FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

e-ISSN: 2542-4920

Volume 9, Issue 1
Spring 2025

JOURNALS lectito

This page intentionally left blank.

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 1(1)
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

CHIEF EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

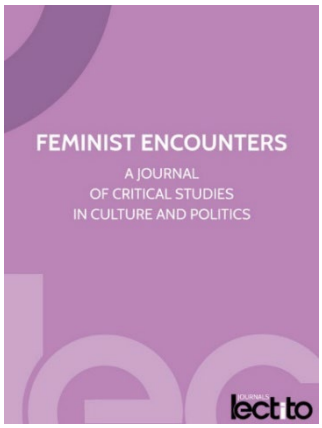
This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

Sally R Munt, University of Sussex
Founding Editor

This page intentionally left blank.

EDITORIAL BOARD



VOLUME 9 ISSUE 1
SPRING 2025

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: RELIGION AND FEMINISM

Guest Editors

Sonya Sharma
University College London, UNITED KINGDOM

Dawn Llewellyn
University of Chester, UNITED KINGDOM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 01
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Editorial

Introduction to Special Issue on Religion and Feminism

Sonya Sharma [1]*, Dawn Llewellyn [2]

Published: March 1, 2025

INTRODUCTION

A special issue on 'Religion and Feminism' is significant and timely, the topic however has often taken a backseat to that of 'religion and gender'. This corresponds with the mainstreaming of gender, feminist and women's studies in the humanities and social sciences since the 1990s (Richardson and Robinson, 2020). The development of the subfield of religion and gender has expanded in scope because of social and political change, migration flows, media and technological reach and the porosity of private and public domains. The growth of this subdiscipline has been evident in the appearance of specialist conference themes, funded research and established journals, and there is much more consideration of how religion and gender shape and are shaped by social structures. For example, how they are part of intersecting axes of oppression and liberation (e.g., Bilge, 2010; Singh, 2015), residual and ongoing effects of colonialism (e.g., Pui-Lan and Donaldson, 2015), white supremacy and patriarchy (e.g., Joshi, 2020), processes of racism and racialisation (e.g., Selod *et al.*, 2023), ablism (e.g., Klassen, 2016; Waldock, 2023), and sexisms and marginalisations (e.g., Avishai, 2008; Browne *et al.*, 2010; Gaddini, 2022). We recently co-edited with Sîan Hawthorne *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality* (Sharma *et al.*, 2024) which augments these discussions and reveals the importance of critical, transnational, decolonial, intersectional and feminist approaches, demonstrating how religion and gender are lived and implicated in relations of power in varied contexts (also see Starkey and Tomalin, 2022).

Feminist theory and research are embedded and implicit in this wide-ranging scholarship, often providing the conceptual scaffolding but less prominently identified front and centre with religion. 'Religion and feminism' because of the growth of religion and gender does not typically comprise a special issue in sociology, religious, gender, feminist and women's studies journals (although see *Feminist Review*, 2011: Issue 97; *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 2011: Issue 2; *Religions*, 2018: Issue 12; and the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*). Why might this be? On the one hand, feminist religious studies have been commonly thought of as reticent in their stance because of their disciplinary seclusion (Llewellyn, 2015; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). On the other, secular feminisms have frequently been thought to neglect women's religious experiences relegating them to what 'other' women do as 'cultural difference' (Fernandes, 2003). Contributing to religion and feminism's occlusion is that the religions/secularisms 'binary is also doubly gendered: women are linked with religion and men with secularism, and religious women [also] represent subordination and non-feminism while secular women embody liberation and feminism' (Nyhagen, 2017: 498). Thus, secular and religious studies feminists have been sceptical of each other for the inclusions and exclusions that can occur, and because of histories of colonialism, and androcentric and somatic norms (Puwar, 2004) that have informed the spaces of academia and religious institutions. The sacred/secular divide also persists. Yet, not participating in organised worship does not mean being without faith or a relationship with an energy or divine force (Davie, 1994). People's relationships to religion and spirituality change, and are lived out in several ways, including in relation to feminist politics and practices.

Despite these tensions, scholars have shown how religion and feminism can work together to shape authority, teachings, rituals, sacred texts, roles, and lived experience in and outside of institutions, traditions, and communities. Bringing religion and feminism together to be interrogated, observed, and analysed and as forms of analysis can reveal societal challenges and change. This special issue shares this aim: to build on this body of work and to reveal how religion and feminism are continually in movement and relation. The questions we asked

[1] *University College London*, UNITED KINGDOM
[2] *University of Chester*, UNITED KINGDOM
***Corresponding Author:** sonya.sharma@ucl.ac.uk

contributors to consider were: In what ways is the relationship between religion and feminism being lived, transformed, challenged, utilised, or extinguished? How are the categories of religion and feminism being questioned and therefore their relationship to one another? What new insights can be gleaned from the relationship between religion and feminism? How does this relationship inform inclusions and exclusions? And in what ways is it present and responding to changing social worlds that include global crises of conflict, economics, health, and social wellbeing? The nine articles on this topic that are included in this special issue offer their responses and much to 'think through' – in other words how religion and feminism, amid socio-political transformations and the mundane, are made and unmade, done and undone (Bannerji, 1995). Together these pieces offer notable insights into the contemporary relationship between religion and feminism, a complex relationship that is rich in intersectoral vantage points.

The contexts in which these articles are written vary across countries and cultures. The manuscripts showcase lived experiences of contexts located in Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, Iran, the UK, and the USA. Within them, secularisation, religious pluralism, and nationalist ideologies jostle to varying degrees. All have been impacted by histories of colonialism, and all have experienced feminist activisms responding to an array of issues and that include religion and religious actors. These dynamics form the backdrop to which the authors of this special issue grapple with, shaping their critical work. As a group of articles, they point to three key themes related to religion and feminism.

First this special issue highlights authors employing and foregrounding feminist theories to analyse religious participation, work, and spaces and how through feminist analyses religion can contribute to both oppression and empowerment. Daniela Bevilacqua's article focuses on 'the Kinnar Akhāṛā, a Hindu religious order of gender non-conforming individuals rooted in the *hijṛā* tradition but structured akin to traditional Hindu ascetic groups', established in 2015. Set among patriarchal structures and right-wing Hindutva ideologies, Bevilacqua shows how the Kinnar Akhāṛā are enacting a religious transfeminism. She draws on Emma Tomalin's (2006) 'religious feminism' to theorise 'religious transfeminism' and states that rather than 'rejecting religion for its inherent patriarchy' (Tomalin, 2006: 385) the Kinnar Akhāṛā have opted for a reinterpretation of its 'core' values – read *sanātana dharma* – to reclaim a religious role. Bevilacqua demonstrates how religious transfeminism interacts with decolonial and intersectional aspects in her ethnographic research with *kinnar* leaders. She also shows how by utilising Hindu religious texts to create their own tradition and authority, the Kinnar Akhāṛā occupy religious spaces that had been barred to them, thus cultivating recognition and empowerment of transgender people.

Feminist theory has also been important in understanding Christian traditions which have long sustained cultures of patriarchy that uphold gendered norms that have contributed to inequality. Tracy McEwan, Rosie Clare Shorter and Tanya Riches shed light on those feminist Christian women who step forward to call out gender inequality and sexism in their churches, those who protest and importantly 'complain'. Yet, when they do, they are subject to abuse, disapproval, exclusion and marginalisation. This is even after Christian women's historical contributions to feminist movements to progress equality in their churches. They employ Sara Ahmed's (2021) critical feminist theorisation of complaint or what she terms 'complaint as queer method' – 'wherein forming complaint collectives can enable feminists to do counter-institutional work'. Ahmed's theory helps them to locate Christian feminists as 'complainants' and to 'assemble and create a Christian feminist complaint collective'. Through case studies of complaints in Anglican, Catholic, and Pentecostal settings, which have challenged being side-lined and inequitable gender dynamics and norms, McEwan, Shorter and Riches 'reconceptualise how feminist theory can be (re)applied to feminist activism within Christian religious traditions and communities'.

Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham also implement feminist theories to analyse the work of women healthcare chaplains. Women healthcare chaplains are part of the demanding and routine life of clinical settings who challenge the social inequities that also dwell within these spaces. They do so through 'a spiritual care based in a transformative spirituality for social justice'. Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham define this form of spiritual care as 'spiritual activism' building on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), AnaLouise Keating (2005) and Leela Fernandes (2003) via an intersectional framing (Crenshaw, 1989). By locating a spiritual activism informed by the theory of Black, Chicana, and women of colour feminist scholars, they expand and demonstrate how this can offer vital insights to the study of religious women who grapple with intersectional inequalities and histories of colonialism and white benevolence in their religious and medical institutions (Gebhard *et al.*, 2022). The work of women healthcare chaplains can also expose oppositions between and among feminisms and religions, but through spiritual activism, how these divisions can diminish because their work across social difference is attuned to interdependence (Mani, 2022). Thus, feminist theory applied to forms of religious participation and power can reveal new directions of study and analysis but also the areas of socio-religious life that are pushing for change and more equity.

The feminist theory that takes centre stage to study religious activism, participation, practices and communities overlaps with our second theme. Like the array of participants rooted in the research of our first theme, the next set of articles emphasises the importance of recognising diverse religious women as foundational to feminist work

and collectives. Jamie Lee Andreson highlights this in her research on Brazilian Black Feminists Lélia Gonzales, Beatriz Nascimento and Djamila Ribeiro. She shows how their work on historical processes of liberation among Afro-Brazilian communities reveals how Afro-Brazilian religious worship – found in the maroon societies – *quilombos* and the Candomblé *terreiros* – made important contributions to social progress. She draws from oral histories, ethnography, and written publications by Candomblé priestesses and their daughter-initiates in the twentieth century, to consider the ways these societies formed autonomous Black communities foregrounding racial injustice. Andreson argues that Candomblé priestesses were key historical predecessors and foremothers of contemporary Black Feminism in Brazil and that the relation to the spiritual in Candomblé as an African Diasporic religion links historical memory and generations of people through embodied experience. Bodies and thought offer continuity of religion and feminism as they migrate and evolve through different political moments. But what happens when some religious women are included, and others excluded within feminist collectives? The relationship between religion and feminism has often posed inclusions and exclusions relating to contemporary political issues on religion, gender, and women in the public sphere.

Saaz Taher and Khaoula Zoghlami look to the situation in Quebec, Canada where the support for Muslim women affected by secularism laws remains tenuous despite a shift within the Quebec feminist movement to take up anti-racism and intersectionality in solidarity. They specifically examine 'the advocacy discourse against the Act Respecting the Laicity of the State (Law 21) led by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), Quebec's largest feminist coalition'. Taher and Zoghlami's interrogation of the FFQ's support however reveals a failure to enact an intersectional framework that includes religion, and especially Islam as it relates to Muslim feminists' lives. Thus, even though there is political support for Muslim's women's rights, this research uncovers a persistent perpetuation of incompatibility between feminism, Islam and consideration of Muslim women as knowledgeable feminist subjects. Marziyeh Riazi offers a similar perspective on Iranian women who have migrated to Australia. Herself also living in Australia, she concentrates on the time they lived in Iran and their experiences of legal and social restrictions informed by Islamic regulations. She explores how these affected participants' societal treatment, self-perceptions, and relationships. Riazi importantly notes that not all the women of her sample identified as Muslim but were from other faith traditions that hindered their acceptance and participation in daily life in Iran. She argues that while Islamic feminism aimed to provide a space for women, it could not meet the needs of all women, especially those who did not identify as Muslim. Riazi argues for an 'inclusive feminism' as proposed by feminist scholar Naomi Zack (2005) which would help to ameliorate the exclusions and vulnerabilities experienced by the women she interviewed, and the limitations of Islamic feminism for some Iranian women. Thus, appreciating and acknowledging the diversity of religious women who identify as feminist and as part of feminist collectives is important and hard work because it exposes the inequalities that persist amidst efforts for more equality.

There is much in the issue that focuses on the social, political and religion in the everyday. Embedded in these activities and contexts are written texts that include scripture, song lyrics and academic writing. There is power in such texts because of the socio-religious norms and expectations they can espouse and challenge. In this special issue, three contributions offer feminist analysis and interrogation of different texts. Barbara Thiede and Johanna Stiebert, 'two feminist-identifying Hebrew Bible scholars review feminist commentary on biblical texts of sexual violence' forty years on from the publication of Phyllis Trible's pivotal book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984). They argue that the field is 'diverse, interdisciplinary, and dynamic and that reading with empathy remains a critical part of the feminist project'. To emphasise 'critical feminist empathy' they examine two tribute books published in 2021 that echo Trible's title. The first is *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence* (2021), a collection of essays edited by Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker. The second is *Texts After Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible* (2021), a monograph by Rhiannon Graybill. Their analysis demonstrates the multiple voices contributing to feminist biblical criticism and the need for ongoing resistance to the Bible's problematic content in contemporary societies that continue to be affected by the distress, harm, and injustice of sexual violence. In examining the two books, Thiede and Stiebert call for feminists to combine critical thinking with critical empathy in their reading of violent texts because depending on how they are read such analyses and considerations have the potential to bring about more recognition and compassion for victims, then and now.

Holy scripture, written in the past, reaches into the present interpreted in contemporary Christian music. Maiken Ana Kores provides a feminist analysis of popular evangelical Christian music revealing intersections of heterosexual and feminine ideals that are promoted amongst fans and followers of the American Christian pop/rock band Superchick. Since the 1970s, evangelical Christians have shaped and developed a consumer marketplace selling Christian books, clothing, and other paraphernalia. Alongside this, worship and popular music have emerged to become an industry in and of itself. In studying the Christian alternative pop/rock band Superchick, Kores applies a discourse analysis of their song lyrics to show how they adopt 'feminist discourse to promote feminine adherence to purity, and obedience of Christian religious directives', for example, abstinence until marriage. Kores argues that such a dichotomy is part of the industry's desire to be regarded as 'hip and

countercultural in contrast to its secular counterparts'. In doing so, her analysis of the band's songs between the 1990s and early 2000s uncovers how their presence coincided with the evangelical purity movement, endorsing conventional forms of femininity and heterosexual marriage among American girls and young women.

Applying a feminist standpoint can expose what has not changed and what remains invisible. Thus, within academic scholarship to what extent is feminism included. Is it utilised to think about women's lives in religious contexts and more specifically in the sociology of religious leadership? This is something that Katie Steeves, Lucy Smith, Elizabeth Kreiter and Jessica Stobbe question. Inspired by and building on the important work of Orit Avishai and Courtney Irby (2017) they note that developments in feminist knowledge and theorising are not always employed by sociologists of religious leadership. To interrogate this further they conducted a literature review of empirical sociological journal publications on religion, gender and leadership between January 2001 to December 2021. They used 'a combination of citation analysis, and the analytical codes developed by Avishai and Irby'. Their findings thus suggest that the existence of 'the intellectual bifurcation' also raised by Avishai and Irby subtly persists. Scholars in the subdiscipline of sociology of religion researching gender and leadership include reference to some gender or feminist works in background or literature review sections, but these are rarely current works, nor are they substantially drawn on to adequately inform concepts to situate analyses or discussions. Steeves and colleagues' work notes the in/visibility of feminist theory and analysis in academic writing on the sociology of religious leadership. More broadly, by doing such research on published academic writing it raises questions about whose work is applied and considered in analytical processes, and about citational justice, which highlights omissions of marginalised scholars' work that has been integral to knowledge pathways in the academy.

Feminism and feminist theory are dynamic, plural and critical. This is what makes them exciting. Religions in many ways are this too. When brought together they can offer rich perspectives and analyses of how they inform each other and social life especially regarding power relations, identities, culture and politics. Depending on how religion is situated, feminism can bring to light those on the margins of religious communities and society. Religion can likewise make space for the outcast or cement the position in which they already occupy. When feminism is applied, it can root out and shed light on inequity and when brought together with religion that seeks social justice it can be a powerful mix for transformation. The articles in this special issue speak to these elements showcasing a variety of contexts and actors pushing forth discussions on religion and feminism against a backdrop of social and political change.

Sonya Sharma and Dawn Llewellyn October 2024

GENERAL ARTICLES

The five articles in this issue that are included in the general section are focussed on reproductive rights, literature, and on the catastrophic war in Palestine.

Aideen C. O'Shaughnessy, in her article, 'The Antidote to the Foetal Image? The Role of Creative Performance Counterprotest in Contemporary Abortion Activism', analyses ways of resisting anti-abortion protestors through performativity. In this way, pro-choice activists 'reclaim political and affective territory and contest the representation of abortion in these images as a "violent" or "unnatural" act'.

In 'Experiences and Perceptions of Gynaecological Violence: A Descriptive Exploration of the Phenomenon from Survivors' Standpoints' Alexandra Toupin and Sylvie Lévesque use critical thinking, queer theory, and intersectional feminism to discuss their phenomenological study on Canadian people's experience of dehumanising gynaecological experiences. The experiences range from verbal microaggressions to physical violence and medical neglect. The authors recommend advocacy and discuss a possible intervention they have developed based on their findings.

Our first literary piece is by Brigita Miloš and Dubravka Dulibić Paljar ("'Being Inside a Tangled Knot": *Écriture Féminine* and Elena Ferrante'). In the article, the authors consider Elena Ferrante's work in the light of Ferrante's 'persistent anonymity' and the non-presence of the author. They argue that Ferrante's work is 'a new form of *écriture féminine*' that employs a language of its own and should be read accordingly.

Also in this issue's general article section is a striking video essay, 'Stray Visuality in Andrea Arnold's *American Honey'* by Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. The concept of 'stray' pervades the essay in often unsettling ways, with uncomfortable juxtapositions. Demonstrating a different way of looking, the essay makes space for alternate narratives and non-human presences.

We end this issue with Sahar Khamis and Felicity Sena Dogbatse's timely essay: 'I'm Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive': Palestinian Digital Feminism and Intersectional Narratives of Resistance. As we compose this issue, the terrible Israeli destruction of Gaza and its people continues. As feminists we need to focus our critical attention on the war against the Palestinian people, understand its logic in colonial and patriarchal historical genocides, and mobilise our feminist analysis and our activisms to protest.

BOOK REVIEWS

Four book reviews complete this issue. Jessica A. Albrecht reviews *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India*. Cristina Basso discusses *Contested Social and Ecological Reproduction: Impacts of States, Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis*. Sadiq Bhanbhro considers *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*. And Sneha Gole reviews *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*

Sally R. Munt and Rose Richards

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478022336

Anzaldúa, G. (2002). Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (un)safe spaces, in G. Anzaldúa and A. Keating (eds), *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical visions for transformation* (pp. 1–5). London: Routledge.

Avishai, O. (2008). 'Doing religion' in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency. *Gender & Society*, 22(4), 409–433. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208321019

Avishai, O. and Irby, C. A. (2017). Bifurcated conversations in sociological studies of religion and gender. *Gender & Society*, 31(5), 647–676. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217725244

Bannerji, H. (1995). *Thinking Through: Essays on feminism, Marxism and anti-racism*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Bilge, S. (2010). Beyond subordination vs. resistance: An intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(1), 9–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860903477662

Browne, K., Munt, S. R. and Yip, A. K. T. (eds) (2010). *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and sacred places*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 1, 139–168.

Davie, G. (1994). *Religion in Britain since 1945*: *Believing without belonging*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Fernandes, L. (2003). *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-violence, social justice and the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Gaddini, K. (2022). *The Struggle to Stay: Why single evangelical women are leaving the Church*. New York: Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/gadd19674

Gebhard, A., McLean, S. and St. Denis, V. (2022). Introduction, in A. Gebhard, S. McLean and V. St. Denis (eds), *White Benevolence: Racism and colonial violence in the helping professions* (pp. 1–22). Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Graybill, R. (2021). *Texts after Terror: Rape, sexual violence, and the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190082314.001.0001

Joshi, K. (2020). *White Christian Privilege – The illusion of religious equality in America*. New York: New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479835119.001.0001

Keating, A. (2005). Shifting perspectives: Spiritual activism, social transformation, and the politics of spirit, in A. Keating (ed), *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds*: *New perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (pp. 241–254). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403977137_24

Klassen, C. (2016). Complicating the whole from the position of a broken body: Interactions between religion, disability and material feminism, in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds), *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities* (pp. 205–213). Abingdon: Routledge.

Llewellyn, D. (2015). *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality: Troubling the waves*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137522870

Llewellyn, D. and Trzebiatowska, M. (2013). Secular and religious feminisms: A future of disconnection? *Feminist Theology*, 21(3), 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735013484220

Mani, L. (2022). *Myriad Intimacies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478022886

Melanchthon, M. J. and Whitaker, R. J. (eds) (2021). *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence*. Atlanta: SBL.

Nyhagen, L. (2017). The lived religion approach in the sociology of religion and its implications for secular feminist analyses of religion. *Social Compass*, 64(4), 495–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617727482

Pui-Lan, K. and Donaldson, L. E. (eds) (2015). *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315023274

Puwar, N. (2004). *Space Invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Oxford: Berg.

Richardson, D. and Robinson, V. (eds) (2020). *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies* (5th ed). London: Bloomsbury.

Selod, S., Islam, I. and Garner, S. (2023). *A Global Racial Enemy: Muslims and 21st-century racism*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Sharma, S., Llewellyn, D. and Hawthorne, S. (eds) (2024). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350257207

Singh, J. (2015). Religious agency and the limits of intersectionality. *Hypatia*, 30(4), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12182

Starkey, C. and Tomalin, E. (eds) (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Gender and Society*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429466953

Tomalin, E. (2006). The Thai bhikkhuni movement and women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 14(3), 385–397. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070600980492

Trible, P. (1984). *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Waldock, K. E. (2023). The impossible subject: Belonging as a neurodivergent in congregations. *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 27(4), 568–583. https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2023.2249452

Zack, N. (2005). *Inclusive Feminism: A third wave theory of women's commonality*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Citation: Sharma, S. and Llewellyn, D. (2025). Introduction to Special Issue on Religion and Feminism. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 01. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16011

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 02
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

The Religious Transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhāṛā

Daniela Bevilacqua [1*]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Established in 2015, the Kinnar Akhāṛā is a Hindu religious order of gender non-conforming individuals rooted in the *hijṛā* tradition but structured akin to traditional Hindu ascetic groups. *Kinnar*s aspire to enhance the social inclusion and acceptance of transgender people within Indian society by reclaiming their (supposed) historical religious role in Hinduism. In this pursuit, they challenge the patriarchal, male-dominated ethos of traditional ascetic orders, but also face criticism from those who see them pandering to right-wing Hindutva ideology to garner political favour from the central government. This article examines the Kinnar Akhāṛā as an example of religious transfeminism, a form of feminism that integrates various strands of feminist thinking into a religious group. By describing how this religious transfeminism manifests in religious space, activism, and a decolonial and intersectional approach, this article expands feminist discourse beyond the narratives of the global North and highlights forms of alternative empowerment to achieve religious and social transformations in India.

Keywords: religious transfeminism; kinnar; hijṛā; sanātana dharma; decolonisation; Hindutva

INTRODUCTION

On 15 April 2014, the third gender was officially recognised by the Supreme Court of India, which affirmed that the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution applied equally to all, including transgender individuals. This ruling granted transgender people the right to self-identify as male, female, or third gender.[1] Among the petitioners championing this cause was Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (henceforth Laxmi), a transgender activist and a *hijṛā* leader at the time. Nearly one year later, on 30 October 2015, Laxmi, along with fellow *hijṛā*s, established a religious organisation named Kinnar Akhāṛā. In 2019, during an interview with an online organisation, Bharat Marg, Laxmi expressed the importance of religion to connect with the masses. She noted that while LGBTQ+ activists often engage with specific segments of their community, religion has a broader reach, transcending boundaries (Bharat Marg, 2019). Recognising the limitations of secular activism in challenging ingrained societal attitudes, *kinnar* leaders decided to use religion to raise their communities from marginalisation. Despite coming from the *hijṛā* tradition, which blends Hindu and Islamic features (Nanda, 1990),[2] they asserted a *kinnar* Hindu identity to reclaim their religious role within *sanātana dharma*, the eternal (Hindu) faith,[3] and mainstream religious spaces in India. By establishing a new *akhāṛā*, they challenged – and intend to challenge – the entrenched patriarchy within ascetic communities.[4]

This article presents the Kinnar Akhāṛā as a case study to explore religious transfeminism, a form of feminism that integrates various strands of feminist thinking into a religious structure (see Tomalin, 2006). Since 2019, following their official acceptance by the Jūnā Akhāṛā, a powerful religious institution, at the Ardh Kumbh Melā, an

[1] https://indiankanoon.org/doc/193543132/.

[2] *Hijṛā* gurus are mostly Muslims, and although individuals from all religions can become *hijṛā*s, in some *hijṛā*s' households they first must convert to Islam. The tradition, however, presents a religious syncretic approach influenced by the context in which *hijṛā*s worship or perform (Reddy, 2005: 113). Traditionally, *hijṛā*s are religious performers: they sing and dance on special occasions to bestow blessings.

[3] The term *sanātana dharma* has been used since the 19th century by Hindu leaders, reformists, and nationalists to refer to Hinduism as a unified world religion.

[4] Since the end of the 19th century, thirteen *akhāṛā*s (traditional Hindu militant orders) have been recognised. Today, their leaders form the Akhāṛā Pariṣad, a 'family' entitled to organise religious events and protect the Hindu *dharma* (religion).

[1] *University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE_IUL), Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA)*, PORTUGAL
*Corresponding Author: daniela.bevilacqua@iscte-iul.pt

Hindu gathering held at Prayagraj (Bevilacqua 2022: 62–63), *kinnar*s have participated in major religious events, occupying religious spaces they previously attended as secondary performers. As well as their religious advocacy, *kinnar* leaders remain active in social spheres, promoting rights and integration for transgender individuals. Additionally, they advocate for a decolonial and intersectional approach. However, the movement also seems to navigate the political climate in India, influenced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing political party leading the central government since 2014, which favours Hindu supremacy over minorities such as Muslims (see Jaffrelot, 2021).

To explore the complexity of this case study, the article is divided into three sections. First, I outline Indian feminism and transfeminism to contextualise the religious transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhāṛā. Second, I clarify the methodology and theoretical framework used. Third, I analyse *kinnar*s' transfeminism as it relates to religion and activism, and decolonial and intersectional dynamics such as caste and class. This research reflects on aspects of South Asian feminisms and how, in the case of *kinnar*s, religion serves as a catalyst for enhancing status, gaining power, and occupying new spaces within Indian society.

FEMINISM, TRANSFEMINISM AND RELIGIOUS FEMINISM IN INDIA

Emerging from the backdrop of the Indian Liberation Movement, which sought independence from British colonial rule after World War Two, and influenced by the global Women's Liberation Movement since the 1970s, Indian feminism has navigated numerous historical moments (see Sen, 1990). Rekha Pande (2018) divides Indian feminism in two main phases: pre-Independence and post-Independence.[5] In the pre-Independence era, the women's movement was initially led by educated elite (mostly men), and between 1917 and 1927 by feminist organisations such as the Women's India Association, the National Council of Women in India and All India Women's Conference (Pande, 2018: 6). As women actively participated in the India Freedom Movement, women's civic rights were included in the Indian Constitution (1950).[6] In the first decades after Independence in 1947, no specific political agendas were thought of for women, therefore the Women's Movement took on important issues ranging from the dowry debate, women's labour, land rights, women's political participation, the rights of Dalit and marginalised women, growing religious fundamentalism, and the representation of women in the media (Pande, 2018: 9). Despite the presence of progressive social legislations and constitutional rights, women continued to have an inferior status in areas such as employment, political participation, and health provision. The 1970s, saw an increased focus on socio-economic and ecological issues, often linking these to women's issues. Women were frequently portrayed as victims in need of aid, which influenced development strategies (Guha Ghosal, 2005). This resulted in forms of feminism characterised by strong activism linked with non-governmental organisations, which led in the 1990s to the 'NGO-ization' of several women's organisations to get access to funds and resources (Roy, 2012: 10).

The 1990s also witnessed the political exploitation of religious and communal issues by political parties to consolidate their electoral supports. These had profound impacts on inter-community relations, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence and communal tensions that continue to influence the country's social and political landscape. In the 1990s, the spread of communalism also led to the emergence of forms of militant Hindutva feminism. Hindutva, the ideology behind Hindu nationalism, defines Indian culture in terms of Hindu values and advocates for policies that foster and preserve the Hindu identity and culture in a country they perceive as being overly secular or influenced by non-Hindu elements (see Jaffrelot, 1995). While Mazumdar (1994) dissociates the possibility of considering movements that refer to Hindutva as part of any kind of feminism, Sarkar (1993) shows that, although not contributing more broadly to women's rights, women participating in Hindutva politics were able to gain space in the public sphere, and a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. Recent analysis supports this perspective. Atreyee Sen (2012) describes the militancy of women affiliated with the *Shiv Sena* (a Hindu right-wing organisation) and shows how these women are not victims of right-wing ideologies, but protagonists in its dissemination.[7] Sen argues that this is an example of 'how a localized politics of womanhood and belonging, embedded in different material conditions and political realities, produced varying forms of women's resistance' (2012: 78). This attitude is in line with the propaganda built by the current BJP government regarding women's

[5] See Chaudhuri (2005) for a comprehensive historical analysis, and Guha Ghosal (2005) for a summary of feminist trends in India.

[6] Articles 14, 15 and 16 establish the right to equality and prohibit discrimination based on gender. Articles 39, 42 and 43, advocate for economic justice, equal pay and support during maternity. Article 51A(e) emphasises the moral duty to renounce practices derogatory to women's dignity (https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s380537a945c7aaa788ccfcdf1b99b5d8f/uploads/2023/05/2023050195.pdf).

[7] On this issue, see also Sarkar (2022: 21–22).

empowerment, which co-opts feminist ideals in order to compete with modern feminist tendencies (Singh and Parihar, 2024: 145).

Different forms of Indian feminisms coexist and present a distinctiveness that 'had to constantly negotiate, define and distinguish itself in relationship to the West' (Chaudhuri, 2005: xiv), as Western understandings of freedom, agency and oppression cannot be representative of the women's struggle in India. Indian women are part of hierarchical relationships that differ from the 'simple' gender division but are entangled in duties according to society, caste, age, religion, and gender (Sugirtharajah, 2002: 100). It is because of this structure of duties, political unawareness, and lack of education that, despite the presence of pro-women laws, basic rights are frequently not claimed by women (Chitnis, 2005: 19–21). Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan propose a precise definition of feminism for South Asian women: an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation (1999: 3).

According to this definition, anyone who recognises the existence of these forms of repressions and acts against them is a feminist. Is there a place for transgender individuals in it?

Transgender communities in India have been clamouring for the recognition of their rights. Considering their historical relationship with feminism in India, Urvashi Butalia points out that trans men and women were far from the movement, because Indian feminists did not engage directly with sexuality and sexual identities (2017: n.p.). Transwomen first began to join the feminist movement in the mid-1990s, but as it has been recently emphasised by Sohini Sengupta (2022: n.p.), 'the cis-het Savarna[8] spaces continue to treat Dalit or trans rights as peripheral'. Given the complexity of these dynamics which do not only concern India,[9] it is here necessary to introduce the term transfeminism,[10] which denotes 'a trans-inclusive form of feminism, which challenges the assumptions of restrictive perspectives that focus only on cis women', and does not merely merge trans politics with feminist discourses, but expands them with intersectional, critical and global issues (Weerawardhana, 2018: 187, 189). In India, it would seem that important changes and practices come from transfeminist grassroots, from 'the alternative spaces created by trans people, queer folx, as well as Dalit and Bahujan women' (Sengupta, 2022: n.p). In this article, I show that the Kinnar Akhāṛā, though not without controversy, provides an example of an alternative space, deeply grounded in religion.

A link between women's empowerment and religion has been created in India since the beginning of the Women's Movement because Hindu religious traditions give special importance to female goddesses and the principle of *śakti*, the feminine creative power (see Rajan, 1998). While the Brahmanical ideology that in most cases shapes the life of Hindus does not confer power on actual women as individuals, contemporary religious and socio-political movements have used religion as a source of female agency and emancipation. Hindutva movements discussed above provide an instance of this approach (see also Basu and Sarkar, 2022; Bacchetta, 2004; Menon, 2006).

An early example of a feminist religious movement unrelated to right-wing politics is provided by the Brahma Kumari – a religious association that proposed a form of 'liberation' for women according to religious parameters – described by Lawrence Babb (1984: 399). Babb (1984: 416) analyses the activities of the Brahma Kumari and classifies it as a form of 'indigenous' feminism. He points out that 'to be free can be manifested in different ways by different cultures' (1984: 399). For the Brahma Kumari, freedom occurs through celibacy: sexual renunciation could provide women with freedom and effective control over their bodies (1984: 411). Babb defines this group as feminist because it recognised women's position as an alienation caused by corrupt institutions (which is a feminist motif), and adds the adjective *indigenous* because its notion of the wrongs suffered by women and its image of liberation 'are all in one way or another derived from the Hindu tradition', thus it is a form of feminism 'that is radical in its implication and true to its own past' (1984: 416).

Babb's (1984) analysis partially aligns with what Emma Tomalin calls religious feminism: the 're-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the "core" values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking' (2006: 387). In India, under the umbrella of religious feminism, one could cite emancipatory religious movements such as the 'dharmic feminism' of the Pari Akhāṛā led by Trikal Bhavanta (DeNapoli, 2019: 30); or the 'feminist theological stance' taken by the high-profile and well-educated female guru Anandmurti Gurumaa, studied by Angela Rudert (2017: 130). These religious leaders challenge religious interpretations and the way

[8] Members of the four main castes (Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras) are referred to as the *savarṇa* (those with *varṇa*, i.e., social class), while Dalits (or untouchable) are *avarṇa*, without caste, outside the system (see Singh, 1983: 734).

[9] See the issue Stryker and Bettcher's *Trans/Feminism* and its references.

[10] The label is credited to activists Diana Courvant and Emi Koyama, although it was Koyama's *Transfeminist Manifesto* published on her website in 2001 that led the term to reach a wider audience. Transfeminism is 'primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans-women, non-trans-men, and others who are sympathetic to the needs of trans women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation' (Koyama, 2003: 245).

women have been prevented from embodying religious authority. As I explain in the below section, I use Tomalin's (2006) theoretical frame to analyse Kinnar Akhāṛā's religious transfeminism.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I began directing my attention to Kinnar Akhāṛā during the 2019 Ardh Kumbh Melā[11] in Prayagraj, a city in Utter Pradesh, Northern India. Although my research at that time primarily focused on male ascetic groups, the Kinnar Akhāṛā intrigued me. After disclosing my role as researcher on Hindu ascetic groups to the main *kinnar* leaders, I requested permission to attend the *kinnar*s' camp and conduct interviews. *Kinnar*s leaders, especially Laxmi, are used to answering questions from scholars, journalists and reporters. However, the fact that I was a white foreign woman working alone among male ascetics aroused their curiosity, because at that time they were also dealing with the ascetics from the male *akhāṛā*s. During the festival months, I observed how the Akhāṛā garnered public support and, through it, the backing of the Jūnā Akhāṛā.

This article draws on ethnographic data collected in 2019 and during subsequent field research from November 2023 to March 2024 in Kolkata, Varanasi, Prayagraj, and Delhi. In both 2019 and 2024, my privileged position as a white researcher but especially as a foreign woman granted me special access to *kinnar* leaders, compared to the general public.[12] I focused predominantly on two leaders, Laxmi and Bhavani Ma Nath Valmiki (henceforth Bhavani), because they operate in distinct spaces with different strategies, collectively moving towards the same goal: empowerment and the occupation of mainstream spaces as part of their lost rights. Laxmi played a crucial role in the recognition of the third gender and emerged as a prominent figure in the Kinnar Akhāṛā. With her Brahmanical background, she navigates challenges posed by orthodoxy and countered critics comprehensively. Bhavani, a Dalit (untouchable) *kinnar* leader, previously converted to Islam as part of her *hijṛā* identity and performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. She returned to *sanātana dharma* to create the Kinnar Akhāṛā, pursuing a religious tantric path rooted in her family tradition. In 2019, I spent most of my time at the Ardh Kumbh Melā with Laxmi, whom I interviewed again in March 2024 in Delhi. During the 2024 Magh Melā, I was predominantly in the company of Bhavani, who generously provided time in the morning to answer my questions. By conducting interviews with *kinnar* leaders and attendees, participating in *kinnar*s' events, and interacting with *hijṛā* communities in the aforementioned cities, I gained a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within the order, its activities and relations to *hijṛā*s.

Before reconnecting physically with *kinnars* in 2024, I expanded my 2019 ethnographic data using the Internet as a research tool (Markham, 2003: n.p.). I explored whichever online source I could find related to *kinnar*s: TEDx Talks by Laxmi (TEDx Talks, 2017a, 2017b, 2018); *kinnar* leaders' interviews, statements, and videos in online newspapers and platforms like Facebook and Instagram.[13] The analysis of the contexts in which these online sources were produced, the interlocutors and the language used, helped in understanding the image *kinnar*s want to project, the spaces they occupy (both physical and digital) and their agency. This online data was verified during fieldwork. Participating as an observer was crucial for capturing everyday contexts not evident on social media or headlines.

Online sources and ethnographic data presented in this paper are those that address the four main themes – religion, activism, and decolonisation and intersectionality – through which I expand Tomalin's definition of religious feminism into 'religious transfeminism'. Religious transfeminism, as my theoretical framework, is functional in describing a religious movement whose leaders reinterpret religious sources to support emancipatory claims also driven by human rights-based approaches and feminist theories. *Kinnar*s, in fact, rather than 'rejecting the religion for its inherent patriarchy' (Tomalin, 2006: 385), have opted for a reinterpretation of its 'core' values – read *sanātana dharma* – to reclaim a religious role. Kinnar Akhāṛā leaders use Hindu religious textual sources to create their own tradition and authority. In so doing, they also occupy religious spaces that had been barred to them, aiming for the empowerment and recognition of transgender people. The religious transfeminism of *kinnar* leaders is enriched by decolonial and intersectional aspects emphasised by the leaders themselves.

The works of scholars such as Mignolo (2000) and Quijano (2000), following key orientalist and postcolonial thinkers such as Said (1978), Mohanty and Alexander (1996), Spivak (1990), Bhabha (1994), show how colonialism

[11] The term *melā* indicates a fair, or a religious festival. During the *melā*, religious groups set up camps with tents to accommodate devotees and pilgrims.

[12] Nowadays, in the ascetic world, having foreign people around signifies internationality and value, so religious leaders often invite them to stay. However, the power dynamics in place are that the leaders decide everything: whether a person can stay, if they will answer questions, etc. Adopting a respectful approach that acknowledges these power dynamics facilitates the possibility of interviewing people. Interviews followed the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of my research center (https://cria.org.pt/en/ethics-comitee).

[13] Online sources are mentioned mainly in brackets while the link is included in the References.

not only involved political and economic domination but also imposed Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies, which continue to shape global hierarchies, cultural relations and to marginalise non-Western ways of knowing today. The imposition of a specific understanding of gender roles and power relations is part of it. According to Lugones (2010), gender cannot be precluded from discussions of decolonisation because it strongly affected and produced social and cultural identities. A decolonial approach seeks to sever from Western-centric systems of thought to create alternative epistemologies and forms of knowledge production. This approach has influenced feminism, and decolonial feminism has become an emerging theoretical concept that attempts to understand 'gender that emanates from marginalized women in the Global South' (Manning, 2021: 1204). This framework is important for understanding how *kinnar* leaders use a decolonial approach to challenge the colonial history that has marginalised them (see Hinchy, 2014) and to position themselves regarding the use of the term 'transgender' to describe South Asian gender non-conforming identities. The limitations of the term transgender with respect to Indian terminology have been discussed at an academic level. Dutta and Roy (2014: 327) underline that because it is used to universalise, it 'subsumes terms that are now posited as merely local variants', while the binaries associated with the use of terms such as cis/trans, homo/trans, limit possible discourses or practices of gender/sexual variance present in India (Dutta and Roy, 2014: 328). Hossain and Nanda (2020: 47) emphasise that the term transgender 'engender[s] a new hierarchy in which hijras become the embodiment of an indigenous and traditional, but also backward and non-respectable subject position against the modern and modernising transgender community, which significantly, in many cases seeks integration, not distinction from the larger society'. This has led to strong frictions between *hijṛā*s and lay transgenders (Hossain, 2020: 408).

Frictions between communities are also driven by power dynamics rooted in social stratifications and, therefore, by the presence of multiple layers of intersectionality. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualised the term (1989: 140), intersectionality has been used to demonstrate how various forms of social stratification (such as race, gender, class, etc.) intersect and overlap in complex ways. Consisting of a society where hierarchies and systemic inequalities are deeply embedded, the principle of intersectionality becomes a useful analytical tool in South Asia to tackle systems of power and oppressions (see George, 2023). Reddy (2005) and Revathi (2010) provide insights into how intersectionality operates in *hijṛā* communities. Scholars like Dutta (2019), Fry *et al.* (2021) have presented the complexity of intersectionality within South Asian queer communities and the various power and social dynamics at play. In this article, I examine the intersectional issue by focusing on how socio-religious identities are managed within the Kinnar Akhāṛā and its entanglement with *hijṛā* communities.

As I shall demonstrate, the religious transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhāṛā becomes an example of Velez's (2019) suggestion for a reorientation of feminist practices (here in a religious guise) that propose decolonial and intersectional aspects not referring to inclusive or general categories, but that offer spaces of empowerment through local definitions and praxis.

KINNAR AKHĀṚĀ'S RELIGIOUS TRANSFEMINISM

When in March 2024 I met Laxmi in Delhi, I asked her if she was a feminist. She answered: 'Of course I am a feminist! Yes, totally'. To my second question on whether the Kinnar Akhāṛā could be understood as a transfeminist religious organisation, again she answered: 'Absolutely, yes!' On a similar note, Bhavani stressed that only thanks to her *nārī rūpa* (feminine shape) she could be Bhavani and therefore be recognised as *mā* (mother), sister or daughter, without being abused (Prayagraj, 5 February 2024). She owes everything to womanhood, she said, and therefore, she fights for the respect of women, even in the religious field. Although it is likely that not all *kinnar*s call themselves feminists or transfeminists, as Chaudhuri explains (2005: xvi) self-identification should not necessarily be used as a criterion for inclusion/exclusion. As already mentioned, anyone who recognises the existence of forms of repressions and acts against them could be defined as a feminist. Expanding on Tomalin's (2006) theorisation of religious (trans)feminism, I analyse how it manifests in the Kinnar Akhāṛā. This section is divided into three subsections, focusing on religion, activism, and decoloniality and intersectionality.

Religious Transfeminism in the Religious Field

In this subsection, I examine the transfeminist approach of *kinnar* leaders in the religious field, starting from online interviews given by Laxmi and Bhavani in recent years. This online data is supplemented by information collected during my ethnographic fieldwork, which shows how this approach manifests when *kinnars* occupy the space of a religious festival. In 2021, Laxmi said to the *Times of India*:

> Religion has been made patriarchal. The Akhada parishad is a male-dominated, patriarchal body. They (ABAP) didn't even accept the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada, [so] expecting them to accept trans person[s] is far-fetched. (Mishra, 2021)

During the *Amit Rai Show* in 2023,[14] Bhavani uttered similar words. In fact, when *kinnar*s decided to establish a new *akhāṛā*, this was strongly opposed by the Akhāṛā Pariṣad. Basically, the two leaders accused the patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s of not being inclusive especially towards women. The thirteen traditional *akhāṛā*s that form the Pariṣad are male-dominated and although a few have female sections, there is a tendency to discourage female participation because women are seen as a hindrance to male ascetics. While the Kinnar Akhāṛā was eventually accepted in 2019 by the Jūnā Akhāṛā, a women-only *akhāṛā* has not yet been recognised.

As I have shown elsewhere (Bevilacqua, 2022: 63–67), *kinnar*s created new religious symbols to express their religious identity and began to celebrate Brahmanical Hindu rituals but also more esoteric, tantric ones. To justify their authority, *kinnar*s claim to be present in the Vedic and Puranic literature as demigods. Therefore, they use and reinterpret some aspects of Hinduism, referring to an ancient 'Vedic/*sanātana*' period[15] that, according to them, was more modern than the current patriarchal and corrupt one. The responsibility of *kinnar*s is to change the current narrative of religion and bring *sanātana dharma* back to be more inclusive. They do not refer to or support ideals rooted in traditional gender roles (e.g., an orthodox idea of Hindu femininity as supported by right-wing feminists) but rather they emphasise the need for respect, dignity, and inclusion in religion. Such a stand aims to empower gender non-conforming people in the religious field. The Kinnar Akhāṛā has created a religious space within the heart of Hindu orthodoxy able to host those gender non-conforming individuals who are seeking a religious path unhindered by their gender identity or who wish to participate in religious events without hiding their gender identity. I observed this in the 2019 Ardh Kumbh Mela, and in the 2024 Magh Melā, both in Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh). In the Magh Melā 2024, for example, I met P. who officially joined the Kinnar Akhāṛā, although he is not a transgender person. He is a gay man who, attracted by the religious context, decided to become part of the Akhāṛā to avoid hiding his sexual identity with them. He is a *saṃnyāsī* (renouncer) part of the Kinnar Akhāṛā.[16] Similarly, I met a few other gay men who felt completely accepted by *kinnar*s and preferred to stay and attend their camp rather than others. This feeling of safety and empowerment was also felt by the women who attended the *kinnar*s' camp. Except for three priests reciting tantric mantras, only women could actively participate in the three days ritual organised by Bhavani (from 6 to 8 February). They brought the offerings, creating the ritual grounds together with Bhavani's *kinnar*s disciples, and contributed to the performance of the ritual, late in the evening.

Muslim gender non-conforming individuals are accepted too. Bhavani told me that she recently initiated a Muslim, and she became her disciple (Prayagraj, 5 February 2024). She became *fakirī mā*, to stress an Islamic ascetic identity. Entering the Akhāṛā does not require a conversion. Bhavani claimed that nobody should be obliged to change his/her *dharma* and go against his/her religious path. She also said that Muslims could come and participate in the Melā with accommodations for their own needs.

The 'queerisation' of the religious space – the creation of a safe space for members of the LGBTQ+ communities and cisgender women – and the increased visibility of *kinnar*s in religious festivals as protagonists rather than secondary religious performers, results from a specific strategy that uses religion to normalise gender non-conforming individuals in contexts where they were not traditionally entitled to such positions, thereby attempting to influence broader societal norms.

Religious Transfeminism and Activism

Since one of the features of religious transfeminism is the support of human rights-based claims, in this section, drawing on online speeches and posts, I emphasise the role of *kinnar* leaders as activists and how their religious position makes their activities more visible.

Laxmi was among the petitioners in the appeal against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which made homosexuality a crime, and was among the petitioners for the official recognition of the third gender by the Supreme Court of India. As an activist, she began working in an organisation to raise awareness about HIV among *hijṛās* and transgender communities and today, she collaborates with several NGOs, including the *Astitva Trust*, the *Asia Pacific Transgender Network* and the *Maharashtra Trithiya Panthi Sangatana*, which promote equality for transgender individuals. She collaborates with the National Network of Transgender Persons (NNTP), a national collective of transgender people, rights activists, and transgender organisations. As an activist and a community leader, Laxmi gave several talks that can be found online. Reading the comments left by viewers, it seems these talks provide inspiration to the younger generation for their feminist and anti-patriarchal stance. Here are some online examples from 2017 onwards:

[14] Amit Rai Show. (2023). *Kinnar ka Sach. Bhawani Maa Kinnar.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIknjoRSP-0.

[15] According to *kinnar* leaders, *sanātana dharma* was the just and universal law present during the Vedic period (second millennium BCE), a time when social and gender discrimination were absent from society.

[16] As some *kinnar*s were initiated into *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation), they are entitled to give the same initiation.

> […] the biggest strength in the world is the strength not to surrender and my sister across the world knows that… There is no end to struggle, we have to help others. Believe in yourself to face conflict. (Women in the World, 2017)

> We don't need politicians who are not educated because they say things like girls are raped because they are wearing jeans pant. Slap those men! What kind of India we have when the panchayats are still prevailing, and the government does not say anything [...]. What kind of India are we living in? […] Don't spare time, kick their butt up, nobody will come to fight for you, as a woman, the first thing people will try to do is assassinate you. This happened to me too […] It's my body, it's my choice, if I am begging on the street will somebody come and feed me, help me? (TEDx Talks, 2018)

In the TEDx Talks (2018), Laxmi continued emphasising that although the women's rights movement is older than the transgender ones, a women's bill is still pending, while there has been much attention and haste in proclaiming two transgender bills. This, according to her, is because too many social constructs hinder women in the fight for their rights and safety. As she lamented in another online speech, 'Nirbaya's mother is still crying for the rights of her daughter' (*The Public India*, 2020), referring to the victim of a shocking rape case that occurred in New Delhi in December 2012. In another online interview from 2020, she acknowledges that, from a legal point of view, India has improved policies for transgender people, however, the general mentality is that of a ***puruṣa pradhān*** (male-dominated) society, and unless education is changed, gender imbalance will remain (The Pakhandi Theatre, 2020).

Mahāmaṇḍaleśwara[17] Pushpa Maai, a disciple of Laxmi, in 2008 founded Rajasthan's first LGBT Queer community-based organisation, the NGO *Nai Bhor Sansthā* that works to secure the rights and social developments of LGBTQ+ people.[18] This NGO has been associated with *3rd Voice* 'a registered Impact Based Community Media Platform' that works to highlight community issues through digital videos (Third Voice, 2020). Since 2015 with *Nai Bhor Sansthā*, she has been organising the 'Queer Gulabi Pride Jaipur', the name of Rajasthan's LGBTQ+ queer pride walk.[19] In 2015, she declared in an interview:

> Jaipur is a very conservative city and there is hardly any visibility for the LGBT community here. Most of the activities involving the community are held without involving any publicity. The idea of having this march is to assert our presence in the city and we hope to sensitize people of the needs and problems faced by us.[20]

In two separate online interviews, Pushpa Maai emphasised the importance of facilitating transgender people's access to identity cards, enabling them to apply for benefits and government opportunities (*Third Voice*, 2020). She underscored the importance of education and family support for transgender individuals, stating that acceptance should begin within the family, with societal acceptance following suit. This process, she believes, will break down barriers between the 'two societies' (i.e. the *kinnar samāj* and the general *samāj*) and foster transgender people's confidence, which education further enhances (Tyagi Talks, 2021). Her goal is to create an environment where transgender individuals are accepted with dignity, treated equitably, and integrated into all mainstream activities. Additionally, Pushpa Maai has become a member of the Rajasthan Government's Transgender Welfare Board. Based on her Instagram account, she has been invited to serve as an ambassador for the 2024 *Swacch Survekshan* campaign in Jaipur, an annual survey evaluating cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation in villages, cities, and towns across India.[21]

The developments of NGOs – not only those established by the Akharā members – is not without criticism. As Goel reports, Living Smile Vidya, a Dalit transgender feminist writer and theatre artist, 'expresses concerns, saying that "savarna transgenders who have NGO funding" claim to falsely represent the community and direct all the benefits towards themselves' (2022: n.p.). Further investigation is needed to verify the influence and effectiveness of *kinnar*s' organisation over a long period. What can be observed now is that several NGOs have been started by Laxmi's disciples, and that while Laxmi was a well-known activist before she became ***mahāmaṇḍaleśwara***, the attention and importance given to other leaders depend on their new religious guise and the success of the Kinnar Akhāṛā.[22] In terms of content, those involved in activism emphasise the need to fight for

[17] The title of ***mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*** is one of the highest titles in the Hindu religious traditions.
[18] https://ngodetails.com/india/andhra-pradesh/nai-bhor-sanstha/.
[19] https://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/jaipur-to-witness-first-queer-pride-march-on-march-1st/#gs.25x8AaI.
[20] https://www.gaylaxymag.com/latest-news/jaipur-to-witness-first-queer-pride-march-on-march-1st/#gs.25x8AaI.
[21] https://www.instagram.com/p/C96l9zPBOrQ/?igsh=MTNlZGl5aG1vZGFzOQ==.
[22] Bhavani, for example, on 25 October 2023 was invited at the National Summit on Holistic Sciences & Wellness to talk about *kinnar*s' society and her life experience. https://www.facebook.com/Nationalsummitonholisticsciencesandwellness/videos/1224443592278465.

rights and for the implementation of transgender rights, an approach shared also by non-activist *kinnar*s. During the *Amit Rai Show* (2023), Bhavani claimed: 'As long as my people do not sit in parliament, politicians will not listen to my voice or our requests'.[23] During one of our interviews (Prayagraj, 3 February 2024), she confirmed her position about this issue, but also added that she wants to be represented by a *kinnar* or a *hijṛā*. She emphasised that she does not feel represented by a transwoman or a transman as these terms still contain definitions in which she does not recognise herself, that is being a man or a woman. She identifies herself as a *kinnar* and no Western word, she said, could carry the value of such a label.

Religious Transfeminism, Decoloniality and Intersectionality

Bhavani's words highlight an important aspect of decolonisation that, although approached differently, is profoundly felt by *kinnar* leaders. In this section, I show how the *kinnar* leaders' awareness of decolonial and intersectional issues makes their words and stances part of the theoretical framework presented above (see Dutta, 2019; Hinchy, 2014; Velez, 2019). To do so, I start with examples from online data and then focus on ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork.

Kinnar leaders support the idea that transgender people were present not only in Indian religions but also in Islam, and that it was only during the British Raj that they were side-lined.[24] According to Bhavani (Prayagraj, 4 February 2024), the Islamic 'colonisation' of the *kinnar* traditions did not lead to their marginalisation. In fact, *kinnar*s were respected during the Mughul period and could become *senapati*s (chieftains). The spread of British morality, Bhavani continued, destroyed Indian culture and religions because it led Indians to discriminate against and participate in the marginalisation of the various *hijṛā* traditions, which struggled to survive. In a TEDx Talks, Laxmi claimed that during the English Raj, *hijṛā*s became 'transparent people', ignored by the rest of society, and that the written history is a 'colonised' one made by the British, which still affects the self-representation of transgender people (TEDx Talks, 2017a). While calling herself a transgender rights activist, she recognises the limitations of the term 'transgender' as a category to be used in South Asia and that in reality 'there is no English word for our communities' (TEDx Talks, 2017b). *Kinnar* leaders point out that *hijṛā*s and *kinnar*s come from an initiatic, *guru-śiṣya* (guru-disciple) tradition and thus refer to a specific cultural context and transmission of practices that cannot be represented by a simple 'T' like in the acronym LGBTQ+. Kinnar Akhāṛā's construction of a religious identity encourages the decolonisation of the concept of transgender as a Western category, making religion the source for its trans-resilience and empowerment. Its narrative supports an Indian perspective of gender non-conforming people as it arises from a specific Hindu frame. However, while Bhavani, as I mentioned, strongly asserts her identity only as *kinnar*/*hijṛā*, Laxmi shows a more nuanced approach depending on the audience she addresses, whether it is in a UN meeting, a national committee or a religious gathering. Yet, those *kinnar*s who are involved in NGOs or governmental dynamics that expect the use of such terminology, follow such directions.

In India, the theme of decolonisation has become the rhetoric of militant nationalism.[25] As the Kinnar Akhāṛā's counter-narrative to the colonial discourse is a narrative that favours a Hindu identity, it has been associated with the 'saffronisation'[26] of the 'trans subjects to serve an essentialist, Hindu normative vision of the nation' (Ung Loh, 2022: 242). Laxmi has been accused of having a strong right-wing nationalist attitude and of appealing to Hindutva ideology for political gains. The ways *kinnar*s refer to a Hindu golden past could evoke associations with the central government's rhetoric and Hindutva ideology. This alignment could potentially steer the religious transfeminism of *kinnar*s towards the kind of right-wing feminism mentioned earlier. However, *kinnar*s' support to Hindutva/BJP should not be taken for granted.

On March 2024, when I interviewed Laxmi in Delhi and asked about her association and that of Kinnar Akhāṛā with the right-wing, she affirmed that she does not support any right-wing and surely not the Hindutva ideology. She said: 'You all can put us in any wing, but we are our own wing'[27] and emphasised: 'Does being Hindu or claiming my Hindu identity make me part of Hindutva?' This is a question that gives one pause for thought. Regarding a possible saffronisation of *hijṛā*s, she answered that *kinnar*s are not against *hijṛā*s, but against the fact that they are not part of the mainstream religion.

[23] *Hijṛā*s succeeded in achieving political office at national and local levels, exemplary is the case of Shabnam Mausi elected in Madhya Pradesh (see Ung Loh, 2013).

[24] *Hijṛā*s were criminalised under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a law aiming to eliminate *hijṛā*s 'as a visible socio-cultural category and gender identity' (Hinchy, 2014: 279), revoked in 1952 (Dutta, 2012: 828).

[25] In 2017 the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing organisation, planned a two-day national conference on 'Decolonisation of Indian Mind' which was duly attended by intellectuals from nineteen states (VSK Telangana, 2017).

[26] Saffronisation (from the saffron colour used in Hinduism) refers to the policies of Hindu nationalist groups that glorify Hindu contributions to Indian history while undermining others.

[27] Such an ambiguous answer might indirectly support the thoughts shared by several *hijṛā*s and activists I spoke to: in essence, the Akhāṛā will ally itself and show support to whichever party is in charge.

The relationship between *kinnar*s and *hijrā*s is complex and offers opportunity to analyse how religion, caste and class intersect within their organisation. *Kinnar* leaders assert that the Akhāṛā welcomes individuals from all religions without requiring conversion to Hinduism. This approach contrasts with some *hijṛā* households, where conversion to Islam is required for entry. However, as religious identities among *hijṛā*s are fluid (see Reddy, 2005), it is likely that the religious openness proposed by the Akhāṛā is due to the close interconnection between *hijṛā*s and *kinnar*s. Many *kinnar*s before were *hijṛā*s, and continue to maintain their *hijṛā* 'role', exemplifying how their identities intersect. For instance, *kinnar*s who were *hijṛā nāyak*s (leaders) with areas of influence (*ilāka*) continue to uphold these roles, and their disciples perform the same activities as before. At a local level the structure appears unchanged. As Bhavani mentioned (Prayagraj, 8 February 2024), to join the Akhāṛā she had to seek permission from her guru and, like other *hijṛā*s who entered the Akhāṛā, had to pay a *daṇḍa* (fee) to her *hijṛā* household. *Kinnar*s with *hijṛā* gurus (often Muslim) still maintain their relationship with them, including Laxmi. Despite the emphasis on a Hindu identity, there is not an opposition to Islam within the community. *Hijṛā*s/*kinnar*s perform both for Hindus and Muslims, and no one from these communities questions them about their religious affiliation. Bhavani also criticised the contemporary political climate, where Hindus and Muslims are divided, and the conditions for Muslim have worsened. As *hijṛā*s/*kinnar*s benefit from the well-being of the lay society, its prosperity leads to their own prosperity (Prayagraj, 4 February 2024). However, considering that *kinnar*s who maintain their roles as *nāyak*s may aspire to enhance their local political influence, the interconnection between local context and regional politics might be crucial, with religion potentially being exploited to gain power at the expense of other communities.

As I discussed elsewhere (Bevilacqua, 2022: 69), the association of the Kinnar Akhāṛā with a specific uppercaste, casteist attitude stems from a focus on Laxmi (Biswas, 2021; Upadhyaya, 2020), which reduces the Kinnar Akhāṛā to one individual and overlooks other leaders like Bhavani. Regarding caste, Bhavani mentioned to me that the real problem in Hinduism is the caste system. She belongs to the Valmiki caste, considered an *achūt* (untouchable, Dalit) by Hindus (Prayagraj, 3 February 2024). Bhavani is vocal about her caste and the discrimination faced by low-caste and untouchable people in India. With the Kinnar Akhāṛā, however, she became one of first – if not the first at that time – Dalit individuals to receive the title of *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*, one of the highest religious titles in Hindu traditions. Her pride in declaring her caste contrasts with the recent tendency among some *hijṛā* communities to hide their caste background or adopt high-caste Hindu surnames (Dutta, 2023). Regarding caste,[28] it seems that the approach among *kinnar*s is more progressive than that of *hijṛā* communities (see Goel, 2022: n.p.). *Hijṛā*s have a hierarchy of class (often related to caste) based on their practices. At the top are *hijṛā*s who perform *badhāī* (blessing performances), followed by those engaged in sex-work, and finally those who ask for money in shops or on the streets. It is unclear if the caste/class system present among *hijṛā*s is mirrored in the Kinnar Akhāṛā at a more local level. Given that there is not a strong divide between *hijṛā*s and *kinnar*s, these power dynamics may not be easily reinterpreted.

The Akhāṛā aims to include people from all castes, classes, and religions without discrimination. This openness extends to LGBTQ+ individuals who are often marginalised by Hindu orthodoxy, and cisgender women who still fight for roles in traditional religious groups. As Laxmi told me (Delhi, 23 March 2024), the Akhāṛā idea of empowerment does not concern only transgender people: 'It has place for male, women and for entire LGBTIQ+ community, but it is started, and it is run by trans female'. She continued: 'We believe that empowerment has to come to everybody, especially women and trans women. Women at large, women of different colour, different caste, they all should have their own rights.'

CONCLUSION

The Kinnar Akhāṛā is a complex organisation that brings together different aspects of Indian (trans)feminism that I have summarised in the first part of this article but develops them in a religious frame. *Kinnar*s follow a 'global' transfeminist praxis based on social activism and the establishment of NGOs, through which they advocate for the social inclusion of transgender people and the implementation of women's and transgender individuals' rights. Following the general trend of feminist approaches from the global South, they manifest decolonial attitudes that, together with their religious approach could also lead to right-wing feminism. As the Kinnar Akhāṛā's 'local' praxis uses *sanātana dharma* and various forms of feminist strategies to gain authority, empowerment and a new religious role, this paper has discussed it as an example of religious transfeminism. Their religious identity enables *kinnar*s to occupy spaces that were previously not inclusive for them, and due to their conformity to current political – read Hindu – standards their presence is growing in the main religious festivals. Their Hindu/decolonial position allows them to ride a trend that gives them further visibility. This visibility aims to change the mindset of the public which, they believe, will lead to effective social inclusion of transgender people. This approach is not without criticism, particularly from transgender communities who reject the identification as demigods (which is the

[28] On the emergence of caste concerns in the trans movement and *hijṛā* communities, see Kumar and Datta (2024).

propaganda used by *kinnar*s to justify their roles).[29] Criticism also arises from proponents of a transfeminist secular approach and those who perceive the Kinnar Akhāṛā as a manifestation of a right-wing religious organisation aiming to exploit 'trans Hindutva or Hindu nationalism'[30] solely for individual gain.

It is uncertain however whether the use of a *sanātana dharma* rhetoric that sometimes tumbles into a Hindutva-like rhetoric and the involvement with traditional orthodox groups, will lead the religious transfeminism of *kinnar*s towards extremist tendencies, creating forms of exclusions, especially of Muslim *hijṛā*s. According to Ung Loh (2022: 227), 'Many communities cannot afford to turn their backs on the state when it finally recognizes them'. However, as *hijṛā* groups includes both Hindus and Muslim and the interconnection between *kinnar*s and *hijṛā*s is still very strong, a sharp division between *kinnar*s and *hijṛā*s is elusive.

The case study of the Kinnar Akhāṛā serves as a South Asian example to expand feminist perspectives beyond the classifications and frameworks of the global North. It demonstrates how religion and transfeminism can be jointly utilised as instruments for negotiating agency and empowerment. The *kinnar* leaders, adapting to the current Indian context, strive to reshape and negotiate power dynamics to achieve religious and social changes. As the Kinnar Akhāṛā is still a relatively young organisation, with leaders operating in diverse religious, social, and political spheres, both locally and globally, its future and outcomes remain in development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this paper has been funded by the FCT Funding Programme of Portugal: https://doi.org/10.54499/2022.03515.CEECIND/CP1758/CT0004

REFERENCES

Amit Rai Show. (2023). *Kinnar ka Sach. Bhawani Maa Kinnar*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIknjoRSP-0. (Accessed 17 August 2023).

Babb, L. A. (1984). Indigenous feminism in a modern Hindu sect. *Signs*, 9(3), 399–416. https://doi.org/10.1086/494068

Bacchetta, P. (2004). *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS women as ideologues*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.

Basu, A. and Sarkar, T. (eds). (2022). *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009128254

Bevilacqua, D. (2022). From the margins to demigod. The establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India. *Asian Ethnology*, 81(1, 2), 135–164.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bharat Marg. (2019). *Kinners (Transgenders) & Sanatana Dharma: Acharya Laxmi Narayan Tripathi*. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/BharatMarg/videos/2333975893498239. (Accessed 19 April 2019).

Bhasin, K. and Khan, N. S. (1999). *Some Questions on Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali For Women.

Biswas, A. P. (2021). The Iconography of Hindu(ized) Hijras: Idioms of hijra representation in northern India, in A. Roy (ed), *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization* (pp. 84–98). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003025474-6

Butalia, U. (2017). Queer and trans women are essential to Indian feminism, *The Guardian*, 29 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/29/indian-transgender-feminism-urvashi-butalia. (Accessed 20 July 2023).

Chaudhuri, M. (ed). (2005). *Feminism in India*. London: Zed Books.

Chitnis, S. (2005). Feminism: Indian ethos and Indian convictions, in M. Chaudhuri (ed), *Feminism in India* (pp. 8–25). London: Zed Books.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.

DeNapoli, A. E. (2019). A female shankaracharya? The alternative authority of a feminist Hindu guru in India. *Religion and Gender*, 9(1), 27–49. https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-00901002

[29] Ung Loh reports the words of Living Smile Vidya, who claims: 'if you are connecting identity with religion, then you're getting distracted from the core issues […] it doesn't really help us if they only see us as mythological beings.' (2022: 233)

[30] Dutta (2023: 11) talks of 'trans Hindutva or Hindu nationalism' to emphasise the rise of queer nationalism in areas that were usually outside its traditional strongholds.

Dutta, A. (2012). An epistemology of collusion: Hijras, kothis and the historical (dis)continuity of gender/sexual identities in eastern India. *Gender and History*, 24(3), 825–849. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2012.01712.x

Dutta, A. (2019). Dissenting differently: Solidarities and tensions between student organizing and trans-kothi-hijra activism in eastern India. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (20), 81–100. https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.5210

Dutta, A. (2023). Elsewheres in queer Hindutva: A hijra case study. *Feminist Review*, 133(1), 11–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/01417789221138095

Dutta, A. and Roy, R. (2014). Decolonizing transgender in India: Some reflections. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(3), 320–337. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2685615

Fry, A., Monro, S. and Smith, V. (2021). Intersectionality and South Asian non-normative sexualities, in A. Roy (ed), *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization* (pp. 180–197). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003025474-11

George, J. (2023). Intersectionality at the heart of oppression and violence against women in law: Case studies from India. *Journal of Moral Theology*, 12(1), 108–131. https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.75196

Goel, I. (2022). Understanding caste and kinship within hijras, a 'third' gender community in India, in K. Nelson and N. T. Fernandez (eds), *Gendered Lives* [Online, n.p.]. New York: SUNY Press.

Guha Ghosal, S. (2005). Major trends of feminism in India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 66(4), 793–812.

Hinchy, J. (2014). Obscenity, moral contagion and masculinity: Hijras in public space in colonial India. *Asian Studies Review*, 38(2), 274–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2014.901298

Hossain, A. (2020). Hijras in South Asia: Rethinking the dominant representation, in Z. Davy, A. C. Santos, C. Bertone, R. Thoreson and S. E. Wieringa (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities* (vol. 1, pp. 404–421). Thousand Oaks: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714364.n19

Hossain, A. and Nanda, S. (2020). Globalization and change among the hijras of South Asia, in J. M. Ryan (ed), *Trans Lives in a Globalizing World* (pp. 34–49). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201783-3

Jaffrelot, C. (1995). *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dc9jzx

Jaffrelot, C. (2021). *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Koyama, E. (2003). The transfeminist manifesto, in R. Dicker and A. Catching (eds), *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming feminism for the 21st century* (pp. 244–259). Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Kumar, P. and Datta, S. (2024). Caste concerns in transgender communities in India: Contesting, cohesiveness, broadening horizon(s). *Social Change*, 54(2), 257–272. https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857241248989

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742–759. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x

Manning, J. (2021). Decolonial feminist theory: Embracing the gendered colonial difference in management and organisation studies. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(4), 1203–1219. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12673

Markham, A. N. (2003). *Metaphors reflecting and shaping the reality of the Internet: Tool, place, way of being*. Available at: http://markham.internetinquiry.org/writing/MarkhamTPW.pdf. (Accessed 2 April 2024).

Mazumdar, S. (1994). Women and cultural construction of Hindu India, in V. M. Moghdam (ed), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural reassertions and feminisms in international perspective* (pp. 243–273). San Francisco: Westview Press.

Menon, K. D. (2006). Passionate renouncers: Hindu nationalist renouncers and the politics of Hindutva, in M. Khandelwal, S. L. Hausner and A. G. Gold (eds), *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, yoginis, saints, and singers* (pp. 141–169). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-10485-4_6

Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mishra, I. (2021). Kinnars find acceptance in Vedas and that is enough, *The Times of India*, 13 March. Available at: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/81472983. (Accessed 20 August 2023).

Mohanty, C. T. and Alexander, J. M. (1996). *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. London: Routledge.

Nanda, S. (1990). *Neither Man nor Woman: The hijras of India*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishers.

Pande, R. (2018). The history of feminism and doing gender in India. *Estudos Feministas*, 26(3), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584-2018v26n358567

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(3), 533–580. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005

Rajan, R. S. (1998). Is the Hindu goddess a feminist? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(44), WS34–WS38.

Reddy, G. (2005). *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating hijra identity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226707549.001.0001

Revathi, A. (2010). *The Truth About Me: A hijra life story*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Roy, S. (ed) (2012). *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and possibilities*. London: Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350221505

Rudert, A. (2017). *Shakti's New Voice: Guru devotion in a woman-led spiritual movement*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sarkar, T. (1993). The women of the Hindutva brigade. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars,* 25(4), 16–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1993.10416135

Sarkar, T. (2022). Introduction: Women of Hindu rashtra, in A. Basu and T. Sarkar (eds), *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009128254.001

Sen, A. (2012). Martial tales, right-wing Hindu women, and 'history telling' in the Bombay slums, in A. Loomba and R. A. Lukose (eds), *South Asian Feminisms* (pp. 75–94). Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394990-003

Sen, I. (ed). (1990). *A Space Within the Struggle: Women's participation in people's movements*. Delhi: Zubaan.

Sengupta, S. (2022). Mainstream feminist spaces and their exclusion of the trans community, *Feminism India*, 13 July. Available at: https://feminisminindia.com/2022/07/13/mainstream-feminist-spaces-and-their-exclusion-of-the-trans-community/. (Accessed 4 August 2023).

Singh, P. and Parihar, G. K. (2024). The Hindutva brand of populist politics and the women question. *Political Studies Review*, 22(1), 138–155. https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299221146695

Singh, S. S. (1983). Varna, jati and jana: An anthropo-historical perspective. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 44, 731–744.

Spivak, G. C. (1990). *The Post-Colonial Critic – Interviews, strategies, dialogues*. London: Routledge.

Stryker, S. and Bettcher, T. M. (2016). Introduction. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3(1–2), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334127

Sugirtharajah, S. (2002). Hinduism and feminism: Some concerns. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 18(2), 97–104.

TEDX Talks. (2017a). *Changing gender dynamics in current structure of India*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE47-5Mi6d8&t=4s. (Accessed 17 June 2023).

TEDX Talks. (2017b). *A journey beyond the two check-boxes of gender | Laxmi Tripathi*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiXCLSXL38Q. (Accessed 20 June 2023).

TEDX Talks. (2018). *Demystifying gender in Indian culture | Laxmi Narayan Tripathi*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0pp4fZ4NTE&t=1091s. (Accessed 20 June 2023).

The Pakhandi Theatre. (2020). *Laxmi Narayan Tripathi interview*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXE_GuHnDyE. (Accessed 20 June 2023).

The Public India. (2020). *Opening minds | Keynote speech by Acharya Laxmi Narayan Tripathy*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eLtzY2plNc&list=LL&index=28&t=3s. (Accessed 20 June 2023).

Third Voice. (2020). *RUWA introduce Pushpa Maai*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEEwpklk0Og. (Accessed 25 June 2023).

Tomalin, E. (2006). The Thai bhikkhuni movement and women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 14(3), 385–397. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070600980492

Tyagi Talks. (2021). *In conversation with Pushpa Maii*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLtjyvOaItc. (Accessed 25 June 2023).

Ung Loh, J. (2013). *'Why vote for a fake kinnar when you can vote for a real one?' Representation and political identity among kinnars in Madhya Pradesh, India* (PhD dissertation). London: SOAS University of London.

Ung Loh, J. (2022). Trans contestations in an era of heightened nationalism: The saffronization of transgender identity, in A. Basu and T. Sarkar (eds), *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism* (pp. 224–262). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009128254.009

Upadhyaya, N. (2020). Hindu nation and its queers: Caste, islamophobia, and de/coloniality. *Interventions, International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22(4), 464–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1749709

Velez, E. D. (2019). Decolonial feminism at the intersection: A critical reflection on the relationship between decolonial feminism and intersectionality. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 33(3), 390–406. https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.33.3.0390

VSK Telangana. (2017). *Educate Others about Decolonisation: RSS Sarsanghachalak Shri Mohan Bhagwat*. Available at: https://vsktelangana.org/educate-others-about-decolonisation-rss-sarsanghachalak-shri-mohan-bhagwat. (Accessed 2 June 2023).

Weerawardhana, C. (2018). Profoundly decolonizing? Reflections on a transfeminist perspective of international relations. *Meridians*, 16(1), 184–213. https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.16.1.18

Women in the World. (2017). *Indian activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi on the third gender*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzhf29NBWbw&list=LL&index=18&t=69s. (Accessed 4 August 2023).

Citation: Bevilacqua, D. (2025). The Religious Transfeminism of the Kinnar Akhāṛā. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 02. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16012


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 03
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Feminist Complaint Collectives and Doorway Disruptions in Australian Christian Traditions

Tracy McEwan [1,2*], Rosie C. Shorter [3], Tanya Riches [4]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Christian traditions maintain patriarchal cultures by upholding gendered norms that can shape ministry opportunities and sanction gender inequality and sexism, while also scaffolding gendered violence. Feminist Christian women who name this inequality, or who 'protest' and 'complain' can therefore be subject to a range of adverse consequences, from subtle social disapproval to malicious abuse and exclusion. Simultaneously, although Christian women led in 19th century feminist movements, contemporary religious and secular feminists can be mutually sceptical. As a result, Christian feminist women often occupy a marginal space. Sara Ahmed has consistently argued that when feminists speak of sexism within institutional settings, the response is often to problematise the complainer. Ahmed (2021) introduces the idea of forming complaint collectives to enable feminists to do counter-institutional work. In this paper we use Ahmed's scholarship to locate Christian feminists as 'complainants' and assemble ourselves to create a Christian feminist complaint collective. We present case studies of complaints and doorway disruptions in Catholic, Anglican, and pentecostal settings to challenge gender inequality and marginalisation and reconceptualise how feminist theory can be (re)applied to feminist activism within Christian religious traditions and communities.

Keywords: Australian Christianity, pentecostal women, complaint collectives, Sydney Anglicanism, Catholic feminism

INTRODUCTION

In the days following Sinead O'Connor's death, images of her ripping a photograph of Pope John Paul II in 1992 resurfaced and were circulated on social media, proclaiming O'Connor's act as bold and prophetic. Decades ahead of investigations into institutional and clerical abuse, O'Connor publicly and visibly held the Catholic Church to account. With hindsight, it is easy to see that O'Connor's criticism of the Church was well founded. Australian journalist Julia Baird (2023) writes:

> The catch-cry in Ireland now is: Sinead was right. … Which was the greater offence: ripping up a picture or protecting predatorial paedophiles on a mass scale?

Nevertheless, at the time, the consequence of calling out sexual and gender-based violence in the Catholic Church was that O'Connor was punished. Baird (2023) reflects that:

> Her punishment was swift and savage, and became a protracted spectacle. Women who challenge religious hierarchies, and lay a claim to any kind of spiritual authority, are often cast as wounded witches, or mad bitches. Men speak on behalf of God; women hear voices.

The torn photograph of the Pope John Paul II was viewed as a bigger problem than what O'Connor was protesting. That she became the problem, is symptomatic of one of Sara Ahmed's (2023) 'core killjoy truths.'

[1] *University of Newcastle*, AUSTRALIA
[2] *Australian Catholic University*, AUSTRALIA
[3] *Deakin University*, AUSTRALIA
[4] *Eastern College Australia*, AUSTRALIA
***Corresponding Author:** tracy.mcewan@newcastle.edu.au

Ahmed (2023) contends that, 'If you expose a problem, you pose a problem: if you pose a problem, you become a problem' (18). This feminist killjoy truth can be applied across many institutional settings.

Ahmed (2010, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2023) reveals core killjoy truths in action in the family, in politics and in the university. She has shown that when women expose the problem of institutional sexism across these contexts, when they protest it, or make formal complaints, they become a problem for the institution. They are, to borrow Baird's (2023) words, 'cast as witches.' In this article, we enter into dialogue with Ahmed's work to explore how this feminist killjoy truth can help us to understand women's experiences in - and out of - Australian Christian institutions.

Even though Christian feminist scholars have long noted the violence of women's oppression and marginalisation (Brennan, 1996, 2007; Schüssler Fiorenza, 2016), feminism and associated movements are often framed in Christian traditions as irrelevant, unnecessary, and even sinful (Beattie, 2006; Lim, 2018; Smith, 2012; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). This critique parallels neoliberal rhetoric common across western ('secular') societies where the collective struggle of feminism is understood as redundant, with inequalities situated in the self, rather than in disparities or inequalities that emerge from social structures (Evans, 2023). Simultaneously, while Christian women often occupied leadership roles in the 19th century feminist movements, contemporary religious and secular feminists can be sceptical of each other, leading to a 'neglect' of religion in feminist studies (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013; McPhillips, 2016). Feminist Christian women can find they occupy a marginal space, where — in our experience — it feels as though we are situated in a doorway between 'orthodox' Christianity *and* 'orthodox' feminisms.

All three authors of this article are white women, Christian or post-Christian, and settlers living on unceded lands. It is important for us to acknowledge how Christianity, coloniality, and heteronormativity work together to structure contemporary Australian society (Carlson and Farrelly, 2023), which remains simultaneously Christian, post-Christian, and secular (Possamai and Tittensor, 2022). From 1788 onwards, the Australia Government and Christian churches worked together to enact colonial violence (Pattel-Gray, 1998). In Christian settings, racism, sexism, and gendered violence can often be further sanctioned by gender complementarity; a biblically based belief that men and women are 'equal but different' (Truong *et al.*, 2020; Weng and Shorter, 2023). Gender complementarity and other gendered-based norms are factors in historical and social patterns of gendered abuse in Christian settings (Baird and Gleeson 2017; Pepper *et al.*, 2021, 2023). Moreover, these and other sexist and patriarchal attitudes can shift the burden of responsibility and blame for abuse away from male perpetrators towards female victim-survivors (OurWatch, 2024).

As Australian feminist scholars interested in the study of religion, our research stems from our experiences within varied Christian traditions/communities. Tracy McEwan has written extensively about women's experiences in Catholicism and gender-based violence (McEwan, 2022; McEwan *et al.*, 2023a, 2023b; McPhillips and McEwan, 2022). Rosie Clare Shorter's work has focused on how Sydney Anglicism, as a lived religion, is gendered (Shorter, 2021, 2023). Tanya Riches has explored various aspects of women within (and leading) Australian pentecostal[1] congregations (Riches, 2021, 2022). In our scholarship and lived experiences, we have observed how Christian women who 'protest' or 'complain' against gendered inequality and sexism shoulder the burden of responsibility and blame and can be subject to a wide range of adverse consequences in their religious community. Catholicism and Anglicanism are Australia's largest Christian denominations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). While pentecostalism is numerically small, it was (until 2016) Australia's fastest growing Christian denomination and represents its largest (mega) congregations (Austin, 2017; Shorter and Riches, 2023).

In this article we intentionally inhabit the marginal space outlined in Ahmed's (2021) work on complaint, joining our experiences and scholarship together to explore Christian women's historic and contemporary activism across Catholicism, Anglicanism, and pentecostalism in Australia. Together we act as a complaint collective against institutional sexism and gendered violence. We invite others to join us in this ongoing work to (re)claim the scholarship and activism of feminist Christian women, as legitimately feminist *and* Christian.

COMPLAINT AS METHOD

In her book *Complaint!* Ahmed (2021) introduces the idea of 'complaint as a queer method' wherein feminists, by assembling and creating complaint collectives, can do counter-institutional work. As complaints often follow diverse trajectories, hampered by precarity and uncertainty, they can be described as having a long genealogy (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed utilises the notion of a 'complaint biography', to explain how complainants situate

[1] In studies of pentecostalism, capital 'P' Pentecostal usually is taken to refer to the classical Pentecostal movements. Therefore, lowercase 'pentecostal' has been adopted in this article in reference to the broad global movement with its diverse theologies (see Smith, 2010).

themselves, and proposes that this 'helps us to think of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or a group of people' (2021: 30). Complaint collectives are a way of sharing and supporting experiences and bringing together and amplifying complaints that would otherwise be buried away in files, filing cabinets, and bureaucratic processes. In complaint collectives, feminists doing complaint activism play a role of both conscious-raising issues and becoming each other's resources (Ahmed, 2021, 2022).

There are already some significant complaint collectives in Australian Christianity. While accounting for all complaint histories is not the focus of this article, we acknowledge the women who go before us and are alongside us. Notably, Aboriginal Christian Leader and theologian Anne Pattel-Gray (1998, 1999, 2023) has led a sustained 'complaint' against the enmeshment of institutional Christianity and coloniality. The collected testimonies of Australian victim-survivors of domestic violence who spoke to journalists Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson (2018) are also a powerful multi-faith complaint collective. Baird (2018) observes the swift and punitive response by Christian men:

> Our first piece, on Islam, did not evoke a single word of protest. But when we wrote about the [Christian] church, a volcano of comment erupted. And in the ensuing maelstrom, somehow two American professors were looped into a local culture war exclusively conducted by men that, briefly, almost completely drowned out the words of women in print and on TV. (8)

The factors which impact whose testimony is deemed credible and reliable and whose are not, are multifaceted and diverse. Similarly to Ahmed, our approach has evolved from sense-making of the culture in which we are immersed (Ahmed, 2021). We focus on data that we have inherited through both our research and personal experiences, lending a 'feminist ear' to re-hear these different case studies, textual analyses, and archives as complaint. Herein, we intentionally situate Christian feminists as 'complainants' and present case studies of 'complaints' in three (Catholic, Anglican, and pentecostal) settings in Australia. We do this firstly to challenge gender inequality and marginalisation in patriarchal denominations and churches. And, secondly, to reconceptualise how feminist theory can be applied to feminist scholarship and activism in Christian religious traditions and communities.

In naming feminists who protest gendered, sexist, and racist norms within their religious traditions as 'complainants', we follow Ahmed in reclaiming a negative label and using it for feminist action, collectivity, and solidarity. Ahmed (2023) argues that to reclaim the insults, dismissals and stereotypes thrown our way, 'is not to agree with the negative judgement behind it', but rather it 'channel(s) the negativity, pushing it in another direction' (16). In our reclaiming we are not alone; we join in solidarity with others who resist and disrupt exclusionary norms. As Ahmed (2023) reminds us,

> there is a long tradition in activism of reclaiming the terms that have been used against us, insults as well as stereotypes – terms like queer, for instance – to say something about who we are as well as what we are against. (16-17)

We do this as a collective to remind ourselves that we do not stand on our own; nor does the complaint we have heard. Our stories might be small, but 'we sound louder when we are heard together; we are louder' (Ahmed, 2021: 277). We show there is continuity across time and across the three selected Christian denominations.

A GENEALOGY OF COMPLAINT

There is a long genealogy of Christian women complaining in Australia. Women have been resisting patriarchal control in the Catholic Church in Australia since the early days of British colonial government. In 1835 an English Benedictine, Bede Polding became Australia's first Catholic Archbishop of Sydney. In 1838, five Sisters of Charity arrived in Sydney from Dublin, Ireland to assist in what was termed the 'Australian mission' of the Catholic Church (O'Sullivan, 2019). On their arrival Polding asserted, 'No words can describe our gratitude and delight of heart, when we witnessed the arrival of the heroic Sisters of Charity' (cited in Moran, 1895: 237). However, all five Sisters of Charity had left Sydney by 1859 when Polding wrote, 'These sisters almost from the beginning have been more or less a trouble to us' (cited in Sutter, 1965: 79). Even when apparently 'difficult' personalities and the patriarchal cultures and restrictions of colonial Sydney are considered, it is evident that their persistence in complaining about unwavering, authoritarian clerical governance made life impossible for these pioneering women religious (O'Sullivan, 2019).

A few decades later, on 22 September 1871, Australia's first Catholic saint and co-founder of an Australia order of women religious, Mary MacKillop was excommunicated by the bishop of Adelaide. MacKillop is (now) acknowledged for her commitment to social justice issues, especially gender equality in education. However, her persistence and determination to achieve these goals, and self-governance for her order, placed her at odds with

the clerical authorities (McPhillips, 2013). Although her excommunication was initially blamed on her insubordination, it would be eventually linked to hostility regarding her complaints about sexual abuse by a local priest (Maley, 2010).

A series of contemporary research projects have continued to draw attention to the complaints of Catholic women. Between 1996 and 1999 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference conducted a research project on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia (Macdonald *et al*., 1999). Published as *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* (1999), the project collected data to address barriers to women's participation in the Catholic Church in Australia. The extensive research revealed 'a strong sense of pain and alienation resulting from the Church's stance on women' (vii-ix), with gender inequality the dominant issue (Macdonald *et al*., 1999). In 2000, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference published a follow-up Social Justice Statement, *Woman and Man: The Bishops Respond* (2000), which included nine decisions and 31 recommendations for action to further the participation of women in Catholic parishes and dioceses. More than 20 years on all the recommendations remain unresolved.

In 2018, the Catholic Church in Australia embarked on the process of its Fifth Plenary Council, an official meeting of bishops and other delegates from all the dioceses and eparchies. The first phase of *Listening and Dialogue* began with consultations with the Catholic community in Australia. More than 222,000 people participated contributing to 17,457 submissions (Dantis *et al*., 2019). Submissions frequently complained a lack of inclusion of women in the Catholic Church governance and ministerial leadership roles (Dantis *et al*., 2019). Yet, in July 2022, during the second, and final assembly of the Council, a deliberative vote on the Motions and Amendments document 'Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men', failed to pass when it did not reach the required two-thirds majority support of Australia's bishops. The issue was a proposed amendment which named and recorded that Council members had heard the disappointment and frustration regarding women's exclusion (Fawkner, 2022).

Council members, particularly women, reported feeling sad, shocked, angry, disappointed, and frustrated at the outcome of the bishop's vote. One woman wept openly. There was a morning tea break directly after the vote. When the members returned to take their seats there was a spontaneous, silent gathering of 60 of the 277 members near the doorway at the rear of the room (Bowling, 2022; Rodrigues, 2022). In the aftermath, this silent gathering of women and their allies was framed as a 'protest' or 'complaint' (Fawkner, 2022). The Plenary Council had been widely promoted as a process of listening and synodality yet hopes for a process where the voices of women were heard and acknowledged seemed dashed. Then something unexpected happened. Instead of the assembly continuing after the women stood and resisted, the agenda pivoted and a re-formulated decree on the equal dignity of women and men was voted on and passed (Knott, 2022). The re-drafted decree committed the Australian Catholic Church 'to enhancing the role of women in the Church, and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality' (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022). It did not include any promise of radical change in the status of women in Catholicism, but there was expectation among Catholic women that adjustments and amendments might finally address gender inequality (Knott, 2022). More than a year has now passed and the situation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia remains unchanged.

In *Complaint!* Ahmed (2021) theorises that doors, open doors, closed doors, and doorways can literally and metaphorically explain institutional power dynamics, including how women, as complainants, resist and are shut in and out of institutions. For many generations Catholic women in Australia have been knocking on doors and standing in doorways, asking and begging for gender equality and recognition without success. When institutions, such as the Catholic Church, deal with complaints by following procedures, conducting research, holding councils, writing statements, and creating new policies, they can make the complaint non-performative. In this sense, the complaint and complainer become sites of negation; particularly when misconduct and harassment is part of institutional culture (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed (2021) observes, 'to be heard as complaining is not to be heard' (1), yet 'to complain is to keep knocking on that door, hoping to create an impression, to cause a disturbance, to disturb someone who is there' (305). A 'door' although it can be an actual door, is often a door of consciousness (Ahmed, 2021). The closing of a door of consciousness, which is used to exclude the complainant, can also be used by the complainant as a withdrawal and survival strategy. Ahmed (2021) suggests that complaints and complaint activism often have a queer method that leaves a non-linear or circular trail. In the following section, by focusing on The Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), we consider how the formation of Christians women's groups in the second half of the twentieth century operated as complaint collectives to disturb institutional sexism.

FORMING COMPLAINT COLLECTIVES

In the 1960s and 1970s, built on the successes of the second wave women's movement, Christian complaint activism grew, and complaint collectives were formed. Christian women gathered in church-based, feminist movements and produced publications that generated understandings of feminist agendas in Christian traditions,

including the ordination of women and the lack of inclusive language in the liturgy (Madigan, 2021; McPhillips, 2016). One prominent example is the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW). Early leaders of the movement positioned themselves and their activism as feminist (Scarfe, 2007).

In 1983, MOW engaged in what we might, retrospectively, term feminist doorway activism. Calling to mind Martin Luther's alleged doorway protest, members of MOW gathered at St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney and glued their 'protest against the Church (12 propositions for the ordination of women) to a door of the Cathedral' (Scarfe, 2012: 122). MOW's protest was penned by then theology student, Susanne Glover (Piggin and Linder, 2020). Glover named the complementarian principle of male headship as an errant theology which was being used to limit women (Piggin and Linder, 2020). In gluing Glover's (theological and feminist) complaint against headship to the cathedral door, MOW brought public attention to the long-standing problem of sexism with the Anglican Church of Australia. In the words of Patricia Brennan (1996: 28), 'The Movement flushed the debate out of the back room.' However, the history of MOW begins before this complaint, indeed, while 'a complaint might be the start of something … it is never the starting point' (Ahmed, 2021:20). According to historian Stuart Piggin (2012), MOW Australia was formed in Sydney by Brennan after a collective complaint she had assembled was silenced, yet, that collective complaint continues to arise from gendered exclusion within the church.

Prior to forming MOW, Brennan was part of the 'Sydney diocesan committee on the question of women's ordination' (Piggin, 2012: 180). Piggin (2012) writes that to open conversation, Brennan had collected the written testimony of 19 women and presented it to a fellow committee member, Peter Jensen. Piggin (2012) does not elaborate on the content of these collected testimonies; he simply notes that Jensen 'returned all of it to [Brennan] without comment' (180). Over the course of the next 20 years, Jensen would become the Archbishop of Sydney. He would advocate that complementarian ministry was good, biblical, and rewarded by God. In his final address to the Sydney Synod, Peter Jensen (2012) declared:

> [O]ur complementarian position is Biblical and has never held us back ... I urge you to recognise that it is the clear teaching of scripture and remain loyal to it. God will bless such costly, counter-cultural obedience to his word, and he has done so already. (14)

In contrast, Brennan (2007) would later write of herself as 'counted among those MOW leaders who are not part of a local Anglican congregation' (61). Engaging in complaint activism against the complementarian principle of male headship does not open doors to the centre of diocesan life. Assembling a collective complaint led Brennan to a more marginal space in the diocese, however, it also 'gave birth to MOW' (Piggin, 2012: 180). This should remind us that, 'complaint activism can lead to forming new kinds of collectives' (Ahmed, 2021: 285). As a complaint collective, MOW gathered many who would engage in complain activism. By 1985, MOW 'had attracted over 800 members around the country' (Scarfe, 2012: 120).

In the story of MOW's activism, a door had multiple and contradictory effects. By co-opting a physical Cathedral door MOW's protest was loud, public, and unavoidable. The action amplified the collected arguments of many Christian women, as well as male clergy who supported women's ordination. This protest eventually opened the door to women's ordination in most of the Anglican Church of Australia. However, the door to ordination remains closed in the Sydney Anglican Diocese, and feminist women, like Brennan, and intentionally feminist women's groups such as MOW continue to occupy a marginalised space in the Diocese.

INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND THE LEGACY OF CLOSED DOORS

Although MOW Australia began in Sydney, I (Rosie Clare Shorter) had no knowledge of MOW as a child or teenager in the Sydney Anglican Diocese. In 1992, nearly ten years after MOW's doorway disruption, when I was ten years old and regularly attending a Sydney Anglican church with my family, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia voted that Anglican women could be ordained as priests (Rose, 1996; Scarfe, 2012). I didn't know this at the time. I must have had some awareness through my late teens and early twenties that outside of Sydney, Anglican women could be ordained, yet I simultaneously believed they could not be. As a Sydney Anglican, I believed preaching and ordination was for men. Brennan (2007) suggested that the possibility of women priests is 'an unspeakable topic … in the Sydney Anglican Diocese because of its obsession with male headship as a fundamental doctrine of faith' (60). For me, women's ordination was unspeakable because complementarian discourse (Shorter, 2021) made it 'unhearable'. I had not heard the complaints of those who came before me.

MOW had named, and attempted to change, the sexist cultures and practices within the Anglican church (Scarfe, 2014), yet institutional culture worked to keep such complaints hidden from view. Ahmed (2021) maintains that the work of complaining about an institution, teaches us about that institution, and about institutional power; 'Power works by making it hard to challenge how power works' (125). When MOW raised the voices of Anglican women, patriarchal power circulated through the Sydney Anglican Diocese to minimise and erase their experiences.

Peter Jensen's refusal to engage with the complaints Brennan had assembled, as discussed above, is illustrative of this.

While MOW hoped to open a door to constructive theological debate (Brennan, 1996), their 'opponents' refused to debate, and instead 'sought to starve the issue of oxygen' (Piggin and Linder, 2020: 408). One tactic for avoiding debate was to read MOW's feminist position and activism as a sign of insufficient doctrinal and confessional knowledge and practice. Scarfe (2012) explains as follows:

> Both its opponents and Church leaders were quick to dismiss MOW members as secular feminists with little understanding or appreciation of the Anglican Church or the nature of a religious vocation– a view that has persisted. (121)

Early dismissal of MOW's complaint activism resulted in this history of complaint being buried under the noise of those, who – in varying degrees – continue to advocate men's headship. For example, in *Sydney Anglicanism* (2012), Sydney Anglican minister Michael Jensen (2012) has one separate chapter on the topic of women's ministry. Here, he attributes the diocesan position against women's ordination to a 'theological conviction about the nature of the church,' which he considers to be like a home or family, and so the both are based on New Testament passages which outline 'a pattern of leadership-through-service, and submission as a response' (128-129). He does not mention MOW.

When I asked Sydney Anglicans[2] about ministry, leadership, and preaching, only two women, both in their seventies, voluntarily raised MOW in conversation. Cassandra (who had previously been involved with MOW) described the Sydney Anglican Diocese as getting 'harder and harder lined' on the question of ordination. I asked Cassandra if she thought this was based on an interpretation of scripture which reads the New Testament as prescribing male headship, she replied, 'That might have been the excuse.' She considered it less about how the Bible was read, and more about institutional power. Cassandra explained:

> The whole thing, including the current complementarian doctrine in my opinion, is about who is in charge. It's all about power. And if they have these convenient verses, the subordination of women becomes socially acceptable in the Diocese. If they said it was about power, then there wouldn't be nearly so many supporters. But as far as I can see, the whole thing has been about power.

In naming complementarianism, Cassandra's words were reminiscent of Rose (1996) and Brennan (2007) who firmly linked the diocesan stance against women's ordination to male headship and power.

Another woman, also in her seventies, told me she had recently met with members of MOW and that she 'gave them a little razz up, because they are small, depressed, burnt out.' Her assessment should not surprise us. Institutions minimise complaint by wearing out the complainer over time; 'the time it takes to get a complaint through the system needs to be understood as part of the system. If the complaints process is long and drawn out, it is more likely that a complainer will tire out' (Ahmed, 2021: 104). Some members of MOW have been complaining for 40 years or more. Reduction in numbers and momentum is a legacy of institutional power, and the door it closed on their complaint.

OPTING OUT/ OPTING IN

The dismissal of Christian women's feminist activism sits in wider context of reduced membership in Christian feminist groups across denominations in the 1990s and 2000s, as many women opted not to participate. By the late 1990s to mid-2000s, neoliberal political agendas, reduced church attendance, and increased awareness of clergy sexual abuse prompted 'a cultural turn in the feminist politics of religion away from the big reform movements to new styles of political engagement' (McPhillips, 2016: 144). Taking place alongside such changes in feminist politics of religion in Australia was a growing discourse of generational contempt among secular feminists (Summers, 1993). The absence of younger women in Christian feminist groups created tensions (Madigan, 2021); although the reasons are complex. The valorising and rewarding of women who comply and conform with patriarchal edicts and norms – alongside the policing and enforcement of women who are perceived non-compliant – operated alongside secular feminist discourses, and a post-feminist backlash to silence feminist complaint activism and collectives in Christianity (Manne, 2018; McEwan, 2022).

An era of neoliberal political agendas and increased popularity of complementarian ecclesial movements juxtaposed to reinforce traditional gender roles and make feminism unconvincing for some women. In patriarchal

[2] Shorter interviewed 28 Sydney Anglicans between July 2019 and November 2020. 'Cassandra' is a pseudonym. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Ethics Research Committee in June 2019, approval number: H13296.

Christian traditions counter-hegemonic feminist movements sought to promote and reinforce traditional gender roles via gender complementary patterns of ministry (Bowler, 2019; Schüssler Fiorenza, 2016). In Australia, specific government exemptions for religions from certain human rights laws and anti-discrimination regulations currently permit religious organisations to create their own policies for employment and training (McPhillips, 2015). Therefore, within government reports and policy documents, women's rights and LGBTIQA+ rights can be problematically framed as challenging religious freedoms (Poulos, 2019). This can result in the exclusion of certain groups, such as women and LGBTIQA+ people, based on Christian doctrine (Hollier, 2022).

Within Catholicism, a dualistic, feminine identity movement called 'New Feminism' emerged which promoted complementarian and essentialist theologies and supported the subjectification of women by maintaining women's subordination as essential, natural, and preordained by God (Beattie, 2006; Schüssler Fiorenza, 2016). In a similar way, Anglican women formed Equal but Different, 'to counter MOW' (Piggin and Linder, 2020: 407), and 'to testify to the unchanging truth of God's word—especially as it applies to the unity, equality and complementarity of male and female in God's creation, in marriage, and in ministry' (Equal but Different, 2015-2023). While many Anglican women opted out of explicitly feminist Christian groups, they increasingly opted into the complementarian theology circulated by groups such as Equal but Different. These groups typically guaranteed smoother pathways to employment opportunities; with conservative Anglican women writing how they have flourished in complementarian marriages and ministries (e.g., Hartley, 2019; Smith, 2012).

The 1970s and 1980s also marked the exponential growth of new pentecostal congregations in Australia. Hillsong Church, founded in 1983, quickly grew to be Australia's largest single congregation. Historian Denise Austin (2017) asserts that many of these pentecostal congregations, but particularly Hillsong, directly benefited from women opting out of mainline denominations, including Anglican and Catholic traditions. However, by the early 2000s younger pentecostal female leaders, heavily influenced by more conservative evangelical models, began to intentionally reject the second wave feminist notion of 'having it all' by choosing not to postpone child rearing but focus on motherhood, continuing their leadership as the wives of celebritised male church leaders (Bowler, 2019). Hillsong's Sisterhood and Colour Your World women's conferences, which have been critiqued for their conservative post-feminist values, often served to only amplify these women, thereby often reinforcing complementarian theologies (Maddox, 2013; Miller, 2016; Riches, 2022).

As it relates to women, Australian pentecostal history is complex. Today, prevailing ministerial rhetoric emphasises the largest denomination, the Australian Christian Churches (or ACC) movement's roots as egalitarian, echoing the prophetic utterance in the biblical Pentecost event (Acts 2:17-18). Women within Australia's pentecostal movements do have the right to be ordained; and the ACC was founded by women; most notably the street evangelist Sarah-Jane Lancaster. However, soon after her death the movement re-introduced complementarianism in various aspects of practice (Hutchinson, 2019). By 2009, Alphacrucis College faculty Jacqueline Grey and (now post-pentecostal) Shane Clifton stated:

> Most spirit empowered people believe in female equality and empowerment (whatever their views on headship) and would be horrified to be told that they function in such a way as to sustain a sexist church culture ... the difficulty is of course, that good intentions are not enough... the presumption that [pentecostal] communities are empowering to women (when compared, for example, to mainline denominations) creates the situation where the sense of self-congratulation undermines the voice of any who might be advocating for change. (Clifton and Grey, 2009: 2)

A decade later, Elizabeth Miller (2016) demonstrated that a 'theology of submission' prevails in practice. In this way, ordination is not all that is required to ensure that institutions consider women constituents or leaders.

Upholding complementarian ideals may at times look to be pro-women as it focuses on the special 'feminine' attributes individual women can bring to ministry. However, as we have shown across Catholic, Anglican, and pentecostal traditions, failing to acknowledge the way the rhetoric of complementarianism scaffolds institutional sexism and gendered violence, means complementarian ideals also operate to keep complaint collectives hidden behind closed doors. We suggest that by joining and forming complaint collectives across denominational boundaries, feminist Christians can operate from an in-between space to re-open the door for those who came before, and keep it open for those who will carry complaints forward.

As in previous sections we have reviewed some of the counter-institutional work done by Catholic and Anglican women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we now examine a contemporary complaint collective in a pentecostal educational context.

CARRYING COMPLAINTS FORWARD

In 2019 as an ordained minister and senior lecturer in theology expanding the higher education awards of the pentecostal megachurch Hillsong, I (Tanya Riches) encountered a convergence of complaints. Ahmed (2021) notes that complaints unfold paths, which must be walked; 'a path can be what unfolds through action: a path as what you have to do to get somewhere' (31). Eventually, I assisted by carrying a report summarising complainants' concerns through the third-level security doors into Hillsong Church's executive boardroom.

The precipitating event was a relatively innocuous post (initially public, later restricted) on the Hillsong College[3] alumni Facebook page on 15 October 2019. It was written by an alumnus simply requesting resources for deconstructing Christianity; however, over 1,600 comments ensued in the space of approximately 48 hours. Complaints of over 250 individuals in this thread were initially visible to all. As alumni converged in the space sharing their fragmented vignettes, which included their shared memories and general experiences, but also frustrations, unmet expectations, and allegations. I sent a short message to the moderation team encouraging them to review the content of each complaint methodically. This resulted in a press statement announcing my involvement.[4] Some commentators rejected this and demanded an external review; therefore, additional to the Hillsong College internal team, the legal firm HWL Ebsworth was commissioned.

Ultimately, the year 2021-2022 proved a tipping point for Australian pentecostals. The numerous Hillsong 'scandals' leaked to the media disposed the senior leadership, with the church's constituency still in redefinition at the time of writing. Various failures to adequately address sexual assault/harassment complaints had become, in one sense, an institutional branding problem that could not be suppressed any longer. For example, journalist David Hardaker (2024) details the mishandling of complaints made by Hillsong College student Anna Crenshaw, after she was assaulted by Jason Mays, a member of staff. Hardaker (2024: 159) asserts that 'according to Anna Crenshaw, when she took her complaint to the church, it took three months to notify Jason Mays of her claim, and then it took no further action for another two months.'

Although I had always prided myself on student advocacy, I realised I had been privileged not to 'see' many of the organisation's paths. The process of reviewing complaints opened a door of consciousness with no return. For me, the months between Sydney's COVID pandemic lockdowns were characterised by emergency zoom meetings with Hillsong Church's Global Senior Pastor Brian Houston, General Manager, PR liaison, executive college leadership, and varied student support personnel. What unfolded was a slow rolling institutional crisis. A further 70 Hillsong College students/alumni requested interviews with faculty, while others turned directly to media to voice their experiences and concerns (Hardaker 2024; Riches and Peerenboom, 2024; Shepherd, 2023). In media reporting, the gendered nature of these complaints became evident; several high-profile cases included instances in which the church publicly admitted to the sexual assault and harassment of women (Riches and Peerenboom, 2024), alongside other allegations. As Ahmed (2021) notes, complaint is ineffective and costly and cannot be undertaken by everyone. During this time, some student complainants sent anonymous emails and petitions, unaware that anonymity sometimes prevented complaint handling under the institution's policies (Shepherd, 2023). Students publicly highlighted their objections with their earlier complaint-raising as well as the church's responses to media narratives; overall, they objected to Hillsong College's separation or 'atomisation' of the issues. As Ahmed (2021) terms it, these 'doors' kept women in private messages and meetings, and from realising that other complaints existed. As celebrity pastors and leaders were exposed and came under investigation in Australian Courts, many other concerns presented were also validated.

Ahmed (2021) notes that complaints show institutional mechanics; meaning those who complaint-raise often *become* the mechanics demonstrating how the institution's systems work. Complainants converged around the pentecostal model of training, whereby Hillsong College students were inducted via service learning into the pastoral vocation. Overall, the students proposed, this model *didn't work as well* for those outside the existing Hillsong campus norm of an extroverted, married, white, (male) pastor. Certain students described experiences of exclusion at Hillsong Church, and these were particularly from women, and gender diverse and sexually diverse people. The described exclusion was exacerbated for students who were older, single, or lived with disabilities and/or mental health issues. Where students did not fit the model, they were often expected to change. And yet, Hillsong's famous brand had depicted (and therefore drew into the student body) a diverse global church; often described by scholars as 'the cosmopolitan ideal' (Riches and Wagner, 2017). This was articulated by some students to have become what Ahmed (2021) terms a 'coercive diversity' or 'pretence' that suggests the institution is something other than what it is. As in, the marketing drew diverse young people from all corners of the earth to

[3] Hillsong College is an educational provider based in Australia that is a part of the pentecostal megachurch, Hillsong Church.
[4] The use of non-disclosure agreements (NDA) has been widely examined in the suppression of complaints in Christian organisations. My own experience was of an NDA being produced even as my own personal experience was of suffering reputational damage due to the publicity surrounding the event. Notably, I do not here detail any complaint subject matter or breach any individual's privacy in this article.

attend Hillsong College's Sydney campus. But when they got there, they often found themselves 'strangers' within a white middle-class Australian suburban church, experiencing the structural violence of a world not created for them. Ahmed (2021) explains; 'You complain because you don't belong here' (158).

Ahmed (2021) notes, 'A complaint can require saying no to those with authority who in receiving your complaint will use their authority to retell the story' (146-147). At significant moments during the institutional crisis Hillsong's leaders sought to discount the veracity of complainants in public by emphasising high numbers of (assumedly) satisfied graduates. During this time, Hillsong Church set up a 'newsroom' on its site to refute victim's stories in granular detail, a strategy that scholars later noted to result in emotional and religious harm (Morehouse and Lemon, 2023).[5] Increasingly, these responses acted as the organisation's disciplinarian tools, retelling the story from the organisation's perspective. Therefore, just as Ahmed (2021) notes, 'what you encounter when you make a complaint is *more* of what you encountered *before*' (159).

It soon became apparent that what prevented student experiences being acknowledged by the church was the *affect* students held toward the organisation (i.e., disgruntled, disaffected) versus the College's intended graduates: positive, ready-to-serve church volunteers. Sociologists Matthew Wade and Maria Hynes (2013) had previously emphasised the Hillsong Church's affective production; it seemed that pastors wanted to ensure their college's vocational programs developed particular affective qualities in potential church leaders. Ruth Graham (2022) writing in The New York Times articulates this succinctly:

> Terry Crist, a fifth-generation pastor in Phoenix, joined the global megachurch Hillsong in part because of what he describes as its *distinctly joyful approach to church life:* Hillsong was an institution where leaders seemed 'light and free,' offering a church experience that attracted tens of thousands of people around the world (emphasis added).

To become a complainant was to betray the code. Ahmed (2021) makes this explicit, 'If you can become a complainer by virtue of not reproducing an institutional legacy … not reproducing an institutional legacy can be seen as the work of complaint' (164). It seemed that those who were not happy to reproduce the legacy were expected to leave. Therefore, as in Ahmed's (2021) case, 'a path can also be a path *through* an organisation' (31).

As complainants gathered in intensity and force, so did global media attention. In February 2022, Global Senior Pastor Brian Houston announced he would be standing aside, instating interim pastors. At the time, he was facing a charge from Australian police for the concealment of sexual assault due to crimes concerning his father, of which he was acquitted. However, through this process it was revealed that Houston had been investigated internally twice for breaches of Hillsong's own ministerial code of conduct in interactions with women. Therefore, leaders receiving the alumni's complaints had themselves been under secret disciplinary action, raising questions as to who the heavy third-level security doors were built to protect. My sense of betrayal from the Hillsong General Manager and Board was intense; as Ahmed (2021) notes of complaint,

> you reenter the institution through the back door. You find out about doors, secret doors, trapdoors: how you can be shut out, how you can be shut in. You learn about processes, procedures, policies; you point out what they fail to do, pointing to, pointing out; you fill in more and more forms; forms become norms; files become futures; filing cabinets, graves. (276)

After the 'scandals', and continuing appearances of grievances in the media, Hillsong Church experienced a decline in attendance with many of its (female and diverse) congregants disappearing (Shorter and Riches, 2023). Following the change in leadership, Hillsong's new Senior Pastor Phil Dooley apologised in a Hillsong gathering to all congregants who had experienced harassment, reported on the evangelical website *Eternity* (Abbott, 2022). It is not known if this apology was extended to or received by the complainants not in attendance. As Ahmed (2021) proposes, after a complaint fails, the main grief becomes that these voices and contributors are gone.

CONCLUSION

Feminist Christian women can find they occupy a marginal position, standing in a doorway between Christianity and feminisms. In this article, following Sara Ahmed, we have assembled ourselves in this in-between space as a Christian feminist complaint collective to firstly, challenge gender inequality and marginalisation in patriarchal

[5] For example, an editorial in Hillsong Newsroom (2021) stated 'since Hillsong College commenced, almost 20,000 people have successfully graduated and now serve successfully in ministry positions across the world. The vast majority of past students report wonderful experiences, however like any college, there are some students whose experience did not meet their expectations, for a variety of reasons' (n.p.).

denominations and churches. And, secondly, to reconceptualise how feminist theory can be applied to feminist scholarship and activism in Christian religious traditions and communities.

We have brought together the complaints of women arising across Catholic, Anglican, and pentecostal settings in Australia as a collective complaint against institutional sexism and gendered violence. Drawing on the work of Ahmed (2021), we have shown that when Christian women protest sexism and gendered violence, or make formal complaints, they become a problem for their institutional churches.

Positioning Christian women, especially feminist women, as troublemakers and complainers, is a tactic for dismissing and burying their concerns and the complaints. Some complaints – such as the demands made of Catholic and Anglican women – have been buried by institutional processes and tucked away in the archives of institutional memory. Others – such as the complaints and allegations raised by pentecostal students and former staff at Hillsong College – have been erased and even repurposed as positive statements.

In hearing and retelling complaint stories, knowing that 'to the tell the story of a complaint is how the complaint comes out from where it has been buried' (Ahmed, 2021:276) we have exposed gender norms, including how power is reproduced and how boundaries are policed in Christian traditions. As a complaint collective we inherit the complaints of those who came before us, and we are willing to hold the complaints of those who work alongside us and come after us. Doorway work, as a way of lending a feminist ear, of resisting and pushing back against institutional sexism and boundaries, is a legitimate and necessary feminist and Christian action. We invite other feminist scholars to join us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

Abbott, R. (2022). Hillsong repents and regroups, *Eternity,* 21 March. Available at: https://www.eternitynews.com.au/world/hillsong-repents-and-regroups/. (Accessed 21 July 2023).

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jkj2

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373377

Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2022). Complaint as a queer method*, Feministkilljoys*, 24 March. Available at: https://feministkilljoys.com/2022/03/24/complaint-as-a-queer-methodb/. (Accessed 7 July 2023).

Ahmed, S. (2023). *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. United Kingdom: Allen Lane.

Austin, D. (2017). 'Flowing together': The origins and early development of Hillsong Church within Assemblies of God in Australia, in T. Riches and T. Wagner (eds), *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You call me out upon the waters* (pp. 21–37). London: Palgrave McMillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59656-3_2

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Religious affiliation in Australia*, Government of Australia.* Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia. (Accessed 21 August 2023).

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. (2000). Woman and man: The bishops respond: Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000, *Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*. Available at: https://www.catholic.org.au/commission-documents/bishops-commission-for-health-community-service-1/513-woman-and-man-the-bishops-respond-1/file. (Accessed 20 June 2021).

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. (2022). Final Decree 2: Witnessing to the equal dignity of men and women, *Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*. Available at: https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-4-Witnessing-to-the-Equal-Dignity-of-Women-and-Men.pdf. (Accessed 7 July 2023).

Baird, J. (2018). Data thy neighbour. *St Mark's Review*, 243, 7–24.

Baird, J. (2023). When I met Sinead O'Connor she looked like a monk who smoked Marlboro lights, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 28 July. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/culture/celebrity/when-i-met-sinead-o-connor-she-looked-like-a-monk-who-smoked-marlboro-lights-20230728-p5ds2z.html. (Accessed 31 August 2023).

Baird, J. and Gleeson, H. (2017). 'Submit to your husbands': Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 18 July. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028. (Accessed 12 March 2024).

Beattie, T. (2006). *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and theory*. New York: Routledge.
Bowler, K. (2019). *The Preacher's Wife: The precarious power of evangelical women celebrities*. US: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691185972
Bowling, M. (2022). Vote over role of women disrupts Plenary Council assembly, *The Catholic Leader*, 12 July. Available at: https://catholicleader.com.au/news/vote-over-role-of-women-disrupts-in-plenary-council-assembly/. (Accessed 28 June 2023).
Brennan, P. (1996). Into the ring, *Eureka Street*, March.
Brennan, P. (2007). O Sydney, Sydney, killing the prophets. *Women-Church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 40, 60–65.
Carlson, B. and Farrelly, T. (2023). *Monumental Disruptions: Aboriginal people and colonial commemorations in so-called Australia*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
Clifton, S. and Grey, J. (2009). *Raising Women Leaders: Perspectives on liberating women in pentecostal and charismatic contexts*. Sydney: Australian Pentecostal Studies.
Dantis, T., Bowell, P., Reid, S. and Dudfield, L. (2019). *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final report for the Plenary Council Phase I: Listening and dialogue*. Canberra: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference National Centre for Pastoral Research.
Equal but Different. (2015–2023). *What we do*. Available at: http://equalbutdifferent.org/what-we-do. (Accessed 12 August 2023).
Evans, A. (2023). Femininity in the 21st century. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101502
Fawkner, P. (2022). What is it about women and the Church?, *The Good Oil*, July. Available at: https://www.goodsams.org.au/article/what-is-it-about-women-and-the-church/. (Accessed 28 June 2023).
Graham, R. (2022). Hillsong, once a leader of Christian cool, loses footing in America, *The New York Times*, 29 March. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/us/hillsong-church-scandals.html. (Accessed 28 August 2021).
Hardaker, D. (2024). *Mine is the Kingdom: The rise and fall of Brian Houston and the Hillsong church*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
Hartley, K. (2019). The women of Sydney are not silenced, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-women-of-sydney-are-not-silenced-20191028-p534xp.html. (Accessed 1 July 2020).
Hillsong Newsroom. (2021). Response from Hillsong College to The Daily Mail enquiry (editorial), *Hillsong Newsroom*, 16 April. Available at: https://hillsong.com/newsroom/blog/2021/04/response-from-hillsong-college-to-the-daily-mail-enquiry/. (Accessed 18 June 2024).
Hollier, J. (2022). 'I will never be considered human': The devastating trauma LGBTQ+ people suffer in religious settings, *The Conversation*, 9 February. Available at: https://theconversation.com/i-will-never-be-considered-human-the-devastating-trauma-lgbtq-people-suffer-in-religious-settings-176360. (Accessed 18 March 2024).
Hutchinson, M. (2019). Lancaster, Sarah Jane (Murrell), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism Online*. Available at: https://brill.com/display/db/egpo. (Accessed 21 July 2023).
Jensen, M. P. (2012). *Sydney Anglicanism: An apology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Jensen, P. F. (2012). 'Last words': Presidential address 49th Synod of the Sydney Anglican Diocese*, Sydney Diocesan Services*. Available at: https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/2012%20Presidential%20Address%20-%208%20October%202012%20%282nd%20session%20of%20the%2049th%20Synod%29.pdf. (Accessed 28 June 2023).
Knott, M. (2022). Catholic bishops backflip on status of women in Church, giving hope to reformers, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/national/catholic-bishops-backflip-on-status-of-women-in-church-giving-hope-to-reformers-20220710-p5b0hh.html. (Accessed 28 June 2023).
Lim, A. (2018). The ardent feminist who found delight in biblical submission, *Eternity News,* 5 March. Available at: https://www.eternitynews.com.au/culture/the-ardent-feminist-who-found-delight-in-biblical-submission/. (Accessed 11 August 2023).
Llewellyn, D. and Trzebiatowska, M. (2013). Secular and religious feminisms. *Feminist Theology,* 21(3), 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735013484220
Macdonald, M., Carpenter, P., Cornish, S., Costigan, M., Dixon, R., Malone, M., Manning, K. and Wagner, S. (1999). *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*. Sydney: Harper Collins.
Maddox, M. (2013). 'Rise up warrior princess daughters': Is evangelical women's submission a mere fairy tale?. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29(1), 9–26. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.29.1.9
Madigan, P. (2021). 'Be patient, ladies! Be patient!': Women and the Australian church (WATAC), 1982-2021. *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 98(3), 259–283.

Maley, J. (2010). MacKillop exposed paedophile priest, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/national/mackillop-exposed-paedophile-priest-20100924-15qkt.html. (Accessed 12 March 2024).

Manne, K. (2018). *Down Girl: The logic of misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190604981.001.0001

McEwan, T. (2022). *Gen X women and the Australian Catholic Church: Negotiating religious identity and participation* (Doctoral thesis). University of Newcastle. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1431156. (Accessed 12 March 2024).

McEwan, T., McPhillips, K. and Pepper, M. (2023a). *International Survey of Catholic Women: Analysis and report of findings*. Callaghan: University of Newcastle. https://doi.org/10.25817/0FNN-Z889

McEwan, T., McPhillips, K. and Pepper, M. (2023b). *International Survey of Catholic Women: Analysis of responses from Australia*. Callaghan: University of Newcastle. https://doi.org/10.25817/ESKG-9H64

McPhillips, K. (2013). In the southern land: Gender, nation, and saint-making in Australia. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29(1), 26–39. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.29.1.26

McPhillips, K. (2015). Religion and gender in the post-secular state: Accommodation or discrimination? *Feminist Theology*, 23(2), 156–170. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735014555635

McPhillips, K. (2016). Contested feminisms: Women's religious leadership and the politics of contemporary western feminism. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 29(2), 134–149. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.v29i2.31139

McPhillips, K. and McEwan, T. (2022). The sexual economies of clericalism: Women religious and gendered violence in the Catholic Church. *Religions*, 13(10), 916. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100916

Miller, E. (2016). Women in Australian pentecostalism: Leadership, submission, and feminism in Hillsong church. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 29(1), 52–76. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.v29i1.26869

Moran, P. F. (1895). *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia: From authentic sources*. Wellington: Oceanic Publishing Company.

Morehouse, J. and Lemon, L. L. (2023). Beyond reputational and financial damage: Examining emotional and religious harm in a post-crisis case study of Hillsong Church. *Public Relations Review,* 49(1), 102–282. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102282

O'Sullivan, M. M. K. (2019). *A Cause of Trouble: Irish nuns and English clerics* (2nd ed). Australia: Kindle Direct Publishing.

OurWatch. (2024). *Preventing violence against women*. Available at: https://www.ourwatch.org.au/. (Accessed 18 March 2024).

Pattel-Gray, A. (1998). *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia critically appraised from an Aboriginal historico-theological viewpoint*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.

Pattel-Gray, A. (1999). The hard truth: White secrets, black realities. *Australian Feminist Studies,* 14(30), 259–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649993092

Pattel-Gray, A. (2023). Freedom from colonial bondage: Decolonizing biblical narratives and theological education. *International Review of Mission*, 112(2), 240–256. https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12478

Pepper, M., Powell, R. and McEwan, T. (2021). *NAFVP Experience Study Report: The nature of experiences of family violence for those with a connection with Anglican churches*. Sydney: NCLS Research Report for the Anglican Church of Australia.

Pepper, M., Powell, R. and McEwan, T. (2023). The impact of marriage norms and gender on Anglican clergy actions in response to domestic violence. *Religions*, 14(6), 730. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060730

Piggin, S. (2012). The diocese of Sydney: 'This terrible conflict', in E. Lindsay and J. Scarfe (eds), *Preachers, Prophets, and Heretics: Anglican women's ministry* (pp. 178–204). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Piggin, S. and Linder, R. D. (2020). *Attending to the National Soul: Evangelical Christians in Australian history 1914–2014*. Melbourne: Monash University Publishing.

Possamai, A. and Tittensor, D. (2022). *Religion and Change in Australia*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003255338

Poulos, E. (2019). Constructing the problem of religious freedom: An analysis of Australian Government inquiries into religious freedom. *Religions,* 10, 583. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100583

Riches, T and Peerenboom, L. (2024). Complaint as testimony?: Listening to Australian Pentecostal Christian women. *Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, 44(1), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2024.2334062

Riches, T. (2021). 'Wisdom cries out': Towards a feminist pentecostal theology of (dis)ability, in J. Firth and D. Cooper-Clarke (eds), *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture: Papers by Australian women scholars in the evangelical tradition* (pp. 187–202). Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

Riches, T. (2022). Nevertheless, she persisted: Freeing women's bodies from silent theological sacrifice zones, in K. Ervin Alexander, M. L. Archer, M. J. Cartledge and M. D. Palmer (eds), *Sisters, Mothers, Daughters: Pentecostal perspectives on violence against women* (pp. 49–68). Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004513204_005

Riches, T. and Wagner, T. (2017). *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You call me out upon the waters*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59656-3

Rodrigues, M. (2022). Australia's Catholic plenary council in crisis over role of women in church, *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 July. Available at: https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/australias-catholic-plenary-council-crisis-over-role-women-church. (Accessed 28 June 2023).

Rose, M. (1996). *Freedom from Sanctified Sexism: Women transforming the church*. Queensland: Allira Publications.

Scarfe, J. (2007). Journeying together on the Freedom Bus. *Women-Church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 40, 47–51.

Scarfe, J. (2012). Movement for the ordination of women: Their hearts in their mouths, in E. Lindsay and J. Scarfe (eds), *Preachers, Prophets and Heretics: Anglican women's ministry* (pp. 117–145). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Scarfe, J. (2014). Changed rules, changing cultures?: The ordination of women. *St. Mark's Review,* 228(2), 51–58.

Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (2016). *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, gender, and kyriarchal power*. Cambridge: Feminist Studies in Religion Books.

Shepherd, T. (2023). Hillsong College allegedly taught some students women should 'submit' sexually to husbands, *The Guardian*, 27 February. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/27/hillsong-college-allegedly-taught-some-students-women-should-to-submit-sexually-to-husbands. (Accessed 9 March 2024).

Shorter, R. C. (2021). Rethinking complementarianism: Sydney Anglicans, orthodoxy and gendered inequality. *Religion and Gender*, 11, 218–244. https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-bja10005

Shorter, R. C. (2023). Complementarianism, heteronormativity and the future of the Anglican Church: Tensions in lived Sydney Anglicanism. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion,* 36(1), 118–144. https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.25740

Shorter, R. C. and Riches, T. (2023). We're told pentecostal churches like Hillsong are growing in Australia but they're not anymore, is there a gender problem, *The Conversation*, 27 February. Available at: https://theconversation.com/were-told-pentecostal-churches-like-hillsong-are-growing-in-australia-but-theyre-not-anymore-is-there-a-gender-problem-199413. (Accessed 21 July 2023).

Smith, C. (2012). *God's Good Design: What the Bible really says about men and women*. Kingsford: Mathias Media.

Smith, J. K. (2010). *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal contributions to Christian philosophy*. Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Sullivan, K. R. and Delaney, H. (2017). A femininity that 'giveth and taketh away': The prosperity gospel and postfeminism in the neoliberal economy. *Human Relations*, 70(7), 836–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716676322

Summers, A. (1993). The future of feminism: A letter to the next generation. *Refractory Girl: A Women's Studies Journal*, (44–45), 192–197.

Sutter, T. L. (1965). *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia 1788-1870: The formation of Australian Catholicism*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

Truong, M., Sharif, M., Pasalich, D., Olsen, A., Calabria, B. and Priest, N. (2020). Faith-Based Communities' Responses to Family and Domestic Violence: CSRM Working Paper No. 1/2020, *Australian National University*. Available at: https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/2/Faith-based_communities_responses_to_family_and_domestic_violence.pdf. (Accessed 11 April 2023).

Wade, M. and Hynes, M. (2013). Worshipping bodies: Affective labour in the Hillsong Church. *Geographical Research*, 51, 173–179. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12010

Weng, E. and Shorter, R. C. (2024). Decolonial perspectives on dominant constructions of 'religion', in J. Ravulo, K. Olcoń, T. Dune, A. Workman and P. Liamputtong (eds), *Handbook of Critical Whiteness* (pp. 1–15). Singapore: Springer.

Citation: McEwan, T., Shorter, R. C. and Riches, T. (2025). Feminist Complaint Collectives and Doorway Disruptions in Australian Christian Traditions. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 03. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16013


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 04
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Social Justice in the Work of Women Healthcare Chaplains: A Feminist Analysis of Spiritual Activism

Sonya Sharma [1]*, Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham [2]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

In the fraught and intimate context of healthcare, women chaplains provide spiritual care to the suffering. In addition to listening and prayer, their spiritual care is often focused on equity and inclusion such as advocacy for the vulnerable amid broader social and economic crises. This article draws on data from qualitative interviews conducted with women healthcare chaplains in London, England and Vancouver, Canada. We note that while social structures affect disadvantages among healthcare constituents, women healthcare chaplains challenge these inequities through a spiritual care based in a transformative spirituality for social justice. We understand such forms of spiritual care as 'spiritual activism' building on the work of Anzaldúa (2002), Keating (2005) and Fernandes (2003) via an intersectional framing (Crenshaw, 1989). Expanding on this critical feminist work, we demonstrate contemporary workings of spiritual activism among women healthcare chaplains, which can alter the often-perceived divisions between religion and feminism, offer overlooked directions of analysis for chaplaincy studies, and highlight a group of women that have received scant attention in feminist and religious studies.

Keywords: chaplains, gender, healthcare, spiritual activism, spiritual care

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary changes in religion and society are frequently understood through spectacular and conflictual forms, such as terrorist attacks, the non-European migrant, and the 'death' of religion. Yet, what sort of picture would we create if we began with the everyday acts of women healthcare chaplains? What might they tell us about the work of the sacred in a world that grows more unequal and can feel devoid of hope? Working at the edges of the secular institutions that employ them, women healthcare chaplains manoeuvre to bring about change if even on a small scale. They come alongside to help distressed staff who have been bullied, a patient confronting terminal illness, and a family facing financial hardship. Their help is offered in the forms of listening and prayer and forms of advocacy such as writing a letter of support or raising funds quickly for those in need. While not unique, this is the work of women chaplains in the healthcare context, a microcosm of society that reflects a complex social conjuncture of inequities, religious and cultural plurality; political change against a backdrop of historical and contemporary colonial relations; and global climate, economic and health crises. Women chaplains face precarious employment themselves because of financial pressures on healthcare systems, and the de-prioritisation of the spiritual dimensions of health and illness. These women are diverse and dynamic as is their work of spiritual care across clinical settings.

In the mid-twentieth century more women entered the profession of chaplaincy, as it offered them an opportunity to do paid religious work, including leadership positions not necessarily available to them in their religious institutions. For example, the Church of England (2024) recorded over 300 ordained women working in chaplaincy from 2018-2022 compared to around 700 ordained men. Chaplaincy has given women a place to evolve and progress in their religious and working lives (Ibrahim, 2022; Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022). It was recently found however that little research has been conducted and published about women in these roles (Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022). One of the reasons cited was that men typically outnumber them in the profession. As with many studies on chaplains, women's experiences are subsumed into the larger cohort of chaplains being investigated which risks their work being invisible. In a recent study on prayer in healthcare, 40% of the chaplains

[1] *University College London*, UNITED KINGDOM
[2] *Trinity Western University*, CANADA
***Corresponding Author:** sonya.sharma@ucl.ac.uk

studied were women (Reimer-Kirkham *et al*., 2020) but their experiences were not foregrounded (a shortcoming we rectified with a follow-up article, Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022; and this current analysis). Women healthcare chaplains are often not a focal point in research. Rather, examinations of religious diversity and non-religious representation among chaplains have been prioritised for what they can reveal about religion in the public sphere (Bryant, 2018; Cadge, 2012; Eccles, 2014; O'Donoghue, 2020). Women healthcare chaplains' experiences are woven into such research accounts, but they are not central nor are the intersecting effects of gender, religion, and race (Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022, 2023).

The term 'chaplain' has historic association with Christianity, and, in turn, Christianity with colonial processes of enslavement, mission, and whiteness. These associations are residual and (re)produce intersections of religious and racial hierarchies in the present (Joshi, 2020). Several of the women chaplains we interviewed were aware of how these processes could show up in the healthcare context via forms of inclusion and exclusion such as racialisation of religion, microaggressions, chaplaincy team membership, and access to designated sacred spaces. Because of its staying power, 'chaplain' has been adopted by non-Christian and nonreligious groups providing spiritual care, signalling inclusivity (Gilliat-Ray *et al*., 2013). Spiritual care is typically defined as, 'a holistic approach to care, attending to an individual's beliefs, values, behaviours and experiences related to spirituality, religion, and culture, … and [making] space for meaningful change. Spiritual care is practiced through the assessment and treatment of issues specific to each person' (Canadian Association for Spiritual Care, 2024).[1] The definition aims to be inclusive of all. Yet, in its reference to 'holistic', 'the concept of holism in health, spirituality and ecology is beset by limitations' ignoring experiences of the body that are not perceived as whole such as amputees (Klassen, 2016: 177). Further, the above places emphasis on the 'individual' which may obscure how healthcare constituents are affected by webs of structural inequalities such as racism, classism, and homophobia.

Women healthcare chaplains in our research were aware of these operatives to varying degrees and aimed to challenge social inequities to benefit their communities, not just individuals. We view such approaches to spiritual care as spiritual activism – a transformative spirituality for social justice – a stance often missed and under-theorised because of foci on clinical efficacy of religion and spirituality for wellbeing, and practice-based theological illustrations. Social justice has both secular and religious dimensions working for the better of society and supporting individuals and groups within it. It involves numerous forms including distributive, legal and procedural, and restorative and reparative (Palmer and Burgess, 2020). There is no one definition as it is mutually constitutive of different social and cultural contexts. Our understandings of 'spiritual activism' expand and are informed by the work of Black, Chicana and women of colour feminist scholars who have similarly been working from the edges such as in academia. Their theoretical graft helps us to note that, while social structures affect advantages and disadvantages of healthcare constituents, many women healthcare chaplains challenge these through enacting spiritual care for social equity. One can also learn from the work of women healthcare chaplains that the often-perceived divisions between religion and feminism (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013) can dissipate because of their work to welcome in and defend the other in the intimate, public and demanding space of healthcare. Women healthcare chaplains, frequently read as 'other' because of their gender, race, and religion, reach across difference to assist human flourishing and address injustice. In what follows, we theorise what we mean by 'spiritual care' and 'spiritual activism' and that this work among women healthcare chaplains continues a long trajectory of feminist and religious women's intersectoral work. We then describe our study, give an analysis of three illustrative examples, and end with concluding thoughts.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

We consider the spiritual care of women healthcare chaplains through the theoretical framings of Black, Chicana and women of colour feminist scholars. Their thinking and writing emerge from a history of women and collective movements that have long-considered spiritual care as intersectional, and as a stance of love, compassion, and social justice. We heed the writings of Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, and Leela Fernandes among others to theorise the spiritual care and spiritual activism we heard in the women's accounts.

[1] Two public inquiries in Canada – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of 2015 endorsed by all levels of government in Canada, and in BC the 2021 *In Plain Sight Report*, an inquiry into Indigenous-specific racism in healthcare – have forced engagement with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Governments. Public institutions (e.g., healthcare, universities) and professional associations have made statements of apology and released policy statements. For example, health professions are accountable to a New Practice Standard on Indigenous Cultural Safety, Cultural Humility and Anti-racism. The Canadian Association of Spiritual Care (CASC, 2024) has established a Reconciliation Council, with an action plan to move toward allyship and advocacy, and in their direct care to Indigenous peoples. Hence, while there is much work to be done, we note this as an example of recognition of historical structural oppressions and inequities to be addressed in the spiritual care provided.

We interpret spiritual care as grounded in a spirituality that emerges from deep within oneself. 'One finds one's way to spirit through woundings, through nature, through reading, through actions, through discovering new approaches to problems' (Anzaldúa, 2015: 38). This informs the collective to embed and practice equity and social justice. Audre Lorde (1984), Black Lesbian Feminist, activist and poet defines the spiritual and the political as entwined and part of our 'erotic knowledge' in the sense that it connects the physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deep within us, our passions and love for ourselves and others. 'For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of' (Lorde, 1984: 57). When in touch with this part of ourselves, Lorde writes that, 'Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within' (Lorde, 1984: 58). One is 'less willing to accept powerlessness, resignation and despair' (Lorde, 1984: 58). The women's accounts revealed this process in their coming to work in chaplaincy and the suffering they confronted in hospital settings that challenged their faith and self.

Our understanding of spiritual care is tied to how we define spiritual activism as a transformative spirituality for social justice. It draws from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (2005) who conceptualised 'spiritual activism' which complements the work of Lorde. Gloria Anzaldúa was a Chicana, feminist, activist, author and poet whose work has been studied and written about by AnaLouise Keating (2005), a women-of-colour theorist. From their work, spiritual activism 'locates authority within each individual, individuals often scarred by oppression…' (Keating, 2005: 244). Spirit emerges from the small still voice within, which can empower one to transform their world (Keating, 2005). Anzaldúa and Keating view spiritual activism as relational and interconnected between all life forms. Keating writes that it requires both individual and collective forms working together:

> When we define ourselves as part of a larger whole, we attain an enhanced sense of meaning, self-worth, and agency … This altered self-image fosters a sense of accountability that fuels spiritual activists' work for social change. Because self and other are irrevocably, utterly, intimately interrelated, what affects you (no matter how distant, how separate, how different [from me] you seem to be) affects me as well. (2005: 245)

As Lorde (1984) states, 'I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own' (132-33). Spiritual care in this sense requires work not by the self alone but by everyone and across differences. South Asian scholar, feminist, and writer, Leela Fernandes' (2003) proposal for a 'spiritualized feminism' complements and builds on Lorde's and Anzaldúa's and Keating's work. She asserts that while feminists have rightly been wary of religious institutions because of patriarchy, this has indirectly led to 'the disassociation between spirituality and social justice' and limited ability to see how women live across sacred and secular spheres (2003: 9). Fernandes states that, 'At best, feminist theorists and organisations tend to relegate spirituality [or religiosity] to the local "cultural" idiom of grassroots women (usually in "other" places and for "other" women), acknowledging it in the name of an uneasy cultural relativist tendency of "respecting cultural difference"' (2003: 9). She therefore argues for a 'spiritualized feminism' that 'entails a taking back of the realms of the sacred from those forces that have sought to distort divinity or spirituality into a means for the reproduction of hierarchy, oppression and exclusion of subordinated social groups' (2003: 14). A spiritualised feminism links social justice to 'compassion, humility and love' (2003: 59). These are to be considered as practices put into action to help transform social and economic circumstances. Fernandes contends that this is of course challenging but necessary. It is a spiritual care of self and other that can 'assist us in challenging racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of material/psychic oppression' (Keating, 2005: 243).

Addressing overlapping forms of oppression with their spiritual practices, religious and spiritual women are often at the heart of struggle for change, justice, and liberation. For example, the 'struggles against gender and racial oppression were embodied in activist women of faith like Sojourner Truth' (Fernandes, 2003: 58; also see Brah and Phoenix, 2004). Bettye Collier-Thomas' (2013) socio-historical research on four centuries of African American religious women observed how emboldened by their faith and hope they fought against poverty, racism, and sexism, detailing their organisational efforts to fight for freedom in all aspects of their lives and communities. Indigenous women have gathered and fought land removal, societal exclusion, racial and sexual violence, colonisation, and drawn on spiritual and traditional healing practices that privilege 'mother earth' (Dudgeon and Bray, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Catholic feminists are standing up against sex trafficking, the historical sexual abuse in their Church and for those made poor by an unjust economic system (Hunt, 2020). Buddhist women are also committed to social justice, helping to provide for the welfare and wellbeing of others (Tsomo, 2012). Jewish women have organised to help victims of domestic violence and been part of the civil rights movements (Levison and Usiskin, 2005). Muslim women organise to fight inequalities in their mosques and Islamophobia (Bacchus, 2019; Ghafournia, 2022; Lewicki and O'Toole, 2017). Women's religious and spiritual work often 'crosses the boundaries between spirituality, passion and politics' (Fernandes, 2003: 59). This concise

description captures what spiritual activism ignites – a transformative spirituality for intersectional equity and social justice.

Furthermore, social justice at the heart of spiritual care has been an intersectional endeavour. Legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualisation of intersectionality builds on and exists alongside the scholarship, activism, and writings of past and current Black, Indigenous and women of colour thinkers and writers who have been working with and theorising intersecting axes of advantage and disadvantage. Crenshaw (2016) explains that intersectionality 'is not primarily about identity. It's about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability' (n.p.). Following Crenshaw, numerous scholars have theorised and employed intersectionality to tease out the structural interactions between gender, race, and class. Religion as an aspect of identity, practice and structure of power however is often left out of intersectional theorising (Reimer-Kirkham and Sharma, 2011; Singh, 2015). This could be as postcolonial scholar Jakeet Singh states because of the 'generally secular character and constraints of academic research and researchers, as well as the deeply contested and contextual terrain of whether religion is actually an oppressed form of difference or is itself an oppressive force' (2015: 658). Yet Singh (2015) notes the connections that can be made between women's religious agency and intersectionality (also see Bilge, 2010). Women's religious agency when thought of as 'a form of subjectivity' enables more diverse forms and possibilities for 'interconnectedness or interdependency of human and nonhuman (divine or earthly) forms of life' (Singh, 2015: 663). Singh cautions against singular interpretations of negatively framed 'structures of oppression that are to be critiqued and dismantled' (2015: 664); rather women's religious agency should be understood as pointing to how religious life can be both oppressive and liberating and thus intersectional analyses should make room for diverse forms of both (p. 670). Singh cites feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman's instructive point about intersectionality: 'No one ought to expect the forms of our liberation to be any less various than the forms of our oppression. We need to be at least as generous in imagining what women's liberation will be like as our oppressors have been in devising what women's oppression has been' (Spelman, 1988: 132 cited in Singh, 2015: 670).

Just as women's religious lives can be oppressive, they can also be empowering, offering forms of care and community, rituals, and practices to support oneself and others. The above concepts and theorisations from Black, Chicana and women of colour theorists offer 'alternative framings of gender, religion, and race because [they are] so profoundly attuned to the pursuit of justice, peace, liberty and equality as lived and liveable realities' (Hawthorne *et al.*, 2024: 24). We expand on this important critical feminist work to demonstrate contemporary workings of spiritual activism by women healthcare chaplains. In their work of spiritual care in clinical spaces, they actively challenge everyday intersecting inequities.

METHODOLOGY

Our research emerges out of a project on how prayer was welcomed and resisted in healthcare settings in Vancouver, Canada and London, England of which chaplains were our primary sample (2015-2018) (Reimer-Kirkham *et al.*, 2020). Upon completing this project, we noted that women's experiences of gender in chaplaincy could be foregrounded. Therefore, to hear more about women's experiences of gender and chaplaincy in the domain of healthcare we carried out a small-scale project, which is the basis for this article. We recruited twelve women healthcare chaplains: three from Vancouver, Canada and nine from London, England (2019-2020). All participants identified as women, were of various ages and from mainly Christian traditions with one Muslim chaplain. The majority of the women were White and three were from Black and Asian backgrounds. All were paid chaplains, fulltime and parttime, with differing levels of responsibility. We employ the title 'chaplain' as opposed to 'spiritual care provider' or 'spiritual care practitioner' to convey their identification with chaplaincy work and chaplaincy team membership.

The cities of Vancouver and London were our field sites. Vancouver is world renowned for its natural beauty – the oceans and the mountains. It is known for its expensive housing amid poverty and deprivation. The city is also reckoning with its colonial past and reconciliation with its Indigenous peoples. Ecological spiritualities, migration and secularisation mark Vancouver's religious landscape. The religious profile of Vancouver is 55.8% no religion and secular perspectives, 29.9% Christian and 14.3% Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Traditional (North American Indigenous) spirituality and other religions and spiritual traditions (Statistics Canada, 2022). London in contrast is known for its arts and culture, historical architecture, expensive housing, and class divisions, and as the historical epicentre of Britain's imperial past (Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022). 'The proportion of the population identifying as Anglican (belonging to the Church of England or sister churches in Scotland and Wales) has fallen from 40% in 1983 to just 12% in 2018' (Voas and Bruce, 2019: 20). The religious profile of London, according to the recent UK Census (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022) reveals that 40.7% identified as Christian and 25.3% with a religion other than 'Christian'. The 'next most common religious groups in London were 15% Muslim and 5.1% Hindu' (ONS, 2022: 5). Given the differences and similarities

between Vancouver and London, a key reason our research took place there was because they both have public healthcare systems in which socio-religious pluralities are found.

Before we proceeded with our research, we obtained ethical approval from our University Research Ethics Board. After explanation of the research process, all our pseudonymised participants gave their informed consent to be part of this study and publication of unidentifiable quotes. Qualitative data collection took the form of carrying out biographical interviews. This method utilises individual stories to understand lives within a social and historical frame (Merrill and West, 2009). It enabled us to understand how women chaplains make sense of their religious and spiritual trajectories and their trajectories of working in chaplaincy amid social and religious change. In employing feminist theory to bring criticality to our work, we do so from our respective locations as feminist researchers from different disciplines and socio-cultural backgrounds. We heed feminist theologian and qualitative researcher Nicola Slee (2013) in our methodological stance in that, 'feminists are after new ways of knowing' and 'the research process itself embodies ethical and spiritual values' (2013: 13, 14). Slee describes how this stance affects the listening to the lives of women and girls, the handling of collected transcripts, and the writing-up stage (2013: 18-22). Religious or not, 'women's lives are holy ground' (2013: 17) for what they share about their encounters with themselves and others. As researchers we carefully listened and made sense of the women's interviews. After sitting with, (re)reading and examining their transcripts, we generated and collated codes into potential themes, and then checked if these themes worked across the data set. Our process of analysis moved between checking what could be easily grasped to what needed more in-depth reflection (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Our analysis noted participants' trajectories to chaplaincy were gendered and racialised and these structures also marked their chaplaincy practice. While their faith traditions could marginalise them, healthcare chaplaincy offered a space of their choosing where they 'could live their religion and be nourished to venture out, become, and undo' (Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022: 639). The theme of social justice emerged as representative of their work. To exemplify this thematic 'holy work', we focus on three women, two in London and one in Vancouver, corresponding to our sample size. Offering illustrative examples, they challenge structural oppressions of race and gender and deprivation and poverty in their socio-clinical contexts to progress human flourishing. While the three examples are thematically tied to our projects (noted above), they are not generalisable across wider chaplaincy because of the small sample size.

CLAUDIA: 'I DEAL WITH IT STRAIGHT AWAY'

We begin with Claudia, a Black woman healthcare chaplain who worked in a busy London hospital that she knew well. Claudia said when applying for the role of chaplain, she thought: 'I'd love this job because you can talk about Jesus without getting into trouble for talking about your faith. You're coming alongside people with faith or not, being a voice of hope. I thought, this sounds fantastic!' Claudia's quote reveals two points. First, even though Britain has the Equality Act 2010 to protect certain characteristics including religion or belief, the secularisation of many workspaces can cause awkwardness if one mentions their religion. Second, Claudia spoke about her faith similarly to what Collier-Thomas (2011) noted in her historical research on African American women and religion through the figure of Jesus, not God, signifying a separation from the historical Christianity associated with colonialism and enslavement, an association still present today. Her chaplaincy work gave her permission to live her faith and make a difference to hospital constituents. She told us about one account:

> I had a situation the other day, one of the patients I went to visit (...) I don't think they looked after her very well. She was in a side room. This patient had crust around her mouth and her lips were very dry and she didn't look too good. I think they saw me go in and they started clocking that there's somebody seeing her, but up until then there hadn't been. I then said, 'Sorry, could you tell me why her lips are so dry and crust around her mouth?' And they said, 'Oh-oh-oh, we're supposed to wipe it.' I said, 'Well that looks like she's not being cared for properly.' So, they started running around and they got the little sponges with the stick, and they started cleaning her mouth, cleaning her lips and then they got the Vaseline and when they'd finished with her, she looked 100% better. I was quite cross that day and I went back to visit her the next day (…) what you've got to understand with Black people's skin is that we need a lot of cream. This woman's whole body was so dry, it was creped and flaking, and I remember saying to myself, 'I need to get her some cream because they've obviously washed her, but they haven't creamed her.' When I came back the next day, I noticed by the bed there was a pot with lots of sponges sticking upright, where there was none before, and Vaseline. When I looked at her, her face looked much better (…) If I'm going to see a patient and I'm not happy with what I see I go and tell someone straight away; it make[s] a difference (…) this is my hospital (…) when I go on the ward, if I know there's a situation I deal with it straightaway, even though I'm there to pray and to talk and to encourage if they're

> not Christians and even if they're Christians (…) but if there's a situation going on I deal with it first and they look at my badge and they go and sort it out.

In a demanding hospital environment, Claudia's account revealed her advocacy for the racialised and forgotten. It exposed a lack of attention and care for a Black woman's body, albeit rectified once pointed out. She talked about Black skin, how it dries when it is not 'creamed', the staff ignoring and not seeing the Black woman's skin, her body. Political philosopher Frantz Fanon writes about the Black body as inscribed with a 'historico-racial schema', the stories and anecdotes that deny subjectivity and objectify the Black body causing it to be seen and unseen by the 'white man's eyes' (2008 [1967]), and here the intersecting clinical eyes of the hospital staff. She is moreover kept away in a side room that positions 'a border' (Gunaratnam, 2013) between her body and theirs. Although Claudia does not name this account as racism, it was difficult to not read this into the lack of care the Black woman patient received, not hydrating, soothing, touching her skin with lotion.[2] 'Racism is indeed so ordinary as to be transmitted through the flinching away from Black touch, whether as theory or body contact, a movement away which, even if slight, contains within it a moment of contempt/disgust' (Tate, 2014: 69). Despite the clinical setting being a space in which bodies are examined and treated and often done so without their socio-cultural and historical contextualisation, the body is a site where the structuring effects of race, gender and class are inscribed and lived. 'Black skin touches the eye and is distorted in that very touching so that individual uniqueness is eradicated as black homology comes into view' (Tate, 2014: 70-71). Health justice needs to attend beyond equality of access or outcomes, to the intersecting economic, political, and structural conditions that continue to exacerbate inequalities in health services and how these link to historical roots that affect racialised bodies in the health setting (Hankivsky *et al*., 2011: 12).

Claudia crossed into the woman's room and then spoke up. What might have happened had she not come along? This is the work of Claudia and other women healthcare chaplains. They show up. They show up on the wards. Sometimes it is questioned why they are there, who they are, what a chaplain is. A Black woman chaplain does not fit the historic somatic norm of the white Christian male clergy chaplain typically expected (Barnes *et al*., 2023; Bryant, 2018; Hutt, 2019; Puwar, 2004; Sharma and Reimer-Kirkham, 2022, 2023). Claudia is a 'space invader,' taking up a position not reserved for her (Puwar, 2004). By showing up on the ward in 'her hospital', her 'visibility is a tactic rather than an end' (Fernandes, 2003: 57). In this case, Claudia's account revealed the intersection of race and gender oppression with spirituality and action which resulted in an alternative outcome, a move toward justice, recognition, and care for her patient and her community. Like Fernandes (2003), we view spiritual care as integral to social justice and take inspiration from Black feminist writers and activists for whom spirituality was foundational to combating racism and sexism, and epitomised acts of care for themselves and their community.

KATH: 'CALLING OUT WHEN THINGS ARE UNEQUAL'

Kath is a White chaplain who worked in the city of Vancouver in the spiritual care department of a hospital. She described how over time her Christian faith became more open because of her work in the diverse contexts of public healthcare:

> We worked extremely hard to reflect diversity. Our point was we are not a Christian department that will squish you in if you're another faith or spiritual tradition. We had some Christians, but we had Humanists, Buddhist, Baha'i and Jewish and interesting diversity on the team. I loved it, thrived, and partnering with Indigenous health colleagues (…) I think as a chaplain, working as a chaplain [pause] I think hopefully there's a bunch of us out in the world walking around pulling threads together around diversity and noting and calling out when things are unequal or unfair and offering a voice of understanding whether we're at work or in the [shopping] mall (…) I like being in the field with a diverse lens and asking questions and contributing to the conversation of society in a way that they wouldn't expect because we're constantly seen as 'you're the religious weirdos,' and to ask questions or to talk about things in a way that suggests we're not, people get really interested in that. I'm very much interested in gender and the LGBTQ part of that. I will talk about that with no fear.

Kath's excerpt makes two points. First, she was aware of the hegemonic position that Christianity, and whiteness as unnamed, continued to occupy in institutional spaces, side-lining other faith and ethnic groups. Second, her work aimed to challenge inequalities, to be part of conversations that would disrupt the status quo. Kath's work could be described: 'Spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many

[2] Forms of racism and racialisation in healthcare settings have been discussed in numerous places (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2020; Elias and Paradies, 2021).

differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation' (Keating, 2005: 242). Despite being perceived as religiously weird, Kath viewed this as agential to help instigate social change and understanding.

Outside the Vancouver hospital, wealth and deprivation are in stark contrast to each other: luxury Westcoast living sits alongside areas of poverty and homelessness against a backdrop of social activism, community action and resilience. Areas of the city have witnessed the harsh realities of the opioid crises. At a city park, protesters have gathered to stand up for the excluded. It is in this park that an event is held to support and offer basic services to those facing hardship. Kath told us about her and the chaplaincy team's involvement:

> It's not run by us, just to be clear, so I don't want to take any credit. It's an amazing event. Staff volunteer their time. There are a lot of clothes that people can take, there's lunch, there's haircuts, there's glasses, there's kids, staff bring their kids, there's different stations that folks can go to, and they can get their things. We're there with spiritual health. My job has been to walk around the edges and meet people, hear their stories. I wander around. I stand in the line with people, connecting with people.

In the medical context, the rational split between mind and body is pervasive, the spiritual or soul frequently peripheral to the focus on illness and cure. Yet, as gender and health scholar Olena Hankivsky and colleagues note, 'Health is such a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, one determined and constituted in such great respect by the social, spatial, and temporal contexts in which people and communities exist' (2011: 1). The above account revealed Kath and her colleagues reaching out to their city, showing up to connect, listen and support the ailing and vulnerable. Kath 'walked around the edges' not proselytising religion but rather awareness of her position as a White Christian chaplain and power relations. This event disrupted what is typically expected of hospital chaplains. It moved beyond the clinical context; individualised spiritual care at the bedside became collective spiritual care at a local park. 'The spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life are parts of a larger whole, interjoined in a complex, interwoven pattern' (Keating, 2005: 244). The event demonstrated intersections of the clinical with everyday city living, spiritual care as activism.

NICOLA: 'WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?'

Nicola, also a White chaplain, discovered chaplaincy during her process to be a candidate for ordination in the Anglican Church. She started out in a hospice and said, she 'would go along every week and shadow the chaplain. I found it really demanding because people were nearing the end of their life.' She observed, 'People who are dying are absolutely on the margins because they're tucked away, certainly in British society.' Resultantly, upon acceptance to train for ordination she started as a chaplain at a London hospital, 'doing on-call and every Monday night.'

> (…) and I began to see that hospital chaplaincy ministered to people on the margins, who were ill, who were supporting a family member or a friend or a partner who was very sick, people who'd just had a baby and perhaps the baby had died in birth or wasn't doing so well, elderly people in the long-term geriatric ward who had no-one to visit them, people whose mental health had fallen apart and found themselves in hospital, people who had an accident (…).

Described by Nicola, healthcare is a space of suffering that is chronic and ordinary, crisis-laden, and catastrophic (Das, 2015). Suffering is multifaceted and can affect anyone, intersecting with varied economic, political, and social circumstances. Being a chaplain was not always easy for the women in this research. Nicola said, 'There are those huge crises of faith moments (…) if there is a God of love, how could this be?' In processing these catastrophic moments, she said, 'I make space for the doubts and the questions alongside the certainties and the faith and accept that they're integral to each other.' Nicola elaborated:

> Twenty years ago, I would have said 'I really respect other religions, but I actually believe Christianity is the right way.' I would say now, 'I'm not sure about that.' I've had to learn. From working with people and living alongside [them, I've] come to see that there are different ways … and different traditions that are helping.

Healthcare is also a space of revelation, being opened to difference, and acceptance that dominant views and white Christian positioning can be counterproductive and exclusionary. Nicola relinquished 'the right to be right' – in the words of sociologist Lori Beaman: 'Responding to the new diversity in an inclusive way means relinquishing rightness and power by those who are accustomed to having it' (2017: 18). The inward struggle combined with the outward suffering that the women experienced and witnessed could push one toward self-growth and activism (Lorde, 1984). Keating explains that placing spiritual and activism together might be odd for some. Spirituality

often denotes something private, personal, inward-looking and activism as engaged, looking out to make change. 'Rather, spiritual activism combines self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change' (Keating, 2005: 244). Both elements are mutually constitutive and were at the heart of Nicola's work as a chaplain. She explained some of the practical things she did to help others:

> I think sometimes there's something very practical you can do, you can go along to a social worker and say, 'This family cannot feed their children today, they have no food in the cupboard today, what can we do to help?' Sometimes I have gone and bought food for a family who don't have food today and it makes me very angry that with the political situation in this country, people are not able to feed their family or buy school shoes for their kids. There are times where I know I can't solve that problem, but I know someone who can begin to help or contacting charities who might be able to give a grant. There are times where we've had to get involved with the immigration process and write letters of support. For example, it's important that a grandparent can come to see this child who is dying or to support the family, and the Home Office are being difficult. I wouldn't say we've been very successful in that but sometimes writing a letter of support has been important or trying to signpost families to the right person who can help like Citizen's Advice.

Fernandes (2003) discusses the notion of a spiritualisation of practice. She explains how this starts at the individual level with compassion, humility, and love. The quest for social justice begins here. She states that '[I]f social activism is ever to be transformative in any lasting way then qualities such as compassion and humility must be understood not as feelings or even ideas but as actual practices, practices that are a necessary component of transformative social activism' (2003: 59), and in our research a transformative spirituality. In this excerpt, Nicola, spoke about her anger at the injustices patients experienced, and importantly enacting compassion and humility through everyday acts of spiritual care to forward social justice for the hospital community with and for whom she worked. Embedded in her excerpt are the intersecting systems of power that oppress and instigate action – classism, austerity measures, unemployment, racism, and exclusion because of one's immigration status. There were days that Nicola felt defeated, when she felt 'powerless' and the 'social paralysis of the system.' But she said, 'You cannot work in a place where tragedy happens, I don't believe, and not be more open to different ways of thinking' and doing. Similar to other participants, in addition to coming alongside those at the bedside, Nicola wrote letters, raised awareness, and gathered with other chaplains to present at the hospital board level urgent patient-family concerns such as funeral poverty. The women disclosed and demonstrated through their experiences 'how much work is necessary to realize visions of social, political and economic transformation' (Fernandes, 2003: 59). As Keating notes, Anzaldúa insisted 'on a politics of spirit that can empower social actors to transform themselves and their worlds' (2005: 242).

CONCLUSION

The spiritual care of women healthcare chaplains discussed here is not unique to them. Many chaplains, and non/religious leaders, across different contexts are carrying out similar work. What sets our analysis apart is that we demonstrate contemporary workings of spiritual activism among women healthcare chaplains that challenge inequity to progress social justice. Analysed through a feminist intersectional stance we expand the critical work of Black, Chicana and women of colour feminist scholars on spiritual activism by locating it in contemporary healthcare – a complex professional context in which modes of care by women chaplains expose that they offer more than gender, racial and religious representation. They challenge the structures that sustain social exclusions and inequalities through their spiritual activism – action that is in addition to prayer and religious rituals. We expand this critical work to remark on the lived practices of spiritual activism that address institutional and government forms of power that affect the everyday realities of hospital constituents and chaplains. This feminist theoretical and analytical graft on spiritual activism also contributes to the broader study of chaplaincy providing a lens from which to analyse chaplains' care work within and across social locations. To conclude we raise three points to consider alongside what has been set out above.

First, women chaplains in the healthcare context contend with the structures of the religious and medical institutions in which they are situated. Both institutions contain the historical structural intersecting effects of patriarchy and colonialism. Clinical contexts have been historically shaped by these, along with, 'White benevolence, a form of paternalistic racism that reinforces, instead of challenges, racial hierarchies, found across Canadian [and British] institutions (…) it can uphold ideals of democracy, multiculturalism, peacekeeping and tolerance. These colonial scripts are deeply embedded beliefs both at home and abroad' (Gebhard *et al.*, 2022: 1). Arguably, those involved in spiritual work may be drawn to this type of benevolence and saviourism. Chaplaincy teams while becoming more gender, religious and racially diverse, mirroring migration and changing demographics,

can still be spaces of inclusion and exclusion, and exercise forms of 'kindness and helpfulness' that can mask workings of power and superiority that keep systems of oppression in place (Gebhard *et al.*, 2022). While the women aimed to resist these forms of oppression through forms of spiritual activism, colonial histories and racial dynamics were part of the women's contexts and could be unevenly contended with depending on how they were positioned themselves. Spiritual activism as we have theorised in this article is attentive to and actively working to remove forms of systemic inequities that include racism, classism, and sexism. Hellena Moon, a postcolonial theologian, moreover, calls for a 'postcolonial spiritual care' that 'can envision a capacious understanding of freedom and decoloniality' (2023: 15).

Second, many of the women described their work of spiritual care and themselves as on the 'edge'. Claudia, Kath, and Nicola cared for those tucked away in a side room or on the margins of society and described themselves as a believer in Jesus or as religiously different. Women chaplains may be drawn to the profession because of these edges and being on the edges themselves. Being on the edge implies the peripheral, living on the fringe or at the limits of something, a border. It is also a place where a structure or bridge can be erected to join the edges. Anzaldúa states, 'To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without' (2002: 3). The women working on the edges of religious and secular spaces had to reach out and make themselves known. They were often the bridges between patients and staff, the hospital and community, and this conjured openness, risk-taking, relationality and movement for equity.

Third, studying the work of women healthcare chaplains opens new directions when considering the relationship between religion and feminism. Not exclusive to women chaplains, they hold several positions including feminist, spiritual and religious ones but read as religious women they can be othered by secular feminists and likewise by religionists because of their ministerial positions that can be deemed out of place. Lata Mani, South Asian feminist scholar and cultural critic writes, 'Othering is a strategy of power. It distorts complexity. It denies relationality' (2022: 52). To counter this, Mani proposes that, 'Difference as specificity within interdependent diversity is much more capacious' (52). She states, 'Our lives are composed of myriad intimacies. Yet we experience these as so many estrangements, antagonisms, irrelevances. To speak of equality is to tacitly acknowledge multiplicity and relationality: equality is always with-within-among-between-across' (53). Women healthcare chaplains by their very position can reveal oppositions between and among feminisms and religions, but through an active spiritual care, these divisions can dissipate because their work across social difference is attuned to interdependence.

In sum, women healthcare chaplains work in and between the edges of the clinical, secular, and religious. It is in such spaces that the power of spiritual activism moves. The work of these women and those like them and those that have gone before them know how much work there is to be done. They were aware of this and its overwhelm. Nonetheless, from working interpersonally with patients and families to provide care and support, to working to make change in their institutions so that all are welcome, to working to address structural vulnerabilities that surge through hospital doors, they are not still. Their work of spiritual care is that of social justice challenging and shifting the inequity before them. With our critical reading of women healthcare chaplains' work, we augment feminist analyses of spiritual activism, identifying an overlooked area in chaplaincy studies via a group of women insufficiently heeded in feminist and religious studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to the participants who generously shared their accounts and viewpoints with us. We are also grateful to the reviewers for their insightful and useful comments that strengthened the manuscript. This work was supported by the British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group's Seed Corn Funding (No. BSA001714). We also note Kingston University London's Faculty Research Ethics Committee Approval No. 181938. Due to ethical concerns of confidentiality, the data cannot be made openly available.

REFERENCES

Anzaldúa, G. (2002). Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (un)safe spaces, in G. Anzaldúa and A. Keating (eds), *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical visions for transformation* (pp. 1–5). London: Routledge.

Anzaldúa, G. (2015). *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375036

Anzaldúa, G. and Keating, A. (eds) (2002). *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical visions for transformation*. London: Routledge.

Bacchus, N. (2019). Resisting Islamophobia: Muslims seeking American integration through spiritual growth, community organizing, and political activism. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 36(4), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v36i4.548

Barnes, M. J., Bradley Jr, C., Cade-White, L. and Williams, J. P. (2023). 'I've never seen a Black woman chaplain before:' From personal narratives to hypotheses. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 29(3), 279–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2023.2209465

Beaman, L. G. (2017). Recognize the new religious diversity. *Canadian Diversity*, 14(4), 17–19.

Bilge, S. (2010). Beyond subordination vs. resistance: An intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(1), 9–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860903477662

Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 75–86.

British Columbia Ministry of Health. (2020). *In plain sight: Addressing indigenous-specific racism and discrimination in BC health care*. Available at: https://www.bcchr.ca/sites/default/files/group-opsei/in-plain-sight-full-report.pdf. (Accessed 18 November 2024).

Bryant, J. (2018). *The integration of minority faith groups in acute healthcare chaplaincy* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Cardiff University.

Cadge, W. (2012). *Paging God: Religion in the halls of medicine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922133.001.0001

Canadian Association for Spiritual Care. (2024). *Spiritual care*. Available at: https://www.spiritualcare.ca/. (Accessed 18 July 2024).

Church of England. (2024). *Ministry statistics 2022*. Available at: https://www.churchofengland.org/about/data-services/key-areas-research. (Accessed 7 November 2024).

Collier-Thomas, B. (2011). The journey to Jesus, jobs, and justice. *The Journal of African American History,* 96(3), 384–393. https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.3.0384

Collier-Thomas, B. (2013). *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American women and religion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* 1989(1), 139–168.

Crenshaw, K. (2016). On intersectionality. *Women of the World Festival*. London. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPlA. (Accessed 17 August 2022).

Das, V. (2015). *Affliction: Health, disease, poverty*. New York: Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823261802.001.0001

Dudgeon, P. and Bray, A. (2018). Indigenous healing practices in Australia. *Women & Therapy*, 41(1–2), 97–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2017.1324191

Eccles, J. B. (2014). The chaplaincy experience: Negotiating (multi-faith) time and space in a Northern English General Hospital. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 68(3), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/154230501406800305

Elias, A. and Paradies, Y. (2021). The costs of institutional racism and its ethical implications for healthcare. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 18(1), 45–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-020-10073-0

Fanon, F. (2008 [1967]). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Pluto.

Fernandes, L. (2003). *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-violence, social justice and the possibilities of a spiritualized feminism*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Gebhard, A., McLean, S. and St. Denis, V. (2022). Introduction, in A. Gebhard, S. McLean and V. St. Denis (eds), *White Benevolence: Racism and colonial violence in the helping professions* (pp. 1–22). Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Ghafournia, N. (2022). Muslim women's religious leadership: The case of Australian mosques. *Religions*, 13(6), 534. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060534

Gilliat-Ray, S., Ali, M. and Pattison, S. (2013). *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Gunaratnam, Y. (2013). *Death and the Migrant: Bodies, borders and care*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544414

Hankivsky, O., De Leeuw, S., Lee, J. A., Vissandjée, B. and Khanlou, N. (2011). Introduction: Purpose, overview, and contribution, in O. Hankivsky (ed), *Health Inequities in Canada: Intersectional Frameworks and Practices* (pp. 1–15). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774819770-003

Hawthorne, S. Melvill, Sharma, S. and Llewellyn, D. (2024). Loosening religion, gender, and sexuality: An introduction, in S. Sharma, D. Llewellyn and S. Hawthorne (eds), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality* (pp. 15–34). London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350257207.ch-I

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). Putting it together: Feminist research praxis, in S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. L. Leavy (eds), *Feminist Research Practice: A primer* (pp. 329–350). London: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984270

Hunt, M. E. (2020). The power of silence in the work of justice: Feminist Catholicism in action. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 36(1), 99–111. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.36.1.09

Hutt, K. (2019). A manifesto: Black spiritual care in American hospitals, in D. J. Buhuro (ed), *Spiritual Care in the Age of# BlackLivesMatter: Examining the spiritual and prophetic needs of African Americans in a violent America* (pp. 186–193). Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

Ibrahim, C. (2022). Spiritual care by and for Muslim women in the United States. *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 33(2), 99–105. https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2022.2028054

Joshi, K. Y. (2020). *White Christian Privilege: The illusion of religious equality in America*. New York: New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479836468.001.0001

Keating, A. (2005). Shifting perspectives: Spiritual activism, social transformation, and the politics of spirit, in A. Keating (ed), *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds*: *New perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (pp. 241–254). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403977137_24

Klassen, C. (2016). Complicating the whole from the position of a broken body: Interactions between religion, disability and material feminism, in D. Llewellyn and S. Sharma (eds), *Religion, Equalities, and Inequalities* (pp. 205–213). Abingdon: Routledge.

Levison, M. and Usiskin, J. (2005). Jewish women's aid: Combating domestic violence in the UK community. *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, 6(3–4), 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1300/J154v06n03_13

Lewicki, A. and O'Toole, T. (2017). Acts and practices of citizenship: Muslim women's activism in the UK. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(1), 152–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1216142

Llewellyn, D. and Trzebiatowska, M. (2013). Secular and religious feminisms: A future of disconnection? *Feminist Theology*, 21(3), 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735013484220

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.

Mani, L. (2022). *Myriad Intimacies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478022886

Merrill, B. and West, L. (2009). *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028990

Moon, H. (2023). *Liberalism and Colonial Violence: Charting a new genealogy of spiritual care*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2021). *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous women and feminism* (20th anniversary edition). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

O'Donoghue, S. (2020). Fit for the twenty-first century? The state of inclusion for acute NHS chaplaincy pastoral, spiritual and religious care services in England, *Report for the Network of Pastoral, Spiritual, and Religious Care in Health, UK*. Available at: https://network-health.org.uk/documents/NPSPCH_report_web.pdf. (Accessed 7 November 2024).

Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2022). *Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021*. London: Office for National Statistics.

Palmer, M. D. and Burgess, S. M. (eds) (2020). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Puwar, N. (2004). *Space Invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Oxford: Berg.

Reimer-Kirkham, S. and Sharma, S. (2011). Adding religion to gender, race, and class: Seeking new insights on intersectionality in health care contexts, in O. Hankivsky (ed), *Health Inequities in Canada: Intersectional frameworks and practices* (pp. 112–127). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774819770-008

Reimer-Kirkham, S., Sharma, S., Brown, R. and Calestani, M. (2020). *Prayer as Transgression? The social relations of prayer in healthcare settings*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780228002970

Sharma, S. and Reimer-Kirkham, S. (2022). In plain view: Gender in the work of women healthcare chaplains. *Social Compass*, 69(4), 631–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686221105770

Sharma, S. and Reimer-Kirkham, S. (2023). Exploring racism and racialization in the work of healthcare chaplains: A case for a critical multifaith approach. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 29(3), 307–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2023.2209462

Singh, J. (2015). Religious agency and the limits of intersectionality. *Hypatia,* 30(4), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12182

Slee, N. (2013). Feminist qualitative research as spiritual practice: Reflections on the processes of doing qualitative research, in N. Slee, F. Porter and A. Phillips (eds), *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative research perspectives* (pp. 13–24). London: Routledge.

Spelman, E. V. (1988). *Inessential Woman: Problems of exclusion in feminist thought*. Boston: Beacon.

Statistics Canada. (2022). *Distribution (in percentage) of religious groups, Vancouver (City), 2021*. Available at: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/alternative.cfm?topic=10&lang=E&dguid=2021A00055915022&objectId=2_2. (Accessed 11 February 2025).

Tate, S. A. (2016). 'I can't quite put my finger on it': Racism's touch. *Ethnicities*, 16(1), 68–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796814564626

Tsomo, K. L. (ed). (2012). *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, challenges, and achievements*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Voas, D. and Bruce, S. (2019). Religious identity, behaviour and belief over two decades, in J. Curtice, E. Clery, J. Perry, M. Phillips and N. Rahim (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 36th report* (pp. 17–44). London: The National Center for Social Research.

Citation: Sharma, S. and Reimer-Kirkham, S. (2025). Social Justice in the Work of Women Healthcare Chaplains: A Feminist Analysis of Spiritual Activism. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 04. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16014

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 05
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Historical Genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil: Candomblé Priestesses and Embodied Territoriality

Jamie Lee Andreson [1,2*]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Brazilian Black Feminists Lélia Gonzales, Beatriz Nascimento and Djamila Ribeiro constructed theories that reference historical processes of liberation among Afro-Brazilian communities, the two most prominent sites being the former maroon societies—*quilombos*—, and the Candomblé *terreiros*—communities of Afro-Brazilian religious worship. In this article I propose a genealogy of Black Feminism that places Candomblé priestesses as foremothers to the contemporary political and intellectual movement through the concept of embodied territoriality. Ethnographic and historical engagement with public representations of Candomblé shows that despite the rich history of Black women's leadership, their politics are oriented more towards racial justice than gender oppression. Considering the ongoing tensions between an unmarked, but largely White 'Feminism', and the political commitments of Black Feminism as a path to liberation for all oppressed peoples, this work approaches historic Black women who did not frame themselves as 'Feminists', but who nevertheless are fundamental to the genealogy of contemporary Black Feminism. In conversation with US Black Feminism, the paper argues that following the relationships between generations of Black grandmothers and granddaughters from Africa to the Americas allows for continuity of Black feminist thought, history, and practice as it evolves through political and intellectual discourse.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Brazil, Candomblé, Africana Religion, African Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

In her collection of essays *Quem tem medo do feminismo negro?/Who is Afraid of Black Feminism?* (2018), preeminent contemporary Brazilian Black Feminist and Sociologist Djamila Ribeiro shared her experiences with her grandmother, Dona Antônia, who was a *bezendeira* (a healer through prayer and herbal cures),

> Still today I hold the olfactory memory of her house, a mixture of *boldo, arruda* incense, and beans that only she knew how to make and the sweet pumpkin candy with coconut (…) When I felt a stomachache, she would take herbs from the backyard and make a tea, a habit that I still have today (…) she would pray for me and after give me the drink… (Ribeiro, 2018: 9)[1]

Ribeiro's sensory description is laden with nostalgia, admiration, and gratitude for the time she had as a young girl learning traditions passed down from her grandmother. Dona Antônia comes from a lineage of Black women who survived the Middle Passage, slavery, imperialism, racial discrimination, and ongoing anti-Black violence in Brazil. The wisdom Ribeiro received from 'my grandmother, a healer, is a form of knowledge like no other' (2018: 21). She associates her grandmother with other religious leaders, including 'the Candomblé priestesses and priests, the midwives, [and] original inhabitants of the land [indigenous people]' to advocate for feminists to 'recognize other cosmologies and geographies of reason' (Ribeiro, 2018: 22). Ribeiro shares about how she was initiated into the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé at eight years of age, and that 'the knowledge that constitutes me also comes from the *orixás* [deities]' (Ribeiro, 2018: 22). Ribeiro's positionality as a Black woman, Black feminist scholar and Candomblé initiate situates her as a public leader in a growing movement to represent and empower Black Feminism, particularly from Latin America.

[1] All translations from Portuguese into English are by the author unless otherwise noted.

[1] *City University of New York*, USA
[2] *Pennsylvania State University*, USA
***Corresponding Author:** jamielee@psu.edu

Ribeiro's collection traces a historical trajectory that led to the development of a movement called Feminismo Negro in twentieth century Brazil. Yet, she and other Black Feminists who founded the scholarly and activist movement like Lélia Gonzales and Beatriz Nascimento, reference much deeper histories and trajectories of feminist practice inherited from generations of Black women from Africa to the Diaspora. While the late-twentieth century mobilisation of a Black Feminist movement in the public sphere of Brazilian politics found inspiration from the Black Feminist movements that emerged in the United States (particularly from the 1970s to the present), the Brazilian historical and socio-economic context orients their theoretical frameworks and activist platforms as distinct from Black Feminism in the United States. Nevertheless, taking a deeper historical viewpoint reveals important convergences of how Black Feminist thought and practice have been passed down through generations in the African Diaspora.

Many of the key theoretical contributions in the field of Black Feminism in Brazil draw from historical processes of liberation among communities of African descent. The two most prominent sites of Black liberation and autonomy in Brazilian history are the former maroon societies—*quilombos*—that descend from communities of runaway slaves, and the *terreiros*—communities of Afro-Brazilian religious worship and Black solidarity. Contemporary Black Brazilian Feminists articulate concepts such as *Amefricanidade* and a gendered, corporeal knowledge that connect to generations of Black ritual and cultural practices that have persisted despite the colonial history of Brazil as formerly the largest slave society in the Americas, and the last to abolish slavery only in 1888 (Gonzalez, 1988; Smith *et al.*, 2023). A primary site for this intergenerational practice is the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religious community and physical territory, the *terreiro* (translated here as temple).

The concept of embodied territoriality as applied to Candomblé priestesses as leaders of the *terreiro* draws from Black Feminist articulations of identity and belonging that result from shared experiences of displacement and racial discrimination in the African Diaspora. Black Feminist historians argue that to understand and represent the experiences of Black women from the African continent to the Diaspora scholars must employ specific tools of inquiry, research, and analysis (Harding, 2006; Hartman, 2008). Drawing from oral histories, ethnography, and written publications by Candomblé priestesses and their daughter-initiates in the twentieth century, my approach considers the historical necessity of 'reterritorialisation' for Black subjects in the Americas through the formation of autonomous Black communities like *quilombos* and *terreiros* (Harding, 2000; Sodré, 2002). The relation to the spiritual in Candomblé as an African Diasporic religion perpetuates historical memory and identity intergenerationally from people to people (rather than through text, for example) as an embodied experience (Alexander, 2006: 297).

In this article I argue that Candomblé priestesses are key historical predecessors and foremothers of contemporary Black Feminism in Brazil. Candomblé ceremonies are privileged sites of feminine embodied expression through rituals that worship African deities (*orixás*) on Brazilian soil. The religious community established through initiation creates new kinship bonds to form a 'family of saints', with the head priestess, the *Mãe de santo* (Mother of the saint) as the family's leader (Lima, 1977). Contrary to the prominent patriarchal model of the Catholic Church, the Candomblé family descends from historic matriarchal and matrilineal traditions characteristic of 'Black Africa', including the cultural zones of people most involved in the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from West and Central Africa to Brazil (Amadiume, 1997; Diop, 1978). Select historic temples in the coastal city of Salvador continue matriarchal traditions through lineages of Black priestesses that descend from the original African-born founders of the mid-nineteenth century (Castillo and Pares, 2010; Landes, 1947). In these religious spaces, Black women's authority and maternal care have sustained generations of practitioners, many of whom are also very active in anti-racist organising, scholarship, and political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Although Candomblé priestesses have held prominent leadership roles as representatives of their racial and religious communities since at least the nineteenth century, in over ten years of historical and ethnographic research I encountered no case where the priestesses align themselves with 'Feminism'[2] in their organising and intellectual efforts in the public sphere. To substantiate this claim, I draw from interdisciplinary research methodologies including twentieth century media representations of Candomblé priestesses (including *A Tarde* and *O Globo*); ethnographic research conducted among Candomblé temples from 2016 to 2018 in Salvador with a focus on the public politics of African heritage in Brazil and contemporary anti-racist activism; an analysis of published writings by prominent contemporary priestesses; and the collection of oral histories among lineages of Candomblé practitioners with a focus on the state of Bahia (Andreson, 2022b). The ethnographic research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Michigan with all research subject protections

[2] In capitalising Feminism, I signal the absence of public engagement with a feminist identity or a formal feminist movement, though leave space for the possibility that women in Candomblé nevertheless engage in everyday practices of lived feminism.

applied. The temples I visited and conducted ethnographic research in include the Terreiro Bate Folha, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Terreiro São Jorge Filhos da Gomeia, Terreiro Tumba Junsara, Terreiro Mokambo and the Terreiro Gantois, all located within the coastal region of Salvador da Bahia.

Despite the long and rich history of Black women as leaders of Afro-Brazilian communities, their public politics are more oriented towards racial solidarity than gender oppression. During ethnographic research I attended numerous public seminars and events organised by Candomblé practitioners with the intention of following political negotiations between the religious communities and the state regarding the implementation of cultural heritage policies designed to protect Black religious sites and culture (Andreson, 2022a). These seminars were on the topics of 'preserving our history', and honouring the legacy of their founders and leaders, many of whom were Black women referred to as 'matriarchs'. [3]

From my experience as a postgraduate student with the Pós-Afro program in Ethnic and African Studies at the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies (CEAO) at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) from 2012 to 2015, I attended several events organised by academics and Candomblé practitioners, many of whom identify too as anti-racist activists. For example, during Julho das Pretas (Black Women's July) prominent Black women in Salvador articulated the struggles they face through intersectional oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989), presenting a developed analysis of structural racial and gendered inequalities that includes ongoing religious racism and persecution.[4]

Given the long history of state persecution of the Candomblé religion compounded by a distrust of White society and researchers, I approached the religious communities slowly over time through relationship building that started in academic contexts. I situated myself in public events, seminars, and ceremonies to understand how Candomblé communities narrate their own histories and advocate for rights and protections in the context of a multiracial democracy. Previous anthropological work by Ruth Landes in the 1940s initially drew me to Candomblé as a rich research site to investigate a case where women's leadership and Africana gender roles presented a powerful alternative to the hierarchies of race and gender in dominant and mainstream American societies (Andreson, 2019; Segato, 1998; Sterling, 2010). Among my varied engagements with narratives and representations of Candomblé, I did not encounter cases where practitioners identified themselves as feminist or with a feminist movement.

Considering the ongoing tensions between an unmarked White Feminism implicated in imperial relationships and the political commitments of Black Feminism as a path to liberation from all modes of interlocking oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1977), this article asks how scholars can approach historical mobilisations from Black women intellectuals and community leaders who did not frame themselves as 'Feminists', but who nevertheless are fundamental to the intellectual genealogy of contemporary Black Feminism. To do so, this research considers multi-generational modes of transmitting ritual and embodied ancestral knowledge and practice that have sustained lineages of Black women in Brazil, particularly through the grandmother and granddaughter relationship. The article offers an alternative genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil that includes historical predecessors—the 'foremothers'—who informed the current generation's approaches to racial and gender justice through African diasporic practices of embodied territoriality.

TENSIONS BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK FEMINISM IN BRAZIL

Black women are the largest single demographic group in Brazil at over a quarter of the population (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2023).[5] Yet, Black women activists lament that 'the base of the social pyramid continues belonging to Black women who sustain the country brilliantly without taking advantage of the riches produced' (Rede de Mulheres, 2016). Black women are the backbone of the Brazilian economy and social structure yet are largely invisible in popular representation of the country's history, leadership, and demographics. As Black Feminist Anthropologist Christen Smith (2016) articulates,

> We are always standing on the precipice of the social world; teetering on the edge of invisibility, dis-ease, and insanity, triply affected by gender/sexuality, race, and class. As a result, our contributions to society typically go unremarked... The task of Black feminism then, is, in part, to bring these historical figures from the margins back onto the pages of her story (73).

[3] The two seminars referenced here are 'Redescobrindo Nossa História' (Salvador: Tumba Junçara Temple, August 3, 2018); 'Seminário Mãe Mirinha do Portão: 70 anos de preservação da cultura de Matriz Africana' (Portão, Bahia, April 28-29, 2018).
[4] Some of the key women leading these events include the sociologist and politician Vilma Reis, the journalist and anthropologist Cleidiana Ramos, Lindinalva Barbosa, and Valéria Lima.
[5] The last national census in 2022 recorded that most of the Brazilian population was Black (when considering both *Preto* and *Pardo* racial categories), and that the largest single demographic were Black women at 60.6 million people, or 28% of the population.

My work takes up this 'task', as articulated by Smith, to place Candomblé priestesses in the broader historical development of Black Feminism and centre stage as major protagonists of Brazilian history.

Dra. Jurema Werneck claims that Black women in Brazil began to self-identify as feminist in the 1970s. Among many of her achievements, Werneck is the founder of the NGO Criola, which promotes Black women's rights, and the acting Director for Amnesty International in Brazil. According to her, Black women in the 1970s began 'join[ing] anti-racist practice and debate with feminism utilizing resources from the Afro-Brazilian cultural tradition, which affirmed the wholeness of human perspectives' (Werneck, 2007: 107). Much of the Black Feminist production since that period has come out of university-trained social scientists and humanists, as the presence of Black students and professors increased in Brazilian universities following expansion of Affirmative Action programs (*Cotas*) in the early twenty-first century.

While recognising that the adoption of 'Feminism' for Black women activists in Brazil is relatively recent, Werneck (2007) articulates a longer history of Black female leadership and activism that is 'ancient and long predates the history of European colonialism in Africa' (102). With such a deep consideration of Black women's survival strategies and community leadership, Werneck places Feminism as the most recent label that has been relatively successful in facilitating broad-based coalition building and presenting a political platform that addresses intersectional forms of racial, gendered, sexual and class-based oppression, particularly in white supremacist countries of the Americas.

Black Feminists from both Brazil and the U.S. have articulated two key tensions between how White and Black women identify with Feminism: 1) the issue of a projected universal woman subject and 2) the reality of historically racialised labour regimes:

> The universalization of the category of 'women' has in view a political representation that was made with the white, middle-class woman as its basis—for example, to work outside of a man's authorization would never have been the assertion of Black or poor women. (Ribeiro, 2018: 45-46)

The life history of one of the founders of the Black Movement in Brazil (MNU) and a pioneer of Brazilian Black Feminism, Dra. Lélia Gonzalez highlights the divisions between White and Black women as complicating the possibility of solidarity across racial and class lines. Gonzalez's mother was a domestic worker of indigenous descent; a profession that 'poor black women often do in the homes of wealthier white families' (Barreto, 2020: 15). This labour regime perpetuates the social relationships established through nearly four-centuries of racialised slavery in Brazil, which included the enslavement of African, Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race people. Post-abolition (1888), domestic work continued as very low-paid labour that often required the domestic worker to live and sleep in the servant's quarters of the owner's home. Domestic worker remains the most common profession for Black women in Brazil; a statistic that reflects the country's racial inequalities and lack of opportunities for Black women to participate in government, shape the economy and occupy positions of power (Caldwell, 2007).

Even recently, multiple news stories from Brazil reveal that elderly Black women, particularly domestic workers, live in 'conditions analogous to slavery', trapped working in the homes of wealthy White families, in some cases, for their whole lives (Agência Senado, 2024; Globo News, 2024). The ongoing legacies of racial inequalities that stem from the accumulation of wealth at the expense of an impoverished and oppressed working class continue to create an insurmountable rift in the relationship between White and Black women in the Americas. Gonzalez was very clear in her body of work that 'the liberation of white women has been done at the expense of the exploitation of black women' (Gonzalez, 1979: 20). Such a statement justifies the need for a movement with Black women's leadership and a platform directed to meet the demands of that specific community given the history of racialised oppression and discrimination (Hudson Weems, 2023).

Like her mother, Gonzalez started domestic work as a nanny at a young age but pursued a different career path as the first Black student in her classes at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where she studied History, Geography and Philosophy. By the late 1970s, Gonzalez became one of the few Black lecturers at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), where she worked until the end of her life (Barreto, 2020: 15). She published foundational works for Black Feminism in Brazil and mobilised the early foundation of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT-Worker's Party), the Institute for Research on Black Cultures (IPCN) in 1974, the Unified Black Movement (MNU) in 1982, and the N'Zinga Black Women Collective founded in 1986 (Barreto, 2020: 16). Her most influential theoretical contributions to debates on racism, gender oppression and sexual violence in Brazil revolve around her critique of 'the romanticization of miscegenation', which was central to the national myth of a Brazilian 'racial democracy', as a 'way of covering up the trauma of colonial rape' (Barreto, 2020: 16). Through her works, Gonzalez placed Black women as protagonists in the construction of the Brazilian nation, to counter their invisibility in Brazilian history, politics, and intellectual thought.

Gonzalez's most lasting theoretical contribution in Black Feminist and intellectual discourse today remains the political-cultural category of *Amefricanidade,* or Amefricanity, which 'designates a historical process of intense cultural dynamics (resistance, accommodation, reinterpretation, creation of new forms), referenced in African

models but referring to the construction of *a whole ethnic identity*' (Gonzalez, 2018: 336). This theoretical formulation counters mixed-race discourses about Latin American national identities and cultures by centring a Black ethnic group formed between Africa and America. By providing a deep historical perspective, Amefricanity encompasses traditions of Black women's activism in all spheres of life, particularly before they had any significant participation in formal institutions like universities, political parties, research institutes, and activist collectives.

Afro-Brazilian religious territories like the Candomblé temple are among the most prominent examples of an 'African model' that resisted European colonial impositions, cultivated Black community, and facilitated the intergenerational transmission of ancestral knowledge in Brazil. Practices of embodied territoriality permitted the continuation of ritual identity and gendered subjectivity from West-Central African cultural and religious systems to the Brazilian context. The priestesses lead their communities given the historical tradition of African and Black women as spiritual healers and leaders of their communities from the continent to the Diaspora, though not without modifications and reconfigurations in the American context. Black women's leadership is also not exclusive, as male priests too hold key roles in the leadership and serve as public representatives of the religion in Brazilian society (Braga, 2014; Matory, 2005).

Many Candomblé deities, rituals and myths focus on mothers, femininity, fertility, and the power of the feminine, yet religious leaders and practitioners do not orient their public discourse towards a formal, intellectual, theoretical, or political 'Feminism'. This could be in part due to an alternative articulation of sex, gender, and ritual in the Candomblé context, which is informed by Yoruba rituals, where 'motherhood has no gender' (Matory, 1994; Oyěwùmí, 2016). The act of mothering in Candomblé is not necessarily performed only by 'biological' mothers or ciswomen. Another possible motivation for not identifying with Feminism is that Black women do not experience gender oppression within Afro-Brazilian religious communities, which are spaces of empowerment and relief from the dominant hierarchies of race and gender in Brazilian society writ large (Landes, 1947; Segato, 1998; Sterling, 2010). Perhaps the biggest reason, though, that Candomblé priestesses and Black women of prior generations have not identified with Feminism is because of its association as an imperialist, White women's movement.

CANDOMBLÉ, QUILOMBO AND EMBODIED TERRITORIALITY

A prominent Brazilian Black Feminist, Dra. Beatriz Nascimento theorised the *quilombo* (maroon communities) in her work through a wide theoretical lens of Black autonomy. Smith (2016) provides a thorough analysis of Nascimento's conceptualisation:

> Quilombos are not only physical spaces, but also the practice of finding refuge from the *total condition* of slavery—including those conditions that extend beyond the temporal boundaries of physical bondage, like racism and the erasure of Black history. Quilombos are not only physical and cultural spaces that are materially tangible historically and today but also trans-temporal, trans-spatial spaces of Black liberation that Black people in Brazil have articulated in response to the conditions of subjugation (78).

Nascimento's formulation of *quilombo* included various Black territorialities including the *favela* (predominantly Black peripheral neighbourhoods of large Brazilian cities), the *baile blacks* (dance parties), the actual 'remnant quilombo communities' that descend from runaway slaves, and the Candomblé *terreiro* (temple). Furthermore, Nascimento's 'conceptualization of quilombo is uniquely gendered because she privileges the body as a political site' (Smith, 2016: 80). The gendered, embodied experiences of Black women, then, offer a privileged perspective to envision the path to full autonomy and emancipation, which have been denied to Black and Indigenous people through the history of European colonisation, slavery, and ongoing settler occupation in the Americas.

This section presents key historical and contemporary examples of Black women's leadership from the context of *quilombo* and Candomblé communities to view them as integral to the development of Black Feminist thought and practice in Brazil through the practice of embodied territoriality. The boundaries between the Candomblé temple and the *quilombo* are often blurred and overlapping. Members of remnant *quilombo* communities cultivate African religious practices, and many *terreiros* share a history of African and Black-owned land occupation and cultivation in peripheral neighbourhoods of urban cities and interior rural zones to create autonomous Black communities (Andreson, 2022a). Both are key sites of Black liberation and autonomy that persist from the historical context of Brazil as a slave society that was the primary destination for enslaved Africans in the Americas.[6]

The case of Bernadete Pacífico, a leader in the *Quilombo* Pitanga dos Palmares community, demonstrates the clear overlap between *quilombos* and Candomblé as sites of Black territoriality. Known by her religious title 'Mother', Mãe Bernadete was assassinated in her home on August 20, 2023, with twenty-two shots to the body. News outlets

[6] Estimates suggest 47% of the 10.7 million African captives who arrived in the Americas through the trans-Atlantic slave trade arrived in Brazil. For more see 'Estimates', Transatlantic slave trade database (www.slavejoyages.org).

called the murderers *bandidos* (thieves), and headlines suggested she thought she was being robbed with a home invasion (O Globo, 2023). Yet, the Candomblé community and Black activists in Brazil rightly assert that this murder likely had political motivations, as Mãe Bernadete was the acting coordinator of the National Coordination and Articulation of Quilombos (Conaq) and had previously worked as the Secretary of Politics for the Promotion of Equal Rights (Sepromi) of the city Simões Filho (outside of the metropolitan region of Salvador). Current investigations reveal that the assassins were driven by capitalistic land speculation interests to invade Bernadete's *quilombo* territory. This assassination, like that of the Rio de Janeiro City Councilwoman Marielle Franco in 2018, clearly shows that Black women in public positions of power, particularly those working on anti-racism campaigns, are perceived as a threat to the status quo. That Brazil has one of the highest rates of political impunity in the world makes these murders too permissible, as true investigations and punishments for the assassins are few and far between.

Mãe Bernadete was one of many Candomblé priestesses who took a public stance in politics, national debates, and popular culture regarding issues of Black autonomy, territoriality, and cultural resistance. Throughout the twentieth century, prominent Black priestesses participated in the construction of a multi-racial Brazilian democracy by articulating Afro-Brazilian ritual concepts in public discourse, often with support from the Unified Black Movement (MNU). Key figures including Mãe Menininha, Mãe Olga de Alaketu, Mãe Stella de Oxóssi and Mãe Beata de Iemanjá, to mention a few, were fundamental to centring African heritage, religion and culture in Brazilian twentieth-century national politics and culture. In some cases, their advocacy resulted in the redirection of government rights and protections in favor of Candomblé communities and affirmative action policies. Candomblé priestesses are among the most prominent historical and contemporary examples of Black women's leadership in Brazil.

Take for example the lineage of public-facing intellectuals and politically engaged priestesses of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá temple, founded by Mãe Aninha (Eugênia Ana dos Santos, 1869-1938) in 1910 in the city of Salvador. Mãe Aninha was born to African parents of the Grunsi ethnicity in Salvador in 1869. She was a financially successful merchant who facilitated the importation of African ritual materials as a commercial trader with shipments between Bahia and West Africa. Her commercial success contributed to her financial independence and allowed her to legally buy the large piece of land in the São Gonçalo neighbourhood of Salvador where she built her temple of 39,000 square meters that still stands today (Santos, 1988). As the founder of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Mãe Aninha was the first in a prominent lineage of head priestesses that transformed public discourse on race, gender, and African heritage through the Candomblé religion in Brazil (Matory, 2005).

Mãe Aninha was one of the central collaborators in the Second Afro-Brazilian Congress organised in Salvador in 1937, which brought together scholars and religious leaders to represent Candomblé as a religion in civil society in the face of historic discrimination and persecution (Carneiro, 1964). She also proposed the creation of the Union of Afro-Brazilian Religious Sects as a body of leaders to represent Candomblé and self-organise the community (Carneiro, 1940). The Union of Afro-Brazilian Religious Sects served to defend the 5th item of Article 113 of the 1934 Constitution, which granted 'the liberty of consciousness, belief and guarantee of free exercise of religious cults' (Talento and Couceiro, 2009: 61). Although the 1934 Brazilian constitution gave nominal freedom to African religion in a declaration of religious equality, the Bahian state continued persecutory policies from the colonial period, which required temples to pay for licenses to conduct their ceremonies and subjected non-compliant temples to police raids until 1976.

Seven years following the passing of Mãe Aninha, in 1945 the priestess Mãe Senhora (Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, 1890 - 1967) became the head priestess of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá Temple. Mãe Senhora, like Mãe Aninha, was also an independent businesswoman who sold African products through commercial networks in the historic downtown of Salvador (Santos and Nobréga, 2000). Senhora ran a food vendor's tent called the Vencedora (the Winner) at the Mercado Modelo, a central public market in the lower city of Salvador, where she became acquainted with the local intelligentsia. As acting head priestess from 1942 to 1967 at the Opô Afonjá temple, Mãe Senhora received international visitors, particularly from Africa, Europe, and North America (Matory, 2005). At the turn of the 1960s Mãe Senhora was sought out by international artists, local intelligentsia, and politicians as a living legend of African heritage in Brazil. She was even crowned the 'Mãe Preta' (Black Mother) of Brazil by the national folkloric director in Rio de Janeiro in 1965 (Alberto, 2011). Mãe Senhora was widely sought out as the source of African religious knowledge in Brazil, including by African dignitaries, tourists, and academics.

Mãe Stella (Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, 1925–2018), continued the traditions established by her lineage of priestesses Mãe Aninha and Mãe Senhora at the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá temple in Salvador. Over the course of her lifetime Mãe Stella promoted transatlantic educational and religious connections between African leaders and her temple. Following a trip to Nigeria, she established the Ohun Lailai Museum to preserve the legacy of her predecessors. Throughout the course of her life, she also became a vanguard as the first published Candomblé writer in a religion of oral traditions. By the end of her life at 93 years of age in 2018, Mãe Stella had published 4 books, wrote a column for the local newspaper, was nominated a member of the Bahian State Academy of Letters,

and gained an honorary doctorate from the State University of Bahia (UNEB), to mention just a few of her accomplishments.

Consider the following passage written by Mãe Stella when she worked as a columnist for the most prolific newspaper in the state of Bahia, *A Tarde*.

> Many of the seeds of African wisdom planted in me still haven't found the fertile land to germinate, but I don't give up, and that's why I care for the land in every moment. Other [seeds], however, have grown and given fruit… (Filho and Ramos, 2012: 26).

Mãe Stella's passage illustrates the dynamics of embodied territoriality and incorporates the themes of Nascimento's theorisation of the Black woman's body as the ultimate territory of the *quilombo*. By referencing the African wisdom that was planted inside her, Mãe Stella's words also resonate with Gonzalez' articulation of an Amefrican identity that is still in formation. Stella's attention to cultivating the land, in this instance referring also to the physical land of the temple she leads, marks the ongoing process of establishing a more permanent home for the African ancestors in Brazil.

Mãe Stella was not the only priestess who published written works in the late twentieth century. Mãe Beta de Yemanjá (Beatriz Moreira Costa, 1931-2017) published her first book of stories, *Caroço de Dendê: a sabedoria dos terreiros / Palm Oil Seed: The Wisdom of the Temples* in 1996 using her ritual name. In 2004, Mãe Beata published another book in the same genre, *Histórias que a minha avó contava/ The Stories my Grandmother Told*. Mãe Beata was born in 1931 in Cachoeira, Bahia as the great granddaughter of an enslaved Nigerian man and the niece of a Candomblé priest (*babalorixá*). Even though she only went to school until the third grade, during her life she wrote two books and several articles that preserve the ancestral knowledge transmitted through the Candomblé temples. She established her temple in Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s and gained many recognitions including prizes, honorary diplomas and head positions at leading organisations associated with the Black Brazilian movement (Marques, 2012). Due to the social and educational projects she promoted as head priestess, her temple Ilê Omiojuaro was recognised as a federal cultural heritage site by the national agency IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) in 2015. According to Geledés—the Institute of Black Women in Brazil—'the strength of Mãe Beata's stories are in her ancestrality, as a paper record of the teachings transmitted by generations in the day to day, story circles, and in the advice from mothers to the youth in the temples' (Marques, 2012: n.p.).

Mãe Beata's writing of historic myths of the *orixás* (the deities worshipped by Candomblé practitioners) documented stories passed orally through generations of women from West Africa to Brazil. These oral stories persisted within families and among Candomblé temples despite the violence and ruptures of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Brazilian slavery. Her work made these myths available to new audiences on a larger scale, bringing humanity, images and texture to the creation stories as understood by generations of Afro-Brazilian religious communities. She continued an active and outspoken leader, appearing in documentaries and interviews, as well as seminars and events until her death in 2017.

These examples of prominent Candomblé priestesses in public life, national politics and Brazilian popular culture illuminate how Black women religious leaders impact multiple dimensions of Brazilian history and society. Their political initiatives work towards racial justice, protecting African heritage in Brazil, and advocating for religious freedom rather than with Feminism as a movement. Furthermore, Brazilian Black Feminists drew inspiration from the lives, struggles and successes of Candomblé priestesses and *quilombo* leaders in their theories that became foundational to the intellectual and political movement in Brazil.

GRANDMOTHERS OF BLACK FEMINISM

The ancestral knowledge, ritual practice and everyday forms of activism passed down from generations of Black women in the Diaspora can be traced through the grandmother and granddaughter relationship, as it spans the living generations to those passed through embodied knowledge and practice. In the case of Black women in the Diaspora, these intergenerational connections are situated between Africa and America. In this article's opening vignette, Djamila Ribeiro's recounting of her childhood with her grandmother Dona Antônia places herself as an inheritor of Afro-Brazilian women's cosmologies and geographies, yet she does not call Dona Antônia a feminist. Ribeiro highlights Dona Antonia's ancestral knowledge and practices that contributed to the formation of her own identity as a Black Brazilian woman. By doing so, Ribeiro places Dona Antônia within the lineage that led to her development as a Black Feminist.

Ribeiro's framing of her upbringing with her grandmother, which she elaborated in another work *Cartas para minha avó/ Letters to my Grandmother* (2021), resonates with U.S. Black Feminist Mikki Kendall, who in the introduction to her popular trade book *Hood Feminism* (2020) wrote,

> My grandmother would not have described herself as a feminist. Born in 1924, after white women won the right to vote, but raised in the height of Jim Crow America, she did not think of white women as allies or sisters... (ix).

Yet, when recalling the important lessons her grandmother taught her, Kendall concedes that, 'My grandmother remains—despite her futile efforts to make me more ladylike—one of the most feminist women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing, and yet she would never have carried that label… *she lived her feminism*...' (x). This 'lived feminism' or 'everyday Black Feminisms' (Jackson, 2024: xi) in prior generations of Black women connects to the embodied territoriality of Candomblé priestesses in Brazil who did not mobilise under the terms of Feminism, yet their contributions to racial and gender-based movements are integral to the projects of nation building and civil rights organising in the Americas.

Consider the family of the Candomblé Priestess Iyalorixá Valnizia Bianch (known affectionally as Mãe Val). She was born the biological great granddaughter of Mãe Flaviana, the head priestess of her Candomblé temple, the Terreiro do Cobre. Mãe Val wrote of her great grandmother,

> She came from Africa when she was still a small girl with her mother, Margarida de Xangô, who founded the Terreiro do Cobre in the Barroquinha neighborhood. It functioned there until Flaviana, 127 years ago, moved the terreiro to [the] Engenho Velho da Federação [neighborhood], where it exists until today (Bianch, 2019: 30).

Following Mãe Flaviana's passing in the 1940s, the temple did not have a successor and was closed for the next fifty years. According to oral histories, when Mãe Flaviana was dying, she said the person who would take over as Mãe-de-santo had not been born yet. Mãe Val was then born on May 10, 1959 (serendipitously Mother's Day) and initiated into Candomblé at about 20 years of age. She found out she would be the head priestess and re-establish the Terreiro do Cobre when she was just 28 years old and took on the position in the early 1990s. Assuming a leadership role at a young age, she re-established the temple's physical structures that had been in disuse and reconnected the religious ties with the community, as well as created new ones.

Mãe Val is representative of a growing number of leaders and elders of Candomblé who transmit this knowledge through writing interpretations of their own lives, communities, and religion; not allowing their narratives to be usurped and structured by others, well-intentioned or not (Harding, 2019: 14-15). Her most recent collection of published stories, *Reflexões/ Reflections* (2019*)* was translated into English by the African American historian and initiate of the Terreiro do Cobre, Rachel Harding. In the translator's note, Harding presents Candomblé as 'a religion of mothering', in which 'Black women are the pinnacle of leadership', carrying wisdom that 'we, human beings, all of us, particularly need now—a wisdom imbedded in ancestral strength' (Harding, 2019: 15).

In *Reflections,* Mãe Val recounts stories of her upbringing and celebrates the women—*guerreiras* (warrioresses)—who raised her. Her mother birthed thirteen children, and her father died when she was just 11 years old. Given these challenging circumstances, she recounts, 'my mother carried water, worked as a laundress, as a domestic [worker] and made cookies and sweet coconut crackers to sell and supplement her income' (2019: 31). Mae Val's family history echoes that of Lélia Gonzalez, as working-class Black women who performed domestic labour to support their families when facing immense challenges including poverty, racial discrimination, and gendered labour.

Black women in Brazil and throughout the Diaspora articulate specific embodied territoriality and a process of identity formation between Africa and America that clearly deviates from White women's historical trajectories between Europe and America. The divisions between White and Black women along racial lines are well-documented and lived through contentious relationships shaped by labour and class. With the expansion of antiracist movements that hold in view 'interlocking oppressions' (Hill Collins, 2000) through approaches to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), how might scholars and activists include a longer historical trajectory of Black Feminism that counters erasure and appropriation, while honouring the specifics of Black women's embodied knowledge?

My presentation of a historical genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil that includes Candomblé priestesses as foremothers resonates with a U.S. Black Feminist framing of their movement as connecting to Black women leaders during slavery. For example, the Combahee River Collective formed in 1974 references the river crossed by Harriett Tubman in a guerrilla action that freed more than 750 slaves to place Tubman's anti-slavery organising as a predecessor to their work towards Black liberation. In their statement, the Combahee River Collective presented their deep historical perspective: 'we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation' (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Such efforts connect an ongoing antiracist and antisexist struggle through the leadership, courage, and wisdom of Black women past and present to counter their invisibility in the historical record, social life, and political discourse. Considering the longer historical genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil through the

Candomblé priestess presents an alternative trajectory by which contemporary Black Brazilian Feminism did not merely respond to the U.S. movement in the twentieth century. Rather, what connects both movements is a broader Diasporic struggle for Black liberation in response to the intersections of racial, gender and sexual violence in their respective societies.

CONCLUSION

This article contends that Candomblé priestesses are important predecessors to Black Feminism in Brazil, and the historical sites of the *quilombo* and the *terreiro* have been fertile sites to conceptualise and enact Black liberation through practices of embodied territoriality. Yet, it is not within my purview as a scholar to project a 'Feminist' label onto these identities, territories, and mobilisations. Rather, I place Candomblé priestesses as the foremothers of Black Feminism in Brazil as a longer historical trajectory that resonates across the Diaspora. I argue that following the relationships between generations of Black grandmothers and granddaughters from Africa to the Americas allows for continuity of Black feminist thought, history, and practice as it evolves through political and intellectual discourse. Furthermore, as shared through examples of literature, theory and text, the lived experiences of transnational Black Feminists are highly embodied and contextualised within territories; they require specific tools of interpretation and articulation that cannot be easily shared or appropriated across different genders, races, or national identities.

Finding the points of overlap in identifying with a Feminist movement remains a primary challenge of feminist solidarity, both among diverse populations of multiracial nations and across nation-states globally. When comparing the genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil with the US, there are clear points of intersection, particularly given the centrality of embodied and oral knowledge passed down through multigenerational families as an ongoing struggle 'against racism and violence, and for a good life'.[7]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Fulbright-Hays program from 2016-2017, the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan (2017-2018), the Ruth Landes Memorial Fund of the Reed Foundation, New York City (2019), the Africana Research Center (ARC) at the Pennsylvania State University and the Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean (IRADAC) at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center.

REFERENCES

Agência Senado. (2024). *Trabalho doméstico escravizado é realidade ampla e invisível, alertam debatedores*. Available at: https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2024/05/06/trabalho-domestico-escravizado-e-realidade-ampla-e-invisivel-alertam-debatedores. (Accessed 4 June 2024).

Alberto, P. (2011). *Terms of Inclusion: Black intellectuals in twentieth century Brazil*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807877715_alberto

Alexander, J. M. (2006). *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smh19

Amadiume, I. (1997). *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion, and culture*. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.

Andreson, J. L. (2019). *Ruth Landes e a cidade das mulheres: Uma releitura da antropologia do Candomblé*. Salvador: Editora UFBA. https://doi.org/10.7476/9786556304014.0006

Andreson, J. L. (2022a). African territoriality in Brazilian cultural heritage policies. *Journal of Africana Religions,* 10(2), 266–291. https://doi.org/10.5325/jafrireli.10.2.0266

Andreson, J. L. (2022b). Representing Candomblé in the public sphere: Black Priestess' authorship in Brazilian cultural production, in R. Scerbo and C. Bondi (eds), *Afrolatinas/LatiNegras: Culture, identity, and struggle from an intersectional perspective* (pp. 123–143). London: Lexington Books. https://doi.org/10.5771/9781666910346-123

Barreto, R. (2020). Amefricanity: The Black feminism of Lélia Gonzalez. Translated by Rafael Mófreita Saldanha. *Radical Philosophy*, 209, 15–20.

Bianch, V. (2019). *Reflexões: Escritas de Mãe Valnizia Bianch*. Translated by Rachel Harding. Salvador: Edição do Autor.

Braga, J. (2014). *Candomblé: A cidade das mulheres e dos homens*. Feira de Santana Bahia: Editora Vento Leste.

[7] This was the primary messaging for the political campaign of the Black Women's March (Marcha da Mulher Negra) that united 50,000 women in the Brazilian capital in 2015.

Caldwell, K. L. (2007). *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black women, citizenship and politics of identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Carneiro, E. (1940). Apresentação, in *O Negro no Brasil: Trabalhos Apresentados ao 2º Congresso Afro-Brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira.

Carneiro, E. (1964). O Congresso Afro-Brasileiro da Bahia, in *Ladinos e Crioulos: Estudos Sôbre o Negro no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editôra Civilização Brasileira.

Castillo, L. E. and Parés, L. N. P. (2010). Marcelina Da Silva: A nineteenth-century Candomblé priestess in Bahia. *Slavery & Abolition*, 31(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/01440390903481639

Combahee River Collective. (1977). A Black feminist statement, in C. R. McCann and S. K. Kim and E. Ergun (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and global perspectives* (pp. 115–121). New York: Taylor & Francis.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.

Diop, C. A. (1978). *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Chicago: Third World Press.

Filho, R. S. and Ramos, C. (2012). Apresentação, in R. S. Filho and C. Ramos (eds), *Opinião: Mãe Stella de Azevedo Santos*. Salvador: Governo da Bahia.

Globo News (2023). *É assalto?, perguntou líder quilombola Máe Bernadete antes de ser assassinada na Bahia, diz testemunha*. Available at: https://g1.globo.com/ba/bahia/noticia/2023/08/21/e-assalto-perguntou-mae-bernadete-antes-de-ser-assassinada-em-quilombo-na-ba-diz-testemunha.ghtml. (Accessed 1 September 2023).

Gonzalez, L. (1979). Cultura, etnicidade, trabalho: Efeitos linguísticos e políticos da exploração da mulher, in *Proceedings of the 7th Conference of the Latin American Studies Association*, 5–7 April. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh.

Gonzalez, L. (1988). A categoria político-cultural de amefricanidade. *Brasileiro*, 92/93, 96–82.

Gonzalez, L. (2018). Nany, in União dos Coletivos Pan-Africanistas (ed), *Primavera Para as Rosas negras: Lélia Gonzalez em primeira Pessoa* (pp. 321–336). São Paulo: Diáspora Africana.

Harding, R. (2000). *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and alternative spaces of blackness*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Harding, R. (2006). É a Senzala: Slavery, women, and embodied knowledge in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, in R. M. Griffith and B. D. Savage (eds), *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, power, and performance* (pp. 3–18). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Harding, R. (2019). Translator's note: Black women's wisdom and bridgework, in *Reflexões: Escritas de Mãe Valnizia Bianch*, translated by Rachel Harding (pp. 14–15). Salvador: Edição do Autor.

Hartman, S. V. (2008). Venus in two acts. *Small Axe,* 26(12/2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1

Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (10th anniversary edition). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Hudson Weems, C. (2023). *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming ourselves* (6th ed). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003411673

Jackson, J. M. (2024). *Black Women Taught Us: An intimate history of Black feminism*. New York: Random House.

Kendall, M. (2020). *Hood Feminism*. New York: Penguin Books.

Landes, R. (1947). *The City of Women*. New York: The Macmillan Co.

Lima, V. C. (1977). *A família de santo nos candomblés jejes-nagôs da Bahia: um estudo de relações intragrupais*. Salvador: UFBA.

Marques, F. (2012). Mãe Beata: Contos da guerreira. *Portal Geledés,* 28/5/2012. Available at: https://www.geledes.org.br/mae-beata-contos-da-guerreira/. (Accessed 28 February 2024).

Matory, J. L. (1994). *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the politics of metaphor in Oyo Yoruba religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Matory, J. L. (2005). *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, transnationalism, and matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

O Globo. (2024). *Casal da Bahia condenado por manter doméstica em trabalho análogo à escravidão alegava relação de afeto e 'cuidado'*. Available at: https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2024/04/18/casal-da-bahia-condenado-por-manter-domestica-em-trabalho-analogo-a-escravidao-alegava-relacao-de-afeto-e-cuidado.ghtml. (Accessed 4 June 2024).

Oyěwùmí, O. (2016). *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of power, procreation and identity in the age of modernity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Partido dos Trabalhadores. (2023). *Ministério da Igualdade Racial apresenta diagnóstico sobre as mulheres negras no Brasil*. Available at: https://pt.org.br/ministerio-da-igualdade-racial-apresenta-diagnostico-sobre-as-mulheres-negras-no-brasil/. (Accessed 1 March 2024).

Rede de Mulheres Negras da Bahia. (2016). *Parem de nos matar! Manifesto*. Salvador: Biblioteca Barris, 13 de julho.

Ribeiro, D. (2018). *Quem tem Medo do Feminismo Negro*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

Riberito, D. (2021). *Cartas Para Minha Avó*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

Santos, D. M. (1988). *História de um Terreiro Nagô*. São Paulo: Max Limonad.
Santos, J. F. and Nóbrega, C. (2000). *Mãe Senhora: Saudade e memória*. Salvador: Corrupio.
Segato, R. (1998). The color-blind subject of myth; or where to find Africa in the nation. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27, 129–151. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.27.1.129
Smith, C. A. (2016). Towards a Black feminist model of Black Atlantic Liberation: Remembering Beatriz Nascimento. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 14(2), 71–87. https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.14.2.06
Smith, C. A., Gomes, B. N. F. and Davies, A. (2023). *The Dialectic Is in the Sea: The Black radical thought of Beatriz Nascimento*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3079202.5
Sodré, M. (2002). *O Terreiro e a Cidade: A forma social negro-brasileira*. Salvador: Secretaria da Cultura e Turismo.
Sterling, C. (2010). Women, space, power, and the sacred in Afro-Brazilian culture. *The Global South,* 4(1), 71–93. https://doi.org/10.2979/gso.2010.4.1.71
Talento, B. and Couceiro, L. A. (2009). *Edison Carneiro: O mestre antigo: Um estudo sobre a trajetória de um intelectual*. Salvador: Assembleia Legislativa da Bahia.
Werneck, J. (2007). Of Ialodes and feminists: Reflections on black women's political action in Latin America and the Caribbean. *Cultural Dynamics,* 19(1), 99–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374007077383
Yemanjá, M. B. (1996). *Caroço de Dendê*: *A sabedoria dos terreiros*. Rio de Janeiro: Pallas.
Yemanjá, M. B. (2004). *Histórias Que a Minha Avó Contava*. São Paulo: Terceira Margem.

Citation: Andreson, J. L. (2025). Historical Genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil: Candomblé Priestesses and Embodied Territoriality. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 05. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16015


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 06
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

What is Holding Back Full Feminist Solidarity with Muslim Women? The Epistemic Failures of White Liberal Feminism

Saaz Taher [1*], Khaoula Zoghlami [2]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Despite the recent shift towards embracing anti-racism and intersectionality within the feminist movement in Quebec, Canada, support for Muslim women affected by secularism laws remains elusive. Our article seeks to understand what is still holding back a full feminist solidarity with Muslim women in Quebec by examining the limits of intersectional solidarity discourses from feminist groups officially positioning themselves in defence of Muslim women's rights to wear religious symbols. We focus on the advocacy discourse against the *Act Respecting the Laicity of the State* (Law 21) led by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), Quebec's largest feminist coalition. We employ a theoretical framework combining feminist critical Muslim scholarship and critical epistemologies, which leads us to ask: How does the FFQ's advocacy work against Law 21 mobilise an intersectional approach to defend Muslim women's rights against nationalist and secular colonial narratives? What are the limits and blind spots of this advocacy work? Our analysis shows that despite FFQ's declared political support for Muslim women's rights and attempts to incorporate religion within an intersectional framework of domination, the organisation still failed to dismantle the deep-rooted idea of an inherent incompatibility between feminism and Islam and to consider Muslim women within its ranks as full feminist epistemic subjects.

Keywords: Muslim feminism, intersectionality, feminist solidarity, white ignorance, contributory injustices

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES FEMINIST SOLIDARITY LOOK LIKE?

Wearing a hoodie in the workplace has been, at least for a day, a sign of rebellion and defiance of patriarchy in the province of Quebec, Canada. On November 12, 2019, thousands of women wore one in solidarity with Catherine Dorion, a white woman politician, and member of the provincial party Québec Solidaire, who had been barred from the Salon Bleu of the National Assembly of Quebec for dress code violation. The jeans and oversized orange hoodie that Dorion wore were deemed 'inappropriate', a violation of decorum, and showing disrespect for the institution (Hall, 2019). This event stirred a unanimous wave of protest from members of Quebec's feminist movement culminating in Wear-a-Hoodie Day #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix (#MyHoodieMyChoice) launched in her honour.[1] This moment of feminist solidarity would have been inspiring if not for the 'double standard' it displayed (Savic, 2019, para. 10). A few months before Dorion's incident, the Quebec government of the Coalition Avenir Québec adopted Law 21, the *Act Respecting the Laicity of the State*, a secularism law restricting thousands of Muslim women wearing headscarves from accessing positions as lawyers, police officers, and schoolteachers, in addition to ruling out their chances at ever becoming elected political representatives, all without stirring the same unanimous and spontaneous feminist outrage.[2]

Disappointed by this two-tiered solidarity, Muslim feminist organisers tried to use the momentum created by #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix to bring attention to the injustices of Law 21. They launched the initiative #MonVoileMonChoix (#MyHeadscarfMyChoice), which was a call to wear, in addition to the hoodie, a headscarf or a button against Law 21 (Lau, 2019). Not only did their event fail to draw a significant mobilisation (compared

[1] All translations from French to English are our own.

[2] In June 2019, Law 21 established the secular nature of the State of Quebec, prohibiting public service workers in positions of 'authority' from wearing religious symbols, and disproportionately targeting Muslim women who wear a headscarf. The law also prohibits face-covering for both the offering and receiving of public services, targeting also niqab-wearing women.

[1] *University of Toronto Scarborough*, CANADA
[2] *Université Laval*, CANADA
***Corresponding Author:** saaz.taher@utoronto.ca

to #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix), but it also incited a vehement backlash from feminists who rejected the association between the cotton hoodie and the headscarf. The backlash was particularly fuelled by the support of #MonVoileMonChoix expressed by the president of the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ) – the province's largest coalition of feminist organisations – who called for wearing a headscarf in a day of solidarity with Muslim women. Her call triggered the wrath of both supporters of Law 21 and feminists rallying against it, all accusing the FFQ of 'promoting the veil' (Jury, 2019) and of betraying women forced to wear a headscarf who are living in Muslim autocracies. Hence, not only did the outpouring of feminist support towards Dorion not extend to Muslim women, but also the attempt to include Muslim women within the initiative provoked yet another controversy around the veil. Paradoxically, an event created to bring attention to Muslim women's exclusion from feminist consciousness became another occasion to double down and seal this exclusion.

This sequence of events made two things obvious. First, it highlighted the disappointment of Muslim feminists over the lack of solidarity displayed by the white feminists regarding secularism laws. Second, it made clear how despite the yearlong feminist mobilisation against Law 21 – led mostly by Muslim women activists, with the support of other women of colour and white women, all under the label of intersectional solidarity (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Collins and Bilge, 2016) – Muslim women's lives were still barely considered a feminist issue, and a divisive one at that. Indeed, the mobilisation around Dorion was a sad reminder to many Muslim feminists – the authors of this article included – of what feminist solidarity could look like, and how united in their outrage white feminists can be when their freedom of choice is threatened or violated. This compels us to ask the following questions: What is still holding back full feminist solidarity with Muslim women? Why is the connection between white women's rights to dress freely in the workplace and the similar rights of Muslim women still not spontaneously made? More importantly, why do we not see the same outrage triggered by Dorion's ban directed against secularism laws even from feminists who have embraced the call to 'intersectionality' and have been mobilising with Muslim women around their freedom of choice for years?

Various works analysing feminist interventions during secularism debates in Quebec and other Western liberal societies have provided important clues in answering these questions, through the lens of the gendered racialisation of Islam (Benhadjoudja, 2018a, 2022; Mahrouse, 2010; Zoghlami, 2020), the 'phobogenic' quality of the veil (Bentouhami, 2017), and sexual and secular nationalist ideologies (Barras, 2022; Benhadjoudja, 2022; Bilge, 2010, 2012; Jacquet, 2017; Jahangeer, 2020; Selby, 2014; Taher, 2024). While we do draw from this rich literature, we also opt for a different path, which does not aim to study openly Islamophobic feminist discourses that support secularism laws and oppose the visibility of Muslim headscarves in Quebec (which have been extensively researched). Instead, responding to Jasmin Zine's call for a 'critical faith-centred space' (2004) within anti-racist feminism, one that centres faith as a valid epistemological site for resistance and feminist knowledge, we examine the limits of intersectional solidarity discourses from feminist organisations that officially position themselves as advocates for Muslim women.

Using a theoretical lens combining feminist critical Muslim scholarship and critical epistemologies, we examine the intersectional advocacy discourse of the FFQ in support of Muslim women and against Law 21. Our discourse analysis of the FFQ's public statements about Law 21 reveals that despite its declared political support for Muslim women's rights and the attempt to consider religion within its intersectional approach to domination (Collins and Bilge, 2016), the organisation still fails to deconstruct the deep-rooted idea of a fundamental incompatibility between feminism and Islam and to consider Muslim women involved in its ranks as full feminist epistemic subjects. As Muslim feminist scholars who have been navigating within feminist activist circles in Quebec in the past decade, we see this article as an opportunity to engage in a critical conversation with our feminist and anti-racist allies (within and outside of the FFQ) to question and push further the boundaries – and scope – of our solidarities and alliances.

BACKGROUND OF THE FFQ'S INTERVENTIONS ON SECULARISM LAWS

The Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ), established in 1966, is a province-wide umbrella organisation focused on feminist advocacy. It is one of the main feminist organisations that emerged in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. The Quiet Revolution was a significant period for the development of Quebec nationalism, and the feminist groups that emerged during this period contributed to challenging the traditional social norms dictated by the Catholic Church, thereby promoting women's autonomy in both the public and private spheres (see Jacquet, 2017). However, despite their common nationalist and secularist roots, feminist organisations did not adopt a unified stance throughout the controversies about the visibility of Islam and Muslim women's headscarves in the past two decades.[3] Whilst mainstream secular feminist organisations in Quebec have

[3] Although the first controversy surrounding the Muslim headscarf dates back to 1994, Islam became a key subject of feminist public debate in Quebec only in 2006-2007, during the so-called reasonable accommodations crisis (see Bilge, 2010; Mahrouse,

consistently advocated for state secularism and religious neutrality, the FFQ instead promoted open secularism and systematically criticised the numerous attempts by the Quebec government to regulate and control the visibility of religious signs in the public space, the most recent of which was Law 21. For example, in May 2009, the FFQ took an official public stance to support Muslim women's right to wear a headscarf and opposed the ban on religious symbols for civil servants. This position, supported by the leftist party Québec Solidaire, sent shockwaves through feminist networks and was seen by secular feminists as a betrayal of the FFQ's long legacy in the fight for women's rights. However, in 2011, the only exception to this solidarity was the niqab, which was considered as a manifestation of 'Islamist fundamentalism', and all feminist organisations in Quebec – except for the South Asian Women's Community Centre – supported its ban under Bill 94.[4]

The FFQ's disapproval of the niqab was not enough to prevent criticism from secular feminist organisations. In 2013, many of them broke away from the FFQ to form Pour les Droits des Femmes du Québec (PDF-Q) and the Janettes, two groups that 'wanted to explicitly advocate for secularism and against "cultural and religious rights", which in practice involved advocating against veiling during the anti-veiling debates' (Jahangeer, 2020: 124). Despite harsh external criticism and internal resistance, the FFQ pursued and solidified its solidarity work by adopting in 2016 intersectionality as 'an orientation for the future, to be deepened and implanted in the ways of doing things, in the demands, projects and structures of associative life' (Couture, 2016: 38). Pushed by Black, Muslim, and racialised feminists, intersectionality was understood both as an analytical framework and as a critical praxis (Cho *et al.*, 2013; Collins and Bilge, 2016), revealing the political marginalisation of women from minority groups 'within the organization and the broader women's movement and (. . .) redress[ing] their under-representation' (Laperrière and Lépinard, 2016: 376). Intersectionality is also used as a tool for political representation, contributing to transforming the FFQ's discourse, positions, and political agenda. According to Laperrière and Lépinard (2016),

> While grassroots women's organisations [in Quebec] implement intersectionality to include minority women in a unified feminist project and identity, the FFQ uses intersectionality to challenge and transform the very idea of a single feminist identity for all women. (380)

In that respect, the FFQ's adoption of the principles of intersectionality led the organisation to change its official position against the niqab. In 2017, it publicly stated the unconstitutionality of Bill 62 and one of its vice-presidents, Marlihan Lopez, declared that 'The law targets a group of women by stigmatising them, by excluding them from public spaces' (quoted in Boutros, 2019). Similarly, during public debates against Law 21 in 2019, the organisation asserted 'that the Secularism Act undermines gender equality by discriminating against women wearing religious symbols' (FFQ cited in Nantel, 2022). In appearance, FFQ's position seems then to answer Sirma Bilge's (2010) call to make 'intersectionality scholarship' and praxis 'systematically attend to the religious/secular divide, which is rarely integrated to the collection of social divisions (gender, race, class) typically taken into account' (24).

Considering this long history of public stances taken by the FFQ in defence of Muslim women's agency against discriminatory secularism laws, coupled with the intersectional approach adopted by the organisation and the heavy work of awareness-raising undertaken by Muslim feminists in its ranks, we find it rather puzzling that this advocacy work has not translated into a wide grassroots feminist mobilisation. While a case could be made about a possible gap between the position of the FFQ's board of executives – which during debates on Law 21 was formed by many racialised feminists – and the position of the FFQ's base, which remains predominantly composed of white organisations, we believe that examining the FFQ's intersectional political advocacy discourse can give us important insights into what lies behind the 'elusive solidarity' with Muslim women (Drimonis, 2018).

FEMINISM AND ISLAM: A CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP

At the Roots of the Idea of Incompatibility

Extensive research has already demonstrated how the premise of the supposed incompatibility (or incommensurability) between feminism and Islam has Western colonial roots (for example, Ahmed, 1992; Ali,

2010). The discourse surrounding accommodations culminated in the creation of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, named for its two chairs the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (2007–2008), and the subsequent introduction of legislative measures addressing religious accommodations and the wearing of religious symbols. These include three different bills, with the most recent being Law 21, passed in 2019. The debates on reasonable accommodations in Quebec were marked by a political and media representation of religious minorities, especially Muslims minorities, as making unreasonable and abusive accommodation requests, thus reinforcing a set of racial stereotypes against them.

[4] During the public debates surrounding Bill 94, the FFQ advocated an exemption of the ban on concealing the face for educators in family daycare centres.

2012; Fadil, 2014; Salem, 2013; Seedat, 2013b; Thobani, 2021; Zine, 2004). This premise is a product of the colonialist construction of Islam as Europe's 'Other' (Asad, 2003; Saïd, 1978) and as its inverted mirror, a 'mirror of practices and ideals that are internal to Europe, yet that no longer fit its self-understanding, and that have been gradually projected upon the "Other"' (Fadil, 2014: 58). The association between secularism and sexual and gender equality, coined as sexularism, has been made since the colonial era with reference to Islam (Scott, 2017). This association was later regularly reiterated and reinforced through cyclical secularism debates that reasserted Western liberal democracies 'as the only space for women's emancipation' (Fadil, 2014: 55). Talal Asad (2003) helps us to understand that if this association has been possible, it is because secularism is more than just a political system in which freedom of conscience is guaranteed by a neutral state; it is – as paraphrased by Sunera Thobani (2021) – 'a doctrine of governance, that presently underpins the self-presentation of the "West" as democratic and "Islam" as repressive' (159).

Further, Nadia Fadil (2014: 53) explains how white secular feminists have historically played an active part in constructing the '"woman question" (. . .) as one of the political anchor points for the stabilization of civilisational hierarchies' (see also Éwanjé-Épée and Magliani-Belkacem, 2012). Whilst secular feminism claims to be critical of all religions, most scholarly and public Western debates about the relationship between religion and feminism predominantly focus on Islam (Ali, 2012). White secular feminists have contributed significantly to shaping dominant nationalist narratives and fostering the notion of an open or pluralistic secularism as a threat to gender and sexual equality, as a foundational value of the nation (Bilge, 2012). These secularist civilisational hierarchies have been reinforced both locally and globally following 9/11 and the USA 'War on Terror' when white Western feminists 'came to be seen not only as understanding the "real" cause of "Islamic terror" but also [as] the experts best suited to understand and represent the interests of Muslim women' (Thobani, 2021: 145). These dynamics nurtured a complex relationship between white feminists and Muslim women, with the former positioning themselves as the guardians entrusted with the keys to the emancipation of all women, while the latter are perceived as 'an abject object' eliciting paradoxical feelings of pity, fear, envy, and revulsion (Thobani, 2021: 142). Muslim women evoke pity for their perceived need to be rescued from their men, religion, and cultures (Abu-Lughod, 2002), fear as they symbolise the 'Muslim invasion' threatening liberal, secular, and feminist norms in Western democracies (Bakht, 2008; Bilge, 2013; Razack, 2008), and fascination, envy and revulsion as they inspire a paradoxical orientalist sexual imaginary (Jarmakani, 2010; Thobani, 2021).

In terms of feminist scholarship on Islam and Muslim women, Marnia Lazreg (2005) has revealed the ascendancy of a 'religious paradigm' which, paradoxically, understands Muslim women's experiences only through a religious lens and, simultaneously, minimises the importance of religion as a spiritual resource and praxis as well as a system of knowledge. Furthermore, religion is not viewed as a potential lever for subversion or rebellion, or as a valid space for fostering and building solidarity. Consequently, when Muslim women collectively organise, their resistance is read in binary terms as being either against religion or despite it. In the best-case scenario, when it is not a tool of oppression, Islam is seen as a trivial cultural accessory, not central to the way women organise their struggles (Zine, 2004). Even antiracism scholars and activists often reject religious frameworks as valid for feminist theorising and activism. As Zine puts it, '[T]he idea that women can use religion as a site of resistance and as an epistemological terrain upon which to construct alternative visions of womanhood has not been validated in most antiracist feminist discourses' (2004: 171).[5] Criticising this essentialism that defines Islam as a static reality, fundamentally dogmatic and inherently sexist, Zine (2004) emphasises how the elimination of any possibility of convergence between feminism and Islam by white secular feminists dismisses alternative theological readings sensitive to gender equality. This dismissal, in turn,

> upholds the most rigid and dogmatic narrations as being the authoritative voice. They [white secular feminists] therefore fall into the same trap as fundamentalists, who derive only static and literal meanings from the Qur'an and see the human interpretation of laws derived from religious texts as inviolable and fixed rather than as the product of historical, cultural, and gendered attempts to apprehend the meaning of divine intent. (180)

Islamic Feminism and How it Disturbs (or Does Not Disturb) the Idea of Incompatibility

Because of the strong belief in an incompatibility between 'feminism' and 'Islam' among liberal Western feminists and in secular circles, the term 'Islamic feminism' or 'Muslim feminism' emerged as an oxymoron and still faces a lot of scepticism (Ali, 2012). Before delving into how this term disturbs (or does not) the idea of

[5] Due to the Western feminist movement's complicity with colonialism and imperialism, Muslim communities – spanning secular traditions, conservative movements, and scholars advocating for gender justice (see Kausar, 2006) – refuse the label of 'feminism'. The same essentialism characterises both the secular and conservative Muslim approach: the first defines Islam as a static reality, while the second defines feminism as a unique model representing a normative Western modernity (Ali, 2012).

incompatibility, we clarify our use of the concepts of Islamic and Muslim feminisms. On the one hand, Islamic feminism usually refers to the academic field of 'knowledge production and meaning making within Islam' from the perspective of gender justice (Salem, 2013: 8). Thus, Islamic feminism questions the religious patriarchal authority through rethinking Muslim jurisprudence and Muslim historiography (Ali, 2012). On the other hand, Muslim feminism generally designates Muslim women's cultural and political activism against patriarchy without using religious sources as references (Benhadjoudja, 2018a: 115). Although this distinction is tacit, we follow Leila Benhadjoudja's (2018a) suggestion to blur the border between the two notions and consider Islamic feminism as part of Muslim feminism in such a way that 'the latter would encompass the various ways in which feminism and Islam fit together' and are lived out differently depending on the women's social location (116). Muslim feminism can thus be broadly apprehended 'as both a critical practice and an ontological stance', which combines grassroots activism with an intellectual and academic approach rooted in a socio-political commitment to the emancipation and liberation of Muslim women (Abu-Bakr, 2013: 4). Even if the terminology emerged only in the 1990s, many Muslim feminist scholars trace it back to the original message of Islam and to the struggle for gender justice of early Muslim women from the revelation period (Ali, 2012). Moreover, to account for the multiplicity of historiography and genealogies of Muslim women's activism for gender justice, and to counter the systematic erasures of Black Muslim women (see Délice Mugabo, 2016), it is vital to always 'apprehend Islam at the intersection of race, religion and gender' (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 116).

Through her review of feminist scholarship on feminism and Islam, Fatima Seedat warns against the easy 'conflation or inflation of the convergence between Islam and feminism as "Islamic feminism" (2013a: 404). According to her, this convergence does not necessarily advance Muslim women's struggles for equality and neither does it erase the Western perception of Islam as a sexist and patriarchal religion that is bad for women. Seedat explains how 'Islamic feminism' is often promoted by scholars who advocate for the necessity of an Islamic feminism for Muslim women and who usually date it at the beginning of the 1990s. This limited genealogy locates feminism in a Western intellectual paradigm in which Islamic feminism is only an 'Islamic version of Western liberal feminism' (Seedat, 2013b: 40). Feminism thus redeems Islam and the Qur'an, in the sense that the late encounter between Islam and feminism is presumed to transform Islam into a progressive religion compatible with Western modernity and civilisation (Barlas, 2008). Hence, 'contemporary women's gender consciousness' is seen as 'another stage in the historical development of Islam as a religion' (Seedat, 2013b: 40). Western feminism is again situated as not only the norm but also the condition to save Islam – and, by extension, Muslim women – from patriarchy.

Muslim feminist scholarship also brings a new conceptualisation of agency, challenging the one advocated by white liberal feminism. Among the first articulations of this critique, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2006) shows how 'pious' women reinvent the content of emancipation and agency beyond Western liberal norms.[6] Mahmood describes how dominant feminist scholarship understands human agency as 'one that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power' (2006: 33). According to Mahmood, this liberal conception of agency cannot make sense of 'the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions' (33). Adopting a post-structuralist approach, Mahmood suggests instead to look at agency 'not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (33–34). According to Fadil (2014), in addition to contributing to the 'decentring of the notion of emancipation and agency by opening it up to other, less obvious, ways of thinking about these questions', Mahmood's work had posed a 'more fundamental interrogation' about 'the *translatability* of these differences: the possibility to decentre our conception of agency in order to consider and envision other ways of being' (53, italics in the original).

If feminist critical Muslim studies have analysed the nuanced ways in which the incompatibility between feminism and Islam can be articulated in liberal feminist and secular discourses, we consider it relevant to combine these works with critical epistemology studies, to focus on the epistemic undertones of those discourses. To do so, we reframe the incompatibility between feminism and Islam as a (re)production of 'white ignorance' (Mills, 1997).

White Ignorance and Contributory Injustices

In *The Racial Contract* (1997), philosopher Charles W. Mills develops the concept of 'epistemology of ignorance'. As Mills explains, white supremacy is an 'unnamed' political system (1997: 1) that implicitly binds white individuals within society, by what he calls the 'racial contract', and produces 'white ignorance'. The racial contract, according to Mills, is based on an epistemology of ignorance, that is, on 'localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)' (1997: 18). These dysfunctions, Mills tells us, distort white people's

[6] In line with Mahmood's (2005) study of Islamist women's movements in Egypt, scholars have developed theories on women's agency and gender equality through the Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence and law (see Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Ali, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

perceptions of social reality, and 'prevent them from understanding the world they themselves have created' (1997: 18). In other words, white ignorance – for members of racially dominant groups – entails failing to see that the social world is structured by racial hierarchies in which they are privileged and which they help to perpetuate. Therefore, not only are the members of the dominant groups ignorant of the realities experienced by the dominated, but their ignorance is cultivated because (and as long as) it is not rectified.

As white ignorance contributes to maintaining and perpetuating racial domination, as described through the racial contract, it also contributes to sustaining other power relationships intersecting with race, particularly those of gender, class, and sexuality (Pateman and Mills, 2007). This understanding of white ignorance at the intersection of various power dynamics enables a deeper grasp of the subtle marginalisation of minorities' contributions and voices within prevailing national narratives, as well as the potential of these contributions, if acknowledged, to disrupt those narratives.

Based on Mills's concept of white ignorance, philosopher Kristie Dotson (2012) develops the concept of 'contributory injustice' as a form of injustice preventing experiences of members of non-dominant groups to be understood, caused by the situated ignorance of an epistemic agent. She argues that epistemic ignorance occurs when the epistemic agent does not want to voluntarily depart from the so-called dominant and widely diffused hermeneutical resources in society. Hermeneutical (or interpretative) resources are concepts and norms that are collectively shared as public resources in society. By refusing to acquire marginalised hermeneutical resources, dominant groups maintain these resources and the groups that hold them in a position of marginality *vis-à-vis* the dominant resources and groups. Linking contributory injustice with epistemic ignorance, Dotson accounts for the power relations that play out to prevent epistemic contributions produced by marginalised groups from finding a place in the prevailing collective hermeneutical resources (2012: 32).

This point echoes Muslim feminist scholars' critique of liberal feminism and how alternative conceptions of agency, 'which do not necessarily comfort our liberal sensibilities, are either ignored or viewed as fundamentalist ignominies' (Fadil, 2014: 51). The perpetual discussion about feminism and Islam through an interrogative framework reproduces these racialising logics that construct Muslim women and Muslim communities broadly as epistemically incompetent Others (Fadil, 2014). It is for this reason that many Muslim scholars and activists for gender justice resist the label 'Islamic feminist' or 'Muslim feminist' to dissociate themselves from the Western secular feminist movement and lest their struggles be subsumed under the homogenising umbrella of feminism (Barlas, 2008; Seedat, 2013b; Benhadjoudja, 2018b). Indeed, some consider the obligation to use the label 'feminism' as an act of epistemic violence or a triumph of modernity over Islam (Seedat, 2013b).

The famous exchange between theologian Asma Barlas and historian Margot Badran illustrates this tension eloquently. Barlas protests the label of 'Islamic feminist' given to her by Badran and asks, 'How can people call me a feminist when I'm calling myself a believing woman?' (2008: 16). To Badran's answer that 'feminism provides a common language' (cited in Barlas, 2008: 19), she retorts: '[I]f we want to build solidarity with Muslim women, we need more than the shared discourse of feminism. We need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements' (19). Later she adds, 'While the plurality of feminism is said to be its strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?' (19). Seedat echoes Barlas's argument, writing, '[W]hen feminism insists on incorporating others, two things happen. First, it affirms its own inclusiveness and second, it exercises its power to legitimise other women's equality discourses' (2013b: 35). Through this double move, 'Western feminism' reiterates and affirms its power to name and to save other women. This exchange highlights the epistemic tension whereby Muslim women find themselves caught between, on the one hand, adopting the feminist label and inserting their perspectives within the dominant white feminist framework at the risk of being diluted; and, on the other hand, resisting the label and thus actively refusing to participate to mainstream feminist hermeneutical resources. Therefore, regardless of how this tension is resolved, Muslim women's analyses and insights into Western liberal and feminist circles remain unacknowledged as significant epistemic contributions.

METHODOLOGY

This theoretical background led us to the following research questions: how does the FFQ's advocacy work during public debates on Law 21 mobilise an intersectional approach to defend Muslim women's rights against the nationalist and secular feminist narrative and its racial and colonial undertones? How does the FFQ's discourse dismantle (or not) white ignorance about feminism and Islam? And finally, how does it incorporate (or not) the insights and contributions of Muslim women and feminists within its advocacy? To answer these questions, first, we conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), allowing us to deconstruct the mechanisms of power and exclusion that manifest often subtly through language and, in this case, through FFQ's language of inclusion and intersectionality (Van Dijk, 1980; Fairclough, 1995). We analysed the FFQ's official and media statements during the debate on Law 21 (between February and June 2019), including the organisation's report for the provincial

parliamentary consultation on the law (FFQ, 2019b). This analysis focused on the arguments put forth by the FFQ to defend Muslim women's rights and contest the legitimacy of the law. We paid specific attention to how intersectionality was translated as an advocacy strategy to justify the FFQ's position, and how the relationship between feminism and religion (including Islam) was articulated within this argument. Second, to examine the contributions of Muslim women within the FFQ, we complemented our analysis of FFQ's official discourse with public testimonies from Muslim feminist activists and researchers regarding their experiences within the organisation. Nineteen testimonies have been selected from six academic and activist documents, grey literature, and media columns, published between 2015 and 2020, when intersectionality was being implemented within the FFQ and other white feminist organisations. Our analysis of this second set of data focused on the way Muslim women described the conditions of their inclusion and their activism within the FFQ, and, more broadly, within the mainstream feminist movement in Quebec.[7]

THE FFQ'S INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS EPISTEMIC FAILURES

When Intersectionality Meets Secularism: The FFQ's Rights-Based Discourse

The FFQ's operationalisation of intersectionality as a political representation and as an advocacy tool against Law 21 can be described as an intersectional secular rights-based discourse. Indeed, the FFQ backs up its advocacy discourse by 'a solid and uncompromising approach to intersectionality' (FFQ, 2019a) that,

> recognises that women who are marginalised and whose lives are directly affected by specific realities must be the ones to determine the way forward on an issue, as they are the first concerned. This self-determined action is called agency. (. . .) For us, feminist solidarity means that we can't let our own reservations prevent marginalised women from taking actions that they feel are in their best interests. (FFQ, 2019b: 9–10)

Following this commitment to intersectionality, the FFQ critiques Law 21 for its institutionalisation of 'economic and social violence against Muslim women, already relegated to the margins of Quebec's public sphere' (FFQ, 2019b: 10). The FFQ defends Muslim women's rights to 'autonomy', refuses the attempt to control their bodies, and condemns their 'infantilisation' and marginalisation during the public debate on Law 21. To protest Muslim women's exclusion from the public hearings held during the parliamentary commission on Law 21, the FFQ bypasses this exclusion by sharing its platform with Black Muslim activist Idil Issa.

Interestingly, the FFQ's commitment towards intersectionality also goes hand in hand with a commitment to *laïcité* (secularism): 'We want to make it clear that the FFQ is absolutely in favour of secularism, but not the falsified secularism that is at the heart of this bill [21]' (FFQ, 2019b: 16). FFQ distinguishes between two *laïcités:* a 'false' *laïcité* (FFQ, 2019a), labelled as '*catho-laïcité*', which discriminates against Muslim women and 'infringes on civil servants' freedom of religious practice', and a 'true *laïcité*', defined as 'a principle aimed at separating religious institutions from state institutions' (2019b: 24). This position is consistent with FFQ's history, and that of the Quebec feminist movement more broadly, which has long supported the secularist project in Quebec, although it has gradually distanced itself from its more conservative version in recent years (Jacquet, 2017; Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023). However, what this attachment to *laïcité* fails to address is how secularism plays a central role in reinforcing the 'colonial sovereignty of the Quebec State' (Benhadjoudja, 2022: 184). The distinction between a good and bad secularism does not dismantle how the idea of secularism is constitutive of the foundational myths about two solitudes – 'the colonial narrative of two founding peoples [the French and the English], and their rivalry in the colonial project' that erases Indigenous presence and history (184). Nor does it address how secularism is 'a historical product with specific epistemological, political, and moral entailments none of which can be adequately grasped through a nominal account of secularism as the modern state's retreat from religion' (Mahmood, 2017: 198). Hence, secularism in Quebec can hardly be dissociated from the nationalist narratives and their 'story of progress towards women's rights and sexual minorities [that] tend to racialise Muslims in particular (but not only)' (Jacquet, 2017: 87). Contrary to the idea of a 'dissociation between Quebec feminism and nationalist struggles in the province' (Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023: 124), our analysis suggests that white Québécois feminism's attachment to the notion of *laïcité* – which is a symbol of Quebec's sovereignty and a reminder of its exceptionalism – reveals an enduring connection with white nationalist ideals.

While the FFQ professes its commitment to *laïcité* (a true *laïcité*), it also endeavours to incorporate religion within an intersectional approach to domination. This is what the feminist organisation states in an official press release:

[7] Since the interview excerpts are sourced from previously published materials, their citation does not pose any ethical concerns.

> In Quebec, there are religious feminists, just as there are reactionary atheists. (. . .) Let us think, for example, of the Christian feminists who fight for the right to free abortion, and think of all the Muslim feminists who, as members of the FFQ, fight with us for the rights of all women. (. . .) It is wrong to automatically associate religion with the oppression of women, just as it is wrong to automatically associate secularism with equality between men and women. (FFQ, 2019b)

This excerpt has been a pivotal component of the FFQ's argument against Law 21 as it is the only one that directly tackles the idea of an incompatibility between feminism and religion and also mentions Muslim feminists. Thus, it was included in most of the FFQ's communications concerning Law 21 (FFQ, 2019a, 2019b). We address two key aspects of this statement. First, although the FFQ mentions that there are Muslim women in its ranks, it does not provide more information about their multiple contributions to the feminist movement – their hermeneutical resources, in Dotson's words – or about the history of their activism in Quebec. It is as if using the homogenising label 'feminists' is enough to inform us about these women's activism, whereas Muslim feminism is plural and

> is neither an imitation of white feminism, nor a strategy of justification implemented by women to 'prove' that Islam is not misogynistic [but rather a] space in which women experience Islam as a place where liberation is enunciated. (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 119)

Additionally, while the only information given by the FFQ's statement is that it is possible to be a Muslim feminist, it also says more about those who include than about those who are included. While the first can be lauded for their inclusiveness of women from different religious backgrounds, the second are not presented as a meaningful addition: 'they fight *with us* for the rights of all women' (italics added). Second, while Muslim feminists are not credited with substantive contributions, the mention of Catholic feminists serves to underscore their significant legacy within the feminist movement in Quebec, particularly in the 'fight for the right to free abortion'. Although this reminder of Catholic feminists' input to feminism in Quebec seems to counter the bias about religion and its contradiction with feminism, it stems from the widespread belief that secular feminism is equally critical of all religions, including Catholicism. However, this deconstruction of the incompatibility between religion and feminism does not extend to Islam. Unlike Islam, 'symbols of Catholicism are read as a legitimate white heritage, [and as] a way of affirming one's history and identity' (Benhadjoudja, 2022: 193). Consequently, this point appears to be in tension with the FFQ's criticism of *catho-laïcité*, which acknowledges the Christian racial heritage embedded in *laïcité*. This FFQ's solidarity statement shows how the organisation falls short of actively deconstructing the history of Quebec's feminist movement and advocating for a greater visibility of the contributions made by women of faith, including Muslim women.

The FFQ's rights-based discourse seems then to be torn between a commitment towards intersectionality and an allegiance to *laïcité* (and the nationalist narratives it holds). Even when it attempts to counter the idea about an incompatibility between feminism and Islam, its advocacy discourse does not dismantle it. To the contrary, because of the silence about Muslim feminists' contributions to the feminist movement, on the one hand, and the reminder of its Catholic heritage, on the other hand, the FFQ's discourse reproduces – although in a very subtle way – this incompatibility and reinforces the secular-Christian Québécois ethos.

Muslim Women's Conditional Inclusion Within the FFQ

Our analysis of the FFQ's statement must also be read in light of the testimonials of Muslim women who were involved with the federation, both at the grassroots level and in leadership positions, or with white feminist groups who share inclusion politics similar to the FFQ's. Although these women's activism within the feminist movement is not new, it was not always labelled as Islamic or Muslim feminism (Benhadjoudja, 2018a). Their identification as Muslim feminists occurred mostly after their voices were silenced and ignored. Their encounters with white feminists show, however, that identifying themselves as 'Muslim feminists' has not proven sufficient for them to be fully considered as epistemic agents within the movement (Bdeir, 2018; Benhadjoudja, 2018a; Ibnouzahir, 2015).

Both the scientific literature on the feminist movement in Quebec and the activist one by Muslim feminists highlight how beyond the formal position of the FFQ, internal dynamics within the Quebec feminist movement reinforce a conditional inclusion of Muslim women, even those who consider themselves as feminists. Despite the FFQ's official support since 2009 of Muslim women (except niqab-wearing women), 'the debate around the headscarf has created definitive fractures' (Benhadjoudja, 2018b: 121). This led many FFQ member groups to leave the organisation, which they no longer considered to be 'a safe space to organise their feminist struggles' (121). Leila Bdeir, a figurehead of Muslim feminism in Quebec and co-founder of the Collective of Muslim Feminists of Quebec, explained that the inclusion of Muslim women within the FFQ has always been conditional:

> [F]or the inclusion of some, the exclusion of others is necessary, and this is what makes it possible to reaffirm each time the essential 'we'. As a Muslim, my entry prize was women who wear the niqab, that

> is to say my implicit endorsement (. . .) of FFQ's anti-niqab position of the time [in 2010, during the debate around Bill 94]. (Bdeir, 2018)

This idea of conditional inclusion also came up in Benhadjoudja's interviews with Muslim feminist activists, and especially in the testimony of Lamia:

> I don't want to be allied with feminists or with people who will say: you know, (. . .) we support you in your struggle, but (. . .) without necessarily respecting your deep identity, so . . . we support you, but we hope that one day you will be different. (quoted in Benhadjoudja, 2018a: 126)

Muslim feminist activist Dalila Awada testified that this conditional inclusion of Muslim women is also a sign of suspicion. 'Muslim feminists, especially those who wear the headscarf, must constantly "prove beyond any doubt" that they are "real" feminists. They must constantly demonstrate to what extent Islam and feminism are compatible' (quoted in Pierre, 2020: 122). This suspicion about Muslim women's – and other minority women's – feminism leads to their containment at the margins of the feminist movement, into 'diversity' spaces and 'intersectional' committees (Lopez, 2017: para. 6). This point echoes a previous analysis from Dolores Chew, founding member of Montreal's South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC), a long-standing member of the FFQ, and a previous member of its executive board:

> What has been the reality is the slotting of minority women into a niche as objects to be studied and acted upon. Monies are spent on workshops where our lives and experiences are analysed, but this is not translated into solidarity and actions. We are not accepted on our own terms, and this is an essentially anti-feminist way of knowledge-building and working. (Chew, 2009: 89)

These selected testimonies are exemplars of the testimonies studied and offer an illustration of how the subtle exclusion processes we deciphered in FFQ's intersectional advocacy work against Law 21 have long been experienced, named and denounced by Muslim activists within the feminist movement in Quebec. They also illustrate the limits of a feminist solidarity with an understanding of feminism still anchored in a white liberal and secular perspective. Muslim women are included if they demonstrate how they fit within the dominant definition of feminism. This solidarity is expressed from the position of a superior and emancipated feminist subject who hesitantly supports Muslim women despite their doubts about the validity of their feminism. It is, again, a patronising solidarity based on pity, where Muslim women are believed to be both victims of an antifeminist religion, and of an Islamophobic socio-political context. Thus, asserting that secularism laws are Islamophobic does not seem to undo the belief in an incompatibility between feminism and Islam. It simply adds to it or juxtaposes it. Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) already demonstrated how dangerous the discourse based on pity is – whatever the source of that pity –, and how '[p]rojects of saving other women depend on a reinforced sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged' (789). This solidarity based on pity and this conditional inclusion within the Quebec feminist movement allows for the reaffirmation of the domination of white feminist perspectives on women's emancipation, and the preservation of a liberal and Western definition of agency.

CONCLUSION

A more attentive examination of the FFQ's position in 2018 against the ban of religious signs shows that this decision was all but spontaneous (Drimonis, 2018). After a ten-hour special assembly where it 'officially declar[ed] that women have agency and independence and should be free to choose the sex trade as a legitimate career choice' (para. 3), the FFQ 'decided to postpone once again issuing a statement of unconditional support for Muslim women who wear religious head coverings (para. 1), [c]iting a need for more clarity on the issue' (para. 4). According to Toula Drimonis (2018), this decision 'both angered and frustrated many Quebec feminists[,] who see it as political cowardice and an egregious lack of solidarity with Muslim women' (para. 4). The challenges surrounding the adoption of a resolution in support of Muslim women's agency, right before the debate on Law 21, provides clarity around the tension within the FFQ's rights-based intersectional advocacy. Despite its substantial and continuous advocacy work in support of Muslim women, there is still visible discomfort and hesitation that obstructs a full and spontaneous solidarity like the one witnessed during #MonCotonOuatéMonChoix. Our critical discourse analysis showed that this discomfort seems to stem, among other things, from a deeply anchored attachment to secular and liberal Western understanding of feminism where Islam is still considered as a remote opposite Other. Although not overtly declared (unlike other secular feminist groups), the idea of incompatibility between feminism and Islam is still palpable in the FFQ's discourse through what is *not said* about Muslim women, and in the way their perspectives and hermeneutical contributions are excluded from the advocacy discourse that

is supposed to fight for their rights. The fact that the incompatibility between feminism and Islam is the cornerstone of the secularism debates seems to make it also its blind spot.

Our article also highlights the limits of intersectionality as a representation and advocacy tool as long as it is still rooted in white ignorance (Mills, 1997). Feminist scholarship on intersectionality has already pointed out theoretical limits of the use of intersectionality as a 'unifying framework' (Carbin and Edenheim, 2013: 237–238) and as an 'all-inclusive consensus upon which to build a feminist theory and politics' (Singh, 2015: 660). Some works have also noted the struggles faced by feminist organisations in Quebec to translate intersectionality into a coherent praxis, while others use it as lip service (Laperrière and Lépinard, 2016; Zoghlami, 2021; Pagé and Anctil Avoine, 2023). Our article contributes to this literature by examining the epistemic failures of the FFQ's use of intersectionality as a tool for political representation, and its role in concealing the still-active eviction of Muslim women from feminist epistemic consciousness. We suggest that this white ignorance is not only the product of a failed intersectional representation strategy but – as shown through Muslim feminists' testimonies – it is also embedded within the organisation's practices, and thus ensures that the relationship with Muslim feminists is, at best, one of figurative and conditional inclusion.

Finally, this article underscores the limitations of the liberal intersectional feminist paradigm to envision relationships between feminists, and the limits of intersectionality as a political representation and advocacy tool when it is translated *only* through the liberal framework of inclusion – in this case, inclusion of religious minorities. Our article stresses the importance of integrating Muslim feminist initiatives and insights into the global – and the local – history of feminisms, without imposing the white liberal feminist conceptual framework or easily – or non-critically – conflating feminism and Islam (Seedat, 2013b). We reiterate Zine's call for 'an alternative faith-centred [feminist] epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it' (Zine, 2004: 181). As long as the history and rooting of feminism are told through a Western white liberal perspective, the insights and contributions of Muslim women will be considered only as exceptions and curiosities, but not as substantively constitutive of feminist struggles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the editors, Dr. Sonya Sharma and Dr. Dawn Llewellyn, for their support and valuable comments. Our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers as well. Their suggestions helped enrich the paper immensely. We are also grateful to our colleagues from the Feminist and Decolonial Learning Community at Université Laval, where an earlier version of this paper was presented in November 2023, for their generous and enthusiastic feedback. Finally, we would like to thank Naomi Pauls for her wonderful assistance in editing this paper.

REFERENCES

Abu-Bakr, O. (ed) (2013). Introduction, in *Feminist and Islamic Perspectives. New horizons of knowledge and reform* (pp. 4–8). The Women and Memory Forum. Available at: https://www.wmf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Final-English-Islamic.pdf. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783–790. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ali, K. (2006). 'The best of you will not strike': Al-Shafi'i on Qur'an, Sunnah, and wife-beating. *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 2(2), 143–155. https://doi.org/10.1558/cisv2i2.143

Ali, Z. (2012). *Féminismes Islamiques*. Paris: La fabrique éditions.

Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bakht, N. (2008). *Belonging and Banishment: Being Muslim in Canada*. Toronto: TSAR Publications.

Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barlas, A. (2008). Engaging Islamic feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative, in A. Kynsilehto (ed), *Islamic Feminism: Current perspectives* (pp. 15–24). Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere.

Barras, A. (2022). Travelogue of secularism: Longing to find a place to call home. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(2), 217–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818755415

Bdeir, L. (2018). *Les limites de la solidarité féministe au Québec*. Paper presented at Table de Concertation sur le racisme systémique (TCRS) Conference: Pratiques de consultation inclusive, 2 June. Montreal, Quebec.

Benhadjoudja, L. (2018a). Les femmes musulmanes peuvent-elles parler? *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, 42(1), 113–133. https://doi.org/10.7202/1045126ar

Benhadjoudja, L. (2018b). Territoires de libération: Perspectives féministes musulmanes. *Tumultes*, 50(1), 111–130. https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.050.0111

Benhadjoudja, L. (2022). Racial secularism as settler colonial sovereignty in Quebec. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 7(2), 183–199. https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.7.2.0182

Bentouhami, H. (2017). Phénoménologie politique du voile. *Philosophiques*, 44(2), 271–284. https://doi.org/10.7202/1042334ar

Bilge, S. (2010). Beyond subordination vs. resistance: An intersectional approach to the agency of veiled Muslim women. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(1), 9–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860903477662

Bilge, S. (2012). Mapping Québécois sexual nationalism in times of 'crisis of reasonable accommodations'. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33(3), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.673473

Bilge, S. (2013). Reading the racial subtext of the Québécois accommodation controversy: Analytics of racialized governmentality. *Politikon*, 40(1), 157–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2013.765681

Boutros, M. (2019). Des groups demandent le retrait du projet de loi sur la laïcité, *Le Devoir*, 30 March. Available at: https://www.ledevoir.com/politique/quebec/551087/un-projet-de-loi-raciste. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Carbin, M. and Edenheim, S. (2013). The intersectional turn in feminist theory: A dream of a common language? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(3), 233–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506813484723

Chew, D. (2009). Feminism and multiculturalism in Quebec: An/other perspective. *Canadian Woman Studies / Les cahiers de la femme*, 27(2/3), 84–92.

Cho, S., Williams Crenshaw, K. and McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 785–810. https://doi.org/10.1086/669608

Collins, P. H. and Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Couture, D. (2016). Un tournant majeur à la FFQ. *Relations*, 784, 36–38.

Dotson, K. (2012). A cautionary tale: On limiting epistemic oppression. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33(1), 24–47. https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2012.a472779

Drimonis, T. (2018). Solidarity with Muslim women remains elusive at the Fédération des femmes du Québec. *Canada's National Observer*, 16 November. Available at: https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/11/06/opinion/solidarity-muslim-women-remains-elusive-federation-des-femmes-du-quebec. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Éwanjé-Épée, F. and Magliani-Belkacem, S. (2012). *Les féministes blanches et l'empire*. Paris: La fabrique éditions.

Fadil, N. (2014). Islam and feminism: A vexed relationship? Thinking through the 'Muslim question' and its epistemological conundrums. *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 1(1), 51–59. https://doi.org/10.11116/jdivegendstud.1.1.0051

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis. The critical study of language*. London: Longman.

Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) (2019a). Laïcité et voile: Notre argumentaire, 28 February. Available at: https://ffq.qc.ca/portfolio-items/laicite-et-voile-notre-argumentaire/. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) (2019b). Mémoire sur la laïcité de l'État. Press release. Available at: https://ffq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Memoire_FFQ_PL21_2019.pdf. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Hall, H. (2019). The hoodie is a global statement of rebellion. *The Independent*, 12 November. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/catherine-dorion-hoodie-ottawa-mark-zuckerberg-ralph-lauren-a9200151.html. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Ibnouzahir, A. (2015). *Chroniques d'une musulmane indignée*. Montreal: Fides.

Jacquet, C. (2017). *Représentations féministes de 'la religion' et de 'la laïcité' au Québec (1960–2013): Reproductions et contestations des frontières identitaires* (PhD dissertation). Université du Québec à Montréal.

Jahangeer, R. (2020). Anti-veiling and the Charter of Québec Values: 'Native testimonials,' erasure, and violence against Montreal's Muslim women. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 32(1), 114–139. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.32.1.05

Jarmakani, A. (2010). 'The sheik who loved me': Romancing the war on terror. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(4), 993–1017. https://doi.org/10.1086/651044

Jury, P. (2019). Le manque de sens à la Fédération des femmes du Québec. *Le Droit*, 30 January. Available at: https://www.ledroit.com/2020/01/30/le-manque-de-sens-a-la-federation-des-femmes-du-quebec-c23240515a58a450bbc5cdac5861b2bb/. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Kausar, Z. (2006). *Muslim Women at the Crossroads: The rights of women in Islam and general Muslim practices*. Batu Caves, Selangor: Darul Ehsan, Thinker's Library.

Laperrière, M. and Lépinard, E. (2016). Intersectionality as a tool for social movements: Strategies of inclusion and representation in the Québécois women's movement. *Politics*, 36(4), 374–382. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716649009

Lau, R. (2019). The controversy over Quebec politician Catherine Dorion's hoodie has now turned to hijabs, *CTVNewsMontreal*, 13 November. Available at: https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/the-controversy-over-quebec-politician-catherine-dorion-s-hoodie-has-now-turned-to-hijabs-1.4683470. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Lazreg, M. (2005). Decolonizing feminism, in O. Oyěwùmí (ed), *African Gender Studies A reader* (pp. 67–80). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-09009-6_4

Lopez, M. (2017). Enjeux et défis de l'appropriation de l'intersectionnalité au sein du mouvement des femmes du Québec, *Droits et libertés*, 1 March. Available at: https://liguedesdroits.ca/enjeux-et-defis-de-lappropriation-de-lintersectionnalite-au-sein-du-mouvement-des-femmes-du-quebec/. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, S. (2006). Feminist theory, agency, and the liberatory subject: Some reflections on the Islamic revival in Egypt. *Finnish Society for the Study of Religion*, 42(1), 31–71. https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4633

Mahmood, S. (2017). Secularism, sovereignty, and religious difference: A global genealogy? *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(2), 197–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816656081

Mahrouse, G. (2010). The 'reasonable accommodation' in Quebec: The limits of participation and dialogue. *Race & Class*, 52(1), 85–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396810371768

Mills, C. W. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2006). Muslim women's quest for equality: Between Islamic law and feminism. *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4), 629–645. https://doi.org/10.1086/508085

Mugabo, D. (2016). On rocks and hard place: A reflection on antiblackness in organizing against Islamophobia. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2(2), 159–183. https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0159

Nantel, M. (2022). Des groupes féministes en Cour pour faire déclarer la Loi 21 inconstitutionnelle, *Pivot*, 8 November. Available at: https://pivot.quebec/2022/11/08/des-groupes-feministes-en-cour-pour-faire-declarer-la-loi-21-inconstitutionnelle/. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Pagé, G. and Anctil Avoine, P. (2023). Intersectionnalité, idées queers et nationalisme: Les féminismes québécois entre tensions et inclusions. *Bulletin d'histoire politique*, 30(3), 113–129. https://doi.org/10.7202/1101965ar

Pateman, C. and Mills, C. W. (2007). *Contract and Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Pierre, A. (2020). *Empreintes de résistance: Filiations et récits de femmes Autochtones, Noires et racisées*. Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage.

Razack, S. (2008). *Casting Out: The eviction of Muslims from Western law and politic*s. University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442687554

Saïd, E. (1978). *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon.

Salem, S. (2013). Feminist critique and Islamic feminism: The question of intersectionality. *Postcolonialist*, 1(1), 1–8.

Savic, L. (2017). 'Mon coton ouaté, mon choix': Vague de solidarité pour Catherine Dorion, *Métro*, 11 November. Available at: https://journalmetro.com/actualites/national/2396441/mon-coton-ouatemon-choix-vague-de-solidarite-pour-catherine-dorion/. (Accessed 24 April 2024).

Scott, J. (2017). *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc7792k

Seedat, F. (2013a). When Islam and feminism converge. *Muslim World*, 103, 404–420. https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12022

Seedat, F. (2013b). Islam, feminism, and Islamic feminism: Between inadequacy and inevitability. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29(2), 25–45. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.29.2.25

Selby, J. A. (2014). Un/veiling women's bodies: Secularism and sexuality in full-face veil prohibitions in France and Quebec. *Studies in Religion / Sciences religieuse*s, 43(3), 439–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429814526150

Singh, J. (2015). Religious agency and the limits of intersectionality. *Hypatia*, 30(4), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12182

Taher, S. (2024). Les paroles des femmes musulmanes et les dénonciations du racisme sont-elles audibles? Analyse discursive des auditions publiques sur le projet de Loi sur la laïcité de l'État au Québec. *Politique et Sociétés*, 43(1). https://doi.org/10.7202/1108193ar

Thobani, S. (2021). *Contesting Islam, Constructing Race and Sexuality: The inordinate desire of the West*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350148123

Van Dijk, T. A. (1980). *Macrostructures: An interdisciplinary study of global structures in discourse, interaction, and cognition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Zine, J. (2004). Creating a critical faith-centered space for antiracist feminism: Reflections of a Muslim scholar-activist. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 20(2), 167–187. https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2004.20.2.167

Zoghlami, K. (2020). Qui peut témoigner? Présences indésirables et paroles sous surveillance, in L. Celis, D. Diabby, D. Leydet and V. Romani (eds), *Modération ou extrémisme? Regards critiques sur la loi 21* (pp. 195–207). Quebec City: Presses de l'Université Laval. https://doi.org/10.1515/9782763749754-014

Zoghlami, K. (2021). 'Centering [voices from] the margins': Negotiating intersectionality as a consultative framework, in C. Benoit-Barné and T. Martine (eds), *Speaking with One Voice*: *Multivocality and univocality in organizing* (pp. 153–177). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429297830-8

Citation: Taher, S. and Zoghlami, K. (2025). What is Holding Back Full Feminist Solidarity with Muslim Women? The Epistemic Failures of White Liberal Feminism. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 06. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16016


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 07
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Unveiling the Impacts of Islamic Regulations and the Limitations of Islamic Feminism: Experiences of Women from Iran

Marziyeh Riazi [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

In Iran, strict Islamic regulations significantly impact women's lives, imposing legal and social restrictions that limit personal freedoms and exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities. While Islamic feminism focuses on cultural and religious recognition, it may neglect pressing issues and exclude non-Muslim women. This qualitative study that included semi-structured interviews with fifteen Iranian women who had recently migrated to Australia and of diverse religious identities focussed on how gender dynamics in Iran contribute to gender (in)equality. The interview questions addressed various aspects, including personal backgrounds, family dynamics, societal treatment, cultural norms, and self-perceptions. The findings revealed that the compulsory hijab and other enforced traditions restricted freedoms, subjected women to scrutiny, and caused emotional distress. Societal judgment and lack of support further contributed to an environment where women felt unsafe and vulnerable to harassment. Importantly, this article applies an inclusive feminist theoretical framework (Zack, 2005) that transcends religious and cultural constraints, respecting both Islam and feminism. Through the women's experiences, this feminist approach is applied to understand and reveal the limitations that Islamic feminism can have for some Iranian women.

Keywords: inclusive feminism, Iranian women, women's rights, Islamic Feminism, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Following Mahsa Jina Amini's death in 2022 in the custody of the 'morality police' in Tehran due to her improper hijab, Iranian cities experienced daily anti-government protests by young women and men. The protests snowballed, leading to waves of demonstrations in approximately 160 cities, with participants chanting anti-regime slogans (Darvishi, 2023). The government responded with violence and brutality, leading to an estimated 500 demonstrators being killed and more than 15,000 people being arrested. Iranian women globally united in solidarity, marching on the streets (Khatam, 2023). The sight of women within Iran, unveiled and at the forefront of these protests, burning their headscarves, alongside Iranian women abroad without an Islamic hijab, exhibiting secular attire, challenged global perceptions of Muslim women. The protestors rallied behind the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' (Dabiri, 2023; Rouhi, 2022), which emphasised the importance of women's rights at the core of human existence and liberty. They also voiced their opposition to the Islamic government through other slogans like 'Death to the Dictator' and 'Down with Khamenei' (Khatam, 2023).

In February 2023, a group of independent Iranian trade unions, feminist organisations, and student groups released a 12-point manifesto that expanded upon and defined the significance of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement. Their manifesto aimed to put an end to oppression, discrimination, tyranny, and dictatorship (*Iran Wire*, 2023). In a show of solidarity with this movement, the 2023 Simone de Beauvoir Prize, an esteemed international award that recognises women's rights, was awarded to Iranian women. This was the second time the prize had been granted to Iranian women, with the first occasion occurring in 2009 when it was awarded to the 'One Million Signatures' campaign. This earlier campaign, led by the women's rights movement in Iran, challenged discriminatory laws in the country and demanded reform (Sameh, 2019). Despite these campaigns and movements, within Iran, feminism is still depicted as the paradigmatic representation of indulgent Western imperialist beliefs, and as ostensibly incongruous with Islamic values (Asadi Zeidabadi and Aghtaie, 2023).

The history of women's rights activities in Iran can be traced back to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1908 which led to the transfer of power to Parliament. This marked the start of modernisation in Iran.

[1] *University of Tasmania*, AUSTRALIA
***Corresponding Author:** marziyeh.riazi@utas.edu.au

However, when women were initially denied the right to vote, feminist associations emerged and advocated for women's rights, leading to the rise of a feminist discourse among urban, middle, and upper-class women critiquing gender discrimination, including the exclusion of women from political life (Badran, 2005). Then, between 1962 and 1978, as part of Mohammad Reza Shah's White Revolution, Iranian women gained new rights such as the right to vote, permission to occupy public office, an expansion of divorce and custody rights and reduced polygamy (Najmabadi, 1991; Welslau, 2023). However, the subsequent Islamic Revolution in 1979 brought in limitations on women's social and political activities. The new government viewed women as responsible for the moral health of the country and imposed strict dress codes and segregation (Najmabadi, 1991). Critics have argued that women's rights have been significantly diminished since the revolution, with discriminatory laws and practices persisting (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Kar, 2007; Moghadam, 1992).

Islamic feminism emerged in response to conservative views and has aimed to interpret Islam in a way that benefits women (Ahmadi, 2006). For example, Islamic feminists advocated for reinterpreting Sharia law to promote gender equality in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. They argued that true Islam supports women's egalitarian status in the family and society and their education and employment opportunities (Moghadam, 2002). However, after the formation of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the Islamic code of behaviour was enforced in schools, universities, and workplaces, mandating wearing of the hijab by women and restriction of cosmetic use. For instance, female students may be denied entry if wearing makeup and be asked to remove it (Golkar, 2016). Additionally, studies (Foroutan, 2019; Paivandi, 2012) on gender socialisation in Iranian primary school textbooks reveal a notable bias favouring males, with females having limited representation in work settings. Fathers are depicted as primary providers, while mothers' employment roles are acknowledged but minimised (Foroutan, 2019). Furthermore, in common with other Middle Eastern nations, feminism is stigmatised as a Western and dangerous ideology, deemed detrimental to traditional family values and gender relations. This led to arrests and propaganda against activists, prompting many women to eschew the feminist label for fear of imprisonment (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). Consequently, Islamic feminism, though the only acceptable form of feminism in Iran, is not meeting all of Iranian women's needs.

In this article, I use inclusive feminism as a theoretical framework to argue that the imposition of fundamental Islamic principles negatively impacts the everyday lives of Iranian women, particularly in relation to the consequences of speaking up. While Islamic feminism seeks to improve conditions for women, it remains bound to a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings (Moghissi, 2011). Not all women in Iran are Muslim. To ensure that all women's voices - not solely those of Muslim women - are heard, there is a necessity for research that shares the perspectives of Iranian women from the diversity of religious positionings that exist.

To do this, I will draw on the work of Naomi Zack (2005)[1] to underpin how inclusive feminism is understood and applied in my research. According to Zack, feminism should not be anchored in specific identities within womanhood, as womanhood itself is an overarching relational concept that encompasses all women (Zack, 2005, 2007, 2018). She suggests three essential criteria for defining womanhood within the framework of inclusive feminism: the definition must be applicable to all women as they exist or can be conceived; it must align with the goal of feminist critical theory, which aims to enhance the lives of women; and it must effectively bridge the gap between language, theory, and the real-world issues faced by women (Zack, 2007: 203). Zack posits that what unites women is not a shared identity but rather a shared relationality, which inadvertently (or perhaps directly and purposefully) challenges strands of feminism that focus on identity positions, Islamic feminism included (Zack, 2007). In relation to the Iranian context, I discuss how applying inclusive feminism can address diverse women's realities, align feminist theory with enhancing women's lives, and bridge theoretical insights with practical challenges.

The next sections are structured as follows: 'Feminism in Iran' provides historical and contemporary context for women's activism in Iran from the early 20th century to Reza Shah Pahlavi's reforms promoting women's roles and contrasted with the post-1979 Islamic Revolution's imposition of the compulsory hijab and the emergence of Islamic feminism amidst critiques of its inclusivity. 'Methodology' details my qualitative research approach. 'Findings' presents the research results on Iranian women's lived experiences, and 'Discussion' analyses these findings from the perspectives of Islamic feminism and an inclusive feminism framework. Finally, the 'Conclusion' summarises key insights.

[1] Although Zack's work originates from a U.S. context, it is applicable to Iran, as my study shows that Iranian women are diverse beyond their global Muslim perception. Integrating Zack's inclusive approach allows for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of Iranian women.

FEMINISM IN IRAN

Women's activism in Iran dates to earlier movements such as the Tobacco Protest (1890) and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 during the Qajar dynasty (Moghissi, 2008). In the subsequent dynasty, Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi shah (1925-1941), drew ideas of secular nationalism from Turkish leader Ataturk and proposed that women should be involved in the construction of the new state bureaucracy, be granted access to education and employment opportunities, and abandon traditional clothing such as the veil. The Pahlavi shahs, particularly Mohammad Reza, introduced reforms that granted women voting rights, participation in public office, and enhanced legal protections, albeit with state control (Afary, 2009; Najmabadi, 1991). Notable figures like Farrokhroo Parsa and Mahnaz Afkhami played crucial roles in advocating for women's rights through secular and nationalist feminist strategies in Iran during the 1970s (Afkhami, 2022). However, state suppression of opposition under the Pahlavi dynasty fuelled conservative religious mobilisation, which curtailed women's movements, contributing to the downfall of the Shah (Moghissi, 2008). In response, a significant political shift took place that led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. It was driven by the concept of '*Gharbzadegi*,' or 'Westoxification,' popularised by Ahmad (2000)[2] which portrayed women embracing Western styles as symbols of cultural erosion (Najmabadi, 1998).

In fact, Iranian women with diverse motivations played significant roles in establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moghissi (2016) has categorised them into three groups: marginalised working women seeking pragmatic gains; urban middle-class women resisting modernising policies while advocating gender-based labour divisions; and educated young women gravitating towards socialist or Islamic-Marxist ideologies or radical Shi'ism. Throughout the Islamic Revolution, a perspective emerged that idealised women as devoted mothers and submissive wives. This resulted in curbing their social and political roles. The imposition of the compulsory hijab underscored this transformation, diminishing women's individuality and reinforcing a new conservative identity under theocratic rule (Behrouzan, 2005; Nafisi, 2008; Toolo and Shakibaee, 2000). Patriarchy in Iran, deeply rooted in culture, has been further reinforced by post-1979 Revolution Islamic governmental traditions based on Sharia law. These traditions view women as dependents requiring male control and state protection. Despite constitutional claims, women legally remain second-class citizens (Asadi Zeidabadi and Aghtaie, 2023).

Many women, both secularist and religiously oriented, became increasingly alarmed by the conservative interpretation of Islam propagated by the Islamist movement, prompting them to advocate for a progressive Islamic approach (Badran, 2005). Iranian women activists faced challenges balancing loyalty to the state and advocating for women's rights amid government pressure, arrest, and imprisonment. Prevailing authoritarianism hindered effective strategies, leading to the adoption of non-confrontational and reform-oriented approaches (Tohidi, 2016). Islamic feminism, as a concept, found currency in the mid-1990s and it was used to distinguish a brand of feminism or the activities of Muslim women seeking to reform, in women's favour, social practices and legal provisions that rule Muslim societies (Moghissi, 2011). While other types of feminists faced repression, Islamic feminism as a response to theocratic governance aimed to reinterpret religious teachings for women's rights, merged faith and gender empowerment.

Islamic feminism critiqued the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran and called for a re-evaluation. It advocated for women's rights within the framework of religion, and aimed to work within the Islamic regime (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). Islamic feminism highlighted the outcomes and implications of patriarchy and its influence and effect on society (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). It supported egalitarian principles in gender relations and rejected the notion of equality based on the understanding of complementary gender roles (Badran, 2013).

Although some aspects of women's lives, such as literacy levels, have improved due to the efforts of Islamic feminists, the regime's values still restrict women's roles and discourages women's activities outside the home. Strategies like the compulsory hijab and early retirement policies reduced women's participation in the workforce and in the public sphere generally (Hoodfar, 1994; Hoominfar and Zanganeh, 2021). Critics of Islamic feminism (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Moghissi, 2011) argue it avoids addressing oppressive gender practices and discourages critical analysis of Sharia-based reforms. They contend that the promotion of Islamic feminism limits diverse voices and strategies, prioritising only those aligned with an Islamic framework, thus restricting authentic representation of women's agency in Muslim cultures (Moghissi, 2011). Despite the efforts of Islamic feminists in Iran, they have not been successful enough to negate the needs of many Iranian women. Since the emergence of the Islamic Revolution, there has been an irregular series of protest movements and campaigns since the late 1970s (Afary, 2009; Hashemi, 2018).

[2] Jalal Al-e-Ahmad was a notable Iranian novelist, short-story writer, translator, philosopher, and socio-political critic, also known for his work as a sociologist and anthropologist. His book titled *Gharbzadegi* was published in Farsi in Iran in 1962. The version cited here is its translation, published in the year 2000.

Table 1. An overview of the diverse backgrounds of the research participants

No	Pseudonym	Religion	Marital status and visa type upon departure from Iran	Year of arrival	Age at the time of interview
1	Ahoo	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2016	30s
2	Azadeh	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2018	40s
3	Ayda	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2017	30s
4	Arezoo	Non-religious	Single (student visa)	2006	40s
5	Banafsheh	Non-religious	Married (skilled visa)	2019	30s
6	Bita	Non-religious	Married (skilled visa)	2019	30s
7	Samira	Non-religious	Married (partner visa)	2015	40s
8	Salumeh	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2017	50s
9	Sima	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2016	40s
10	Sarvenaz	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2019	40s
11	Sudabeh	Muslim	Married (partner visa)	2020	40s
12	Sona	Non-religious	Married (partner visa)	2010	30s
13	Darya	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2000	60s
14	Dorsa	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2019	40s
15	Delara	Bahá'í	Married (refugee)	2005	70s

Using an inclusive feminist framing allows an examination of potential limitations of Islamic feminism in addressing the complex and varied experiences of women in Iran. While Islamic feminism seeks to reconcile Islamic principles with feminist ideals by interpreting Islamic teachings in a more women-friendly way, this focus can overlook the everyday needs of women, particularly those who do not fit within the Islamic faith (Afary and Anderson. 2023; Rouhi, 2022). In Iran, strict Islamic regulations significantly impact all women's lives, creating legal and social restrictions that limit personal freedoms and exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities (Rouhi, 2022). By focusing primarily on cultural and religious recognition, Islamic feminism may neglect these pressing issues, excluding women who do not identify as Muslim and who lack freedom and support. In Iran, mostly Muslims, especially Shia Muslims, have privileges, while those identifying as non-religious face persecution (Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). 'Apostasy' is, in principle, punishable by death in Iran (Nixon, 2020). Consequently, individuals who speak against Islamic principles may face discrimination or harassment under the guise of Islam (Bielefeldt, 2016). My study is significant as Iranian women from diverse backgrounds shared their experiences openly. Situated in Australia, participants felt safe to express themselves more freely. By amplifying these voices, my research enriches understandings of gender dynamics in Iran, contributing to the advancement of gender equality and social justice.

METHODOLOGY

My study employs a qualitative research approach rooted in the interpretivist paradigm (Angen, 2000) and informed by feminist qualitative research traditions (Harding, 2007; Olesen, 2011). The chosen methodology aims to elucidate the nuanced experiences of individuals within specific socio-religious contexts. This article is framed by two research questions:

1. How does living in a Muslim-governed country influence the personal and social lives of Iranian women?
2. To what extent has Islamic feminism been effective in supporting Iranian women's needs?

Fifteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in 2021. These interviews, lasting between 60 to 120 minutes, took place in person, at times convenient for participants and were audio recorded with their consent. I conducted the interviews in Farsi, the participants' native language, which was crucial for effective communication and enabled them to express their thoughts and feelings with clarity and precision (Maydell, 2010). Participants were recruited in collaboration with local community organisations to ensure cultural sensitivity and to leverage trusted intermediaries. Recruitment involved disseminating information via emails and at various cultural events hosted by these organisations. Interested individuals contacted me directly to discuss their potential involvement. Eligible participants were Iranian women over 18 years old who had resided in Australia for over two years and were currently based in Tasmania. In my study, the participants were divided into two main groups: humanitarian visa refugees, and migrants. The humanitarian visa group comprised of Iranian Bahá'í refugees who had fled their home country due to religious persecution. The migrant group consisted of three subgroups: students, skilled workers, and wives of the skilled or student visa applicants (entering the country on a Partner visa). Participants had diverse religious viewpoints, including non-religious individuals, Muslims who did not wear hijabs, and conservative Bahá'ís. **Table 1** provides an overview of the diverse backgrounds of the research participants within the study context. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.

Thematic analysis, following Knott *et al.* (2022), was employed for analysing the interviews. First, all the interview transcripts were read before initial coding was undertaken to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. The first round of coding focused on identifying descriptive themes based on common experiences among participants, such as the compulsory hijab, having sexual relationships with boyfriends, and gender discrimination. The second round of coding involved an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts and critically engaging with emerging themes relating to participants' emotional experiences of everyday practices. This allowed for a nuanced exploration of the research questions, which are presented in the following sections. To ensure the accuracy and credibility of my findings, member checking was employed, where participants reviewed the interpretations drawn from their interviews. I demonstrated credibility through member checking, and authentic engagement with participants, ensuring confidence in the 'truth' of my findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Stahl and King, 2020). After each interview, participants were informed that they could access free counselling by the university for debriefing as needed. I also found that scheduling dedicated time for reflection and journaling after data collection was beneficial for exploring my thoughts and feelings before conducting the next interview. By providing rich, thick descriptions of Iranian women's experiences, the research allowed for transferability, whereby my findings offer insights that may be relevant to similar socio-religious contexts with comparable oppressive regimes for women. The study's dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of the research process, allowing replication of methods by other researchers under similar conditions. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining a clear audit trail and using reflexive practices, ensuring that my findings were shaped by the respondents' perspectives rather than by researcher bias or interests. My study[3] has received ethics approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: 21783).

My lived experience as an Iranian woman in Australia informed the research design. Being fluent in both Farsi and English facilitated my investigation. As an 'insider' (Watts, 2006) sharing an identity with my participants, I could see from their perspectives. Embracing reflexivity and feminist standpoint theory, I aimed for genuine engagement with the data (Knott *et al.*, 2022) and awareness of how positionality can shape the research process and outcomes.

In what follows, I present themes related to the emotional impacts experienced by participants of living in an Islamic-governed country. Themes include experiences of guilt, fear, anxiety, and worry caused by the enforcement of Islamic rules on women; experiences of safety in public spaces and pervasive everyday harassment; experiences of anxiety, shame and stress as a consequence of stigma around premarital sex; and experiences of resentment, fear and isolation associated with needing to suppress individual identity due to dress codes, alongside concealment of relationships and feminist views. I then move on to the discussion section where I apply an inclusive feminist lens to reveal the limitations of Islamic feminism in advancing progress in Iran for women.

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF ENFORCING ISLAMIC RULES

The enforcement of Islamic rules on the women profoundly shaped their emotional experiences. My findings revealed significant government efforts for citizens to internalise Islamic regulations from a young age, with children learning Islamic values in their families and having them reinforced in the education system. In many conservative Muslim families, children are compelled by their parents to practice Islam, with religious duties obligatory for women from the age of nine (Nashat, 2021). For example, Ahoo explained that, as her parents had full-time jobs when she was a child, she spent quite a lot of time with her aunt's family who were living upstairs. They were a conservative Muslim family, and they forced her to dress in alignment with Islamic requirements. In her interview, Ahoo questioned the forced practices at home, wondering why she was compelled to wake up early to pray or fast. At eight years old, she recounted experiencing feelings of guilt and fear, believing that not adhering to these practices would make God stop loving her and lead her to hell.

> I remember for a while I didn't want to pray at all. I gave up. I said that I didn't understand why I had to pray. I didn't pray. Or when my hair was out of the scarf, I felt so guilty. I felt that now God doesn't love me anymore, it's over, and I'm going to hell. I was 8 years old and still under religious duty-bound age in Islam.

These teachings were also reinforced in school settings. Female students, for example, were required to follow the Islamic dress code and participate in school prayers. Participants mentioned that school staff valued students who practiced Islam in addition to their regular studies. Ayda, from a Muslim family that did not practice Islam at home,

[3] My study is part of my PhD research project, which I began in 2020 in the field of Sociology at the University of Tasmania and completed on August 15, 2024.

shared her feelings about being at school and compared herself to peers who could memorise the Quran. This made her feel inadequate, even though she did not value it. She said, 'I used to think to myself that maybe I'm not smart.' Another participant, Azadeh, came from a similar family. She had not learned how to pray at home and worried that school staff would find out, which embarrassed her. She recounted her teacher telling the class, 'If you don't have a hijab, they will hang you from your hair in hell, and your hair will look like a snake.' She imagined her hair turning into a snake with horror – terrifying images of the consequences of not following the Islamic religion.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches progressive revelation, emphasising unity of God, humanity, and religion, alongside equality of men and women, science-religion harmony, and community (Lawson, 2012). Bahá'í believers are persecuted in Iran primarily due to their adherence to a faith that diverges from the dominant Shia Islam and challenges the religion of the state (Asim, 2023). Iran's Supreme Leader has labelled Bahá'ís as unbelievers and ritually impure, leading to severe persecution. Bahá'ís are barred from public schools, universities, and government jobs (Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2021). Dorsa recalls her high school principal's abusive behaviour:

> She would take me to the office and start swearing at me because I was a Bahá'í. Or she would say to my friends, 'Why are you friends with her? They are unclean.' My friends used to come and tell me. I was upset, but there was nothing we could do.

Participants highlighted the emotional impact of enforced Islamic rules on them in Iran, emphasising how deviations from social norms in public places lead to public judgment, disturbing women's privacy, and peace of mind. Samira recounted an incident on a bus when she was 19 years old, in her hometown. A woman in a chador[4] accused her of seducing husbands of other women because of her attire. 'She said 'What is this scarf (you are wearing)? Half of your hair is out. Don't you have parents?!' Terrified by the judgmental stares, Samira got off the bus and went home in tears, resolving never to return to that city. This experience highlights the severe emotional consequences the women faced due to societal enforcement of Islamic dress codes. Similarly, Banafsheh discussed the mental health impact of constant harassment in public spaces, stating, 'When I was in Iran, being a woman was very restrictive for me. You could easily feel that you're a second-class citizen.' She described the continuous self-consciousness and vigilance required to navigate public spaces. 'Sometimes, when I was walking somewhere, I would imagine to myself, "If I were a man, how would I feel walking in this alley? If I were a man, it would be as if the streets and the alleys belonged to me. As a woman, you must be vigilant when you walk."' These experiences shed light on the pervasive anxiety and restriction the women faced under these social and religious norms.

SECURITY AND HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC PLACES

Of significance for participants, were their experiences of security and harassment in everyday public places. My findings revealed daily harassment in the streets of Iran was a common experience for participants, ranging from being stared at or catcalled, to private cars stopping to pick them up, and even instances of sexual assault.

> Once I was coming back home from school. I was on the footbridge. A man jumped over me and grabbed my breast. I almost fell off the bridge. I fainted. I couldn't do anything, and he wouldn't let me go. (Bita)

Several participants expressed that they could not speak up for fear of being judged, accused of creating the situation, or shamed by the public. They believed that this reluctance stemmed from a pervasive notion that women are to blame for the harassment they receive on the streets based on their dress or actions. Consequently, they often endured the abuse in silence, feeling embarrassed and helpless. Arezoo shared an incident illustrating this issue: 'Once, I was sitting in a taxi and a man sitting next to me was leaning a lot against me. I was very uncomfortable. I told him, "Dear sir, could I ask you to sit properly?"' Arezoo noted that such confrontations are rare because frequently reacting to such behaviour would require women getting angry multiple times a day. Some participants believed that separation between genders and the stigma that has been attached to sexual relationships has encouraged men to be more sexually aggressive towards women. They said that in Iran, many men allow themselves to behave as they wish without considering women's permission or feelings. Participants found this behaviour very disrespectful. My findings show that the uncontrolled freedom of men and the exclusion of women from public spaces have created a dangerous and unsafe environment for women, which aligns with the findings of Chubin (2014). Ahoo, who said her father would follow her on the way to school, believed that he was protecting

[4] In Iran, the national outfits are known as *Chador* and *Manto*. *Chador* is a large black piece of cloth covering the entire body, leaving only the face exposed, while a *Manto* is a coat-like garment covering the upper body, requiring pants or a long skirt and a headscarf to complete the ensemble.

her from boys. Samira told a similar story about her father who was worried and always would pick her up from school. Darya believed that it was the right decision for parents to protect their daughters from men.

STIGMA AROUND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Islamic governance could be felt in private spaces too. Participants highlighted the significance of virginity for men in Iran, noting the societal pressure for women to remain virgins until marriage (Yavari, 2024). Despite some not believing in its importance, the demand for virginity certificates in conservative families added stress, leading some of the women to resort to illegal procedures to restore their virginity. One participant expressed her fear of societal judgment regarding her sexual history and its impact on her marriage prospects:

> You have this fear, what if I want to get married? My friend used to say, 'What if the groom's family asks you for a virginity certificate.' I would say that I will marry a man who accepts this. They would say 'No, what if his family doesn't accept.' I'd say that well, if he doesn't want me, he won't marry me. They would say 'What if your mum and dad find out?' (Ahoo)

In Iran, where virginity is highly valued, violating this norm can lead to severe consequences such as honour killings (Heydari *et al.*, 2021). Premarital relationships brought mental challenges because of the need to conceal them, along with the fear of societal repercussions if discovered. Some of the research participants experienced significant concerns and stress while involved in these relationships. In addition to having to deal with the consequences of losing their virginity, which can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt and regret, they had to bear the stress of hiding their relationship status so that no one found out or reported them to the police.

> When I wanted to bring my boyfriend to my house, I was afraid that neighbours might report or call the security forces. When I would pick him up in my car, I would cover him with a blanket until we'd reach my apartment. He would get into my place like a smuggled cargo. … all of this gives you stress. (Azadeh)

The stigma surrounding intimate relationships, particularly regarding the importance placed on virginity, presented considerable distress for the women while living in Iranian society. This societal pressure induced anxiety and fear especially among those who engaged in sexual activity prior to marriage which compelled them to conceal their true selves.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND BELIEF SUPPRESSION

Most of the participants expressed that the enforcement of traditional gender and religious norms, as well as the consequences of not complying with them, caused them to adopt personas that did not reflect their true selves, akin to wearing a mask to conceal their identity. Arezoo, for example, grappled with the conflict between her desire for self-expression and the fear of her father's violent reaction upon discovering her secret boyfriend.

> I had sex with my boyfriend and my father would've had a stroke if he had known. Its consequence could be so horrible that I couldn't imagine what would happen. This is a terrible risk, and you live with and learn how to handle it. The anxiety never ends. Very hard. Very unpleasant.

Concealing her relationship felt like compromising her identity, yet the potential danger outweighed her personal freedom. She stated: 'I couldn't be 100% of myself for sure, either as a woman or as a human being.' The pressure on women in relationships was immense due to societal norms and legal constraints, restricting their ability to openly pursue healthy relationships. According to Arezoo, navigating this societal pressure required maintaining a facade of singleness while being in a relationship, leading to a sense of hypocrisy and the constant anxiety of being discovered.

The interviews also revealed how the mandatory Islamic regulations created a complex interplay between personal desire and societal expectations. For example, participants highlighted that they could dress up in the way that they like, but suggested that they dressed in a way that would not cause them trouble. They often felt they were restricted in showing their identity. For example, Arezoo shared her desire to wear brightly coloured *mantos*, though noted the risks for doing so:

> Me and many other women like me knew that wearing this style has consequences. You will be annoyed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basijs (who are subordinate to and receive their orders from the IRGC and the Supreme Leader of Iran), or in the streets, by men who call you

> with unpleasant titles. However, you are a woman, and you want to wear whatever you like, everyone love freedom, so, you buy it and wear it.

She went on to express the continued psychological diligence that was needed for this 'silent war'. Here, it can be observed how women constantly navigated the balance between protecting themselves and the desire to be themselves. Despite all the efforts of the Islamic government to repress women and to prevent the spread of feminist ideas by censoring media and books, some participants read feminist writers' books which stirred them to resist the daily sexism or misogyny described above. They drew motivation from feminist writers and figures and viewed these women as role models for standing up against oppressive societal norms and customs. Azadeh explained, 'I was inspired by writers like Oriana Fallaci and Simone de Beauvoir. I loved independent women very much.'

Several participants experienced Islamic laws as oppressive and discriminatory, viewing them as a source of humiliation that further entrenched gender inequality. They highlighted laws such as blood money,[5] which allows for a lighter penalty in cases of honour killings, and inheritance, which grants daughters only half the inheritance that sons receive (Moghadam, 2013). Additionally, family laws like child custody laws, which immediately grant children to the father upon divorce, were seen as particularly problematic.

> Hearing the news of the murders is painful. It's very painful for a woman. Why (do these murders happen)? Because we are a woman? We happen to have a lot more endurance than men. Unfortunately, the Islamic Republic of Iran is making a big difference (between women and men). Our law discriminates against women. There is no equal right at all, and this is painful. (Sima)

Participants stated that expressing antireligious ideas or criticising the government could result in losing their job, imprisonment, or even risking one's life (Manocha and Tahzib, 2018; Partow *et al.*, 2023). Due to this fear, the women hid their beliefs, censored themselves, and pretended to adhere to religious practices. Women, in particular, are forced to hide their beliefs to avoid judgment from family and society or to maintain job security. Banafshe explained:

> What I used to hide most of the time in Iran was that I'm not a religious person and I don't like Islam. I'm not interested in religion. I wouldn't say this. I was ashamed living in a country where authorities were so misogynist and didn't care about human rights, but you had to hide it and said you were okay.

One of the participants, who did not like to lie about her personality and beliefs, tried to isolate herself to avoid exposure to society and pretending to be a good Muslim woman. She also felt unwelcome in that society and was scared to join it.

> I wasn't engaged so much in society. I think I kept myself deliberately a little bit away from society. I didn't really want to be a member of that society because I think they wouldn't accept me. They don't like such a woman. I was almost isolated in some way. (Ayda)

Samira who had been working in Tehran believed that women should be careful about the topics they discuss in the workplace. They could not talk about women's rights, and they had to hide their beliefs. For her, it was like hiding part of her identity, and if she did not, she might lose her job.

> In a more private situation, you can talk, but in public, especially if there are some religious people, you are not comfortable because you might lose your job. You have no job security. You could not talk about politics, government, women's clothing, and freedom. The differences between men and women were applied, but you should have thought that there was no difference. Everything that the Islamic society didn't accept was taboo. You should be aware that at work with your colleagues you must pretend that you're not who you are, otherwise, they may report you, this happens a lot.

Many participants expressed that they felt trapped in a 'cage' in Iran, denied freedom of thought and expression. They believed education provided them with a pathway to escape and to live a life free from imposed limitations and restrictions. As Azadeh expressed, 'In Iran, I was always thinking of escaping. I wanted to be free. I felt like I was in a cage. I saw myself in a cage, a big cage called Iran.' The pressure on participants in Iran became unbearable, leading them to contemplate fleeing the country. Despite their university education and potential for contributing to the country's development, they felt restricted and longed for a freedom and action that they believed could only be found elsewhere.

5 The amount of 'blood-money' payable to the family of a murdered woman is half the amount that is payable to the family of a murdered man.

DISCUSSION

In the light of the women's experiences, I discuss how inclusive feminism can be applied to participants' experiences drawing Zack's (2007) three points as outlined above. First, Zack (2007) stated, womanhood—or inclusive feminism in this instance—must be applicable to all women. My findings demonstrate that Islamic practices were enforced, and those who did not comply were punished from a young age in schools or families. The structuring of Islamic teachings in children's lives is observed elsewhere with Naz *et al.* (2023) identifying how curriculum textbooks in Pakistan, a similarly fundamentalist Muslim-governed country to Iran, strategically shape gender identities by emphasising traditional gender roles, portraying women young and old mainly as caregivers confined to domestic spaces and clad according to Islamic dress codes. Based on this experience, on the one hand, an inclusive feminism appears necessary to ensure that all women's voices and perspectives are acknowledged and valued in the pursuit of gender equality, not only those of Muslim women. On the other hand, my findings showed that enforced adherence to Islamic norms suppressed diverse beliefs and feminist ideas.

Women's rights activists who label themselves feminists are often associated with Western ideologies by conservative Muslims (Asadi Zeidabadi, 2023). While Western interpretations of feminism are not accepted in Iran, Islamic feminism has gained some traction. For example, Mir-Hosseini (2011), a self-proclaimed Islamic feminist works within the Iranian system and interprets Islamic Sharia in favour of women. Yet, my research revealed that there are women in Iran who are not Muslim and do not wish to adhere to Islamic rules, preferring to make their own choices. The experiences documented in this study reveal the limited capacity of an identity-based feminism (Zack, 2020) to empower and advocate on behalf of all Iranian women. A broader feminist discourse that acknowledges and respects the plurality of women's identities is needed (Zack, 2005, 2007). An inclusive feminism in Iran would provide a more comprehensive platform for advancing gender equality, accommodating varied cultural and religious interpretations, and promoting women's agency beyond the confines of traditional religious paradigms. This approach is essential for fostering genuine societal transformation and empowering women to assert their rights and aspirations freely.

According to Zack (2007) an inclusive feminism must align with the objectives of feminist critical theory, which seeks to enhance the lives of women by providing tools to scrutinise and dismantle patriarchal systems, thereby fostering greater social and economic equity. My findings revealed that the ideology and policies of sex segregation and enforced Islamic dress codes, significant to the Islamic regime of Iran (Tohidi, 2016), have profoundly impacted participants' well-being and their integration into society throughout their lives. By grounding its definition of women in the real world and the practical problems they face, inclusive feminism seeks to address the diverse experiences and challenges encountered by women through a more comprehensive and realistic approach (Zack, 2007). Embracing an inclusive feminism can empower Iranian women by validating their experiences and advocating for their rights, thereby enhancing their lives and well-being. For instance, it can promote legal reforms that protect both secular and religious women from discrimination, ensuring their stories and needs shape policies, fostering solidarity and a comprehensive approach to gender equality.

Finally, inclusive feminism (Zack, 2007) must effectively bridge the gap between language, theory, and the real-world issues faced by women. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2005), when opposing gender segregation, emphasised that the Islamic Republic's policies spurred an indigenous feminist consciousness among women, legitimising previously suppressed awareness. Women began using terms like 'male dominance' and 'patriarchy' to challenge their experiences of sexism and misogyny and confront the status quo (Mir-Hosseini, 2005). This illustrates how theoretical concepts such as gender segregation, when applied to Iranian lives, contradicted the reality for some women and challenged their experiences of oppression and inequality. Participants in my study endured unwanted advances and assaults in public, undermining their autonomy and dignity, perceiving themselves to be objects of (unwanted) male desire. Contrary to the argument by some Islamic feminists that the hijab protects women from objectification (Abbas, 2023), my research revealed that neither the Islamic dress code nor sex segregation shielded women from harassment but left them feeling like sexual objects despite wearing the full hijab, a finding similarly reported in other studies conducted in Iran, such as Chubin (2014). These examples demonstrate how theoretical debates about the hijab in Islamic contexts are directly challenged by empirical evidence of women's lived experiences of harassment and objectification.

Premarital activities provide another example that illustrates the gap between Islamic theories and some women's lives in the real world in Iran, which inclusive feminism can address by bridging this gap. Evidence from my study and others (Afary, 2009; Motamedi *et al.*, 2016; Salehi *et al.*, 2020) indicates that although the social and physical interactions between men and women before marriage are restricted by Iran's sexual code, Iranians are involved in such interactions. For instance, research participants in Salehi *et al.* (2020) expressed concerns about public health and advocated for the right to choose relationships freely. They highlighted the increasing trend of 'white wedding' and the need for societal acceptance of sexual relationships as a basic right. Yet, some Islamic

feminists argue that Islam perceives male-female relationships as inherently sexual and advocates for controlling women's perceived sexual power through veiling (Moghadam, 2002).

Due to all the restrictions and harsh consequences, participants had to conceal their true identities and live double lives. These findings are reminiscent of Zack's (2007) critique of intersectionality, which claims a splintering of feminism based on various markers of identity (including race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ableness, and age) shifts attention away from the real-world problems faced by women. Iranian women, according to Salehi *et al.*'s (2020) study, learned to adopt multiple identities from a young age to conform to societal expectations which negatively impacted their quality of life. My study's participants insisted to me that they were more than the sum of their parts; they were multiple, complex beings all of the time, which shows the need for a feminism inclusive of and addressing the diversity of experiences and identities that exist and how these are situated within social structures that have structuring effects on equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The combination of Islamic-inspired legislation and patriarchal culture in Iran had a significant impact on the personal and social life of Iranian women that I interviewed. The forced imposition of specific Islamic traditions and laws, such as the compulsory hijab restricted women's freedom, subjected them to constant scrutiny, and caused emotional distress. The lack of support for women in speaking up and the societal judgment they faced further contributed to an insecure society where women felt unsafe and vulnerable to harassment and assault. My findings revealed that many participants were critical of the ways in which the patriarchal interpretation of Islam perpetuated gender inequalities. This led to a disparity between constitutional provisions, such as Sharia-based family law, and women's lived experiences. Whether aware of Western feminist debates or not, these women rejected patriarchal ideologies and instead desired gender equality.

While my research predates the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement in Iran, the recent protests have highlighted the contradictions between women's everyday lives and the Islamic laws that govern them. These events have ignited a renewed conversation about the relationship between Islam and feminism, a complex and multifaceted topic. It is crucial to approach this topic with careful consideration, acknowledging the various interpretations and practices within Islam and the diversity within the feminist movement. Many Islamic feminists (Ahmed, 2021; Mir-Hosseini, 2006) argue that Islam, at its core, promotes justice, equality, and the dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender. They contend that it is the misinterpretation of religious texts and the imposition of patriarchal cultural practices that have led to the subjugation of women. However, both my findings, derived from firsthand accounts from Iranian women, and evidence gleaned from existing literature (Afary and Anderson, 2023; Moghissi, 2011; Tohidi, 2016) show that Islamic feminism cannot alone attend to the diverse needs and lived experiences of women in Iran and Muslim-majority nations.

Moving forward with only Islamic feminism stifles exploration of alternative voices and strategies within cultural contexts of countries like Iran. Prioritising Islamic feminism marginalises other perspectives, and limits women's agency to those aligned with Islamic frameworks. By sharing hidden layers of women's lives in Iran, my research has highlighted the need for an inclusive feminist discourse that transcends religious and cultural constraints. In Iran's context, inclusive feminism should extend its relevance to encompass all women, including non-Muslims, in their diverse realities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the University of Tasmania for the research stipend that they provided for my PhD candidature.

REFERENCES

Abbas, S. Z. (2023). The veil: A silhouette of autonomy and empowerment. *Culture and Psychology*, 29(2), 247–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X221115852

Afary, J. (2009). *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815249

Afary, J. and Anderson, K. B. (2023). Woman, Life, Freedom: The origins of the uprising in Iran. *Dissent*, 70(1), 82–98. https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2023.0032

Afkhami, M. (2022). *The Other Side of Silence: A memoir of exile, Iran, and the global women's movement*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469669991.001.0001

Ahmad, J. A. (2000). Westoxication, in M. Moaddel and K. Talattof (eds), *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam: A reader* (pp. 343–357). New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-09848-1_33
Ahmadi, F. (2006). Islamic feminism in Iran: Feminism in a new Islamic context. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22(2), 33–53. https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2006.22.2.33
Ahmed, L. (2021). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300258172
Angen, M. J. (2000). Evaluating interpretive inquiry: Reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialogue. *Qualitative Health Research*, 10(3), 378–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973230001000308
Asadi Zeidabadi, P. (2023). Political identity: Feminists and feminism in Iran. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 30(12), 1712–1732. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2118240
Asadi Zeidabadi, P. and Aghtaie, N. (2023). The perspectives of Iranian feminists and women activists on gender equality in Iran. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 52(1), 20–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2225895
Asim, M. (2023). Iranian constitution under pro-center dogmatic authoritarianism and pro-Persian cosmopolitanism, and its impacts on ethno-sectarian and ethno-linguistic minorities, in S. B. Hosseini (ed), *Ethnic Religious Minorities in Iran* (pp. 13–44). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1633-5_2
Badran, M. (2005). Between secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1(1), 6–28. https://doi.org/10.2979/MEW.2005.1.1.6
Badran, M. (2013). *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. London: Simon and Schuster.
Behrouzan, O. (2005). Homeless mind: The fate of Persian identity in exile. *The Discourse of Sociological Practice*, 7(1/2), 275–294.
Bielefeldt, H. (2016). Religious freedom: A disputed human right. *Concilium*, (4), 37–47.
Chubin, F. (2014). You may smother my voice, but you will hear my silence: An autoethnography on street sexual harassment, the discourse of shame and women's resistance in Iran. *Sexualities*, 17(1–2), 176–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713511097
Dabiri, A. (2023). 'Woman, Life, Freedom': a movement in progress in Iran. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*, 8(1), 5. https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2023.08.01.05
Darvishi, A. (2023). The history of feminist resistance in Iran from 1978 to 2023. *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, 3(1). Available at: https://intersectionalities.mun.ca/index.php/JU/article/view/2599/2159. (Accessed 21 October 2024).
Foroutan, Y. (2019). Formation of gender identity in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Does educational institution matter? *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 40(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2018.1435087
Golkar, S. (2016). Manipulated society: Paralyzing the masses in post-revolutionary Iran. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 29(2), 135–155. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-015-9208-0
Harding, S. (2007). Feminist standpoints, in S. N. Hesse-Biber (ed), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 45–69). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
Hashemi, K. C. (2018). The girls of Enghelab Street: Women and revolution in modern Iran, in J. Beaujouan (ed), IMEIS annual conference 2018 identity, legitimacy and power in the Muslim world. *Global Policy Journal at Smashwords*, 17–27.
Heydari, A., Teymoori, A. and Trappes, R. (2021). Honor killing as a dark side of modernity: Prevalence, common discourses, and a critical view. *Social Science Information*, 60(1), 86–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018421994777
Hoodfar, H. (1994). Devices and desires: Population policy and gender roles in the Islamic Republic. *Middle East Report (New York, NY)*, 24(190), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520917583-020
Hoodfar, H. and Sadr, S. (2010). Islamic politics and women's quest for gender equality in Iran. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(6), 885–903. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502717
Hoominfar, E. and Zanganeh, N. (2021). The brick wall to break: Women and the labor market under the hegemony of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23(2), 263–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1898286
Iran Wire. (2023). *Trade unions issue charter of minimum demands*. Available at: https://iranwire.com/en/politics/113866-iranian-trade-unions-civic-groups-issue-charter-of-minimum-demands/. (Accessed 02 July 2024).
Kar, M. (2007). Iranian law and women's rights. *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 4(1), 9. https://doi.org/10.2202/1554-4419.1113
Khatam, A. (2023). Mahsa Amini's killing, state violence, and moral policing in Iran. *Human Geography*, 16(3), 299–306. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786231159357
Knott, E., Rao, A. H., Summers, K. and Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(1), 73. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6

Lawson, T. (2012). Bahá'i religious history. *Journal of Religious History*, 36(4), 463–470. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9809.2012.01224.x

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Manocha, K. and Tahzib, S. (2018). Religion, social change and responding to persecution–the case of the Bahá'í community in Iran, in G. D. Chryssides (ed), *Minority Religions in Europe and the Middle East* (pp. 203–214). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595559-15

Maydell, E. (2010). Methodological and analytical dilemmas in autoethnographic research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1), M5.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2005). Women and politics in post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, veiling and emerging feminist voices, in H. Afshar (ed), *Women and Politics in the Third World* (pp. 145–173). London: Routledge.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2006). Muslim women's quest for equality: Between Islamic law and feminism. *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4), 629–645. https://doi.org/10.1086/508085

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2011). Beyond 'Islam' vs 'feminism'. *IDS Bulletin*, 42(1), 67–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00202.x

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2019). The challenges of Islamic feminism. *Gender a Výzkum*, 20(2), 108–122. https://doi.org/10.13060/25706578.2019.20.2.486

Moghadam, V. M. (1992). Patriarchy and the politics of gender in modernising societies: Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. *International Sociology*, 7(1), 35–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/026858092007001002

Moghadam, V. M. (2002). Islamic feminism and its discontents: Toward a resolution of the debate. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27(4), 1135–1171. https://doi.org/10.1086/339639

Moghadam, V. M. (2013). Feminism and family law in Iran: The struggle for women's economic citizenship in the Islamic Republic, in F. Sadiqi and M. Ennaji (eds), *Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 114–128). London: Routledge.

Moghissi, H. (2008). Islamic cultural nationalism and gender politics in Iran. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), 541–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590801931504

Moghissi, H. (2011). Islamic feminism revisited. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31(1), 76–84. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2010-054

Moghissi, H. (2016). *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's struggle in a male-defined revolutionary movement*. New York: Springer.

Motamedi, M., Merghati-Khoei, E., Shahbazi, M., Rahimi-Naghani, S., Salehi, M., Karimi, M., Hejabi, A. and Khalajabadi-Farahani, F. (2016). Paradoxical attitudes toward premarital dating and sexual encounters in Tehran, Iran: A cross-sectional study. *Reproductive Health*, 13, 102. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-016-0210-4

Nafisi, A. (2008). *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A memoir in books*. New York: Random House.

Najmabadi, A. (1991). Hazards of modernity and morality: Women, state and ideology in contemporary Iran, in D. Kandiyoti (ed), *Women, Islam and the State* (pp. 48–76). London: Temple University Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21178-4_3

Najmabadi, A. (1998). Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of hardship, years of growth, in Y. Y. Haddad and J. L. Esposito (eds), *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* (pp.59–84). Melbourne: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195113563.003.0004

Nashat, G. (2021). Women in the ideology of the Islamic Republic, in G. Nashat (ed), *Women and Revolution in Iran* (pp. 195–216). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429268632-15

Naz, N., Drew, S. and Beasy, K. (2023). The construction of gender identities through Pakistani curriculum textbooks, in K. Beasy and J. Watson (ed), *Education and the Un Sustainable Development Goals: Praxis within and beyond the classroom* (pp. 203–222). Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-3802-5_12

Nixon, A. G. (2020). 'Non-religion' as part of the 'religion' category in international human rights. *Religions*, 11(2), 79. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020079

Olesen, V. (2011). Feminist qualitative research in the millennium's first decade, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 129–146). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Paivandi, S. (2012). The meaning of the Islamization of the school in Iran, in M. Ahmed (ed), *Education in West Asia* (pp. 79–102). London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544483.ch-005

Partow, N., Moridnejad, M., Irannezhad, E., Parizadeh, M. and Dadpour, R. (2023). Systematic oppression of tertiary education in Iran under the Islamic Republic. *Higher Education Policy*, 37, 655–669. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00321-4

Rouhi, M. (2022). Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran. *Survival*, 64(6), 189–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2150441

Salehi, A., Sebar, B., Whitehead, D., Hatam, N., Coyne, E. and Harris, N. (2020). Young Iranian women as agents of social change: A qualitative study. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 79, 102341. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102341

Sameh, C. (2019). Discourses of equality, rights and Islam in the one million signatures campaign in Iran, in D. Collins, S. Falcon, S. Lodhia, M. Talcott (eds), *New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights* (pp. 152–171). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315874685-9

Stahl, N. A. and King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26–28.

Tohidi, N. (2016). Women's rights and feminist movements in Iran. *Sur International Journal on Human Rights*, 13, 75.

Toolo, N. and Shakibaee, S. (2000). 'Parted from my origins': Iranian women re-constructing identity. *Studies in Western Australian History*, (21), 101–115.

Watts, J. (2006). 'The outsider within': Dilemmas of qualitative feminist research within a culture of resistance. *Qualitative Research*, 6(3), 385–402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106065009

Welslau, H. (2023). Buying modernization. Western NGOs and gender politics in Pahlavi Iran. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 51(4), 793–809. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2164479

Yavari, M. (2024). 'Sewed girl' pronounced 'virgin': Hymenoplasty and the shift in rhetoric of virginity in Iran. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 26(2), 208–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2194672

Zabihi-Moghaddam, S. (2016). State-sponsored persecution of Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 3(2), 124–146. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798916638207

Zabihi-Moghaddam, S. (2021). Religious persecution of Bahá'ís under the Islamic Republic of Iran, in R. H. Stockman (ed), *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* (pp. 488–497). London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429027772-46

Zack, N. (2005). *Inclusive Feminism: A third wave theory of women's commonality*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Zack, N. (2007). Can third wave feminism be inclusive?, in L. M. Alcoff and E. F. Kittay (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (pp. 193–207). Carlton: Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470696132.ch11

Zack, N. (2018). *Reviving the Social Compact: Inclusive citizenship in an age of extreme politics*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Zack, N. (2020). *Progressive Anonymity: From identity politics to evidence-based government*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. https://doi.org/10.5771/9781538136041

Citation: Riazi, M. (2025). Unveiling the Impacts of Islamic Regulations and the Limitations of Islamic Feminism: Experiences of Women from Iran. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 07. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16017


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 08
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror – A Feminist Reflection

Barbara Thiede [1]*, Johanna Stiebert [2]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Forty years on from the publication of Phyllis Trible's pivotal book *Texts of Terror* (1984), two feminist-identifying Hebrew Bible scholars review feminist commentary on biblical texts of sexual violence arguing first, that the field remains vibrant, diverse, interdisciplinary, and dynamic and second, that reading with empathy is a critical part of the feminist project. Two tribute books echoing Trible's title have appeared in quick succession. One, *Terror in the Bible* (2021), is a collection of essays edited by M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker; the other, *Texts After Terror* (2021), is a monograph by R. Graybill. Examining both books functions as a strategy to demonstrate first, the ongoing polyvocality of feminist biblical criticism and second, the need for ongoing resistance to the Bible's toxic content in a world where sexual violence remains a potent source of trauma, harm, and injustice. In the light of considerable acclaim for Graybill's 2021 book, the article offers critical assessment that cautions against some of its claims to radical transformation. The article calls for feminists to combine critical thinking with critical empathy in their reading of violent texts.

Keywords: feminism, Bible, critical empathy, sexual violence, rape culture

INTRODUCTION

In his groundbreaking exploration of masculine ideals in the Hebrew Bible[1] (1995), David Clines points out that biblical exegetes have typically presented violent male biblical characters as objects of 'gender-based hero worship' while bypassing and normalising sexual violence against women (1995: 235). Clines focuses on depictions of the character of David, who dominates significant portions of biblical narrative (notably, the books 1 and 2 Samuel). David rises to become Israel's foremost king and he continues to be mentioned long after his death and the end of the monarchy he inaugurates. For Clines, David represents the quintessential example of admired masculinity. The main feature of this masculinity is warrior prowess. As Clines points out, the legacy of admiration, even hero worship, of David, including among biblical commentators, plays down or elides the extent of David's violence, including his sexualised violence. While David may be the archetype of the admired Israelite masculine man, elision of violence, including violence perpetrated against women, is evident also in the depiction of other biblical heroes.[2]

'Though most literary critics agree that the biblical narrative is androcentric,' writes Esther Fuchs, 'they rarely allow this fact to interfere with their analytical procedures' (2000: 34). In 1984, Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* provided a clarion call for change. Trible explored four biblical texts (three of these featuring sexual/ised violence)

[1] 'Hebrew Bible' refers to a collection of texts held sacred in common by both Jewish and Christian communities. This body of text is arranged differently in both communities. It is routinely called 'Tanakh' in Jewish and 'Old Testament' in Christian settings.

[2] Another example is the revered prophet, Moses. Moses commands the Israelite army to kill all women, excepting virgins (Numbers 31:14–18). The implication is that female virgins are spoils of war (cf. Judges 5:30). This is yet another example of a powerful man using his power in ways that harm women – but without the text (and often without commentators of the text, too) negatively critiquing this violence, thereby normalising it. Military leadership and prowess appear to be emblematic of many masculine men of the Bible. This applies to Joshua, the leaders called judges (whose stories are recounted in the book of Judges), and several kings of Israel (including kings Saul and Josiah). Many commit brutal acts of violence that are accepted, even valourised.

[1] *University of North Carolina at Charlotte*, USA
[2] *University of Leeds*, UNITED KINGDOM
***Corresponding Author:** bthiede@charlotte.edu

and the misogyny they reveal.[3] She argued for reading 'on behalf' of victims, including female biblical characters. 'As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny,' she wrote, 'feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance' (1984: 3).

In the four decades since, feminist scholars have researched, explored, and protested sexual violence in the Bible. Reading on behalf of the characters and resisting misogyny remains, for Trible, for us, and many other feminist biblical scholars, an act of both empathy and resistance. Other feminist biblical scholars, however, have recently professed some exhaustion and even tedium with such approaches. Hence, during the 2022 Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) session on Rhiannon Graybill's *Texts After Terror* (2021), panellists discussed how Graybill's work addresses a shared experience: feeling 'bored' with feminist encounters with rape texts. Graybill herself describes the topic of biblical sexual violence as 'exhausting, dissatisfying, or simply sad' (2021: 1).[4]

Two tribute works to Trible's *Texts of Terror,* both published in 2021, reveal important fault lines in today's feminist biblical scholarship. Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon and Robyn J. Whitaker's edited collection of essays *Terror in the Bible* draws inspiration from Trible and revisits the language and gendered violence of biblical texts, with prominent focus on race and ethnicity. Contributors to the collection advocate for acknowledging the pain of victims in the Bible as a moral obligation, given the social, cultural, and political implications and reverberations of texts considered both authoritative and sacred across the globe. Melanchthon and Whitaker argue that feminist theory can serve as a vital tool in addressing how Bible narratives 'validate and sanctify violence' against the vulnerable (2021: 2).

Graybill, on the other hand, expresses feeling 'locked in a pattern of what feminist criticism beginning in the 1980's had already done' (2021: 1) and finding it 'exhausted, dated, and even unfeminist' (2021: 2).[5] Relying on the work of Eve Sedgwick, who argues that a position of 'paranoia' leads to anticipating 'bad news' which, in turn, produces reflexive analysis and strong theories of negative affect (2003: 130), Graybill argues that feminist readers' anticipatory paranoia 'flattens' texts of sexual violence and limits 'appropriate responses to sadness and grief' (2021: 7).[6] As an example, she faults feminist scholars for 'simply' compiling lists of rape, describing such lists as evidence of paranoia (2021: 23).[7] Is biblical feminist criticism on sexual violence locked in a wearying spiral of repetition and sadness with little left to say? Is Graybill's book an—even *the*—antidote? We explore these questions and, while doing so, make the case for the importance of critical empathy.

Both tribute books address the position of the feminist scholar. Melanchthon and Whitaker argue *with* Trible for resisting misogyny to effect change. They point out that,

> many broken and bruised bodies of victims in biblical narratives speak into the material contexts of varied tyrannies, validating and sanctifying racism, sexism, colorism, caste oppression, classism, colonialism, and heteronormativity. (2021: 2)

Graybill, on the other hand, is wary of 'strong theories' that place great faith on assuming that if violence and misogyny are exposed, they can be transformed (2021: 51). For Graybill, 'the work of feminist criticism is about finding ways to read and live with biblical rape stories' (2021: 175).

Scholars should ask whether past judgments and calls for change have had impact on misogyny and sexual violence. At the same time, scholars dismissing the need to expose sexual violence and misogyny in biblical literature have downplayed, overlooked, and excused sexual violence in the Bible for centuries (Thiede, 2024b). Consequently, we question the notion that feminists should 'live with' violent biblical texts. If feminists do not continue to challenge misogyny, what resistance can they offer either to the misuse of power in biblical texts themselves or to those who wield such texts for violent purposes? In our view, feminist scholarship on the Bible must combine critical thinking with critical empathy.

---

[3] The first story Trible examines is the story of Hagar (Genesis 16:1–16; 21:9–21) who is oppressed on account of her Egyptian nationality, her class (she is enslaved to Sarah and Abraham, on whom the story is primarily centred) and her sex (she is a female in a patriarchal story world). The second is the narrative of the rape of King David's daughter Tamar by her brother Amnon, David's firstborn son (2 Samuel 13). The third is the story of the gang rape of the unnamed wife of a Levite (that is, a man of priestly descent) (Judges 19). The fourth is the story of Jephthah, an Israelite warrior, who sacrifices his unnamed daughter to fulfil a vow he made to God (Judges 11). With the exception of the fourth story, all explicitly recount sexual violence inflicted on female characters.

[4] There are multiple rape texts in the Bible. Alongside the three rape texts discussed by Trible (see note 3), Graybill focuses also on the rapes of Dinah (Genesis 34) and of personified Daughter Zion (book of Lamentations). There are other, more cursory, mentions of rape in the Bible, too.

[5] *How* feminist scholarship is 'unfeminist' is not elaborated.

[6] Ruth Leys notes, however, that affect theory's 'anti-intentionalism' and the resultant 'radical separation between affect and reason' has made ideological dispute and judgment irrelevant to cultural analysis (2011: 472).

[7] Yet, Graybill herself provides just such a list (2021: 18).

Empathy, as such, is not unproblematic. While some have argued that empathy can redress the ruthlessness of the globalised neoliberal order, it is equally clear that empathy can undergird and reinforce existing power structures. Gendered assumptions that women are especially skilled at 'doing empathy' and should demonstrate that skill have caused personal and professional harm (Gentry *et al.,* 2015). Such expectations reinforce hegemonic masculine codes as well as stereotypes of femininity. The expression of empathy can be (and has been) encouraged in all manner of institutional settings—governmental, educational, medical, business, and so on—precisely to bypass the need to address injustice. Employing empathy as a satisfactory response to inequality and inequity does nothing to mitigate harm. Such empathy reproduces power structures; it does not challenge them.

But *critical* empathy, as Andrea Lobb points out:

> is not just a process of feeling one's way into suffering or identifying with suffering in general, but of identifying with a morally specific variety of suffering that arises from social pathology and injustice. (2017: 597)

Scholars engaging in critical empathy are motivated by a moral imperative to acknowledge that such suffering is itself wrong. Critical empathy is especially essential in conditions where sufferers cannot articulate their pain or advocate for themselves. Here, critical empathy aids in establishing ethical standards as well as communicating pain and harm for which the sufferer has no words (Lobb, 2017: 596–597).

Critical empathy can also establish language for suffering that has been actively hidden by discourses of power (Lobb, 2017: 602). Feminists who identified sexual violence and its harm and created terms for brutal injustices that once had no name, terms like 'sexual harassment,' 'coercive control,' and 'rape culture,' were motivated by critical empathy. They focused on identifying the tropes and mythologies hegemonic masculinity relies on to normalise sexual violence. They extracted what had gone unsaid and unnamed, and they identified that suffering is a moral wrong. Critical empathy is a tool for contesting and resisting power. Amidst the prevalence of sexual violence up to our own time, feminists gave us names and language for identifying where such violence comes from and what must be done to effect real change.

Feminist biblical scholars have been engaged in just such work where the Bible is concerned. When biblical authors depict sexual violence with language that obscures and normalises it, this is precisely *because* of the hegemonic masculine ideology that generated their literary products. Feminist scholars have resisted the dominant ideology of reconstructing rather than interrogating such ideologies; hence, they have resisted the erasure of biblical sexual violence by articulating the suffering the texts describe and by identifying it as immoral, unjust, and pathological. Feminist readings do not aim to reproduce biblical ideology and excuse its toxic elements as 'just the way things were back then,' but hold it to account. Critical empathy is essential to that aim. In reflecting on the current state of feminist investigation, with focus on the tribute books, we advocate that critical empathy is essential if feminist scholars wish to reject normalising or downplaying the Bible's painful depictions of sexual violence.

POLYVOCALITY, DIVERSITY, AND ARGUMENT: BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP'S FEMINIST PROJECT

Feminist biblical scholarship on sexual violence in the Bible is demonstrably wide-ranging and polyvocal. Feminist scholars have not, as Graybill suggests, collectively reduced Hagar and 'her range of relationships to a single traumatic experience' (2021: 94), or bypassed Sarah's use of power (2021: 91), [8] or overlooked intersectionality, or ignored the 'fuzzy, icky, messy terrain of relationships between women' (2021: 88). Multiple commentators have explored each of these topics (e.g., Dube, 2017; Reaves, 2018; Stiebert, 2016: 114–132; Weems, 1988). Reductive claims, such as the statement that texts of sexual violence have only been read three ways—historical enquiry, lament over female suffering, and postures of witnessing (Graybill, 2021: 29)—do not do justice to the wide-ranging nature of feminist biblical scholarship.

Trible herself notes 'changes alongside continuities' in the field, including the emergent prominence of such categories as cisgender, ethnicity, gender fluidity, intersectionality, postcoloniality, queering, and trauma (2021: x–xi). Scholars have also applied their knowledge of rape culture and its features to biblical texts (Shiloh Project: Resources). Nomenclature has been debated as well; hence, Deryn Guest makes a strong case for favouring 'gender criticism' over 'feminist criticism' (2012), and Musa Dube sometimes (2000) chooses the term 'feminist' over 'womanist.'

The feminist project is neither static nor monolithic: it encompasses, for instance, lesbian lenses (e.g., Guest 2005), gender-critical approaches (e.g., Guest, 2012), womanist (e.g., Weems, 1995) and mujerista (e.g., Isasi-Díaz and Tarango, 1988) feminisms, among others. Powerful contributions are made by all genders, including by white

[8] See note 3.

male scholars, such David J. A. Clines (1995), Ken Stone (1996), and Harold Washington (1997). Feminist biblical scholars disagree over the measure of agency or voice given to female characters; they offer differing interpretations of the language and the terminology of sexual violence; they apply, among others, anthropological, archaeological, sociological, and literary-critical approaches to biblical literature. Scholars have read biblical texts in the light of survivor testimony (Blyth, 2010), noted how the objectification of women goes hand-in-hand with racialised sexual violence (Dunbar, 2022; Rey, 2016), and explored the use of sexual violence against men and characters whose gender performance does not fall clearly into binaries (Greenough, 2021; Thiede, 2022, 2024a; Tombs, 2022). Diverse perspectives and conclusions abound, as Susanne Scholz's three edited volumes *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* (2013, 2014, 2016) and Yvonne Sherwood's *The Bible and Feminism* (2017) make abundantly clear.

Feminist biblical scholarship, like the feminist movement itself, has been dominated by white, privileged, cisgender, and heterosexual voices, however. Biblical scholars with Indigenous histories and Black biblical scholars, especially womanist scholars, have exposed ways in which privileged feminist biblical scholarship ignores or simply fails to recognise issues of class, caste, race, and ethnicity (e.g., Weems, 1988). Later waves of #MeToo (from 2017) and Black Lives Matter (especially from 2020) have received more attention and voice within white spaces (e.g., see Reaves, 2018), but significant challenges remain. A guild dominated by white, cisgender, heterosexual men and women is served by a publication industry that is skewed to advantage those who are already privileged. Perhaps because feminist biblical scholarship remains dominated by and nurtures voices that are—like our own—white, Global North, cisgender, and heterosexual, Graybill's *Texts After Terror* has received more attention and publicity than *Terror in the Bible*.[9]

Well-intentioned white feminist biblical scholars can still display a lack of intersectional awareness—we ourselves need to stay attuned to this (see Dube, 2017 critiquing Stiebert, 2013: 50–59). To give one example, Amy C. Cottrill in her recent book *Uncovering Violence* (2021) juxtaposes an exploration of the biblical character Abigail, wife of Nabal (1 Samuel 25),[10] with an excerpt from a semiautobiographical novel by Hannah Crafts, a formerly enslaved woman (2021: 120–121). Cottrill describes how:

> the immediacy with which Crafts perceived threat (…) gave me insight into the immediacy with which Abigail shifts into actions that will protect herself and her household. (2021: 122)

Abigail, Cottrill claims, had to demonstrate a 'sensitivity to coercive power similar to that of Crafts' (2021: 123).

But gender and racial subjugation are *not* the same thing, and decades ago Black women called on white feminists to cease placing middle-class white women's subordination on the same level as Black women's daily struggles with systemic oppression (hooks, 2000 [1984]; Morrison, 1971). Here, a white feminist scholar compares Abigail, a wealthy biblical farmer's wife, to an enslaved Black woman. Abigail is an Israelite; in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites have privilege (cf. Reaves, 2018). Their story and their success, which often rely on brutal acts of violence against other peoples, is told in its pages. Cottrill (2021) may intend the connection she sees as a fillip prompting reflection and insight, but appropriating the experiences of persons of colour who have been historically subjugated, colonised, and oppressed (and still are) to explain the challenges faced by wealthy Israelite women of the Hebrew Bible holds potential to harm. Here, exercising critical empathy would help focus attention on the different power structures at work.

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer writes that 'a starting point of feminist interpretation of the Bible is not [only] the biblical text in its own right but rather the concerns of feminism' (2008: 206). Postcolonial feminist Musa Dube makes clear the wide-ranging nature of these concerns:

> Like most feminists in the guild, I am motivated in my reading by an attempt to understand how texts expound ideologies of oppression; how they have legitimized the oppression of the Other; and whether

[9] The 2022 Annual SBL meeting featured both books. Despite a call for papers for a panel dedicated to *Terror in the Bible*, the session titled 'Terror in the Bible' makes no other mention of the volume. Two speakers presented: one on Numbers 21:4–9 and the other on Jonah. No keyword related to sexual violence appears. A panel devoted to Graybill's monograph billed it as a 'groundbreaking examination of sexual violence within the Hebrew Bible [that] raises new questions and provides innovative approaches.' (For both, see Society of Biblical Literature, 'Program Book: 2022 Annual Meeting'). A Google search using author/editors and title demonstrates that Graybill's book, with its striking cover, is far better marketed and circulated, even though it is Melanchthon and Whitaker's book that is open access. Graybill (2022) has reviewed Melanchthon and Whitaker's book.

[10] In this biblical chapter, David, before becoming king, is living as a fugitive with his followers. He requests provisions from Nabal, a wealthy landowner, who is described in the text as foolish. After Nabal refuses David, David resolves to go into battle against him. But at this point, Nabal's wife, who is described as intelligent and beautiful, goes to meet David, taking with her abundant amounts of food and drink. Abigail manages to avert David's anger and wins his favour. Shortly after, Nabal dies, and Abigail becomes David's wife.

> they can be reread for liberating interdependence. I subscribe to the assumption that biblical texts were written in patriarchal cultures, reflecting the views and interests of patriarchal authors, interpreters, translators, scholars, and institutions that have guarded how they are interpreted and used in cultures where biblical texts are read. Together with the feminist guild, I subscribe to the paradigm that recognizes that gender oppression is always in tandem with other categories of oppression and domination such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, and religion, among others. (2017: 46–47)

How, then, do the two tribute books responding to Trible's call respond to feminist agendas? Do they reinforce Trible's premise, that the duty of a feminist scholar is to read 'on behalf' of victims? Do they employ critical empathy to uncover new knowledge about sexual violence biblical hegemonic masculinity obscures? Do they promote new ways of reading biblical texts of sexual violence? Next, we address the premises of both works. We compare how the volumes respond to two well-known rape texts of the Hebrew Bible, both of which are explored in Trible's book of 1984: the rape of Tamar and the gang rape of the Levite's *pilegesh* (translated 'concubine' or 'wife').[11] We summarise what our comparison reveals about the feminist study of sexual violence in the Bible.

TERROR IN THE BIBLE AND *TEXTS AFTER TERROR*: PREMISES, THEORY, AND NOMENCLATURE

Terror in the Bible features diverse voices. These comprise thirteen scholars representing five continents and deploying a range of hermeneutical lenses in their essays, including feminist, queer, and Pasifika lenses. Melanchthon and Whitaker state that:

> [f]eminist theory helps us understand traumatic stress on individuals as microcosmic—namely, as manifestations of larger societal and cultural forms involving power, domination, and victimization. (2021: 2)

They argue that violent texts of the Bible have played a role in 'prescribing, producing, enabling, and triggering' individual and collective harm and trauma (2021: 3) and note that such texts continue to be ignored or bypassed in faith communities. The editors openly situate their book alongside past scholarly attempts to recognise suffering (2021: 4). The contributors read, with Trible, on behalf of victims both literary and real; their essays 'seek to address how violence or injustice against women and marginalized communities is depicted, shared, listened to, and responded to' (2021: 4).

For her part, Graybill proposes 'a feminist theorization of biblical sexual violence that starts from the fuzzy, the messy, and the icky' (2021: 11). She writes of these terms: 'I am interested in the ways that sexual violence, including rape, is talked about and experienced in ordinary life' (2021: 11). Graybill suggests that victims' memories may be 'fuzzy,' the way their experience is understood and defined by others may be 'fuzzy,' even the experience itself may aptly be described as 'fuzzy' (2021: 12). When women 'consent' to sex to escape being even more brutally treated by an assailant, their experience may be labelled 'fuzzy' (2021: 13). Graybill's second term, 'messy,' is meant to demonstrate that an experience of sexual violence is not neatly categorised by using either the term 'victim' or 'survivor.' Combining the terms ('victim/survivor'), Graybill argues, offers 'disruption to the stability of either category' (2021: 15). Lastly, 'icky' is the domain of creeps and weird things: '*Icky* names bad sex, uncomfortable sex, regrettable sex' (2021: 16).

Graybill's interest in affect theory may be behind the search for 'everyday' terms, but she provides no evidence for the claim that *fuzzy*, *messy*, or *icky* reflect 'ordinary' experience, or that these terms are regularly used by victims/survivors of sexual violence. Graybill's use of these terms can also be emotionally unsettling. Graybill's definition of 'icky,' for example, extends well beyond the question of bad sex. Yhwh's killing of David's infant is labelled 'icky' (2021: 63) and, as we shall see, so is a gang rape, dismemberment, genocide, and mass abduction.

Graybill's 'fuzzy' and 'messy' sometimes echo language that legal or institutional representatives use to cast doubt on victims/survivors' descriptions of sexual violence. Graybill's use of Chanel Miller's *Know My Name*, which records the aftermath of Miller's rape by Brock Turner, is a case in point. Here, Graybill suggests that Miller describes a 'fuzzy' experience in regard to her memory of the assault (2021: 12). Miller is *not*, however, describing her memory, but condemning the ways in which the *legal system* and its representatives weaponised it against her:

> I was told that because I could not remember, I technically could not prove it was unwanted. And that distorted me, damaged, me, almost broke me. (…) I had no power, I had no voice, I was defenseless. My memory loss would be used against me. (Miller, 2019: 340, see also 341–342)

[11] See note 3.

Graybill refers to what happened to Miller as 'clearly rape,' yet she also uses it as an example of a case where sexual violence and rape are ambiguous, hence 'fuzzy' (2021: 12). Here, Graybill deploys terminology that not only obscures sexual violence but unintentionally accords with language and tactics used to silence rape victims. Applying critical empathy, in contrast, would clarify and name the devastating consequences of Miller's rape, contesting and resisting the power structures that worked to deny her the right to her voice and experience.

Relying on the work of Sedgwick, Graybill repeatedly points to the danger of 'strong theories' which seek to explain everything. And yet, her own 'strong theory' regularly pushes biblical texts into a paradigm that minimises and downplays sexual violence. Graybill's treatment of the rape of Nineveh (a text not addressed in *Texts of Terror* or *Terror in the Bible*) offers one example. Graybill brings Nahum 3:4–7, a biblical text of troubling violence, into conversation with Kristen Roupenian's short story 'Cat Person' (2017). The biblical text personifies the city of Nineveh as a sexually deviant woman and graphically details how the Israelite deity will publicly strip and expose, throw filth at, and disgrace her. 'Cat Person' is the story of Margot, a young woman who has sex she would rather have avoided with an older man named Rob. 'Cat Person' closes with Rob repeatedly texting Margot, finally calling her 'whore.'

Graybill suggests that we consider Yhwh (that is, the Israelite deity) as a version of Rob, 'a nice guy, sort of,' 'a little dorky,' 'a little melodramatic,' someone who 'had really done nothing wrong, except like her, and be bad in bed, and maybe lie about having cats' (2021: 28). The biblical text is no longer a painful example of divine violence, exercised through sexually humiliating and abusing a female. 'Instead,' Graybill writes, 'we have something more everyday: familiar, exhausting, prickly, irreducible to the category of tragedy. And also: fuzzy, messy, icky' (2021: 29).

Here Graybill's own strong theory functions to downplay the violence of the text, because the Israelite deity is *not* some awkward older man looking for a sexual encounter. In the Hebrew Bible, Yhwh has all power; he strips, humiliates, and arranges the stoning of Israel, personified as female (see Jeremiah 13:20–27; Isaiah 47:3; Ezekiel 16:27–41, 23; Hosea 2:3; Nahum 3:5). He arranges the gang rape of his own cities and his own people and metaphorically engages in rape himself (Lamentations 1:9–10, 23; Hosea 2:12–13). The Israelite deity determines the fate of humanity (Genesis 6–8); he controls the future of peoples, ordering or using his Israelite henchmen to enslave and destroy (e.g., Numbers 31, 1 Samuel 15, 2 Samuel 8). Yhwh of Nahum 3 is not 'a nice guy, sort of,' 'a little dorky,' 'a little melodramatic' (2021: 28). Critical empathy is pertinent here to identify and resist the power exercised by Yhwh and the violence he perpetrates. Instead, Graybill makes no real attempt to challenge the misogyny of the biblical text. We celebrate multivocality in feminist scholarship, but not when it minimises or renders risible brutality and violence.

2 SAMUEL 13

In *Texts of Terror*, Trible acknowledges that readers are wounded by violent texts. Still, she argues for 'seeking a blessing' (1984: 4). Feminist scholarship since has, as Graybill notes, sought redemptive readings. Feminists have also, however, questioned that effort. Hence, in her contribution to *Terror in the Bible*, Rachelle Gilmour asks if Trible's attempt to find a blessing in 2 Samuel 13 leads to misreading it.

The narrative opens with Tamar's half-brother, the royal firstborn Amnon, conspiring with his cousin, Jonadab, to trap Princess Tamar in his rooms. Tamar is first put on display for a company of men (13:8–9) before Amnon expels his male guests and begins his assault on her. Tamar desperately tries to forestall him, appealing to the damage he will do to his reputation (13:9–12). At one point, she suggests that Amnon speak to their father, King David, presumably to ask for her hand in marriage (13:13). Amnon rapes her instead and afterwards orders his servant to throw 'this' (i.e., her) out (13:14–17). Tamar does not go quietly. She rends her clothing and screams in despair (13:19). She then meets her brother Absalom. After receiving confirmation that Amnon has raped her, Absalom instructs Tamar to be silent, for Amnon is her brother (13:20). Two years later, Absalom arranges for Amnon's execution by his men (13:28–29).

Trible argues that Absalom is Tamar's advocate who 'supports and protects' his sister with 'tenderness': '[he] stands apart from the other male characters' (1984: 52). Gilmour, on the other hand, questions whether Absalom is genuinely acting in Tamar's interests. Is he avenging *her rape* or an insult to *his own honour*? Gilmour points out that biblical hegemonic masculinity depends on contests between men: contests that frequently rely on the violent abuse of women's bodies (2021: 58–59). She notes that after the rape, Tamar goes into mourning and makes her distress publicly known (13:19), crying out loudly (וַתִּזְעַק). Gilmour argues that the related verb (צעק) is used in Deuteronomy 22:24, 27 to describe what a woman *should* do to make her violation public. Nevertheless, Absalom immediately hushes his sister.

Gilmour points out that Tamar is described as 'desolate' only *after* she is placed in Absalom's house (2021: 60). She suggests Absalom is simply one more male character who suppresses or ignores Tamar and who adds to her pain. She observes multiple parallels with the treatment of David's unnamed *pilagshim*, his secondary wives (2

Samuel 15–20) (2021: 63). Both Tamar and David's wives are effectively made available to rapists by the men who should protect them. Tamar is silenced by Absalom; David's wives are silenced by the narrator, who gives them no voice. Finally, just as Tamar is shut up in Absalom's house (13:20) so David makes sure to shut up his *pilagshim* in his own house until they die (2 Samuel 20:3).

Gilmour takes into account the broader narrative context, one in which the rape of Tamar is just one part of the deity's sentence against David (2 Samuel 12:10–11): 'Tamar is the victim not only of Amnon, but of the whole outworking of God's punishment of David' (2021: 62). Brutal sexual violence against women is not only a tool of kings and princes in their competitions for power, but God's tool to punish those he condemns. Gilmour makes clear Tamar's honour was never at stake—for David, for Absalom, or for the biblical author. Instead, Absalom is 'another oppressor' (2021: 62). She uses critical empathy as a tool to resist power and to identify another layer of harm Tamar endures.

Gilmour's essay demonstrates that feminist readings of Tamar are not 'exhausted,' 'dated,' or 'locked in a pattern of what feminist criticism beginning in the 1980's had already done' (Graybill, 2021: 1). Decades of work on biblical hegemonic masculinity have led to readings which have begun to explain sexual violence in the Bible as far more than the product of individual 'bad apples.' The systemic nature of sexual violence against female characters, against subordinate male characters, and against characters whose gender identity appears fluid has recently become an important line of feminist inquiry (e.g., Thiede, 2022).

Gilmour's treatment combines critical analysis and empathy. After demonstrating that Absalom is hardly providing Tamar with a kind and supportive response following her brutal rape, Gilmour notes:

> there is more terror, and irredeemable terror, in 2 Samuel 13 than Trible argued. Tamar has no comforter (…) [t]he story conveys no illusions that Tamar is safe or protected in either her father's or her brother's house. (2021: 62)

Gilmour closes her chapter by stating that the role of interpreters is 'to critique society then and now' (2021: 65).

Graybill's treatment of the same chapter stands in contrast with Gilmour's. The rape of Tamar, Graybill claims, is 'messy' because of its consequences for the Davidic monarchy and because of the purported messiness of what Tamar herself allegedly wants. To make the text conform to her theory and its nomenclature, Graybill makes what is in our view an unsubstantiated claim: that Tamar harbours a '*desire* to marry her rapist' (2021: 43, italics ours; cf. the toxic argument by Reis, 1997). It is true that rape victims do not react uniformly. They may freeze; many do;[12] or, they may try to talk their attackers out of assaulting them. There is, however, no textual evidence in 2 Samuel 13 supporting Graybill's claim that:

> [f]or Absalom, Tamar's desire to marry her rapist half-brother is a queer desire indeed (and here recall the affective overlap of 'queer' and 'unhappy'); his words are an attempt to force her on a less unhappy path. (2021: 53)

What indicates that Absalom suspects or knows that Tamar 'desires' to marry Amnon? Absalom encounters Tamar in a state of despair, anguish, and pain *after* being assaulted—and after, as the text makes clear, resisting assault. After the rape, too, Tamar makes no mention of any 'desire'. She makes her rape public. She puts dust on her head, tears her clothes, and screams in anguish. Also, this text is not 'queer.' It is a narrative that tells an oft-heard story: a woman is raped, and when she tries to make what has happened to her public, she is silenced.

Graybill references the work of Sara Ahmed (2014), who discusses 'the violence that converts no into yes' (2014: 56). Ahmed also asks that we consider cases where 'yes' involves force but is not experienced as force. Yet Tamar *is* depicted as experiencing what happens to her as force. As rape. She resists, she mourns, and she screams. In any case, those forced to say 'yes' to mitigate the violence they face are suffering conditions that are themselves violent. Rather than addressing the violence inherent in the biblical system, Graybill, to us, plays it down, even throws it into question. For readers of biblical texts who know what it is to be forcibly raped, Graybill's reading might be (albeit unintentionally) actively harmful.

Graybill argues that the words *fuzzy*, *messy*, and *icky* provide a nuance that has been missing from treatments of sexual violence (2021: 84). She describes, for instance, Roberta, a character in Lara Williams's novel *Supper Club* (2019), who is finally able to acknowledge that she was raped, before detailing several trauma symptoms, including fear of the dark, of a stranger lurking under the bed, and of the rapist on the other side of the door. Graybill writes, 'while Roberta experiences rape, her pain and harm cannot be limited to, or even traced to, the specific incident' (2021: 97). Here, a rape victim's post-traumatic symptoms, *which she herself describes in the context of having experienced sexual assault,* are not apparently related (only or primarily?) to the violence experienced.

[12] A large-scale study demonstrates that 70% of women who have been raped report significant tonic immobility; 48% report extreme tonic immobility (Möller *et al.*, 2017: 935).

Graybill continues to apply her signature language: rape is 'itself only one detail.' We should focus on the 'fuzziness, messiness, and ickiness' (2021: 97). Where is critical empathy, empathy that rests on a moral and ethical imperative to articulate the pain of sufferers and to demonstrate that the violence they are suffering is wrong? For rape victims, articulating their pain can be a gruelling task. Readers who *have* experienced sexual trauma know full well how many diverse symptoms originate in, and persist long after, the actual assault. Questioning the connection between sexual assault and its resulting trauma downplays the effects of that violence.

JUDGES 19

Trible noted that Judges 19, perhaps the most shocking text of sexual violence in the entire Bible, was long met with 'overwhelming silence' (1984: 86). Feminist scholars have, ever since, regularly addressed the text's horrific gender-based violence. *Terror in the Bible* includes two treatments of this text; we focus here on 'Reading Crucifixion Narratives as Texts of Terror' by David Tombs.[13]

Tombs directs attention to male-on-male sexualised violence in Bible texts, a topic feminist scholarship has recently begun to address. He notes that scholars have yet to fully appreciate how rape and torture are 'intimately connected' in both Judges 19 and other literary and actual contexts (2021: 144). Sexual violence, as Tombs states, is a frequent feature of armed conflict, and ubiquitous in torture (2021: 147). Tombs offers a linguistic analysis of Judges 19:25, a verse that describes how the rapists 'knew her' (*וידעו אותה*) and 'abused her' (*ויתעללו בה*) all night long. He notes that Trible translates the second verb (a hitpael form of *alal,* עלל) as 'tortured' (1984: 77). This verb, when coupled with the preposition *bet* (ב) signifies sexual violence. Tombs also points out that the *hitpael* of *alal* is elsewhere translated with 'mock' (see, for example, the New American Standard and Jewish Study Bible translations of Exodus 10:2).

These associations lead Tombs to compare Judges 19 with the torture and mocking of Jesus depicted in Matthew 27. Noting Trible's warning against a Christological[14] reading of Judges 19, Tombs exercises particular care in identifying any parallels between the Hebrew Bible's Judges 19 and the New Testament's Matthew 27 (2021: 150, 155): the host and the crowd negotiate the fate of the Levite and his *pilegesh*, while Pilate discusses Jesus' fate with a crowd; both the unnamed woman and Jesus are subjected to mockery, brutality, and eventual death; mobs of men—in Gibeah and the cohort of five hundred Roman soldiers—play critical roles in witnessing or enacting sexual/ised violence. In both cases a person is betrayed and made subject to sexual/ised violence. Tombs is uncovering another layer of how power inflicts harm; using critical empathy, he gives voice to what the biblical hegemonic texts silence: the relationship between torture and sexual violence.

Graybill responds to the gang rape, death, and dismemberment of the Levite's *pilegesh*, as well as to the mass abductions, rapes, and killings that follow (Judges 20–21), by calling what has happened 'icky' (2021: 155). If '*icky* names bad sex, uncomfortable sex, regrettable sex, and sexual encounters' (2021: 16) then we are at a loss to explain this. The very term itself, and Graybill's definition, when, as here, applied to depictions of sexual horror and atrocities of war, trivialise.

Graybill also writes of Judges 19: '[I]t has been almost a rite of passage to wrestle with the story, to seek what new feminist truth might be extracted from its bloody and dismembered pieces' (2021: 158). Do feminist scholars *really* go through some kind of 'self-hazing'? Could we possibly derive 'much pleasure' from reading this narrative (Graybill, 2021: 175)? Graybill also writes:

> And yet, people survive rapes, even gang rapes. Not everyone does—this is essential to remember—but also, and equally importantly, some people do. (2021: 161)

Indeed, horrifyingly, we read news stories about gang rapes that result in death. Should feminists respond by noting, 'yes, this rape victim died, but it is important to remember that some survive gang rapes'? Where here is the critical empathy that gives voice to the voiceless and interrogates violence and power?

Of the gang rape, death, and dismemberment of the Levite's unnamed *pilegesh* as well as the mass abductions, rapes, and genocide that follow, Graybill also writes:

[13] Brent Pelton's essay, 'The Fruit of Others' Labor: How Judges 19 Stands with Dehumanized Migrant Workers,' uses critical empathy to address complex uses of power; his essay argues against feminist readings which reduce victimisation in the narrative to gender alone. Doing so marginalises voices both in the Bible and in contemporary settings (2021: 173–174).

[14] Christological interpretation functions through retro-jecting Christian theological notions on to pre-Christian, Jewish sacred texts. One example of this might be to identify the suffering servant in the Hebrew Bible's Isaiah 53 as depicting the suffering of Jesus, identified by his followers as 'the Christ' (or messiah saviour), suffering which occurred centuries after this text was composed. Such retro-jective identification of Jesus Christ in much earlier texts is called Christological interpretation.

> Perhaps I should feel icky about feeling (just) icky. But this is also the point: The language of fuzzy, messy, and icky was never intended as a comprehensive description of all sexual violence, still less all sexualized or misogynistic violence. My goal has never been the wholesale replacement of one set of words for speaking and writing about sexual violence with another. (2021: 156)

Graybill excoriates prior 'strong theories' for ostensibly seeking 'to explain everything through a single master narrative' (2021: 156). Yet, while she claims to sit with 'ambiguity, ambivalence, and non-resolution' (2021: 4), we see Graybill repeatedly pressing biblical narratives into moulds prescribed by modern texts (such as 'Cat Person') and selecting 'ordinary' terms. What results is prescriptive. Texts of sexual violence may not be read with predation or culpability in mind (2021: 69). They may not be read with mourning or pity. Graybill's readings provide readers with 'sharp lessons on how (not) to memorialize trauma, lingering, instead, with fuzzy, messy, and icky' (2021: 115). Apparently, *only* by reading texts of sexual violence in those terms can we 'stay with the story and its difficulties' (2021: 156). She lauds those who take her approach:

> Against the image of a female victim/survivor Finding Her Voice to Speak Her Truth, they dwell with the fuzzy, the messy, and the icky. (2021: 116)

The use of capital letters seems mocking. And yet, victims and survivors of sexual violence may need decades to find their voices and speak their truth.

Clines has noted the troubling outcome of scholarly commentary that obscures violence in biblical texts. He writes:

> When the function of commentary on biblical texts [is] (…) to familiarize the Bible, to normalize it (…), to render it as undisturbing as possible, to press it into the service of a different worldview; [then] eventually, the effect will be to write the Bible out of existence. (1995: 244)

Writing terror out of the Bible obscures the aims and achievements that Phyllis Trible and other feminists have advanced for several decades. We are not persuaded by the presumed nuanced capacity of Graybill's terms for describing sexual assault. Instead, they diminish, even erase, biblical sexual violence. The application of critical empathy can offer the opposite outcome. Critical empathy identifies injustice and abuse that causes suffering. Critical empathy gives voice to the anguish that the sufferer is unable to express and, in some systems, is even prevented from articulating. It names the pain and harm that is silenced by discourses of power.

CONCLUSIONS

Feminist biblical scholarship exploring sexual violence in the Bible is by no means 'exhausted' or 'dated.' The conversation is a vibrant one, informed, in recent decades, by the integration of trauma studies, affect studies, queer studies, masculinity studies, and more. Collaboration and cross-fertilisation among those approaches offer new understandings of sexual violence in biblical literature. Feminist scholars have influenced gender-sensitive readings that focus on ableism and on the treatment of non-human animals in biblical literature (Olyan, 2008: 1–2). They have continued to explore feminist postcolonial and race-critical interpretations, addressing the racist and misogynistic nature of biblical narratives and laws, together with their misogynistic underpinnings (e.g., Blyth and Davidson-Ladd, 2018; Dunbar, 2022; Gafney, 2009; Rey, 2016).

The outcome of feminist conversations with affect and trauma studies has demonstrated how biblical texts present sexual trauma both for individuals and communities. Feminist scholars have asked whether ancient texts of trauma once served communal efforts to process devastation and destruction and whether they may facilitate healing for modern readers (Boase and Frechette, 2016). Such studies have also increasingly attended to the trauma male biblical characters experience from sexualised assault (Thiede, 2024a).

Queer studies have informed feminist ones. Scholars like Guest (2005, 2012), Hornsby and Stone (2011) have spanned these two fields and invited readers to see beyond binary categories in biblical literature. Doing so is an additional act of resistance both to binary presentations of gender in the Bible and to modern readings that depend on reinforcing them. Other queer readings, absorbing influence from contextual Bible study, pioneered at South Africa's Ujamaa Centre, have embraced also so-called 'ordinary readers' in interpretations of queer resistance (e.g., van Klinken *et al.*, 2021).

Feminist scholars who have engaged in productive relationship with masculinity studies (as Graybill does in in her earlier monograph of 2016) have opened up a host of new readings where sexual violence in the Bible is concerned. Their studies may have begun with identifying how systems of hegemonic masculinity function to enable and sanction sexual violence, but they hardly end there. Masculinity studies has helped feminist scholars

address not only the performance of masculinity in the Bible but its own fluid nature. Hence, feminist scholars have addressed sexual violence against male characters, too—both by women and by men.

Finally, we note that works like *Terror in the Bible* engage feminism in conversation with a variety of fields, including economics, psychology, and sociology, deploying a range of methodological approaches. A diverse set of hermeneutical lenses is found therein, including, among others, queer, Pasifika, and caste perspectives. None of this strikes us as boring, outmoded, or resistant to ambiguity. The conversation between feminism and the Bible remains complex and fluid well beyond the confines of Graybill's monograph, yielding diverse and revelatory discoveries.

Each of these approaches rests on premises that were foundational for feminist biblical scholarship of the 1980's. Each addresses power imbalances that feature domination over subordinated populations. Each contains resistance to those power imbalances and a commitment to naming them. To us it continues to represent necessary and often vibrant resistance to hegemonic masculinity and abusive power—and while, yes, such resistance *can* be exhausting, it is far from *passé*. Biblical texts that depict women and other vulnerable communities experiencing violence need our interrogation—still—and critical empathy lies at the heart of this.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2014). *Willful Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke UP. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376101

Blyth, C. (2010). *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's silence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199589456.001.0001

Blyth, C. and Davidson-Ladd, J. (2018). A theology of rape: Plundering the woman's body in Deut. 21:10–14 and Louis John Steele's *Spoils to the Victor*, in C. Blyth, E. Colgan, and K. B. Edwards (eds), *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, & Religion: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 145–167). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72224-5_9

Boase, E. and Frechette, C. G. (2016). Defining 'trauma' as a useful lens for biblical interpretation, in E. Boase and C. G. Frechette (eds), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (pp. 1–23). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd

Clines, D. J. A. (1995). *Interested Parties: The ideology of writers and readers of the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Cottrill, A. C. (2021). *Uncovering Violence: Reading biblical narratives as an ethical project*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Dube, M. W. (2000). *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.

Dube, M. W. (2017). Dinah (Genesis 34) at the contact zone: 'Shall our sister become a whore?' in L. J. Claassens and C. J. Sharp (eds), *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, ambiguity, and intersectionality* (pp. 39–57). London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Dunbar, E.S. (2022). *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective trauma, cultural memory, and identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003168911

Fuchs, E. (2000). Contemporary biblical literary criticism: The objective phallacy, in E. Fuchs (ed) *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a woman* (pp. 34–43). London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press.

Gafney, W. (2009). Mother knows nest: Messianic surrogacy and sexploitation in Ruth, in C. A. Duggan and T. Pippin (eds), *Mother Goose, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest: Biblical mothers & their children* (pp. 23–36). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Gentry, W. A, Clark, M. A., Young, S. F., Cullen, K. L. and Zimmerman, L. (2015). How displaying empathic concern may differentially predict career derailment potential for women and men leaders in Australia. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 26(4), 641–653. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.05.003

Gilmour, R. (2021). But he would not listen to her: Revisiting the Story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 1, in M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker (eds), *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence* (pp. 355–366). Atlanta: SBL.

Graybill, R. (2016). *Are We Not Men? Unstable masculinity in the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Oxford UP. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190227364.001.0001

Graybill, R. (2021). *Texts after Terror: Rape, sexual violence, and the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford UP. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190082314.001.0001

Graybill, R. (2022). Review of M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker (eds), *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence*. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 84(4), 721–723. https://doi.org/10.1353/cbq.2022.0163

Greenough, C. (2021). *The Bible and Sexual Violence Against Men*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003029601

Guest, D. (2005). *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian biblical hermeneutics*. London: SCM Press.

Guest, D. (2012). *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

hooks, b. (2000 [1984]). *Feminist Theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
Hornsby, T. J. and Stone, K. (2011). *Bible Trouble: Queer reading at the boundaries of biblical scholarship*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1r4xcrc
Isasi-Díaz, A. M. and Tarango, Y. (1988). *Hispanic Women: Prophetic voice in the Church*. San Franciso: Harper & Row.
Leys, R. (2011). The turn to affect: A critique. *Critical Inquiry*, 37(3), 434–472. https://doi.org/10.1086/659353
Lobb, A. (2017). Critical empathy. *Constellations*, 24(4), 594–607. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12292
Melanchthon, M. J. and Whitaker, R. J. (eds) (2021). *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
Miller, C. (2019). *Know My Name: A memoir*. New York: Viking.
Möller, A., Söndergaard, H. P. and Helström, L. (2017). Tonic immobility during sexual assault: A common reaction predicting post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression. *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica Scandinavica*, 96(8), 932–938. https://doi.org/10.1111/aogs.13174
Morrison, T. (1971). What the Black woman thinks about Women's Lib. *The New York Times*, 22 August (section SM, 14). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-black-woman-and.html. (Accessed 24 August 2024).
Olyan, S. M. (2008). *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting mental and physical differences*. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499036
Pelton, B. (2021). The fruit of others' labor: How Judges 19 stands with dehumanized migrant workers, in M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker (eds), *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence* (pp. 161–178). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
Reaves, J. R. (2018). Sarah as victim and perpetrator: Whiteness, power, and memory in the matriarchal narrative. *Review and Expositor*, 115(4), 483–499. https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637318806591
Reis, P. M. (1997). Cupidity and stupidity: Women's agency and the 'rape' of Tamar. *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 25(1), 43–60.
Rey, M. I. (2016). Reexamination of the foreign female captive: Deuteronomy 21:10–14 as a case of genocidal rape. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32(1), 37–53. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.1.04
Roupenian, K. (2017). Cat person. *The New Yorker*, 11 December, 93(40), 66–73. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person. (Accessed 24 August 2024).
Scholz, S. (ed) (2013). *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect: Biblical books* (Volume I). Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
Scholz, S. (ed) (2014). *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect: Social location* (Vol. II). Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
Scholz, S. (ed) (2016). *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect: Methods* (Volume III). Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
Sedgwick, E. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786
Sherwood, Y. (ed) (2017). *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the field*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198722618.001.0001
Shiloh Project. (n.d.). Rape culture, religion, and the Bible. Resources. Available at: https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/. (Accessed 3 May 2024).
Society of Biblical Literature. (2022). Annual meeting: call for papers. Available at: https://sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_CallForPaperDetails.aspx?MeetingId=41&VolunteerUnitId=291. (Accessed 3 May 2024).
Society of Biblical Literature. (2022). Program book: 2022 annual meeting. Available at: https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramBook.aspx?MeetingId=41. (Accessed 3 May 2024).
Stiebert, J. (2013). *Fathers & Daughters in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199673827.001.0001
Stiebert, J. (2016). *First-Degree Incest and the Hebrew Bible: Sex in the family*. London and New York: T&T Clark.
Stone, K. (1996). *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
Thiede, B. (2022). *Rape Culture in the House of David: A company of men*. London, New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003014911
Thiede, B. (2024a). Hidden in plain sight: Saul's male trauma narrative in 1 Samuel. *Biblical Interpretation*, 32(3), 221–242. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-20231763
Thiede, B. (2024b). Taking biblical authors at their word: On scholarly ethics, sexual violence, and rape culture in the Hebrew Bible. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 143(2), 185–205. https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1432.2024.1
Tiemeyer, L.-S. (2008). Feminist and ideological interpretation, in T. Longman III and P. Enns (eds), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, poetry and writings* (pp. 205–218). Leicester: Intervarsity Press.
Tombs, D. (2021). Reading crucifixion narratives as texts of terror, in M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker (eds), *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence* (pp. 139–160). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Tombs, D. (2022). *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, sexual abuse, and the scandal of the Cross*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429289750

Trible, P. (1984). *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Trible, P. (2021). Foreword: Biblical terrors then and now, in M. J. Melanchthon and R. J. Whitaker (eds), *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender, and violence* (pp. ix–xii). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

van Klinken, A. and Stiebert, J., with Brian, S. and Hudson, F. (2021). *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ refugee lives and the Bible*. Suffolk: James Currey. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jpf1x6

Washington, H. C. (1997). Violence and the construction of gender in the Hebrew Bible: A new historicist approach 1. *Biblical Interpretation*, 5(4), 324–363. https://doi.org/10.1163/156851597X00120

Weems, R. J. (1988). *Just A Sister Away: A womanist vision of women's relationships in the Bible*. San Diego: LuraMedia.

Weems, R. J. (1995). *Battered Love: Marriage, sex and violence in the Hebrew prophets*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Williams, L. (2019). *Supper Club*. New York: Putnam's Sons.

Citation: Thiede, B. and Stiebert, J. (2025). Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror – A Feminist Reflection. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 08. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16018

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 09
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

One Girl Revolution: The Christian Feminism of Superchick

Maiken Ana Kores [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Since evangelical Christians became a major force in the US consumer marketplace in the 1970s, they have increasingly carved out a space for themselves in the arena of popular culture with their own brand of contemporary Christian music (CCM). This article proposes an analysis of how Christian alternative pop/rock band Superchick uses feminist discourse to promote the feminine adherence to purity and obedience of Christian religious directives. The origin of such a dichotomous relationship between form and substance can be traced to the Christian music industry's desire to frame Christianity as 'hip' and countercultural in contrast to its secular counterpart. Musical forms are appropriated freely without regard for the historical specificities of their genre and added lyrics promoting evangelical Christianity's values. The article examines how resisting the corrupt pull of secularism is frequently framed as an act of rebellion to win over young and teenaged audiences. I will especially focus on the period of the 1990s and early 2000s, when the so-called evangelical purity movement was popular and influencing the lives and futures of young American women and girls.

Keywords: cultural studies, music, language and linguistics, feminist history, activism and politics, gender studies

INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s, evangelicalism has been on a steady upward trajectory within USA society, establishing itself as a culture-defining powerhouse (Byle Bruland, 1989). It has, in a postmodern turn, coalesced with neoliberal conservative politics; this is particularly perceptible in the gendered norms that shape contemporary American female identities (Flournoy, 2013). Evangelical women navigate postmodernity by negotiating a multiplicity of, sometimes contradictory, ideologies. This is evinced in their co-opting of a language of empowerment, which weaves feminist and postfeminist ideals into a conservative Christian and neoliberal framework (Eskes *et al.,* 1998; Gaddini, 2021; Marcuse, 1964). This commodified empowerment has proven influential in shaping cultural production and social relations, and has, since the 1990s, come to pervade popular discourse in the USA (Riordan, 2001). As mediated discourse is one of the arenas of the ideological struggle surrounding the term 'feminism' and the feminist movement in US culture and politics (Loke *et al.*, 2017: 123), the gendered subject constructed by Superchick, a prominent female-fronted Christian band, which embodies the contradictory notions of empowerment and traditional femininity, is a compelling lens for examining these complex dynamics.

In this article I will argue that the modern evangelical discourse, exemplified in Superchick's lyrics, reinforces women's subordination and an adherence to patriarchal Christian dynamics. By exploring evangelical themes of embattlement and aggressive masculinity, the analysis reveals how these narratives place the responsibility of sexual purity and modest behaviour on women. Additionally, the concept of 'princess theology' is critiqued for confining women to passive roles oriented toward heterosexual marriage. While Superchick's lyrics promote 'girl power' and rebelliousness, they simultaneously align with evangelical doctrines, illustrating a form of traditional evangelical feminism intertwined with postmodern individualism and consumerism, emphasising self-improvement through therapeutic language. The band's musical activity, which spans the early 2000s to the early 2010s, situates it at an intriguing point in evangelicalism's development. In the 1990s, evangelicals' engagement with mainstream culture had been on a steady upward trajectory, spurred by their outrage at divorce, abortion, the sexual revolution, and pro-ERA activism. A variety of movements sought to reaffirm traditional notions of propriety and gender complementarity (Hendershot, 2004; Kobes Du Mez, 2020). On the other hand, evangelicalism's consistent

[1] *Independent Researcher*, SLOVENIA
***Corresponding Author:** maiken.kores@gmail.com

engagement with mainstream culture has led to it appropriating and adapting certain philosophies, such as feminism, that rethink the role of women within the Church and society (Byle Bruland, 1989; Cochran, 2005; Daly, 1975). To understand these relationships and where the female subject constructed by Superchick fits into them, I first look at the development of USA evangelicalism, the emergence of its material culture, and its engagement with feminism.

MEET THE EVANGELICALS

Evangelical Christians are a largely Protestant subvariant of Christianity forming a distinct subculture within USA society whose ethos is predicated on the active sharing of the word of God, a literal understanding of the Bible, an emphasis on individual responsibility for salvation, and is characterised by moral and political conservatism (Flournoy, 2013; Hendershot, 2004). As Smith (1998) argues, evangelicals' vitality arises from disengaging with pluralistic society, emphasising their socially constructed distinction as an out-group, marked by a rhetoric of conflict and threat. Perceiving themselves as outcasts within a secular, anti-Christian culture, they assert the superiority of their morality that they derive from beliefs in 'ultimate Truth'.[1] Employing an individualistic 'personal influence strategy' in social activism, they impact political life and public discourse, despite their apparent limitations in understanding the broader social world. The activism of evangelical Christian women has, according to Kintz (1997), shaped political discourse since the early 1990s, leading to a conservative resurgence that has implications for contemporary politics. Women are attracted through promises of community, female agency within traditional roles, and the security offered by responsible male behaviour. Such a patriarchal conception of masculinity also known as 'muscular Christianity' has been, according to Kristin Kobes Du Mez (2020), instrumental in shaping US evangelicals' perspectives, fuelling Christian nationalism and the emergence of the Religious Right from the late 1970s. Led by charismatic leaders, including the likes of James Dobson and Jerry Falwell, the Religious Right emphasises predetermined gender roles, Christian nationalism, and militarism, and thus has close ties to the Republican Party as ideologically compatible. Though not synonymous with evangelicalism, some two thirds of white evangelicals consider themselves Christian nationalists (PRRI, 2023). Flournoy (2013) notes that, besides asserting that Christians in contemporary USA are being persecuted by the liberal Left and secular media, women of the Christian Right have staked their claim for the definition of a new feminism in line with conservative ideals and headed by prominent political figures such as Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin.

PRODUCT PURVEYORS

Evangelical morality is deeply grounded in traditional notions of patriarchy and characterised by promoting heterosexuality and hyper-femininity, partly as a reaction to what they see as the increasingly shifting cultural landscape (Gill, 2007; Loke *et al.*, 2017; Townes, 2006). The threat of creeping secularisation is combatted by their creation of a diversified and ubiquitous Christian media and products industry (Carpenter, 2010). There is ample scholarship on evangelical material culture and evangelicals' ways of engaging with modernity: evangelical fashion and beauty ministries blend mainstream iconography with restrictive notions of feminine submission (Carpenter, 2010), while female microcelebrities and bloggers on social media are striving to break free from the patriarchal norms of traditional evangelicalism (Gaddini, 2021; Laughlin, 2020). Hendershot (2004) analyses the evolution of the Christian products industry that began in the 1970s, spurred by the increasing social and economic visibility of evangelicals, which forged a place for middle-class, white evangelicals within US consumer culture. Despite attempts to diversify, she notes that most[2] evangelical media is created by and for white individuals. Emphasising the integration of faith into everyday life and as a reaction to secular youth culture, Christianised alternatives of secular products and activities provide a way for evangelicals to live out their faith and reinforce their commitments, while helping teens construct a 'hip' youth identity. Contemporary Christian music has particularly, thanks to skilful marketing, evolved into a wealthy industry, with certain rock music bands, such as Creed and Switchfoot, crossing

[1] 'American evangelicals believe not only that an unchanging and universal Truth exists, but—more audaciously, perhaps—that *they* are the ones who know it because God has revealed it to them' (Smith, 1998: 126).

[2] Superchick is an exception: founder Max Hsu is Asian American, while guitarist Dave Ghazarian is of Armenian descent (Easley, 2020).

over into the mainstream. Books, magazines[3] and videos are more explicit in their messaging and some of the key promoters of sexual abstinence and the so-called purity movement that peaked in the 1990s and 2000s.[4]

PURCHASING PURITY

Founded in 1993, the purity movement was a USA-based phenomenon, characterised by systematically associating salvation with sexual purity, and advocating for chastity and abstinence-only sex education (Fahs, 2010; Klein, 2018). Its primary promoters were the Southern Baptist initiative *True Love Waits* and the *Silver Ring Thing* pledge program, which offered teens a variety of purity products in order to sell the concept of purity itself (Gish, 2016; Machin and Thornborrow, 2003). Girls' passivity and hyper-femininity were further inscribed through participating in public declarations of abstinence, such as in ring ceremonies or father-daughter purity balls (Fahs, 2010; Gish, 2016; Hendershot, 2004). The negative consequences of these practices have been widely documented, and lead to shame, sexual anxiety (Klein, 2018), normalising sexual violence, damaging women's construction of their sexuality, and lack of knowledge about safe sex and sexually transmitted infections, directly harming women's sexual health (Fahs, 2010). In the following section, I will offer a brief overview of evangelical feminism and its inception.

EVANGELICAL FEMINISM

In the 1970s, and under the influence of modern hermeneutics, evangelical feminism emerged (Cochran, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). It challenged the evangelical movement's stance on biblical inerrancy and advocated for gender equality, in alignment with liberal feminist ideas, as well as in the use of inclusive language. Evangelical feminism highlighted the power of language in shaping beliefs and underscored the evolving nature of US evangelicalism, influenced by individualism and consumerism. This reshaped US evangelicalism, challenging traditional views on women's roles and contributed in turn to changes in evangelical theology (Cochran, 2005). Evangelical feminists navigated a delicate balance, adapting feminist ideas while maintaining core Christian beliefs (Byle Bruland, 1989). The evolution of the Christian products industry, which includes a variety of Christianised versions of secular products and media forms, established evangelicals as an important consumer demographic, thus cementing the link between evangelicalism and neoliberalism (Hendershot, 2004). The link between evangelicalism, neoliberalism, and postmodernism is evident in cultural shifts towards market-driven principles, impacting social and economic life. In such a consumer culture, promotion becomes a central communicative function, primarily concerned with selling ideas, organisations, individuals, goods, or services (Fairclough, 1993). Superchick's construction of femininity balances 'girl power' rhetoric with evangelical notions, perpetuating complementarity, purity, and modesty for the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1999). Their practices fit into the concept of 'power femininity' (Gill, 2008: 442), applauding women while re-inscribing them within a patriarchal worldview.

Evangelicals' engagement with modernity and feminism has been extensively documented (Barker, 2005; Burke, 2016; Byle Bruland, 1989; Campbell, 2007; Cochran, 2005; Flournoy, 2013; Gallagher, 2004; Gardner, 2011; Gish, 2016; Griffith, 2004; Hendershot, 2004; Kintz, 1997; Klein, 2018; Laughlin, 2020; Maddox, 2013; Valenti, 2009). However, a notable gap in research concerns the discourse of contemporary Christian music within a postfeminist neoliberal context, specifically how notions of empowerment can contribute to a distinct gender ideology. My study aims to address this issue, enhancing the understanding of the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism. Though seemingly supporting and empowering women, I argue evangelical discourse, as represented by Superchick's lyrics, encourages women's 'rightful' subordination to men and their adherence to the patriarchal dynamics inherent in Christianity. Beginning with an overview of evangelical embattlement marked by militaristic metaphors and an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy, my analysis delves into the construction of a dominant and aggressive masculinity, which frames male desire as uncontrollable and places the responsibility of guarding themselves on women. My study also explores how evangelical gender perspectives confine women to so-called princess theology, portraying them as passive objects geared towards heterosexual marriage. This conception ties into expectations of modest behaviour and sexual purity, conflicting with contemporary views on female sexuality and beauty. Superchick's songs address resulting anxiety and self-esteem issues, presenting a discourse of 'girl power' to empower female listeners. 'Girl Power' is an idea promoted by the 1990's globally successful British pop

[3] *Brio* (for girls) and *Breakaway* (for boys) mirror secular media in their gendered construction of (teenage) bodies, and promote heteronormative and complementarian ideals, marked by an oppressive focus on (principally) female bodily control (Hendershot, 2004: 11–88).

[4] Reacting to the perceived liberalisation of mores in American society, the purity movement chiefly promoted abstinence and reinforced traditional gender roles (Hendershot, 2004; Kobes Du Mez, 2020).

band the Spice Girls, a concept that rapidly gained traction in what became known as postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). The female subject constructed in my analysis of the corpus of lyrics maintains a rebellious stance, framed as countercultural, yet aligned with evangelical doctrine and prescribed codes of behaviour. The latter ultimately inscribes it as part of traditional evangelical feminism which is indicative of the postmodern shift towards an individualist, consumer-based society predicated on an ethos of self-improvement frequently mobilised through therapeutic language (Cochran, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

My analysis is grounded in a framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that understands language as a social practice shaped by social and historical constraints, and which shapes identities, relations and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1993). The relationship between text and social practice is mediated by discourse; text production and interpretation are mutually influenced by the nature of social practice. CDA systematically explores the complex causality and determination of discursive practices, events, and texts, and broader social and cultural structures, and how they are ideologically shaped by power relations and struggles (Fairclough, 1993). The effects produced by lexical choices are examined from the standpoint of feminist stylistics to elucidate how Superchick construct a gendered subject who simultaneously embodies the figure of an empowered woman alongside a modest and feminine evangelical figure (Mills, 2005: 4–6).

Self-defined as not just a band, but a movement, Superchick was founded in 1999 in Chicago by Max Hsu, the band's keyboardist, disc jockey and main lyricist. Known for its constantly changing line-up, members included Matt Daly on bass, vocals and synthesisers, Brian Fitch and Brandon Estelle on drums, Justin Sharbono on guitar, Dave Ghazarian on lead guitar, Melissa Brock on rhythm guitar and backing vocals, and her sister Tricia as lead vocalist (Rate Your Music, n.d.; Sarachik, 2013). Their energetic sound blends rock, pop, punk, R&B, and rap, drawing comparisons to No Doubt and Avril Lavigne (Concert Archives, 2021). Lyrics address themes of self-worth, aiming to help listeners become more secure as intended by God (Hertz, 2002). Their understanding of music as ministry, Ghazarian's involvement with *Campus Crusade for Christ* (Easley, 2020),[5] and their views on sexual purity (Penney, 2002: 38–40) situate them within traditional evangelicalism.

Superchick released six albums between 2001 and 2013, achieving significant commercial success (Christian Music Archive, 2020). Their songs were released during the peak of the purity movement (Hendershot, 2004). In this period, evangelicals saw heightened right-wing political engagement due in part to the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA (Kobes Du Mez, 2020), and evangelicals were negotiating a new feminine subjectivity which combined feminist with complementarian ideals (Flournoy, 2013). Despite a primarily evangelical fanbase, some songs gained mainstream popularity. In 2008, *Rock What You Got* debuted at #65 on The Billboard 200 (2008) and was nominated for a Grammy Award the following year (IMDb, n.d.). The track *One Girl Revolution* was part of the 2001 film *Legally Blonde* (IMDb, n.d.), contributing to the band's crossover appeal. The song's inclusion in this film, which has been characterised as postfeminist (Schwartz, 2023), inspired the choice to select Superchick as the subject of my analysis. This is grounded in my experience with CDA and interest in the intersection of language with various cultural forms, particularly from a feminist perspective. Although, being neither a citizen of the USA nor an evangelical, but raised in a Catholic household, my perspective is necessarily that of an 'outsider'.

The band, which was initially formed to minister to young girls struggling with self-esteem (Easley, 2020), conveys a positive image that may not immediately reveal its evangelical ethos, and might even be interpreted as feminist. My analysis sought to ask: is their message indeed feminist, and, if so, what type of feminism is expressed in their lyrics? Can one be feminist and complementarian, or is the convergence impossible? Following a close reading of Superchick's discography, thirteen songs were selected based on two criteria: expressing a sense of isolation and embattlement, a trait broadly characteristic of evangelical media. Lyrics relating specifically to women/girls, be it in a perceived feminist or complementarian way.

Analysing lyrics of popular songs is a useful tool for problematising the meanings expressed therein (Whiteley, 1997). What is central to my analysis, is that ideas about gender, and how women and men should (not) behave are not fixed by the author or songwriter; rather, they are fluid, situational, and shaped by audiences, other media and social institutions. These guide listeners towards certain meanings: such is the notion of male aggression versus female passivity, both in society as well as heterosexual marriage; the latter is typically framed as women's central aspiration. Both the construction of women as passive objects and the centrality of heterosexual marriage in their lives are themes expressed in the analysed corpus (Cohen, 1997).

The analysis combines two linguistic approaches. Form-and-meaning analysis considers formal characteristics like vocabulary, mood, and modality to decode the texts' intended meaning. This is complemented by a feminist stylistics approach to the lexical choices and how these represent women versus men and their respective place in

[5] An international parachurch organisation committed to evangelising (Cru, 2024).

society. Special attention is paid to how the self has been commodified and individualised by appropriating feminist discourse (Morris and Korobov, 2020), particularly the notion of empowerment (Thompson, 1987). An interpretative and qualitative analysis grapples with the fundamental contradictions of these two concurrent identities in the context of US evangelicalism. This is marked by competing discourses of traditional femininity and independence, which are characteristic of a postmodern identity creation increasingly adopted by evangelical women in the USA (Flournoy, 2013).

MUSIC AS MINISTRY

As a *dispositif*, music can help shape a particular moral worldview; within the evangelical context, this musical framework is intertwined with discourse that perpetuates and legitimates idealised archetypes, and imparts moral directives to uphold a specific social order. Music's power to shape public perceptions has long led to its use as a tool of propaganda, notably due to musicians' function as 'truth bearers' who can be instrumental in mobilising members of a movement and establishing an 'us versus them' dichotomy (Street, 2003: 114–127). Music, importantly, contributes to the ongoing process of producing, contesting, and redefining the categories of gender and masculinity, such as the characterisation of women as stumbling blocks, princesses and passive recipients of male desire, focused exclusively on romantic love (Cohen, 1997). Music can, furthermore, underscore the importance of purity, female passivity, beauty capital and advance a commodified version of 'girl power'.

Us and Them

Media helps individuals construct aspects of their identity, such as their sense of 'us' and 'them' (Kellner, 1995: 8), a distinction frequently employed in evangelical cultural products. The framing of evangelicals as embattled is exemplified in the song *Cross the Line* (Brock *et al.*, 2008b). The perceived danger of constructing an identity that differs from the secular norm is made implicit using militaristic metaphors to evoke an impending conflict:

> Everybody freeze – don't step over the line
> Don't stand up, they'll shoot down the first one who tries
> (…)
> Revolutions start when someone crosses the line

The theme of revolution is repeated in *One Girl Revolution* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b): 'I can find my revolution, I can learn to stand alone,' and *One and Lonely* (Brock *et al.*, 2002): 'Some days it's hard to be a one girl revolution.' A discursive focus on war and violence draws on a model of dominant masculinity traditionally used to express exercising agency (Lazar, 2006; Maddox, 2013) Such a defensive attitude towards secularism can be interpreted as a reaction towards the pluralistic landscape of contemporary postmodernism which necessitates a continuous renegotiation of adherents' subjectivity for the Christian ideology to evolve and adapt accordingly (Flournoy, 2013). A clear distinction between the 'in-group' and 'out-group' (Tajfel and Turner, 2004: 374) is established by the repeated use of the personal ('we', 'you', 'us' versus 'they'), and indefinite pronouns ('somebody', 'someone', 'all', 'everybody', 'everyone') (*Cross the Line*, Brock *et al.,* 2008b). Deontic modality is employed to communicate a supposedly societally desired course of action:

> Follow the leader, stay in the lines
> (…)
> Go with the crowd
> (…)
> Play it safe, play by the rules (Brock *et al.*, 2008b)

Stumbling Blocks

Binary distinctions, particularly regarding gender roles, are also a foundational aspect of how western culture is organised, and one of the principles of evangelicalism. Evangelical Christian media discursively constructs men and women as fundamentally different. This difference is rooted in the centrality of a dominant masculinity versus a passive femininity. A marker of this rhetoric is the infantilising practice of referring to women of all ages as 'girls' (Maddox, 2013: 19–20), a term which appears over 40 times in the analysed body of material. Men are consistently framed as inherently sexual beings, while women are expected to be pure, virginal, and submissive, guarding their bodies from the animalistic urges of men (Carpenter, 2010: 34; Fahs, 2010: 120). I contrast two lines from the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), wherein Superchick echo the belief that men are primarily interested in sex, while women desire exclusively romantic love:

> 'Cause they don't flaunt what the boys want more
> (…)
> No girl should feel she has to trade
> Her body for love or be an old maid

The underlying implications are as follows: first, by using the verb 'flaunt', failing to dress modestly is equalled to showing off and 'asking for it' – a construction notoriously deployed in rape trials. Secondly, pre-marital or, indeed, any sexual intercourse is perceived as something women might be willing or pressured to exchange for what they truly desire. Conforming to a passive model of femininity, which includes withholding sex to obtain a long-term commitment, ascribes to and reinforces dominant discourses of heterosexuality that construct women as sexual gatekeepers and as passive recipients of male desire (Moran, 2016: 11). The metonymic construction of 'her body' further equates women's personhood with their physicality, a common trope in complementarian theology where women are created 'for' men (Valenti, 2009: 25). In the line 'You might feel like public property / You might, you might, you shouldn't be', the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a) further expands on this implication. By referring to women as de facto objects, 'public property' implies that a certain mode of dress means forfeiting bodily autonomy. This supports patriarchal society's objectification of women's bodies which can lead to justifying violence against them (Kilbourne, 1999: 278).

Teachings of gender complementarity frequently construct men as flawed (Maddox, 2013: 14):

> You hate men, is what you say
> And I understand how you feel that way
> (…)
> All princes start as frogs, all gentlemen as dogs
> (…)
> But some boys can become men (*Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)*, Hsu, 2002)

Again, this example draws on the motive of a dominant, inherently aggressive masculinity. Aggression is understood as a 'natural' feature of maleness and expressed through declarative statements employing the indefinite pronoun 'all' to indicate their general factualness. Women are expected to respond to this masculinity with both patience and understanding:

> Just wait till it's plain to see
> What we're growing up to be (Hsu, 2002)

This is expressed via deontic modality using the imperative instruct on appropriate female behaviour or lack thereof ('wait').

Princess Theology

Women's inaction is highly regarded in evangelical circles, and informs what has come to be labelled as 'princess theology'. A year before Superchick's second album *Last One Picked* (2002) and during the peak of the purity movement, John Eldredge's popular book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (2001) reinforced the importance of male leadership and female passivity. In it he describes girls' dreams of being rescued by a Prince Charming as being part of God's creation. These themes are central to two tracks on the album: *Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)* (Hsu, 2002) and *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002). In the former, Eldredge's stance is echoed in the line 'All girls dream of a fairy tale'. The declarative mood and the indefinite pronoun 'all' present this information as factual. This assumption is not just a product of evangelicalism but draws from contemporary 'princess culture' responsible for perpetuating gender stereotypes and encouraging girls to submit to their prince once being proverbially rescued by him (Orenstein, 2012: Chapter 2). Women are portrayed as in need of rescuing in *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002):

> Knight in shining armour
> Hero to rescue me

Here, men are seen as protectors and rescuers, who complete a woman, and it echoes longstanding folktale tropes in western culture (Propp, 1975). Princess mythology's ubiquity is just another example of the mutual influence of evangelicalism and popular western culture, and their centring of female victimhood and passivity.

Good Things Come…

Judith Butler argues that the gender identities prescribed of women and men are not inherent but need to be continuously constructed through repetitive action (Butler, 1999). Or, perhaps in the case of evangelical women, inaction. The notion of waiting, tied to women's forced passivity, pervades the analysed corpus:

> They wanna see how they're gonna grow up (*Barlow Girls*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a)
> I've been waiting here so very patiently (*TV Land*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001)
> I am a voice yet waiting to be heard (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)
> Just wait till it's plain to see
> What we're growing up to be (*Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)*, Hsu, 2002)
> He is the one that I've been waiting for
> (…)
> I've waited my whole life for the day I am his (*Wonder (If She'll Get It)*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)

This final example presupposes that waiting for one's predestined partner is supposed to not only ensure a blessed union (Burke, 2016; Gaddini, 2021; Gardner, 2011), securing a man is women's goal and purpose in life. Despite (or perhaps due to) evangelicals' often vehement opposition to women's bodily displays and sexual autonomy, the objectification of the female body in evangelical ministries and media is widespread (Carpenter, 2010: 34–35). Self-objectification is apparent using the possessive pronoun 'his'. Women are constructed, and as the example indicates, encouraged to see themselves as gifts to be given to their future spouse. Evangelical media generally espouses this centrality of heterosexual marriage following centuries of Christian teachings on the supposed 'containment' by marriage of female sexuality.

Going Steady

Commercial teenage culture (both secular and evangelical) continuously pressures girls to get a boyfriend and encourage them to long for romantic love (Bayton, 1997). Despite advances in women's rights, becoming a wife and mother is still seen as their end-goal (Morris and Korobov, 2020), especially within evangelical circles where these roles are constitutive of the ideal woman (Gaddini, 2021). Purity teachings particularly identify women as in need of guidance and protection from a male figure (Gish, 2016). These aspirations are central to the song *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002):

> So beautiful I know our children will be
> (…)
> I promise to love him
> Forevermore
> I've waited my whole life for the day I am his

The verses presuppose the aim of marriage and a nuclear family. Epistemic modality ('I know') indicates certainty about future children. Vocabulary associated with marriage vows and women being 'given in marriage', equating 'dreams' to marriage and children, perpetuates a patriarchal understanding of women's roles, valuing them in relation to men and male exchange, rather than as individuals.

Pure Is Cool

Brought up in evangelical Christianity, US girls' preparation for heterosexual marriage is supposed to begin in childhood and is most saliently promoted in purity teachings. These instruct fathers to monitor all aspects of their daughters' lives and instil in them the importance of modest attire and obedience, grooming them for heterosexual marriage, when they are to be handed over to their husbands. Obedience and modesty are also promoted in evangelical media (Gish, 2016).[6] The sexual purity doctrine is most clearly defended in the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a):

> They don't date, they won't date
> They wanna see how they're gonna grow up
> Who they're gonna be
> But in the meantime, they might feel unloved
> When all the girls around them are hooking up
> But I know for sure it's never popular to be pure
> And while some guys might be passing them by

[6] Magazines encourage girls to imagine what Jesus would think of their outfit (Gish, 2016).

> I think they've caught someone's eye
> All the boys in the band want a valentine from a Barlow Girl
> Boys think they're the bomb
> Cause they remind them of their mom

The decision to remain sexually pure is discursively constructed as defiant through an inversion of contemporary commonsense, which (Line 6), affirms chastity as 'sexy' (Gardner, 2011: 18). Line 5 employs epistemic modality to provide a value judgement on non-evangelical women's behaviour, contrasting them unfavourably with the ideal chaste young woman and framing the Christian teenager as morally superior, though potentially an outcast (Line 4). The outcast motif draws upon heroic outcast memes that have become ubiquitous in western culture, with its origins in folklore. Superchick's male members elaborated on their views regarding sexual purity in an *Open Letter to Girls*,[7] published in teen Christian magazine *Campus Life* (Penney, 2002: 38–40). In it, they underscored the negative consequences of dressing provocatively, framing chastity as correct and appealing to 'cool' men, thereby attempting to appease female readers' anxieties about not conforming to a secular norm. Their advice for girls to police the way they dress with the aim of 'taking it a little easier on (us) guys' likewise implies women's responsibility for controlling men's sexual thoughts and impulses (Penney, 2002: 38–40; Sharma, 2008) which is a widespread, longstanding trope circulating not just in Christianity but also in Islam and Judaism.

Arguably, although secular and evangelical culture share their obsession with objectifying the female body, the latter is especially focused on control, viewing women as dangerous sources of temptation, or stumbling blocks, responsible for managing men's overwhelming sexual desires (Carpenter, 2010; Gish, 2016; Klein, 2018). In *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), women are implicitly faulted for attracting male attention:

> You can get noticed with your body
> Sexual hypnosis by being hottie

Their desirable appearance, reinforced using the term 'hottie', is symbolically invested with a power of influencing or 'hypnotizing'[8] men (of course, this goes back to Greek mythology and is perpetuated throughout history as an aspect of western Romanticism). Dressing provocatively is seen by evangelicals as tantamount to engaging in sexual intercourse, though girls seem to be chastised regardless of what they wear (Klein, 2018). The song goes on to shame and caution immodest women:

> You might feel like public property
> You might, you might, you shouldn't be (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a)

In the first verse, speculative epistemic modality links immodest attire with objectification ('public property'); meanwhile the second verse combines the repetition of the modal auxiliary 'might' with the deontic expression 'you shouldn't be', underscoring immodesty's negative consequences and delivering an injunction on inappropriate behaviour.

Beauty Capital

The bodily discipline imposed on and demanded of women specifically within US Christian evangelicalism and more widely within western culture is a pervasive element of social control, exhibited through pressures to conform to a certain standard of beauty (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). In both religious and secular contexts, women are often valued primarily for their physical beauty (Carpenter, 2010). Neoliberal media frame the central preoccupation of femininity as becoming desirable to men, while simultaneously projecting confidence and indifference towards one's appearance, marking a shift from overt sexual objectification to subtler sexual subjectification, in favour of the male gaze (Gill, 2008; Moran and Lee, 2011; Mulvey, 1999). Transferring responsibility to women as individual, rational, self-regulating neoliberal subjects ignores the impact of cultural influence on their internalising of socially constructed ideas about gender (Gill, 2008; Moran, 2016).

[7] 'I'm sure most of you have figured out that the sexier you dress, the more attention you get. But even though the attention can feel good, it's really not good for you. Everyone deserves to be loved, not lusted over. When you dress to impress, guys notice, but when you try to live a life that's honoring Christ, a whole different set of guys notice. (…) So if you're feeling left out because you don't show off your body, don't date yet, or if you're thinking about taking it a little easier on us guys by dressing a touch more conservatively, I promise you're going to get noticed. In fact, I can name at least five skateboarding, guitar playing, skydiving, motorcycle riding, snowboarding, rock climbing guys in this band who are going to think you're the bomb' (Penney, 2002: 38–40).

[8] Hypnosis is 'a state similar to sleep, in which someone's thoughts and actions can be influenced by someone else' (LDCOE, 2018).

Evangelical and secular discourse, while differing in prescribed behaviours, share the centrality of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999), for which female beauty must be continuously performed (Carpenter, 2010). Women in the analysed song lyrics are exclusively its objects:

> Watching TV, checking Britney, televised,
> My guys checking out her thighs (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)

Men, on the other hand, are not similarly objectified. Ideal evangelical women are constructed as: 'Ordinary girls they don't live in the fast lane' (*Barlow Girls*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), or the synonymous 'just your average Jane' (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b). They do not stand out from the crowd or follow 'an exciting way of life that involves dangerous and expensive activities' (LDCOE, 2018).

Though pressures to conform to a certain standard of beauty influence the lives of women and girls regardless of their religious affiliation, Griffith (2004) notes that these pressures are even more intensely felt within the evangelical community. Their outward appearance is seen as a reflection of inner beauty and strength of faith. Women's performance of a specific feminine and sexualised appearance fosters a shared feeling of belonging among members of the community. This is amplified by a host of consumer-driven practices,[9] which normalise women's obligation to adhere to a set of restrictive and heteronormative visual standards (Flournoy, 2013). 'Beauty capital' is obtained by the possession of an ideal thin physique, in the US context sometimes referred to as the 'Scandinavian Barbie': tall, thin, blonde and blue-eyed (Gaddini, 2021: 5). Throughout the corpus there are multiple instances where beauty and perfection are equated with thinness and framed as a desirable characteristic in the individuals one is surrounded with: 'I wanna live in TV land where they're so thin and pretty' (*TV Land*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001c). Fatness is therefore seen as dangerously representative of 'appetite', something which the demure Christian woman should not show.

This unattainable female beauty standard fosters perpetual anxiety, known as 'normative discontent' (McRobbie, 2008: 98), which results in psychological issues (Grogan, 1999). Personal happiness and self-esteem are contingent on achieving this normative ideal, potentially leading to a negative self-image and even disordered eating:

> But one imperfection takes away my grin
> Not that I think I'm ugly
> But acne throws me for a backslide
> I won't go outside
> (…)
> No lunch cause the jeans don't fit days (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)
> I don't know the first time I felt unbeautiful
> The day I chose not to eat (*Courage*, Brock and Hsu, 2005)

While women may be aware of the oppressive effects of such dominant discourses—such as, 'It's not like I even need to be competing with unreality TV, fantasy / Not for a smart girl like me' (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)—they are nonetheless affected by them (Moran, 2016). Though the track *So Beautiful* (Brock *et al.*, 2008c) pushes back against beauty standards, it reinscribes the centrality of attractiveness. Furthermore, by contrasting light to darkness, beauty is equated with goodness, an ancient bifurcation that remains a burden for women today:

> We are a beauty that's our own
> (…)
> We are light, we were born beautiful
> We were meant to be more than just these shadows of girls

Girl Power

The pressures to embody a modest and desirable femininity are externally prescribed by identifying with the successful performance of femininity with continuous self-improvement. Such a commodified feminism is insidiously couched in a rhetoric of choice that encourages the consumption of pro-girl artefacts with which to purchase empowerment (Braun, 2009; Gill, 2008; Moran, 2016; Riordan, 2001). Once a signifier of competence and ability, this has increasingly become associated with a contemporary construction of female sexuality primarily catering to the male gaze (Tolman, 2012). The 1970s feminist concept of female empowerment decisively made its way into the mainstream in the 1990s with postfeminism, and it did not take long for it to be subsumed into neoliberal capitalist ideology. As a commodity, its focus has shifted to an individualistic pursuit of self-improvement, also dubbed 'girl power' (Riordan, 2001: 284–288). This empty signifier is no longer a politically

[9] Self-help books for women bear titles such as *Less of Me: A 30-Day Devotional for Your Weight Loss Journey* (Lehman, 2017).

liberating concept that maximises women's agency, but a product that can be purchased by adopting the latest product, idea, or style (Goldman, 1992; Macdonald, 1995).

Despite evangelicals' criticisms of feminism (Gilder, 1993; James, 1992; LaHaye, 1993) and their promotion of a traditional, restrictive sexual morality, feminism has undeniably influenced and transformed evangelical ideas in the modern era. The development of evangelical feminism provided an alternative to secular feminism and allowed evangelical women to redefine their spirituality in terms of contemporary culture, using scripture as a therapeutic means to address psychological and social anxieties (Cochran, 2005). In this vein, Superchick use their platform to push back against the restrictive bodily ideals imposed on young women. The distinction between 'real' and manufactured beauty is expressed in *TV Land* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001c). Note the use of the verb 'safe' to evoke the theme of conflict in typical evangelical fashion:

> Sometimes you've got to choose between real and plastic surgery
> (…)
> Make it safe to be ordinary gonna do my own show
> It's about us real live girls in TV land

This notion of 'safety' further evokes how the world can be a dangerous place for a woman. Elements of the analysed corpus focus on a few themes which fall under the category of this postfeminist girl power rhetoric. The first concerns self-acceptance and refusing objectification:

> I've got better things to do than be shown off
> I won't be the doll you lock up in a box (*Real*, Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002)
> There are trophies to win
> instead of being one of yours (*Anthem*, Brock *et al.*, 2005)

Meanwhile a second set of lyrics grapples with the issue of female agency and resisting wifely submission:

> Not a Stepford wife made to obey (*Alive*, Brock *et al.*, 2008a)
> I can find my revolution, I can learn to stand alone
> (…)
> I'll be everything that I want to be (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)
> I will find my voice my stand (*Real*, Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002)
> We are not what you think
> you can't keep us in our place (*Anthem*, Brock *et al.*, 2005)

Influenced by neoliberalism, girl power is markedly individualistic, as evidenced by the multiple repetitions of the personal pronoun 'I', which appears 36 times in the track *Real* (Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002):

> But I want to be real
> I want to find out who I am
> And I will find my way to heal
> And I will find my voice my stand
> I am who I am
> I am woman hear me roar and I am salt, I am sand
> A million starfish stranded, landed, I'll throw back what I can
> I'll save the planet, change the world, I'll make a lone girl stand,
> I've got better things to do than be shown off
> I won't be the doll you'll lock up in a box

The above excerpt reveals a particular construction of femininity that is active and decisive, rather than passive, as evidenced by the repeated use of the epistemic modal auxiliary 'will', and phrases starting with 'I am' that reveal how the subject constructs herself. In the final line, she constructs herself not through what she is, but what she is not, making use of a common evangelical rhetorical trope relying on binary oppositions (Smith, 1998). Noun phrases 'my way', 'my voice', 'my stand' inscribe themselves in the contemporary understanding of feminism as synonymous with self-actualisation and betterment, otherwise known as postfeminism (Moran, 2016). 'I am who I am' is, likewise, incredibly reminiscent of James' (1992: 168) call for an evangelical version of feminism, though there is no official indication that it was the source of Superchick's inspiration. This track might be especially empowering to girls, however, because of the music genre of rock itself.

It is widely accepted that certain musical styles, sounds, and instruments are associated with the performance of collective presuppositions regarding gender. In Euro-American cultures, rock music typically symbolises

masculinity. Within this masculinist discourse, women occupy one of two roles: sex object or tomboy (in other words, an imitation male). Since society teaches women how to behave in accordance with prescribed feminine roles, and because of the inherent male genderedness of rock, girls are not usually exposed to images of inspirational female role models in popular culture. In fact, women playing an electric guitar or performing rock and roll are seen as breaking the gender code (Bayton 1997; Coates 1997; Cohen, 1997). Superchick, at first glance, attempts to transgress this code. In *Real* (Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002), the singer occupies the traditionally masculine role of rockstar, she is 'a girl with a band' and 'a velveteen rabbit made of steel with a plan'. This is contrasted with what she is not, that is to say 'a beauty queen', staking her claim to embody a more independent femininity. However, empowerment in their songs is mostly achieved by adopting the role of tomboy. In *One Girl Revolution* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b), independence is framed using a militaristic, hence, traditionally masculine metaphor (Kobes Du Mez, 2020):

> I've got the rifle, gonna be myself
> I'll shoot the shot
> Bang
> That you hear 'round the world (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)

Meanwhile, in *Anthem* (Brock *et al.*, 2005) girls are celebrated for embodying multiple femininities:

> We are fire inside
> We are lipstick and cleats
> (…)
> We are girls with skinned knees
> We are concrete and grace
> (…)
> Here's to the girls on their boards with bruises and scars
> Here's to the girls whose fingers bleed from playin' guitar

Yet, underscoring that they can be both tomboyish and feminine ('lipstick and cleats'), these metonymic constructions reinforce a complementarian masculine-feminine dichotomy, wherein boys are 'hard', and girls are 'soft'.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of discourses espousing female passivity, modesty, and submission in the examined body of material in evangelical media speak to the ongoing promotion of patriarchal and complementarian notions of gender that, though claiming to value women as members, still view them as rightfully subordinate (Byle Bruland, 1989; Gaddini, 2021; Gish, 2016; Valenti, 2009). Though the article reflects on US evangelicalism's engagement with feminism through popular music in the early 2000s, it does not consider the sonic form of the music, and other multimodal elements, thus opening potential for further scholarship. Likewise, future research could focus on the way in which femininities have come to be articulated through the discourses of more contemporary CCM artists.

Evangelicals, especially women, continually negotiate their subjectivities within a postmodern context (Flournoy, 2013). To maintain their cultural and ideological relevance, they forge youth identities and evangelise; evangelicals constantly engage with secular culture which, in turn, subtly modifies some of their beliefs. For example, evangelicals' engagement with feminism has resulted in a partial 'liberalisation' of the traditional mandates of wifely submission within evangelical marriage (Hendershot, 2004: 34–94). The emerging trend of evangelical feminism and the prevalence of girl power rhetoric in Christian music and media, noted here in the examined corpus, speaks to the commodification of empowerment, characteristic of postfeminism and neoliberalism that strips any notion of empowerment of its political, shall we say feminist, significance (Gill, 2008; Loke *et al.*, 2017). As modern society has shifted towards a market-driven, consumer culture, postfeminist discourse has increasingly come to emphasise the importance of self-improvement (Fairclough, 1993; Riordan, 2001). This has, likewise, influenced the development of evangelical feminism, particularly its traditionalist strain. Due to Superchick's views on music ministry and the importance of purity until heterosexual marriage (Easley, 2020; Penney, 2002), their lyrics firmly inscribe themselves within traditionalist evangelical feminism as outlined by Cochran and here (2005).

Much like Superchick view music as delivering ministry, digitalisation has made other cultural forms like vlogging and social media increasingly prominent in evangelical culture. These platforms can not only spread religious messages but also challenge traditional evangelical views and power structures (Barker, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Gaddini, 2021). Though this is beyond the scope of my current analysis, members' activity on social media,

which persists though the band is no longer active, could offer insight on Superchick's views regarding contemporary topics.

Social media has become an important tool for evangelicals to spread their views: past years have seen an advent of female evangelical 'microcelebrities' on Instagram (Gaddini, 2021: 3). Such platforms offer evangelical women the possibility to perform authority, either in specific spheres—like performing an idealised version of womanhood—or by challenging male-dominated structures (Gaddini, 2021). Challenges to the traditional concept of male headship have also appeared from elsewhere within evangelicalism, such as in prominent Bible teacher Beth Moore's departure from the Southern Baptist Convention in 2021. Her move was also motivated by racism within the movement and evangelicals' embrace of the white nationalism of Donald Trump (Smietana, 2021). Regardless, white evangelicals remain an important demographic for the Republican Party, having widely supported Trump in the 2016 elections. In that year, the former US president received the vote of 81% of white evangelicals and 73% of white evangelical women (Gaddini, 2021; Martinez and Smith, 2016).

Superchick's lyrics portray the dichotomy between evangelical womanhood and 'empowerment' which still largely characterises contemporary evangelicalism. There remains potential for future scholarship on how evangelical women's identities are articulated through more contemporary forms of media, as well as how, and if, this has influenced women's perception of their traditionally 'subordinate' role within evangelical society. It is also important to recognise how audiences negotiate meaning in popular music and whilst this article has articulated how dominant discourses on masculinity and femininity are supported by this music, it would also be useful to identify where listeners and audiences have read or manipulated text into counter-discursive formations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to guest editors Dr Sonya Sharma and Dr Dawn Llewellyn for all their kind guidance, as well as the reviewers at *Feminist Encounters* that helped give the present article its current and final form.

REFERENCES

Barker, E. (2005). Crossing the boundary: New challenges to religious authority and control as a consequence of access to the internet, in M. T. Hojsgaard and M. Warburg (eds), *Religion and Cyberspace* (pp. 67–85). London: Routledge.

Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. London: Routledge.

Bayton, M. (1997). Women and the electric guitar, in S. Whiteley (ed), *Sexing the Groove: Popular music and gender* (pp. 37–49). Abingdon: Routledge.

Billboard (2008). *Rock What You Got* [Album]. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20080803030606/http://www.billboard.com/bbcom/discography/index.jsp?aid=1145121&pid=473948. (Accessed 2 February 2024).

Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Braun, V. (2009). 'The women are doing it for themselves': The rhetoric of choice and agency around female genital 'cosmetic surgery'. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24(60), 233–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164640902852449

Brock, M. R. and Hsu, M. T. (2005). *Courage*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/courage.html. (Accessed 9 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Dally, M., Estelle, B., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2005). *Anthem*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/anthem.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Dally, M., Estelle, B., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2008a). *Alive*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/alive.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Dally, M., Estelle, B., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2008b). *Cross the Line*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/crosstheline.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Dally, M., Estelle, B., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2008c). *So Beautiful*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/sobeautiful.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Dally, M., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2002). *Wonder (If She'll Get It)*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/wonderifshellgetit.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Brock, M. R., Brock, P. E., Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2002). *One and Lonely*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/oneandlonely.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Burke, K. (2016). *Christians under Covers: Evangelicals and sexual pleasure on the Internet*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520961586

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Byle Bruland, E. (1989). Evangelical and feminist ethics: Complex solidarities. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 17(2), 139–160.

Campbell, H. (2007). Who's got the power? Religious authority and the Internet. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1043–1062. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00362.x

Carpenter, M. (2010). 'Thank you God for making me cute!' Negotiating bodies, power, and religious meaning in Christian evangelical fashion and beauty ministries for teenage girls. *Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston*, 9, 19–45.

Christian Music Archive. (2020). *Superchick*. Available at: https://www.christianmusicarchive.com/artist/superchick. (Accessed 5 February 2024).

Coates, N. (1997). (R)evolution now? Rock and the political potential of gender, in S. Whiteley (ed), *Sexing the Groove: Popular music and gender* (pp. 50–64). Abingdon: Routledge.

Cochran, P. (2005). *Evangelical Feminism: A history*. New York: New York University Press.

Cohen, S. (1997). Men making a scene: Rock music and the production of gender, in S. Whiteley (ed), *Sexing the Groove: Popular music and gender* (pp. 17–36). Abingdon: Routledge.

Concert Archives. (2021). *Superchick Concert & Tour History*. Available at: https://www.concertarchives.org/bands/superchick. (Accessed 3 February 2024).

Cru. (2024). *About*. Available at: https://www.cru.org/us/en/about.html. (Accessed 15 February 2024).

Daly, M. (1975). *The Church and the Second Sex*. New York: Harper Colophon Book.

Easley, M. (2020) Ghazarian's Journey to Guitarist. *Michael Easley in Context*. Available at: https://michaelincontext.com/interview-dave-ghazarian/. (Accessed 3 February 2024).

Eldredge, J. (2001). *Wild at Heart: Discovering the secret of a man's soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Eskes, T. B., Duncan, M. C. and Miller, E. M. (1998). The discourse of empowerment: Foucault, Marcuse and women's fitness texts. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 22(3), 317–344. https://doi.org/10.1177/019372398022003006

Fahs, B. (2010). Daddy's little girls: On the perils of chastity clubs, purity balls, and ritualized abstinence. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 31(3), 116–142. https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2010.a402749

Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133–168. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002002

Flournoy, E. (2013). No, it's not a joke: The Christian right's appropriation of feminism. *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 25(3), 350–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.798970

Gaddini, K. C. (2021). 'Wife, mommy, pastor and friend': The rise of female evangelical microcelebrities. *Religions,* 12(9), 758. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090758

Gallagher, S. K. (2004). The marginalization of evangelical feminism. *Sociology of Religion*, 65(3), 215–237. https://doi.org/10.2307/3712250

Gardner, C. J. (2011). *Making Chastity Sexy: The rhetoric of evangelical abstinence campaigns*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520950559

Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2001a). *Barlow Girls*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/barlowgirls.html. (Accessed 4 August 2023).

Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2001b). *One Girl Revolution*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/onegirlrevolution.html. (Accessed 13 August 2023).

Ghazarian, D. and Hsu, M. T. (2001c). *TV Land*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/tvland.html. (Accessed 3 August 2023).

Ghazarian, D., Hsu, M. T. and Sharbono, J. (2002). *Real*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/real.html. (Accessed 5 August 2023).

Gilder, G. (1993). *Men and Marriage*. Gretna: Pelican.

Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, 25, 432–445. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.28

Gish, E. (2016). Producing high priests and princesses: The father-daughter relationship in the Christian sexual purity movement. *Religions*, 7(33), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7030033

Goldman, R. (1992). *Reading Ads Socially*. London: Routledge.

Griffith, R. M. (2004). *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and spirit in American Christianity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520217539.001.0001
Grogan, S. (1999). *Body Image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children*. London: Routledge.
Hendershot, H. (2004). *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and conservative evangelical culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226326801.001.0001
Hertz, T. (2002) The Rolling Superchic[k] Revue, *Christianity Today*, 21 May. Available at: https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/32.71.html. (Accessed 6 February 2024).
Hsu, M. T. (2002). *Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/superchick/song4triciaprincesandfrogs.html. (Accessed 6 August 2023).
IMDb (n.d.) *Legally Blonde Soundtracks*. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0250494/soundtrack/. (Accessed 4 February 2024).
IMDb (n.d.) *Superchick Awards*. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4292175/awards/?ref_=nm_awd. (Accessed 1 February 2024).
James, K. C. (1992). *Never Forget*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Kellner, D. (1995). *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*. London: Routledge.
Kilbourne, J. and Pipher, M. (1999). *Deadly Persuasion: Why women and girls must fight the addictive power of advertising*. New York: Free Press.
Kintz, L. (1997). *Between Jesus and the Market: The emotions that matter in right-wing America*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382102
Klein, L. K. (2018). *Pure: Inside the evangelical movement that shamed a generation of young women and how I broke free*. New York: Touchstone.
Kobes Du Mez, K. (2020). *Jesus and John Wayne: How white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
LaHaye, B. (1993). *The Desires of a Woman's Heart*. Wheaton: Tyndale.
Laughlin, C. 2020. #AmplifyWomen: The emergence of an evangelical feminist public on social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(5), 807–821. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711794
Lazar, M. M. (2006). 'Discover the power of femininity!'. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6(4), 505–517. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770600990002
LDCOE. (2018). *hypnosis*. Available at: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/hypnosis. (Accessed 20 August 2023).
LDCOE. (2018). *the fast lane*. Available at: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/the-fast-lane. (Accessed 20 August 2023).
Loke, J., Bachmann, I. and Harp, D. (2017). Co-opting feminism: Media discourses on political women and the definition of a (new) feminist identity. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(1), 122–132. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715604890
Macdonald, M. (1995). *Representing Women: Myths of femininity in the popular media*. London: St. Martin's Press.
Machin, D. and Thornborrow, J. (2003). Branding and discourse: The case of *Cosmopolitan*. *Discourse & Society*, 14(4), 453–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926503014004003
Maddox, M. (2013). 'Rise up warrior princess daughters': Is evangelical women's submission a mere fairy tale? *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 29(1), 9–26. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.29.1.9
Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge.
Martinez, J. and Smith, G. (2016). How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis, *Pew Research Center*, 9 November. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/. (Accessed 25 May 2024).
McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937
Mills, S. (2005). *Feminist Stylistics*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
Moran, C. (2016). Re-positioning female heterosexuality within postfeminist and neoliberal culture. *Sexualities*, 20(1–2), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716649335
Moran, C. and Lee, C. (2011). On his terms: Representations of sexuality in women's magazines and the implications for negotiating safe sex. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 2(2), 159–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2010.534489
Morris, B. and Korobov, N. (2020). Navigating the neoliberal capitalist appropriation of feminist discourses against compulsory romance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 17(3), 285–303. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1786140
Mulvey, L. (1999). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema, in L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory readings* (pp. 833–844). New York: Oxford University Press.

Orenstein, P. (2012). *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the front-lines of the new girlie-girl culture*. New York: HarperCollins e-books.
Penney, A. (2002.) What's wrong with wearing this, *Campus Life*, March. Print.
Propp, V. (1975). *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
PRRI. (2023). A Christian Nation?, *PRRI*. Available at: https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PRRI-Jan-2023-Christian-Nationalism-Final.pdf. (Accessed 3 February 2024).
Rate Your Music. (n.d.) *Superchick*. Available at: https://rateyourmusic.com/artist/superchick. (Accessed 2 February 2024).
Riordan, E. (2001). Commodified agents and empowered girls: Consuming and producing feminism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 25(3), 279–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859901025003006
Sarachik, J. (2013.) Former Superchick frontwoman Tricia on family, going solo and real beauty (INTERVIEW), *The Christian Post*, 9 October. Available at: https://www.christianpost.com/news/former-superchick-frontwoman-tricia-on-family-going-solo-and-real-beauty-interview.html. (Accessed 2 February 2024).
Scanzoni, L. D. and Hardesty, N. A. (1974). *All We're Meant to Be: A biblical approach to women's liberation*. Waco, TX: Word Books.
Schwartz, A. (2023). 'Any *Cosmo* girl would've known': Collaboration, feminine knowledge, and Femme theory in *Legally Blonde*. *Sexualities*, 27(8), 1430–1444. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231160060
Sharma, S. (2008). Young women, sexuality, and protestant church community. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(4), 345–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506808095274
Smietana, B. (2021) Beth Moore says she's no longer Southern Baptist, *Christianity Today*, 9 March. Available at: https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/march/beth-moore-leave-southern-baptist-sbc-lifeway-abuse-trump.html. (Accessed 25 May 2024).
Smith, C. (1998). *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226229225.001.0001
Street, J. (2003). 'Fight the power': The politics of music and the music of politics. *Government and Opposition*, 38(1), 113–130. https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00007
Superchick. (2002). *Last One Picked*. Nashville (TN): Inpop Records. Available at: https://www.discogs.com/release/11940851-Superchick-Last-One-Picked. (Accessed 3 February 2024).
Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior, in J. T. Jost and J. Sidanius (eds), *Political Psychology: Key readings* (pp. 367–390). New York: Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16
Thompson, J. B. (1987). Language and ideology: A framework for analysis. *The Sociological Review*, 35(3), 516–536. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1987.tb00554.x
Tolman, D. L. (2012). Female adolescents, sexual empowerment and desire: A missing discourse of gender inequity. *Sex Roles*, 66, 746–757. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0122-x
Townes, E. (2006). *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230601628
Valenti, J. (2009). *The Purity Myth: How America's obsession with virginity is hurting young women*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
Whiteley, S. (1997). Introduction, in S. Whiteley (ed), *Sexing the Groove: Popular music and gender* (pp. xiii–xxxvi). Abingdon: Routledge.

Citation: Kores, M. A. (2025). One Girl Revolution: The Christian Feminism of Superchick. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 09. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16019


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 10
ISSN: 2468-4414

Investigating the Intellectual Bifurcation Between Feminist Theory and Sociology of Religious Leadership

Katie Steeves [1]*, Lucy Smith [1], Elizabeth Kreiter [1], Jessica Stobbe [1]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Despite rich theoretical developments occurring within feminist theory, Avishai and Irby (2017) have identified that a problematic 'intellectual bifurcation' (652) exists between the fields of 'feminism' and 'sociology of religion.' This means that developments in feminist knowledge and theorising may not be being used by sociologists of religion to frame their work on gender. The present study elaborates on the work of Avishai and Irby (2017) by conducting a literature review which considers empirical sociological journal publications in the area of religion, gender and leadership between January 2001 to December 2021. Using a combination of citation analysis and the analytical codes developed by Avishai and Irby (2017), the findings of this article suggest that the existence of the intellectual bifurcation subtly persists, as scholars in the subdiscipline of sociology of religion doing work on gender and leadership include some gender or feminist citations in background or literature review sections, but these are rarely substantial or timely, nor do they trickle down to influence the conceptual frameworks used to situate analyses or discussions. The article concludes by presenting some considerations on using citation analysis to better understand patterns of knowledge transmission and bifurcation.

Keywords: feminism, sociology of religion, gender, leadership, literature review

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Stacey and Thorne posited that the wealth of sociological work being done on gender has yet to transform sociological knowledge. Gender and feminist scholarship, they observed, seemed to be segregated to specialised courses and publication spaces rather than influencing overall theory, methodology, or canonising within sociology. They called this phenomenon the 'missing feminist revolution' (MFR). Twenty years later, the persistence of the MFR in sociology was again evaluated by several feminist scholars (Acker, 2006; Lorber, 2006; Ray, 2006; Rupp, 2006; Stacey, 2006; Thorne, 2006; Williams, 2006). This symposium suggested that the 'revolution' was still missing, or perhaps failed, as individual subdisciplines remained disconnected from each other and global contexts. A similar finding was documented by Avishai and Irby's 2017 literature review of one sub-discipline: sociology of religion. Their survey of 32 years of religion scholarship (234 articles published between 1985 and 2015) demonstrated that, while religion scholars showed interest in gender, most failed to engage gender theories or feminist scholarship and the two fields remained bifurcated.

Among the contributions of Avishai and Irby's (2017) review is an analytical framework for evaluating the salience of both gender and feminist scholarship in sociology publications (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 649; **Table A1** in **Appendix A**); however, their scope allowed them to only consider publication venues at the centre of the sociological field: 6 'top' (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 653) or high impact factor journals including *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Sociology of Religion* and *Gender & Society*. While the centre is a good place to search for patterns of knowledge production (Collins, 1998), insight and innovation can also come from the margins (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; McLaughlin, 1998). Previous studies looking for the MFR at the centre of an intellectual field may have overlooked innovative feminist applications occurring on the fringes, including work published in lower impact factor journals or in non-sociological venues. If such applications exist, the MFR might be redefined as 'marginalised' (there, but outside of the centre) rather than 'missing' (not there). The present study provides an empirical evaluation of the MFR within sociology of

[1] *Trinity Western University*, CANADA
*Corresponding Author: Katie.steeves@twu.ca

religion surveying the margins of this field as well as the centre, with a specific focus on empirical studies of women in religious leadership at the turn of the twenty-first century.

To analyse our data, we developed a thematic citation analysis approach and employed the feminist/gender analytical framework developed by Avishai and Irby (2017). Our approach enabled us to examine feminism's influence on publications in sociology and other disciplinary journals to answer the research question: 'Are contemporary feminist-informed theories being applied by early twenty-first century sociologists of religion in their study of gender and religious leadership to set up their data collection or conceptualise their results and recommendations?'

THE STUDY OF GENDER AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Scholarship in gender and religion continues to provide an interesting location to search for the MFR. While all social institutions have histories of gender-based exclusion, religious institutions are unique in that many still overtly sanction systems of patriarchy and gender-based oppression (Castelli, 2001; Plaskow, 1997; Strenski, 2021). Investigating the possible existence of the MFR in research on women's religious leadership is important, in part, because recommendations in this area may have practical applications for equity seeking religious women. Most conventional religions inhabit the paradox of being predicated on legitimised systems of male domination while also espousing a majority of women adherents and, increasingly, many women religious leaders. As women exert religious authority, the tensions between agency and submission, contemporary imaginaries and the imaginaries of tradition play out in their everyday lives and stretch the structural sinews of religious organisations (Mahmood, 2005). Both feminist scholars and sociologists of religion have been interested in how women enter religious leadership roles, and the impact their leadership has on religious organisations (Avishai, 2008; Avishai *et al.*, 2015; Chang, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Charlton, 1997; Darwin, 2018; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis and Nesbitt, 2000; Moon *et al.*, 2019; Ozorak, 1996; Prickett, 2015, Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998). What follows provides a brief history of this work and details some of the shifts happening around the turn of the twenty-first century.

The most sizeable body of sociology of religion literature at the intersection of gender, religion and leadership exists in the study of Christianity. While women have always played a significant role within the Christian church, as Adams (2007) notes, 'for most of Christian history, official church policies excluded women from holding clergy positions' (80). While some denominations (like the Catholic church) still limit the participation of women in officially ordained ministry (Ecklund, 2006), many other denominations began fully ordaining women in the mid-1900's (Chaves, 1996). A significant amount of early sociological work in this field was preoccupied by the history of this shift in a predominantly American context and examined the experiences of the 'first' or 'pioneering' (often white) women clergy (i.e., Chang, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Charlton, 1997; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis and Nesbitt, 2000; Ozorak, 1996; Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998).

Since 2001, empirical work in this area has continued to focus on religious occupational gender inequality whether interdenominationally (Adams, 2007; Schleifer and Miller, 2018; Steeves, 2017) or denomination specific (Bagilhole, 2003; Bagilhole, 2006; Ecklund, 2006; Robbins and Greene, 2018; Sturges, 2020), as well as considering attitudes of lay people (Adams, 2007; Smith and Stevens, 2003; Stewart-Thomas, 2010) or male clergy (Fry, 2019; Fry, 2021) towards women clergy. Work being done in the early 2000s has also begun to consider the intersectional experiences of racialised women, both in ethnic churches in the global north (Barns, 2006; Chan, 2015; Huang, 2017; Lee, 2004; Min, 2008; Wong *et al.*, 2017) and in congregations in the global south (Agadjanian, 2015; Cazarin and Mar Griera Llonch, 2018; Hua, 2018; Le, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2010; Ojong, 2017; Wagner-Ferreira, 2011).

Another development in work being done at the intersection of religion, gender and leadership in the twenty-first century is the growing sociological interest in women's experiences of leadership within non-Judeo-Christian religions. The study of Islam provides one example of this. Since the 1970s, some Muslim women have challenged the interpretation that oppressive gender dictates are of divine origin (Jawad, 2009). Islamic feminists seek to retain their religious beliefs while also addressing gender equality in reading religious texts from a woman's perspective (Jawad, 2009). Ismail (2016) notes that Muslim women have historically taken on respected teaching roles, although their ability to access formal religious education and publicly inhabit these leadership roles varies across time and location. The rise of movements like Islamic feminism has prompted empirical research in the sociology of religion to consider the source and experience of women's religious authority in Islam in both the global north (Nalborczyk, 2016; Sharify-Funk and Kassam Haddad, 2012) and south (Cieślewska, 2016; Kloos, 2016; Sultanova, 2011). Some scholars have also begun to take an interest in women's emerging leadership in other established religions like Hinduism (Alisauskiene, 2021; DeNapoli, 2019) and Buddhism (Hannah, 2012), while others have turned their attention to alternative or 'new' religious movements (NRMs). Existing at the margins of dominant religious organisations, NRMs can sometimes be places of equity seeking and experimentation (Alisauskiene, 2021; Vance, 2015). Some NRMs boast women founders, charismatics, mediums, gurus, and other leaders (Alisauskiene, 2021;

Table 1. Inclusion criteria

Include
Peer reviewed English language journal article
Empirical research
Engagement with sociology (citations or theory)
Engagement with religion
Engagement with leadership
Engagement with gender
Published between January 2001 – December 2021

Eller, 1993). Scholars of religion have become interested in studying women's agency in these contexts, including Pagan movements (Alisauskiene, 2021; Vance, 2015), Davidians and Branch Davidians (Pitts, 2009), the Red Tent movement (Castro, 2020) and Church of the Latter-day Saints (Kane, 2018).

As sociologists of religion have begun to increasingly consider women leaders in various religions and contexts, the extent to which they use gender theories, contemporary feminism, or other analytical lenses to help frame diversity in religious women's leadership opportunities and experiences requires further investigation.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review methodology was chosen for this study following the example of previous empirical work investigating the MFR (Avishai and Irby, 2017; Ferber and Brun, 2011; Wills and Risman, 2006). While not attempting to replicate any of these studies, our literature review was influenced by some of their techniques like Wills and Risman's (2006) use of citation analysis and Avishai and Irby's (2017) gender/feminist analytical framework.

Search Strategy

An academic librarian worked on our team to develop our detailed search strategy. A comprehensive search of the literature took place on March 3, 2022, through the following databases: Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science), Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest), Atla Religion Database (EBSCO), SAGE journals (SAGE), JSTOR (JSTOR), Wiley Online Library (Wiley). The reproducible searches for all databases, as well as the PRISMA diagram outlining the identified, excluded, and included records, are hosted at https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/NREQ7U. Search results were limited to English language, peer- reviewed journal articles between 2001-2021 inclusive, and excluded grey literature. This alleviated the need for a translator and allowed the team to focus on the state of the recent formal, scholarly discussion of religion and gender. The publication period between 2001-2021 was chosen because of the shift in the decentralisation of the sub-field occurring around this time when more sociologists of religion began to consider the leadership experiences and opportunities of racialised women, and women leading in non-Judeo-Christian religions and non-western contexts (Avishai *et al.*, 2015). Temporally, this coincides with shifts in feminist theorising in similar directions. While certainly still contested and fluid as a concept, there appears to be some consensus that contemporary, or 'fourth wave' (Allen, 2023: 908), feminism is fundamentally critical, intersectional, reflexive, global, deconstructing of binaries, and politically motivated to decentre several interrelated systems of oppression (i.e., patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism) to incite social change (Allen, 2023; Avishai and Irby, 2017; Collins, 2019; Ferguson, 2017; Lorber, 2006; Ray, 2006; Reger, 2014; Wills and Risman, 2006). Thus, our team wondered if the two fields of sociology of religion and contemporary feminism were conversing in less central publication spaces.

Selecting Studies

After the initial search results were gathered, we exported our results to Covidence systematic review management software. Two independent reviewers screened each article based on the inclusion criteria outlined in **Table 1**. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

In screening for 'sociology,' we included articles published in sociological journals, as well as those which claimed to be sociological/use sociological theory. In screening for 'gender and leadership,' we included studies whose primary stated focus was either:

(1) women in formal authority roles sanctioned by the religious institution (i.e., fully ordained women pastors in a protestant Christian denomination) or

(2) women in informal authority positions in religious contexts where their formal recognition is organisationally contested (i.e., Islamic women speakers or non-ordained Catholic pastors).

The first round of screening was at the level of title and abstract, eliminating any articles obviously outside of the criteria. This resulted in 145 articles being moved forward for screening at the level of full text review.

Table 2. Data attributes (n = 66)

Attribute	Article count
Study design	
Qualitative	48
Quantitative	14
Mixed methods	4
Religion of participants	
Christianity	47
Islam	7
Judaism	2
Other	4
Multiple	4
Study location	
United States	30
United Kingdom	12
Canada	2
Other	22
Top 3 publication venues	
Gender, Work and Organization	7
Journal for the Academic Study of Religion	5
Sociology of Religion	4

Secondary screening included a thorough analysis of the full contents of each article to determine eligibility, resulting in the inclusion of 66 articles that fit all inclusion criteria.

Data Attributes

Table 2 outlines some relevant attributes of the 66 articles included for analysis.

While **Table 2** only displays the top three most frequent publication venues in our sample, it is significant to note that a very wide variety of publication venues were represented. Articles were published in 43 unique journals, including some oriented towards work and occupations (i.e., *Gender, Work & Organization*), general religion (i.e., *Sociology of Religion*), specific religions (i.e., *Comparative Islamic Studies*), regional studies (i.e., *Asian Studies Review*), or gender/feminism (i.e., *Journal of Gender Studies*).

Analysing the Data

After finalising the sample, all 66 articles were uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for analysis. Two distinct sections of each article were coded using two distinct coding schemas:

(1) the 'frontmatter' of each article, defined as all writing prior to the methods section of each article,[1] was coded inductively, and

(2) the 'backmatter' of each article, defined as the analysis, discussion and/or conclusion sections of the article, was coded using a combination of deductive and inductive coding.

Two different coding schemas were used because there are differing academic conventions for literature versus discussion/analysis and conclusion sections in scholarly articles. An inductive citation analysis schema worked for the frontmatter sections as this is conventionally where authors cite relevant background literature, and such citations could be coded to indicate feminist (or other) engagement. The backmatter sections of articles, however, are conventionally where data is interpreted to suggest importance and implications. Simply analysing citations here would not have captured the complexity of these written interpretations. We thus coded authors' communications around the importance and implications of their findings in this section of articles, applying the framework of Avishai and Irby (2017) for identifying feminist and gender conceptual frameworks and developing our own codes to identify 'other' frameworks (as described below).

To capture type of literature engagement in the frontmatter of each article, the team employed an iterative, qualitative form of thematic citation analysis. Citation analysis has been used to study knowledge claims more broadly (Budd, 1999; Riviera, 2013; Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022) and, relevant to the context of this study, to understand the intellectual diffusion of feminist concepts like 'intersectionality' (Keuchenius and Mügge, 2021; Moradi *et al.*, 2020). We followed Boyack *et al.*'s (2008) definition of a citation as: 'a mention of a reference within the full text of a document. A reference can be mentioned one or more times in a document. Each mention is an in-text citation' (60). When examining in-text citations, codes were developed by the research team inductively

[1] On the rare occasion when an article did not clearly identify a methods section with a heading, the team ascertained by context in the text where this transition happened and stopped coding for literature when methods began to be outlined.

(Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2021) to document what bodies of literature were being used to frame each study. This 'type of literature engagement' coding occurred in two stages in which each article was analysed independently by two team members, and discussion around code development and disputes were resolved in team meetings. In the first stage, context was considered and multiple citations were coded together to capture general patterns of literature engagement. For example, an entire paragraph of an article referring to work done in sociology around congregational resources was coded 'Sociology of Religion,' a paragraph describing the glass ceiling was coded 'gender/feminist,' and a few sentences with citations referencing sections of the *Qur'an* was coded as 'Theology or religious teaching.' Through this collaborative process, 32 unique 'types of literature' codes were developed.[2]

In the second stage, two reviewers again reviewed each article in a similar manner to code individual in-text citations in the frontmatter to a previously established 'type of literature' code based on the cited article's title and publication venue. For example, a citation from an article published in *Sociology of Religion* was coded as 'Sociology of Religion,' a citation from an article published in *Gender & Society* was coded 'gender/feminist,' and a citation from a passage of the *Qur'an* was coded 'Theology or religious teaching.' It is important to note here that gender literature and feminist literature were coded into the same category entitled 'gender or feminist literature' due to the researchers' inability to fully evaluate the referenced article's adherence to contemporary feminism based on the reference.[3]

When coding for conceptual frameworks in the backmatter sections, the researchers combined deductive and inductive approaches. First, we deductively used the coding schema created by Avishai and Irby in 2017 (**Table A1** in **Appendix A**) to code each article to one of their categories of feminist (critical, cultural, herstory or systematic), gender (rigorous/systematic[4] or rudimentary), gender as site, or marginalising gender theoretical frameworks based on the descriptions provided by the authors (see **Table A1** in **Appendix A**).

While not seeking to duplicate their analysis parameters, we attempted remain faithful to Avishai and Irby's (2017) recorded descriptions. In evaluating the backmatter of sample articles, we were able to distinguish between feminist and gender orientations based on textual context. We interpreted Avishai and Irby's (2017) 'feminist theoretical framework' categories to mean the article engages timely and relevant feminist terminology, expresses a call for change, and emphasises the salience of gender in the framing and analysis. For example, an article which considered whether ethnic churches were also progressive in supporting women in ministry through the lens of a complex intersection of race, gender and class was coded as 'Feminist-Critical.' We understood Avishai and Irby's (2017) gender analysis framework, on the other hand, to include the use of gender-oriented theory without employing feminism's interdisciplinary or liberatory ends. For example, an article which talked about ethnic churches being gendered organisations without racialisation theory or considering the possible equity implications of these gender roles was coded 'Gender-rigorous/systematic.' If no feminist or gender theory was engaged in the backmatter of an article, the article was coded either 'gender as a site' or 'marginalising gender' in alignment with the descriptions in **Table A1** in **Appendix A**.

Second, we inductively looked at the backmatter of articles coded 'gender as site' or 'marginalising gender' to assess alternate theoretical frameworks used if not feminist or gender. Through paying close attention to the analytical lenses authors used to discuss their data, new codes were again developed collaboratively. These included 'conceptual framework' codes under the categories of culture, economics, occupations and organisations, religion, social constructivist or interpretive, social psychology and theology.

In summary, our coding of the data considered:

(1) if gender/feminist sources were used to contextualise studies in the frontmatter of articles through literature engagement;
(2) if feminist or gender conceptual frameworks influenced the author(s)' discussion around empirical findings in the backmatter of articles; and
(3) what literature and conceptual frameworks were used alongside or instead of gender or feminist.

Next, we consider the findings emerging from each of these areas of analysis in turn.

GENDER/FEMINIST LITERATURE ENGAGEMENT

Analysis of the frontmatter sections of articles presents a mixed picture of the place of gender and feminist theorising in sociology of religion, gender and leadership scholarship. Our findings suggest that gender or feminist scholarship is being peripherally referenced by most articles published at this intersection. **Table 3** describes the

[2] See the complete codebook at https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/NREQ7U.
[3] Also, a very limited number of citations were unable to be coded because the title and publication journal were not in English.
[4] Avishai and Irby's 'systematic' category for gender analysis was coded as 'rigorous' in our NVivo codebook as it is not good practice using this software to have two codes with the same label.

Table 3. Top 5 types of literature cited by number of citations across the sample

Type of literature coded	Number of articles with at least 1 citation (n = 66)	Number of citations across the sample
Sociology of religion	61	1,471
Organisations and occupations	37	438
Gender/feminist	41	346
History of religion/group	42	273
Theology/religious teachings	43	217

Table 4. Density of within article citations for top 3 types of literature cited

Type of literature coded	Number of articles with at least 1 citation (n = 66)	High engagement articles (10 or more citations)	Low engagement articles (9 or fewer citations)
Sociology of religion	61	45 (74%)	16 (26%)
Organisations and occupations	37	10 (27%)	27 (73%)
Gender/feminist	41	11 (27%)	30 (73%)

top five types of literature referenced by articles in our sample, based on the total number of citations in frontmatter across the sample.

As **Table 3** suggests, 41 of the 66 articles contained at least one 'gender/feminist' citation, for a total of 346 citations occurring in the frontmatter across the sample. Gender/feminist literature was the third most frequently referenced type of background literature based on citation count. This result provides support to the earlier assertions of Wills and Risman (2006) and Avishai and Irby (2017) that gender studies does seem to be garnering attention in the field of sociology and the subdiscipline of sociology of religion; however, this may tell only part of the story. Citation counts alone do not always provide meaningful information, so examining the context in which citations appear helps establish impact (Bornmann *et al.*, 2020; Tahamtan and Bornmann., 2019). With this in mind, we looked at the broader context of the literature grouped within our gender/feminism code to evaluate whether the authors' use of gender/feminist sources seemed to be substantive and/or timely (elaborated on below).

Gender/Feminism's Substantive Influence?

As Tahamtan and Bornmann (2019) note, citations can be used in many ways within a text and should not all be considered as equal. A one-off reference, for example, would indicate less engagement with a text (and the body of knowledge it symbolises – see Budd, 1999 on the symbolic nature of citations) than multiple citations to the same source or sources within the same body of knowledge. Substantive engagement with gender or feminist literature was measured by number of gender/feminist citations used within individual articles, with a higher number of citations considered indicative of a more substantive influence. We considered 'high engagement' articles to be those which included 10 or more citations to the type of literature under consideration, while 'low engagement' articles included 9 or fewer citations. **Table 4** outlines the percentages of high versus low engagement articles for the top 3 most frequently cited types of literature within the sample.

As **Table 4** suggests, across 41 articles including gender/feminist citations, 27 (73%) were categorised as 'low engagement.' The majority of these (23 of the 27) contained 5 or fewer individual citations to gender/feminist literature. Only 11 articles (27%) contained 10 or more gender/feminist citations, suggesting a higher level of engagement. Within text density of citations is comparable between gender/feminist literature and organisations and occupations literature; however, the trend is significantly reversed when it comes to individual articles' engagement with sociology of religion literature. Most sample articles (74%) are classified as having high engagement with this type of literature. **Table 5** and **Table 6**, respectively, examine the top 10 highest engagement articles for gender/feminist citations and the top 10 highest engagement articles for sociology of religion citations, demonstrating another angle on the disparity of engagement.

Comparing the numbers in **Table 5** and **Table 6** indicates that the density of citations for sociology of religion data for the highest engagement articles with this subfield (**Table 6**) greatly outpaces the numbers for gender/feminist literature (**Table 5**). Whereas the highest engagement article for gender/feminist literature contained 37 citations to this type of literature, the top two highest engagement articles for sociology of religion literature contained 88 citations each. Our analysis thus suggests that there is still a disparity between engagement with gender/feminist literature and sociology of religion citations when the density of citations within individual articles is considered. Fewer articles were classified as 'high engagement' with gender/feminist literature, and high engagement articles were still not engaging with gender/feminism as frequently as those engaging with sociology of religion literature.

Table 5. Number of 'gender/feminist' citations in top 10 sample articles coded 'high engagement' with this literature

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of citations coded 'gender/feminist'
H. D. 2018	37
F. J. A. 2012	33
F. A. 2021b	29
J. S. 2021	21
K. N. 2018	19
B. S. L. 2006	18
G. A. 2015	16
F. T. W. 2020	15
B. K. 2021	13
S. M. 2010	11

Table 6. Number of 'sociology of religion' citations in the top 10 sample articles coded 'high engagement' with this literature

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of citations coded 'sociology of religion'
W. T. 2002	88
B. S. L. 2006	88
C. E. 2015	67
M. E. 2016	56
H. C. 2017	56
M. P. G. 2008	49
A. V. 2015	47
S. M. 2010	46
K. D. 2016	42
C. G. 2020	41

Table 7. Number of unique 'timely' gender/feminist citations used in 'high engagement' sample articles

Sample article author initials and publication year	Number of *unique* citations coded 'gender or feminist'	Number of 'timely' citations (within 10 years of publication year)
H. D. 2018	21	4 (19%)
F. J. A. 2012	17	3 (18%)
F. A. 2021b	24	8 (33%)
J. S. 2021	15	5 (33%)
K. N. 2018	7	4 (57%)
B. S. L. 2006	12	5 (42%)
G. A. 2015	12	7 (58%)
F. T. W. 2020	12	3 (25%)
B. K. 2021	11	2 (18%)
S. M. 2010	7	4 (57%)
C. G. 2020	10	5 (50%)

Gender/Feminism's Timely Influence?

A further indication of the MFR in frontmatter literature engagement emerges when the timeliness of the gender/feminist literature referenced is evaluated. Timeliness matters, as feminism has gone through several iterations and changes since its inception (Allen, 2023; Avishai and Irby, 2017; Collins, 2019; Ferguson, 2017; Ray, 2006), and part of our research intent was to probe whether religion scholars are drawing from the most recent feminist theorising available to them. We (generously) defined 'timely' gender or feminist citations to be those published within 10 years of the sample article's publication date. **Table 7** provides a summary of how many 'timely' gender or feminist citations are included in the 11 'high engagement' sample articles for this subfield.[5]

As the numbers in **Table 7** suggest, most of the top engagement articles (7 of 11) draw from more dated gender/feminist citations than timely. While some of these more 'dated' citations refer to seminal or classic texts (i.e., West and Zimmerman's 1987 'doing gender' article), it is still problematic for the goals of contemporary feminism if religion scholars fail to engage with emergent critiques, expansions and iterations alongside these

[5] Note that instead of counting the same citation each time it appeared in the frontmatter, the following table accounts for each unique citation in the article, counting each reference only once.

Table 8. Feminist or gender conceptual frameworks used to frame findings

Conceptual framework: Feminist (F), Gender Analysis (GA), or No F/GA Engagement	**Unique articles coded (n = 66)**
F: Herstory	2
F: Cultural	4
F: Systematic	14
F: Critical	2
Total F	**22**
GA: Rudimentary	10
GA: Rigorous (systematic)	1
Total GA	**11**
No F/GA: Gender as a site	14
No F/GA: Marginalizing gender	19
Total No F/GA Engagement	**33**

Table 9. All other conceptual frameworks identified

Conceptual framework	**Articles coded (n = 33)**
Occupations & Organisations	17
Religion	6
Theological	3
Culture	3
Social Constructivist or Interpretive	2
Social Psychological	1
Economics	1

earlier, sometimes tokenised, contributions. As Avishai and Irby (2017) assert, some of the ideas emerging from earlier waves of feminism, while important building blocks, have now undergone revision by more contemporary feminist scholars. Thus, the datedness of the gender/feminist literature referenced in the highest engagement articles in our sample provides further evidence of the MFR in this subfield. Were feminism having a more meaningful influence, we would expect to see more religion scholars engaging with the timelier feminist literature available to them.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Feminist, Gender, or no Engagement

Turning now to the backmatter of the sample articles, the theoretical frameworks used reveal how scholars interpret their findings around gender and leadership within religious institutions. As discussed above, the first tool used to code for theoretical frameworks in our study was Avishai and Irby's (2017) framework (**Table A1** in **Appendix A**). Each of our 66 sample articles was coded into one of the provided categories to describe its relationship with a feminist, gender, or no engagement framework. **Table 8** outlines the number of articles coded to each category and sub-category.

Within the feminist category, there are four subcategories, two of which indicate usage of more contemporary and sophisticated feminist theory. Only 16 of the 66 articles in our sample fit into these most complex approaches to feminist analysis. Another 11 of the 66 articles employed a gender analysis approach. Finally, the largest number (33 of 66 articles) were found to not employ feminist or gender analysis frameworks at all. This means they either primarily discussed other social processes ('gender as a site:' 14 articles) or failed to engage gender scholarship entirely ('marginalising gender:' 19 articles). This further supports the assertion that the MFR persists in the 'margins' of scholarship in this area and led us to consider what alternate frameworks were being used by these 33 articles to frame their analysis and recommendations.

Other Theoretical Engagement

Table 9 lays out the 'other' (outside of gender or feminist) conceptual frameworks which emerged through our inductive analysis of the data.

As seen in **Table 9**, of the alternative theoretical frameworks found, an 'occupations and organisations' (O&O) lens was most frequently employed (17 articles). This paradigm was used significantly more frequently than the religion lenses (only 6 articles). This finding may be influenced by the fact that work being done at the intersection of sociology of religion, gender and leadership is sometimes published in workplace or organisations-oriented journals, most predominantly in our sample the journal *Gender, Work & Organization* (see **Table 2**). It is interesting

to note that many scholars sociologically studying religious leadership still seem to be concerned with the career opportunities and occupational environments in which women lead. This includes investigating work satisfaction or values (4 articles), women's authority in the workplace (3 articles) and organisational structures (9 articles). Our data suggests that recommendations salient to the sociological subfield of O&O may be having a similar impact on sociology of religion and leadership scholarship as feminist orientations.

DISCUSSION

> Scholarship about women or gender topics is not synonymous with gender or feminist theorising, and citing literature does not guarantee that it will be seriously engaged. (Avishai and Irby, 2017: 670)

The findings of this literature review further confirm the existence of the MFR in empirical studies in sociology of religion. While Avishai and Irby (2017) documented this gap surveying publication venues central to the field, the present study contributes further verification of its existence in more peripheral publication locations and studies investigating women's religious leadership. Furthermore, it contributes to work on scholarly networks in the area of citation analysis and justice, and points to the importance of considering what other theoretical frameworks authors use to discuss gender.

Studying citations and bibliographic data can provide useful information about knowledge reproduction in scientific communities (Riviera, 2013). While it is challenging to reliably report on authors' motivations to cite, citations themselves can be conceptualised as acts of communication linking and perpetuating particular social systems (networks) of knowledge (Riviera, 2013; Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022). For example, Tahamtan and Bornmann (2022) outline Luhmann's (1995) theory of nested systems for conducting citation analysis, including the psychic system (authors) and communications systems (publications and in-text citations). They suggest sidelining the psychic system (human motivations to cite) to foreground what communication acts (i.e., citations and conceptual frameworks) reveal about the production of knowledge in and of themselves. As hooks (1989) suggests, communication acts using language are 'a place of struggle' (16) where power dynamics occur, as speaking the dominant language (perhaps, in this case, adhering to certain publication conventions or citing certain literature) is often necessary to participate in academic life. In this vein, our analysis of citation counts and quality in the frontmatter of articles points to patterns of communication and power within one subfield of sociology of religion. For example, our finding that these articles cite other sociology of religion articles more frequently than articles from outside of the subdiscipline illuminates both an insularity and an absence. One communication pattern is the privileging of sociology of religion scholarship over any others by articles in our sample, as sociology of religion scholarship was cited over four times more frequently than gender/feminist scholarship (1471 versus 346 citations, respectively), and over three times more frequently than the next highest cited type of literature (O&O, 438 citations). This points to an insularity of focus which, in an autopoietic system, may become a reification, making it difficult for other types of knowledge, like contemporary feminism, to enter the system.

The communication patterns noted in the frontmatter of our sample articles also indicate an absence which can meaningfully 'let the reader know something has been missed' (hooks, 1989: 17). This can be seen in the dated nature of the gender/feminist citations found, and their higher concentration so few of the sample articles. What is there, in this case, points to what is missing – timely, substantive engagement with feminist work in many articles, even when investigating a sub-topic that has related and interdisciplinary implications (gendered leadership).

When it came to guiding conceptual frameworks used in the latter parts of these research articles, our findings also suggest that few authors in our sample publishing at the turn of the twenty-first century used more critically developed contemporary feminist lenses to inform their analyses (24% of our sample). Several of these articles topically considered gender and racialisation or women leading in geographic locations in the global south, but without employing a critical feminist lens (which might include relevant explorations of intersectionality, black/post-colonial theory, or queer theory). Some of these considerations (17%) employed a gendered perspective. While these gender-oriented articles explore the experiences of women entering leadership positions within religious institutions as some of their late 20th century predecessors did (i.e., Chang, 1997; Charlton, 1997; Chaves, 1996; Konieczny and Chaves, 2000; Lummis *et al.*, 2000; Ozorak, 1996; Sullins, 2000; Zikmund *et al.*, 1998), for many contemporary feminists, simply acknowledging experiences is no longer adequate when researching equity seeking communities. Thus, from a contemporary feminist perspective, this subset of articles is not doing enough to advocate for equity for women seeking religious authority. As a communication act, the conceptualising of gender in rudimentary or systematic ways (Avishai and Irby, 2017) perpetuates the MFR as these less sophisticated ways of interacting with gender continue to be reproduced by some sociologists of religion. This also reproduces a dominant racialised, heteronormative, and classed narrative in religious studies research. Even more significantly, half of the articles in our sample (33 of 66) did not engage feminist or gender scholarship in their theoretical framing at all. Once again, this absence communicates the failure of gender or feminist scholarship to

be meaningfully shaping the subfield of sociology of religion, even on the 'margins' of the field. Our data suggests that the MFR is, indeed, missing and not simply marginalised in this subfield.

While we cannot analytically suggest why other theoretical frameworks may be gaining more currency in sociology of religion research on gender and leadership, the O&O analytical lens may be chosen to suit the less religion-centric journals religion, gender and leadership articles are published in (i.e., *Gender, Work & Organization*). Wills and Risman (2006) suggest that some family scholars avoid overtly using feminism because they do not wish to be seen as activists. Sociologists of religion may also be motivated to avoid feminism if attempting to make research findings more palatable for more conservative religious institutions, leaders and practitioners. Some previous research suggests that the relationship between religion and feminist scholars is coloured by suspicions arising from both sides, as some feminists also see religions in a strictly negative light (Castelli, 2001; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) suggest that, although contemporary feminism considers a plethora of identities women espouse, religious identities are often excluded. This is problematic as 'the majority of women globally are engaged in religious and spiritual practice and tradition' (255) and, we might add, many are religious leaders. Simultaneously, religion scholars have not fully considered contemporary feminism's influence on religious women's lives (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013). While we avoided the psychic (author motivations) level of analysis in the present review, the communication patterns identified here indicate that scholars in both intellectual fields may be making choices against collaboration. This neglect of contemporary feminism on the part of sociology of religion scholars may negatively colour the recommendations emerging from their publications, as the wealth of resources and liberatory ends of feminism are not being drawn from to inform suggested outcomes. This, in turn, may contribute to a stagnation in the conditions of religious women who inhabit or seek positions in religious leadership.

CONCLUSION

The present study surveyed 20 years of sociological gender, religion and leadership scholarship to assess its engagement with contemporary feminism. Our findings suggest that the MFR continues to persist in this subfield. The main contribution of this review is its expansion on the findings of Avishai and Irby (2017) to indicate that the MFR persists beyond publications in higher ranked journals in sociology and can also be found in the 'margins.' Our work also contributes to the changing fields of citation analysis and network theory. While citation analyses have often been used in a normative manner to impute motives to authors or meaning to citations (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022), our study points to another possible useful way citation analysis might be employed – to evaluate gaps and absences in knowledge communication, contributing to the broader goal of seeking the decolonisation of knowledge and raising awareness about issues of citational justice (Kwon, 2022). Larger scale citation analysis methods should be used when further empirically evaluating the MFR, as they provide a tangible way to study something 'missing' and can thus point to important silences where marginalised voices and perspectives may be left out. Future research should also consider to what extent journal editors and editorial boards are complicit in perpetuating the MFR as they hold power to define the conventions, or 'language' (hooks, 1989), used by authors who publish in their venues through acceptance or rejection of articles using interdisciplinary feminist citations and lenses. While we have based our analysis on the level of the 'social system' (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022: 7) to investigate citations and conceptual frameworks as communication acts in and of themselves, future research in this area might consider investigating the 'psychic system' (Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2022: 7), or author level, to understand whether sociology of religion and feminist scholars experience tensions which might contribute to the bifurcation. Finally, future research should empirically assess the missing feminist revolution in other disciplines and subfields, and consider empirically investigating why scholars make the choices they do around framing and conceptualising gender in their work, so that specific barriers to collaboration might be removed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We would also like to thank the reviewers and editors of this special issue for their constructive feedback which strengthened our article.

REFERENCES

Acker, J. (2006). Introduction: The missing feminist revolution. *Social Problems*, 53, 444–447. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.444

Adams, J. (2007). Stained glass makes the ceiling visible: Organizational opposition to women in congregational leadership. *Gender & Society*, 21(1), 80–105. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206293773

Agadjanian, V. (2015). Women's religious authority in a sub-Saharan setting: Dialectics of empowerment and dependency. *Gender & Society*, 29(6), 982–1008. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215602106

Alisauskiene, M. (2021). Women's leadership in new religions and the question of gender equality in post-communist Lithuania. *Nova Religio*, 24(4), 84–103. https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2021.24.4.84

Allen, K. R. (2023). Feminist theory, method and praxis: Toward a critical consciousness for family and close relationship scholars. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 40(3), 899–936. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211065779

Avishai, O. (2008). 'Doing religion' in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency. *Gender & Society*, 22(4), 409–433. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243208321019

Avishai, O. and Irby, C. (2017). Bifurcated conversations in sociological studies of religion and gender. *Gender & Society*, 31(5), 647–676. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217725244

Avishai, O., Jafar, A. and Rinaldo, R. (2015). A gender lens on religion. *Gender & Society*, 29(1), 5–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214548920

Bagilhole, B. (2003). Prospects for change? Structural, cultural and action dimensions of the careers of pioneer women priests in the church of England. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 10(3), 361–377. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00200

Bagilhole, B. (2006). Not a glass ceiling more a lead roof: Experiences of pioneer women priests in the church of England. *Equal Opportunities International*, 25(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1108/02610150610679538

Barnes, S. L. (2006). Whosoever will let her come: Social activism and gender inclusivity in the Black church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45(3), 371–387. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2006.00312.x

Bornmann, L., Haunschild, R. and Mutz, R. (2020). Should citations be field-normalized in evaluative bibliometrics? An empirical analysis based on propensity score matching. *Journal of Informetrics*, 14(4), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2020.101098

Boyack, K. W., van Eck, N. J., Colavizza, G. and Waltman, L. (2018). Characterizing in-text citations in scientific articles: A large-scale analysis. *Journal of Informetrics*, 12(1), 59–73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2017.11.005

Budd, J. M. (1999). Citations and knowledge claims: Sociology of knowledge as a case in point. *Journal of Information Science*, 25(4), 265–274. https://doi.org/10.1177/016555159902500403

Castelli, E. (2001). Women, gender, religion: Troubling categories and transforming knowledge, in E. Castelli and R. C. Rodman (eds), *Women, Gender, Religion: A reader* (pp. 3–25). New York, NY: Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-04830-1

Castro, M. (2020). Introducing the red tent: A discursive and critically hopeful exploration of women's circles in a neoliberal postfeminist context. *Sociological Research Online*, 25(3), 386–404. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419889973

Cazarin, R. and Mar Griera Llonch, M. de. (2018). Born a pastor, being a woman: Biographical accounts on gendered religious gifts in the Diaspora. *Culture and Religion*, 19(4), 451–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2018.1534749

Chan, E. (2015). Complementarianism as doctrine and governance: Narratives on women's leadership among second-generation Asian Americans. *Review of Religious Research*, 573), 435–452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0186-x

Chang, P. M. Y. (1997). Introduction to symposium, female clergy in the contemporary protestant church: A current assessment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(4), 565–573. https://doi.org/10.2307/1387690

Charlton, J. (1997). Clergywomen of the pioneer generation: A longitudinal study. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(4), 599–613. https://doi.org/10.2307/1387693

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chaves, M. (1996). Ordaining women: The diffusion of an organizational innovation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(4), 840–873. https://doi.org/10.1086/230782

Cieślewska, A. (2016). Transforming the social role of female religious professionals in Tajikistan. *Asian Studies Review*, 40(4), 510–526. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1229739

Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007098

Collins, R. (1998). *The Sociology of Philosophies: A global theory of intellectual change*. Cambridge, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Darwin, H. (2018). Redoing gender, redoing religion. *Gender & Society*, 32(3), 348–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243218766497

DeNapoli, A. E. (2019). A female Shankaracharya? The alternative authority of a feminist Hindu Guru in India. *Religion and Gender*, 9, 27–49. https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-00901002

Ecklund, E. H. (2006). Organizational culture and women's leadership: A study of six catholic parishes. *Sociology of Religion*, 67(1), 81–98. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/67.1.81

Eller, C. (1993). Twentieth-Century women's religion as seen in the feminist spirituality movement, in C. Wessinger (ed), *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (pp. 172-195). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Ferber, M. and Brun, M. (2011). The gender gap in citations: Does it persist? *Feminist Economics*, 17, 151–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2010.541857

Ferguson, K. (2017). Feminist theory today. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1), 269–286. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052715-111648

Fry, A. (2021). Postfeminist, engaged and resistant: Evangelical male clergy attitudes towards gender and women's ordination in the Church of England. *Critical Research on Religion*, 9(1), 65–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303220952868

Fry, A. D. J. (2019). Justifying gender inequality in the Church of England: An examination of theologically conservative male clergy attitudes towards women's ordination. *Fieldwork in Religion*, 14(1), 8–32. https://doi.org/10.1558/firn.39231

Hannah, M. (2012). Colliding gender imaginaries: Transnational debates about full ordination for Tibetan Buddhist nuns. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 18(4), 7–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2012.11666134

hooks, B. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, 15–23.

Hua, D. (2018). 'Double-burdened mothers': A narrative inquiry concerning women pastors in contemporary protestant churches in Mainland China. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 5(1), 101–130. https://doi.org/10.1163/22143955-00501006

Huang, Y. (2017). Becoming missionaries: Gender, space and subjectivities in Chinese Christian communities in the UK. *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 18(3), 211–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2017.1302987

Ismail, N. B. (2016). Female preachers and the public discourse on Islam in Malaysia. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 33(4), 23–47. https://doi.org/10.12816/0037477

Jawad, H. A. (2009). Islamic feminism: Leadership roles and public representation. *Hawwa*, 7(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1163/156920809X449517

Kane, N. (2018). 'Priestesses unto the Most High God': Gender, agency and the politics of LDS women's temple rites. *Sociological Focus*, 51(2), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2017.1370683

Keuchenius, A. and Mügge, L. (2021). Intersectionality on the go: The diffusion of Black feminist knowledge across disciplinary and geographical borders. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 72(2), 360–378. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12816

Kloos, D. (2016). The salience of gender: Female Islamic authority in Aceh, Indonesia. *Asian Studies Review*, 40(4), 527–544. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2016.1225669

Konieczny, M. E. and Chaves, M. (2000). Resources, race and female headed congregations in the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39, 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8294.00022

Kwon, D. (2022). The rise of citational justice. *Nature*, 603, 568-572. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00793-1

Le, N. B. L. (2017). Gender-inclusive leadership: Transforming Toraja church in Indonesia. *QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia*, 2, 60–76.

Lee, S. (2004). The structure of a spiritual revolution: Black Baptists and women in ministry. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(2), 154–177. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241603261754

Lin, Y.-F., Li, C.-S., Irby, B. J. and Brown, G. (2010). Exploring Asian female pastors' leadership roles in the church: Using Deborah's story. *Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1431–1458.

Llewellyn, D. and Trzebiatowska, M. (2013). Secular and religious feminisms: A future of disconnection? *Feminist Theology*, 21(3), 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735013484220

Lorber, J. (2006). Shifting paradigms and challenging categories. *Social Problems*, 53(4), 448–453. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.448

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lummis, A. T. and Nesbitt, P. D. (2000). Women clergy research and the sociology of religion. *Sociology of Religion*, 61(4), 443–453. https://doi.org/10.2307/3712528

Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

McLaughlin, N. (1998). How to become a forgotten intellectual: Intellectual movements and the rise and fall of Erich Fromm. *Sociological Forum*, 13(2), 215–246. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022189715949

Min, P. G. (2008). Severe underrepresentation of women in church leadership in the Korean immigrant community in the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 47(2), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2008.00404.x

Moon, D., Tobin T. W. and Sumerau, J. E. (2019). Alpha, Omega and the letters in between: LGBTQI conservative Christians undoing gender. *Gender & Society*, 20(10), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219846592

Moradi, B., Parent, M. C., Weis, A. S., Ouch, S. and Broad, K. L. (2020). Mapping the travels of intersectionality scholarship: A citation network analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(2), 151–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320902408

Nalborczyk, A. S. (2016). Polish Tatar women as official leaders of Muslim religious communities and the sources of their authority. *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 12(1-2), 37–54. https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.34854

Ojong, V. B. (2017). Gender and leadership in Christian religious circles in Africa. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 32(2), 125–138. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk3gm5h.9

Ozorak, E. W. (1996). The power, but not the glory: How women empower themselves through religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35(1), 17–29. https://doi.org/10.2307/1386392

Pitts, W. L. Jr. (2009). Women leaders in the Davidian and Branch Davidian traditions. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 12(4), 50–71. https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2009.12.4.50

Plaskow, J. (1997). We are also your sisters: The development of women's studies in religion. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 21, 199–211.

Prickett, P. J. (2015). Negotiating gendered religious space: The particularities of patriarchy in an African American mosque. *Gender & Society*, 29(1), 51–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214546934

Ray, R. (2006). Is the revolution missing or are we looking in the wrong places? *Social Problems*, 53(4), 459–465. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.459

Reger, J. (2014). Debating US contemporary feminism. *Sociology Compass*, 8(1), 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12118

Riviera, E. (2013). Scientific communities as autopoietic systems: The reproductive function of citations. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64(7), 1442–1453. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22826

Robbins, M. and Greene, A. (2018). Clergywomen's experience of ministry in the Church of England. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(8), 890–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1340153

Rupp, L. J. (2006). Is the feminist revolution still missing? Reflections from women's history. *Social Problems*, 53(4), 466–472. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.466

Saldana, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schleifer, C. and Miller, A. D. (2018). Occupational gender inequality among American clergy, 1976-2016: Revisiting the stained-glass ceiling. *Sociology of Religion*, 78(4), 387–410. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx032

Sharify-Funk, M. and Kassam Haddad, M. (2012). Where do women 'stand' in Islam? Negotiating contemporary Muslim prayer leadership in North America. *Feminist Review*, 102, 41–61. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2012.10

Smith, K. L. and Stevens, D. P. (2003). Attitudes of laypersons toward female clergy and priests: Testing two theological arguments against ordination. *The Social Science Journal*, 40(3), 419–429. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319(03)00039-9

Stacey, J. (2006). Feminism and sociology in 2005: What are we missing? *Social Problems*, 53(4), 479–482. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.479

Stacey, J. and Thorne, B. (1985). The missing feminist revolution in sociology. *Social Problems*, 32(4), 301–316. https://doi.org/10.2307/800754

Steeves, K. (2017). Experiencing a call to ministry: Changing trajectories, re-structuring life stories. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 13(4), 48–68. https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.13.4.02

Strenski, I. (2021). Sex and gender, in R. A. Segal and N. P. Roubekas (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2nd ed, pp. 429-439). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119092797.ch30

Sturges, J. (2020). In God's name: Calling, gender and career success in religious ministry. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(6), 971–987. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12424

Sullins, D. P. (2000). The stained glass ceiling: Career attainment for women clergy. *Sociology of Religion*, 61(3), 243–266. https://doi.org/10.2307/3712578

Sultanova, R. (2011). *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and culture in central Asia*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755608478

Tahamtan, I. and Bornmann, L. (2019). What do citation counts measure? An updated review of studies on citations in scientific documents published between 2006 and 2018. *Scientometrics*, 121(3), 1635–1684. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-019-03243-4

Tahamtan, I. and Bornmann, L. (2022). The Social Systems Citation Theory (SSCT): A proposal to use the social systems theory for conceptualizing publications and their citations links. *Profesional de la información/Information Professional*, 31(4), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.jul.11

Thorne, B. (2006). How can feminist sociology sustain its critical edge? *Social Problems*, 53(4), 473–478. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.473

Vance, L. (2015). *Women in New Religions*. New York: New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479841493.001.0001

Wagner-Ferreira, E. C. (2011). Revisiting the role of women pastors in the church in Tshwane. *HTS Theological Studies*, 67(2), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.932

West, C. and Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125–151. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002

Williams, C. (2006). Still missing? Comments on the twentieth anniversary of 'the missing feminist revolution in sociology.' *Social Problems*, 53(4), 434–458. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.454

Wills, J. B. and Risman, B. J. (2006). The visibility of feminist thought in family studies. *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 68, 690-700. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00283.x

Wong, M., Worthy, P., Fung, J. and Chen, E. C.-H. (2017). A qualitative analysis of the experience of female Chinese American church leaders: Associations with gender role, culture, and work-family balance. *Pastoral Psychology*, 66(5), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-017-0773-1

Zikmund, B. B., Lummis, A. T. and Chang, P. M. Y. (1998). *Clergy Women: An uphill calling*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

APPENDIX A

Table A1. Conceptual approaches to coding schema. [Avishai, O. and Irby, C. I., *Gender & Society* (Volume 31, Issue 5) pp. 657-658. Copyright © 2017 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications]

Code	Description
Feminist engagement	Analysis emerges from an explicit feminist perspective; seeks to contribute to feminist theorizing, and/or explicitly engages feminist politics of liberatory social change. Four inductive subcodes reflect shifts in feminist theorizing. *Herstory*: Untheorized narrative about women researchers or religious women. Example: An article with little to no citations describes the author's experiences as a feminist scholar of religion. *Cultural*: Focuses on women's experiences to challenge androcentric understandings of religion. Example: Article challenges assumptions in conversion literature by studying women's experiences of conversion. *Systematic*: Informed by feminist insights into gender as a relational and hierarchical institution, the analysis investigates how religion, as a major social institution, constructs gender as a social category and/or how individuals respond to and navigate this institution. Example: Article that examines religious women's political activism acknowledges that religious institutions produce gendered inequalities but focuses on how religious women navigate this gendered institution to reveal how gender and religion intersect to pattern their lives and actions and critique binaries such as "religious" and "secular" or "religion" and "feminism." *Critical*: Critically evaluates and situates gender as a racial, colonial, and/or heteronormative project; typically engages poststructural, postcolonial, and/or queer theories. Example: Study of religious women's activism in a Muslim-majority country draws on postcolonial theories to nuance feminist sociological analyses of agency.
Gender analysis	Analyzes religion as a gendered social institution (but without feminist markers identified above). *Rudimentary*: Article is informed by sociological theories of gender, but its primary framing relies on outdated theories and/or conceptualizes gender as a dichotomous social characteristic without engaging broader understanding of gender as a social institution. Example: Article published in the 2000s discussing religious socialization patterns of men and women utilizing role theory without engaging its critiques. *Systematic*: Draws on contemporary gender theories to rigorously analyze intersection of the institutions. Example: Article analyzes religious men's and women's attitudes toward domestic division of labor without attending to the social and cultural implications of such gendered religious ideologies.
Gender as a site	Acknowledges subject as gendered phenomena but primarily analyzes other social processes, such as immigration, organizations, social movements, etc. Example: Article on *hijab* focuses on questions of immigration and limitedly engages gender/feminist studies of women in conservative religion.
Marginalizing gender	Topically the article empirically analyzes a gendered question, phenomenon, or sample, but it does not engage with gender scholarship. Example: Article on why women are more religious than men frames analysis within "nature versus nurture" debate without attending to critiques by gender/feminist scholars.

Citation: Steeves, K., Smith, L., Kreiter, E. and Stobbe, J. (2025). Investigating the Intellectual Bifurcation Between Feminist Theory and Sociology of Religious Leadership. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 10. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16020


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 11
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

An Antidote to the Foetal Image? The Role of Creative Performance Counterprotest in Contemporary Abortion Activism

Aideen Catherine O'Shaughnessy [1*]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

How can pro-choice activists counteract the hegemony of the foetal image which has, for decades, served as a highly effective tool for anti-abortion activists worldwide? Via qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis, this article analyses the work of two Irish 'pro-choice' activist groups, Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice – active in the campaign to repeal the constitutional abortion ban in 2018 – to argue that creative, performance counterprotests serve to counteract the hegemony of the foetal image in three ways. Firstly, by using their bodies to 'block' graphic foetal imagery exhibits, pro-choice activists reclaim political and affective territory and contest the representation of abortion in these images as a 'violent' or 'unnatural' act. Secondly, their use of specific protest objects and costumes – in this case, LGBTQ flags and white angel costumes – offer an alternative visual and moral framing which destigmatises and reconstitutes abortion, in this case, as a cornerstone of sexual freedom and as a 'divine right'. Lastly, this article argues that creative performance counterprotests provide an effective challenge to the foetal image because they focalise a new body-ontology; one which dislodges the 'object-body' of the foetus and prioritises the 'lived' bodily experience of women and abortion-seekers, at the centre of contemporary abortion rights debates.

Keywords: abortion, activism, performance, Ireland

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE VISUAL IMAGE IN (IRISH) ABORTION POLITICS

The use of foetal images in abortion politics can be attributed to the US-based 'Pro-Life' activists who first mobilised such imagery in their campaign against legalised abortion in the 1960s (Johnston Hurst, 2021). It was during this decade, against the background of the burgeoning Women's Health Movement that Swedish photographer Lennart Nilsson published his now infamous sequences of images 'The Drama of Life Before Birth' in *Life* Magazine. Nilsson spent seven years on assignment across five hospitals in Stockholm, photographing embryos, with the goal of creating a visual narrative which would depict 'in colour the stages of human reproduction from fertilization to just before birth' (Rosenfeld, 1965). German social historian Barbara Duden describes how 'The Nilsson Effect' catalysed a 'new kind of seeing', characterised by 'the disappearance of the frontier between visible things that are visibly represented and invisible things to which representation imputes visibility' (Duden, 1993: 16).

Indeed, Nilsson's images were in fact 'a pervasive illusion' (Duden, 1993: 25). The 'Drama of Life Before Birth' exhibition did not depict live, in utero foetuses but rather corpses. At the time of the publication of Nilsson's work, the technology required for fetoscopy – where a small instrument or laparoscope is inserted into the uterus to see the placenta and foetus - was still in development (Duden, 1993: 14). Despite this, the proliferation of the public image of the foetus from the 1960's onwards had the dramatic effect of bolstering the idea of the separateness and autonomy of the foetal 'person' (Pollack Petchesky, 1987). As anthropologist Pollack Petchesky wrote, as the abortion debate moved from the legislative arena into the 'terrain of mass culture and imagery', silhouettes of the foetus began to 'float like spirits through courtrooms…through the hospitals and clinics' (Pollack Petchesky, 1987: 264).

Since the second half of the 20th century then, the anti-abortion movement in various locales has relied heavily on the deployment of images of dead foetuses or 'unborn babies' to denote particular ideas about the 'reality' of intrauterine experience, and to trigger particular emotional responses from the public towards the issue of abortion

[1] *University of Lincoln*, UNITED KINGDOM
*Corresponding Author: aideen4193@gmail.com

rights (Duden, 1993). As anthropologist Faye Ginsburg documents in her 1998 ethnography of 'Pro-life' and 'Pro-choice' activism in Fargo, North Dakota, 'the idea that knowledge of fetal life, and especially *confrontation with the visual image of the fetus* will "convert" a woman to the pro-life position has been a central theme in both local and national right-to-life activism' (Ginsburg, 1998: 104)[1]. Feminist scholar Jeannie Ludlow (2021) argues that the contemporary anti-abortion movement has created 'two subgenres of fetal representation: the dismembered fetal body, and the now-canonical unborn baby' (49). Whilst the latter category tends to focus on depictions of foetal development, the former claims to portray the allegedly violent 'reality' of abortion itself, providing 'close-ups' of bloody foetuses being torn apart by surgical instruments.

Whilst the use of such 'graphic' foetal imagery is associated predominantly with anti-abortion activism in the United States, recent years have seen a "transference" of American styles of protest' to the opposite side of the Atlantic (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 222). In their research on anti-abortion clinic activism in the U.K., Sarah-Jane Page and Pam Lowe describe the use of graphic foetal imagery displays as a 'key mechanism' by which anti-abortion activists attempt to 'alter public opinion on abortion' (2022: 6). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with members of the *Centre for Bioethical Reform UK* (an offshoot of the US-based 'Pro-Life' organisation of the same name), Page and Lowe describe that the 'intended goal' of anti-abortion protestors installing these displays is to 'forge an alignment between the image and their perception of abortion, so that a violent and disturbing image comes to represent the singular (but contested) understanding that *abortion is a form of violence*' (Page and Lowe, 2022: 15).[2]

As British Geographers Jackson and Valentine (2017) argue in their research on UK-based 'Pro-Life' activism, the use of graphic foetal imagery displays constitutes a novel way of 'performing' anti-abortion politics which brings into question 'who has access, and the right, to public space' (223). In setting up their billboards and banners in particular locations (often outside women's health clinics), anti-abortion protestors perform a 'territorial act', Jackson and Valentine declare, laying claim to and controlling specific physical and 'affective territory' (227). Interestingly, Jackson and Valentine argue that such displays contest ideas of 'decency' and 'acceptability' by challenging ideas of what sorts of images are appropriate for public display (2017: 223). Importantly for this analysis, Jackson and Valentine describe how 'Pro-Choice' activists in Britain have variously attempted to counteract such the use of graphic foetal imagery in public protests by using objects like coloured paper or scarves to 'cover up' the aforementioned posters and signs (Cresswell, 2006 in Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 227).

In the Irish context, as Side (2021) has discussed, 'visual realignment strategies' have seen a gradual move away from the use of religious imagery - more popular during the 1983 campaign which resulted in the insertion of an amendment to the Irish Constitution enshrining the right to life of the 'unborn' - towards 'fetal-centric visual discourses' favoured by contemporary anti-abortion groups. As Loughnane (2022) has argued in this journal, during the 2018 referendum which saw the constitutional abortion ban overturned, thousands of posters were installed across the country, featuring 2D ultrasound images and photographs of pregnant bellies (Loughnane, 2022: 7). Similarly to the UK, the use of 'graphic' or 'medico-technological' foetal imagery have generally been avoided by the mainstream 'Pro-Life' movement in Ireland (Loughnane, 2022).

A notable exception to this occurred in 2018 when members of the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* (ICBR) demonstrated at university campuses, maternity hospitals, and outside LGBTQI venues 'using banners and temporary displays of graphic foetal imagery as a form of protest' (Loughnane, 2022: 7).

As feminist theorist Johnston Hurst (2021: 4) argues whilst the public has largely become savvy to the manipulative power of mass media and photography, foetal images 'continue to be understood as capturing the real of bodily interiority and are employed in public and private settings as confirmation of the fetus's personhood'. The question remains then as to how the 'Pro-Choice' movement might respond to or counteract the efficacy and power of the foetal image as it is perpetually wielded and weaponised by anti-abortion activists. As Ludlow (2021: 50) argues, 'to counter anti-abortion images of fetal materiality', the 'pro-choice' movement in the US has so far offered 'almost nothing beyond radical co-optation of anti-abortion imagery'. This sentiment is resonant of arguments made by Argentine feminist scholars Sutton and Vacarezza (2020) who have theorised that, in the Latin American context, abortion activists have responded to the primacy of the foetal image 'with images centred on women's suffering due to unsafe abortion and with the figure of the dead woman' (735). Whilst such images may be politically expedient, they fail to destigmatise abortion and in fact, may reinscribe its illegal and immoral status.

In this article I argue that 'creative activism' and specifically 'performative' activism or counterprotests provide a useful method by which the 'Pro-Choice' movement might contest the hegemony of the foetal image and effectively transform the aesthetic economy of abortion politics. Central to my argument is the study of *embodiment* or of the 'embodied practices' of abortion activists, that is, I am interested in the diverse ways in which activists 'utilise their bodies' in their stand for or against abortion (Page and Lowe, 2021: 22). This argument derives from the analysis of the actions of two 'Pro-Choice' activist groups active during the 2018 abortion rights campaign in

[1] My emphasis.
[2] My emphasis.

Ireland – the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice – who organised 'vibrant counterprotests', assembling in locations where the Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform set up its graphic displays (Loughnane, 2022). It is my argument that creative, performance activism serves as an effective challenge to the foetal image not only by blocking out or covering up graphic foetal imagery displays, but through performing additional symbolic and affective functions which point the way forward for embodied abortion activism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws upon a long history of feminist scholarship on embodiment and political protest. As Argentine sociologist Barbara Sutton argues, at the same time as women's bodies are targets of political, social, and economic violence, women's political resistance has historically involved 'putting the body in action' to affect social change (2007: 129–130). The concept of '*poner el cuerpo*' or putting the body on the line, as elaborated in Sutton's (2007) work, as vital to processes of political transformation and as a mechanism through which activists reconstruct their embodied subjectivities is central to this analysis. Similarly influential to my analysis is Nayla Luz Vacarezza's research on the *pañuelo* or green kerchief – that symbol of hope and democracy for abortion rights activists across Latin America – which as Vacarezza argues 'mobilises new affective repertories' and which, when worn on the body, has given way to a unique 'performative repertoire of features and uses that merits analysis' (Vacarezza, 2021a: 63; Vacarezza, 2021b: 81).

Reflecting more specifically on this question of 'the performative', feminist theorist Wendy Parkins delineates the historical significance of the 'corporeal' and 'corporeal performance' as central to women's self-conceptualisation as political agents (Parkins, 2000: 59). In her research on the British suffrage movement, Parkins outlines how inside of the 'liberal body politic' where political agency could be derived only from legal or property rights, women 'refigured political agency as based on performance rather than entitlement' (2000: 63). In their quest for enfranchisement, the suffragettes performed 'daring feats' of bodily activism which, as Parkins argues, 'subverted dominant constructions of citizenship as exclusively masculine and primarily deliberative' and which provided these women 'a powerful sense of their own bodily capacities' (Parkins, 2000: 63). Such efforts to wield their bodies as vehicles of protest were particularly subversive in this context, since it was the 'feminine specificity' of their bodies which marked the 'grounds for their political exclusion' (Parkins, 2000: 72).

The concept of the 'performative' or 'performativity' as it relates to political protest is understood here, according to Paavolainen, as embodying 'a plurality of conflicting meanings' (2022: 38). On the one hand, the notion of 'performance' activism is used to invoke the aesthetic, artistic, or theatrical nature of protest (Paavolainen, 2022). In this sense, the term 'performance' activism is closer to the idea of 'creative activism', which Tilley (2022) describes as 'creative works that advance social change' (4). On the other hand, performativity can also be understood here in the more Butlerian sense as describing 'both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting' (Butler, 2015, in Paavolainen, 2022: 38). In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Butler argues that when bodies appear 'on the street', the 'persistence of the body in its exposure' calls the legitimacy of the state into question 'through a specific performativity of the body' where 'action and gesture signify and speak both as action and claim' (2015: 83). As Paavolainen (2022) puts it 'if protest is about "doing something" about some perceived injustice, then the performativity of protest concerns the various ways that doing and that something relate' (39).

In this sense, performance (counter)protest is conceptualised here not only as a 'site of opposition' whereby collective actors voice their contraposition of the political status quo but as an 'act of manifestation' which 'conveys the sense of claiming a space in order to bring something (a message, a resistance) into appearance' (hooks 1995, 201; Lavendar and Peetz, 2022: 5). As Lavendar and Peetz (2022) argue, performance protest is 'representational' (5). In other words, activist/performers engage their bodies in 'specific symbolic actions', often using protest objects like placards, banners, or costumes, to 'make new constituencies and create new realities' (Lavendar and Peetz, 2022: 6). Drawing upon relevant insights from queer studies scholarship, creative activism and performance protest are conceptualised here as providing an opportunity to 'act out an image of the world in which activists hope to live' (Shepard, 2010: 1).

The counterprotest actions of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice groups can be considered as part of a longer 'chorus of creative and activist voices' which have directly challenged Ireland's abortion ban (Broderick, 2022: 61). These include the London-based feminist performance activist group 'Speaking of IMELDA (Ireland Making England the Legal Destination for Abortions)' who 'knicker-bombed' the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny at a fundraising dinner in London in 2014; throwing pairs of underwear with feminist pro-choice slogans onto Mr Kenny's dinner plate (Speaking of Imelda, 2014). More recently, the 'Say Nope to the Pope' action in 2018 saw pro-choice activists 'buy up' tickets to the Papal Mass in Dublin 'with the intention of deliberately not attending the event' (Antosik-Parsons, 2024: 269). Antosik-Parsons theorises this action as 'part of larger efforts of feminist and queer activists to draw attention to socio-political issues' including clerical sex

abuse (277). In this article, I conceptualise such creative, performance, protests as integral elements of a broader movement to transform the lived reality of gender politics in Ireland through embodied political activism (O'Shaughnessy, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the analysis of the activities of two pro-choice direct-actions groups – the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice - who campaigned as part of the movement for abortion rights in Ireland in 2018. These groups were primarily active in the three-month period preceding the national referendum on 25 May 2018, which saw 66% of the voting public elect to repeal Ireland's constitutional abortion ban. In the months preceding the referendum on the 8th amendment, the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* targeted several of Dublin's maternity hospitals, setting up large displays with banner-style pictures of dismembered foetuses. In response to the actions of the Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform, the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice organised counterprotests, to voice their opposition towards the ICRB's graphic foetal imagery displays.

Launched in February 2018, Radical Queers Resist was a direct-action group concerned with a range of social justice issues including LGBTQ rights and sex education (Donohoe, 2018; Grainger, 2018). In a 2018 article in *Gay Community News*, members of the 'Radical Queers' recount the origins of the group in student organising at Maynooth University, where their first counterprotest was staged in response to manifestations by the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* there (Donohoe, 2018). In this first protest, members of the Radical Queers Resist covered up the ICBR's graphic foetal imagery installations using bedsheets and banners. The Radical Queers Resist group became involved more explicitly in the abortion rights campaign once the *Irish Centre for Bioethical Reform* announced their intention to target queer spaces, because of collaboration between LGBTQ and abortion activists during the repeal the 8th campaign (Donohoe, 2018).

Another group of pro-choice activists who organised counterprotests in opposition to the ICBR demonstrations was the performance-activist group 'Angels for Choice' (also known as the 'Repeal Angels', 'Angels for Yes' or 'Angels for Repeal'). The Angels for Choice group was made up of pro-choice activists, many of whom were also actors and singers, based in and around the greater Dublin area. Performing a similar role to their colleagues in the Radical Queers Resist group, the 'Angels' regularly assembled in locations where anti-abortion activists (including members of the ICBR) were demonstrating, with the intention of covering up their graphic visual displays. Members of the Angels for Choice dressed in all-white robes, adorned with feathered wings on their backs, and a red 'Repeal' heart across their chest.

This research follows a two-pronged methodology which includes the analysis of interview data collected between 2019 and 2020 as part of my research on embodied abortion activism in Ireland. My own positionality as an 'insider-outsider' – both in terms of my personal identity, being born and raised in Ireland but now living in the UK; and as academic researcher who has also been involved in abortion activism in Ireland over the past number of years – facilitated my access to research participants via a snowball sampling method (Corbin, Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The interview data included below relates to interviews conducted with abortion activists who were involved in the Angels for Choice group. Pseudonyms have been given to interview participants and any potentially identifying information has been removed. Since I did not directly interview any members of Radical Queers Resist, I have supplemented this with the analysis of publicly available secondary data relating to this group. Specifically, I conducted a thematic analysis of relevant news media articles and imagery relating to the Radical Queers Resist group which were collected via a Google search in March 2022.

DISCUSSION

(I) Putting the Body on the Line: Reclaiming Political Territory and Disrupting the 'Pro-Life' Panopticon

Sydney Calkin explains how the history of abortion politics in Ireland can be characterised by a regime of 'manufactured invisibility' (Calkin, 2019: 2). Whilst abortion was initially outlawed by the 1861 *Offences Against the Persons Act*, the 1983 referendum on the 8th amendment which constitutionally enshrined the foetus' 'right to life' allowed the State to cement its 'abortion-free' status and protect its identity as the last remaining stronghold of Catholic morality in Europe (Martin, 2002; Calkin, 2019). Historically-speaking, the 'fiction' of an abortion-free Ireland has been maintained, Calkin describes, through the 'off-shoring' of abortion-seekers; a policy which was preserved in the Constitution in 1992 through the 13th amendment, which inserted the 'right to travel' abroad for abortion care (Calkin, 2019: 17). In Ireland, this state-sanctioned 'exportation' of abortion-seekers has historically been contingent upon an additional spatial dichotomy wherein the public or political sphere is mapped as masculine and the private sphere, or the sphere of the home is mapped as feminine (Carnegie and Roth, 2019).

Against this historical backdrop, Calkin (2019) argues for the important connection between art and women's political agency in the Irish context. Exploring artistic interventions by abortion activists, Calkin explains how these methods have allowed activists to 're-place' abortion and abortion-seekers 'in public space' and to assert their '(geo)political agency' (Calkin, 2019: 5, 3). Following Calkin's argument, the actions of performance activist groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist can be conceptualised as part of a broader effort to utilise creative activism to refocus public attention on abortion rights and as an opportunity for pro-choice activists to reaffirm their political subjectivity through bodily protest. To paraphrase Fintan Walsh, in the case of the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice, the right to perform, the right to protest and even the right to exist 'become blurred' (Walsh, 2013: 105). By reappropriating public space through their protesting bodies, the activists pose a challenge – in corporeal terms - to a political system which has historically sought to marginalise and exclude them based on their gendered and reproductive identities.

Reflecting more specifically on the actions of the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist as 'counterprotests', it becomes clear that these actions serve not only to allow activists to defend their right to public space and reassert their political agency. More specifically, these counterprotest activities provide an opportunity for abortion activists to reclaim political and 'affective territory' from the 'Pro-Life' movement (Jackson and Valentine, 2017). In their research on anti-abortion clinic activism in the UK, Jackson and Valentine (2017: 226) discuss how 'Pro-Life' activists 'operate a specific spatial and territorial strategy', attempting 'to "fill" the space' for 'increased attention' and '"maximum" impact'. Public space becomes a 'stage' upon which the anti-abortion activists attempt to 'promote their message' (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 228). In this context, pro-choice groups must use their bodies to reclaim both literal and affective space, by 'chanting and shouting' or waving 'decorative scarves' (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 226). This becomes a 'game' or 'performance', Jackson and Valentine (2017) contend, as both groups work to 'out manoeuvre' the other so that their signs and banners remain visible (227).

As I have argued elsewhere, the installation of large-scale graphic foetal imagery displays can be conceptualised as producing and solidifying the symbolic and political dominance of the anti-abortion movement (O'Shaughnessy 2024). In constructing my argument, I have drawn here upon the work of Lowe and Hayes (2019) who situate anti-abortion clinic activism 'within broader understandings of gendered harassment' (330). Anti-abortion activity, specifically outside maternity units or abortion clinics, Lowe and Hayes argue, is often experienced by women and abortion-seekers as 'invasive', particularly as it 'subjects them to critical unwanted scrutiny' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 331). Lowe and Hayes borrow here from Goffman's theory of 'focused vs unfocused interaction 'and the 'rule of civil inattention', which argues that 'those who are not considered to enjoy equal status are not accorded civil inattention, they can be openly stared at or verbally enjoined' (Goffman, 1963 in Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 335).

In this framework, the failure of anti-abortion activists to extend 'civil inattention' to women and pregnant people entering abortion clinics, or more generally in public space, works as a form of gendered harassment which directly impacts the experiences of these individuals as they attempt to navigate these spaces, often to access reproductive care (Lowe and Hayes, 2019). In their study, Lowe and Hayes report how women and abortion-seekers often feel 'upset, intimidated, uncomfortable, distressed and stressed' at being 'observed or approached' by anti-abortion activists outside of health clinics (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 340-341). Echoing Lowe and Hayes (2019), my own research with Irish activists has illustrated that anti-abortion protest objects, including graphic foetal imagery installations are experienced by women and abortion-seekers as a material manifestation of and as an extension of a culture of violent reproductive coercion and surveillance. Interestingly, activists explain how they experience a type of resonance or sense of 'embodied solidarity' with the pregnant bodies exemplified and objectified in these anti-abortion posters (O'Shaughnessy 2024, 52).

It can be argued then that, through their counterprotest activities, the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice work not only to 're-territorialise' public space but to disrupt the surveillant gaze of the anti-abortion movement which is embodied and sustained by the ICBR protestors and their graphic foetal imagery displays (Jackson and Valentine, 2017: 227). In my interview with Cliodhna, she described that the primary aim of the Angels for Choice group was to 'block out' the graphic foetal imagery displays which were being systematically installed at various locations around Dublin city, including outside several of the capital's maternity hospitals. As she explains in the below quotation, the organisation was in fact 'set up' with this primary objective in mind.

> Cliodhna: Do you remember those ghastly people who used to go around with pictures of foetuses and put them outside the maternity hospital? So, the angels were set up in order to block that out. So, what they would do would be dress up and go where somebody had those pictures and stand in front of them. With angel feathers and these white costumes. So, I joined them and went out with them 5 or 6 times. We went all over the city.

Recounting the logistics of their counterprotest operations, Cliodhna told me how guerrilla counterprotests were organised via WhatsApp groups. Cliodhna explained that the members of the Angels for Choice groups would 'dress up' in 'angel feathers and these white costumes' and go 'stand in front' of the ICBR's graphic foetal imagery

Figure 1. Radical Queers Resist counterprotest on 17 April 2018, Georges Street, Dublin. Source: @puhjayjayjay on X (21 August 2022) – reproduced with permission.

displays. Both the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist activists used their bodies as well as LGBTQ flags to 'cover up' or 'block out' the graphic foetal images. By positioning themselves *in between* the anti-abortion posters and passers-by, the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist activists *interrupt* the almost panopticon-like gaze of the anti-abortion movement and the broader culture of reproductive surveillance and coercion which these images exemplify and sustain (O'Shaughnessy 2024).

In the case of the Radical Queers Resist counterprotests, the use of the flag, a symbol normally associated with 'political hierarchy' and 'political dominance', to cover up or block out the graphic foetal imagery is particularly interesting and warrants further analysis (Shanafelt, 2008: 16). In this case, the 'rainbow' flag appears to function not only as a mechanism to obscure the graphic foetal imagery displays but as a method to extend the reach of the activist body (to maximise their 're-territorialisation' of public space) (Jackson and Valentine, 2017). In addition, the LGBTQ flag serves here as a symbolic and affective device which evokes the presence of other(ed) queer bodies who gather with abortion activists under the banner of non-normative, stigmatised sexual subjects. The decision to utilise the LGBTQ 'pride' flag in this case can be seen, I argue, as emblematic of a broader global effort to 'queer' abortion rights, that is to place the battle for abortion rights and LGBTQ rights together inside the frame of sexual liberation and bodily autonomy (Sutton and Borland, 2018).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in their analysis of graphic foetal imagery, Page and Lowe argue that these images are 'purposefully crafted' by anti-abortion activists to 'forge an alignment between the image and their perception of abortion, so that a violent and disturbing image comes to represent…the understanding that abortion is a form of violence' (2022: 15). With this in mind, the efforts of the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist activists to 'block' out such imagery should be considered, I argue, not only as an effort to 'shield' women and abortion-seekers from having to witness what are perceived as 'upsetting' imagery but as part of a wider strategy by abortion activists to challenge or refuse this representational economy which constitutes abortion as a 'violent' and 'unnatural' act and abortion-seekers as 'failed' women or maternal subjects (Halpin, 2018; Page and Lowe, 2022). By placing their bodies, flags, or other protest objects in front of the graphic foetal imagery displays, pro-choice activists operate to disrupt this 'representational system' which defines abortion as a 'shameful, guilty secret' and to make space for an alternative aesthetic economy of abortion within which abortion could be reimagined as part of a positive, non-stigmatising affective regime (Millar, 2017: 65).

(II) A 'Divine' Right? Reconstructing the Moral and Affective Economy of Abortion

In their research on anti-abortion activism in the UK, Lowe and Hayes describe how the presence of anti-abortion activists outside of maternity hospitals and reproductive health clinics functions as a form of 'bearing public witness' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). That is, for anti-abortion activists themselves, their presence in such spaces constitutes what they believe to be a religious act, which serves to call attention to the 'unethical' or 'immoral', through 'religious observance and public presence' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). 'Bearing witness' relies on a particular politics of visibility. In the case of anti-abortion activism, the objective is to call public attention to abortion, to make abortion increasingly 'visible', so that the act of abortion can be more easily 'named and opposed' (Lowe and Hayes, 2019: 333). 'Bearing witness' functions as an important element in the repertoire of anti-abortion activists, specifically as it can be conceptualised by anti-abortion activists as 'peaceful' and 'inoffensive' (even when it is not experienced as such by abortion-seekers), and thus facilitates greater 'acceptance of their activities by the broader public' (Page and Lowe, 2022: 30). Interestingly, in my interview with Sinead, a member of the Angels for Choice, she described their counterprotests activities as a way of 'bearing witness' to the actions of anti-abortion groups.

> Sinead: We walked slowly, in single-file, one behind each other. And we would stop, for coffee, or stop outside the protest places. And I think the silence really pissed off the anti-choicers, because they'd be taunting us. And we'd be like 'say nothing, say absolutely nothing. We're here bearing witness'.

In religious terms, the act of 'bearing witness' implies a moral responsibility; to take evidence of wrongdoing to establish a charge against someone, to serve the rule of justice, and to be present and be in dialogue with vulnerable subjects.[3] Another possible interpretation of the religious act of 'bearing witness' is that its purpose is to 'awaken and draw others to God'.[4] As the quote from Sinead above illustrates, for the Angels for Choice activists, their activities took on a quasi-religious function – in this case, the Angels use their performative counterdemonstrations to 'bear witness' to the (graphic) foetal imagery displays, to call attention to what they consider as the immorality of the actions of the anti-abortion groups and what they perceive to be offensive and traumatising visual imagery displays.

Scholarship on 'witness bearing art', however, which is defined by Bacharach (2023) as 'activist art which is strategically placed in the street' defines its function as 'to transmit knowledge about certain unjust and harmful events' (153). Bacharach argues that 'witness bearing art' works to 'testify visually to certain events which might not be (sufficiently) publicly acknowledged'. Reflecting on witness bearing as a form of creative activism, Bacharach maintains that such actions function to acknowledge and 'work through' collective trauma (2023: 154). Particularly relevant to this analysis, Bacharach contends that witness-bearing art serves to 'go beyond the facts' to validate and disseminate the 'lived and embodied experiences' those who have been 'marginalised' or 'silenced' by 'dominant narratives' (Bacharach, 2023: 154, 160). Importantly, Bacharach posits, witness bearing art allows the artist/activist to 'construct new narratives about past events and how they have impacted different groups' (160).

Returning to Sinead's testimony, by 'bearing witness' to anti-abortion activity, the Angels for Choice activists serve to call attention to what they consider as immoral, invasive, and distressing graphic foetal imagery displays. In addition to this however, by dressing in all-white Angel costumes with feathered wings, the activists deliver an *iconoclastic performance* which both brings into focus and contests the powerful monopoly that the Catholic Church in Ireland has traditionally held in defining the moral parameters of sexuality and reproduction. Ecclesiastically-speaking, abortion has been regarded – alongside euthanasia, terrorism and genocide – as one of the great 'evils' of modern society. In 1983, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign which lobbied for the insertion of the 8th amendment was backed directly by the Irish Catholic Church. The fervent historical 'protection' of foetal rights by Irish religious organisations has functioned as the keystone around which the country has sought to prove its 'superior' Catholic morality, specifically in contrast to an increasingly secular and liberal European Union (Martin, 2002).

As Rich and Bartholomew describe (2023), iconoclastic movements – which involve the reappropriate and subversion of 'sacred imagery' (in this case, guardian angels) – 'address the problem of historicity' (194). That is, iconoclastic movements do not attempt to 'undo the past' but instead, they 'gesture toward the distinction between the past on one hand and history on the other'. In light of this history, the subversive appropriation of religious dress and Catholic iconography by the Angels for Choice activists is particularly significant and can be considered as part of a broader effort by Irish feminist activists in the abortion rights campaign to highlight the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church who, whilst advocating for sanctity of motherhood and the protection of 'the unborn',

[3] *Bearing witness in religion | Global Strategies & Solutions | The Encyclopedia of World Problems* (no date). Available at: http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/strategy/200518. (Accessed 6 September 2022).

[4] Witness, Christian. Available at: https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/witness-christian. (Accessed 1 April 2024).

oversaw the incarceration and institutional abuse of thousands of unmarried mothers and pregnant people inside of its network of Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes up until the end of the 20th century (Antosik-Parsons, 2024).

As Pollack Petchesky argues, moral discourse around abortion is not 'static and given' but 'socially constructed' (Petchesky, 1980: 332). Through their creative, performance activism, the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist serve not only to call attention to the invasive and intrusive nature of the graphic foetal imagery displays, but to reconstruct the moral and affective economy of abortion, in a broader sense. Here, we come back to the idea of performance protest as an 'act of manifestation' which creates new visions of society and the world (Lavendar and Peetz, 2022). In the case of the Angels for Choice, the symbolism of their 'angel' costumes requires further analysis. In theology, the function of angels is to serve and praise God, to work as messengers between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, to give strength and comfort to religious 'believers', and most importantly, to operate as 'guardians' who shepherd human beings through the world, *protecting* them from evil forces (Catholic Straight Answers, n.d.).

Returning to Sinead's description of the Angels for Choice counterprotests as a form of 'bearing witness', I want to highlight an additional interpretation of this term. In her research on 'bearing witness' in the nursing profession, Maria Arman writes that 'bearing witness' entails a constant 'dialogue between closeness and respect' (2007: 85). Bearing witness, Arman explains in her article, requires not only 'facing' the other in his 'vulnerability' but putting oneself 'at the disposal of the other'. The 'unconditional presence' of the witness operates as a form of 'protection for the other's dignity' (Arman, 2007: 86). In the interviews I conducted with Angels for Choice activists, as well as in interviews given to local media, by members of Radical Queers Resist, both groups spoke about their objective to *protect* women and pregnant people from graphic foetal imagery displays; with protection understood here in terms of safeguarding individuals from physical intimidation as well as from the emotional harm that these images might cause. This is exemplified in the passage from my interview with Sinead below:

> Sinead: We just got incensed seeing these outside maternity clinics. People coming out of maternity clinics after facing God knows what and they were horrible, horrible images. Really really cold-hearted people. So, it was like 'How do we counteract that?'…So, you'd walk up to outside the Dail where the protests were, or outside the maternity hospitals and you just walked in silence and stood silently, protecting…it was so powerful. Really moving, really moving.

Dressed in their white robes and feathered wings, standing silently in front of the foetal imagery displays, the 'Angels for Choice' serve as '*guardian* angels' whose role is to safeguard women's access to reproductive healthcare – as they did when they performed several counterprotests opposing the ICBR's graphic foetal imagery displays at several Dublin maternity hospitals in 2018. It is my argument that the Angels for Choice counterprotests serve not only to 'guide' or 'herald' abortion-seekers outside of abortion clinics but that the aesthetics and symbolism of their *performance* worked to reconstitute access to abortion itself as a 'divine right'. Taking a more critical lens towards the Angels for Choice protests, this discourse which constitutes abortion-seekers as in need of 'protection' from graphic foetal imagery displays should not go unscrutinised. Whilst on the one hand, this discourse might be considered as subversive of the common 'Pro-Life' rhetoric which constitutes the 'unborn' as being in need of 'protection' from irrational and irresponsible women and pregnant people themselves, such paternalistic language could potentially be appropriated by patriarchal political and medical systems and utilised to advance their interventionist agendas, thereby further jeopardising the bodily autonomy and sexual freedom of women and abortion-seekers themselves (Millar, 2017).

What is clear is that the somewhat controversial aesthetic adopted by the Angels for Choice activists evokes powerful emotions and symbolic meanings. Borrowing from Sutton and Vacarezza, through their creative, performance counterprotests, these activists provide us with an alternative 'visual frame' for abortion rights which works to 'advance the movement's discursive repertoires' (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 733). In the case of the Angels for Choice, the reshaping of the affective economy of abortion is achieved using specific clothing or dress. In relation to the aesthetic created by the Angels for Choice, the decision to adorn themselves in white angel costumes has additional affective significance, outside of subverting religious iconography. The decision to don the colour white can be conceived, I argue, as a rebuttal of misogynistic ideas which constitute abortion-seekers and sexually active women as 'impure' or 'unclean' and as part of broader efforts to 'stick' new affective charges to abortion, including peacefulness, cleanliness, wisdom and healing (all connotations which the colour white evokes) (Ahmed, 2014).

In this sense, the work of activist groups like the Angels for Choice can be located inside of wider contemporary actions in reproductive rights organising which prioritises consciousness-raising and destigmatising work through alternative visual and affective representations of abortion. In 2021, Northern Irish abortion campaigners, Alliance for Choice in Belfast, launched their 'Abortion is Normal' billboard campaign, in a direct response to the activities of anti-abortion protestors who gathered outside clinics across Northern Ireland with 'traumatising images and

Figure 2. Angels for Choice demonstration, 9 May 2018, The National Maternity Hospital Holles Street, Dublin. Source: Raymond Keane (12 November 2024) – reproduced with permission.

misinformation'[5]. In response graphic foetal image displays by anti-abortion groups, Alliance for Choice installed their own large billboards across Northern Ireland which featured drawings of different types of women and abortion-seekers, in bright colours, with captions including 'Strong', 'Abortion is Normal' and 'All Sort of People Need Abortions'.

In many ways then, the work of both the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist can be conceptualised as part of a broader global movement by abortion activists to take a 'diametrically opposed' path to conservative 'pro-life' campaigners, when it comes to the visual economy of abortion politics (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 753). In their analysis of key visual symbols of the '*marea verde*' in Latin America, Sutton and Vacarezza argue that the use of the orange voting hand, the green '*pañuelo*' and the LGBT 'rainbow colours' by groups including the *Lesbianas y Feministas por la Descriminalización del Aborto* in Argentina, demonstrate a systematic attempt by 'pro-choice' activists in this area to avoid 'limiting visual meaning that might be interpreted as stigmatising or victimising' (2020: 753). Instead of responding with images of women's suffering as a result of unsafe abortion, these strategies shift the goalposts altogether, advancing 'openly destigmatising meanings' and celebrating 'diverse bodies in relation to gender and sexuality (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 753–754).

In the same vein, the use of the LGBTQ colours and pride flag by the Radical Queers Resist group can be considered as part of this effort to destigmatise abortion in the Irish context. As Sutton and Vacarezza have argued, popular images of abortion often use 'dark' colours to imply the 'sinister' nature of the abortion experience, such that the attachment of 'joyful and lively' colours to abortion becomes a radical act (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 745). In this same vein, the use of the LGBTQ flag by the Radical Queers Resist activists can be seen as doubly effective, as it creates the idea of abortion as a prideful, rather than a shameful object; and works to 'disrupt essentialised and heteronormative notions' about who needs access to abortion rights (Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 744). In this Irish context, the LGBTQ rainbow flag provides a point of connection for queer and aborting bodies – all of whom have faced pathologisation, social exclusion and even institutionalisation inside the cisheteronormative, pro-natalist state.

(III) An Alternative Body-Ontology in the Abortion Debate: Validating the 'Lived Body' and the 'Non-Reproductive'

What is increasingly clear then is that, not only do activist groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist pose a direct challenge to the efforts of anti-abortion groups to visually-frame abortion exclusively through bloody, graphic foetal imagery; but through their performative, counter-protest activities, they offer an alternative aesthetic of abortion politics, which has radical, subversive potential for abortion activists in Ireland and beyond. As Pollack Petchesky has argued, it appears that feminists have indeed too easily 'ceded the visual terrain' to the anti-abortion lobby (Petchesky, 1987: 265 in Sutton and Vacarezza, 2020: 734). The work of groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist offers important clues as to how to reclaim visual territory for pro-choice campaigners, and how to recast abortion in 'positive' visual and affective terms. Moreover, I argue that through their protest activities, groups like the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist not only transgress and refute the dominant conceptualisations of pregnant embodiment exemplified in these graphic foetal imagery

[5] Alliance for Choice, 2021. Available at: https://www.alliance4choice.com/billboard-campaign. (Accessed 1 April 2024).

Figure 3. Angels for Choice demonstration, 18 May 2018, Grafton Street, Dublin. Source: Raymond Keane (12 November 2024) – reproduced with permission.

displays; they contribute and validate alternative notions of gendered and sexual embodiment which have radical potential to transform contemporary reproductive rights debates.

In direct defiance of the silence (or rather silenced), passive and objectified pregnant body exemplified in foetal imagery displays, the performance protests of the Radical Queers Resist, and the Angels for Choice portray and validate an active and acting gendered subject-body. In other words, by situating themselves and their performing, activist bodies in opposition to the passive, objectified pregnant bodies exemplified as part of the anti-abortion foetal imagery displays, members of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice groups refocus the primacy and necessity of a phenomenological approach to the reproductive body and to reproductive politics, more broadly. Such acts operate then to remind us that unlike foetal images which exist only as 'second order' expression of bodily experience, the active, performing bodies of these mostly feminine and queer activists remain the 'absolute source' of experience 'without which the symbols of science would be meaningless' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014: ix).

In addition, through their creative, performative counterdemonstrations, members of the Radical Queers Resist and Angels for Choice activist groups put forward an alternative aesthetic of reproduction where 'the main character' is no longer 'the embryonic man' but the active, agentic, feminine and queer body (Phelan, 1993: 132). Inside of a pre-existing, hegemonic representational system which valorises pregnancy and 'disembodied wombs' as exemplifying the 'truth' of bodily reproduction, these creative activists' performances recentre and revalue the idea of women and abortion-seekers as autonomous, agentic "embodied political subjects" (Calkin, 2019: 12; Hyndman, 2007 in Calkin, 2019: 13). The alternative abortion aesthetic put forward by the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice activists is especially transformative I argue because – due to its nature as *performance* – it resists ontological reification (Phelan, 1993).

As feminist theorist Peggy Phelan has argued, it is 'the pregnant woman's very visibility', the ability of medical science and photography to capture and reify her bodily image, that has allowed the pregnant body to become the object of legal control (Phelan, 1993: 140). Phelan maintains that 'the connection between reproduction and representation is intractable. To control one is to control the other'. Phelan writes that performance 'in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive' and in fact 'clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation' (Phelan, 1993: 148). Phelan contrasts photography, which she says is 'vulnerable to charges of counterfeiting and copying' with live performance which 'eludes regulation and control'. Unlike photography, Phelan maintains, performance is difficult to 'capture' (Phelan, 1993: 148).

In a visually oriented society, wherein we seek to perpetually seek to reproduce ourselves in our own image, these performances cannot be replicated. Each performance or counterdemonstration is an entirely new act; one which exists only in a specific space and time.

Phelan characterises performance itself as 'an attempt to value that which is nonreproductive' (Phelan, 1993: 152). Moreover, Phelan (1993: 148) explains, 'performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies'. The 'referent', Phelan explains, is the 'agonizingly relevant body of the performance' (Phelan, 1993: 150). Perhaps then, what the activists from the Angels for Choice and Radical Queers Resist groups achieve here is not simply that they point the way towards an alternative visual framework for abortion politics; but that they point us towards a way out of reductive visibility politics. As Phelan (1993) argues, there are 'disadvantages in staking too much on visibility as a means of achieving representational power' (140). Perhaps, the great potential of creative performance protests, like those of the Radical Queers Resist and the Angels for Choice, is that in the face of a foetocentric visual culture, their work reaffirms the inherent value of the present, transient, fleshly bodies of the mostly feminine and queer activist performers.

CONCLUSION

As has been well-documented by scholars analysing contemporary abortion politics, the anti-abortion movement across various transnational contexts has proven itself to be extraordinarily successful in deploying visual imagery to support its political aims (Duden, 1993; Ludlow, 2021). Feminist artists and activists have responded to the hegemony of the foetal image through aesthetic interventions which aim to reconstruct the visual economy of abortion and specifically to refocus the lived experience and political agency of women and pregnant people (Phelan, 1993; Calkin, 2019). In this article and responding to the turn towards increasingly 'graphic' foetal imagery amongst anti-abortion campaigners in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, I have explored the potential of creative, performative counter-protests to challenge the political efficacy and emotional connotations of the foetal image and to indicate future avenues for embodied abortion activism which shift the focus of campaigning beyond the narrow confines of a dichotomous visibility politics.

Exploring the case of counterdemonstrations by the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist activist groups during the Irish abortion rights referendum in 2018, this research has argued that creative, performance counterprotests provide an important symbolic challenge to the foetal image as well as performing additional affective and political functions including; reclaiming public space and political territory for the abortion rights movement through the unruly performing body, interrupting the surveillant panopticon-like gaze of 'Pro-Life' protestors as it emanates with and through graphic foetal imagery displays, and reconstituting the affective and moral economy of abortion. In the Irish context, the Angels for Choice deliver an iconoclastic performance which subversively reconstitutes abortion as a 'divine right', whilst the Radical Queers Resist attach lively and prideful colours to a practice traditionally perceived as sinister or impure.

To conclude, in the face of the hegemony of the foetal image, the performing activist body refocuses the primacy of the lived experience of the reproductive body and refuses ontological reification. The work of groups like the Angels for Choice and the Radical Queers Resist have significant potential then as it replaces at the centre of contemporary abortion politics the active, agentic, fleshly bodies of women, gestating people, and abortion-seekers, who retake their place as the central characters in the story of abortion rights.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Antosik-Parsons, K. (2024). Say nope to the Pope: Performance and resistance in the creative interventions during the 2018 papal visit to Ireland. *Irish Studies Review*, 32(2), 262–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2024.2335675

Arman, M. (2007). Bearing witness: An existential position in caring. *Contemporary Nurse*, 27(1), 84–93. https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.2007.27.1.84

Bacharach, S. (2023). Bearing witness and creative activism. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 81(2), 153–163. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpad002

Broderick, C. (2023). Insurgent bodies in cultural responses to reproductive justice in Chile and Ireland. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/blar.13420. (Accessed 12 March 2024).

Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674495548

Calkin, S. (2019). Healthcare not airfare! Art, abortion and political agency in Ireland. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(3), 338–361. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1552928

Carnegie, A. and Roth, R. (2019). From the grassroots to the Oireachtas. *Health and Human Rights*, 21(2), 109–120.

Donohoe, K. (2018). Meet the radical queers fighting for LGBT+ rights in Ireland, *Gay Community News*. Available at: https://gcn.ie/meet-radical-queers-fighting-lgbt-rights-ireland/. (Accessed 30 September 2022).
Duden, B. (1993). *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on pregnancy and the unborn*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
Ginsburg, F. (1998). *Contested Lives: The abortion debate in an American community*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520922457
Grainger, K. (2018). Radical queers resist announce the group is dissolving, *Gay Community News*. Available at: https://www.hotpress.com/culture/radical-queers-resist-announce-group-dissolving-22750547. (Accessed 30 September 2022).
Halpin, H. (2018). Graphic abortion posters displayed outside Rotunda again despite requests from hospital not to, *thejournal.ie*. Available at: https://www.thejournal.ie/icbr-graphic-posters-hospital-3993502-May2018/. (Accessed 30 September 2022).
hooks, b. (1995). Performance practice as a site of opposition, in C. Ugwu (ed), *Let's Get It On: The politics of Black performance* (pp. 210–19). Seattle: Bay View Press.
Jackson, L. and Valentine, G. (2017). Performing "moral resistance"? Pro-life and pro-choice activism in public space. *Space and Culture*, 20(2), 221–238. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331217697142
Johnston Hurst, R. A. (2021). Representing abortion, in R. A. Johnston Hurst (ed), *Representing Abortion* (pp. 1–14). London; New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003016595-1
Lavender, A. and Peetz, J. (2022). On protest. *Performance Research*, 27(3–4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2155388
Loughnane, F. (2022). Foetal images on political posters: Bodily intimacy, public display and the mutability of photographic meaning. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 6(1), 09. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/11753
Lowe, P. and Hayes, G. (2019). Anti-abortion clinic activism, civil inattention and the problem of gendered harassment. *Sociology*, 53(2), 330–346. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518762075
Ludlow, J. (2021). IT'S A boy-BORTED; Fetal bodies, graphic abortion, and the option to look, in R. A. Johnston Hurst (ed), *Representing Abortion*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003016595-4
Martin, A. (2002). Death of a nation: Transnationalism, bodies and abortion in late twentieth-century Ireland, in T. Mayer (ed), *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the nation* (pp. 65–88). London: Routledge.
Merleau-Ponty, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714
Millar, E. (2017). *Happy Abortions: Our bodies in the era of choice*. London: Zed. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350220591
O'Shaughnessy, A. (2024). *Embodying Irish Abortion Reform: Bodies, emotions, and feminist activism*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529236460
Paavolainen, T. (2022). On the 'doing' of 'something': A theoretical defence of 'performative protest'. *Performance Research*, 27(3–4), 38–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2155394
Page, S.-J. and Lowe, P. (2021). Contested embodiment: The use of prayer in public displays of anti-abortion activism, in S.-J. Page and K. Pilcher (eds), *Embodying Religion, Gender and Sexuality* (pp. 21–38). Abingdon New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003130291-3
Page, S.-J. and Lowe, P. (2022). Gendered violence, religion and UK-based anti-abortion activism. *Religion and Gender*, 12(1), 5–28. https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-01201009
Parkins, W. (2000). Protesting like a girl: Embodiment, dissent and feminist agency. *Feminist Theory*, 1(1), 59–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647000022229065
Phelan, P. (1993). White men and pregnancy: Discovering the body to be rescued, in P. Phelan (author), *Unmarked: The politics of performance* (pp. 130-145). London and New York: Routledge.
Pollack Petchesky, R. (1987). Fetal images: The power of visual culture in the politics of reproduction. *Feminist Studies*, 13(2), 263. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177802
Rich, S. A., and Bartholomew, S. (2023). Iconoclasm, speculative realism, and sympathetic magic. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 81, 188–200. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpad008
Rosenfeld, A. (1965). Drama of life before birth: An unprecedented photographic feat documents the stages in the growth of the human embryo. Photographed by Lennart Nilsson. The Marvels of the Placenta. *Life*, 1965, 58 edition, sec. 17.
Shanafelt, R. (2008). The nature of flag power: How flags entail dominance, subordination, and social solidarity. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 27(2), 13–27. https://doi.org/10.2990/27_2_13
Shepard, B. (2010). *Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, pleasure and social movement*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203892145

Side, K. (2021). The shifting visual terrains of anti-abortion strategies in the Republic of Ireland, in R. A. Johnson Hurst (ed), *Representing Abortion* (pp. 104–118). London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003016595-9

Speaking of Imelda. (2014). *Knicker-bombing campaign*. Available at: https://www.speakingofimelda.org/knickers-for-choice. (Accessed 10 July 2024).

Sutton, B. (2007). Poner el cuerpo: Women's embodiment and political resistance in Argentina. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 49(3), 129–162. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2007.tb00385.x

Sutton, B. and Borland, E. (2018). Queering abortion rights: Notes from Argentina. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 20(12), 1378–1393. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1437221

Sutton, B. and Vacarezza, N. L. (2020). Abortion rights in images: Visual interventions by activist organizations in Argentina. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45(3), 731–757. https://doi.org/10.1086/706489

Tilley, E. (2022). Undefining creative activism: From praxis and participation to poiesis and presage, in E. Tilley (ed), *Creative Activism Research, Pedagogy and Practice* (pp. 3–32). Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Vacarezza, N. L. (2021a). Orange hands and green kerchiefs affect and democratic politics in two transnational symbols for abortion rights, in B. Sutton and N. L. Vacarezza (eds), *Abortion and Democracy: Contentious body politics in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* (pp. 70–91). London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003079903-4

Vacarezza, N. L. (2021b). The green scarf for abortion rights: Affective contagion and artistic reinventions of movement symbols, in C. Macón, M. Solana, and N. L. Vacarezza (eds), *Affect, Gender and Sexuality in Latin America* (pp. 63-86). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59369-8_4

Walsh, F. (2013). Pride, politics, and the right to perform, in N. Giffney and M. Shildrick (eds), *Theory on the Edge: Irish Studies and the politics of sexual difference* (pp. 105–122). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137315472_9

Citation: O'Shaughnessy, A. C. (2025). An Antidote to the Foetal Image? The Role of Creative Performance Counterprotest in Contemporary Abortion Activism. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 11. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16021


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 12
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Experiences and Perceptions of Gynaecological Violence: A Descriptive Exploration of the Phenomenon from Survivors' Standpoints

Alexandra Toupin [1]*, Sylvie Lévesque [1]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing movements against gender-based violence, resentment against sexism and disrespect within the medical field has gained attention. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, this study aims to provide a comprehensive description of gynaecological violence (GV) from survivors' perspectives. The convergence of critical thinking, queer theory, and intersectional feminism underscores the importance of understanding diverse and marginalised perspectives as well as individual narratives. Nine participants from Québec (Canada) shared their stories through individual, semi-structured interviews. Phenomenology was used to analyse the deep and nuanced lived experiences, enabling the capture of the essence of GV. The findings first highlight the negative experiences faced by participants, encompassing situations where they felt deprived of choices, unheard, treated insensitively, dehumanised, abandoned, and gaslighted. The results then trace the line between participants' negative experiences and GV, revealing how perceptions of violence are formed. Finally, a phenomenological description of GV is provided, offering insights into how the phenomenon can be personally experienced by individuals. This study bridges a gap in the literature, provides a foundation for future research and advocacy, and presents recommendations. It calls for reevaluating practices in gynaecological health services to ensure they are inclusive and respectful.

Keywords: phenomenology, critical thinking, queer theory, gynaecological violence, intersectional feminism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, movements against gender-based violence have gained momentum (Russo and Pirlott, 2006), bringing attention to issues of sexism and gender bias within healthcare services (Verdonk *et al.*, 2009). Numerous individuals have disclosed experiences of gynaecological violence (GV), encompassing various harmful acts of neglect, abuse, or misconduct within the context of gynaecological health services (GHS) (Cárdenas-Castro and Salinero-Rates, 2023; Vuille, 2016). These experiences have ignited international discussions and condemnation (Commission sur l'égalité et la non-discrimination [CEND], 2019; Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes [HCE], 2018; Šimonović, 2019).

Despite the media, activist groups, and the public raising their voices against GV (Vuille, 2016), the subject remains largely understudied, except for its obstetrical dimension (Bohren *et al.*, 2015). The lack of comprehensive research on GV has left a gap in our understanding of the issue, undermining efforts to combat it effectively. This article sets out to lessen this gap by exploring GV from the experiences of those who have faced it, offering an in-depth description of the phenomenon as it is lived.

Prevalence and Manifestations of GV

The concept of GV, while increasingly recognised in political and activist discourse, suffers from a lack of a concise, universally agreed-upon definition. This lack of clarity is evident as the term itself varies. For example, it is sometimes referred to as mistreatment and, at other times, as sexism. Despite this variability, some characteristics of GV are often repeated in its existing definitions. According to these, GV encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, actions, gestures, statements, or behaviours, both committed and omitted, that occur within healthcare (HCE, 2018; Marcilly and Mauri, 2018). It covers the absence of free and informed consent, lack of justification for medical interventions, or interventions going against scientific knowledge and best practices (CEND, 2019;

[1] *Université du Québec à Montréal*, CANADA
***Corresponding Author:** Toupin.alexandra@uqam.ca

Quéré, 2019). GV's perpetrators are healthcare providers across various specialities who may not have violent intentions, and the survivors are the patients (HCE, 2018; Marcilly and Mauri, 2018).

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (2022) provides examples of such violent practices in gynaecology, including psychological and physical violence (e.g., shaming or judgemental remarks), non-consensual acts (e.g., forced vaginal examination), medically unnecessary procedures (e.g., routine episiotomies), and delay or refusal of care (e.g., refusing to help a patient requesting an abortion). The CEND (2019) further expands on this list, adding inappropriate acts, sexist behaviours, disrespectful and abusive treatment, brutality, stigmatisation, marginalisation, pressure to relinquish patients' rights, contempt, and indifference to pain.

To date, only one available study (Cárdenas-Castro and Salinero-Rates, 2023) seems to have directly addressed the subject of GV using that term precisely. This study describes it as the subordination of patients by healthcare providers, leading to a loss of autonomy and decision-making capacity. In that study, GV is characterised by actions such as withholding information, making ironic or impertinent comments, reprimanding, infantilising, performing non-consensual genital examinations, imposing excessive medicalisation, and using deliberately painful procedures. It also encompasses forms of sexual violence, such as a medically unjustified injunction to nudity, inappropriate touching of sexual organs, and sexual assault. However, due to the current lack of studies devoted to defining the concept of GV, their description cannot yet be based on a thoroughly developed, well-established foundation, underscoring the need for more research. Nevertheless, their study has documented the prevalence of GV in Chile's healthcare system. Out of 1,503 women from different areas of Chile, 57.9% experienced GV, with higher rates among marginalised groups: 61.9% for those under 34 years old, 71% for non-heterosexuals, 72% for Indigenous people, and 83.3% for Afro-descendants.

GV, Rooted in Gynaecology's History

GV is said to emerge in a context where sexual-reproductive healthcare is institutionalised and legitimises the power dynamic between providers and patients (CEND, 2019; HCE, 2018). It stems from sexism, racism, classism, and a desire to control, all of which pervade the history of sexual-reproductive medicine (HCE, 2018; Cooper Owens, 2017). Gynaecology's history is indeed unsettling, marked by a legacy of violence. For instance, during the 19th century in North America, doctors were conducting experimental vaginal surgeries forcibly and without anaesthesia on Black enslaved women and impoverished Irish immigrants (Cooper Owens, 2017). The history of violence within the field of gynaecology extended over time, persisting through various manifestations, such as eugenic sterilisations forced upon women from oppressed groups, notably those who were Black, Indigenous, criminalised, poor, or disabled (Bocquillon, 2018).

Today, the echoes of this dark historical background are still felt. For example, in 2014, on Twitter, a French student launched the hashtag #PayeTonUtérus (pay your uterus), prompting over 7,000 people in just 24 hours to publicly disclose their negative experiences with GHS (HCE, 2018). Other hashtags pursuing the same goal subsequently appeared across the globe – #balancetongynéco, #prekinimošutnju, #STOPVGO, #bastatacere, and #MeTooPelvic, to name just a few (HCE, 2018).

The Origins of the Concept of GV and its Relation to Obstetric Violence

GV often falls under the broader concept of 'obstetric and gynaecological violence', which originated in Latin America in the early 2000s (Williams *et al.*, 2018). While obstetrics focuses on perinatal care, closely related to childbirth, gynaecology encompasses feminised sexual-reproductive systems, including body parts such as the vulva, vagina, and uterus (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Obstetric violence (OV) gained prominence through Latin American activist movements, particularly in Brazil (Sadler *et al.*, 2016; Williams *et al.*, 2018). In 2007, Venezuela formally included OV as one of the 19 forms of violence against women punishable by law, framing it as a violation of sexual and reproductive rights (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2007). Argentina, Bolivia, Panama, and Mexico have subsequently incorporated it into their legislation against gender violence and inequality (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Recent studies have further enriched our understanding of that phenomenon (Lévesque *et al.*, 2018). A systematic review has even encompassed papers addressing the mistreatment of women during childbirth in 34 countries spanning five continents (Bohren *et al.*, 2015), suggesting a global concern. Meanwhile, GV is still relatively neglected in both academic and legal frameworks.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović (2019), mistreatment and violence against women in reproductive health services, including gynaecology and obstetrics, are part of a continuum. Building on this, Garcia (2020) expands the concept of OV by including early pregnancy termination procedures and preconception care. Pickles (2024) further notes that definitions of OV can include forced sterilisations or contraception. These insights highlight how pervasive and interconnected various forms of violence in reproductive health services can be. Šimonović (2019) emphasises that such violence is driven by structural inequalities and patriarchal norms. Therefore, GV and OV are likely to overlap, sharing the same root causes (Pickles, 2024; Šimonović, 2019). This idea is further supported by Pickles (2024), who builds on Kelly's (2013)

concept of a continuum of violence against women to show how different forms of violence are interconnected rather than mutually exclusive.

Nonetheless, in this study, emphasising GV is essential to address the epistemic imbalance between GV and OV in the current state of research. While there are similarities between the two, GV also presents distinct characteristics. Encompassing a wider range of interactions and procedures related to sexual and reproductive health, it comprises non-pregnancy-related care, such as cervical screening for cancer, menopause symptoms management, and alleviation of menstrual pain. GV also affects a broader demographic, including younger and older patients and those who may never experience pregnancy or childbirth. Moreover, Pickles (2024) explains that establishing conceptual boundaries is helpful to ensure that interventions are effectively tailored to address integrity violations in specific contexts. Thus, although we acknowledge their potential overlap and the connection through the obstetrics-gynaecology medical speciality, maintaining a conceptual distinction between GV and OV remains opportune.

The Present Study

In this article, we aim to provide a comprehensive and situated description of GV, shedding light on what constitutes this form of violence from the standpoint of individuals who have directly experienced it.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm with an inductive, qualitative approach inspired by queer theory, intersectional feminism, and critical thinking. We challenge the use of the category 'woman' in GHS by drawing upon various fundamental ideas from queer theory. One of these is Foucault's (1978) views of sexuality as a socially and historically constructed concept influenced by power dynamics. Another one is his critique of the marginalisation and devaluation of groups of people and types of knowledge in establishing what is considered scientific knowledge (Foucault, 1997). These ideas prompted us to reassess the gender-biased biomedical paradigms in GHS. Indeed, if gynaecology is said to be the medical expertise of women's health, then who is included and who is excluded from this category? In some of their most notable work, Butler (1990, 1995) argued that the category 'woman' can be exclusionary and reinforce gender norms, so they advocated for a more inclusive understanding of it. This means not discarding the category but reinterpreting it to accommodate diversity (Baril, 2007, 2009). Oudshoorn (2000) further emphasised that biomedical understandings of the body are socially and linguistically constructed, challenging the notion of objective truths in science. Queer theory allowed this study to acknowledge that those requiring GHS may not identify with the category 'woman' and that not all women require these services. By challenging the traditional binary understanding of gender and sexuality, queer theory exposes the biases and power imbalances within the medical system. It helps to uncover how medical practices marginalise individuals who do not conform to conventional gender norms.

Intersectional feminism, emerging from Black feminism, examines how various oppressions, like racism, sexism, and classism, intersect to form an individual's social position (Gkiouleka *et al.*, 2018; Hill Collins, 2015). Oppressions also include ageism, cissexism, heterosexism, fatphobia (sizeism), sanism, ableism, colonialism, and nationalism and xenophobia (Bilge, 2009; Chbat *et al.*, 2014; Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019; Morrison and Dinkel, 2012; Prohaska and Gailey, 2019). An individual's social position regarding these multiple axes of oppression influences their experiences of the world, including within GHS (Chbat *et al.*, 2014; Quéré, 2019). This study is inspired by this theoretical framework to help contextualise the concept of GV, showcasing its feminist origins and the violent roots of gynaecology. Intersectional feminism reveals that the discrimination and violence faced by patients are not only gendered but also influenced by their socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and other social positionings. By drawing on intersectional feminism, this study recognises the diverse needs and experiences of all patients.

Critical thinking emphasises the political aspect of research, which affects knowledge production and dissemination (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). It encourages methodological reflexivity, social justice promotion, challenging existing paradigms, and being aware of biases in data interpretation (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). It also involves acknowledging power structures and avoiding exclusions for a comprehensive perspective. The political dimensions of GV are entrenched in historical, ideological, and policy-driven contexts, where identities intersect to shape medical practices and policies. Historically, this is exemplified by experimental genital surgeries performed without consent on enslaved Black women in the nineteenth century (Cooper Owens, 2017). Today, legislation on reproductive rights, funding allocations, and public health initiatives continue to impact how GV is recognised and addressed. Activist movements and political advocacy have been crucial in highlighting GV, pushing for legal reforms and greater accountability (CEND, 2019; HCE, 2018; Šimonović, 2019). By employing queer theory, intersectional feminism, and critical thinking, this study aims to uncover and challenge these political influences and advocate for more inclusive and equitable healthcare practices.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Recruitment

We used intentional and snowball recruitment. The inclusion criteria were: 18-year-old or older; francophone; report having experienced violence within GHS. Given the variability in the vocabulary surrounding GV, we included in the recruitment posters examples of violence within the context of GHS as cited in the literature: 'inappropriate behaviours or comments, disrespect, abuse of power, absence of consent, rights denial, unethical practices, discrimination, mistreatment, etc.' We also provided a few examples of what GHS can encompass: 'speculum examinations, contraception counselling, perineal rehabilitation, IUD insertion/removal, abortion, STI screening, etc.'

We established an exclusion criterion for those who had experienced violence exclusively related to pregnancy and childbirth. Participants could still recount perinatal experiences if they were relevant to their understanding of GV. However, the criterion ensured we would also analyse experiences beyond perinatal care, complementing previous studies on OV.

To encourage diversity and inclusivity in our recruitment, we solicited 21 organisations in Quebec that work with socially marginalised groups. Twelve were selected because they were members of La collective du 28 mai, a group dedicated to combating GV. They served notably women living with cancer, with disabilities, individuals from the sexual and gender diversity, immigrant women, survivors of sexual violence, and racialised women. The remaining nine organisations were chosen for their work with other marginalised groups, such as individuals experiencing fatphobia, people using drugs, sex workers, polyamorous and non-monogamous individuals, and people with endometriosis. Six of them agreed to collaborate by sharing the calls to participate via their social media (Facebook, Instagram), website, and newsletter: Fédération des Femmes du Québec, Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances, Centre des femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs, Réseau des tables régionales de groupes de femmes du Québec, Centre de santé des femmes de Montréal, Endométriose Québec.

Data Collection

Each participant underwent a 90-minute semi-structured interview, delving into themes covering their experiences in GHS, their subjective interpretation of these experiences, and their comprehension of what constitutes GV. To ensure an authentic representation of their self-perception, they were also encouraged to share their pronouns and present their identity without predefined categories, in line with queer theory.

The interview questions were designed by the first author to be open-ended and clear and to promote detailed and spontaneous reflections. As suggested by Baumbusch (2010), emotionally laden questions were placed midway. Following Kallio and colleagues' recommendations (2016), the interview canvas was revised (by the second author) and tested (with a lab member) to improve question clarity and reduce biases. It featured both primary and probing questions, the latter fostering deepening insights for a more comprehensive approach (Baumbusch, 2010; Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Interviews were conducted in 2021 via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Analysis

We opted for phenomenology as the analytical strategy because the study's aim was to deliver a thorough, contextualised description of GV from the experiencers' viewpoints. This method excels in revealing detailed, personal perspectives by depicting experiences as they are lived without imposing preexisting theoretical frameworks. It aims to describe the phenomenon in a way that is as close to its essential nature as possible, yet, out of epistemic humility, we acknowledge that our positionality can paradoxically introduce bias and interference in the analysis process. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study honours the participants' experiences by inviting their voices to lead the inquiry.

Based on Ranse *et al.*'s (2020) flexible blend of descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenologies procedures, the first author followed these steps, assisted by NVivo: conduct an initial interview; transcribe it; repeatedly read it and listen to the audio recording simultaneously; identify moments of 'experiencing GV' and give them titles; *remove, modify, or add titles by asking 'Does this title illustrate the moment of the explored phenomenon properly?'*; identify exemplars for each of the titled moments; *remove, modify, or add exemplars by asking, 'Does this exemplar represent the moment of the explored phenomenon?'*; create a lived experience description of the phenomenon; incorporate, where relevant, additional information about the role of phenomenological existentials[1] in participants' experiences. The second author provided feedback on the italicised steps and contributed to the creation of the phenomenological description by identifying blind spots and unnecessary segments. She also reviewed the presentation of the results in this article multiple times to ensure they were comprehensive, understandable, supported by interview excerpts, consistent with theoretical and analytical approaches, and reasonably concise.

[1] Spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived body), communality (lived relationships), and temporality (lived time).

Epoche (bracketing), the phenomenological practice of suspending judgment on knowledge of the world (Ndame, 2023; van Manen, 2017), was seen here as a goal inspiring a mindset to be adopted during data collection and analysis (Tufford and Newman, 2012) rather than an absolute state to be achieved, again out of epistemic humility. The authors acknowledge their biases, approaching the study with careful consideration of how they may influence their work, as recommended by Finlay and Gough (2003) and Moustakas (1994).

The description that emerges from this analysis is a co-created anecdote (participants and researchers). This means it does not represent a particular interviewed individual or an exact experience reported. Instead, it is constructed from a balance between evocative interview excerpts, sometimes synthesised and rearranged, combining reported moments and situations (Ranse *et al.*, 2020). The description must still faithfully capture the essence of the lived moments and remain consistent with participants' narratives. It is meant to give a rich, almost palpable sense of what experiencing GV can be like (Ranse *et al.*, 2020).

The interview excerpts provided in the results section were translated by the first author after the analysis, with as much concordance as possible with the original vocabulary and syntax used by the participants. It is, therefore, possible that some sentences or expressions appear grammatically incorrect, unusual, or odd to anglophones. It was nevertheless important to remain as close as possible to the participants' words to ensure coherence with the phenomenological analysis approach and to limit interpretation bias.

We conducted peer debriefings with lab members working on two other GV and OV research projects as well as three external researchers who gave valuable feedback on our research proposal, process, and findings. To promote transparency and replicability, we kept a comprehensive audit trail, including interview transcripts, emails, interview canvas, recruitment posters, collaboration agreements with community organisations, NVivo file, a list of organisations targeted for marginalised representations, initial contact procedures for participants, and pre-interview questions. Our iterative coding process, revisited and refined over 18 months, continued throughout the writing phase for consistency and accuracy. Finally, multiple audits by the second author enabled the review of the study's methodology, data, and findings.

Ethical Considerations

The project obtained approval from UQAM's ethics committee on June 17, 2021, with two annual renewals. We also adapted the guidelines from the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health's code of ethics (Bauer *et al.*, 2019) to align with the study's queer framework. An online Qualtrics form was used to obtain information and consent. We provided participants with a list of psychosocial resources but did not offer financial compensation, as the study was unfunded.

RESULTS

The results first introduce participants' profiles and the experiences shared during the interviews. Subsequently, six moments of negative experiences are presented, followed by a delineation of violence within those. Lastly, a phenomenological description of GV is offered.

Participant Profiles

The sample is composed of nine participants. **Table 1** outlines their sociodemographic details, including gender identity, age, relationship and family status, and education. Additionally, it summarises their use of GHS, the axes of oppression they have encountered, and the chronology of their experiences with GV.

Experiences in GHS

The participants interacted with various providers, including internists, gynaecologists, obstetrician-gynaecologists (OB-GYNs), physiotherapists, social workers, nurses, pharmacists, emergency doctors, family doctors, anaesthetists, doulas, and radiologists. Given the complexity of health, gynaecological issues may have implications for other health issues and vice versa. Therefore, it seems consistent to refer to GHS rather than gynaecology when addressing GV.

Experiences within the GHS were portrayed in various ways. Some were described as positive or neutral, with terms like 'good' or 'OK.' Others were seen as negative and described using terms like 'clumsy' and 'uncomfortable.' Within the negative experiences, those considered violent were described using terms like 'extremely mistreating,' 'unacceptable,' and 'nightmarish.' Participants have thus encountered a variety of negative experiences in GHS, but not all were considered violent. The nuance is important if we are to circumscribe what constitutes GV. The fact that participants used various terms to describe their experiences also emphasises the subjectivity behind their shared interpretation of a lived phenomenon. It suggests that the vocabulary used to describe GV can influence whether individuals recognise it as such or not.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Participant	Age	Relationships and family	Education (field) and job field	GHS related to...	Oppressions related to the experiences of GV	GV timeline
Charlie (cis woman)	40s	1 male partner No child	PhD (Spirituality) Spiritual care	Abortion, contraception, endometriosis, menstruation, vaginal mycosis	Ableism, geographical/spatial inequality, sanism, sexism	Started at 16–17-year-old and ongoing
Dany (cis woman)	25	1 male partner No child	BA (Arts and communication) Entrepreneur	Contraception, genital discomfort	Ageism, geographical/spatial inequality, sanism, sexism	Around 20- and 24–25-year-old
Em (cis woman)	27	1 male partner No child	PhD (Social sciences) Researcher	Vestibulitis, vulvodynia	Ableism, ageism, heterosexism, sanism, sexism	Around 21-year-old
Gab (cis woman)	Not disclosed	1 male partner while experiencing GV, now single No child	Not disclosed Immigration and education	Endometriosis, infertility, laparoscopy, ovarian cysts	Ableism, classism, sexism	Around 2016 and 2018
Joe (cis woman)	48	Not disclosed 2 children	MA (not disclosed) Education	Childbirth, contraception, menopause, menstruation, perineal physiotherapy	Classism, geographical/spatial inequality, sanism, sexism, sizeism	Since age 17
Max (cis woman)	34	1 male partner 1 child	Not disclosed Education	Abortion, childbirth, contraception, endometrial biopsy, menstruation, miscarriage, pregnancy	Geographical/spatial inequality, heterosexism, sanism, sexism, sizeism	Since age 18
Pat (cis woman)	40	Not disclosed 2 children	PhD candidate (not disclosed) Public services and communication	Abortion, childbirth, contraception, laparoscopy and laparotomy, mammography, menstruation, miscarriage, perineal physiotherapy, pregnancy, STIs, uterine fibroids	Ageism, geographical/spatial inequality, nationalism/xenophobia, sanism, sexism	From adolescence onwards
Sam (cis woman)	32	1 male partner 1 child	Not disclosed Unemployed (previously self-employed)	Abortion, cervical biopsy, contraception, laparoscopy, menopause, menstruation, miscarriage, oophorectomy, ovarian cysts	Ableism, ageism, classism, sanism, sexism	Over the past 20 years
Vic (non-binary)	28	Not disclosed; not heterosexual No child	Technical diploma (not disclosed) Community worker	Cervical biopsy, STIs, contraception, menstruation, ovarian cysts	Ableism, cissexism, classism, heterosexism, sanism, sexism, sizeism	Since age 22

We divided the negative experiences shared by participants into six phenomenological moments: being deprived of choices, unheard, treated insensitively, dehumanised, abandoned, and challenged in their sense of reality (gaslighted).

Moments of being deprived of choices

Participants shared negative moments that involved having limited choices. They recounted instances where their decision-making autonomy was denied, preventing them from giving or withholding consent due to unclear information and limited options presented. These moments sometimes manifested when they were forced to consult specific providers, follow predetermined treatments, or obstructed from pursuing a chosen care path or treatment. For example, Pat narrated a moment when she was coerced by a provider to take Depo Provera for six

months after she had had an abortion. She said, 'I felt like I was… like a drug addict or something; that there was like a parole officer, and I had to go back.' Lack of choices also encompassed hidden alternatives, deception, and strong pressure towards a professional's favoured approach. Gab said:

> When we consult a doctor, they'll often offer us a solution like nothing else was available. That's nonsense because everyone knows there are millions of treatments for all kinds of situations, never just one. When people have a discourse that's very 'That's it, and that's all,' categorical, I think that's manipulation.

The absence of choice in treatment decisions was also illustrated by Em's experience. Confronted with vestibulitis (pain at the entrance of the vagina), she experienced the denial of surgical intervention by her gynaecologist. According to her, the gynaecologist displayed condescension and disdain toward her due to her sexual inexperience, advising her to wait until she found a partner based on the presumption that 'Sometimes, the condition magically disappears with a partner.' She said:

> My medical treatment depended on a spouse. I was like, 'Wow! We're back in 1950, this is fantastic.' As a feminist, I have a lot to say on the subject. I was like, 'Wait... I'm being fucked with right now. What's going on? This is a nightmare.'

Em's account underscores the lack of options presented to her and the broader sociocultural implications of such medical practices, which she perceives as regressive and antithetical to feminist principles. Her reflections capture the essence of being trapped in a medical paradigm that can deny individual autonomy.

Moments of being unheard

The participants shared situations in which they perceived that providers did not listen to them, leading them to feel ignored, dismissed, interrupted, or restricted in communication, resulting in a lack of acknowledgement and acceptance. They could not voice concerns, set boundaries, or communicate their needs. Charlie said:

> I had a list with five points [to discuss with the doctor]. He said, 'No. When you come here, it's one point.' Imagine! I was starting to be more able to defend myself. I said, 'Sir! I've just come from [city]. These are important things for me. I need prescriptions.' He said, 'Ah... OK.' Geez! What's that? What's the problem? I'm on medication right now; I need a follow-up!

Limited information exchange between them and their providers led to accessing services that were sometimes ill-fitted and unsuitable for their needs. The participants also experienced being unheard when they conveyed information to providers who dismissed their statements as untrustworthy and unreliable. Max said:

> He asked me how much I weighed. We're in an emergency room; he could have weighed me. I'm kind of heavy, and I gave him my actual weight (I knew it). He said, 'I'll add a bit to it. All women lower their weight.' I was like, 'Oh yeah, huh? So that's how you start...'

Similarly, the participants felt unheard when providers failed to directly address or engage with them as the primary stakeholders of their health. The latter is shown in another example from Max:

> I was like, 'What the hell is the corpus luteum?' And he more or less answered my question. The following week, I asked the same question while lying down, my legs spread. He said, 'Madam, you'll have to ask your husband. Him, he understood.' I went, 'Oh, boy! Really? That's really what you're telling me? If my husband understands, good for him, but I still have questions, so you'll answer them.' I was really angry. I couldn't believe he could say that.

Moments of being treated insensitively

Negative experiences in GHS included moments when providers treated participants rudely, harshly, and insensitively. Max, for example, described an instance of invasive and insensitive behaviour from her doctor, characterised by a dismissive attitude toward her emotional well-being, a coercive approach to the procedure, and a callous disregard for basic principles of patient dignity and privacy:

> [The doctor] said, 'OK. Take off your panties; I'm going to do a vaginal exam.' (...) I asked the doctor, 'Do you have a small towel?' Because he'd say, 'Well, take your clothes off, now.' Just like that. In front of him. He wasn't leaving and was chatting with my boyfriend. I said, 'Well, do you have a little something? I'm going to cover up so I can pull down my panties.' (...) He said, 'Oh come on! You're with your husband and me; it's fine!' I said, 'Well, I'd really like a towel.' I kind of insisted. (...) Finally,

> he accepted and gave me one, but he kind of threw it at me. Then he said, 'Here, your towel.' And he said, 'Pull down your pants.' But he didn't leave. He just handed me a towel.

The participants endured stony and occasionally brutal behaviours, leaving them with an almost unbearable sense of coldness. This behaviour often disregarded their physical and emotional sensitivities, sometimes even treating their pain and suffering as laughable. As Sam was speaking with her surgeon before an oophorectomy, she told him:

> 'I don't bleed a lot anymore because I've bled so, so much... [Now,] it lasts maybe half a day, two days, but I'm 20 days in excruciating pain, [even though] there's not that much bleeding.' (...) He tells me, 'Don't say it too loud. Some people will envy you; you're lucky.' 'Lucky? Oh, yeah? Sorry, (...) I'm bleeding from my rectum and vagina, so I can't see where my luck is. And it hurts like hell.'

These experiences of pain were not just ignored; they were sometimes intentionally silenced. That means providers recognised the participants' suffering but deliberately chose to prioritise, perpetuate, or even endorse actions causing it. This sent the message that complaints and concerns would not be tolerated and addressed. Charlie said:

> The abortion was horrible. I was told to stop screaming so I wouldn't scare the others in the clinic. I had to shut up while it hurt me. Maybe I didn't have enough anaesthesia. That traumatised me. It's like, 'Shut up, woman.' And it was a man who did that, too. Not all men are the same, but... my best friend was there; she was holding my hand; it was rough for her, too, to see that, but *she* didn't tell me to stop.

Alongside this silencing treatment, participants recounted moments where they were insulted and devalued (e.g., for their thoughts, actions, identity, capacities, and looks) or blamed for their problems. Vic said that a provider mocked their attractiveness:

> I got comments... terms used to describe me... First, the misgendering, but also… when you want a screening test for STIs, they'll ask: 'Do you want to have the widest screening?' Sometimes, it comes with blood work. But that gynaecologist commented that I probably don't have many partners anyway or that... yup, that it won't be necessary.

Moments of being dehumanised

Instances were reported where participants' human dignity was disregarded. They mentioned not being treated like persons, like whole human beings. Dany, for example, expressed: 'I feel treated... not like a human. I don't feel treated like a person right now.' Using similar words, Pat conveyed: 'I'm not a person anymore. I'm just some kind of thing that you pass through the machine. (...) It's really dehumanising. It's like you're not a person at all.' Denied the possibility of seeing her doctor following surgery that left her in immense pain, Gab said: 'It seemed almost inhuman.'

A few participants explained that their body, or certain body parts, were considered, but not their entire being. Joe articulated that it was as if she was important in the genital area, '[but] that's it; the rest of the body doesn't exist. (...) It's as if they forget that there is a human being in the body.' She felt like 'a belly/vagina/vulva on two legs.' In a similar vein, Max suggested practitioners ought to acknowledge they are interacting with patients, not merely vaginas or uteruses.

For some participants, the experience manifested in being regarded as lesser humans or undeveloped adults. When asked how they felt treated in healthcare services, Vic answered:

> Like a human of inferior value… I was going to say like a child, but I'm not sure anyone would mistreat a child so badly...

Sam and Gab also spoke of being infantilised. Sam remarked:

> I wasn't treated with respect, and I wasn't treated as if I were a human being in my own right. I felt treated like I belonged to the healthcare system; like it was my parents, and they made the decisions. I was treated very badly.

As for Gab, she repeatedly mentioned that she felt treated as if she were a little girl instead of a fully grown adult. A few participants compared how they were treated to how we treat non-human animals. Joe used the word 'cattle' to convey that perception.

Participants recounted instances in which they experienced being regarded as objects instead of human beings. Joe, Max, and Dany described the sensation of being treated as mere numbers, and Joe specifically mentioned

feeling like 'a source of cash.' Pat expressed her sense of being 'a kind of medical object,' 'a kind of object, tossed from one side to the other,' 'a problem you need to solve,' 'a vessel for babies,' 'a woman-object that's just there to procreate and make babies.' She said:

> In the same way that in the media, women are objectified to the point that you can have a gang rape, and nobody cares... I have the impression that in the medical system, you can have a woman on a table, legs spread, and you insert something inside her without any warning, and it's completely normal. It's objectifying, it's dehumanising, and it's... completely normalised.

Moments of being abandoned

Participants shared negative situations in which they were left alone in highly vulnerable situations. That included instances such as not knowing where to go or who to speak to and encountering a lack of adapted material or techniques (e.g., day-after pills approved for larger bodies). Many participants had to fight to be prescribed diagnostic tests that would unlock services and treatments. Charlie said:

> 'You may have endometriosis or not.' Then, she basically advised me against laparoscopy. I said, 'No, no, no! I want to know what's wrong with me!' So, with everything I was going through in my body, I had to fight to get... and *that*'s violence: having to fight to get services and know what I have...

Despite having a diagnosis, obtaining further treatment remained a challenge for some. Charlie, after much persistence, managed to persuade her healthcare provider to conduct further tests. However, Em's efforts to find a remedy for her vestibulitis were met with resistance. Her gynaecologist suggested that her pain might resolve spontaneously, disregarding Em's explanation of having endured the pain for years.

> 'OK. But... if it doesn't go away, what do I do?' 'You may have to go to physiotherapy, see a sex therapist, maybe do couple's therapy, and only as a last resort, we may have to do surgery.' I say, 'Can I have surgery right away if it'll solve the problem? That would seem to be a better solution.' She says, 'No. All the other steps must be tried first to rule out patients who are not good matches and can work with other solutions. We won't do an operation on you.' I remembered that my mother had a similar condition and had had surgery. I made the connection: 'But my mom had it. It's probably genetic. [Surgery] worked for her. Why not me?' 'No. I don't want to hear about it.' (...) She refuses to treat me: 'I can't do anything for you.' She doesn't even give me... a cream, a medication... nothing...

While not demanding instant fixes, the participants expected truthful, unbiased information from their providers. At the very least, they hoped for empathetic and supportive words to uplift them instead of being left in despair or pressured to keep emotions bottled up. Em shared:

> She was telling me that I would be in pain forever. (...) I started crying. I was like, 'I'm always in pain. What am I going to do?' Then she got very, very cold and said, 'Stop crying. You're lucky; you don't have cancer. I treat people with real problems, more serious than this. It's going to be OK. Stop crying. You're not going to die.' So, I was trying to calm down because I was like, 'OK. This is it. Am I lucky, after all? No. I'm not lucky in this situation.' But you just want to get out of there. There's no solution. (...) She's the specialist. There's nothing I can do. I feel stuck.

The participants occasionally had to self-educate about their diagnosis, symptoms, and rights. However, sharing this knowledge with providers often led to contempt and being treated as uninformed, discouraging further knowledge acquisition and hampering empowerment and independence. Pat explained:

> I'm a very curious person (...), and I think [reading] has become my go-to when I can't find answers. (...) I read. I read. I read. But I think that for everything gynaecological, things [I read] were far from reality. (...) And ultimately, I was completely powerless and taken charge of. It was as though even if I had been a specialist in the field, it wouldn't have mattered. It wasn't up to me, anyway.

Moments of being gaslighted

Participants described instances where their understanding of reality was doubted, particularly when they chose not to follow their providers' recommended approach, had differing opinions, encountered providers without solutions, or when their concerns were downplayed as psychological or not significant enough to warrant medical attention. They sometimes faced blame for their problems. Dany said:

> He installed the speculum and another instrument to open the cervix, and it hurt so much that I went into vasovagal syncope. I thought I was going to throw up. I've never experienced pain as bad as that. I

> remember, when I felt the pain, I threw a kick, but it was a reflex; it wasn't intentional. He said, 'Hey! Don't move [or else] of course it'll hurt you!' He blamed it on me.

Participants also felt alienated when their provider's expertise was prioritised over theirs. For example, they were often denied the authority to assess the normality or tolerability of their pain. Gab explained:

> The nurse didn't want me to see the doctor. I was telling her: 'Can you at least prescribe me something for the pain? Because right now, I'm in pain, and you've given me something, but it's not working. It really hurts.' And she told me: 'Laparoscopy doesn't hurt, ma'am.'

In addition, the participants faced threats by providers, such as denying assistance or presaging illnesses if they did not follow treatment, inducing fear and vulnerability. Vic explained that when they remained unconvinced by their doctor's cancer and death predictions (unless they complied with treatment), he threatened to close their file and discontinue their follow-up.

The participants described another type of alienating moment: having their health problem psychologised. For example, when Dany expressed her concern about her weight gain after starting the contraceptive pill, she was flagged as having an eating disorder. When she considered genital plastic surgery as a solution to recurrent discomfort triggered by a labia minora hypertrophy (when labia minora are larger or stick out of the labia majora), she was deemed self-destructive and prone to self-mutilation.

Some participants with psychiatric histories (even if long-treated) were discredited as their physical health issues were assumed to be mental. Sam, for example, explained that with providers, she could not speak up for herself – not because she was not able to, but because no matter what she would say, she would be dismissed:

> When I [spoke my truth], it was worse every time. I felt like I had no right to do that. Whenever I tried to bring something up, it was like, 'Uuuurgh...', really badly perceived. They wouldn't call me back. The ER doctors would leave me hanging. It was like, 'Look, she's just crazy. Let her be. She needs attention.'

Even without such a history, Joe's symptoms of severe anaemia due to menstruation were initially ignored, as her providers attributed her condition to a mental health condition (depression) – a diagnosis that did not consider all her complaints.

Delineating Violence Within Negative Experiences Through Subjectivity: Perception of GV

Identifying the previous six phenomenological moments only served as a preliminary step since, as previously stated, participants did not label all their negative experiences as GV. Therefore, we inquired about how they distinguished violent from non-violent negative experiences. According to their answers, limiting the description of GV to a list of actions would be inadequate, as the violent nature of an incident is heavily contextual. For instance, Joe explained that a provider's reaction to their causing unintended pain was pivotal in categorising the act as violent. Acknowledging, empathising, and addressing the error was essential to her:

> There can be clumsiness, but if they acknowledge it by themselves or if you tell them and they try to repair the fault, then we're not in violence. But if you tell them about – or you can tell they noticed – your discomfort, and yet they do nothing [about it], in my opinion, we crossed the line of violence.

All participants emphasised the importance of tuning into their feelings and self-confidence during interactions to facilitate the identification of unacceptable experiences and the self-validation of that interpretation. They asked reflexive questions that helped them determine if a situation had been violent: Were there questions of mine left unanswered? Were my choices respected and honoured, or at least were there efforts made to come to a compromise? Were all my rights (human, civilian, institutional) respected? Were my limits trespassed? Was this medical intervention necessary? Did I feel at ease? Did the providers explain what they would do to me before doing it? Did they listen to me? Have I been pressured to consent to something? Max said:

> Not having the right to consent to a procedure or not having information, I think that's violence – that treatment, for example, is given to you without you knowing or understanding it. All the statements, comments, or acts that are non-consensual or unnecessary (...), all the judgments you may face (...). Not knowing what's happening to you or not being informed of what's being done to you, in my opinion, that's violence. Techniques or choices that you couldn't make... (...) For example, if a woman doesn't want an epidural, but [the providers] say, 'Ah! well, you know, you don't really have a choice.' Or, 'You have to take it now.' In my opinion, that's violence.

All participants concurred that negative experiences should be deemed violent if perceived as such by the affected individual. They acknowledged that interpretations of violence vary and that while some situations may

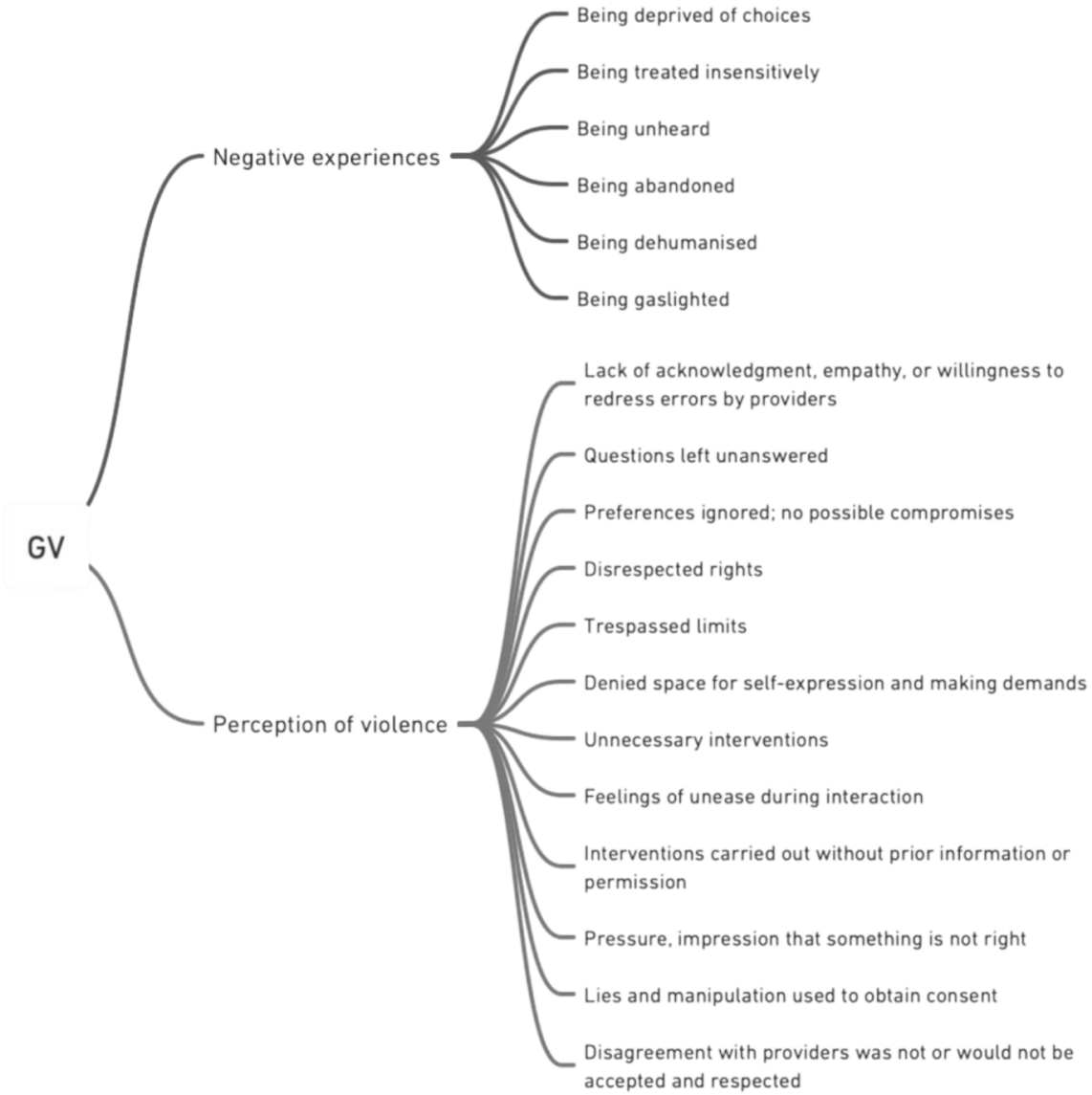


Figure 1. GV = Experiencing at least one negative moment + perceiving it as violent (2024)

not subjectively seem violent, they could still objectively be so. However, what ultimately matters most to them is how they feel about the experienced moment, as their subjectivity influences the event's repercussions on their well-being. Vic explained:

> The first thing I'd say to a patient is that if they feel uncomfortable, it's because they're experiencing violence and that what's happening is unacceptable. That's a sufficient criterion. (...) It's not normal to be uncomfortable. I mean... uncomfortable, yes, maybe, but I mean... Well, yes, that's it. I stand by my answer because I think failure to do everything possible to ensure we're comfortable is already going too far. (...) As soon as you're not satisfied... that you walk out and you're not well, there, inside, it's because something's wrong.

So, participants described GV as a combination of a negative moment within GHS and a perception of violence associated with that experience. **Figure 1** presents this combination and elements that helped participants acknowledge their perception of violence.

Experiencing GV: A Phenomenological Description

As a reminder, the phenomenological description is a created anecdote that does not represent a specific interviewed individual or an exact reported experience. It is constructed from evocative excerpts from the

interviews, sometimes synthesised and rearranged, combining the experiences of different participants. It aims to bring the experience to life, providing an almost palpable sense of what experiencing GV can be. The goal is not to illustrate the full extent of the phenomenon's manifestations but to provide an overview of the nine participants' experiences with it. This is a preliminary step towards better understanding GV.

> The gynaecologist introduces herself with a distanced but professional tone: 'Hello, I'm Dr Johnson, and this is a medical intern, Dr Patel.' The intern says nothing. I wonder why he is here. I feel uncomfortable. My anxiety rises. I worry about being judged. 'What can I do for you, madam...?' 'Alex. My pronouns are they/them,' I say shakily. 'I am here because I am having constant bleeding and intense pain.' She asks me questions and takes notes without looking at me. Then, she instructs me to undress and sit on the examination table. I wish I could refuse the intern's presence.
>
> I am very apprehensive about the examination, as I do not know precisely what they intend to do. I dare not share my concerns because they seem distant and rushed. My body is as tense as a bow. My heartbeat echoes in my chest. My breath fastens. Without warning, the gynaecologist inserts a cold instrument into my vagina, and a sharp pain shoots through me.
>
> 'Wait, what are you...?' My voice breaks. She continues her work like nothing has happened. I feel my heart racing, each pulse amplifying my vulnerability. My breath comes in short gasps. 'Excuse me; you could have warned me,' I manage to articulate. 'It's normal; I took a piece of your cervix for the biopsy. It's nothing serious; you'll be fine,' she replies, not even looking at me.
>
> I freeze, trapped in a moment over which I have no control. I feel the heat of anger rising, mixed with fear. The pain intensifies. It does not seem to matter to them. I think they forgot that I am not just a body. I squeeze my hands and eyelids to give myself courage. 'I'd rather be warned,' I murmur. The gynaecologist finally turns to me. 'You don't have to worry so much. Patients are often too anxious.' 'What exactly are you doing to me?' I try to regain control. She sighs. 'It's complicated. You don't need to understand the details.' She turns to the intern, 'Madam here has recurring gynaecological symptoms. I did a biopsy on her, and we'll send that off to the lab.'
>
> I feel invisible. They ignored my pronouns and identity. As I get dressed, blood runs down my leg. I ask for a towel. I feel ashamed, dirty, humiliated. My uterus contracts into painful cramps. Once dressed, I shyly ask, 'Will there be any follow-up or treatment?'
>
> 'Your problems probably have more to do with anxiety than any medical condition.' My heart sinks with the frustration of not being heard. 'I think my concerns are valid.' I hope my voice does not betray my vulnerability. I'm nearly in tears. 'I came here because I'm constantly in extreme pain.' The tears finally flow. My voice trembles. 'I'm in pain right now. What am I supposed to do? What are my options?' The gynaecologist disregards my emotions. 'We'll call you if the biopsy results show something. If not, you can always come back if the bleeding continues.'
>
> I was disoriented and emotionally drained after the consultation. I later realised that many questions remained unanswered. My concerns and choices were ignored, and my rights as a patient were overlooked. Unable to express my needs, I doubted the necessity of the medical intervention, given the poor communication. I felt uncomfortable and uninformed. This experience left me with feelings of injustice, disrespect, and the realisation that I had endured gynaecological violence.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to address GV by investigating patients' experiences. Specifically, it sought to describe it phenomenologically. The results indicate that GV was seen as a negative moment experienced in GHS coupled with a perception of violence linked to that experience.

Six negative moments were identified. These included being unheard and being abandoned, which align with the observations of Marcilly and Mauri (2018) and the HCE (2018), highlighting how GV can involve omission behaviours. Another negative moment was being deprived of choices. This conforms with existing literature (CEND, 2019; Friesen, 2018; Quéré, 2019), emphasising that GV, akin to any form of violence, occurs when people lack free, informed, and continuous consent. The participants also presented gaslighting as a negative moment, which is unsurprising considering that, aligning with Lévesque *et al.*'s (2018) definition, violence involves power abuse and strategies to keep individuals subordinate and compliant. Insensitive treatment and

dehumanisation, the last two negative moments, could fall within a spectrum measuring the extent to which caregivers deny the sentient experiences of patients. Studies (Dawson, 2021; Svenaeus, 2023) suggest that a certain degree of dehumanisation and insensitivity is sometimes necessary to make it bearable for caregivers to administer treatments that inherently cause pain or distress. However, research indicates that dehumanisation disproportionately affects marginalised groups (Dawson, 2021), aligning with intersectional feminist theory and this study's findings. Participants' experiences highlight that an individual's social position on axes of oppression (e.g., being a woman and having a history of psychiatric treatment) makes them experience specific forms of discrimination and prejudice (e.g., questioned lucidity and implied tendency to exaggerate pain).

Few participants discussed experiences of violence other than interpersonal (e.g., institutional, symbolic, systemic). This could be interpreted by the fact that GV awakened anger that tended to be directed toward a present, tangible, and imputable culprit. Participants were aware of external pressures providers face that impact care quality, but they remained more critical of the humans who hurt them than the structures that enabled hurtful actions.

In this study, the delineation of violence within negative experiences through subjectivity revealed a nuanced understanding of GV that aligns with and expands upon existing literature. The idea that violence cannot be confined to a predetermined list of actions resonates with the work of other scholars. For example, Kona (2011) examined violence through a hermeneutical lens, arguing that its understanding requires considering power dynamics, historical contexts, and personal experiences. Violence's recognition is thus subjective, circumstantial, and rooted in broader societal implications. The extension of GV's understanding beyond objectivity echoes a paper from Robbennolt (2009). That article argues that apologies from physicians – an acknowledgement of a fault and expression of regret – can decrease blame and anger while enhancing trust and therapeutic relationships.

The importance of consent and the reliance on internal feelings and self-confidence, as articulated by participants, support feminist perspectives that advocate validating personal experiences as legitimate sources of information (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). It also resonates with the broader discussion on patient autonomy and informed consent (CEND, 2019; Friesen, 2018; Froidevaux-Metterie, 2018; Quéré, 2019). Participants in our study considered that not being informed or feeling pressured into consent is a form of violence, a perspective in line with the challenges to traditional medical paternalism (Talukdar, 2020).

Our study reveals significant overlaps between GV and OV, particularly in the experiences of autonomy deprivation and dehumanisation described by participants. These align with Šimonović's (2019) report on forced medical procedures and lack of informed consent, and Bohren *et al.*'s (2015) global study on mistreatment during childbirth. The structural inequalities and patriarchal norms highlighted by Pickles (2024) and García (2020), including their incorporation of contraception and abortion as part of OV, echo, for example, Pat's forced contraception after her abortion, further underscoring the interconnected nature of GV and OV.

Similarly, Rachelle Chadwick (2021) argues that the concept of OV acts as an epistemic intervention, challenging normalised reproductive harms by naming and exposing oppression while rejecting frames that silence and devalue alternative reproductive knowledge and agency. Chadwick emphasises viewing OV as specific violence against reproductive subjects, encompassing various coercions and neglect beyond gendered violence. She highlights the importance of Afro-feminist, decolonial, and queer perspectives in advancing understanding and addressing its broader implications. Her insights illuminate GV by emphasising the need for epistemic interventions that challenge normalised harms in reproductive healthcare. Both OV and GV highlight reproductive oppression, where bodies are controlled, medicalised, and subjected to various forms of violence. Chadwick underscores the need to address intersecting oppressions like racism, cisnormativity, and economic inequalities in GHS. An intersectional and queer approach is indeed essential to recognise the unique experiences of trans men, non-binary individuals, and queer women. Both concepts serve as 'struggle concepts,' rooted in activist resistance and concrete experiences of oppression, advocating for systemic change.

While maintaining distinct definitions seems important, at least for addressing specific contexts, our findings support the relevance of a broader discourse on violence and mistreatment in sexual-reproductive healthcare, emphasising the need for targeted interventions to protect patients in both obstetric and gynaecological settings.

Implications and Recommendations

This study shows the importance of promoting patient-centred care, which involves actively listening to patients, addressing their concerns, and ensuring they feel supported. To prevent GV experiences, it is crucial to implement strategies that enhance patient autonomy and informed decision-making. For instance, Spinnewijn *et al.* (2024) conducted a qualitative study in a Dutch teaching hospital's obstetrics and gynaecology department, interviewing 20 clinicians to explore the adoption of Shared Decision-Making (SDM) using the diffusion of innovations theory. Their findings recommend conducting practice assessments to identify areas needing improvement, fostering open discussions within clinical teams about SDM's utility and challenges, and initiating professional development for reflective practice. Additionally, decision support tools, such as visual aids, was said

to help structuring consultations and clarifying treatment options. Organisational support, including leadership and policy changes, was essential to cultivate a culture that prioritises SDM, supplemented by training programmes to enhance clinicians' awareness and skills in SDM techniques.

Intersectional feminism can promote equity and inclusivity in healthcare by addressing the intersecting oppressions that contribute to gender-based violence. Intersectional advocacy aims to create policies that are inclusive and equitable, ensuring marginalised groups receive adequate protection and resources. For example, integrating policies related to gender-based violence with policies addressing poverty, housing, and healthcare can offer a more holistic support system for survivors (Perez Brower, 2024).

Providing patients with resources and support can help them become better informed about their healthcare rights and the standards of care they should expect (World Health Organisation, 2013). Encouraging patient feedback and offering platforms for sharing their voices can further improve the healthcare system. Adams (2011) conducted a three-year study in the US, UK, and the Netherlands, examining patient narratives on 'share-your-experience' websites to assess their impact on healthcare transparency and quality improvement. Through discourse analysis of 450 patient reviews and interviews with 15 Dutch stakeholders, the study highlights these platforms potential to enhance healthcare transparency and quality despite concerns about representation and bias. Adams recommends improving patient engagement strategies and ensuring healthcare institutions actively respond to feedback, fostering a balanced and credible reflection of patient experiences. This approach could also provide GHS patients with a platform to share their voices.

Trust and transparency, fostered by open communication and a commitment to learning from past shortcomings, are also essential for improving the quality of care. This involves educating healthcare providers to enhance and refine their practices. Towle's study (2022) offers valuable insights into this matter. Her situational analysis of pelvic examination learning materials from five Canadian medical schools revealed that these materials often depicted patients homogeneously and normatively, using outdated and sexualised language and lacking diversity. Clinical authority was frequently emphasised over the patient agency, and many materials did not include modern techniques that enhance patient experiences, such as speculum self-insertion. The study recommends updating these materials to better represent diverse patients, improve patient agency, incorporate contemporary techniques, and focus on patient-centred and culturally competent care to reduce health disparities.

There is a need for further exploration of various aspects of GV, including survivors' needs, strategies, resistance, and resilience; GV's repercussions; perspectives of healthcare providers; effectiveness of prevention and awareness interventions; impacts of inclusive services; efficacy of policies and laws.

Limitations

The study's limitations include using specific examples of violence and GHS in recruitment materials, which likely influenced participants' recognition and description of their experiences. Terms like 'inappropriate behaviours,' 'disrespect,' 'abuse of power,' and 'absence of consent' may have guided participants to frame their responses within these categories, potentially overlooking other forms of violence. To mitigate this bias, we designed broad and open-ended interview questions, such as 'Tell me about your experiences with GHS in general,' and 'From your point of view, what makes a GHS violent?' These measures aimed to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives.

Despite our emphasis on gender diversity representation, only one participant was not a cisgender woman. Given that trans individuals make up about 0.14% and non-binary individuals about 0.09% of Quebec's population (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2024), the predominance of cis women may reflect the province's demographics, especially since gynaecology has traditionally been associated with women. However, beyond cissexism, we were able to represent other axes of oppression, such as sanism, ableism, sizeism, and ageism, without prioritising any or attempting to cover all.

The participants, more educated than the average Quebecer, shared traits such as well-articulated political and social ideologies. Their higher education levels might be linked to the lack of financial compensation, as the study was unfunded. The sample also lacks full intersectional representation, particularly in self-reported racialised experiences. This gap likely resulted from recruitment challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, as organisations prioritised immediate community needs like food and shelter over study participation. However, this did not detract from the study's exploratory aims, capturing various intersectional positions and focusing on subjective realities. Future research could further explore intersectionality by case-studying one individual facing multiple social disadvantages.

Collecting information on participants' identities through an open-ended interview question was a deliberate choice to empower their self-expression. This supported our values of subjectivity and agency but made comparing experiences difficult without common parameters. Future studies might benefit from pursuing specific identity categories, like gender or sexual orientation (still without predetermined answer choices), for a more structured yet adaptable intersectional analysis.

Finally, while this study offers valuable insights, the small sample size limits a comprehensive description of GV. Therefore, it should be viewed as a preliminary step towards a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, contributing to the ongoing development of its definition.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the body of knowledge on GV. Its queer approach reminds us of the neglected presence of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals in GHS. Focusing primarily on GV rather than OV, the study offers one of the first detailed, experience-rooted descriptions of this phenomenon from a scientific approach. Describing GV phenomenologically encourages its relatableness. The results offer pointers for intervention and action, providing guidelines for the future.

REFERENCES

Adams, S. A. (2011). Sourcing the crowd for health services improvement: The reflexive patient and 'share-your-experience' websites. *Social Science & Medicine*, 72(7), 1069–1076. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.02.001

Baril, A. (2007). De la construction du genre à la construction du « sexe »: Les thèses féministes postmodernes dans l'oeuvre de Judith Butler. *Recherches féministes*, 20(2), 61–90. https://doi.org/10.7202/017606ar

Baril, A. (2009). Judith Butler et le nous femmes: La critique des catégories identitaires implique-t-elle leur réfutation? in F. Descarries and L. Kurtzman (eds), *Faut-il réfuter le Nous femmes pour être féministe au XXIe siècle?* (pp. 65–92). Montréal: Les Cahiers de l'IREF.

Bauer, G., Devor, A., Heinz, M., Marshall, Z., Pullen Sansfaçon, A. and Pyne, J. (2019). *Code d'éthique de la cpath en matière de recherche concernant les personnes trans et les communautés*. Available at: https://cpath.ca/fr/resources/cpath-ethical-guidelines/. (Accessed March 14, 2024).

Baumbusch, J. (2010). Semi-structured interviewing in practice-close research. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 15(3), 255–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6155.2010.00243.x

Bilge, S. (2009). Théorisations féministes de l'intersectionnalité. *Diogène*, (1), 70–88. https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.225.0070

Bocquillon, S. P. (2018). Sterilization in the United States: The dark side of contraception. *Revue de Recherche en Civilisation Américaine*, 8. Available at: https://journals.openedition.org/rrca/1169. (Accessed 26 October 2024).

Bohren, M. A., Vogel, J. P., Hunter, E. C., Lutsiv, O., Makh, S. K., Souza, J. P., Aguiar, C., Saraiva Coneglian, F., Diniz, A. L. A., Tunçalp, Ö., Javadi, D., Oladapo, O. T., Khosla, R., Hindin, M. J. and Gülmezoglu, A. M. (2015). The mistreatment of women during childbirth in health facilities globally: A mixed-methods systematic review. *PLOS Medicine*, 12(6), e1001847. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001847

Campbell, R. and Wasco, S. M. (2000). Feminist approaches to social science: Epistemological and methodological tenets. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(6), 773–791. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005159716099

Cárdenas-Castro, M. and Salinero-Rates, S. (2023). The continuum of violence against women: Gynecological violence within the medical model in chile. *Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare*, 37, 100891. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2023.100891

Chadwick, R. (2021). Breaking the frame: Obstetric violence and epistemic rupture. *Agenda*, 35(3), 104–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2021.1958554

Chbat, M., Damant, D. and Flynn, C. (2014). Analyse intersectionnelle de l'oppression de mères racisées en contexte de violence conjugale. *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, 26(2), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.7202/1029264ar

Commission sur l'égalité et la non-discrimination. (2019). *Violences obstétricales et gynécologiques*. Available at: https://pace.coe.int/pdf/bb630b0dd4f3819ec3441b2da7a6dc0728955bbc2fab73d2e930866bcf2597d5?title=Doc.%2014965.pdf. (Accessed 15 November 2024).

Cooper Owens, D. (2017). *Medical Bondage*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt69x

Dawson, J. (2021). Medically optimised: Healthcare language and dehumanisation. *British Journal of General Practice*, 71(706), 224. https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp21X715829

Finlay, L. and Gough, B. (2003). *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776094

Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality (Volume 1): An introduction*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1997). *Il faut défendre la société*. Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil.

Friesen, P. (2018). Educational pelvic exams on anesthetized women: Why consent matters. *Bioethics*, 32(5), 298–307. https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12441

Froidevaux-Metterie, C. (2018). *Le corps des femmes: La bataille de l'intime*. Philosophie magazine Éditeur.

Garcia, L. M. (2020). A concept analysis of obstetric violence in the United States of America. *Nursing Forum*, 55(4), 654–663. https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12482

Gkiouleka, A., Huijts, T., Beckfield, J. and Bambra, C. (2018). Understanding the micro and macro politics of health: Inequalities, intersectionality & institutions, a research agenda. *Social Science & Medicine*, 200, 92–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.025

Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes. (2018). *Actes sexistes durant le suivi gynécologique et obstétrical, des remarques aux violences, la nécessité de reconnaitre, prévenir et condamner le sexisme*. Paris: Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes. Available at: https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/hce_les_actes_sexistes_durant_le_suivi_gynecologique_et_obstetrical_20180629.pdf. (Accessed 17 November 2024).

Hill Collins, P. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

Institut de la statistique du Québec. (13 May 2024). Personnes de minorités sexuelles et de genre, *Gouvernement du Québec*. Available at: https://statistique.quebec.ca/vitrine/egalite/dimensions-egalite/demographie/personnes-minorites-sexuelles-et-genre. (Accessed 27 June 2024).

International Planned Parenthood Federation. (2022). *Gynaecological & obstetric violence*. Available at: https://europe.ippf.org/sites/europe/files/2022-12/Gynaecological%20and%20Obstetric%20Violence%20-%20IPPF%20EN%20Research%20%26%20Policy%20Paper.pdf. (Accessed 14 March 2024).

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M. and Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031

Kelly, L. (2013). *Surviving Sexual Violence*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Kona, P. (2011). Contextualizing violence: A hermeneutical perspective. *Modern Horizons Journal*. Available at: https://www.modernhorizonsjournal.ca/wp-content/uploads/Issues/201111/Issue-201111-Kona.pdf. (Accessed 26 October 2024).

Lévesque, S., Bergeron, M., Fontaine, L. and Rousseau, C. (2018). La violence obstétricale dans les soins de santé: Une analyse conceptuelle. *Recherches féministes*, 31(1), 219–238. https://doi.org/10.7202/1050662ar

Marcilly, A. and Mauri, M. (2018). *Maltraitance médicale dans la pratique gynécologique et obstétricale ambulatoire et conséquences pour le suivi: Point de vue des patientes* (Thesis, Université de Grenoble). Grenoble. Available at: https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-01881279. (Accessed 14 March 2024).

Matsuzaka, S. and Koch, D. E. (2019). Trans feminine sexual violence experiences: The intersection of transphobia and misogyny. *Affilia*, 34(1), 28–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918790929

Morrison, S. and Dinkel, S. (2012). Heterosexism and health care: A concept analysis. *Nursing Forum*, 47(2), 123–130. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6198.2011.00243.x

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. 1,000 Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Ndame, T. (2023). Phenomenological studies, in J. M. Okoko, S. Tunison and K. D. Walker (eds), *Varieties of Qualitative Research Methods: Selected contextual perspectives* (pp. 377–382). New York, NY: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9_58

Perez Brower, M. (2024). Movements to end gender-based violence and rethinking feminist advocacy, in M. Perez Brower (ed), *Intersectional Advocacy: Redrawing policy boundaries around gender, race, and class* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009433075.001

Pickles, C. (2024). 'Everything is obstetric violence now': Identifying the violence in 'obstetric violence' to strengthen socio-legal reform efforts. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 44(3), 616–644. https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqae016

Prohaska, A. and Gailey, J. A. (2019). Theorizing fat oppression: Intersectional approaches and methodological innovations. *Fat Studies*, 8(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1534469

Quéré, L. (2019). Les formes ordinaires du consentement. Consciences du droit dans la consultation gynécologique. *Droit et Societe*, 102(2), 413–432. https://doi.org/10.3917/drs1.102.0413

Ranse, J., Arbon, P., Cusack, L., Shaban, R. Z. and Nicholls, D. (2020). Obtaining individual narratives and moving to an intersubjective lived-experience description: A way of doing phenomenology. *Qualitative Research*, 20(6), 945–959. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120905988

República Bolivariana de Venezuela. (2007). Ley orgánica sobre el derecho de las mujeres a una vida libre de violencia, *Gaceta oficial de la República de Venezuela*. Available at: http://virtual.urbe.edu/gacetas/38770.pdf. (Accessed 14 March 2024).

Robbennolt, J. K. (2009). Apologies and medical error. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 467(2), 376–382. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11999-008-0580-1

Russo, N. F. and Pirlott, A. (2006). Gender-based violence. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1087(1), 178–205. https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1385.024

Sadler, M., Santos, M. J., Ruiz-Berdún, D., Rojas, G. L., Skoko, E., Gillen, P. and Clausen, J. A. (2016). Moving beyond disrespect and abuse: Addressing the structural dimensions of obstetric violence. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24(47), 47–55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2016.04.002

Sensoy, Ö. and DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Šimonović, D. (2019). A human rights-based approach to mistreatment and violence against women in reproductive health services with a focus on childbirth and obstetric violence, *United Nations*. Available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3823698/files/A_74_137-EN.pdf. (Accessed 26 October 2024).

Spinnewijn, L., Aarts, J. W. M., Braat, D. and Scheele, F. (2024). Unravelling clinicians' shared decision-making adoption: A qualitative exploration through the lens of diffusion of innovations theory. *BMJ Open*, 14(6), e080765. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-080765

Svenaeus, F. (2023). The phenomenology of objectification in and through medical practice and technology development. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy: A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine*, 48(2), 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1093/jmp/jhad007

Talukdar, S. (2020). Ensuring risk awareness of vulnerable patients in the post-montgomery era: Treading a fine line. *Health Care Analysis*, 28(3), 283–298. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-020-00396-9

Towle, S. (2022). 'Poorly relaxed women': A situational analysis of pelvic examination learning materials for medical students. *Medical Education*, 56(7), 716–723. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14737

Tufford, L. and Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316

van Manen, M. (2017). But is it phenomenology? *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6), 775–779. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317699570

Verdonk, P., Benschop, Y. W. M., de Haes, H. C. J. M. and Lagro-Janssen, T. L. M. (2009). From gender bias to gender awareness in medical education. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 14(1), 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-008-9100-z

Vuille, M. (2016). Le respect dans les soins gynécologiques: Un enjeu de mobilisation féministe. *Chronique Féministe*, (118), 5–7. Available at: https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:97546. (Accessed 17 November 2024).

Williams, C., Jerez, C., Klein, K., Correa, M., Belizán, J. and Cormick, G. (2018). Obstetric violence: A Latin American legal response to mistreatment during childbirth. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 125(10), 1208–1211. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.15270

World Health Organisation. (2013). *Exploring patient participation in reducing health-care-related safety risks*. Available at: https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/326442/9789289002943-eng.pdf. (Accessed 26 October 2024).

Citation: Toupin, A. and Lévesque, S. (2025). Experiences and Perceptions of Gynaecological Violence: A Descriptive Exploration of the Phenomenon from Survivors' Standpoints. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 12. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16022


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 13
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

'Being Inside a Tangled Knot': *Écriture Féminine* and Elena Ferrante

Brigita Miloš [1]*, Dubravka Dulibić-Paljar [1]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Starting from the intertwining of interpretations of the term *écriture féminine*, this analysis will develop around the 'poethical' and political aspects of Cixous' concept, which could be described as the non-presence of the author, language as a productive force and the 'poethical' as political. If it is the case that *écriture féminine* is not a recipe, not a protocol, not a style, and not even necessarily *féminine*, then the rest of *écriture* might also host versions of a feminine that is formed in its own language, outside of any particularity, essence or opposition. The core ideas underlying our claim that Ferrante's *oeuvre* is a new form of *écriture féminine* lie in Ferrante's reflections on her way of writing, in the productive heights of narrative pleasure she expresses, and in the narrator's not-knowing, not-saying and enjoying. Ferrante's writing challenges the theoretical and/or political dead ends of thinking about women and literature, not only because of her persistent anonymity, but above all because of her immersion in a language that does not allow for safe simplifications.

Keywords: art, écriture feminine, Elena Ferrante, feminism, literature

> I prefer to think of myself as being inside a tangled knot: tangled knots fascinate me. (Elena Ferrante)

THE INTERTWINING OF *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*

The syntagm *écriture féminine* is a term coined in 1975 by Hélène Cixous in her ground-breaking article *The Laugh of the Medusa*. It seems that *écriture féminine*, as the name itself indicates, relies on the notion of '*féminine*' (or 'woman'), both of which are terms burdened with troubles – nowadays, somewhat different sorts than previously faced. For example, in her article Cixous wrote:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies (…). Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous, 1976: 875)

Jones clarifies that Cixous' theoretical and imaginative works emphasise the significance of various, particularly feminine, subconscious libidinal impulses in women's unconsciousness and the creation of future liberating female discourses (Jones, 1981: 252). It seems that for Cixous, a woman's body is a direct source of female speech; the immediacy with which the body is experienced 'promises a clarity of perception' against phallic delusion.

Still, the ideas of plain 'feminine' or 'woman' sound at odds not just with contemporary theoretical efforts focused on emphasising the instability or fluidity of identity concepts in their gendered and other aspects. Even at the time of its inception, the intrigue of the term was present in what Berger later calls the 'false enemy' (Berger, 2021: n.p.), meaning the fact that Cixous herself 'gave the greatest recognition to female writers named Shakespeare, Genet, or Kleist'. Berger goes on to point out that

> the term 'woman', the adjective '*féminine*', and even the phrase 'the woman' (…) none of these terms, taken together or separately, refer to what was previously believed and said about the second sex. The 'woman' invoked in these texts is not an ideological fossil. (authors' translation)

[1] *University of Rijeka*, CROATIA
***Corresponding Author:** bmilos@uniri.hr

Therefore, it seems unjustified to understand *The Laugh of the Medusa* as a kind of essentialist discourse that invokes or celebrates a way of writing based on the notion of 'femininity' or the notion of 'woman', which would represent a different foundation than the notion of 'man' or 'masculine writing'. Ultimately, Cixous herself has renounced the *féminine* in the term, so that what remains is literature 'which is in itself queer' (Segarra, 2021: 97). In this sense, writing is to be understood as a specific activity in which the subject can open up to far greater possibilities than those offered by 'traditional binarism'.

If it is the case that gender particularism (essentialism) is merely a reductionist and superficial reading and understanding of the concept and its context, the question arises as to how that concept can be presented in its holistic and intended sense. This line of enquiry is further complicated by the fact that it seems that whilst the question itself can be included in the (epistemic) register from which it can certainly be posed, it is equally impossible to find a precise or at least satisfactory answer within this register. As Cixous wrote:

> As soon as the question 'What is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, *we are already caught up in masculine interrogation*. I say 'masculine interrogation': as we say so – and – so was interrogated by the police. (Cixous, 1981: 45)

At the risk of unwittingly/unintentionally tying ourselves up in the knots of the investigative process, we suggest that one way to approach the term *écriture féminine* in its programmatic sense is to contextualise it as a form of resistance or challenge to phallogocentrism.

For Cixous, most literary texts are phallogocentric as they are determined by an invasive, colonising, 'obligatory virility' (Cixous, 1976: 877). The necessary reference to Derrida in this context points not only to the creative affinity between the two authors, but also to some premises that Cixous and Derrida share in their work and which are important for analysing the literary material in this study. The first premise concerns the concept of the author; the second, the concept of style.

With regard to Derrida's and Cixous' shared conception of language and writing, Segarra notes that Derrida's thesis of renouncing performative authority in order to enable the appearance of 'events' in language is also accepted by Cixous, who writes that the 'author must not be the 'pilot' in the journey of writing, but must 'submit' to the power of language' (Segarra, 2019: 227–228). On the other hand, if the presence (penetration) of the author in a work is recognisable (interpretative?), such a style (authorial style?) could write the work out of what would fall under *écriture féminine*. 'In fact', as Segarra underlines, '"feminine writing" and "style", a term rejected by both Cixous and Derrida, would be poles apart' (227). These premises in Derrida and Cixous are linked to their 'postmodern style due to an intensive use of the versatility and possibilities of signifiers' (228) in the pursuit of 'meaning and truth'.

It can be assumed that the (again contested) nouns 'meaning' and 'truth' are to be understood within the framework of the postmodern, deconstructivist paradigm of the formation of these terms. In any case, the desired goals are only achievable through the activation of different libidinal economies than those that are generative for and within the mainstream realm of cultural, social and political (phallogocentric) space. This different libidinality, even if labelled feminine, should be understood as a (creative) position (of difference), 'and not as an essence of actual women' (Segarra, 2019: 228).

> If fact, 'writing with the body' or, more broadly, (feminine) writing, might be assimilated to a performative writing that not only thematizes the body in unusual ways in literary tradition, but writes the body, inscribing it in the text. (…) 'To risk' the writer's own 'active body in the text' may also be considered an ethical engagement, which has frequently been related to a feminist way of writing, at least as it was undertaken by some women writers, Cixous among them, in France at the time of the MLF, the 1970s. (229)

In any case, to attempt a taxative or formal account of the elements that constitute *écriture féminine* or writing with the body would be 'a regrettable oversimplification of the notion' (227). Therefore, it is likely that analytical representations of Cixous' terms can be found in the (interpretative) tangled knots of poetics, politics and ethics and in the dynamics of tensions between holistic and particularist (essentialist) approaches, such as the one mentioned by Jones or in the quote from the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* which reads:

> Hélène Cixous famously proposed the notion of *écriture féminine*, positing that the expression of women's lived experience might be impressed in women's literary production in linguistic styles that offer alternatives to standard objective description and linear temporal development. (Korsmeyer and Weiser, 2021: n.p.)

Toril Moi more straightforwardly points out that Cixous' standpoint appears to embody a potent feminist adaptation of Derridean theory, rejecting essentialism and biological determinism. Nevertheless, Moi continues:

> Unfortunately, Cixous's theory is riddled with contradictions: every time a Derridean idea is evoked, it is opposed and undercut by a vision of woman's writing steeped in the very metaphysics of presence she claims she is out to unmask. (Moi, 2002: 108)

It is not only Moi who is overtly unhappy with Cixous' solutions, whether literary or political. Jones recounts Wittig's outraged exclamation about the scandalous nature of Cixous' stances on the necessity (actually non-necessity) of analyses of material aspects or causes of gender oppression (Jones, 1981: 256–261). Moi is likely working along the same lines as Wittig with an interesting comment on 'ermine as emancipation' (Moi, 2002: 124). However scandalous and contradictory Cixous might be, she is also one of the most prominent figures of endeavours aimed at proposing parallel methods to distinguish creative *puissance* different from monosexual, phallogocentric writing.

Apart from the poetic-political-ethical knot that is noticeable at the level of receptions to Hélène Cixous' writing, 'the poethical' (Parker, 1999) aspect of Cixous' apporoach to writing also functions, according to Sant, as Cixous' intrinsic organisational and creative principle. Sant notes similarities between Cixous' writing practice and Derrida's conception of the 'poem', explaining that 'the poematic is a dictate that comes from the other' (Sant, 2017: 79). In the words of Cixous: 'The other is imposed on me, is dictated in an absolute way to me' (Cixous, as cited in Sant, 2017: 80). Moreover, as Sant emphasises, the importance of the ethical (poethical?) aspect in Cixous' work is made clear in her quote: 'for me, there is only ethics, nothing else' (81).

The poethical nature of Cixous' *écriture* (*féminine*) thus becomes political, i.e., a relationship with the other, with alterity, 'which allows for an opening towards the undecidable and the unpredictable' (Erlingsdóttir, 2014: 115). This relationship consists in the 'liberation from social stigmas through the liberation of language', through the 'invention of new ways of speaking and writing, but also new ways of seeing, hearing, touching, and tasting' (115).

ELENA FERRANTE, OR AN AUTHOR IN THE (K)NOT

To add more uncertainty to the already not very solid ground of *écriture féminine*, let us recall that the pronouns 'she' or 'her' used to denote Elena Ferrante are themselves questionable. Elena Ferrante is a pseudonym behind which a person unknown to the public is hidden. A dozen novels can be attributed to the author Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* (*Troubling Love*) being the first published title (1992). It took about a decade of a fruitful writing career to arrive at the smash-hit in four volumes titled the *Neapolitan Novels*. The series consists of the titles *My Brilliant Friend / L'amica genial* (2012), *The Story of a New Name / Storia del nuovo cognome* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay / Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child / Storia della bambina perduta* (2015).

Despite being recognised as a novelist at an international level, Ferrante has kept her identity secret. Speculation about it has been rife, and several theories, based on information she has given in interviews and analysis drawn from the content of her novels, have been put forward. For example, in 2003 Ferrante published *la frantumaglia*, a collection of letters, essays, reflections and interviews, which sheds some light on her background. In a 2013 article for *The New Yorker*, critic James Wood summarised what is generally accepted about Ferrante, based in part on letters collected in that volume:

> (...) we learn that she grew up in Naples, and has lived for periods outside Italy. She has a classics degree; she has referred to being a mother. One could also infer from her fiction and from her interviews that she is not now married ... In addition to writing, 'I study, I translate, I teach.' (Wood, 2013: n.p.)

Of course, the question of why we, the public, should take these, or any other sentences of Ferrante as non-fiction remains unanswered. In fact, she herself cites Italo Calvino's sentence on biographical facts:

> I don't give biographical facts, or I give false ones, or anyway I always try to change them from one time to the next. Ask me what you want to know, but I won't tell you the truth, of that you can be sure. (Calvino as cited in Ferrante, 2016: 84)

Unlike Calvino, Ferrante concludes the paragraph by emphasising her reluctance to create a chain of false answers and preference to remain silent about who she (or he…) is.

Hiding the author behind the signifier 'Elena Ferrante' has, in the theoretical sense, several resonance fields. Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that pseudonyms have hardly been an unknown phenomenon in literature, especially in earlier eras. In particular, female writers choosing pseudonyms, whether suggesting a male or female author, is nothing new. The decision to adopt a pseudonym would be driven by the desire for success in an environment not always (or ever) favourable to female authors, or perhaps the pseudonym would serve to give female authors the opportunity to venture into creating works that were new or different from what they were known for. The author's name or even a pseudonym was not always necessary for the publication of a literary text,

but contemporary publishing works according to different economic and cultural codes. In that respect, the pseudonym in the case of Elena Ferrante can also be read as an interesting (media), lucrative (marketing) and ingenious (publishing) move.

Furthermore, the fact that the pseudonym 'Elena Ferrante' refers to a female author indicates the deliberate construction of a specific gender position of authorship. This gendered position can still, and often does, function as the other half of humanity in the wider social context. Therefore, 'Elena Ferrante' can also be understood as a signal of a ghettoising convention (in either an ironic or non-ironic key). Certainly 'Elena Ferrante' must also be understood as a conscious acceptance of a name that exists only as a play of signifiers. The most intriguing moment associated with the theme of pseudonymity undoubtedly relates to Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author'. When this death occurs, Barthes writes, 'writing begins' (Barthes, 1977: 142). Writing, however, a 'neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away', is a type of space 'where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (Barthes, 1977: 142). Barthes' renunciation of the writing body corresponds to Cixous' call that the adjective feminine is not a marker for an opposition, and that it does not refer to an essence of woman or the feminine, but is a signifier for a difference to (gender) opposition itself: a signifier that can ultimately also be removed because it is a tautology of the noun to which it was originally attached.

And just as some of the feminist readings previously discussed are not entirely convinced by Cixous' proposals, it is also the case that Barthes' theoretical proposal was not met with enthusiasm by some feminist authors. Mary Eagleton, for example, writes about how Barthes' death of the author or Foucault's indifference to the question of who speaks provoked critical responses from Kamuf, Miller and Sage (Eagleton, 2005). All these responses can be described as critical reservations about Barthes' proposal, emphasising the importance of the (female) identity component in literary theoretical considerations.

From the perspective of 'identity' (feminism), the pseudonym 'Elena Ferrante' can easily become a semantic knot that needs to be addressed or categorised. However, this can only happen if 'Elena Ferrante' is understood as something other than an integral part of the writing process – or that she is something other than the 'language that speaks' (Barthes, 1977: 143), the point at which only language acts, 'performs', and not 'I' (Barthes, 1977: 143).

What interests us, then, as much as Ferrante's 'extra-literary' authorial framing, is the writer's elaboration of the way of writing, or her way of writing as a form of autopoiesis. Since the time of Varela and Maturana (1980), the term autopoiesis has been employed in many different contexts. When literary scholars use the term, it usually refers to conceptions of language processing, as in Ira Livingston's quotation:

> (…) an autopoietic system is an eddy in linear time, or, to put it another way, autopoietic systems constitute relational time (...) this eddying flow is familiar as the operation of meaning in language: in the flow of speech and writing, words that come after alter the meaning of words that came before, making meaning a continual and more or less open-ended recontextualising. (Livingston, 2006: 88)

Other readings that emphasise specific aspects of literary texts and the representations of consciousness are articulated through various literary genres (see Lippert, 2009). The description of the successiveness of language as a fundamental cognitive principle of language processing can be a valuable introduction of Ferrante's autopoiesis to the concept of *écriture féminine*, and especially so through the notion of *la frantumaglia*.

LA FRANTUMAGLIA AND *SMARGINATURA*: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Ferrante may be anonymous, but what distinguishes her is the massive critical appraisal of her work. She has been called the writer of her generation and perhaps the greatest living novelist. Her writing is described as addictive, fascinating and even universal in its impact on readers regardless of their cultural, linguistic, gender, class or age differences. Naples seems to have become a widespread *topos* for everyone's joys and miseries.

As Tiziana de Rogatis, one of the scholars whose work on Ferrante is often praised as thorough and exceptionally informed, states:

> (…) the signature of Ferrante's poetics lies in the plasticity of her prose, which enables her to remain anchored in the real world with its objective, opaque and trite features, and also reveal, epiphanically, its metaphorical depth. (De Rogatis, 2019: loc. 338/4726)

What prevents such poetics from falling into the abyss of bizarreness or chaos, and what makes it 'plastic' (understood as convincing, plausible or *vraisemblable*) 'is the porous wall separating the public "I" from the disorder of *frantumaglia*'.

These terms need more detailed explanation. Detected as Ferrante's *métier* is her capacity to 'guide an event' of everyday life towards 'its murkier, more resistant centre because writing is rooted in a preverbal realm, where words fail us', as Tiziana de Rogatis further explains

> The so-called public 'I' can thus be understood as a specific point from which Ferrante's narration slips into a differently styled course of events, purposefully more internal, in order to stimulate the sensation of a more intimate truth: the kind of truth that could be called someone's personal reality. (De Rogatis, 2019: loc. 338/4726)

Ferrante's insistence on being as close as possible to reality/objectivity leads her deep into the depths of the personal unspeakable, into the world of complex feelings every person faces as an inevitable and immediate surrounding. To that extent, the inner world is characterised by particular features of a unique reality, and this reality has the potential to dissolve into a preverbal disorder of precepts, sensations and fragments: what Ferrante calls *la frantumaglia*. What is fascinating about this familiarism – the word belongs to the vocabulary of Ferrante's mother – is that despite being the state of a dreadful abolition and negation of reality, it has the productive power of reality, which makes the frightful 'eddy' (seem) real. The interchangeable appearance of different narrative intensities merges the interplay of inner and outer optics and creates Ferrante's narrative-tissue dynamics.

> I work by contrast: clarity of facts and low emotional reaction alternating with a storm of blood, of frenzied writing. However, I try to avoid dividing lines between the two moments. I tend to make them slide into one another without a break. (Ferrante, 2016: 86)

This absence of breaks creates the particular tone of Ferrante's writing, and her texts' continuity and almost organic coherence facilitate an overall atmosphere of reality in the narrative worlds represented in her novels.

In her reading of the phenomenon of *la frantumaglia*, Milkova suggests that it is a denotation mark for 'women's corporeal and psychical fragmentation', that is to say:

> Her protagonists succumb to systematic assaults which leave them bleeding or broken. (…) Battered, bleeding, disfigured, mutilated or penetrated female bodies frame the representation of women's corporeality (…). In turn, this corporeal fracturing informs women's subjectivity as shaped by, and lived as, fragmentation, liminality and slippage. (Milkova, 2021: 28)

A few lines later, Milkova draws a bold conclusion: 'To be afflicted with frantumaglia is to acknowledge – and submit to – the protocols of a universal patriarchy'.

Our reading, we believe, does not lead to such a straightforward conclusion, but it certainly shares some similarities with Milkova's argument. We read *la frantumaglia* as an epistemic principle, even an epiphanic flash outside of the downbeat (narrative) successiveness of one's life course. Namely, *la frantumaglia* has to do with the outer reality that strikes the characters (and dictates the tone of Ferrante's writing) at certain moments in time. The outer impulses are reduced to their most potent (typical) fragments, excessive in their clarity and multitude, and the plenitude of such forms simply overwhelms. *La frantumaglia* in our reading is a productive stasis that enables Ferrante's characters' (narrative) progression and development. In contrast to Milkova's conclusion, we argue for *la frantumaglia* as a principle of an outsized understanding of the conditions of life, but not necessarily the condition of patriarchy as an underlying principle. If the patriarchy were an underlying principle in Ferrante's writing, the characters would not be in a position to embrace any modality of knowing outside the rigid framework of the unique and overall status quo. The logic of the text has to provide for the prolapses of 'feminine' ways of knowing, but they have to stay merged in the totality of causes and events constitutive of the narrative. The position of horizontality of events afflicted by *la frantumaglia*, which equates them with other events – even those of explicit patriarchal brutality – assures the narrative adherence to the (pro-)claim(ed) (of) reality. Therefore, our reading of *la frantumaglia* does not rely on the disfigured (butchered, perforated and smashed) female body or psyche, but on the feminine body and psyche capable of knowing and understanding.

Furthermore, the other important term in Ferrante's writing, *smarginatura*, the dissolution of margins, is something Milkova reads as a symptom of *la frantumaglia*. We propose that *smarginatura* is a symptom of the absence of *la frantumaglia*. *Smarginatura* is more of Ferrante's *stylistic/symptomatic* principle. Reality starts to dissolve in the absence of linkage (painful and overbearing) to it. The process of dissolution initiates stiffness, immobility, and utter incomprehension of the surrounding reality; in consequence, it makes the character feel fearful and incompetent.

The principle of *smarginatura* is best represented in the character of Lila in the *Neapolitan Novels*: not just in her narrated dissolving episodes, but the complete setting of her character's narrative appearance and functioning. As well as Lila, the character of Olga in *The Days of Abandonment* suffers the symptoms of *smarginatura*. After Olga is abandoned by her husband, she goes through a crisis in which descriptions of her daily life, such as caring for her children and the house, alternate with paralysing sequences of *smarginatura*. The stupor of *smarginatura* completely numbs Olga and renders her incapable of even the most banal actions, such as unlocking doors. Olga desperately tries to understand, to find her own truth and meaning.

> Therefore, with an effort that cost me a struggle to the limit of the bearable, I got to my feet. I have to take hold of myself, understand. Get back in touch immediately. (Ferrante, 2005: 140)

But this is not the case. The mere desire for understanding is not the same as understanding itself. The novel *The Days of Abandonment* is somewhat simplistically understood as the portrait of a woman's pain in the crisis of a failed marriage. This portrait is indeed detailed, up close and personal. The seductive intimacy and strategic proximity to typically understood 'women's-fiction' themes skilfully conceal the possibility of a different (happy) ending. At the end of the novel, Olga talks to a neighbour with whom she enters into a romantic relationship, and he asks:

> - What happened to you that night?
>
> - I had an excessive reaction that pierced the surface of things.
>
> - And then?
>
> - I fell.
>
> - And where did you end up?
>
> - Nowhere. There was no depth, there was no precipice.
>
> - There was nothing. (Ferrante, 2005: 205)

The 'nowhere', the 'no' and the 'nothing' that finally frees Olga from the burden of fate *à la* Ana Karenina, her literary ex-point of reference, is the promise of an undiscovered personal epistemic space that is yet to come.

ETHICS AND POLITICS OF THE OTHER: STUMBLING OVER A BODY

The body of Ana Karenina is famously destroyed under a train. Karenina's body is certainly not the only female (literary character's) body annihilated in writing. In the context of *écriture féminine*, as elaborated before, the body appears to be a significant stumbling block, even with all of the changes that term has gone through: from unique *féminine* anti-theorising practice all the way to the general concept responsible for designating numerous different writings and literary possibilities. The term is loaded with second-wave pathos and contradictions and it resonates with the questions of language management, engagement and liberation. Certainly, the term resonates with (if not mirrors) the idea of a woman's body as well.

The phantasm of the woman's body expressed, represented, engraved, won or regained in language has motivated our choice because Ferrante's novels are fertile sources for these types of analyses. Multiple facets appear through Ferrante's narratives, creating a maternal, sexual, sisterly, friendly, girlish, artistic and intellectual kaleidoscope of women's lives. These facets create the material *locus communis* of female narrative destiny by being crammed inside the phrase 'a woman's body'. They create and sustain it as a perceptible narrative fact; the myriad facets are 'watched over' to produce a specific result:

> The female body has learned the need to watch over itself, to take care of its own expansion, its own vigour. Yes, vigour. Today this noun may seem suitable only for the male body. But I suspect that at first it was mainly a female virtue, that the vigour of the woman was like that of plants, invasive life, rampant life (...). (Ferrante, 2016: 104)

The vigorous female bodies of Ferrante's narratives are not to be mistaken for rigorous bodies if such a remark is allowed (or may be induced) by the phrase 'watched over'. The author continues to elaborate on the importance of female awareness and 'looking-after-ness' of self-sustainable processes during challenging and/or formative periods. Her stance towards female vigour – as a nourishing and supportive prerequisite of any (*féminine*) life – is almost an echo of Cixous' words:

> And woman? Woman, for me, is she who kills no one in herself, she who gives (herself) her own lives: woman is always in a certain way 'mother' for herself and for the other. (Cixous, 1991: 50)

The word 'mother', as formulated in Cixous' paragraph, functions as a generative force of self-giving and attention, an incentive of alert auto-productivity with manifold possible outcomes. For Ferrante, the 'vigorous body' carries a very similar meaning.

The vigorousness of the female body is needed especially for the reasons of knowing how to continue living one's life after being affected by the harsh lessons of *la frantumaglia*. Ferrante writes:

> The frantumaglia is to perceive with excruciating anguish the heterogeneous crowd from which we, living, raise our voice, and heterogeneous crowd into which it is fated to vanish. (Ferrante, 2016: 99)

If we are to offer an example of the *frantumaglia* afflicting Ferrante's characters, we can again turn to Olga, a protagonist of *The Days of Abandonment*. As Ferrante explains:

> [Olga] doesn't want to be Ana Karenina or a broken woman. Above all she doesn't want to be like the abandoned woman of Naples who made an impression on her as a child, she feels that she is the product of different culture, a different female story, she thinks that nothing is inevitable. Of course, she feels deeply that every abandonment is a vortex and annihilation, maybe also an indication of the desert that has expanded around us. But she reacts, she recovers, she lives. (Ferrante, 2016: 76)

Furthermore, and not to miss the famous tetralogy the *Neapolitan Novels* and an important shift in Ferrante's ethics of care, the character of Elena, the narrator, vigorously watches over herself as well as others throughout the narrative. In possession of the means of creation and care/surveillance – language – Elena Greco could have emerged as the more resilient figure of the two protagonists. On the other hand, Lila Cerullo, essentially stripped of her own voice (and her language, the dialect), could have remained just one of the figures in Elena's coming to being, of Elena's story. However, as Ferrante exclaims:

> You hear? My, my, my. How often do we repeat that possessive adjective. In fact, a first big step forward, in the matter of writing, is to discover exactly the opposite: that what we triumphantly consider ours belongs to others. Dealing with the world, yes at any time they are entirely ours. But the words – the written form in which we enclose them, attentive to the red margins of our notebooks – are not. (Ferrante, 2022: 46)

Is there any contradiction in this statement of Ferrante's? What does 'dealing with the world' mean? Moreover, without words, how is one to deal with the world? How is one to accomplish the deeds, and how will those accomplishments be structured as parts of a person's life? There is a possibility that Ferrante distinguishes between the world of words and the world of deeds. Moreover, it seems that we belong to the words – even the bad ones – but the words do not belong to us. They are always someone else's; we always need someone other than ourselves – or many others – to tell (us) our own story in others' words.

The thought of being placed in language – and thus in storytelling – as a fundamental element of making meaning of life leads Ferrante to think about her specific position as a writer. Left unenthusiastically empty after finishing her 'one-protagonist' novels, Ferrante concluded:

> My women, because I could see only one way that adequately and truthfully described them and myself, ended up, against my will – I insist: you don't tell the story without the shoves of others; that old principle has remained firm – in a sort of solipsism, without which, however, I saw, for me as an author, only a regression toward the inauthentic. (Ferrante, 2022: 35)

The desire Ferrante experienced to find a new language suitable to her new authorial needs is evident in the following passage:

> I was trying to get out of the dead end of *The Lost Daughter* by drafting a new story of mothers and daughters (...) when I picked up Cavarero's book again. It seemed new, a book I had never read, starting from the use she makes of Karen Blixen and the story of the stork, recounted in *Out of Africa*. But what kindled my imagination was an expression: *the necessary other*. It serves as the title of an entire chapter, is set up by a complex dialogue with Hannah Arendt, skirts the theme of narcissism, and arrives finally at the following definition: The necessary other is (...) a finitude that remains irremediably an other in all the fragile and unjudgeable insubstitutability of her existing. It was, I recall, a shock. *An other* seemed to me what I needed in order to leave the three earlier books and yet stay within them. (Ferrante, 2022: 35–36)

The Necessary Other – which was supposed to be the title of the first volume of the tetralogy – thus becomes the backbone of the constructive mechanisms of the author's subsequent novels. Differently put, in her writing about coming to writing, Ferrante emphasises the condition of interrelational writing. Besides the interplay of auto- and biographical, the mutual exchange or the principle of the necessary other also presupposes a condition to share, exchange, and most importantly, be narrated – put into being – with and through the other. That an 'I' exists through the discourse of the other, and the other exists through the discourse of an 'I' is the protocol of the fundamental procedure of Ferrante's narrative structures. It is also the underlying credo of Ferrante's narrated worlds: worlds crowded with other women.

It is in this aspect of Ferrante's work that we find a crucial step in understanding her *écriture* (*féminine*). For the purposes of this article, we have named this aspect the ethical principle of Ferrante's discourse. The ethical principle of Ferrante's writing is much less invested in examining the language effects from within by interrupting, successfully or less successfully, the core protocol of language acquiring, the successiveness (in a different register – readability). *Écriture féminine* (or for that matter also Irigaray's *parler femme* or Kristeva's semiotic coda), is an attempt heavily indebted to either deconstruction or psychoanalysis, or both theoretical approaches. Having (or wanting) to deal with (man-made) structuralist and poststructuralist theories, Cixous' endeavour (and those of others mentioned as well) suffered several criticisms such as cohesive inconsistency (the body problem) or formal inability (to deconstruct the deconstruction). Still, in Weil's words:

> (…) these writers [meaning the so-called French feminist authors] want to go beyond the playful deconstruction of the male tradition, and strive to write in such a way as to open up another space for female imagining and action. French feminists used écriture as a weapon not to represent the feminine but to create it through experimental poetics. (Weil, 2006: 169)

Such interventions strove to grasp language and spill (it) over the edges to fertilise and grow what the language could/can not sustain. How hollow does it sound to write a woman? And to whom?

THE FIREWORKS PUT ASIDE, OR *QUESTIONE LINGUISTICA*

From the privileged position of the *post hoc* and for reasons of analytical clarity, we will distinguish between two layers (at least) of Ferrante's language. The first is what has usually been named the narrative technique, which builds the style that affects the tone of a specific narrative. In other words, the first layer consists of language that in technicals terms would be understood as Elena Ferrante's poetics. The second layer is that of language understood as materialisation in specific idiom.

The first-layer analysis starts with the language of Elena, the first-person narrator of the *Neapolitan Novels*, as a mechanism (made) of others that is formed entirely by the subtle threads of mutuality in between the narrated content and in between the layers of narration/writing. If we are to make a 'femmage' to Cixous and ask what the language of the white ink looks like, the answer for Ferrante could be that it is 'a flow of language and writing without feeling otherness as a barrier' (Ferrante, 2022: 66). To start with Elena, furthermore, means to be aware of the knots that any other character creates in Elena's narrative and pulls and pushes them in the story as if Elena and others, especially Lila, want to unknot their mutually entangled hair. Those movements of force and delicacy, of ruthless bestiality and sweet tenderness, produce the fundamental dynamic of the tetralogy. Moreover, if our metaphor is functional, it speaks of the essential content of the tetralogy that is skilfully entangled into the formal novelistic constitutive parts. Namely – and in line with Adriana Cavarero's reading (Pinto *et al.*, 2020) – the suggested 'poethics' of the tetralogy is that the biographical narrative of Elena mirrors the development of the papers written by Lila. Still, those papers are absent, and Ferrante writes that throughout the *Neapolitan novels*, we never know anything of Lila's extraordinary writing except what Lenù summarises for us, or the little that emerges in Lenù's writing.

> I said to myself at a certain point: you should make up some passages from Lila's letters of notebooks. But it seemed to me inconsistent with Lenù's rebellious inferiority, with her deluded autonomy that aims, in a process as complex as it is contradictory, at absorbing Lila by taking off her power, and empowering Lila by absorbing her. And, besides – I confessed when the book was going well – would I who write along with Lenù, I, the author, even be able to create Lila's writing. Am I not inventing that extraordinary writing just to describe the inadequacy of my own? (Ferrante, 2022: 54)

The intertwining of the narrative levels expressed in the interview with Ferrante mentioned above mirrors a continuous intersection at which each becomes the narrator of the other, actual or potential. Cavarero detects in this fact the poetics that, in Ferrante's writing, becomes a new literary genre for fiction: biographies of lasting relationships (Pinto *et al.*, 2020: 239–240).

Therefore, the ethical principle of Ferrante's *écriture* does not reach only up to the combinatory effects of narration, but it displays relationality as the key feature of the constitutive narrative. The tectonic movements of Ferrante's world are not those of the narrated facts (biographies of people) but those of the underlying processes (biographies of relationships). The same structure can be detected in the layer of language understood as materialisation in specific idiom.

As for this second layer: we start with two main questions regarding Ferrante's work. The first question considers the so-called brow dilemma, and the second we have named the dialect dilemma. Put somewhat differently and a little more humorously, whether Ferrante is incapable of writing in proper Italian or she is

incapable of writing in the Neapolitan dialect, for some readers and critics she is a deluge of bad language. A more positive description of Ferrante's use of language would be somewhat Spartan, or as Schappell called it 'spare, muscular prose' with no 'pyrotechnics' where 'the language never draws attention to itself', but this very fact 'creates a powerful effect' (Schappell, 2015: n.p.). In the interview with Schappell Ferrante has commented on her language stylisations, emphasising that she writes stories about 'middle-class women who are cultivated and capable of governing themselves'. In *Frantumaglia. A Writer's Journey* Ferrante highlights:

> Then something breaks and these women's boundaries dissolve, and the language with which they are attempting to say something about themselves also is loosed, unbounded. From that moment, the problem – a problem that is, above all, mine, as I write – becomes how to rediscover, step by step, the measured language they started with and, with it, the kind of self-governing ability that stops the characters from falling into depression, into self-degeneration, or into dangerous feelings of revenge, aimed at themselves or at others. (Ferrante, 2016: 336)

And this is not the only problem with Ferrante's use of language, as described here. As mentioned before, the problem with the 'brow' position is also to be tackled. In an article titled 'A problem of middlebrow style: Dialect and translation in Elena Ferrante's Naples tetralogy', Robinson neatly lists all the relevant aspects raised in the discussion of Ferrante's middlebrow-oriented writing. Having stated that it is rather suspicious that Ferrante is not using dialect, Robinson argues for Ferrante's work as being a modern type of middlebrow literature characterised and shaped by the set of expectations of the particular type of readers to whom new-middlebrow literature is speaking. Some of the essential features constitutive of this type are the 'intelligent passion' of middlebrow reading, cognitive complexity of immersion, and empathetic identification, which need not be conceived as naïve and pre-modernist (Robinson, 2022: 583–584). The author continues:

> This recent rearticulation of a sophisticated middlebrow sensibility well describes the critical reception of Ferrante's novels, particularly as the middlebrow is primarily though not exclusively associated with the majority of readers. It is gendered feminine because most readers of fiction are women. (584)

Differently put, taken from the perspective of brows, what exactly would constitute an appropriate literary canon of proper (female) art? Would it consist of writers suspicious of style, resistant to the fetish of beautification, those transgressing genre boundaries, those commercially popular within the system of world literature? Would it include those whose use of language is queer because their written signifiers allow for translations (almost!) without being lost in it? If so, Ferrante has her place reserved. It is precisely in the form of queer reductivism of Ferrante's language that we see the 'formal' (technological) step forward in the notion of *écriture* à la Ferrante. Her version of *écriture* (*féminine*) appears as if the semiosis of her texts is a force active in the interplay of the subterranean depths of (her) language.

The second dilemma of Ferrante's language is that of dialect. A paragraph from *The Story of the Lost Child* illustrates the problem. Namely, during a conversation with Lila, just after Lila's daughter has gone missing, Elena writes:

> It occurred to me that it was now a linguistic question. She resorted to Italian as if to a barrier; I tried to push her toward dialect, our language of candour. But while her Italian was translated from dialect, my dialect was increasingly translated from Italian, and we both spoke a false language. She needed to explode, lose control of the words. I wanted her to say in the authentic Neapolitan of our childhood: 'What the fuck do you want, Lenù, I'm like this because I lost my daughter, and maybe she's alive, maybe she's dead (…)' (Ferrante, 2015: 362)

Where a materialised dialect should occur, only its naming occurs. There are very few dialectal expressions in the works of Elena Ferrante. She explains this as follows:

> This is because dialectal vocabulary and syntax, as soon as they're written, seem even more false than Italian. (...) Once written, Neapolitan seems sterilised. (...) Gradually, I began to find it [the dialect] could be effective in a literary work, not used as it typically is in the realist tale but as a subterranean stream, a cadence within the language, a caption, a disturbance in the writing that suddenly erupts with a few, usually obscene words. (Ferrante, 2022: 51)

Robinson formulates it as the *questione linguistica* that is repeatedly confronted in narrative but is evaded in language (Robinson, 2022: 601). Ferrante's explanation of engaging the dialect as a lurking linguistic force highlights her loyalty to standardised Italian invariant of language. She even mentioned Italian language as a sole modus of assigning her own sense of national belonging to herself: 'Being Italian, for me, begins and ends with the fact that I speak and write in Italian language' (Ferrante, 2019: 18). In Italy, as in other nation-states, the

question of language standardisation is rarely just about philology. It is loaded with political, cultural, economic and historical elements. Besides, in Ferrante's case, the '*nom du dialecte'* sheds light on the sometimes critically unappreciated, 'mediocre' (Porciani, 2016), unbrushed, '*grosso modo*' (Sacco, 2016) Italian standard she has generally used in her writing. These rather unflattering characterisations of the language Ferrante uses are part of the reserved reception (mainly Italian) of Ferrante's work, which is partly due to linguistic reasons and partly to remarks about, for example, the specific composition of the novels, which resemble scripts for television series (Limbrandi, 2019: 285–386).

Apart from Robertson's assertion about the fundamentally meta-linguistic status of dialect in Ferrante's work, however, other studies also point to a much more nuanced relationship between standard Italian and dialect (or local language) in Ferrante's novels. For example, Limbrandi, who analyses dialect primarily in Elena Ferrante's tetralogy, proposes the term 'silent language' (*lingua silenziosa*) (Limbrandi, 2019: 388) for all those linguistic expressions in Ferrante's work that have a local or dialectal basis. Limbrandi notes that some of them are predictable and serve to characterise the characters, while others are less conspicuous and more original and are related to the structure of the narrative. Alfonzetti analyses the role of dialect in the novel *Nasty Love* through the 'silent language' and finds that dialect is consistent with the psychoanalytical interpretation of the novel. The dialect is interpreted as a trigger for the protagonist's confrontation with a childhood trauma and as a means of healing that trauma (Alfonzetti, 2018: 306–311).

The dialect in Ferrante's novels 'involves a strong emotional engagement at the prosodic and kinesic level' (Alfonzetti, 2018: 306), often indicating anger, rage, vulgarity and obscenity, but sometimes also intimacy, proximity and love (Librandi, 2019: 389-390). When asked about her (non-)engagement with dialect, Ferrante confessed:

> As a child, as an adolescent, the dialect of my city frightened me. I prefer to let it echo for a moment in the Italian, as if threatening it. (Ferrante, 2016: 234)

In the quoted paragraph, the dialect is represented as a frightening environment, because it is the dialect of the city: its main means of communication. At the same time, it represents an ambivalence of possibilities for the (young) Ferrante – either she has to engage with the dialect and suffer the consequent anxiety, or communication is interrupted. Therefore, the dialect in the quoted paragraph reveals itself as a specific (textual) orifice of and towards the other. At the same time, it opens up as a form of (linguistic, communicative, epistemic) wound. The circumventions around the dialect in Ferrante's novels repeatedly emphasise the position of dialect as a 'non', as a hole (and we are fully aware of the play of signifiers here), a wound. If Cixous is right when she claims that 'the wound is at the origin of writing' (Sant, 2017: 73), then Ferrante's circumvention around the wound is simultaneously an ethical and poetic claim. For if the ethical occurs exactly 'where the unexpected arrival of the other reveals the ineffectivness of a priori established modes of conduct', and if unconditional hospitality requires the 'willingness to relinquish mastery' (111), then Ferrante's engagement with dialect is present as, for example, in the quotation from *The Story of the Lost Child*, in which Elena opens herself up to the subterranean cadence of Lila's indignant fear and hostility caused by the immeasurable pain of losing her daughter. But it does not come to that. On the contrary, Lila's use of 'translated Italian' does not fulfill Elena's desires related to how she believes Lila should express her pain. Elena is thus deprived of the effect of the unconditional hospitality that Lila offers her, and *vice versa*. It seems that both characters have no possibilities to understand each other or themselves.

The void of the wound prevents the characters from translating them from the places where they reside in the process of signification. At the same time, at the level of the narrative, the wound fertilises the progress of the text, regardless of the fact that it is a text that lacks 'language', regardless of the fact that it is 'wounded' (Fleishman, 2015: 192). Ferrante's work

> points to an orientation towards experimentation with/in the powers of language/languages that simultaneously underlies and undercuts different communicative positions: that of authorship, the position of the text itself and that of the reader.

(FEMININE) READWRITING

Ferrante has gone one step further with the concept of (feminine) writing, creating a linguistic universe that is in harmony with her narrative stimuli of *frantumaglia* and *smarginatura*, with the anonymity whose presence resonates loudly, with the other- body in the process of mutual exchange, with the wounds that are preserved from the banality of dictating to heal or to be complete. However, Cixous might call this step a *scandale*. Is it possible to imagine *'Nun me ne fott!'* being Ferrante's likely answer? Hardly, we believe, although this dialectal expression will not be a problem at all to accurately translate in any language into which Ferrante's answer might be translated.

Far from feminist auto-irony or even complacency and especially feminist resentments, Moro writes about Ferrante:

> Ferrante's arduous pursuit of a language capable of expressing the truth about women's lives ultimately casts doubt upon the viability of such an enterprise, laying bare the limits of language, literature, friendship and feminism. (Moro, 2023: 135)

If women's lives are cramped, stifling, monotonous, laborious, empty, and paralysed in the vortex of fragments (and in Ferrante's works the lives of the heroines are often thus) then Luperini's cry for air is not surprising:

> Enough, I told myself at a certain point, enough! Air, air! I felt trapped in a lightless universe: cramped, concentrated, consisting solely of minutiae of intersubjective relationships and psychologically repetitive dynamics that always unfold in obsessively monotonous ways. In these pages, one cannot breathe. (Luperini, 2015: n.p.; authors' translation)

Luperini struggles in the demanding environment of narrative text. Women often struggle in the demanding environment of life. We opt for an open conclusion of this article in relation to the sudden appearance of the (plain?) 'woman', which might appear as a pre-existing phantasm or as a regress of this writing, or as a *regressus* in infinite 'sclerosis' (Miller as cited in Eagleton, 2005: 19), or discrepancies between theoretical positions dedicated to engaging with the notions of literature and gender.

Openness here is an act of welcoming 'the other, conveyed by literature'. As Segarra points out, 'This opening might also be identified to the 'feminine' in feminine readwriting' (Segarra, 2019: 229). If reading for Cixous is a bodily experience comparable to a 'wound' that 'opens the reader's body', if it is equitable to writing, and if *féminine* is one of the many possible differences of *écriture*, then our reading of Ferrante's *oeuvre* can be understood as *écriture féminine*.

REFERENCES

Alfonzetti, G. (2018). Il dialetto 'molesto' in Elena Ferrante, in G. Marcato (ed), *Dialetto e società* (pp. 303–314). Padova: CLEUP.

Barthes, R. (1977). *The Death of the Author*. Translated by S. Heath. London: Fontana.

Berger, A. E. (2021). L'invention de l'écriture féminine. *Dictionnaire du genre en traduction / Dictionary of Gender in Translation / Diccionario del género en traducción*. 19. April. Available at: https://worldgender.cnrs.fr/notices/linvention-de-lecriture-feminine/. (Accessed 18 May 2024).

Cixous, H. (1976). *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Translated by K. Cohen and P. Cohen. *Signs*, 1(4), 1, 875–893. https://doi.org/10.1086/493306

Cixous, H. (1981). *Castration or Decapitation?* Translated by A. Kuhn. *Signs*, 7(1), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.1086/493857

Cixous, H. (1991). *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*. Translated by S. Cornell, A. Liddle, and S. Sellers. Edited and translated by D. Jenson. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press.

De Rogatis, T. (2019). *Elena Ferrante's Key Words*. Translated by W. Schutt. New York: Europa Editions. iBooks.

Eagleton, M. (2005). *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230502215

Erlingsdóttir, I. J. (2014). Inscriptions du politique chez Hélène Cixous. Différence sexuelle, rêves et résistances. *Milli Mála*, 6, 109–130.

Ferrante, E. (2005). *The Days of Abandonment*. Translated by A. Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions.

Ferrante, E. (2015). *The Story of the Lost Child*. Translated by A. Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions.

Ferrante, E. (2016). *Frantumaglia. A writer's journey*. Translated by A. Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions.

Ferrante, E. (2022). *In the Margins: On the pleasures of reading and writing*. Translated by A. Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions.

Fleishman, I. T. (2015). 'Ce qui est coupé repousse': Jean Genet, Héléne Cixous, the wound, and the poetics of omission. *French Studies*, 69(2), 190–204. https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knu300

Jones, A. R. (1981). Writing the body: Toward an understanding of 'l'écriture féminine'. *Feminist Studies*, 7(2), 247–263. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177523

Korsmeyer, C. and Weiser, P. B. (2021). Feminist aesthetics, in E. N. Zalta (ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-aesthetics/. (Accessed 18 May 2024).

Lippert, F. (2009). Narrowing circles: Questions on autopoiesis and literary interpretation after Dietrich Schwanitz. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 16(1–2), 125–141. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506808101762

Livingston, I. (2006). *Between Science and Literature: An introduction to autopoetics*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Luperini, R. (2015). L'ultimo libro di Elena Ferrante: Discutiamone. Il caso Elena Ferrante/1, *laletteraturaenoi.it*, 20 April. Available at: https://laletteraturaenoi.it/2015/04/20/l-ultimo-libro-di-elena-ferrante-discutiamone/. (Accessed 5 February 2024).

Maturana, H. R. and Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The realization of the living*. Dordrecht, Boston and London: D. Reidel Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8947-4

Milkova, S. (2021). *Elena Ferrante as World Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501357558

Moi, T. (2002). *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426036

Moro, C. (2023). The pursuit of feminist language in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet. *The Italianist*, 43(1), 133–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2023.2254125

Parker, A. (1999). Living writing: The poethics of Hélène Cixous. *Postmodern Culture*, 9(2). Available at: https://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/19/living-writing-the-poethics-of-helene-cixous/. (Accessed 18 May 2024).

Pinto, I., S. Milkova and A. Cavarero. (2020). Storytelling philosophy and self writing—Preliminary notes on Elena Ferrante: An interview with Adriana Cavarero. *Narrative*, 28(2), 236–249. https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2020.0006

Porciani, E. (2016). Da Napoli al cliché. Note sull'*Amica geniale* di Elena Ferrante. *Allegoria*, XXVIII (87), 174–178. Available at: https://www.allegoriaonline.it/929-da-napoli-al-cliche-note-sull-amica-geniale-di-elena-ferrante. (Accessed 5 February 2024).

Robinson R. (2022). A problem of middlebrow style: Dialect and translation in Elena Ferrante's Naples tetralogy. *Textual Practice*, 36(4), 528–604. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2030514

Sacco, M. (2016). Leggere Elena Ferrante. Cosa scrive, *Il Pickwick*, 11 April. Available at: https://www.ilpickwick.it/index.php/letteratura/item/2599-leggere-elena-ferrante-come-scrive. (Accessed 26 December 2023).

Sant, J. (2017). *The ethics of poetic force Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Paul Celan* (Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University). Available at: https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/107652/. (Accessed 20 May 2024).

Schappell, E. (2015). The mysterious, anonymous author Elena Ferrante on the conclusion of her Neapolitan novels, *Vanity Fair*, 27 August. Available at: https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/elena-ferrante-interview-the-story-of-the-lost-child. (Accessed 5 February 2024).

Segarra, M. (2019). Derrida, Cixous, and feminine writing, in J. M. Rabaté (ed), *Understanding Derrida, Understanding Modernism* (pp. 226–239). New York: Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501331893.0022

Segarra, M. (2021). Venturas y desventuras de la *écriture féminine*. *Tropelías Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada*, 36, 86–100. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_tropelias/tropelias.2021365311

Weil, K. (2006). French feminism's *écriture feminine*, in E. Rooney (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807069.008

Wood, J. (2013). Women on the verge: The fiction of Elena Ferrante, *New Yorker*, 13 January. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/women-on-the-verge. (Accessed 5 February 2024).

Citation: Miloš, B. and Dulibić-Paljar, D. (2025). 'Being Inside a Tangled Knot': *Écriture Féminine* and Elena Ferrante. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 13. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16023

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 14
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Stray Visuality in Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*

Katarzyna Paszkiewicz [1*]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

In dialogue with Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed's work on the concept of 'stray', this video essay explores 'stray visuality': visuality that exceeds the anthropocentric and ocularcentric frames of reference. Focusing on Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*, this essay argues that her cinema is profoundly stray, not only because it makes room for a variety of human and non-human strays, but also because of its formal engagement with strayness. Even though at first glance *American Honey* is concerned with the phenomenological rhythms of its human protagonist, the camera often strays away from her to look at other things, while redrawing the anthropocentric hierarchies often in unsettling, uncanny ways. This video essay shows that (eco-)videographic criticism itself can be thought of as a vehicle for retraining our perception.

Keywords: stray visuality, the non-human, Andrea Arnold, Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed

Video link: https://vimeo.com/978442545

ACCOMPANYING COMMENTARY

This video essay opens with a quote from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, in which she writes about the 'sublime':

> When the starry sky, a vista of open seas, or a stained-glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things I see, hear, or think. The 'sublime' object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which […] transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. (Kristeva, 1982: 12)[1]

It is through this poetic and near-cinematic imagery that Kristeva enacts what she is struggling to comprehend, transporting the reader beyond the confines of language and, indeed, beyond the purely visual. In Kristeva's writing, like in the 'sensuous methodologies' of videographic research (Grant, 2013, 2016), the form and the content intermingle. Through her words, Kristeva is prompting us to stray.

In dialogue with Kristeva, and Barbara Creed's reflection (2017) on 'stray ethics' in the Anthropocene,[2] this video essay examines what I dub 'stray visuality': visuality that exceeds the anthropocentric and ocularcentric frames of reference. Deriving from my previous work on Andrea Arnold and her stray aesthetics (Paszkiewicz, 2021a, 2023), with a particular focus on Arnold's rewriting of the road film in *American Honey*, I argue that her cinema is profoundly stray, not only because it makes room for a variety of human and non-human strays, but also because of its ongoing formal and stylistic engagement with strayness. I show how, even though at first glance *American Honey* is concerned with the phenomenological rhythms of its human protagonist, the camera often strays

[1] In the French version of this passage, Kristeva uses the verb 'se perdre' (to lose oneself) instead of 'stray': 'je me perds pour être'. As Barbara Creed observes, 'synonyms for stray are to become "lost, abandoned, homeless, roaming, vagrant"' (2017: 8). All of these terms, as I show in my video essay, resonate deeply with Andrea Arnold's work.

[2] Stray ethics is closely related with the concept of care. As Creed puts it, 'a stray ethics asks us to put ourselves in the place of the other, while also recognising the importance of acting upon the experience through an ethics of care', and as such, it offers 'an alternative for living in the Anthropocene' (2017: 101 and 99).

[1] *University of the Balearic Islands*, SPAIN
*Corresponding Author: katarzyna.paszkiewicz@uib.es

away from her to look at other things, while redrawing the anthropocentric hierarchies often in unsettling, uncanny ways.[3]

As a research method to investigate 'stray visuality', I have chosen to maintain Arnold's scale and near-square format for all clips, while keeping most of the screen space in darkness. Just like Arnold's aspect ratio, this choice delimits the visual field, questioning the wide-open vistas of far-reaching landscapes that have traditionally served as a mere background for narratives of progress and heroic action in Hollywood Westerns and road movies. Much has been written about how the beautified framings of landscape in these genres contribute to the glorification of the US nation (Klinger, 1997: 189-192), carefully tied to 'the establishment of white male authority over territory and peoples that seemingly require subjection' (Tasker, 2017: 112). Arnold revisits this convention by emphasising the constrained movement of her underprivileged female protagonist and, most importantly, by enclosing the expansive vistas in narrow, claustrophobic frames; yet, in doing so, she also offers glimpses of the non-human lives that generate a deep sensorial immersion with the environment, both 'built' and 'natural'.[4]

In keeping with Arnold's aesthetics but reorienting the attention away from most of the human characters in the film, I have foregrounded the material quality of landscape and phenomenological rhythms of its inhabitants – many of whom also inhabit the 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) of motels and temporary homes – while opting for the kind of montage that would be in tune with Arnold's poetic glimpses. The soundscape of the video essay re-performs and intensifies the sounds already present in *American Honey*: the acoustic environment of the traffic superimposed with the sound of flapping wings, birds' chirping, cows' mooing and, towards the end of the video essay, the sound of the protagonist suffocating under water. The latter purposefully destabilises the film's utopian ending (Kirby, 2019), revealing the fragility of human and non-human survival in a damaged world. An earlier repetition of a textured shot of blood-stained grass in the proximity of the slaughterhouse, which appears only momentarily in the source film, stretches out the cinematic image (Mulvey, 2006: 146) and magnifies the haunting quality of the landscape: the capitalist appropriation of 'cheap Nature' (Moore, 2016), which encompasses both non-human animals and those human animals that have been barred from participating in the Anthropos. These strategies reveal the film's subtle questioning of its hopeful ending: the anthropocentric power cannot be divorced from the repeated patterns of gendered, class and racialised violence.

If, as I have argued elsewhere, building on Anna Tsing (2015), ecocinema can be understood as part of 'the arts of noticing' (Paszkiewicz, 2021b), then straying as an aesthetic strategy, which allows for redirecting the attention to the non-human and noticing the details that first passed unnoticed,[5] can also be read as an ecocinematic endeavour. In this sense, videographic research itself can be thought of as a vehicle for retraining our perception (MacDonald, 2013) or as a site where our 'sense of reciprocity with the world' can be re-learnt, as John Landreville, drawing on Lauren Berlant, proposes in his revisiting of ecocinematic paradigms. That is, audio-visual film analysis can work as an 'amplifier' or 'sensitizer' (Neimanis, 2017: 59) that increases the ecocinematic dimension of the studied film and our attunement to it, as well as, more broadly, our attunement to the world. Put simply, videographic criticism itself can do the ecological work. With this in view, rather than making videos *about* ecological or environmentalist issues, what is at stake in (eco-)videographic criticism is precisely the retraining of perception. In Catherine Grant's words, videographic work often 'reveals, materializes and, indeed, re-performs something that is already there' in the source film, 'but which is difficult to see or to reflect on fully at normal speed in its original cinematic flow' (2024). While Grant refers here to Laura Mulvey's reflections on delayed cinema, such methods of noticing can also involve selecting, repeating, and contraposing images, sounds and words, while straying from the film's human-centred plots, not only to make certain visual clues and meanings visible, but also to 'sweep [us] beyond the things [we] see, hear, or think' (Kristeva, 1982: 12).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Belén Iniesta for her creative input into this video essay. This video was supported by the research project 'Cinema and Environment: Affective Ecologies in the Anthropocene', funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (grant PID2019-110068GA-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033).

[3] See also Catherine Grant's (2016) influential video essay, 'Un/Contained', that reveals the haunting quality of Arnold's poetics in *Fish Tank*.

[4] On the non-human in the cinema of Andrea Arnold, see also Thornham (2016), Lawrence (2016), and Forrest (2020), among others.

[5] See also Mulvey's (2006) rethinking of Roland Barthes's notion of the *punctum* in cinematic ways.

REFERENCES

Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London and New York: Verso.

Creed, B. (2017). *Stray: Human-animal ethics in the Anthropocene*. Sydney: Power Publications.

Forrest, D. (2020). *New Realism: Contemporary British Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474413046

Grant, C. (2013). Déjà-viewing? Videographic experiments in intertextual film studies. *Mediascape*. Available at: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/41656/. (Accessed 30 October 2024).

Grant, C. (2016). Beyond tautology? Audio-visual film criticism. *Film Criticism*, 40(1). https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.113

Grant, C. (2024). 'I learned an awful lot in Little Rock': Laura Mulvey reflects on her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Remix. *[in]Transition*, 11(1). https://doi.org/10.16995/intransition.15503

Kirby, J. (2019). American Utopia: Socio-economic critique and utopia in *American Honey* and *The Florida Project*. *Senses of Cinema*, 92. Available at: http://sensesofcinema.com/2019/feature-articles/american-utopia-socio-economic-critique-and-utopia-in-american-honey-and-the-florida-project/. (Accessed 30 October 2024).

Klinger, B. (1997). The Road to Dystopia, in S. Cohan and I. Rae Hark (eds), *The Road Movie Book* (pp. 179–203). New York: Routledge.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Landreville, J. (2019). Alternative ethics for ecocinema: *The Tree of Life* and post-continuity aesthetics. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 17(1), 99–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1563365

Lawrence, M. (2016). Nature and the non-human in Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13(1), 177–194. https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2016.0306

MacDonald, S. (2013). The ecocinema experience, in S. Rust, S. Monani and S. Cubitt (eds), *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (pp. 17–42). New York: Routledge.

Moore, J. (2016). *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*. Oakland: PM Press.

Mulvey, L. (2006). *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the moving image*. London: Reaktion Books.

Neimanis, A. (2017). *Bodies of Water: Posthuman feminist phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415

Paszkiewicz, K. (2021a). Framing the non-human: *American Honey* as eco-road movie. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 18(3), 303–328. https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2021.0576

Paszkiewicz, K. (2021b). Cinema and environment: The arts of noticing in the Anthropocene. *Res Rhetorica*, 8(2), 2–21. https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2021.2.1

Paszkiewicz, K. (2023). Stray Aesthetic in the Cinema of Andrea Arnold. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 15. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2023.2196808

Tasker, Y. (2017). Contested masculinities: The action film, the war film, and the Western, in K. Lené Hole, D. Jelača, E. A. Kaplan and P. Petro (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Cinema & Gender* (pp. 111–120). New York: Routledge.

Thornham, S. (2016). 'Not a country at all': Landscape and *Wuthering Heights*. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13(1), 214–231. https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2016.0308

Tsing, A. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548

Citation: Paszkiewicz, K. (2025). Stray Visuality in Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 14. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16024


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 15
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

'I'm Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive': Palestinian Digital Feminism and Intersectional Narratives of Resistance

Sahar Khamis [1]*, Felicity Sena Dogbatse [1]

Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study adopts a postcolonial feminist intersectional approach to investigate the agency and activism of Palestinian women who are utilising social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, to amplify their voices of resistance, share their narratives of empowerment, and challenge mainstream Western media narratives amid the war in Gaza. Through analysing a number of prominent Palestinian women digital activists' social media accounts, the study unpacks the intersectionality and overlap between myriad forms of feminist resistances and activisms which crosscut the parallel political and social spheres, and private and public spheres. The study explores the ways through which these women activists deploy digital media to convey their messages and analyses the most important themes they focus on, such as asserting their empowerment, showcasing their resistance, boosting their visibility, and galvanising international solidarity and support. The study unpacks the affordances of these social media platforms, such as the power of visual communication through images and videos, and the role they play in enhancing the visibility of women's resistances and activisms and broadening their global outreach. The study investigates how digital spaces empower marginalised voices and it contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and hybridity of intersectional, global feminist activisms and resistances.

Keywords: social media, Palestinian women, digital feminism, online activism, Gaza war

INTRODUCTION

The Gaza war which erupted in October 2023 has been a focal point of global attention, due to the significant humanitarian toll, extensive damage, and high casualty figures (London *et al.*, 2024). Thousands have died in Israel's war on Gaza, thousands more have been left seriously injured or missing under the debris, and hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee to overcrowded shelters and makeshift homes. The financial cost has also been high, with losses amounting to billions of dollars, severely impairing Gaza's already fragile economy (Khalidi and Iwidat, 2024).

The gravity and scale of this humanitarian disaster necessitates a closer look at its coverage in international media outlets, especially mainstream Western media, compared to social media platforms, and the most important characteristics of each. It also requires an in-depth exploration of the rise of alternative voices on digital platforms, such as Palestinian digital activists, who challenge and resist the dominant narratives surrounding the war on Gaza through various forms of cyberactivism (Howard, 2011).

Against the backdrop of this temporal context, namely the war on Gaza, this study pays special attention to the multiple roles that Palestinian women activists have been playing, and how they have been using digital media tools to fill the gaps in legacy media's coverage of this war.

Gaps in Mainstream Western Media Coverage

The coverage of the Gaza war in mainstream Western media has been problematic. According to Fahmy *et al.* (2024), 'individual, media routines, organizational, institutional, and social systems level factors' have an effect on how this war is covered by journalists and how in-depth and rich the stories written by those who have experienced it firsthand are (174). This is primarily because mainstream media frequently encounters a variety of problems in its efforts to give the public the information they need about this war, such as logistical limitations, ideological conflicts, and political restrictions (Fahmy *et al.*, 2024).

[1] *University of Maryland, College Park*, USA
***Corresponding Author:** skhamis@umd.edu

Consequently, there has been an ongoing critique, particularly in the Middle East and amongst Palestinian supporters worldwide, that mainstream Western media have not covered the Gaza war truthfully, impartially, and comprehensively (Khamis, 2023a). Numerous factors have been cited as the cause behind this, including the one-sided coverage of the crisis that favoured the Israeli narrative over the Palestinian narrative. This was particularly evident when relying on official reports from the Israeli side, more than the Palestinian side (Youmans, 2024).

The lack of historical contextualisation of this intricate and protracted conflict, which has lasted for several decades, and the dehumanisation of the Palestinian victims—by either downplaying or ignoring the severity of their daily humanitarian suffering—are two other related criticisms of this coverage (Khamis, 2023a).

There are a number of reasons for these gaps in the coverage of the Gaza war by mainstream Western media. These include the fact that international journalists have limited access because of political restrictions from the Israeli side and concerns about their safety which further limit their ability to report comprehensively (CPJ, 2023, 2024; Palmer, 2022). Therefore, a large number of foreign media outlets regularly depend on statements from the Israeli government and state embedded journalism, which restricts the range of viewpoints and the breadth and depth of news reporting.

Furthermore, many mainstream Western media outlets have mischaracterised and reduced the complexity of the Gaza crisis, which has been entwined with numerous regional and international geopolitical interests for many years, to an 'Israel-Hamas conflict,' exacerbating the reductionism and decontextualisation of this war's media coverage (Khamis, 2023a).

According to Johnson (2023), distorted reports of the first several months of the Gaza conflict were broadcast by CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News. According to Pérez Castro (2024), the majority of news reports regarding the Gaza war that were published in print media—including prestigious newspapers like The New York Times, Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times—favoured Israel and showed a persistent bias against the Palestinian people, paying little attention to their suffering.

Youmans (2024) contends that 'News outlets have consistently prioritized Israeli lives over Palestinian ones, adopting Israeli framing and narratives even when they fail to stand up to scrutiny.' This style of reporting frequently produces a narrative that is created by the powerful and ignores the underprivileged.

This has been applicable to Western media's coverage of the Gaza crisis which has been criticised for its shortcomings in addressing pain, elevating Palestinian voices, giving historical context, and humanising the victims (Zghoul, 2022). Due to the underreporting of Palestinian civilian deaths and the emphasis on military data, rather than firsthand accounts of civilian loss and resilience, the public's perspectives on the war have been distorted because of the lack of accurate and complete information (Fahmy *et al*., 2024; Khamis, 2023a; Peterson, 2024).

Palestinian perspectives and voices have not been sufficiently represented by Western media, particularly American media. According to Badran *et al.* (2024), official narratives frequently obscure the voices of individuals who live in Gaza, preventing the general public from learning about the variety of individual experiences and ordinary lives of the Palestinians, who are often misrepresented as either passive victims or, worse, violent villains.

While Palestinian lives have not received sufficient attention, depth, or specifics, there has been a discernible trend to concentrate more on Israeli experiences, giving Israeli narratives more emotional depth and relatability (Buheji, 2024). Palestinians are dehumanised by this discrepancy in media coverage patterns, which turns them from unique people with complex lives into insignificant statistics. The lack of narratives that emphasise their hopes, perseverance, and day-to-day hardships strengthens preconceptions, prevents empathy, and aids misrepresentation.

Another notable void in Western media coverage has been the poor contextual analysis of the political and historical aspects. Reports around the Gaza war frequently exclude essential information about the protracted history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is key to understanding the adversarial dynamics of the war (Pérez Castro, 2024). Audiences are left with a superficial and contemporary grasp of this conflict that lacks in-depth awareness of its historical context.

Moreover, political barriers, ideological challenges, and logistical constraints have hindered the journalists' ability to provide in-depth coverage, leading to a skewed reporting that often prioritises the Israeli narratives. The insufficient historical context, underreporting of Palestinian suffering, and the absence of Palestinian voices dehumanised the Palestinians and reduced their stories to mere statistics. This lack of diverse perspectives and emotional depth further skewed public perceptions about the Palestinians, reinforced power imbalances, and boosted misrepresentation.

Alternative Narratives Via Digital Media

Due to its ability to bridge gaps and fill voids in mainstream media coverage, social media platforms have emerged as essential tools for presenting alternative narratives (Kokeyo, 2023). The way conflicts are reported has changed dramatically as a result of social media, which greatly influenced the Gaza war coverage (Avelar, 2024).

Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have given laypeople a voice by displaying their images, real-time updates, and personal narratives. Popular posts and hashtags, including #freepalestine and #Gazaunderattack, have raised awareness and sparked discussions beyond national boundaries, as well as occasionally outside ideological ones (Shestakov, 2022). Through offering lively firsthand reports from those on the ground and enabling them to provide real-time updates, social media sites have given voice to those who are otherwise voiceless, marginalised, and invisible (Dogbatse, 2024).

Diverse points of view are made possible by citizen journalism through presenting tales that conventional media might not cover. A large worldwide audience can now hear the viewpoints of common people, thanks to the democratisation of information (George, 2024; Schmitt *et al.*, 2024).

Human rights violations and humanitarian issues that are commonly disregarded by mainstream media are among the many issues that activists, and the general public, use social media to raise awareness of (Awwad and Toyama, 2024), thus providing thorough knowledge of conflicts.

Therefore, social media has a big impact on how people perceive and disseminate information regarding the Gaza war. For instance, social media 'influences the way Americans, especially young Americans, perceive the conflict' (Georgios *et al.*, 2023).

Social media, especially Instagram and TikTok, is where younger viewers obtain more news, compared to conventional media like television and newspapers. According to Bruns and Hanusch (2017), viewers' perceptions of events are influenced by hashtags, viral posts, and multimedia content.

Through the affordances of digital platforms, users can participate directly with shared materials online, increasing engagement and interactivity. Social media makes online campaigns that raise awareness and promote global action—like joining petitions and fundraising—more accessible. Using audio-visuals and hashtags like #GazaUnderAttack, people around the world have come together to show support and awareness (Manor and Crilley, 2018). These platforms assist the organisation of grassroots efforts aimed at creating momentum and influencing global public opinion, as well as giving younger audiences access to the most recent updates on the situation in Gaza.

Furthermore, community development and internet networking are critical for raising the funds required to support charity projects. According to Al Attar and Brik (2024), these platforms foster comprehensive dialogues, resource sharing, and coordinated actions of activism, all of which boost collective engagement and global solidarity.

Thus, despite its limitations, such as the speed at which information spreads, which invites misinformation and creates problems with verification, social media is still crucial for increasing awareness, strengthening mobilisation and solidarity, and filling the gaps in mainstream media coverage, through sharing eyewitnesses' first-hand accounts. These functions are clearly manifested in Palestinian women's digital activism when covering the Gaza war, as will be discussed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study unpacks the myriad ways through which Palestinian women activists have utilised digital media platforms to challenge mainstream Western media's coverage of the Gaza war, amplify their voices of resistance, share their alternative narratives, and assert their feminist identities.

In doing so, it attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the various forms of Palestinian digital feminist activism via Instagram and TikTok?
2. What are the main themes in Palestinian digital feminist activism via Instagram and TikTok?
3. How can social media affordances serve Palestinian digital feminist activism?

These questions will be addressed in the article's discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digital Feminist Activism: An Intersectional Postcolonial Approach

This study adopts a postcolonial intersectional feminist approach (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Al-Ali, 2012; Joseph, 2000; Moghadam, 2003). This approach is informed by the conceptualisation of feminism as the complex and dynamic relationship between awareness and action, consciousness-raising and mobilisation, and the importance of unpacking women's unique individual personal experiences to acknowledge their diverse realities and amplify their varied voices (Radsch and Khamis, 2013).

By doing so, this approach challenges rigid and standard conceptualisations of Western feminism which can obscure the diversities and complexities of women's lived experiences, forms of agency, and expressions of activism (AlKhaled, 2021). Therefore, it offers a novel approach in the realm of investigating the multiplicity,

plurality, and *hybridity* of transitioning feminisms and activisms across different social, cultural, historical, and geographical contexts (Tzoreff, 2014).

Most importantly, this approach compels us to investigate the complexities and nuances of shifting feminist identities and resistances *beyond* the 'gender norms' vs. 'modernity,' or the 'tradition' vs. 'modernisation,' or even the 'religious' vs. 'secular' dichotomies, since it acknowledges that these modes of feminist resistance are not mutually exclusive, rather they coexist in parallel and they overlap, giving birth to new *hybrid* identities which crosscut multiple spheres.

Therefore, adopting an intersectional feminist approach necessitates moving away from the static mindset of a 'one size fits all' model of feminism and acknowledging the multiple forms of feminisms, activisms, and resistances, while denouncing the adoption of a western-centric, ethnocentric, uniform feminist model, which privileges western-defined feminism, as the only valid form of feminism to be emulated and adopted by women everywhere (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Al-Ali, 2012; Joseph, 2000; Moghadam, 2003; Walby, 2011).

A number of scholars adopting this postcolonial intersectional feminist approach asserted the necessity of moving away from this orientalist approach, through acknowledging the necessity of appreciating the multiple forms of activisms and feminisms which prevail in non-Western communities in the Global South, including Arab and Muslim societies, among different groups of women representing varying demographics, experiences, manifestations of religiosity, and expressions of activism and resistance to combat different layers of oppression across the social and political spheres simultaneously. Fully embracing this postcolonial intersectional feminist lens entails resisting the stereotypical orientalist misperceptions of the Global South and of Arab and Muslim women's gendered identities (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Moallem, 2005). This necessitates acknowledging, and accepting, their varied forms of identity-expression (Khamis, 2023b).

Therefore, this approach contributes to countering wider structures of social and political injustice and oppression and the justifications behind them which are oftentimes embedded in deep colonial, orientalist, and Islamophobic discourses which legitimise the dehumanisation of the 'Other' (Khamis, 2023b).

Moreover, adopting such an approach necessitates avoiding the so-called 'save the Muslim woman syndrome' (Abu-Lughod, 2013) which implies that Arab and Muslim women are helpless, oppressed, and weak beings who lack *agency* and, therefore, need to be *saved* by 'Others,' especially (women with agency, that is to say: white, middle class and educated) Western feminists.

One of the most important techniques which women from marginalised communities, including in the Arab World and the Muslim World, have been relying on to defy their sidelining, invisibility, and misrepresentation has been cyberactivism (Howard, 2011), especially cyberfeminism (Radsch and Khamis, 2013), which has been providing them with the needed tools to raise their voices, share their narratives, and defy their stereotypes and marginalisation, both socially and politically. There is a growing body of intersectional interdisciplinary feminist scholarship which is paying special attention to bringing transnational and postcolonial approaches into the analysis of 'digital feminist activism' which refers to digital practices and online spaces that activists engage with to promote feminist voices and experiences (Vachhani, 2023).

Another interconnected term is 'networked feminism' which refers to 'a form of contemporary political action that is characterized by complex connectivity and which operates at the intersections of online and offline' (Fotopoulou, 2016: 49). This term encompasses 'broader questions of how technology shapes the social imaginaries of feminist politics' (Vachhani, 2023: 1033).

These terms are particularly relevant to this study, as they help unpack networked activist and feminist movements in the Global South and help understand the potentials, nuances, limitations, and complexities of the digital feminist activism of the discussed Palestinian women.

Social Media Affordances as Tools for Feminist Digital Activism

Social media platforms have diverse features and unique affordances. Understanding the affordances of each social media platform helps determine their role in this study, such as raising awareness, mobilising action, or fostering deeper connections. It matters because these affordances affect how women in Gaza represent their realities, how they are perceived by the global community, and how their stories and voices are amplified. In recent years, social media platforms have transformed the ways in which individuals and groups engage in activism, share stories, and build movements.

Two of the most prominent social media platforms—Instagram and TikTok—offer distinct affordances that shape how content is created, shared, and consumed. Both platforms prioritise visual content, but their unique features influence how users communicate and interact with audiences (Lu and Steele, 2018). Understanding these distinctions is critical for appreciating the role of social media in contemporary advocacy, especially in contexts where visibility and voice are often constrained by political and social factors (Chalise, 2024).

Both Instagram and TikTok are designed around the principle of visual content, making them powerful tools for advocacy and activism. According to Anderson (2020), Instagram initially a photo-sharing platform, has

evolved to include a variety of content formats such as photos, videos, Stories, Reels, and IGTV for longer-form content. TikTok, on the other hand, is entirely video-based, allowing users to create short, engaging clips that can be easily shared (Schellewald, 2021). The visual nature of both platforms enables users to communicate powerful stories, and for women in Gaza, these affordances provide opportunities to depict their daily realities and struggles in ways that transcend language barriers.

Another similarity is the reliance on user-generated content and community interaction. Both platforms encourage active participation, whether through creating content or engaging with others through likes, comments, and shares. This interactivity is essential for advocacy movements because it allows activists to foster a sense of community and support (Leong *et al.*, 2019). Women in Gaza can, for example, post videos of their daily lives under occupation, which can prompt solidarity and emotional engagement from audiences around the world.

Instagram and TikTok are also driven by algorithms that prioritise popular content, making it possible for activists to reach wide audiences if their content gains traction. The ability to go viral on either platform means that even marginalised voices, such as those of the women in Gaza, can achieve a level of global recognition, drawing attention to issues that might otherwise remain ignored by mainstream media.

According to Lei (2024), "Achieving viral success on TikTok and Instagram requires a complex mix of aggressive audience engagement with careful protection of brand reputation" (5). This means that women in Gaza could achieve a level of global recognition and viral success, while balancing drawing attention and boosting engagement with safeguarding their personal identities for security reasons.

Despite these similarities, Instagram and TikTok differ in crucial ways that affect how content is created and shared. One of the most significant differences is the format and length of the content. TikTok is designed for short-form video content, typically between 15 seconds and 3 minutes, encouraging quick "short video content, catchy, and visually engaging narratives" (Steele, 2021: 463). This format suits content that needs to grab attention quickly and fits well with TikTok's algorithm, which aggressively recommends new content on the 'For You Page' (FYP). In contrast, Instagram offers a broader range of content formats, from single photos and videos to multi-part Stories and IGTV for longer video content. This flexibility allows for more detailed and sustained storytelling which can be crucial for activism that requires context and explanation, as is often the case in advocacy related to complex socio-political issues like those in Gaza.

TikTok places a strong emphasis on discovery by frequently displaying material to users from networks other than their own (Kaye *et al.*, 2022). Rapid viral dissemination is made possible by this characteristic, particularly when users interact with popular music or hot subjects. TikTok's discovery feature may allow women in Gaza to share their stories with a much wider audience, possibly even attracting attention from abroad (Cervi and Divon, 2023). But this emphasis on virality also means that TikTok content can be ephemeral and lacking deep engagement, as trends change quickly.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative methods to investigate the use of social media sites, especially Instagram and TikTok, by Palestinian women activists to share their narratives around the war in Gaza. Qualitative research is particularly relevant for this study, since it allows for deep, rich, and contextual descriptions and analysis of social phenomena and offers valuable tools for understanding them and unpacking their complexities (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative approach enabled a comprehensive investigation of the varied ways through which women in Gaza utilise social media, including the content they share, the issues they discuss, and the ways they express themselves, given the continuous nature of digital communication (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Data Collection

This study's data has been manually extracted from public Instagram and TikTok accounts online belonging to Gaza-based women. To guarantee that only pertinent content has been gathered and to enable in-the-moment observations of user behaviour on various sites, a manual scraping technique has been used. Manual scraping refers to the process of manually collecting data from websites or social media platforms by directly observing and recording the content, rather than using automated software tools, allowing for more precise and contextually relevant data collection (Silverman, 2016). Manual methods allow researchers to apply consistent criteria when selecting and coding data, ensuring methodological rigor and facilitating more accurate comparative analyses across different platforms (Flick, 2018).

Using a purposive sampling technique (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015), we selected videos and online contents which are most relevant to this study. We chose samples of digital postings about Gaza that specifically represent the voices of Palestinian women activists and journalists. The accounts from which these postings have been selected were chosen due to the public prominence of the digital content creators and their participation in social and political struggles, as well as the visibility of their platforms and the regularity of their online activities.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, a popular technique in qualitative research, was used to examine the gathered data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A methodical investigation of the recurrent themes in the content published on TikTok and Instagram was made possible via thematic analysis. The investigation concentrated on the ways in which Palestinian women use these platforms for advocacy, self-expression, and solidarity—particularly in light of Gaza's societal constraints and political crisis.

The process involved coding the data (posts, pictures and videos) to come up with key themes, such as empowerment, resistance, and community-building, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In thematic analysis, visuals such as charts, diagrams, or infographics can enhance the interpretation of patterns and the relationships between themes. For example, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that visuals offer a clear way to represent the connections and distinctions between emerging themes. This approach emphasises clarity in illustrating relationships among themes, making the data more accessible and engaging for audiences (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of this political crisis, ethical considerations were paramount. The study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring that no private or sensitive information has been collected, and that all the accounts and postings which have been analysed were publicly available, not private or restricted accounts, and were accessible. Obtaining informed consent was not applicable in this case, since the study relied on publicly available data. No identifying details were shared to protect the anonymity and privacy of the users who are engaging with these online accounts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

RQ1: The Various Forms of Palestinian Digital Feminist Activism

The Palestinian people, particularly women and children, have borne the brunt of the Gaza war's devastating effects. As the violence escalates, it becomes increasingly crucial to highlight the stories of those most impacted.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective (Al-wazedi, 2020; Chambers and Watkins, 2012), the voices of Palestinian women are vital in challenging the intersecting forces of imperialism, patriarchy, and occupation. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become crucial tools for Palestinian female journalists and influencers to amplify these narratives. These platforms serve as modern-day 'affordances'—enabling resources that allow women to both resist and reframe dominant colonial and patriarchal discourses (Lu and Steele, 2018).

Through their digital activism, these women are reshaping global perceptions by foregrounding the gendered and intersectional dimensions of the Palestinian struggle. They use social media not only to document the suffering of women and children but also to emphasise resilience and resistance within a broader postcolonial context (Banerjee and Kankaria, 2022). This fusion of feminist discourse with digital tools highlights the continued relevance of postcolonial feminism in contemporary conflicts, as these influencers and journalists stand at the intersection of resistance, gender, and digital activism, reclaiming narratives that have often been marginalised or silenced.

As noted by Awwad and Toyama (2024), social media democratises access to information, allowing oppressed communities to reclaim their narratives and challenge the gatekeeping of mainstream media. For instance, during initial outbreaks of violence, when airstrikes first targeted densely populated areas in Gaza, Palestinian influencers such as Mariam Barghouti and Rania Zabaneh shared real-time updates from Gaza through the live share feature of Instagram. These posts often focused on the immediate chaos, showing the destruction of homes, the displacement of families, and the psychological toll on children.

As tensions continued to rise, their posts began to delve deeper into the long-standing effects of occupation. Barghouti, for example, used Instagram stories to draw parallels between the sudden escalation of violence and the enduring impacts of occupation, framing her posts around themes of intergenerational trauma and resilience in the face of military aggression. She emphasises how the conflict disproportionately affects Palestinian women and children, often drawing attention to their experiences that are frequently overlooked in conventional media.

By sharing posts, reels, and IGTV content, Barghouti fosters a form of activism that humanises Palestinian experiences, allowing her global audience to witness the destruction of homes, the displacement of families, and the loss of innocent lives. Her work situates the resilience of Palestinian women within a broader framework of resistance against both military occupation and gendered oppression.

When Al Jazeera's senior producer Rania Zabaneh covers the Gaza war, she focuses on the impacts on women and children. Through her Instagram and Twitter accounts, she shares reports that shed light on the everyday

struggles of Palestinian women living under occupation. Her content includes images and videos that document the aftermath of bombings, interviews with grieving mothers, and stories of women who have resisted the occupation in both subtle and overt ways. Zabaneh emphasises the gendered dimensions of conflict, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Palestinian women, such as the need to care for their children amidst extreme stress.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective (Al-wazedi, 2020; Chambers and Watkins, 2012), the stories shared by these women on social media challenge imperialistic narratives that often obscure Palestinian lives, especially the gravity of women's struggle during this war. This variation in their activism, from documenting immediate trauma to fostering resilience and building international solidarity, highlights the adaptability and complexity of their resistance, and shows the transition from the workspace, in the case of professional journalists, to their personal lives to illustrate the multifaceted reality of living under prolonged occupation.

RQ2: The Main Themes in Palestinian Digital Feminist Activism

Feminist identity as Palestinian resistance and empowerment

In the context of the Palestinian struggle, postcolonial feminism intricately interweaves national liberation with gendered resilience, positioning Palestinian women as critical figures in the resistance movement. Challenging the misperception of Arab and Muslim women as desperate and weak women, the roles of Palestinian women as journalists and influencers who capture both suffering and resilience as agents of resistance in today's digital age illuminates the layered realities of war from distinctly gendered and intersectional perspectives (Puar, 2017).

One glaring example is how the young Palestinian journalist, Bisan Owda, used her personal Instagram platform to document the war. Her real-time reporting from Gaza using her account 'I'm Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive' went viral on AJ+, winning a 2024 Emmy Award. It brought unparalleled visibility to the daily toll of the conflict on women and children and captured vivid portrayals of survival, featuring images of women shielding children from explosions and documenting scenes of families in cramped shelters. This level of visibility fills mainstream media's gaps in humanising Palestinians.

Owda's posts highlight the intersectionality inherent in her experience as a young woman journalist navigating both patriarchal norms and the colonial experience of occupation. Her ability to reach international audiences underscores the importance of 'feminist knowledge' in postcolonial contexts, allowing global viewers to grasp the compounded oppressions faced by Palestinian women and children through her lens of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

Another compelling example is Palestinian journalist, Nour Odeh, who leverages her Instagram account to provide daily updates on the situation in Gaza. Her work exemplifies what Haraway (1988) refers to as 'situated knowledge,' reflecting the lived experiences of those most affected by conflict. One particular post by Odeh in December 2023 shows a mother comforting her child under the flashing lights of explosions, symbolising both vulnerability and fortitude. Her posts highlight women's dual roles as nurturers and symbols of Palestinian resistance.

Furthermore, Odeh critiques global feminist movements for their failure to address the unique challenges faced by Palestinian women living under colonial oppression and patriarchal structures. Odeh's posts challenge the view of women as mere victims, instead positioning them as central agents of resistance. Thus, contextualising personal suffering within broader colonial and patriarchal structures, making a compelling case for intersectional solidarity with marginalised women globally.

Similarly, TikTok influencer @palestinianmommy utilises humour, vlogs, and political commentary to portray the everyday struggles of Palestinian mothers. In one widely shared video, she juxtaposes the mundane act of cooking dinner with the backdrop of an air raid, illustrating the juxtaposition of normalcy and the devastating realities of wartime survival. The video's concluding appeal for global solidarity underscores the intersection of personal experience and political action, resonating with hooks' (1984) notion of the 'personal as political.' This framing contextualises the lived experiences of oppressed individuals within broader narratives of resistance and power.

Moreover, by contrasting daily life with the imminent threat of violence, the young Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi underscores how Palestinian women's experiences of violence are not isolated events, rather they are part of a larger struggle against the intersecting oppressions of colonialism, militarism, and patriarchy.

Activist Ahed Tamimi gained international recognition as a teenager after being imprisoned for slapping an Israeli soldier. Through her Instagram advocacy for Palestinian rights, she emphasises the significant contributions of Palestinian women and girls in resisting Israeli occupation. Tamimi shares stories, images, and videos of young women participating in protests, challenging the stereotype of women as mere victims of conflict. In a notable post featuring young girls engaged in demonstrations, she underscores the importance of female empowerment in the fight for Palestinian liberation.

Collectively, the digital activism of women like Owda, Odeh, @palestinianmommy, and Tamimi underscores the power of crafting feminist narratives around the Palestinian liberation discourse. Each of these figures operates from unique vantage points within the intersectional web of gender, age, and sociopolitical status.

Their posts reveal how Palestinian women negotiate their multiple identities and advocate for global solidarity, challenging dominant narratives that ignore, marginalise, or dehumanise their experiences. This reclamation of agency highlights a postcolonial feminist commitment to intersectional activism that opposes gendered and colonial violence, fostering an inclusive solidarity that respects their lived realities and voices across diverse audiences (Hurley and Johnston, 2022).

Global solidarity through the intersectionality of gender and nationalism

Understanding the suffering of Palestinian women and children during the Gaza war necessitates adopting a postcolonial feminist lens which critically examines how colonial legacies intersect with gender, race, and class to create unique experiences of marginalisation, as articulated by theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). In the context of the Israeli occupation, Palestinian women journalists and influencers leverage social media platforms to underscore the disproportionate impacts of the conflict on women and children.

Mariam Barghouti, for example, utilises Instagram to highlight the compounded effects of the siege on Gaza. In one poignant post, she shares the story of a young girl who lost her mother in an airstrike, emphasising the distinct trauma that war inflicts on young girls compared to boys, and the specific emotional and social consequences of war on female youth (Barghouti, 2021). Furthermore, Barghouti's posts offer a critical intersectional narrative in which gender, age, and national identity converge, challenging the dehumanising framings that often dominate international media's coverage. By sharing these layered, personal accounts, her work calls for a global feminist solidarity rooted in understanding Palestinian women's specific experiences of oppression under occupation.

Similarly, Lara, known as @gazangirl, employs Twitter and Instagram to discuss the historical and ongoing effects of the occupation on Palestinian women. She underscores the necessity of women's participation in the Palestinian liberation movement and their roles within both resistance and identity-preservation spheres. By sharing her personal experiences as a woman living in Gaza, Lara draws attention to the surge in gender-based violence that accompanies conflict. Her Instagram Stories feature interviews with Palestinian mothers, revealing the psychological toll of raising children amid constant fear of airstrikes. Lara also critiques global feminist movements for their selective advocacy and lack of action in supporting the rights of Palestinian women, thus highlighting the need for a more inclusive feminist discourse.

Malak Mattar, a young Gaza-based artist, utilises Instagram to share her vivid artwork which reflects the suffering of Palestinian women and children throughout the ongoing conflict. Her poignant illustrations convey the complexities of resilience and the emotional burdens borne by women in crisis. In one piece, she depicts a mother shielding her child from a bomb, symbolising the protective instinct and psychological strain experienced by women during wartime. Through her visual storytelling, Mattar places women's experiences at the forefront of the larger narrative of the Israeli occupation, using colour and symbolism to illustrate the challenges facing Palestinian women.

Through their strategic use of social media tools and their affordances, these Palestinian women not only articulate their lived experiences, they also challenge dominant narratives surrounding gender, violence, and resistance. By centring their voices and everyday narratives, they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial feminism that recognises the intricate intersections of gendered identity and oppression within the specific context of conflict.

RQ3: Social Media Affordances and Palestinian Digital Feminist Activism

The differences in affordances between various social media platforms shape how they are being used by Palestinian women to advocate for their rights and share their stories. The use of intersectional, postcolonial feminist theory elucidates the digital strategies of Palestinian women to be activists (personal life) and journalists (professional life) during the crisis (Rogan and Budgeon, 2018).

Through their utilisation of digital platforms and their affordances, they not only challenge dominant media narratives but also create inclusive spaces that connect the women and children who have become victims and amplify their voices through telling real-time stories of the horrors of the war across local and global contexts

On TikTok, the affordance of this platform enables women to focus on short, impactful videos that align with global trends to gain immediate visibility. Given TikTok's virality potential, they capitalise on it to create quick emotional appeals, leveraging the platform' trending challenges, and they use music to draw attention to their struggles. This enables their videos which may show brief, yet powerful, moments about daily life in Gaza to resonate with viewers and gain prompt attention internationally.

However, the affordances of Instagram enable women in Gaza to engage in more sustained storytelling through longer videos, slideshows, and pictures. They can also use Instagram's photo posts or IGTV to provide more in-

depth accounts of their lives through interviews, photo essays, or longer video updates to illustrate how their personal lives have been affected by the political events. When navigating these complexities, these women turn to their personal digital media spaces on Instagram to give a day-to-day chronicling of events which helps them maintain a consistent presence in their audience's feed, while offering a deeper understanding of ongoing events (Ghabra, 2018).

Visuals have a unique capacity to evoke empathy, as people tend to react emotionally to human faces and real-life scenarios depicted in images and videos. A study by Melhemallaham (2024) highlighted the psychological impact of war images on students, showing that visual depictions of the war in Gaza intensified their emotional response and engagement. In times of war, visuals can humanise abstract statistics and distant events, compelling audiences to feel the urgency of the situation. Unlike text, images and videos provide instant information (Allan and Allbeson, 2024; Friend, 2007).

Additionally, Instagram's captioning feature which allows for the inclusion of text, provides important context that might be difficult to convey in TikTok's shorter format, such as the intricacies of life under occupation or the specific challenges women face in Gaza. For example, Mariam Barghouti and Rania Zabaneh, two women who are positioned in the midst of the war, use their personal social media accounts to draw attention to the suffering, demonstrating how these visual accounts offer a crucial channel for exposing the suffering of young and marginalised groups in Gaza.

According to Avelar (2024), younger audiences—who are more active on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok—often turn to short videos and images rather than traditional media sources to obtain their news. Videos and images create a lasting visual memory of an event and they serve as archives that can be revisited and shared long after the conflict ends. Migowski da Silva (2023) contends that this supports historical documentation and sustained advocacy initiatives. As demonstrated by hashtags like #FreePalestine and #GazaUnderAttack, which draw attention to the situation and promote global engagement, visuals also boost online participation.

Remrey (2024) indicates that videos and pictures from war areas provide firsthand perspectives on situations that may be hidden by mainstream media. By displaying raw firsthand information from the ground, they subvert official narratives. A narrative opposing the official news coverage of the Gaza conflict was established by social media posts showing the devastation of homes and the suffering of residents. Khamis (2023a) explains how Western mainstream media frequently dehumanises Palestinian victims by emphasising statistics over first-hand accounts.

In the context of postcolonial feminism, the social media affordances that these platforms offer are crucial for amplifying the narratives of marginalised voices (Dogbatse, 2024). They enable Palestinian women to assert their agency, challenge dominant discourses, and cultivate a global community of solidarity (Radsch and Khamis, 2013). Through these platforms, they not only document their realities but also engage in a transformative dialogue that redefines the intersections of gender, identity, and resistance within the context of ongoing colonial struggles.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on postcolonial intersectional feminism through examining how Palestinian women in Gaza use social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok as tools for resistance, empowerment, and activism, and how, by doing so, they are raising awareness about the plight of the Palestinian people and filling some of the gaps in legacy media's coverage of the Gaza war.

Through the lens of postcolonial feminism, the narratives shared by Palestinian women highlight the enduring legacies of colonialism and how they intersect with patriarchy, occupation, and militarism. In other words, these women are engaging in multilayered forms of resistance against multifaceted and intersectional forms of oppression.

The dual roles of Palestinian journalists like Rania Zabaneh and Mariam Barghouti illustrate the intersection of professional journalism and personal and political activism in the lives of these women. This intersection of personal and professional lives characterises feminist activism (Rogan and Budgeon, 2018). According to Chrifi Alaoui (2021), women's ability to put their personal narratives on digital platforms enables marginalised groups to reclaim narrative control and challenge mainstream discourses. Also, they draw attention to the amount of subjugation and discrimination they experience in order to survive, while trying to provide people with information globally.

Similarly, Ghabra underscores how Palestinian women activists use social media to humanise Palestinian experiences and foreground gendered perspectives which are often absent in legacy media, thus challenging dominant narratives that marginalise them and empowering their communities (Ghabra, 2018). This approach allows them to go beyond the constraints of traditional journalism, which prioritises objectivity, and embrace subjective storytelling as a form of resistance and self-representation.

To the women mentioned, social media tools became the avenue to challenge the dominant discourses around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which are narrow or one-sided. These women move beyond the 'othering' or muted group space to become subjects with voices geared towards change. This is particularly important in a context where mainstream media outlets, especially in the West, frequently portray Palestinians in dehumanising and distorted ways (Al-wazedi, 2020; Chambers and Watkins, 2012).

Postcolonial feminism emphasises the importance of centring the voices and experiences of women from formerly colonised regions. In the context of Gaza, Palestinian women journalists, activists, and social media influencers like Bisan Owda, Mariam Barghouti, Rania Zabaneh, and Nour Odeh exemplify this approach by using their platforms to reclaim narratives about the war, occupation, and their lived experiences. This enables them to move from being peripheral to becoming centred voices of resistance.

Through visual storytelling, these women highlight not only the suffering of women and children but also their resilience (Chrifi Alaoui, 2021; Ghabra, 2018). They shift the discourse from one that merely victimises women to one that reenacts and recognises their agency within the broader resistance movement (Banerjee and Kankaria, 2022). Through their personal digital platforms, they become the voice and the screen through which the experiences of both men and women are seen and appreciated amid the war.

In doing so, these women utilise what Lu and Steele (2018) refer to as the affordances of digital media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to reframe dominant colonial and patriarchal discourses. Their digital activism challenges the imperialist narratives that frequently depoliticise or oversimplify the Palestinian struggle by offering nuanced and gendered perspectives on the impacts of the conflict. Social media, therefore, becomes a vital tool for not only archiving their suffering, but also for fostering global solidarity, galvanising support, and preventing their erasure.

However, it is important to steer away from technological determinism by remembering that social media platforms are simply tools and that the most important element in the process of cyberactivism is always the actors who are deploying these tools, in this case the women themselves. It is always their own agency, goals, and objectives which shape this process.

Through tackling these complex and interconnected phenomena, this study contributes to the intertwined bodies of literature on intersectional postcolonial feminism, 'digital feminist activism' (Vachhani, 2023; Ghabra, 2018), and 'networked feminism' (Fotopoulou, 2016; Vachhani, 2023). It illustrates that these women's experiences cannot be fully understood without accounting for the intersection of colonial occupation and gendered violence, as their roles as mothers, caregivers, and activists are all shaped by both the patriarchal structures within their society and the political forces which seek to silence them. We argue that Palestinian women activists are engaging in multiple intersectional feminist struggles which crosscut the public and private, the local and global, the personal and political, and the online and offline simultaneously to defy their marginalisation, amplify their voices, and resist suppression.

Palestinian digital activism also illustrates the convergence of the private and public and the personal and political, as an important concept in intersectional feminist thought. bell hooks (1984) famously stated that 'the personal is political,' underscoring how individual experiences of oppression are linked to broader systems of power. This perspective highlights how personal narratives within Palestinian digital activism can illuminate the complexities of living under occupation, revealing how these individual experiences resonate with broader societal injustices. In doing so, they create a space where personal experiences become part of the collective struggle for justice, underscoring the interconnectedness of individual and political realms.

This duality fosters solidarity among activists and promotes a deeper understanding of how intersecting identities—such as gender, class, and ethnicity—shape their experiences and resistance. Thus, Palestinian digital feminist activism not only serves as a tool for political engagement, but it also acts as a critical site for the exploration and expression of identity, community, and collective empowerment, illustrating how personal survival and resistance are deeply political acts within the context of occupation.

The intersectional feminist framework used in this research further enriches the analysis of how Palestinian women activists use social media, since their myriad identities as women, Arabs, Muslims, and inhabitants of an occupied territory result in intersecting, and overlapping, layers of marginalisation and invisibility which shape their lived realities (Broekhuysen and Al Shaer, 2023). Their advocacy activities are complicated by these intersecting oppressions. However, their point of marginality becomes a space of "radical possibility, openness, emancipation, and empowerment to have dreams of a better future" (hooks, 1989: 20).

Western legacy media is frequently critiqued for its biased coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, often portraying Palestinians as passive or violent figures, while overlooking the historical and sociopolitical context that has led to this war. Khamis and Dogbatse (2024) argue that such biased representation in Western media diminishes the lived experiences of Palestinians. Therefore, Palestinian women utilise digital media as a space for counter-narratives that emphasise resilience, resistance, and the will to survive (Ghabra, 2018). They use their professional

and personal digital platforms to serve as a corrective to the dehumanising reductionism found in mainstream Western media coverage.

Social media enables marginalised voices to address intersectional issues such as race, gender, and colonialism, providing a means to foster solidarity across global audiences (Calafell, 2020). Thus, by occupying digital spaces, these women invite their followers to engage in a critical discourse around their marginalised communities under siege. Digital media activism challenges colonial occupation, ethnic erasure, religious marginalisation, and gender discrimination, all of which influence how they interact with, and are portrayed on, digital platforms.

The work of female influencers, activists and journalists in this study illuminates these intersections by highlighting how the Israeli occupation impacts women differently than men, often exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities. This aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) notion that marginalised groups experience overlapping forms of oppression, which must be understood in relation to one another.

As postcolonial feminist scholars have long noted, nationalist movements often marginalise women's contributions, viewing them as secondary to the larger cause of national liberation (Katrak, 1989; Munyoka, 2023; Vickers, 2002; William, 2023). This reclamation of feminist narratives underscores the continued relevance of postcolonial and intersectional feminism in understanding contemporary conflicts.

By using social media to document their experiences, Palestinian women are not only engaging in digital activism, rather they are also reshaping the global understanding of what it means to resist (Nartey, 2023). Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have provided these women with the tools to challenge dominant narratives, amplify their voices, and build global solidarity.

Their activism highlights the need for a more inclusive and intersectional feminist discourse that recognises the unique challenges faced by women in conflict zones, particularly those living under the dually repressive colonial and patriarchal structures. It is only through a deep and nuanced analysis of these intersecting historical, contextual, spatial, temporal, and socio-political factors that we can truly unpack the complexities and paradoxes of multi-layered feminist activism in Gaza and appreciate its depth, diversity, outreach, and impact.

REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674726338

Al Attar, H. M. and Brik, A. B. (2024). The historical tragedy: Evaluating social protection programs in Gaza, in Anis Ben Brik and Hamad Bin Khalifa (eds), *Public Policy in the Arab World* (pp. 216–243). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035312696.00021

Al-Ali, N. (2012). Gendering the Arab Spring. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5(1), 26–31. https://doi.org/10.1163/187398612X624346

AlKhaled, S. (2021). Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise? *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(3), 950–972. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12626

Allan, S. and Allbeson, T. (2024). *Conflicting Images: Histories of war photography in the news*. Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203129852

Al-wazedi, U. (2020). Postcolonial feminism, in N. A. Naples (ed), *Companion to Feminist Studies* (pp. 155–173). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119314967.ch9

Anderson, D. (2020). *Instagram Reels Marketing*. Estalontech.

Avelar, B. (2024). *Resistance beyond borders: Eye-witness accounts from young Palestinian journalists and global perception of the current Palestinian genocide through social media* (Master's Thesis, Jönköping University, School of Education and Communication).

Awwad, G. and Toyama, K. (2024). Digital repression in Palestine, in *Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1–15). Honolulu, HI. https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642422

Badran, L., Amin, H., Gur, A. and Stein, M. (2024). 'I am an Arab Palestinian living in Israel with a disability': Marginalisation and the limits of human rights. *Disability & Society*, 39(8), 1901–1922. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2181764

Banerjee, S. and Kankaria, L. (2022). Networking voices against violence: Online activism and transnational feminism in local-global contexts. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*, 24(1), 6.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Broekhuysen, L. and Al Shaer, F. (2023). Identity, trauma, and resistance: The lived experience of Palestinian motherhood in the West Bank, in D. Ü. Arıboğan and H. Khelghat-Doost (eds), *Constructing Motherhood Identity Against Political Violence: Beyond crying mothers* (pp. 109–127). Cham, Swizerland: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36538-6_8

Bruns, A. and Hanusch, F. (2017). Conflict imagery in a connective environment: Audiovisual content on Twitter following the 2015/2016 terror attacks in Paris and Brussels. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(8), 1122–1141. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717725574

Buheji, M. (2024). Connecting the dotts.. How Gen-Z re-establishing the true story of Palestine? *International Journal of Social Sciences Research and Development (IJSSRD)*, 6(1), 179–199.

Calafell, B. M. (2020). Monstrous erasure: Quare femme (in) visibility in *Get Out*, in M. N. Goins, J. Faber McAlister and B. K. Alexander (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Communication* (pp. 191–205). Abingdon, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429448317-14

Cervi, L. and Divon, T. (2023). Playful activism: Memetic performances of Palestinian resistance in TikTok# challenges. *Social Media + Society*, 9(1), 20563051231157607. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607

Chalise, A. (2024). Scrolling social media sentiments on the Gaza war. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*. Available at: https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/scrolling-social-media-sentiments-on-the-gaza-war/.

Chambers, C. and Watkins, S. (2012). Postcolonial feminism? *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(3), 297–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412456167

Chrifi Alaoui, F. Z. (2021). Unpacking African epistemological violence: Toward critical Africanness in communication studies. *Review of Communication*, 21(4), 293–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.2001687

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Dogbatse, F. S. (2024). Let the silenced speak: Digital platform usage by feminist and gender equity nongovernmental organizations in Ghana. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 43, 66–76. https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v43.a508

Fahmy, S. S., Salama, M. and Alsaba, M. R. (2024). Shattered lives, unbroken stories: Journalists' perspectives from the frontlines of the Israel–Gaza war. *Online Media and Global Communication*, 3(2). https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2024-0012

Flick, U. (2018). Doing qualitative data collection–Charting the routes, in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 1–16). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070

Fotopoulou, A. (2016). *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between empowerment and vulnerability*. Princeton, NJ: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50471-5

Friend, D. (2007). *Watching the World Change: The stories behind the images of 9/11*. London, UK: Macmillan.

George, A. S. (2024). Weaponizing WhatsApp: Organized propaganda and the erosion of democratic discourse in India. *Partners Universal Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 1(1), 22–36.

Georgios, K., Charikleia C. K. and Peklari, I. (2023). Gaza through whose lens? Breaking apart U.S. coverage of the Israel-Hamas War, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. Available at: https://features.csis.org/gaza-through-whose-lens/index.html

Ghabra, H. S. (2018). *Muslim Women and White Femininity: Reenactment and resistance*. Lausanne, Switzerland: Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/b13493

hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality* (pp. 48–55). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203760635-6/choosing-margin-space-radical-openness-bell-hooks

hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist Theory: From margin to center*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

Howard, P. N. (2011). *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information technology and political Islam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hurley, Z. and Johnston, D. (2022). *Women in Mass Communication*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Joseph, S. (2000). *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

Katrak, K. H. (1989). Decolonizing culture: Toward a theory for postcolonial women's texts. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 35(1), 157–179. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0420

Kaye, D. B. V., Zeng, J. and Wikstrom, P. (2022). *TikTok: Creativity and culture in short video*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Khalidi, R. and Iwidat, Q. (2024). Assessing the economic and social impacts of Israel's war on Palestine. *Al-Muntaqa: New Perspectives on Arab Studies*, 7(1), 80–90.

Khamis, S. (2023a). Western Media has failed to properly cover Gaza conflict, *Afkar*. Available at: https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/gaza-conflict-in-western-media-distortion-of-facts/

Khamis, S. (2023b). Effective countering Islamophobia strategies in the digital age. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 8(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.8.1.0025

Khamis, S. and Dogbatse, F. S. (2024). The Gaza war coverage: The role of social media vs. mainstream media. *IEMed: Mediterranean Yearbook* (pp. 295–300). Barcelona, Spain.

Kokeyo, A. (2023). Exploring the dynamics of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Preliminary reflections. *African Journal of Emerging Issues*, 5(17), 181–194.

Lei, A. (2024). Virality in the fast lane: How businesses can succeed with integrity on TikTok and Instagram. *Scholarly Review Journal*, SR Online: Showcase (Equinox 2024). https://doi.org/10.70121/001c.124868

Leong, C., Pan, S. L., Bahri, S. and Fauzi, A. (2019). Social media empowerment in social movements: Power activation and power accrual in digital activism. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 28(2), 173–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2018.1512944

London, L., Watterson, A., Mergler, D., Albin, M., Andrade-Rivas, F., Ciaula, A. D. and White, R. (2024). A call from 40 public health scientists for an end to the continuing humanitarian and environmental catastrophe in Gaza. *Environmental Health*, 23(1), 59. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-024-01097-9

Lu, J. H. and Steele, C. K. (2019). 'Joy is resistance': Cross-platform resilience and (re) invention of Black oral culture online. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(6), 823–837. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1575449

Manor, I. and Crilley, R. (2018). Visually framing the Gaza war of 2014: The Israel ministry of foreign affairs on Twitter. *Media, War & Conflict*, 11(4), 369–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635218780564

Melhemallaham, H. H. (2024). Impact of visual images on the psychological state of media students (Gaza war as a case study). *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 12(2), 359–373. https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2024.122018

Migowski da Silva, A. L. (2023). *Mnemonic Practices on Social Media: The Brazilian Dictatorship on Facebook*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-41276-0

Moallem, M. (2005). *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic fundamentalism and the politics of patriarchy in Iran*. Oakland, California: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938465

Moghadam, V. M. (2003). *Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Munyoka, E. (2023). Decolonial and postcolonial feminisms: Raising African women's voices, in M. C. C. Musingafi and C. Hungwe (eds), *Women Empowerment and the Feminist Agenda in Africa* (pp. 259–274). Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-9721-0.ch016

Nartey, M. (ed) (2023). *Voice, Agency and Resistance: Emancipatory discourses in action*. Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003373674

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N. and Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42, 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Palmer, L. (2022). Press freedom during Covid-19: The digital discourses of the International Press Institute, Reporters Sans Frontières, and the Committee to Protect Journalists. *Digital Journalism*, 10(6), 1079–1097. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943480

Pérez Castro, V. (2024). *How states and the media build strategic narratives: The case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in western media* (Master's Thesis, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid). Available at: https://repositorio.comillas.edu/jspui/retrieve/663471/TFG%20-%20Perez%20Castro%2C%20Vega.pdf.

Radsch, C. C. and Khamis, S. (2013). In their own voice: Technologically mediated empowerment and transformation among young Arab women. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(5), 881–890. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838378

Remrey, M. K. (2024). *Shaping of news values and frames during war: A content analysis of Israeli and Palestinian short-form video* (Master's thesis, Louisiana Tech University).

Rogan, F. and Budgeon, S. (2018). The personal is political: Assessing feminist fundamentals in the digital age. *Social Sciences*, 7(8), 132. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7080132

Schellewald, A. (2021). Communicative forms on TikTok: Perspectives from digital ethnography. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 21.

Schmitt, J. B., Baake, J. and Kero, S. (2024). What means civic education in a digitalized world? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1257247. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1257247

Shestakov, A. (2022). *Evidence from wartime mediatization: Framing digital trace of Sheikh Jarrah evictions* (Master's Thesis, Hamad Bin Khalifa University).

Silverman, D. (2016). Introducing qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 3(3), 14–25.

Steele, C. K. (2021). Black feminist pleasure on TikTok: An ode to Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression." *Women's Studies in Communication*, 44(4), 463–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1987822

The Committee to Protect Journalists Report. (2023). *Israel-Gaza war brings 2023 journalist killings to devastating high*. Available at: https://cpj.org/reports/2024/02/israel-gaza-war-brings-2023-journalist-killings-to-devastating-high/.

The Committee to Protect Journalists Report. (2024). *Israel-Gaza war*. Available at: https://cpj.org/full-coverage-israel-gaza-war/.

Tzoreff, M. (2014). The hybrid women of the Arab Spring revolutions: Islamization of feminism, feminization of Islam. *Journal of Levantine Studies*, 4(2), 69–111.

Vachhani, S. (2023). Networked feminism in a digital age—Mobilizing vulnerability and reconfiguring feminist politics in digital activism. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 31(3), 1031–1048. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13097

Vickers, J. (2002). Feminists and nationalism, in V. Dhruvarajan and J. Vickers (eds), *Gender, Race, and Nation: A global perspective* (pp. 247–272). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442675193-013

Walby, S. (2011). *The Future of Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Youmans, W. (2024). Accounting for the biases in U.S. media coverage of Gaza. *Dawn*. Available at: https://dawnmena.org/accounting-for-the-biases-in-u-s-media-coverage-of-gaza/. (Accessed 5 December 2024).

Zghoul, L. (2022). *Al-Jazeera English and BBC news coverage of the Gaza war 2008-9: A comparative examination* (Doctoral Dissertation, Cardiff University).

Citation: Khamis, S. and Dogbatse, F. S. (2025). 'I'm Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive': Palestinian Digital Feminism and Intersectional Narratives of Resistance. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 15. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16025

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 16
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Book Review

Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India

Jessica A. Albrecht [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

Book's Editor: Shweta Prasad

Publication Date: 2024

Place of Publication: London and New York

Publisher: Routledge

Number of Pages: 276

Price: £130

ISBN: 978-1-032-62841-7

The anthology *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India*, edited by Shweta Prasad, is an informative and very broad engagement with the questions and problems that are already raised in the title of the volume, despite its seemingly limited focus on the context of India. It consists of 17 concise chapters that engage with the topic in such a way that it is useful and applicable to other contexts as well. This is because it is structured into three parts: (1) a more theoretical and methodological macro approach to the field of gender, the environment and development; (2) regional examples of women's specific challenges and responses, with specific focuses on water and infrastructure; and (3) present-day and envisioned strategies that might be applied to other contexts as well.

The edited volume is based on the premise that the Global South carries the burden of the excesses of the Global North, stemming from the latter's own economic development of the twentieth century as well as their impact in organising the structure of development in other parts of the world as well. As this (masculinist) form of development is based solely on economic growth, it cannot take into account other forms of development, especially any that do not harm the environment and increase the oppression of women at the same time. This remains the prevailing mode of thinking, despite the fact that feminist and environmentalists have argued since the 1960s and 1970s, respectively, that those issues are drastic and interconnected. This anthology engages fruitfully with this problem by new and insightful theoretical engagements and the narration of case studies from the perspective of India.

The first part, Macro Scenario and Environmental Discourses with Gender Lens, consists of four chapters that deal with the question of the relationship between women, the environment, sustainable development, eco-feminism, and the gendering of knowledge systems. The first chapter, by Janki Andharia and Lavanya Shanbhogue Arvind, uses the concept of vulnerability from a material and discursive theoretical perspective to argue that the relationship between women and nature within the context of ecofeminism is necessary for a reconceptualisation of sustainability from a (critical) intersectional lens. The second chapter, by Vijaylakshmi Brara, applies a feminist critique towards the influence of patriarchy and masculinity and contrasts it with women's indigenous knowledge. Jyoti Prasad Saikia and Suravi Pathak also engage with women's knowledge in ecofeminism – in particular in

[1] *Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg*, GERMANY
***Corresponding Author:** jessica_albrecht@gmx.de

relation to agriculture and women from poor and rural backgrounds. Premula Raman, in the fourth chapter, calls for a new relationship between nature and humanity and, therefore, a reconfiguration of development.

The seven chapters of part two, Profile of Different Regions with regard to Environmental and Development Challenges and Responses, more thoroughly engage with individual case studies – regional or event-connected – which enables the authors (Ramarao Indira and G. Shanthi, Sushil Kumar and Deep Shikha, Nibedita Bayen and Shilajit Sengupta, Sunayana J. Kadle, Geeta Balakrishnan, Nasmeem Farhin Akhtar, as well as Sheela Suryanarayanan, Rajib Nandi and Srishti Sharma) to look more closely at the agency of women, their role as women, and their simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility as women. The chapters reach from engagements with women's challenges in relation to natural disasters, their societal and bodily relation to water as a resource and burden, to differences between urban and rural lives and how this needs to inform development strategies more holistically and inclusively.

Lastly, part three, Strategies for Environmental Safety and Sustainable Development, aims to show different pathways towards sustainability. It consists of six chapters (by Sunita Dhal, Linda Lane and Nilima Srivastava, Sangeeta Desai and Ashish Desai, Biswarupa Ghosh, Khevana Desai, K. Velumani, and Simi Mehta) that not only highlight the importance of women but also highlights women's existing work and achievements within the context of environmental activism and sustainable development. Women's agency, in these case studies, stems from their specific place within the tradition and gendering of agriculture in India, their role as mothers, leaders of households, and food production.

Coming together, the chapters of the edited volume argue that any step towards sustainability, and specifically sustainable development needs to be a holistic step that equally considers the importance of gender and the environment in decision-making, strategies, and policies. The anthology succeeds in bringing together a vast number of scholars from India who engage with these questions and provides an insightful overview of the current state of problems and challenges faced by women in India and possible pathways for reconfiguring the relationship between gender, the environment and sustainable development.

The anthology stands in line with feminist scholarship in two ways: firstly, since many of the chapters are the fruit of collaborative scholarly work, it highlights the successfulness of collaboration that the authors praise in their case studies. Secondly, it engages with contemporary feminist scholarship in relation to indigenous knowledge (production) and meaningful engagement with on-ground activism and women's agency beyond the scholarly frames of subalternity and oppression.

However, the anthology also has a couple of shortcomings, specifically in relation to the use of gender. Despite it being amongst the triad of theoretical frameworks and alleged contents, there is almost no engagement with gender as a critical framework *per se*, but the book focuses on case studies of femininity/women in the main. One noteworthy exception is chapter two, Need to Steer Development Patterns through Women's Knowledge Systems, by Vijaylakshmi Brara. The collapse of women with gender, which is common within the development discourse, is not challenged, neither by the authors nor the editor, and it is even sometimes explicitly affirmed. This leads to an (implicit) exclusion of gender as a broader category of analysis. The collection would have been enriched by more inclusion of scholarship that deals with masculinity, and the contextual construction of gender discourse itself in the context of India that informs the environmental and development discourses. This leads to the second omission, namely the embeddedness of the discourse that equates women with nature in colonial structures – despite the editor mentioning that the gender binary is a 'modern western concept' (p. 17). These colonial structures have been criticised by decolonial feminist scholars around the world (Jackson, 1993; Mohanty, 2003; Resurrección, 2017; Rigby, 2018). In general, there is insufficient engagement with such scholarship outside of India, which might have helped to see exclusions and boundaries that were implicitly and explicitly drawn by the editor and the authors.

Lastly, I have to note that the editor and some of the authors explicitly refer to a so-called 'Oneness' of the Indian culture, which conceals inner-Indian religious, cultural, language, ethnic, caste, and class divides. It might be seen to stand in line with specific Hindu conceptions of universalism and oneness, that many oppressed groups within India have criticised. Coming from a feminist perspective and arguing for a new form of (Indian) ecofeminism, as this anthology proposes, such exclusions, omissions and assumptions should be made explicit and/or critiqued. In general, there should be a more thorough engagement with the cultural contexts of the case studies and more reflections on the historical and contemporary assumptions that are made. These tend to be concealed by the focus on the divide between Western political and economic ideology and Indian women, as it leaves no room for further critical evaluations of the role of the Indian state, Indian institutions and context-specific patriarchy as players in this field.

Nevertheless, the edited volume is a useful companion to any interested reader, may it be students, early career researchers or established academics. It achieves what it set itself out to do: provide an overview over women, the environment and sustainable development in India, including a variety of contexts and perspectives, especially in relation to regionality and the urban-rural divide. It proves to be an insightful read for anyone who looks for theoretical engagements as well. This is not only limited to scholars of India or South Asia, since the conclusions

that are drawn might apply to other contexts as well. In fact, the volume editor could have made a stronger case for global alliance instead of Indian exceptionalism. There is a strong foundation for such a feminist claim within the individual chapters.

REFERENCES

Jackson, C. (1993). Women/nature or gender/history? A critique of ecofeminist development. *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* 20(3), 389–418. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066159308438515

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders. Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smp7t

Resurrección, B. P. (2017). Gender and environment in the Global South: From women, environment, and development to feminist political ecology, in S. MacGregor (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment* (pp.71–85). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315886572-5

Rigby, K. (2018). Women and nature revisited: Ecofeminist reconfigurations of an old association, in L. Stevens, P. Tait and D. Varney (eds), *Feminist Ecologies: Changing environments in the anthropocene* (pp. 57–81). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64385-4_4

Citation: Albrecht, J. A. (2025). [Review of the book *Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Responses from India*, edited by Shweta Prasad]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16026


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 17
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Book Review

Contested Social and Ecological Reproduction: Impacts of States, Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis

Cristina Basso [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

Book Editors: Antonia Kupfer and Constanze Stutz

Publication Date: 2024

Place of Publication: Opladen, Berlin and Toronto

Publisher: Verlag Barbara Budrich

Number of Pages: 148

Price: £33 Paperback

ISBN: 978-3-847-42721-6

This recently published anthology contributes significantly to our understanding of a systemic and multipronged crisis of the material conditions of life which threatens to envelop the whole globe, intersecting with historical forms of injustice and structural forms of violence. It will be of particular interest to scholars and students of social sciences and feminist and Marxist theory. It could also engage a non-academic audience hoping to interpret and articulate different experiences and perceptions of inequality and hardship. In fact, it constitutes a precious documentation of the ways in which this crisis is signified and contested in distinct localities. It is crafted through the weaving of different threads, which make up a layered and vivid tapestry. It incorporates ethnographic material grounded on the labour, livelihood struggles, community-making, and change- and life-fostering practices of women in places as diverse and distant as Costa Rica, India, Iran and Germany. The case studies included in the volume are read through a historical materialist and feminist lens. It is precisely within this theoretical framework that the variously experienced economic, political, ecological and health crises endangering the lives and the livelihoods of the vast majority of the world population can be connected and interpreted as different manifestations of a deeply rooted crisis of social reproduction.

The introductory chapter is written by Prof. Antonia Kupfer, who currently teaches Macrosociology at the Technical University of Dresden and by Constanze Stutz, who at the time of the publication of this volume was completing her doctoral studies at the Institute for Social Research of Frankfurt. They begin by considering the urgent and profound deterioration of the living conditions of most world inhabitants, and of women above all, and by acknowledging the global re-emergence and reconfiguration of a host of social movements and local struggles, waged around fundamental, life-inherent issues. *Change*, *crisis* and *livelihoods* are the concepts the editors use to frame and connect phenomena as diverse as ecological emergencies, armed conflicts, growing economic inequalities and political authoritarianism. Through a brief examination of the origins of the climate justice movement, which they see as rooted in the practices and initiatives of people of colour, the authors are able to contrast the indigenous grassroots approach to the ecological crisis, based on a different, more integrated, social relation to nature, with the technical fixes and the hegemonic 'green' projects offered as a solution by the current socio-economic order. Different political/collective subjects provide distinct, often irreconcilable, understandings of the crises of social reproduction which are investing the planet. The conflicts ignited by incompatible

[1] *Independent Scholar*, ITALY
***Corresponding Author:** crismabasso@gmail.com

representations, narratives and injunctions and by the engineering of possible antidotes to the planetary poly-crisis constitute the other pivotal concern of the volume. It is also through this idea of contested framings and heterogeneous countermeasures that the editors attempt to connect the various case studies comprising the book. In the final part of the first chapter the editors provide an overview of the contributors' works, which include a poignant variety of livelihood crises and collective contestations.

In the second chapter, Gabriela Arguedas Ramirez, with insights, stories and data from her fieldwork in an impoverished town in Costa Rica, tackles the issue of food insecurity, showing that the technocratic and neoliberal approaches, far from providing a solution to food crises, famines and nutritional poverty, contribute to the production and perpetuation of hunger. The author sees hunger, which dramatically affects lives and livelihoods and predominantly hurts women and children, as a disciplinary mechanism. Hunger reinforces structural injustice and carries social trauma across the generations. It is therefore a perfect example of the deadly form of power that Achille Mbembe (2020) called 'necropolitics'. Arguedas Ramirez, elaborating on Scheper-Hughes' and Lock's (1987) model of the three bodies, constructs her idea of the 'hungry body' as an 'intersection of materialities'. The voices speaking to the researcher and, through the mediation of her carefully constructed texts, to the readers of the anthology, are a compelling evocation of the lived experience of the Costa Rican women she met. Interwoven with social theory and strengthened by a radically critical position, they propel us to move the issue of hunger back into the political realm and away from the purely 'technical' domain.

In the subsequent chapter, Low analyses and questions an Indian social welfare scheme launched by the national government in 2016, based on the distribution of LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) connections to women of households living below the poverty line. According to its proponents, this social programme would provide poor women with affordable and sustainable cooking fuel and liberate them from the time-consuming task of gathering firewood. According to governmental rhetoric, the women chosen for the project would thus have more time for education and other family or leisurely activities. Low carefully demonstrates that these promises have not been fulfilled and that, moreover, the digitalisation and financialisation of household activities connected to the welfare scheme has imposed extra burdens on women and subjected them to increased state control and to the risk of family conflicts and indebtment. Furthermore, the PMUY (Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana) programme has criminalised domestic economies *vis-à-vis* large infrastructural projects and exacerbated the paternalistic and authoritarian tone of the relationship between women and the 'father of the state' (the current Indian president), represented as a saviour of marginalised and impoverished women. Finally, Low contrasts this kind of top-down welfare schemes with the popular, territorial and increasingly interconnected struggles of Dalit and Adivasi women and farmers and Muslim communities.

Tabea Latocha, in the fourth chapter of the anthology, writes about the experience of precariousness, existential uncertainty, displacement and exclusion of the German tenants living in the housing blocks owned and managed by large real estate companies. Through a 'feminist infrastructural perspective', and following David Harvey, she sees the current financialisation of housing as the last cycle of an accumulation process based on dispossession. She cogently interprets the geographies of gentrification and prevarication shaped by neoliberal housing policies as another example of the crisis of social reproduction.

In 'Social movement and bodily integrity', Kijan Mohammadi briefly recounts the history of Mahsa Amini Movement in Iran. Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman of 22, died in a Teheran hospital in 2022, after being held in custody by the Islamic religious police for allegedly refusing to wear her hijab in the 'customary' way. Her death sparked a huge wave of protests, led by women and young Iranians, and subsequently joined by other political subjects. Protestors faced imprisonment and harsh repression. Mohammadi uses the productive, thought-provoking idea of the right to 'bodily integrity', whose roots in the philosophical/ethical /legal/psychological domains she briefly sketches out, to give voice to the protestors and substance to their claims.

Ingrid Artus, in 'Women* in Movement: Female (Care) Strikes Between Unions and Feminism', encourages the readers to read the strikes of predominantly female medical and school workers in Germany as 'female care' protests and connects them with other, internationally renowned, and female led movements, like the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos*. She writes about strikes as moments of collective identity construction and sees them as 'hubs of utopia', thereby encouraging her readers to see utopias as paths to be constructed while in movement. Her optimistic outlook is accompanied by a more sober account of the tense but potentially fruitful relations between women's movements and unions in recent history.

The volume ends with an engaging and fluent conversation between its editors and the well-known feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser, who published *Cannibal Capitalism* in 2022. Throughout this brief but compelling interview, the readers can be introduced to or re-acquainted with some of Fraser's most recent contributions.

Fraser's idea that the current economic order accrues value through a mix of exploitation and expropriation is particularly apt to understand the experience of housing and food insecurity, in a period of renovated enclosures and reconfiguration of global capitalism. Fraser's acknowledgement that people's lives are affected differently by the systemic crises of our times is a cautionary reminder that the workers and women of the world perceive the

social and ecological contours of their existential emergencies through different filters. They tell different stories about the roots of the 'evil' which stunts and endangers their lives and poisons and haunts their communities. They also envision different solutions. Creating a vast counterhegemonic bloc, as she suggests, implies building bridges across different experiences, epistemologies and ontologies. Fraser proposes thus an 'expanded view of socialism', as a broad and fundamental political project, within which different groups can participate in the construction of a biophilic order, despite and through their differences.

I found the structure of the volume particularly significant. It is divided into sections, each one prefaced by a term ('Beginning', 'Eating', 'Cooking', 'Inhabiting', 'Surviving', 'Fighting', 'Sparking') which simultaneously captures the challenges and the possibilities of the context it refers to by constituting a distinct point of view over a planetary crisis which is experienced, given meaning and contrasted by women in culturally specific and /or increasingly global ways.

Each section is an ensemble of different voices, speaking with the same urgency but from different standpoints. Therefore, it is the whole anthology, not just the final chapter, which can be read as an ongoing conversation and interpreted through the overarching narrative of the systemic crisis, with each emergency and each history of existential precariousness, dispossession and suffering amplified by and deciphered through the others. 'Eating' is, for instance, inextricably related to food sovereignty, to political, ecological, energetic and infrastructural crises, to gender discrimination and socialisation, and to the historical injustice and trauma which operate within and through real body-selves. Moreover, 'eating' and 'cooking' are also about inhabiting and surviving within the territories alienated, wrecked or enclosed by a life-devouring system, and about 'beginning' to acknowledge the existence and the historical resilience of other spaces and modes of being and 'fighting' to construct alternative, more optimistic futures.

I felt particularly drawn to the chapters based on fieldwork in Costa Rica, India and Germany. My research interests and my own life experience have brought me to consider the paradoxes and contradictions of top-down, large-scale development projects and the social fissures and ecological wreckage brought about by neoliberal policies.

I grew up in southeastern Sicily, witnessing in part the transformation of a once celebrated coastal landscape, rich in hydric resources, archaeological remains and ingenious watermills, channels and cisterns into a poisoned wasteland. The economic benefits of such destruction were, for common people, scarce and short-lived. Nowadays, the few available jobs that survived (trans)national capitalist restructuring are distributed along carefully honed clientelist networks, further dispossessing people from their decision-making and change-envisioning capabilities.

While doing anthropological research (Basso, 2015), I looked at how an often-undecipherable enmeshment of state institutions and corporations slowly altered the relation that historically marginalised people entertained with their land, along the lines that Fraser's model accurately captures in *Cannibal Capitalism*. This was also accomplished, as it increasingly happens, through the deployment of narratives of progress, prosperity, inclusivity and ecological sustainability. It is through the widespread circulation and acceptance of such rhetoric that in the Caribbean Colombia of my fieldwork, the construction of a wooden pier or the reclaiming of land for sustenance by native inhabitants came to be stigmatised and criminalised while 5-stars floating hotels and water-consuming luxury resorts could be marketed as the epitome of sustainability.

As a teacher and a mother living in southern Europe, at last, I am trying to survive the syphoning off of public funds from education, healthcare and family services. These resources are increasingly re-directed towards the debt payment black hole and the re-armament race, while soaring living prices, unemployment, the work of local and transnational criminocracies and inequitable taxation disrupt families, communities and lives.

Therefore, I consider particularly valuable the contributors' attempts to elucidate the contextual ways in which the capitalistic socioeconomic order, especially in its neoliberal and developmental declinations, finds ways to catch up with and to leech off the resources and the narratives of other political domains, like the green movement or, as shown in the Indian case study, conservative, nationalistic or paternalistic projects. The book also provides much needed evidence on how the discourses of progress, empowerment and participation can mingle with local material and cultural conditions to reinforce dependence and to control people's behaviour and labour, disavowing popular knowledge and criminalising local sociality and small-scale economies. Moreover, we are now observing that variously calibrated compounds of *laissez-faire* and technocratic encroachment, far from being path-breaking solutions to our crises, dispossess women, families and communities and the chapters based on research in Costa Rica, India and Germany deftly describe these socio-political trends.

Furthermore, the concept of 'crisis of social reproduction', which is a central, unifying concept in the volume, is a crucial construct insofar it uncovers the political dimensions of individual and collective crises and highlights the linkages between different experiences of emergency and insecurity across the globe. The case studies also examine spontaneous moments of political resistance and new and resurgent forms of place-based struggles, whose meanings and premises differ from the stale monocausal narratives that Vandana Shiva (1993) calls 'monocultures

of the mind'. The juxtaposition of these experiences emphasises commonalities that could make a vast network of biophilic alliances possible.

I think that the book also prompts us to re-evaluate and re-interpret the works of the anthropologists and philosophers who have prioritised, from different perspectives, the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2008) or the 'state of emergency' (Ong, 2006; Mattei, 2022) as the dominant paradigm of neoliberal governance and as spaces for devising and practising changes in and experiments with sovereignty and citizenship.

In fact, not only have political, ecological, and medical emergencies and constant warfare been catalysts for socio-ecological destruction, but they also have facilitated accumulation and dispossession and made them more 'sustainable' through specific legal provisions and spectacularized and hyper-trophic narratives. In my opinion these linkages deserve honest and serious-minded analysis which, perhaps, other works could attempt.

The broadening and simultaneous re-centring of feminist grassroot politics and feminist theorisation which the volume undertakes is perhaps its most visible accomplishment. Ecofeminism, radical feminism, historical materialism and indigenous and Afro-American thought and praxis have all, in their peculiar ways, shown that colonialist and capitalist oppression has always been primarily grounded in women's bodies. The history of capitalism can thus also be narrated as a history of the body-selves the system tried to capture and alienate, enclose, exploit or turn into machine-like organisms. Food and house insecurity, the worsening of labour and living conditions, the policing of dissenting bodies, political repression and the forced, top-down modification of our economic, social and spiritual relation with the ecosystems we inhabit, are all matters of life and death. Feminist research and feminist struggle must then look again at the corporeal dimensions of the current cycles of primitive accumulation, incorporating the analysis of the technical leaps that are reshaping the system's biopolitics. Such broadening and recentring efforts could uncover, as the feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Daly (1984) used to say, the 'oldspeak' concealed behind and reworked into corporatist and institutional 'newspeak' and help us to re-member the knowledge, the struggles and the eco-social relations which, in various historical moments, offered opportunities for individual and collective healing and agency. The concept of 'bodily integrity', which had a major significance in the history of philosophy, legal theory and psychology, as Mohammadi shows in her contribution to this volume, has then far-reaching implications, if the body is understood in its relational dimensions and in its layered historical, cultural, material consistency.

Finally, the volume contributes to the development of the idea of 'total extractivism' (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020), a concept which encapsulates the rapaciousness and the necrophagous spirit of our economic system. The life experiences, whether of suffering or resistance, shown throughout the book create a vivid account of how common people can be led to experience and perceive an often mysteriously destructive and hostile economic order. For this reason, they can also enter into productive conversations with the approaches that try to understand the system's most recent looting expeditions to expropriate, commodify and profit from, just to name a few examples, human experience turned into behavioural data (Zuboff, 2019), genetic commons (Shiva, 2016; Ho, 1998), body parts and reproductive capacities (Raymond, 1995; Ekman, 2017), natural disasters (Klein, 2008), health emergencies and the measures deployed to face them (Green and Fazi, 2023), or neurodivergent and disabled body-selves (Broderick, 2022). The monster, the ghost, the zombie, the vampire and other spectral and demonic figures have functioned, since the beginning of capitalism, as conceptual metaphors to express the all too common experiences of domination, violence and alienation of women and of the marginalised and dispossessed. The imperative of total extractivism has replenished and rearticulated this imaginary and experiential reservoir of spectres and monstrous machines. This, obviously, leads us to the ultimate world- and life-devouring mega-machinery: war, whose monstrous jaws devour lives, ecosystems, histories and the commons that had survived centuries of appropriation. It is time for feminist research and theorising, some currents of which boast a venerable tradition in the critique of war, to engage again in a committed and in-depth critique of political-military violence in all its refurbished or re-assembled disguises and components.

REFERENCES

Agamben, G. (2008). *State of Exception*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Basso, C. (2015). *Bridging Worlds: Movement, relatedness and social change in two communities of Cartagena de Indias Bay*. PhD thesis, University of St Andrews.

Broderick, A. A. (2022). *The Autism Industrial Complex: How branding, marketing, and capital investment turned autism into big business*. Gorham, ME: Myers Education.

Daly, M. (1984). *Pure Lust: Elemental feminist philosophy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Dunlap, A. and Jakobsen, J. (2020). The worldeater(s) in process: Uncovering the nexus of conventional and 'green' extraction, in A. Dunlap and J. Jakobsen (eds), *The Violent Technologies of Extraction: Political ecology, critical agrarian studies and the capitalist worldeater* (pp. 91–118). Berlin, Germany: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26852-7_5

Ekman, K. E. (2017). *El ser y la mercancía. Prostitución, vientres de alquiler y disociación*. Barcelona: Bellaterra.
Fraser, N. (2023). *Cannibal Capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet and what we can do about it*. London and New York: Verso Books.
Green, T. and Fazi, T. (2023). *The Covid Consensus (Updated): The global assault on democracy and the poor—a critique from the left*. London: Hurst Publishers.
Ho, M. W. (1998). *Genetic Engineering-Dream or Nightmare? The brave new world of bad science and big business*. Baltimore, MA: Gateway Books.
Klein, N. (2008). *The Shock Doctrine. The rise of disaster capitalism*. London: Penguin. https://doi.org/10.1177/194277860800100215
Mattei, U. (2022). *Il diritto di essere contro*. Milan, Italy: Edizioni Piemme.
Mbembe, A. (2020). *Necropolitics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478007227
Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpgzc
Raymond, J. G. (1995). *Women as Wombs: Reproductive technologies and the battle over women's freedom*. Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press.
Scheper-Hughes, N. and Lock, M. M. (1987). The mindful body: A prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1(1), 6–41. https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1987.1.1.02a00020
Shiva, V. (1993). Monocultures of the mind—understanding the threats to biological and cultural diversity. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 39(3), 237–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556119930304
Shiva, V. (2016). *Biopiracy: The plunder of nature and knowledge*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Faber and Faber.

Citation: Basso, C. (2025). [Review of the book *Contested Social and Ecological Reproduction: Impacts of States, Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis*, edited by Antonia Kupfer and Constanze Stutz]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 17. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16027


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 18
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Book Review

Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan

Sadiq Bhanbhro [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

Book's Author: Nadia Agha

Publication Date: 2021

Place of Publication: Singapore

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Number of Pages: 273

Price: £109.99 Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-16-6858-6

The gender-based inequalities in Pakistan are not only increasing but also worsening in terms of the degree of their negative consequences, particularly for women and girls as the primary victims (Ali *et al.*, 2022). Women and girls encounter discrimination at all levels, including inside and outside the home, within and outside their community, social and political domains and in the marketplace, both in physical and virtual spaces, which significantly impacts their everyday lives, access and control over education, health, and employment (Pourya Asl and Hanafiah, 2024; Iqbal *et al.*, 2012; Ejaz and Ara, 2011). Nadia Agha's book, *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*, offers timely and deep insights into this alarming situation of women and girls who live in the rural parts of the country and make up much of the total population. This book is a pioneering sociological analysis depicting the detailed picture of rural women's lives and their strategic encounters termed as 'bargaining with patriarchy' in the oppressive patriarchal structures of rural Sindh. This is the first of its kind for rural and remote areas of Pakistan, where patriarchal structures are considered relatively more potent due to tribal or semi-tribal social organisation of the research settings (Shah, 2016; Bhanbhro *et al.*, 2013), local customs and traditions that justify, support and maintain male authority and control over women's lives.

The author, Dr Nadia Agha, is a professor of Sociology with a PhD in Women's Studies. Her extensive experience and passion for research are evident in her numerous publications on women's issues in various media outlets. She is a regular contributor to Pakistan's oldest and largest circulated English daily, *Dawn*[1]. Dr Agha's scholarship and research, including this book, have been published in several high-quality international peer-reviewed journals, such as the Women's Studies International Forum and the Journal of Research in Gender Studies. Her expertise in the field has been recognised by the Higher Education Commission Pakistan[2], which awarded her the Research Award for Best Book Publication in Social Sciences.

Agha's book is a significant contribution to the field of feminist and gender studies. It will impact the field as the study challenges the perception of women as passive victims of patriarchy and instead portrays them as active

[1] Nadia Agha: https://www.dawn.com/authors/3689/nadia-agha
[2] HEC Confers Research Awards & Best University Teacher Awards: https://www.hec.gov.pk//english/news/news/Pages/HEC-Confers-Research-Awards-&-Best-University-Teacher-Awards1010-370.aspx

[1] *Senior Research Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University*, UNITED KINGDOM
***Corresponding Author:** s.bhanbhro@shu.ac.uk

negotiators who navigate within male-dominated social systems. This has significant implications for feminist studies as it enhances our understanding of women's roles in patriarchal society. It provides a more nuanced perspective on agency and resistance that goes beyond the specific context of rural Sindh. Furthermore, Agha's discussion of how women's reproductive roles are perceived and controlled through marriage ties into broader global feminist concerns about the regulation of women's bodies. This is critical for understanding how sexuality is constructed and controlled in rural South Asian contexts, and it invites comparisons with other patriarchal societies where women's sexuality is similarly governed by cultural and familial honour.

This ethnographic qualitative research, which includes individual interviews, focus group discussions, and observation methods in 6 rural villages of a district in Upper Sindh, provides a comprehensive understanding of the topic by capturing and valuing insider perspectives. Agha employs Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'patriarchal bargain' (p. 27) in conjunction with Sylvia Walby's idea of 'private patriarchy' (p. 28) as a theoretical lens. This framework provides a clear structure for the analysis, enhancing the reader's understanding of the lives of rural women in their natural social groups, including families, castes, clans, tribes, sub-tribes and kin groups. Despite the challenges faced by a female researcher conducting in-depth qualitative research in villages of a district in Upper Sindh and interacting with men and women on a sensitive topic, she has done an excellent job. Upper Sindh is a region located in the northern part of the southern province of Pakistan. Nafisa Shah, who was the former mayor of the district, was also the first person to highlight the issue of murders of women and girls in the name of honour in the local language known as *karo-kari*[3] and in English, commonly called honour killing. When Shah (2016) came from Oxford to do her fieldwork in Upper Sindh, she referred to it as the 'violent world of Upper Sindh' (p. 15) because this region is notorious for a particular form of honour crime known as *karo-kari* (honour killing), which is most prevalent in this area. Therefore, conducting fieldwork in this region on such a sensitive issue is a courageous undertaking and demonstrates the author's commitment to the feminist cause. Agha has identified herself as a feminist since childhood (p. 43). She mentioned participating in an essay competition where she wrote about the same topic she chose for her PhD research. However, it would have been more beneficial to discuss how her positionality as an educated, employed, middle-class and feminist woman has influenced her research processes, data collection, and analysis.

The book provides a comprehensive understanding of patriarchal structures, including 'patrilineal kinship, patrilocal residence, extended family, gendered division of labour, son preference, dowery, and early marriage' (p. 35). These are fundamental features of patriarchy and are shared by the South Asian region; these not only maintain patriarchy but provide the central infrastructure to thrive. Throughout the book, the author provides a comparison of neighbouring countries and literature to back up their arguments. Agha argues that despite these *oppressive* (emphasis is mine) patriarchal structures, rural women negotiate with patriarchy through tactical positioning within their households, using creative assets of handcraft for income generation, and expanding their agency through domestic chores. In her analysis, Agha challenges the assertion that women's mobility is often associated with their autonomy and economic status. Through ethnographic data, she demonstrated that a family's structure, whether nuclear, joint or extended, age and other factors are associated with the women's participants' autonomy and mobility. For example:

> [An] older woman may not always be autonomous but can often be mobile than younger women; similarly, a younger woman may be somewhat autonomous but cannot be mobile as older women are. (p. 201)

Agha's analysis of the intersections between poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchy in rural areas is based on detailed narratives collected from the field. However, it raises questions about whether patriarchy in urban poor areas of Pakistan is different in its nature and level of oppression. Pakistan has poor performance in human development indicators; for example, Pakistan ranks 145th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024). An estimated 22.8 million children (aged 5-16 years) in Pakistan are out-of-school children; 53% of females (15-64 years) reported that they never attended school, compared to 33% of males in the same age range. The overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women in Pakistan is 21%, which stands well below the global percentage at 39%. At the national level, the refined LFPR of women (aged 15-64 years) is very low at 26% compared to 84% for men (UN Women, 2023). Further, of those two central patriarchal notions, *ghairat/izzat* (honour) and *purdah* (veil), which define Pakistani women's lives, the latter is not strictly observed in rural areas as compared to urban settings.

[3] It is a Sindhi language term that is literally translated as a blackened man and a blackened woman. After the invention of the term honour killing in late 1990, the term *karo-kari* was labelled as honour killing. Initially, terms were used for 'adulterer' and 'adulteresses', but this term is now used for multiple forms of perceived immoral behaviour. It describes a social practice whereby a woman and a man found in, or more often suspected of, an illicit relationship is killed by family members to restore family honour.

The different forms of the marriage systems, including early exchange and consanguineous marriage, socio-cultural and economic factors behind them and the implications for women and girls have been presented as the significant devices which help patriarchy to operate and maintain itself in these rural settings. The author has discussed in detail a few prevalent forms of marriage in the research settings; however, there are several other types of marriage, such as a marriage by exchange of money, known as *vekro* in the local language, which literally means selling of a woman for marriage, has been commonly practised in Pakistan and essentially treat women and girls as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Bhanbhro, 2021). The argument of different forms of marriage being a pivotal tool to maintain patriarchy is built on the notion that in Pakistan and parts of patrilineal India is that 'men are seed providers to the wombs of women and women are regarded as the field that nourishes the seed' (p. 70-80). This conception of women being the soil for sowing male seeds suggests that marriage is a formal contract by which a husband gets a place (womb) to implant his seeds. This leads to another patriarchal notion, 'honour', which is a mechanism to control women for keeping the seed pure. So, the women of one's family should bear pure seeds of their own; if they are mixed with somebody else's seed, then they are defective [impure]. That becomes a source of dishonour, and people can kill or be killed for family honour. Therefore, honour crimes against women and girls are prevalent in Pakistan.

The author also discussed this practice and wrote, 'Rural Sindh is known to be a tribal area and the birthplace of honour killing' (p. 25). Though a form of honour killing called *karo-kari* is prevalent in rural areas of Upper Sindh (Shah, 2016; Bhanbhro *et al*., 2013; Bhanbhro, 2021), the author's claim that these are birthplaces of honour killing is unfounded and ahistorical as violence and murders for the sake of honour has been a historical and cross-cultural phenomenon (Giordano, 2016, 2001; Fournier *et al*., 2012; Goldstein, 2002). For example, the earliest explanation of honour that underlies violence and killings is that it developed in small-scale herding and pastoralist face-to-face communities such as Mediterranean societies (Campbell, 1964; Peristiany, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1968), where there was a weak or an absence of state structures (Schneider, 1971). It evolved as a social norm to maintain and assess the social position of an individual, family or a social group in the social structure that is subjected to damage through their social and moral behaviours, specifically, the sexual conduct of women (Campbell, 1964; Perstiany, 1965; Abou-Zeid, 1965; Bourdieu, 1965; Pitt-Rivers, 1968), maintaining the distinctive group differentials (Ortner, 1978), and protecting the economic basis of their culture, which is vulnerable to lose through theft, raiding, encroachment and rivalries on resources with neighbouring groups (Campbell, 1964; Schneider, 1971). Moreover, a study titled 'Honour crimes in contemporary Greece' (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969) published in the British Journal of Sociology discusses violent crimes like *karo-kari* (honour killings) committed in defence of a dishonoured female family member, coining the term 'honour crime.' However, the term 'honour killing' is not used. Similarly, a 1981 study in *Current Anthropology* examines homicides for family honour among Israeli Muslim Arabs, again avoiding the term 'honour killing' (Kressel, 1981). Additionally, honour killings have been reported in various parts of the world, including Albania, Chechnya, the Philippines, Latin America, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries, and South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, and Nepal (Fisk, 2020; Xhaho, 2011; Chesler, 2010; United Nations Population Fund, 2000; Goodwin, 1994; Brooke, 1991). These killings also occur in immigrant communities within countries that do not otherwise have societal norms promoting such acts. Historically, honour killings were practiced in Mediterranean Europe, including countries like Italy, Greece, and France (Grzyb, 2016). Therefore, I argue that the practice of honour killings does not have originated in Sindh as claimed by the author in this book; its actual origins remain unknown. Historically, there have been reports of this practice across various societies, primarily targeting women and girls in the name of honour.

In relation to the origin of *karo-kari* in Sindh, Shah (2016), in her ethnography 'Honour and Violence', argues that *karo-kari* originated in the territories of Baloch tribes in the Balochistan province of Pakistan and travelled with the Baloch diaspora in Sindh. In her book, she mentions that her participants describe *karo-kari* as a 'spillover' of the Baloch custom of *siyahkari* (which also means 'being black') and that it is considered to be a part of the Baloch honour system (p. 31). Nonetheless, the practice of killing women and girls (and men and boys in some cases) for the sake of family honour has a long history and is known by local names, whereas the term 'honour killing' is a recent invention. Grewal (2013) argues that, as a media-invented-and-led term, honour killing circulates as a symbol of cultural deviancy and as 'a crime of culture' (p. 3), which not only describes honour as a cultural ideology but is also seen as a fixed cultural 'pathology' (p. 4). Also, honour was attributed as an underlying reason for horrible violent practices, including duelling in England, foot binding in China, wife immolation in India and the honour-based system of retribution in the Southern States of the USA (Bhanbhro, 2023).

Moreover, until recently, in Pakistan, these kinds of killings have been traditionally viewed as the problem of ethno-linguistic groups such as Sindhis and Balochs. For instance, the term *karo-kari* is a Sindhi-language expression which means black male-black female. This implies that the victim has blackened themselves by bringing dishonour to the family by engaging in illicit pre-marital or extra-marital relations. In Pakistan, the term is still predominantly used by print and electronic media and state institutions to label such crimes, whether the incident occurred in Sindh province or elsewhere in Pakistan (Bhanbhro, 2015). However, killings of this sort

occur across Pakistan. The analysis of annual reports published by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) shows that over 15,222 honour killings have been recorded in the country between 2004 and 2016. This figure excludes attempted honour killings and other forms of honour-related violence. This means an average of 1170 honour killings annually and 22 per week (Bhanbhro, 2023). They are known by regional names such as *Kala-Kali* (Punjab), *Tor-Tora* (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and *Siyakari* (Balochistan).

The book's second part focuses on women's strategies for negotiating with patriarchy not only for their survival but also as a form of resistance. It provides interesting insights and highlights this understudied aspect of rural women's lives. They are seen as docile actors of the patriarchal regime who need saving all the time. Agha's detailed analysis of women's negotiations and bargaining with patriarchy to gain power within a household through bearing a male child, income generation through handicrafts to contribute to household income, making alliances with other family women, including mother-in-law, being obedient to win support from different male and female older family members are activities they do to tactically improve their status in the house and negotiating power with husband. Based on the analysis of strategies applied by women to negotiate with patriarchy, Agha argues that

> women in the villages of Khairpur are not just passive victims of their lot; they actively negotiate with patriarchy. They work to embrace the system and try to perform well. In so doing, they exhibit a high degree of reflexivity and agency, both of which are actively in play. (p. 257)

The book offers a thorough and insightful analysis of how marriage practices serve as the foundation of patriarchy, ensuring its ongoing unchallenged power. In Pakistan and among people of Pakistani origin worldwide, marriage must be approved by one's parents, sanctioned by the religion, and registered by the state. One's social group must witness the wedding ceremony. Agha's book provides new insights into the impact of patriarchy in rural Pakistan. It challenges the perception of women as passive victims and instead portrays them as active negotiators within male-dominated social systems. The detailed analysis of patriarchal marriage practices and their impact on women's autonomy is crucial for understanding how patriarchy perpetuates itself. It offers practical insights into how patriarchal systems are intertwined with socioeconomic factors like poverty and illiteracy. It provides a framework for understanding grassroots strategies of economic empowerment. The book emphasises the importance of education, economic independence, and social support networks in empowering women and challenging local and global feminist narratives. It is essential reading for scholars and practitioners interested in gender, feminism, development, and sociology. Furthermore, it offers hope and strategies for change in patriarchal contexts. Therefore, it should be widely read.

REFERENCES

Abou-Zeid, A. (1965). Honour and shame among the Bedouins of Egypt, in J. G. Peristiany (ed), *Honour and Shame: The values of Mediterranean society* (pp. 243–259) London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Agha, N. (2021). *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*. Berlin, Germany: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6859-3

Ali, T. S., Ali, S. S., Nadeem, S., Memon, Z., Soofi, S., Madhani, F., Karim, Y., Mohammad, S. and Bhutta, Z. A. (2022). Perpetuation of gender discrimination in Pakistani society: Results from a scoping review and qualitative study conducted in three provinces of Pakistan. *BMC Women's Health*, 22(1), 540. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-02011-6

Bhanbhro, S. (2015). Representation of honour killings: Critical discourse analysis of Pakistani English-language newspapers, in J. Tomás and N. Epple (eds), *Sexuality, Oppression and Human Rights* (pp. 1–16). Boston: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848884243_002

Bhanbhro, S. (2021). *Uncovering community notions of honour and their relation to honour killings* (Doctoral dissertation, Sheffield Hallam University).

Bhanbhro, S. (2023). Stalking and coercive control: Commonly used strategies in honour-based abuse against young people, in M. Mellin, R. Wheatley and C. Flowers (eds), *Young People, Stalking Awareness and Domestic Abuse* (pp. 141–159). London, New York and Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32379-9_7

Bhanbhro, S., Wassan, M. R., Shah, M. A., Talpur, A. A. and Wassan, A. A. (2013). Karo Kari: The murder of honour in Sindh Pakistan: An ethnographic study. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 3(7), 1467–1484.

Bourdieu, P. (1965). The sentiments of honour in Kabyle society, in J. G. Peristiany (ed), *Honour and Shame: The values of Mediterranean society* (pp. 191–241). London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Brooke, J. (March 29, 1991). 'Honour' killing of wives outlawed in Brazil, *New York Times*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/29/us/honor-killing-of-wives-is-outlawed-in-brazil.html. (Accessed 23 October 2024).

Campbell, J. K. (1964). *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A study of institutions and moral values in a Greek mountain community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chesler, P. (2010). Worldwide trends in honor killings. *Middle East Quarterly*, 17(2). Available at: https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/worldwide-trends-in-honor-killings. (Accessed 24 October 2024).

Ejaz, S. S. and Ara, A. A. (2011). Gender discrimination and the role of women in Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 50(1), 95–105.

Fisk, R. (2010). The crime wave that shames the world, *The Independent*, 7 September. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-the-crimewave-that-shames-the-world-2072201.html. (Accessed 4 November 2024).

Fournier, P., Mcdougall, P. and Dekker, A. (2012). Dishonour, provocation, and culture: Through the beholder's eye? *Canadian Criminal Law Review*, 16(2), 161–193.

Giordano, C. (2001). Mediterranean honour reconsidered. Anthropological fiction or actual action strategy? *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, 10, 39–58.

Giordano, C. (2016). Honour between different cultures and legal systems: Social status, reputation, struggles for recognition. *European Review*, 24(3), 417. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798716000144

Goldstein, M. A. (2002). The biological roots of heat-of-passion crimes and honour killings. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 21(2), 28–37. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0730938400005748

Goodwin, J. (1994). *Price of Honour: Women lift the veil of silence on the Islamic world*. New York: Plume.

Grewal, I. (2013). Outsourcing patriarchy: Feminist encounters, transnational mediations, and the crime of 'honour killings'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.755352

Grzyb, M. A. (2016). An explanation of honour-related killings of women in Europe through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and masculine domination. *Current Sociology*, 64(7), 1036–1053. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115627479

Iqbal, H., Afzal, S. and Inayat, M. (2012). Gender discrimination: Implications for Pakistan security. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(4), 16–25. https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-0141625

Kressel, G. M. (1981). Sororicide/filiacide: Homicide for family honour [and comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 22(2), 141–158. https://doi.org/10.1086/202632

Ortner, S. B. (1978). The virgin and the state. *Feminist Studies*, 4(3), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177536

Peristiany J. G. (1965). Introduction, in J. G. Peristiany (ed), *Honour and Shame: The values of Mediterranean society*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Pitt-Rivers, J. (1968). Honour. *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 6, 503–511.

Pourya Asl, M. and Hanafiah, S. A. binti M. (2024). Mapping violence against women in Pakistan: A Galtungian reading of Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. *South Asian Review*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2024.2304994

Safilios-Rothschild, C. (1969). 'Honour' crimes in contemporary Greece. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 20(2), 205. https://doi.org/10.2307/588531

Schneider, J. (1971). Of vigilance and virgins: Honour, shame, and access to resources in Mediterranean societies. *Ethnology*, 10(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/3772796

Shah, N. (2016). *Honour and Violence: Gender, power and law in Southern Pakistan*. New York: Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvswx7d4

UN Women. (2023). National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan 2023, *UN Women Country Office Pakistan*. Available at: https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary_-nrsw-inl_final.pdf. (Accessed 2 August 2024).

United Nations Population Fund. (2000). The state of the world's population (Research Report). *UNFPA*. https://doi.org/10.18356/7e4afadd-en

World Economic Forum. (2024). The global gender gap report 2024, *World Economic Forum*. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024. (Accessed 2 August 2024).

Xhaho, A. (2011). *Honour crimes of women in Albanian society boundary discourses on violent culture and traditions* (Doctoral dissertation, Central European University).

Citation: Bhanbhro, S. (2025). [Review of the book *Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan*, by Nadia Agha]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 18. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16028


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 19
ISSN: 2468-4414

lectito

Book Review

Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives

Sneha Gole [1]*

Published: March 1, 2025

Book's Editors: Judith Mirashi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H Kalpana Rao

Publication Date: 2024

Place of Publication: Oxon and New York

Publisher: Routledge

Number of Pages: 369

Price: £108 Hardback

ISBN: 978-1-032-38929-5

This book attempts to bring together scholarship from the disciplines of Literature and History to understand the nature of indentureship and the subsequent diasporic location for the lives of marginalised men and women who made the journey. Did that experience result in empowerment and a better life or further marginalisation? How did diverse individuals cope and negotiate with the changed circumstances? What role did race, class, caste, ethnicity and gender play in these negotiations? How does theorising 19th-century experiences of indentureship allow for a better understanding of diasporic Indians in the 21st century? These are some of the questions guiding the essays in the book. Apart from academic essays, the book also includes interviews with contemporary fiction and non-fiction writers to understand how they use the legacy of indentureship as a space to resist and challenge. This is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on forced migration, displacement and legacies of slavery and indentureship. The book's intended audience is researchers of literature, history, gender, migration, race, postcolonial studies, South Asian and Indian Ocean studies, and those interested in questions of slavery. The editors are located within the discipline of English literature and postcolonial studies and have previously published titles around literature on the indenture and diaspora.

The volume is concerned with intervening in South Asian history and Indian diaspora studies, which have not paid adequate attention to the '*girmitiya*' or the indentured labourer. Diaspora studies have mainly focused on the more affluent and recent diaspora in the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe: the 'new' diaspora consisting of post-colonial migration. According to the editors, the 'old' diaspora, consisting of labour-related colonial migrations like indenture, is disowned owing to the marginal status of the migrants. This volume is, therefore, an attempt to correct this neglect and reinstate the '*kala pani*' (in Hindu cosmology, crossing the ocean was forbidden, the term *kala pani* literally means black waters) crossings and migrants into the fold of diaspora studies.

Within the '*girmitiyas*' literature and history, women constitute a further marginalised group whose experiences and voices seldom find representation. The volume aims to bridge this gap by bringing a gender lens to the discussions over Kala Pani crossings and diaspora. The particularly complex and vexed question has been the emancipation of women within the indenture system. This has to do with who the recruited women were, the skewed sex ratio at the ports of destination, and the impact of the changed context on structures of intimacies, marriage and kinship. Whether indenture offered women a chance at a new life or a life marked by sexual violence and economic exploitation was a question that achieved salience in the historical context and continues to be

[1] *Assistant Professor at the Savitribai Phule Pune University*, INDIA
***Corresponding Author:** gole.sneha@gmail.com

debated. The nationalist discourse of colonial times elevated the indentured woman and the question of sexual violence to a question of purity and national identity. In colonial historiography, the indentured woman came to be equated with the loose sexual morals of the colonised. These complexities have only been fully addressed within feminist scholarship, which has tried to make sense of the contradictory freedom of indentured women and humanise them, rescuing them from sexualisation, dehumanisation and iconisation. This volume then attempts to address this question more holistically by bringing gender to the centre of the discussions of *kala pani* and the diasporic communities wrought out of these transformations.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section, 'Rethinking Kala Pani: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches', has three essays: Mala Pandurang's essay applies a south-south comparative framework to studying the diaspora by decentring both the 'old'/'new' diaspora framework as well as the mainstream framework of Atlantic slavery. She draws from her experiences of designing and teaching a course focusing on intersectionality within an Indian university framework to do so. Himadri Lahiri takes on the idea of the sea as a method to read the representation of transoceanic travel of female coolies as represented in fiction and how it allows for problematising the binaries of land/ocean and public/private. The third essay in this section examines the question of women and indenture by studying historical records and accounts, especially the discourse in India around the victimhood and morality of indentured women. Overall, this section lays out the most relevant issues that inform the volume, particularly its methodological concerns and theoretical preoccupations, including how bringing gender as a central analytical category recasts the understanding of indenture and the subsequent experiences of migration and formation of diasporic communities and how reading fiction and narratives might be an excellent methodological entry point for the same.

The second section, 'Past and Present: Revisiting the Sexual Contract', consists of three essays focusing on marriage, intimacy and kinship within the diaspora. The first essay by Suparna Sengupta looks at the marriage 'system' as it was shaped in the penal colony of the Andamans and the complications in rendering these into a semblance of 'permanence'. She argues that male convicts were provided access to women's bodies to enforce a heteronormative moral code, which enabled both the reproduction of labour, as well as the imperial process of colonisation of the penal colony. Auritra Munshi's work focuses on man-woman relationships and marriage in the coolie diaspora through a critical examination of literary texts. Arnab Kumar Sinha's essay examines the interrelationship between queerness and diaspora by exploring Shani Mootoo's novels and short stories. The essay mainly focuses on the fraught relationship between Hindu religious rituals, the formation of diasporic Indian communities and negotiations of queerness, highlighting the conflict between the religious desires of the community and the queer desires of the individual.

The third section of the collection, 'Voice and Vision Redeemed', consists of four essays that focus on voice in poetry, literature, and narratives. The first two essays, by Vijaya Rao and Jenni Balasubramanian focus on Francophone resources, while the others look at English literature. In her essay, Vijaya Rao examines two French narratives from India and the Reunion Island to understand the experience of the 'returnee', a relative rarity in the history and literature of indentureship. She argues that these works engage with the idea of decoloniality, and the figure of the returnee is granted agency on the intersections of archival recuperation and epistemic disobedience. Jenni's chapter explores literary representations of the first-generation Indian indentured women labourers in colonial literature from Reunion. Praveen Mirdha's essay examines and reads meaning into women's silences, as articulated within Indo-Caribbean poetry, to underline the distinctive diasporic consciousness among postcolonial Indians. The essay argues that this poetry provides an insight into the untraceable history and distant memory of these first-generation expatriate labourers and how they accepted home as a temporary residence and found opportunities for healing and negotiation in these new worlds created by indentureship. Gargi Dutta's work focuses on the non-normative characters in three literary texts, *Jahajin*, *The Swinging Bridge*, and *Sea of Poppies*, to explain their role in constructing Kala Pani's history. Underlining the differences between the three novels in terms of the gender of the authors and their narrative arcs, the essay reads them as retrieval narratives, highlighting their importance for mainstream Indian colonial history.

The book's fourth part – titled 'In Conversation with India: Memorial Narratives Inside Out', has two essays and focuses on conversations with India. Ridhima Tewari's essay looks at popular Bhojpuri films to argue that the popular becomes a site for creating a coherent, prescriptive narrative that draws from gendered imaginaries of the nation and attempts to 'resolve' the gender question across indenture diaspora and post-indenture migration. Stephanos Stephanides' essay documents the worship practices around Mariamman in contemporary Guyana and the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in the United States. This profoundly personal essay tracks a Greek-Cypriot scholar's relationship with Mariamman, who becomes both the focus of his study and the object of his faith and worship. It traces the shifts in the Indo-Guyanese community through indentureship, colonialism and neo-liberal capitalism, with goddess worship as the entry point.

The book's last and perhaps the longest part, 'In the Writers' Own Voices', consists of detailed interviews with eight writers of Kala Pani literature. These include writers from the Kala Pani diaspora, including Fiji, Trinidad,

Guyana and Mauritius. What emerges from these extremely rich and diverse interviews, which should each be read in the original version for the depth and intensity of issues they open up, are many cross-cutting questions. It highlights the degree to which the idea of India as 'homeland/motherland' shapes the subjectivities and identities of these writers and how the degree of generational separation from the 'original' migration, as well as peculiar family histories, shape their notion of themselves as Fijians/Guyanese/ Trinidadian or Mauritian and as belonging to the Kala Pani diaspora. The interviews also engage with Khal Torabully's invocation of the concept of Coolitude and how different authors see it as a useful term. Some reject the term, preferring those like '*girmit*' or '*girmitiyas*' instead, while others see it as helpful in making sense of the peculiarity of the diasporic existence of indentured labourers. These interviews also reflect on the archive and its influences on oral histories, family myths and folklore as resources for fiction writers, among other issues. The thread that runs through these interviews is an understanding of the creative process of writers and how they navigate the complex identities of gender, race, and nationality in their writing and life.

The book's contributors are primarily located within the discipline of Literature, and this is perhaps the collection's strength and weakness. Essays sometimes do not take cognisance of debates taking place within other disciplinary spaces like Gender Studies. For instance, while an essay draws from Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the nationalist resolution of the woman question, it does not account for the extensive debate around that formulation, fuelled mainly by feminist historians, among others. This is not merely an argument for citation and acknowledgement but about how these elisions / omissions might have affected the substantive arguments. A growing body of literature on the Bhojpuri diaspora and the Bhojpuri language and culture exists. The book does not consistently take cognisance of this body of work either.

The book is relevant for its contribution to knowledge around diaspora by de-centring the 'new' Indian diaspora, which has been the de facto framework. It is also important to challenge the idea of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and related journeys as the only 'crossings' of importance in understanding the making of labour diasporas and cultures. However, it is an uneven book, with certain parts and essays being more theoretically rigorous and advanced.

Creating a category called Kala Pani as a conceptual category is an important contribution to knowledge of the book, especially since it brings together anglophone and francophone plantation colonies. The attempt to read these as 'connected histories' with continuities and ruptures with each other, as well as with the homeland and as 'connected sociologies' conscious of their positionality in the larger context of colonialism, indentureship, and enslavement, is a significant contribution and should be acknowledged. The attempt to bring together scholars and writers in the same volume allows for a multiplication of the voices that address, write and redefine the contours of this historical experience. This book is, therefore, an important addition and will be helpful not only to those who study slavery and indentureship but also to those interested in South Asian history, politics, and culture as a whole, with a focus on gender.

Citation: Gole, S. (2025). [Review of the book *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*, edited by Judith Mirashi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H Kalpana Rao]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 19. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16029


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectito1


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

This page intentionally left blank.

https://www.lectitopublishing.nl