of narrative care: third-person narration, an intentional form of listening that actively shifts subjectivity, and a Foucauldian form of genealogical work to understand the historical events that shape our understanding of sexual violence.

In “Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence,” Marie-Pier Lemay explores some of the ways in which criminal or legal systems influence and shape the normative expectations experienced by survivors of violence. Specifically, she notes that survivors often experience moral ambiguity about whether to participate in the criminal justice system. On one hand, survivors might be reluctant to do so because they oppose carceral systems more generally or are personally reluctant to go through the process of a criminal trial. On the other hand, survivors might feel the social pressure of what it means to be a “good survivor” who is thought to be willing to participate in such systems. Lemay argues that such ambivalence is born in part from the way that being a “good survivor” is treated as something that is individualized, neglecting the way that sexual violence is in fact a structural phenomenon.

In “The Aftermath of Roe v. Wade,” Jordan Pascoe argues that Brison’s work in Aftermath offers tools for understanding how to conceptualize the harms of forced gestation following the Dobbs decision in June 2022. Noting that the end of Roe has created disastrous conditions for women and other potentially pregnant persons, Pascoe notes that more work is needed in philosophy and beyond to conceptualize the particular violations of state-mandated forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth. Pascoe argues for the need to reframe experiences of forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth as themselves instances of sexual violence, and explores further how such violations must be situated among other persistent state- and socially-sanctioned instances of gender-based violence.

In conclusion, Susan Brison weaves concepts found throughout these papers into a discussion of her experiences—of violence and writing about violence, of being silenced and speaking out. In further unpacking her own narrative, Brison situates it in the context of contemporary attacks on reproductive health care, misogynistic violence, and the ongoing privileging of some survivors’ narratives over others. Brison offers a reflection on the possibilities created by anti-rape activism from the 1990s up until the present, the pushback such activism generated, and the ways in which more public attention and transformation of social norms are still deeply needed. To that end, Brison’s paper serves as an invitation for more people to speak out and join this vitally important conversation.

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APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of newsletter articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.

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2. Where to Send Things: Please send all articles, comments, suggestions, books, and other communications to the incoming editors: Ami Harbin, Oakland University, at aharbin@oakland.edu, and Barrett Emerick, St. Mary’s College, at bmemerick@smcm.edu.

3. Submission Deadlines: Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding February 1; submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding November 1.
ARTICLES

Aftermath’s Aftermath: Brison’s Methodological, Pedagogical, and Disciplinary Contributions

Ann Cahill
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Sometime in 1995 or 1996, as I was approaching the end of my coursework for my PhD, I decided that I was going to write my dissertation on the topic of sexual assault. I was lucky enough to be in a graduate department that consistently supported feminist projects, and thus I had no hesitation about choosing this topic with regard to my standing in the department, no worry that it might be controversial or that I might struggle to assemble a supportive committee. With regard to professional implications, I was entirely naive, and although there was no way to avoid knowing how dismal the job market was, I didn’t think twice about going on the market with feminist theory as one of my primary AOSes, and the topic of sexual assault as central to my current and future research agendas.

I emphasize this lack of concern as a point of contrast, to highlight the kinds of risks that Susan Brison took in deciding to write about sexual assault. She wrote the articles that preceded Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self (2002)—articles that I relied on as I completed my dissertation—as an untenured professor, unprotected by the kind of naivete that surrounded my coursework for my PhD, I decided that I was going to write my dissertation on the topic of sexual assault. I was lucky enough to be in a graduate department that consistently supported feminist projects, and thus I had no hesitation about choosing this topic with regard to my standing in the department, no worry that it might be controversial or that I might struggle to assemble a supportive committee. With regard to professional implications, I was entirely naive, and although there was no way to avoid knowing how dismal the job market was, I didn’t think twice about going on the market with feminist theory as one of my primary AOSes, and the topic of sexual assault as central to my current and future research agendas.

It is no exaggeration to say that Aftermath, and the courage that drove Brison to write it, transformed our discipline. And given its transformative effects, I offer this piece as an unapologetic, albeit incomplete, tribute to the work. Other contributions to this issue will, I trust, extend its analysis and engage in the kind of critical reading that philosophers rightly value. But there is also a place within our field, or should be, for responses that remain focused on how a given text has improved how we think, how we teach, and how we adopt philosophical methods that are both generative and in alignment with anti-oppression values. In any case, that is what I aim to do here.

In claiming and mining her own experience of sexual assault as the philosophical topic that it was, Brison changed our assumptions of what a philosopher looked like, sounded like, thought like, paving the way for works such as Karyn Freedman’s One Hour in Paris (2014) and Linda Martín Alcoff’s Rape and Resistance (2018). It helped, of course, that Aftermath is elegantly written, rigorously argued, and brimming with novel insights that ring true. As she describes the experiences of being overwhelmed by a violent stranger, subjected to judicial processes that were alienating and unmooring, and forced to construct a new self in the wake of gender-based, sexual violence, Brison the writer is sure-footed. She writes confidently about having her confidence shaken, organizing beautifully her portrayal of the cognitive confusion that trauma imposed upon her and laying bare the logical contradictions she identified in the charged assumptions that arose through her interactions with friends, family, and colleagues, some of which caused significant pain.

There are few books that I know as well as Aftermath. There has probably not been a year in the past two decades that didn’t send me back to this book, diving into it with students of all levels, as well as fellow scholars. And while I’ve delighted in the careful parsing of Brison’s arguments and analyses that I’ve undertaken in the context of colleagues, I have to admit that it’s the experience of engaging the text with undergraduate students that has brought home to me its importance. I have taught chapters of Aftermath in such a wide variety of courses—a methods class, a class on sexual ethics, a two-week class as part of the summer philosophy program at Hamilton College (where the students had the opportunity to discuss their questions with Brison over Zoom), a philosophy of the body class—and it always, always stops students in their tracks. It has for me a remarkable balance of accessibility and insight; the writing is so direct and clear that there’s no danger of the students becoming lost in a sea of jargon, and yet the central ideas are so astute, so revealing, that the students start clamoring to apply them to their own experiences and knowledge. It provides students with a model of how to reflect carefully and authentically on lived experience, demonstrating to them that it is possible to honor the particularity of the experience while simultaneously relating it to other scholarly texts and conversations—sometimes to reveal the latter’s flaws, sometimes to illuminate the former’s meanings, but always with the dual and co-constituted aims of generating philosophical insights and figuring out how to live in the world into which we have been flung.

But perhaps most importantly, Aftermath is pedagogically valuable insofar as it allows the students in my classes to grapple with the topic of gender-based violence without the distanitizing effects of the philosophical texts that preceded the work. Brison’s work wasn’t the first philosophical text centered on the harms and meanings of sexual violence, but the ones that preceded it refrained, on the whole, from extensive considerations of firsthand experience. This is not to say that there wasn’t substantial and insightful feminist scholarship on sexual assault, including in feminist philosophy; Catharine MacKinnon’s analysis of sexual violence (1989) was enormously influential, and works by Susan Griffin (1977), Susan Estrich (1987), H. E. Baber (1987) all made their way into feminist analyses (the scope
of the different feminist theoretical approaches to sexual assault were represented in Keith Burgess-Jackson’s 1996 Rape: A Philosophical Investigation). But by and large, the scholarship generated by the discipline did not delve into the details of the experiences of those who had suffered sexual and/or gender-based assaults, primarily relying on either hypothetical, ostensibly paradigmatic examples or references to the sheer scope of the phenomenon (i.e., how commonplace sexual assault was). Such patterns were particularly strong in the non-feminist philosophical literature, which adopted a supposedly objective stance that often strenuously avoided questions of gender inequality.  

While these and other texts made crucial philosophical interventions that illuminated the social and political meanings of sexual assault, none of them has had the pedagogical impact that Aftermath has had. By centering an actual, lived experience of sexual assault (and the social, judicial, emotional, and psychological effects of the assault), Aftermath made space in the classroom for other lived experiences, including ones that differ substantially from Brison’s own. In reflecting on Brison’s experience, and sometimes their own, students didn’t so much apply her analysis to lived experience as much as they joined her in Aftermath’s project: to think philosophically, and generatively, about firsthand experiences of the gender-based violence that is so prevalent in their everyday lives.

It matters, too, that I’ve recommended Aftermath to friends, colleagues, and relatives—not only to those struggling with an experience of gender-based violence, but also those trying to find their footing after any kind of traumatic experience (a car crash, the witnessing or experiencing of interpersonal violence, even if not gender-based, the sudden loss of a loved one). In one case, I suggested the book to a family member who is an accomplished artist, who produced a series of moving works inspired by Brison’s description of trauma as a surd:

My current view of trauma is that it introduces a “surd”—a nonsensical entry—into the series of events in one’s life, making it seem impossible to carry on with the series. This account of the nature of trauma draws on both senses of surd—the mathematical sense (from the Greek alogos) of an irrational number of quantity, not expressible by an ordinary fraction, but only by an infinite series and the linguistic sense of a voiceless sound or a sound dampened or deadened by a mute.

While Aftermath’s direct and accessible writing style, as well as its insistence on the importance of firsthand accounts of traumatic experiences, including gender-based violence, can explain how it thrives beyond the disciplinary bounds of philosophy, its scholarly contributions to the field itself are also crucial. Here, I highlight three of those contributions: crucial methodological approaches, one of which I explore at some length, and two specific insights that continue to reverberate throughout the literature on gender-based violence and trauma.

Central to the analyses that we find in Aftermath is Brison’s insistence that experiences of trauma, as related by those who have actually undergone them, are philosophically relevant—that they, if unpacked carefully and insightfully, speak directly to central philosophical questions:

Sexual violence and its aftermath raise numerous philosophical issues in a variety of areas in our discipline. The disintegration of the self experienced by victims of violence challenges our notions of personal identity over time, a major preoccupation of metaphysics. A victim’s seemingly justified skepticism about everyone and everything is pertinent to epistemology, especially if the goal of epistemology is, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, that of feeling at home in the world. In aesthetics, as well as in philosophy of law, the discussion of sexual violence in—or as—art could use the illumination provided by a victim’s perspective. Perhaps the most important issues posed by sexual violence are in the areas of social, political, and legal philosophy, and insight into these, as well, requires an understanding of what it’s like to be a victim of such violence.

I find it particularly helpful to contrast Brison’s methodology regarding firsthand experiences of trauma with a quite different philosophical approach, precisely because it too promises to think from firsthand, embodied experiences: the references to and descriptions of illness and disability that are central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. From his extensive descriptions of Johann Schneider’s many ailments to his reliance on the example of the blind man’s interaction with his cane, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996) regularly turned to impaired and disabled bodies as he developed his phenomenology of embodied existence. Even as and when scholars in various fields related to critical theory (feminist theory, queer theory, disability studies, etc.) find his phenomenological approach useful in illuminating the lived experiences of members of socially and politically marginalized groups, they consistently note problematic ways in which such examples are put to use in his work.

Merleau-Ponty uses case studies of people with impairments, in most instances, as subjects whose abilities and behaviors deviate from those of the “normal” subject. His primary interest is on what the former can elucidate regarding the latter. Merleau-Ponty only discusses the functional limitations of Johann Schneider and other individuals he uses as examples rather than focusing on ways society may limit them. This approach is in marked contrast to that of disability theorists. So, it may seem that Merleau-Ponty’s framework is counterproductive for disability theory. However, given that he considers being in the world to be a system in which one’s body and the world are fundamentally intertwined, his analysis goes beyond the objective body to examine some of the implications of impairment and illness for being.

Merleau-Ponty’s famous reading of the blind man’s cane is problematic insofar as it omits the social dimensions of disabled experiences, misconstrues the radicality of blindness as a worldcreating
Merleau-Ponty seems to use descriptions not grounded in actual lived experience: does not take into account the ways in which such ableism of blindness in a world that privileges sighted bodies, and he does not include central aspects of the lived experience of disability with suffering and deficiency, primarily insofar as Merleau-Ponty does not avoid the “ableist conflation” of deficiency (particularly in the examples derived from Schneider’s experiences) here functions methodologically as a kind of experimental condition, philosophically relevant insofar as it illuminates normative forms of embodiment.

The case of the example of the blind man and his cane constitutes a different kind of mistake, one that Joel Michael Reynolds (2017) has examined at length. Here, the experience of the blind man, and the ways in which the cane is integrated into the man’s corporal schema, is taken as an example of human embodiment tout court. This methodology seems to be a distinct improvement over the first kind of approach, insofar as it does not take blindness as a deficiency, but rather as a form of embodiment that shares structural elements with non-blind embodied human beings. The trouble is, as Reynolds points out, that Merleau-Ponty does not avoid the “ableist conflation” of disability with suffering and deficiency, primarily insofar as he does not include central aspects of the lived experience of blindness in a world that privileges sighted bodies, and does not take into account the ways in which such ableism distorts the description of the blind man’s experience, a description not grounded in actual lived experience:

Of central concern here is the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s claims about the cane are based in an able-bodied simulation of blindness that does not recognize the difference introduced by disability in the analogy with the feather and car. For brevity’s sake, I will refer to this henceforth as the bodily habit analogy. I will argue that this analogy runs awry by 1) omitting the social dimensions of blindness, 2) misconstruing the radicality of blindness as a complete sensory-perceptual experience—what I will call a “worldcreating disability,” and 3) operating via what seems to be a simulation grounded not in experiences of blindness, but of ocular sightedness.

In both modes, Merleau-Ponty risks dehumanizing disabled persons. In the first case, by framing their experience as telling and illuminating precisely due to its distance from normative experience, the figure of the deficiently disabled person is used to throw into relief the structures of normative embodiment. In the second case, by blithely and implicitly using ableist assumptions about how disability shapes experience and ignoring how social dynamics shape the lived experience of disability, Merleau-Ponty too quickly confounds abled and disabled experience, thus failing to recognize the particularity of blind ways of being in the world.

In Aftermath, Brison avoids precisely both of these pitfalls. Her avoidance of Merleau-Ponty’s second mistake is the result of Aftermath’s most central contribution to the field, that is, her use of personal, firsthand experience. Where Merleau-Ponty must imagine what the blind man is experiencing, Brison is remembering (with all the complexities that memory entails) her own experience, and explicitly tracking the differences (including the epistemological differences) between the experiences of a survivor and the norms and assumptions of a social world that has not honored or integrated those experiences.

Her avoidance of the first mistake, however, is a bit more complicated, and requires more unpacking. As Brison reflects on her own experience of trauma, and draws on narratives from other survivors of trauma, she does not shy away from the harms and suffering that trauma imposes, including the paradoxical experience of feeling as if one was not alive:

When the inconceivable happens, one starts to doubt even the most mundane, realistic perceptions. Perhaps I’m not really here, I thought, perhaps I did die in that ravine. The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased.

For the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world. Tom and I returned to the States, and I continued to convalesce, but I felt as though I’d somehow outlived myself.

Were Brison to adopt the first of Merleau-Ponty’s methodologies described above, she would take this experience as a kind of deficiency, an example of human beings leading a life that lacked something crucial to normative human experience. By contrast, Brison takes the lived experience of the survivor of trauma as itself a human experience, one not beyond the bounds of the norm, which by its distance and marginalization help us to see the norm in starker relief. By taking actual experiences of trauma seriously, and philosophically meaningful, we learn more about human existence, because Brison refuses to dehumanize those survivors, even as the harms that other persons have visited upon them include the persistent sense of nonexistence.
By avoiding Merleau-Ponty’s first mistake, Brison is able to derive from the experiences of survivors of trauma a complex notion of the self that is resolutely relational and that honors both the importance of autonomy and the centrality of embodiment. She grounds this notion of self in a nuanced understanding of how a survivor may move through that sense of nonexistence, and what the process of integrating the experience of trauma (not to be confused with common models of healing, which too often implicitly adopt the foolhardy and damaging goal of reclaiming the self that one was before the trauma) requires and entails. What the survivor needs in this moment reveals truths about the self: not because the survivor is lacking in selfhood, but because the self of the survivor has been directly targeted and threatened, but not destroyed. In the same way that an acutely hungry person reveals the dependence that marks all humans, including those with easy and regular access to appealing and nutritious food, so too does the need of the survivor to have their narrative of trauma heard and recognized reveal truths about all selves:

Not to be heard means that the self the survivor has become does not exist for these others. Since the earlier self died, the surviving self needs to be known and acknowledged in order to exist.

This illuminates a connection among the views of the self as narrative, as embodied, and as autonomous. It is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it: one must (physically, publicly) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative and others must see or hear it in order to for one’s survival as an autonomous self to be complete. This reveals the extent to which the self is created and sustained by others and, thus, is able to be destroyed by them. The boundaries of the will are limited or enlarged, not only by the stories others tell, but also by the extent of their ability and willingness to listen to ours.10

Brison’s methodology produces a host of compelling insights that I find generative and insightful; here, I will limit my discussion to just two. The first consists of her analysis of how our categories of thought shape both our experiences ourselves and the meaning that we’re able to make from them:

How one experiences a trauma, for example, depends on how one (often unconsciously) categorizes the event: is it life-threatening, is it human-inflicted, is it inescapable? These categorizations (which depend on the culturally available models and metaphors) determine whether one feels fear, anger, hopelessness, or other seemingly unmediated emotions.11

In identifying the structural role that categories of thought play in experiences of trauma, the emotions associated with those experiences, and the meanings that survivors wrest from them, Brison refuses overly simplified models of sexual violence (such as Brownmiller’s [1975] understanding of rape as violence, not sex) that do not sufficiently take into account social and political context.

It is crucial to note here that recognizing the socially constructed nature of an experience of sexual assault could be read as politically risky in a social context where there exist multiple hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the prevalence of gender-based violence and the harms that it imposes. If one has to convince one’s community that gender-based violence happens (and far more frequently than is assumed), and that it is deeply harmful, it’s tempting to adopt highly definitive approaches: sexual assault always does this, and always means that. Yet such definitiveness, as Alcoff (2018) argues persuasively, misrepresents the phenomenon itself (or, better yet, the phenomena, as gender-based violence occurs in a wide variety of social contexts and thus has a wide variety of meanings) and the experiences of those who are targeted by it. If one takes seriously the model of the human person as both embodied and relational, incapable of having experiences except through the lenses of shared (and contested) social categories and norms, then there can be no easy, clear, definitive understanding of sexual assault or gender-based violence; feminist political goals must thus be shaped by a willingness to engage with their irreducible complexity.

The second insight I would like to briefly address is Brison’s description of how legal processes stultify the meaning-making process that integrating an experience of trauma requires, a description that captures an aspect of engaging with the criminal justice system that had previously been absent from the literature on sexual assault:

In comparison to most other rape survivors, I was lucky, in being able to bring the perpetrator to justice. But, it seems to me now, there are ways in which having to get—and keep—trauma narrative straight, for the purpose of a trial, for example, can also impede the process of recovery, hampering the ability to go on.12

What I emphasized earlier in this book as the central task of the survivor—regaining a sense of control, coming up with a coherent trauma narrative and integrating it into one’s life story—may be crucial to the task of bearing witness, of living to tell, but it may, if taken too far, hinder recovery, by tethering the survivor to one rigid version of the past. It may be at odds with telling to live, which I now see as a kind of letting go, playing with the past in order not to be held back as one springs away from it. After gaining enough control over the story to be able to tell it, perhaps one has to give it up, in order to retell it, without having to “get it right,” without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures.13

Here again, Brison’s analysis allows us to see the harms in requiring, as judicial processes do, a stable and unchanging representation of an experience of sexual violence. Such a requirement denies not only the experience’s complexity, but also the survivor’s ongoing process of identifying (or not being allowed to identify, or refusing to identify) its meanings. That process, and therefore the meanings that it can generate, necessarily changes as the survivor...
is inevitably (but not in predictable ways) influenced by any number of encounters: with other survivors, with communities of all sorts, with art, with one-on-one relationships. And yes, with scholarly texts. Neither Brison nor I would argue that all such influences are positive or beneficial to the survivor’s flourishing and well-being, but the overarching point—that both survivors and their understandings of their traumatic experiences must be recognized as always in process, and that the judicial process distorts both in its demand for consistency and stability—is a crucial one.

These and other points have instigated meaningful and productive conversations in my classrooms, deeply informed my own understandings of sexual assault and gender-based violence, and served as models for me of just how productive philosophical work can be. But I’m not sure they or any of the many other insights in the work are as important as the way in which Brison’s philosophical method serves to counter the specific kinds of harm that interpersonal violence imposes. As her theory of the self emphasizes, we, as embodied human beings, are vulnerable to the actions of others, so vulnerable that if those others attack and violate us, we cannot help but experience ourselves as the living dead. As a philosopher, though, Brison refuses to perpetuate that harm, and takes survivors of trauma not as the living dead, but as resolutely, persistently, undeniably human. Not shards of persons, but persons themselves. And this is the move, I think, that allows so many readers to respond to her work with relief and gratitude.

NOTES
1. See, for example, Belliotti, "A Philosophical Analysis of Sexual Ethics," and Bogart, "On the Nature of Rape," the latter of which explicitly refused the relevance of firsthand experience.
4. In addition to the two quoted here, see Weiss, "The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies."

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Temporality, Hermeneutical Injustice, and Freedom After Rape

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When Susan Brison wrote in Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self that, “Saying something about a traumatic memory does something to it,” she made an enduring contribution to how we understand the narrative fracture of the self that occurs in trauma and the performative power that speech in community has as a means of recovery.¹ Now twenty years old, Brison’s book remains fundamental to the work of philosophers and those more broadly engaged in trauma research.

The assumption that one can say something about trauma, however, presumes that trauma can be identified by the victimized party and, in turn, spoken about. But what happens when the trauma—and I will limit my argument here to sexual trauma—is not so easily identifiable? Put differently, what happens when, as Nicola Gavey asks, someone is raped but does not know it?² In what follows, I propose that hermeneutical limitations exacerbate problems with naming rape, resulting in a form of hermeneutical injustice that limits speech and that can even distort how victimized individuals know their own experiences, thus resulting in epistemic constraint. In particular, I propose a kind of friction between these dominant hermeneutics and the wisdom of the body. The lack of epistemic authority
granted the body as a valid source of knowledge—coupled with the hermeneutical power of rape scripts—thus has the potential to increase victims’ distress and inhibit their freedom, where freedom is defined as liberation from dominant hermeneutical constraints. In response, I suggest that individuals need three elements—time, resonant epistemologies, and safety—to counter the effects of this form of injustice so that they can speak in a way that, as Brison states, “does something to trauma.” To build this argument, I will employ Miranda Fricker’s conception of hermeneutical injustice to propose that there is the potential for a form of freedom to emerge if one can transcend the hermeneutical constraints. In the spirit of Brison, I employ first-person narrative to construct the argument.

HERMENEUTIC INJUSTICE AND RAPE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Susan Brison’s most celebrated work revolves around her unflinching and skillful ability to weave her own experience of rape and attempted murder into a philosophical argument about the self, but the sexual violation she experienced at the hands of a stranger in France more than thirty years ago was not the only time she was raped. As she recounted in an op-ed for TIME back in 2014, Brison had also been raped as a college student by an acquaintance who came into her dorm room and used, presumably, minimal physical violence. She did not report the rape and, as she writes in the op-ed, she “told no one about it until many years later, and, even then, didn’t call what happened ‘rape.’”\(^\text{11}\) Brison goes on to recount that the event left her so traumatized that she considered taking her own life.

Brison is far from being the only person victimized by rape who does not label the experience as such and, because of the lack of labeling, does not receive the support needed to recover. Indeed, the psychologist Mary Koss proposes that a majority of women who have experiences that meet the legal definition of “rape” fail to acknowledge them, such that they are what Koss refers to as “unacknowledged rape survivors.”\(^\text{12}\) Koss provides data suggesting the lack of acknowledgment is most likely to occur when—as in the case of Brison’s rape in college—their experiences deviate from dominant rape scripts, often due to a prior relationship with the assailant or a lack of physical violence. She did not report the rape and, as she writes in the op-ed, she “told no one about it until many years later, and, even then, didn’t call what happened ‘rape.’”\(^\text{11}\) Brison goes on to recount that the event left her so traumatized that she considered taking her own life.

Much is at stake here, given that most rapes more closely resemble the one Brison experienced in college, not the one she wrote about in Aftermath. So if language performs such that the term “rape”—or its cousin, “sexual assault”—only represents violations that fit into the script of a stranger using physical violence to attack a white, sober, middle- or upper-class, unprovocatively dressed cisgender woman without significant disabilities, then a majority of those who experience harm will not find their experiences within the word meant to represent it. Low acknowledgment rates make even more sense when one recognizes how dominant beliefs and interpretive structures construct individuals, LGBTQ+ individuals, Black, Native American, Latinx, and Asian women as unrapable, as well as how a certain degree of violence has become embedded into normalized sex scripts. One need only refer to the rise in choking rates in sex for an example of what this looks like.\(^\text{13}\)

Still, what can be explained and what is morally justifiable are not synonymous. Likewise, the idea that something can be explained is not synonymous with the eradication of suffering. As stated above, low acknowledgment rates do not correlate with the kind of ignorance that leads to bliss; they correlate with increased distress, perhaps because the body knows a violation occurred even if that violation seems to exist beyond speech. Hence, the inability to find one’s experience rooted within dominant hermeneutical structures can be devastating for someone who experiences a violation they cannot label, as the event may leave them isolated, feeling they’re not entitled to use the word “rape,” and worried that, if they do so, they will not be understood. They may wonder why they’ve responded negatively to something that appears to be within the scope of “normal,” or be concerned that they’re co-opting the term from individuals who truly deserve to use it. They may feel significant psychological distress for no apparent reason, and, lacking an etiology that can be named, they may wind up feeling more distress as a result. Finally, they may feel unentitled to claim any kind of wrong was done because of the way the wider community might react to their testimony. As Brison herself reflects on the distinction between the rape she experienced in France and the one she experienced in her dorm room, “One was the best kind of rape, as far as my credibility as a victim was concerned. The other was the worst.”\(^\text{12}\) In this way, a community can just as easily thwart the self’s recovery as it can aid in its reconstruction, per Brison’s argument in Aftermath.

If one’s experience deviates enough from rape scripts such that it seems as if the word “rape” no longer applies, but one is nonetheless experiencing a negative aftermath, informed
by shame, fear, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, an eating disorder, or suicidal ideation, then one also faces what Miranda Fricker refers to as a "credibility deficit." That deficit can be both internally imposed (I believe I am not a credible victim) as well as externally imposed (Society does not believe I am a credible victim). Those who suffer a sexual violation that deviates from the rape script can thus face significant challenges both in terms of labeling the event in the privacy of their own mind as well as publicly labeling it to others, not just because the hermeneutical structures do not create space for it but also because the price to one's sense of self may be too high. In both cases, there are practical effects. The inability to name what happened impacts the likelihood that one might seek out and receive appropriate support, whether it be in the form of therapeutic support or support from law enforcement, the court system, a Title IX office, one's faith community, or one's family and friend group. In other words, a vicious cycle emerges in which someone who was raped is unable to seek out support, thus exacerbating their own difficulties, and, in turn, doing little to change dominant hermeneutical structures because no one is challenging them.

If victimized individuals face these challenges, so do those who perpetrate the harm, for the role they played in the rape likewise remains unacknowledged. As Brison herself notes in the TIME piece she wrote about the acquaintance rape in her dorm room,

I haven't named the man who raped me when I was 20 and I don't intend to. If he were to read this piece, he wouldn't recognize himself—or me. If he did care enough to think about what happened, he wouldn't have remembered it as a rape, since I froze instead of fighting back.

Brison's suggestion that the man who raped her would not himself label the event as such provides an example of how sex has absorbed within it some of rape's violation. Put differently, because a certain degree of violence is considered part and parcel of a normal sexual encounter, then it becomes more likely that a perpetrator might not label their actions as inappropriate, much as a victim might not label their experience as "rape." As Catharine MacKinnon summarizes, "Men who are in prison for rape think it's the dumbest thing that ever happened . . . it isn't just a miscarriage of justice; they were put in jail for something very little different from what most men do most of the time and call it sex. The only difference is they got caught."

As a result of the hermeneutical elision between sex and rape that MacKinnon describes, it makes sense that a person who perpetrates harm might be as unlikely to see the wrongdoing as the victimized party is. Indeed, if the violating event that someone enacts is normalized as appropriate according to dominant sex and rape scripts such that—to their minds and the minds of others—it ought to be labeled as "sex" and not "rape," then they lack a reason to see themselves as a "perpetrator." In contrast to barriers faced by the victimized party, however, the hermeneutical barriers to labeling the offense as "rape" and the credibility deficit accompanying it appear, *prima facie*, at least, to benefit the perpetrator, as they can avoid uncomfortable accusations or the vulnerability required for active accountability. Audrey Yap relatively suggests that the social imaginary also contributes to who we see both as a credible victim and as a credible perpetrator. Indeed, because the social imaginary aligns more with rape scripts than the actual scope of sexual harm, the victimized party not only suffers a credibility deficit but the person who perpetrated the harm experiences a credibility excess in cases where the sexual violation violates the rape script. That credibility excess, in turn, impacts not only how a single perpetrator interprets their actions but also how the class of perpetrators does. This includes pre-perpetrators, who have the luxury of believing their future actions are both possible and morally blameless because that is the hermeneutic that has been modeled unquestioningly for them.

One thus sees that the way the rape script has embedded in language and affected acknowledgment rates, enabling the continued perpetuation of the violation. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that, as violence has become embedded into the normalized sex script, what is socially acceptable to categorize as "rape" must be more exotic than sex to attain credibility as a wrong. Systemic oppression—specifically misogyny and racism—can aid here, by casting the perpetrator as a Black male stranger who uses physical force against a white woman. Of course, a majority of rapes do not possess this element of the exotic, such that the term "rape" performs in ways that enable continued perpetration not only of it but also of misogyny and racism, in turn benefitting those with power who would just as well prefer to maintain the status quo. As Catharine MacKinnon writes:

The world is not entirely the way the powerful say it is or want to believe it is. If it appears to be, it is because power constructs the appearance of reality, by silencing the voices of the powerless, by excluding them from access to authoritative discourse. Powerlessness means when you say, "this is how it is," it is not taken as being that way. This makes articulating silence, perceiving the presence of absence, believing those who have been socially stripped of credibility, critically contextualizing what passes for simple fact, necessary to the epistemology of the powerless.

In this way, the hermeneutical injustice faced by those whose experiences do not align with standard scripts of rape illustrate how power embeds in language such that it performs in ways that enact concrete harm not only on the victimized party but on the wider community. The dominance of these scripts may cause listeners to adopt a kind of implicit bias; it may also cause pre-victims of rape, regardless of gender, to receive interpretative guidelines for their future experiences that ultimately result in a credibility deficit because the possibility of labeling themselves as "rape survivors" is foreclosed by the dominance of rape scripts. An element of legacy thus accompanies the hermeneutical injustice of the term "rape," one that elides through time, enabling not only the
lack of acknowledgment but also the assurance of future harm.

DOMINANT HERMENEUTICS VS. THE BODY

More than a decade before Brison published her *TIME* editorial, I experienced a rape that likewise might be considered “the worst,” as far as my credibility as a victim was concerned, a rape that fundamentally resembled the one Brison experienced in college.4 Like her, I was in a dorm room. Like her, I knew the person who perpetrated the harm. There was psychological and verbal coercion but quite limited physical force. I had no reason to seek medical help and did not report the event to anyone at the time because it didn’t seem that there was anything notable to report. Indeed, had you asked me then—now more than twenty years ago—I would have told you that this all had been entirely appropriate, despite the fact that I said “no” several times through tears. The rape also caused substantial psychological harm that required years of therapy to address. I experienced intense anxiety, numbness that alternated with irrational anger, crushing nightmares, deflated grades, and trouble driving because my heightened startle response was triggered every time a neighboring car passed mine. I questioned whether I would ever date, marry, or have children, let alone finish my degree, and all the while time appeared to stop, and the narrative of my life stopped with it, as I found myself stuck in the trauma. Still, despite these symptoms, I didn’t say anything because I didn’t think there was anything to say, and when I went searching for stories that resembled mine, I found none. In other words, Brison’s reflections on her first rape might just as well have been mine: “I told no one about it until many years later, and, even then, didn’t call what happened ‘rape.’”25

Legally, though, it was a rape, and even if legally it had not been, my body processed it that way, leaving me—like so many other survivors—in this liminal state of a trauma that lacked a label. Echoing Fricker, I was inhabiting the landscape of hermeneutical injustice, which had very practical consequences insofar as the symptoms I had appeared to have no etiology. But it also raised the question of what would happen if I could address what my body was trying to tell me and transcend the hermeneutical foreclosure. Returning to Nicola Gavey’s question posed at the beginning of this article, it was not so much that I did not know I had been raped. My body knew all along. The problem was I could not name that I had been raped.

Brison writes in *Aftermath* of the fury and terror that come with acknowledgment, and I have felt both. I have hated the world with a vengeance I did not know was within my heart to feel. Yet in cases where acknowledgment involves transcending hermeneutical injustice, my proposal is that one of the byproducts of naming the seemingly unnamable can also be that one enters into a less constrained epistemic and hermeneutical space, one in which what counts as a valid source of knowledge is reassessed such that knowledge is not interpreted according to the limits of dominant discourses but rather by the truth of what one has actually experienced. In this way, the process of challenging dominant beliefs about what constitutes “rape” creates the potential for a kind of epistemic freedom, in which freedom isn’t defined by a positive, pleasant good—such as happiness—but rather is defined by epistemic and hermeneutical liberation from false ideologies. It is not, for instance, a joyous revelation to name one’s experience as rape, but it is one that can counter hermeneutical injustice and can open up once unforeseen epistemic possibilities, including a richer respect for the body’s wisdom. It is likewise not a joyous moment—epistemically or hermeneutically speaking—to recognize that sexual violations like rape are far more common and insidious than most publicized examples would have the public believe, but it does offer the possibility for fury and grief, as well as the eradication of the cognitive dissonance that may come from experiencing embodied symptoms of trauma but having no name for what has brought them on. Perhaps most importantly, it affords one the opportunity to act in resistance to future physical and hermeneutical violations by naming, listening, and acting differently in the world.

The process of acknowledging one’s own experience of rape, I would argue, starts by tempering the hermeneutical power of the rape script and instead prioritizing the wisdom of the body. Indeed, the body is a check and balance against whatever hermeneutics or ideologies or social constructions dominate the ways that individuals come to know and label “rape.” It registers what it experienced as violating, regardless of whether dominant hermeneutics codify it as such or not. In other words, one may be conscious that sexual harm happens to others; one might identify as a feminist; one might have read every book there is to read about rape, but there is a difference between reading about a violation and the body’s knowledge of it, and the epistemic bias against the body only exacerbates that. Moreover, when the body registers harm that does not lie within the scope of books or social norms or popular discourses, then suffering is exacerbated because it becomes difficult for the victimized party to speak and for their wider community to understand what they are saying. Given that, as Brison recognizes, “Saying something about a traumatic memory does something to it,” speech is necessary because it codifies and validates that what the survivor’s whole self—including their body—experienced is wrong.

But that speech is, of course, only effective if words exist to hold the concept and if listeners can receive what is being said without a credibility deficit getting in the way. This is another reason why Brison was right to assert in *Aftermath* that rape requires a communal response for the remaking of the self to occur.26 Particularly when hermeneutical injustice intermingles with linguistic injustice—perhaps because of a gap in language or, per Hornsby and Langdon, because of a lack of linguistic reciprocity—then enacting any kind of liberation requires constructing speech that does the required conversational work, as well as having a community that is equipped to let those words perform as intended, rather than constraining them in a way that facilitates a credibility deficit.27 Putting Brison’s work directly into conversation with Fricker’s, one might argue that the self can only be remade in relationship to others if a credibility deficit doesn’t obstruct it.28
My proposal here is that decoupling one’s naming of a violation from the dominant hermeneutics of it involves a process that might be described as the double consciousness raising of the body. At an internal level, the survivor becomes more aware of and takes the wisdom of what their body is trying to communicate more seriously, regardless of whether language can encapsulate it. At an external level, it also involves becoming more aware about what the societal body is saying, doing, and valuing about rape, sex, gender, power, and intersectional systemic oppression. The disharmonies, gaps, and syntheses between one’s own embodied experience of a violation and the wider society’s disembodied perceptions about it can reveal how hermeneutical injustice operates within the life of survivor. In this context, such injustice occurs, at least in part, because sources of power construct the wisdom imparted by survivors’ bodies as being invalid or unreliable as a source of knowledge.

**PRECONDITIONS FOR THE PROCESS**

Three elements may be helpful foundations for the process of survivor acknowledgment, namely, exposure to time, resonant epistemologies, and safety. Time, the first component, is a double-edged sword for trauma survivors, both their biggest asset and, literally, their nightmare. Time—*prima facie*, at least—appears to exist as a horizontal plane that one moves forward in, from birth to death, accompanied by the daily undulations of one’s moods or the body’s needs. Yet survivors often feel stuck in time, seemingly unable to affect agency or escape from their embodiment of the trauma due to the presence of flashbacks and other psychological symptoms. Every moment of time, however, possesses the potential to lessen the power of the trauma, making temporality an essential asset for the trauma survivor.

Time, however, requires the synthesis of two other elements, one of which is exposure to resonant epistemologies. Philosophy—alongside other disciplines that confront assumptions in order to make sense of the world around us—makes unique contributions here. It is willing to challenge what society at large overlooks or refuses to name, just as it dares to speak of that which seems unspeakable but which is in fact merely taboo. This is one of the reasons Brison’s work remains so revolutionary, a model for a generation of scholars who have been inspired by her bravery to tell a vulnerable story while also being willing to employ that story in order to strengthen the wisdom of her discipline. Indeed, I first encountered *Aftermath* as I was struggling with my own experience of rape, and while I did not find myself in the practicalities of what she experienced, I did discover resonances in the argument she made for how the self is both undone and remade in community after a trauma. Those resonances, in turn, gave me the courage to take the wisdom she articulated and apply it to my own experience, such that she became a member of the community that helped me to reconstruct my own sense of self and begin to feel safe enough to publicly articulate what happened.

Resonant epistemologies, in other words, are worth little if there is not enough safety to uphold them. Safety—which psychiatrist Judith Herman notes is a primary need for trauma survivors—therefore comprises the third element needed for this double consciousness raising process to occur. Such safety may be cognitive—as in the case I just described, where Brison’s work offered cognitive solidarity, and, in turn, cognitive safety—but just as importantly, it may be physical, psychological, or spiritual. In my case, a community was essential to rebuilding my sense of safety, and it was a community made up not only of supportive friends but also of professors who created opportunities for me to wrestle with concepts that related to trauma and rape through their course offerings, readings, and assignments. Many of these professors had no idea that undergirding the comments I made in class, the notes I wrote in the margins of books like *Aftermath*—which a professor assigned to me early in graduate school—or the words I wrote in my papers was a personal wrestling with rape. Disclosure was not the point; wrestling with matters of ultimate concern was. Academics, in other words, play a critical role in trauma recovery, sometimes in ways they never know, simply by doing the work of teaching, writing, and researching about issues that touch the lives of their students.

The process of interpreting rape through time, safety, and exposure to epistemologies and hermeneutics that challenge dominant ones thus has the potential to change a survivor’s understanding of not just the event itself but also of the world around them such that the survivor has a more authentic way of expressing their experiences, who they are, and how they make sense—or do not make sense—of the world around them. These elements thus can prevent hermeneutical injustice from having a hold, from constraining one’s knowledge of their experience and the world around them, but also, as Fricker notes, from becoming a person who “may be, quite literally, prevented from becoming who they are.”

The way one labels the memory may thus become more accurate with time, truer to itself via exposure to epistemologies and hermeneutics that offer solidarity, and easier to acknowledge with safety. The cash out, in turn, is a different way of knowing and being in the world, one that has practical wisdom that can be used for good, perhaps to challenge dominant power structures or to support other survivors. As Linda Martín Alcoff reflects, “A personal history that includes rape or sexual abuse can indeed color our perception, not necessarily causing us to jump to conclusions, but perhaps yielding into likely outcomes. We may be more aware of the signs of abuse, more distressed at what we know will be a long-term trauma.”

One might contend, from this argument, that the process I’m proposing suggests that there is a concrete good that emerges from rape—what social scientists might term “resilience” or “post-traumatic growth”—and that this concrete good is worth the cost of the trauma, per Brison’s aunt, who wrote in a belated birthday card to Brison that the rape she described in *Aftermath* would enable her to “become stronger” and “able to help so many people. A real blessing from above for sure.” Such a read would be to misappropriate my argument, which is not that there is a benefit to sexual trauma that outweighs the cost or even that the knowledge gained could not be gained by
another means. Rather, my proposal is that in cases where hermeneutical injustice constrains acknowledgment, the experience of breaking through that barrier has the potential to participate in the reconstruction of the self by helping one to restructure how one understands their experience of sexual harm as well as their sense of self and the world around them. One might even go so far as to say that in such cases, the truth does set a person free.

This oft-invoked biblical quotation—cloyingly inscribed onto mugs and wooden Etsy plaques—is one Brison herself references in Aftermath, where she reflects on what she has learned in the period following the attack she experienced in France. In that statement, she writes that “If it has been hard for me, as a philosopher, to learn the lesson that knowledge isn’t always desirable, that the truth doesn’t always set you free. Sometimes, it fills you with incapacitating terror and, then, uncontrollable rage.” The expression—whether implicitly or explicitly—reflects the assumption that freedom ought to be an asset to the self. This assertion also relies upon a certain conception of it. Indeed, truth may not set one free if one presupposes freedom as an existentially laden concept wherein being set free is equivalent to being liberated from physical, psychological, and emotional constraints. In this case, joy, happiness, and a life that involves moving around in the world without risk are treated as synonymous with liberation from such constraint. But if one reconceives freedom as hermeneutical liberation from falsehoods, including flawed ideologies or, borrowing Kate Manne’s terminology, from being pre-gaslit or self-gaslit, then perhaps freedom is indeed what is attained when one acknowledges a sexual violation that seems, prima facie, unnamable.

Of course, one might argue that this kind of hermeneutical freedom is of comparatively little value in relation to the cost of attaining it, and at some level, I don’t disagree, if for no other reason than that taking the experiences of survivors seriously means including those survivors who have felt that life was not worth living after what they suffered. Though I’ve never been suicidal, I can imagine a million ways my life would be more carefree and convenient if I didn’t know what I know cognitively or if my body didn’t know what it knows physically. What I experienced left me needing years of mental health treatment, and it has impacted every corner of my life, from how I hear news articles about an alleged rape to how I parent. I do not know who I would have become had it not occurred, for good or for ill, but I know that I would not be who I am now.

While the cost of knowing has been high, I would argue that the higher cost was that the violation occurred in the first place. In other words, wishing I did not know I was raped is different than wishing there was nothing to know. I was raped, and even if I did not want to cognitively give credence to that knowledge, my body was not willing to forget. Put differently, I cannot undo that night or the relationship of which it was a part, and insofar as that time in my life left an embodied trace, not knowing was doing concrete harm because it meant I could not ask for help. Having spent years with undiagnosed mental illness and an undiagnosed cause for it, I can say that it was a lonely and frightening way to live. At least now I can speak and be heard, and I want to speak and be heard, because I know there are others who have had or will have experiences like mine. I want to be part of the community that listens and takes concrete steps to change individual lives and societal structures because, as Brison argues, this is not only how the self gets reconstructed after the fracture of a trauma but also how future harm gets prevented.

Society, of course, is not always interested in helping survivors reconstitute the self or in hearing their stories. All too often—even given the heightened awareness of #MeToo—it is not interested in survivors at all. To that end, one of the reasons why some survivors feel that life is not worth living—or that knowledge is not worth having—after a sexual violation is because of what they learn about their communities when they try to disclose the harm. They discover too many people do not believe survivors or are apathetic to their suffering. They find that the criminal justice system and Title IX committees will all too often not care to hear what they have to say. They become prophets unwelcome in their hometowns. The freedom that comes from being aware thus becomes a double-edged sword, yielding to a “consciousness of weakness and a consciousness of strength.” That consciousness is not just about one’s own being but about society at large, such that, to some extent, the question of whether knowledge is worth gaining is contingent upon what kind of knowledge one gains about their community. If communities more often did the work of self-construction that Brison describes as meaningful or took steps to eradicate sexual harm in the first place, then perhaps some of what survivors could discover about their communities would be less distressing.

Yet there is a distinction between imposing a way of interpreting one’s life and making a hermeneutic available as a potentially valuable resource that a survivor can call upon of their own free will. In other words, just as it could be potentially harmful to tell someone they were raped if they did not know it, it could potentially be just as harmful to keep that knowledge from them if it could give them a more complete understanding of their past and present experiences. Hence, I would not go so far as to force another survivor to know that they’d experienced a rape if they were blissfully ignorant, but at the same time, the body does keep the score, as Bessel van der Kolk notes. The body has the capacity to speak in ways that press against the limits of language and social constructions and hermeneutics, and at times when its wisdom is demanding acknowledgment, I cannot help but wonder about the freedom that can come from employing language and hermeneutics in its service, especially if the wider community aids in the effort.

The society that Brison wrote Aftermath for twenty years ago both is and is not the society of today. In many ways, the fears, divisions, injustices, and power structures that existed then are more prominent now, simultaneously because of the efforts of those like Brison who sought to raise the culture’s consciousness and because of the continued attempts by those in power to chip away at institutions and systems designed to protect the vulnerable. Her book is one that might be said to be unfortunately timeless, because it would be vastly preferable if society had taken
more steps over the past twenty years to eradicate the kinds of violations that Brison so unflinchingly analyzes. Indeed, in a more ideal world, she would never have had to write the book at all. But neither her body nor mine has the luxury of denying that rape occurs in ways more frequent and insidious than society cares to acknowledge.20 Her book therefore continues to remind readers that survivors speak to be heard, just as those who listen have a responsibility to listen in order to understand. After all, it is their understanding that reminds us that we are not alone, that there is trust worth having, and that there is hope for a world that might one day come to be, even if it’s a world that our bodies may never know.

NOTES
1. Brison, Aftermath, 56.
2. Gavey, Just Sex?, 288.
14. To be clear, I do not think it is the responsibility of a rape survivor to challenge hermeneutical structures. I am saying that the wider society, especially those with power to construct hermeneutics and narratives, need to widen the scope of what is considered wrong so that victimized individuals can find themselves within the words meant to represent their experiences.
15. Brison, “Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another.”
19. For a study on how students described the difference “rape” and “sex” in a way that defined “rape” in terms of its most stereotypical and least common attributes, see Heather L. Littleton and Danny Axson, “Rape and Seduction Scripts of University Students: Implications for Rape Attributions and Unacknowledged Rape,” Sex Roles 49, no. 9 (November 1, 2003): 465–75, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025824505185.
21. While reporting of rape remains low, it is worth noting that according to an FBI report from 2019, approximately 70 percent of those arrested for rape were white men, whereas only 26 percent were Black men. “FBI: Arrests by Race and Ethnicity, 2019” https://www.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u-s/2019/crime-in-the-u-s-2019/topic-pages/table-chain/table-43.
29. For a book-length philosophical examination of sexual violations and time, see Megan Burke, When Time Warps: The Lived Experience of Gender, Race, and Sexual Violence, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
32. Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 5.
33. Linda Martín Alcoff, Rape and Resistance (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 70.
34. Brison, Aftermath, 11.
37. For one particularly well-publicized case, see the suicide of Daisy Coleman.
40. Brison, Aftermath, 4, 9.
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Bodies Under Threat: Trauma and Motivated Ignorance

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Among the many remarkable achievements of Susan Brison’s Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self is the account she offers of the unruly body of the rape survivor, indeed, as she lays bare, of her own unruly body in the aftermath of the life-altering sexual assault and attempted murder she suffered in the summer of 1990, as she found herself gripped by what she calls the “autonomy-undermining symptoms of PTSD.” When Aftermath was published, the fast-developing neuroscience of trauma was just taking a firm hold. In the twenty years since then, the neurobiological model of trauma has come to dominate the field. Over this period there has been a marked shift away from a conception of trauma as psychological, manifesting in the deliberative and self-reflective evaluations survivors experience following a traumatic event, to a conception of trauma as neurobiological, manifesting in a set of autonomic bodily responses that result from structural changes to the brain. Brison was prescient on this point in Aftermath, as she was on many others. The way that trauma plays out in the body seemed to her no more under deliberative and conscious control than “were my heart rate and blood pressure,” as she put it, which made her wonder, twenty years ago, whether we ought to be calling trauma “psychological.” She was onto something.

Picking up on her lead, in Part One of this paper I argue for a narrow and precise conception of trauma. While there are a multitude of serious harms that survivors experience following events that threaten life and bodily integrity, there are good reasons to reserve the notion of trauma for the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain that result from a central nervous system under threat, and for those types of events in which these changes occur. As I elaborate below, this conceptual shift is in keeping with the science of trauma as it has evolved over the last two decades, and it is a conception that captures a broad spectrum of traumatic events, from a one-time sexual assault, which will be my central focus here, to the complex trauma that arises from repeated incidences of sexual or physical violence, as well as the trauma that results from living under life-threatening social, political, and material conditions, like war, racism, and colonialism. Finally, it provides leverage against a host of injustices faced by survivors of traumatic events.

Considering its dominance in neuroscience and trauma theory, it is worth asking why the neurobiological model has failed to gain widespread mainstream purchase. In Part Two, I argue that this persistent ignorance ought to be regarded as motivated. My thinking on this subject has been influenced by Charles Mills’s notion of white ignorance,4 which I take to be the defining case of motivated ignorance. With white ignorance, the truth about what it is like to be a Black person in the United States (and elsewhere) is systematically denied through the perpetuation of dominant but false narratives that help to maintain white privilege. As Mills shows, motivated ignorance arises in circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups in which the absence of truth inoculates people in positions of privilege from having to reflect on the unearned benefits they receive in virtue thereof.

In the case of trauma, ignorance about the neurobiological consequences of traumatic events occurs within the context of a broader phenomenon that, in a nod to Mills, I call male ignorance. Here, the perpetuation of dominant but false narratives about the realities of sexual violence, a historically gendered phenomenon, results in tangible benefits for men at the expense of losses to women, as I elaborate below. This incentivized non-knowing about the ways in which threats to life and bodily integrity result in acute brain changes allows for the flourishing of misinformation and falsehoods about the routine and predictable embodied consequences of threatening events. This leaves us with a picture of the survivor’s behavior in the aftermath of a traumatic event as incoherent, baseless, exaggerated, overly emotional, even foolish, a picture which feeds into
rape myths while trivializing and minimizing the harms of sexual violence, abusive domestic environments, and oppressive social conditions. This view of the aftermath of traumatic events undermines the credibility of those who endure these experiences and contributes to unjust social relations within communities and between individuals. It results in unfair treatment of survivors of sexual violence broadly speaking, but perhaps most acutely within the criminal justice system.

PART ONE: TRAUMA

Aftermath was published in 2002, around the same time that I was completing my PhD in philosophy. A dozen years before that, in the summer following my first year as an undergraduate student, I had been raped while travelling in France, coincidentally like Brison, as she reveals in Aftermath, but unlike Brison, I was not “out” about my experience. Being raped had nearly destroyed me, as it often does, and immediately afterwards, awash with the shame that comes unbidden from having your body used sexually against your will, I decided to keep my rape a secret, as if not talking about it might make it go away. But my body has always known better. The trauma lodged deep within and played out in my body in ways that seemed to me, at the time, surprising and arbitrary—jumping at the slightest sound, feeling afraid in situations that I knew were safe, my heart racing for no apparent reason, and so on. I could not make sense of these and other recalcitrant experiences, which only amplified the various other challenges that I was having—the crushing anxiety, intrusive thoughts, panic attacks, and sleepless nights. Ten years on, my inner life had become wearying, and I could not go on as I had been, in denial. I decided to find a therapist and face head-on what had happened to me. Not long after that, I got my hands on a copy of Brison’s newly published Aftermath.

This book broke me wide open. At a time when I was too vulnerable to speak my truth, it made me feel seen by rendering visible what it is like to be raped, what it feels like, from the inside. Before Brison, rape was barely considered a legitimate topic in mainstream philosophy. Aftermath changed that and set a bar for philosophical accounts of rape by interweaving the personal with the philosophical, legitimizing the value of first-person narratives in philosophy by expertly providing a case in point, and its account of relational autonomy and the remaking of the self through narrative laid the foundation for contemporary philosophical conceptions of rape and recovery.

But, in my mind, one of the key achievements of the book is Brison’s account of the chaotic and uncooperative body of the rape survivor. Her description of what happens to bodies under threat, of what happened to her body, mirrored what was happening to mine in a way that, when I first read it, seemed uncanny. That sense of uncanniness faded once I understood more about trauma, but at first, I found it surprising how similar our experiences in the aftermath had been, especially the patent loss of control over our own bodies. This is what Brison refers to as the autonomy-undermining symptoms of postraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including intrusive thoughts, flashes of unwanted images, exaggerated startle response, panic attacks, and hypervigilance. While not all survivors of threatening life events experience the full range of these symptoms, and not always to the same degree, far from being unpredictable or arbitrary—despite how they might feel in the moment—these autonomic responses are the routine and foreseeable consequences of traumatic events like rape.

I will refer to these characteristic symptoms of PTSD as somatic harms because they are foremost among the acutely felt unconscious embodied responses of a central nervous system to a threatening life event. But they are only one kind of manifestation of the damage to the brain’s threat circuitry, and only one of a multitude of serious harms that survivors experience in the aftermath of sexual violence. These harms are not discrete, and they interact in complex ways. Still, it can be helpful to group them roughly into general categories.

In addition to somatic harms, sexual violence can also result in clinically detectable injuries to the body, like abrasions, cuts, and fractures—a straightforward conception of physical harm, for which the expression “physical trauma” remains apt. There is also a set of harms that fall somewhere in the categories of psychological and emotional, including shame, grief, sadness, fear, and rage, which tend to chip away at one’s self-image, identity, trust in others, and sense of security. There is also the potential of social, political, and material harms that arise within certain cultures, especially but not exclusively religious ones, including rejection by family and friends, dissolution of relationships, and ostracization from communities. Finally, following Fricker, there is the quintessential epistemic and ethical harm of not being believed or treated as a credible reporter of one’s own experience.

These are some of the typical harms that arise in the aftermath of a traumatic experience like rape. They are properly categorized as harms because each one changes one’s life for the worse. Colloquially, and in fields outside of neuroscience and trauma theory, they are referred to collectively as the trauma of rape. This loose characterization of trauma is, in part, indicative of the evolution of the concept, which has become both ubiquitous and diluted, such that “trauma” is used to refer to all manner of unpleasant life events, ranging from truly difficult but not life-threatening to trivial—from the breakup of a marriage to not getting a table at the trendy restaurant. While characterizing the harms of sexual violence as the trauma of sexual violence has the advantage of identifying the cause or source of the various harms, it does so at the expense of conceptual accuracy. Given what we now know about what happens to brains under conditions of inescapable threat, we ought to say, more precisely, that the trauma of rape, like the trauma of war, complex trauma, and the trauma that arises from living under threatening social conditions, consists in prolonged stress to the brain’s threat circuitry. The collection of harms described here are best understood as the consequences of trauma—the aftermath—in varying degrees of directness.

Although the neuroscience of trauma is a relatively new discipline, the concept of trauma dates back centuries, and in recent history has undergone dramatic paradigm shifts.
shifts. This has been well documented by historians of medicine, sociologists, and trauma theorists, who chart the evolution of the term from the Greek for “wound,” used to refer strictly to physical injuries (a use still seen in medical contexts, e.g., trauma wards), to the striking shift in the mid- to late 1800s when the concept was psychologized.  

With increased attention being paid to the mind and human psyche among physicians and in the emerging fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in America and Europe, the idea of a psychic wound took hold, as medical practitioners observed in their patients behavioral patterns suggestive of a nervous system subjected to extreme threat. The early permutations on psychological trauma—from railway spine to nervous shock, hysteria, traumatic neurosis, and shell shock—reflected shifting conceptions of illness and disease.  

The concept continued to gain momentum over the course of the century, in the context of catastrophic events like World War One and the Holocaust. By the end of the Vietnam War, with the explosion of post-war forms of suffering among veterans, there was a coordinated and successful campaign by activists, psychiatrists, and social workers to have psychological trauma recognized as an official psychiatric category in the third edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III).  

Soon after that, feminists and mental health professionals began to draw attention to the consistency between the characteristic symptoms of PTSD exhibited by war veterans and survivors of rape and domestic violence.  

Forty years later, following a fertile period beginning in the 1990s (what Bessel van der Kolk has dubbed the “neuroscience revolution”), we now have a robust explanation that accounts for this remarkable consistency among survivors of traumatic events. The routine and predictable aftermath of terrorizing life events is a consequence of the brain’s threat circuitry gone haywire due to prolonged activation of the stress response. The brain is evolutionarily wired to scan for danger. The amygdala is the central hub of the defense or threat circuitry in the brain (what used to be called the “fear center”), and when it senses threat it sets off a fight-or-flight-or-freeze response. These are adaptive, nonconscious defense responses that have evolved over time to help us survive dangerous situations. Recent advancements in neuroscience tell us that once the defense mechanism is triggered, there is a significant release of stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline, which make the heart beat faster and increases blood pressure, pulse rates, and breathing. This rush of chemicals occurs instinctively, before we even feel afraid and before we are consciously aware of a threat. This energizes a fight-or-flight-or-freeze response in a dangerous situation, which, when successful, can help quell the release of the stress hormones. But when the threat is inescapable, such as in cases of chronic abuse, rape, war, and oppressive social conditions, the secretion of stress hormones continues and floods our nervous system, which results in structural changes to brain circuits.  

These brain changes are what lead to the classic arousal and dissociative symptoms of PTSD. In cases of extreme threat, the brain can get stuck in a defense mode, primed for danger, and unable to stop scanning. Hyperarousal, startle response, hypervigilance—these are adaptive biological responses, and in situations of actual danger, being on guard can save lives—it does save lives. That is true not only in the case of a one-time sexual assault, but also in situations of ongoing heightened threat, such as in abusive domestic environments and oppressive social conditions. But staying highly alert to threat becomes maladaptive once the danger is gone, and the survivor can find herself, as Brison put it, “jump[ing] at the sound of a dry leaf skittering down a sidewalk.” Instead of properly regulating, in other words, the threat response dysregulates, and thus interferes with basic human systems of biological functioning—eating, sleeping, breathing, and connecting with others.  

We can tell a similar story of maladaptation for the less theorized immobilization strategy of freezing (and its more severe variations), especially in cases of chronic abuse, which can result in complex posttraumatic disorder (C-PTSD). Dissociative symptoms, including numbness, blunted affect, and avoidance, can be equally adaptive under conditions of extreme threat, helping us survive the seemingly unsurvivable. Indeed, these behaviors exist to keep us alive, but by prolonging disconnection in the absence of an ongoing threat, they too become maladaptive.  

According to the neurobiological model of trauma, the changes to the brain depend on which of the three main defense reactions is taken (flight, fight, or freeze). The data here are not conclusive and research continues apace, but we can broadly summarize current findings and say that extreme stress impairs the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which is the rational part of our brain that regulates cognitive function; it increases activity in the amygdala; and it results in a reduced hippocampal volume, which is connected to memory storage and retrieval.  

This tells us that traumatic events leave biological markers in survivors, which sets off the characteristic arousal and dissociative symptoms of PTSD. These biological markers, on their own, do not determine exactly how someone responds to a traumatic event. Biology is nothing without ideology. Our neurobiological responses get expressed in the context of particular social, cultural, and environmental information. These factors, in addition to genetic predispositions to stress, account for much of the variation we see among people who have suffered traumatic events. But the biochemical and neurological changes to threat circuits are foundational in understanding what happens to bodies under threat.  

It makes sense that, absent current neuroimaging techniques and other advances in neuroscience, we might have imagined that the classic somatic symptoms of PTSD were the result of the conscious and deliberative responses of survivors in the scary aftermath of a terrorizing life event—how we had come to see and feel about ourselves and the world, in light of our experience. But we now know better, and this helps normalize the aftermath of a traumatic event: the survivor’s heightened expectation of catastrophe, the panic, the fast-beating heart and inability to catch a deep breath, the disconnection, numbing and low affect, and the uninvited images that flash through
her mind—all part of her body’s autonomic response to threat, working overtime.\textsuperscript{27} Even better, this enhanced understanding of trauma as written in the body has led to a host of body-based therapies for healing, which offer tremendous possibilities for recovery.\textsuperscript{30,31}

The science of trauma has come full circle, in a sense, once again privileging a conception of trauma as a physical injury, one that leaves a biological imprint on survivors, even if the marks of trauma are not always clinically detectable. This evolution of the concept might help to explain why, in fields that study the phenomenon, the use of the prefix ‘psychological’ has all but disappeared.

### PART TWO: MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

Given its dominance among neuroscientists, trauma theorists, and trauma practitioners, it is worth considering why the neurobiological model of trauma has not been met with broader uptake outside of specialist discourse. No doubt, this is at least partly due to the genealogy of trauma just discussed, in which the concept has undergone multiple mutations, from physical to psychological and now neurobiochemical. Certainly, this evolution has resulted in shifting meanings and contributed to common misconceptions of trauma, but it seems to me that we need a more robust explanation for the widespread and persistent ignorance about the neurobiological model of trauma.

Our cultural preoccupation with the idea of trauma has waxed and waned over time, but we are currently at a high peak, given recent calamitous events in climate, Western democracies, regional wars, a global pandemic, and a renewed focus on sexual violence because of #MeToo. This heightened interest has accelerated an outpouring of decidedly accessible information on the consequences of extreme threat on brain circuits. In its early stages, neurobiological research on trauma was published exclusively in science journals for experts in the field, but over the last decade that database has moved into the mainstream in many formats intelligible to the nonspecialist. For instance, the number of reputable podcasts on trauma is in the hundreds, and many of these reflect current scientific research geared to the general listener.\textsuperscript{32} There are also hundreds of trade books on the subject, again, many offering up-to-date and accessible accounts of the science of trauma, including Bessel van der Kolk’s \textit{The Body Keeps the Score} (2014), which has been on the \textit{New York Times} bestseller list for paperback nonfiction off and on for nearly a decade, for a total of at least 141 weeks since its publication (during the height of the pandemic it remained in the number 1 spot for 27 consecutive weeks).\textsuperscript{33} Add to this the 362 TED talks on trauma, and we have clear evidence of the trickle-down effect of scientific knowledge on trauma.\textsuperscript{34} The information is out there, so to speak, but it seems clear that there is some sort of barrier limiting the flow of knowledge, which is failing to make significant inroads with a mainstream audience. As such, there remain many falsehoods about the aftermath of traumatic events—a jarring disconnect between specialist discourse and general knowledge, with large pockets of ignorance. What is blocking the successful transmission of knowledge in this case?

Earlier, I characterized this ignorance as motivated, drawing on Mills’s idea of white ignorance. Mills’s profound insight is that some gaps in knowledge are not morally or epistemically neutral, but instead motivated by circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups.\textsuperscript{35} In his analysis of white ignorance, race plays a causal role in epistemic practices that promote misinformation, such that the truth of what it is like to be a Black person in the United States is suppressed or denied though the perpetuation of false beliefs or absence of true ones. For Mills, this incentivized non-knowing can be perpetuated by individuals, willfully or without intention, and it is also manifested structurally, embedded in social norms and institutional practices. As he explains it, white ignorance functions to protect and preserve the privilege of white supremacy: “So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures.”\textsuperscript{36} White ignorance insulates privilege and affords concrete benefits to white people at the expense of losses to Black people. Thus, white supremacy is left intact at the expense of Black wealth, health, education, employment, opportunities—indeed, at the expense of Black lives.\textsuperscript{37}

Analogously, I propose that the gendered nature of sexual violence, in which women are vastly overrepresented, is a key contributing factor to the flourishing of misinformation and falsehoods about the aftermath of traumatic events like rape. This incentivized non-knowing about the ways in which threats to life and bodily integrity result in acute brain changes is part of the broader phenomenon of male ignorance in which the realities of sexual violence are minimized or trivialized.

It is a fact of patriarchy and its deeply entrenched gender bias against women that the broad range of profound harms detailed earlier are downplayed or outright dismissed in the aftermath of sexual violence, leaving survivors feeling misunderstood, unseeen, unheard, even gaslit. This long-established practice of diminishing the realities of sexual violence becomes more challenging, however, in light of the neurobiology of trauma, for if one accepts the current science about the impact of extreme threat on brain circuits, it becomes difficult to maintain dominant rape myths that tell us that sexual violence is no big deal; that the victim needs to just “get over it”; that if she didn’t “want it,” she could have stopped it; that if it was not consensual, then she would have fought back; and that if a victim’s account is in any respect inconsistent, then she must be lying. None of these myths are sustainable considering what we know about trauma. But instead of widespread understanding about what happens to brains under conditions of extreme threat and a corresponding dismantling of these myths, there is persistent ignorance which leaves us with a picture of the rape survivor’s behavior in the aftermath as muddled, incoherent, and overly emotional, and renders her testimony of what she has suffered through all too easy to dismiss.

Who stands to benefit from this ignorance? Primarily, perpetrators of sexual violence, who are overwhelmingly
male. These perpetrators are the central beneficiaries of the trivialization of sexual violence within the criminal justice system, as I discuss below, but just like one does not need to be a white supremacist to benefit from the ingrained privileging of whiteness, one does not need to be a sexual predator to benefit from the trivialization of the realities of sexual violence. This non-knowing functions to protect and preserve privileges for men, more generally. It sustains the status quo. It insulates men from having to reflect on their role in a culture that promotes pernicious rape myths and victim-blaming norms. It affords men the advantage of not needing to know what it is like to experience the everydayness of the threat of sexual violence, or what it is like to live in a body that has been attuned to the terror of sexual violence. Absent this knowledge, the unfettered freedom of mobility that men enjoy—the relative ease with which they are able to travel, ride public transport, use public restrooms, walk alone at night—and the opportunities that this opens up for them, from employment to housing and recreation, is not something that they are forced to consider or reconcile.

Male ignorance is a group-based ignorance, like white ignorance, but not all men are equally served by it. Trans men, queer men, and men of color (and those with intersecting identities) do not get to move through the world with anywhere near the same level of ease as straight white cis men. And while women and girls are the main targets of sexual violence, men and boys also suffer high rates of sexual violence. Privilege comes in degrees, and thus it is to varying degrees that men have the freedoms described here, and the advantages that come with them. What’s more, not all men are the equivalent of Mills’s racist cognizer. Some incentivized non-knowing is perpetuated willfully, by sexists and misogynists, but some men form mistaken beliefs (or lack true beliefs) about the realities of sexual violence without bad faith (as Mills puts it), but because of structural forces, through embedded social norms and institutional practices.

This structural form of male ignorance is manifest in the ingrained social norms that suppress or deny what it is like to be a victim of sexual violence, but arguably, it is most acutely visible within the criminal justice system. These days, it goes without saying that the criminal justice system is in dire need of complete reform, if not abolition. But until such time, survivors deserve respect and dignity within the system that purports to protect them. Instead, among its many enduring flaws is its institutional bias against survivors of sexual violence, whom it fails at every point of contact within the system—from police and lawyers to judges and juries. It is a paradigm of institutionalized misogyny.

This should come as no surprise, given the history of rape law and its well-known overt discrimination against women in general, and victims of sexual violence in particular—treating women as property, marital rape exemptions, proof of chastity requirements, the utmost resistance condition, and so on. Despite important reforms to rape laws and the rule of evidence over the years, the adversarial nature of courtroom justice combined with vestiges of gender discrimination in the law and the unchecked reliance on prejudicial stereotypes by its main representatives results in the system’s wholesale failure to secure justice for women who report rape.

This failure is well known and, in light of how poorly women qua complainants are treated within the system, helps to explain why rape is universally the most underreported of all crimes. In the unusual case that a victim of sexual violence decides to file an official report, her first encounter with law enforcement often marks the beginning of a lengthy process in which her account is treated with skepticism and her credibility questioned, if not undermined, owing to police cultures that are saturated with victim-blaming norms and rape myths. If she passes the first hurdle and the police believe her, she can expect further challenges to her credibility as her case moves forward within the criminal justice system. Complainants are instructed by prosecutors to brace themselves for the always vigorous and often vicious cross-examination by defense lawyers, who poke fun at inconsistent testimony, find fault with fragmentary memories, and belittle those who remain in threatening situations and do not fight back when under attack, which gets used as evidence against their veracity.

This kind of treatment by lawyers is unexceptional. Judges permit it and juries are swayed by it. And as far as legal strategies go, it is a successful one, resulting in a miniscule number of convictions. Women who go through this experience describe it as brutal. To be asked to tell and retell one’s story can be overwhelming for survivors, but the demand to do so by aggressive defense attorneys is almost inhumane, and it inevitably results in testimonial injustice for survivors, who suffer the intrinsic epistemic and ethical harm of having their credibility undermined because of prejudicial stereotypes, and it also results in serious secondary harms. To be poked and prodded in this way can be humiliating for anyone, but for the rape survivor it can trigger familiar feelings of powerlessness and shame and a shattering of trust, bringing her right back to her experience of terror.

The legal strategy of undermining the credibility of rape survivors by preying on inconsistencies in their testimony is made possible by the systemic failure to acknowledge the neurobiological consequences of trauma, with each instance of derision reflecting motivated ignorance about the evolutionarily wired responses of bodies under threat. And yet, despite the intractability of ignorance and the high incentive for it in this context, the science of trauma is making inroads within the criminal justice system. In Canada and the United States, for instance, in the wake of #MeToo and due to ongoing pressure from feminists, legal activists, medical professionals, and trauma scientists, we have seen the beginnings of change. There have been calls for positive reform through the implementation of trauma-informed courtrooms, with trauma-informed lawyers, judges, and juries, supported by trauma-informed policing with trauma-informed interview techniques.

A trauma-informed criminal justice system would go some distance to ending the poor treatment of women in this system, which currently fails sexual assault survivors by even its own measure. No doubt there will be backlash.
Her deposition to the police, which two and a half years after her near-damaging cross-examinations and for the implementation can continue to advocate for an end to humiliating and methods for obtaining justice for rape survivors, we least some reason for optimism. Until we have alternative to truth, it is important not to overestimate the power of institutional norms can amount to legitimate obstacles ignorance while sustaining the status quo. And although long-held pernicious stereotypes that are epitomized in however specialized it is in its detail, but it does challenge The basic upshot of this science is not hard to understand, of concrete, trauma-informed measures to ensure that the criminal justice system is less stressful and more humane for survivors of sexual violence.

CONCLUSION
Near the end Aftermath, in Chapter Six, “Retellings,” Brison talks poignantly about the shape trauma narratives take when they are told and retold, how they morph, depending on who we are talking to and what information is demanded of us—from police to doctors, friends and parents: “My story was shaped by what the listener needed to know most urgently, and, after a few days when I could breathe more easily, it expanded and contracted to fill whatever time was available.” Her deposition to the police, which she gave from her hospital bed, took an astonishing eight hours. Every detail had to be precisely told and then exactly remembered. Reflecting on this later, after the trial in which her assailant was convicted of rape and attempted murder, she said there was something “deadening” about the demand for truth, “from the perspective of a detached, objective observer,” as she found that she had to force herself to “will the true story to stay straight in order to reproduce it at trial,” two and a half years after her near-death assault.

The science of trauma has enhanced our understanding of the aftermath of terrorizing events over which we have no control. We now know that rape and other traumatic events are so-called because a central nervous system under threat results in structural changes to the brain. The impact of extreme stress on the mPFC, the amygdala, and the hippocampus helps to explain why the survivor’s testimony is jumbled or inconsistent, why she has a hard time remembering certain aspects of her story, and why her emotional response is flat. The evolutionarily wired freeze response helps to explain why she stayed and why she didn’t fight back. The science of trauma gives us leverage against a host of injustices faced by survivors, including a requirement for flawlessness in testimony and the demand that, in the immediate aftermath, a survivor give an eight-hour-long deposition from her hospital bed.

The basic upshot of this science is not hard to understand, however specialized it is in its detail, but it does challenge long-held pernicious stereotypes that are epitomized in the criminal justice system and that motivate widespread ignorance while sustaining the status quo. And although institutional norms can amount to legitimate obstacles to truth, it is important not to overestimate the power of dominant but false narratives. That we are beginning to see inroads within the criminal justice system gives us at least some reason for optimism. Until we have alternative methods for obtaining justice for rape survivors, we can continue to advocate for an end to humiliating and damaging cross-examinations and for the implementation of concrete, trauma-informed measures to ensure that the criminal justice system is less stressful and more humane for survivors of sexual violence.

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NOTES
2. Brison, Aftermath, 44.
3. Brison, Aftermath, 44.
6. Freedman, “The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo.” In clarifying his position that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged group-based ignorance, Mills uses the example of “male ignorance” (“White Ignorance,” 22), but his meaning of the term is more general than the sense I am employing here.
8. Notable exceptions (published pre-Aftermath) include Alcoff and Gray, Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?, and an anonymous referee for their helpful suggestions and guidance. I also want to thank the editors of this journal and an anonymous referee for their helpful suggestions and guidance.
10. While my focus here is on rape, most (if not all) of these harms arise in the aftermath of chronic abuse and domestic violence as well as war, racism, and colonialism.
11. These harms can arise from deliberation and self-reflection, hence the categorization, but structural changes to the brain impacts memory storage and retrieval as well as our ability to construct coherent narratives of the self, as Aftermath illuminates so well. Thus, even if these harms are not obviously somatic or embodied in the same way as, say, exaggerated startle response, they too are impacted by the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain’s threat circuitry.
13. I have further elaborated these harms elsewhere (Freedman, “The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo”).
15. The essays in Micale and Lerner’s Traumatic Pasts chronicle this time and the central figures in this early history of psychological trauma in America and Europe, from Erichsen, Charcot, and Oppenheim through to Janet, Breuer, and Freud.
16. See Leys (Trauma: A Genealogy) for an intellectual history of the concept of trauma through the twentieth century.
17. From its first appearance in DSM III (1980) to its most recent in DSM-5 (2013). PTSD has never been controversial. The fascinating and fraught story of the “invention” of PTSD, which is a story of biology and politics, has been definitively told by Scott (“PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and
26. Reis and Ortega discuss a variety of ongoing challenges to PTSD over the last three decades: outstrips any other standing psychiatric category in the DSM. Many of these controversies have centered on the unique stressor criterion (i.e., what ought to count as a stressor) and the related worry that PTSD pathologizes normal human distress. For a taste of this controversy, Summerfield ("The Invention of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Uses of Diagnostic Categories") remains a classic. The stressor criterion has been updated with each new edition and revision of the DSM, always with mixed reviews; see Hoge et al. ("Unintended Consequences of Changing the Definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in DSM-5: Critique and Call for Action") for an argument that the problems with the categorization and definition of PTSD in the DSM-5 are insurmountable.


19. van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.

20. Joseph LeDoux’s (Anxious: Using The Brain to Understand and Treat Fear and Anxiety; "Feelings: What Are They & How Does the Brain Make Them?"); My Word: Thoughtful Feelings; LeDoux and Pine, "Using Neuroscience to Help Understand Fear and Anxiety: A Two-system Framework") work here has been influential, leading the way on this conceptual shift, which marks a reversal from his early work in which defense responses were described as "fear" responses (The Emotional Brain). LeDoux’s (with this conceptual reversal, is to clearly demarcate subjective fearings (i.e., fear) from brain mechanisms that operate nonconsciously to detect danger.

21. The autonomic nervous system is comprised of mobilizing responses (fight-or-flight), which employ the sympathetic branch of the nervous system, and immobilizing ones (freezing/collapsing/horrible-immobility/death-reigning, Kozlowska et al., "Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management"), which employ the parasympathetic branch. In the later part of the twentieth century, research on trauma emphasized sympathetic responses often to the exclusion of parasympathetic ones, but that has changed in recent years, no doubt due, in part, to Stephen Porges’s influential Polyvagal Theory ("The Polyvagal Theory: New Insights into Adaptive Reactions of the Autonomic Nervous System"); The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation; The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe.


25. Roeffls’s in-depth review ("Freeze for Action: Neurobiological Mechanisms in Animal and Human Freezing") of recent work on the neural mechanisms of freezing, drawing on comparisons between animal and human studies, brings much-needed attention to this undertheorized defensive threat reaction. See also Roeffls and Dayan ("Freezing Revisited: Coordinated Automatic and Central Optimization of Threat Coping") for a novel interpretation of the freeze response, which sees it not as a passive response, but as a complex and coordinated cognitive state that is preparing for action.

26. Reis and Ortega discuss a variety of ongoing challenges to neuropsychological models from neuroscientific and philosophical perspectives in "Neuroscientific Perspectives for a Theory of Trauma."


28. Hacking, Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory; Lewontin, Biology as Ideology.

29. In Aftermath, Brison talks about a realization she had while reading Judith Herman’s Trauma and Recovery, and the "aha" moment when she first understood that she was not, in fact, "too sensitive," as she had been told since her attack: "I wasn’t crazy. I was traumatized. My responses were normal, to be expected, after such a terrifying event" (Aftermath, 111).

30. The shift in understanding of trauma as rooted in the body, in addition to a deepened understanding of neuroplasticity, has led to a wide variety of somatic or body-centered approaches to therapeutic treatment of trauma, like neurofeedback and somatic experiencing (e.g., Fisher, Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma; Calming the Fear-driven Brain; Levine, in an Unspoken Voice; Ogden et al., Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy), as well as some unconventional approaches, like dance, yoga, and martial arts.

31. On the other hand, when left untreated a dysregulated stress response can lead to a variety of health problems, beyond PTSD, which result in severe health outcomes and shortened life expectancy (Burke Harris, The Deepest Well).

32. Here are the top sixty (ranked by traffic, social media, domain authority & freshness) https://blog.feedsport.com/podcasts/; here is another ranking, done by a human (Laura Reagan): https://traumatherapistnetwork.com/podcasts-trauma-therapists/.


34. Mills, "White Ignorance."


36. I offer a more detailed analysis of Mills’s account in Freedman, "Knowing Better: Motivated Ignorance and Willful Ignorance."

37. Not all men are perpetrators of sexual violence, of course, but the majority (99 percent by most accounts) of perpetrators are men.

38. Chapter Two ("Gender Neutral with Urinals") of Criado Perez (Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men) is chock-full of detailed examples of urban planning from around the world that show gender discrimination built into the very fabric of cities.

39. In the US, the statistic is 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 33 men (Rainn.org).


41. Freedman, "Knowing Better," I distinguish between willful and non-willful motivated ignorance and argue that while not all motivated ignorance is willful, all motivated ignorance results in harm, and it is harm, not willfulness, that grounds attributions of culpability.

42. Freedman, "Rethinking the Wrong of Rape," I discuss a new mode of ways that the criminal justice system fails survivors of sexual violence, but for some striking legal failures globally, including a list of countries in which rapists can escape legal punishment by either paying the victim’s family or by marrying the victim, see Equality Now, "The World’s Shame — The Global Rape Epidemic: How Laws Around the World Are Failing to Protect Women and Girls from Sexual Violence"; and World Bank, Women, Business, and the Law.

43. Marital rape continues to be legal in at least ten countries and remains prevalent even where it is illegal (Equality Now, "The World’s Shame — The Global Rape Epidemic").
45. However disastrous rape law has been for white women, it has always been worse for Indigenous women, disabled women, women of color, and especially Black women. Historically, enslaved women could not refuse sex or testify against their “masters,” and even after emancipation, Black women were not considered rapedeable under law (Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty). This way of thinking evolved over time into a unique set of rape myths in which Black women are seen as naturally promiscuous, “jezebels,” with insatiable sexual desires (Capers, Real Women, Real Rape).

46. West, “Consent, Legitimation, and Dysphoria.”

47. This varies by jurisdiction, but in Canada, for instance, 90 percent of rapes go unreported (Johnson, “Limits of a Criminal Justice response: Trends in Police and Court Processing of Sexual Assault”).

48. For instance, in 1 in 5 official reports made to the police are deemed “un-founded,” a classification that denotes that the crime never happened (i.e., the woman didn’t want it, or that she didn’t change her mind midway, or that she hadn’t just had a bit too much to drink and is now embarrassed, etc. See (McQueen et al., “Sexual Assault: Women’s Voices on the Health Impacts of Not Being Believed by Police”) for a discussion of the health impacts of not being believed by the police based on firsthand reports by survivors.

49. Craig, Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession.

50. Statistics show this number to be under 3 percent globally: https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country.

51. Fricker, Epistemic Injustice.


53. Craig, Putting Trials on Trial; Haskell and Randall, “The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims”; Hopper, “Important Things to Get Right About the ‘Neurobiology of Trauma’; and Lowrey, and Arachnabul, ‘the victim is lying’ (Doolittle, “Unfounded: Mishandling of Sex-assault Cases Violates Right to Equality, Lawsuit Alleges”), but an even larger number are rejected as baseless because, according to police, there is no evidence that the woman didn’t want it, or that she didn’t change her mind midway, or that she hadn’t just had a bit too much to drink and is now embarrassed, etc. See (McQueen et al., “Sexual Assault: Women’s Voices on the Health Impacts of Not Being Believed by Police”) for a discussion of the health impacts of not being believed by the police based on firsthand reports by survivors.

54. Craig, Aftermath, 106.


56. Brison, Aftermath, 109; Italics in original.

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**Narrative Care: A Political Method of Survivor Self-Making and Communal Critique**

Miranda Young

**The New School for Social Research**

CW: mentions sexual violence, attempted murder, and trauma

Since the self is intersubjective and thus steeped in social power relations, when considering social understandings of sexual violence, oppressive social norms mediate both the survivor’s self-understandings and the audience’s receptions of their narratives. Oftentimes survivor narratives are treated with suspicion or ignored. If a narrative does not fit the description of an ideal victim, it may be questioned or undermined by an unsympathetic audience. Given these conditions of social reception, it is unclear how a survivor can construct a narrative that transcends these oppressive social norms. How can a survivor tell a story that both ruptures oppressive norms and is true to their experience? How can audiences give narratives proper uptake (i.e., appreciate survivors’ testimony, update their hermeneutic resources and skills, etc.) if their ability to hear is mediated by oppressive social norms? If we follow Brison’s account of the intersubjective narrative self, what can we say about the structure and effectiveness of political storytelling,
Given that all narratives are mediated through oppressive social norms?

This paper argues that this process happens through something I term narrative care, which I ultimately argue is necessary to build a better anti-rape politics. Narrative care is an intersubjective political practice that contests rape culture by engaging in a practice of self-making through narrating, listening to, and treating survivor stories with care. This kind of care draws attention to what I call the discursive conditions of possibility for the intelligibility of narratives as such. In my view, narrative care offers a view into the historical, material, and discursive conditions that operate at the background of storytelling. This kind of attention allows one to draw conclusions about the systemic and intersecting dynamics of oppression that produced the narrative, and therefore leads to radical political engagement.

In this paper, I bring narrative care into view by fleshing out three tools of narrative care. The first (1) is the practice of third-person narration. Third-person narration is when you tell someone else’s story that is not your own. This is an integral part of narrating with care because in telling someone’s story you are able to be cognizant of the ways in which you represent others, and the worlds and subjectivities you afford to them. Narrating another involves bringing them into a space of appearance and requires a careful engagement with their uniqueness. The second tool of narrative care (2) is an intentional form of listening that actively shifts our subjectivity and ruptures our frameworks of sense-making. This practice addresses how our society often struggles to make sense of survivor narratives on the perceptual level. I argue that this attitude disrupts our forms of listening, enacts new forms of listening, and thus remakes our perceptual capacities. The third tool (3) involves genealogical work or engaging with a “history of the present.” This form of genealogy is distinctly Foucauldian. Foucault creates genealogies to destabilize concepts we take for granted as natural or fixed. In other words, to enact narrative care we have to get into view the historical events that precede our comprehension of sexual violence. When we pay attention to our histories, our cultural scripts, and our archival documents, we can see how they produce us and our experience of the world and what they leave out.

Section 1 breaks down Brison’s interrelational self, which she develops from a study of trauma. Here, I aim to show how Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self opens up questions about a political project of listening to survivor narratives. Section 2 describes narrative care as a response to the political question of how we can and ought to engage survivor narratives. Narrative care involves self-narration, narration of others, and listening to others as a specific practice of attention to the discursive conditions of narrative intelligibility. In particular, I address the political stakes that animate these questions: What norms are organizing our narrative understandings? Whose pain is recognizable to us? Which character arcs are redeemable in our view? Answering and engaging these questions is part of the process of narrative care, and give us resources to advocate for better feminist politics: pursuing the end of rape culture through intersectional and radical politics, without relying on carceral logics. Sections 3, 4, and 5 expand on the three practices constitutive of narrative care I pointed out previously: third-person narration, modes of listening, and genealogical work.

**BRISON’S RELATIONAL SELFHOOD**

Susan Brison illustrates the role that first-person storytelling plays in a survivor’s therapeutic negotiation of trauma as well its role in social transformation. In her view, a study of trauma illustrates a new account of the self:

The study of trauma reveals that the accounts of embodied self, the self as narrative, and the autonomous self are compatible and complementary, focusing on different aspects of the self. I also argue that the study of trauma provides additional support for the view that each of these aspects of the self are fundamentally relational.

Brison argues that the self is embodied, autonomous, and narrational. Each of these aspects of the self is fundamentally related to the social environment in which it is situated. Our embodiment, our will, and our desires are fundamentally dependent on others. We are vulnerable to the world and are marked by this fragile dependency.

Brison feels this interdependency when remaking herself after her rape and near-death experience. She writes that narrating her experience to others helped with the dynamic, common to survivors, of intrusive and involuntary memory. Narrative made it so that memory did not have to be “passively endured” but could be turned into action—an action that allows one to develop control around the recall of a specific memory. In her view, trauma survivors need to be able to narrate their experiences in order to construct themselves anew. Remaking the self involves narrative control over traumatic memories, and this involves constructing a new narrative self in turn.

Oftentimes, survivors cite not having a language for their suffering. Brison believes this phenomenon illustrates a despair that the world is either indifferent or hostile to the survivor’s experiences. Audiences have trouble hearing survivors’ stories because it is difficult to bear the idea that they could be vulnerable to the same kind of violence. Awareness of our relational selfhood comes when we feel the failure of recognition, when we feel abandoned and alienated. Brison cites the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who writes that a survivor needs to have their narrative heard by an “empathetic listener” in order to understand their stories anew. New understandings of their experience are important for a survivor as they process their trauma.

Brison addresses remaking the self on both an embodied and narrative level. On the embodied level, Brison tried medications, took self-defense classes, and debated on whether to have children. On the narrative level, she participated in individual and group therapy, sharing her story with empathetic listeners and retelling it over and over again. Each of these relational practices—narrating and engaging with a healing of her body—allowed Brison
to rebuild a sense of autonomy. Remaking the self involves “being sustained by, and caring for others,” she writes.  

For Brison, survival is about a social world that gives you what you need to live: it is about acceptance and care from a community, and about finding a way to see the future as significant. In this sense, her work is normative: she demands that the world make space for survivors to create new narrative selves, a creation that has the capacity to fundamentally address and change rape as a cultural practice. This imperative is where I begin my inquiry. While I agree that narratives have the power to alter social arrangements—narratives of survivors entail the potential for personal and social transformation—the conditions of possibility for the shift remain unclear. This is because narratives of survivors can also be weaponized by oppressors and then re-entrench oppression: trauma testimonies can be mobilized towards oppressive politics. The rest of this paper outlines an approach, what I call “narrative care,” that tries to address and solve these issues. This kind of radical systemic critique is committed to abolishing rape culture and taking seriously its multiple sources. Narrative care offers us a view of how white supremacy, capitalism, coloniality as well as patriarchy produce sexual violence. It subsequently mobilizes an intersectional politics—a prison abolitionist decolonial anti-racist feminist politics.

THE CONDITIONS OF NARRATIVE CARE

A central political project to be picked up after Brison’s book is the following: If the survivor’s self-(re)construction after trauma is bound up with the audience’s reception, and if the audience’s epistemic and hermeneutic resources are mediated by oppressive politics, how does one remake oneself against or through those forms of reception? How do we counteract oppressive social implications in our own narratives when those norms mediate the audience’s reception? And if narrative selves are informed by cultural “master narratives,” how do you engage in narration as a means to liberate both yourself and other survivors?  

Storytelling as political critique involves narration that struggles to overcome entrenched and oppressive social understandings of specific phenomena. In the feminist movement, this is prevalent in relation to phenomena of sexual violation (e.g., #MeToo). However, without critical attention to the conditions of narrative articulation and narrative reception, oppressive politics may be reproduced. Indeed, many uses of political narrative storytelling in the guise of “feminist” politics are used to mobilize harmful stances. For instance, trauma narratives have been instrumentalized by the political right to incite xenophobic rhetoric like increased border policing: think, for example, about Donald Trump’s appeal to the “Mexican rapists” to incentivize the construction of the border wall. Narratives have also been used to justify the rolling back of gun control and transphobic policies around public restrooms. Furthermore, stories of sexual violence are used to mobilize “tough-on-crime” carceral politics and systemically targets poor Black and brown communities rather than protect them.  

Narratives—such as the construction of “counter-stories” that purportedly oppose a “master narrative”—are not intrinsically neutral or good. They can bolster or produce other oppressive “master narratives.” Simply producing a story against what one perceives as a master narrative is not an adequate expression of radical politics. Rather, the expression of radical politics has to involve a specific kind of attention to the social production of narrative selves and the conditions through which we empathetically engage with them. This is what I take to be the discursive conditions of intelligibility.

Discursive conditions mediate how we become intelligible to ourselves and how others become intelligible to us. In his account of narrative intelligibility, Alasdair Macintyre argues that the narrative form is essential to conceptualizing a human life, primarily because we are “storytelling animals.” We tend to shape our ordinary actions into a narrative history, or setting, which comprises all the material events that lead to a specific action and organize its explanation. Macintyre theorizes intelligibility in terms of the framing of action. In his words:

To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passions and purposes.

We understand actions once they become conceivable to us—when we manage to frame a sequence of actions in a causal structure. Narrative, as a sequence of events, produces a causal structure. Actions become intelligible within the frame of a narrative sequence.

Through Foucault, it is important to emphasize that these conditions of intelligibility are themselves historically contingent and discursive. For Foucault, discourse means a historically produced set of meanings and knowledge that organize our social comprehensions; it is both practical and linguistic. Discourses are created, reproduced, repudiated, or ossified by material and institutional dynamics of power. Foucault referred to these as technologies of the self—the study of how the subject is made. Structures of power produce our ability to recognize, engage, and feel emotionally involved with someone’s narrative sequence. Sylvia Wynter refers to these discursive conditions as a “culturally specific discursive program” through which we construct ourselves. Our ability to hear stories is mediated by discursive conditions that both influence us on an affective level and organize how we are persuaded and moved by storytelling. We arrive as listeners with pre-given intuitions that impact which stories persuade or move us. The affects and embodied aspects of narration are pertinent to the political project of storytelling because they can both obscure and produce stories, told or untold.

I develop this general account of discursive conditions of intelligibility to call attention to a method that is particularly powerful in women of color feminisms. Black feminist theory and decolonial feminism engages this method. This practice of narration is involved in calling attention to
I define care as a process. Hartman argues that care involves both an affective dimension and a behavioral dimension. You care about something when you engage in an affected displacement of yourself for another person, where you supplant your reality with the reality of another. For Noddings, the affective phenomenon of “engrossment” is a requirement for care to exist. The engrossment motivates the carer towards action: placing oneself in the reality of the other one to act in service of that other. Joan Tronto similarly argues that care involves a dual process of a “mental disposition of concerns” and the “actual practices that we engage in as a result of those concerns.”

My view of care extends from these thinkers, in that I think of care as a form of affectivity that invests in another body and person and a set of practical actions that follow from that investment. These actions aim at preserving the well-being and flourishing of the person the care is addressed to. However, I depart from these care ethicists in that I believe that the affects themselves need to be subject to interrogation—something that a practice of paying attention to discursive conditions of possibility would reveal. For example, I take there to be a real issue with vindicating the role of empathy that induces care without this attention to the discursive and material conditions that allow empathy to manifest. This critique is inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s critique of the role that white empathy plays in garnering moral outrage against slavery. She makes the case for her concerns through the prominent white abolitionist, John Rankin. In letters to his brother, Rankin expressed a deep abhorrence to the scenes of slavery he witnessed. He felt it important to “render the horrors of slavery” through narrating them to other white people. He pictures “the cruel lash approaching my wife and children...” Rankin felt drawn towards reproducing the images of violence. And he expressed that they moved him towards deep sentiment and solidarity for the enslaved, and motivated him towards convincing other white people to become abolitionists. In Hartman’s view, Rankin’s empathetic identification revealed more about what he felt for himself than what he felt for the enslaved. And the ease through which he was able to empathetically identify with the enslaved relied both on his good intentions as well as the “fungibility of the Black body.” Hartman argues that the material economic conditions of the Black body as a commodity are the grounds through which one can easily insert themselves into the experience and consciousness of a Black enslaved person. This material reality produces a dynamic wherein the perspective of the Black enslaved is obscured. Here, when moral sentiment relies on a white perspective, it occupies a Black body as if it were a commodity in order to garner political investment.

While it is unclear whether Hartman thinks that the affect of empathy is always fueled by a problematic desire, I view this critique as a good example of how examining the discursive conditions changes our understanding. Hartman’s insight is that under the specific historical materialist conditions through which the Black body is rendered “fungible,” it seems reasonable to conclude that the psychic practice of projecting a white viewpoint onto a Black body is made possible by having material conditions that make that occupation easy, or on her view, even pleasurable.

This view departs from that of some care ethicists who have argued that empathy is a moral emotion indispensable for care. For example, such uncritical vindication of empathy as a method of care goes awry in Maurice Hamington’s 2004 work on the caring imagination. For Hamington, imagination allows us to expand that particular caring process across worlds and avoid parochialism. Hamington argues that we can cultivate our capacity to care via imagination so that we can care for those beyond our immediate surroundings and communities. This is a valuable insight, but his examples illustrate the problem with empathy that Hartman details. One example he gives is of “young girls who face the horrors of genital mutilation in foreign lands.” This was a prominent political issue at the time his book was published; however, this example of empathy, often deployed in white feminist Western thought, frequently took for granted uncritical assumptions about the cultural specificities of the clitoridectomy, specifically in North Africa and the Middle East, and consequently contributed to racist and xenophobic inferences. This example demonstrates how some care ethicists at the time argued for the practice of empathy without examining the cultural and historical context through which they are deploying that affect. They thereby ran the risk of projecting or exporting politics and care practices that are oppressive and harmful, rather than attentive. The point is not that empathy is bad all of the time. The point is that attention to the discursive conditions reveals what is mobilizing the emotion, and whether the care practices that follow are productive.

I have reconstructed what I take to be some of the conditions of narrative care from a set of theoretical accounts. I adopt Brison’s definition of narrative: “a social interaction—actual or imagined or anticipated or remembered—in which what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know and also by what they cannot or will not hear.” I define care as a process of both affective engagement and practical rationality that accompanies a set of actions that tend towards the well-being of the cared for. In addition to engrossment, it often involves experimentation, humor, trepidation, caution, and an openness towards being corrected or fixing mistakes. These affects and their practices have to be a part of our political care engagement. You have to be willing to attend to the background political systemic conditions in order to address what practices are needed to care for the person, narrative, or situation. Specific to the practice of narrative care is an attention to the discursive conditions of intelligibility that are historically and contingently produced so that the actions and politics that follows from that attention are politically radical. By “politically radical,” in the context of feminist anti-rape politics, I mean politics that acknowledges and resists the multiple sources of domination that produce rape culture: white supremacy, late capitalism, carceral logics, a history of colonial violence, as well as a misogynistic sense...
of impunity. Narrative care is in service of producing a radical politics that is systemic and multifaceted. Narrative care towards survivor narratives leads us towards a feminism that is anti-racist and abolitionist—abolishing both carcerality and rape culture, which I see as intertwined. I now detail tools of narrative care through several feminist scholars—and those tools are narrating others, modes of listening, and historical and genealogical work.

**NARRATING OTHERS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THIRD-PERSON NARRATION**

Brison illustrates the significance of first-person narrative accounts in survival storytelling. However, when thinking about survivor stories it is important to consider the political significance of third-person narration and how it influences social understanding of survivors of sexual assault.

Cavarero argues that we each hold a desire to be narrated. And this desire to be narrated drives the practice of narration as a way of revealing identity. Our desire to be narrated reveals that personal identity is relational and dependent on another, since we appear before the other. Self-construction is incomplete without a sense of our own narratability by others. Our selfhood is pre-conditioned by the way we appear to another, and our ability to narrate is predicated on how we are narrated, or how we view to be narrated.

To illustrate the significance of this claim, she tells the story of Emilia and Amalia. This story is from the famous Italian feminist text *Non credere di avere dei diritti (Don’t Think You Have Any Rights).* Emilia loved to narrate herself—she was known for endlessly telling different stories from her life. However, she lacked an ability to express herself well, often boring the people to whom she was narrating. On the other hand, her friend, Amalia, was gifted in her ability to express herself. So, Amalia, as a gift to her friend, wrote the story of her life. Given Emilia’s frequent narrations, she knew the story well, and Emilia carried the narrative with her in her handbag, "reading it again and again, overcome by emotion."

We can draw two conclusions from the story of Emilia and Amalia. First, consider the emotional relief that Emilia feels reading her story. Emilia “weeps because she recognizes in that narration the object of her own desire . . . and the desire reveals itself in relation between the two friends in the act of the gift.” Being narrated by another, being third-person-narrated is emotionally important because it is an invested attention to the details of your life by someone else, and a way of tending to that particularity that cultivates your well-being and meets your desires. For Cavarero, narrative care is the oldest form of care—attention to the accidental quality of a life, something that distinguishes it as “this and not that.”

Second, relationality (and things that fall out of it, like attention to detail) is important to the proper narration of others. It matters that Amalia is Emilia’s friend, that she pays attention every time Emilia tells her story. While others were bored by Emilia’s self-narration, Amalia listened carefully and then constructed a narrative with an intimacy and detail that only a friend could. Through storytelling Emilia and Amalia provide each other their own space of exhibition and appearance. Emilia’s life appears significant to her because of the attention Amalia has given it. Her life has not gone without narration—a fate that Cavarero considers intolerable.

Caring third-person narration produces diverse and plural survivor narrative experiences that then circulate the public sphere. In *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation*, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that this is politically important. Public recognition of plural survivor experiences leads to better feminist politics in that it allows us to get into view the different ways that rape culture is produced and maintained. Narrating for others is an important tool of narrative care. It can be a method of engaging in radical feminist politics when we pay attention to the discursive conditions that precede the narrative. Amalia is able to give Emilia’s narrative that kind of attention, given the intimacy of their relationship. We take from this anecdote the idea that the good, life-affirming way to treat narratives (including survivor narratives) is to treat them with the kind of care one naturally gives to friends, and that third-person narration is important for the well-being of the person who is being narrated.

**FRAMEWORKS OF SENSE AND FORMS OF LISTENING**

I argue that some forms of listening to survivor narratives may lead us towards radical feminist politics. I am informed by the work of María del Rosario Acosta Lopez, a decolonial feminist scholar who develops an aesthetic and political method that she calls “grammars of listening” to respond to trauma. Acosta broadly defines trauma as “a particular type of experience, or . . . a particular structure of experience that, in its devastating effects, profoundly colonizes the subjectivities, identities, bodies, and languages it cuts through.” She develops her methods on the grammars of listening after working with survivors of torture by Chicago police. She found that, when listening and documenting their experiences, she needed to develop a method of listening that helped her process the stories on a perceptual level.

Acosta builds off Friedrich Schiller’s work on aesthetic experience to lay the groundwork for resistance and critique. Schiller claims that aesthetic experiences cause a radical shift in the frameworks through which we perceive. This radical shift involves “a suspension of and resistance to the frameworks that give shape to what has been recognized and accepted as truth.” Acosta mobilizes this insight to explain what happens when we listen to stories of trauma. She writes:

> What one hears in [trauma] testimony is also the shattering of all available frameworks to make sense of what is being communicated. This is due . . . to the unprecedented forms of violence to which it bears witness, and thus to the lack of available categories that can properly name and render intelligible what is being communicated.

Recall Brison’s discussion of a listener’s instinct to turn away from the survivor’s narration. Acosta calls this...
These discursive conditions influence our capacity “protection.” In order to create something like these new narratives that desire worlds where we don’t have to rely on punishment or the incarceration of bodies for them. Grammars of listening involve a method of listening practice of listening that we have a chance at rupturing oppressive political systems, and it is through a careful construction under oppressive material conditions. The forms of listening cut to the heart of a problem of subject-and sensuous realm of experience.

The listener of the survivor narrative ought to dwell in that space of rupture instead of turning away from it. When we hear a story that disrupts our normal abilities to make sense of that story, we need to dwell on the inadequacy of our frameworks of sense, to stay in the feeling of discomfort, unfamiliarity, and fear. We need to make space for survivors to show us worlds that we didn’t know existed. Some modes of listening to survivor storytelling would involve being open to the idea that the violence they are describing may have been invisible to you. This would involve attention to the narrative background that the survivor is providing you. One should be curious and open minded as to how the survivor experienced the harm and how they made sense of the experience, and paying attention to what the survivor needs or asks of you. The ways in which art illustrates to us new forms of music, painting, visual images, survivor stories show us realities and experience formerly beyond our comprehension. These forms of listening create something new—something new for the narrator and something new for the listener. Acosta refers to this listening as making audible a story that our frameworks have been consigned to silence. Just as the survivor lives in a space where their sense of perception has been destroyed, so too does the listener of the story. When we listen, we create a new form of self, and when we are listened to, we have the chance to construct ourself anew.

We run the risk of erasing, ignoring, and obscuring violence that doesn’t make sense to us if we don’t see how oppressive norms, values, and structures mediate our own narrative self-understandings. Some examples of these conditions are the ways in which sexual violence against sex workers, the incarcerated, or undocumented migrants are rendered unperceivable under the eyes of the law. These discursive conditions influence our capacity to listen to survivors of sexual violence and dignify their narratives. Acosta’s grammars of listening combat these discursive conditions by disrupting frameworks of sense that result from structural violence. By framing the practice of listening as aesthetic, she addresses the pre-reflective and sensuous realm of experience.

In the archive, Hartman often faces scenes of violation and violence against the Black enslaved, both from the perspectives of the slave trader or master and that of the abolitionists. She notes that there is little in the archive from the perspective of the enslaved themselves. She writes:

And these stories are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess . . . transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified
Hartman feels a responsibility to move beyond the excess of the reproduction of scenes of violence she reads in the archive. From her perspective, to merely reproduce the scene of violence from the outside crucially misses the particular perspective of the Black enslaved themselves. This reverberates forward with our contemporary politics.

Hartman identifies how discursive possibility and conditions are informed by the voices in the archive and the voices that are not in the archive. This genealogical work is indispensable for narrative care to occur. When we consider our hermeneutic and normative resources for our stories as historically produced, we may ask how they came to be. Genealogy is a practice of arranging events so that we destabilize concepts, values, and norms that we take for granted because we see that our histories are contingent and thereby subject to change.

By engaging with the archive in the way she does, Hartman sets herself up to be doing a type of second-order narration, or meta-narration. Contrast this, for example, with Hamington’s form of empathetic imagination. Hamington takes his conception of empathy as a first-order process. That is, Hamington takes the process of empathy wherein one produces images from a given set of empirical data. The empathetic process extends from access to a material reality, and the caring imagination allows one to extrapolate from that first-order interaction and establish emotional investment across different cultural contexts. Hartman’s historicizing and genealogical work, on the contrary, places what she examines—the seemingly objective data in the archive—into a narrative context: [what is there and what is not, and who has left it out and why.] In this sense, Hartman develops a type of meta narration—a second-order narrative context that seeks to fill in the gaps of history without reducing them to empirical givens. We may think that, by filling in those gaps, she is making the same kind of mistake as Hamington, but it is her use of genealogy and historicizing that prevents her from making that mistake. Through this activity she destabilizes her own position as an archivist, historian, philosopher, and narrator. She holds the stories of these women at an ambivalent distance, and expresses her own worries about what feeds her and others’ desires.

I conclude by showing how Hartman develops a method to respond to our historical discursive conditions called “critical fabulation,” which is an example of narrative care. Critical fabulation is a form of narrative care that is directly related to the type of historical work one does in order to get discursive conditions into view. This section aimed to show that engagement with one’s historical specificity and context is indispensable towards acts of narrative care. In order to narrate ourselves, another, and listen with care, we have to see ourselves as situated at the end of a contingent history and genealogy.

### CONCLUSION: TWO EXAMPLES

In Hartman’s words, critical fabulation is a tool to “tell the impossible story” while highlighting the “impossibility of storytelling.” It involves rearranging the “fabula,” i.e., discrete but related events, of a story. Shifting narrative causality is an aspect of critical fabulation, which also involves narrative restraint. That restraint, for Hartman, is articulated as a refusal to fill in gaps or “provide closure.” It signals the presence of the “Black noise” that underlies the experience of the transatlantic slave trade but is not captured by the archive: “shrieks, moans, nonsense, opacity.”

Critical fabulation is a hermeneutic as well as a method. It’s a form of storytelling that also brings into view the practices and investments that inform the storytelling process. Hartman’s Wayward Lives is a practice of critical fabulation: it documents young Black women’s stories at the turn of the twentieth century in Harlem and Philadelphia. The characters are figures that Hartman discovered in the archive. She follows their lives closely, engaging in the form of close narration—a first- and third-person narration style where the narrator and the character are inseparable.

Hartman employs critical fabulation to handle scenes of sexual violence and coercion with care. In a story entitled “A Minor Figure,” Hartman unpacks a photo of a young Black girl found in the belongings of the infamous photographer Thomas Eakins. Eakins was a prominent artist in Philadelphia who was subject to scrutiny when accused of coercing women to pose for him in the nude. While the complaints of white upper-class women students of his are well documented, Hartman notes that little is known about a photograph found in his possession of a nude Black child reclined on a couch. There is no documentation of her name, and amongst the list of Eakin’s victims she is not accounted for. Hartman tries to imagine the story of the child.

She left the studio exactly as the way she came: down the four flights of stairs into the rectangular garden with the row of elephant ears, past the water hydrant, the four cats and the setter, exiting through the wooden fence back onto Eighteenth Street, and then made her way back home. Was she able to settle back into her life or did this latest violence leave a mark, a record as indelible as the photograph? As the photograph makes plain, her body was already marked by a history of sexual defilement, already branded as a commodity. Its availability to be used, to be hurt, was foundational to the prevailing set of social arrangements, in which she was formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial and sexual violence.

Hartman overlays the words of the text over a faded image of the photo. She refuses to clearly reproduce the image of violence. She will not make a spectacle of the image. She tries to imagine the narrative she does not have access to—how the girl felt, what it meant for her to leave the studio. But Hartman complicates her authority as narrator. She does not claim, even from her careful study in the
archive, to know the truth of what happened. She narrates a possibility, one outcome of the event. She uses first- and third-person narration, and this oscillation between forms produces an ambiguous affect, where the reader tries to latch onto any narrative intelligibility and have it yanked from them, their perceptual senses inadequate to the task of full comprehension.

Critical fabulation allows Hartman to center Black women’s perspectives and Black women’s relationships, even with a sparse archive, rather than exclusively centering the scene of violence and the perspective of the rapist. She reflects the ambivalence she finds in the narratives, feeling on one hand a desire for romance and whimsy for these women and on the other a commitment to honestly recording their experience of violation. Her words at the end remind us of how the violent use and abuse of Black women’s bodies is a historical fact that directly influences our contemporary discursive conditions. Violence against Black women in the United States was a routine practice that organized an entire system of subjugation. And we must remake our perceptual capacities through and against this historical phenomenon.

Critical Fabulation is an example of narrative care as I defined it above—a perspective that crucially responds to the fraught discursive terrain of storytelling and sexual violence. It is a method that historicizes the practice of storytelling in order to reveal the conditions that produce the ability to tell stories. Engaging in critical fabulation entails some risk: there is always the possibility that one is romanticizing a perspective, or distorting, or projecting one’s desires. This process is not politically pure, and it is possible to produce uncaring narration from fabulation. However, Hartman and others show that by engaging with genealogical accounts and framing the words and values within a contingent (and always revisable) discursive framework, we have a better chance to tell stories in caring ways.

Feminist philosophy brings to light the personal as a site of theorizing, and this move fundamentally changes the way in which we do philosophy and the project of political storytelling. Understandings of care, however, are never purely abstract but constantly affected by our lived practices and investments. Some of my personal experiences have been crucial in shaping this understanding of care. My Popo, or 婆婆 (translates from Cantonese to “grandmother”), suffers from multiple conditions that impact her mobility, one of which led to a successful but intense spinal surgery in 2021. She was then released to a rehab facility to face a long and difficult recovery. The facility’s understaffing and budget cuts in addition to the language barrier between her and the nurses led to harmful neglect of my grandmother. A product of racist, xenophobic, ageist, ableist, and classist structures, this neglect led to the accumulation of bedsores during her time there, which by the time she left had developed into open wounds. Upon her release from the rehab facility, she went to live with my mother and sister. My sister and my mother worked tirelessly to heal the wounds. This proved difficult because the wounds had routinely been wrapped in damp bandages without being treated with antibiotics and, therefore, never healed. Committed healing involved my mother and sister cleaning and changing the bandages multiple times a day for several months. My sister cut the bandages into particular shapes that kept them from getting damp. She applied a series of creams. Some of them were for healing, some were for comfort. Getting Popo ready for bed was an extensive process, which involved a series of moisturizing and massage techniques to make sure she was nice and comfortable at bedtime.

When I first came back to help my mom and sister, the sight of the wounds really frightened me. I was raised by my grandmother and had been used to the image of her standing upright, her mouth in a tight firm line or yelling at me in Cantonese. I had to adjust to seeing her so vulnerable and in so much pain. But my sister brought an odd sense of fun to the process. She would tease my grandma, she laughed at my squeamishness, she made games out of placing the bandages. And every time we would lift Popo into her bed, my sister would say, “Now we have to hug her to lift her! It’s her favorite part!” The kind of care my grandmother needed took time, attention, and experimentation. It took us a while to find the right combination of creams, the right bandage configuration, and the right changing schedule. It involved mistakes, pain, and humor. We also needed to continually ask Popo how she felt, and what felt good and what was working.

I share my story as an example of narrative care. In telling this narrative I exemplify how narrative care may be extended beyond stories of sexual violence: it is a method that can be used across political contexts. I attend to the details of my grandmother’s story. I see her experience as important to narrate and treat it in a loving manner, but also in a way that pays attention to the structural and systemic causes of her maltreatment. I narrate this moment of coming up against understanding (being frightened) but pushing through my lack of understanding to gain new perspective. I shared this story in order to show that my own thoughts and views are not really my own, but passed to me by the people that I love and my care community. And they are open to correction—my grandmother will likely have edits in my retellings of her experience.

In this paper, I have shown that a method of narrative care is needed for feminist political storytelling. Brison offers us a conceptual schema to think about narratives, selves, and politics through the study of trauma. That conceptual schema, however, presents a fundamental puzzle—one that has political and ethical stakes for survivors. Given that we are constituted by the social narratives that surround us, how do we change ourselves? And further, how do we use our self-transformation to change that social world? I believe this kind of attention to discursive conditions of survivor narrations can lead us to be critical of carceral politics and supportive of prison abolitionist politics, but I will not be able to go into that work in this paper. I have argued that political storytelling must pick up this puzzle through a multiplicity of methods subsumed by the term narrative care—a process of writing and narrating for ourselves and for others and listening deeply with an attention to the particular and a curiosity for what you don’t yet understand. Women of color feminist theory
is at the forefront of this methodological production, precisely because it directly engages in the theoretical heart of self-making under oppressive material, discursive, and epistemic conditions. We employ narrative care to bring forth stories that have been silenced, obscured, or unannotated and produce new social narratives so that these selves have places to thrive. We can tell stories about those who have gone unannounced, even as we pay close attention to ourselves as narrators. By attending to these histories, we build new worlds towards the future. Narrative care can help us see the truthful logics of domination that are illustrated by our survivor narratives, and we can consciousness-raise towards beautiful radical ends.

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NOTES
1. The term "narrative care" emerged from my participation in Fanny Söderbäck’s seminar on Singularity, Vulnerability, Narration. Söderbäck’s work on “Narration as a Practice of Care” and the discussions of the class were influential for this work: I am deeply indebted to them.
2. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.”
5. Brison, Aftermath, 82.
7. Laub, Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History; cited in Brison, Aftermath, 58.
10. I take this language from Hilde Lindemann’s text Damaged Identities and Narrative Repair. She brings in these terms to show how cultural master narratives can be oppressive and an individual’s “counter narrative” can rupture them.
12. For more information on the topic of carceral feminism, please see Mindy Gottschalk’s text The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America.
15. Macintyre, After Virtue, 208.
18. Foucault, Archeology of Knowledge.
19. Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”
20. Wynter’s argument on narrativity relates to a general claim on the general construction of the human as both bio-evolutionary produced as well as socially discursive. Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter To My Colleagues,” 5.
23. This critique is informed and inspired by Kelly Gawel’s work on radical care. Gawel argues that care ethicists take for granted the social and material conditions in which caring emotions manifest. As a result, this often leads to unequal distributions of care labor and naive and vindicatory arguments on engrossment, empathy, and self-sacrifice. Gawel, “Radical Care: Seeking New and More Possible Meetings in the Shadows of Structural Violence.”
24. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection.
27. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 18.
32. Hamilton, Embodied Care, 64.
33. For more information on debates around this issue, see Sylvia Tamale’s work African Sexualities, a Reader, or Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving.
34. Brison, Aftermath, 102.
35. For more information on this type of abolitionist feminism, see Amber Stroina’s chapter on carceral feminism in her book The Right to Sex.
36. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 32.
37. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 32.
40. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 56.
41. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 53.
42. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 56.
45. del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars,” 207.
47. López, “From Aesthetics of Critique,” 143.
49. NHI is the legal acronym for No Humans Involved. Sylvia Wynter and Jackie Wang in different places of their text illustrate the categorical logic that legal linguistic implements to designate who is a victim, criminal, and thus “human” (see Sylvia Wynter, “No Human Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues”; Jackie Wang, “Against Innocence,” Lies Journal, 2012). NHI is often used to classify the jobless, homeless, sex worker, and migrants, and thereby organizes liability and criminal activity based on this status.
50. Specifically, Hartman is working within the context of the United States’ archives and the perspectives of the black enslaved American experiences.


In her essay "The Woman Who Stayed Silent" published in 2022, Sarah Polley returns to her decision not to join other complainants in the 2016 Canadian criminal trial against radio host Jian Ghomeshi. She chose not to report her sexual assault that happened two decades before the trial. Polley describes how her ambivalence towards Ghomeshi and the assault through all these years (often retold in a lighthearted way as just a bad date) would impact her credibility as a victim of sexual violence. She recalls how the attorneys she consulted in connection to her sexual assault discouraged her from pressing charges against her assailant, saying that they would never recommend a woman they love press criminal charges for rape; she was told that going forward would be "The most stressful thing [she]’d ever experienced."

Yet, we do have this persisting archetype of a heroic sexual violence survivor successfully pressing charges against their assailant and overcoming their trauma in a court setting ending with a guilty verdict. The reality, as I show, is often more complex and intricate. In this short essay, I explore how the demand to be a good survivor of sexual violence is constituted through the criminal-legal process, which undermines survivors’ ability to heal and pursue accountability and justice on their terms. Victims may feel ambivalent about how to move forward and pressured to perform survivorhood, which is only realized through criminal prosecution. The aftermath of sexual violence can be more morally ambiguous and confusing than it appears in mainstream narratives of justice; either one seeks justice through traditional means, or one avoids violence can be more morally ambiguous and confusing than it appears in mainstream narratives of justice; either one seeks justice through traditional means, or one avoids the second victimization that often plagues victims who go through criminal-legal processes. As much as we collectively expect crimes to be punished, we expect that victims will go through criminal-legal proceedings; failure to do so can be seen as a failure to conform oneself to norms of good survivorhood, and thereby amounts to a moral failure.

Inspired by Susan Brison's philosophical method in her book Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self—interweaving first-person narratives, social science research, and feminist philosophy—this paper explores how moral expectations in the aftermath of sexual violence are shaped by the criminal-legal system. When someone acknowledges that they survived an instance of sexual violence, this often raises the question of what should follow, which may trigger a moral ambiguity about how one must act. I describe the moral ambiguity of people who experienced sexual violence as a set of beliefs or behaviors that seemingly exhibit indecisiveness or inconsistent choices regarding what they might do in the aftermath; for instance, victims may regret or be hesitant about participating in the criminal process. In addition to being influenced by the criminal-legal options, good

**Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence**

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survivorhood is often fashioned through an individualized framework, preventing us from seeing the structural nature of the violence that happened. The aftermath, I show, often takes the form of a double-bind, where victims must perform enough agency and survivor traits on one hand, while at the same time they must demonstrate the traits of being a victim.

To proceed, I first show that, when an instance of sexual violence is recognized as such, we expect survivors to seek justice through the criminal-legal system. Good survivorship is often actualized through pressing charges against perpetrators of violence where there is no place for ambiguity. I explore how the individualization of the aftermath of sexual violence shapes the moral and legal framework. The tension between the individual nature of sexual violence and the collective and political meaning of its punishment deserves more critical and normative attention in feminist philosophy.

FROM RAPE MYTHS TO SURVIVOR MYTHS

The type of story I mentioned above about Polley’s hesitation in pressing charges matters for thinking through the aftermath of sexual violence. It allows us to grapple with the high-stakes dilemma survivors may experience in wondering whether it is the right decision to press charges for an instance of sexual violence against someone they know. I acknowledge that this is an unusual case because survivors of sexual violence often do not recognize and name the violence that happened to them. In this section I argue that rape myths shape our collective and individual understanding of sexual violence, and in particular that they shape how victims recover from sexual violence.

Rape myths are beliefs that make us less likely to believe people who experienced sexual violence when they disclose this to us or to service providers. Rape myths—such as “she was asking for it,” “most rapes are committed by strangers,” “false rape accusations are common,” or “a husband cannot rape his wife”—prevent us from identifying common instances of sexual violence, simultaneously “minimizing” victims’ credibility and harm while “catastrophizing” the supposed exceptional character of sexual violence. In practice, these myths may impact access to services in the aftermath of rape victims because they may not be seen as “real” victims by service providers (e.g., doctors, social workers, attorneys, police officers) or their immediate community. Survivors themselves can fall into rape myths when they intend to understand what happened to them. Because sexual assaults often do not follow a clear narrative of a stranger attacking someone (e.g., the case of a date rape such as the one described by Polley), they render victims vulnerable to hermeneutical injustice, in which they are unable to identify the situation as involving sexual assault because they lack the conceptual resources to do so.

Concurrently with rape myths that assign the responsibility of an instance of sexual violence to victims themselves (i.e., victim-blaming), survivor myths individualize responsibility by making victims responsible for their recovery. I argue that there is not only pressure on survivors regarding how they should have behaved before and during the event, but there is also pressure in the aftermath of violence, when victims recognize that the harm of what happened to them is rife with social expectations of how to “move forward” after sexual violence. If a victim recognizes what happened to them as sexual violence, victims may feel pressured, as a result, to press charges and seek justice through traditional means. Hence, a failure to do so discredits their survivor identity. In the aftermath of violence, rape myths, through survivor narratives, constrain and silence people who experienced sexual violence. As I will contend later, the necessity to keep a coherent account of victimization, in case one goes through the criminal-legal system, silences ambiguity experienced by the victims.

According to more mainstream versions of the #MeToo movement, one becomes a survivor by denouncing and refusing to be silent; survivors must follow a teleological path from victimhood to (criminal) justice and recovery. The rape myths that persist in the aftermath may make the survivor believe that there is only one right way to present oneself as a survivor, exacerbating the ambiguity that might be felt by them. The rich social science literature on norms of survivorhood is helpful for grappling with this individual responsibility for recovery; that is, victims are individually tasked to find remedies to the structural problem of sexual violence. Stephanie R. Larson conceptualizes what she calls “compulsory survivorship,” highlighting the need to individually overcome violence and take personal responsibility for the effects of violence. She shows how this disdain of victimhood is rooted in a denial of pain and celebration of the able-bodied, neoliberal, and independent individual. Failing to perform survivorhood becomes a personal failing, rather than a societal one. People who experienced sexual violence bear “the responsibility for surmounting social ills through individual efforts, in a context where social remedies are sorely lacking.” Victims become virtuous survivors through individual empowerment, not through community and collective empowerment.

The myth of survivorhood does not give enough room for the complex moral ambiguity that can characterize the aftermath of violence; the figure of the survivor allows for some anger, but not too much. Erin Gilson writes about this impossible double-bind survivors may experience in these terms: “to be ‘good,’ ‘true’ victims, women must be vulnerable—weak and incapable—but simultaneously agential, perfectly rational, and calculating about how best to document and prove their victimization, yet never so rational as to be perceived as unemotional (contrary to normative gender expectations) or manipulative (aligning with tropes of ‘bad femininity’).” This double-bind, where victims must perform their victimization while showing how successful they are at resisting, is also present in many cases of domestic violence. As argued by Paige Sweet, domestic violence survivors must respond to similar social expectations of sexual violence survivors in
order to be deemed credible and legible to the eyes of the law and service providers. As Sweet shows, while domestic violence survivors must be “successful” in their embodiment of survivorhood (i.e., through trauma therapy and self-help strategies) for accessing resources, they must at the same time convince criminal-legal authorities that they are, indeed, victims.

Making victims individually responsible for their recovery shapes their ability to imagine justice beyond the criminal-legal system. Indeed, how can one think about recovering through collective means when they are deemed responsible for overcoming their pain? Seeing the aftermath of violence as an individual project realized through myths of survivorhood shapes horizons of justice.

LIMITED HORIZONS OF JUSTICE

The social expectations are that to be a good victim or a good survivor is to seek criminal prosecution, which may in turn pressure victims into seeking criminal-legal options. In this section, I focus on how survivors are pressured to enter into the criminal-legal process and how they are revictimized as a result. For sexual violence survivors, horizons of justice appear to be limited to the criminal-legal system despite the fact that alternatives to criminal prosecution might be available. If we expect that harmful and immoral behavior, such as a rape, must be criminally punished, this implies that we expect that victims of sexual violence must go forward and press charges. In Just Sex, Nicola Gavey writes that the way in which the law distinguishes rape from non-rape affects how survivors perceive themselves and understand their experience of violence; the legal definition of rape demarcates victims, even if one does not go through the process of pressing charges. As a result, the aftermath of sexual violence is intertwined with legal definitions of sexual violence. Thinking about instances of sexual violence that happened to us through a “legal consciousness” not only individualizes the accountability and the remedy for what happened, but silences remaining ambiguity, as I will show in the third section.

Pressing charges for a sexual crime is known for creating a second victimization for those that have been first victimized by sexual violence. The combination of rape and survivor myths work in tandem to impact service and legal responses to disclosures of sexual assault. Jurist Elaine Craig quotes a Toronto woman who filed a complaint and expressed that much of her trauma is not related to her sexual assault per se, but to the brutality of the criminal-legal system. As Craig highlights, while Canada has become one of the countries with laws that are the most progressive in terms of protecting sexual assault complainants, reporting rates of sexual assaults have not risen since the law changed. As she writes, “Perhaps most disappointingly, given that the aim of many of these reforms was to protect complainants from the discriminatory and traumatizing treatment they endured as witnesses in sexual assault trials, women continue to report their experiences of the sexual assault trial process as brutal and inhumane.”

The second victimization, however, is not limited to the court process itself. The horizon of justice provided by the criminal system can be additionally observed in the state’s efforts to provide care, even when it is not actively being used to seek justice. Sameena Mulla’s ethnographic research in Baltimore in the Violence of Care analyzes the peculiar standpoint of forensic nurses that need to simultaneously perform care for women who experienced sexual violence while collecting forensic evidence that could be used if women were to press charges for what happened to them. She persuasively argues that this cold and antiseptic first response to sexual violence, centered on the need to collect evidence (e.g., DNA) for potential prosecution, is a form of violence and injustice for survivors. People who have experienced sexual violence do not get the justice they deserve as a first response to their traumatic experience. This body of work highlights the entanglement between medical and criminal responses to sexual violence.

The politically charged dilemma faced by victims, who, in order to become survivors are expected to speak out about their experiences, often takes the form of entering a long and excruciating criminal process. The dichotomy established between the complainant and the perpetrator in a criminal setting further contributes to the individualization of responsibility for sexual violence. The process of filing charges for sexual violence can involve long wait times and requires the survivor to relive their experience in court, even years after the event, and to leave all traces of moral ambiguity behind. In her book, Brison helpfully distinguishes the retelling that happens in court from the one in a therapeutic space; within a criminal setting, the emphasis on “getting the story right” superseded the acknowledgment of harm done to the victim—a point to which I will return shortly. If one decides to go forward because, above all, one is seeking to receive some form of apology, as soon as we enter the criminal realm, it is not in the interest of the perpetrator to apologize, or to offer any reparations for what they did, because to do so would be an admission of guilt. Instead, it is in the interest of the perpetrator and their defense attorney to wholly deny what happened (or to argue that it was consensual for both parties). Because of the nature of the cross-examination of the victim by the defense attorney in court settings, legal scholars John Conley, William Barr, and Robin Riner argue that “all too often [...] the courtroom reenactment results in the victim being blamed for the crime.” As the state is legally the accrued, and the victim the witness, in criminal cases, the victim must partially relinquish their agency in the criminal proceedings while still being responsible—at least in some cases—for the decision of whether to prosecute.

Within this criminal setting, sexual violence survivors often find themselves in a double-bind where either they choose to remain silent or they choose to prosecute. In practice, victims may find themselves in a situation where either they follow what is expected for them (pressing charges) or they avoid the common second victimization of victims that go through the criminal-legal system. We expect survivors to be “brave” while being victimized enough to keep their credibility intact in legal proceedings. Therefore, people who have experienced sexual violence find themselves in a situation where their agency and victimization are in conflict. Performing a pristine view of victimhood may be
more challenging when the violence was done by someone we know because we often belong to the same community as the person who assaulted us. From this conflicting terrain, I argue that the focus on reporting and pursuing criminal complaints tends to isolate and pathologize the complex moral emotions experienced by survivors. Indeed, the hesitation to report or the ambivalence some survivors may feel towards their perpetrators may be construed as a failure to be a heroic survivor standing up for themselves.

The choice not to report or to pursue criminal prosecution is often equated with remaining silent, and so the moral dilemma that characterizes the “duty to report” in the current criminal system can be interpreted as a lack of self-respect. Overcoming sexual violence becomes an individual endeavor that is only realized through the criminal prosecution of the perpetrator. The narrative of a perfect victim harmed by a monster obscures the structural dimension of sexual violence. Moreover, this individualization of sexual violence hinders ways of seeing perpetrators of violence outside of a “monster narrative,” instead of considering the social structures that lead to the creation of this form of violence. Philosopher Audrey Yap compellingly writes that we lack the resources in our social imagination to recognize that “nice young men” can commit acts of sexual violence and still maintain healthy relationships with family and friends.25 If we leave behind the idea that the people perpetrating sexual violence are monsters, it allows us all to finally see the fact that violence is often committed by perfectly normal men. The time, energy, and emotional readiness required for pressing charges and going through the criminal and legal system is further complicated by the fact that it is the state itself that confronts the perpetrator of violence. It is not, in most cases, the fully agential process that the feminist embrace of the carceral state has promised, as I explore later.

CRIMINAL-LEGAL FRAMES
While most cases of sexual violence do not end up in court, the criminal-legal frame is deeply influential in the ways in which victims make sense of their experiences of sexual violence, and how best to remedy it. Using Kristie Dotson’s notion of “epistemic oppression,”24 Heiner and Tyson write about the “epistemic occupation” of carceral logic; that is, our horizons of justice are shaped by our inability to imagine justice outside of the criminal-legal system.25 Thinking through the criminal-legal frame as occupying our own horizons of justice is helpful to understand how it creates zones of ambiguities for survivors. In this section, I argue (concurrently with Brison’s work on trauma and sexual violence) that the emphasis on clarity, and the underlying dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, within the criminal-legal frames, is harmful for survivors. I suggest that the uncertainty and ambiguity felt by survivors may constitute spaces for healing.

In her book Aftermath, Brison details the court process following her assault and notes that it was relatively straightforward due to a number of factors, the most important of which were the physical injuries she sustained that helped to corroborate her account. In many ways, Brison’s assault was paradigmatic of the idea we have of rape: it was committed by a stranger (even though most sexual assaults are committed by people known to the victim); it was committed in broad daylight in the middle of the day; and it was overtly physically violent.26 Despite being straightforward in all these ways, Brison describes the pain of keeping one’s memory of a traumatic event straight enough to answer questions in court. As she writes, “it seems to me now, there are ways in which having to get—and keep—a trauma narrative straight, for the purpose of a trial, for example, can also impede the process of recovery, hampering the ability to go on.”27 When one goes forward with pressing charges, keeping a coherent testimony in criminal-legal proceedings is not easy for most people who have had a traumatic experience, sexual or otherwise. Brison describes the relief she felt after she gave her testimony in court, as she no longer needed to “keep the story straight. [She] could let go of the details [she]’d kept alive in [her] mind.”28 Going through criminal proceedings often involves for the survivors keeping alive painful memories in minute details to testify in court or, earlier in the process, to answer questions while the sexual crime detective investigates the crime.29

Not only is it difficult to keep a traumatic memory in our minds, but it is also challenging to present it in a coherent manner—even when, as in Brison’s case, it is a comparatively straightforward account. Legal scholars Conley, Barr, and Riner note how, during a court setting, “Trivial inconsistency in [a victim’s] testimony will be blown out of proportion to suggest a fault, if not mendacity.”30 Linda Martín Alcoff writes similarly about the consistency of memories that is expected from people who pressed charges for sexual crimes, arguing that consistency should not be the test of truth in court proceedings given what we know about research on trauma.31 In her memoir, Polley gives an account of how trauma impacted her ability to remember any difficult memories before poignantly asking, “What, then, are we to do with the uncomfortable fact that people who have been traumatized do not often have a handle on the whole truth or are covering up some surrounding details of an assault out of shame or embarrassment?”32 The inability to maintain a consistent testimony over a prolonged period undermines one’s credibility as a witness in criminal-legal proceedings, making the victim suffer from a testimonial injustice where they are not believed for the harm they suffered.33

The binary constructed between the victim and the perpetrator within the criminal-legal frame often implies that the victim leaves aside the affective dimensions of her testimony. Legal scholar Nicola Lacey writes about how often the court process negates the reality of embodiment to embrace clear speech: “the language of embodied existence—of pain, shame, loss of self-esteem, the sense of violation and objectification—find no place within formal legal categories: nothing in those categories invites the victim to construct her testimonial narrative in the terms which empirical research suggests would best relate her experience.”34 Until the criminal-legal process is over, the victim must keep their sexual violence narrative intact while silencing underlying ambiguity.

Because the criminal-legal frame tends to silence survivors’ remaining ambiguity around their instance of sexual
Feminist scholars have increasingly looked at the impact of the interplay between the carceral, medical, and legal systems on how people who experienced sexual violence understand themselves and their experience of violence. In this body of work complements recent calls to abolish the criminal-legal system, "envisioning a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment." Feminist abolitionist thinkers ask us to reimagine accountability for sexual violence outside of the prison-industrial complex and thus reject the logic of punishment and vengeance. To be clear, abolishing the carceral state does not mean letting those who commit acts of violence off the hook. Rather, it is to find alternative ways of seeking justice, centered on the survivor's needs. As the abolitionist thinker Ruth Wilson Gilmore stresses, "abolition is not primarily about absence—the absence of police and prisons—it is fundamentally about presence." In contrast to the criminal framing of sexual violence, abolitionist thinkers, such as Mariame Kaba, write about "making violence unthinkable in our culture" and about centering accountability on the victims' healing process. Abolitionist approaches to justice are amenable to recognizing the ambivalence felt by sexual violence survivors because the focus is not on punishing the "bad men" but on finding ways to create accountability for sexual violence. That being said, I acknowledge that going through community justice initiatives is rarely an option for someone, given how ingrained and prevalent the carceral logic is.

Finding ways to listen to the ambiguity felt by sexual violence survivors matters for collectively grappling with the aftermath of sexual violence. The ambivalence of survivors towards the criminal-legal system must be recognized as meaningful and common, and used to explore alternative frameworks of accountability and justice. Hearing the voices of those who have experienced sexual violence requires allowing for the conflicting dilemmas and pressures they feel as they navigate the aftermath of violence. I hope I have shed some light on such tensions, and on the need for alternative, ambivalent responses.

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**NOTES**


2. Following critical work on the carceral and criminal system, I refer to this system as the "criminal-legal" process, frame, or options rather than "criminal justice system." I concur with Anna Terwiel
who did so in her work on carceral feminism "in order to unsettle the assumption that this system delivers justice." Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” 438.


4. Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility"; cf. Hall, Howard, and Boezio, "Tolerance of Rape: A Sexist or Antisocial Attitude?"


6. Jenkins, "Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices."


8. Pilipchuk, "Good Survivor, Bad Survivor:# MeToo and the Morality of Survivorship."


10. Larson, "Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds."


15. While I borrow the phrasing “legal consciousness” from Sally Engle Merry, I understand that she uses that term to refer to human rights struggles against gender-based violence. See Merry, Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice.

16. Craig, Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession.


18. Craig, Putting Trials on Trial, 102.


20. In the same vein, anthropologist Sonia Rupich movingly describes a similar narrative in Care Centres in South Africa, where, what she calls, a “biocarceral citizenship” is bestowed upon those who seek HIV care after a sexual assault and those who caused sexual harms. The need for the medicalization and criminalization of care for the victims and the perpetrators deprives these individuals of a sense of agency. Rupich, "Biocarceral Citizenship: Criminalizing through Care in Post-Apartheid South Africa."


23. Yap, "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault."

24. Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression."

25. Heiner and Tyson, "Feminism and the Carceral State: Gender-Responsive Justice, Community Accountability, and the Epistemology of Antiviolence."


27. Brison, Aftermath, 102.


29. It is vital to not reduce criminal proceedings to the courtroom. Indeed, the criminal investigation, which occurs when one files a complaint, may be revictimizing. Additionally, we should bear in mind that plea bargains (where typically the perpetrator will plead guilty to a lesser offense to avoid a trial) are more common than trials for cases of sexual violence in the US. Golding et al., "Justice Served? Perceptions of Plea Bargaining Involving a Sexual Assault in Child and Adult Females."


31. Alcoff, "Consistency Shouldn’t Be the Test of Truth in Sexual-Assault Cases."

32. Polley, Run towards the Danger, 92.


34. Lacey, Unforgettable Subjects: Feminist Essays in Legal and Social Theory, 116.

35. Brison, Aftermath, xii.

36. Brison, Aftermath, xii.

37. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, Just Words, 20; See Matoesian, Reproducing Rape: Domination through Talk in the Courtroom.


40. See the preface to the 2022 edition of Aftermath where Brison makes a similar claim.

41. See the preface to the 2022 edition of Aftermath where Brison makes a similar claim.

42. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? 108.


44. Kaba, Nopper, and Murakawa, We Do This ’till We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice, 58.

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**The Aftermath of Roe v. Wade**

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In the wake of Dobbs, the situation in Louisiana is dire. A woman was forced to endure hours of labor when she miscarried because the hospital refused to perform a fifteen-minute evacuation procedure banned by the state’s abortion law. Another woman was turned away from two hospitals when she experienced a miscarriage; neither would confirm that she was experiencing a miscarriage, nor provide care. In another case, a woman carrying a non-viable fetus missing parts of its skull was forced to travel 1,400 miles to New York City to obtain an abortion. She carried the fetus for weeks longer than she might have had she been able to have an abortion nearer home.

These are stories of trauma, and they are not limited to Louisiana: abortion bans are reshaping not just access to abortion, but basic maternal care across the country. In this essay, I explore how Susan Brison’s work, which offers a critical, transformative perspective on embodied violations and the experience of trauma in their aftermath, offers us some critical tools of orientation in this new landscape. In other words, I want to think with Brison in another kind of aftermath: the aftermath of Roe v. Wade.

Let us begin by acknowledging that the end of Roe, since the Dobbs decision came down in June of 2022, has been nothing short of a disaster for women and potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that go far beyond the already horrific lack of access to safe, legal abortions, the danger posed to pregnant women and persons, and to doctors providing abortion and prenatal care. The end of Roe has transformed health-care standards for women and other potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that reach far beyond pregnancy to access to medication, treatment standards for those with health conditions that make pregnancy dangerous (like cancer, heart and lung disease, MS), and privacy concerns for all menstruating persons. And yet, much of our public debate about abortion remains organized through arguments that are depressingly familiar, especially to those of us who have long taught “the abortion debate” in its standard form in philosophy.
Like rape, forced gestation is a question about the rights of the fetus (Is it a person?), and about the state’s duty to "balance the interests" of women and fetuses; we accept the assumption that abortion is a "special" or "exceptional" form of health care, provided primarily in special clinics designed for this purpose, which are then subject to special regulations and risk. But the fallout from the end of Roe makes it unavoidably clear that these arguments fail to grasp the kinds of violation that forced gestation entails, and to center the experiences of trauma that state-mandated forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth generates.

The question I ask is how should we reframe our understanding of abortion and forced gestation in this new landscape? One problem that philosophers, in particular, face is the serious gaps in our resources for thinking about the question of abortion. As Margaret Olivia Little put it more than two decades ago, “a question of method thus shadows all discussions of abortion”, a question about what the abortion question, methodologically, is like. We inevitably compare the status of the pregnant person and the fetus to conflicts between persons (Is it a kidnapping or an act of self-defense?), but the relation between the pregnant person and the fetus is nothing like other kinds of relations. And because we have failed to take pregnancy as a paradigmatic feature of what it is to be a person (we are all here, after all, because of a pregnancy), we have failed to build accounts of personhood that take pregnancy as a given, as a normal, essential part of what it is to be human.

I am not asking questions about personhood here, but about method. I suggest that we can draw on Brison’s thinking about violation and trauma to inform conversations about what forced pregnancy is like. I mean this in two senses. Brison’s account gives us tools for thinking about embodied trauma and the importance of first-personal experience, which allows us to ask what it is like to endure forced gestation and forced childbirth. This can help us reframe an experience that is often overlooked as one that is profoundly traumatic, and in doing so, to make space for first-personal accounts of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and the forms of obstetric abuse that follow from this, in our account of abortion. But it also gives us resources for responding to Little’s methodological question: one thing that forced pregnancy and childbirth are like is sexual violation. I begin by drawing on Susan Brison’s Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self to explore the second question: What, conceptually, is forced gestation and childbirth like? I will then use Brison’s account of trauma to make some space for thinking about what experiences of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans, are like. Thus, in the first section, I argue that forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans are best understood as sexual violence, while in the second section I explore how forced gestation and childbirth and obstetric harms shape experiences of trauma that should be understood as serious disruptions of the self.

One note about terminology before I continue. I use the phrase “women or pregnant persons” at various points throughout this essay. At times I also focus on one or the other. While the class of pregnant persons is not co-extensive with women, one important feature of sexual violence is that it is violence that targets people because of their gender or sexuality. While it is important to be inclusive of pregnant persons who do not identify as women—and to recognize the distinctive harms they face in the aftermath of Roe—it is equally important to situate the violence of abortion bans as continuous with forms of sexual violence that have long targeted women because of their gender. Indeed, part of my aim in this piece is to recognize the gendered nature of such violence.

CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES: HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

Brison’s work is part of a body of work that did not exist when the Court framed Roe in 1973: a rigorous conception of the wrong of rape and of the specific nature of embodied violation. These are important resources for thinking through the ways that the wrong of forced pregnancy is akin to the wrong of sexual violation. Both involve a violation of, and an invasion of, the body against one’s will in ways that disrupt one’s self in profound and long-lasting ways. But at the same time, both are so common and so mundane that many assume they are, as Brison puts it, “natural, a given, something not in need of explanation and not amenable to change.” Like rape, forced gestation and childbirth have been an element of womanhood—and a threat to women’s lives—quite literally forever; the idea that we might encounter these experiences as a serious violation of the self may need some scaffolding.

The feminist literature on forced pregnancy—like its literature on sexual violation—has long centered consent, or the idea that what is wrong with forced gestation is that one is pregnant without one’s consent, and that, therefore, one’s body is being used against one’s will. As we develop better philosophical and legal conceptions of consent with regards to sexual violation—the importance of affirmative consent, of ongoing consent, of the right to rescind one’s consent at any point—we would do well to revise our conception of the right to abortion accordingly, taking seriously how the use of one’s body against one’s consent—or after one’s consent has been revoked—is a serious violation. And we would do well to learn from feminist attendance to the ways in which the conditions of consent are relevant here: it matters whether I feel that I can say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons, and not only if I have a very good reason to do so. Likewise, it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons can say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option available to them. It matters whether they think they can access an abortion simply because they need one, or if they believe they would need a really, really good reason to access one (for example, because they’ve been taught it’s acceptable only in cases of rape or incest, or only to save the mother’s life, or that abortions must be “safe, legal, and rare”).
Likewise, I argue, we should understand rape as “sex without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation: “we don’t think of theft as ‘coerced gift-giving.’ We don’t think of murder as ‘assisted suicide minus consent.’” We don’t explain the wrong of theft through recourse to gift giving; theft is, as Brison puts it, already conceptualized in such a way that no one would reasonably consent to it. When we define rape as “sex without consent,” it must be because “the violation in the case of rape hasn’t been all that obvious.” I want to follow Brison’s intuitions here and suggest that conceiving of forced gestation and childbirth as “pregnancy without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation. Instead, Brison argues, we should understand rape as sexual violence: violence committed on the basis of sex. Likewise, I argue, we should understand forced gestation and childbirth—and the kinds of obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of Dobbs—as a species of sexual violence.

I am not arguing that the fetus violates the pregnant person. Rather, I am arguing that when the state forces a pregnant person to gestate against their will, or creates conditions in which obstetric care is compromised, the state commits sexual violence against the pregnant person.

Very few of our famous abortion analogies include the role of the state. And this is because, as Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco has argued, our philosophical framings of the abortion question tend to be dangerously apolitical. We create a false moral bubble to examine the “relationship” between the pregnant person and the fetus, to “balance” their rights, to weigh them against one another. But as the months since Roe fell have made clear, the abortion question is a profoundly political question, and it is centrally a question about how and when the state is justified in forcing a woman or pregnant person to have her body used against her will (in order to further the state’s purported interest in protecting the value of life). It is a question about what this means for the institutions and agents through which the state enacts this enforcement—which are often the very institutions and agents (hospitals, emergency and obstetric physicians) who are ostensibly meant to provide care to the pregnant person at their most vulnerable.

Brison provides us with resources for thinking about this kind of dynamic, particularly in her analysis of the ways in which such violations cause us to “lose trust in the world”: “it is as if the tormentor says with his blows, ‘you are nothing but a body, a mere object for my will—he, I’ll prove it!’” writes Brison. In forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow, it is the state standing in the position of the tormentor. In this dynamic, Brison argues, the victim’s experience of rape is akin to testimonies of torture, “not only because both objectify and traumatize the victim, but also because the pain they inflict reduces the victim to flesh, to the purely physical.” Likewise, to be told that you must undergo the experience of gestating a child, of birthing a child, of carrying a dead fetus inside you until you nearly die and thus “deserve” an abortion, is to be objectified and traumatized, to be treated merely as a “purely physical” entity. It is an experience through which one is bound to lose trust in the world—and certainly, to lose trust in those agents and institutions who are enforcing these rules rather than providing you with care.

And so, it is critical that in the aftermath of Dobbs, we develop new conceptual resources that reframe reproductive injustice as sexual violence. We need to center an awareness of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of Dobbs as profound violations, akin to sexual assault, and name these violations as state-sanctioned and state-enforced violence. We need to develop our shared awareness of the ways that forced gestation is a profound violation of one’s self, and to name the ways that forced childbirth is among the most extreme forms a torture a person can be subjected to. And we need to be unyielding in our insistence that the state is inflicting these violations and this violence upon women and pregnant persons.

Thus, it is not overstating the case to claim that those undergoing forced gestation and childbirth, or being denied care because of abortion bans, are being violated by the state. Or to name the ways that states that have banned abortion are committing violence against women and pregnant persons who are undergoing miscarriages and are turned away from hospitals in order to wait until the fetus ejects itself from their bodies, or that they are torturing pregnant persons who must go into sepsis before a doctor can claim to be intervening to “save her life.” The state is committing violence against women and pregnant persons who cannot gather the resources to travel thousands of miles for an abortion and are forced to gestate against their will, and they are traumatizing women and pregnant persons who are too terrified to ask for help to gather those resources for fear that anyone they talk to will be sued.

And it is, of course, not the first time the state has tortured women in these ways. Rape, forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth were normative institutional features of American enslavement. As Black feminists have long pointed out, female slaves were positioned as “breeders” responsible for the profitable reproduction of slaves; these children were often taken from them. Reproductive injustice has been central to Black feminist narratives since Harriet Jacobs positioned a violently “frustrated maternity” at the heart of the experience of enslavement, and enslaved women used forms of folk contraception and abortifacients as a matter of survival and resistance. But feminist framings of abortion have persistently neglected to frame the politics of abortion in light of the history of enslavement, in part because, as Brison argues, “intense psychological pressures make it difficult, however, for others to listen to trauma narrative. Cultural repression of traumatic memories (in the United States about slavery, in Germany and Poland and elsewhere about the Holocaust) comes not only from an absence of empathy with victims, but also out of an active fear of empathizing with those terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own.” These habits of repression continue to shape collective ignorance of reproductive injustice and sexual violence, shaping a debate about abortion and reproductive rights that centers white women’s histories and experiences.
Likewise, Roberts describes the practice of punishing pregnant slaves by first digging a hole in the ground to fit the pregnant belly, and then whipping the mother's back, as forerunner to contemporary policies that punish and abuse women in the name of protecting fetuses. When we understand reproductive injustice in these terms, as a structural feature of enslavement, then we both anticipate state practices that enforce reproduction—and we find reasons to think that the right to reproductive freedom is embedded in the Constitution, as a feature of the “13th and 14th Amendments, especially as related to Black women’s bodily autonomy, liberty and privacy which extended beyond freeing them from labor in cotton fields to shielding them from rape and forced reproduction.”

But Black women have also insisted that forced reproduction and the right to abortion cannot come to define our understanding of reproductive injustice by calling our attention to broader patterns of state control of reproductive freedom, from the ways that forced sterilization and birth control techniques were developed on Black bodies to the widespread use and state legitimation of sterilization and criminalization to control Black reproduction. Black women carry what Brison calls the “postmemories” of this trauma, as well as the “prememories” of the ways that obstetric care, in the US, continues to harm Black women and babies at unparalleled rates so that maternal mortality rates are consistently three times higher than for white women—and rising—while the racial gap in infant mortality is wider now than it was under enslavement in 1850. 

From this perspective, the state’s culpability in maternal trauma and death is impossible to deny, and Black women have, accordingly, rarely framed the question of abortion in terms of agency or choice, but have persistently developed a broader analysis of reproductive and intimate justice that attends to not only the right not to have children one does not want, but also to the right to have children, and to parent them in conditions free from violence. The contemporary Black feminist-led Reproductive Justice movement offers a broad vision of the kinds of transformative justice required to hold the state accountable for this long history of violation, by connecting the question of the right to abortion to the right to health care, childcare, food and housing security, education, poverty relief, environmental justice, gender and racial justice, and an end to private and state violence like rape, police brutality, and mass incarceration. This vision is informed by and rooted in the postmemories of Black reproductive trauma: it is explicitly, as Loretta Ross argues, a vision of a world that has never existed before.

My engagement with Brison is inspired by this orientation: our job, in the aftermath of Roe, is not to yearn for a return to the days of legal but often inaccessible abortion—to return, in other words, to the “normal” of before—but to acknowledge the deep trauma of the present moment, and to marshal a wide range of resources to radically reframe what is possible, to reshape our understanding of both reproductive justice and the wrongs of reproductive injustice, and to resist our habits of looking away from the lessons of state-sanctioned reproductive trauma, from enslavement to the present.

This means building new conceptual resources and new epistemic habits; it is here that I think Brison’s work should inform our thinking, teaching, and arguments in the aftermath of Roe. Rather than rehearsing the familiar arguments about the rights of women and pregnant persons, and the rights of fetuses, I want to center the insight that, just as Brison helped us to understand sexual violation as a trauma so immense that one can barely live through it—that one must, in effect, outlive oneself—we must reframe forced pregnancy as a trauma so immense that we must fight for a world where it, like rape, is simply unthinkable. But to do this, we will also have to draw on Brison to think about what experiences of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric trauma are like.

TRAIhMA IN THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

To begin with, we must reframe our philosophical accounts of abortion around LaGuardia-LoBianco’s insight that abortion is a political problem, and refuse to think and teach about abortion in ways that treat it as an abstract question of justice or morality. But to do this, we must also, following Brison, center experience in our analyses of abortion and forced gestation, making space for first-person accounts of forced gestation and childbirth, and allowing these to transform our understanding of the kind of violation involved. We must, as Brison puts it, think against the ways that philosophical writing often frames questions of ethics or justice in impersonal terms.

For Brison, the problem is not just that philosophical framings do not center personal narrative, but that they pose questions from a dislocated perspective: for example, she notes that we take up questions of strategy and justice in war, but not soldiers’ experiences in war; we write essays on “the wrong of rape” that do not attend to how the experiences of survivors should inform our understanding of the wrong. Likewise, we tend to think about pregnancy and abortion as a question of ethics or justice, from a dislocated position (e.g., from the perspective of the law) from which women’s and pregnant persons’ rights and the state’s interest in protecting the fetus can be balanced, rather than allowing the visceral, embodied experience of forced pregnancy and labor to orient our moral awareness and considerations of justice.

This is exacerbated by the fact that when exploring difficult or “inconceivable” experiences, philosophers tend to turn to thought experiments. In abortion discourse, we have of course the “famous violinist” case, and the many cases constructed to develop and challenge it. Brison argues that such thought experiments, “however farfetched, are at least conceivable, whereas the experiences of rape victims, Holocaust survivors, and war veterans are, for most of us, unthinkable.” The same is true for forced pregnancy and
obstetric abuse. We have few philosophical resources for considering the phenomenology of pregnancy to begin with, and extraordinarily few for thinking about what it is like to have an unwanted being living and growing inside yourself—and forcing its way through your body into the world against your will. And this is striking, since pregnancy is at once one of the most mundane and miraculous parts of human life: we are, after all, all here as a result of a pregnancy. And yet pregnancy remains, within philosophy, such a strange and undertheorized experience that we rely on thought experiments to render it thinkable.

Brison names the complicity of even feminist philosophy in this problem, in de Beauvoir’s understanding of childbirth and nursing as “passive” and thus dehumanizing processes. Brison roundly rejects this argument, attending to the ways that (rare) philosophical treatments of motherhood have “led me to see the liberatory potential in chosen maternity, childbirth, and childrearing.” The italicized chosen is no mistake: Brison understands better than most that one’s agency and participation—one’s right to choose—what happens to one’s body is a critical feature of theorizing. In this sense, there is no sense in developing philosophical accounts of “pregnancy” that do not account for the distinction between wanted and forced pregnancies: from the perspective of the person experiencing it, a wanted pregnancy is no more like a forced pregnancy than sex is like being assaulted. Thus, we need not only philosophical accounts of wanted pregnancies—the “embodiment and connection pregnancy provides”—but also philosophical accounts of forced pregnancy, forced childbirth, as well as of the kinds of obstetric abuses that were already common but have proliferated under abortion bans.

These abuses, however, draw our attention to the ways that this distinction is not so simple. In our post-Roe era, we must attend to the ways that forced gestation does not necessarily track cases of unwanted pregnancy: in states with abortion bans, many women and pregnant persons are being forced to gestate fetuses that are desperately wanted but not viable, or being forced to carry dead fetuses inside them for extended periods of time because they are turned away from medical care when they experience a miscarriage. Kate Parsons points to the continuities between elective abortions and the experience of miscarriage when she relates her own experience of using the abortion pill Mifepristone to complete a miscarriage that ended a desperately wanted pregnancy, noting, “the slow methodical dripping of blood and dropping of tissue from my body made the process more intense and more traumatic than I would ever have expected.” And yet, as she notes, her miscarriage was free from “the cloud of shame that our society heaps on women who electively abort,” and it occurred at a time and in a place when she had access to obstetric care including medical abortion pills. Parsons was one of the lucky ones: Dorothy Roberts and Michele Goodwin have tracked the ways that Black women and other women of color have long been denied obstetric care and faced legal punishment when they miscarried; in states with abortion bans, women and pregnant persons are not only turned away from care, but sometimes found legally liable for the death of their fetus. These continuities between experiences of miscarriage and abortion, and the impact of abortion bans on those seeking care for wanted pregnancies unsettles many of the binaries that orient our understandings of pregnancy. This is particularly true given how much of our conceptions of pregnancy are shaped by an impersonal approach, with an emphasis on morality and the “weighing” of rights. And so it is particularly important to draw out the experience of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric abuse, and to attend to these first-personal accounts as we would other instances of sexual violence.

In one of the few philosophical articles on abortion to center the embodied experience of pregnancy, Margaret Olivia Little argues, “to be pregnant is to be inhabited. It is to be occupied. It is to be in a state of physical intimacy of a particularly thorough-going nature. The fetus intrudes on the body massively; whatever medical risks one faces or avoids, the brute fact remains that the fetus shifts and alters the very physical boundaries of the woman’s self.”

If the fetus has such an invasive effect on the pregnant person’s self in a “normal” pregnancy, then we should attend to the ways that such an invasion is experienced as a disruption of the self in a forced pregnancy. Brison’s analysis of trauma is particularly rich in its resources for mapping the multidimensional ways that the self is disrupted through embodied violation, which challenge standard philosophical dualisms that organize our thinking about the persistence of personal identity over time. She argues that, in the aftermath of being raped, “I was no longer the same person I had been before the assault, and one of the ways I seemed changed was that I had a different relationship with my body.” Her body now felt like the enemy—but one she could not turn away from, since traumatic memories live in the body, intermingling with the mind in ways that render the will useless in overcoming or making sense of these memories. In forced gestation, likewise, it is not only difficult to feel oneself to be the same person as one’s body transforms; when this transformation is occurring against one’s will, when it is inflicted upon one by others (in this case, by the state), then the body—and the fetus inside one’s body—becomes one’s enemy. And yet, of course, one cannot distinguish the body from the self, particularly as the body transforms in ways that make it difficult to hold onto clear distinctions between the body and the mind.

A critical part of this disruption of the self, as Brison maps it, is the way that trauma challenges our sense of our selves as autonomous through the experience of loss of control. She notes, “some researchers of trauma have defined it as a state of complete helplessness in the face of an overwhelming force. Whether or not such total loss of control is constitutive of trauma, a daunting, seemingly impossible, task faced by the trauma survivor is to regain a sense of control over her or his life.” There are few embodied experiences that involve a deeper loss of control than pregnancy and childbirth. When these experiences are chosen, there can be a kind of willing surrender to this loss of control. But even then, the loss of control can be terrifying—and all the more so for those who have already suffered trauma. As a rape survivor myself, I remember the terror with which I awaited labor when I was pregnant (by
choice) with my first child. I knew that the loss of control was coming, that one of these days, a process would begin in my body which would subject me to terrible pain, over which I would have no control. Against this fear, I had my own agency in my pregnancy, and my desperate excitement to meet the child inside me. It was enough to get me through. But it is hard not to imagine how devastating that fear of the loss of control would be if I had not chosen the pregnancy, if the child inside me was unwanted and I had been forced, by the law, into this position. In those days before labor began, it was hard not to think of labor like torture: terrible, terrifying pain ahead of me, with no control over when it would begin or how long it would last or what the ramifications might be. It was hard not to draw on the resources I had for thinking about such terrifying loss of control: my memories of rape.

We should think, then, about what it is like to await childbirth for a woman or pregnant person whose pregnancy is the result of rape. About what it is like to go through childbirth against one’s will, for a child one did not want, or a child who is not viable. We should recharacterize childbirth against one’s will as amongst the most extreme forms of torture to which a person can be subjected. This is not just about the pain (although, as anyone who has been through childbirth will tell you: it is also about the pain). It is, as Brison reminds us, about loss of control. All stages of forced gestation involve a terrifying loss of control; when this loss of control is human-inflicted—when it is inflicted on pregnant people by the state, and enacted by those in medical contexts, “it not only shatters one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and one’s safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.”

The loss of this connection is a particularly difficult dimension of trauma. Brison notes that “shattered assumptions about the world and one’s safety in it can, to some extent, eventually be pieced back together, but this is a slow and painful process. Although the survivor recognizes, at some level, that these regained assumptions are illusionary, she learns that they are necessary illusions.”

Critically, for Brison, reconstructing these illusions, and the sense of safety they support, is not a project one can undertake alone: one needs those sustaining connections between one’s self and others. This is because piecing oneself together requires one to construct new self-narratives capable of containing this trauma, but to do this, “we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they have endured.”

A central piece of Brison’s argument is the insight that “saying something about a traumatic memory does something to that memory.” Survivors of trauma need spaces in which they are safe to construct and share new narratives in ways that allow for the remaking of one’s self. And so it is important to attend to the ways in which silencing is a critical part of the new regime in places where abortions have been banned. We should consider the impact of a law like Texas’s SB8, which allows private citizens to sue anyone who “aids and abets” an abortion, creating a context in which women are unable to share their experiences for fear that doing so might incriminate their listener. We should think about how medical providers are refusing to listen to or acknowledge women’s and potentially pregnant persons’ testimony of miscarriages or pregnancy complications in order to shield themselves from liability. And we should think about how it is not standard practice for care providers to ask women and pregnant persons whether or not a pregnancy is against their will, meaning that those living through forced gestation and childbirth are often offered “the joy of meeting their child” as motivation by well-meaning caregivers.

All this is further complicated by the fact that the narratives necessary to reconstruct oneself in the wake of forced gestation and childbirth are often nearly impossible to construct and share. Take, for example, the story of seventeen-year-old G, who was denied judicial permission for an underage abortion in Texas in 2020 on the grounds that she wasn’t “mature enough” to have an abortion (but apparently, she was mature enough to experience forced gestation and childbirth, and to make the impossible decision about whether to keep her twins). When her babies were placed on her belly after twenty-six hours of painful labor, she felt empty. She struggled emotionally after the birth, but couldn’t tell anyone: she knew she was supposed to be adjusting, falling in love with her babies, coping with the logistics. But she wasn’t. And because her support system was made up of people who’d told her that having an abortion would be “murdering two people,” she also couldn’t begin to share her narrative of what had happened to her, admitting how angry she was would mean that she was a bad mother. And that meant, as Brison reminds us, that she could not begin the work of piecing herself together. In the end, G told her story to a journalist; it was the journalist she called, late at night, when faced with the decision of whether to give up her parental rights or try and raise her children in conditions of poverty and instability.

The journalist doesn’t frame G’s story as one of trauma. But I think perhaps it should be: the depression that followed the judge’s denial and stretched into the dark months after she gave birth is likely the result of the ways in which, as Brison puts it, “trauma not only haunts the consciousness and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event.” The journalist’s telling focuses on G’s inability to navigate the economic and emotional realities of mothering, even though she had successfully and independently navigated the impossible, labyrinthian Texas bureaucracy to make her way from an abortion clinic to a legal services fund to court, and through the hoops (a crisis pregnancy center, Christian abortion counsellors) the court required her to jump. Framing G’s experience through the lens of trauma might allow us to see her transformation after the judge’s denial not as mere “depression” but as a profound loss of trust in the world that is compounded by the ongoing experience of forced gestation and childbirth; it allows us to understand
her numbness after the birth of her children as a result of the ways that “trauma can obliterate one’s former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions.” G knows how she is supposed to feel about her children, but she doesn’t feel it. And, as Brison notes, “the inability to feel one’s former emotions, even in the aftermath of trauma, leaves the survivor not only numb, but also without the motivation to carry out the task of constructing an ongoing narrative.” G is numb, and she’s also processing the profound loss of control which is constitutive of both trauma and new motherhood. It is no wonder that, surrounded by people who can accept only the “I love my children” version of the story, that G struggles to remake herself.

I linger on G’s story in order to lay out the profound challenges that women and potentially pregnant persons face following forced gestation and childbirth. There is the trauma of those embodied experiences. There is the loss of trust that follows from knowing one was forced into them by the state, with the complicity of those purportedly meant to provide care. There is the divergence between one’s nightmarish experience and the expected narrative. There is the fact that one is now a new mother, with all that follows from that—particularly in circumstances where one knew one did not have the resources to parent. And there is the fact that there is no way to piece this narrative together without being seen as “a bad mom.” There is no end point, no place of safety or stability from which to begin this process of remaking oneself. Our country fails new mothers at the best of times, but it is downright cruel to those facing new motherhood in poverty and isolation, to those unprepared for it. The victories of the so-called pro-life movement have done nothing to change that.

We cannot understand the terrain in which we now find ourselves without centering, and understanding, these stories. We will never understand the horrors of the post-Roe landscape if we continue to treat abortion as an abstract question of morality or justice, or if we treat it purely as political, but not as personal. It is essential that we reframe the abortion debate around trauma, that we repeat and amplify and share these stories, that we make it impossible to look away from the profound violations this legal reality is shaping. It is important that we use every tool in our arsenal to make this visible as a wrong, and that we fight for federal and state constitutional abortion rights, for expanded abortion access, for an overhaul of maternal care, and for the full legislative agenda developed by the Reproductive Justice movement. But it is also critical that we do not turn away from the women and others undergoing these harms, right now, that we build spaces where these stories can be shared, and develop the conceptual resources for naming and sharing these harms. As Brison reminds us, sharing experiences like these does something to them. But in this case, it is not enough to listen. We need, too, to unflinchingly center these stories in the fight for reproductive justice, and to connect them to our long national history of racialized reproductive injustice, as we fight for a world in which this kind of violence is unthinkable.

CONCLUSION

Much of the public imaginary of the “abortion debate” in the years Roe was the law of the land turned on the inescapable image of the fetus inside the womb. As feminists have long argued, it’s an image turned into a symbol—a poster, a billboard—by the anti-abortion movement. The image is taken inside a woman’s body; there is no woman in the image. The image is distorted, blown up: it doesn’t matter. It’s powerful anyway: an image all of us carry with us, that our students picture even as we raise questions about women’s agency and the nature of justice.

In the face of this image, feminist and philosophical thinking about abortion has often been rather defensive and careful: we take up the question of the moral standing of the fetus, the question of when a life matters; we grant, like Thomson, the premise that perhaps a fetus is a person. What these arguments lack is an equally compelling image around which a positive account of reproductive justice, of abortion as a social good can coalesce. What Brison’s work offers is a resource for reshaping this imaginary around an understanding of forced gestation as sexual violence, and the obstetric harms that follow. Abortion bans are forms of torture sanctified by the state. In this imaginary, women and pregnant persons’ experiences of trauma are at the center, requiring us to shift the gravity of the “abortion debate.”

This is not a hopeful vision of a world without reproductive injustice or sexual violence. That’s okay: this moment, in the aftermath of Roe, is not a hopeful time. What we need are resources for being here, in this moment of terrible collective trauma. And for beginning the process of sustaining one another in ways that make it possible to move forwards, to improvise, and to imagine.

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NOTES

2. Westwood, “Bleeding and in Pain, She Couldn’t Get 2 Louisiana ERs to Answer: Is It a Miscarriage?”
5. Susan Sherwin, Carolyn McLeod, Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla), and Ann Cahill have argued for a relational conception of pregnancy which refuses presumptions of a bounded, individualist conception of persons and recognizes, as Kukla puts it, that pregnant persons are “an agent whose very nature and boundaries are themselves under contest during pregnancy” (Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies, 137), and that affirms “a stable body and agency strong enough to resist boundary crossings that are violating rather than liberating” (Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies, 226). As McLeod argues, such a conception must recognize the epistemic agency of the pregnant person by attending to highly
varied subjective experiences of relational pregnancy, including
the varying degrees to which a pregnant person may recognize
the fetus as being “part of them” (Self-trust and Reproductive
Autonomy, 160). These analyses offer an important corrective
to “standard” accounts of pregnancy and abortion that take the
relation of the pregnant person and fetus to be comparable to
other kinds of relations between persons, by developing instead
a phenomenological account of pregnancy, grounded in the
epistemic authority of pregnant persons.
12. Brison, Aftermath, 47.
13. Brison, Aftermath, 47.
19. Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 44.
21. Dorothy Roberts traces the ways that vasectomies were
performed as a form of punishment for Black inmates (Killing the Black Body, 66); Durrenda Onugwuje explored the development of gynaecological omen on enslaved women (“The Medical Ethics of the ‘Father of Gynaecology’, Dr J Marion Sims”).
22. Loretta Ross points out that “the United States became the first
nation in the world to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to ‘purify the race’” (“Trust Black Women,” 66); Angela Davis (Women, Race and Class) and Dorothy Roberts (Killing the Black Body) examine how population control and forced sterilization were central to twentieth-century race politics, from the ways that the birth control movement gained widespread uptake not as an arm of the feminist movement, but through the eugenic movement, which promoted birth control as a form of population control, to the use of forced sterilization in prisons and as part of standard medical practice from the South to Boston and New York (Roberts Killing the Black Body, 90–92), to the promotion of Norplant and Depo-Provera as forms of reproductive control in the 1990s; Toni Cade (“The Pill—Genocide or Liberation?”) grapples with the legacies of this history for Black liberation movements, while Loretta Ross (“Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism”) and Melissa Murray (“Race-ing Roe: Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice, and the Battle for Roe v. Wade”) examine impact of these histories on contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric.
24. Villarosa, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis.” For an excellent discussion of how Black maternal mortality has been positioned as a “crisis,” casting Black women as symbols of “tragic heroism,” see Nash, Birthing Black Mothers.
25. Cf. Dorothy Roberts reframes reproductive rights as a social
justice-oriented form of “reproductive liberty” (Killing the Black Body); Shatema Threadcraft defends a capabilities-oriented conception of “intimate justice” (Intimate Justice).
27. Cahill, Rethinking Rape.
32. Brison, Aftermath, 42.
33. Brison, Aftermath, 43.
34. Brison, Aftermath, 43.
35. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to
develop this point.
37. Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage,” 16. Parsons, like Carolyn McLeod (Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy), Sarah Clark Miller (“The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage”), and Alison Reiheld (“The Event That Was Nothing: Miscarriage as a Liminal Event”), explore the ways that miscarriage can be a profoundly destabilizing experience, in both an embodied and relational sense, as well as in one in which one may experience

grief that is in direct tension with one’s beliefs about abortion
and the nature of the fetus (Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on
Miscarriage”). This may include grief about the loss of the fetus—
with the recognition that the fetus may mean many things, from
a wanted, prospective child to a burden—about the impact on
relationships, about the liminal, invisible grief of the miscarriage
experience itself, about the immediate embodied experience of
pregnancy loss—as well as, in many cases, a sense of self-doubt
and guilt about whether one in any way contributed to the
pregnancy loss.
38. See Baldwin, “Losing a Pregnancy Could Land You in Jail in Post-
Roe America”; Goodwin, Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood; and Roberts, Killing the Black Body.
39. See, for example, Kukla’s distinction between the “Fetish Mother”
and the “Unruly Mother” (in Mass Hysteria), and Parsons’s distinction between the ways that abortion rights advocates
insist on the careful language of “embryo” and “fetus” while the miscarriage support community suggests referring to the loss as a “baby” (in “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage”).
41. Brison, Aftermath, 44.
42. Brison, Aftermath, 45.
43. Brison, Aftermath, 73.
44. Brison, Aftermath, 40.
45. Brison, Aftermath, 50.
47. Brison, Aftermath, 56.
48. For further discussion on how attendance to forced gestation and
childbirth should in (“The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage”), see
Laura Pascoe, “Consent and Trauma-Informed Birth Practices,”
in Consent: Gender, Power and Subjectivity eds. Laurie James
Hawkins and Róisín Ryan (Routledge, forthcoming).
49. Presser, “She Wasn’t Ready for Children. A Judge Wouldn’t Let
Her Have an Abortion.”
50. Brison, Aftermath, xvi.
52. Brison, Aftermath, 50.
53. These stories are particularly important given that full data on
relational morbidity and mortality for 2022 will not be available
until 2025. Given the lag in official data for tracking the impacts
of these legal changes, anecdotal and journalistic evidence must
provide us with some sense of the scope of the problem.
55. For further discussion of how such gaps in conceptual resources

57. Peters, Trust Women.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**The Words to Say It**

Susan J. Brison

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I’m filled with gratitude to Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin for planning and editing this special issue marking the twentieth anniversary of Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self, and I’m moved beyond words by the contributors’ wonderfully insightful and generative responses. I’m not a solitary scholar and writing by myself is a lonely, anxiety-ridden task that I avoid whenever possible. But philosophy as conversation is one of my life’s greatest pleasures, and I couldn’t ask for a more thoughtful and inspiring group of interlocutors.

I’m good friends with some of the contributors and I hope to become friends with the others. Philosophy-with-friends is a refreshing change from the pre-feminist, pugilistic style of philosophizing—scoring points by taking down opponents. (Someone who used to teach in the Rutgers Philosophy Department tells an anecdote about a former chair who had a blackboard in his office on which he kept a running tally of invited speakers’ talks, noting, for each week, whether the visiting team or the home team won.) These articles have sparked exchanges that I hope will continue for years to come—ideally, in person—and this brief response, which touches on some themes raised by each of the contributors, is only the beginning.

Learning how Aftermath was received by these six theorists has prompted me to think more about the reception of trauma narratives in general and about how my perception
of the ways my own narrative has been received has changed in the thirty years since I began writing publicly about my assault. What follows is not a stand-alone article, with a thesis and argumentation of its own, but, rather, a coda that resonates with themes sounded in the six articles that precede it.

I first spoke out publicly, as a rape survivor, at a Take Back the Night Rally at Princeton University in April 1991, nine months after I was raped and nearly murdered in France. I was on disability leave for the academic year, living in Princeton, where my partner, Tom Trezise, teaches. Although I’d had difficulty speaking for months after my assault, by that time, I’d gotten my voice back, after taking a Women’s Self-defense and Rape Prevention class at Princeton and participating in a rape survivors’ support group in Philadelphia for several months. Tom also spoke out for the first time that night, as the group walked around the campus, stopping in several places to listen to survivors tell their stories. He was, as I recall, the only Princeton faculty member who spoke at the march, and it was only then that I learned how my assault had traumatized him, as well. We then submitted our narratives to The Dartmouth, a student newspaper, which published them as a cover story during sexual assault awareness week.

The responses—from friends and colleagues who knew something had led to my being hospitalized in France the previous summer, but didn’t know what—prompted me to write a longer essay on rape from the perspective of a survivor, stressing the political significance of gender-based violence. I submitted it to The New York Times Magazine where it caught the attention of the editor, Warren Hoge, who phoned me to say that he was intrigued by what I’d written, but that they had already commissioned a feature-length article on rape that was in the pipeline. However, he added, if I were to shorten my piece, focusing only on my personal experience, leaving out the gender politics of rape, it would make an excellent “Hers” column. I was so irritated by his trivializing and marginalizing what I considered the central point in the piece that I said I had no interest in doing that. A year later, though, after meeting many other survivors who were suffering in silence and coming across virtually nothing in the mainstream media on rape from a victim’s perspective, I relented and submitted a “Hers” column on sexual violence, which appeared in the magazine on March 21, 1993.

Three months later, the magazine’s cover announced, in big, bold letters, “RAPE HYPE BETRAYS FEMINISM.” This was the article the Magazine had commissioned. Entitled “Date Rape’s Other Victim,” it was an excerpt from Katie Roiphe’s The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus. In it, Roiphe claimed that campus rape is a myth promulgated by “rape crisis feminists” who longed for a return to “the days of greater control, when the university acted in loco parentis and women were protected.”

But the anti-rape activist students I’d come to know by that time had no desire to restrict women’s sex lives and were, on the contrary, refusing to allow their lives to be limited by the threat of male violence that had for so long kept women “in their place.” Far from needing anyone to “protect” them, these women were seizing control of their own lives, taking self-defense classes, educating their male peers, fighting for equality, and celebrating their sexuality.

I wrote a letter to the editor to that effect and, after it was published, a producer from NBC News contacted me to say they were doing a special on campus rape and would like to interview me at Rockefeller Center. I flew down for the day and spoke with the producer at length about my experience with student rape survivors. We also talked about my “Hers” column. When the segment, hosted by Katie Couric, aired, I was dumbfounded to see that it was a puff-piece focused entirely on Katie Roiphe, amplifying her claim that campus rape was a myth. Nothing of my critique, other than a couple of lines from my letter to the editor, was aired.

When the producer later asked me what I thought of the segment, I told her I thought it was a piece of shit and said I felt used and betrayed. She acted surprised and said that it was precisely because these so-called “campus date rapes” were so unlike what I had experienced, that to call them “rape” trivialized what had happened to me, which was, in contrast, something really serious. I was furious with her—how could she so distort and misconstrue what I wrote and said?—but that should have been a warning to me of how my narrative, intended to make it easier for other survivors to speak, could be used to silence them.

The media backlash against campus anti-rape activists had only just begun and was intense and relentless that year, with newspaper and magazine articles entitled “Crying Rape: The Politics of Date Rape on Campus,” “Sexual Correctness,” and “The Victim Trap,” most of which were written by women. Just as some of us had begun speaking out about having been raped, we were, told, by some self-described feminists, no less, that, in drawing attention to male violence against women, we were not only revealing ourselves to be weak, fragile, and pathetic, but were also turning other women into victims, denying their agency, infantilizing them, and looking to men to protect us. Anti-rape feminists were labeled “anti-sex” and campus feminism came under attack.

For nearly two decades following that backlash, anti-rape activism—and feminism, generally—were seen by many young women on college campuses as passé, no longer needed, if they ever were. Amia Srinivasan wrote that, when she was in high school (in 1999–2003), she and “all [her] friends” would have been “ashamed” to call themselves “feminists,” and added, in an interview, that she had no awareness of feminist theory as an undergraduate at Yale, having discovered it only later in graduate school. I was shocked by this revelation, but I’ve since heard from some other now-feminist colleagues of her generation that they, too, were not at all interested in feminism in high school and college.

The incidents of rape on- and off-campus, however, continued unabated. As a professor at Dartmouth and at Princeton in the 1990s and 2000s, I was a lightning rod for women students who’d been assaulted, none of whom reported their assaults to the police, and very few of whom
said anything to campus authorities. Some said they hadn’t told anyone else but me. They minimized what had happened to them. They blamed themselves. They told me it would be “social suicide” to speak out publicly. They said they didn’t want to be known as that girl, the one who ruined a young man’s future.

I thought I understood well the reasons why victims remained silent. I regularly warned them that they would have no control over how others would view or use their stories, should they decide to speak about their assaults at a campus Take Back the Night March. I stressed that my speaking out about my assault should never be interpreted as my exhorting other victims to do the same. The fact that I had masses of unearned credibility that most victims didn’t have led to my deciding that I had an obligation to speak out, but that didn’t mean I thought any other victims did.

Still, one of my primary motivations for going public with my easy-to-tell narrative of having been raped by a stranger, in circumstances that didn’t prompt victim-blaming, was to make it easier for other victims to tell their harder-to-tell stories, should they choose to. So I was flattered when, sometime around ten years ago, I asked a student who had confided in me about her assault why she didn’t feel able to tell even her closest friends that she had been raped, and she said it was because what had happened to her was trivial compared to what had happened to me. It wasn’t such a big deal, and she knew she’d be socially ostracized if she talked about it, so shouldn’t she just get over it?

This made me realize I had to tell the story of another rape, the one I described in the 2014 Time magazine piece Danielle Tumminio Hansen discusses in her article in this issue. This rape occurred when I was twenty, during a junior year abroad in England. One night, at the end of the winter quarter, I was asleep in my dorm room when someone knocked on my door. It was an older graduate student, someone I considered a friend, and I let him in. I had a (secret) crush on him and so, although I was a little bewildered by what appeared to be his sudden romantic interest in me, I wasn’t alarmed and I even welcomed his unexpected passionate kiss. But then, in an instant, he threw me down on my narrow bed, got on top of me, and, instead of stopping on an overpass, I drove to a Planned Parenthood office. They gave me a pregnancy test, and, when I refused, she told me that, if I didn’t agree to meet with him, I would have to move out. “You can ruin your life, if you want to,” she said, “but you’re not going to ruin ours.” This may sound harsh, but it got me out of bed. I agreed to meet with the minister and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

I wasn’t sexually active at the time and wasn’t using any form of birth control, and he didn’t use a condom. I never saw him again.

I didn’t tell anyone what had happened. What would I have said? What had happened? I wasn’t raped. I didn’t call it “rape.” Whatever it was didn’t have a name or an identifying description. After a disastrous spring break stint as a tour guide taking American high school students around Europe, I suffered a complete breakdown. I stayed in my dorm room and didn’t go to my new spring quarter classes. I stopped eating, except for the occasional cups of yogurt I ventured out to the student co-op to buy.

After I missed my period, I was sure I was pregnant. I blamed myself for what had happened and believed that I didn’t deserve to live any longer. I now know that, when someone treats you as worthless—something to be used and discarded—even if only briefly, you can come to believe that you are worthless. After several weeks, someone notified my parents that I had dropped out of school and arranged for me to fly back to the States.

I stayed at my parents’ house for a couple of months trying to figure out the best way to kill myself. I’d missed another period, then another, so I was even more certain I was pregnant. I couldn’t tell my parents what was wrong with me. It wasn’t only that I was pregnant; it was that there was something terribly, irredeemably, wrong with me and, even though I didn’t know what it was, I knew it wouldn’t go away. I was convinced I was a horrible person. It seemed to me that the only solution to my unlivable situation was to jump off a highway overpass during rush hour. I didn’t say any of this to my parents, but I could tell I was breaking their hearts. I remember my father sitting on my bed next to me telling me I was beautiful, smart, and had everything going for me. But I thought I was so ugly that I couldn’t bear to look at me and, even though I’d gotten the equivalent of straight As in my junior-year-abroad philosophy courses before I dropped out, I was convinced I wouldn’t be able to complete an undergraduate degree. And, anyway, what would be the point?

I rarely left my room—why would I inflict myself on anyone?—and when my parents were at their wits’ end, I heard them, outside my door, arguing about what to do with me. My mother didn’t believe in therapy, but she believed in God and she insisted I meet with their minister for counseling. When I refused, she told me that, if I didn’t agree to meet with him, I would have to move out. “You can ruin your life, if you want to,” she said, “but you’re not going to ruin ours.” This may sound harsh, but it got me out of bed. I agreed to meet with the minister and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

My mother drove me to their church where I met with the minister in his office. I didn’t say much. I didn’t tell him I was pregnant, but my mother must have told him something had happened to me while I was in England. On his desk was a glass filled with water into which he threw me down. I agreed to meet with him and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

My mother drove me to their church where I met with the minister in his office. I didn’t say much. I didn’t tell him I was pregnant, but my mother must have told him something had happened to me while I was in England. On his desk was a glass filled with water into which he threw me down. I agreed to meet with him and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

At the time, I didn’t think much of this demonstration—how was that supposed to help?—but I now think it registered unconsciously that I didn’t do something bad, but that something bad had happened to me. That it wasn’t my fault. That I wasn’t irreparably damaged. That maybe I could get help.

It didn’t occur to me until nearly four decades later that I had been raped, that someone else had done something wrong to me, but the next morning, I borrowed my parents’ car, and, instead of stopping on an overpass, I drove to a Planned Parenthood office. They gave me a pregnancy
test and I didn’t believe them, at first, when they told me I wasn’t pregnant. How could I not be, I told them, when I’d had unprotected sex and then hadn’t had a period for three months? 15

I can’t know for sure, but had abortion not even been a possibility, I think it’s quite likely that I would have killed myself. The abortion I didn’t have, but could have had, saved my life.

Now, after Dobbs, 17 in many parts of the US, my twenty-year-old self would not have that option. The availability of abortion is crucial, not only for people with unwanted pregnancies, but also for those who think they might be pregnant and for those who know that they could get pregnant, whether they want to be or not. It’s crucial for the well-being of potentially pregnant persons to know that, should they need to terminate a pregnancy, for whatever reason, they would have the means to do so.

As Jordan Pascoe argues in this issue, just as it matters, in a sexual encounter, “whether I feel that I can say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons ... it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons can say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option available to them.” 18

Abortion, like rape, must be viewed as a political problem, not merely a matter of personal choice. A large part of the harm of Dobbs is the message it sends to those who might become involuntarily pregnant, which is strikingly similar to the message conveyed to victims by rapists (and, typically, by the social/legal response to rape): You don’t matter. Your choices don’t matter. It’s your fault you’re in this situation and now there’s nothing you can do about it.

* 

In comparison to the rape I experienced when I was in college, the one I wrote about in Aftermath was easy to talk about. For a while, it was harder not to talk about it. And, in many ways, it was easier to recover from. I wrote, in Aftermath, about how I wished I could blame myself for doing something careless or foolish, so I could simply avoid doing it again. 19 It was hard to accept that I would never be safe, and that I never was safe. But I didn’t become suicidal. If anything, I became suicide-proof, because, whenever I was in the grip of depression, I thought, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to finish my assailant’s job for him.”

It feels self-indulgent to talk about this earlier rape. 20 But I’m now aware of the harm in not talking about it.

By 2014, many other survivors of campus rape had begun to speak out publicly, bringing the issue of sexual violence back into national prominence, and had formed organizations, such as KnowYourIX, End Rape on Campus, A Long Walk Home, and SurvJustice, to reform campus policies and provide support for survivors. It was anti-rape activists, such as Alexandra Brodsky, Wagatwe Wanjuki, Salamishah Tillet, Annie E. Clark, Laura Dunn, Andrea Pino, and Dana Bolger, who, by speaking out about their own rapes, loudly and insistently, enabled survivors of the most prevalent type of rape—and not only those of us who survived the more spectacular and relatively rare stranger rapes—to be heard and accorded credibility.

All the contributors to this special issue stress the importance of reconceptualizing rape, of finding the words to call it what it is, and of acknowledging when the right words aren’t (yet) available in our conceptual repertoire. Sometimes trauma narratives enable other, even quite different, narratives to surface. After I published my “Hers” column, I heard from a Black male victim of a racist hate crime and a mother whose toddler had drowned in her pool that my narrative made them feel understood and accompanied in their pain. But sometimes trauma narratives, especially those that conform to and reinforce pernicious stereotypes, can occlude other stories, as in the case of those whose experiences of sexual violation don’t “fit” the language available to describe them.

At the end of Aftermath, I say of my mother, who had an extremely traumatic childhood, but was told she had to be “a rock,” that “[s]he was schooled, no doubt benevolently, in the ontology of silence, as if, without the words to say it, there wouldn’t be so much pain.” 21 But pain doesn’t work that way. Silence can calcify it and make it worse. So I’ll end by saying “thank you,” again, to the editors of and contributors to this issue whose words have heartened and inspired me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d also like to thank Ami Harbin, Kate Norlock, and Michael Doan who organized last year’s annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy on the theme of “Aftermath” at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, USA, October 28, 2022, in conjunction with a panel on “The Twentieth Anniversary of Aftermath: Violence and Remaking of a Self” at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, November 24, 2022. Some of the conversations continued in this special issue began at those events, as well as at an Author-Meets-Critics Session on “Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self—Twenty Years Later,” organized by Sarah Tyson, with papers by Ann Cahuil and Linda Martín Alcoff, at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada, January 5, 2023.

NOTES

1. Although that was the name of the course, it was a course in rape avoidance, not rape prevention. Would-be rape victims can’t prevent rape; they can only try to reduce the odds that they will become victims. However, if all girls and women (and other feminized groups) were trained in self-defense and socialized to consider themselves worth defending, would-be rapists would have reason to think twice before sexually assaulting anyone.

2. The “Hers” column was a section of the Magazine, started in 1977, that featured writing by women on “women’s issues.”


12. Although I wasn’t explicitly blamed for my assault—no one took seriously my assailant’s claim that I had “provoked” it—the colleagues Tom and I were staying with when I was attacked said that nothing like that had ever happened there before. (The local paper noted that a very similar rape happened the following day in the next village over.) And when another woman from the US visited them a few months later, they wrote to us that they “kept her on a short leash.”


14. I don’t recall having given any thought to the trauma such an act would inflict on the driver(s) who hit me. And I believed my parents and siblings would be better off without me.

15. Since I’d already taken a year’s worth of philosophy courses in two quarters and there was no gap evident in my transcript, no one but my parents, my siblings, and a few acquaintances with whom I soon lost all contact knew I’d dropped out of college for a few months. For decades afterwards, I told no one, and it continued to be a source of shame.

16. I learned later that extreme stress and malnutrition can cause amenorrhea.


18. See Pascoe in this issue.

19. I’m not, however, suggesting that’s it’s ever right for rape victims to blame themselves.

20. This is not because the earlier rape was more mundane than the later one, but because I’ve already written one first-person narrative about rape.

FROM THE EDITOR

Lori Gallegos
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Latina feminist philosophers have made some of the earliest and most significant contributions in Latinx philosophy, particularly in the areas of phenomenology and epistemology. Indeed, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Latinx philosophy, Manuel Vargas proposes that “Latina feminist philosophy is a main, if not the main proximal origin to what we now recognize as Latinx philosophy.” Two of the most important thinkers from this body of work are Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones. These thinkers utilize innovative methodologies and offer rich conceptual tools for examining identity and selfhood under oppressive conditions. The essays in this issue of APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy carry forward the scholarship in this area.

We begin with an essay titled “María Lugones and the Value of Playfulness for World-Making.” In this essay, author Ricardo Friaz focuses on Lugones’s relatively lesser-explored notion of playfulness. He weighs in on the debate about whether playfulness is necessary for what Lugones calls “world-traveling,” which enables one to recognize another person as a full subject. Friaz argues that although the attribute of playfulness may not be necessary for world-traveling, it is necessary for collaborative world-making—creating a new, shared world that is opened through the activity of play.

In the second article, “La Facultad: Towards Active Embodied Agency and an Embodied Epistemology,” author Karina Ortiz Villa proposes that Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of la facultad is a form of active, embodied, epistemic agency. It integrates conscious self-awareness, bodily experiences, motor skills, and sensory information with the rational mind to engage with and navigate the world. Ortiz Villa argues that when an agent uses la facultad, they acquire a novel form of knowledge—one that is only accessible through that capacity.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the spring 2024 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on any topic related to Hispanic/Latinx thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as meditaciones, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

ARTICLES

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All essay submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review.

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

DEADLINES

The deadline for the spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. The deadline for the fall issue is April 15. Authors should expect a decision by June 15.

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor, Lori Gallegos, at LoriGallegos@txstate.edu, Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

FORMATTING GUIDELINES

ARTICLES

Maria Lugones and the Value of Playfulness for World-Making

Ricardo Friaz
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Maria Lugones’s essay “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” has had an immense influence in feminist philosophy, and particularly in the field that Mariana Ortega has called “Latina feminist phenomenology.” The essay, which was published originally as a journal article in 1987 before being republished with minimal changes in Lugones’s book Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, is self-avowedly about the “possibility and complexity of a pluralistic feminism” that affirms plurality as rich and central to feminist ontology and epistemology. Lugones argues for the necessity of the practice of world-traveling that is essential for building a deep mutual understanding of one another that is a condition for building meaningful coalitions and community. Although much attention has been given to the concept of world-traveling, significantly less attention has been given to Lugones’s discussion of playfulness, which she says is essential for world-traveling. Of those who have responded to Lugones’s discussion of playfulness, Ortega’s critical reading of playfulness is especially astute, and she ultimately argues for a concept of critical world-traveling instead of playful world-traveling.

In this essay, I argue that while the attribute of playfulness may not be essential for world-traveling, it is necessary for world-making, which I provisionally define here as the creation of communal social realities facilitated by world-traveling. This essay has three sections: a reconstruction of Lugones’s discussion of playfulness and related key concepts, a discussion of Ortega’s critique of the attribute of playfulness and its necessity for world-traveling, and an argument for the importance of playfulness in world-making.

WORLD-TRAVELING
The focus of Lugones’s essay is on theorizing a way of identifying with others by way of understanding “what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes,” and that this is apparently necessary for becoming “fully subjects to each other.” Lugones argues that this can be accomplished by traveling to someone else’s “world,” and notes that we cannot know others without also knowing their worlds such that we remain in a condition of solipsism or lack of intersubjectivity without this travel. While these citations show Lugones’s emphasis on the epistemic and the intersubjective at stake in traveling to another’s world, or world-traveling, Lugones also emphasizes that knowing other women’s worlds is part of loving them such that world-traveling matters for our affective relations with others. World-traveling not only brings us to intimacy and full understanding, for it can also reveal violent worlds, as well as worlds in which we come to see the ways in which we function as oppressors or arrogant perceivers. The conclusion of the essay emphasizes that world-traveling involves risking the very ground we stand on.

Throughout the essay, Lugones returns to the matter of understanding one another and building what she terms “a coalition of deep understanding fashioned through ‘world’-traveling.” The outcome of a coalition of understanding is a feminism that would affirm the plurality in each of us as central to feminist ontology and epistemology. Prior to invoking the language of “worlds,” Lugones refers to the particular experiences of an outsider to mainstream white/ Anglo organization of life that she terms a “construction of life” where one is themselves “constructed.” A condition of living in multiple constructions is flexibility for shifting across constructions, but Lugones argues that this condition can also be used resistantly. The resistant version of shifting across various constructions of life where one is constructed across a spectrum spanning being an outsider to being “at home” is what Lugones calls “world”-traveling.

World-traveling can be done willingly or unwillingly, and it is typically done unwillingly to hostile worlds. It is the unwilling version of world-traveling most will be familiar with, and this unwilling version has obscured its value. Unwilling world-traveling is not limited to any one group, such that anyone may find themselves traveling to other worlds at some point, although certainly not everyone undergoes it to the same degree. Unwilling world-traveling takes us, against our wishes, to hostile worlds where we are constructed in ways that are painful. Unwilling world-traveling is painful because we are taken to worlds hostile to our presence, and this hostility is painful to the degree we are subjected to what Marilyn Frye, in an essay called “In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love,” calls “arrogant perception.”

ARROGANT AND LOVING PERCEPTION
In “Arrogance and Love,” Frye is concerned with developing a revolutionary vision of women that goes beyond the woman as an abstract concept of a victimized “female human animal.” Frye analyzes exploitation and oppression that is focused on the capture of meaning and meaning-making. In this context, Frye arrives at the concept of the “arrogant eye,” which organizes the objects of its perception as existing for its sake. Against the arrogant eye, Frye introduces the “loving eye,” which perceives without presupposing that the other poses either a constant threat or exists for its own use: The loving perceiver maintains the difference between itself and those they perceive. Towards the end of her essay, Frye emphasizes the difficulty of separating from the arrogant eye insofar as it “gives all things meaning by connecting all things to each other by way of their references to one point—Man.” Nothing less than liberation depends on the imagination that results from the loving eye, which is able to perceive others in their independence.

Lugones’s engagement with Frye is concerned to extend and develop her idea of a revolutionary vision, or imagination, that goes beyond either abstract knowledge or a repetition of arrogant perception that fails to “dissolve the structures and dismantle the mechanisms by which Woman is Mediated by Man.” It is with Frye’s analysis in mind that Lugones conceptualizes world-traveling.
WORLDS AS SOCIAL RELATIONS

In describing what she means by world-traveling, Lugones explains how she understands the concept of a “world” by way of describing a particular experience that she had which she calls “ontological confusion.” In her narrative, Lugones recounts that the particular and profound state of confusion she found herself in had to do with an antinomic experience of seemingly both having and not having the attribute of playfulness. Lugones talks to both faraway friends who knew her well, and she asks people around her, perhaps coworkers, as to whether she is playful. Her friends tell her with conviction that she is playful, and the others say that she is serious—she takes everything seriously. As she works through this antinomy, Lugones lands on the concept of worlds to begin accounting for why she does and does not have the attribute of playfulness. The stake in what accounts for the antinomy of the attribute is whether or not it is something that Lugones could simply work on herself as an individual or subject: “You see, if it was just a matter of lack of ease [in certain worlds], I could work on it,” and it is in understanding this relation between the interior of the self and its exterior relations that Lugones turns to the concept of “world.”

In the introduction to Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, Lugones elaborates beyond the “World-Traveling” essay’s discussion of world by comparing it to Arthur Danto’s use in The Wake of Art. In his essay, Danto distinguishes between “expressions” and “manifestations” in order to analyze the way in which symbols are interpreted according to their social context. The essay thematizes “world” only in order to discuss symbols, and Lugones cites Danto because he comes close to her own understanding while remaining distinct from it. Lugones and Danto differ on the distinction between actual and possible worlds: for Danto, there is an actual world with many possible worlds, and for Lugones, all worlds are actual and overlap. Danto invokes the world in order to distinguish between expressions and manifestations as a way to think about symbols in regards to art. In the process of arriving at this distinction, Danto draws another distinction—between interpretation and explanation—such that manifestations can be understood by explanations while expressions are to be interpreted in light of the fact that explanations of a phenomenon as a manifestation have failed.

Danto thinks of manifestations as the way in which the actual world offers something to be understood. Using the example of a disordered room, Danto discusses the ways in which a disordered room can be understood as manifestations of our world: a room poorly maintained, or else a room lived in by someone who considers such a state of the room to be quite orderly by their own social standards. In contrast, expressions are symbols that refer to a possible world, or a way in which the world could be arranged but is not currently. Danto locates expressions on the side of the individual, and conversely locates manifestations on the side of the social. Expressions are conscious manifestations of an internal state, as Danto puts it, and they depict the way the world could be. The particular concept that Danto is interested in is the symbolic as distinct from the sign, and this distinction corresponds to the one he makes between expression and manifestation.

Where the manifestation is a sign, which gestures to its cause as a footprint stands in for a footstep, the symbol is a material embodiment of an idea. The symbol is a symbol of a particular world, but in contrast to Lugones’s assessment, Danto’s language threatens to collapse the distinction between actual and possible worlds he elsewhere attempts to maintain. Immediately after Danto writes that the symbol represents a world by embodying that other world “as if it were here and now,” he writes that the symbol “brings into this world another world through something which [Danto is] saying embodies it.” Danto’s insistence that the symbol brings one world into another makes sense given that his focus is on the artwork, and his essay’s focus on photography in its second half is based on the distinction between the sign and symbol with regard to the distinctions between reality and its images. Lugones is emphatic that she is concerned with actual worlds, and rejects any hypothetical logic involving the “as if.”

Lugones takes “the social” to be intersubjectively constructed through a play of forces such that no world is inherently stable or at rest, and it may be that the instability of a particular world motivates her reticence to define it conclusively. In lieu of a definition, Lugones establishes a necessary condition for something to be a world, and a list of sufficient conditions. For something to be a world, it has to be “inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people,” although it may also be inhabited by imaginary, dead, or other kinds of people beyond those of flesh and blood. A world can be an actual society, but also a resistant construction of society, a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society, it may be incomplete, they can be layered over one another, and its inhabitants may not recognize or understand the ways they are constructed in any given world. In all cases, the sense of a world is fundamentally a description of an experience.

PLAYFULNESS AND WORLD-TRAVELING

Playfulness is the motivating attribute that leads Lugones to reflect on worlds according to her story, and it turns out to be the case that playfulness plays a significant role in world-traveling. While she notes that one can be maximally at ease in a world such as to refuse to travel to other worlds, one can also be maximally confined to a single world. To be stuck in one world scares Lugones: “I am seriously scared of getting stuck in a “world” that constructs me that way, a “world” that I have no escape from and in which I cannot be playful.” Before embarking on her own analysis of the concept, Lugones comments that she prepared by reading two classics on the subject of play: Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s chapter on play in Truth and Method. Lugones subsequently gives a short critique of Huizinga and Gadamer, noting that though she will not provide an extended argument for her interpretation of Gadamer and Huizinga, she finds that both of them have an agonistic sense of play.

To introduce her own conception of loving playfulness, Lugones gives an example of the kind of playing she has in mind. Lugones describes a particular experience that takes place on a riverbank: The river is low, and wet stones appear above the water line. Two friends walk on the stones for a while, picking up and shattering stones...
In discussing the concept of playfulness, Lugones notes that there is no purposive activity or set of rules guiding the activity, and instead it is “the attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude” that turns the activity into play.25

Based on her example, I find that loving playfulness has three relevant aspects in addition to having the aspect of loving perception inherited from Frye: it is risky, creative, and destructive. It is destructive because, in being open to multiple worlds, it risks one’s own ground, and can erode those worlds which are grounded upon being the only world. Play is corrosive of rules insofar as it elevates itself above any ruleset in order to derive rules from play. Play is creative because, in its destructive capacity, it allows for the derivation of new rules from out of playfulness, and for Lugones there is meaningful potential for more inclusive rules to arise from out of loving playfulness insofar as it is rooted in caring communal experience. Play is risky for its destructive and creative capacities insofar as it can destroy things that matter to a community, and, just as it can create meaningful communities, it can also create new forms of oppression.

ORTEGA’S CRITIQUE OF PLAYFULNESS

Lugones’s essay has generated many responses since its original publication, and the majority of these responses have focused on the world-traveling aspect of the essay. There has been relatively less of a response to the essay’s discussion on playfulness, and of those responses, a particularly rigorous one is Ortega’s commentary on playfulness and world-traveling in In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self.

In her chapter “World-Traveling, Double Consciousness, and Resistance,” Ortega writes the following:

I wonder, however, whether the experience of world-traveling capable of opening possibilities needs to involve playfulness, as Lugones suggests. The value of playfulness in her account stems from the fact that it allows us not to take ourselves so seriously that we cannot construct and reconstruct ourselves, others, and societal norms.29

Further down, she asks, “Is playfulness the only attitude that could yield an opening for possibilities of construction and reconstruction in this case?” She concludes, “I am deeply aware of the importance of play for Lugones and other feminists, and I don’t want to minimize this notion here, but I do not consider play as central as it is in Lugones’ view. For her, play is at the ‘crux’ of liberation. For me, play is at the ‘crux’ of liberation.” This last point is quoted from Lugones, who writes that playfulness is “at the crux of liberation, both as a process and as something to achieve. I think there is something important in the relation between playfulness and tenderness.”

In the preceding chapter, called “The Phenomenology of World-Traveling,” Ortega writes that for Lugones, playfulness is an attribute that is “character central,” and that Lugones defines “character central” as an attribute that is central to one’s personality to the degree that the “world” must support or be a good fit for that attribute for that person to be at ease.21 In discussing the concept of “character central” attributes, I think it is important to note that Lugones is writing in second-person, leaving it somewhat ambiguous whether she is talking about herself or a hypothetical playful person. This point is relevant for discussing Lugones’s theory of the self, which it must be noted is closely linked to world-traveling, but for now I leave it aside. I only note that what is at stake in the concept of “character central” attributes is whether playfulness is at the crux of liberation for Lugones because of who she is, or because playfulness is essential as such.

Ortega makes clear that it is not that playfulness itself is to be rejected, but whether world-traveling essentially needs to involve playfulness particularly in the case of opening possibilities of resistance. While she recognizes the importance of playfulness in allowing for creative space, she goes on to argue that the critical elements Lugones’s account of world-traveling do not need to be essentially playful, and Ortega instead proposes a critical world-traveling instead of a playful world traveling. Critical world-traveling refers to the critical attitude that can change, revise, and reinterpret worlds as well as one’s self-reflection on world-traveling.34 Critical world-traveling helps ensure that world-traveling does not become an “everyday practice dominated by publicness,” and although critical world-traveling offers no guarantees of resistance to oppression, it ultimately creates more openings for such a stance.

A danger that Ortega wishes to avoid is world-traveling becoming a sort of play itself: “a sort of game in which one learns some interesting things about the ‘other’ but that ultimately has no real consequences for the practitioner.”35 Along similar lines, playfulness conveys the idea that there is not much at stake, which ties back to Lugones’s distinction between frivolity and playfulness. If what is truly important is taken lightly, we cross into the realm of grotesque irresponsibility in a time in which, as Rita Segato puts it, “the historical conditions that transform us into monsters or accomplices of monsters stalk us all.”36 I think Ortega recognizes the stakes well, and she is right to emphasize the importance of critical world-traveling. I have reconstructed Ortega’s reading of playfulness, and I will now move into my final discussion where I reflect on what possibilities playfulness may still offer with regard to world-making.

PLAYFULNESS AND WORLD-MAKING

Lugones writes that she sees playfulness as the crux of liberation, but her remarks explaining why that is are short. When she mentions playfulness as the crux of liberation, she links it to a relation between playfulness and tenderness, and she attempts to develop this connection by arguing for a playfulness that is tied to risk, specifically the risk of one’s self in and for a community.31 I read Lugones as proposing a kind of productive risk where exposure to others can be generative of more meaningful relations to one another that is entailed by world-traveling. Lugones stops short of discussing what it would mean to co-inhabit worlds, for the world-traveler must always return to their world if they are by definition traveling and not settling or
migrating. I think that there is a need for communal world-making that accompanies world-traveling without being reducible to it.

Lugones’s analysis emphasizes adjectival modifiers on her concepts. I have in mind her account of the Western man’s account of play in which competence and established roles are central in what she calls the “agonistic sense of playfulness.” Further in her essay, she calls this the agonistic attitude, and qualifies it as “the playful attitude given Western man’s construction of playfulness.”

I take Lugones to mean that the Western construction is a flawed account of playfulness, and it would be better to call it agon or competition in distinction to her own account of loving playfulness, which perhaps Lugones means to be playfulness as such.

Lugones’s critique of Huizinga offers further insight into the value she places on playfulness and its kinds. Huizinga, a Dutch historian, interprets Western civilization as founded on or derived from play, and this is clear in the title of his lecture that became his book, Homo Ludens. Lugones writes that it “is an interesting thing for Third World people to think about” that Western civilization has been interpreted by a White Western man as play in the agonistic sense.

The agonistic attitude, Lugones notes, is not a healthy, loving attitude to have in traveling across worlds, but it is certainly able to “kill other ‘worlds’ with it.”

Lugones’s analysis is brief but faithful: Huizinga’s text straightforwardly asserts that civilization is drawn from play, and for him, civilization is synonymous with the Western. His text contains consistent references to primitive man, treating the non-Western as remnants of humanity’s childhood in contrast to mature Western civilization in a gesture that Johannes Fabian calls a “denial of coevalness,” by which he means “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.” Lugones’s reading of Huizinga stops short of theorizing what it would mean to base a world off of loving playfulness. If Western civilization, in whatever reductive manner, is derivative of agon and agonistic world-traveling, what would it mean to imagine worlds derived otherwise?

Lugones’s essay is part of her book’s larger concern with building and theorizing coalition, as the subtitle of Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes indicates. Lugones’s concern with coalition is apparent across her body of work, and is present as early as her 1978 dissertation, Morality and Personal Relations. In her dissertation, Lugones is ultimately concerned with thinking about our personal and impersonal relations—how we love each other across friendships and relationships of all kinds amidst multiple oppressions. In her world-traveling essay, world-traveling is itself invoked as the way by which a coalition of deep understanding is fashioned among “Women of Color” specifically.

Lugones is clear that world-traveling is meant to be creative as well as a form of loving. I gather that her emphasis on playfulness as risk is meant to elaborate her point that working and playing together involves an exposure to one another that risks our very tenderness. If it is the case that playfulness is not essential for world-traveling, I think that it is essential for world-making, and specifically a world we derive from loving playfulness with one another that departs from worlds founded on agonistic playfulness. If world-making is a practice distinct from world-traveling, the distinction must rest between a movement to an already-established world and the collaborative creation of a new one. I mean to emphasize the collaborative aspect, and I suggest that the key mode of collaboration is a playful one in which worlds can emerge out of loving playfulness with one another.

Any discussion of world-making invites rigorous reflection on what a world is such that its making or un-making can be legibly referred to. The world is a concept with much history in philosophy, as Sean Gaston notes that “concepts of world have been a part of Western philosophy since the biblical and classical period,” and if the scope of the concept of world is expanded to contemporary considerations of globalization, the literature is even vaster. All this is to say nothing of non-Western thought, which certainly has much to say about the world and worlds. The creation and destruction of the world is central to Aztec accounts of the Five Suns, where the world has been created and destroyed four times, and a similar account is found in the K’iche’ Mayan Popol Vuh, which similarly features multiple creations and destructions of the world, as well as a distinction between the world and underworld.

In her essay, Lugones is explicit that she does not want to define precisely what she means by world, for she thinks that “the term is suggestive and [she] does not want to close the suggestiveness of it too soon.” Her usage of the term is tactical, and her aim is to “use worlds against the grain of atomic, homogeneous, and monistic understandings of the social in any of its dimensions” as a practice of resistance. I follow her then, in thinking about world-making from out of experience as a resistant practice that is valuable for its suggestiveness, and not primarily for its precise description of a phenomenon. It is risky to eschew rigorous definitions in a work of philosophy, and it serves as one kind of example of the risk involved in being playful, but hopefully a less risky proposition in the wake of Lugones’s own work.

In describing world-making and playfulness’s relation to it, I return to Lugones’s own account of loving playfulness in the scene by the riverbank where two friends are showing each other stones. Lugones writes that “I laugh and bring the pieces back to you and you are doing the same with your pieces.” The component pieces of this activity can be broken down to understand the work that playfulness is doing and how it can “make” a world. The gesture that initiates the play is the sharing of the colorful stones with another. Prior to the act, the two friends Lugones describes are driven by playfulness: they are walking along a riverbank without a purpose. While purpose can certainly be attributed to their acts by suggesting they are walking to stay in shape or to visit a local hike a friend recommended,
Lugones emphasizes that the driving attitude is playfulness as an “openness to surprise.”

The playful activity of the two friends depends on a mutual social recognition, and Lugones acknowledges the Hegelian register of this point while disagreeing that self-recognition requires tension or hostility. I depart slightly from Lugones at this point in her focus on subjectivity here, for while world-traveling is what enables us to become “fully subjects to each other,” I want to suggest that the playful activity of the two friends goes beyond world-traveling to world-making by way of their joint creative activity. What occurs is a moment of risk in playfulness where a friend shows another a pretty rock, and the success of the play activity depends on the other friend recognizing what the first friend sees. I think that what occurs in the mutual recognition of the pretty rock is not a world-traveling by the other friend, but a collaborative activity by both friends that is not reducible to either of their actions as agents and instead concerns a relation between them. This relation opens up a world that is neither one nor the other’s world, but another world that is the space of their playing.

World-making is distinct from world-traveling in this account because it is not the case that the friend who initially breaks open the stone to reveal its pretty colors is inhabiting a previously existing social reality. It is their original playfulness that comes to reveal a world they make together whose previous existence is indebted to neither of them. In this sense, world-making is similar to artistic production by way of what Danto called a symbol, but where a symbol refers only to a possible world, I follow Lugones here in referring to actually existing worlds brought into being. The world that emerges from the activity of the two friends is oriented around a shared appreciation for walking and crashing stones. More relevant than the content of the new world is the way in which it comes into being, and on Lugones’s account it depends on playfulness as a fundamental openness to one another.

Ortega’s critique of playfulness may be reactivated here in order to ask whether it is ethical or always practical to risk the creation of a world without knowing ahead of time what the contents of that world may be. Such a criticism is valid when it comes to deciding whether or not one should embark on world-making at all, or whether one should world-travel with either a playful or critical attitude. It remains that world-making must first involve a playful attitude insofar as making a world involves openness and risk without privileging any particular set of rules. I think that for Lugones, like world-traveling, world-making is fundamentally social insofar as a world is always social, and the success of world-making depends on its recognition by others such that it cannot be a solitary endeavor. In pursuit of liberation and resistance in coalition, it remains important to both hone our critical edges while also risking the uncertainty and fun of being playful to both understand each other and create together.

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NOTES

2. Maria Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 77.
3. Ortega, In-Between, 135.
4. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 97.
5. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 98.
6. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 78.
7. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 77.
8. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 77.
9. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 77.
16. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 86.
17. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 87.
18. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 21.
23. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 87.
25. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 89.
26. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 93.
27. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 123.
28. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 95.
29. Ortega, In-Between, 133.
30. Ortega, In-Between, 133.
31. Ortega, In-Between, 133.
32. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 32.
33. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 92.
34. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 135.
35. Ortega, In-Between, 141.
36. Rita Laura Segato, La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado (Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina: Tinta Limón Ediciones, 2013), 45; my translation.
37. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 33.
38. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 95.
39. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 95.
40. Lugones, Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes, 95.
42. Maria Lugones, “Morality and Personal Relations” (Madison, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1978), http://gateway.proquest
According to Holton, these phenomena arise when we make a judgment about which option is best. Based on this judgment, we choose the best course of action and then act on that choice. When we perform an action in a manner that is not captured by the above, we tend to think that the action is habitual, random, or irrational. In this paper, I want to suggest an aspect of Gloria Anzaldúa’s thought that challenges this assumption.

In “Willing, Wanting, Waiting,” Richard Holton gives us two compelling examples of this type of action. The first is the case of a fire lieutenant who leads his crew into a burning building. The fire crew tries to put out the fire, but nothing happens. The lieutenant then starts to feel “as if something is not right” and orders his fire crew to leave the building. As soon as they are out, the building collapses. Right after this event, the lieutenant reflects on it and comes to believe he may have relied on some “sixth sense.” How else would he have known that the building was going to collapse? The second case is about subjects in an empirical study who were given the job of pressing a button corresponding to a quadrant with a cross in it. They unconsciously “learned to use this algorithm to predict where the next cross would appear.”

Holton explains this phenomenon as “choice absent judgment,” where our choices respond to “features that we have registered but of which we are unaware,” compelling us to act either in the absence of judgment or prior to judgment because of the complexity of the situations we find ourselves in. According to Holton, these actions contribute to knowledge such that the choices we make inform our judgments. In other words, by rationally reflecting and forming explanations about our choices, our actions give us prima facie evidence as to why we chose to act as we did, either because we learn which states of the world are best by looking at the consequences of our actions, or because we learn something about why we chose what we did by reflection.

However, this framework crucially leaves out the body in its discussion of agency and knowledge, making it seem as though the process Holton describes is purely cognitive. Though bodily responses can play an instrumental part in this exercise of agency, it is relegated to a minor role in the form of haptic feedback, or as Letitia Meynell argues, a “mere medium through which information passes and by which the will pursues its ends.” Further, the account overlooks the fundamental role of the body in influencing actions, as well as shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world. But as philosophers like Merleau-Ponty, Mexican existentialists such as Emilio Uranga, and third-world feminist philosophers have compellingly argued, agency and embodiment are intrinsically tied.

Thanks to her training as a literary scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa has contributed uniquely creative tools to help us understand human actions in their context. She created theories that reflect the diversity and multifariousness of her culture as well as have the power to be transformative and liberating. Her framework, which can be described as an epistemic borderland, is “partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference.” Importantly, Anzaldúa’s agential and epistemological framework builds on existential and phenomenological traditions by fusing it with the language, ideas, and concepts of her indigenous heritage and her life on the border. This, according to Alessandri (2020), places Anzaldúa within the Chicana existentialist tradition often bearing resemblance to concepts found in the broader Mexican existentialist thought.

In this paper, I argue that Gloria Anzaldúa’s own philosophy la facultad captures a form of active, embodied, epistemic agency. I further argue that when an agent uses la facultad, they acquire a novel form of knowledge, one that is only accessible through this capacity. In Section II, I define la facultad as consisting in the active integration of conscious self-awareness, bodily experiences, motor skills, and sensory information with the rational mind to engage with and navigate the world. As such, the actions we choose to do are not solely determined by reasoning or mere mental states but are fundamentally shaped by the dynamic interplay between our bodies, sensory perceptions, emotions, and the situational context in which we find ourselves. In Section III, I elaborate on the epistemological contribution of la facultad. Finally, in Section IV, I conclude with some questions for further research.

**LA FACULTAD AS EPISTEMIC AGENCY**

At the center of Anzaldúa’s epistemology is la facultad. First introduced in Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa’s
discussion of la facultad is succinct, and it only features centrally in Chapter 3, “Entering into the Serpent.” The term is introduced here to recapture the marginal ways of knowing that have been historically cast aside, alienated, and frozen. We can translate the Spanish term la facultad as a mental or physical power, capability, or capacity. But Anzaldúa defines la facultad as “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.” In her writings, Anzaldúa’s way of conceiving of this mechanism evolves. At first, la facultad is thought to be a type of sixth sense, but later it becomes an “intuitive form of knowledge.” Some philosophers have interpreted la facultad to be a form of clairvoyance or a new form of perception that “encourages exploration into [the Shadow self]” and promotes “creativity and embodied agency.” Others like Cynthia Paccacerqua (2016) argue that la facultad is “the power to bring the obscured, scattered, unintelligible parts into a unified whole, to regenerate the expressive relationship between thinking and sensibility.” However, I’ll try to show that these interpretations do not capture the complexity and richness of the epistemological framework that Anzaldúa offers. So, in this section, I will try to do justice to the notion by showing that la facultad is a form of active, epistemic agency in which emotional, bodily responses to stimuli elicit action before judgments are consciously made. It does this through a sense of urgency to understand what we have experienced.

Anzaldúa’s overarching aim is to problematize the view that there is a neat distinction between mental and physical phenomena. In line with this, la facultad can then be thought of as a capacity that is both mental and physical, where the mental and physical are interdependent, intertwined, and inseparable. According to Anzaldúa: “Coatlícuie, la facultad, la frontera, and nepantla—concepts that mean . . . ‘a mestizo/mestiza, cognitive kind of perception . . . it’s hybridity, a mixture, because I live in this liminal state between worlds, between realities, between systems of knowledge, between symbology systems.’”

This inseparability of the mental and physical is highlighted by two different aspects of la facultad. The first, which she calls the proximity sense, is a “quick perception, arrived at without conscious reasoning” and an “acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is behind which feelings reside/hide.” This sense is constructed through physical responses to unconscious risk assessments. The second aspect, a deeper one, is described as a “shift in perception” that “deepens the way we see concrete objects and people.” This latter one can only be developed through the first. This is because la facultad shakes us out of our habitual existence.

Though Anzaldúa’s discussion in Borderlands/La Frontera is brief, we can find this concept in most of her corpus and even in her early interviews, both explicitly and implicitly. For example, in Luz en lo Oscuro / Light in the Dark, Anzaldúa deploys la facultad as part of the stages of conocimiento (knowledge). Though not defined as robustly as in Borderlands, the way she uses the term la facultad and its elements offers important clues to the second, deeper aspect mentioned above.

According to this work, conocimiento proceeds in stages. In the first stage, when a person suffers an arrebatamiento, that is, an event that shocks her, she is moved to “question who [they] are and what the world is about.” Because the arrebatamiento is inherently uncomfortable, the person develops a strong sense of urgency to understand what they are experiencing. Through this sense of urgency, la facultad awakens. In the second stage—nepantla—la facultad (although it is not explicitly invoked by Anzaldúa), is developed or honed. Because nepantla is the place where “different perspectives come into conflict,” la facultad becomes an ability to control perception. La facultad, then, plays an integral role in moving through the stages of knowledge. In fact, it is a capacity that compels the agent from the state of arrebatamiento to an attempt to control what is seen in order to make it intelligible.

When highlighting its epistemic import, Anzaldúa calls la facultad “the proximity sense.” Anzaldúa describes the proximity sense of la facultad as a “perception without conscious reasoning” and an “acute awareness.” What Anzaldúa has in mind here is a form of proprioception, or the ability of our bodies to sense our movement and its spatial relation to the world. However, la facultad goes beyond proprioception by incorporating our relationship with social structures. In other words, our body is aware of how we move in material spaces (i.e., how close I am to this chair, whether I am upright or crooked) and how others perceive us and how we relate to them. As embodied, social beings, we unconsciously register information about our environment, the people we engage with, and the social structures and locations we reside in. This can be as mundane as unconsciously learning to use an algorithm for prediction, as cited by Holton, or as crucial as picking up on behavioral and bodily cues from an abuser in order to predict when the next act of violence will happen. This embodied capacity to register information unconsciously however, most often originates from psychological and physical trauma and constant apprehension of bodily, mental, and spiritual harm. Trauma, marginalization, and oppression condition the body to be hypersensitive and hypervigilant to the material and social environment to avoid situations that may harm it.

This information produces bodily responses such as a “tingling on [the] skin,” an impending sense of doom, or a gut feeling. These responses offer tangible information regarding the consequences of expected actions and are utilized instinctively, often bypassing the necessity to deliberate between actions consciously. Importantly, this ability significantly shapes an agent’s perception of the environment, narrows attention, and influences the choice to act. Like Holton, Anzaldúa claims that these bodily reactions are not reducible to pure emotions, nor do they have the form of an unconscious judgment or propositional evaluative attitude. Instead, it seems to involve a non-conceptual representation of content or, as she writes, “the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols.” Unlike Holton’s account of choice absent judgment, however, la facultad is not informationally
encapsulated nor cognitively impenetrable.\(^2^1\) Because, as we will see later, Anzaldúa argues that when the full capacity of \(la \ facultad\) is developed, it can be altered by conscious thoughts, beliefs, or intentions.

With the proximity sense fleshed out, we can turn to the second aspect of \(la \ facultad\). Anzaldúa says surprisingly very little about what this aspect entails. She calls it both a “shift in perception” and the “ability to shift attention and see through the surface of things and situations.”\(^2^3\) Thus, we can interpret the second aspect in two different ways: (1) if it is a shift in perception, then this “deeper sense” is a fuller understanding of the world that follows from the proximity sense of \(la \ facultad\) being deployed; and (2) if the “deeper sense” is an ability, then it is an act of embodied agency.

On the one hand, several passages suggest the first interpretation—this deeper aspect of \(la \ facultad\) entails, as a consequence of the proximity sense, a change in the way we view our external world, by forcing us to see the true aspects of reality. As Anzaldúa writes, it is a “mode of initiation,” “taking away our ‘innocence’ and our ‘safe and easy ignorance.’”\(^2^4\) In other words, we often walk this world unaware or ignorant of the social contexts that we inhabit. We become comfortable with this mode of existence because it is non-threatening and safe. However, there are times when we are placed in dangerous and life-threatening situations that force \(la \ facultad\) to deploy. This mode of being is uncomfortable because it feels like we have no rational control over our choices and actions. Nevertheless, in the process of self-reflection (Why did I move away? Why did I feel uneasy? Why did I get goosebumps on my skin?), we learn something new about the world and our social location in this way.

However, this interpretation fails to capture the ways \(la \ facultad\) is deployed in conocimiento, or even in how Anzaldúa initially thought of it in interviews conducted in the 1980s. Further, to think of it in this way is to keep \(la \ facultad\) as an individual capacity and alienated from our rational mind and ourselves, thus in conflict with the transformative aspect of \(la \ facultad\). Worse, it is to deny the inseparability of mind and body crucial to the overall Anzaldúaan framework.

On the other hand, if Anzaldúa means to say that it is an ability, then \(la \ facultad\), in its fullest (deeper) sense, is an act of embodied agency. It is the active integration of conscious self-awareness, bodily experiences, motor skills, and sensory information with the rational mind to engage with and navigate the world. As such, the actions we choose to do are not solely determined by abstract reasoning or mental states but are fundamentally shaped by the dynamic interplay between our bodies, sensory perceptions, emotions, and the situational context in which we find ourselves.

This interpretation is supported by multiple passages where Anzaldúa deploys \(la \ facultad\) in conocimiento. Anzaldúa writes that conocimiento “comes from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms.”\(^2^5\) Consisting of seven stages, Anzaldúa deploys \(la \ facultad\) explicitly between the first (the arrebatamiento) and the second (nepantla) but is developed in nepantla.\(^2^6\) At first, the arrebatamiento causes a person to “question who [they] are and what the world is about.”\(^2^7\) The person becomes “split,” unsure about themselves and the world, continuously questioning all elements. Because questioning is inherently uncomfortable, as she writes, \(la \ facultad\) awakens.\(^2^8\) Thus, in the first stage, we get the proximal stage of \(la \ facultad\), insofar as it concurs with how she thinks of it in Borderlands (as coming from and developed through traumatic experiences).

In the second stage, nepantla, Anzaldúa writes, “The outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality.”\(^2^9\) Here we can begin to see part of the activity inherent in \(la \ facultad\), as Anzaldúa describes “seeing through” and being “able to access knowledge.”\(^3^0\) In this stage, she also describes the “ability to control perception” and “staying despierta” as a survival tool.\(^3^1\) The exciting suggestion is that Anzaldúa thinks that \(la \ facultad\) can be controlled and deployed (even if in a very weak sense), as well as that it is fundamentally plastic. However, it is not so much that the rational mind has control over \(la \ facultad\), but that \(la \ facultad\) is like an arm to a body, part of a whole system and unified. Through actions done on or with the body, \(la \ facultad\) can be developed. As Paccacerqua says, Anzaldúa willfully “[depl[ois]] affective techniques like sustaining periods of sense-deprivation to lock herself into fantasies that grip her body, or holding and animating words, images, and body sensations to imprint the sense of self in new ways.”\(^3^2\) Because \(la \ facultad\) crucially involves both an active and conscious self-awareness and the ability to hone and develop these unconscious bodily abilities, it is open to change and transformation as new forms of relationality and accountability emerge.

**CREATING KNOWLEDGE FROM LA FACULTAD**

With this in mind, a crucial question remains: How does \(la \ facultad\) afford or generate knowledge? Unfortunately, I am only able to partially answer this question, as Anzaldúa is mostly silent on this process. First, Anzaldúa is explicit in Luz en lo Osuro/Light in the Dark that \(la \ facultad\) contributes to knowledge in these cases through a sense of urgency to make sense of a world that seems opaque to us. But, as previously argued, at least in this deployment, Anzaldúa seems to be invoking the proximal sense of \(la \ facultad\). Thus, when we are in situations that awaken the proximal sense of \(la \ facultad\), we start to pick up on patterns from our bodily responses in order to track what elicits them, and so be able to avoid or promote them in the future. This is supported in Borderlands/La Frontera, where Anzaldúa describes being “forced” to develop \(la \ facultad\) so that “we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away.”\(^3^3\)

In addition to picking up patterns, \(la \ facultad\), according to Anzaldúa, gives us access to a form of instinctual knowledge. This is supported by the fact that she derives the concept of \(la \ facultad\) from stories of la Llorona, who represent for her “not the root of all evil but instinctual knowledge and other alternative ways of knowing that fuel transformation.”\(^3^4\) Instinctual knowledge or intuitive knowledge, as she writes, “is the closest you come to
direct knowledge (gnosis) of the world, and this experience of reality is partial, too. It is worth pausing here to point out the use of the word “gnosis,” a term seldom used but notably found in José Vasconcelos’s Estética. According to Stehn and Alessandri, who painstakingly document the influences of Mexican philosophy on Anzaldúa, Anzaldúa not only was familiar with Vasconcelos’s work but, they write, she “read Vasconcelos’ philosophy in order to critically rework it.” Though we only know definitively that Anzaldúa was familiar with Vasconcelos’s La Raza Cósmica, her use of the word “gnosis” suggests a further familiarity with his corpus. In the first chapter of Estética titled “Gnoseología Estética,” Vasconcelos claims that our “gnosis” of the world comes through three principal (and axiologically progressive) faculties: “(i) through sensation [conocimiento sensorial], (ii) through reason [conocimiento intelectual], and (iii) through emotion [conocimiento emocional].” Emotion is the “highest” because it brings us closest to metaphysical truth and brings us to direct contact with our body and world. As Emiliano Salomon argues, “rather than abstracting data from the wealth of our sense perceptions, [emotion] instead creates values, i.e., it adds significance to the objects we conceptually determine.”

With this in mind, a fuller picture of la facultad is now illuminated. As epistemic agents, Anzaldúa claims that we are merely interpreters of knowledge (or Truth) and thus, our access to this direct knowledge is only partial and always mediated through our mind/body, social location, emotions, etc. Further, individuals are not objective, non-relational observers but part of a collective identity that is both constituted in relation to the self, others, environment, and knowledge and thus shapes (or is an active participant in) knowledge and reality. One can only see a “complete” picture by understanding where we are in relation to everything and how we shape it. As such, the deeper sense of la facultad becomes a crucial mechanism to generate new frames of reference and categories that are relational for which to interpret Truth. Chela Sandoval has a similar idea in mind when she describes la facultad as a process that “provides the basis for a differential and coalitional methodology.” In other words, through the active synthesis of self-reflection with embodied action, we simultaneously deconstruct oppressive, ideological frames of reference (such as identity categories) while creating or generating new ones that incorporate our own lived experiences and marginalized ways of living. As Andrea J. Pitts writes, it is a “resistant form of epistemic practice.” In addition, what this entails is that creating values or new frames of reference is a collaborative function that requires epistemic humility and deference to those harmed the most.

Considering the ability to generate these frames, if a person acts in the world with an eye toward generating new frames of reference for the purpose of social and political justice, then it is possible, as Anzaldúa writes, to “generate subversive knowledges.” Thus, the ability to “shift attention” allows us to examine how we construct our view of the world (our social context). It forces us to confront ourselves and the reality we take for granted and be able to “see” realities that we typically would not. It also helps generate the tools needed to create, develop, and refine epistemological methods for advancing forgotten or destroyed knowledge systems to become better positioned and empowered to represent and advocate for our communities.

What we understand from Anzaldúa is that there is a kind of knowledge we traditionally (or in a modern dualistic context) fail to recognize as knowledge. The consequences of this failure of recognition include an impartial understanding of reality and Truth, negative implications for other forms of theoretical knowledge, and unethical practices that are ultimately justified by this misguided pursuit of impartial knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself. Anzaldúa further helps us illuminate how knowledge practices can be oppressive because they fragment and split the self. Though these other forms of knowledge are often conflated with a sixth sense or relegated to the margins, if we adjust how we think about making choices, and how we engage with the world as active, embodied agents, then la facultad is one way of helping us capture that version of accessing knowledge that dominant frameworks do not.

CONCLUSION

Even considering my interpretation of la facultad, much remains to be pieced together. First, considering the evolution of la facultad throughout Anzaldúa’s writings leaves open questions about its mechanism and how it fits into conocimiento. Part of addressing this requires paying attention to the philosophical influences that shaped how she developed her philosophical theories and how they interact. In particular, it is worth exploring further how much Anzaldúa takes up Vasconcelos’s aesthetic monism in building la facultad and conocimiento. This is because while Vasconcelos publicly rejects existentialism, Anzaldúa makes significant use of it. Thus, it opens the question as to whether and how Anzaldúa’s framework is a synthesis of these opposed theories.

Another interesting line of inquiry is how Anzaldúa provides important insight into the intellectual evolution of Mexican philosophy in the United States. We now know that Anzaldúa read a significant amount of Mexican philosophy and thus was building from frameworks that had already been established. Less work has been done, however, in how more contemporary theorists end up taking on board Mexican philosophy through Anzaldúa. Seeing it through this lens not only will allow us to classify Anzaldúa as part of a larger Mexican philosophical tradition but will potentially help us build bridges.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that Anzaldúa’s philosophical contribution remains significant. Her work picks up on a phenomenon that we continue to discuss in epistemology, philosophy of action, and the cognitive sciences. My objective was to bring her contributions into conversation with some of the contemporary theories in these areas and to show that essential and groundbreaking theories can be developed from those that have suffered the most. If we can connect this dimension of her work with other contemporary and previous similar philosophies, we would come a long way in showing her philosophy as part of a broader tradition.
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NOTES
4. Meynell, "Introduction."
11. Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas, 268, my emphasis.
14. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
15. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
16. Sarah S. Ohmer offers a competing interpretation of the dynamic between conocimiento and la facultad. In particular, she writes, "Conocimiento and being/self are interrelated, and espíritus lend conocimiento to an individual, hence the shamaneic exercise. The path to the journey of conocimiento comprises a confrontation of avoided elements, which in turn lead to the full use of la facultad, a perception that transcends the programming that censors/blinds/represses/distorts. El conocimiento is ‘skeptical of reasoning and rationality’; it involves spirituality and intuition, with intuitive knowledge coming from ‘unmediated constructs’ and not from the filter of identity." See Sarah S. Ohmer, "Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s Decolonizing Ritual of Conocimiento," Confluencia 26, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 149. However, it is unclear to me as to whether this is what Anzaldúa had in mind. In a 1999 interview, Anzaldúa describes conocimiento as the “awareness of facultad that sees through all human acts,” but in Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, she only talks about la facultad as being awakened in the first stage and doesn’t refer to la facultad again. Similarly, she also talks about conocimiento as a theory of consciousness, an epistemology, a theory of composition, counter-knowledge and an awareness.
17. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 60.
18. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 60.
19. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 56.
20. Much more needs to be said about how la facultad captures non-conceptual representation and whether it is a form of non-conceptual representation of values, as Christine Tappolet suggests in the cases of emotions. See Christine Tappolet, "Truth Pluralism and Many-Valued Logics: A Reply to Beall," The Philosophical Quarterly 50, no. 200 (2000): 382–85. I believe that Anzaldúa might have something like this in mind considering the influence of Vasconcelos on Anzaldúa’s philosophical theories. However, a deep exploration into this is beyond the scope of this paper though a worthwhile project to pursue in the future.
21. Here, Holton takes on board Fodor’s thesis of modularity to argue that these choices cannot be beliefs because they are too “informationally encapsulated (knowledge from outside cannot get in) and cognitively impenetrable (not under the control of central processes).” See Holton, Willing, Wanting, Waiting, 68. By taking this on board, Holton seems to suggest that pre-judgment choices are like emotions with fixed behavioral dispositions. However, I agree with Tappolet that the modularity model fails to capture the complexity or wide range of human emotion and its action tendencies and thus, so too, do pre-judgment choices framed in this way fail to capture complexity. More needs to be said to flesh this out, however, and it is beyond the scope of this paper.
22. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 58; Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
24. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 120, my emphasis.
25. See note 14 for a competing interpretation of la facultad and conocimiento.
26. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
27. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
28. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
29. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 125.
30. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 127.
33. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 121.
34. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 120.
37. Salomón, Metaphysics, Aesthetics, and Race.
38. Salomón, Metaphysics, Aesthetics, and Race.
41. Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro, 120.
43. This work has already been started by Pitts, Jacqueline Martinez, and Alessandri. For example, Martinez shows that Anzaldúa draws heavily from Malebranche and as such, concepts like borderlands, la conciencia de la mestiza, and la facultad are inherently phenomenological interventions and that la facultad is a perceptual capacity. See Jacqueline Martinez, "Culture, Communication, and Latina Feminist Philosophy: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Culture," Hypatia 29, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 221–36. At the same time, Alessandri argues that Anzaldúa is ultimately an existentialist philosopher and an “intellectual bridgebuilder connecting European, Mexican, and Africana
philosophies." See Alessandri, "Three Existentialist Readings of Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera."

44. Vasconcelos is quoted to have said in the 1950s, "existencialismo? Eso es basura!"

45. For example, although la facultad bears a strong likeness to Uranga's corazonadas, it is unclear how similar these two concepts really are. According to Carlos A. Sánchez, a corazonada is an "emotive intuition . . . [they] grant access to the mysteries of Mexican being; they are heartfelt intimations that reveal the secrets of existence." It is also something that can be used to produce knowledge or is a source of truth. (See Carlos A. Sánchez, "(M)Existentialism," The Philosophers' Magazine Archive (n.d.), accessed July 10, 2023, https://archive.philosophersmag.com/mexistentialism/.) Ultimately, while at this moment we can't ascertain whether Anzaldúa had access to his work, it does help us put Anzaldúa into a Mexican philosophical context. Whether Anzaldúa built on Uranga or she and Uranga had similar intellectual evolutions and commitments remain to be seen. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for this crucial point.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Amy Marvin
LAFAYETTE COLLEGE

When I last wrote to you, I explained that though this journal has changed its designation from Newsletter to Studies, I plan to carry forward the tradition of the LGBTQ newsletter format. Hence, I will open this Introduction with a general update before directly introducing the following interview and essays. My previous letter to you was from a historical home surrounded by an infamous battlefield, and this letter finds me writing from the mountains of northeast Pennsylvania. I ended my previous Introduction emphasizing contingency, which remains the case for me, as it remains for you. Currently, the New College of Florida is planning to officially remove their Gender Studies program under a rising tide of lucrative anti-LGBTQ sentiment across the US. In June, a professor and two students were stabbed during a philosophy course focused on Gender Issues. Though the Philosophy Department at West Virginia University has not yet been eliminated like other departments, it will be subject to further review. Meanwhile, faculty are increasingly placed in contingent positions at institutions where tenure still means job security. In a situation of anti-LGBTQ legislation, violence, and rising austerity in higher education and beyond, it remains important to have venues like this journal that center LGBTQ work and thought.

The issue opens on the timely theme of anti-LGBTQ and specifically anti-trans backlash. In 2022 Loren Cannon published his book The Politicization of Trans Identity: An Analysis of Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling from Obergefell to Bostock to analyze the origin and mechanics of an increasingly hostile political climate focused on trans identity. Now, a year later, Jacki Alvarez and Loren Cannon share a conversation about the book, the institution of marriage, the concept of harm, the causality of backlash, and further work that can be done to address the contemporary politics of anti-trans hostility.

Following the interview, the issue includes three essays that use methods of autotheory to think about identity, violence, and love. In “Better Word: Queer Time Travel, Intersexuality, and Autoethnography,” Maren Behrens bridges autoethnography and philosophy of time to reflect on coercive medicine, compulsory heterosexuality, trauma, and identity. Next, in “Political Economy of Passing: A Trans Genre Meditation on Queerness,” Eric Maroney brings together autotheory, feminist and queer Marxist scholarship, and poetry to critique the imperative to pass as non-trans across its racialized and classed dynamics. Finally, Cavar concludes the issue through a meditation on trans love titled “Loving Trans into Possible: t4t As Transpollinatory Praxis.” Like the preceding essays, Cavar draws from autotheory and poetics, challenging dominant narratives of trans corruption by introducing a praxis of pollination in conversation with queercrip, transfeminist, and new materialist frameworks. Each of these essays is engaged with how to think LGBTQIA lives in the context of misinformation, neglect, violence, epistemic injustice, and rampant public backlash.

Moving forward, I am hoping that this issue will provide an excellent example of what LGBTQIA philosophy work can look like across disciplines, genres, and methods. I hope that even in a context of public violence and austerity LGBTQIA philosophy continues to creatively thrive within and without the academy.
I sincerely hope this book reaches a wide audience, especially philosophers whose conceptions of identity are biologically essentialist or those who are stuck in a two-gender system. Academics unfamiliar with the historical and ongoing harms experienced by our community should read the book too. But I wonder who your target audience is, or if you thought about who might read it. Is it for transgender people like us? Are you writing to cis people? It’s clearly an academic book, but are you aiming for an audience of a wider academic community beyond philosophy?

LC: Well, first, Jacki, thank you so much for participating in the APA session last spring of the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World and being open to engage with me about the book. Thanks too for those whose labor produces this publication, the APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy. This publication has done so much to advance LGBTQ philosophy for so many years. This work is so vital not only for our discipline but also for our intersecting communities, and those of us who are looking to find a professional home in this field.

To answer your question, though, I didn’t have any specific audience in mind for the book, especially at the beginning. Instead, I found myself, like so many others, witnessing the national politicization of trans and gender non-conforming identities and experiences, and realized that this phenomenon was morally, politically, socially, and legally significant. I wondered why the wave upon wave of anti-transgender legislation was not being seen as a national tragedy; as something so obviously morally abhorrent and unacceptable. I started with the ideas of “backlash,” “scapegoating,” and “dog whistling” and wanted to investigate to what extent these ideas were relevant to the present circumstances. After doing some conceptual work to adequately characterize these ideas, I argue that they are relevant here, and as such, provide a meaningful way to discuss our present circumstances. Meaningful, in the sense of being morally and conceptually meaningful. Targeting trans and gender non-conforming folks is not just “another Wednesday” of political sparing, but has real ramifications for those that are targeted, and those that transgress gender in various ways regardless of their identities.

So, I was motivated by engaging in the analysis itself, I wasn’t really thinking about readership. I hope, though, that many folks of different experiences will consider reading the book.

JACKI: Agreed. I hope that a wider audience reads your book, especially those who aren’t transgender will read this book because I suspect other people leading transgender lives might feel some of the same pain I felt while reading it. And we need more people to know of this pain so they might be more compelled to stop it, to intervene against it. Some of the narratives and examples bring forward an ever-present fear about the violence that I might sustain in my own life. They are reminders of the violence my community and I have experienced. Particularly, the sections on bathroom bills, transgender folks that are incarcerated, and the pervasive rhetoric in the public consciousness regarding transgender folks and accusations of sexual predation.

LC: I do recognize that it can be difficult to read at times. I was worried, as related to your original question, that many would believe that backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling were not relevant terms in this context. For that reason, this book has lots of stories, about real people, experiencing discrimination, violence, and other forms of intersectionality applied and experienced oppression and contemporary evidence about those that are actively marginalizing our communities. My own view of philosophy, especially social philosophy and ethics, is that our theorizing should stick close to lived experience. We need not always abstract to the realm of fiction when what is happening right now affects ourselves, our chosen families, colleagues, and communities.

JACKI: The careful attention paid to identifying not only progress but also backlash and dog-whistling is so important lest we forget or let down our guard as we keep fighting injustices that our community continues to experience. One thing I worry about is that if it’s all scapegoating and dog-whistling, then shouldn’t we try to ignore what’s going on and not get distracted? How do we protect ourselves and our community while also being in charge of the narratives of our lives where our gender, and our genital status, just isn’t what is most important about us?

LC: That is a good question. Many, many years ago I would regularly teach an essay on the moral obligation to stay informed, written by Carlo Filice. It was written before most of us carried computers in our pockets and became bombarded with information of all kinds. Contemporarily, many realize that watching/reading the news incessantly leads not to empowerment but more likely to depression and hopelessness.

We live in a complicated time. It is one in which taking care of our mental, emotional, and spiritual health requires that we sometimes disengage. That said, the politicization of trans and gender non-conforming identities and experiences is something that is crucially important to pay attention to and to think carefully about. Threatening to put gender-affirming parents in jail, prohibiting updates to legal documents, life-sustaining health care, the use of public restroom facilities, participation in sports, and to be paradoxically blamed both for Trump’s election win and his loss, are all serious claims that lead to violence and discrimination. The legislative and social assault can barely be underestimated in its importance. Historically, scapegoating has led to serious harm and the beginning stages of this scapegoating can’t be ignored.

JACKI: In addition to the painful memories and the sadness and anger I felt while reading, there were also experiences of pride, validation, and solidarity. I felt a part of a beautiful, though violently oppressed, community. And we have plenty of history from the feminist movement, among other fights for civil rights, to know that we need to know what is happening to others and need to work together, and have allies, to make change. The book is doing powerful consciousness-raising work, through careful observation, research, and philosophical analysis that brings us together to notice what is really happening. Have you also considered what
the right responses ought to be or where best to act in resistance?

LC: Thank you. As far as your question, I tend to think that any characterization of apt responses is context dependent. Appropriate responses start with an understanding of our present circumstances (what I hoped to contribute to illuminating), and active reflection, empathy, and engagement. This may look different for different people differently positioned in our world. The response of a national politician (either democrat or republican) is going to be different than that of a PTA member, a philosopher, or a twenty-year-old college student. There is sufficient good work to be had for everyone, and I believe that context shapes what that work looks like.

JACKI: Let’s get into some of the details of the book. I was really hoping you would reject marriage as an institution. Why defend an institution that is still separate and unequal? I am underwhelmed by, even skeptical of, the Obergefell decision, a bit more so than you seem to be in the book. Sure, a byproduct of the case is that many gay and lesbian people can marry, though you reveal how it was more a technical trick of law than a welcoming of LGBTQ+ people into full rights. And still, it can be difficult for some transgender people whose identifications don’t match their account of themselves and who cannot get them to match through the tangle of laws and government offices with different rules. So even where the extension of rights includes some people, it still leaves out others.

LC: Yes. I recall you bringing this up in the APA session for the Association of Philosophy in the Contemporary World. In Chapter One of my book, I do a close review of the Obergefell decision and am critical of much of the reasoning of the Supreme Court on this issue. Additionally, I explicate the arguments from others that conclude that emphasizing the legality of same-sex marriage either constituted a move towards unacceptable assimilation or was simply a misplaced priority. I agree with you and many others that any codification of rights through the participation of socially traditional (or nearly so) relationships is distasteful. Additionally, I have been much influenced by thinkers like Dean Spade who argue that marriage, an institution that is still separate and unequal, is coupled with increased economic insecurity, we need to prove how current treatment—socially, politically, and legally—of transgender people meet each criterion disproportionately, biased irrational thinking without any antecedent, transgressive of sexual norms, ostracism, and dog whistling that is happening to our community since the Obergefell case, wouldn’t rejecting the byproduct or minimal advantage help the most vulnerable facing the harm (and a non-ideal solution)?

JACKI: Though the book offers a detailed look at current conditions for a specific class of people, I read it offering a general theory of harm as well. You essentially prove how current treatment—socially, politically, and legally—of transgender people meet each criterion (backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling) and each sub-criterion (including being blamed unjustly and disproportionately, biased irrational thinking without any antecedent, transgressive of sexual norms, ostracism, and marginalization to name a few) [p. 138]. The argument you make is that we must look at all the three concepts—backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling—and their interdependence to fully understand the harm. Each has its own structure, but to look at only one or to isolate them

The first chapter of the book lays out the context of this debate. While I certainly nod to some views more than others, I don’t take an explicit stand on the issue. This is mostly due to the fact that the project of the book really doesn’t involve taking a stance on the political prioritization of same-sex marriage, but how the Obergefell ruling is related to the backlash that followed that SCOTUS ruling. The Obergefell ruling was the beginning of two different eras that are crucially relevant to LGBTQ+ lives, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the politicization of trans and gender non-binary identities.

JACKI: Fair enough, but after reading your book, it made me want to reject marriage. I was persuaded by you. And, as someone who teaches Applied Ethics, I am always struck by the strangeness that the very salience of people’s identities is up for debate or are considered as moral dilemmas. Deciding whether, or how much, to donate to those far away living in extreme poverty is a conversation about moral obligation. Discussing the legitimacy of people’s gender is not. Why does the salience or ontology of marginalized peoples’ identities get discussed as if the eradication of the identity itself is up for debate? I remember gay marriage as a topic in my first ever ethics course as an undergraduate. Even then I asked why we weren’t discussing the morality of marriage full stop. Why is it a reasonable question to consider only the marriage rights of a particular group of marginalized people already without social power? Your book does some real work to look at marriage as a whole. And it does well to lay out how transgender people are targeted specifically because of their vulnerability, so that was a connection that I made to my own experience. Still, given all of the backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling that is happening to our community since the Obergefell case, wouldn’t rejecting the byproduct or minimal advantage help the most vulnerable facing the harm (and a non-ideal solution)?
from each other would lead to error. Some people might be able to dismiss one or another abuse, but to see them all intersecting and overlapping shows undeniably the reality of the politicization of trans identity and the willful attack on the freedoms and equality of trans people.

LC: Yes, I think these are important connections. When I first started thinking of the book topic, I thought it would be an analysis of whether “backlash,” “scapegoating,” or “dog whistling” were the best descriptors. When I started thinking that backlash is a form of a directed response, I realized that all of these ideas helpfully describe the present political context. Directed backlash employs scapegoating, scapegoating employs dog-whistling, and this entire constellation of practices is for the benefit of those who have, or wish to gain, political power.

JACKI: Maybe loosely analogous to the interdependence of the harms is also the necessity of intersectional analysis for holistic analysis. You are careful in the book to highlight ways that trans people aren’t all the same, but that race and class and other differences matter in how these oppressions are experienced.

LC: Yes, I believed that an intersectional approach was crucial to this project. Even now, when intersectional analysis is in no way a new way of thinking, too often those who discuss LGBTQ+ rights or trans rights are either 1) talking about these rights for white, middle-class, able-bodied folks or 2) thought to be discussing the rights of white, middle-class, able-bodied folks. The first is especially likely to occur if the theorist is white, like myself. Creating a social context where trans and gender non-conforming people thrive must involve acknowledging and eventually eradicating racism, sexism, ableism, and other systemic systems of oppression. To work for the betterment of lives for trans and gender non-binary persons and not also be anti-racist is only to be concerned for white trans and gender non-binary persons and to invisibilize the communities of Black, Indigenous and People of Color and trivialize the harms that are daily experienced. As I explain, I believe that anti-trans animus is a tool of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, just as racism (and other systemically created harms) are tools for anti-trans animus.

JACKI: I typically teach logic and critical thinking, and I presented a paper at the last APA about how inductive reasoning is the difficult type. Symbolic logic is far easier because there is an answer. When students think inductive arguments are easy, or futile for that matter, I explain that they should take a closer look. It’s a matter of degree, and the reception of the argument tends to be a mixed bag. Sorry, that was a long introduction to say that your book makes one of strongest causal arguments I’ve read. You make it so difficult to object because of the examples, not just the sheer number of them but how poignant and relative they are to each corresponding concept. Your argument isn’t a causal claim simply because these things happened in time and space that are correlative but a succinct account of the descriptions of the status of transgender people in society coupled with the plethora of anti-trans bills. I tried to imagine how someone would object, where or how they would given your argument about the politicization that ensued after the decision in 2015. I imagine someone might say it’s a slippery slope fallacy or false cause, but then why did all of the anti-trans bills arise? Maybe someone could say that as visibility increases, so do the bills. Looking to the Trans Legislations Tracker, we can see that in 2015, mostly bills concerning restrooms arise. Then as gender-affirming care rises, so do the bills against the care. Things slow a bit during the pandemic, and then in 2021 the number of bills doubles (“144 bills were introduced in 37 states”). Then in 2022, we see the gender-affirming care bills (“174 bills, were introduced and 26 passed”). In 2023, we see bills blocking teachers, students, health care, and an attempt to delegitimize birth certificates. I think that the data is consistent with your causal claim even if there are other causes, surely Obergefell was a cause. Did you intend to make a causal claim argument?

LC: I believe that the Obergefell ruling and the anti-trans backlash are causally connected. Like you, I see these kinds of arguments, especially in the messy context of human society, really difficult to make. Can we imagine a world in which a court case made same-sex marriage legal, and we didn’t have a backlash against transgender and gender non-binary people? Absolutely! There is no necessary connection here. Still, it is more than just temporal proximity that links these two events. (No fallacy of post hoc ergo propter hoc?) What I believe is the crucial element that ties the two events is not that folks would “naturally” have negative feelings about trans folks based on the passing of Obergefell, but that the frustration and even fear that some felt about the new legality of same-sex marriage was exploited to produce political and economic gain.

JACKI: We started this discussion with you sharing your motivations for writing this book, notably that you couldn’t look away from everything you were seeing happening around us. So I wonder also what is next for you. Are you writing more about trans lives? I recall that you noted in the book that you don’t want to write about trans identity because you are interested in so many other topics and that your original attention was on collective responsibility. I relate to that since I find myself making similar decisions, wishing I could be an Arendt scholar but writing more about identity and living authentic lives. There’s also risks to writing about trans identity, especially for trans persons. The backlash you write about in wide-scale legal moves also happens to individuals in their private and professional lives. So maybe the place of trans identity in your current writing has shifted after this book. What are you working on?

LC: Maybe like many in our field, I have a notebook in which I keep a long list of essay topics and ideas that I’d love to spend time exploring. Currently, I am looking at how expression, as an expression of belief, of gender, of religion, is being legally conceptualized in recent court cases and what this means for those of us against whom some claim their expression of belief is inhibited by our expression of self. I am also working on an essay involving investigating different kinds of barriers to Maria Lugones’s idea of “World Traveling” and how these barriers are relevant to different contexts including those of our present environmental crisis and the challenges of creating a just university under the burden of neo-liberal ideology.
Lastly, I think it important to acknowledge that politicizing trans and gender non-binary identities politicizes our work on these issues. I have gotten hate mail as a result of this book and have been put on the "Professor Watch List" for the group Turning Point USA. (An action that basically proves the point of the book.) Having such lists, especially in this political climate, is very worrisome. This needs to be a time of increased solidarity between those of us in higher education and those who teach K-12. There are so many of us, including those that teach the truth about our country's racial history, that are under intense scrutiny, or worse.

ARTICLES

Better Word: Queer Time Travel, Intersexuality, and Autoethnography

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I imagine that when I was born, there were two of me. Twins sharing the same body, although you wouldn’t notice at first glance. At a second glance, doctors decided that they couldn’t leave us like this, so they attempted to separate us. My twin was supposed to become medical waste, but they couldn’t get it all out.

For thirteen years, I didn’t know that my twin was alive. For another sixteen years, I feared him as an evil brother; someone who was trying to break through my thin skin with his dark stubble, and ruin my charade. For another thirteen years, I tried to befriend him. Now, I don’t think of my sibling as another half anymore. I think of them as a time traveler.

Unlike me, they skip back and forth through time. If time were a map, then my path would resemble a straight road, with my body as a car, and my mind in the driver’s seat. My sibling doesn’t have a path, nor a road, nor a car. Their location on time’s map would appear as scattered dots and wiggly lines. I follow my road as if time were a straight line. My body appears to move from past to future at a steady pace. My sibling’s dots and wiggly lines would hardly have any connections between them. But in some places, their lines would cross my path and some of their dots would be visible from my road; porchlights in the distance, or fireflies in the shrubs. I can squint at them until they become a message from another time; not my future and past, exactly, but a future and past that might still tell me something about my place on time’s arrow.

When I was born, homosexuality was still partially criminalized, and would be for another fourteen years. Gay marriage was nothing more than a joke. I would become an adult before it approached the realm of the possible, and I would approach middle age before it became a reality. In my year of birth, even the most rudimentary legal recognition for trans persons was still a year away. The law that was drafted then still remains in force, even though it can no longer be applied consistently, since most of its sections have been found unconstitutional. The birth of intersex children was treated as a medical emergency. I was treated as a medical emergency, and moved from a regional hospital to the university hospital in Hamburg within days of my birth.

“Are you a lesbian girl or a gay boy?” I put effort into casually leaning against the wall of this Viennese dive bar, sipping a drink that’s far too sweet for my taste. My company for the evening, the other queer person at work, is charming his way out of the advances of a French couple. I’m talking to a younger man; he’d been waiting tables at the restaurant where we began our Friday night out. I enjoy the attention implied by his question; the question itself exasperates me.

I don’t remember anymore what I replied.

“Why can’t you just have fun?” A whole group of us is going to a lesbian bowling night in Jamaica Plain. Everyone is enjoying themselves, but my skin is crawling on the inside, so on the outside, I sulk. I don’t belong here, but I can’t tell anyone why, least of all myself.

I don’t think anymore that I just needed to build confidence.

“You get that she’s a lesbian, right?” A college friend is getting married. We’ve made it through the dinner conversation and the games, the point of one of which was to make it obvious to everyone who among the wedding guests was still, tragically, single. Now I’m sitting outside with one of the groom’s friends. He’d introduced himself with a snide comment about gays, my friends went back inside. But I’m still there, first lecturing him, then debating him, then just having a conversation with him. Another one of the singles, exposed earlier. When it’s time for my friends and me to leave, I hug him. Then I kiss him, shyly. He responds with a much more assertive kiss.

I don’t think anymore that I was just drunk and confused.

Like everyone else, I was relentlessly groomed into heterosexuality; in school, by the books I read, the music I listened to, and the television I watched. None of the conceptual tools on offer allowed me to understand my desires, nor my body, and how and why it responded to these desires. I remained a black box to myself. When the first homosexual characters appeared in the books I read, the music I listened to, and the television I watched, I latched onto them to regroom myself.

“Where’s this from?” I’m seven, maybe eight years old, asking my mother about the long scar across my belly. “You had a hernia when you were an infant,” she tells me. I don’t know yet that hernias don’t leave scars like that. It’ll be a long time before I learn that.

When I was a child, cutting was considered a kindness, and the cutting of intersex children was to be done as early as possible; in my case, before my first birthday. Any “adequate” surgical result, even if it left visible scars, damaged healthy tissue, destroyed reproductive capacity, or necessitated follow-up surgeries, was considered better than leaving things as they were.
I’m having a barrage of tests at my family’s general practitioner and the hospital that first treated me. I don’t remember how much of this was explained to me, but what sticks is the German word my mother uses when she finally tells me what this is about. It means freak, something that shouldn’t have been brought into existence; it means protecting myself against exposure at utterly unreasonable costs. This much I already understand. In response to this understanding, I cry violently. My mother doesn’t know how to stop it, other than by telling me to stop.

I cannot remember any direct expression of love, pride, or affection from my parents toward me when I was a child, nor can I remember that they comforted me when I was in distress. This may seem unusual, even cruel, but I now know that this made us an ordinary German family. The avoidance of difficult emotions has been our collective second nature for a long, long time.

I’m waiting for the puberty that’s been announced and explained to me. I’ve been told about sex in school, and I’ve seen pornography, but I notice that what I’ve been told and what I’ve seen doesn’t quite apply to me. I don’t know how to phrase that as a question someone would respond to with useful information. I can’t bleed, but when it’s time for girls to get their periods, I pretend; and my mother plays along with it for a few weeks until I drop the topic.

She tries to talk about it once, when another letter from the hospital arrives. Asks me whether I would want to get more surgery, so I can sleep with boys. Terrified by the suggestion, I can only say that I don’t want that, but I can’t say what I want. Not to my mother, not to any of the girls I’ve been interested in. The conversation is much shorter in my memory than it was in reality.

The treatment protocol for intersex children that informed medical practice in most of the “Western” world for half a century was premised on lies and secrecy. The cutting was to be done early, so that the child would never have to experience any doubts about its gender identity, or develop any abnormal desires.

We don’t know yet that my father is dying of lung cancer. After decades of heavy drinking, he finally tries to stop, goes to rehab. I’ve only known him as an alcoholic, and I’ve always either feared or despised him. We visit him in the rehab facility; it’s a grey, late winter Sunday. On the desk in his drab room, I spot a piece of cardboard. It’s an exercise from his therapy sessions: “List the happiest moments of your life,” and on his list he wrote: “the birth of my daughter.” I wonder whether one of the reasons that my father needed to drink so much was that I wasn’t quite his daughter, and never would be.

Self-loathing is a common response to trauma.

“You should cry,” my mother says. It’s been days since my father died and I still just sit there, dry, barren, and silent. I can’t cry at the appropriate times and I can’t bleed; but I can make myself bleed. Cut up my arms, pour hot wax on the wounds: to impress a girl, and scare her boyfriend.

We are twelve years old, maybe thirteen; on the brink of adolescence, but the birthday parties still happen on Saturday afternoons. We have one glass of champagne each, we watch Fried Green Tomatoes: The most romantic thing you can do for another woman is to slay the bad men in her life; but that still doesn’t mean that you will get to be with her the way you want to.

Regrooming yourself into homosexuality can be just as confusing and painful as being groomed into heterosexuality.

Find a part to play. Pick a role and a costume to go with it: cloak and armor. A strange armor it is, made of defiance and ignorance. I get to perform my strangeness, all obscure and shot through with suffering that seems to reach to the core of the earth. But this is all surface; this is a half-man’s performance. It’s infuriating and it’s comfortable: I never need to get naked.

Falling in love, but unable to see myself being loved in return, never noticing how she looks at me. Never venturing near the library stacks where they keep the books about the freaks. It dawns on me that I’ve picked an imagined community. I can’t participate in: What’s underneath my armor remains. This square face, these large hands, these broad shoulders, and this flat chest; all visible in spite of how I disguise myself. Make up, lip gloss, nice hair, a nice skirt; all useless against the reflection in the mirror.

Self-compassion is commonly regarded as a crucial step in coming to terms with trauma. Proper self-compassion is impossible when you hate yourself so much that you cannot even bear to look at yourself.

“This is the ladies’ room.” A cleaner at work, a drunk woman in a bar. They’re not aggressive, they’re just asserting their space, doing their job. “I know,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster, and when they hear my voice they realize their mistake, but now I’m standing in front of myself exposed, and I wonder: “Did they actually make a mistake?”

“Mommy, is that a boy or a girl?” A small child in the seat in front of me on the train, stares at me, pokes the mother, stares at me. The mother shushes the child, makes a point of not looking at me. My shield falls to the ground with a loud “clang!” I quietly pick it up, embarrassed by the commotion, wishing I had the courage and the patience to explain to the child that some people are both.

Understanding that gender is performative does not help as long as the flawed performance is still a failure, and not a message. Performance cannot outrun the silence inscribed on the body; and the domesticated and trimmed body is not a parody, but a sigil of submission. When most have the privilege to never think about their gender, never question the spoken and unspoken rules, never feel out of place, there is little difference between parody and submission.

“If I didn’t have a boyfriend, I would kiss you now.” She didn’t kiss me, and I didn’t dare, but I noticed how she looked at me. And there will be a first kiss, seven years
later. It’s the last summer before I leave the country, and we won’t be lovers, but we still love each other.

I need to settle down in another language before I can put a name to what I see in the mirror. Learn that putting a name to it would not be the end of things, but their beginning. “What’s your stake in writing about this?” My friend in Boston as we’re about to get on the 47 bus; my friend in Vienna as we’re getting ready for our farewell party. My interests are academic now, I’ve read the books about the freaks, so I don’t need to answer that question.

“There is no straight line through trauma.”1 You might have to draw wide circles around the source of the pain for years, and you might have to put it all into another language in order to soften the blow of the words.

The learning is terrifying. A soft fire on my lips, crawls from the neck down my spine, icy cold. On my arms, a slow knife across the skin; it leaves a mark, but this time the skin doesn’t break. Across my chest, drawing a line downwards, downwards; and there you may go, and how quickly I’ve dropped my armor, but you mustn’t speak about what you find.

“Why do you never talk about it?” Because as long as we don’t speak about it, I can pretend that you haven’t seen anything, felt anything. That by your touch, I could still change into something pure and desirable; but if we called things by their proper, foreign names that possibility would disappear forever. Because I wouldn’t know what to make of it if your desire were because of this body and not in spite of it. Because that means I’d never get my armor back.

Shame is a curious and overwhelming force. And sometimes, love and care are utterly powerless against it.14

“I don’t open this door with women anymore.” A fast-growing feeling suddenly exits my body; a tall, slender tree with shallow roots, felled by the storm, leaving a muddy wound in the grey clay. I try much too hard and too early to patch it with friendship. I wanted to object: “But I’m not a woman.” This wouldn’t have changed a thing about her feelings, or how she expresses them. But it might have changed a thing or two about how I regard myself.

“You were just you.” I couldn’t believe them any more than I believed myself. I couldn’t believe them when they told me they found me beautiful. So I assumed that they were just as confused as I was, and made up reasons to be something other than what I was. I couldn’t believe that the pronouns, clothes, and haircuts I’d been trying on weren’t just another daydream.

If you have not been given opportunities to experience external affirmation, you will eventually withhold it from yourself. It is a pre-emptive strike against the mere possibility that others might not like or understand you, and against the probability that love, once granted, will end, or change. From the outside, this looks like a set of entirely irrational fears. From the inside, it is self-denial as a necessary element of survival.15

I imagine that my sibling’s ability to skip back and forth in time allowed them to learn from the past while not having to live it. They always had access to a better future. They always saw what it could be like. From my place, in the car, on the road along time’s arrow, there are three fundamental responses to their freedom: jealousy, grief, or relief. Two of these end with death, one ends with life.

I will never be as free as the version of me that wasn’t mutilated as an infant, didn’t grow up in a dysfunctional family, wasn’t smothered with shame and secrecy, and never allowed themselves to look for community as an adult.

I will never have as much agency as someone reaching adolescence and adulthood with access to information and connections to others like them, thanks to changing mores and communication technology. But I still have a choice: I could begrudge their agency and freedom, further limiting my own. Or I could be happy for them.

NOTES

1. “Intersexuality” and “intersex” are considered outdated as medical terms. What they refer to is usually described as “disorders” or—without the gratuitous pathologization—“differences of development” (DD) today. During my own childhood and adolescence, the even more outdated term “hermaphroditism” was still de rigueur, and I use “intersexuality” with purpose here, because it was the first term I encountered that helped me move away from the stigma of being a “hermaphrodite.” See Joris A. Gregor, Constructing Intersex: Intersgeschlechtlichkeit als soziale Kategorie, transcript 2015.


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**Political Economy of Passing: A Trans Genre Meditation on Queerness**

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**I. FURTIVITY**

2012, eight years before millions of protestors rise in anti-racist rebellion to proclaim *Black Trans Lives (also) Matter*, CeCe McDonald—a Black trans woman is sentenced to three and a half years in prison. McDonald, just twenty-three at the time, pleads guilty to manslaughter for defending her own life against a white supremacist who, statistics project, would have killed her if given the chance. Writing from a men’s prison, where she would ultimately serve nineteen months, McDonald represents the asymmetry of law. Too often weaponized judiciary statutes categorize and contain queer life, poor life, Black and Brown life. McDonald fits all three.

Like CeCe, transgender and gender-nonconforming people are often caught within a web of carceral logics. Trans people experience significantly “high rates of poverty, homelessness, and discrimination in schools and the workplace,” which, in turn, leads to “disproportionate contacts with the justice system, leading to higher levels of incarceration.” A 2018 report by The National Center for Trans Equality documents "A history of bias, abuse, and profiling towards LGBTQ people by law enforcement," and notes that 47 percent of Black transgender people report having been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

A year following CeCe’s January 2014 release, I attend Haymarket Books’ annual Socialism Conference, a gathering of authors and organizers, artists, and academics who will shape my thinking for years to come. Standing in a hotel conference room located inside the downtown Chicago Loop, I fidget with a notebook that will remain empty when I walk out of the conference room doors. Inside, the room is cramped; it is humid, and at its front, CeCe McDonald recounts the moments that lead to her incarceration. At her story’s crescendo, the room surges with emotion: "As I got closer," she tells us, "I start to hear all types of epithets, you know faggots, chicks-with-dicks. You dress like that because you want to rape men, trick men." Her attackers’ virulent transmisogyny is laced with anti-Blackness. "African baby," she is told, "go back to Africa" just moments before her attackers slice into her face with broken glass. The conference hall is standing room only; we lean shoulder against shoulder, separated only by the thin cotton of T-shirts, listening as CeCe speaks. We are silent; we know what comes next.

Fumbling for a pair of scissors in her handbag, CeCe will stab her attacker resulting in his death, and though she is acting in self-defense, CeCe will be handcuffed, arraigned, and ultimately found guilty; "What is considered a crime and who is considered a criminal" is determined always by social constructions. CeCe is attacked and incarcerated because CeCe can be seen; she can be recognized, and because her corporeality evades binary categorization, she is reconstituted as deviant, as criminal.

Years later, when I read Imani Perry for the first time, I think of CeCe and her refusal to die. This refusal, in itself, is a radical undertaking as Perry reminds readers of the "juridical foundations of modern patriarchy," the "coercive power of legal words," and the social identity constructions that legalese entreats. "Nonpersons" Perry writes, "those who lie outside the citizenship and the gender binary had [and continue to have] distinct rules applied to them, which are often mechanisms for violent domination." This domination might be legislative; it might be carceral, or it might be intimate and extralegal. For many, for me, it is in this context that passing earns its appeal.

To pass is the opposite of failure. It is also to move or to proceed—as in CeCe passed through the prison walls and back into the world. Passing can refer to the transfer, control, or custodianship of property—as in CeCe was passed from the police to the courts, to corrections. To pass is to “go uncensured, unchallenged, seemingly unnoticed”—as in, there is a direct correlation between the violence trans people experience and the degree to which they can pass—a constant furtivity. In *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Julia Serano explains, “the problem is that words like ‘pass’ or ‘passing’ are active verbs. So when we say that a transsexual [sic] is passing it gives the false impression that they are the only active participant in this scenario.” However, from moment to moment trans people are interpellated through relationality; we are read as real or unreal, as belonging or unbelonging. Through a mix of signs and significations that preceede our arrival, our queer bodies animate, arouse, and quicken the materiality of the street corner, the bar, the courtroom, the classroom. The decision to pass is never a simple one. While at its core passing remains an assimilationist practice, at times in my life, it has also been necessary for survival.

**CLOSETS ARE DANGEROUS PLACES**

Pressed against the slatted bifold doors, a person’s vision becomes distorted; slices of light narrow the field of expectations. An older millennial,
my queer trans experience
taut between two anchors.
On one end, a generation
who felt furtivity was a given;
on the other, a generation
who packed gender
with c-4 demolition blocks,
and set the world on fire.

II. DISCIPLINE
The authority of the State in moderating and disciplining
gender remains unparalleled. On the one hand, the State
coerces trans bodies into passing as their cisgender
correlative. On the other, the State erects classed and
racialized legislative barriers that prevent trans people
from access to physical and social transition. Violence is
central to this project. As a young radical, I must have read
Lenin's State and Revolution at least a dozen times—the
pages of my copy crowded with notes and yellowed with
coffee stains. Though I have since moved away from some
of the text’s argument, this still rings true: In its unadorned
essence, the state is violence; it “is an organ of class rule…;
it is a creation of ‘order’ that legalizes and perpetuates
oppression.” With its prisons and its “special bodies of
armed men,” state power terrorizes; state power coerces;
state power compels. To compel requires categorization;
it requires the sorting and evaluation of bodies, so that
some bodies become nobody, and other bodies become
somebody. The recent wave of anti-trans legislation is
intimately concerned with who those nobodies are, how
those nobodies move; how those nobodies labor, and
where and how those nobodies receive care. And when
legal coercion becomes insufficient, vigilantism takes its
place.

On March 12, 2023, I wake up to horrifying images of white
supremacists and neo-Nazis outside a drag story hour event
in Akron, Ohio. Hundreds of Proud Boys, Patriot Front, and
"White Lives Matter" protestors descend on Wadsworth
Memorial Park to disrupt a charity event for survivors of
the mass shooting at Club Q, an LGBTQ bar in Colorado
Springs where five people were murdered and twenty-five
were injured in November of last year. Cellphone footage
of the drag charity event captures right-wing protestors
waving swastika flags, chanting "pedophiles get the rope,"
and "Weimar conditions, Weimar solutions"—a reference
to Nazi ascendency over the Weimar reform period in
Germany. A friend who attends a counter-protest event
reaches out through a Discord channel and asks, What can
anti-fascist organizing look like in a period of escalating
violence? This is a fitting question. The far-right is more
dangerously emboldened than at any other period in my
lifetime; nevertheless, extralegal violence has always
been central to the containment and castigation of black
bodies, brown bodies, queer bodies, nobodies. Like the
masked protestors in Akron, when CeCe’s attacker lunged
at her eleven years ago, he was also decorated in Nazi
iconography—a four-inch swastika tattooed across his
chest.

Reflecting on these scenes, I am reminded that extralegal
violence has been foundational to American settler
colonialism—that pioneer vigilantes sought to impose order
on newly settled frontier lands; that post-civil war vigilantes
sought to reestablish de facto property rights over newly
emancipated slaves, and that animated by anxieties over
neoliberal decline, twenty-first-century vigilantes seek to
rehabilitate the supremacy of the white and white adjacent
American family. In “The History of Vigilantism in America,”
Richard Maxwell Brown notes that vigilantes are concerned
with policing both geographic and behavioral boundaries,
often using extralegal violence to do so. Queer bodies
know this all too well. According to the Williams Institute
at the UCLA School of Law, "LGBT people are nearly four
times more likely . . . to experience violent victimization,
including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple
assault." Queer people are also more likely to experience
both intimate violence and stranger violence. As these
statistics make clear when CeCe is attacked, it is because
her Blackness and her queerness transgress the boundaries
of post-colonial acceptability, or as CeCe puts it, “I guess
[my] presence kind of offended them.”

Archives of Discipline
No one can interpellate like the state.
No other institution or entity
can manufacture identity,
can codify one’s
seemingly immutable being;
birth certificates,
marriage licenses,
tax returns,
al make legible
the corporeal misdemeanors
of those who don’t belong
or who sometimes belong.

III. INTIMATE DISCIPLINE
The euphemism intimate violence lends a tenderness
to the brutality of gender discipline that occurs between
those known to one another. And yet, like vigilantism, it
seeks to reimpose boundaries around acceptable gender-
 Based on the extracted text, here are a few key points:

1. **Discipline and State Authority**: The state plays a central role in disciplining gender, with both coercive and classed legislative barriers. Violence is central to state authority, as seen in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*.

2. **Horrifying Events**: On March 12, 2023, an event in Akron, Ohio, involving white supremacists and neo-Nazis, highlights the resurgence of extralegal violence.

3. **Extralegal Violence and Historical Context**: Vigilantism, a form of extralegal violence, has a long historical precedent, from post-civil war vigilantes to twenty-first-century counterparts.

4. **LGBTQ+ Victimization**: LGBT people are disproportionately at risk for violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated assault.

5. **Queer Identity and Acceptability**: Queer people, especially those who are Black and queer, face heightened risks of violence and discrimination.

6. **Archives of Discipline**: The state has the unique ability to interpellate individuals, creating and codifying identity through legal means such as birth certificates and marriage licenses.

7. **Intimate Violence**: Intimate violence, a euphemism for gender-related violence, is integral to the discipline of gender, affecting those who know each other personally.

These points illustrate the complex and pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the role of the state in perpetuating and disciplining this violence.
gender transition. Same-sex marriage is illegal in forty-nine states, and Obergefell v. Hodges will not appear before the Supreme Court for another nine years. *Time* magazine’s “Transgender Tipping Point” is almost a decade in the future, and it is only six years since Mathew Shepard was tied to a barbed wire fence, beaten, and left to die in the cool Wyoming air.

The night that Ricky dies, he wears a halter top and miniskirt; local papers describe his assailant bashing his head against the steering wheel before throwing his body from the car. Witnesses tell of a dark green Honda pulling into Christ Temple Church before returning to the scene, where gunshots flash into the dawn. It is 2004 and still possible to use fear of gay and trans people as a legal defense against murder in all fifty states. Ricky’s assailant, who has a documented “hatred for gay people” and who is later celebrated as “a faggot killer,” is ultimately set free. In life, I didn’t know Ricky well. We shared a single story still ties me in knots. Bearing witness to the speed at which a queer life, a Black queer life, could be undone alters my worldview, sending me to search for new kinds of justice.

Aren Z. Aizura writes, trans citizenship requires “fading into the population… but also the imperative to be ‘proper’ in the eyes of the state: to reproduce, to find proper employment, to reorient one’s different body into the flow of nationalized aspirations.” Similarly, comparing trans bodies to disabled bodies, Jasbir Puar writes, “Neoliberal mandates regarding productive, capacitated bodies entrap the trans body to recreate an abled body not only in terms of gender and sexuality but also in terms of economic productivity and economic development of national economy.” This kind of assimilation asks the trans body to bend into its cisgender correlate in exchange for a limited and precarious promise of safety—a safety Ricky was ultimately denied. For seventeen years I have pushed syringes full of testosterone into my thighs, the skin welting beneath. In 2010, I had my breasts removed during a summer spent drinking whiskey sodas from plastic straws to dull the pain. Six months ago, as the governor of Texas signed the bill into law, I witnessed the grotesque insisting, “I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face and redefine a life worth living.” In both invocations, monstering refuses authorization through medical violence and medical surveillance; however, to resist the limitations afforded through neoliberal inclusion requires more than an aesthetic noncompliance. In other words, neither passing nor the refusal to pass offer a sufficient means of resisting the constellations of violence that discipline both Ricky and CeCe as they attempt to move through public space. In “Passing as Privileged” Daniel Silvermint offers, “The moral status of passing as privileged is complex… since passing allows victims to escape certain oppressive burdens.” Likewise, Jasbir Puar establishes the limitations of aesthetic refusal offering that resistance to passing often takes the form of “piecing,” which in effect establishes an alternative and exaggerated trans aesthetic, one that might be considered equally commodified and neoliberalized. Importantly, Puar reminds readers that “The transnormative body of futurity that reflects neoliberal celebrations of flexibility and piecing remains an elusive reality for many.” Taken as a whole, these observations highlight the complexities that accompany the construction of the trans self, which further complicates the act of coming out.

Popular representation of the transgender narrative often centers on the moment of self-disclosure, but this reductive trope rests on the notion that there is a before and now an after. In a linguistic formulation that concedes ground to biological essentialists, trans subjects are “born into the wrong body” and as a corrective, they transition in an act that supplants the cisgender self with the transgender self. The self is reborn or made anew, severing the “dead-named” former self from its present embodiment. And yet, this simplification erases the dialectical unfolding of being. There is no before just as there is no after. The self composes in present perfect: I have not come out, but I have been coming out. I have not transitioned, but I have been transitioning. Passing is not passive. The choice to move against it must continually be renewed. In transitioning, I learn to speak in a language that was kept from me at birth, to conjugate new forms of myself, and to code as male. The right constellation of signs enables me to move about undetected, and yet this constellation shines too dimly to reveal my trans multiplicity.
2019, fifteen years after Ricky loses his life and eight years after CeCe saves her own, I come out (again)—this time in the form of an open letter. I choose this form because written words approximate a permanence that verbal disclosure cannot. The letter, addressed to my former high school students, is posted to a social media account on the tenth annual Trans Day of Visibility. “It is my wish,” I confess, “that you see me and accept me not in spite of my transgender identity but also because of it. At the same time, I challenge myself to more fully see you. It is only through this mutual acknowledgment and affirmation that any hope for a better world is possible.” I sign off, “Your teacher, your friend,” and hold my breath for what may come. In the days that follow, I receive hundreds of public messages in support and thanks. However, despite this encouragement, fear takes hold. There is a long history of queer erasure from the classroom and though I no longer work in a K-12 setting, the city, where I taught twelfth-grade English for just shy of a decade and where I now teach community college, has long been my home.

A few days after my public disclosure, I find myself stretched over a weight bench in a big box gym not far from the high school where I used to work. Brightly colored fans pump overhead and the smell of sweat mingles with the air. I rack the bar loading 45 lb. plates on either end and lie across the bench squinting up at the fluorescent lights. I arch my back, tighten my grip, and lift off. Breathing in, I lower the bar to my chest. Breathing out, I press it into the air. When the set is complete, I re-rack the bar overhead, and, in my periphery, I feel the presence of a body that is not my own. From where I lie two former students tower over me crowding out the lights overhead. In comparison, my small stature is clownish. Breath catches in my throat. This is it, I think, the anticipated moment of judgment. I steel myself for the invasive questions that may follow. No doubt, the boys have seen the post as hundreds of their classmates shared comments in response. After a beat, a hand reaches for mine. I grasp it and pivot to a seated position. “Can we work out with you?” they ask, offering knuckles to bump.

On either side of me, benches remain unoccupied, but I nod in agreement and the three of us enter into a kind of masculinized communion. Often, boys love quietly, still, the meaning is felt. We talk about form and athleticism and where we feel the tension in our bodies—getting close but never invoking my recent disclosure. The whirl of the motorized fans churns overhead, and when Ty places his hand between my shoulder blades to instruct my posture, the touch of his palm tells me that nothing of consequence has changed. In fact, my disclosure has opened the door for a kind of sacramental affection. In Cruising Utopia, Jose Estaban Munoz writes, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” This moment, in this gym, with these boys exceeds warm illumination, and for this instant, we are better versions of ourselves. Queerness is a relationality; it is a refusal of the atomized neoliberal constructions that ask us to distrust those not immediately like ourselves. To move queerly is to unbutton capitalism’s expectations, which in itself, is a revolutionary gesture.

V. FELLOWSHIP AND RESISTANCE

While wistful imaginings of queer futurity may unbutton capitalism’s expectations, these imaginings are neither enough to unravel capitalism itself nor enough to undo its prevailing harms; consequently, we must learn to move from gesture to embodiment. The stakes are enormous. Our moment is one of accumulated trauma. Even in the American context, the very center of post-colonial imperialism and Western hegemony, generalized want runs deep: food insecurity, homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health crises abound. All of these crises have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting years of economic instability. Yet even before the pandemic, decades of neoliberal disinvestment from public goods has placed an untenable strain on the family, and this reality combined with aging workforce demographics is forcing an impasse. Neoliberal logics, having already cut to the bone, cannot offer a solution through restructuring and privatization. At the same time, prevailing wisdom is yet to accept that sustaining working families will require greater financial investment by the state. It is at this impasse that the regimenting of gender becomes all the more necessary based on the logics of capital and its increased need for both the productive and reproductive laboring of racialized and gendered bodies.

This crisis of productive and social reproductive capacity requires that capitalist logics attempt to assert greater control over our bodies generally, and this has resulted in a reissuing or tightening of definitions around what kinds of bodies fit into what kinds of categories. Renewed attacks on access to reproductive health care have attempted to redefine the pregnant body. This is evidenced by the 2022 explosion of state restrictions to abortion access, which ultimately preceded the direct overturning of Roe. Similarly, an attempt to redefine the child’s body is underway. Efforts to shift its legal categorization from eighteen to twenty-one to twenty-five seek to prevent trans youth from accessing gender-affirming care. Historically, Black and Brown children have experienced this redefinition in relation to sentencing laws, as youth of color are often sentenced using adult criteria. In fact, according to the Campaign for Youth Justice, “In 2014, Black youth were 14% of the youth population nationally, but 52.5% of the youth transferred to adult court by juvenile court judges.” That the present moment insists on a renewal of boundaries to contain citizen bodies, gendered bodies, athletic bodies, becomes a process by which each of our bodies risks classification as a criminal body. In this context, what methods to reclaim the validity of our skin, our hair, our sex remain?

Listening to the words of Angela Davis, I am reminded that the present political reaction in response to transgender-affirming care is not only compelled by backlash to a human rights framework but is also concerned with creating and sustaining the conditions for criminality. As such, our resistance to the backlash must operate in a register both in and beyond that of liberal human rights. Again, trans access to social and physical transitions must not only be protected but also expanded. At the same time if we are to understand the origins of trans oppression as situated within a broader matrix of exploitative logics, then we must widen our emancipatory visions. When Davis observes
that “the trans community is showing us the way” and “if it is possible to challenge the gender binary, then we can certainly, effectively, resist prisons and jails, and police” she seemingly anticipates the profound political reaction to both the George Floyd uprisings and the social and cultural advances made by queer and trans people over the past several decades. Indeed, if our opponents recognize this queer and abolitionist kinship, so must we.

I have come to understand that abolitionist praxis begins in the material now, seeking to undo present harms while also reserving space for the imaginative work of conjuring Black, Brown, poor, and queer futures. Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us that criminality is manufactured and that the presence “of vital systems of support” renders criminality obsolete. Without criminality the process of categorization loses its coercive power, allowing new forms of the self to fall within our reach. Gilmore notes that “abolitionists ask how we resolve inequalities and get people the resources they need.” Echoing Gilmore’s call for systems of vital support, transgender Marxist Jules Joanne Gleeson insists that “Neither a legalistic nor reform-minded approach can achieve full trans liberation” because “the inherent suffering faced by trans women [and trans people generally] does not find its origins in civic criminalization or social ‘illegibility’ alone.” Gleeson warns that although trans “networks of mutual support and solidarity” often provide life-saving care work, these networks “reach their [emancipatory] limit” in that they usually “serve to supplant the work done by the heterosexual family, not replace it.” And while care work cannot be replaced altogether, it can be supported through state-funded welfare programs and the support for public goods. Taking Gilmore and Gleeson’s lead, I want to assert that resistance to the legislative, carceral, intimate, and extralegal violations that queer and trans people experience requires a commitment to a wider liberatory trans praxis—one that not only invokes queer liberation, but also centers progressive tax reform, state-funded health care, childcare, and eldercare. These vital systems of support necessarily precede the bodily sovereignty of all people, trans and cis-embodied people alike. But wresting these resources from the state, and ultimately from the wealthy class, requires a political power we do not yet hold. Building this power necessitates that we embrace a brave new solidarity. Could it be that Ricky’s invocation of call and response; CeCe’s refusal of victimization; two teenage boys’ gestures of beauty suggest that in places, we are already on the way?

Let’s hope Together; The alternative, is ugly.

My brother is six or seven, younger maybe. Dark hair hangs evenly across his face; bangs cut square over beady eyes—narrow and comical. We are in the driveway spinning in circles. He has pressed himself into the tulle-lined ballerina costume my mother purchased for a dance recital decades before doctors helped me change my sex and I became male. The dress is teal blue. It is the blue of artificial flavoring, soft drinks, cotton candy, the shade of the sky in a child’s drawing. We are spinning, spinning, spinning. Our arms stretch overhead and we laugh at the sky. Silver sequins are sewn into the breast of the garment; they glitter in the afternoon light and illuminate my brother’s smile. How sure we are of ourselves; how noble we are in our play, but nobility lacks permanence and childhood gives way.

When the garage door groans open, a neighbor, a teenage boy, steps out into the sunlight and calls my brother faggot, we each feel a shame neither of us knew existed.

But this shame can be resisted. Indeed, discriminatory legislation can be resisted; both state violence and intimate violence can be resisted; prisons, jails, and police can be resisted. If we come to view our queer bodies through a political economic lens instead of a human rights grievance, we become better positioned to respond to the backlash and to reach for new kinds of justice.

NOTES


7. Lenin, State and Revolution, 45.

8. Lenin, State and Revolution, 45.

9. Lenin, State and Revolution, 45.


15. We Are Many Media, 06:58-07:01.


18. Frampton, “Homophobia Possible Motive in Alleged Murder.”
Loving Trans into Possible: t4t As Trans poi

Cavár

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

ENCOUNTER

September, 2020. A new friend and I sit on opposite edges of a park bench in Davis, California. We both face forward as we speak to each other, squatting into smoky air. We try not to cross breaths. A week prior, I had posted to several dating apps that I was searching for friends in the area. For several hours, despite the smoke, we speak a small space of public intimacy.

Our space is once, briefly, punctured: a young man laughs, asks “which is which?” (I reply: “take your pick!”), and for several minutes pontificates (it seems) on the coming Rapture and assured existence of aliens, before bidding us an amiable goodbye.

Though we laugh as he wanders off, we’re startled. I am aware of who we appear to be: queers on a date, though neither of us used this language to describe our encounter. Yet, here we are, on a trajectory without a simple name, one animated and undergirded by the place our genders touch. When Sam and I finally rise and express our shared longing to hug goodbye, we each carry with us something of the other. I carry the seed of these words.

We took a risk in meeting. Our encounter was public and it was intimate; we were strangers to each other whose shared trans—a thing held between our bodyminds and masked mouths—necessarily deestranged us. We spoke as loudly and unreservedly about our shared trans as picnicking students nearby did about the perils of Zoom. We talked about sex. Genitals. Surgeries. Even our parents. In our speech and in our silences, too, we engaged in a shared act of witnessing—from the moment Sam and I swiped right on each other (her bio: “trans; neuroqueer,” mine: “genderless; disability justice and Mad studies”) to the awkward, masked, two-way scavenger hunt we performed—all in the name of “t4t,” an erotic configuration that emerged with and through the “trans technology” of craigslist.

In Future Fatigue: Trans Intimacies and Trans Presents (or How to Survive the Interregnum) Hil Malatino aims “to develop relational ways of witnessing and perceiving trans and gender-variant bodies regardless of their relation to, positioning within, or investment in medicalized teleologies of transition.” That is, trans subjectivity is divorced from an imagined state of individualized, exceptional, and pathological gender crisis. Following Crawford’s (2008) and Sullivan’s (2006) trans engagements with Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming, Malatino illustrates the possibility of inherently conflictual, temporally tousled, and queerly heterogeneous trans communities. Such communities, Malatino argues, provide a means of attending to trans difference without recourse to transnormative logics of “post-”transition ease. Malatino resists “trans folk” a static, “abstract and overcoded monolith,” one whose racial, geographic, class, and other particularities are routinely obscured, in favor of a “t4t praxis of love.” Like Lorde’s (1984) conception of the erotic as a shared sensual project, one of feeling with- and across recognized difference that subsumes and destabilizes typical understandings of “solidarity,” Malatino’s t4t praxis also refuses a “frictionless and easeful understanding of trans relationality” in favor of “small [and, implicitly, plural in form and genre] acts of love.” When Malatino and Lorde speak of love, they speak of movement(s), intimacies beyond dyadic engagement, beyond platonic/romantic binaries, and toward community with similarly different others. It catches and catches-on.

During those minutes in the park, we bore shared witness, shared fear, through a dozen tiny looks and gestures. I sensed with her the acute, heightened fear not only of verbal harassment but of transmisogynistic physical violence. I was conscious that she likely would not have been “clocked” at all in the absence of my own ambiguous presentation, but that we were nonetheless in danger when placed side by side. We were not discrete trans individuals engaging, but instead emerging, trans, from a relationality...
We became visibly-trans in each event; relation, rather than content alone: our bodyminds do not independently bring “trans” to the proverbial table, but manifest in concert. We became visibly-trans in each other’s presence. We co-emerged as trans in our t4t intra-action, our little two-person (en)counter slipping evermore toward its -public.

New materialist theorists like Rosi Braidotti have argued for an understanding of subjectivity that refuses the discrete, individual bodymind in favor of “assemblages that flow across and displace . . . binaries.” This framing illuminates contemporary and historical fears of queer, and particularly trans, social contagion discourse, whose gatekeeping, censorious impacts, and possibilities for reclamation I will address later in this article. If “distinct entities do not precede [their] relations, but rather emerge through their intra-action,” we might understand both a given gendered status, and/as one’s status as a trans person, is not an inevitable embodiable truth but the result of nature, through continued acts of witnessing, “making itself known.” To witness, an infinitive. A verb is process to be shared-in, and conjugation necessitates more-than-one, of recognizing multiple perspectives, knowledges, and experiences. Witnessing, as Lugones notes, is part and parcel of the project of “world*-traveling.” Here, we share intimacies not by spectating on others’ realities, but by entering them: the lines between loving, seeing, and becoming(-like) fuzz and blur.

I collect these messy movements under the term pollination, a concept I trace both to grassroots organizing and tie with developments in New Materialisms, neuro queer epistemologies and cri pistemologies, and transfeminisms. I borrow the term itself from Bay Area organization The Pollinators, whose core mission is inter-community social and skill-exchange, “straddl[ing]” divides between queer community and mainstream culture. This is not an argument for the ecological process of pollination as inherently trans. Rather, I am grounding my analysis in the definition provided in “The Pollinator’s Toolbox” by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine and Andrea Maybelline Danger:

1. [A]ny insect or animal that deposits pollen gathered from the stamen of a plant to the pistil (often of another plant), fertilizing the flower in the process; 2. any person, of the queer variety, who travels from place to place depositing information gathered from previous locales, fertilizing ideas as it goes. A pollinator is not only a world-maker but a coalition-realizer; I refer here to Edelman’s understanding of coalitions as dynamically producing (in this case, trans) political projects through collective labor, rather than simply facilitating care between pre-existing subjects. So too is a pollinator a skilled user of love as relational-innovation—love as a verb that makes trans happen. A pollinator seeds temporally and cross-spatially, bringing information to the unlikeliest (the Pollinators found themselves “enter[ing] the mainstream to share [queer and trans] survival skills”) and untimeliest (between the queer and the normative, the past and the possible, they are perpetually precarious “straddlers” of spacetime). Thus, the project of pollination does not only bring together like-minded others, familiar-strangers, but makes subjects in relation. Such a reconceptualization of queer and trans relationalities, routinely cast as unmanageable vectors of contagion, pollution, and even death, not only pays homage to the innovation of the Pollinators’ collective, but it describes a critical mode of t4t praxis. It acknowledges trans as a “crip feeling,” an awakener of anxieties around threats to the normative bodymind—and Otherwise possibilities. It is in these quiet, t4t pockets—these quiet, shared opacities through which we trans—that we love our(shared)selves into possible.

Trans catches. We carry it, locating the best grounds for “transplant[ation].” Below, I follow and pair Barad’s concept of intra-action with t4t, at first an initialism borrowed from the since-shuttered Personals section of craigslist, a long-derided “queer counterpart” bathed in familiar rhetorics of risk, illegality, and dis(f)ease. While directed at least somewhat specifically at Personals (at the notion of finding a sexual partner anonymously, and online), the language of contagion has commenced its own sinister circulation among anti-trans reactionaries, many of whom explicitly take up the tired “social-contagion” models of anorexia, suicide, and self-injury of moral panics past. In the wake of growing medical, legal, and interpersonal attacks on trans life, I argue, the accusation of “contagion” is particularly open to retheorization. That is, I refuse to disavow the sheer catchiness of t out of a vain (in both senses of the word) bid for respectability. I have shared t’s irresistible taste with many a lover. I anticipate many more. Trans is a thing we make together; we make each other / trans. No one is immune.

THE AD

haha being nonbinary isnt a contagious disease silly haha anyway come closer

– Irvu, 2020 [emphasis in original]

Originating on craigslist in the early 2000s, the initialism t4t originally signified a trans person explicitly, and usually anonymously, looking for a trans sexual partner. While t4t relationships and personal ads, yet-unnamed as such, long predate the Internet, the arrival of the online ad and widening circulation of trans terminology quickly conferred a visible link between them. Today’s ad-induced panics resemble the well-worn tropes of social and physiological contagion that rendered HIV-positive people as deadly threats to the individual and national body, targeting queer(ed), racialized, poor, and disabled bodyminds as stigmatized Others to be barred from social life. This stigma, Lingel notes in An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist, is cyclical: “with quirky, kinky, or queer desires getting significant attention, reinforcing craigslist’s reputation as a hub for sensational ads and deviant people.” It has been recycled and amplified with the emergence of SESTA/FOSTA and crackdowns on sex workers by PayPal and Venmo. Talk of contamination, linked to the specter of dangerous sexuality in a new
and hard-to-govern virtual space, coalesced around “t”-related posts. More than individually soliciting sex, these posts indicated larger sexual counterpublics, whose queerness included not only LGBTQ+ people but others queerly rendered beneath a white supremacist, anti-sex worker, cishepateronormative regime. Emergent and risky cyberspaces, to paraphrase Bornstein, posed a queer and pleasant danger to the unsuspecting browser, a familiar threat to white feminized virtue invoked by reactionary radical feminists and their allies on the Christian Right and came to symbolize both container and substance of contagion.

As awareness of the ads increased, news coverage of craigslist grew saturated with contamination-discourses: as one headline put it, the site needed a “clean-up.” News coverage stoked fears of “sexual depravity and financial fraud” even after the passing of SESTA/FOSTA and subsequent removal of its “Adult Services” section.

In a telling 2013 Slate article, Why Is Craigslist So Popular Among Creepy Murderers? Justin Peters partially attributes craigslist crime (whose preponderance of nonsexual financial scams he does not attempt to tackle) to its “mostly free to use . . . mostly anonymous” setup. Weaponizing the “normalizing gaze of journalism,” Peters instead links unrelated crime and sexual predation to prove craigslist a “creepy,” “dangerous” platform. He invokes an example of the admittedly rare craigslist homicide (itself also not the result of an ad soliciting sex) to warn readers that anonymous sex ads constitute “catnip for the aspiring psychopath [and] spell trouble for the aspiring libertine” [emphasis mine], a term that, particularly post-AIDS crisis, carries antigay connotations. Regardless of intention, such articles invoke long-held notions of sickness as “endemic to the queer [and trans] body.” and of libertine degeneracy as a contagion—whether online or in a public restroom—and threat to “good clean fun.”

Trans and gender non-conforming bodyminds have long proven, and continue to prove, fodder for moral panics, particularly given growing transnormative perceptions of trans subjectivity as diagnosable and even “curable”—shapeable into legible, productive, sane, and able national citizen—through biomedical intervention. “Curable” cases are framed as few and definite, casting those qualified as “truly” trans in contrast to trenders, whose identities are—to use craigslist’s terminology—unvetted, and who are frequently themselves figured as disabled or Mad so as to disqualify them from true-trans identity. Refusal to recognize certain genres of transness—and fears of the spectral “faker,” who Fisher suggests participates in a secondary counterpublic against both cis and normative trans communities—are rooted in anxieties over autonomy in trans-declaration and trans-practice, particularly (though not exclusively) among youth. In such autonomy rests the possibility that one’s trans might defy, non-comply, and roguely replicate itself, spawning new shapes. And indeed, despite the potentially unwanted homogeneity conjured by “t,” the term provided a generous, generative alcove under which users could reinvent themselves through a shared sense of trans. While the original initialism t4t may have presupposed an existing “t” subject, it left a window open. The trans pollinator (mis)fits through the crack, seeding as they go, expanding possibilities beyond those designed by and for cis people. Counterpublics like craigslist are venues of mutual recognition, a kind of digital “trap door” through which we can fall, into relationships and toward newfound ways of knowing and being.

Today, works like Littman’s widely discredited article on “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” name trans as a “psychic epidemic” afflicting youth predisposed to “mental illness,” both a physiological threat and a viral media contagion. Littman cites “excessive use” of Tumblr and YouTube, both of which have raised scholarly interest as sites of trans-affirming public scholarship, as primary sources of illicit gender exploration, as well as political coming-to-consciousness. Central among the “behaviors” Littman attributes to trans youth are withdrawal from, and identification of transphobia among, their parents, as well as “defend[ing] the practice of lying to or withholding information from therapists or doctors in order to obtain hormones for transition more quickly” [emphasis mine]. This is a thread common to discourses of trans sex, access to biomedical transition, and other forms of trans connectivity: it is difficult for cis eyes to detect until “too late.” As in the case of anxieties around public/digital sexuality, the unauthorized practice of trans is in itself pathological, especially in the presence of real or figurative Children, impressionable by a “dangerous” queerness. Amid demands to evidence our legitimacy through body parts, narratives, and/or medical records, the “true” trans bodymind has long been made by the cis gaze. Given demands to evidence ourselves to cis gatekeepers in order to earn trans legitimacy, to publicly make oneself trans, and to facilitate t in others is only further evidence of danger.

“Contamination” discourses were not animated by a litany of known risks and consequences, isolable to individual trans bodies or objects. Rather, following Barad’s intervention in “Posthuman Performativity,” (t)trans is unknowable and infinitely possible until it comes into being through reinventive intra-actions, “infections” that, in this case, are local to the internet and often anonymous. Forums like craigslist became worthy of fear as venues of emergent trans possibility, signs, as in the case of the HIV/AIDS crisis, of a queerness perpetually in need of surveillance and containment so as to avert a murderous, future-foreclosing, and anonymous spread. Identificatory and presentational fluidity indicate riskiness, with reporter Jackson West describing post-crackdown sex workers, a large number of whom are affected by transmisogyny as “just putting on a new coat of makeup” before returning to the job. This has only been reinforced by the use of “trans panic” defenses (banned in eleven states, with more pending as of 2020, according to the Movement Advancement Project) by murderers of trans women. Transsexual becomes illicit unless seen, named, and supervised by parent, doctor, or website admin—specifically, until its performative possibilities could be prefigured through a cisnormative framework, its ontological unruiness managed. Anonymous sexual connections—connections that so happened to be queer and queered—are (web) sites with infectious potential, especially if left unwatched; indeed, sites are agents in their own right, part of a dynamic
assemblage in which it can "generate transformations" [emphasis mine]. I think t4t along these uncertainties, embracing generative trans possibility as pollination, not contagion.

I subsequently depart from the spatial, temporal, and sexual specificity of craigslist and other online personal ads. That said, make no mistake: t4t first was, and remains, about fucking. It’s not only about fucking gender, fucking convention, fucking (up) (d/c)iscourses, or fucking around with hyphens, backslashes, and parentheses. While I expand upon its possible usages below, I remain faithful to t4t as a site of sexual intimacy and pleasure for trans people (or, as we will discuss, people who via some enactment of t4t collectively realize trans into being), feeling neither need nor desire to remove the term from its sexual origins. t4t fucks us as only we know how. We map upon each other’s bodyminds a recognition that does not result from, but rather, itself produces t4t possibility. Without visceral acts of queer (re)creation, no part of this work [its author included] would exist. "Surely," bell hooks writes in Yarning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, "our desire for radical social change is intimately linked to our ability to experience pleasure, erotic fulfillment, and a host of other passions." My conception of t4t as transpollinatory praxis highlights the necessity not just of bringing together "individual" pleasure and collective resistance, but considering them to be always-already entangled.

**RECOGNITION**

im not cisphobic some of my best friends were cis when i met them

—@AuntieLumb, 2021

My first relationship was t4t, though I didn’t know it at first. When we met, my then-partner, Elliot, who remains a beloved chosen-family member to this day, did not yet know they were trans. We were sixteen. I was using the term “genderfluid” at the time, though only on social media, claiming my “t” digitally. After several months of friendship, we began dating long-distance. I eagerly shared information gleaned from an expansive network of trans Tumblr bloggers, and later, from scavenged academic sources I still struggled to comprehend.

Their curiosity grew personal. Soon, they switched to they/them pronouns and tried several new names. We spoke, daily, for hours at a time; I felt seen in ways I had not felt before, accompanied in a rejection of the cisness I had known. I felt my trans sharpen in coalition, a word derived from the same root as “coalesce”: coalescere, or “grow together.”

Elliot and I ultimately dated for two separate periods of time, until identity shifts moved our relationship to a different register. Where they had once felt uncomfortable with, and even unworthy of, membership to the category “trans,” they came to reject cisness wholeheartedly. I had moved toward lesbian identity; Elliot was no longer comfortable as an object of lesbian desire. Our orientations were formed and re-formed through these processes of gender-transformation, our emergent trans selves taking shape with the manifestation of our desires. As they boyed, my felt sense of connection with, and orientation toward, them shifted. Our shared access to trans knowledge—and to each other as conduits of this knowledge— influenced the queer paths our desire lines could take. Equally, our orientations continuously changed and complicated with each day we lived our trans.

At first glance, I could frame our relationship this way: we learned to love each other in new ways, ways that upheld the veracity of our respective emergent identities. In this figuration, however, experiences of transness are framed as individual, taking place within our respective bodyminds and independent of our relationships to each other. Such an essentialist approach, necessarily bound to transnormative medico-legal discourse, obfuscates fundamental aspects of our entangled histories and trans movements, movements “across” that, like queer, “[do] not reside in a body or object, and [are] dependent on the mutuality of support.” As previously indicated, we were and are not trans individuals, whose shared attraction was a mere matter of two people with discrete sexual identities. Rather, we are trans-in-relations, our t4t collaborative links. Our trans forms in a process of becoming with, which Haraway links to the prepositional (“for”/“4”), the possible, and the queer against hegemonic understandings of gender.

A transpollinatory praxis implies a transpollinatory epistemology, which works to deny authoritative bodies the privilege of our collaborative companionship, namely, because such institutional bodies seek not collaboration but control. A t4t alternative to institutional ways of knowing can be found in trans forms of recognition, which evade cis medical demands for both identificatory fixity and transparency. For Elliot and I, the process of trans pollination was one of recognition, of realizing and loving likeness. Our desires for each other were, equally, desires to share in the language-pollen we supplied each other in the process of “coming home,” and in sightseeing home we mapped lines of desire previously unavailable. Queercrips scholars Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ellery Russian describe this world-opening desire as the “lust of recognition.” While Piepzna-Samarasinha and Russian use the term specifically in reference to connections between already-self-identified queercrips (a category which includes both Elliot and myself) such a lust can and does inaugurate new forms of similarity, in which tools of self-understanding, ever-multiplying, are passed along. Pollination, as The Pollinators note, loves queer (and as trans) into heretofore “straight” worlds, infusing them with the methodologies and aesthetics of transgression and (re)build ways of relating to one another. As such, t4t pollination might be thought of not only as a relational praxis but also as a criepistemological approach: derived, as McRuer and Johnson write, from the “backwoods” (in this case, increasingly censored queer digital spaces online) of knowledge-production, borne of a shared yearning for the trans publics we co-create.

This model allows us to think through new technologies of what micha cárdenas calls trans-realization: a participatory, “empowering practice that can make life livable and
joyfully intensified.”

It also queers the relationships through which similar-difference, love, and lust can be realized. Through and in pursuit of trans counterpublics, I pollinated—relationally co-realized—Elliot’s trans without claiming authority over their identity, relational primacy, or consistent/normative romantic-sexual desire, or monopoly over their time. They, too, pollinated my growing understanding of what lesbianism looked like within my own genderless experience. To discuss such entanglements, we might engage language generated by the asexual and aromatic spectrum (a-spec) community, which constitutes a new, much-needed toolbox for realizing new genres of pollinatory desire and collaboration.

Rather than looking to the metaphorical violence of the “crush,” for example, we may turn to the “squish,” which trans, neuroqueer rhetorician M. Remi Yergeau describes as “a kind of leaning or longing [...] [that] might involve arousal, or fascination, or a kind of emotional or inter bodily turning toward—or none of these things at all.”

While there is not space here to elaborate on all possible intimacies between trans and a-spec politics, the squish is just one example of pollinatory recognition, reshapeable and eminently forgiving, that allow us to imagine new methods of loving trans into possible.

If “transness” is a matter of shared recognition amid mutual opacity, then a radical reclamation of trans, and of t4t, must involve a decision to recognize ourselves with and through our love for each other, and in and on our own terms. I have argued that it is with these acts of love that we can both affirm trans experience and inaugurate trans identification, wielding our warmth to fuck gender, to verb a “trans” between us. Not only this, but the process of pollinatory recognition constitutes a unique way of knowing, one always-already entangled with the practice of trans social and sexual life. As such, t4t confers the possibility not only of generating romantic-sexual-sensual pleasure between trans individuals, but serving as a gateway into trans (political, relational, erotic) alignment. The t4t poster seeks out their t; the t, hearing the call, comes.

### POLLINATION

trans love is so damn beautiful, we are all so different and together we can find such strength

–loyalmlm, 2021

What am I talking about when I am talking about t4t? I am talking about long nights in bed, phone in hand; I’m talking about nighttime conversations on the floor of a friend’s dorm room; I’m talking about the genderw(or)ld(s) we make in these spaces of intimacy, where heretofore unspeakable questions become possible. I am talking about the internet, I am talking about the first time I saw a nonbinary person reach middle age. I am talking about my dining hall talks, multi-hour, coffee-laden events made of whispers and downward glances. You don’t have to know what you are. But you do have to know that, even if you don’t know, you can be trans. You can be trans for any reason you want. In the meantime, I am with you.

I am talking about pollination. The dandelion spoke to seed anew; the weed only grows from where another one had blown. I am talking about continuous movement, along lines of becoming, a collective, and literally creative process.

I also am talking about a project both generative and eminently resourceful: we generate trans possibilities out of what already matters / already-existing matter. We take the signifiers floating around us and, rather than capturing them with definitive names, view them together in a new light.

At the time that I write this paragraph, the streets are turning yellow, both graveyards to their brittle leaves and repositories of fine, golden powder. I walk beside a pandemic-podmate, eagerly carving the contours of our respective childhoods, our journeys inside and outside and against and beyond gender. I listen as she recounts a litany of femme lesbian experiences that put the label “cis” to shame, and try—mask be damned—not to sneeze.

“It’s the season,” I tell my barista several days later, apologizing for my reddish eyes. Suppress a cough. “Everything’s blowing around.”

While chiefly concerned with The Pollinators’ definition of pollination, it is worth meditating for a moment on pollinators themselves. Critical to the growth of about 250,000 plant species, the category of “pollinator” can include animals, insects, water, wind, and gravity. While some plants produce pollen light and dry enough to spread with the breeze I mention above, others’ pollen must be intentionally carried by pollinators like bees, who maintain often (though not always) mutualistic relationships— likened by some to marriages—with the flowers they visit.

Plants have evolved to possess traits (for example, a flower’s two bottom petals, called the keel), that facilitate pollinator interaction.

Perhaps most famous among these traits are the “deceptive” practices of the orchid:

[A] certain type of orchid, displaying similar physical and sensory characteristics to female wasps, lures male wasps into a strange sexual dance. The frustrated wasp moves from orchid to orchid, attempting copulation and, through this process, transfers pollen between plants. In this way, the wasp becomes part of the reproductive apparatus of the orchid and the orchid facilitates the sexual activity of the wasp.

With the salutary “trickery” of the orchid in mind, I conclude with a return to the material reality of pollination to open up new avenues for becoming-trans.

T4t becoming is not only facilitated by, but made possible through, trans connection; that is, there is no t without its 4. Trans, as a “crip feeling,” awakens collective anxieties around what heretofore-normative bodies can become; bodies becoming-trans remind us that no body has reached or will reach its final form, instead continuously, and oftentimes uncomfortably affecting and being affected, as was the case for Sam and I in the park. Elliot
and I fucked gender together, emerging into identities, worlds, and knowledges that necessarily exceeded and evaded cisnormative, transmedical restrictions: we were mutual pollinators, not patients. Having “caught” my t, they responded with their own, prompting my own gender-reconceptualization. We learned that if we had a desire to be transgender, we were transgender.\textsuperscript{92} We co-constituted our identities within the context of our relationship, one grounded in love and continuous recognition, understanding trans not as a “thing” but a process, an art of love and act of becoming (only) possible together.

T4t was the tool with which we poked through the epistemological pavement of cis-heterosexism, making space for hermeneutical justice\textsuperscript{93} in an environment keen to mark trans subjectivity as artificial and grotesque, especially when chosen for reasons other than intolerable pain.\textsuperscript{94} It also disrupts normative timelines of gender-in an environment keen.

In this article, I have encountered our collective impulse to frame the trans subject as unwilling victim—whether to dysphoria, social deception, or both—by framing trans subjects instead as beneficiaries of the epistemological and relational openings t provides. T4t comes to represent the openness and reciprocity such ways of knowing and relating offer: far from utopian or conflict-free, the transpollinatory praxis of t4t is nevertheless generational, creating worlds as it generates new desires, possibilities, and becoming. A pollinatory understanding of t4t facilitates community formation, affirming those already-t and “broaden[s] the joining,” for new ts.\textsuperscript{95} Even by acknowledging that trans- catches, and framing its spread as pollination and not contagion, we may disidentify\textsuperscript{96} with trans-as-viral \& mirror pollinate new possibilities. These include understanding trans as an affinity and a creative project, albeit one rife with difficulties and unresolvable contradictions; a deliberate break with cis epistemologies and ways of life. Pollination isn’t a bug (but a feature!): it renders plural and open-ended trans ways-of-life rather than circumscribed results of individual or social pathology. As Laboria Cuboniks celebrates “contamination” as a “mutational driver” between lived realities (and in pursuit of new ones),\textsuperscript{99} I celebrate contagion/pollination for its ability to t our lives.

Within cis fears of contagious dysphoria lies a truth of trans love: it is not limited to those deemed born-this-way, dysphoric-all-along, no-other-choice. A direction, orientation, and a becoming, trans life can be made anywhere, and made deliberately. What might these ways of life, attuned to internal difference with an eye toward solidarity, look like? Pollinatory methodology shows that t4t as a relational praxis is not simply broadened or sustained but made in the joining, in the process of bearing loving witness to another’s emergent community-identification. Just as the joining process is continuous, the new lifeways we embark on are ever in flux. The ways we, to paraphrase Malatino, \textit{survive the interregnum}, grow more numerous as we do, evading the textual capture any quarterly journal promises. Instead, I suggest, we continue to live into the ways of life we so desperately seek to pin. By transmuting contagion to pollination, we might radically democratize access to “trans” as something we do / -getherto other, and to

\begin{itemize}
  \item trans
  \item -form
  \item into possible.
\end{itemize}

\section*{NOTES}


14. They knock on my dorm room door, tell me “it’s she/they” now once I’ve closed it behind them. The gender talks are in our rooms by salt-lamp light, and occasionally in essay-length texts.

15. Throughout this piece, when referring to “pollination,” I follow the definition provided by The Pollinators, which refers only to cross-pollination. Trans self-pollination is an area ripe for future scholarship.


22. That is not to discount the pollinators’ intentionality of movement. “[I]f a bee cruised a flower it’s no accident,” wrote Willa Smart on the question of uniqueness, personal communication, 2021.


26. Susalka, “Mattering Beyond the Binary.”


33. Lingel, An Internet for the People, 117.

34. Lingel, An Internet for the People.


38. Lingel, An Internet for the People, 49; Reynolds, “‘Crisisgist is Nothing More Than an Internet Brothel.’”


55. It is interesting to note that Tumblr, after their December 2018 “porn ban,” suffered much the same fate as (and similar exodus to) craigslist. It should be noted that that ban was grounded in a far longer history of queer- and trans-specific censorship of the site, which served as a space for trans, queer, kink, and/or sex worker communities (see Carolyn Bronstein, “Pornography, Trans Visibility, and the Demise of Tumblr,” TSQ 7, no. 2 (2020): 240–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/1073814819844679; J. D. Sol del, “As Craigslist Personal Ads Shut Down, We’re Losing an Important Queer Space,” The Washington Post, March 27, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloshit/wp/2018/03/27/as-craigslist-personal-ads-shut-down-were-losing-an-important-queer-space/). As Haimson et al. note, inaccurate “adult content” labels were applied to nonsexual, educational, and medical images of trans bodies, thus stymying the circulation of vital knowledge. See Haimson et al., “Tumblr Was a Trans Technology,” 5, 12.

56. Littman, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults,” 2.

57. Littman, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults,” 23.


66. bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 13.

67. (@Lumb_PDX), “I'm not cisphobic some of my best friends were cis when i met them,” Twitter, May 14, 2021.

68. We use “did not yet know” not to reinforce the “born this way” trope, but rather to signal an understanding of one’s existence as trans for some period before the term was available. In contrast, when I refer to my own life, I use the phrase “was not yet” trans, to convey most accurately that my emergence as a trans person was not so much a coming-out but a coming-into my identity-movement. Both of these respective conceptions of personal trans subjectivity can and do exist harmoniously, and among those of infinitely-many others.


74. Willa Smart: “If the bee is the emblematic pollinator, it is appropriate that the beehive is as well an emblem of collectivity,” personal communication, 2021.

75. Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).


77. Mingus, Crip Sex.


81. hooks, Yearning, 13.


83. Though, as Ulisses Bougie notes, “a-spec language at least attempts to go beyond these a bit, as well, to try to find the erotic in a lack of any collaboration, romantic or sexual or platonic or otherwise,” personal communication, 2021.

84. Yergeau, Authoring Autism, 188.


86. Stark and Laurie, “Deleuze and Transfeminism,” 129.


92. van der Kooi, Vallejo-Marín, and Leonhardt, “Mutualisms and (A) symmetry in Plant-Pollinator Interactions.”


94. Forrest, “Crip Feelings / Feeling Crip.”


96. Mario Vallejo-Marín, and Sara D. Leonhardt, “Mutualisms and (A) symmetry in Plant-Pollinator Interactions.”


98. Stark and Laurie, “Deleuze and Transfeminism,” 129.

99. Forrest, “Crip Feelings / Feeling Crip.”
95. This sentence itself has been added at the recommendation of Willa Smart, who helpfully noted that I “might introduce overlaps, simultaneities, delays into the narrative parts of this essay [... ] to make concrete the political stakes of [my] claim.”


99. A nod to years of personal contact with Elliot, my queer kin, intimate, and nominal “ex.” For us, texting a string of ampersands is shorthand for a kind of open love-listening perhaps familiar to fellow pollinators.


CALL FOR PAPERS

APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy invites members to submit papers, book reviews, and interviews, conversations, and more experimental writing formats for publication in the spring 2024 and fall 2024 editions. Submissions can address the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, asexuality, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The journal seeks quality paper submissions for review. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings, in particular, are encouraged to submit their work. Please pitch the editor before the deadline if you have an interview or more experimental proposal.

DEADLINE
The deadline for submission of manuscripts for a spring edition is December 15, 2023. The deadline for the fall edition is May 1, 2024. The editor may choose to move submissions from the spring edition to the fall edition depending on the amount of submissions received.

FORMAT
Papers should be in the range of 5,000–6,000 words, with 7,500 words maximum permitted. Reviews and Notes should be in the range of 1,000–2,000 words, with 3,000 words maximum permitted. All submissions must use endnotes and should be prepared for anonymous review. Please contact the editor if you have plans for alternative formats such as interviews.

CONTACT
Submit all manuscripts electronically (.doc or .docx format), and direct inquiries to Amy Marvin, Editor, APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy, marvina@lafayette.edu.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Jacqueline Alvarez is a professor of philosophy at Merced College. The preponderance of her work focuses on Identity Politics such as race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and the metaphysical salience of those identities as a lived experience. She has written several papers that have been presented at regional and national conferences such as “The Strengths of Induction in Everyday Life,” “Identity as Truth Bearer,” “Extending Visible Identities,” “Immigration: A Consciousness of Alien Sexuality,” “Transgender Identity and Authenticity,” and “Sexuality as Visible.” Jacki recently received a Mellon Grant to develop training in the state of California for educators who teach in prison. She has served as a principal writer on the project in collaboration with the ASCCC and Mellon Foundation. Jacki also teaches philosophy through the Prison Ed program and is currently concerned with the interrelations of identity politics, justice, and equity in prison.


Maren Behrensen is assistant professor in philosophy at the University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands. They currently work on the politics and ethics of social identities (especially gender and nationality), populism and the internationalization of the far-right (especially regarding the ongoing anti-trans backlash), and the connections of these topics to the ethics and philosophy of technology.

Eric W. Maroney (he/him) is an associate professor of English at Gateway Community College and a graduate student at the University of Connecticut where he is pursuing a PhD in English/American Studies. In addition, Eric holds an MFA in writing from Sarah Lawrence College. His work has appeared in New Politics, Tempest Magazine, Common Dreams, and the English Journal. He can be found on Twitter @Eric_W_Maroney.

Cavar is a PhD candidate in cultural studies at the University of California, Davis, traversing the nexes of transMad and queercrip ways of writing, thinking, and (un)knowing in/around digital publics. Their works across genre and form can be found or are forthcoming in Lateral, Electric Lit, Disability Studies Quarterly, the Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies, Nat Brut, the Review of Disability Studies, and elsewhere. Cavar’s debut novel, Failure to Comply (Featherproof Books), will be published in 2024.

Amy Marvin is the Louise M. Olmsted Fellow in Ethics at Lafayette College. Her work focuses on care, cultural production, solidarity, community, and their mediation through institutions, with interests in feminist philosophy, social and political philosophy, and continental philosophy. Her writing appears in Philosophy Compass, Contingent Magazine, Hypatia, Feminist Philosophy Quarterly, Transgender Studies Quarterly, Curiosity Studies: A New Ecology of Knowledge, and The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook.
FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Agnes B. Curry
UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH

Along with the article, “Performing Education through the Embodied Dancing Knower: Epistemic Features of Hula,” by Celia T. Bardwell-Jones (University of Hawai‘i at Hilo), Kumu Kekaiokalani Naone (Hawai‘i Community College), and Kumu Krisha Zane (Unukupukupu), this issue includes two items from Andrea Sullivan Clarke (University of Windsor), the outgoing chair of the APA Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophers. The first is her final communication as chair, summing up the previous year’s committee activities. The second is an article, “Discovering Reality and a First Nations/American Indian Standpoint Theory,” built from a symposium address to the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy that starts to outline her take on a First Nations/American Indian Standpoint theory as distinguished from an Indigenous standpoint. The final item is a collaborative article by Ryan Molloy, an undergraduate student and his environmental ethics instructor, Áila O’Loughlin, both of the University of Minnesota. The article both argues for and demonstrates the pedagogical significance of a more accurate understanding of the history of academic inquiries in environmental ethics.

We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to Dr. Sullivan-Clarke for her leadership through these last three years. In a time of unprecedented challenges in which the impossible was routinely asked of everyone in academia, she not only preserved the committee but further strengthened it, adding to its membership, opportunities for communication, and scope of activities. We also welcome the incoming chair, Joey Miller (West Chester University), who will build on these accomplishments.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

We invite you to submit your work for consideration for publication in APA Studies on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy. Work submitted goes through anonymous peer review. Our project in this journal is to engage in scholarly and pedagogical conversations that further develop this field in its integrity. We accept work that foregrounds these philosophical perspectives. We also accept work that addresses the professional and community concerns regarding Native American and indigenous philosophies and philosophers of all global indigenous nations. This is an inherently decolonial project. We do not accept work that engages merely in comparative exercises or uses Native American and Indigenous philosophy merely to solve the philosophical or practical problems generated by Western thinking.

We welcome comments and responses to work published in this or past issues. We also welcome work that speaks to philosophical, professional and community concerns regarding Native American and Indigenous philosophies and philosophers of all global indigenous nations. Editors do not limit the format of what can be submitted; we accept a range of submission formats including but not limited to papers, opinion editorials, transcribed dialogue interviews, book reviews, poetry, links to oral and video resources, cartoons, artwork, satire, parody, and other diverse formats. In all cases, however, references should follow the Chicago Manual of Style and include endnotes rather than in-text citations. For further information, please see the Guidelines for Authors available on the APA website. Please submit material electronically to Joseph Miller (JMiler4@wcupa.edu). For consideration for the spring 2024 issue, please submit your work by January 15, 2024.

FROM THE CHAIR

Report from the Native American and Indigenous Philosophers Committee

Andrea Sullivan-Clarke
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Hensci! (Greetings in Muskogeel!)

This is my final report as chairperson. I stepped into the role as chairperson in the midst of the global pandemic. What a chaotic time that was! Since then, our committee has seen many changes. From the development of the official land acknowledgement statement for the APA to the participation in the divisional conferences, our members have been quite active.

This year, we acquired an APA Connect member community for our general membership (thank you, Mike Morris!), and it has paid off in terms of new faces and Indigenous representation. Our membership extends beyond the borders of Turtle Island (North America) and includes
members of global indigenous groups! We cordially invite members of the APA who are Indigenous and/or conduct Indigenous research to join our group.

The membership was quite busy this year. Our committee was present at all three divisional conferences. At the Eastern Division meeting, Andrew Smith (Drexel University) and I participated in the committee's first Teaching Hub session. (See the spring 2023 issue for information on our presentations.)


Our session at the Central Division meeting—Relations, Land, and Knowledge—included papers from Joel Alvarez (University of South Florida), "Spinozism and Native American Pantheism," Aila KK O’Loughlin (University of Minnesota), "Relationality in Indigenous Kinship Ethics: A Shared Central Value in Localized Ethical Systems," and Andrea Sullivan-Clarke (University of Windsor), "Strategic Ignorance and Two Objections Involving Indigenous Epistemology."


In addition to participating in the divisional conferences, members Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Georgetown University) and Joseph Len Miller (West Chester University) received an APA Diversity and Inclusiveness Grant for their project, "Savage Education: Epistemic Injustices of Native American Boarding Schools." The workshop took place in July 2023 at West Chester University.

The committee is continuing to raise funds for the creation of an Indigenous writing prize. To that end, I would like to thank Andrew Smith (Drexel University) for his work on the drafting of grant applications. I would also like to thank the managing editor of our publication, Agnes Curry (University of Saint Joseph), for her tireless efforts in producing a quality publication, and the co-editors reviewers who put in the time to provide helpful comments and recommendations. They are the heart of our committee, and I am lucky to work with them all.

It is with great pleasure that I close with a welcome to our incoming chairperson, Joseph Len Miller (West Chester University). As a fellow Muscogee, I wish him many years of successful contributions to our field. We are very excited for what the future holds for our group. Mvto (thank you)!

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ARTICLES

Performing Education through the Embodied Dancing Knower: Epistemic Features of Hula

Celia T. Bardwell-Jones
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I AT Hilo

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Kumu Krisha Zane
UNUKUPUKUPU

One of the most remarkable instances of racism against Polynesian people by a Western philosopher is infamously made by Immanuel Kant in which he claims that “South Sea Islanders” were examples of a people that were prone to idleness and unable to cultivate (moral, rational) talents. This colonial assessment of Polynesian people became a pervasive assumption throughout Western Anglo culture, which normalized and justified the settler colonial illegal occupation of Hawai‘i, ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanaui citing Noenoe Silva’s work notes that the political economy of Hawai‘i amplified by a Christian/Puritan work ethic falsely interpreted Native Hawaiians’ “love of hula” as a sign of laziness rather than acts of resistance against settler colonialism or more importantly as an epistemic practice that cultivates morally valuable and rational talents. The idleness mistakenly associated with hula led to its ban in Hawai‘i in 1830 until King Kalākaua officially declared hula to be legally performed in a public setting in 1874.

In this essay, we examine the epistemic features of hula that challenge the settler colonial assumption that Native Hawaiians’ “love of hula” perpetuates moral and rational idleness. This racist assumption reduces hula’s epistemic features within a logic of scarcity informed by capitalist projects that views nature and people outside of a framework of abundance, thereby interpreting cultural practice as well as landscapes and seascapes as useless as wastelands. This assumption has justified bans such as hula in the service of building environmentally degrading infrastructures, i.e., plantation-style agriculture. According to Candace Fujikane, an epistemic feature utilized by Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian people) emerges within mo‘olelo, stories, that have been transmitted throughout the generations. As Fujikane notes, mo‘olelo reveals “the art of kilo, keen intergenerational observation and forecasting key to recording changes on the earth in story and song, and such changes were met with renewed efforts to conserve, protect and enhance abundance.”

An Indigenous methodology of abundance undermines capitalist projects and makes space for Indigenous lifeways that view elemental forms in nature as familial, which illicits the appropriate care to those relationships that ought to be nourished. Within a Western Anglo framework, the practice of hula became disassociated from its Indigenous meaning, which obscured hula’s epistemic potential as encouraging epistemic laziness. However, hula’s epistemic tradition is...
richly choreographed within the ancestral lineages of the Kānaka Maoli performed through the embodiment of the dancing knower.

DANCING WITH/AS NATURE: EPistemology as performance

Pualani Kanaka’ole Kahele, an eminent and revered kumu hula master, situates hula within the movements of nature: “Hula begins with the movement of the sun, the wind, the sounds, the growth on land and the ocean.” Moreover, Kahele explains: “Like nature hula is rhythmic, inclusive, transformative, physical, spiritual, healing, and above all, it is Hawaiian.” It would be impossible to understand hula outside a Kānaka Maoli metaphysics grounded within an embodied attunement to nature. Much like other Kānaka Maoli practices, such as he’e nalu, or surfing, hula develops a kilo, a form of knowledge production that keenly observes nature’s movements. Part of hula’s kilo necessitates an understanding of the movements of nature through a distinctly poetic mind culturally cultivated and transmitted throughout the generations. For example, Kahele writes: “The foot movements of kāholo, wāwae kā, kāhele, kalākaua, ‘uehe, and ēkāneo some imagery of the kiʻi (ocean) movement.” The poetic motions performed through the body mirror the movements of nature generating a specific form of knowledge.

One particular hula, Ke Ha’a Lā Puna, demonstrates how through hula the dancer becomes the vehicle to translate the animacy of the environment by becoming the embodiment of nature itself. The dance embodies Hi’iaka’s friendship with Hōpo’e and throughout the hula, elemental nature also participates and dances alongside the hula dancer. The place, Ha’ena (located in the district of Puna on Hawai’i Island), becomes transformed to ke kahua, the stage, where the hala groves melodically sway with choreographed precision close to the ocean shores. The sea in the hula chant passionately responds to the swaying hala leaves capturing an elemental harmony that exceeds human perception. Joy is the mood, tone, creative expression; joy poetically arranges the embodied performance of both human and elemental nature. Unlike other modes of human activity that assume a boundary between the human and natural world, hula’s logic/epistemology embraces the humanistic spirit in nature and the elemental call embedded within the human soul. Every being is dancing.

THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF HULA

In this sense hula’s distinct kilo poetically choreographs nature’s movements through storytelling, mo’olelo. For example, the story of Hi’iaka and Pele (sister deities who traveled and found a home in Hawai’i) charts the journey of Hi’iaka at the behest of her older sister Pele to retrieve her lover Lohiau from Ka’au as Hi’iaka overcomes many challenges along the way. This mo’olelo has been told through performances in hula. According to ho’omanawanui, “The intertwining of oral and written traditions is expected in mo’olelo such as Pele and Hi’iaka, because of the performance aspect associated with it—not just through storytelling, but through story performance (hula) . . . the practice of hula is both a practice of memory and the embodiment of tradition.” Emalani Case similarly reflects on the intertwining of the oral and performance traditions through her embodied engagement with hula. She writes, “When I was old enough to begin my formal training, I was introduced not only to the basics of hula—or to basic foot and hand motions and the principles of discipline and how to hold your body—but also to the stories that my motions would tell.” What Case and ho’omanawanui point to is that the embodied transmission of the stories is made possible through literacies of the dance. For many Kia’i (protectors/activists) of Mauna Kea, the tallest mountain in the archipelago of Hawai’i and considered to be a sacred place (wahi pana), the proposed building of a thirty-meter telescope is interpreted to be an act of desecration. Hula as ritually performed by the Kia’i three times daily during the time in which the access road to the mountain was blocked by thousands of activists served as an ethical and political embodied enactment of resistance drawing upon the mo’olelo of the land, the sea, and the mountain to nourish and restore the elemental relationships of the Kānaka Maoli to their ancestors.

In summary, hula’s epistemology is situated within nature and develops a kilo or method of observing nature through poetically choreographed performance of the mo’olelo, the ancestral stories, of the elemental deities. Ethical and political observations anchored within nature are also hermeneutically woven within the performance.

PERFORMING PEDAGOGIES THROUGH HULA

All of the co-authors of this article met through our participation with Unukupukupu, a hālau, or school, organized through Hawai’i Community College under the direction of Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō, Professor of Hawaiian Studies at Hawaii Community College and UH Hilo. Keaiokalani Naone and Krisha Zane were rigorously trained as kumu hula under Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō. Celia Bardwell-Jones participates in a faculty development program at UH Hilo, known as Uluākea, whose main purpose is to indigenize higher education through a pedagogy informed by Hawaiian practices, such as chanting and hula. Celia also participates in the Kūkūena (older sister of Pele and presides over the ceremonial awa drinking) cohort, of which she is still a member. Through this opportunity of study, we reflected on how learning hula, as dancers and knowers, as students and teachers intertwines and weaves our professional and spiritual life. What this experience has taught us was to adopt an alternative model of being an educator. We learned a different Indigenous framework for seeing education, a decolonial kilo, that places Hawaiian concepts and cosmologies at the center of inquiry. Throughout our learning of hula under the direction of Dr. Taupōuri Tangarō, we paired our dance with reflections on how to become better human beings in our professional lives. How does hula, the mele, represent deeper meanings for us as educators or professionals as we engage a variety of different student learning capabilities from diverse lineages in Hawai’i? Being a student in this cohort decentered any “expertise” we may have held in the classroom and positioned us to rethink how education can be indigenized through the framework of hula.

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Moving away from an attitude of hula that was stigmatized in the nineteenth century, currently at UH Hilo and Hawai'i Community College, hula is revered and integrated in educational practices and perpetuates a radical future making that manifests resilience and resurgence of the animate spirit in education. Two examples from our learning in hula that showcase this pedagogical method include the mele komo (welcoming chant) and the ho'ike (demonstration of knowledge through performance). In the mele komo, students chant to ask permission to enter the hālau. At this point, all preconceptions and assumptions are left at the door. The student enters with an open mind, a humble spirit, making it possible to activate the creative potentialities of the soul. Teachers are committed and willing to teach the student and the relationship of learning is made through this performance of trust and reciprocity. In the ho’ike, students demonstrate their skills and mastery of knowledge, 'ike, and are showcased as a collective body or on an individual basis to an audience. Mastery of a skill can vary from dancer to dancer and so as a collective body, hula’s framework rejects the model of an individual knower grasping the truth with certainty, a knowledge grounded in solitude. Ho’ike’s epistemic feature is grounded within a community of dancing knowers profoundly interdependent, accountable for others’ bodily movements, spirits and learning. Unlike forms of Western education that hold accountable individual students, dancing knowers are held accountable to a community of hula dancers as one’s progress and mastery of hula can only occur through them. One guideline for hula dancers is that once you are ready to perform, you offer your assistance to others to ensure all the community of hula dancers are ready together in spirit and capability.

These examples gesture towards a model of Indigenizing and decolonizing education. Decolonizing education involves generating paradigms that resist settler colonial epistemologies that operate on a logic of scarcity. It also involves a willingness to step forward and hula, to dance with others, to be held accountable with others, which requires education to be framed through values of abundance, thereby making Indigenous futures possible. Settler-colonial frameworks that rendered hula as idleness lacking any epistemic credibility fail to understand the resistant power and the creative and innovative scope of hula in contributing to the rich hermenutical resources of the community.

NOTES
1. ku’aloha ho’omanawanui, Voices of Fire: Reweaving the Literary Lei of Pele and Hi’iaka (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 15.
6. See the chant and brief description: https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Ke_Haa_La_Puna.html.

The hula was also performed during the 2021 Merrie Monarch by Hālau Ka Wēkiu: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUZ4iDYQA9s.
8. ho’omanawanui, Voices of Fire, 57.

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Discovering Reality and a First Nations/ American Indian Standpoint Theory

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There are a few moments in the trajectory of one’s career when you have the feeling that you have come into your own. One such moment occurred this year when I was invited to take part in a symposium hosted by the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy (CSWIP) at the Canadian Philosophical Association meeting in May 2023. The symposium was titled Discovering Reality Forty Years Later, and the organizer (Rebecca Ring, York University) encouraged the participants to engage with the influential legacy of the 1983 anthology edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka, Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science.

The symposium opened with a welcome from Sandra Harding, who addressed the environment that motivated the creation of the anthology, and its surprising influence as well as the later critique of its ideas. The contributors to the anthology staked out new territory in philosophy and forged new paths of research for future generations of feminist philosophers. In addition to the welcome from Harding, a research group headed by Alison Wylie (University of British Columbia) presented a project currently under development that included a podcast in which Sandra Harding discussed the impact of the anthology and promised future podcasts with other contributors. This project contains the history
of this area of feminist philosophy and will be especially useful for future generations.

Motivated by the work of Naomi Scheman (Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota), Lauren Edwards (York University) presented "Pernicious Love Myths," an engaging example of the way in which the anthology is motivating research today. In the presentation, Edwards challenges scientific constructions of love as a relation that is gendered, narrowly understood as romantic, and marginalizes the experiences of non-cisgendered individuals.

As an Indigenous philosopher who conducts research in social epistemology, I opted to consider the reliability on an Indigenous standpoint in science involving First Nation/American Indian populations. I suggest that a First Nations/American Indian standpoint would be more appropriate in certain instances than one that relies on a broader (read global) Indigenous standpoint. My presentation provides only a general sketch in support of such a theory. It primarily identifies some of the questions and issues that would involve the use of a First Nations/American Indian standpoint.

The final presentation of the symposium was provided by Naomi Scheman, who spoke on being included in the anthology, and the environment in which the development of a decidedly feminist epistemology arose. She addressed the topics of the papers presented by myself and Edwards, and noted the directions for future research. As she discussed her account of individualism in political theory and social science methodology, I could not help but think that an Indigenous worldview, one that is more communal and not as individual, would complement her critique of Western science.

What follows is my contribution to the symposium. I wrote it with the intention of addressing the impact of Discovering Reality, as well as considering the implications for the future. There were no Indigenous contributors to the anthology, and given how the experiences of Indigenous (and colonized) people are often conflated, I suggest that some research questions may require a more fine-grained theory of Indigenous standpoint. If the challenges to patriarchal science were posited in order to secure a better understanding of human nature, then the knowledge needed to achieve understanding must include First Nation/American Indian lived experiences.

Research in various areas, such as health disparities and the politics of education curriculum, point to a First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory, noting its use in knowledge production. Absent of any formal account of a First Nations/American Indian standpoint, researchers in one case tailor a global Indigenous standpoint theory, such as that provided by Aileen Moreton-Robinson or Martin Nakata, to suit their needs. In the other case, the author works from the feminist critiques of philosophers in developing nations, like Jitendra Mohanty, Uma Narayan, and Chela Sandoval, to craft a standpoint associated with colonialism. These cases prompt the question of whether an Indigenous standpoint theory—one that may be global but still engages with historical and contemporary colonialism—is adequate, or even morally acceptable, as a resource for research concerning First Nation/American Indian issues. If we consider First Nations/American Indian philosophical thought and the nations' unique engagement with colonialism, I am not convinced that we should just "make do." Thus, I propose the need for a more formal account.

A general sketch of a First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory must address the use of "Indigenous" as a way of denoting First Nations, American Indians, Métis, Inuit, and Alaskan Natives of North America. The use of the term "Indigenous" is broader; it denotes other individuals and communities across the globe. Using "Indigenous" may gloss over some critical differences between groups of people, even if they all have experienced colonialism. Colonialism is complex and it is not dead—it is contemporary. Even if Indigenous communities over the globe experienced the same historical treatment, it does not necessarily mean they have similar experiences now.

With differences in philosophical thought and worldview, it makes sense to distinguish between Indigenous and First Nations/American Indian standpoint theories. (I am not saying we can't use Indigenous standpoint theory when formulating a theory for First Nations/American Indians or that the authors in the above articles are wrong for tailoring Indigenous conceptions to fit their needs. Rather, we should attend to the critical differences of all Indigenous nations/communities if we are seeking a more complete understanding of humanity, and I suggest formal theorizing to do that.)

This prompts an additional question: If key differences are a distinguishing feature, then shouldn't there be a standpoint for each community/nation? I feel the significance of this observation. In fact, the issue mirrors the conversations in the discipline as to whether it is better to use the term "Indigenous philosophy" or 'Indigenous philosophies'—or better yet, refer to the specific community or nation, as in "Muscogee philosophy." The language of the colonizer has as its goal the erasure of First Nations/American Indians; it is easier to lump groups together (with the added comfort of no need to pronounce specific names). It also reduces the issues with those nations/communities to a single problem. I am reminded of Duncan Campbell Scott's goal of getting rid of the "Indian Problem"—as described, it permitted the eradication of First Nations people through assimilation or extermination.

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Hensci, Estonko! (Greetings in the language of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma.) It is an honor to take part in this symposium and to be associated with such distinguished scholars, especially since their work has made a profound impact on my own. As I consider the changes in our discipline since the publication of Discovering Reality and turn my thoughts to the future, I envision a theory of First Nations/American Indian standpoint. In this talk, I provide a general sketch of the theory while also calling attention to some interesting questions, and concerns for future research.
Yet, there are times when grouping by similarities affords the opportunity to speak more generally. For example, many communities maintain that they stand in relation to all things, which is useful for thinking about an Indigenous approach to environmental issues for example, or when trying to understand an Indigenous conception of “sacred.” The research on health disparities benefits from a more general usage of Indigenous (referring to the Indigenous of North America) because it provides an adequate sample size (so long as there are relevant similarities among nations). Similar to the treatment of race as a socially constructed category, researchers might use “Indigenous,” not because it is a natural kind, but because it does work. Having addressed some initial worries, I turn to a general sketch of a First Nations/American Indian standpoint as a way of theorizing knowledge from a position that distinguishes itself from the settler-colonial view. Canada, Mexico, and the United States are settler-colonial states that conducted “profound epistemic, ontological, [and] cosmological violence” against First Nations/American Indians to secure land as “[a] home and [a] source of capital.” As such, First Nations/American Indian standpoint is incommensurable with other feminist standpoint theories, even those incorporating intersectional analyses. This result stems from different kinds of knowing. For First Nations/American Indian communities/nations, the exchange of knowledge assumes many forms and is shared amongst relations, human and nonhuman. Stories are not myths and dreams and/or visions are sources of knowledge. The knowledge is not propositional, but it is discursive, resulting from walking in two worlds; it takes place in a space that exists between First Nations/American Indian and Western knowledges. A First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory not only situates First Nation/American Indian epistemology, but it also centers sovereignty in a current colonial context. Given that it is “informed by politics, history, knowledges, family (relations), and collective consciousness” there is an awareness that First Nation/American Indian “epistemologies have been omitted from the creation and implementation of knowledge” regarding them. It seeks to restore balance and harmony to interactions with non-Indigenous researchers/scientists by advocating for the nation/community. As such, research should be undertaken by the communities or with sovereign oversight. Research must also be conducted for the benefit of First Nations/American Indians as well as be consistent with their interests. A First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory is unsettling. That is to say that it is decolonial and the goal is to repatriate/rematriate the land and ways of living. Given its goal, how decolonization is defined or understood is critical. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang note that although some ways of conceiving of decolonization may be consistent with social justice projects, they have the worrisome trait of relying on a metaphorical sense of decolonization. What makes this troubling is that a metaphorical sense of decolonization makes available strategies that “actually further settler colonialism.” It allows for an unearned alliance through the language of putative solidarity—such as “decolonizing our schools” or using “decolonizing methods.” Such language avoids the real task of decolonization and instead “recenters whiteness, it restatifies theory, it extends innocence to the settler, [and] it entertains a settler future.” The project of reconciliation is also impacted by the sense of decolonization underwriting a First Nations/American Indian standpoint. Reconciliation can only arise in a context of respectful relations. As Tuck and Yang remind us, “decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.” Solidarity is not sufficient for decolonization, as it “neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict.” It enables its settler participants to avoid the hard work of repatriating/rematriating First Nations/American Indian land and life. Reconciliation will only come if decolonization is attained, so what sense of decolonization grounds a First Nations/American Indian standpoint matters. Given that decolonization plays such a foundational role in the First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory, the priority of social efforts to Indigenize institutions lessens. Indigenization is a project of social justice, but not of decolonization. Increasing the number of First Nations/American Indian researchers, developing curriculums, and centering research are socially just, but not decolonial. Another side of the same coin reveals that the First Nation/American Indian projects of resurgence, resistance, and resilience, however, increase in importance because they emphasize particular, precontact/pre-removal/pre-assimilative/precolonial methods and content of knowledge production. Attendant to the epistemology is a system of values as well as a communal identity that cannot be extracted. Like a braid of sweetgrass, the areas comprising the content of our discipline—the metaphysics, the epistemology, and values—are tightly interwoven. The repatriation/rematriation of First Nation/American Indian life takes place within these contexts. Resurgence includes a reclamation of languages and cultural practices/protocols. It also assumes a form of resistance to present-day colonialism in the adoption and/or pre-contact/first colonialism/first assimilative methods and content of knowledge production. To this end, Simpson asks a simple question, the answer of which indicates the framework for the resistance: “Do my Ancestors recognize me as their own?” The type of resistance endorsed by Simpson entails the reclamation, and continuity, of the cultural practices and traditions that gave rise to the resilience of the people in the face of historical colonial policies. As Simpson explains, when my indigeneity grows, I am more connected. I fall more in love with my homeland, my family, my culture, and my language and more in line with the thousands of stories that demonstrate how to live a meaningful life, and I have more emotional capital to fight and protect what is meaningful to me. I am a bigger threat to the Canadian state and its plans to build pipelines across my body, clear-cut my forests, contaminate [sic] my lakes with
toxic cottages and chemicals, and make my body a site of continual sexualized violence.  

Simpson’s call to resist by doing as we have always done cannot be adequately addressed by the concept of intersectionality. The specificity of context supports the need for a more formal account of a First Nation/American Indian standpoint—and may even provide resources for determining the scaling of the standpoint up to denote “Indigenous” groups—bounded by Turtle Island or a more global conception—to scaling down when relevant distinctions and context demand specificity at the level of nation, or perhaps clan. It might be the case that language families (given that language is the seat of knowledge) be a way to assess the “boundaries” of a standpoint.

The formulation of a First Nation/American Indian standpoint theory will not only contribute to more meaningful research regarding those nations/communities, but it also has the resources to contribute to the discussions of settler ignorance and the epistemologies of ignorance. Similar to the Indigenous critique levied by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (that Western theories of standpoint and intersectionality fail to adequately address colonialism), the Western frameworks of epistemologies of ignorance and their solutions rely on a less focused, and too frequently, that of race or of colonialism (but where all colonized people are the same). A more formal conception of First Nation/American Indian standpoint may serve as a guide for locating key features to distinguish cases of ignorance from one another, such as white ignorance from settler ignorance. Charles Mills notes that white ignorance is not exclusive to white people, but its focus is racial.  

What exactly are the differences between a First Nations/American Indian standpoint theory and one that is Indigenous? I suggest that it can be found in the unique relations with the land and the efforts to maintain them in the face of colonialism. Some communities have unique relations with the beings of their traditional land—the Makah and the whales, the Ojibwe and wild rice (minoomin), and the Muscogee Nation and turtles. Through colonial policies of removal, some nations have relations that must be re-established. Some must work against the building of dams that prevent salmon from swimming upriver to spawn and others must work against mining, fracking, and threats from the transport of dangerous materials. I suggest that it is these differences in the maintenance of relations that indicate when to scale up or down the theory.

As I look to the next twenty years, I wish to point out that a First Nations/American Indian standpoint, one that distinguishes itself from a global Indigenous one, is not solely to right the historical wrongs of knowledge production in a colonial context (past tense). Rather, it is a way of bringing First Nations/Americans to the research in a respectful way—read moral way. There is a normative sense associated with living in the world. According to Viola Cordova (Jicarilla Apache), “the universe is a good thing—a goodness is inherent in the fact that the moving, living universe operates on the principles of balance and harmony.” Given that what humans do contributes to the creation of the world, individuals are obligated to act in those ways that “maintain balance” and harmony. If “I am responsible for adding to the world a new thing,” then it must be consistent with the values of the Indigenous communities that affirm this unique way of being in the world. The discovering of reality is a normative practice. What knowledge we introduce into the world determines whether the balance is upset, restored, or maintained. A standpoint that endorses nation sovereignty will address historical errors, but it will also enable new productions to be accomplished in the right way, in a way that our ancestors would recognize.

NOTES

3. See Martin Nakata, Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Discipline, especially Chapter 11.
16. Leanne B. Simpson, As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance, 179.
17. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 182–83.

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Rethinking a 1970s Timeline for a History of Environmental Ethics

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Ryan Mulloy: Opening the Environmental Ethics syllabus for the first time, I looked through the course readings, and was surprised to see articles by multiple Indigenous philosophers. Growing up as an Indigenous (Ojibwe) student in public education, Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge were always taught separately. Indigenous knowledge was learned primarily through stories, traditions, and the land. The public schools in Minneapolis allowed for “Indian education,” but the way it worked in practice was that once every two weeks, community elders would come to school, remove the few Indigenous students from class, and educate us in the traditional way. The two methods, of Western and Indigenous education, never mixed. A wave of anticipation rushed through me as I looked forward to the first day of class in which we would be discussing Indigenous ethics at a public university.

In the first course reading by the philosopher Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi), Whyte discusses concepts such as kinship and reciprocity in the context of the environment and environmental justice. It was Áila’s intention for this piece by Whyte to ground the course, but after seeing how some of the students struggled with these concepts, I was skeptical that it would work. It was not that the concepts were too difficult for the students; rather, it seemed they were too strange. One student expressed to me their particular difficulty imagining how one could have genuine, reciprocal relationships with non-human animals.

However, as the weeks went by and we progressed further into the material, reading works by non-Indigenous philosophers, the other students continued to carry those Indigenous concepts. While discussing works of environmental virtue ethics, or deontology, the Indigenous ethics remained in discourse. Now after having finished the course, I can no longer conceive of a conversation on environmental ethics without including Indigenous ethics.

After this course the disparate dichotomy between Western and Indigenous education that I previously felt has come closer to being reconciled.

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Áila O’Loughlin: While preparing material to teach the spring section of Environmental Ethics (EE), I could not find a single overview history of EE that included the formative contributions to the discipline of Indigenous peoples, philosophy, thought, or philosophers. As an American child of an Irish father and Sámi/Finnish mother, I knew the influence of my own Sámi relatives on environmental philosophers and activists like Arne Naess and Greta Thunberg. As a scholar of kinship ethics, I view work from philosophers Kyle Whyte and Brian Burkhart as the forefront of practical ethics as it pertains to the environment. And as a global citizen, I know that since Indigenous peoples protect 80 percent of the planet’s biodiversity, which is increasingly threatened by climate crisis, Indigenous rights are environmental rights. Yet, where was this Indigenous history past, present, and future in the philosophical accounts on the history of environmental ethics? So I did what all other philosophers before me have done when the canon excludes voices integral to the subject: I supplemented. And lectured. And attempted to offer an alternative history of environmental philosophy that doesn’t hold on to Indigenous erasure. The purpose of this paper, written by both student and instructor, is to challenge that Indigenous erasure in historical accounts of environmental ethics.

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This paper is about the history of environmental ethics. Specifically, we argue that any account of the history of environmental ethics that does not include the foundational role of Indigenous thought is inaccurate. Environmental ethics’ (EE) emergence as a distinct field of philosophical study began in the 1970s, according to prominent accounts. However, in this paper, we challenge the 1970s genesis timeline for the history of EE by highlighting the foundational role of Indigenous peoples and thought in the formation of the field. We aim to show Indigenous peoples have been doing EE before its 1970s emergence as an academic discipline, and are constitutive to the philosophical subdiscipline of environmental ethics since the 1970s.

Environmental ethics is a growing sub-discipline of philosophy germane to pressing contemporary issues such as the climate crisis. When we use the term “environmental ethics” in this paper, we mean any philosophical study of moral value as it pertains to the environment, as well as the relations between subjects that constitute that environment. Literature in the field commonly cites the 1970s as the “beginning” of environmental ethics, with references to the 1949 work of Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac, Lynn White’s 1967 The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, and Rachel Carson’s 1962 Silent Spring as formative for the field. Alternatively, philosophers have also credited seventeenth- to nineteenth-century social contract theory and philosophy of science as proto-EE that laid groundwork for the academic discipline.


Along with the work from zoologist Rachel Carson, historian Lynn White, and agricultural economist Aldo Leopold, Indigenous practices and thought are foundational to the philosophical subdiscipline of EE; however, the role of Indigenous thought is often absent from canonical historical accounts. By showcasing examples of the bedrock role of Indigenous thought to the academic discipline of EE, we hope to motivate a correction to that absence in future historical accounts.

The first EE movement we highlight in this paper to showcase the essential role of Indigenous thought in environmental ethics is deep ecology. Coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, deep ecology takes a holistic approach to EE, and places moral significance on whole ecosystems. Deep ecology stands in contrast with shallow ecology; shallow ecology is Naess’s term for environmental movements he deems superficial, or short sighted. Naess views these shallow movements as merely concerned with fighting pollution and supporting the well-being of people in developed nations. Conversely, deep ecology positions itself as a long-range movement focused on decentralization, and symbiosis of all living things across the planet. The first tenant of deep ecology claims, “The deep ecology movement rejects the human-in-environment image in favor of the relational, totalfield image: organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations.” This relational-based understanding of the human and non-human world underpins all of Naess’s ethics. An example of practical Indigenous environmental ethics as influential to Naess’s framework can be found in his travels to Nepal:

During a climbing expedition in Nepal, Naess discovered with surprise that the Sherpa people would not venture on to certain mountains they considered holy or sacred. Naess and two of his Norwegian friends took inspiration from this reverence for mountains to formulate a new philosophy that would extend the same moral regard to all of nature.

Through learning about Indigenous Sherpas’ practices, Naess found inspiration for his ecosophy.

Further, Arne Naess cites the Indigenous Sámi worldview as influential to his writings on deep ecology. Both in the film The Call of the Mountain (1997), which details Naess’s life and work, as well as an interview with Naess made for the film’s release, Naas repeatedly cites the Sámi response to the Alta Dam construction in Norway as inspiration for his life and writing. In the interview, Naess recalls:

Yeah, the Sámi people, they astonished me; one young man there, a Sámi man, who was caught by the police, standing where they should make a road. It was a part of direct action in favor of the river that should not be used for hydro-electric dams. And the police: “Why do you stay here?” “Well, this here, is part of myself.” . . . that he could say “it is part of myself.” And that is typical of deep ecology movement.

To be clear, in Naess’s own work, Naess cites Indigenous practices and worldview, from both his travels to Nepal as well as his home country in Norway, as fundamental to the formation of deep ecology. Deep ecology is considered a cornerstone movement in the history of EE, yet the role of Indigenous knowledge and practice is absent from prominent historical accounts.

In addition to deep ecology, environmental philosopher Baird Callicott’s work, much of which interprets and builds from Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac, directly cites Indigenous practices of EE. In Leopold’s Part II: Chihuahua and Sonora from A Sand County Almanac, Leopold references traditional ecological knowledge from the multiple Indigenous tribal nations of North America as emblematic of the ethical claims he was advancing in his text that whole ecosystems have moral value. In Callicott’s 1994 Earth’s Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics, Callicott compares environmental ethical frameworks from around the world, including what Callicott refers to as “Indigenous African Environmental Ethics” and “American Indian Environmental Ethics.” The work of both Callicott and Leopold’s Land Ethics as those land ethics engage with Indigenous environmental ethics is the subject of several contemporary peer-reviewed articles in EE.

So far in this text, we aim to have shown the ways that pre-1970s Indigenous environmental ethics has been fundamental to early work in academic philosophy on moral value and the environment. Prominent literature on the history of EE places the origins of EE in the 1970s; nonetheless, people have been practicing and studying EE since well before then. And in fact, early environmental philosophers such as Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold, and Baird Callicott directly reference the pre-1970s environmental ethics of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, just as Rachel Carson or Lynn White are included in the history of environmental ethics due to the influence of their work on environmental philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s, so too ought we accurately reference the bedrock influence of Indigenous practical environmental ethics on the academic discipline of EE.

Today, the growing sub-discipline of EE still includes the cornerstone movements of Naess’s deep ecology as well as Leopold’s, and then Callicott’s, land ethic. Since the 1970s, academic environmental philosophy has galvanized additional movements in EE such as environmental pragmatism, ecofeminism, and Indigenous kinship ethics (IKE). The prominent literature on the history of EE does not mention Indigenous kinship ethics as a major movement in the field despite philosophers working on IKE contributing greatly to environmental philosophy. Kinship is a large topic, but we follow Kyle Whyte’s (2020) description here:

For Potawatomi, Quechua, and Sámi peoples, qtegeman, papa arariwa, and siida are kinship relationships that serve as ethical systems that motivate humans to be responsible for protecting the environment. That is, they are relationships with qualities of reciprocity. Dialogue across Indigenous peoples on reciprocity is a global conversation that we have with each other.
Here, Whyte provides a working definition of kinship as a criterion for ethical action, as well as details the role that kinship plays in a practice and study of ethical behavior when it comes to the environment.

In Indigenous communities, ethical thinking starts in childhood through storytelling and community mentorship, both of which provide a behavioral and moral framework of how to interact and form kinship bonds with the world. One of the ways these kinship bonds are strengthened is through acts of reciprocal gift giving. For instance, in Ojibwe culture it is common to leave a gift of tobacco at the base of a tree from which medicine is gathered. The tree’s gift of medicine is reciprocated by the human, through the gift of tobacco. These acts of reciprocal gift giving demonstrate the interdependence of life, which is fundamental to kinship ethics.

Indigenous philosophers such as V. F. Cordova, Vine Deloria Jr., Kyle Whyte, and Brian Burkhart have all published prolific academic work on kinship as it pertains to the environmental. This work often cites traditional Indigenous practices that have been central to Indigenous environmental study and stewardship long before the 1970s. By highlighting the contributions of Indigenous kinship ethics in EE today, we hope to draw a throughline to the fundamental role of Indigenous thought in the development of EE, both in genesis as well as contemporary scholarship. Indigenous thought has always inextricably studied, and continues to study, moral value as it pertains to the environment. Indigenous thought continues, as well, to contribute greatly to the academic field of EE. Therefore, any historical work on EE would be inaccurate without an inclusion of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous kinship practices. The influence of Indigenous thought on deep ecology and land ethic challenges the 1970s genesis timeline; the rich history of Indigenous kinship ethics demonstrates that Indigenous thought was not only integral to the formation of the academic field of EE in its inception, but continues to offer vital developments today.

The 1970s genesis timeline is one story about the history of environmental ethics. We propose an alternative story. This alternative story could go something like this: Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have practiced a study of moral value as it pertains to the environment and all its constituents. For example, the Haudenosaunee democracy formalized the Seventh Generation Principle, which measures right action according to how it impacts generations (of human and other-than-humans) in the future. This kind of practical Indigenous environmental ethics largely influenced the formation of the subdiscipline of EE in philosophy, which emerged in the 1970s, as credited by major early EE philosophers such as Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess. In addition, the publication of environmental theory in other fields greatly influenced the formation of EE as a subdiscipline in philosophy, such as zoologist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or historian Lynn White's *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. Today, environmental ethics is a broad philosophical subdiscipline that studies moral value as it pertains to the environment through canonical movements (such as deep ecology, environmental pragmatism, ecofeminism, or Indigenous kinship ethics) as well as topics and puzzles (such as geoengineering, animal rights, or collective responsibility).

This alternative story more accurately reflects the beginning of the study of moral value as it pertains to the environment, as well as how the academic discipline of philosophy has developed considerations on the environment over the past fifty years. In total, this paper aims to highlight the Indigenous influence on the EE movements of deep ecology and land ethic, as well as detail Indigenous kinship ethics as a major contemporary movement in EE that is often left out from prominent literature on the history of environmental ethics. Ultimately, we challenge the 1970s genesis timeline that remains a prevalent narrative by showing that Indigenous people have been doing EE before its 1970s emergence as an academic discipline, as well as continue to contribute crucially to that academic discipline since the ’70s. Due to this historical influence and contemporary contribution, we contend that any history of environmental ethics that does not include Indigenous peoples and thought is inaccurate. Finally, last spring, as both student and instructor, we each prepared for an upcoming environmental ethics course carrying the weight of known Indigenous erasure into the classroom. Together, we look forward to the next era of a history of philosophy where it is no longer possible to conceive of a conversation on environmental ethics without including Indigenous ethics.

NOTES

7. Boeckel, Jan van, *Interview with Norwegian Ecco-philosopher Arne Naess.*
12. This principle is referenced in philosopher William MacAskill’s *What We Owe the Future* (2022).

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FROM THE EDITORS

Anthony Sean Neal
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This issue of APA Studies in Philosophy and the Black Experience marks a transition in the editorial staff. The recent past editors, Drs. Stephen C. Ferguson and Dwayne A. Tunstall, were part of a long line of editors who desired to present the best version of writings authored by philosophers who had a focus on the Black experience. This transitory moment is not a step away from the tradition formed in the past. In many ways, this is a re-investment in the notion that gave rise to the significance of the initial publication of the Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience.

Accordingly, Leonard Harris wrote the following:

The title “Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience” is informed by W.E.B. Du Bois’ Black Folk: Then and Now and St. Clair Drake’s Black Folk: Here and There. “Black” is not definable by simple reference to biology, actual color or place of origin. It has to do with the way people, frequently African people, have been understood and identified through the aegis of biology, color, and origin. Crucial to that understanding and identity are individual and group cultural and material experiences that cover the range of possible human experiences, including subjugation, separation of people by race, and forms of resistance accompanying immiseration. Racial and ethnic forms of alterity, infused in the entrails of what it is to be a person, whether in Black Athena (Martin Bernal), post-colonial India, Yugoslavia, Brazil or America inform the concerns of NPBE.

If the history of racism and ethnocentricty worldwide were not so divisive and malignant, the need for a publication on the Black experience might be no greater than the need for a publication on the experiences of Croations or tall people. The cutting edge of social reality, however, helps shape and reshape experiences that warrant attention. It is also attention to that edge that may offer a basis for universality, human bonding, and universal emancipation.

During our service as the new editors of APA Studies in Philosophy and the Black Experience, we hope to stay the course while allowing space for innovation. As a part of this innovation and along with the inclusion of the occasional book review, APA Studies in Philosophy and the Black Experience will have a section entitled Mentions, where we attempt to make mention of all new books by Black philosophers, or books about Black philosophers, or books about the Black experience. In order to accomplish this task, help is needed from the readership, or anyone interested in making sure that there exists an archival record for future scholars. We ask that you email your new titles, or titles of which you become aware, to apa.philbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

Thank you for your support in the past, and we hope to continue to be worthy of your support in the future.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

APA Studies on Philosophy and the Black Experience is published by the Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between ten and twenty pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between five and seven pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author.

DEADLINES
Fall issues: May 1
Spring issues: December 1

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INTRODUCTION: MY PATHWAY INTO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

My path into the discipline of philosophy generally and African philosophy in particular was unusual. This had to do with the fact that in my home country, Kenya, philosophy is not taught in primary and secondary schools. Neither is it taught in technical and vocational colleges. It is taught only in universities. Therefore, when I applied for admission to the University of Nairobi (UoN), since I was not familiar with the discipline of philosophy, I applied to undertake a BA degree in government (political science). This was a discipline I was acquainted with and was quite popular within the academy and among the populace also.

When I gained admission in September 1979, I registered as a student in the Department of Government. However, unknown to me, students admitted to the then Faculty of Arts at the UoN were required to register in three Departments in the Faculty during their first year of study. For the sake of fulfilling that requirement, I went ahead and also enrolled in literature in English and philosophy, which were housed in the Departments of Literature and Philosophy, respectively.

However, during the course of my first year of study, my interest shifted from the discipline of government to philosophy. This was largely because of the nature and subject matter of philosophy. The unrestricted attribute of philosophy and the pertinent questions that it addresses stood out for me. Its concern with the nature of being and the human condition, and its focus on those questions we ask about life and how we should live, enthralled me. It then (also) dawned on me that political science, the discipline I so much desired to pursue at the university, was actually a component of philosophy in the form of political philosophy. Because of the shift in interest, during my second year, I dropped both literature in English and political science and pursued philosophy. The other reason why I became attracted to philosophy had to do with the attitude of the philosophy lecturers toward their students. Whether by chance or design, they were down-to-earth and personable. Despite their levels of education, they were objective in their approach to issues and did not have or appear to have a know-it-all attitude. During tutorials, the lecturers more or less played the role of moderators and encouraged all to express their views. Just as a midwife does not give her own child to the expectant mother, they did not push their own ideas and views on the students. The philosophy lecturers seem to have adopted the famous Socratic metaphor where a philosopher is portrayed as a midwife of the intellect. I found this approach to be as unique as it was desirable.

During my three-year undergraduate studies, as much as I liked philosophy courses, courses in African philosophy appealed more to me. This was mainly because I came to realize that in mainstream philosophical discourses, the discipline was considered to be inherently occidental. The term “African philosophy” in this view constituted a self-contradiction; anything truly philosophical could not be African and anything genuinely African could not be philosophical. Despite my tender age in academia, that view in my considered opinion was prejudiced and misguided. What’s more, I had the benefit of two lecturers grounded in African philosophy who would guide me in my readings and research in African philosophy. These were Henry Odera Oruka and D. A. Masolo. During the long vacations, Odera Oruka would engage me and a couple of other students as research assistants in his “Sage Philosophy Project.” This actually marked the beginning of my engagement with African philosophic sagacity. I went on to undertake my master’s and doctoral studies at the UoN and wrote theses with Afrocentric groundings in the two programs both supervised by Odera Oruka. That then explains how I “strayed” into philosophy generally and African philosophy in particular.

Many of my publications are in the area of African philosophy with a focus on philosophic sagacity, though some are in the areas of logic as well as social and moral philosophy; areas that I consider core to philosophy. But even in these latter areas, I ground myself on issues pertaining to or relevant to Africa and its diaspora. This is because ideally philosophy and social milieu should not be separated. They constitute a continuum in that social milieu affects the content of philosophy and, on the other hand, the content of philosophy seeks to affect the social milieu, either by confirming it or opposing it. Unfortunately, the manner in which the discipline of philosophy is taught at several universities—including those in Africa—seems to defy this connection. Currently, in most institutions of higher learning, philosophy programs are but exercises in Western philosophy producing students who are grounded in the history of Western philosophy; students with capabilities of quoting faithfully from Western philosophers of the ancient era to those in contemporary times. In other words,
a vast majority of degrees in philosophy are fundamentally
degrees in Western philosophy. Even more unfortunate
is the fact that a good number of universities in Africa
with programs in philosophy also follow the same trend.
It is incumbent on all African and Africanist philosophers
teaching in universities to push for the inclusion of courses
with African foundations and themes.

TRENDS IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
One way of initiating students into the discipline of
African philosophy is by introducing them to the trends.
In his paper "Four Trends in Current African Philosophy,"
Odera Oruka identified four broad categories in African
philosophy. These four categories have been referred to
variously. Some allude to them as approaches, whereas
others call them schools of thought. Odera Oruka referred
to them as trends. The four broad categories are ethno-
philosophy, professional philosophy, philosophic sagacity,
and nationalist-ideological philosophy. In his later work, he
added two more categories, namely, literary/artistic trend
and hermeneutic trend. These two, however, were never
appropriately explained and developed fully.1

The ethno-philosophical approach identifies African philosophy with the totality of customs and common
beliefs of a people. African philosophy is construed as
impersonal in that it is not identified with any particular
individual(s). It is the philosophy of everybody; it is
understood and accepted by everyone. In a way, therefore,
it is a philosophy without philosophers. In this approach,
communality is the essential attribute of African philosophy
as opposed to European philosophy, which is construed
to be individualistic—as consisting of a body of thoughts
produced or formulated by various individual thinkers.

In contradistinction, the professional approach holds the
view that African philosophy should be critical and individual.
The approach grants the existence of African philosophy
in the academic/professional sense. The thinking in this
approach is that what passes as philosophy proper must be
a thought that is critical, systematic, rigorous, and
independent. The thought must be enshrined with argument
and criticism since "philosophy as a theoretical discipline is
devoted to detailed and complicated argument."2 Bodunrin
aptly summarizes philosophy as "a conscious creation.
One cannot be said to have a philosophy in the strict
sense of the word until one has consciously reflected on
one's beliefs."3 Proponents of the professional approach,
therefore, argued for the destruction of the use of "African
philosophy" where "philosophy" is understood in the
idiosyncratic sense.

While I have always been sympathetic to the position of the
professional approach, I believe that there is some sense
in the ethno-philosophical standpoint. The view by the
professional approach that philosophy must always operate
at a higher rarefied level and with deep abstractions is
not always true even in Western philosophy. For example,
Descartes, often referred to as the father of modern
Western philosophy, writes very simply and like an ordinary
commonsense thinker. Philosophy can in many ways be
expressed very simply with no metaphysical mysteries or
epistemological banality. Some very good philosophers are
not as abstract as some people would wish them to be.
Philosophy, in my opinion, is two-dimensional: there is the
academic facet and the popular slant. While the academic
sense of philosophy emphasizes the critical and analytical
aspect of thought, the popular sense equates philosophy
with an individual's or group's general outlook on life or
some aspects of it. While the professional philosophers
tend to lean towards the academic sense of philosophy,
the ethno-philosophers are inclined to the popular sense.
The problem in the debate between the professional
philosophers and the ethno-philosophers was that the
debate proceeded as if it was an "either . . . or . . ." affair
in the exclusive sense; yet the appropriate position was
that the disjunction should have been understood in the
inclusive sense.

The philosophic sagacity approach, as formulated and
championed by Odera Oruka, stipulates that there exists
African philosophy in the professional second-order sense.
It maintains that African philosophy does not begin and
end in communal folk thought and, more importantly, that
Africans even without outside influences are not innocent
of logical and dialectical mode of inquiry. Some critics of
Tempels had challenged him that he identify at least one
African philosopher to strengthen his hypothesis regarding
the existence of African philosophy. Philosophic sagacity
seems to have come to Tempels's rescue in this regard by
identifying individual Africans in the traditional setup who
are thinkers in the second-order sense—philosophic sages.
Philosophic sagacity, therefore, marries the dominant
elements in the ethno-philosophical and professional
approaches, that is, it reflects the professionalism in the
latter and Africanness in the former.4

In the nationalist-ideological philosophy approach, the
position is that in the modern world, African philosophy
can only be revived if and when the African society is
truly free and independent. The apparent belief is that the
exact nature of African philosophy would remain elusive
until and unless African society disengages itself from the
yoke of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. It
is necessary that it reverts to some of its former cardinal
principles of indigenous Africa. Since this approach is
basically concerned with the question of emancipation
of African nation-states and hence with the political and
ideological thoughts and strategies that would lead to the
same, its sphere of operation is fairly broad in comparison
to the other schools of thought. It includes the thoughts and
writings of leading African statesmen (former and current)
and those scholars whose bent of minds and writings are
of political nature. The subject matter of this approach has
to do with Africa's social, cultural, political, and economic
problems in traditional, colonial, and postcolonial periods.

The starting point of the hermeneutical trend is its
reverence for African traditions, which should, however, be
followed by critical analysis. It is a trend that is radically
open and susceptible to that which is preserved in Africa's
own cultural heritage. At the same time, it is critical of
tradition to the extent that the cultural elements that have
been preserved in it have ossified and are a hindrance to
the requirements of contemporary existence. This fruitful
tension between esteem and criticism, when properly
A S O M E  P R A C T I C A L  R E L E V A N C E  O F  P H I L O S O P H I C  S A G A C I T Y

Most of my writings reflect the practical significance of philosophic sagacity, but in this article, I highlight only five of the essays.

In “Philosophic Sagacity: A Classical Comprehension and Relevance to Post-colonial Social Spaces in Africa,” I trace and discuss the origins of philosophic sagacity to two research projects that were initiated by Odera Oruka, titled “Thoughts of Traditional Kenyan Sages” and “The Philosophical Roots of Culture in Kenya,” in 1974 and 1976, respectively. While the aim of the first project was largely theoretical, it is in the second project that one explicitly notices the practical significance of philosophic sagacity to the social-political spaces in African countries in general. In that research project, he argued that if the thoughts of the sages were granted more intellectual and social spaces in modern Africa, then that would enable African cultures to withstand invasion by foreign ideas and values, especially those that are objectionable. Any culture has both practical and theoretical aspects. Things such as music, dance, and fashion constitute the practical aspect. The theoretical aspect is formed by the philosophy which justifies such activities. A culture without a clear philosophy is actually incomplete and vulnerable to foreign values and isms, no matter how distasteful they may be. This is the reality that various African cultures have to grapple with today. One sure way to avoid the invasion is for the people to advance and articulate the philosophy of their culture and this it can do through philosophic sagacity. Herein lies a practical significance of African philosophic sagacity.

"Philosophic Sagacity: Aims and Functions" (2009) is an essay in which I outline three aims and functions of philosophic sagacity. I refer to these as the academic, cultural-nationalist, and epistemic functions. While the academic function is explicitly intellectual and theoretical, the other two point to the practical significance of the approach. Concerning the cultural-nationalist function, African scholars and cultural conservationists are challenged to investigate and unearth the principles upon which African customs and traditions are anchored. This, it is argued, is necessary both for posterity and for the development of a national culture. This investigation or research should be a part of the national program in every African state. The practical epistemic function of sages is illustrated using Odera Oruka’s exposition in “Sagacity in Development.” In that essay, it is argued and demonstrated that if sages are used as sources of information, then their explanations can go a long way in shedding some light on the socio-cultural factors (problems) that affect change and development in their societies. Government and non-governmental organization officials in African countries who are concerned with development strategies and plans should therefore consult and utilize the thoughts of sages if they sincerely wish to attain any meaningful degree of success in their development endeavors. Within the epistemic function, philosophic sagacity is considered to be a source as well as a storehouse of knowledge. The interest in this function of sagacity is that philosophic discussions and discourses should focus on various features and themes that emanate from indigenous African societies. These could be cultural, religious, linguistic, etc. The basic difference between the epistemic function and the cultural-nationalist one is that, whereas in the latter the aim is primarily to unearth the fundamental principles of culture with a view to creating a national culture leading to harmonious co-existence, in the former, the aim is to generate and sustain philosophical discussions with African themes.

In “The Tripartite in Philosophic Sagacity,” I go further to show some relationship between the three functions of philosophic sagacity—academic, cultural-nationalist, and epistemic—with the corresponding three approaches to African philosophy—professional philosophy, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and ethnophilosophy—respectively. I demonstrate that the academic function corresponds to the professional school, the cultural nationalist function to the nationalist-ideological philosophy trend, and the epistemic function to ethnophilosophy. In the essay, I also distinguish three shades of philosophic sagacity as represented by myself, North American researcher Gail Presbey, and the renowned Kenyan philosopher D. A. Masolo. Despite the differences in terms of approach and varying epistemological values, it is shown that the efforts in some of their works are to various degrees linked to the aims that Odera Oruka had in mind when he started the philosophic sagacity project—they are therefore works in sagacity. Noteworthy about “The Tripartite in Philosophic Sagacity” is my effort to exhibit, despite variations, the practical value of philosophic sagacity rather than merely explicating and outlining its basic tenets.

“Climate Change Ethics: The End of Development, or New Horizons from African Sagacity?” is a co-authored piece that acknowledges the worldwide problem brought about by climate change. The essay recognizes that climate change, development, human well-being, and human security all go hand-in-hand. It recommends that if meaningful resolutions are to be arrived at in relation to the problems, then the one-sided, though monolithic, suggestions emanating from the Western world cannot resolve the problems by themselves. The essay recommends that it is time to move on to consider African philosophical approaches which have hitherto hardly been brought into the picture. The chapter specifically recommends that philosophic sagacity be taken into account.

The recent co-authored text “Role of Sagacity in Educational Philosophizing” is a demonstration of the application and significance of philosophic sagacity in the realm of education. It honed in on showing the significant function the approach can perform in teaching of philosophy of education in Africa. This is a piece that should interest
educators in Africa. This essay is an attempt to extend and show the significance of philosophic sagacity beyond the general discipline of philosophy. Specifically, it illustrates how the approach could be widened into the sub-discipline of philosophy of education in Africa. The argument advanced is that for the sub-discipline to be genuinely African and truly philosophical, then philosophic sagacity needs to be incorporated as an essential ingredient. Pedagogy of sagacity is therefore recommended as a useful science and art of African philosophy of education. It is argued that this would not only engender critical thinking within the sub-discipline, but would at the same time guarantee its relevance to the African milieu.

COMMUNALISM IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

There is an ongoing conversation regarding the utility of the communal spirit in indigenous African societies. The views have been divergent with some arguing in favor of the individualistic spirit in the modern world. I have myself held a contrary view that privileges communalism also. On this matter, I concur with Wiredu who argued that some aspects of culture in indigenous Africa are good and should be translated into modern African experience. He argued, for instance, that the communal fellowship in traditional society infuses the social life of Africans with a pervasive humanity and fullness of life that visitors to Africa have always easily recognized. This, according to Wiredu, is a quality of African culture that should not only be preserved but positively developed and deepened in the modern world.  

There is no question that indigenous African societies were basically communalistic, and this viewpoint has been well argued and documented by several scholars. Mbeki is renowned to have asserted that in indigenous Africa the underlying maxim is "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." The import of this catchphrase is that in indigenous Africa, it is the community that gives meaning to the individual. Hord also underscores the same idea by asserting that communalism in indigenous African culture is the idea that the identity of the individual is never separable from the sociocultural environment, neither from the wider environment and nature, nor even from the continuity of generations. Identity in indigenous African culture is not some Cartesian abstraction grounded in a solipsistic self-consciousness. Ontologically, cosmologically, spiritually, and normatively, the individual in indigenous African societies is connected to the community which is at the center of every activity, practice, belief, and value. Community, in this sense, is not a mere conglomeration of individuals—the way community is conceptualized in modern individualistic societies—but a tight composite of individuals. The "we" is a comprehensively fused collective. It is a transcendental or organic "we" and cannot be reduced to its parts. The individual self is, by various quasi-organic processes, constituted by the community, and the community is an organically fused collectivity of the individual selves. This "we" is a prism of traditions, structures, interests, values, and beliefs that cannot be pinned down or reduced to the set of individuals and institutions constitutive of the community.

The communalistic spirit is reflected in various African practices and even languages. For example, the Luo ethnic group of Kenya has a phrase "ero kamano," which someone is bound to instantly translate as the English "thank you." However, that would not be accurate. Denotatively, "ero kamano" intimately mirrors the inseparability of "I" and "we" in indigenous African cultures. Someone belonging to the Luo ethnic group would typically utter the phrase "ero kamano" to anyone who performs an act considered to be virtuous, noble, honorable, or magnanimous, etc. The phrase is therefore an expression of gratitude and appreciation. Accordingly, it would be understandable for one to ostensibly translate "ero kamano" as equivalent to "thank you." However, the literal and unvarnished translation of "ero kamano" is "that is how it ought to be" or "that is how it should be." This subtle semantic interpretation is understandable in the context of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." In indigenous Africa, an individual is expected to engage in acts that are consistent with the general well-being of persons. One's conduct and behavior are supposed to conform to or promote the general well-being of the community. Therefore, if and when someone acts accordingly, the person would have done what is expected of him or her; the person would have done the right thing, and so a Luo person will say "ero kamano." In this context, "ero kamano" is less of an expression of gratitude but more of an acknowledgment of an action or behavior in accordance with communal expectations.

Other instances or activities that reflect the communal emphasis in indigenous Africa in contradistinction to the Western world include the rationale for greeting and also eating. In indigenous Africa, the intent to greet is to build relationships; one builds relationships by greeting people. One would not pass others on the way without greeting them even if he or she is not acquainted with them. Doing so would be considered inappropriate and rude. Given the intensity underlying the communal spirit with its attendant cognate conceptions of identity and moral personhood, one is under an obligation to greet others since it is an avenue for establishing relationships and communication. In the Western world, on the other hand, because of its strong individualistic character, one is under no such obligation. In a typical individualistic environment, if one happens to greet someone, then chances are that that person wants to request something of you or obtain some information. Other instances or activities that reflect the communal emphasis in indigenous Africa in contradistinction to the Western world include the rationale for greeting and also eating. In indigenous Africa, the intent to greet is to build relationships; one builds relationships by greeting people. One would not pass others on the way without greeting them even if he or she is not acquainted with them. Doing so would be considered inappropriate and rude. Given the intensity underlying the communal spirit with its attendant cognate conceptions of identity and moral personhood, one is under an obligation to greet others since it is an avenue for establishing relationships and communication. In the Western world, on the other hand, because of its strong individualistic character, one is under no such obligation. In a typical individualistic environment, if one happens to greet someone, then chances are that that person wants to request something of you or obtain some information. In the rural areas and villages in Africa, a greeting is a common phenomenon whereas in the urban areas, it is not. In the villages, if someone passes another without greeting the person (whether one is acquainted with the person or not), that would be considered bizarre and morally unacceptable. In the urban areas, on the contrary, what would be considered bizarre would be when one was to greet someone whom he or she was not acquainted with. All this boils down to the fact that while life in the rural areas and villages is largely communalistic in outlook and orientation, persons in the urban areas have adopted Western values and are generally individualistic. Another activity in indigenous Africa that has a somewhat additional justification based on the communal emphasis is that of eating. It can be argued reasonably that in a typical individualistic Western setup, the activity of eating is mainly directed at acquiring new energy. The
foods people eat provide the much-needed energy to work, support their everyday activities, and promote their survival. In indigenous Africa, however, eating has an added justification. It is also viewed as a social event. People eat not merely in order to acquire new energy but also to share food and have discussions. As people eat, they chat, they tell stories, they discuss. So eating is seen as an activity that goes beyond acquisition of new energy; it has a social dimension to it. Again, in the urban areas, it is quite common to find that during meal times families do not engage in discussions; they would rather have their discussions before or after meals. This is because, in their minds, meal times are basically occasions for acquiring new energy and not talking. The only sounds one would hear during meal times are those made by the clattering of the eating utensils and plates. However, on some few occasions, the urbanites may engage in socialized eating. This would be mostly when they are celebrating holidays and anniversaries.

**SUMMATION**

In summation, I propose two engagements that scholars in African philosophy ought to take seriously. These are (1) articulation of the philosophies that underlie the various African cultures and practices; and (2) giving more visibility and relevance, in the modern world, to the various manifestations of the communal spirit in indigenous African communities.

What is the rationale of the first engagement? As stated earlier, today, Africa finds itself at a crossroads in that it is under "invasion" by foreign cultural values. Foreign cultural values and mannerisms of all sorts are finding their way into the African sphere. However, this in itself is not something bad. At any rate, today’s world is more of a global village and intercultural mingling is a reality. My concern, nonetheless, has been that the progression of this blending has been a one-way affair—from Europeans to Africans—and what’s more, some of the foreign cultural values which are apparently detestable find their way into the African sphere. My submission has been that the reason why foreign cultural values find it easy to penetrate Africa’s cultural space is that Africa has more or less lost sight of the philosophical grounding of its cultures. Besides the articulation of the philosophies, the second engagement is equally important. More visibility should be accorded to the various demonstrations of the communal spirit in indigenous African communities. The demonstrations should include illustrating their utilities in the current global sphere. This is necessary because a narrative has been advanced that modernity and individuality go hand in hand.

The first engagement would assist in the retention of African personality and identity in its interface with values of other cultures of the world. The second engagement would lead to a renaissance of the cardinal humanist principle in indigenous African societies, namely, communalism. There is no doubt in my mind that the retention of African personality and the renaissance of communalism in the modern world would in several ways work in the interest of Africa and its Diaspora.

**NOTES**


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#### INTRODUCTION

Historically, psychology evolved out of philosophy and physiology. In other words, psychology can be said to be the study of philosophy by other means. To the extent that, across the globe today, what is taught in psychology is purely Western or hegemonic psychology, it is safe to say that hegemonic psychology evolved out of Western philosophy. Some examples abound to illustrate Western philosophical underpinnings of hegemonic psychology and its relevance to psychological inquiry. For instance, Burrhus Frederic Skinner’s (1904–1990) operant conditionning was influenced by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) through his adoption of the Baconian inductive method. Similarly, Rene Descartes’s (1596–1650) mechanistic explanations of behavior paved way for exploring stimulus-response theory and radical behaviorism in hegemonic psychology. Again, David Hume’s (1711–1776) exposition on the laws of association of ideas and analysis of causation influenced approaches to experimentation in psychology whereas Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) influenced the emergence of phenomenology in the social and behavioral sciences. Baruch Spinoza’s (1632–1677) philosophical work on emotions also made it possible to investigate emotions as a construct in psychology, and impacted psychoanalytic thinking. Additionally, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) notion of the Dionysian aspect of human nature as das Es metamorphosed into Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) idea of id and his exploration of the concept of repression, which later became foundational to Freudian psychoanalysis. These examples serve to illustrate that, indeed, Western philosophy is the unspoken basis (or at least, settled debates) of today’s scientific psychology.

The above-argued contingency of psychology on philosophy is strengthened by the fact that all sciences that have human beings and their attributes as their subject matter of study must necessarily confront a philosophical question, a response to which conditions the principles and methods of their discipline. The human being is the subject of study of psychology, inasmuch as the discipline deals with the thought processes and behavior of persons. But understanding the outward behavior of persons requires a prior knowledge of what a person is: what is the nature of a person, such that her attributes—her mental processes and her behavior—are worthy subject matters for psychological study. This fundamental question, the question of the nature of a person, is a philosophical question that underlies all applied human sciences and one that conceptually connects philosophy to psychology.

At this juncture, we need to consider what African psychology (or indigenous psychology in Africa) is or could be. Nwoye defines African psychology (APsy) as “the systematic and informed study of the complexities of human mental life, culture and experience in the pre-and post-colonial African world” whereas Ratele defines APSy as “ways of situating oneself in the field of psychology in relation to and from Africa.” We adopt Oppong’s definition that APsy is “an orientation that adopts a culture-conscious approach to the selection of research questions, design, data analysis, and interpretation of results.” When we refer to a person as an “African psychologist,” we do not refer to a geographical location per se but to the person’s orientation and resolve that African perspectives constitute valid ontology and epistemology for expanding the existing narrow perspectives about human nature in Western psychology. It has been argued that hegemonic psychology is underpinned by Western folk and philosophical psychologies. Thus, one cannot study the complexities of human mental life in the African world without exploring the philosophical underpinnings within that context. We, therefore, argue that there cannot be any viable APsy without African philosophy (APh). In the rest of this article, we discuss a potential co-dependence of APsy on APh with the use of the Akan concept of tiboa. We show that tiboa can and ought to be a viable foundation for exploring the mind, personhood, and behavior. We distill the psychological implications of our philosophical exploration of tiboa in the African context.

#### REFLECTIONS ON TIBOA AS A PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

**DEVELOPMENT**

Tiboa is a philosophical idea that comes across in Akan conceptions of a person. The term, which has immense psychological significance and provides an avenue for conceptualization in philosophy and psychology, is best understood by analyzing its constituents. Ti means head, and boa, can mean the verb “help,” or it can be a derivative of the noun aboa (animal). Thus, tiboa may literally be translated as “the helper of one’s head” or “the animal in one’s head.” We endorse the latter interpretation because we believe the agential content embedded in the notion of ‘helper’ places noteworthy emphasis on the functions of animality. We wish, then, to translate tiboa as “the animal in one’s head,” as an active principle or capacity of the human mind. This interpretation is consistent with the pre-analytic usage of the term, which is unmistakeably offered to mean “conscience,” a value-laden concept.
Tiboa is often used to denote a moral capacity that a person ought to possess. Hence, a person who acts without moral sense or one who seems not to care about the moral implications of her actions would be rebuked with the question, wo tiboa awu anaa? (Is your conscience dead?). The question should, however, be properly construed as an expression of disappointment about (or disapproval of) the refusal of the moral agent to act in accordance with a capacity (moral sense) that she is expected to possess as a member of a community. Tiboa, therefore, is a moral category and forms the basis of key concepts in Akan ethics. In our view, it also has implications for the formation of concepts in psychological theories of cognition, personality development, and emotional intelligence, as discussed below:

(i) Emotional Intelligence

There is widespread agreement amongst African philosophers on the notion of relational personhood, the idea that Africans philosophically consider humans as relational beings by nature in the sense that they consider sound interpersonal relationships as necessary for self-definition, human well-being, and social cohesion. The relevance of such a conception of personhood for African psychology has been clarified by some psychologists.

This notion of personhood would hardly be persuasive without the activity of tiboa, which invariably underlies the expression of patience, kindness, fellow-feeling, and respect for the moral status of others in community. The relationality of humans is so ingrained in Akan thought that caring about the welfare and moral integrity of the other and being mindful of the effects of one’s actions on others is not only a matter of rational choice but also a crucial element of moral agency.

Ajei and Flikschuh discuss the emphasis of several Ghanaian philosophers on the cooperative activity of reason and emotions in shaping human personality. This view is well captured by Danquah’s assertion that emotions promote and enhance the regulative function of reason in that they expand the horizon of reason’s acuity and judgment. It is also embedded in Wiredu’s assertion that the absence of feelings as a basis of moral motivation in the foundational principle of Kant’s moral theory, i.e., the Categorial Imperative, evacuates the imperative of humanistic impulse. In Wiredu’s view, “ability without sentimentality is nothing short of barbarity.” In our view, embedded in all of these is the idea that a person’s tiboa should guide her in making clear the moral benefits of emotional intelligence, towards developing qualities such as patience and forgiveness. For, these attributes, from an Akan perspective, underlie fruitful human relations and moral conduct.

(ii) Cognition

The subjects of theories of cognition in psychology are beings who are equipped with rationality—that is, persons who can know through thinking, experimentation, and perception. The concept of tiboa is relevant for cognitive theory in that it presupposes cognition since it is impossible for conscience to exist or, at least, its expression to be perceived, without knowledge of that which one is expected to be conscientious about. Yet, the acquisition of a moral sense and exhibition of moral wisdom are part of the capacities of a rational being—the subject of cognition.

However, as will be seen in our discussion of personality formation below, tiboa’s role in evoking moral motivation and in regulating moral behavior is primarily performed by invoking a personal sense of guilt or public censure. Since personal guilt and public censure are largely due to a person’s knowledge of right and yet performing wrong actions, tiboa provides intellectual grounding for moral knowledge. While tiboa is a human quality, a person’s knowledge of moral rightness and his or her capacity to perform actions in consonance with conscience are acquired through experience. And this method of knowledge acquisition allows the lessons from a past moral dilemma and its solution to inform a person’s decision on a new but similar moral situation. So, any action that is taken about the new moral situation would be contingent on experiential knowledge. This empirical character of Akan morality, and the role of tiboa in it, makes it amenable to psychological theories of cognition.

(iii) Personality Formation

The communitarian character of African societies, expressed in the relational ontology of personhood, makes for assigning paramount importance to the interest and well-being of community. One consequence of this is that moral education occurs at two levels: family and community levels. Core values and practices of community serve as standards of child-upbringing (molding of character) that are adopted by families in discharging their direct responsibility for educating young members on moral virtues. The family ensures that a child imbibes community values, shares in its aspirations, and develops a virtuous character. At the center of virtuous character is tiboa, that which makes one feel ashamed for behaving morally wrongly. Danquah’s discussion of Akan ethics recognizes the feeling of shame—“adefer”—as an effective moral category. The relevance of shame, a feeling of loss of dignity and of remorse, is a function of tiboa. Ackah likewise emphasizes the cultivation of conscience, and cultivating behavior that will elicit praise rather than blame, as a primary focus of Akan moral education.

Tiboa, as basis of personality formation in African societies, is similar to concepts in theories of personality formulation in psychology. For instance, tiboa is very similar to an element in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of human personality. According to Freud, three elements of personality (the id, the ego, and the superego) work in tandem to create human behaviors. Whereas the id is entirely unconscious and grounds instinctive and primitive behaviors, the ego comprises a cohesive awareness of personality that deals with reality. The superego, on the other hand, encodes internalized standards and ideals that we acquire from moral education and provides guidelines for moral judgments. There is striking similarity between the function of tiboa and the superego, even though there is room for arguing for tiboa as an element of the conscious mind, as opposed to the sub-conscious status of Freud’s superego.
PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

To elicit the psychological implications of the philosophical exploration on tibo, we employ a three-axis framework of theory, research, and praxis.56 We view the domain of theory as providing accurate explanations and predictions by identifying obscure causal relationships.57 We also understand research to imply “research questions, design, data analysis, and interpretation of results.”58 In addition, we discuss the potential application of tibo in clinical/health and business settings to improve well-being and wellness.

First, we present the theoretical insights that can be derived from the philosophical reflections on tibo. Undoubtedly, tibo endows an individual with most of the attributes that make up emotional intelligence. Social science researchers have established four dimensions of emotional intelligence: 1) recognizing other people’s emotions, 2) recognizing and expressing one’s own emotions, 3) regulating one’s emotions, and 4) the use of one’s emotional expression to facilitate performance.59 The reflections above show that tibo is the source of attributes such as patience, kindness, fellow-feeling, respect for the moral status of others in community, as well as sensitivity to the effects of one’s actions on others. Hence, tibo qualifies as a metaphysical concept that explains the expression of what mainstream psychology identifies as emotional intelligence. This is significant; for none of the numerous studies on emotional intelligence convincingly informs readers on the source of emotional intelligence. By “source,” we do not refer to mere correlates of emotional intelligence as predictors, but to an independent theoretical postulate of explanation. And our claim that tibo is a likely source of emotional intelligence constitutes a major theoretical insight and adds to psychological literature on what we have come to call emotional intelligence.

The role of tibo in cognition was also reflected upon in the previous section. As argued, tibo functions as the seat of a person’s knowledge of moral rightness, and her capacity to act in consonance with conscience is acquired through experience. This can rightly be identified as a typology of long-term memory in addition to the current typology that consists of declarative memory (semantic and episodic memory) and implicit memory (priming and procedural memory).60 For a long time, no one has seriously questioned the absence of a seat of moral thinking in long-term memory. The current typology fails to locate the memory for moral guidance. We shall call this morality memory to distinguish it from moral memory in philosophy and psychology and moral memories in cultural sociology. Moral memory refers to the idea of retention, retrieving, and forgetting of moral guidance in relation to one’s moral transgressions whereas moral memories refer to a collective memory (akin, in many ways, to institutional memory) that influence the remembering of the collective morally and politically.61 In our view, tibo qualifies as a type of long-term memory dedicated to only morality and expands our current understanding of long-term memory.

In terms of personality formation, tibo enables the African psychologist to account for the similarities in behavior (and even culture as a group phenomenon) and character in a monothetic approach, as opposed to an idiographic approach which mainstream psychological research on personality tend to adopt. Thus, one of the ways African psychologists can use tibo is to employ it as an explanatory framework that accounts for generalization and our understanding of social patterns in behaviors and personality in Africa, and possibly in the rest of the world. In this way, tibo can be seen to explain uniformity and consistency in human nature.

We discuss the psychological research implications of the concept in the rest of this section. One potential implication is the construction of a scale to use in psychological research. In this case, we propose the construction of a Strength of Tibo Scale (STS) as a normative measure of how well one’s tibo is developed or how far it moves towards the desired state of tibo in promoting social harmony in human living. However, this can only be possible with further exploration of the philosophical literature on tibo and subsequent psychological studies that seek to understand the nature (definitions, characteristics, and components) and functions of tibo. Such work will build the needed psychological literature to afford psychometricians the opportunity to construct the STS. As a guide to such work, psychologists ought to employ qualitative research approaches to achieve the desired research objectives. In this instance, Gavi et al. provide a useful guide on how one may proceed because they use qualitative approach to explore the conceptions of personhood in the Ghanaian setting.62 Once developed, the STS can be used in studies that seek to identify predictors of social harmony-promoting behaviors. Based on the current philosophical reflections and social science research on emotional intelligence, we can fairly propose that high scores of the STS would correlate with high scores on measures of prosocial behaviors, organizational commitment, corporate social responsibility (these studies should be done from the upper echelons perspective63), civility, honesty, ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behaviors, and a host of others. Conversely, high scores on STS will correlate with low scores on measures of crimes, counterproductive work behaviors, corruption, social deviance, and related others. We are aware that these proposals remain speculative here at best, and that the exact nature of the relationships can only be determined through empirical studies.

Besides the use of survey study design, it is equally possible to conduct experiments and quasi-experiments whereby aspects of tibo are manipulated to observe their effects on some behaviors or attitudes. This will be possible only when we know enough about tibo in the psychological literature, particularly from the initial qualitative studies. Another research topic that may be very important is an examination of the effects of tibo on common mental health problems (depression, anxiety, stress, substance use, etc.). This is because if tibo enables one to seek social harmony, it is more likely that those high on STS will also experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress given the effect of modernity in Africa on individualism and self-interest. Western education and urbanization tend
to make Africans more likely to assume an “autonomous relatedness” mode of thinking or behavior as the former impact the autonomy (tendency to make decisions for oneself despite the impact on the group). This implies that those with high levels of STS are more likely to be frustrated by the non-reciprocity of selfless acts which might lead to these common mental health problems. Again, these propositions remain speculative pending empirical studies to establish the exact nature of the relationships. If such studies suggest that STS is related to common mental health problems, it may require further studies to formulate culturally appropriate interventions to enable mental health patients to minimize or protect themselves against the undesired effects of well-developed tiboa in contemporary African society.

Finally, we discuss the psychological practice implications. We see several areas where STS will have implications for psychological assessment. One area of application, for instance, can be in organizational practice, where STS could be used in leader and managerial selection, etc. However, for lack of space, we would choose to discuss the employment of STS in clinical and counseling psychology. STS can be employed to screen clients, particularly those who present signs and symptoms of non-psychotic disorders. This is because the tiboa of those suffering from neuropsychiatric or psychotic disorders and those characterized by perceptual disturbances (e.g., schizophrenia, dementia, substance misuse, delirium, severe unipolar depression, etc.) can be said to be “dead” in that they largely lack orientation of self to time, place, and people. This screening will enable the practitioner to establish the level of agency and willingness to change or achieve the desired purpose of a therapy. The potential use of tiboa in therapeutic settings will hinge on the exploration and animation of the person’s tiboa. We shall call this Tibo Exploration and Animation Therapy (TEAT). Although the modalities for such a therapy are not yet defined, TEAT once developed would enable practitioners to explore to identify “misalignments” in the tiboa while engaging in activities that can animate (give vigor to or move to action) or give reasons, to the tiboa to want to change and/or maintain the momentum to change. Despite the potential effectiveness of TEAT based on the philosophical reflections, Oppong observes that the Akan saying afutuo nsakyea onipa gyey sp nsowhe (to wit: challenges change people not advising) has therapeutic implications. This saying signifies that a talk therapy (modulative modalities) may not be as successful as behavioral modification or therapies that involve making changes to the environment (generative modalities). What this means is that, in addition to TEAT, practitioners would need to expose tiboa to conditions that might cause it to want to change. Thus, the focus of TEAT or tiboa-informed therapy is not on the person but on that “animal” in the headspace, and the aim is to cause a change from within.

Beyond therapeutic settings, these reflections may have implications for encouraging health-promoting behaviors including health-seeking behaviors and medication compliance in the primary healthcare system. If promoting social harmony involves recognition of one’s responsibility to, and natural membership of, society; then ensuring one’s healthy physical status may strongly signify acknowledgment of one’s duty to those who depend on you: good health is necessary for one’s ability to offer needed support to others. This may partly explain why some people endure harsh conditions to ensure the survival of others. Thus, TEAT can be modified to target health-promoting behaviors. However, everything we have discussed here remains speculative until empirical studies have been conducted in psychology to understand the exact nature of the relationships.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed the concept of tiboa (conscience) and how it connects African philosophy with African psychology. The connection has a twofold grounding: first, on the importance of tiboa to the development of personhood and the centrality of this latter notion to theorizing in African philosophy with African psychology; and also, to the fact that philosophy provides conceptual foundation for psychology and the applied sciences in general. From the African perspective, the status of personhood is achieved by cultivation of a virtuous character that fosters sound social relations and communal well-being. We argue that tiboa is the basis of virtuous character formation and hence it is central to personhood, one of the most theorized concepts in African philosophy.

We demonstrate that tiboa has implications for theorizing in psychology, especially in relation to emotional intelligence, cognition, and personality formation. In our view, tiboa can function as an independent theoretical postulate for explaining emotional intelligence, morality memory (as a type of long-term memory), and foreground a monothetic approach to personality studies. Besides, a Strength of Tibo Scale (STS) and a Tibo Exploration and Animation Therapy (TEAT) can be developed for application by clinical and counseling psychologists. These tiboa-informed tools can facilitate the development of therapies to assist persons with common mental health problems and encourage health-promoting behaviors in the primary healthcare system.

Tibo, thus, offers prospects as a conceptual avenue for interdisciplinary research between African philosophers and psychologists. It is for this reason that we call on African philosophers and psychologists to collaborate to conduct the needed research to develop STS, TEAT, and other tiboa-informed practices as well as to explore new domains that have not yet been explored.

NOTES

1. Hergenhahn, An Introduction to the History of Psychology; Oppong, “History of Psychology in Ghana since 989AD.”
2. Oppong, “History of Psychology in Ghana since 989AD.”

8. Oppong, "Overcoming Obstacles to a Truly Global Psychological Theory, Research and Praxis in Africa."


12. Ajei and Flikschuh, "Kantian Ethics and African Philosophy: Receptivity and Disputations," 128. This view seems quite close to an Aristotelian conception of human nature in which reason, though in one sense divine—i.e., extra-natural—nonetheless works in harmony with the emotions in developing a virtuous disposition that allows the agent to experience the full palette of human emotions in ways that are consistent with good conduct. Yet while Aristotelian ethics is essentially self-regarding in that it is focused on self-perfection, all the Ghanaian philosophers demand of the moral agent a concern with the interests of others.


15. Wiredu, "Moral Foundations of an African Culture," 197. Arguably, the notion "ability" in this affirmation by Wiredu, is elliptical. In the context of the quote, it is clear that he understands the term to mean not merely mental aptitude but rather the skill to deploy one’s mental faculties toward an end, i.e., skillful action toward an end. If so, then the quote can be rendered as "reasonable action without sentimentality is barbarity."


20. Oppong, "Overcoming Obstacles to a Truly Global Psychological Theory, Research and Praxis in Africa."


24. Bruck, "Long-Term Memory."

25. Cowan, "The Puzzle of Moral Memory"; Stanley and De Brigard, "Moral Memories and the Belief in the Good Self."


27. Gavi et al., "Conceptions of Personhood in Ghana."


BOOK REVIEW

Some Thoughts on Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò’s Against Decolonisation

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COLONIALISM AND DECOLONIZATION, PSEUDO-COLONIALISM AND PSEUDO-DECOLONIZATION

Colonialism, explains Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, "represents a subversion of modernity and its core tenets, processes and practices." These tenets of modernity are "the principle of subjectivity, the centrality of Reason, the importance of governance by consent." Colonization thus denies agency. This "issue of autonomy, of self-governance—the central credo of the modern age—was the differentia specifica when it came to defining the economic organisation of the colonies, with the interests of the colonised subordinated to and determined by the colonial powers."

Decolonization is necessary to transform this heteronomy into autonomy; it means to convert “a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction.” This is, as Táíwò insists, the “original meaning” of decolonization. However, “today [decolonization] has come to mean something entirely different: forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonialism, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past.” This new meaning Táíwò calls “decolonisation,”; the original meaning he calls “decolonisation.”

The necessary and justified work of decolonization, is done. Amilcar Cabral, an important reference for Táíwò, said in 1965 “that in our countries, which have been martyred for centuries, humiliated and insulted, the insult may no longer rule” and that he was well aware that “[w]e are struggling to build in our nations […] a life of happiness, a life where every man will have the respect of all men, where discipline will not imposed, where no one will be without work, where salaries will be just, where everyone will have the right to everything man has built, has created for the happiness of men. If
is for this that we are struggling. If we do not reach that point, we shall have failed in our duties, in the purpose of our struggle."10 Táíwò completely agrees with Cabral.11

Interestingly, we can find this understanding of decolonization being done not only in Cabral, but in many other African political philosophers of the twentieth century.12 Kwame Nkrumah wrote, it would be "clear that we must find an African solution to our problems, and that this can only be found in African unity."13 Julius K. Nyerere knew that "[i]ndependence means self-reliance [and] cannot be real if a nation depends upon gifts and loans from another for its development,"14 and in the Conscience Africaine Manifesto it is stated "that the realization of our hopes will depend on our own efforts, and we will not fail to remind the Congolese often of the harsh truth that we are able to demand our rights only if we are fully conscious of our duties and our responsibilities."15

All this seems forgotten.16 Today, Táíwò insists, it must be emphasized again, that the "movement towards this outcome is no longer part of the anti-colonial struggle."17 The further continuation of the decolonization project is no longer necessary, or rather, as we have to be more precise here, it is no longer possible since "colonialism has not survived independence."18 However, despite this impossibility the decolonization project is continued, Táíwò’s primary examples for this are Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kwasi Wiredu.

Whoever engages in the struggle to ensure "the realization of our hopes"19 and "a life of happiness"20 by continuing the decolonial project, whoever engages in decolonization,—like, for instance, Ngũgĩ or Wiredu do—does, by implication, contribute to the "persistent ignoring and/or denigration of African agency—whether done with good or bad intentions" and thus "reaffirms the racist ideology that Africans are permanent children."21

To decolonize does no longer mean to convert "a colony into a self-governing entity,"22 on the contrary. Decolonization, Táíwò’s analysis reveals, happens to be an ally of colonialism. The agents of Decolonization, do not fight colonialism—it "has not survived independence"23—they rather, whether they are aware of it or not, stage colonialism as if it were still alive and then they stage themselves as the fighters against this very pseudo-colonialism—which Táíwò could have consequently called colonialism. Colonialism means an "absolutisation of European colonization,"24 which simultaneously means "turning Africans into permanent subalterns in their own history."25 Táíwò lets us know quite clearly what he thinks of these champions of decolonization, and their resurrected colonialism: "I wish them well. [. . .] I want no part of it."26

MODERNITY AND AGENCY

It is Olúfẹmé Táíwò’s serious and heartfelt concern to move forward, i.e., to no longer decolonize,27 but to modernize. This cannot happen, he predicts, "until we quit our fascination, even obsession, with forever chasing down the last traces of a colonial presence in the framework of our world."26 This obsession is motivated by the conflation of "modernity and Westernisation[,] a big and unwarranted mistake."27 The conflation produces the disastrous hidden (or ignored) paradox of the decolonial discourse. When the "call to ‘decolonise’ lumps together modernity and colonialism" it consequently "insists that the rejection of colonialism means the rejection of modernity."24 And here is the paradox: The decolonizers, portray colonialism as a subversion of modernity and, at the same time, they portray their decolonization as a subversion of modernity. Táíwò exposes decolonization, as a project against colonialism, and thus as an anti-Western and thus as an anti-modernity project.

However, Táíwò insists, as much as decolonization, was an anti-colonial project, it was neither an anti-Western nor an anti-modernity project. The "the anti-colonial struggle,"28 as Táíwò explains, "was carried out, at least in part, to force the colonisers to live up to the ideology used to justify the colonial adventure."29 Decolonization, Táíwò lets us know, "was brought into existence when the colonisers in part, to force the colonisers to live up to the ideology used to justify the colonial adventure."29 Decolonization, wanted to force colonizers to be what they claimed to be, that is, modern. And that means adhering to the "principle of modernity and those principles are universal, they are not Western, but human,"30 "The capacity for agency," Táíwò wrote in his essay on Cabral, "the essential precondition for making history is definitive of humanity”—not definitive of Western humanity. In his earlier Manifesto, Africa Must Be Modern, Táíwò explained what modernity, human modernity, human agency, would mean for Africa: "Africa must embrace individualism as a principle of social ordering; make reason central in its relation to, activity upon, understanding of, and producing knowledge about the world, both physical and social, that it inhabits; and adopt progress as its motto in all things."31

If anything at all, decolonization, would insist on more and not less modernity, "it stands to reason that post-independence, decolonisation would not be identified with the abandonment of those principles."32 For "the western imperialists," as Ralph Leonard has pointed out beautifully in his review of Táíwò’s book, "Enlightenment principles were the exclusive property of white Europeans: their inherent universality and dialectical appropriation by the colonised against them was unsettling."33 Colonization subverted modernity and Decolonization continues this subversion. Those who believe that there is still colonization "have made the definition of colonialism so elastic that it no longer has any meaningful boundaries, or they have chosen to ignore African agency after independence."34 And Táíwò adds: "I refuse to accept this dangerous move."35

PERFORMANCE ERRORS

It is quite surprising that an author who so relentlessly criticizes the lack of attention to details and the lumping together of things which do not belong to each other cannot avoid doing so himself. Certainly, the philosophies of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kwasi Wiredu are invested in the question of decolonization. However, is their understanding of decolonization so similar that we can simply “lump” them together? Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, as Emmanuel has expertly shown, "defends and afrocentric approach to
decolonization,” while Wiredu “is more pragmatic and largely devoid of the tendencies that Táíwò holds in contempt.”

The portrayal of these thinkers overall is quite strange; especially in Wiredu’s case, Táíwò seems to be missing some important ideas. Wiredu, for instance, knew very well that decolonization is a finite project, he wrote—even though, after decolonization, was long done in Ghana—“that although at the present time we are still in an era of post-colonial reconstruction which calls for a large dose of decolonization, we ought not to be oblivious to the other imperatives of philosophical thinking. Decolonization, even as only one of our preoccupations, is not something that we will be doing for ever in African philosophy.”

Wiredu did not lump together colonization and modernity; he explicitly writes: “Modernization, properly understood, is the application of the results of modern science for the improvement of human life. People should link the modernization of the conditions of their lives with the modernization of all aspects of their thinking. [. . .] To develop in any serious sense, we in Africa must break with our old un- critical habits of thought; that is to say, we must advance past the stage of traditional thinking.”

Wiredu obviously does not understand decolonization as subversion of modernity; he welcomed African modernity. And he understood that this modernity to be synthesis: “It seems to me likely that any African synthesis for modern living will include indigenous and Western elements, as well, perhaps, as some from the East.”

Certainly, Wiredu’s and Táíwò’s positions are not identical, but Wiredu’s position and decolonization are not identical either. It is quite unfortunate that Táíwò seems to claim the latter. I’m not sure why this was necessary.

Something similar also happens in other respects, for instance, in the strange misrepresentation and reductionist understanding of contemporary decolonization. Toyin Falola is right when he notes that Táíwò’s “argument against decolonisation appears to portray decolonisation as a game of payback for what the colonial masters did in Africa decades ago, when it should be seen as a patriotic struggle to Africanize Africa.” And Falola goes on to point out one of the most serious problems of Táíwò’s book. The book “categorised decolonisation solely as efforts to bring down any footprints, culture, system, and institutions of the colonial master in Africa. This, however, underestimates the seriousness of the struggle.” It is surprising, if not upsetting, that Táíwò wrote a book that is so passionate, so fearless, so fervent, so intelligent, so educated and yet, so harsh towards the heartfelt pain and genuine concern of African philosophers regarding their philosophy. I find this so strange that I find myself asking, very seriously, whether I have overlooked something. I am almost certain I did.

DESUPERIORIZATION

I would like to make one more comment. Táíwò writes at one point, “Why are we now asking Cambridge University Press’s Journal of African History, dominated by British and American Africanists, to decolonise? Why are we holding outsiders responsible for our own failure to commit adequate resources to studying Africa?”

Of course, I am not entitled to comment on this. I am one of the outsiders. However, it is important when it comes to decolonization, and if you are one of the outsiders, to bring up a question that us outsiders like to forget: What does decolonization mean to the ex-colonizer? A lot of outsiders, I would think, understand decolonization as what Táíwò describes as decolonization. There might be a difference of decolonization, from an insider’s or an outsider’s perspective.

I cannot speak from the insider’s perspective. But I do know that an outsider engaging in the decolonization of Africa would hardly be able to avoid recreating a structure of domination, this time not via colonialism, but via decolonialism. I would, indeed, also advocate for the outsider to not participate in this part of the project of decolonization, or, as I have called it elsewhere, in the project of adseredition. However, there is a second part to the decolonization project that is often ignored. Not only those who have been colonized need, using Táíwò’s term, to modernize, but also those who have colonized. Colonization should have not been possible, if we outsiders would have taken the “core tenets” of modernity seriously. What did we do, to make it possible to foundationally contradict ourselves without suffering from this contradiction? We need to remember, colonialism did not end because we understood the error of our ways, but because it became too risky, too unprofitable, or too exhausting.

We outsiders need to desuperiorize our philosophical self-understanding, we need to correct the notorious misunderstanding that makes us believe that our culture, our philosophy, our modernity are culture, philosophy modernity per se. So, indeed, it is not for those who suffered colonial violence to ask Cambridge University Press’s Journal of African History to decolonize. It is for the outsiders to demand that it is desuperiorized.

NOTES


2. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 47.

3. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 45.

4. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 3.

5. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 3.

6. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 3.

7. Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 3 et pass.

8. Cabral, Unity and Struggle, 253.


10. See Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 65sq.

11. See Tawo, Against Decolonisation, 65.


15. See Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 177.
16. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 66.
17. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 66.
18. Merriam, Congo, 326.
21. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 3.
22. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 66.
23. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 142.
24. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 142.
27. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 39. See, for a detailed analysis: Táíwò, Africa Must Be Modern.
28. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 41.
29. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 47.
31. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 180.
32. Táíwò, Africa Must Be Modern, xxv.
33. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 47.
35. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 46.
36. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 46.
42. Falola, “Against Decolonization,” 126.
43. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 53sq.
44. See Freter, Decolonial Philosophical Praxis, 210–12.
45. Táíwò, Against Decolonisation, 47.

MENTIONS

Books, Anthologies, and Papers

Björn Freter
GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

BOOKS


ANTHOLOGIES


PAPERS


LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

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We welcome our readers to the fall 2023 edition of the APA Studies in Teaching Philosophy. We begin and end with poetry, the first one reflecting on the process of teaching and learning, authored by John DeCarlo of Hofstra University. We end with three amusing poems on teaching and learning by Felicia Nimue Ackerman of Brown University. Additionally, we offer three articles on teaching.

Our first paper, “Summer Experiments in Pedagogical Innovation,” is a collaborative effort by Russell Marcus and Catherine Schmitt, both of Hamilton College. The paper reports on experiments in teaching philosophy that were conducted by volunteer professors and students. The courses were held outside the normal college curriculum and students were given no grades. The program was “designed to push the limits of students’ imaginations through innovative philosophical pedagogy.” The courses and their titles were “Philosophers Reimagine the World: A Conceptual Toolbox,” “Disagreement in the Digital Age: Philosophical Reflections about/with New Technology,” and “Philosophy and Comedy.” Students were encouraged to use exaggeration and even silliness in an effort to devise new solutions to old problems in a changing intellectual environment. For example, for the old question of whether there is intelligent life on other planets, students were asked to “invent [their] own creative form of alien life.” They responded in one case by inventing “tiny bacteria-like aliens that communicate through pheromone release” and, in another, by inventing “giant sea like creatures that lived on Jupiter.” The instructor then asked them questions such as, “Would we be able to communicate with your aliens?” In general, the instructors write, the program “centers on student engagement, risk-taking, and finding joy in philosophy studying and teaching.”

Our second article, “Plagiarism and the Indispensability of Authorship,” is by Isaac Nevo of Ben-Gurion University. Professor Nevo begins with an analysis of the concept of plagiarism in which he distinguishes it from related concepts such as dishonesty of claims, theft of property, and the corruption of some common good. He then defines the normative issue in plagiarism as “mis-applied credit for an original contribution to some common good, deemed worthy of reward.” He later turns to a criticism of certain post-modern and post-structuralist theories of texts and authorship, some of which would make plagiarism as a normative issue nugatory since, if these theories are correct, there would be no proprietary rights to violate or author to divest of recognition. Professor Nevo notes the kinds and scale of plagiarism committed by faculty and students alike. He views the prevalence of the problem as coming from “failures of affected institutions to act vigorously against it. . . . It goes without saying that the whole academic world stands to lose.”

Our third article, “Ethics Olympiad,” is by Matthew Wills, who is the project manager of this Australian institution. The Olympiad is a series of formal discussions among students in which teachers offer oversight and score the participants on their philosophical acumen based on standards that are outlined for us by the author. The Ethics Olympiad that is described by Wills is an adaptation to Australian and East Asian conditions of the Ethics Bowls that were founded in the US in 1995.

The Olympiad as it is described by Matthew Wills has brought student “teams” together from schools in Australia, East Asia, and the United States for structured online discussions about social issues that have moral implications. A few of these issues are described by the author. The aim of these discussions is not the learning of philosophy as such, but the cultivation of good reasoning skills, encouraging the mastery of facts relevant to the issue being discussed, and developing the capacity to formulate a convincing account of the moral content of the issues discussed. Professor Wills provides us with many techniques for the organization and evaluation of such Olympiads and gives an account of how new issues for discussion are developed and formulated in a way that is appropriate to the ages of the participants.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We always encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material that they think may be especially good for classroom use. Philosophy teachers may describe and reflect on their classroom innovations and experiences on our platform. Further, we welcome articles that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages. Please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles but also when reviewing material for our publication.
The daring agility and logical certainty of trapeze artists
Oscillating to and fro with gestures of grace and elegance
A mime, with tender cheek, rosey nose and unspoken
.glance,
Intimating primordial dances of the sacred and profane
Lions and Tigers leaping through fierce flames of ethical
tensions
Jugglers, right and left, alternating the flow of dialectics
With the fluidity of reversals and inversions
The balance and finesse of acrobats
Adroitly flipping with keen analysis &
Tumbling with elongated synthesis
And all the while, admire the knife thrower and his daggers
Hitting the marks of truth, beauty and goodness –
Never slighting the flesh of humanity &
Don't overlook the epistemological midget
Quietly slipping into the thinnest phases of the sublime &
The magician, amid raspberry blooms and silky silhouettes,
Conjuring up energetic particles from the purity of
merriment
Yea, Come One, Come All!
And savor joyful melody's deepest refrain
In sweet harmony with our Philosophical Reign!!

ARTICLES

Summer Experiments in Pedagogical Innovation

Russell Marcus and Catherine Schmitt
HAMILTON COLLEGE

In summer 2022 we directed (Russell) and attended (Catherine) the Hamilton College Summer Program in Philosophy (HCSPiP), which offered three unique courses designed to push the limits of students’ imaginations through innovative philosophical pedagogy. Professors Anthony Weston (emeritus, Elon University) taught “Philosophers Reimagine the World: A Conceptual Toolbox for 21st Century Possibilists”; Mike Barnes (Australian National University) taught “Disagreement in the Digital Age: Philosophical Reflection About/With New Technology”; and Ashley Pryor (University of Toledo) taught “Philosophy and Comedy.” Each course ran for ten ninety-minute sessions over two weeks. The program culminated in a live-streamed conference in which instructors reported on their work. This essay is a report on the classes, written in the hopes of disseminating some of the innovations.

Unlike other summer philosophy programs, the focus of the HCSPiP is not primarily to prepare students for further
Anthony Weston, using pedagogy as conceived in his book, *Teaching as the Art of Staging*, taught a course meant to broaden students’ views of how philosophy could be applied outside the classroom. On the first day of class he presented each table of students with a plastic cup of water and posed the question, “How many ways can you empty the water without moving the cup?”

We quickly went to work brainstorming: “You could soak it up with a sock!”

“I could drink it with a straw.”

“We could tip the table—but would that count as moving the cup?”

“We could wait for it to evaporate!”

When the class came back, exhausted of ideas, together we had come up with thirty-six different methods of removing water from our cups.

Then Weston announced, “Now empty the cup using a method that we haven’t come up with yet.”

At first shocked, because we thought we had discussed every strategy possible, the class quickly began to search for new solutions. My table used a disemboweled pen as a vacuum, covering one end of the barrel with a finger to pull water out of the cup; soon every table in the room was soaked by quick thinking and new ideas. Even when we thought we had found every solution, there were still more discoveries to be made. Weston was teaching us to trust ourselves to persist past what can seem like the end of our work, to remember that further progress is possible even when we think we have exhausted all solutions.

Over the next two weeks Weston asked us to think in new ways and stretch ourselves to find diverse solutions to problems. One day we worked in teams to invent ways to show how large-scale time might be alternatively conceived; we recalibrated our minds to view the present as a period of ten thousand years as suggested by Stewart Brand and then invented and drew plans for constructing something that reflected large-scale time—elaborate rituals for celebrating centuries and millennia, giant sun-powered clocks, and time-keeping circuses. No ideas were disregarded. Weston challenged us to think bigger, making the looming problems of the present such as climate change and women’s rights and poverty seem like tiny blips in the course of time rather than the gutting catastrophes we often felt them as.

Any ideas worth thinking were worth thinking more. We read portions of Weston’s book, *Creativity for Critical Thinkers*. There, he described different strategies for creativity, including the exotic association method and the tool of exaggeration. For exotic associations, we opened books to random pages, closed our eyes, and put a finger down on the page; whichever word it pointed to would be used as a catalyst for new ideas. Weston promoted using the tool of exaggeration to “take some feature of the problem and push it as far as it can go,” as we did in the water experiment. Imagine perfect solutions first, and then backtrack to find plausible compromises. Such creative activities may seem a little silly, but that’s the point. “A little silliness may be just what we need. Randomness—generating possible prompts without filters—is exactly what it may take to break out of the rut that we happen to be in (but can’t quite see).”

One day, we used the Drake equation, which is commonly used to estimate the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in the Milky Way, to form our own conclusions about the probability of alien life existing in the universe; we came up with numbers ranging from three planets containing alien life to hundreds of thousands. Then, we were asked to invent our own creative form of alien life. We invented tiny bacteria-like aliens that communicated through pheromone release, aliens that existed as the spots in your vision when you stood up too fast, and giant sea monster-like creatures that lived on Jupiter. As the class came back to present their new alien concepts, Weston asked, “Would we, as humans, be able to communicate with your invented alien?”

“Probably not.”

“Even if we could make contact, I don’t think it would be a good idea. . .”

“Our aliens wouldn’t be able to communicate like humans do.”

Many scientists have made calculations using the Drake equation and many attempts to contact aliens, for example by the SETI Institute, have been made to no avail. Yet, we all devised aliens that couldn’t be contacted through radio wave projections into the universe. Other life forms might exist in totally different ways from ourselves; failure to make contact with aliens meant nothing about their existence. Some philosophical questions require us to understand humans and our social and political relationships better, like how to improve the justness of our political arrangements. Others, like the nature of personhood or value, might require thinking beyond human-centric perspectives to develop non-chauvinistic characterizations of those concepts.
In the second week, our class took a field trip to Common Place Land Cooperative, an intentional community in Truxton, NY. Intentional communities are voluntary residential organizations designed for social cohesion and interdependence. Common Place operates on principles of environmental stewardship, using consensus to make collective decisions. In preparation, we had explored records from previous alternative living communities in the US in the Hamilton College library archives. We approached the field trip with lots of questions: Is it possible for “ecovillages” to operate on a large scale? Is seclusion necessary for an alternative living community—is seclusion a good thing? Are alternative communities the best way to challenge social norms? We spent the trip hauling wood, making salad, caging peach trees, moving gravel, and using compostable toilets, engaging the community throughout. While we came to the experience with ideas of living sustainably by driving electric cars and using paper straws, the off-grid, agricultural eco community presented a wildly different way of reimagining sustainability.

Weston urged students to step back to reform their ideas about modern problems. Innovative philosophical thinking is a gateway into viewing modern solutions as springboards into worlds of new ideas. In classrooms, encouraging students to evaluate what they take for granted about the world around them can lead to critical thinking about how to better fix problems. Activities similar to the water cup, alien, or time-drawing projects require students to stretch their minds and think creatively beyond what we imagine our limits to be, while working and communicating collaboratively.

By the end of Weston’s course, some students were enthralled by the prospect of living in an ecovillage and others were fascinated by the probabilities of extraterrestrial life. Teaching creativity and how to reimagine different aspects of the world leads to more mindful philosophy students who are prepared to challenge social constructs and norms.

Mike Barnes dived into the implications of the quickly growing internet in his course. We had prepared by reading John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* and Sarah Jeong’s *The Internet of Garbage* before the program began. We started the course framed by both the idealism of free speech and the shocking realities of how harmful what is published on the internet can be to people’s psyches and safety.

Throughout the course, Barnes asked us to communicate in various ways. It became quickly apparent that the medium through which discussions occurred changed conversational dynamics, sometimes radically. In one class, we placed sticky notes on the classroom board with our opinions, anonymously, to indicate the media platform we used most, allowing us freely to represent what each of us liked about a diverse range of platforms. Another day, we wrote down our thoughts on Mill’s harm principle and read them aloud. Writing down answers made it harder to hide or adjust our opinions. Since we couldn’t change our answers the conversation never evolved beyond initial reactions.

Towards the end of the course, we all joined an online anonymous group chat to answer some class discussion questions. We typed and sent messages incognito. Despite our being otherwise thoughtful, the anonymous conversation quickly devolved into streams of lewd comments, shaming, and spam. Philosophical discussion was nearly impossible over such a platform. Taking a step back to discuss online anonymity in conjunction with Jeong’s claim that online discourse has enabled catastrophes, students learned that anonymity combined with the minimal time required to put ideas online drastically changes what people are willing to say and do.

It quickly became apparent that Mill’s ideals of freedom of speech and minimal governmental control are obsolete in a world where global communication allows for widespread hate speech and subliminal messaging. We grappled with the concept that people naturally surround themselves with media that agrees with them, creating echo chambers of specific political or scientific ideas that reject all outside opinions and even facts. We questioned our own self-determination. Are we in control of our own beliefs and actions? As Jeong described, Facebook can make more of us vote and Google can tailor search results to our past patterns? Many current media platforms employ fact-checking, but we discussed the difficulties of effective curation and how unbiased fact-checking is impossible since every curator has personal opinions. The best escape seemed to be an off-grid Ecovillage.

Teaching students how their media of communication change what they say and think is valuable in helping young philosophers understand the opinions and ideas they and others present. An exploration of various ways to discuss, communicate, and collect information can teach students their own subconscious biases and how their worlds can be changed by the online platforms they use. Through experimenting with anonymity and identification in writing, typing, reading, and voting exercises, Barnes demonstrated how the media with which we engage can drastically alter our thoughts. We walked away fascinated by how the social media platforms we use impact our interactions with friends and strangers, as well as the beliefs we hold.

Professor Ashley Pryor began her course with icebreakers in the form of improvisation games. Most of us had never done improv or acting before and the games set the stage for a classroom of quick thinking and lightheartedness, which contrasted with the labored contemplation—and its often comconitant hesitancy—commonly found in a traditional classroom. We spent the first two days exploring philosophical theories of comedy, interspersing improv activities with small-group work. We built conceptual foundations by exploring different theories of comedy. We looked at superiority theory, a view adopted by Aristotle and the Stoics, which postulated that comedy arises from ridiculing others to make ourselves feel superior, as well as incongruity theory, a view held by Kant and Kierkegaard, which held that discrepancy between reality and our expectations was the primary cause of laughter. For students, these discussions raised the question of whether laughter was ethical. Realizing the discomfort among students with some contemporary comedians,
Pryor paused the abstract theoretic work to encourage us to choose three controversial current comedians for a cancellation trial: Each student came into class on Thursday as either a prosecutor, a defendant, or a jury member, ready to apply theories of comedy, ethics, and politics in order to decide whether Dave Chapelle, Louis C.K., and Bill Burr should be allowed comedic platforms.

"Chapelle makes people laugh using superiority-theory-type comedy and thus is alienating already marginalized groups!"

"But John Stuart Mill would say that he should be allowed freedom of speech!"

"Wait but is public alienation of marginalized groups directly encouraging physical harm? I think Mill would say that the harm principle applies here!"

"Then should we cancel him completely or just regulate his material? How do we draw solid lines between what’s okay to joke about and what’s problematic?"

The exercise merged the worlds of philosophy, comedy, and policy, raising questions of the harm that comedy can do, and exploring possibilities, both prudential and ethical, for regulating sexist, transphobic, and racist messaging.

Other highlights of the course included a workshop with an improv troupe from Second City Chicago, and a class on satire writing, led by the course tutor, Chris Bousquet (Syracuse University). Bousquet and Pryor encouraged students to create their own satire based on news stories they found appalling, using tools such as exaggeration and repetition of increasingly outrageous ideas, both of which connected to work we did with Weston. We practiced improv games, evaluated ethical dimensions of new comedy, and workshopped writing pieces which satirized Fourth of July celebrations, new abortion laws, the banning of juuls, and more. In one popular improv game, Pryor asked students to act as different characters while a party host tried to guess their roles: conservative grandpa, person with smelly feet, giraffe, garden gnome.

Working with improv helped us to train ourselves to listen carefully to others, a skill essential to good philosophy and emphasized by Tina Fey. "The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. . . . YES, AND means don’t be afraid to contribute. It’s your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you’re adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile." We practiced saying "YES, AND" in improv scenes, creating bigger ideas and adding more energy into dialogues. The course culminated in a performance that included both improvisational games and satire pieces.

Our regular philosophy classes have conditioned us to believe that refined and carefully contemplated thoughts are most valuable to philosophical discourse. In contrast, Pryor encouraged us to take risks, to let go of our conditioned beliefs, and find new ideas and value in spontaneous exclamations during improv. Asking students to acknowledge previous ideas and build on them by using "YES, AND" as a tool could be used to facilitate better conversations in classrooms. A comedians-on-trial activity could be directed in any class on applied ethics or political philosophy, and is an attractive way to bring philosophical theory into contact with students’ extracurricular interests. Improv-like warm-up exercises could be utilized in any philosophy classroom as both ice breakers and ways to make students feel encouraged to contribute openly. There are good reasons for philosophers to think slowly at times.

Pryor taught the benefits of quick thinking, particularly in classroom settings: building community, removing barriers, and finding new perspectives.

The program served as a brief collision between many different viewpoints and pedagogies. The unique ideas of each student, tutor, and professor could be expressed and discussed both inside and outside the classroom, leading students to engage with their peers in deep discussions about how they view the world and their place within it. In post-program surveys, 89 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that their classes showed them new ways to learn and 83 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the program changed the way they think about philosophy and its role in their lives. In their anonymous feedback, we heard the following:

I think this program and this course in particular helped me feel a lot more free and curious about how a philosophical outlook can energize any of the work I do. . . . After three years of philosophy courses, I felt that I was stuck in a certain (flawed) philosophical, analytical mode of thinking that started to become repetitive and routine. These [courses] definitely helped address that feeling. . . . The class gave me a much better awareness of when and how I was participating in discussions. . . . With philosophy readings, it’s easy to figure out a central thesis, attempt to understand the piece, decide if I agree, and stop there. But there’s always a baseline assumption that needs to be questioned, or a way to take the argument further in the world, and I will be looking for those pieces in future classes. . . .

Most summer philosophy programs for undergraduates focus on preparing students for graduate school, often with the laudable goal of diversifying the discipline by supporting students from identity groups underrepresented in philosophy. HCSPIP, instead, centers on student engagement, risk-taking, and finding joy in philosophy studying and teaching, providing an inclusive environment to explore together. Weston, Barnes, and Pryor employed innovative teaching strategies which changed the way students partook in classroom activities and understood the concepts they were learning. Students were left with new perspectives on how philosophy can change the world.

NOTES
1. Weston, Teaching as the Art of Staging, 14.
2. Fey, Bossypants, 137.
Plagiarism and the Indispensability of Authorship

Isaac Nevo
BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY

As commonly understood, plagiarism is a form of theft and dishonesty which occurs when one person intentionally puts one's name to the already expressed ideas of another, and falsely claims them to be his or her own. The theft in question is of a non-tangible good—credit (academic, literary, or other)—which is due to another. The dishonesty consists in misrepresentation of original authorship to third parties, for example, university authorities, professional colleagues, the scholarly record,1 or the public at large. Plagiarism is, thus, a two-sided offense with both direct and indirect victims, namely, those on the one hand whose credit has been robbed, and those on the other who suffer the damages of degraded practices. In this paper I shall defend a normative conception of plagiarism, involving theft of credit and dishonest misrepresentation as basic ingredients, against various attempts to take the sting out of plagiarism charges by contextualizing the notions of authorship and originality which underlie the normative force of the term. However, the normative aspect of plagiarism is not to be captured by any general definition of the term. It is, rather, a "family resemblance" concept, governed by overlapping similarities rather than conditions that are jointly necessary and sufficient. Correspondingly, there are varieties of plagiarism, involving different degrees and forms of theft or dishonesty that are exemplified in diverse cases.

Theft and dishonesty are clearly normative terms of both ethics and law, and what makes these concepts applicable to literary or scientific credit is the relative value placed, in different settings, on the twin concepts of authorship and originality, and the consequent recognition and rewards that authorship and originality merit. More specifically, the issue in plagiarism is mis-applied credit for an original contribution to some common good deemed worthy of reward rather than, as the matter is often formulated, an issue of intellectual "property" which may be legally protected in copyrights, patents, or other legal devices. Plagiarism infringes upon credit that is owed, not necessarily property that is owned. Such credit may take many forms other than financial remuneration. Indeed, the concept of plagiarism has long preceded the developments of the various copyright laws and protections. Related ethical issues concern how the common good that is jeopardized by plagiarism is to be understood, what excellences (and sacrifices) the common good requires, how contributions to it are rewarded, in what ways such rewards can be "stolen," and what damage results upon such misrepresentation.

In the academic setting the common good is understood to be the advancement and dissemination of knowledge for which the introduction of theoretical novelties generated by original theorists and scholars (or groups thereof) is held to be essential. By contrast, in the realm of literary fiction the good served may be thought of as the enrichment of culture through unique expressions of human experience. What novelty is to knowledge, uniqueness is to literary culture; and both are goods that are forms of the excellence of originality which is revealed in personal or collective accomplishments that can easily be laid claim to by pretenders. In both realms of activity original authorship is an excellence thought to be worthy of (different kinds of) social reward.

The distinction between the ethical issue of plagiarism and the legal issue of copyrights is often mistakenly conflated. Plagiarism may occur where no copyright protections are present and copyright violations need not involve plagiarism at all. One may plagiarize texts in the public domain, and one may republish, or translate, a copyright protected text (piracy) without plagiarizing it, i.e., without making any false claims of self-authorship. The understanding of a text as property distinguishable from the physical book in which the text appears—the type vs. the token—appeared in early modern times with the development of print and markets for books, and it was publishers rather than authors who first sought and received these protections.2 Before that time there was not much to be gained by legally protecting texts as property. But the ethics of recognizing authors has a longer history, as the very term "plagiarism," coined in the first century AD by the Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (Martial; c.48–104, AD), suggests. Lacking the relevant (modern) notion of texts as "owned property," Martial highlighted literary theft as a kind of symbolic kidnapping3 in which it is not a tangible product that is stolen but what may be viewed as the creative identity of a person.4

In this paper, the focus will be on plagiarism as an ethical concern in the academic setting—that is, in scientific and scholarly research and in higher education and teaching. In these contexts, the common good to be served is the production and dissemination of knowledge, valued both for its own sake and for the sake of service to society. To contribute to that common good is to introduce some novelty to the body of existing knowledge or its application, such originality then being rewarded with some form of academic credit and benefit. The point of these rewards is, obviously, to enhance further knowledge by encouraging those whose capabilities have proven adequate to the task of producing it. When it comes to teaching, the originality of students is taken to consist in their independence in formulating hypotheses or reaching conclusions "in their own words," even when these "words" are not, strictly

REFERENCES


speaking, novel contributions to human knowledge. Again, the point is to develop in students the capacities requisite for the production of knowledge or its expert application.

THE POSSIBILITY OF AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY

This common understanding of plagiarism as an ethical concern involving authorial originality has not gone unchallenged. Broadly speaking, two lines of argument have been offered against this view. As noted above, some following Foucault regard both authorship and plagiarism to be modern (and Western) constructs, born of the understanding of texts as property, which developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On this line of reasoning, projecting the concepts of authorship and plagiarism upon pre-modern, or non-Western cultures (or educational systems) is ill-conceived. Others, following structuralist and post-structuralist reasoning, speak rather of the “death of the author,” viewing the very idea of authorial originality as a myth.

On this account, a problem arises for any view of “plagiarism” as a normative term of criticism since, according to this view, the normative force of the charge of plagiarism is anchored upon the notions of “authorship” and “originality” and therefore depends upon the viability of these terms. If, however, authorship is a matter of convention or social construction and has no fixed or independent grounding of its own, the charge of plagiarism loses its normative force. Ron Scollon (1995), for example, has argued that “the common-sense view of texts as commercial products, and of the author as the manufacturer of those texts . . . represent the economic/ideological system which arose in Europe in the time of the enlightenment.” On this view, norms of authorship are not applicable to pre-modern or non-Western writing. Rather, “it is difficult if not impossible to maintain that any clear understanding is ever possible of just who might stand in the role of the private authorial self.” Scollon concludes that without such clarity any attribution of authorship is nothing but a “historically established system for the distribution of social power and privilege,” a fact that belies universal application of anti-plagiarism norms across cultural and historical boundaries.

A similar argument regarding the impossibility of originality and authorship appears in Pennycook (1996) and Chandasoma et al. (2004). Alastair Pennycook objects to the “unilateral” deployment of the concept of plagiarism in the context of international collegiate education, particularly, as that notion is used in non-Western educational settings. “My chief interest,” he says, “was to describe what has increasingly been promoted as a global academic norm and to contextualize it as a particular cultural and historical practice.” Pennycook’s purpose is to find room for cultural differences in the understanding both of what learning is and of the role that memory and repetition (rather than originality and individuality) might have in it. Pennycook writes: “what I am trying to get at is the ways in which relationships to text, memory, and learning may differ. To deal equitably with our students, we need to appreciate such differences.” While preserving some room for the (normative) possibility of “transgressive” textual borrowing, Pennycook argues for greater flexibility regarding the standards by which such transgression is to be judged.

Pennycook’s respect for other cultures’ ways of viewing what is important in the realm of education is laudable. However, in “contextualizing” plagiarism for these good purposes, no strong argument against authorship or originality of the kind Pennycook offers is required. Plagiarism is committed only when there is an intention to deceive and steal credit. However, when “borrowing” is practiced by, say, Chinese students as part of the learning practices to which they are accustomed, no such intention exists and therefore no basis appears for the charge of plagiarism. Pennycook does, however, go for a much stronger argument to establish his point. In that argument he questions the concept of authorship altogether. (As it turns out, although he makes the argument about authorship, he then shies away from its conclusion, seeing it as possibly “too relativistic,” and he falls back on the weaker conclusion that while “unacceptable borrowing practices” should be criticized, accusations of plagiarism in intercultural contexts ought not to be “unilateral” or culturally insensitive. The latter claim is, as I argued above, fully compatible with a normative notion of plagiarism.)

Pennycook makes the case against authorship and originality in the following terms:

The postmodern and poststructuralist positions on language, discourse, and subjectivity . . . raise serious questions for any notion of individual creativity or authorship. If, instead of a Self or an Identity, we consider the notion of subjectivity . . . then we arrive at more or less a reversal of the speaking subject creating meaning: we are not speaking subjects but spoken subjects, we do not create language but are created by it. As I suggested earlier, the question then becomes not so much one of who authored a text but how we are authored by texts. Taking the concepts of originality and authorship to be nothing but a modernist myth, Pennycook concludes that the charge of plagiarism has nothing on which to rest other than the power of ruling academic elites. Since texts are not authorial productions but rather collections of permanently circulating signs beyond the control of any subject, no “texts” are original and no individual stands alone as originator and producer. What follows from this is that individual authors are “constructed” by texts, culturally (and collaboratively) produced, and textual borrowing is therefore not plagiarism but merely the inevitable drift of words from text to text (through which authorship is constructed). When university instructors tell students to avoid plagiarism by using only their own words, they are setting them an impossible task since no words are ever genuinely our own. Pennycook tries to sharpen this point by quoting Barthes:

A text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original,
blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.\(^\text{14}\)

The conclusion appears to be that since no text is original, none can be plagiarized. There remains no normative basis on which charges of plagiarism can be made.

In what follows, I shall take a closer look at the various arguments by which the postmodern critique of authorship had been conducted. I shall look first at the argument from “writing” (to be found in Pennycook and Barthes), and then at an argument regarding names of authors, the argument from “naming” (to be found in Foucault). Both are deeply flawed and so do nothing to undermine authorship in the sense required for a normative notion of plagiarism.

**WRITING AS TEXTUAL BORROWING**

Consider, first, the argument from writing. Writing, it is argued, is not the expression of ideas that are present in the mind of a writer, a (productive) subject to whom meanings are present independently of their written expression. Rather, a written text is, in Pennycook’s language, a stream of “borrowings,” which cross-ref to one another independently of any “author’s” control. In Derridean language, written signs are “iterable,” i.e., multiply re-applicable in further cases, with each iteration being somewhat different from the previous instance, with the result that differences are introduced by deferral (différence).\(^\text{15}\) For Derrida, what follows from this is that the meaning of the sign is constructed, if at all, by the indefinitely open class of its iterations, and not by the supposedly determinative intentions of its “original author.” Hence, the author is, in a sense, created by the text, not the text by the author. As an expressive subject, i.e., an independent source of meaning, the author is just a myth. As Barthes puts it, the ideas supposedly residing in the mind are nothing but the “dictionary” of a speaker’s language, which is in no way originally her own.

Pennycook concludes that “these challenges to the notion of the author and individual creativity, and this argument that meanings are in a sense in circulation, that language is constantly cycled and recycled, raise profound questions about how we consider the notion of textual borrowing or plagiarism.”\(^\text{16}\)

There are many assumptions hidden in the line of argument just presented that would be hard to establish by independent philosophical arguments. One such assumption is that language, or writing, is just a collection of signs, or words, rather than a structured grammar (and compositional semantic structure) both of which enable a “competence” far exceeding the mere iteration of signs. The fundamental fallacy in the argument from writing is that although it is true that words, or signs, are not original with any person, and, therefore, all words are “borrowed,” or “iterated,” from previous “writings,” what does not follow is Pennycook’s claim that no thoughts, or propositions, are original with any person. Thoughts are composed of words in sentential and semantic structures, and such constructions may go on to figure in larger theoretical or narrative compositions. Noveltly and originality pertain to such compositions and not to their component words or phrases. As a generative and compositional structure, language makes possible the formation, on the basis of a finite number of words and rules, of indefinitely many new sentences and propositions, and these new sentences can be further composed into larger blocks of meaningful text in theoretical or narrative or dramatic or poetic formations. It is in these compositions that original authorship finds its expression.

The original author of a text is not so completely submerged under the stream of borrowings, citations, and words that already belong to others as to be considered non-existent (“dead”). Originality in the use of language, both in everyday discourse as well as in science and literature, is not a matter of the words used—whether they are one’s own or not—but rather a matter of how they are further composed. The argument from writing, as put forth by Pennycook and his sources, is insensitive to this function of language. (Indeed, Pennycook goes on to deny it.) Pennycook’s mistake is to assume that the basic unit of meaning in language is the individual word, or sign, and since words/signs are in common circulation, novelty can arise only by the introduction of entirely original words/signs, or not at all. But, clearly, this is a flawed view of language. The unit of meaning (as taught by a different tradition of philosophical thought, from Frege to Chomsky and from Wittgenstein to Davidson) is not the word but sentences, or propositions, the stock of which can be indefinitely generated from a finite set of words and rules. In one sense of novelty, each sentence we produce is new, a member of an indefinitely large set though composed of commonly used words that are not our own. In a more interesting sense, groups of sentences are composed into theories, stories, and poems, introducing more complex possibilities of novelty and originality for which we might care enough to claim authorship. But in all cases originality lies in composition, not in words.

Pennycook confronts the argument from language as a generative/compositional structure in a way that reveals both his indebtedness to post-structuralism and the limitations of his approach. Quoting Goethe to the effect that “everything clever has already been thought; one must only try to think it again,”\(^\text{17}\) he goes on to dismiss the compositional view of language in the following terms: “Rather than the generativist-grammian view of language as an infinite production of sentences—a view which suggests that such linguists have rarely been in a conversation. . .—is it not far more significant to focus on the social production and the circulation of meanings?” He goes on to conclude that “A view of language that relates its use to social, cultural, and ideological domains suggests that we need to go beyond a view of language as an infinite series of decontextualized sentences or as the idiosyncratic production of a completely free-willed subject.”\(^\text{18}\) These claims are hardly persuasive. The alternative he presents—that there is nothing new to say, but only to mimic, or quote, or borrow, what others have already said—is hardly a very attractive view, and certainly an exorbitant price to pay for an account of language as a social or cultural entity. Furthermore, Pennycook is mistaken in thinking that a compositional view of language negates its social dimension. While linguistic competence is, surely,
an individual asset and part of each individual’s psycho-linguistic endowment, vocabulary is just as surely social and inherited, as are reference and interpretation. The view implicit in Pennycook’s argument that we must choose between the social and the compositional dimensions of language use is false and rests on a false dichotomy. We need not choose between the social and the compositional dimensions of language use. As language users we recognize our linguistic communications as both compositional AND social.

WHAT’S IN A NAME: FOUCAULT’S ARGUMENT

A different argument against the commonsense view of authorship, which Pennycook draws on in his case against plagiarism, can be found in Foucault’s celebrated paper “What Is an Author?” (1977 [1969]). In that paper, Foucault expressed unease regarding “empty slogans” about the death of “God and man,” and sought a more specific analysis of the construction of authorship by considering how authors are named. Foucault aimed at a historical understanding of authorship, and utilized what he saw as the special semantic status of the names of authors to criticize the modernist view. Complaining that the argument from writing (écriture) eliminates the author as an external presence only to leave the writing as an abstraction, i.e., a system of endless citations and borrowings without any concrete historical anchoring, Foucault tries to re-establish a role for a named author as a historically constructed figure. For Foucault, the question becomes, “What is the name of an author?” Or how should the functioning of an author’s name be understood? I shall call this the “argument from naming,” to be distinguished from the argument from writing analyzed above.

The argument is based on a theory of naming derived from John Searle. On Searle’s view, the meaning of a name cannot be reduced simply to descriptions pertaining to the bearer of that name. A proper name has a designative function that is not reducible to descriptions that are true of the person who bears that name. Were it the case that the name “Aristotle” meant, say, “The teacher of Alexander the Great,” then the statement “Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great” would still name whoever did write the sonnets while in another possible world where he had not written the sonnets commonly attributed to him, then that would be a different name, and it would have a different referent. In the former case it would name whoever did write the sonnets while in the latter case it would refer to the same person, even if, contrary to fact, Dumont was not living in Paris, did not have blue eyes, and was not a doctor in his profession. As Kripke would put it, the name “Dumont” rigidly designates the person whose name it is in all these possible worlds. However, according to Foucault, with the names of authors, things are quite different. Names of authors designate by certain relevant descriptions and are, for this reason, quite different in their meanings from names of ordinary persons. In Foucault’s words: “the link between a proper name and the individual being named and the link between an author’s name and that which it names are not isomorphous and do not function in the same way.” By way of an illustration Foucault offers an account of the name “Shakespeare.” Being the name of an author, that name is, in his view, descriptive in a way that proper names are not. Had it turned out that Shakespeare had not written the sonnets commonly attributed to him, or that it was Francis Bacon who wrote the famous plays that we now associate with Shakespeare, then that would change the way the name “Shakespeare” functions, namely, it would have a different referent. In the former case it would name whoever did write the sonnets while in the latter case it would refer to Bacon. Hence, as Foucault puts it, “the name of an author is not precisely a proper name among others.” In other words, names of authors refer by description and so are, in Kripke’s terms, non-rigid designators.

Before looking at Foucault’s conclusions, it is worth noting that he offers no supporting argument to establish his assertion that the names of authors are logically different from other proper names, and in the context of attempting to establish the “disappearance” of the author (as an external point of reference), the claim seems to be question-begging. Why should names of authors be different in this regard from proper names generally? Clearly, if it turned out that someone else wrote the sonnets, or that Bacon wrote the whole Shakespearean oeuvre, “Shakespeare” would still be the name of the person humbly born in Stratford. It would not be Bacon’s name, nor that of the sonnet writer. Rather, we would say that Bacon’s plays (or the sonnets) were wrongly attributed to Shakespeare.

It is worth noting here that Searle’s view has received a scathing critique by Saul Kripke. On Kripke’s view, proper names have no descriptive function. Names are, in his parlance, “rigid designators,” by which Kripke means that they designate their bearers in all possible worlds regardless of how they are described, or of what is true of them in one or another counterfactual situation. Descriptions, by contrast, are non-rigid designators. They designate different bearers in different possible worlds, depending on what is true of them in those worlds. Hence, pace Searle, no disjunction of identifying descriptions of Aristotle need be true of him, but the name “Aristotle” would still designate the same person, Aristotle, in all possible worlds.
Taking the name of an author to be a descriptive term, designating its bearer only through a selection of relevant, text-specifying descriptions, Foucault reaches the conclusion that the author—the bearer of the name—is a function of the texts that are associated with the name. And since the concept of a text is a historical phenomenon, having to do with such developments as print and book-markets for which texts are “objects of appropriation,” so, he claims, is the concept of an author. As Foucault also puts it, “We can conclude that, unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person. . . , the name of the author remains at the contours of text—separating one from the other, defining their forms, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture.”

Still, Foucault does not eliminate any and every designative function from the author’s name so constructed: “The author’s name is not a function of a man’s civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach. . . .”

As noted, my main criticism of this argument is that its major premise that an author’s name is not a proper name because it is primarily descriptive, and not designative, is left without any justifying grounds. It is merely stated and appears to be question-begging. At any rate, it is hard to see how any of this serves to undermine the normative conception of plagiarism, namely, the misrepresentation of authorship for the purpose of receiving undeserved credit.

VARIETIES OF PLAGIARISM

While the normative view of plagiarism survives the attacks that I have noted above on authorship and originality, the principles of the normative account may be seen to shed light on a whole variety of cases not usually considered under the term “plagiarism.” Consider, for example, the following range of cases.

Academics typically collaborate in researching, writing, and publishing together as co-authors. At times, one partner unilaterally takes the jointly conceived material that he or she produced with others and republishes that material in another form and venue—say, a book, journal article, or popular presentation—while suppressing the fact of co-authorship and presenting the work as exclusively his or her own. The other author(s) may or may not receive some acknowledgement within the newly published work, but his or her status as an author is denied. In some such cases, the offending party may be protected by (non-exclusive) copyrights, and where significant power differentials exist between the parties (as between an established professor and a graduate student or aspiring academic), the offender may have institutional support. Typically, having lost authorial credit, the aggrieved party may also be subject to academic losses such as loss of professional recognition, and, because of this, perhaps also loss of employment prospects and promotions. As well, given that evidence of past collaborative work has been “appropriated” good academic work could be laid to waste as further collaboration may be made less likely.

Cases such as the one just described may not be viewed as “standard” cases of plagiarism. It is certainly not a case of one person copying someone else’s material and publishing or submitting that material as one’s own—which seems to be what one has in mind by a “standard” case of plagiarism. Nevertheless, the requisite elements of plagiarism, namely, theft of credit and (dishonest) misrepresentation, are clearly present. In plagiarism, credit is stolen by presenting someone else’s work as one’s own; it is only a minor tweaking of the term to apply it to the suppression of a collaborator’s authorship by presenting collaborative work as exclusively one’s own.

As noted above, plagiarism is a dual offense involving both theft of credit and misrepresentation of authorship. Of these two components, theft of credit is sufficient (when intentional), but not necessary (as attested by cases of “commercial plagiarism,” where one buys a paper authored and sold to one by another, unmerited authorship, where authorship is claimed by someone who has not contributed to the writing of, or the research for, that for which authorship is claimed, or self-plagiarism, where no “stealing” is at issue). On the other hand, misrepresentation of authorship, while necessary, may not be sufficient to indicate plagiarism (as this might occur as a result of unintentional lapses, e.g., cryptomnesia, or in cases where a student lacks sufficient understanding of the relevant norms regarding quotation and attribution). Nevertheless, some combination of the two components is typical of the range of cases which we view as constituting “plagiarism.” Like other general terms, “plagiarism” merits a “family resemblance” account, where there is a network of similarities among cases and some core examples, rather than any clear boundary between the cases.

We may, thus, distinguish varieties of plagiarism, not all of which satisfy all the various conditions, but some of which are sufficiently similar to core cases in some normatively salient respects. Among the various sorts of plagiarism that may be recognized are (1) plagiarism by copy/paste, on the part of students, who typically make no public claim of authorship, or established academics, who do make such claims, albeit either without quotation or attribution or with only insufficient and misleading ones. In some cases, paraphrasing may serve in place of simple copying, thereby further disguising the origin of the work; (2) plagiarism by fake authorship of various kinds, which typically does not produce duplicate papers (and cannot be mechanically detected). I include here various forms of “guest authorship” by free riders who have made no substantive contribution to the writing of or research for the texts on which their names appear. Among this class may be theses-supervisors, heads of laboratories, providers of funding, or others who exercise power to gain authorship status and reap its rewards; (3) self-plagiarism, namely, republishing the same material one has previously published under one’s own name but in another venue and without any reference to the fact that the material had been previously published (there are, of course, legitimate cases of repeating one’s writings from previously published works, for example, when one duplicates a section on methodology for a piece of research that forms the basis for more than one publication); (4) plagiarism by suppression of co-authorship, which amounts to repackaging co-authored material as a single-authored new publication;
These different varieties exemplify theft of credit or dishonest (mis)-representation of authorship in different ways and degrees.

Theft of credit and misrepresentation of authorship are intentional, motivated actions, and motive and intent inform the normative horizons of the offense of plagiarism. Unintentional cases may lead to different charges, e.g., violation of copyrights, accountability for untoward consequences, or charges of incompetence. Against this, however, it might be argued that a more operational definition of plagiarism is needed, especially for purposes of detection, one whose application does not depend on assessments of motive or intent. The busy editors of science journals should not worry about such subjective components when apparent plagiarism is detected by digital or other means. But matters are not always quite as simple as that. Publishers, editors, conference organizers, teachers, and others—impatient with the need, and not having the means to determine intent—may take a merely practical perspective that will not do justice to the full complexity of the phenomenon in question.  

In the academic setting, students typically plagiarize by "cheating" on their assignments. According to the website of the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), surveys (conducted by Donald McCabe) reveal that the percentage of graduate students who admit to some form of plagiarizing is 43 percent, and the percentage of undergraduates who admit to it is a staggering 68 percent. Commonly, students copy from an existing source (or from one another) into their term papers without indicating the copying and the source, that is, without proper quotation marks and/or attribution. Students often use various techniques. They may copy from a single source (in whole or in part), they may intermingle several sources, they may "patchwork" the copied material with original phrasings, or they may paraphrase to serve as a veil for their appropriation. They may copy from a single source (in whole or in part), they may intermingle several sources, they may "patchwork" the copied material with original phrasings, or they may paraphrase to serve as a veil for their appropriation. Quotation marks may be either entirely missing or insufficient to indicate the full use of the copied material, thus leading to the impression that the work is the student’s own. Similarly, attribution may be entirely missing, or insufficient to indicate the full scope of use, again creating a misleading impression. Admittedly, in these cases, the consequences of credit-theft to its (direct) victims are minimal since these assignments usually go no further than the instructor’s pile of papers to grade and no public grabbing of credit takes place. But the instructor is misled, his or her work is exploited, and the grade system, predicated as it is on meritocratic principles, is undermined, with deleterious consequences, in the aggregate, for higher education at large.

Even worse cases are those where the cheating process is commercialized, as when students buy term papers in the open market and put their names on them before handing them in as their own. (A few clicks in Google will lead one to the various websites that offer “essay-writing services” to students worldwide. From the number of such competing sites, one can infer that there is an active market in academic papers for college students.) In such commercial transactions, no theft of credit is at issue, and no duplicate papers exist in any public form to be detected (unless the same essay is sold more than once). But the corruption involved constitutes an even graver threat to the integrity of academic teaching, raising questions as to the viability of higher education in its role as providing competent experts for the service of society. Experts, whether in teaching or engineering, are supposed to have earned their credentials, not to have bought them.

Buying term papers in the open market is, obviously, a case of corruption. But not all cases of student plagiarism are equally offensive, and some are excusable if not entirely benign. On this point, Pennycook and Chandrasoma et al. (1996, 2004) do have important things to say. Students may become implicated in plagiarism charges unwittingly, and the immediate referral of such cases to investigative bodies and disciplinary courts may be ill-conceived. Indeed, these authors convincingly detail varieties of unquoted and unattributed uses of prior texts, assigned or unassigned, through which students legitimately express their learning curves, their reliance on what they take to be common knowledge, and even their inchoate resistance to forms of knowledge production that deny their cultural heritage. Coming from traditional systems of primary and secondary education where studying is often a matter of learning by rote, undergraduate students cannot be assumed to understand, without prior instruction, either the purposes of academic writing, the principles, rules, and conventions of academic work, or the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate use of existing sources. Hence, the prevalence of plagiarism among undergraduate students, as documented above, may reflect lack of clarity among students regarding the relevant norms of quotation as much as low standards of morality on the part of the student population. At this level, confronting plagiarism is, first and foremost, a matter of making sure that the principles and standards are well understood, and only secondarily a matter of discipline and punishment. These priorities are clearly to be reversed when it comes to graduate students. At that level, the principles of academic meritocracy and the rules of citation and attribution can be assumed to be fully internalized. Graduate students are prospective researchers and teachers as they learn to produce theses and dissertations that become part of the public academic record.

A scandal involving the prevalence of plagiarism in doctoral dissertations submitted to German universities is documented and discussed by Debora Weber-Wulff (2014). As she describes, cases of plagiarism have been discovered a-plenty in doctoral dissertations in Germany, particularly in the aftermath of a scandal involving a popular German politician, the Minister of Defense, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. A popular website, VroniPlag Wiki, has been set up to track cases of plagiarism in dissertations submitted to German institutions. Many such cases have been exposed and documented, some leading to doctorates being rescinded. Given the prevalence of plagiarism in
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higher education generally, it should come as no surprise that the problem travels upwards in the academic ladder, affecting not just undergraduates but doctoral students as well in their dissertation work. But it does show that the problem is real and disturbing, undermining credibility of university education at its highest levels, as well as the credentials and authority of experts who come out of these institutions. As Weber-Wulff states, “doctoral students who do not understand what constitutes plagiarism are a danger to the future of science if they continue to work in this plagiarizing way.”

Looking at student plagiarism, let us review the damage wrought by this level of plagiarism to the system of higher education and to the public at large. As noted, the theft of credit issue is, for the most part, not a serious concern, though it can become so in theses and dissertations that do enter the public domain after having been approved. A plagiarized dissertation may, if successful, redirect citations from an original work to a non-original one, thereby “enslaving” someone else’s work for the benefit of the thief. In our day and age, with citations becoming the measure of “impact”—questionable though that measure might be—this is the mechanism whereby credit is siphoned off from where it belongs. However, I believe that the greater negative moral impact of student plagiarism lies in its degradation of the system of higher education. With studies that show 43 percent to 68 percent plagiarism in students’ work, clearly, most of it is not caught and the plagiarizers reap the benefit of good grades that were not honestly earned. If 43 percent to 68 percent of students’ GPA is, thus, unjustly earned, the degrees such students receive, which are held to testify to a level of expertise that the students have gained in their studies, are similarly diluted. They become false coins. Somewhere along the line, the public stands to suffer as its service providers will be less competent than the public was led to believe (and paid for in taxes). The effect on society is cumulative. It will not be immediately noticed, but over the long run services will decline, whether in teaching, economics, or engineering, and trust in the system of higher education will gradually erode. Perhaps this is the price universities are paying for having become providers of mass tertiary education, rather than elite institutions of research, but it is not an inevitable price, and it could be minimized by educators and university managers through appropriate policies regarding student plagiarism.

Students are not the only ones in the academic setting who plagiarize. Faculty plagiarism in publishing and research is also a growing problem. A recent study, a meta-analysis of surveys, estimates the percentage of scientists having reported awareness of plagiarism by others to be 30 percent. (Self-admissions of plagiarism by scientists are estimated at 1.7 percent). A recent report in The Washington Post (January 26, 2020) details a public call by a committee of the Russian Academy of Science for the retraction of 2,528 research papers published in 541 Russian journals, alleging plagiarism of various forms. A Russian group called “Dissernet,” active since 2013, has claimed to uncover thousands of cases in some 1,500 journals as well as 7,251 cases of academic degrees given on the basis of plagiarized work. The Russian case may not be typical, as political pressure on Russian institutions to over-produce may have added to the competitive pressures felt by scientists worldwide as their publications are quantitatively measured for citations and impact. But, clearly, the Russian case shows that science is not immune to corruption and the brave interventions of the Russian Academy of Science, Dissernet in Russia, and VroniPlag Wiki in Germany are laudable.

Clearly, the damage of professorial plagiarism is manifold greater than it is in the case of student plagiarism. First, these are the cases where the damage to the direct victims must be taken very seriously. If the theft is conducted by copy/paste at a distance, without adequate quotation and attribution, the credit is embezzled by redirecting citations from original to plagiarized work. Where the theft is by fake authorship, extorted from subordinates by threats of various kinds, the damage may become as bad as sabotaging the careers of younger researchers, or leaving them with a strong sense of an identity infringed by an unscrupulous “strongman” shielded by an indifferent academic setting. Secondly, beyond compromising the meritocratic reward system on which the academy depends for its reputation, real damage is wrought to science itself and to the published record, which will now lead people astray as they consult it for further research. Those 30 percent of scientists who have detected plagiarism in others (and have not, presumably, made this information public) will, like the rest of us, continue to operate in a degraded and corrupted system, losing trust in it just a step or two before the general public does. In educational contexts, the plagiarists become the teachers of the next generation of students, and that clearly bodes ill to the chances of properly educating the young.

Those whose work has been plagiarized are, obviously, the most direct and main victims of plagiarism. Their ideas have been stolen, and given the intimacy of one’s relation to one’s own ideas, the victims of such theft have grounds for feeling personally violated. To be sure, not all direct victims of plagiarism are equally exposed but, typically, those at the lower rungs of the academic system, namely, younger academics without secure positions, or those suffering from the insecurities (and inequalities) associated with certain races, ethnicities, and/or gender, are likely to experience the consequences of having been plagiarized more acutely than others. Additionally, when the work of research students—or junior faculty—is involved, there is, in addition to the simple theft of credit, a breach of trust when the plagiarism has been committed by a thesis supervisor or senior faculty—a breach that adds insult to injury—which is not to deny that the insult may not itself be highly injurious. (In many such cases, the element of theft is covered up by the false claim that there was agreement, on the part of the person(s) plagiarized, to dual authorship. One should always be wary of such assertions because claims to “agreement” under conditions of great power differentials are often suspect. Sometimes, the reality behind such agreements is one of pressure consisting of implied threats to the victim’s professional future.)

Plagiarism, in all its forms, threatens the excellence promised by academic meritocracy. It is made more prevalent by
failures of affected institutions to act vigorously against it, which is, perhaps, already a sign of meritocratic failure. It goes without saying that the whole academic world stands to lose.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of the impact of plagiarism on the scholarly record, see Dougherty, “Correcting the Scholarly Record in the Aftermath of Plagiarism.”
4. For an account of the Roman poet Martial’s accusations of plagiarism in the context of Roman law, see J. Mira Seo, “Plagiarism and Poetic Identity in Martial.” Martial was apparently the first to use the term, which originally suggested the act of kidnapping a person with the aim of enslavement, for the purpose of claiming about the literary theft of his own poems. It is interesting to note that Martial focused on what J. Mira Seo, a literary historian of the Roman period, describes as the “materiality” of his texts, which have been represented by others as if they were their own, but without yet viewing those textual types as his own property (in the modern sense of the term). In Bk. 1, #52, of his Epigrams, Martial was asking a patron, Quinctianus, to stand up for him against a false appropriation of his poems (by a third party; another poet who took to reciting Martial’s epigrams in public performances as his own) and “bring shame on the plagiary.” The term was thus coined as a metaphor, betraying an awareness of the text as a type, separate from any performance (or book) token, the (mis)appropriation of which is more akin to the theft of identity than to other forms of stealing. See Martial, Epigrams. Book 1. Epigrams 52. Bohn’s Classical Library (1897) http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book01.htm.
13. Pennycook, “Borrowing Others’ Words,” 209. It should be stressed that the structuralist and post-structuralist authorities that Pennycook relies on, e.g., Barthes and Foucault, were not discussing textuality or authorship in the contexts of plagiarism in college education, research, or literary production. These contexts arise by way of Pennycook’s application of the structuralist and post-structuralists accounts to the question of plagiarism. Pennycook, “Borrowing Others’ Words,” 210; the text quoted is from Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 146.
19. These considerations barely scratch the surface of a complex philosophical terrain. Admittedly, Chomsky (“New Horizons in the Study of Language”) does consider the social dimension of language to be “epiphenomenal,” taking its generative aspect to be part of our pre-social, biological heritage. I follow Davidson (1984) in emphasizing the need for a compositional semantics out of a generative grammar, and both Davidson (“Truth and Meaning”) and Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations) in emphasizing the impossibility of a private language and the social character of language use and semantic interpretation.
25. See Kripke, Naming and Necessity, 61, 74–75.
29. Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 123.
30. The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines “cryptomnesia” as “an implicit memory phenomenon in which people mistakenly believe that a current thought or idea is a product of their own creation when, in fact, they have encountered it previously and then forgotten it. Cryptomnesia can occur in any creative enterprise, as for example when an investigator develops a research idea that he or she believes is original whereas in actuality it can be documented that he or she saw or heard the idea at some earlier point in time. Also called inadvertent plagiarism; unconscious plagiarism.” See The APA Dictionary of Psychology on line at https://dictionary.apa.org.
31. If there are cases of unintentional stealing, as in sleepwalking, then stealing should not count as sufficient. One doubts, however, that they merit the term “stealing.” Cases of cryptomnesia, which come close to “sleepwalking,” are better seen as unintended cases of misrepresentation, rather than theft. By contrast, cases of compulsion, as in kleptomania, are still intentional, and do merit the term. Kleptomaniac compulsion can serve as an excuse, but not as a change of category.
32. For general terms and family resemblances, see Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 65–71; a “family resemblance” account has the effect of expanding the range of cases that fall under the term “plagiarism,” so that it includes the whole variety of fraudulent authorship manipulations (some of which others might prefer to subsume under a more anemic general term such as “academic misconduct,” which doesn’t specify the nature of the problem).
33. Recently, as this paper is being prepared for publication, concern has arisen regarding the use of artificial intelligence devices (chatbots) for the purpose of artificially producing what appear to be coherent, or adequate, pieces of text and turning them in as student papers, or even as papers submitted for publication in academic venues. Clearly, if this turns out to be “the new normal,” such use would constitute another variety of plagiarism, where credit is wrongly claimed, and third parties are misled to the detriment of the academic profession which values and depends on originality of thinking, writing, and research. Indeed, the AI device itself could be thought of as plagiarizing the reams of material it goes through or reproduces in some form, without credit or quotation marks. That, too, forms a new “variety” of the old practice, with its two types of norm violations and two kinds of victims.
34. See Patience et al., “Intellectual Contributions Meriting Authorship.” The authors describe various (conflicting) criteria of scientific authorship as specified by institutions such as the ICMJE, WAME, Harvard Medical school, or the NIH. These various
criteria “aim to reduce unethical practices—coercive authors, Honorary authorship, guest authorship, gift authorship, and ghost authorship.” Apart from ghost authorship, which presents a different ethical problem, the other cases are all various forms of laying claim to authorship by people who have made no adequate contribution to the intellectual content of work in question.

35. In his novel, Solar, Ian McEwan portrays a fictional character who publishes as his own groundbreaking results of a student who died mysteriously and left his unpublished work with him as his professor. In her novel, The History of Love, Nicole Krauss depicts a case of plagiarizing a whole novel by a Holocaust victim, presumed dead, who in fact survived, by another survivor who presents the work as his own. In these fictional works, the two major normative aspects of plagiarism are vividly depicted.

36. Suppose, for example, A, B, and C collaborate in producing a research paper, and unbeknownst to A and B, C plagiarizes some other work in his part of the project. Are A and B plagiarists in our assessment? They are signed on a piece of work that is clearly a plagiary and may have been detected as such. But, of course, we may have to assess their motive and intention, indeed their knowledge, to come up with a judgment that is just. This could, obviously, have far-reaching consequences for the careers in question, and may come up as a practical issue the next time A or B attempt to publish a paper. Thus, a paper might be plagiarized while the authors may not all be plagiarists, so we need a fuller understanding of the nature of the offense if we are to render a judgment, which is not to say that the non-offfending parties may not be accountable for other aspects of the event, including copyright violations and the need to alert the scientific community and clean up the mess. Science is based on trust, and anyone can fall victim to misplaced trust. All these considerations require a careful assessment of intent and motive. Operational technicalities will not do the job.


38. See Weber-Wulff, False Feathers, 60.


41. Typically, in such cases, the plagiarized material has not yet been settled in terms of copyrights or remains hidden in a local library in the form of a dissertation thesis, so the victim, if s/he wishes to pursue the matter, may be called upon to prove his or her case. This may involve confronting the plagiarists themselves and appealing to (perhaps untrusted) university authorities, or journal editors—both of which takes courage and tenacity and is likely be an unsettling experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ethics Olympiad

Matthew Wills
ETHICS OLYMPIAD PROJECT MANAGER

In my 2012 contribution to the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy, I outlined the growth and popularity of Philosothon in Australasia. For the uninitiated, a Philosothon is a popular inter-school-based program involving school-age students engaging in philosophical discussions while being scored by philosophers.1 Here, I will not outline the successes or failures of the Philosothon project, but instead focus on a more recent initiative called the Ethics Olympiad.

An Ethics Olympiad is also an inter-school competition, but an important difference from a Philosothon is its focus on ethical issues. The Ethics Olympiad is based on the structure of an Ethics Bowl. Ethics Bowls have existed in the US since 1995.2 We chose to call this event an Olympiad early on rather than an “Ethics Bowl” because “football bowls” are peculiar to the US. We refer to the event as an Olympiad and to students as “eth-letes” to emphasize the goal of excellence in moral reasoning.3 In sum, the Ethics Olympiad offers a creative way for teachers to introduce ethical issues and cultivate good reasoning, using age-appropriate issues in a collaborative format. This project is not, strictly speaking, about the teaching of philosophy,
but is a useful pedagogical tool for teachers to use with students as they engage with contested ethical issues.

At an Ethics Olympiad schools are represented by one or two teams, and each team consists of five students. In the preparation for an Olympiad, cases involving an ethical judgment are provided early to the participating schools, thus giving the teams sufficient time to develop their thoughts on the cases before the event takes place. The ethical cases include real-life situations that require a moral decision. For example, a senior high school case might focus on the recent removal of a statue of the seventeenth-century philanthropist James Colston in Bristol because of his involvement in the slave trade. The case study might also explore the moral implications of the fact that a hero such as Winston Churchill was directly responsible for the deaths of many German civilians during World War II. The case study will include claims of those who support the disposal of such statues and counter claims from those who do not. Students are thus given various—indeed, opposing—perspectives so that they might develop their own views on the topic and consider claims they had not previously considered. While some cases are of international or national concern, other cases are more personal and/or familiar to a student context, such as a case dealing with two students sharing homework, where only one of the two students did the work.

The discussions are not debates. The teams are not required to take opposing views, and each team is encouraged to acknowledge and discuss views that are different from their own position. Indeed, collaboration and generosity rather than competitiveness are the goals, goals clearly reflected in the marking key. The marking key highlights parameters such as respectful dialogue, moral reasoning, and the serious treatment of counter arguments.

Our first Ethics Olympiad took place online between Austin High School, a school in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Hale School in Perth, Western Australia. On that day we also participated in a “scrimmage” (to use an Ethics Bowl term) between a team from Bentley High School in California, and Hale School in Perth, Western Australia. We used Skype with the Tennessee school and video conferencing technology with the school in California. Both US schools had participated in the first National High School Ethics Bowl at the University of North Carolina, so they were comfortable with both the process that we used and the types of ethical cases we presented. We had judges located in Australia and the United States, and I served as the moderator at the event. All the eth-letes, coaches, and judges loved the experience, and with that the Ethics Olympiad was born.

We ran Ethics Olympiads (online) occasionally over the next few years with other schools in other regions of Australia. We received a great deal of positive feedback from participants. The following is typical:

“The nature of this event being collaborative yet competitive is wonderful and so needed in our increasingly polarised world with algorithm-driven news feeds, where discourse is lacking. It was wonderful to have the expertise of skilled, highly qualified thinkers as judges. . . . Overall, a wonderful event.” (Glenda McCarthy, Centralian Senior College - Alice Springs - Northern Territory - Australia)

In 2017 we held face-to-face Ethics Olympiad trials at Scotch College in Melbourne, Victoria and at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra. Students gathered in teams representing their schools. The events were held in school halls with circular tables, each table having two teams of five students and a judge. I would moderate the event from a podium at the front of the hall (see Figure 1 below).

Following the success of this trial, over the next few years, we ran face-to-face events in most capital cities in Australia and New Zealand. Many hundreds of schools participated. Schools volunteered to host an event, welcoming teams from other schools in the region. I ran each Olympiad with a projector and microphone from the front of the hall. The program for the day was displayed on a PowerPoint and was projected onto a large screen at the front of the school hall. The presentation included team allocations for each heat, the ethical cases to be considered, and displayed timers for each of the heats.

During the morning, we ran three heats, assigning teachers to judge on each table. No teacher judged a team from his or her own school. They listened to the team’s responses, engaged in the Q & A, and provided scores for both teams at the end of each heat. In the afternoon, professional philosophers from the local universities judged a final round between the top-ranked teams from the three heats in the morning. At the end of the day, medals were awarded to the winning team for that day (see Figure 2).

With the arrival of COVID in 2020 we did a Zoom format trial for the first time. We did this with schools in China, specifically, schools associated with the China Ethics Bowl. We used the same format in breakout rooms, and from all reports (including anonymous surveys sent to all participants. The following is typical:

Figure 1. Face-to-face Ethics Olympiad 2018.

Figure 2. Gold Medal awarded to all members of the top-ranked team.
participants) the trial was very successful. (Interestingly, the introduction of our Olympiad in China coincided with a downturn in Australia/China relations, which led to trade sanctions and a frosty relationship between the two countries. Nevertheless, the Ethics Olympiad was constructive and friendly. In fact, we called these “the Friendly Games.”)

Over the course of 2020 we developed online protocols for schools participating in Ethics Olympiads via Zoom. Later that year we ran twelve online regional events for middle school students. One of the benefits of the new online format was that philosophy lecturers as well as philosophy PhD students could participate as judges from anywhere in the world, and we trained over twenty-five judges from such countries as Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand and the US. (Some were eager to join due to the adverse effects of COVID travel restrictions on their teaching loads.)

Currently, each Ethics Olympiad involves three or four heats with between ten and forty participating teams. At the commencement of the program, teams are allocated to different Zoom breakout rooms, each breakout room with two teams and a judge/moderator. Heats begin with introductions and a “getting to know each other” exercise. Each heat involves two rounds. The judge/moderator starts the heat with a coin toss determining which of the two teams will be Team A, and which is Team B. Team A is then presented with a case from the case set they were provided with earlier and a question. With that, the first round begins.

Recently, we introduced an online Ethics Olympiad application. It consists of two parts, a “management” program and a “judges” program. The “management” program is used by the host to create the format of an event. This determines the number of heats, the cases that will be used, and the ethical questions presented to participants. Figure 3 displays the “judges” program, specifically an event consisting of four heats involving Queensland schools in May last year. The judges program is shared by the judge in their breakout room with participating teams during each heat. This application has fast-tracked, automated, and standardized timing and score submission.

The judge clicks on the relevant heat to start the program in his or her breakout room. After the case is re-read (sometimes a video clip is played), teams are presented with a question on which the teams are to focus during the first round. Figure 4 is an image of the start of the round, with the question and stopwatch.

Once the judge presses “start” for Team A, the members of that team have two minutes to discuss their response to the question while muted. All contributions by team members are preceded with a period of deliberation and consultation. Each round deals with a different case, but Team A presents first, and Team B then critiques Team A’s presentation, and then Team A responds to the critique. Each round ends with a period of Q & A from the judges. (See Figure 5 below for all the times.) Team B is then presented with a different case and question, and they go through the same format as described above. Time is allocated at the end of each heat to allow the judges to give feedback to the teams about where they were successful and where they need improvement.

The new application includes a scoring page for each judge (see Figure 6). Judges are assessing their clarity, focus, and thoughtfulness. Teams are asked to consider the counter argument to their own position. Specificially, they look at whether their presentation indicates an awareness of and...
During 2021 the popularity of Ethics Olympiads continued to grow online. We had nearly six hundred teams participating during the height of COVID lockdowns. When a student/team was in lockdown, the new online Zoom program made it possible for the student or team to participate from home. Another unexpected benefit of the pandemic has been the acquisition, by teachers in many schools, of confidence and training in the use of Zoom.

The online format also made participation in Olympiads possible for a greater number of schools in many remote or regional parts of Australia and New Zealand, for example, Centralian High School in Central Australia in Alice Springs and Muslim schools such as Zahed School for Girls in New Zealand. We have even had several teams of homeschooled eth-letes participating.

At the request of primary school teachers in 2021, we introduced “Junior School” Ethics Olympiads for nine-to twelve-year-olds using age-appropriate cases. (We included film clips such as from Babe, where Farmer Arthur Hogsett says to Babe “We only eat animals that are stupid.” Junior students are then given the question, “Do you think it is OK to eat animals if they are stupid?” We also use picture books with younger students, and these provide the starting point for each round.

During 2022, we decided to make the Senior Ethics High School Olympiads available to other schools in Southeast Asia, including Singapore and Hong Kong, and, more recently, to schools in India. Also in 2022, we created an annual Ethics Olympiad for Canadian schools. One of the benefits of the new Zoom format is that we have been able to run International Ethics Olympiad finals easily. Regional medal-winning schools from throughout the world are now thoughtful consideration of different viewpoints, including those that might loom large in the reasoning of individuals who disagree with that team’s position.

Judges provide a total score out of sixty for each team at the end of each heat, and, once submitted, the scores are collated by the application. These scores are used to determine the gold, silver, and bronze medals awarded at the end of each Olympiad.

This new online application has also opened all sorts of possibilities. We have already made the application available to schools/universities to run their own Ethics Olympiad using current case sets.

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eligible to participate at the international finals that are held each year.\footnote{14}{

The recent introduction of Tertiary Ethics Olympiads has allowed us to return to the origins of the Ethics Bowl, wherein Australasian university students can now participate. The Ethics Bowl started in the 1990s as an intercollegiate initiative by Professor Robert Ladenson at the Illinois Institute of Technology. It grew from there to become a national US event with its own system of regional events culminating in an annual final: the US Intercollégiate Ethics Bowl. Prior to the recent Tertiary Ethics Olympiad, we had run events only for school-aged students, so in offering it to university students we are in a sense returning to its roots. We are now able to run international events with Australasian universities and US colleges. This year we held an international Tertiary Ethics Olympiad final between US and Australian Universities.\footnote{15}{

One further recent development has been the introduction of a case writing competition. The ethical cases that we present for analysis and discussion at each Ethics Olympiad are vitally important to their success. The cases that we use are revised each year. Early in the development of the Ethics Olympiad, we used US written cases, with permission, from the US High School Ethics Olympiad.\footnote{16}{But we have found that while the cases available from the National High School Ethics Bowl were excellent, the establishment of a case writing competition here in Australia has enabled us to develop a collection of cases that are written for and about Australasian moral issues.\footnote{17}

Many of our judges are now alumni of the Ethics Olympiad, and some high school students have gone on to study philosophy at a tertiary level and have come back afterwards to judge at an Olympiad. Furthermore, we have had reports that due to student involvement in Ethics Olympiads, some schools have introduced ethics programs and others have recruited alumni to coach younger children in their school.\footnote{18}{

I finish this paper as I started it, with a vote of thanks to the pioneers that created the Ethics Bowl. Since starting the Ethics Olympiad, I have always been happy to acknowledge its founder and the authors of the cases we have used. The event has developed substantially in its short history, and now we are drawing on cases written by and for Australasian students, thus producing programs and drawing on resources that are peculiar to a Southern Hemisphere event. In all of this there has been a significant “coming of age” for the Ethics Olympiad.

We are excited to see where the next steps will be taken.

NOTES

1. In 2012, I was awarded a Winston Churchill Fellowship to do research in the US with a view towards creating a national Australasian Philosothon. I visited various stakeholders and participated in Ethics Bowls over the course of my month-long visit to eight US states. People were very generous with their time, wisdom, and resources. I returned to Australia and established the Australasian Philosothon, which has run annually in Australia since its inception in 2012. This is the report from the Fellowship: \url{https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/matthew-wills-wa-2009/}. This Philosothon and its website are now managed by the Australian Association of Philosophy: \url{www.philosothon.org}.

2. A great deal is owed to people in the US, particularly Professor Robert Ladenson who created the first Ethics Bowl, and then others involved in the management of the High School Ethics Bowls, such as Dr Alex Richardson, the director of the National High School Ethics Bowl, Professor Tom Wartenberg from Holyoke College, and Roberta Israeloff, the Director of the Squire Foundation. The model for the Intercollégiate Ethics Bowl became the basic model for the Australasian Ethics Olympiad, and the Ethics Olympiad adopted the rules and procedures for the National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) in the US. This is the official site for the National US High School Ethics Bowl based at the Parr Centre for Ethics at the University of North Carolina: \url{https://nhseb.unc.edu/}.

3. Early on I realized that the concept of an “Ethics Bowl” was a specifically US locution and while I was familiar with the use of the term, I did not think it appropriate to adopt it in an Australian context. In part this was to avoid accusations of cultural appropriation. I created the name “Ethics Olympiad” soon after participating as a judge at the US National High School Ethics Bowl in 2013, in order both to retain the sporting metaphor, and to draw on a more internationally popular concept, namely, the Olympics. I wanted the name to signify a structured event that both promotes respectful dialogue between students and also rewards excellence (by means of medals given to teams of students that score highly). We refer to the students as “Eth-letes,” a play on the word “Ath-lete.” Like athletes, these students are in training for excellence, but evidence is also there in the moral reasoning. (This terminology was also coined very early in the history of the Ethics Olympiad in 2013.)

4. Team B can agree with Team A, and in their commentary, they may even choose to develop Team A’s argument further or ask questions of Team A that may challenge Team A or, perhaps, allow Team A to further develop claims that they put forth. Or they may present challenges that they themselves grappled with when preparing for the event and state their own responses to these challenges. Also, unlike what typically takes place in a debate, a team may change its position during the Heat. There is a sense, therefore, in which both teams are working together to build the best possible answer that they can to a difficult ethical question.

5. I am aware of some skepticism concerning the value of such competitions, the argument being that philosophy is ideally about the pursuit of wisdom without extrinsic rewards that accompany this sort of event. (See Simon Kidd, “The Philosothon: Philosophy as Performance,” \textit{Journal of Philosophy in Schools} 9, no. 2 [2022]: 41–77, \url{https://jps.bham.ac.uk/articles/abstract/160/}. I am not unsympathetic to this argument, but have written elsewhere responses to this criticism (e.g., in this article Dr. Alan Tapper and I argue that such competitions are not antithetical to philosophy: \url{https://jps.bham.ac.uk/articles/10.4670/jps.11-151}). There is also evidence to show that such interchanges do improve civility and confidence in young people. These events encourage young people and schools to develop skills in moral reasoning … and fall in love with philosophy. The following report was written by Dr. Rachel Buchanan in 2019. While it deals with Philosothons, its conclusions equally apply to the Ethics Olympiad (\url{http://ethicsolympiad.org/AustralasianPhilosothonReportBuchanan.pdf}). Herein, there is evidence students participate in philosophy after having been successful in these competitions.

6. Initially these Olympiads involved older (fifteen- to eighteen-year-old) secondary students. After the first twelve months we decided to offer Ethics Olympiads for Middle School students (twelve- to fifteen-year-olds) as well. This proved to be equally successful with nearly three hundred teams participating late in 2019. I traveled throughout Australia and New Zealand conducting Ethics Olympiads using this same structure each time, modifying it only slightly and developing protocols for use in the following year. Unfortunately, COVID-19 arrived early in 2020 when two hundred fifty teams were registered to participate in thirteen Olympiads across Australasia. The pandemic proved to be the opportunity we needed to cancel these events. Due to lockdowns and a general fear in schools about cross-contamination, we had to cancel events and reimburse schools, notify judges, and cancel extensive travel plans throughout Australia and New Zealand. Despite these problems the pandemic proved to be the opportunity we needed to grow the event online extensively and internationally.
7. The China Ethics Bowl was introduced to China in 2019 as an International Affiliate of the US Ethics Bowl and was first known as the Shanghai Interscholastic Ethics Bowl (SIEB). The China Ethics Bowl is co-ordinated by a small committee chaired by Leo Huang, with support from an executive committee across China and providing support for regional organizers, including promoting, fundraising, material design, and international collaboration opportunities. The official website for the China Ethics Bowl is https://ethicsbowlchina.com/.

8. Previously, judges simply shared a PowerPoint program, set up for the round, which included cases and times for each heat, and scores were submitted separately via email. The new online application has been designed specifically for Ethics Olympiads, allowing judges to easily share the online program in their Zoom breakout room with the same cases, times, and a link for scoring.

9. This program was designed by one of our judges in Canada, Karamvir Singh. The online application is password protected and allows a host to set up an event using the current case set.

10. Unlike the US events where the judges announce the winner at the end of each heat, we made the decision early on at the Ethics Olympiad to provide only broad feedback during the event and provide the overall ranking of the teams, via email, only after the event. We did this in large part to reduce emphasis on the competitive side of the event.

11. The Hosting Licences we have made available enables anyone to run a heat as a practice or a scored event. In 2022 we decided to offer licensees to organizations/people to run their own Ethics Olympiads. With this license we are providing resources, technologies, training, and support that will allow others to host their own Ethics Olympiads. We offered five licenses in 2022 and all five were taken up. We are offering another five in 2023. More information is available at https://ethicsolympiad.yahoosites.com/hosting-licences-1.html.

12. Please note that we only run three heats for Junior School students. One of the reasons that these Junior Ethics Olympiads have been very popular is that it gives students the chance to engage with other students from throughout their region, and even beyond. (A school on the South Island of New Zealand can be in a heat with a school in Tunisia, or Hong Kong, Perth, or Delhi.) Here is an example of a case we used at a recent Junior School Ethics Olympiad. This case uses a film clip from Professor Tom Wartenberg’s wonderful collection, “What’s the Big Idea” (http://whatsthebigideaprogram.com/). Here is the clip from Babe: http://vimeo.com/75045741. These clips can be embedded in the new software application and then shared in a breakout room. There is another case from the recent Junior School Ethics Olympiad, this time using a picture book: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAdbpuGCbug.

13. These events are hosted by We Up Education in Canada by Archie Stapleton who is studying at Harvard. More information can be found at https://canadianethicsolymp.wixsite.com/website-1.

14. We only run International Finals for “Senior” and “Middle” School students. We usually take the “Gold Medal” and “Silver Medal” winning team from each regional event held in a month. E.g. We run Senior Ethics Olympiads in twenty separate regions around Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, and in Canada. So, two teams from each of these events have been invited to participate on a designated date, which we call the International Ethics Olympiad final. Medals are again awarded to the top-ranked teams at this event. The Ethics Cup in the UK and the Ethics Bowl in the US use a similar format, drawing on winning schools in the regions to run finals at a broader level. In the UK the final is run at St Andrews’s University in Edinburgh (https://ethicscup.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/) and in the US the final for the High School Ethics Bowl is held at the University of North Carolina (https://nhsb.unc.edu/). A recent Ethics Olympiad Senior High School final involved forty teams from throughout Australasia, South-east Asia, India, and Canada. But the time difference between different regions was significant. For example, the start time for students in India was 6:30 a.m. (finishing at 11:30 a.m.) whereas the start time for the Canadian teams was 9 p.m., finishing at 1:30 a.m. Because of the time differences involved, it was not possible to include schools in Europe or the UK.


16. We always attribute authorship to the case-writing committee members who create these cases. Many and even most of the cases relate specifically to the US context.

17. Additionally, we have developed opportunities for organizations to sponsor Ethics Olympiad Case-Writing prizes. The Ethics Centre (Australia) and Humanity Matters (New Zealand) have sponsored monetary prizes for successful students, and we are now using student written cases in upcoming Senior and Middle School Ethics Olympiads.

18. We make a point of encouraging our judges to share their own journey with participating “eth-letes” and to highlight the value of studying philosophy at the university level. It is interesting and heartening to see alumni of an Ethics Olympiad coming back and participating as judges after they have gone on to study philosophy at university. (Some high school students have also gone on to participate successfully as undergraduate philosophy students in the Tertiary Ethics Olympiad mentioned previously.)

THREE POEMS
Felicia Nimue Ackerman
BROWN UNIVERSITY

The Table’s Here?
The table’s here, or so it seems,
If not a figment of my dreams.
I’d have to be extremely smart
To manage to refute Descartes.

Like the Past?
The future will be like the past;
That’s what we all assume.
But look upon the wisdom vast
That comes from David Hume.

What’s Natural Is Always Good?
“What’s natural is always good,”
Say nature-lovers, firm and shrill.
To get beyond that, as we should,
Just take a leaf from J.S. Mill.

Who’s the Frailest?
(First published in Light, https://lightpoetrymagazine.com/)
“The past few years we’ve seen a lot of conservative criticism about the ‘snowflakes’ at our colleges and universities. . . . Not only do conservative lawmakers whine about acknowledging the realities of our political and social history; they’re passing laws against even discussing them. . . . Who are the real snowflakes?”

–From a letter to The Boston Globe

Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who’s the frailest of them all?
Who demands complete protection?
Who can’t bear the least objection
To their own unsparing view?
Both sides now? Alas, it’s true!