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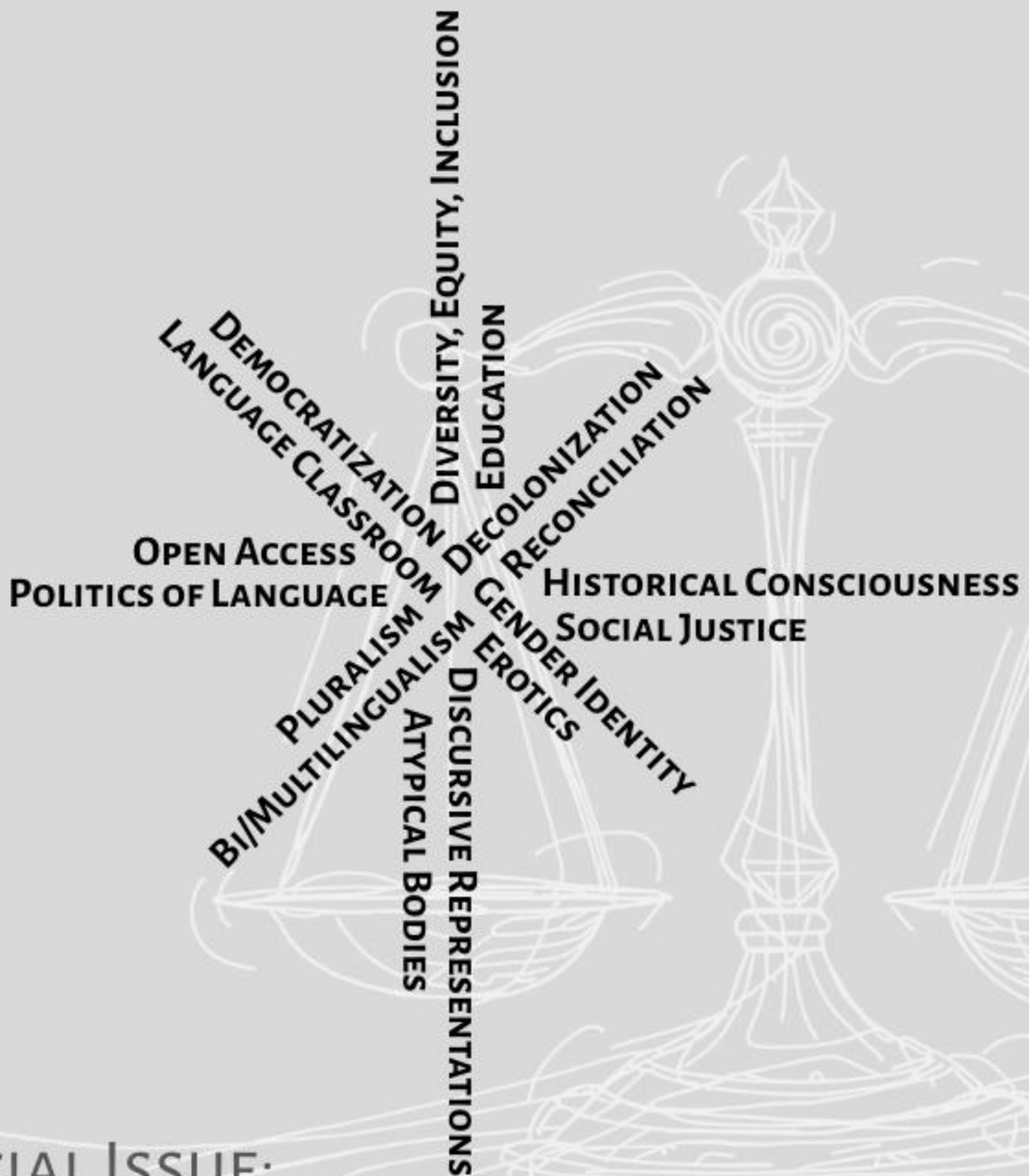

Special Issue:
Social Justice

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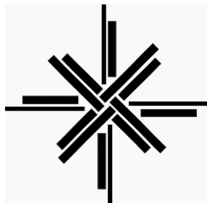

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EDITORS' NOTE

James S. Baumlin
https://doi.org/10.71106/BJFD4323

On November 4, 2025, citizens of New York City elected Democratic candidate Zohran Mamdani "as its first Muslim and first South-Asian mayor" (Goodwin). Though a local election merely, the results were closely watched nationally—and not just in the U.S., as BBC News made its morning-after report:

> Since democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani first entered New York City's mayoral race, the 34-year-old state assemblyman from Queens has risen from near-total obscurity into the national spotlight. His bold, left-wing platform has energised progressives, shaken up his Democratic Party, and drawn harsh criticism from President Donald Trump and other Republicans. "Today we have spoken in a clear voice: hope is alive," Mamdani told supporters after triumphing in the contest. Unlike his more established opponents, Mamdani's new perspective, youth and new left-wing platform excited and ultimately won over voters eager for a fresher politician. "Let City Hall, with our compassion, our conviction and our clarity, be the light that our city and our nation so desperately need," Mamdani said on the week he was elected. (Goodwin)

"Ugandan-born of Indian parents" (Goodwin), Mamdani ran a successful campaign based in issues of affordability and access. Having promised to freeze rents in city-subsidized housing, reduce energy bills, and offer free public transport, Mamdani must now enact a series of progressive policy changes that New York's city government will have to find ways to fund, administer, and enforce. If his mayoralty succeeds, Mamdani will be seen as an embodiment of social justice. "Hope is alive," says the mayor-elect, and most New Yorkers now share in this hope. But the onus falls on City Hall as Mamdani himself notes, since one man's campaign promises will require city-wide changes in government institutions and policies, including laws and law enforcement, taxation levels, and basic infrastructure.

And not all share his hope. As another BBC News headline reads, "Trump Says it's 'Communism or Common Sense' after Democrat Mamdani Wins NYC Mayoral Election." The brief news report continues:

> Trump says that after last night's election results, the difference between the two parties could not be more clear, saying it's a choice between "communism and common sense." "Our opponents are offering an economic nightmare and we are offering an economic miracle," he said. "They put America last, we put America first." (BBC News)

The stakes are high for New Yorkers, with politicians "on both sides of the aisle" keeping a close, critical eye on City Hall. Still, with so many crises of access and affordability worldwide, why should a "mere" mayoral election matter to readers of this *LLIDS* Special Issue? There are other crises the world over, many far more dire: of grinding poverty; of systemic inequality and discrimination by race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity; of food

insecurity and famine; of civilian deaths and displacements through flooding, fires, drought, and climate change generally; of civil war; of ethnic cleansing; of genocide. These, indeed, matter; so why begin with the story of NYC mayor-elect Mamdani?

***

This Special Issue and its attendant forum seeks to initiate a global dialogue on social justice (SJ), a term marking the intersection of politics and public policy, ethics and economics, pedagogy and social praxis. The Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ), a politically non-partisan think-tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., offers a concise description:

> Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development. (Center for Economic and Social Justice)

And, *de rigueur*, social justice "encompasses economic justice" (Center for Economic and Social Justice). The CESJ description accords with recent declarations made by the United Nations: namely, that "Social justice […] broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth," provides "an underlying principle for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations" (International Forum 7). While considerations of economics undergird SJ theory, its discourse reaches beyond economics to address inequalities of access, privilege, and rights generally.

As an interdisciplinary journal in the Humanities, *LLIDS* enjoys a scholarly readership focused on languages, literatures, and cultural discourse. Unsurprisingly, a majority of the journal's authors and readers are academicians whose teaching and research interests reflect some interest in social justice. (I'd assume, further, that most readers embrace SJ theory as part of their intellectual "equipment." We profess it in our scholarship; we teach it in the classroom.) As a mode of academic discourse, SJ theory embraces a range of critical theories and methods, including colonialist criticism, critical race theory (CRT), gender criticism, queer theory, and cultural criticism. The realm of "the social" is well explored in these prior theories and methods. What SJ theory adds to their varied social-cultural perspectives is a heightened emphasis upon institution-alization. It's the "J" in SJ theory that marks its territory and defines its discourse.

For SJ theory offers to critique the institutions—social, political, economic—that sustain inequalities of access, privilege, and rights. In practice, SJ theory aims to deinstitutionalize systematic inequality by means of progressive public policy. Indeed, treating equal access and opportunity as matters of social "justice" necessarily entails law and policy. Concomitantly, the promotion of equal access, privilege, and rights rests in institutions and infrastructure—that is, in adequately funded government offices and

public agencies. Again in practice, SJ theory seeks to protect and expand rights of individuals and historically underserved communities.[1]

As noted above, academicians in the U.S. and elsewhere have invested heavily in SJ theory. They have done so with the institutional support of public school systems and universities and—as important—with financial underwriting by state legislatures. That is, until recently. In the U.S. (and elsewhere, as contributors to this *LLIDS* Special Issue have noted), an ultraconservative brand of politics has gained power within federal government and several state legislatures, and its leaders have taken aim at SJ policies and projects. With conservative media outlets amplifying their political message, they have used the institutions of government—its laws, its powers of policing and, perhaps most potent, its sources of funding—to dismantle SJ-supportive policies in social services, business hiring, legal advocacy, and education. At the federal level, this is reflected in the current U.S. administration's assault against school "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) initiatives and CRT curricula.[2] Perhaps inevitably, school DEI policies have become flashpoints in the nation's politically charged "culture wars." Even as this Issue's forum is being edited for publication, departments of English and cultural studies across the nation engage in an intensely ideological struggle, aiming to provide ethical/intellectual/aesthetic defense of (and justification for) teaching practices supportive of progressive social policy.

We have long thought that academia's Ivory Tower stood above party politics, and that it ought to do so. In my lifetime as a student and teacher, academic freedom was taken for granted, irrespective of the party in power. This is no longer the case. I do not blame conservative party politics per se, since numerous SJ policies (in voting rights, civil liberties, and equal opportunities in housing and employment) have enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Besides, a healthy democracy demands a diversity of voices and viewpoints. But the factionalism that has overtaken the institutions of government is not "business as usual." As an intellectual community, we can no longer ignore the political firestorm that surrounds us, lapping at our own Ivory Tower, once seemingly impervious, with its flames. In the current state of affairs, our own academic freedoms fall under

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[1]In alignment with posthumanism and ecocriticism, SJ theory extends its protections to the planet and its delicate ecology. Given that an extinction of whole species is threatened by climate change and environmental degradation, these our "companion species" are afforded rights under SJ theory. See, Baumlin, James S. "From Postmodernism to Posthumanism: Theorizing Ethos in an Age of Pandemic." *Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–25, https://doi.org/10.3390/h9020046.

[2]For readers unfamiliar with the term, critical race theory (CRT) "is an academic field focused on the relationships between social conceptions of race and ethnicity, social and political laws, and mass media. CRT also considers racism to be systemic in various laws and rules, not based only on individuals' prejudices" ("Critical"). The web article continues:

> CRT is also used in sociology to explain social, political, and legal structures and power distribution as through a "lens" focusing on the concept of race, and experiences of racism. For example, the CRT conceptual framework examines racial bias in laws and legal institutions, such as highly disparate rates of incarceration among racial groups in the United States. A key CRT concept is intersectionality—the way in which different forms of inequality and identity are affected by interconnections among race, class, gender, and disability. ("Critical")

In the U.S., the current federal administration has joined with conservative state governments in banishing CRT curricula from public schools and universities.

assault; and, even as voices of dissent are being forcibly silenced, we choose to add our voice to theirs.

Here in the U.S. and elsewhere, the academician is called to speak out. Though bold in its call-to-action, such is the starting point for this Issue on social justice, which seeks to reflect on, analyze, expand on, and complicate SJ theory and its applications. As noted above, the *LLIDS* editors have sought to involve authors and audiences globally in exploring this timely issue. Though terms like diversity, equity, and inclusion have wide appeal, it stands to reason that diverse communities will express different needs and aspirations. A glance at contributors' topics (and their academic affiliations) will show if this noble aim has been achieved.

Prospective contributors were posed with a series of questions and propositions apropos to the topic:

- How does SJ theory understand itself as an ideology or ideological behavior?
- How is SJ theory taught? What is its curriculum? What are its paths of resistance?
- In the classroom, in scholarship, and in public/political discourse, what does SJ theory enable or make visible? What does it leave unseen or unspoken? What are its "blind spots"?
- How can SJ theory address the political-economic crisis of the so-called 1% against the 99%?
- Can social justice have the same meaning and application/implication for all communities, charting both the Global North and the Global South?
- As per the U.N. declaration, social justice seeks a "fair and compassionate distribution" of wealth. This remains a noble aim and aspiration. Given the deep entrenchment of global capitalism, is it viable?
- How can SJ advocates claim to speak "on behalf" of a community unless/until its members have spoken and been heard? Is advocacy earned through listening? (Is SJ theory a mode of "listening rhetoric"? Can/should it become one?)

As it turns out, contributors to this Special Issue needed no such prompts. They have their own experiences, their own concerns, their own methodologies; and, perhaps most salient, they have their own stories to tell. As one would expect from a humanities journal, "the politics of language" becomes a recurring theme. Social justice aims at action but takes language as its energy and expression. The contributors to this Special Issue each write on behalf of a community, serving as its spokesperson. Will their voices be enabled and amplified? Will their voices be ignored or, worse, forcibly silenced? Within a journal Issue on social justice, questions like these multiply.

As noted above, the *LLIDS* editors have assumed that social justice must mean different things to different people worldwide. As a means of testing this assumption, this Issue includes responses to a questionnaire distributed amongst people from different geographies and walks of life. Its writing prompts focus on individuals' prior understanding ("What is social justice for you?"); their experiences ("How have you felt wronged by society in your personal life and/or your area of work?"); and, of course, their personal narratives ("Tell us your own story about Injustices/problems you have faced").

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If allowed to speak on behalf of the journal and its editors, authors, and readers, I'd do more than offer thanks or congratulations. For it's a profoundly ethical, existential task that we have taken upon ourselves. Our work, though intellectual, is worldly. The act of writing, much like the act of speaking, makes an appeal, ethically and existentially. To speak is an appeal to be heard, and to be heard is an appeal to be seen—to be seen, that is, within one's markers of gender, ethnicity, physical ability, and social-economic status. It's to be seen within one's aspirations; it's to be seen within one's challenges and needs. And to be seen is to be made real—real in one's aspirations, real in one's needs. Any individual, group, or government that stands opposed to the appeals made on behalf of social justice will work to silence these; and if the speakers making such appeals refuse to be silenced, then they'll be demonized, dehumanized in some way. Such is the current state of politics and of its gruesome rhetorical habits.

The paradox of a global forum on social justice is that each essay contribution becomes personal and each story local—both radically individual and communitarian at once. In ways that are more than symbolic, we dwell in our varied communities in much the same way that we inhabit our bodies. Note that our living material bodies, our personal histories, and our seemingly unique, individual stories bear markers of identity that are drawn from communities. We bear these markers upon us and within us; by their means, we are made visible; through them, we can be heard. They give us substance; they make us real. To borrow a term from Kenneth Burke, we are consubstantiated with/in culture. If I may coin a word suggestive of our ethical-existential nature, I'd call us a communified species, conjoined to our fellows. In standing for social justice, we stand for our communified selves.

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Social Justice Questionnaire: Responses

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Nikita Goel | E.L.A. Project
Sharanya DG | E.L.A. Project
https://doi.org/10.71106/TVDW7434

While developing this Special Issue on Social Justice (SJ), we became increasingly aware that even though SJ claims a global discourse, the term is largely embedded with academic erudition. Underneath the theoretical and policy aspect of SJ lies the very real, painfully visceral human experiences of injustices, leading to varying articulations of what SJ means to people in different socio-economic, politico-cultural contexts. The Issue's attempt to present global perspectives and personal narratives on the problem of SJ would remain incomplete if its explorations do not go beyond the confines of the academic community and conventional templates of academic research practices. While *LLIDS* attempts to break away from the latter and create an alternative space through its Forum section, the very nature of the topic of SJ and its real-time implications demand a more personal and diversified approach. The idea of the questionnaire then was an attempt to innovate a writing format by way of including perspectives of people from all walks of life on their lived experiences of discriminations and injustices as well as their expectations from Justice.

The responses to this questionnaire present a set of raw confessions and ruminations on a range of injustices that people live through every day. The responders differ widely in their contexts as it relates to their geographies, professions, communities, social classes, age, gender, sexuality, race, caste, religion, etc., and this difference can be seen in their outlooks as well. What follows is a compilation of contradicting ideas about what SJ means, ranging from descriptive understanding of the concept to frustrated grievances of its failures, to hopeful expectations from one's society. Varied and conflicting as the responses may appear, they still present only a sliver of the social injustices perpetrated in the world. Despite our attempts to open up the questionnaire to other languages, this exercise remains limited to the English-speaking groups given the digital form of the survey.

By acknowledging the multifarious observations on social (in)justice from people across the globe—experiential and visceral, stripped of theory and analysis—these responses act as a preface to the Research Papers and Forum sections of this Special Issue. An interesting question that came up from one of the responders of the questionnaire upon reading the compiled responses was: "It seems to me there is an agreement on social justice as a goal, but divergence in how to achieve it. What means

are necessary to achieve the end goal?” We are afraid that this Issue will not be able to answer this. The only thing then we can do, as Prof. James Baumlin put in an email to us, “is not to debate or to give or withhold assent, but to bear witness. If each [response] had been offered in living conversation, ‘I hear you (and I see you)’ would be a humane reply.” We hope that a reflection on the spectrum and complexity of issues voiced within and beyond the Questionnaire evoke an understanding towards tolerance and inclusivity in us, its readers. As we read through these responses, let us take a moment to reflect: what is at stake when we raise questions on the problem of Social Justice?

What is Social Justice?

“For me, social justice is when an individual feels secure about her/his rights. The person must have the protection of the right to flourish, develop, and fulfil dreams and aspirations.

– Parveen Kumari, Assistant Professor, India

“I see social justice as the natural order of things, as balance. When we check our ego and find within ourselves capacity for love and compassion, we practice social justice. When we value each member of the ecosystem and encourage diversity to happen, we practice social justice. Social justice means never losing hope, that we can do better, that we can create abundance and ensure everyone has access to it.

– Maddy Grzybowski, Social Worker, Czech Republic

“A way to right many of the historically lopsided relations of power currently in the world, which place certain groups of people at a serious disadvantage.

– Agostinho Pinnock, GeoHumanities Lecturer, United Kingdom

“Social justice is the state of equity in social relations and material welfare including along axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nation of origin (distributive justice). It also is the invocation and capacity to repair past injustices (reparative justice). It also is the capacity of people equally to participate in decision making at local and broader levels of society (procedural justice). It also is the equal representation of subaltern knowledges in public culture (epistemic justice).

– Dana Cloud, Professor of Communication, United States

“Social justice means that those who can stand up for, support, and uplift others should do so for those who need it. They should do so not for legal reasons, but because it’s the right thing to do, though the law can be a powerful encouragement if utilized properly. Both words are key: the social makes clear that this is not just individual but action on behalf of society while the justice is ethical and can be used both positively and negatively in ways that transcend existing legal systems.

– Jeff Horn, Dean, USA

“When everyone is treated humanely, and all voices are equally heard and respected.

– Aida Hass-Wisecup, University Professor (Criminology), United States

“Anyone regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation, class, religion, or nationality should have access to education, health care, housing, and the freedom to choose occupations. They have the right to protest, to be safe from gun or other violence, racism, or sexism. They also have the right to a political system truly about integrity and not driven by financial interest.

– Cari Carpenter, Professor Emerita, USA

❝ Equity (meaning the erasure of all forms of discrimination) and multispecies kinship, or in other words, unprivileged multiplicity, that is social justice for me.

– Stavroula Anastasia Katsorchi, PhD candidate in English Studies, Greece

❝ Principles for organizing society in a fair and equitable manner.

– Hon Fai Chen, Professor, Hong Kong

❝ Social Justice for me is the equitable distribution of resources and equal access to those resources for each member of the society with diverse ethnic, race and geographic identity.

– Tirupati Pariyar, Program Manager at Samata Foundation, Nepal

❝ Social Justice, for me, is a goal—a process and action—in which we celebrate differences and not belittle or discriminate against identities that have historically been marginalized.

– Amy Aldridge, University Administrator, USA

❝ Social justice, in my view, entails ensuring justice for every individual, regardless of gender, class, or other social distinctions. This principle seeks to promote fairness in the distribution of opportunities and privileges, as well as recognize and protect individual rights.

– Biswarup Das, PhD, India

❝ Ensuring equity and dignity for all individuals in society is social justice.

– Sayan Lodh, PhD candidate in History, India

❝ Equal opportunities for all, regardless of class, gender, or differences. The right to be heard and seen as equal—no less than a man or a woman from a more privileged background.

– Ayesha Latif, Teacher/Student/Mother, Pakistan

❝ Social justice means structuring societal systems to provide fair and equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background. It is grounded in the belief that all people have inherent, God-given value and dignity. This perspective emphasizes justice as a reflection of equality under God, not just societal norms, and calls for systems to operate in ways that honor this truth.

– Toby Sommer, LMCS Pastor, USA

❝ Social justice to me has been made into something it was never intended to be. It was supposed to be a voice for all people: one that was equally heard no matter their

formal place in the socioeconomic structure. Now, I feel it has been weaponized against anyone with a traditional, conservative voice. I recognize that social justice is important to society, but being hateful towards someone because their opinion is different does not contribute to the very principles social justice stands for.

– Jeremy Roe, Director of Enterprise Fraud at Dickinson Financial, United States

“Social Justice was a great concept until exploited by the left to disparage hard working people. Growing up in the Midwest, everyone had the opportunities to excel and succeed if you’re willing to put in the work. Now it seems that the cries of Social Injustice come mainly from those who want everything without putting in the work. To me, it is a crutch by those who want the government to provide at the expense of others.

– Scott Burrelsman, United States

“Social justice in India is to give unlimited powers, quotas, freebies, scholarship, employment, opportunities, reservation, etc., to some numerical strong castes who are useful in elections as radical and polarized vote banks.

– Yogesh Kumar Sharma, Professor (Retired), India

“Equality for all whether it’s work or housing or income; I don’t agree with any of that, there’s laws in place in our country that make it unlawful but easy to discriminate against someone.

– Riley Gilmore, Entrepreneur Taxidermist, North America

“A person should be given what they are qualified for. They should not be just given it because of their race or sex. It should be given to you for your qualifications.

– William Ghirardi, Apartment Maintenance, United States

According to you, what are the biggest problems in your society today?

"People have reduced agency to live in the world we envision, both because of structural limitations to our power, but also because we give up our agency voluntarily and neglect to create personal, community and societal visions. Shopping, scrolling, gaming, grooming, consuming—all divert our attention and drain our agency. Anxiety and fear drive responsiveness rather than love. We increasingly lack the skills to collaborate with others, to negotiate difficult conversations, to govern ourselves. We need to reclaim these skills and commit our time to envisioning our world if we want to be free and exercise our personal power to change the structure of the society we live within.

– Michelle Miller, Researcher on food systems, USA

"In our society we don't think as a citizen, rather we (most of the people) put our class, religion, caste, etc., above our rights and duties of a citizen.

It happens very often that whenever there is a problem around nobody tries to solve it positively or nobody ever takes any initiative. For example, in my colony if the drainage is overflowing, nobody wants to solve this problem positively, rather we choose to ignore it by thinking that anybody else will do it.

Even I don't take initiative because in our education system it was never taught to us. I mean how to solve practical problems is never part of our education system.

– Surya Pratap, Learner, India

"Expectations to conduct oneself in a manner which is driven by age old traditional and conventional mindset. Society doesn't give the freedom to experience and try new things because of fear of failure.

1. No counselling for a kid when attaining maturity, to decide the next course of action in education, physical activities or lets say career. It's not a regular practice where one can feel heard. It's much like following the pack at the moment, just because "kuch krke dikhana hai."[1]
2. Life Orientation: No education or discussion about how one should conduct him/herself at an adolescence age. Discussions about issues in society, crime, drugs, touch, sex, family. It has to be voiced out at a certain age so that it does not become a taboo or an uncomfortable conversation in future life.
3. Under age kids working at households, because of schools not providing service that they should at ground level.
4. Lack of NGO's and support to NGO's.

– Shreeyansh, Managing Director at Smart Creation, India

[1]Editor's Note: "kuch krke dikhana hai" is a colloquial phrase in Hindi language. It translates to "I have to prove myself."

“Intolerance has replaced tolerance.

– Nawazish Ali, PhD Student, China

“The biggest problem, according to me, is how intolerant people are to anything that doesn’t align with what they believe in, how they’re not even open to having a dialogue where there might be a possibility that the conclusion won’t be in their favor, or that the conclusion might prove them wrong.

– Sonali, PhD Scholar, India

“Issues of caste discrimination, oppression of religious minorities as well as the issues of women’s safety comprise some of the major social problems in Indian society today.

The pandemic has exacerbated certain social problems. For Instance, the widening of the class divide, and the effects of the pandemic are being felt unequally by those in marginalised groups.

– Swarnika Ahuja, Assistant Professor, India

“I would like for more people to become conversant and comfortable discussing identities and Intersectionality.

– Amy Aldridge, University Administrator, USA

“Exclusion of certain groups because of race, class, gender (gender inequality and pay gap), inaccessibility to public health and education, environmental pollution and disrespect towards others specially.

– Stavroula Anastasia Katsorchi, PhD candidate in English Studies, Greece

“For me, the biggest problem in our society is the staggering inequity in opportunities. A person’s entire life trajectory is decided the moment they are born—defined by who their parents are, their caste, religion, skin colour, or even just the country they happen to be born in. This lottery of birth seals one’s fate long before any merit can be shown. For many, especially those born without privilege, upward mobility is nearly impossible. Even access to justice—supposedly a universal right—is unequally distributed along these same lines of identity.

The pattern of inequality is no longer confined to specific geographies or histories. It is global. From systemic racism in the West to caste hierarchies in South Asia, from economic exclusion in the Global South to the tokenism of diversity elsewhere—structural inequality is everywhere, morphing to fit local contexts but always serving the same function: to keep power concentrated and inaccessible to most.

– Deb Datta, Retired, India

“In this global democratic age, most of the situation still seems unresolved as worldwide conflicts surge in different parts of the world. From the Ukraine-Russia

war to the Hamas and Israel war. Moreover, the religious hegemony seen in the South Asian continent produced by certain political parties' fanatic religion-based politics has created problems for minorities, Dalits, and Adivasis, or tribal groups.

For me, at present, global social justice for tribal groups and Adivasis in the Indian subcontinent has become crucial. The way we have experienced the violence and atrocities being carried out upon the Adivasi and Dalit groups in the Indian subcontinent remains beyond our expectations of the practice of democratic values. Such treatments have led to the exclusion of members of Dalits and Adivasis from the job sectors, be it private or government. Today the Hindutva has increased the violence against those Dalits who are marginalized and sociopolitically oppressed in the political arena.

If you are an educated person from a tribal group, you realize the institutional oppression carried out systematically against such groups. However, if you are an illiterate Adivasi or Dalit, you aren't even going to realize how you have been suppressed by racial injustice and casteism. Even if you are capable, you are not respected, listened to, or consulted just because you belong to a certain caste and community. Being born as an Adivasi and Dalit is the biggest sin you face if you are born in a Hindu society in the Indian subcontinent. Even today the social institutions do not include people from our groups unless we need to be surveyed by some international agencies.

– Mohan Dangaura, Teacher, Nepal

“A lot of women nowadays are seen as less than or not “strong” enough to run for president, make their own decisions, and what we know about our own bodies.

– Megan Skaggs, USA

“Justice is often mistaken as “equality,” and running behind equal rights creates the sense of “binary oppositions” at vivid social levels—gender, religion, class or caste.

– Antra Mani, PhD Scholar, India

“In contemporary India, social justice appears to be skewed toward certain groups, as evident in cases like Atul Subhas's. To genuinely achieve social justice, a society must authentically commit to the principles of equality and fairness, rather than merely paying lip service to them. In India, the disparity between the ideal of social justice and its implementation reveals a lack of authenticity in societal structures. This disparity reflects, to use Jean-Paul Sartre's term, a form of collective “bad faith,” where Indian society avoids confronting the contradictions between its stated values and actual practices.

– Biswarup Das, PhD, India

“Less qualified and less meritorious candidates are selected from radical groups. We have to live under fear due to the misuse of the draconian laws to protect the so called oppressed groups and castes.

– Yogesh Kumar Sharma, Professor (Retired), India

“Many companies are fleeing DEI policies. This will adversely affect the workforce and perpetuate societal inequalities.

– Carlton Funderburke, Pastor, United States

“Ecological destruction and pollution, gun violence, racism, sexism, and other discrimination against the disadvantaged and oppression of the working class by the wealthy.

– Cari Carpenter, Professor Emerita, USA

“Among many other boiling issues, one major issue is how India is full of qualified individuals but no jobs. Many colleges and universities (at least in Mumbai) offer jobs like Assistant Professor only Clock Hour Basis.

– Smita Vivek Jakkani, Independent Researcher, Academic and Creative Writer, India

“It seems to me that one of the biggest social problems is lack of sanitation in public areas.

– Isha Rohatgi, Editorial Assistant, India

“The biggest problems in achieving social justice in India today are the flawed laws and the overburdened judiciary. Cases sometimes take years to reach a conclusion.

– Sayan Lodh, PhD candidate in History, India

“I believe there is a lot of work to do to ensure complete and equal social justice for the entire human race. Due to the fact that ideologies of white vs. Black, American vs. “Mexican,” rich vs. poor, are ingrained in our systems of government—whether it be trade, allyship, etc.—or just the fact that many people do not (or just refuse to) understand that country boundaries are made up and “race” is all just based on melanin levels resulting from sun exposure and perhaps diet. And if we continue the patriarchy mindset of “this is men’s work,” etc., we will never have true equity for females in the workforce. I mean, look who we recently elected to be our president in the U.S., for f*cks sake! The exact opposite of progress towards complete and total social justice has all but reversed course—at least for the time being.

– Jed Long, Student and Library Assistant, United States

How have you felt wronged by society in your personal life and/ or your area of work?

" As a woman living in Delhi, one of the unsafest cities in the country for women, I have constantly struggled with safety issues.

– Swarnika Ahuja, Assistant Professor, India

" I feel like I'm not the right person to answer this because I've had a very fortunate life and living situation, but in society just being a woman I've been wronged in many ways because men are the ones wronging us and are usually the ones who find themselves in a situation of power.

– Maddison Sidwell, College Student, America

" Primarily, I have experienced discrimination based upon my large body size and sex as a (cis) female in a high-level leadership position.

– Amy Aldridge, University Administrator, USA

" I face women's oppression and anti-queer repression in politics, economics, and culture. I also have been discriminated against for my disability.

– Dana Cloud, Professor of Communication, United States

" Oh, definitely! As a gay man, I have had to make myself "straight" when in certain areas/around certain people to produce the expected "societal norms" for how men are supposed to be, especially in my rural Missouri Ozarks hometown. There was a time when I was in college right out of high school in 2015 where I was working in retail, and I was promoted to a customer service advisor. That offer was rescinded, and I was terminated from employment shortly after my disclosure of being gay. While the reason for my rescinded promotion and termination wasn't officially disclosed, it seems as though this may be more than just sheer coincidence—at least from my perspective.

– Jed Long, Student and Library Assistant, United States

" First I was too young then too old, always female and often poor. I 'pass' for several ethnic groups and frankly, am sick of 'passing' as a protective navigational mechanism in group situations.

– Michelle Miller, Researcher on food systems, USA

" Coming from a Dalit community in Nepal, I am perceived as a second class human in the society which has custom tailored my identity constraining my development. It has shaped in a particular way how I should live my life unlike others. I am not liberated.

– Tirupati Pariyar, Program Manager at Samata Foundation, Nepal

“I as a woman and Dalit have felt wrong in personal as well as public life. My access to sources is limited. As a woman, I am told directly that I cannot achieve certain things. I feel that as a woman I have to resist and am at a loss even if I have competence and skills because of societal limitations and prejudices. Whereas a man has the upper hand on me and is privileged just because he is a man. I have to do certain things in a certain period to have societal validation. When the caste factor is included the situation becomes complex. Directly in words, I am not told to act in a certain way or know my place as it is against the constitution of India. However, indirectly in the public sphere, it is expected of me to do as stated or not to excel as compared to certain individuals as they do not like it. Sometimes certain people had easy access to jobs and certain perks from certain individuals because of their social and economic background. While I have to work hard for the same things even after the hard work I have to look to certain cosmic powers to help.

– Parveen Kumari, Assistant Professor, India

“I have been the victim of the casteist mentality of society. I still remember doing great in my studies during my MA and MPhil at the Tribhuvan University of Nepal; however, I was never given top grades. I remember how some politician students from the upper castes would manipulate our professors and score 4 GPAs out of 4 even without submitting original term papers and attending classes regularly. I was even denied a teaching job at the central university just for being a Tharu. People in Nepal and India do not even consider Dalits and Aadivasis as humans. For the upper caste elites, the marginalized groups are just like dirt or a burden to their superior caste and race.

– Mohan Dangaura, Teacher, Nepal

“There haven’t been any major instances. However, due to my surname, I’ve been mistaken for a SC/ST/OBC person many times without actually availing of any of the benefits. There have been instances where I’ve missed out on some opportunities due to my unreserved category.

– Sayan Lodh, PhD candidate in History, India

“Imagine having to spend 20 years studying and 5 more years to earn a PhD (which includes a heavy monetary investment) only to be offered no more than 10K per month. All the while being taught about how idealistic we must be to change the nation. “Be the change to see the change.” It all sounds good till you don’t have enough money or jobs to feed your family.

– Smita Vivek Jakkani, Independent Researcher, Academic and Creative Writer, India

“As someone of mixed-race heritage, I haven’t felt that societal systems were intentionally designed to hold me back. However, I have experienced instances of

racism in the rural South, which were more individual than systemic. On the other hand, my father's experience with redlining in St. Louis in the 1980s revealed a clear example of systemic injustice. Policies like redlining created structural barriers for minority families to achieve homeownership and economic stability, impacting generations.

– Toby Sommer, LMCS Pastor, USA

“ Yes, I feel like they don't give the middle aged white guy in America the same thing that they give people of color, whites, women, we have become the segregated race.

– Riley Gilmore, Entrepreneur Taxidermist, North America

“ Recently, I was dismissed from the DEI committee at my office. I am a white, middle-aged man. I told someone within the committee that I believed we should choose the best candidate for the job, and not select candidates based on their skin tones. One of my colleagues, a black man, began to argue with this statement, stating: Our company needs to be more diverse. To which I replied: If a plane is experiencing extreme turbulence and your life is at risk, do you care about the skin color of the pilot who's trying to keep the plane in the air? No, you just want the most experienced, more assured pilot.” This did not go over well with the committee, but to me, it makes total sense. I want our company to be diverse and represent the American public, but I am not going to hire an unqualified individual just because they present differently than the white majority of this bank.

– Jeremy Roe, Director of Enterprise Fraud at Dickinson Financial, United States

“ For me it has always been question of 'fit,' an issue of belonging, and of a need to understand the way that the (social) game is being played…as these relate to questions of power, how it is being used, and who is using it, and for what ends.

– Cecily Jensen-Clayton, Researcher, Australia

“ I believe society has disproportionately limited the educational and entrepreneurial opportunities in our community.

– Carlton Funderburke, Pastor, United States

“ During my postgraduation, I felt extremely frustrated about the lack of sanitation in my college. Even though my college/university was “very well reputed” but the condition of sanitation was pathetic. During the entire day, washrooms were cleaned just once in the entire day. Sometimes, there used to be no water supply. No handwash/soap, toilet paper and bins. This was the peak of hypocrisy. On one hand, I was reading about feminism but on the other hand I did not have access to basic facility like clean washroom.

– Isha Rohatgi, Editorial Assistant, India

“On a personal level, as females, we are struggling to have the same basic human rights as males with the reversal of Roe v. Wade. Not to mention the disparities in pay and opportunities for jobs. We have never had a female president in America. Society has deemed females as less than, undeserving, and incapable to some degree, even when females are highly qualified and educated individuals.

– Tam Moody, Retired, United States

“I felt wronged when Trump was reelected. He plans to take away my rights and the rights of the people I love. And it made me look stupid to be a part of the nation that reelected him.

– Sidney Brown, Student, USA

“I have never felt wronged by society because I am always hyper aware when things aren't going right and I advocate for myself before feeling taken advantage of.

– Aida Hass-Wisecup, University Professor (Criminology), United States

“Whenever I feel that the results I enjoy are not proportional to the efforts I pay.

– Hon Fai Chen, Professor, Hong Kong

“In my line of work, I have had to hire less qualified personnel because a "quota" was mandated by upper management.

– Scott Burrelsman, United States

“Assumptions about my intellectual abilities in school, endangered constantly by gun and other violence, suffering from sexism as a female. I have witnessed the privilege of white men at work and in the larger community.

– Cari Carpenter, Professor Emerita, USA

As an instrument of policy, social justice seeks to ensure access, equity, participation, and human rights. Please comment on these principles.

“Similar to the way that ideals function in human meaning making, these named principles can and do influence our thinking, behaviours, and social contributions for good ends. However, as personal and social values, the uptake and influence of these principles of access, equity, participation, and human rights very much depend on individual responses to existing conditions. In this post truth era, an era of overwhelming devolution, opportunities exist for reinvention and translation of traditional approaches as these offer opportunities to develop a culture of care for ourselves, others, and our environment. However, enacting social change requires different ways to imagine and think so that the principles of access, equity, participation, and human rights are no longer so tightly constrained by the highly gendered societal system that the English language inculcates.

– Cecily Jensen-Clayton, Researcher, Australia

“Those are all key and crucial things for our society to strive for, so we can actually begin to say we live in a somewhat egalitarian society - which is something we like to say even today, keeping ourselves oblivious to reality. It is crucial to have access to basic and advanced needs, so we can nourish our bodies and minds, it’s crucial we equate human rights to trans rights, queer rights, women’s rights, BIPOC rights, all rights, because human rights belong to all humans and we need to start recognizing ourselves in each other again. Participation is crucial to build relationships - with ideas, with people, places, ourselves. We are transforming human beings into stuff and we humanize things that are for our consumption. Guns have more rights than women. We need to think of ourselves, regardless of identity, as a part of a circle, an ecosystem. And we need to start giving back instead of mindless consumption. We also need to take back our power, our autonomy.

– Maddy Grzybowski, Social Worker, Czech Republic

“These principles are hard to achieve, as the system in which we live creates social inequalities, thus leaving some people unprotected. This allows for a constant cycle of more poor people and more people without opportunities.

– José Duarte, Teacher, Portugal

“While everything may appear workable on paper, much more needs to be done to address and secure these critical issues. The state must ensure the presence of social justice for its citizens—a concept that is glaringly absent in Pakistan. Ethnic, class, and gender divisions have become increasingly pronounced, and the growing lack of trust in state institutions has turned the very notion of social justice into a mockery.

– Ayesha Latif, Teacher/Student/Mother, Pakistan

“Awareness and grassroot level changes can only benefit the society as a whole. And it might even take a generation to accept policies and norms, thereafter one can find actual growth and harmony in the society. Social justice is not ingrained in people and we are not taught the same in practice when kids. It’s all literature and not an activity-based learning. Opportunities are plenty even now, but access to those opportunities seems a tremendous task of its own, and probably underlines where social justice is falling behind.

– Shreeyansh, Managing Director at Smart Creation, India

“I remain skeptical. There is no shortage of policies that claim to promote access, equity, participation, and human rights. But most of these policies are crafted by elites - some of whom may carry the badge of marginalization but are still functioning within elite systems. These frameworks often serve to preserve the status quo, providing just enough relief to prevent unrest but never enough to enable real transformation. It is a carefully managed illusion of justice - hope doled out in small doses to keep the machinery of privilege running smoothly.

– Deb Datta, Retired, India

“One should not forget that these principles may differ in understanding across different cultures. There is not one universal definition. If so, it often risks becoming Westernized, if I may say so.

– Stavroula Anastasia Katsorchi, PhD candidate in English Studies, Greece

“This is absolutely wrong. Only a few powerful castes and communities are benefited by the instrument of social justice. They grab all the benefits and quotas. All the laws, benefits and privileges on the basis of caste, religion and colours must be scrapped and repealed. Only on the basis of economic conditions benefits should be given.

– Yogesh Kumar Sharma, Professor (Retired), India

“I think this is a poorly worded question. If the notion of society is built on democratic principles, then equity, human rights and especially access ought to be fundamental principles. History shows that has rarely been the case. Social justice’s intent and a major purpose of the movement is to create, inculcate and implement those principles.

– Jeff Horn, Dean, USA

“These are the core of the concept of social justice. Policies and practices within government should have the primary goal of protecting the rights of individuals and ensuring that individuals feel well represented. Everyone in society deserves to be seen and heard in a manner that encourages dialogue and acceptance. When people feel protected and respected, they will thrive and refrain from creating factions of withdrawal and hatred.

– Aida Hass-Wisecup, University Professor (Criminology), United States

“In this state of law, localization of these principles through state mechanisms is imperative while policies and programs are controlled by the hegemony manifested by the privileged groups.

– Tirupati Pariyar, Program Manager at Samata Foundation, Nepal

“I think that everyone should have the same human rights. Even if the country has rules about everyone’s rights does not mean that everyone is treated the right way. The laws are fake and only protect white or rich, and this is coming from a white woman. People of color are fighting every day in America to live a better life but instead they’re fighting for it. The lgbtq+ community can’t even like who they want without being harassed, like love who you love. It all is just so crazy to me, like why can’t we all live in peace?

– Megan Skaggs, USA

“By integrating these principles, social justice seeks to dismantle systemic inequalities and create a society where everyone can thrive. It emphasizes that progress is not just about economic growth but about ensuring that all individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are included and empowered in every aspect of society.

– Neha Sharma, Research Scholar, India

“I agree with these principles, even though these terms are highly general and open to interpretations and contestations.

– Hon Fai Chen, Professor, Hong Kong

“I agree that policies are made to provide equal resources to the “Haves not” groups. Social justice is an instrument of policy but is not necessarily to be attained through policy introduction merely. Proper implementation and revisiting of policy can help to understand to what extent it reaches out to people.

– Akanksha, Visiting Scholar, Leipzig University, Germany

“I feel like access and equity goes ignored and it’s so important to highlight these, especially how merely access to resources or even information can change one’s life so much.

– Sonali, PhD Scholar, India

“We are social animals. Everyone wants to belong and to have a purpose in our lifetimes. Social injustices occur because of our tribal tendencies and a fixed distribution of power in laws and institutions and historical legacies of colonialism. These structural inequalities need to be renegotiated to reflect our understanding today. Belonging needs to be renegotiated, too, so that we are not morally

disengaging from one another but practicing curiosity, universal human dignity and appreciation for our differences.

– Michelle Miller, Researcher on food systems, USA

“We just elected a [white male, convicted of felony election interference 34 times over, and accused] of rape into the White House. He ran against a highly educated, qualified, capable [Black, South Asian] female with an unblemished and remarkable work ethic, who is currently serving as Vice President of the [United States]. He won. I think this says all it needs to about the social justice system we currently face. Until we reach a different outcome of choice between an unqualified, white male and a highly qualified [Black, South Asian] female, we are falling short on all fronts.

– Tam Moody, Retired, United States

“The question of social justice is irrevocably connected to that of our Fundamental Rights. However, we run into problems when we think of Human Rights as there is no body to grant us those rights. Human Rights awareness can only come through tools of sensitisation such as literature.

– Swarnika Ahuja, Assistant Professor, India

“I have worked in areas related to EDI—Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. While these are good ideas and practices to take up institutionally, there is a greater challenge with embedding them as an overall culture. This is the part that UK institutions struggle with.

– Agostinho Pinnock, GeoHumanities Lecturer, United Kingdom

“The basis of Social Justice being the idea that everyone has equal rights and opportunities is a very broad statement. But in fact the biggest issues encompassed by Social Justice has so many factors which can be influenced. The fight for gender equality. Yes, men and women should be treated equally and paid equally, but in the industrial work environment, women are a severe minority. Mostly because they do not want to do this type of work and/or are not physically capable. So should a company HAVE to hire women to do not or are not capable?

– Scott Burrelsman, United States

“The purpose of social justice policy should be to ensure access, human rights, and equitable participation for all. However, equity must be balanced with meritocracy. While addressing systemic barriers and unconscious biases is critical, defining equity solely as equal outcomes without consideration of merit can undermine the values of excellence and fairness. Diversity should be a byproduct of just systems, not an enforced standard that sacrifices competence or performance in the marketplace or government.

– Toby Sommer, LMCS Pastor, USA

“ Our laws already have instruments against segregation.

– Riley Gilmore, Entrepreneur Taxidermist, North America

“ It does not. It takes away the rights of the white males. We are the most minorized group having to fight for everything we have now.

– William Ghirardi, Apartment Maintenance, United States

“ Social justice should also be about “not delaying” and “not redirecting.”

– Antra Mani, PhD Scholar, India

“ I think it is good for policy to ensure those things, but I am not the biggest fan of the government so I don’t have the most hope for it.

– Sidney Brown, Student, USA

“ True, as an instrument of policy social justice seeks to do as said. And policy and Policies related to social justice are always there but the real problem is implementation of these policies in true sense and the more important thing is acceptance for these policies among all.

– Surya Pratap, Learner, India

Tell us your own story about Injustices/problems you have faced.

“ As a single woman, particularly a divorced woman, I am often made to feel invisible in social gatherings and public spaces. I have experienced this firsthand while fighting a court case for the custody and remittance of my two children. The judge, along with others involved, clearly regarded me as less important than my ex-husband. Their empathy seemed to lie with him, especially since I was the one who initiated the divorce. The aftermath of this judgmental attitude has left me bearing the brunt of societal biases as well.

– Ayesha Latif, Teacher/Student/Mother, Pakistan

“ I have done the same jobs as males throughout the years for less money and have been passed over for promotions because the positions were given to male counterparts who needed to ‘make more money to provide for their families.’ Being a single parent as a female also affects how society treats women. Companies prefer females without children or overlook them for promotions because they have children. I could go on and on, but why beat a dead horse?”

– Tam Moody, Retired, United States

“ I grew up in a very poor, divorced household. I was always a little different and I used to move a lot as a child, so every time I relocated I was the odd one out. I struggled with bullying a lot and I always felt wronged for beating me down for one simple reason—being different. Being queer, being neurodivergent, being poor, loving to read. As I grew up, I inevitably felt wronged by the housing market skyrocketing, the work market devalueing me as a person because I can’t work long hours or focus for a long time. I definitely felt wronged as a social worker for the funny little salary I used to get. But at least I was getting some.

– Maddy Grzybowski, Social Worker, Czech Republic

“ I have been relatively privileged in life and cannot claim to have been on the harshest edge of systemic injustice. That said, in the early stages of my career, I was grossly underpaid for over fifteen years—despite being productive, committed, and routinely taking on the work of multiple people. The low starting salary created a trap that was almost impossible to escape. My competence wasn’t in question—just my starting point. It was only due to a fortunate turn of events that I managed to break out of that cycle. But that experience gave me a glimpse into how difficult it is to change one’s circumstances when the system is stacked against you.

– Deb Datta, Retired, India

“ Almost all colleges in Mumbai have the potential to open up jobs in academia. But they refuse to give proper jobs and only CHB or contractual jobs to well qualified individuals. This is either in the name of lack of funds or government policy. While

some get the jobs by “donating” heavily. Which is absolutely unfair! What quality of education will such teachers and institutions provide to the coming generations? While we grew up believing we could participate in bringing about positive change one student at a time, we have no path ahead of us. Many struggle because they cannot leave the city for familial commitments and other reasons. With PhDs, we are overqualified for many jobs, underpaid, or jobless. None of which are healthy for the society and for sure unhelpful for the nation.

– Smita Vivek Jakkani, Independent Researcher, Academic and Creative Writer, India

“ What I have concluded is that people are inflexible and follow obsolete principles blindly because of tradition and lack of education. Academia may study all this but its conclusions and theories are often inaccessible to the general public. I would recommend a closer link between academia and the educational system. People in my society live with so many myths about who they are (Ancient Greece and Christianity), about what nature is (two sexes), and everyone seems to have their own opinion, which is good for them and democratic, but it is more often than not, completely uneducated, uninformed, and at the expense of others.

– Stavroula Anastasia Katsorchi, PhD candidate in English Studies, Greece

“ I grew up on First Nations reservations and witnessed every kind of injustice there is in a settler colonial racist system based on dispossession. At the same time, my very real white privilege was rendered invisible. In my life I have experienced inequities in pay and access to resources, along with threats of violence on the basis of gender. I worked for a long time in the movement against the death penalty and witnessed multiple instances of state murder facilitated by profound racism. I see injustice in the treatment of immigrants and once was in a demonstration and civil disobedience action against ICE enforcement in Syracuse. I have seen police hassle unhoused people routinely. I participated in the BLM movement in response to racist police murders. I could go on.

– Dana Cloud, Professor of Communication, United States

“ I felt wronged by society every time when I wanted something and I wasn’t allowed to do or pursue that just because of my gender, every time that I was interrupted and talked over, every time that I was not heard, every time that I had to take a longer route because that would be safer, every time that I walked into classrooms or other spaces that were dominated by men.

– Sonali, PhD Scholar, India

“ When my family asked for help they were told “they were the wrong color” and a promotion wasn’t given because of personal lifestyle played into an evaluation. My father lost his job and had five kids. He went to get food stamps. The person running the food stamps said, “If you give me $30 worth of cash I will give you $50 worth of food stamps.” My father replied we did not have the money. If we did we would

have bought groceries. He was told he was the wrong color to get food stamps. A female supervisor stopped me from getting a promotion because of my lifestyle. She knew I was dating a stripper and on an evaluation wrote a bad report, causing me to lose an important promotion because of my personal life.

– William Ghirardi, Apartment Maintenance, United States

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Toward Redefining Erotics through Autocritography

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> Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.
>
> — Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" (1971)
>
> This book began in my body.
>
> — Robert Jensen, *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men* (2017)

I have come to believe over and over again that that which is most important to me must be spoken or communicated, made verbal or signed and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood or at some time used against me for injurious purposes. This communication heals me beyond most any other effect because it offers a chance for self-examination, dialogue, polylogue, connection, shelter, and healing. I write now at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century on the stolen land of a nation-state—undoubtedly the most powerful corporate organization in the history of human civilization on Earth—made possible through genocide and slavery and misogyny. As a white gay and disabled male from the lowest economic class, with radical feminist, Black feminist, Womanist, and anti-capitalist politics, the meaning of all this rests upon the fact that I am still alive and might not be—according to some people and their ideas and actions or, for that matter, the diseases and disorders ravaging my body.

All my life I have had to deal with heterosexism and capitalism and the bigotry therefrom, and for my entire adult life I have lived with disease and illness. Since my late-teenage years, I have endured Crohn's disease, arthritis, asthma, "benign" positional vertigo, and hypoglycemia. Dating from at least 2013, I have lived with other major gastrointestinal problems, including gastroparesis, biliary stenosis, diverticulitis, pancreas insufficiency syndrome and abnormal pancreas cysts, Lemel's syndrome, as well as vasovagal syndrome, chronic kidney disease, anemia, chronically low white blood cells and platelets, orthostatic hypotension, an irregular heartbeat, and numerous misdiagnoses—as well as the fear, anxiety, and depression that accompany all these ailments. I have endured countless surgeries to attempt to repair my common bile duct, fix my thyroid, and deal with problematic lymph nodes, and I have endured days and nights of great pain while remaining confined to a bed. I realize while writing this that in other times and places, I would not be able to lie medicated in a bed or undergo any medical treatments. I know that I would not be alive.

During these latest, difficult years, I have been forced (some would say "encouraged") to scrutinize myself and my own life with a harsh and urgent clarity that has often left me shaken, sometimes depressed and/or anxious, certainly physically ill, and often deeply troubled about the world and my possible non/existence in it. Finally, however, I am much stronger and purposeful. This time has helped me to understand that my own silences must change communication into action.

Audre Lorde's famous and important essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" is critical to feminist theorizing and praxis and to my own work. In fact, the first three paragraphs of this essay paraphrase Lorde's first two paragraphs and reconfigure her words for my exploration herein—not to steal her work but to continue her work in the way that I can. Lorde says in her essay that a breast-cancer diagnosis forced her to understand that her "priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what [she] most regretted were [her] silences" (*Sister Outsider* 41). As such, Lorde felt compelled more than before to break silence and to speak and work against multiple oppressions. She felt a deep and abiding need to live her life openly and honestly as a Black lesbian feminist in white, patriarchal, capitalist America and, in so doing, reject heterosexism and white supremacy and misogyny. She writes, "[m]y silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (*Sister Outsider* 42). This last sentence is a clarion call not to accept social configurations and discourses of dominance as they exist and permeate all our lives; instead, one must refuse to internalize the oppressors' language and not perpetuate their actions. One must work against domination and death-in-life. If one is to live in harmony with the cosmos, one must reject oppressions, hate, and domination whenever and wherever one finds them, including within oneself. One cannot live fully and freely if one carries around the oppressor's intentions and actions; one simply mimics the Master and refuses all that life can be if one lives or attempts to live in any way like or as a Master. One lives only a half-life, at best, or death-in-life: an existence that is always moribund. If one is to live in a world in which all beings will flourish, one must combat oppressions, hate, and domination wherever one finds them in the world, for living under and/or within oppressions does not allow one and other beings to live fully; living within and/or under oppressions, hate, and/or domination only perpetuates existing discourses and lived realities of destructions, tyranny, and despotism. We cannot live in a just world if some or most beings are degraded or disappeared for the benefit of the few. To live is to flourish freely without existing constraints designed and implemented by those who hold power and/or by those who use power over others for profit and/or sick pleasure. Lorde says, "[w]e can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us" (*Sister Outsider* 44). The oppressed cannot allow the masters of the universe to kill them, so the oppressed must resist. The way to begin is to speak and work against domination, for "there are so many silences to be broken" (44). To break these silences, one must be thoroughly honest about oneself—whatever the consequences—and work to create a new world for oneself and others.

With Lorde's words in mind, I hope that this essay will prove, perhaps even attempt to repay, my serious debt to her writing and activism against oppression and for

social justice and advance the work of fighting domination in all its forms. Lorde's work has been and continues to be a lodestar for me. Thus, I would like to assay one of the most fundamental aspects of human, earthly existence: eroticism and ourselves, and I will do so through autocritography and in the spirit of mutual exchange, comradery, and love.

Autocritography is best described by Michael Awkward, a noted scholar of African American literature and culture who engages Black feminism in his work. In his *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*, Awkward defines autocritography not as autobiography, because the latter "is a genre in which contributors shape their self-representations in response to earlier texts" (7). Instead, according to Awkward, "'autocritography' is a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic art that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved into authors' always strategic self-portraits" (7). Awkward is worth quoting at length as he explains,

> Autocritography, in other words, is an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns. Although the intensity of investigation of any of these conditions may vary widely, their self-consciously interactive presence distinguishes autocritography from other forms of autobiographical recall. (7)

In this essay, I shall attempt not only to engage "texts," or experiences, from my past but to interrogate my own actions, or lived realities, in relation to literal and figurative texts and events, as such texts and events have shaped and reshaped my identity and affected the lives of those around me. Furthermore, I admit that my concerns are not only professional; they are personal and political. Again, Awkward's words are worth contemplating as he writes that in his critical work he

> linger[s] primarily on moments that dramatize the tensions between male self-interest and a recognition of women's systemic oppression. I believe that only by exploring such tensions, by remaining both self-interested and cognizant of the myriad costs of misogyny, can the activity that Tom Digby terms "men doing feminism" contribute to this ever-expanding social, intellectual, and philosophical project. (7–8)

I hope to follow this definition as I attempt to redefine erotics for myself and for western/ized gay men in particular, for doing so, I hope, helps not only to situate such men differently as sexual beings in relation to each other and one another but also in relation to other beings—women, in particular—and simultaneously work to destroy—or at least combat seriously—the matrix of domination: to end the oppressions of misogyny, capitalism, heterosexism, ableism, white supremacy, ageism, and environmental destruction, at least. I hope to fashion a narrative that contemplates my subject position vis-à-vis oppressive systems that hurt women, children, men, and the planet—all life.

My development into a being who opposes all systems of power and domination began early in life, during my childhood, with early encounters of patriarchal violence in my biological family's house informing me that something about intimate heterosexual and human interaction was alienating and potentially lethal. My father's treatment of my mother and her children was physically, emotionally, financially, and sexually abusive.

Outside that house, I encountered racist, heterosexist, and ableist violence as I watched poor and working-class, white, heterosexual parents and neighbors freak out about the integration of my elementary school in southwest Chicago in the early 1980s. I witnessed the terrible treatment that African American and Latiné students faced at the hands of white teachers who were good to me—a small, bright, white, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy. I saw the open discrimination against an uncle and his male partner when these two gay men visited my biological family's neighborhood. I also watched the harassment of a cousin my own age who continues to live with developmental disabilities.

After my biological family's move from Chicago to rural southwest Missouri because of my father's job transfer, I grew up through puberty and adolescence to encounter real and symbolic violence in the forms of heterosexism, homophobia, ableism, and the capitalist class and caste system at home and in school. Generally friendless and treated well almost only by teachers who found me to be intelligent (they felt sorry for me, too, I am sure), I found reading to be the real home for which I was searching. I was, indeed, seeking a home; in fact, I am still looking for home and community—or just a room of my own. Reading, however, was never an easy way out of miserable conditions; reading offered, instead, new ways of understanding the world or even confirmations of thoughts I had about the world. My reading, however, in a small town in the U.S. Upland South was limited to that which high school teachers assigned and to that which the small, public library owned: the white-supremacist-patriarchal canon from school or the popular trash found in that library, which encompasses a range of bad writing. It would not be until I read on my own Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Emily Dickinson's poetry during my first year of undergraduate studies, devoured Toni Morrison's fiction and Adrienne Rich's poetry two years later, and then, read Shakespeare's plays and poems two years later in my MA program, that I would begin to believe that something other than white-supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist, misogynist, ableist, ageist, and environmentally destructive people not only controlled the world but contaminated and contained imagination. Only then did I begin to understand that others might feel as I did and could articulate this well: to assert that violence, power, domination, hierarchy, abuse, objectification, and use with or without consent are simply wrong and contrary to nature, for such practices, behavior, and thoughts begin in conquest and end in death.

Entering graduate school and still searching for home and meaning, I would discover, desperate at twenty-two years old, the reason that I was always at odds with most people; I found Lorde's poetry and, a bit later, her essays in *Sister Outsider*. When I took from a shelf a slim, multicolored volume entitled *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* by a poet of whom I had never heard and whose work I had certainly not been taught in a classroom, and read the first stanza of "Echoes," the cosmos opened and welcomed me:

> There is a timbre of voice
> that comes from not being heard
> and knowing   you are not being
> heard   noticed only
> by others   not heard
> for the same reason. (7)

At last, here was a voice, a person who could articulate in accessible language that which I understood: isolation can kill, and a consciousness that is contrary to dominant discourse can be repressed, silenced, and annihilated. Moreover, one lives connected to others laboring under similar and differing oppressions. Finally, one must find one's voice and use it; the only other option is silence, which is death.

Once this poem fell into my hands, ears, and mouth, connecting to others seemed possible. A linking that might end moribund behavior and thoughts could end domination and hierarchy. This single poem and this particular stanza were my starting place, both intellectually and emotionally, for a raising and confirmation of my contrary consciousness—one that is now informed by difference, or an intersectional feminist ethic of decolonized mutuality, care, and love, for as Rudolph P. Byrd says, "feminism is a means of liberating women and men from the ideological trap of patriarchy through the choice of a politics that nurtures a vision of mutuality, equality, democracy, and nonviolence" (214). And, as Beth Brant says, "Feminism is the saving grace for peoples—women, men, children, and those beings of the air, the land, the sea, and the cosmos" (79).

To proceed: While reading Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) in a feminist theory class during my second year in an English language and literature doctoral program, around 1999, I discovered that academic theorists could make mistakes when formulating ways out of domination. I did not know that one could disagree openly with important scholars. Collins claims in this first edition of her important book that race, class, and gender constitute the main categories through which oppressions operate (221). This idea seemed immediately wrong to me—long before I had heard the world "intersectionality" or read anything by Kimberlé Crenshaw—because I had read Lorde, Rich, and Walker and knew that other differences—sexuality and disability, at least—must be equal to these other categories when creating ways of understanding and fighting oppression. (I would come to understand other identities, such as age, region, religion, nation, a bit later.) Furthermore, I knew the truth from my own living.

I need to interrupt this story about a graduate class to explain how I think I understood that sexuality and disability must be considered simultaneously when thinking about and working against the matrix of domination by discussing "my own living." Simply, I had grown up gay and ill and poor, and this was my immediate objection: I knew that being a sexual other and not being physically normal and having few resources to survive affected the possibilities of my own life and the lives of those to whom I was (am) related in ways that many people of color (both women and men), virtually all poor people, and white women have written about, fought against, and described forever. The equivalency is rough, but it is present in that sexuality and disability work simultaneously with class in my own life to this very moment; all these factors work in dis/harmony to destroy me. While I may receive some benefits because of white skin and being male, other factors of identity can erode or erase those privileges, or at least dent them seriously.

For many years of my life, up to the moment of this class discussion and beyond, I had and have been denied apartments and harassed at jobs. Some landlords and employers were open about their refusal to rent to me or to treat me equally. One

apartment manager in Missouri was direct: "I won't let a faggot live here." This admission was stunning, painful, and frightening—and, at that time and place, not illegal. Furthermore, this was not the only time that this had or has happened to me while looking for an affordable apartment in which to live—in Missouri or Illinois, and throughout my entire life. I felt more than rejected at that moment; I had been degraded, viewed as less than human, and asked to leave at once. Sure, I found an apartment a few days later, but I was emotionally and physically terrified by that man's menacing demeanor and language, and I worried that I would not be able to find a place to live. I was totally alone in the world and had no one upon whom I might call for help. Heterosexism and homophobia, along with lack of money, worked in a dissonant concert to deny me immediate shelter. I could easily have been homeless because of this man's bigotry, and I have endured this treatment—with less harsh language—more than once since that time. I still fear the time when the yearly lease is finished because I cannot know if it will be renewed or if I must search and find money for a new apartment, yet again. This constant terror pairs sexuality and class. Furthermore, many people of color have endured similar and worse experiences—albeit with different language and physical violence used to injure and reject them.

Another example: As a teaching assistant at (Southwest) Missouri State University and Northern Illinois University, and as an Instructor elsewhere, I have been called all manner of hideous names by students, "colleagues," professors, and managers/administrators. The usual anti-gay names were and are common, and insidious remarks about disability fly from the mouths of even the most well-meaning persons. On one occasion, I was teaching an English 101 class that met each day from 8:00 a.m. to 11:10 a.m. during an interim session. A young white woman came to class around 9. She was late, obviously, but I handed her the syllabus and continued to conduct the class. She sat in the front row and did not appear interested. At the break, around 9:30, the students dispersed to the bathrooms and vending machines or stood in the hallway talking on their cell phones. As I walked toward the bathroom, I heard the aforementioned student say into her phone, "I don't know if I'm gonna stay. There are too many Mexicans, and the teacher's a fag." I have heard this idea or some version of it frequently during my teaching career—both the racism and the heterosexism and homophobia. Alas, it is inescapable. This student had not meant for me to hear her hateful speech, I think, but she knew that I had overheard her when she looked up and saw me as I walked by her on my way to the bathroom.

The students and I returned to the classroom after the break and finished the first day's activities. Once the class was over for the day and the students had left the room, I gathered my books and papers and started to leave when I noticed a syllabus on one of the desks. I assumed that someone had accidentally left her, his, or their copy behind, so I went to retrieve it, place it in my folder, and return it to the student the next day. What I found on the desk was, indeed, the syllabus, and at the top of it, in pencil, was scrawled "FAGIT." It was obvious at once to me that this copy of the syllabus had belonged to the white supremacist-heterosexist-homophobe of the break-time phone call. What could I do? At once, I went to the computer to look up her name; I found that she had, rather quickly, dropped the class.

I returned to my office and called my supervisor who told me to pursue action against the student with the Student Conduct Board. I declined. Why? I believe in fighting

oppression, so I should have pursued this gross, discriminatory and harassing behavior, right? I should have turned her in for her racism, heterosexism, and homophobia—all occurring simultaneously and equally. No. I did not do so because I knew—from so many past experiences—that if I attempted to cite her hateful language, to bring her to that which passes for justice in an academic context, that violence against me and perhaps the other students could occur, and I had and have had enough of violence and do not want others to endure it. She seemed the type of person capable of anything. Her words on her phone and her illiterate attempt to call me out of my name prove that white-supremacy, heterosexism, and homophobia work in sync. Certainly, I was not victimized by her racism, but other students in the class were and would be, and I would need to protect them. I was victimized by her anti-gay language, and this language undermines any sort of authority that I can have as a teacher. How can I, then, protect students-of-color from her vicious white supremacy? I cannot. The students-of-color and I are linked by racist and heterosexist oppression in this context. “Race” and sexuality are both facets of identity that matter simultaneously for social justice.

Another example: One of my first supervisors and a former acquaintance who remains a co-worker both said to me, at different times while casually discussing my illnesses, that they were happy and relieved not to be like me—a hypochondriac, they claimed—and to be in dominant groups who are free of oppression. “I’m so glad that I’m not sick or poor or gay or colored,” one of them said. I was appalled, of course, and I told him so, but my words meant nothing. He continues to live his life believing this and living very well financially, and I am left to wonder how he works with students and co-workers whom he is so extremely glad not to be or be like. The reality of being oppressed—and unable to live a life free of bigotry—not only petrified this straight white American man but allowed and granted and grants him a sigh of relief—daily—and permission to express his gratitude to multiple oppressions. He was and is delighted to be straight, white, male, middle-class, and fully abled, and he takes advantage of what we glibly call these “privileges.” They are not privileges; they are oppressions that must be dismantled if we are to live in a world that foregrounds social justice over oppression. Feeling good about not being the other presents a mind thoroughly inculcated with domination’s insidious hatred, and saying so to someone who is such constitutes a gross abuse of language, at least.

To return to the story about the graduate class: A class discussion ensued about this problem, and, as usual, I was not universally persuasive in my claim that other categories of difference matter equally. Only one other graduate student agreed with me; the rest of the class agreed with Collins. Simply, I wanted to discuss the ways in which all intersecting oppressions are created within subjugating and subjugated differences, and that sexuality and disability are two among them that must be considered simultaneously and not additionally. We all suffer under the oppressions of the constructed natures of sexuality, sex and gender, and disability, at least.

The very next year, the second edition (2000) of the text would appear, and Collins would indeed list sexuality along with race, class, and gender in her formulation of understanding the matrix of domination (227). Collins, however, did not include disability or age. While she avoids imperialism by including an understanding of difference across the world as transnational, her inability to enlarge the list still leaves a gap in this particular version of Black Feminist Theory. Happily, Collins’s next book,

Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and The New Racism enhances and expands upon her ideas in both editions of *Black Feminist Thought* as it analyzes racism, misogyny, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism simultaneously and understands the intersections of all oppressions in the lives of African Americans. If I had not found Collins's next book, I simply would have had to return to the older sources or to other sources, to discover and/or recreate a more comprehensive understanding of intersecting oppressions that allows feminists and others to combat domination: race, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, sex, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, region, nation, species, and ecosystem. One immediately thinks of Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) and anything written or spoken by Arundhati Roy and María Lugones.

With all this in mind, I propose a re-conception of eroticism—life's energy—for gay men with/in a radical feminist context—so that we may all flourish. And, I must begin with myself and, as Lorde says "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside [myself] and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears" (*Sister Outsider* 113). To do so, I must define the erotic, perform a self-reflexive and self-conscious analysis of my own erotic life, and give credit to radical feminists and their ideas for helping me to re-understand myself, my body, my connections to other gay men, and my mistakes and future actions.

While the erotic has been defined variously, the most compelling, radical, and revolutionary concept of the erotic comes from Lorde in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978). She writes,

> The erotic is a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we require no less of ourselves. (*Sister Outsider* 54)

This profound configuration of the erotic reimagines the possibilities of all relations; specifically, Lorde's erotic offers a radical Black Lesbian Feminist understanding of the ways in which one might begin to define oneself by acknowledging one's authentic power—a power that refuses domination and creates a space for one to flourish authentically with mutuality at the center of existence. Lorde believes that "[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (*Sister Outsider* 53). Lorde is speaking here to a group of women about the ways in which the erotic as power can function and flourish in their lives once it is uncovered, felt, and experienced authentically. I believe that without simply trying to steal Lorde's idea for myself, I attempt to honor her brilliance by wanting to emulate that which she offers and posit her formulation as a guide for myself and other gay men to follow so that we, too, can flourish and negate the insidiousness of patriarchy as it takes root within gay-male consciousness, connections, and libidinal economies, discourses, and actions. To be sure, men have stolen from women forever, but I hope that my writing here refuses theft and instead takes seriously Lorde's call and applies this necessary knowledge with humble care and acknowledgement and without self-indulgence and the old, racist manner of white men stealing from people of color for their own profit.

Lorde continues to define the erotic and its possibilities by stating how the erotic is and can be undone: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information without our lives” (*Sister Outsider* 53). Thus, women are not allowed to love each other in sexual or non-sexual ways if patriarchal oppression continues to define them and operate within their consciousness and bodies. Women must break with patriarchal and other oppressions to begin to love themselves and each other sexually and non-sexually and to recognize their true power to act out-of-concert with male- and white-supremacist control because “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (54). Drinking from this well spring of fresh water can renew the body and mind. Lorde continues at length:

> The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But, pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (54)

Andrea Dworkin traces the roots of the word pornography to “the ancient Greek *pornē* and *graphos*, meaning ‘writing about whores’” (297). Dworkin continues to prove the brutality of pornography by defining it when she writes, “The word pornography does not mean ‘writing about sex’ or ‘depictions of the erotic’ or ‘depictions of sexual acts’ or depictions of naked bodies’ or ‘sexual representations’ or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores” (297). Furthermore, “Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores […]. The only change in the meaning of the word is with respect to its second part, *graphos*: now there are cameras—there is still photography, film, video” (297). Women are not people with feelings, ideas, and needs; they are objects to be used and abused by the men who objectify them as body parts and use them for their own sick-self-gratification—for men’s, and, alas, women’s “sensation without feeling.” And, contemporary forms of technology—webcams, cell phones, and the internet—only worsen the problem. For Dworkin and radical feminists: “[T]he content is the same; the meaning is the same; the purpose is the same; the status of the women is the same; the sexuality of the women depicted is the same; the value of the women depicted is the same” (297–298). Ultimately, for women, according to Dworkin “[b]eing her means being pornography” (299). Thus, under patriarchy, women are pornography.

What has this to do with gay men if pornography, in Dworkin’s formulation at least, is so obviously heterosexual? Frankly, it has everything to do with gay men, for gay men are men, and as men they are not immune to the dictates of patriarchy; men are patriarchy’s best consumers and purveyors. Gay men, too, can objectify women and reduce them to non-human objects or things of ridicule. Drag; the use of straight women as “fag hags”; the “ick” factor that gay men claim about women’s bodies and, in particular, lesbian sexuality; crude “jokes” with other men about women’s bodies, ideas,

and lives; the dismissal of women as competent and equally capable of performance in athletics, personal defense, and business; and the outright misogyny that one can hear from individual gay men about women, and lesbians in particular, in conversation, in any gay bar or on any gay chat or dating app demonstrate only a few of the ways in which gay men objectify women. If male homosociality is exclusive for both gay and straight men, separately, the talk within spaces created by homosociality for men can too easily recreate misogyny.

Furthermore, gay men imitate straight men in pornography—only they abuse each other and one another rather than women. In 2005, Dwight A. McBride, discussing gay pornography in general, said that "[j]ust about everything you ever wanted to know about the mores or variables regulating the gay marketplace of desire and how it works can be gleaned from a casual stroll through the gay pornography section at your local video store" (101). Tops and bottoms; actives and passives; Daddys and boys; Masters and slaves; "masc" and "femme" positions are methods of imitating and transmitting male domination of women from heterosexual pornography in(to) gay pornography, and, sadly, much of gay-male desire in real life. Moreover, McBride does not leave out that which was then, and certainly is now, the main place to find pornography: the internet. He says,

> Some conservative estimates put worldwide revenues in the pornography industry at $57 billion, with estimates of U.S. revenues coming in at $12 billion. There are 4.2 billion pornographic Web sites on the internet; this accounts for 12 percent of all Web sites. Some 68 million daily pornographic searches are initiated on various search engines; this accounts for 25 percent of all daily searches. (106)

Gail Dines, sociologist and radical feminist, supports this claim by saying that "[t]he size of the porn industry is staggering. Though reliable numbers are hard to find, the global industry has been estimated to be worth around $96 billion in 2006, with the U.S. market worth approximately $13 billion. Each year, over 13,000 films are released, and despite their modest budgets, pornography revenues rival those of all the major Hollywood studios combined" (47). Pornography is big, brutal, and lethal business, and it affects everyone. Dines makes a bold and arresting claim when she writes that "[t]he scale of the pornography business has important implications. In a profound sense, the entertainment industries do not just influence us; they are our culture, constituting our identities, our conceptions of the world and our norms of acceptable behavior" (47–48). How, then, can pornography and patriarchal constructions of the erotic not be ubiquitously murderous for all women and many groups of men—in particular gay men—if the hegemonic entertainment industry not only fashions but creates our culture—and, in this case, our sexuality? How can gay men access the true power of the erotic if pornography not only shapes but potentially dictates their identities? If pornography is the guide, where does the road lead? It leads to nowhere I want to travel.

Sadly, however, McBride is not opposed to pornography. He writes, "Quite the contrary, pornography has a place in my version of a liberal society. An honest place" (105). This is a positively astonishing sentiment after he has been discussing at length anti-Black racism in gay pornography. In fact, after discussing the insidiousness of the ways in which black men are fetishized in gay male pornography—as insatiable beasts with large penises prepared to penetrate any willing or unwilling white anus—McBride

asserts, "Indeed, I see no reason that pornography representing sex that is consensual and takes place between adults should not be enjoyed by whomever chooses to partake. Like it or not, that is already the case in the United States" (105–106). Such enjoyment was the case in 2005, and it is certainly the case today; one must recognize, however, that the ways in which gay pornography imitates heterosexual pornography promulgate the very same violence against gay men that is perpetuated against women—then and now. And, the problem may just be "liberal society" itself.

As feminist icon and attorney Catharine A. MacKinnon cogently argues: "Where feminism was collective, liberalism is individualistic. We have been reduced to that. Where feminism is socially based and critical, liberalism is naturalistic, attributing the product of women's oppression to women's natural sexuality, making it 'ours'" (12). MacKinnon continues, "[w]here feminism is based on material reality, liberalism is based on some ideal realm in the head. And where feminism is relentlessly political, about power and powerlessness, the best that can be mustered by this nouveau movement is a watered-down form of moralism: this is good, this is bad, no analysis of power or powerlessness at all" (12). In imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, which are fundamental to classical and neo-liberal liberalism, no one is free of oppression that the very system requires for its perpetuation. Moreover, those who are oppressed cannot afford to participate in this system unless they live with/in false consciousness. Social justice can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve or even to strive for under such conditions.

Christopher Kendall, scholar and attorney, makes the explicit connection between heterosexual pornography and gay pornography—and straight male sexual desire and gay male sexual desire, neither of which approaches the feminist erotic. After a long discussion of the Canadian Supreme Court Case of *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium* (2000)[1] that "found lesbian and gay male pornography violates the sex equality test for pornographic harm" (110), Kendall explains that the court disagreed with pro-pornography arguments, "finding that gay male pornography, like heterosexual pornography, results in the types of physical and social harms that make racism, homophobia, male supremacy, and misogyny normal and a violation of the right to equality that all citizens have the right to enjoy" (110). Gay men, too, must enjoy said rights, but pornography and the acceptance and, indeed, celebration and even worship of patriarchy not only hinder but destroy the chance for gay men to reject the oppressive and, instead, favor "sensation without feeling." The love and embrace of patriarchy alienate/s gay men from themselves and each other and one another.

When I was a young boy, aged eight or nine, I encountered heterosexual pornography for the first time while looking for gardening tools in the shed behind the family's house. Rummaging around the wheelbarrow and rakes, I found a *Playboy*. I had no idea what it was, so I opened it and found the "centerfold"—a woman wearing a good deal of makeup and lying completely naked, her breasts exposed and her legs open. Her wide eyes were looking directly at me. Without the language then to speak about what I was seeing, my body had a physical reaction of terror, and I ran out of the shed and back

[1]For a brief discussion of *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium v. Canada (Minister of Justice)*, please see the second full paragraph under "Customs and Excise": https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1835/index.do.

into the house. Wondering where I had gone, my father came after me and inquired about what was wrong. I told him about what I had found, and he proceeded to explain heterosexual sex rather crudely by saying: "When it gets hard, you want to stick it in a woman. This picture will help you." I had no idea what he meant by these words; I was too young to have had any sort of sexual feelings, and I knew only that something was wrong. I was not disgusted or ashamed; I simply possessed no language to decry what I had seen: a woman exposed. I knew that naked bodies were somehow "wrong," and that seeing a person's "private parts"—as we were taught to name genitals—was also somehow wrong.

My father, concerned with my reaction, began that summer to train me for heterosexuality; no doubt, he feared what he saw me becoming: a gay boy. He purchased more heterosexual pornographic magazines and rented heterosexual pornographic films from a local video store for me to watch. I found myself increasingly alarmed by what he was requiring me to view because it reminded me so clearly of the first instance that I witnessed my parents having sex.

One night, when I was about five years old, I awoke quite suddenly to what I thought was my mother's screaming. I went into the living room to see my father on top of my mother; they were both naked and having sex. She was naked and moaning, and he was thrusting himself into her and groaning. The site was horrific, and I was petrified. I just stood there until my mother saw me and yelled at me to return to my room; I did so at once, of course. Beyond this, I have no memory of how my parents handled this incident; I assume they were both drunk and had forgotten my appearance—but I was traumatized by the sight of such action. The person I loved most in the world—my mother—seemed to be in pain; her moans sounded like anguish to my young ears, and her contorted face burned my eyes. My father—always cruel or remote—seemed to be abusing her. I was frozen at the moment of seeing this scene, and nothing was ever explained. The next day, we all went about our routines, but I was concerned—and remained so for an extraordinarily long time—that something terrible had happened that night. The magazines and videos that I was being forced to watch later portrayed the same thing that I had seen at age five—a man dominating a woman—and this act felt wrong to me. It has felt wrong to me since that moment.

Entering puberty and beginning to understand sexuality in general and my own nascent gay sexuality, I began to feel that human sexual relations were wrong, or at least not a positive action. They always seemed violent. Always. The way boys at school talked about sex disturbed me because the act was always about using girls and women—classmates, teachers, someone's mother or sister, a neighbor lady or girl—for easy gratification—"to get off." This not only failed to appeal to me; it also troubled me and made no sense. These women were my friends and authority figures and people I loved—people I knew in the world. I did not want them to be treated as my father treated my mother, and I had no interest in replicating that which I had been forced to view in heterosexual pornographic magazines and movies. Furthermore, and obviously, I was interested in knowing boys and, later, men intimately and romantically. Nothing that I had seen or heard could prepare me for gay sexuality, so I had to imagine it, and when I did so, I always imagined two men together in mutual pleasure and sharing love. I did not imagine, and my body did not want, violence or domination; this feeling of mutuality was instinctual. Of course, I had no language for it, but my body knew what I wanted,

and my mind could follow that desire. Even so young and without having read any kind of feminist theory, I wanted Lorde's erotic as a way of being for myself and others. I still want this way of being to be the way that we all interact.

Sadly, finding the erotic as mutual and loving in a sexual or romantic context was not and has not been possible for me at almost any time in my life. It remains an ideal for me, and one for which I continue to work—if no longer for myself then certainly in talking with other gay men about sex, sexuality, and how to live ethically. As I aged and "came out" and began to date men, I seemed mostly to meet potential partners who would always want to replicate what I had already understood as sex: dominance and submission—only this time it would be two men and not one man and one woman. I had no interest in this, and I often ended relationships quickly because my body and my mind would not allow me to participate in such an activity—until a painful breakup in my late twenties.

I wanted the breakup with this person because, simply, we were not well-matched, but I should not have gone on to do what I did after the end of that relationship. I met another young man a few months later, and this new person and I engaged in a "consensual" dominance-submission sexual relationship. This young man wanted me to dominate him in sexual encounters, and I did so. For the few months that we interacted, I did to him all that he asked me to do sexually, degrading him with misogynist and anti-gay language, and slapping and spitting in his face. He claimed to be able to enjoy sex—to climax—only in this way.

My body—something instinctual and pre-linguistic—alerted me to the danger in which I was participating. In fact, my own body has always told me when something is wrong emotionally. After each encounter with this young man, I left his apartment shaking and often crying because I could not believe that I had betrayed my deepest convictions and feminist intellectual and activist work; I could not believe that I had betrayed my body and my mind. I could not believe all that I had just done—and that my body reacted to it with pleasure. It was, indeed, "sensation without feeling." I had read Lorde and radical feminists; I knew better! Furthermore, I wanted more for myself and for him than simple genital "pleasure"; I wanted loving intimacy. The uncontrollable anxiety and feeling of despair simply presented themselves within my physical reaction and in my conscious being; I was immediately aware of the psychic pain without having the language to speak of it. I had betrayed myself in every way imaginable with these actions and experiences. I had betrayed all the women I knew by calling myself a feminist. I had betrayed all the feminist theorists and activists I had read and believed. I had betrayed imagination and possibility and love.

The scholar and radical feminist activist Robert Jensen offers his personal understanding of gay sexuality in the contemporary world: "For me, being gay not only acknowledges sexual desire for men but also resisting the norms and practices of patriarchy" (Jensen, "Getting It Up for Politics" 152). He says that "[g]ayness is not only about what I do, with whom, with my body. It also is about a set of political choices involving a conscious attempt to disconnect from heterosexual norms and patriarchy" (152). To be gay, then, should be to refuse—to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu—masculine domination. As such, I take Lorde's words to heart when she says, "To be sure, there are gay men who do not view their oppression as isolated, and who work for a future" (*A*

Burst of Light 16). I am one of these men, so my interactions with that man are a stain that I cannot remove. Nevertheless, I concur with and borrow from Nett Hart and seek to adapt her lesbian separatist ideas as she writes "I believe it is the body's own truth and wholeness that must be allowed to emerge" (70).

As such, I believe that we must engage radically—go to the root—and bring forth a creative regeneration of and for our minds and our bodies, a life-force, or erotics of equality, mutuality, and cooperation (or, dare I write, a new hegemony and ideology, its truth effects) to begin to achieve social justice. We must reject all forms of domination and reclaim our bodies from the Masters/Monsters who would rather we kill ourselves through the eroticization of inequality through sex or any other interaction. We must reject misogyny, heterosexism, homophobia, white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, and ageism. Sex acts are connected to every facet of identity and action, and to participate in domination in the sex act is to embrace all forms of oppression. No oppressions operate without connection to other oppressions; oppressions are intersectional. For two gay men to role-play with dominance and subordination is for them to replicate master narratives of heterosexuality and all other oppressions. As Hart says, "[w]e can both be Subjects, actively attentive" (74).

Therefore, I conclude with Jensen, who says "[t]he future—if it is to be a decent one—lies in a consistent rejection of a world structured on domination, from the most intimate parts of our lives to the largest questions of global justice" ("The Relevance of Radical Feminism for Gay Men" 25). We cannot be a species on a planet that is dying unless we do the difficult work of expurgating from ourselves the implanted hate that domination requires and, then, begin to work together to create a world in which all beings great and small come together in trust and mutuality for the survival and thriving of all. This work is social justice. We can "have sex," "make love," "interact intimately" without needing to hurt each other and one another. We can eroticize equality. We can and we must come together as equals beyond equals and love without inflicting any sort of pain upon each other, ourselves, and/or one another. We must care mutually and enact tenderness, care, and love in both intimate and political situations, which are never separate. The personal is political; the political is personal. Really, to begin to create this world, we must simply refuse the master's tools and create our own internal and worldly places of safety and togetherness. Furthermore, without taking these radical ideas of the erotic and sexuality seriously and acting with and upon them, humans and the earth are doomed. We cannot accept what is offered from imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; we must reconstitute eroticism immediately so that we may all live in decolonized mutuality, care, and love—true intersectionality. We have no other choice.

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When DEI is Defunded: Politics, Teaching, and the Fate of Social Justice in the U.S. Today

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Through four decades I taught in the English Department at Missouri State University (MSU), a state-funded school in a politically conversative region of a U.S. Midwest state. The fall 2024 semester was, however, my last. The semester began in August so, on July 1 or some time thereabouts I visited the MSU website, aiming to prep for my last assignments in teaching: ENG 513, Shakespeare Seminar; ENG 340, Survey of Early English Literature; and ENG 289, Literature, Culture, Conflict. I had taught these courses before; many times. Visiting the web link to ENG 289 first, I glanced through the student photo album; a handsome group, some fifteen in all. There was an English major and three education majors, but the course had attracted what seemed a surprising number of students majoring in the social sciences, including political science and several in criminal justice. Then I noticed that the course title had changed—that I was assigned to teach ENG 289, Literature, Culture, Social Justice. Apparently, I had not paid attention to recent curriculum changes.

My Last English Lit. Course

The shift in title from "Conflict" to "Social Justice" was a surprise that, really, was no surprise to me at all. Like so many English departments in so many universities across the United States, mine had responded to what had been a catalyzing event in American race relations, the 2020 murder of George Floyd:

> On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black American man, was murdered in Minneapolis by Derek Chauvin, a 44-year-old white police officer. Floyd had been arrested after a store clerk reported that he made a purchase using a counterfeit $20 bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face-down in a street. Two other police officers, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane, assisted Chauvin in restraining Floyd. […] A fourth police officer, Tou Thao, prevented bystanders from intervening. ("Murder")

The web article continues:

> Floyd's murder resulted in a global protest movement against historic racism and police brutality. In the United States, protests of racial injustice in mid-2020 were the largest since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and gave way to

> widespread civil unrest. Protests began locally on May 26 in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area before quickly, within a few days, spreading nationwide and in over 60 countries internationally supporting Black Lives Matter. Over 2,000 cities in the United States had seen demonstrations as of June 13. […] While the majority of protests were peaceful, demonstrations in some cities descended into riots and looting, with more being marked by street skirmishes and significant police brutality, notably against peaceful protesters and reporters.

"Black Lives Matter" (BLM) became a rallying cry for progressive social-political change.

Traumatized, the Minneapolis-Saint Paul "twin cities"—scene of the Floyd murder and subsequent riots—sought to rebuild itself communally, spiritually, institutionally, and ideologically, starting with its police force and justice system and extending to its schools. I visited the cities in 2022; driving through Saint Paul suburbs, I saw "Black Lives Matter" signs displayed prominently in windows, on porches, and in front yards. Back in Springfield, Missouri, the response to Floyd's murder and "Black Lives Matter" was more subdued. Driving the city streets, I'd see an occasional BLM car bumper sticker; more often, I'd see bumper stickers and yards signs announcing "Back the Blue" (alluding to the traditional blue police uniforms) and "All Lives Matter," reflecting the Ozark region's socially-politically conservative demographic.

I confess that the change in title had little impact on my teaching. I kept the course reading list intact, which included Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Jean Anouilh's politically ambiguous wartime drama, *Antigone*, Margaret Atwood's dystopian *Handmaid's Tale*, Tarif Bakdash's *Inside Syria: A Physician's Memoir*, Elie Wiesel's holocaust memoir, *Night,* and Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone*, a "hillbilly noir" novel set here in the Missouri Ozarks. And I kept the old course description:

> This course explores how literature imagines cultural identities, conflicts within and between cultural groups, and efforts to resolve these conflicts. For the purposes of this course, culture will be understood in terms of such categories as nation, region, language, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, family structure, gender, sexuality, age, and dis/ability. Through the critical analysis of literature and through personal reflection on literary texts, students will learn to recognize, describe, and understand their own and others' cultures, the histories of these cultures, and their divergences/convergences. Students will also consider how knowledge of multiple cultures can form a foundation for ethical decision-making and action in a variety of public arenas.

Over the course of the semester, I came to appreciate the ways that social justice became interwoven with questions of culture and identity. I did not have to preach social justice; the literature spoke for itself. And students made their own personal connections with the literature. Several students were African American and spoke of it; several were Hispanic and spoke of it; several were gay and spoke of it; several had experienced trauma or disability and spoke of it. My task was to sharpen their tools, supplying critical concepts and vocabulary. There was, however, a curious dynamic affecting classroom

discussions: we were meeting in the heat of U.S. presidential campaign, and the final weeks of class coincided with the election of our 47th president, Donald J. Trump. The students knew their minds and spoke them, strongly. I ended the semester with an appeal to democratic dialogue: Irrespective of our fears and personal wounds, we must keep talking to each other. If we keep talking, we'll make it through as a nation.

Of course I knew that it takes two sides to make a dialogue, and the Trump administration came out swinging against instruction of any sort that explored cultural identity or acknowledged cultural diversity. Trump was elected on November 5, 2024 and inaugurated on January 20, 2025. By January 29, I was emailing my department head, asking if ENG 287 would ever be taught again. February 1st would be my official date of retirement, so I was still nominally a member of the English faculty. Toward the end of this narrative, I'll give my department head's response.

Farewell, Diversity

I watched from the sidelines as colleagues in English Studies returned for the spring semester under the second Trump presidency. Trump had campaigned on the promise to destroy the so-called "woke" ideology, rooting it out from government offices, from business hiring practices, and—of heightened interest to me personally—from the nation's public-school systems and universities. Even as I write, the Trump administration is making good on that promise.

On January 29, 2025, university faculty and staff received an email memorandum from the MSU Office of the President, titled an "Update on Missouri State's diversity, equity and inclusion":

> Good morning,
>
> As you are probably aware, the idea of and support for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is under considerable scrutiny on a national basis and closer to home in Missouri's state legislature.
>
> In the last several years, there have been many bills filed to eliminate DEI within state agencies, including higher education. While none were successful in gaining passage, we at Missouri State took note.
>
> In 2023, we reviewed and updated programs that provide support to students, faculty and staff to ensure that they are inclusive for all members of our campus community. That work included:
>
> > Discontinuing limited instances in which individual departments were requiring diversity statements from job applicants and communicating with all units that diversity statements will not be required in the future.
> >
> > Eliminating diversity hiring policies that streamlined the hiring process for diverse faculty and staff candidates.
> >
> > Removing scholarship requirements that limited eligibility based on race, sex and other characteristics. This included institutional scholarships, college/department scholarships and donor-funded scholarships.

> Removing program participation requirements that limited eligibility based on race, sex and other characteristics.
>
> Removing old web content that described DEI activities/programs the university no longer offered as of 2023.

Since 2023, discussion of DEI by state leaders has become increasingly heated. More recently, they have focused specifically on Missouri State's DEI programs. Thirty-eight percent of our budget comes from the state. For us to continue providing a quality education to our students, we must align with the expectations established by state leadership. Our Board of Governors agree and support this assessment. As a result, we will take the following steps:

> The office of inclusive engagement will be eliminated. Employees who were faculty prior to their current positions will return to their respective colleges. The remaining staff will move to open positions across the university.
>
> The Collaborative Diversity Conference and Inclusive Excellence Awards Gala are eliminated as university supported events. This year's events are canceled.
>
> We will continue to evaluate how to be in full compliance with state and federal mandates.

As we move forward, we will continue to provide appropriate resources and support for all our students, faculty and staff while at Missouri State.

Thank you for the hard work you do every day to be a successful student, and to faculty and staff who are the heart of Missouri State.

Biff
Richard B. Williams, PhD, ATC
President

The MSU community was swift to respond, as evidenced by an English faculty member's Facebook post (dated that same day, January 29):

> In more news today, Biff announced that MSU is closing the Inclusive Excellence office, moving those people to new jobs, getting rid of any mention of previous equity work the university has done, and deleting any reference to equity and inclusion from HR "in compliance with federal and state mandates." MSU has 38% of its budget funded by the state. Republican legislators are a majority and want to get rid of fair hiring practices for all people, so MSU is pre-complying. Please understand this affects everyone. Are we editing our public affairs mission as well? Will we delete cultural competence and ethical leadership and change community engagement to "some communities engaged"?[1]

[1]Comments left on that faculty member's Facebook page proved thematic. Most respondents were dismayed though "not surprised" by the university's proactive, "voluntary" closure of DEI-related offices and initiatives, and most were "saddened" as much as angered. Several of the more expansive comments follow:

By the next day, local media had picked up the story. In a January 30, 2025 web article of the *Springfield Daily Citizen*, Steve Pokin quotes from a previously published guest column by the previous MSU president, Clif Smart:

> "By the time my tenure as university president ended, DEI was just about creating a welcoming environment for faculty, staff and students of all backgrounds, narrowing achievement gaps, and celebrating different cultures. It was not discriminatory, and it was about more than race.
>
> "…These kinds of programs help provide both access and support for veterans, older people, minorities and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
>
> "And they worked. They spurred growth and created a more welcoming environment for all without discriminating against anyone and caused very little controversy. They serve as a model of how DEI programs can exist in Red States because they are primarily about creating welcoming environments and paths for success, not indoctrination." (qtd. in Pokin)

The opposing view comes from Republican Congressman Eric Burlison, who represents the 7th District covering Southwest Missouri and MSU. In a text published by the *Daily Citizen*, Burlison writes:

> Missouri State University's dismantling of its DEI program is a commendable return to focusing on education and merit. Universities should educate and prepare leaders based on talent and hard work, not identity. "Equality of outcome" undermines the very opportunity it claims to support, promoting mediocrity over merit. We must restore meritocracy to ensure our best minds can thrive in a competitive world. It's time to prioritize true equality of opportunity, not engineered outcomes. (qtd. in Pokin)[2]

> This is a huge step in the wrong direction, and as an alumnus of MSU I am extremely disappointed by this decision. Decisions like this revert higher education back to its roots of only educating wealthy white men, which so many people have fought to dismantle. I'm severely frustrated, but not surprised.
>
> I came to Missouri State on the Inclusive Excellence scholarship. It paid out $20,000, some of which I also used to obtain my master's degree at MSU. I wonder if that scholarship would be erased too. I'm not sure I would have gone to MSU if it weren't for that scholarship, as scholarship was a deciding factor. The university, under [previous president] Clif Smart, realized the importance of having diverse voices in their student population. Diversity was celebrated. This is a terrible decision that has impacts unknown.
>
> Very weird to have learned so much in the classroom at MSU about the benefits and strength DEI programs bring to institutions, only to have them undermined and villainized. They can't take away our knowledge, but this is tough to swallow.

[2]Responding to a draft of this essay, my colleague and *LLIDS* co-author, George H. Jensen, texted me the following:

> Several things struck me about the MSU president's letter. First, he normalizes his decision. He makes it sound like it is an ordinary, everyday decision rather than a dramatic and historic reversal. Second, he does not acknowledge that DEI is a value worth fighting for. Third, he justifies his decision with a short history (ten years or so) that denies any agency on the part of the university and makes his decision seem like it is inevitable. It is almost a history of the present, which I find typical in the rhetoric of Trump and MAGA. The president doesn't explain any of the history of why DEI developed. He should know better. Finally, he seems to be saying, "I am just following orders." So much for the Nuremberg Trials.

The conversation continued in social media. A Facebook post of January 30 came from a prominent MSU alumnus and one-time administrator within the university's Division for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DDEI). The author's eloquence bespeaks a life and career pursued in service of social justice:

> Diversity is not about quotas, preferences nor lack of qualifications and/or merit. Valuing the inclusion of diversity means all of us value the individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, thought, and life experiences) and the group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, religion, non-religious, and ability, as well as cultural, geographical, veteran, and socio-economic status) that characterizes ALL of us.
>
> Contrary to what has been portrayed by too many detractors, pundits, and political opportunists, the university sought to create a welcoming environment where all were treated with respect and dignity whether a poor rural white student, a student of color or a child raised by a single mother in the urban areas, a student or international students who may or may not have immigrant parents. Whether religious, agnostic, able, disabled, foreign or domestic.
>
> Sadly, and regrettably, it's clear that too many individuals and even some who may serve as public officials too often engage in the political rhetoric that has been fomented by some to equate the lack of merit with inclusive efforts to increase access, success and equity for all students who may be underrepresented, underserved and/or under-resourced. The university, as well as the Springfield community, sought to increase access and success for all so that the "promise of America" is attainable for all by seeking to create a welcoming environment where a sense of belonging benefited each and every stakeholder.
>
> Unfortunately, the misinformation and disinformation campaigns that have been going on for some time, are waged by some in promoting the so-called "cultural wars," and are designed to further divide and polarize our citizens primarily for political gain.
>
> However, all of us live in a global society and a global economy, so we must become culturally conscious enough to compete and relate to a broad range of citizens, residents and international neighbors. There is nothing wrong with increasing our individual and collective awareness, knowledge and skills development to effectively compete and relate to a more diverse world. ("Missouri State University's inclusive excellence model")[3]

As for Congressman Burlison, Jensen's comment is succinct: "The Republican congressman cites 'merit,' which invokes the whole idea of the U.S. being a meritocracy, without any awareness that maybe you can't have a meritocracy when so many don't have a chance to develop merit or, if they happen to be statistical outliers, they won't be rewarded for their merit."

[3]Again, I am quoting the university's quondam DEI administrator, whose post responds publicly and at length to the program's closure—a program that he had promoted, nurtured, and overseen. His Facebook post continues:

> Personally, and professionally, I am disappointed and dismayed by the lack of leadership on many levels by those especially in public service. As a former student & community activist, an elected and appointed public servant, educator, mentor, father, and grandfather I have always believed that public service is the noblest good! However, the lack of such leadership, especially by those

As the news spread virally, the topic reached down into private text messages and talk in faculty offices. A colleague in English wrote the following to me personally, replying to my own email request (sent January 29), "Would you take a few minutes to write out a response to the closure of DEI offices and the impact such changes might have on the English curriculum?" Her reflective answer came several days later:

> Like many—or most—of my colleagues, I reacted to the recent closure of Missouri State University's Office of Inclusive Engagement and immediate suspension of DEI initiatives with less surprise than profound disappointment. […] The times are changing, and it feels like the end, this backlash to the innovative and transformative work of the past few decades, not just in the academy but in our culture more broadly. It seems obvious that actively opposing diversity and equity puts a person on the wrong side of American history, and it is terrifying to be faced with this wrong side as the current shapers of that history nonetheless.
>
> But I'm not entirely ready to despair, and the end of funded and named DEI policies is not necessarily the end of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. In my field, literature and culture, over a 30+ year career, I've seen with my own eyes the declining need for purposeful, systematic mandates to include, say, women writers in canonical anthologies, or writers of color in American literature. The British literature anthologies didn't used to be critical of colonization, including the voices of white abolitionists and colonized and post-colonial peoples across the world. American literature classes used to comprise only the white guys, with other writers siloed in specialty classes. We knew next to nothing about neurodiversity when I began, and now nearly every professor I know cares deeply about creating an accessible classroom for a wide variety of students.
>
> It would take more than they've got to make all of that progress disappear. ("Like Many")

Thus began the ideological "cleansing" of Missouri State University. Gone were the offices, staff, and policies aimed at advancing and protecting social justice initiatives premised in DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. As described by the school's elected representative in Republican-controlled Congress, such high (indeed, noble) progressive initiatives did little more than promote "mediocrity over merit." The threatening weapon, needless to say, was economic. Federal and state dollars underwrite institutions like MSU, so the prospect of defunding led administrators to a swift, complete (and, to my mind, ignoble) surrender.

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charged with providing insight, perspective, awareness, knowledge and skills development; and who by commission and/or omission, engage in actions or non-action to limit and divide us as Americans and/or citizens of the world is particularly disturbing, painful, and appalling.

The lack of such cultural consciousness is pervasive and has not served our city, region, state, and nation well in effectively addressing and resolving the historic "-isms" that have limited our abilities and our potential for far too long. It is beyond time for this city, region, state, and nation to do better. Maya Angelou once said, "If you know better … then do better!"

Hopefully, all of us can learn and work to do better! ("Missouri State University's inclusive excellence model")

Now let me quote the rest of my colleague's email. Though the school administration had capitulated, the faculty remained committed and resourceful. Frankly, I find her words inspiring:

> I am not ready to let go of formalized DEI practices in the academy, even in my comparably progressive field. I fear we haven't yet done enough. But maybe the floodgates we've opened won't close again so easily. Even without the institutional scaffolding, the proclamations of diversity as our laudable goal, the organizational tools and resources that enabled and prioritized diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments, we do still have some power. They can't rewrite our principles unless we let them. They can't make us not diversify our workforce, not innovate pedagogically, not get creative about how our learning and living and workspaces could be more equitable and inclusive. I believe it is true that our progress will slow—and I worry a lot about immigrants, about queer people, about those who will continue to be disabled by unaccommodating spaces, about those who will be hurt by new eruptions of good old-fashioned racism and misogyny. But we don't have to go backwards on the gains we have made. It's just up to us now. At least, it's up to us for now. We need to think our way out of disappointment and fear and commit to continuing the work ourselves. ("Like Many")

In the meantime, the MAGA-led assault on education continues its march nationwide, with so-called Ivy League schools in the headlines most recently. While these and other schools are being threatened with defunding, their students—particularly those foreign-born and here on visas—have been rounded up and detained, threatened with deportation. The lack of legal "due process" makes their plight more dire, more like persecution than prosecution for no fault other than an occasional exercise of free speech. So it's not just DEI offices and faculty that have fallen under siege; it's the nation's students as well. The school where I had taught through four decades will not make national headlines like Columbia, Brown, and Harvard. As I've noted, MSU is a state-funded school in a conversative region of a Midwest state. But I give this brief account precisely because its story is so typical, repeated time and again in schools across the United States.

And yet, in telling this story, I commit to the notion that all politics is local and all experience personal. As reflected in materials published in this Special Issue on social justice, the full impact of social justice and the attacks levelled against it must be seen, not in statistics or news headlines, but in the experience of individuals and their communities.

What Next?

This brief essay began with a description of a college undergraduate English course grounded in the cultural criticism of literature and containing "Social Justice" in its title. Back in January, I had asked my department head if ENG 287 would be taught again. His response: "I don't know; we'll see."

These same words hold for virtually every question worth asking regarding the Trump administration's dismantling of SJ programs, policies, and agencies. Much of the

world around us has suddenly become tentative. On virtually any political topic today, what more can we say than this?

We don’t know; we’ll see.

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To Speak, Not to Speak, or How to Speak: Atypical Bodies and the Politics of Language

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Sé dìndìnrìn ni é ni?—"Are you mentally disabled?"[1]—my mother would shout at me and my siblings in Yorùbá when we were still children, a question often provoked by any range of behaviors she deemed unusual. Whether it was bursting into tears when reporting a wrong done by another or responding sluggishly to a question of hers, any difference from expected emotional or behavioral norms prompted this remark. To this day, I can still hear the words, intoned in her Ibadan dialect, echoing through the walls of our one-story home in Lagos, Nigeria.

This is not to suggest that my mother was a terrible person or that she treated Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) poorly. Quite the opposite. I vividly recall a lesson she taught me (at age eleven) and my younger brother (then five) against mocking atypical bodies. It was a Sunday morning like in any typical Christian Nigerian household of the early 2000s: early mornings, no breakfast, quarreling siblings, angry parents, Esther Igbekele's voice crooning out of the CD player in the living room. After the usual Sunday morning drama that day, we got into the car and began the twenty-minute drive to church. My brother and I, sitting in the back seat of the car, noticed a man limping hurriedly towards what I assumed was a church service, his green and yellow patterned Ankara bùbá and sòkòtò with matching filà catching the glint of the sun's first rays as they slowly climbed into the sky.

Our reaction was immediate and thoughtless. We laughed at his limp, making jokes about his gait. In hindsight, our reaction might have been because it was not unusual to see comedic reactions to physical disability on television. Also, having no PwDs in my immediate family at that time, we did not realize how dehumanizing our mockery was. My mother, catching sight of the cause of our amusement in her side mirror, erupted with anger. Her voice filled the compact space of her Honda Civic sedan, her fair face flushing red. As she glanced off the road momentarily to deliver brain-resetting slaps to us, her car veered off course and headed straight for a ditch in what seemed like a split second. It was the very man we had mocked, along with other passersby, who helped to lift her front right wheel out of the ditch it had veered into.

[1]Translated by the author.

Whether it was the fear of my mother's wrath or the realization that the situation could have been far more devastating, or the belief that the accident was God's attempt to punish us for mocking an atypical body, I learned that morning never to mock another's disability. Even still, it was not because I had begun to recognize the inherent problem with normalcy and differences as part of the vast human experience. This same woman, who reacted so viscerally to our mockery, used disability as a metaphor for unwanted behavior. Within the cultural framework we navigated, the question *Sé dìndìnrìn ni é ni?* was neither unusual nor perplexing when directed at a child expected to exercise impulse and emotional control. Indeed, her speaking in this manner was part of a broader cultural system entrenched with stigmatizing beliefs about disability. It is a system that disavows overt mockery, yet allows prejudices to fester subtly, such that, in all its forms, disability becomes a disconcerting image of human frailty and impermanence (Falola et al. 59).

Over the years, many African disability scholars have highlighted the systems of subjugation confronting PwDs in Africa, including harmful traditional beliefs and social stigma, inaccessible social infrastructures, economic disadvantages, as well as social exclusion. They have researched how these systems perpetuate discrimination, enable marginalization, and complicate disability discourses, overlapping to create complex understandings of the atypical body. One of these complex understandings is located within the framing of disability epistemes.

In their book, *Disability in Africa*, Toyin Falola and Nic Hamel attest to the plurality of disability ideologies in African culture. They note that these diverse ideologies "contain a range of both positive and negative representations of disabled people," shaped by physical, cultural, spiritual, and social frameworks (8–9). Edwin Etieyibo, another African disability scholar, contends that such representations, though shifting according to context, are often linked to processes of "othering" the atypical bodies of that society (2). He further suggests that, because disability is understood as a corporeal condition as well as a consequence of spiritual forces in many African societies, all types of disabilities may be perceived as a generational weakness or as a form of divine retribution for past transgressions (7).

Within this metaphysical understanding, two dominant perspectives on the "spirituality" of disability emerge: the "positive" and the negative. "Positive" representations of disability position the atypical body as sacred or special. In her essay, "Disability in Africa: A Cultural/Religious Perspective," Mary Nyangweso highlights that, while some communities attribute disabilities to supernatural forces, others view individuals with disabilities as possessing unique spiritual significance (118–119). I had been afraid that the accident on that Sunday morning was a punishment from God for mocking a visibly atypical body; surely, God must have been angry at our actions. Though seemingly benevolent, the assumed positivity behind framing atypical bodies as vessels of special and mystical powers is disguisedly negative. Respecting the atypical body on the premise of its spiritual significance is pretentious and does not protect the dignity of PwDs.

In fact, perceptions of spiritual significance exoticize the atypical body through a supposedly unique relational dynamic, bringing up a plethora of complexities for both

the disabled and enabled bodies,[2] one of which is the struggle with how or how not to, as well as whether to, interpret differences. Thus generating, in Erving Goffman's words, a "special kind of relationship between attributes and stereotypes," a social tension that sustains disability-related stigma (4).

Moreover, the exoticization of atypical bodies fosters dehumanization and renders them acutely vulnerable to violence. Nyangweso recounts several harrowing examples of such violence:

> It is a common belief that albinos are cursed ghosts whose body parts can ward off bad luck and bring wealth and success. […] As Josephat explains, "[It] is more powerful if the victim screams during the amputation." [Gilgoff, "Albino Killings."] […] [M]en who have contracted HIV/AIDS can be healed from this condition if they sleep with albino girls. (121–122)

Some people are even murdered for having angular kyphosis (a condition where the spine curves more outwardly than it should), their protrusions removed for medicinal purposes (122). Within these logics, the atypical body is temporarily revered as sacred or mystical, only to be reduced to an object exploited for the benefit of others. This precarious positioning mirrors broader marginalizing dynamics, akin to the ways Black male bodies are situated within frameworks that oscillate between strength, utility, and criminality, leaving the exoticized body perpetually susceptible to violence.

Questioning the socio-cultural contexts that promote such beliefs, Nyangweso argues, is pivotal for promoting a change in prevailing attitudes toward PwDs (135–136). As scholars worldwide continue to research the portrayal of disability in literature, politics, and media, as well as how disability intersects with race, gender, and class, scholars in Africa contend with the compounded challenges of "indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial stigmas; legacies of armed conflicts; dense urban zones; vast rural areas; epidemiological risks; misplaced governmental and humanitarian priorities; as well as financial exploitation and underdevelopment" (Falola and Hamel 1). The complexities of disability in Africa, therefore, necessitate a nuanced approach distinct from that of the Global North.

Despite these structural challenges, language remains a crucial yet underexamined site of discrimination. Some scholars, such as Benedicte Ingstad, argue that linguistic critiques of disability in the Global North are largely irrelevant to African contexts. Ingstad posits that for a "poor, hearing-impaired woman in a village…it is presently of little interest whether she is called 'deaf,' 'disabled,' or a 'person with a disability'" (qtd. in Falola and Hamel 2–3). While her observation is not incorrect, it is not entirely true. Her observation overlooks the diversity of African socio-economic experiences, which extend beyond rural villages to include urban spaces where language plays a critical role in shaping identity.

[2]Contrary to the commonly used terminology, "able-bodied" which inherently implies that disabled bodies lack able bodies, the term "enabled" allows for inclusivity and aligns with the social model of disability that emphasizes the (in)accessibility of societal structures, rather than an inherent lack of ability in the disabled body.

In this essay, I speak of disability as atypicality existing within the frames of established bodily normativity. My goal here is to shift attention from the "big" stakes in African disability discourse to the subtleties of language. I want to contribute to African disability epistemes through a lens that integrates linguistic and cultural elements to interrogate how atypicality—both as a concept and a lived experience—is framed in everyday cultural discourses. Through narrative scholarship, I interrogate the cultural scripts that shape perceptions about atypical bodies in two social settings—the classroom and the church—as well as within the figurative ideations of selected disability-centered Yoruba proverbs, in order to emphasize that language holds transformative potential for reshaping narratives around disability. Drawing from my experiences and broader social interactions, I examine how language contexts reinforce ableist ideologies and disability-related stigma. The analysis of selected proverbs allows me to situate this discourse within a specific cultural context, so as to reveal hidden layers of ableist ideologies and emphasize that the language of disability does, in fact, matter in an African context. I argue that rethinking and reshaping language is an act of social justice, one that can help foster a more inclusive and dignified society for PwDs.

Silence in the Classroom

At some point in our academic journey, we have all encountered a so-called "problem" classmate. Too "disruptive," too "unintelligent" for the teacher's liking, and perpetually in trouble for failing to stay on task, complete assignments, score well on tests, or behave in a manner regarded as appropriate. In Nigeria, where corporal punishment is permissible as a form of discipline, such differences from the normative student behavior often result in flogging and shaming—a method of chastisement that dehumanizes/stigmatizes rather than educates. This punitive approach ignores the existence of learning disorders, disabilities, and neurodivergence in the classroom. Teachers rarely adapt their instructional methods to accommodate students' needs. They reinforce the system that rewards "high achievers," leaving the rest to struggle alone. Rather than offering support, they uphold a hierarchy that isolates and stigmatizes those who do not conform to traditional academic expectations.

For these "struggling" students, failure in class is not just a personal struggle; it is a public humiliation, as they may be brought to the front of the class and mocked with the shame song that no child ever desires to be subjected to:

Olódo ràbàtà	*Big, fat dunce*
Ojú eja lo mò je	*You only know how to eat the eyes of a fish*
Òníi lo paper	*You will not use papers*
Silati lo ma lo'	*You will use a slate*
Ògbéni kí lo gbà?	*Mr/Ms., what did you get?*
Òdo bí orí eja	*Zero, like the head of a fish*
Shiki Shiki Shiki shame!	*Shiki, shiki, shiki, shame!*[3]

The shame song is a cruel tradition that further cements the "struggling" students' status as outcasts. To stand before peers while they sing about how one is too academically unintelligent to write on paper—a modern invention—and will instead be relegated to a

[3]Translated by the author.

slate—as used during pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria—is to experience exclusion in its rawest form. This song reinforces the social script of exclusion, wherein only typical bodies and minds deserve access to quality education and resources.

Sometimes, this verbal humiliation is accompanied by strokes of the cane, after which the student walks back to their seat, embarrassed and broken, internalizing the belief that their difficulties are not mere academic struggles but personal failings. Aware of these consequences, students might go to great lengths to avoid behaviors that might label them as different, pushing themselves to keep up, suppressing their struggles, denying their needs, or simply losing interest in school. Inevitably, they blame themselves or are blamed by others instead of the system that fails to recognize individual differences in the classroom. On the other hand, if you are a classmate of a "problem" student, you learn to distance yourself from them. Associating with an ostracized peer risks drawing a similar stigma upon yourself. Some students go as far as engaging in emotional and intellectual bullying to strengthen their own social standing. The proverb "Show me your friend, and I'll tell you who you are" takes on a sinister meaning in this context, reinforcing the idea that failure and difference are contagious and should be avoided at all costs.

One might argue that attitudes toward disability in the classroom have improved over time in Africa. However, these changes are minor when placed side by side with the deeply ingrained, traumatizing norms that continue to exclude students with disabilities. Falola et al. assert that "stigma and social grievances tied to disability still exist," noting that neurotypical and enabled individuals often "separate themselves from those with disabilities and ignore them because of their perceived differences" (50). Within many classrooms, atypical bodies are still denied a supportive and inclusive learning environment. In some cases, parents, anticipating stigma or mistreatment, choose to keep their children with disabilities out of school altogether, with this pattern disproportionately affecting girls. Gendered cultural beliefs that frame girls' education as unnecessary or expendable intersect with disability to further restrict access, particularly in contexts where the female body's value is narrowly defined by domestic roles. At the same time, some families' decisions are shaped less by overt discrimination than by concerns for safety, as girls with disabilities are often viewed as especially vulnerable to physical and sexual violence within and beyond school spaces.

Ebenso et al. note that discourse refers to the creation of knowledge through the representations of language (210). Understanding the way language creates knowledge concerning disability in the classroom is complex because, while it is often overtly hostile, it is also characterized by silence. Disability is like an elephant in the room, a taboo subject that, as Georgina Kleege describes in conversation with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Brenda Brueggemann, is perceived as "so tragic…foreign…and so horrific" (qtd. in Falola et al. 69). I experienced this firsthand while working as a classroom assistant after my first year studying English Education at the University of Ilorin.

Two students stand out in my memory: Student A, a girl with an upper limb amputation, and Student B, a boy who struggled with staying on task, completing assignments, and comprehending lessons. I believed that my attitude toward these

students was generally kind but, in hindsight, I recognize my own biases. I was curious about Student A's amputation (a phenomenon I later learned disability scholars have studied), though I never brought myself to ask about it. More troubling, however, was my internal conflict when grading her work. I often wondered whether I should be more lenient. If she performed poorly on a test, I subconsciously attributed it to her disability rather than considering that the material might have been difficult or that the teaching methods were ineffective. My assumptions equated physical disability with diminished mental ability. I became an unwitting participant in discriminating against her. My reluctance to confront my own biases robbed me of the opportunity to be a better educator.

My response to Student B, however, was quite different. I felt only frustration. I could not understand how anyone could be so disruptive, so resistant to following instructions. Some teachers blamed his mother, arguing that she overindulged him due to the loss of his father. Some even suggested that the mother's own physical disability made her incapable of properly raising a child. I do not recall if I shared these opinions, but I do remember my anger. I only began to understand the root of this anger six years later, after becoming a certified teacher in a different school. While working with students with special learning needs, I saw firsthand the resistance from other teachers when we introduced instructional accommodations. Many viewed these efforts as an attack on their long-established methods. The changes we proposed challenged their deep-seated beliefs about intelligence, behavior, and ability. Rather than re-evaluate their prejudices, they clung to a discriminatory system that had long failed to benefit students with disabilities.

I believe that this resistance, this anger, stems from the language of silence surrounding disability in the classroom; a language that constructs it as something "too difficult; too troubling" to engage, something that must be ignored. We must intentionally rethink the way we (do not) speak about disability, especially the way silence perpetuates stigma. The unwillingness to acknowledge diverse embodied experiences in educational spaces does not erase these differences; instead, it creates strongholds out of biases and stereotypes that could end up causing trauma for the students. Classrooms are, by nature, spaces of diversity, and when they are not, it becomes imperative to question their accessibility and inclusivity.

In many African countries, where education is a crucial pathway out of economic hardship, a traumatic learning environment further disempowers students with disabilities and strips them of their agency. The ableist structures in schools actively work against their well-being and limit their chances of survival in a world constructed to exclude them. We must disrupt these narratives and create educational spaces that recognize and support the needs of all learners rather than perpetuate their exclusion. Through intentional and strategic course design, grading policy, classroom conversations guidelines that promote healthy inquiry, etc., teachers can create an environment that de-normalizes the norm and teaches students that all corporeal conditions are actual lived experiences that must be honored and included.

Problem Body Before the Pulpit

While this section critiques certain religious perspectives on disability, I should acknowledge that these perspectives do not represent the totality of religious life in the religiously pluralist nation of Nigeria. Different faith traditions and denominations engage with disability in vastly diverse ways.

Having said that, I begin here by recalling my first time in an interdenominational church after arriving in the U.S. a few years ago. Standing between the altar and the congregation, to the preacher's right, was an unexpected presence: a sign language interpreter. This was not my first encounter with such accommodation. In Nigeria, large church services attended by people from across the country and even beyond were sometimes televised or live-streamed, and in the bottom right corner of the screen, in an excruciatingly small square, a sign language interpreter would appear. My intrigue, therefore, did not stem from unfamiliarity.

What, then, was it? In hindsight, I realize that before this moment, I had never encountered accessibility and inclusion in smaller religious gatherings, like those of individual branches or parishes, up close. I had only seen sign language interpretation in large, high-profile congregations that functioned as a conglomeration of parishes. This was my first time seeing accessibility in a local church setting. It would be a mistake to compare churches in the U.S. to those in Nigeria. The two exist in distinct cultural, economic, and political contexts, and any such comparison would be complicated by the hierarchical positioning of one over the other. Still, I wonder why my instinctive reaction to the interpreter was "intrigue," despite my prior exposure to sign language in religious spaces.

Additionally, it would also be inaccurate to claim that the Nigerian church actively segregates or excludes PwDs. It would, however, be equally misleading to claim that it does not harbor prejudices against bodily differences. To grow up Pentecostal in Nigeria is to attend churches that often attempt to pray away any difference from the established holistic normativity. A child experiencing difficulties at school, for instance, might be accused of being under the influence of witches determined to plunder their parents' resources. In this environment, the miraculous was always on display as an attempt to right the wrong by healing the atypical body, which implicitly problematizes other ways of being.

Rooted in constructions of normalcy that others nonconforming bodies, the belief that difference necessitates healing reinforces the notion that the disabled body is a "problem" body. Internalized prejudices against disability thus surface through actions presented as care for the "abnormal" body or as exercises of faith aimed at repairing what is perceived as broken. Inevitably, this perception of normalcy transforms disability into a spiritual dilemma to be resolved rather than accepted and seen as one of many expressions of human embodied realities. The "do something" ideology, among many other disability-related ideologies, illustrates the extent to which atypical bodies are abundantly textual, continually producing framings "within ever-shifting and unstable [social] meanings" (Mitchell and Snyder 223). In practice, this often results in interventions that prioritize the emotional reassurance or moral affirmation of onlookers

over the well-being of people with disabilities, reinforcing distorted beliefs about bodies and normalcy.

Far more effort is put into "correcting" the so-called problem body than into ensuring inclusion. Difference is treated as something temporary, something that could disappear with the right amount of faith, with a few efforts to provide resources for believers with disabilities to experience a stress-free worship environment. Prayers frequently target either the removal of existing disabilities or the prevention of future disablement, fostering stigma against PwDs in church settings both because of their disabilities and because of deeply ingrained stereotypes. Here, the spiritual conceptualization of disability in African contexts becomes especially visible through the framing of difference as a "problem" to be solved. Stigmatizing cultural and religious beliefs mark PwDs as subjects in need of fixing, or as cursed, as broken, or as sinful. When healing fails to materialize, these same belief systems often recast them as lacking faith or spiritual commitment. In this way, difference is regarded as a moral and spiritual failing. Such narratives place atypical bodies in a persistent state of scrutiny, fostering cycles of discontent, self-doubt, and fear (Nyangweso 128). Over time, this internalized stigma shapes how they understand their bodies, assess their capacities, and regulate their behaviors, often narrowing their sense of possibility and belonging within both religious and social spaces.

I do not offer this critique as an attack on religion or faith-based practices. Neither am I apologetic for questioning a religion I am a practitioner of. I recognize that I, too, may have my biases, but having this conversation confronts some of these biases. As clear as day, the problematic treatment of atypical bodies in religious spaces distracts from the larger goal of fostering an inclusive environment for worshiping in community. The barriers to accessing faith, resulting from this "problem" body ideology, should be discussed as widely as the barriers to accessing economic, political, and physical spaces are discussed. Talks of inclusivity and accessibility in Nigerian religious spaces should reach beyond ramps, sign language, as well as frugal and futile poverty alleviation schemes. Because, while these are necessary, they are not the only ways to ensure the overall well-being of PwDs in faith-based communities.

Proverbs and the Cultural Construction of Disability

There is language, and then, there is language. The former refers to structured means of communication within shared geographical or historical boundaries, encompassing grammatical rules, syntax, dialects, and accents. Growing up in Lagos, Nigeria, meant being exposed to a variety of (non)indigenous languages: English, the national language; Yorùbá, my tribal language spoken at home; Ibo, often heard from chatting teachers or quarreling neighbors; and Hausa, spoken by shoe cobblers or mobile tailors whose rhythmic clanging of tools signaled their presence in the streets. The latter kind of language extends beyond structured communication. It shapes perceptions of reality, functioning as an inherited state of mind and an unspoken mutual understanding passed through generations. This language manifests in proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and everyday slang that collectively shape as well as reflect a people's mindset and their unexamined truths about the world and each other.

The nature of the Yoruba language within social interactions, particularly its metaphorical ideations evident in its creations and use of proverbs and folklore, offers us a critical site for inquiry about disability. Especially, proverbs are repositories of cultural values and constructed truths about human experiences and social interactions. The Yorubas refer to proverbs as the *esin* "horse" of speech, because when words are lost, proverbs are used to search and find them. This means that through metaphorical and paradoxical expressions, proverbs clarify the intent behind meaning creation. They shape attitudes, stiffen "truths," and, in this case, enforce stereotypes as well as transmit generational beliefs about normalcy and difference.

Proverbs can offer profound insights into implicit ableist constructions of disability. They can reveal how the atypical body becomes a signifier of social meaning (Ebenso et al. 210) and reside in a realm of interpretive inexhaustibility (Mitchell and Snyder 223). In this light, proverbs can reflect how disability occupies the status of a thing too disconcerting: misunderstood as a metaphor for moral failure and a marker of social exclusion, a blemish, contamination, or an aberration of normativity. Thus, as Ebenso et al. note, a "systematic analysis of language use" will expose "cultural knowledge and attitudes" about disability in this context (210).

To this end, I provide three Yoruba proverbs to explore how language can be intrinsically ableist. Firstly, the proverb, *Àbùkù, ni ara ètè l'ówà; eni ti óbá ti ni èté óti l 'ábùkù*, translated as "social blemish is embodied in leprosy; anyone who begets leprosy, begets contempt,"[4] demonstrates how language conveys the social and cultural constructions of disability (Ebenso et al. 212). This proverb exemplifies how a condition like leprosy transcends its medical diagnosis and becomes a form of embodied social blemish that signals the moral or social failure of the person affected. It reveals how "society's intense loathing" of the leprous body constructs a "tainted identity" for the bearer of the disability (212). In its transformation from a biological condition to a social stigma, disability invites rejection and exclusion from spheres of power and social interactions. The proverb, as a linguistic tool, underpins the language of a problem body, while also perpetuating stigma and exclusion as tools for social control. Atypical bodies become embodied signifiers of social contamination and unacceptability.

A second Yoruba proverb, *Aro ònasè kan dí ònà*, translated as "A cripple does not block the road with his legs,"[5] encodes an implicit expectation that people with disabilities should recognize their presumed limitations and refrain from obstructing or challenging the enabled. Though the proverb may appear to function as a neutral observation or a lesson in social decorum, it rests on a reductive and homogenizing view of disability, assuming a singular, visibly impaired body and equating disability with immobility. The underlying presumption is that "cripples" lack legs and are therefore incapable of blocking the road, but this logic forecloses alternative forms of participatory movement and agency. Here, "limitations" are fixed and final; disability is an inherent boundary rather than a condition shaped by social arrangements. In this way, the proverb reinforces ableist hierarchies that legitimize exclusion while discouraging collective

[4]Translation provided in Ebenso et al.'s essay, "Using Indigenous Proverbs to Understand Social Knowledge and Attitudes to Leprosy among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria."

[5]Translation from Oyekan Owomoyela's digital archive of Yoruba Proverbs, "'Part 3: On Cageyness, Caution, Moderation, Patience, and Prudence.' Yoruba Proverbs: The Good Person."

responsibility for accommodation, and also assumes singular ways of being. What is offered as common sense thus operates as a cultural script that disciplines atypical bodies into invisibility, positioning restraint, withdrawal, and self-erasure as proper social conduct.

Here, disciplining refers to the social regulation of disabled bodies through expectations of silence and spatial containment. The proverb does more than describe what a disabled person cannot do; it instructs them on how to occupy space and, more importantly, how not to. By insisting that the disabled body must not "block the road," presence becomes disruption, and agency, impropriety. Disciplining limits PwDs to narrowly defined roles of quiet compliance, making absence or invisibility appear as their most acceptable contribution to social life. Within this framework, exclusion is normalized as etiquette rather than recognized as the outcome of structural inaccessibility. Silence becomes especially desirable, as it allows ableist systems to persist unquestioned, where social barriers are presented as natural rather than as reversible constructs.

Moreover, disciplining the atypical body into subservience contributes to the treatment of PwDs as second-class citizens of humanity, by framing them as burdens rather than individuals with intrinsic worth. Disciplining upholds the ableist belief that success is inherently tied to physical ability, making the accomplishments of disabled individuals seem either extraordinary or, worse, exceptions that prove the rule. This logic feeds into the commodification of disabled success stories, where disabled people who achieve success are transformed into tools for capitalist motivational rhetoric, celebrated as spectacles of resilience who have managed to triumph despite their so-called limitations (Etieyibo 3). In this sense, the proverb's quiet insistence on knowing one's place does more than regulate behavior. Subtly and through the propagation of discipline, it functions as part of an exclusionary social hierarchy that restricts full participation while masking inequality as cultural wisdom.

A third Yoruba proverb, *Á kìí ti ojú oníka mésàán kà*, translated as "One does not count the fingers of a person who only has nine in their presence,"[6] offers an alternative perspective on disability discourse. On the surface, it promotes discretion and sensitivity in addressing someone's impairment, but beneath this "considerate" message lies an ingrained discomfort with openly acknowledging disability. The implied social etiquette of avoiding direct reference to deformity or impairment frames disability as an unsettling anomaly, something to be quietly bypassed rather than integrated into everyday discourse. This avoidance stems from a deep-seated unease with diversity itself.

While this proverb discourages overt mockery, it does little to foster true inclusion or acceptance. It does not honor the disability story as one of many corporeal reminders of the impermanence of our bodies. Instead, it perpetuates a language of silence that encourages the stigma surrounding disability. Silence, in this context, is an act of erasure. It positions disability as something best left unspoken, reinforcing a cultural mindset where disabled individuals must navigate their existence in the shadows.

[6]Translation provided in Ebenso et al.'s essay, "Using Indigenous Proverbs to Understand Social Knowledge and Attitudes to Leprosy among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria."

Though masked as politeness, avoidance sustains ableist ideologies by allowing prejudice to fester unchecked.

Additionally, this silence robs us of teachable moments, of opportunities to challenge harmful assumptions and advocate for true accessibility and inclusion as they affect PwDs. When we refuse to name and discuss disability openly and empathetically, we forfeit the chance to dismantle ableist narratives that have been passed down through generations. Disrupting these silences is essential to rethinking and reevaluating dominant ideologies where ableist and discriminatory ideologies are often cloaked as cultural wisdom and practices (Lalvani).

Breaking this silence, therefore, is a necessary act of resistance. It equips our communities and us with the tools to de-normalize the norm, destigmatize the stigmatized, and de-traumatize traumatic paradigms surrounding disability. It forces us to confront the unconscious ableism we have inherited from our families and traditions, an ableism that continues to shape policies, social interactions, and access to opportunities. Until we make disability a topic of open and empathetic discourse, we will remain complicit in systems that problematize other ways of embodied being and living.

Negative attitudes toward disability are inseparable from the language that sustains them. Proverbs, as linguistic and cultural artifacts, do more than convey moral lessons; they toughen deeply entrenched ideologies about who belongs, who is valued, and who is relegated to the margins. Within the Yoruba context, proverbs about disability construct social realities by rendering disability as a site for metaphorical configurations. Whether it is to admonish decorum or enforce (false) caution, there is no justification for using disability as a site for constructing metaphorical renditions of "truths" about the disabled body.

Because disability is a human experience that comes in diverse forms, to metaphorize the disabled body is to enforce a singular way of being and to limit how disability engages with the corporeal. It is to reduce the human experience of disability to mere signs and symbols for producing controlling narratives of bodies and selves. Encoding disability as a source of shame, a justification for oppressive social hierarchies, or a condition best left unspoken shapes collective perceptions that sustain ableist exclusions across generations.

Yet, because language is a cultural inheritance, it can be a site of transformation. To rethink the language of disability is to challenge the wisdom it carries to disrupt the narratives that justify silence, stigma, and exclusion. If language shapes reality, then reconstructing the way we speak about disability is not just a matter of semantics or naming, but a necessary step toward social justice. By critiquing linguistic expressions that govern social attitudes, we open pathways to a more inclusive cultural consciousness that acknowledges diversity as an integral part of the human experience, thereby fostering societies where PwDs are recognized as full participants in life, rather than as subjects of quiet avoidance or metaphorical caution, or conditional acceptance.

Conclusion

Language is a tool for communication, but it is also a force that shapes how societies construct reality, define normalcy, and assign value to human lives. Within Yoruba

cultural discourse, proverbs serve as a repository of collective wisdom used to ennoble social hierarchies and transmit generational beliefs. In this sense, proverbs can function as mechanisms of exclusion, perpetuating ableist ideologies that relegate PwDs to the periphery of social, political, and economic life. As this essay has demonstrated, linguistic structures encode bias and sustain systems of marginalization.

Nevertheless, if language can construct marginalized realities, it can also be wielded to foster sustainable and transgenerational inclusion. Interrogating the cultural scripts that shape perceptions of disability is a crucial step toward challenging the narratives that justify silence, stigma, and segregation. It is an essential step toward social justice for PwDs. As Irving Zola argues, reflecting on the language of disability requires an awareness of how words "ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean" various forms of embodiment (167). To rethink the language of disability is to attempt to un-name the named and de-normalize the norm, a process that, as Zola acknowledges, is "not without its difficulties or consequences" (167). This transformation necessitates a deliberate effort to challenge oppressive linguistic frameworks and amplify narratives that affirm disabled bodies as integral to the human experience.

Future research into the intersections of language and disability in African societies can extend beyond Yoruba proverbs to examine how other linguistic communities construct disability to shed light on both shared and divergent perspectives. A broader comparative analysis of disability-related proverbs across different African cultures would provide deeper insights into the ways linguistic mechanisms sustain or challenge ableist ideologies. Creative writers can attempt the retelling of folklores, folk songs, and other forms of African oral traditions to subvert implicit ableist ideologies.

Additionally, as African oral traditions continue to evolve alongside modern media, it is equally important to explore the representations of disability in contemporary literature, film, and digital culture. Understanding whether these narratives are shifting in response to disability research or merely upholding traditional ableist ideologies remains a critical area of inquiry. Even as scholars and educators advocate for the preservation and teaching of indigenous languages, there is a need to assess whether literary and cultural institutions are rethinking the framing of linguistic artifacts in ways that promote inclusion rather than perpetuate negative attitudes toward PwDs.

Furthermore, analyzing how language about disability circulates in policy documents, legislative debates, and implementation guidelines can reveal how linguistic attitudes translate into concrete decisions about institutional accessibility, including in schools, healthcare systems, public transportation, and religious institutions. Examining the phrasing of disability rights laws alongside their funding priorities and compliance mechanisms makes visible how assumptions embedded in language shape whose needs are prioritized and which forms of access are treated as optional rather than mandatory. Given the additional layers of marginalization that affect women with disabilities, a feminist framework is especially useful for tracing how cultural narratives about femininity, dependency, and bodily normativity produce distinct forms of stigma that regulate disabled women's access to education, healthcare, sexuality, and public life, with direct consequences for both social perception and policy implementation.

By engaging in these critical inquiries, African disability scholars, activists, and policymakers can contribute to reshaping the linguistic and cultural frameworks that define disability in African societies. Language has long been a vehicle for exclusion, but it also holds the power to dismantle oppressive structures and build more equitable futures. The challenge before us is not only to critique the words that confine but to reclaim language as a tool for liberation to affirm the dignity and agency of all individuals, regardless of embodied differences.

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Decolonizing Knowledge Systems: Open Access in the Indian Context

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Open Access (OA) began with the promise of a more equitable approach to sharing knowledge through increased scholarly communication, changing the ways in which research can be disseminated and accessed. Its initial intent defied the privileging of knowledge as it presented alternatives to traditional subscription models of journal publication that sustained inequality, since these models allow only elite institutions to afford exhaustive research databases, thereby widening the gap between large and small institutions, developed and developing economies, as well as rich and poor nations. Against such traditional models, Open Access offered a level playing field to all, not only benefitting the readers, but also the researchers participating in it, a fact often overlooked in the discussions surrounding this movement. Within the academic community, the production of knowledge through research gains credibility only when it is validated by the scholarly use of the work, a process for which quantitative models of assessing credibility have been created. The reformation of knowledge-disseminating systems assured global visibility to authors from diverse geographical regions across all classes by tearing down the prohibitive barriers of cost and copyright.

Economic sustainability, however, remains a formidable hurdle in the democratisation of knowledge within existing OA models. The inadequacies of Article Processing Charges (APCs) are well-documented, and alternative funding mechanisms remain largely experimental. Most Diamond OA Journals[1] struggle to secure sustainable funding, compounded in the field of humanities by the limited funding options available. Unlike STEM disciplines, which benefit from substantial grants to cover their publication costs, humanities researchers in India struggle with smaller or even non-existent budgets, which creates a structural disadvantage that current OA models fail to address. OA's ecosystem, for Indian academicians and world over, remains a deeply unequal system

[1]Diamond OA refers to a radical publication model where neither the readers nor the authors pay for the publication. Funding for journals in such a model is received from other stakeholders, like research institutions, universities, governments, or patrons. For further information on the different types of Open Access publications, see, "What is Open Access?" *OpenAccess.nl*, www.openaccess.nl/en/about-open-access/what-is-open-access.

which remains blind to the problems of the Global South scholarship. Its policies, moreover, remain heavily influenced by corporate/capitalistic publishers, demanding disproportionate APCs which Global South scholars generally can't afford unless they are funded by their universities. In contrast, most Western universities have infrastructures, policies, and budgets in place to pay the publication costs, providing their scholars opportunities to publish in OA, thereby enhancing the visibility and accessibility of their work. Corporate publishers' covert cooption of OA also helps silence the voices of scholars from Global South, and their work marginalized, as they struggle to gain wider visibility within academia. This paradox of OA creating new economic disparities then works against empowering marginalized scholarship, by keeping scholars as passive readers and limiting their participation in producing and disseminating knowledge. Thus, the promise of OA to serve as a model for democratizing publication opportunities has, unfortunately, fallen short of providing inclusive frameworks that accommodate epistemological systems outside Western standards. Western systems dominate the OA ecosystem through quality-control metrics and evaluation systems, giving impetus to embedded biases that favour methodologies used in the West. This shortcoming has reinforced entrenched homogenous structures that impose rigid standardization on diverse epistemologies. Mehmood Mamdani points to such an imposition of standardization and eventual appropriation by Western systems by referencing the etymology of 'university' which, "as the name suggests, claims a universal significance as a site for the study of the humans" (15). He argues that while diverse forms of higher education have emerged in various parts of the world since premodern times, "it is only one particular historical experience, the Western, that became globalised during the modern colonial era"; and it is only students from such institutes who "claim 'excellence' globally" (15).

Open Access's skewed state in favour of Western-generated models of knowledge can be interpreted as a fallout of the post-colonial dichotomy that plagues nations with rich cultural history yet poor economic conditions and inadequate technical facilities. This is particularly true in the context of Indian humanities scholarship, which is rooted in indigenous traditions and community-based knowledge. India, a multilingual country with 22 official languages and number of dialects reaching up to several hundreds,[2] boasts a scholarly tradition that has been a blend of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian since ancient times. When such a rich tradition engages with the Anglophonic Western world, its contributions are often underappreciated and even misrecognized by a homogenous evaluation standard, where only one language, English, becomes dominant, failing to appreciate its cultural and linguistic diversity. Monica Berger observes the socio-political implications of this guise of globalisation which masks the systemic erasure of non-Western experiences and epistemological frameworks. She notes that OA "continue[s] to be mired in colonial, one-size-fits-all conditions whilst universities and research institutions value traditional, prestige publishing based in the North" (384). This bias results in scholars being evaluated for grants and promotions based on a narrow set of metrics (384), placing them at a disadvantage. Consequently, the majority of scholarship from India, and the entire Global South, is unjustly relegated to the role of passive consumers, contradicting OA's self-proclaimed mission to provide

[2]See, Government of India. The Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India. *The Ministry of Home Affairs*, www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Eighth_Schedule.pdf.

an equitable platform for all kinds of scholarship.[3] In the same vein, Florence Piron warns that “open access can become a tool of neocolonialism if it only gives students and academics better access to science from the North” (117).

While it is an imperative of contemporary times to discern and engage with the knowledge structures from the Global South—acknowledging the historical and cultural factors that shape these knowledge forms—Michalinos Zembylas provides a word of caution against the potential misuse of decolonial rhetoric. He argues that the decolonial rhetoric can be used to further “nationalist and authoritarian agendas [that] reinforce exclusionary and anti-democratic educational policies” (1). The need of the hour is not to uproot all perceived remnants of colonial structures ruthlessly, but to draw out colonising elements from the current blend of structures. ‘Delinking’ existing knowledge systems from their visible colonial markers should not be misconstrued as a debunking of sorts. That can be misinterpreted as a misguided attempt to erase the history of coloniality. Instead, one should strategically distance one’s perspective from colonial structures by rethinking their detrimental impact on native knowledge systems. A genuine pursuit of decoloniality needs to go beyond debunking of colonial power structures and evolve an active discourse on how to relink existing structures with native knowledge systems and re-establish them in the context of pluriversality. To truly decolonize OA, then, we need to reimagine not only validation and dissemination of knowledge but also the very foundations of its production. This involves reviving knowledge systems embedded in native languages and ensuring they receive equal respect alongside colonial languages like English, without forcing their reinstatement as the exclusive mode of education. A decolonized OA champions non-English scholarship by building infrastructure for multiple scripts, establishing comprehensive metadata standards, and developing diverse evaluation criteria for regional language publications. OA initiatives can only thrive as inclusive spaces for diverse epistemological traditions when quality metrics—scholarly communication, citation indexes, and peer-reviews—are reconceptualized to include non-Western cultural approaches alongside Western academic judgments.

An equitable OA is bound to unravel the barriers of inequality in technological infrastructure and digital literacy. Despite India’s significant progress in digital connectivity, disparities persist between urban and rural areas, elite and non-elite institutions, and across different regions. The transition to digital-first publishing, while making publication accessible, raises critical sustainability concerns that are too

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[3]As stated in the Budapest Open Access Initiative, signed on February 14, 2002 at Budapest, Hungary:

> An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet. The public good they make possible is *the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds*. Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge. (emphasis added)

See, Budapest Open Access Initiative. “Read the Declaration.” *BOAI*, 14 Feb. 2002, www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read/.

significant to be ignored. Although digital formats are deemed more accessible, the looming threats of server changes, format obsolescence, and institutional instability jeopardize long-term availability. These preservation challenges disproportionately affect scholars engaged in historical research or long-term projects. Similarly, digitization of texts—through digital humanities projects that have revolutionized access to manuscripts—raises pressing issues of ownership and cultural appropriation. Key concerns include involving traditional knowledge holders in decision-making about online accessibility. While Creative Commons licensing provides control options to OA's unrestricted use, its mechanism remains rooted in Western intellectual property rights frameworks that can clash with indigenous knowledge systems.[4]

Indian education system, despite incorporating English as one of the official languages and its remarkable technological advancements, continues to exclude the broader society from the latest technologically integrated education. This exclusion is particularly pronounced in the humanities, where the absence of comprehensive indigenous frameworks in vernacular languages on the internet stifles alternate knowledge systems. The overwhelming dominance of English on major OA platforms perpetuates a form of linguistic colonialism, marginalizing multilingual scholarship and severely restricting India's intellectual potential. Digital publishing platforms and repository systems, originally designed to democratise knowledge, often unintentionally discourage participation, especially among senior scholars accustomed to print traditions. Online archiving too is dominated by anglophone texts, while native language systems remain marginalized.

A successful decolonization of OA in higher education is not just a possibility; it is an imperative that demands a robust policy framework. India's higher education system, with nearly 1200 universities and 50,000 colleges serving over 43 million students,[5] stands at a crossroads in OA implementation. The challenges are clear, particularly in humanities, which, despite their historical significance in Indian intellectual traditions, are overshadowed by STEM disciplines, whose methodologies closely align with the modern Western knowledge systems. These fields receive disproportionate government funding, industry partnerships, and international rankings. Through the One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS) scheme, Indian government is offering Indian institutions journal-access on a single portal through centralised

[4]Mehtab Khan points this clash by stating that,

> [indigenous communities] haven't always had the autonomy to decide what can be done with their knowledge. International and national instruments have attempted to codify the value of traditional knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples, but the place of such knowledge within conventional intellectual property structures remains deeply contested and uncertain. […] [T]raditional knowledge is often perceived as being part of the public domain by default, when it is not.
>
> There is a colonial history of this perception. The doctrine of discovery, which was used to legitimize and expand colonization, held the assumption that indigenous peoples were "uncivilized," and hence could not own property like European settlers. Therefore, the land and knowledge of indigenous peoples were seen as part of the commons, open for 'discovery' and appropriation. (Khan)

[5]These figures are taken from the latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), conducted in the academic year 2021–22. See, Ministry of Education. *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22*. Department of Higher Education, Government of India, https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report/.

subscriptions, but this access is merely that of a passive consumer.[6] The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's endorsement of OA principles through an emphasis on equitable use of technology (Ministry of Human Resource Development 58–59) marks a crucial step forward. The Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy (STIP) of 2020 specifically insists on an open data policy for publicly-funded research, laying the groundwork with OA guidelines for the field of Sciences in India (Ministry of Science & Technology 12–13). Yet, many institutions remain hamstrung by inadequate infrastructure and support for effective implementation. The problems of a developing country like India require local solutions for knowledge inclusion, preservation, and assimilation. We need policies that would empower Indian researchers to actively publish and engage on the global stage. Indigenous publishing platforms, for instance, hold the potential to present an alternative to commercial publishing models. However, they face challenges of visibility and recognition in the global academic arena. Policy changes, though, are merely the starting point, and it is imperative to embrace a sense of global responsibility to ensure that all communities participate actively, ensuring necessary resources for indigenous knowledge forms to strengthen the academic landscape and improve their global standing. Disciplinary associations must redefine standards to evaluate scholarly contributions beyond traditional metrics. Funding agencies must establish guidelines that champion diverse publishing models, moving beyond the narrow confines of high-impact Western journals.

Ultimately, decolonizing OA is not merely a call for change in publication of research, but about transforming the entire ecosystem of knowledge production to be more inclusive and representative of human intellectual diversity. Success will likely require hybrid approaches that combine the best aspects of traditional and digital models of disseminating knowledge while developing more elastic frameworks that can support multilingual, multicultural, and methodologically diverse scholarship. This might include creating new metrics that can assess impact within specific cultural and linguistic contexts. This would require sustained commitment from all stakeholders: individual scholars, institutions, policymakers, and funding agencies to serve the democratic ideals that inspired the OA movement.

[6]For further information on the ONOS initiative, see, www.onos.gov.in.

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Task of the Intellectual in a Time of Crisis: An Appeal to Colleagues

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> This road away from freedom that the West is currently taking is a powerful reminder that, in a globalized, mediatized, and hyperconnected world, new forms of (fascist) political pathologies do not stop at national borders—let alone walls. Instead, in the age of the Internet, they spread contagiously, via a proliferation of new, transnational media and the cyberwars they trigger. These hypermimetic wars dissolve not only the very conception of clearly defined borders, but also the ontological distinction between self and others, originals and copies, truths and lies, virtual attacks and real attacks.
>
> — Nidesh Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019; xxxiv)

We write as educators and are making this appeal to colleagues here in the U.S. and abroad. Hurled down this “road away from freedom” (Lawtoo), we find ourselves in a not-so-brave new world, one that seems to break with history and to break history itself. In such times, it is important to situate ourselves in our own history.

Born and raised in the U.S. in the mid-20th century, we grew into ourselves with help from an education system grounded in Enlightenment rationality, Humanist ethics, scientific method, and free inquiry. As we experienced it, the classroom generally was an energizing, liberating space. We were able to pull works by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Karl Jaspers off the shelves of our school libraries. Today, linear yards of books are being pulled from these same shelves, boxed up and stored out of the reach of students. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was required reading. Some classes read *Animal Farm* or *1984.* Today, teachers across the U.S. (particularly in conservative, so-called “Red states”) are required to have their reading lists preapproved.

From Kindergarten through graduate school, we benefitted from teachers who taught us, not what to think, but how to think. And, inspired by our teachers, we followed in their footsteps, becoming educators ourselves. We wonder how children in school today are being prepared to enter a world that is becoming increasingly unsettled, destabilized and unpredictable—indeed, so thoroughly estranged from previous social-political norms as to seem, in our eyes, nightmarishly unreal.

Ours was the world after the Great Depression, after Nazism and Stalinism, after the Holocaust and Hiroshima. We heard stories about these social, economic, political, militaristic nightmares as we listened to our parents discuss politics with their neighbors. It was not until we grew fully into adulthood that we learned how thoroughly our own schooling had been shaped in reaction to these then-still recent events and in response to challenges of the then-current world order. As children of the Cold War, we were trained (emotionally as well as intellectually) to embrace democracy as the highest political value and freedom as its social/psychological enablement. Now, the scope of politics and history discussed at home and in classrooms has narrowed.

We are writing about the loss of "historical consciousness" (Gadamer) which, arguably since the 18th century Enlightenment, has informed Western academic/ intellectual culture. Even as we write, the current U.S. administration is demanding that museum exhibitions and public monuments (including national parks and cemeteries) remove all references to the nation's racist past. In school and college classrooms across the U.S., Critical Race Theory (CRT) among other historicist models are being banned. And this wholesale erasure of history may go largely unnoted by a majority of the population, given our recent popular-cultural shift away from the investigation of our *full* history, of what Howard Zinn would call "a *people's* history"—which makes it increasingly difficult for emerging citizens to learn how to live as historical beings.

Inquiry and critique, dialogue and debate—these are habits of thought and expression essential to the development of an educated mind. And education as we had experienced it (and sought to practice it) fosters these habits. More than habits of intellect, we came to recognize these as social and political skills vital to democratic process. By means of these, a "mere individual" grows into a citizen, a responsible and responsive participant in democracy. To lack (or repudiate) these habits is to fail, not just as an intellectual, but as a citizen.

In this brief narrative so far, we've offered little more than the academic commonplaces of our own Cold War generation. As if to test their currency, we asked a web-based search engine to name "the academic values of an intellectual," to which we received an AI-generated response, titled "What It Means to Be an Intellectual Person." Built up from web-archived residues of living human discourse, the following bullet points were supplied by an AI website:

- Skills in critical thinking
- Skills in active listening and communication
- Cognitive flexibility and adaptability
- Skepticism and open-mindedness
- A capacity for self-reflection
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Respect for expertise
- Intellectual humility
- Willingness to admit error

Should we lament that a computer program can teach what all-too-many pundits and policymakers today seem to have forgotten, or ignored, or have never themselves

learned? We appreciate both the list and the website's elaboration upon its terms. We're told, for example, that individuals possessing cognitive flexibility and adaptability have "the ability to understand and empathize with viewpoints different from their own, even if they disagree. This allows for more nuanced analysis and richer understanding of complex issues." Amen. Empathy, indeed, is an aspect of mature emotional intelligence that enables us to live together in communities marked by diverse ethnicities, faiths, sexualities, and cultural practices. As responsible/responsive citizens, we become selves-among-others, mutually supportive and protective of each other's rights and freedoms. As a nation, the United States falls short; inequalities and injustices remain. But, even as "the American experiment" in democracy remains a work-in-progress, its humane values and aspirations abide. We believe that much the same can be said of other nations and of the aspirations of their people.

The qualities that turn individuals into intellectuals are the same qualities necessary for active citizenship in a participatory democracy. Such is the nature of social justice, as explored in this Forum: Enfranchisement, equality, legal rights, and freedoms ought ideally to become institutionalized public policy—and, within a healthy citizen-centered democracy, such policies as these will be enacted, and protected, and staffed, and funded. Yet still more is needed, since the institutions (and the individuals who oversee and staff these) must themselves embrace democratic, pluralistic values. To remain alive, these values need to be part of a healthy political dialogue. The mere existence of bureaucracies, regulations, and clerks won't suffice: Lacking a commitment to democratic, pluralistic values, these can devolve into what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil," where bureaucrats rubberstamp racist, sexist, homophobic policies without consideration of ethics or personal responsibilities. ("Just doing my job," says the clerk as they pull books off library shelves; variations of this refrain were heard time and again in the Nazi Nuremburg Trials, which were televised during our childhood.)[1]

Where democracy fails, social justice falters.

We have been writing of democracy as the highest political aspiration. We turn now to the political disease that has threatened democracy historically and continues to do so today. We are alluding to the antithesis and political adversary of democracy, which is fascism (or totalitarianism, or tyranny: call it what you will). In composition texts that we studied from and, later, taught from, selections were included from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. (By the 1990s, these had disappeared from our textbooks and, hence, from our writing instruction; we need them back.) We studied and taught these as part of a necessary civic skill: specifically, the ability to detect fascism in its root causes and to predict its social-political consequences. In the "War Propaganda" chapter of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler laid out his plan for propaganda, a key component of which was the marginalization of the *intelligentsia*. It's a sad and unsettling moment when *Mein Kampf* becomes part of the current U.S. administration's playbook for the ideological "cleansing" of college campuses, curricula, textbooks, faculty, and staff. We should, however, find some hope and courage in the fact that Hitler feared the *intelligentsia*. He

[1]The U.S. government produced several television documentaries in both English and German based in trial film footage. See, for example, U.S. War Department. "Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today." 1947. *YouTube*, uploaded by Armyworld, 23 Aug. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmJZlh1N4bI.

understood the power and influence that educators can have and the "good trouble" that we, collectively, can cause. We are writing of our own experience with our own nation's intellectual/educational crisis, but we know that academicians the world over face similar challenges; with its diverse voices, ethnicities, genders, and nationalities, this *LLIDS* Special Issue gives the proof.

We educators are, *de facto*, the world's *intelligentsia* today. In our teaching, we do more than promote democratic values; ideally, we profess them—that is, we embody them. By engaging our students in democratic dialogue, we *do* them. But, *within the fascist mindset*, this professing of democratic values makes us effectively "enemies of the state." We are choosing our words carefully; we don't believe that we're exaggerating. (We're the so-called "Woke," after all; we're all "communists," the ones who "hate America"; we're the ones who defend gay marriage and create sanctuary cities for illegal aliens and protest the slaughter of innocents in Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere in the world.) Our textbooks may not be burned in public bonfires, and we personally may not be hauled off to concentration camps—both of which happened in Hitler's Nazi Germany—but our silence, our passivity, endangers us. The intellectual can and should become the cultural hero of this moment but, individually, we fear that our careers remain at stake. At least two authors who had planned to participate have withdrawn submissions from this special issue. Both are of Middle Eastern descent; and both, though committed passionately to issues of social justice, feared reprisals from their own university administrations. In this critical moment, we need to stand with our colleagues and our students. We need to think about their care and our own. We need to learn from history.

The intellectual can no longer dwell in an Ivory Tower, sequestered from the world. Our classrooms and our larger communities need guidance—role models—in resisting tyranny. We need to embrace our writing and teaching as "worldly." We need to commit to the notion that democracy *educates* citizens, whereas fascism merely *indoctrinates*. If, collectively, we can give voice to this claim and profess it—that is, *do* it—then we'll have begun in earnest to embrace the task of the intellectual in our time of crisis.

Ours is a call to action; noble words all, *but where do we go from here?* To defeat fascism, we must study it and expose it. But, on this critical point, we have forgotten the lessons of history. We no longer read or teach the great European intellectuals who survived the Holocaust and wrote in its aftermath, asking "How did it happen?" and vowing "Never again." Arendt, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm: They studied the etiology of fascism and sought its antidotes. Worldwide today, academicians and the institutions they work for have fallen under siege politically/ideologically, and their overall response has been weak, disorganized, passive to near-impotence, and confused. This is not the first time that intellectuals worldwide have faced down tyranny. Unlike the Weimar German *intelligentsia*, who stood by largely passive (and in some notorious instances—think of Heidegger—chose complicity), we know what to expect from the fascist playbook.[2] We

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[2]A printed poster once associated with the U.S. Holocaust Museum offers to identify "Early Warning Signs of Fascism" (Lynch). Available and increasingly popular online, its list of fascist tenets and strategies follows:

Power and continuing nationalism
Disdain for human rights

urge our fellow academicians to arm themselves intellectually with an understanding of our common adversary—fascist tyranny in its several forms—and to speak with one firm, determined voice.

No one of us will determine the path forward. No single speech or action will suffice. So let ours be a choric declaration of common purpose, united in our commitment to the intellectual principles that undergird the educative practices that create active, engaged citizens who embrace and sustain democracy and pursue social justice. Now is not the time for virtue-signaling and mere performative outrage. Rather, let us draw upon the whole of our expertise to act thoughtfully, effectively, and collectively, without rash bravado or meaningless gestures of martyrdom. Let our speaking, teaching, and writing be bulwarks against fascism. Let us, indeed, become students of democracy, and let us not fail when tested in our resolve (as, most assuredly, *we will be tested*). Let us have the courage of conviction and learn to speak, not with reason merely, but with wisdom. Let us rise together to meet this our moment in history.

Identification of enemies as a unifying cause
Supremacy of the military
Rampant sexism
Controlled mass media
Obsession with national security
Religion and government intertwined
Corporate power protected
Labor power suppressed
Disdain for intellectuals and the arts
Obsession with crime and punishment
Rampant cronyism and corruption
Fraudulent elections

As a serious document, it's thin in details and lacking in application. Still, it serves to catch interest and stimulate dialogue.

For more wide-ranging and elaborate discussion, we'd offer Umberto Eco's 1995 essay, variously titled "Ur-Fascism" and "Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt." As recounted in the Wikipedia article, "Ur-Fascism," Eco's list of traits include "the cult of tradition"; "the rejection of modernism"; "the cult of action for action's sake"; a devaluing of critical dialogue (such that "disagreement is treason"); the "fear of difference" (as reflected in racist "appeals against foreigners and immigrants"); an "appeal to a frustrated middle class"; a xenophobic "obsession with [plots]" against the state; the depiction of enemies as "at the same time too strong and too weak"; a political ideology of "life [as] permanent warfare" against enemies; an elitist "contempt for the weak"; "a cult of death" celebrating one's sacrifice to the state; a culture of "machismo," holding "both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality"; "selective populism" (whereby a leader "holds himself as the interpreter of the popular will"); and "newspeak," or the employment of "an impoverished vocabulary in order to limit critical reasoning." See, "Ur-Fascism." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ur-Fascism.

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Relational Visioning: Re-considering Approaches and Alternatives to 'Reconciliation' in Canada

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Abstract | This paper explores various rhetorical approaches to the contemporary dialogue around reconciliation in Canada. Through a critical review of different forms of reconciliation, the author critiques these forms for their various advantages and disadvantages in efforts towards reconciliation. On the other side of these critiques, this paper gathers the reasoning and intention behind reconciliation to argue for new terminology that better expresses these sentiments. Drawing on her Indigenous language, Michif, and its culture to support this work, the author describes the concept of *relational visioning* as an approach to reconciliation in contemporary Canadian context.

Keywords | Reconciliation, Canada, Residential School Project, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Relational Visioning, Indigenous Relations, Rhetoric, Michif, Language, Storytelling

In the contemporary era of reconciliation in Canada, there is no shortage of perspectives on what reconciliation means or looks like. Is it an apology, a statutory holiday, financial compensation, land acknowledgements, Land Back? The list goes on. And where does it end? Is there an end date to reconciliation discourse in Canada? This paper reflects critically on these questions relative to recent scholarship critiquing the concept of reconciliation within a Canadian context and explores alternative ways of understanding reconciliation through story and language grounded in my Red River Métis perspective.

Briefly, the historical context for Canada's relations with the Indigenous peoples of Northern Turtle Island[1] begins in earnest with the French settlement of what is now known as Quebec in 1608 (Hele). In 1670, British colonialism began claiming land around the Hudson Bay as "Rupert's land" which included portions of what became the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta (Hele). In 1763, King George III issued a royal proclamation asserting the British Crown's governance over the North American territories, which led to a huge influx of British Canadian settlers in the area (Hele). A defining characteristic of colonialism in Canada is its settler nature. Where other countries struggled against and survived extractive colonialism under the British Empire as colonial forces sought to exploit resources, the colonial project in Canada sought to claim land for British population settlement, leading to colonial dominance over land, natural resources, and of people therein where colonial efforts included forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the Euro-Christian way of life. This project of land settlement and control is very much ongoing in Canada's contemporary moment; however, Canada's current circumstances are also influenced by the publication of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada Report. This commission was born after the Prime Minister of Canada at the time, Stephen Harper, issued an apology in 2008 on behalf of the Canadian government for its involvement in the Residential school project.[2] The TRC was created in 2010 with the

[1]Turtle Island is a common name for North America found within Indigenous circles through the continent. Northern Turtle Island is the author's way of accounting for Indigenous ways of knowing the territory of Northern North America as land and waterways that existed before, during, and after the authority of the colonial state of Canada's existence.

[2]The Residential School project refers to the period in Canada's history (1880–1996 approximately), in which Indigenous children were forced to attend government-sponsored religious schools with the intention of assimilating Indigenous youth into Euro-Christian Canadian society. Perhaps the most famous quote describing the impetus behind these schools is from the former Prime Minister of Canada, John A. Macdonald: "It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men" (*Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons* 1108).

mandate to inform all Canadians about the history of Residential Schools and concluded with the publication of its report and the *94 Calls to Action* in 2015.[3]

Since the publication of the TRC's reports in 2015, Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples of Northern Turtle Island has been fraught with state pressure to pursue reconciliation as described by the report. Scholars have taken up the issue as there has been much political controversy over the concept of reconciliation. This paper will dive into these theories, as well as present my own consideration of reconciliation informed by my Michif language framework. My theory is a practice of *Relational Visioning* that is informed by my experience as a Michif language learner. The Michif word for learning is *kishkayhta*. This project is *kishkayhta* for how to understand intentions and approaches to reconciliation discourse. Another Michif word I've recently learned is *paykiiwikay* which means to come and visit. While I am still in the early stages of language learning, in this research I feel the urge to connect these words, to find a conception of reconciliation that means to come and visit *and* learn—a sense of *kishkkayhta paykiiwikay*, which could mean to gather together to learn. Michif helps me bring feelings into language that support my perspective on reconciliation to better express the intentions I believe reconciliation is supposed to uphold, and engage with it within an Indigenous epistemological framework.

Recent scholarship on reconciliation has critically examined the use of the term in the TRC's reports and activities, as well as how the term is used in speeches in contrast with state legislative actions (George, "Reconciliation and Palatable Indigeneity"; Joseph and Joseph; Corntassel, "Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse"). What most scholars seem to agree on is that the term 'reconciliation' is being used widely amidst dissenting viewpoints on the concept (Asch et al.; Corntassel, "Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse"; Stark, "Generating a Critical Resurgence Together"). No single definition seems to suit for every time and place reconciliation is invoked. Furthermore, as Nuučaańuł scholar, Rachel George, describes it, competing understandings of reconciliation are creating space for a conceptualization of reconciliation that is disconnected from Indigenous understandings of justice ("Reconciliation and Palatable Indigeneity" 99). When referenced, and it is referenced often these days, the term reconciliation carries many conflicting definitions and the potential to cause further harm within and around Indigenous communities rather than reparations.

This paper will review some of these many community-driven case critiques, as well as put them in conversation with state terminology around the subject. Through this research, I develop a working definition of what reconciliation can mean, as well as the approach of *relational visioning*, which I argue articulates the *spirit* of reconciliation more accurately than the term *reconciliation* does in contemporary discourse. While I approach this work sincerely and humbly, I accept that whatever comes of it will not be perfect and rather must remain inherently unfinished. No definition, however fluid or mobile, in whatever language, will suit all circumstances and certainly not all perspectives. With that in mind, it is my intention that through a gathering of recent

[3]For more information on the TRC and access to its published reports, see: https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports.

literature on the topic of reconciliation and a following critical reflection on common forms of reconciliation, this paper will provide some points for consideration to support further community-specific engagement with concepts of reconciliation and journeys to defining language that directly speaks to unique experiences of ongoing settler-colonialism in Canada.

To speak of my perspective on reconciliation, I offer here my Coming-To story. Coming-To stories are a mode of introduction in which a speaker tells the story of how they have come to the topic in question. In my experience, Coming-To stories offer the benefit of creating opportunities for relationship-building, experiences of self-affirmation, and accounts of nuance that are not common in traditional self-location practices. I first learned about Coming-To stories in Cherie Dimaline's 2017 novel, *The Marrow Thieves*. She wrote whole chapters of Coming-To stories to share the backstories of key characters prior to the events of the novel. That characters' histories inform their actions and relations to other characters in the central plot is a well-understood reality in literary studies. Relationality is a key Indigenous research methodology in that it is through our relations that we understand ourselves and our world. The same is true for our languages. Indigenous languages shape Indigenous perspectives on the world and are therefore essential to talk about how to engage with reconciliation. But this concept has not always translated to the world of Western academic writing where research norms value traditional imperialism, de-personalization, and objectivity. Within Indigenous research methodologies, it is assumed that our stories and languages are imbued with valuable knowledge. For these reasons, Dimaline's concept of Coming-To stories is adapted here to a scholarly setting in which my story and Michif language learning inform and strengthen my academic claims.

When the TRC report came out in 2015, I had just entered post-secondary and had little to no idea what I hoped to gain there. I selected courses that sounded interesting and ended up in classrooms of philosophy, astronomy, history, literature, and creative writing. At the time, I had not considered the TRC report particularly relevant to my life. My family had lost our Métis status long ago and we did not have strong relations who survived Residential Schools. I am somewhat embarrassed to write that at the time, I thought little about the concept of reconciliation outside of the context of some pipeline protests I'd been a part of in high school. After I was armed with a bachelor's degree in creative writing, I turned my attention to Gender Studies and Social Justice for my graduate research. There I began to realize that my attempts to separate myself from my academic work was only to its detriment. I practiced self-location exercises and realized the impact of my studies strengthened when I spoke using my stories and language. It was also around this time that my cousins and I were doing our ancestry research to apply for Métis citizenship. This process was a gift to work on with my family. We are lucky enough to have a cousin who met with my great-grandma, Mary Anne Swain, to record our family history before she died in 1970. This is how my cousins and I were able to learn the details of our family's journey from Red River, through Saskatchewan, and back again to Winnipeg.

Knowing my history informs how I approach my scholarship. Knowing the names of the women who carried my family stories through generations, at times hiding their Métis identity to protect themselves from colonial authorities, informs how I carry and

share my own. Knowing how one of my ancestors, François Dauphinais, served as the Vice-President in the Provisional Government of the Assiniboia alongside Louis Riel infuses my work with a legacy of colonial resistance and political engagement with the Canadian State is both an honour and a responsibility. I am still storying my journey as both Red River Métis and a scholar as I approach the topic of reconciliation in Canada. Knowing where I come from empowers me to come to this work as Red River Métis, a student, and a scholar studying Indigenous literatures and ways forward for Canada. I am continually learning how to be a good descendant to my many ancestors and how to be a good ancestor to those who are yet to come to this life. In this spirit I offer my family names here, Swain, Breland, Grant, and Dauphinais, as a Métis practice of self-introduction to inform all my potential future relations.

The following section explores various definitions, approaches, and critiques of reconciliation in Indigenous theory and politics in a Canadian context. Some critiques focus on fleshing out the required nuances of what reconciliation entails, with its various angles and approaches, such as works from Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully in their anthology, *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*. Others take critical views on the potential harms of reconciliation discourses (Regan; Corntassel, "Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse"; George, "Conclusion"; Corntassel et al.; Snelgrove and Wildcat). While this paper considers various approaches to reconciliation, it is important to note a general resistance to reconciliation that has been commonly tied to the requirement of further truth-telling. These scholars contend that, in reference to the TRC's intentions, Canada as a whole has not yet completed the task of establishing truth across the country about the realities of Indigenous life surviving ongoing settler colonialism in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is founded on the principle that there are truths to be told and heard, followed by the work of reconciliation. But in order for truth-tellings to be effective, there must be "community-centered, decolonizing action behind them" (Corntassel et al. 138). There is a history of colonial harm that needs to be reconciled within settler communities before Canada may begin the reconciliation process with Indigenous peoples in the present. I want to emphasise that there is a long history to colonial violence on Turtle Island, and it continues into our present. This is to say that in order to understand the present, we must recognize and share a collective understanding of our past. Conversations about history are important to discussions of reconciliation to build a shared understanding of the colonial history of Canada, while keeping in mind the present colonial activity in Canada that continues to harm Indigenous communities. This is what is most commonly spoken of as the *truth* in Truth and Reconciliation. This perspective stipulates that there is more "truth-telling" and perhaps *truth-hearing* required before any process of reconciliation can begin effectively in this country. In comparison with governmental statements on reconciliation and publications by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the sheer variety of perspectives on this topic requires a thorough exploration.

According to the 2015 report from the TRC, reconciliation is "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining a respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Introduction" 6). That said, different contexts, approaches, or disciplines can carry whole hosts of complications to the discussion and potential outcomes of reconciliation.

For example, legal perspectives on reconciliation may focus on rights discourses such as land claims or self-determination or treaty negotiations, while others focus on truth-telling in response to the residential school era. That said, truth-tellings are also very much at the frontlines of Indigenous legal battles. The arenas of reconciliation overlap. The politics of reconciliation are further influenced by the history of it, the social dialogue around it, the language used to discuss it, the location of its battles, and so much more. Trying to demarcate the circumstances of reconciliation in Canada is like trying to pin down water beneath a glass. It will always seep into some other land or waterway where it will become something entirely new to what it once was underneath its initial lens. Through a consideration of common themes and goals, I have identified eight different approaches to reconciliation I see taking place in Canada today: Settler-State, Historical, Performative, Active, Land-based, Personal, Transformative, and Resurgent. These overlapping conceptions of reconciliation inform contemporary conversations and scholarship, not to determine which is correct, but rather to articulate the multitude of forms reconciliation may take, and therefore its uninhibited possibilities.

Some approaches to reconciliation seem most invested in a temporal structure, inferring a past wrong that requires a present correction, in order to progress into a neutral future. These forms include Settler-State, Historical, and Performative reconciliation. The concept of Settler-State reconciliation is based within how the settler state engages with reconciliation. Scholar Michael Asch offers a definition which identifies the essential objective to be to "reconcile our practices today with the certain knowledge that we have acted wrongly, […] accept responsibility for the harms our actions have caused, and work to ensure that our actions and values in the future come into accord" (30). Unpacking this definition requires several steps. First, Asch makes clear he is writing from a settler perspective (29). His writing identifies settlers as a "community which originates with Europeans who began coming [to Canada] with colonization and found when they arrived that there were people already here living in political societies" (29). Understanding his own positionality informs his definitions. That is, when Asch writes "*our* practices" and "that *we* have acted wrongly," he is speaking from his positionality within the settler community he defines just prior. This may seem like an assumed distinction in his definition, but it is worth pointing out as it offers an important framing of the work of reconciliation, namely that there has been a past harm that now requires reconciling. Given the state of ongoing settler-colonialism, this definition lacks the nuance to include ongoing colonial activities that further injustice against Indigenous peoples in Canada.

This connects to the concept of a Historical reconciliation, which is a viewpoint that actively historizes colonial violence against Indigenous peoples, while ignoring the continued harms of ongoing settler colonialism. In his 2023 chapter, "Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse," Cherokee scholar, Jeff Ganohalidoh Corntassel, pinpoints ways in which reconciliation discourse fails or distracts Indigenous peoples from generative resurgent relationships with nationhood, homeland, and the natural world. Calling these failed reconciliation approaches the "dead ends of reconciliation" Corntassel identifies the role of historization in distracting discourses of reconciliation (149–151). The historical approach to reconciliation is a distraction because of how it frames history as something to be dealt with and then moved on from. Claims of "a sad chapter in our history," as found in Stephen Harper's 2008 Statement of Apology in

reference to the Indian Residential Schools, is an example signal phrase of this historical rhetoric that fails to serve future relations in this country. Corntassel also cites the phrase "forgive and forget" in this discourse of distraction ("Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse" 150). This historical narrative further articles the harms of colonialism as something that has happened in the past, rather than something that continues to harm Indigenous peoples today. This historical version of reconciliation disallows any work of making significant changes to current colonial realties.

The best response to this historizing line of thinking comes from Lee Maracle's reflective work on her conversations with Canadians. She writes about her discussions with a settler friend who continues to bring up the concept of forgiveness with her in reference to making peace with Indigenous peoples (Maracle 74). In this story, Maracle shares that forgiveness is a Christian belief, and while she knows her friend would not insist on her becoming a Christian, he continues to bring up the business of forgiveness. In this conversation, Maracle reflects that what her friend does not grasp is that in order to consider forgiveness as an approach to reconciliation, she would need to first accept forgiveness as a concept which would require her to convert to Christianity, as 'forgiveness' does not fit into her belief system (74). This response to the issue of forgiveness in the conversation on reconciliation is vital to show that when this work is brought to Indigenous peoples, it is often brought on colonial-settler terms. The direction of reconciliation in historical terms asks Indigenous peoples to come to the settler-colonial state, accept an apology, and, in turn, offer forgiveness as Christian colonial culture demands. But we cannot reconcile within settler systems of thought and ways of life. We must find our own ways forward in our cultures, beliefs, and justice systems. To speak of reconciliation and forgiveness in the same breath is to recolonize the history of colonial abuse and current Indigenous settler relations under settler dominating ideology.

Such historization of colonial harm further allows for Performative Reconciliation to take root in political discourse. Performative Reconciliation is an inactive reconciliation about words and not actions in which reconciliation can be considered a performance. This form of reconciliation is often about performing this national narrative of Canada as the benevolent state which cares for its Indigenous peoples, without taking any actions to effectively do so. Rachel George describes this as the national myth of "tolerance and benevolence of White Canadians" ("Reconciliation and Palatable Indigeneity" 144). Reconciliation as a theatrical performance of Canadian nationhood limits what transformative action is possible. It is easier to perform nationally endorsed moral values than it is to exercise individual responsibility and take transformational action, which connects to frameworks of Personal and Transformative Reconciliation, as will be discussed below. Performative Reconciliation is a kind of virtue-signaling engagement with reconciliation that at best fails to generate change and at worst, reinforces the status-quo of settler-state domination.

The powerful effect and construction of political narratives of reconciliation cannot be overstated. Performative Reconciliation is enabled by a diminished sense or monitoring of accountability. At the national level, Canada has shifted away from accountability in narratives of reconciliation, instead favouring collective narratives of grief over actions of redress. Political theory on this issue explains:

> The mortalist humanist idea that we should dwell longer in grief or forge in grief new solidarities, or find in grievability a new social ontology of equality, informs the recent move away from a justice of accountability in (post)conflictual politics and toward truth and reconciliation commissions that focus, rather, on forgiveness for or acceptance of those who confess their crimes and recount what happened to their victims. Shared suffering, publicly acknowledged, provides the basis of a new order. (Honig 26)

The shared suffering witnessed through the work of the TRC provides the opportunity for the Canadian nation to publicly acknowledge grief, which performs the intention of reconciliation without focusing on justice for or accountability to Indigenous communities. When accompanied by the historical rhetoric of these harms, which is essential to the performance, this public grief creates a new order in which the response to crimes and harms of the "past" is performed out of a reconciliatory ideology that is followed by zero accountability. This makes possible phrases like "dark chapter in Canadian history"[4] to describe the residential school system. Corntassel writes that "reconciliation without meaningful restitution merely reinscribes the status quo without holding anyone accountable for ongoing injustices" ("Re-envisioning Resurgence" 93). Performative reconciliation is then a tool to reinforce colonial power through the rhetorical invocation of reconciliatory intentions. This is made evident by the lack of progress made on the *94 Calls to Action*. Included in the 2015 summary report of their findings from over 6,000 statements from residential school survivors and their families, the TRC states 94 Calls to Action,[5] organized into explicit tasks for various responsible parties to complete as a means of Active Reconciliation. Active Reconciliation is perhaps the antithesis to Performative Reconciliation. However, a 2023 status report tracking progress on these calls in Canada found that since its release in June 2015, only 13 calls out of 94 have been completed (Jewell and Moseby). With no consequences established for failure to act on these calls, Canadian nationalism can continue to perform interest in reconciliation without creating any changes to the state of settler colonialism in Canada.

Another way of approaching the questions of reconciliation is to consider the key actors in the area. Much of the discourse on reconciliation acknowledges its frame as a relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Federal Government of Canada or other

[4]This phrase is common political rhetoric in reference to Canada's complicity in Indian Residential Schools.

[5]These Calls to Action are part of the report the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published in the 2015 report of their findings over an investigation into the legacy and continued harms created by the Residential School system in Canada. The Calls to Action are organized under broad categories of Legacy and Reconciliation, in which subcategories such as Child Welfare, Education, Health, and Justice help to organize these 94 Calls according to the responsible parties. For example, under the Legacy, Education, number 11 reads: "We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education" (2). Under Reconciliation, Museums and Archives, the report writes: "67. We call upon the federal government to provide funding to the Canadian Museums Association to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to make recommendations" (8). This report contains all 94 Calls to Action prescribed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to address the need for the truth about Indigenous peoples in Canada to be known, and for reconciliation to be achieved in Canada's future. For a full list of the 94 Calls to Action, see, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

settler institutional authorities such as Christian churches. In the piece "Reconciliation Here on Earth," James Tully, however, frames the work of reconciliation through our (human's) relationship with the land, seeding a form of Land-based Reconciliation. Tully employs a rhetoric of relationality to make an argument that reconciliation comes down to two connected projects that are our relationships with each other and our relationships with the living earth, further arguing that attempts to tackle these projects independently from one another will never succeed (89). Tully's perspective informs the interconnection of multiple forms of reconciliation, that reconciliation does not happen in one place, at one time, but rather that it is a slow, collaborative process integrating multiple positionalities including Indigenous, Non-Indigenous, and non-human life.

Anishinaabe and Ojibway scholar John Burrows agrees with Tully's requirement of reconciliation with the living Earth adding that "the revitalization of Indigenous peoples' relationships with the rocks, waters, insects, plants, birds, animals, and other forms of life around us" are key to Indigenous peoples' reconciliation with others (50). Burrows's writing here harkens back to Land Back as well; the relationships between Indigenous peoples and their land must be restored through Indigenous stewardship of the land. Land Back is an Indigenous-led initiative that works to return stewardship of land back to Indigenous peoples. Land Back is a clear and active way to work towards reconciliation. Speaking to waters, insects, plants, and animals expands notions of Land Back to include Water Back. The many interconnected systems of life that traverse land and water inform Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being (Leonard et al. 375) and therefore must be considered in conversations of reconciliation. It is the lands and waterways and every form of life therein that Indigenous epistemologies come from, and responsibilities extend to, such that Land-based Reconciliation is about restoring those relationships to every aspect of life within traditional territories.

The integrated framework of Land-based reconciliation strongly converges with notions of Active Reconciliation. A common critique of reconciliation is that there is a lack of action beyond the rhetorical dialogue, that reconciliation is only about words. In response to this, there is a conception of *active reconciliation* or *reconciliAction* as it's called in the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's educational programing ("ReconciliACTION Plans"). Active Reconciliation tries to name specific actions that work towards reconciliation, as a way to move our focus beyond what we say to concentrate on what we do. Bob and Cynthia Joseph offer a distinct definition of Active Reconciliation in Canada that means to honor treaties and acknowledge and respect Aboriginal Rights and Title (4). Active Reconciliation by this definition would encapsulate the return of lands and/or the acceptance and adherence to Indigenous models of self-government (Joseph and Joseph 4). By grounding Active Reconciliation in acts of adherence to Indigenous land authority and sovereignty, Active Reconciliation is closely tied to Land Back.

Within Active Reconciliation, I must also return to the TRC's 94 Calls to Action included in their 2015 summary report of their findings from over 6,000 statements from residential school survivors and their families (Joseph 130–131). While these 94 Calls to Action are organized into explicit tasks for various responsible parties to complete as a means of Active Reconciliation, they are merely recommendations that the parties identified to enact them are free to ignore if they so wish. As per Jewell and Moseby's

2023 report, 81 out of 94 actions are yet to be completed since 2015. It is therefore easy to conclude that despite clear actionable directives, there is currently minimal action being taken on most reconciliation initiatives in this country.

Perhaps for this reason, I find myself as a scholar, particularly interested in the idea of Personal Reconciliation. While we reconcile with each other as humans and the systems of life in our territories, reconciliation also takes place within the self. Sarah Robinson has created a "Truth and Reconciliation" personal action plan that guides readers through stages to engage in reconciliation action: Explore, Discover, Speak, Watch, Ally, Participate, Check Your Privilege, Read, and Train. In each stage, Robinson offers links to various supports and resources through which to engage with reconciliation. The process of personal reconciliation requires an inward look at who we are in relation to reconciliation and colonialism. To learn more about various Indigenous concerns, especially for settler Canadians, means learning about one's country through a different lens, a different set of experiences, which connects to Historical Reconciliation as we need to reconsider our view on Canada's history as a country. To engage in this learning process is to hold contrasting, sometimes opposing views of Canadian nationalism and experiences, that must be reconciled within one's own experience to inform meaningful reconciliation work beyond oneself. For example, Canada has a national narrative of 'being nice.' On the world stage, Canada is largely thought of alongside hockey, moose, maple syrup, and saying 'sorry.' Canadians who feel proud of such an international reputation might be unpleasantly surprised, for example, to hear truth-telling from survivors of residential schools, who hold a very contrary experience of Canada. When the TRC spent six years collecting statements from survivors of residential schools, they were collecting truths about Canada's not-so-distant past. In the process of truth-sharing, survivors did labour to speak truth about history that many settlers did not want to hear or accept. Settlers, now having heard survivors speak these truths, must determine what reconciliation means to them personally as they reconsider their own histories and experiences in Canada.

Rachel George explains in her chapter on "Reconciliation and Palatable Indigeneity," how the Canadian narrative of multiculturalism and tolerance has created a national myth of Canada as the land of benevolence, a myth that functions to maintain settler colonial power (128–129). How might Canadians who identify with such a national myth reconcile it with the truth-tellings shared by Residential School survivors? This is the work of Personal Reconciliation. But Personal Reconciliation is not only for settler Canadians. One example of Personal Reconciliation within my Métis perspective is the need to reconcile Christian faith with the legacy of residential schools. Many Métis incorporate some form of Christian faith into their spirituality, although by no means all. Holding this faith can be complicated when acknowledging the role of the Catholic Church in the residential school system that used violent and sometimes deadly means to force Indigenous peoples to assimilate into Christian Canadianism. It is a task of Personal Reconciliation to find ways to hold the complexities of both these violent realities and a faith in Christianity at the same time, that is to reconcile one's beliefs within a faith associated with so many faith-based crimes.

The Government of Canada describes reconciliation as a "transformative" process that reconciles "the pre-existence of Indigenous peoples and their rights and the

assertion of sovereignty of the Crown, including inherent rights, title, and jurisdiction" ("Principles"). What is not specified here is what is being transformed, or rather the directionality of that transformation. Reconciliation is a process of transforming what into what? The other problem with the above quote is that it reinforces the *sovereignty of the Crown*. In reference to Transformational Reconciliation, Corntassel identifies a shortfall of reconciliation in how it attempts to pursue a return to a previous mythical state of cooperation between Indigenous peoples and settlers ("Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse," 150). If reconciliation connotes a return to a pervious harmonious relationship, and that harmonious relationship never existed, then the conclusion is that reconciliation is based on a false premise. The Canadian Government's approach to Transformational reconciliation connects to Historical Reconciliation as well in that there is a shared desire to look to history for answers between these two forms of reconciliation. Burrows and Tully offer a definition of Transformational Reconciliation as being "grounded in Indigenous traditions of *regenerating* healthy and sustainable, gift-reciprocity relationships" (7).[6] If Transformational reconciliation is a regeneration of these Indigenous values, perhaps there is a helpful link between Transformational and Historical reconciliation, but only insofar as Transformational reconciliation moves beyond normative conceptions of Historical states of relations between Indigenous and settler peoples to focus on a regeneration of our cultures, legal systems, and concepts of justice. This perspective on Transformational reconciliation could be an improved approach, in which, rather than creating a rhetoric of returning to a previous mythical state of harmony between settlers and Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities are supported in their transformations to a renewal of traditional ways of life.

This brings me to the final form of reconciliation that I see in practice, which is Resurgent Reconciliation. Resurgence can be defined as "a force for reclaiming and reconnecting with traditional territories by means of Indigenous ways of knowing and being" (Burrows and Tully 4). Conversations of Indigenous resurgence are often linked to discussions about reconciliation, both critically and favourably (Burrows and Tully; Corntassel "Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse"; Starblanket and Stark). There is a strong connection between concepts of reconciliation and resurgence. As Turtle Mountain Ojibway scholar, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark writes, much of "our framing and calls for Indigenous resurgence [are] being shaped and affected by nation-state interest in the project of reconciliation" ("Generating a Critical Resurgence Together" 3). Where some discourses seem to prefer resurgence instead of reconciliation, I think of resurgence as a generative response to the failures of reconciliation discourses. Burrows and Tully further describe the relationality between resurgence and reconciliation as a combined concept of the two, in which resurgence and reconciliation feed each other, describing the relationship between the two as a form of "gift-reciprocity" (5). They explain that "despite the significant growth of resurgence-reconciliation networks and frameworks" there continues vast debate over the meaning and use of the terms resurgence and reconciliation (Burrows and Tully 5–6). I agree that

[6]Reciprocity is a foundational value to many Indigenous cultures and is especially important in relationship building with those outside their communities. Reciprocal gift-giving is a form of relationship and trust building between sovereign entities.

there are benefits to thinking about a discourse of resurgence *and* reconciliation rather than a juxtaposition politics of resurgence *instead of* reconciliation.

Stark further problematizes the relationship between resurgence and reconciliation by explaining how contrasting resurgent reconciliation with “rejectionist-resurgence” forecloses the transformational work for generative refusal which is fundamental to resurgence (Stark, “Generating a Critical Resurgence Together” 4). Resurgence work heavily incorporates a strong politics of generative refusal and rejection of politics of Indigenous recognition within the settler state.[7] The work of resurgence is a revival of Indigenous political, spiritual, legal, economic, and education systems that does not need reconciliation, and in fact Indigenous resurgence may support an alternative and effective mode of approaching the conversation of reconciliation that has yet to be developed. Combining resurgence with reconciliation can propose a challenging combination of initiatives and priorities that come from differing directions with differing purposes. Stark offers one possible definition of resurgent reconciliation as a perspective that strives to live more holistically and pursues provocative but constructive approaches while rejecting isolationism (4). Taking a resurgent approach to reconciliation then means to engage generative acts of refusal and inclusion simultaneously, while embracing a holistic worldview. This framing connects with reconceptualizations of reconciliation that take away the present singularity of the term and replace it with a continual process of actions engaged with a multitude of perspectives.

Scholars and collaborators at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Aimée Craft and Paulette Regan, argue that “[r]econciliation is not only an ultimate goal but a decolonizing process of journeying in ways that embody everyday acts of resistance, resurgence, and solidarity, coupled with renewed commitments to justice, dialogue, and relationship building” (xi). In contrast to the Historical, Settler, and even some views of Transformational Reconciliation which encourage rhetorical approaches to reconciliation that favour a beginning middle, and end process to achieve reconciliation, Resurgent Reconciliation embraces a continual process of growth, rediscovery, and regeneration with no end date. Contextualizing our approaches to resurgence and reconciliation in collaboration with each other is essential to productive scholarship and progress on this topic. Telling our stories of resurgence can be a useful act to engaging in this form of reconciliation, which is still being defined in contemporary literature and practice.

Looking at this collection of diverse perspectives on reconciliation, it strikes me as a snapshot of many positionalities, all influenced by their own narratives of time and place. There is a temporality to rhetorics about reconciliation influenced by many diverse circumstances. Reconciliation may mean something different today than it did in 2015 when the TRC report was published, or in 2008 when Stephen Harper offered an apology to residential school survivors on behalf of the Canadian government, or in 1998 when Canada released a Statement of Reconciliation in response to the Royal Commission on

[7]While unpacking the politics of refusal in relation to reconciliation discourse is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the literature dedicated to resurgence independent of reconciliation and that further rejects reconciliation politics. See, Simpson, Audra. “Ethnographic Refusal.” *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States.* Duke UP, 2014, pp. 95–114; Coulthard, Glen. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. U of Minnesota P, 2014; Simpson, L. B.

Aboriginal Peoples' report. The same could be said in comparison to 2020 when police arrested Wet'suwet'en Nation land defenders resisting the Coastal GasLink pipeline project invading their territory,[8] or in 1990 in the wake of the Kanesatake Resistance (sometimes referred to as the Oka Crisis).[9] These political events did not happen within a vacuum, isolated from other histories and influences in diverse communities within and beyond Canada's borders. It has long been understood that "Reconciliation speaks to the past, present, and future of Aboriginal-state relations in Canada" (Murphy 251). Informed by our pasts, acted on in our presents, and visioned for our futures, reconciliation is inherently temporally contingent. The story we tell of our past, deeply informs our present actions, and our visions of the future. In the journey of reconciliation in Canada, we must consider the story of where we come from—each of us as we come to the work of personal reconciliation—as our past informs our present actions. As Lee Maracle points out the lack of the concept of 'forgiveness' in her Stó:lō culture (74), so too does Rachel George reflect that her Indigenous language, Nuu-chah-nulth, has no word for reconciliation ("Reconciliation and Palatable Indigeneity" 148). The language of reconciliation is a vital consideration if we are to move forward in this work. For this reason, the language we use to discuss reconciliation and Indigenous futures matters, and while thus far rhetorics of reconciliation can be informative, I argue we must search for better language to speak to our dreams for ourselves and our communities.

At this point in these reflections, I am reminded that each Indigenous nation and community has its own unique wants and needs from reconciliation. The diversity of the issue is vast and ever unfolding. To come up with a modality of reconciliation that works across all communities is to erase complex differences of lands, histories, treaties, and relationships therein. For this reason, I resist claiming any universality to these reflections and instead embrace the process of individual determination in the course of reconciliation. How I have come to conceptualize what reconciliation means to me will not suit for all others, nor should it. Blackfoot scholar, Leroy Little Bear, writes that "one of the problems with colonialism is that it tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of human worldviews" (77). Let us not repeat the errors of colonialism in search for a singular definition of reconciliation. How we tell the story of reconciliation, and the language we use, feeds our actions on this journey. With that in mind, the following section articulates my own understandings of how I mean to speak to the concept of reconciliation in my professional work and

[8]The Wet'suwet'en land defence is a resistance to an invading Coastal Gaslink pipeline project that began construction in January 2019 through the Wet'suwet'en territory in British Columbia, posing a risk to the land and people of that area. The Wet'suwet'en First Nation's land defense and fight for sovereignty gathered extreme public attention in 2020 when protests spread across Canada. In the Winter of 2020, Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs issued Coastal Gaslink an eviction notice, asserting their jurisdiction over the land. However, after several arrests of land defenders resulted in police charges of violating provincial injunction terms, construction on the pipeline continued and five land defenders pleaded guilty to the charges in 2022. Construction of Coastal Gaslink was completed in 2023. For further reading, see, Shah, Shreya. "Wet'suwet'en Explained." *The Indigenous Foundation*. www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/wetsuweten-explained.

[9]The Kanesatake Resistance was a months-long Mohawk-led protest against the expansion and further development of a golf course and resort onto their territory including a Kanyen'kehà:ka burial ground that took place in the late summer of 1990. For further reading, see, Bruin, Tabitha de. "Kanesatake Resistance (Oka Crisis)." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 11 Jul. 2013, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/oka-crisis.

personal values. What follows is an offering of a vision that centres language and story in a relational approach to reconciliation.

Without going deeply into the etymology of the term reconciliation, the language itself can be critiqued for its misassumptions. Historical Reconciliation inaccurately presupposes a harmonious relation between colonizers and Indigenous communities before colonial wrong-doings, and we must now reconcile these past wrongs and restore the previously peaceful relationship to its former status. However, as discussed above, such a relationship has never existed, and so the question follows, to what end are we reconciling? We are not *re*-establishing a previous way of living together. We are working to find a new one across tensions of co-existence. Reconciliation, from a linguistic perspective, is not accurately capturing the process or intention of what reconciliation is supposed to be and do in Canada. Reconciliation is standing in place for the process of moving forward together in a good way that builds relationships of respect and reciprocity. So, if not "reconciliation," what term could speak to the story we are telling about Indigenous peoples in Canada?

One way of responding to this is to remove the "re" from reconciliation. Gina Starblanket and Heidi Stark articulate the "*conciliatory* potential of relations when they are inhabited in a healthy and forward looking way" (Starblanket and Stark 177; emphasis added). Starblanket and Stark's writing speaks to an effort of conciliation, not reconciliation. To be conciliatory means to intend towards goodwill and reduce hostility. In this manner, *reconciliation* could be reconstructed more accurately to be *conciliation* between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian State. We are not returning to a previous state of harmonious relations, but we are working to create a good relationship; not repairing a damaged thing but making a new one.

When we speak of reconciliation, we are speaking across time and relations into the future. What kind of future is possible in Canada? Continued settler-colonialism perpetuates harm through the continued removal of Indigenous peoples from their rights and responsibilities to their relations with the land, waterways, and neighboring Nations, both human and non-human. These relationships are foundational to any conversation or narrative about reconciliation in Canada and therefore, the relational nature of the concept of reconciliation must be carried into future conceptualizations of it. To engage in what is commonly referred to as "reconciliation" is really to engage in the possibility of making futures beyond our current projections of settler-colonialism. Making these futures is a slow progress and it must be done collaboratively. *Indigenous-led future making* is how I reimagine the intention of reconciliation to be, and it is the only way into a future for all our people. In practice, this would look like Indigenous-led initiatives collaborating across communities of settler backgrounds and newcomers in Canada, where Indigenous communities make futures of possibility through everyday actions.

While learning to reconceptualize reconciliation and find new language to better encapsulate the intention of this work, I feel encouraged to bring in my own Michif language learning. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, writes about the importance of researching within concepts and language specific to one's culture (133). For Simpson, it is through working within Nishnaabeg thought that she finds the potential of resurgence work. In so doing, she is able to uncover language and

concepts to speak to her experiences in ways that English could not cover. As discussed in the cases of Lee Maracle and the concept of forgiveness, and Rachel George and the term reconciliation, Indigenous languages and cultures differ from settler-colonial English perspectives. Findings ways forward in our Indigenous languages, using the stories and teachings of our cultures, is vital for reconceptualizations of reconciliation. We need Indigenous language to speak to Indigenous concerns. Corntassel also speaks of how aspects of indigeneity cannot be separated out from each other, that our people, our lands, our communities cannot be thought of separately from our traditions, cultures, and languages ("Truth-Telling Amidst Reconciliation Discourse" 149). I take that to mean that we must bring our whole selves, including our languages, to the work of reconciliation if we are to find a good way to approach it.

Among Michif speakers, there's a common idea that is conveyed to new language learners; it is that when we learn the Michif language, we will realize much of the Cree influence in the language is in verbs. I take this to mean that our Indigenous culture—our ways of being and moving in the world—is informed and articulated through actions. It is through the 'doing' that we live and speak of life. This connects to an earlier topic about Active Reconciliation, in that there is a call for action, as is common in the language itself. Two Michif words that I've shared before that speak to the action-orientation of the language are *paykiiwikay*, which means to come and visit, and *kishkayhta*, which means to learn. The gathering of perspectives on reconciliation explored in this paper then is a kind of *kishkkayhta paykiiwikay*, learning through coming together to visit. Through the language, there is a way to tell the story of reconciliation through actions.

Another Michif word I have been very inspired by is *Pawaatamihk*,[10] which is both Michif and Cree, and means collective dreaming. This is my wish for the idea of reconciliation, that it be about visioning together. Sometimes I let myself dream of people sitting around a fire. They are in the company of some animal relations and have food to nourish themselves. They are joined by a newcomer, a visitor. The visitor asks them all sorts of questions as to how they have lived well in this area. The people tell the story of the land, the boats, and the schools, of the apologies, the acknowledgments, and reports. All of this is spoken into the fire and when the visitor leans back in shock, they ask how all of that could ever have been resolved to the peace around the fire? At this, the people share a look. The warm glow lights their faces and they see each other as hard-won kin. This is not an end to the story, but a dream for some future time. While I actively resist idealizing the work itself, my dreams of hope for future relations between Nations and communities of settlers and Indigenous peoples are the driving intention behind my research. Hawaiian activist, Poka Laenui, writes that dreaming is the most crucial phase of decolonization, "where the full panorama of possibilities [is] expressed, considered through debate, consultation, and building dreams on further dreams which eventually becomes the flooring for the creation of a new social order" (Laenui 154). *Pawaatamihk* is the work of building the flooring for further dreams of our future.

The act of dreaming for the future with all our relations is a practice of storytelling. With language, we share our stories. A story that I received when writing

[10] *Pawaatamihk* is also the name of a new Métis scholarly journal committed to showcasing Métis thought both within academia and community. See, https://pawaatamihk.uwinnipeg.ca/.

this paper comes from a Southern Tutchone and Tlinget singer, Diyet von Lieshout, during a performance with her band, Diyet & the Love Soldiers. Diyet weaves stories of her family and her life in her songs. One story she shared was about her great-grandmother, passed down to her from her grandmother. This story shared how Diyet's great-grandmother was brought by her family to the far away village of her great-grandfather to be married. Along the journey, Diyet says her great-grandmother had lots of time to think about this coming marriage, about what she would do if she did not like the man her family had chosen for her. When they arrived at the village, the community had set up a ceremonial blanket with a part in it hanging down from the roof of the longhouse. The ceremony of walking through the part in the blanket meant to make peace, make a new union. For Diyet's ancestors, this made peace with the new members joining their family. And Diyet's great-grandmother made peace within herself, peace with the choices left to her, peace with her visions for the future they would make together.

This story of the peace-making blanket inspires how I think about reconciliation. There is a *making* required in what I mean when I consider the term reconciliation, a making of the future possibilities of relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers in Canada. This *making* takes place with each other, with the land, within Indigenous communities, within Indigenous settler relations, and within each of us as individuals. It is about making peace, making sustainable futures, and making relationships, and holding ourselves accountable to those relationships. The search for terminology to better encompass all these ideas is the driving force behind these reflections. As I search for language which speaks to these intentions, I have found many considerations of reconciliation that I hold in appreciation. I have found Michif words that speak to my orientation to this work, and these ground me. But I must also make this idea relatable. Therefore, I consider the following translation of *pawaatamihk*, of the making of the *kishkkayhta paykiiwikay*. Collective dreaming, gathering, and learning together speaks to *relational visioning*.

While the term relational visioning has previously been discussed in the context of sustainability research responding to increasingly challenging climate change issues from a Norwegian perspective (Nerland et al.), I propose to use it in relation to reconciliation in Canada. Through a visioning workshop in Norway in April 2023, researchers Nerland et al. investigated the role of relationship-building between stakeholders to achieve transformative action towards sustainable futures (5). Their analysis identified three key elements required to enact transformational relational visioning: shared values, deep listening, and clearly defined direction (7–8). My own research to consider the language and rhetoric used to engage with reconciliation in Canada also led me to the idea of relational visioning, which I understand as a common practise to explore and envision future developments of our dreams with the purpose of bringing them into reality, the work of building futures based in a relationality paradigm. Nerland et al. conducted a visioning workshop that aimed to investigate how participants related to "themselves, to other humans and to nature" and how their workshop could "change these relationships" (2). Their research supports the application of relational visioning as a productive exercise in imagining how our future may develop and uncovering the actions required along the way to force transformational change.

Based on my own experience in visioning circles, my experience as a Métis person taking part in visioning practices informs my perspective that when this work is done in relation, we enter spaces of possibility and multitudes beyond what we can vision alone. From an Indigenous perspective in Canada, relational visioning is about bringing together all our relations into a collaborative process of future making. *All my relations* is a common phrase among many Indigenous communities. One of my favourite teachings of this phrase comes from the Cree Literacy Network which describes it as a "recognition of unity with the universe, of harmony, of balance, and of the invisible bridge that unites the diversity of our lives" (Ogg). If we can vision with all our relations, including with the land, water, plants, and animals, then we are imagining futures that recognize and uphold harmony and balance within our diversity as peoples of Canada while we "facilitate transformative actions" (Nerland et al. 2) towards reconciliation.

I recently attended a visioning circle of Indigenous graduate students to imagine what kinds of support we wanted to see come into reality for us and for future students. In this process, we spoke about our experiences and shared possible solutions that could address some of our challenges. While the organizers had prepared specific questions to ask for feedback, we didn't get to them. We spent all our time visioning how we wished our educational supports could look, feel, and sound to us. What we didn't realize we were doing at the time is relational visioning in how we were only able to come up with possible visions for the future through our discussions with each other. We came up with ideas together I never would have thought of alone in this process.

When I hear the term *reconciliation*, it calls to mind many different worries and frustrations, but it also sparks ideas of possibility and relationality. It makes me think of hard work and most definitively of collaborative work. Despite clear definitions of the term, it is used widely to varying ends. To speak meaningfully about reconciliation requires a restatement of the contextually specific parameters of its use, and even then, the resulting communication is heavily weighed down by discourses and histories of the term that vary across audiences. To engage with the term reconciliation requires an acknowledgement of many discourses, critiques, and perspectives and should not be used lightly. My own findings show me that I have a very specific vision for what reconciliation could be, what I want it to be, that does not align with much of the above gathered discourse around the term. When I speak of reconciliation, I mean collaborative visioning of futures in relation with each other that serve our people. When I speak of reconciliation, I speak of future-making as a collaborative effort of language and story, rooted in Indigenous frameworks of relationality, balance, and reciprocity to inform a process of relational visioning.

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Concepts as Assemblages: Methodological Proposal for Critical Discourse Research on Gender Identity

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Abstract | This paper upholds the importance of treating concepts as situated interdisciplinary arrangements or *assemblages*. This proposal is based on my research on the discursive representation of transgender identities in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I start by giving some context on gender identity as a research topic, and make the case for studying it from a discursive perspective. I then present the methodology, theoretical framework, and main results of my research. From it, gender identity emerges as an interdisciplinary concept that combines elements from Critical Discourse Analysis, Transgender theory, and Deleuzian philosophy. Finally, I use the connections between them to propose a methodological approach based on the concept of *assemblage*, as a view that can enrich both Discourse Studies in particular and critical social science in general.

Keywords | Gender Identity, Transgender theory, Argentina, Discursive Representations, Interdisciplinarity, Assemblage, Critical Social Science, Deleuze

Introduction

This paper upholds the importance of treating concepts from a perspective that prevents taking them as totalised objects of study. Such a view, of course, has already been widely discussed in the social sciences and humanities.[1] The specific contribution I propose here is that the concepts we use to analyse social phenomena should be treated as open, mobile, and situated interdisciplinary arrangements or *assemblages*. This idea evolved from my research on the discursive representation of transgender identities in Buenos Aires, Argentina.[2] More precisely, it stemmed from subsequent reflection on the methodological choices I made during the research and writing process. The paper is structured as follows. The first two sections provide context on gender identity as a socially relevant research topic and make the case for studying it from a discursive perspective. The third section presents the background, theoretical framework, methodology, and main results of my doctoral research, upon which the specific proposal

[1]An early example can be found in Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion that "far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object," where he defies a naïve realist position (See, de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 7). Different authors have gone deeper in this direction by claiming that concepts and analytical categories are not fixed entities with universal meanings, but emerge from contingent historical, political, and discursive relations. Some examples of this anti-essentialist view can be found in Michel Foucault's treatment of concepts as the unstable products of discursive formations that respond to historical relations of power and knowledge (See, Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*. Pantheon Books, 1972; *The History of Sexuality*); in Pierre Bourdieu's relational social epistemology, which aims to overcome the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism (See, Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice.* Polity Press, 1990); in Stuart Hall's view of identity as "not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional [concept]" (3); in Judith Butler's conception that gender categories do not correspond with or emanate from an internal essence, but are continually (re)constituted by performative acts (*Gender Trouble*); and in Donna Haraway's statement that objectivity is the product, not of an all-encompassing and disembodied point of view, but of embodied and thus necessarily situated perspectives (See, Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Routledge, 1991, pp. 183–201). In their review of the major paradigms that inform qualitative social research, Yvonna Lincoln, Susan Lynham and Egon Guba make an illustrative general remark in this sense when they say that, in view of the recent "explosion" of methodologies and materials, "inquiry methodology can no longer be treated as a set of universally applicable rules or abstractions" (Lincoln, Yvonna S., et al. "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited." *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, Sage, 2012, pp. 213–214).

[2]This research was conducted during my PhD formation and led to the writing of my doctoral thesis: Soich, Matías. *Los devenires y la identidad de género: hacia un análisis lingüístico-crítico y conceptual de la construcción de representaciones discursivas sobre la propia identidad de género en personas trans de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (2013-2015)* (*Becomings and gender identity: Towards a linguistic-critical and conceptual analysis of the construction of discursive representations about gender identity among trans people in the city of Buenos Aires [2013-2015]*). 2017. University of Buenos Aires, PhD Dissertation, directed by María Laura Pardo and co-directed by Mónica Cragnolini.

of this article (concepts as assemblages) is based. The fourth section shows how gender identity emerges from this research as a concept that involves interdisciplinary connections from three fields: Critical Discourse Analysis, Transgender theory, and Deleuzian philosophy, and it can be viewed through the image of a "gem" with different facets. Finally, the last two sections propose the philosophical concept of *assemblage* as a more refined image than that of the gem for treating such interdisciplinary connections. I believe assemblages provide both open mobility and synthetic power, which reinforce the epistemological and emancipatory goals of Discourse Studies in particular and of critical social science in general.

The Social Relevance of (Trans)gender Identity

To gain perspective on gender identity as a socially relevant research theme, it is important to consider the historical process that began with the pathologization and criminalization of dissident gender identities and expressions, and lead to our present of social exclusion, collective organized resistance, and fight for equality. Throughout history and geography, there have always been people whose gender identities diverged from what was socially sanctioned, but here we will begin in Western Europe in the 19th century. It is there and then that some of the gender identity-related categories still prevalent in the Western world were created by a scientific community of cisgender[3] male doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists: "Sexology was born under the sign of pathology" (Di Segni 11).[4] Reproductive, monogamous heterosexuality—and the oppositional sexual dualism behind it—was at the core of this new science's criteria for establishing what was to be considered normal or abnormal (Preciado). This normative classification involved elaborate discursive activity that produced sex both as the privileged site of truth and as an object of public interest, scrutiny, and administration (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 24, 56). Through the normalization of bodies and desires, sexology enabled a repressive social function that fell on those classified as abnormal, while at the same time—according to the Foucauldian concept of power—it produced and dispersed various elements that entered into the formation of identities and sexual subjectivities.[5]

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[3]The term *cisgender* began to be used by the transgender community in the USA in the 1990s and since then has gradually expanded worldwide, especially through the work of Julia Serano. Broadly speaking, it refers to those who identify with the gender they were socially assigned at birth, that is, people who are not transgender. Since it claims for a minority the up-to-then denied right to name the majority, it constitutes both an epistemological and political category. See, Serano, Julia. *Outspoken. A Decade of Transgender Activism and Trans Feminism*. Switch Hitter, 2016.

[4]The original quote reads "la sexología nació bajo el signo de la patología." All quotes from Spanish works were translated by the author.

[5]An example provided by Foucault is secondary schools in the 18th century, where such diverse elements as architecture (space for classes, dormitories distribution, furniture design), internal organization (rules of discipline and conduct), and discursive elements that constituted "a whole literature of precepts, opinions, observations, medical advice, clinical cases, outlines for reform, and plans for ideal institutions" (*History of Sexuality* 28) converged around the children as a power machine that intended, not to suppress or silence juvenile sexuality, but to "give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility" (44). The scientific and social constitution of multiple "sexual specimens"—the homosexual, the zoophile, the hermaphrodite, etc.—is another example of this type of power as it "did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals" (47).

In this line, some of the medical works that influenced the development of the notion of *gender identity* include Kaan's *Psychopathia sexualis* (1844), which defined *sexual instinct* as an innate and dually polarized (masculine/feminine) force, and Krafft-Ebing's identically-titled *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886), which decreed that *normal* sexual instinct was heterosexual, and that all "non-natural" satisfactions of said instinct, including homosexuality and "inversions," were to be considered perversions. Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (first volume published in 1897) associated homosexuality with the presence of physical and psychological traits of the "opposite sex," while speaking of "congenital sexual inversion" (1). In *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910), Hirschfeld considered transvestism as a natural phenomenon of somatic origin, arriving at some progressive conclusions for his time, but still supporting moralist prescriptions based on the theory of degeneration.[6] This scenario stretched well into the second half of the 20th century, when advances in sex reassignment surgeries were accompanied by new medical concepts like *transsexuality*, usually with strong pathological and demeaning connotations.[7] These passed on into worldwide influential documents, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*.

In Western Europe, some of these medical classifications aimed at moving unconventional identities and sexualities away from the influence of judicial power, which categorized them as criminal lifestyles. Turning crimes into diseases, however, did not greatly improve people's social status. By the end of the 19th century, an opposite movement was taking place in Latin America, more specifically in Argentina. There, medical criminologists typified the "sexual inverted" as particular types *within* the criminal class (Fernández; Wayar). In these southern latitudes, pathologizing homosexuals, transvestites, and other sexual non-conforming individuals was not an alternative to criminalizing them, but its complement (Ben). With varying degrees of intensity, the criminalization of transgender identities in Latin America persisted during the 20th century. In Argentina, it was typically implemented by the police through local "codes of conduct" that allowed them to discretionally persecute and punish identities and activities—such as homosexuality, transvestism, and prostitution—that were considered "minor crimes" disruptive of the social order (Insausti).

The social dispute around police codes and the use of public space in the 1990s framed the emergence of the first transvestite and transsexual organizations in the city of Buenos Aires (Berkins, "Un itinerario político del travestismo";[8] Soich, "Back to Where they Were"). Initially founded to protest against police harassment, these social

[6]The theory of degeneration, published by psychiatrist Benedict Morel halfway through the 19th century, states that the consequences of "deviant" conducts could be inherited from one's predecessors. In this theory, degeneration encompasses both physical and moral conditions, and its counterpart, normality, is described as a bourgeois quality directed by strict religious values (Di Segni 48–49).

[7]One of the modern founders of this concept, David Cauldwell, claimed for example that "when an individual who is unfavourably affected psychologically determines to live and appear as a member of the sex to which he or she does not belong, such an individual is what may be called a psychopathic transexual. This means, simply, that one is mentally unhealthy and because of this the person desires to live as a member of the opposite sex." See, Cauldwell, David. "Psychopathia Transexualis." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 40–44.

[8]The title translates to "*A political itinerary of transvestism*."

organizations gradually expanded their scope to denounce the general exclusion of transgender people imposed by the State and society, and to demand both formal and material equality. In the 2000s, the first statistical analyses of transvestites and transsexuals' life conditions in Argentina, conducted by an alliance of activists and scholars (Berkins and Fernández; Berkins, *Cumbia*),[9] were published. These studies revealed that factors like early expulsion from the family home and the formal education system, lack of access to both formal and informal employment, discrimination in the health system, and homelessness, among others, formed the links of a continuous chain of social exclusion. As a result, transvestites, transsexuals, and transgender women still have, today, the lowest life expectancy among the Argentinean population: around 35 years, less than half the expectancy of a cisgender person (MPD and BPTMC 157).[10]

Since then, Argentinean transgender movements have multiplied and exponentially boosted their political and theoretical power, becoming an increasingly visible social agent that denounces structural inequality from an intersectional perspective. By reframing gender identity within the human rights paradigm (Litardo), they have achieved many fundamental milestones, at both the State/governmental and civil society levels. These milestones include the creation of transgender worker cooperatives, the passing of Same-sex Marriage in 2010, the opening of Mocha Celis (the first secondary school with an inclusive sexual diversity perspective) in 2011, the passing of the National Gender Identity Law in 2012, and the National Transgender Work Quota and the non-binary Identity Documents in 2021. These were accompanied by an increasing visibilization of transgender productions and topics in the media, the arts, and popular culture. Despite these advances, however, the general life conditions of transgender people in Argentina remain well below average, with dramatic debts regarding basic human rights, social and institutional violence, pathologizing views in the medical system, police criminalization, and hate crimes. This situation was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Soich and Mireles) and by the recent political advance of the neoliberal far-right movement (de Belaunde; Pasik; Lorca).

This brief sketch of the history of transgender identities, from medical classifications in 19th century Europe to the emergence of human rights movements in 20th century Argentina, poses a question of life-or-death consequences: how do we as a society understand gender identity, and how do we act on the basis of this understanding? Attending to this question, in the next section I address the importance of approaching gender identity from a discursive perspective.

Gender Identity and Discourse

As Stuart Hall has argued, by the end of the 20th century different disciplines considered the concept of *identity* as an open and multiple process of identification constructed through difference, instead of a self-sufficient or immutable essence; as a concept that is inevitably inconclusive and, yet, irreducibly necessary for social and political agency;

[9]The full title translates to "*Cumbia, drinking and tears. National report on the situation of transvestites, transsexuals and transgender*."

[10]This number is mainly based on trans-feminine identities. There are no precise statistics on the life expectancy of trans men and non-binary persons in Argentina, who face equally dire conditions, discrimination, and violence.

and finally, as a construction that takes place through *discourse*, conceived in turn as a moment within a complex set of social practices. In this sense, the concept of *identity* experienced a veritable "discursive explosion," according to which identities are "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power" (Hall 4).

These features make identity an extremely interesting concept for Discourse Studies, particularly for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on the dialectic and mutual production of social meanings and power relations, especially by targeting discourses that constitute and are constituted by inequality and power abuse (Fairclough; van Dijk). To this end, CDA researchers use linguistic analysis to relate the formal components of concrete texts with more abstract notions such as *discourse*, which in turn help them understand those texts as part of a social practice. By "social practice" I mean "habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 21). And I understand "discourse" as a moment of social practice that involves different semiotic processes such as talking, writing, gesturing, and producing images. This relation is of course complex, as discourse informs social practice in varying combinations and degrees (compare the role of semiotic processes in different social practices, such as writing an application, resisting eviction, and playing football).

From a feminist historiographical perspective, Joan Scott highlights discourse as a vital constituent of subjective identity and experience: "Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings). […] Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. […] The question then becomes *how to analyse language*" ("Experience" 34; emphasis added). By creating an operative frame for studying (gender) identities as practices that are socially situated, constructed, and negotiated through language—instead of stabilized products (Ainsworth and Hardy)—CDA represents then a possible answer to Scott's question. In the same spirit, in one of CDA's founding texts, Fairclough poses the production of social identities and subjective positions as one of the three main social functions of discourse (64). This was taken up by the Latin American critical appropriation of CDA, whose researchers have explored the discursive production of (usually demeaned and oppressed) social identities.[11] Latin American CDA researchers emphasize social relations, practices, and power dynamics as fundamental aspects of identity: "To understand any identitarian process, it is necessary to know its social and political context, that is, what we term its social practice" (Pardo, "La identidad personal

[11]See, for example, Pardo, "La identidad personal y social" (the full title translates to "Personal and social identity of indigent people in their discourse. A critical analysis of neoliberal discourse in Argentina and its consequences"); Montecino, Lésmer, (editor). *Discurso, pobreza y exclusión en América Latina* (*Discourse, poverty and exclusion in Latin America*). Cuarto Propio, 2010; Aires Gomes, Maria Carmen. "Identidades de gênero no movimento funk: um estudo explanatório crítico de notícias jornalísticas brasileiras (Gender identities in the funk movement: an explanatory critical study of Brazilian journal news)." *Ilha do Desterro*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2016, pp. 183–199; Zoppi Fontana, Mónica, and Josefina Ferrari (orgs.). *Mulheres em discurso: identificações de gênero e práticas de resistência* (*Women in discourse: gender identifications and resistance practices*). Pontes, 2017; and Soich, "Back to Where they Were."

y social" 133).[12] As we will address later, although Latin American CDA researchers share the general principle of European CDA—the commitment to social change through a change in discourses—they focus on local identities and concerns, with a "decolonizing stamp that pursues the creation of its own theories and methods, as well as a bibliography that is pertinent to our problems and entails deep social action" (Pardo and Soich 80).

The concept of discourse as a moment of social practice features prominently in many academic definitions of gender and gender identity. For example, Scott defines gender as the social organization of sexual difference: the knowledge that "establishes meanings for bodily differences," and is therefore inseparable from "a broad range of discursive contexts" (*Gender and the Politics of History* 2). An unavoidable reference for the gender-discourse connection is Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*; *Bodies that Matter*), who theorizes gender as the unstable product of a series of performative practices, constantly re-actualized through (among other things) discourse. From her perspective, gender is not something that people "are," "have," or even "express," but the socially constructed "effect of truth" of a series of discursive practices that stabilize, normalize, and (sometimes) subvert identity within a cultural binary matrix. This matrix operates in all our social dealings. It conditions personal and institutional expectations about other people's genders, how they are "read," talked about and, consequentially, treated.

The functions of gender in its Butlerian definition as intelligibility matrix—that is, producing social identities and subjective positions—overlap with the socially constitutive functions that Fairclough attributes to discourse as social practice. We can consider gender and discourse, then, as two series of interactional practices that converge in the constitution of social identities within specific power relations. This marks the compatibility of the Butlerian notion of gender with CDA, opening up significant possibilities for situated, discursive, and text-oriented analyses of gender identity (de Gregorio Godeo). As an example of this, in the next section I present my research on the discursive representation of transgender identities in autobiographical discourses.

The Representation of Transgender Identities: A Discursive Study

In this section, I present the theoretical background, framework, methodology, and main results of the doctoral research upon which the methodological proposal of this paper is based. Concerning the background, a quick Internet search on the subject will show a vast body of work about the discursive construction of different aspects of identity, such as social class, ethnicity, political ideology, and, of course, gender. However, regarding *transgender* identity, results are far more restricted (Martínez-Guzmán and Íñiguez-Rueda). A systematic search in the main international Discourse Analysis and CDA periodicals (*Discourse & Society*, *Discurso y Sociedad*, *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso*, *Cadernos de Linguagem e Sociedade*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Signo y Seña*, *Forma y Función*, and *Onomázein*) shows relatively few papers featuring linguistic analysis on transgender identities. Results only increase if other academic genres (like thesis and dissertations) and other disciplines that claim to resort to

[12]The original quote reads "para entender cualquier proceso identitario es necesario conocer su contexto social y político, o bien, lo que denominamos su práctica social."

discursive analysis (like psychology, sociology, and communication sciences) are included in the search criteria. These works deal mainly with the self-representation of transgender identities, their treatment in the media, and their relation with the medical system. The analysed corpus typically consists of autobiographical discourses, interviews, and written news pieces. Despite acknowledging the fundamental role of discourse in the construction of gender identity, most of these works on transgender identity favour a purely theoretical approach to that role over detailed textual analysis of the corpus. There is little or no explanation about how the text is methodologically treated, and, when textual analysis of the corpus does occur, it is usually restricted to content paraphrasing. This means that some parts of the corpus (for example, quotes from the answers in an interview) are reproduced and then commented upon in order to illustrate the author's theoretical insights on gender identity, with no examination of how linguistic forms and structures convey and shape meaning.[13]

For my doctoral research, my take on these issues was guided by the following question: is it possible to formulate, with the theoretical and methodological tools of CDA and the contributions of Deleuzian philosophy, a socially relevant interpretation of how transgender persons discursively represent their own gender identities? As can be seen and will be elaborated later, the question itself adopted an interdisciplinary form. To tackle this question, I collected a corpus of 18 oral life stories (in the sense defined by Charlotte Linde)[14] and 27 autobiographical written pieces published in print and digital media. Both the oral and the written pieces were produced by transgender individuals (transvestites, transsexuals, trans women and men, and non-binary persons), ranging from 19 to 83 years old. The corpus was produced in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina,

[13]Some examples of works that favour theoretical approaches over text analysis in the sense described above are: Zambrini, Laura. "De metonimias y metáforas sobre géneros y corporalidades travestis en la prensa digital local (Of metonyms and metaphors about transvestite genders and bodies in the local digital press)." *Avatares de la comunicación y la cultura*, no. 5, 2013, pp. 1–16; Bosco, Cristian, et al. "Personas transexuales y discursos acerca de lo trans: desafíos a la clínica psicológica (Transsexual people and discourses about the transgender: challenges to clinical psychology)." *Revista GPU*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2014, pp. 458–467; González, John Gama. *Ni delincuentes ni putas ni peluqueras. Estereotipo de mujeres trans construido por la prensa en contraste con historias de vida dentro de la vivencia en diversidad de género* (*Neither criminals nor whores nor hairdressers. The stereotype of trans women as constructed by the press in contrast to life stories within the experience of gender diversity*). 2015. Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, MA Dissertation; Coll-Planas, Gerard and Miquel Missé. "La identidad en disputa. Conflictos alrededor de la construcción de la transexualidad (Identity in dispute: conflicts surrounding the construction of transsexuality)." *Papers. Revista de Sociología*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2015, pp. 35–52; and de la Ossa, Abigaël Candelas. "'Talk, listen, think': Discourses of agency and unintentional violence in consent guidance for gay, bisexual and trans men." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2016, pp. 365–382. For more examples see, Soich, "Los devenires" 93–109. It should be noted that my observation about the discrepancy between the discursive orientation stated in these works and their limited implementation of textual analysis does not imply a value judgment on their originality or contributions. On the contrary, many of them offer socially important theoretical reflections.

[14]From a linguistic perspective, Linde defines a life story as an oral unit of social interaction. This unit is temporally discontinuous, as it is made up of the various narratives a person tells about themselves throughout their life. In this sense, a life story can only be ideally totalized; for specific work, researchers must use fragmentary narratives. In addition to being temporally discontinuous, a life story is necessarily open, both structurally and interpretively, as it changes over time according to the circumstances of the narrator and the receivers. Life stories perform various functions, including expressing our sense of self, giving sense to our relationships and activities and claiming or negotiating our membership in social groups. See, Linde, Charlotte. *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*. Oxford UP, 1993.

between 2011 and 2016. All life stories were recorded, transcribed, and segmented in analytical units by me.

While collecting the corpus, I gradually became acquainted and involved with different LGBTIQ+ activists,[15] a process that led me to become a member of the LGBTIQ+ civil association, Mocha Celis. Being a part of Mocha Celis allowed me to interact directly with voices and experiences that modified my theoretical and political views and enriched them with different stances on gender, identity, knowledge production, and social inequality. My experience as a researcher was thus welded with my experience as an activist for LGBTIQ+ rights, which in turn reaffirmed my conviction that critical social theory can and should be made from a situated and involved experience, with an eye set on its possible applications for social change.

The theoretical framework for this research was threefold. CDA provided the main component, as it permitted working on a pressing social issue—the configuration of gender identities that are excluded and abused by society and the State—from a discursive perspective, resorting to text-oriented analysis to study the dialectical relations between discourse, power, and society. While this general take comes from CDA's European sources (Fairclough; van Dijk), my research belongs in the current expressed by the Latin American Network of Discourse Studies on Extreme Poverty (REDLAD).[16] Its members particularly favour some ethical aspects of CDA, such as the researchers' acknowledgment of their political-ideological stance, the interest in fieldwork, and the social application of results (Pardo and Soich). This motivated some important methodological decisions, such as creating an interdisciplinary frame, arranging a corpus that respected the emerging political and ethical standards on gender identity, and adopting inductive and qualitative methodology and methods.[17]

Two fundamental CDA concepts are *discourse as social practice* (Fairclough), which I have addressed in the previous section, and *discursive representations*. The latter

[15]LGBTIQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersexual, and Queer. The sign "+" indicates that the list remains open.

[16]The REDLAD was created in 2005 with three main goals: 1) organizing an interdisciplinary team of CDA researchers that conjointly contribute to the study of cultural, personal, and social identity from discourses, 2) creating knowledge of the theoretical and methodological processes for Discourse Analysis and elucidating Latin American social phenomena, and 3) consolidating academic participation and dialogue between researchers from different countries and fields with an interest in Discourse Analysis. See, Montecino, Lésmer. "Red Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso de la Pobreza Extrema (REDLAD): hablar desde los pobres [Latin American Network of Discourse Studies on Extreme Poverty (REDLAD): speaking from the poor]." *Pasado, presente y futuro de los Estudios del Discurso en América Latina* (*Past, present and future of Discourse Studies in Latin America*), edited by Denize E. Garcia da Silva and María Laura Pardo, Universidade de Brasília, 2015, pp. 82–103.

[17]Regarding qualitative methodology, Julie Nagoshi, Craig Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy comparatively revise their own quantitative and qualitative studies on sexual identity in cisgender and transgender individuals, and conclude that only qualitative approaches allow considering each person's particular vision of gender, while at the same time appreciating the differences between those visions. For these authors, qualitative methods are unique for dealing with the complex process of challenging and re-building traditional, binary gender roles, as well as for affirming the importance of bodily experience. Since gender identity is situated in an intersection of individual and social experiences and practices, they also advocate for its multidisciplinary study. See, Nagoshi, Julie L., et al. *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*. Springer, 2014.

can be defined as those parts of social representations that are mainly (re)produced through discourse (Pardo, *Teoría y metodología* 65).[18] One of CDA's specific tasks is the linguistic study of discursive representations. In a more technical sense, a discursive representation is defined as a generic concept that emerges from an ensemble of discursive categories. Some of these categories are always present in any text, such as those that enable the text's leading "voice," those that convey actions, and those that convey temporal or spatial meanings. Other categories are only present in some texts, because they convey meanings related to that text's particular context and topics. All these categories are inductively reconstructed by the researcher through careful textual analysis, which involves classifying different linguistic elements, establishing their mutual relations, and interpreting how these relations produce specific discursive representations.[19] In this research, the main discursive representation under study is that of *gender identity*.

The second part of the theoretical frame was built upon feminist, gender, and sexual diversity studies. Here, drawing on authors like Butler (*Gender Trouble*; *Bodies that Matter*), Laqueur (*Making Sex*), and Fausto-Sterling (*Sexing the Body*) allowed going over the historical and political transformations of the categories of *sex* and *gender*, from their analogy with the nature/culture pair to the idea of gender as a matrix underpinning all sexual categories. Transfeminist and queer theories were also borrowed from to argue that the notion of *sexual difference*, associated in some feminist currents with the feminine/masculine duality, should be reinterpreted as a multiplicity.[20] But, in order to understand the social context of Argentinean transgender persons and their distinct views on gender identity, South American Transvestite Theory was absolutely essential. Its origin lies in the struggle for transgender human rights in Argentina during the decade of 1990, which quickly became an elaborate collective production that combines political

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[18]The full title translates to "*Theory and methodology of linguistic research. The Synchronic-Diachronic Method for the Linguistic Analysis of Texts*." Social psychology defines social representations as mental entities connected with belief, which significantly condition our acts of comprehension and communication, and, therefore, shape our common sense and our understanding of reality. See, Moscovici, Serge. *Social Representations. Explorations in Social Psychology*. Polity Press, 2000, p. 33. Authors dealing with discourse analysis took special interest in the role of discourse in the (re)production of social representations: van Dijk, for example, states that a core interest of CDA should be "how specific discourse structures determine specific mental processes, or facilitate the formation of specific social representations" (259). For Pardo, the concept of *social representation* is more complex and encompassing than the concept of *discursive representation*, as it involves more than verbal and written language: social representations also include images, physical and emotional experiences, among other experiences, that are not necessarily linguistic or easily verbalized (*Teoría y metodología* 65). For example, the social representation of poverty in a given context can involve different discursive practices, such as news pieces, political speech, and everyday conversation, which will shape specific discursive representations that can be linguistically traced: for example, the poor may be discursively represented, through specific word choices and structures, as a dangerous threat to public space, or as citizens deprived of their rights. But the social representation of poverty will also involve individual and collective images, memories, and emotions that are not always conscious or cannot always be verbalized.

[19]This is a very general description of the method for the linguistic analysis of texts proposed by Pardo in *Teoría y metodología*, which, for reasons of space, I cannot fully elaborate here. For a detailed account of discursive categories and how to obtain them, see, *Teoría y metodología* 65–87.

[20]As does, for example, Preciado: "This paradigm shift may mark the passage from sex, gender and sexual difference (a binary opposition, whether considered as dialectical or complementary, as duality or duel) to an endless number of differences of bodies, of unidentified and unidentifiable desires" (74).

action with the critique of binary thought applied to all forms of identity, and has transcended Argentina's borders in joining a net of authors in countries like Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.[21] In my research process, placing a deliberate emphasis on the production of trans theorists-activists like Lohana Berkins, Marlene Wayar, Diana Sacayán, Alba Rueda and the collective Mocha Celis reaffirmed the value of local sources as part of a decolonial turn. South American Transvestite Theory supplied fundamental concepts like *transvestism as a political identity* and *social transvesticide*. The first asserts the non-binary, non-substantive (that is, not based on a stable, immutable essence), internally heterogeneous, and transversal quality of transgender identities, highlighting their intrinsic connection with social and political struggle in terms of power, inequality, and rights. The second elaborates on the structural conditions and consequences of the violence received by transgender people, as "an ensemble of repeated practices, sedimented through time and in the institutions, that we suffer due to our gender identities" (Berkins, *Cumbia* 123).[22]

The third and last part of the theoretical frame consisted of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*), which places difference, conceived as the affirmative production of ever-changing multiplicities, at the heart of ontology.[23] In this ontology of pure variation, where identity has been removed from its traditional station as first principle, the concept of *becoming* designates the transformative processes that permanently underlie, sustain, and alter our very existence. Every identity is inherently precarious, because it is not founded on division or transcendence (for example, between the subject and the object, God and the world, man and animal, etc.), but rather on the immanence of all modes of being within the same ontological plane. According to this view, then, "what we are is not what distinguishes us from other forms of being, but what links us to them" (Ferreyra 118–119).[24] For my research, it was especially important to underline the role of becomings in the constitution of subjectivity, their political minority in relation with dominant identities, and their ties to language through the concepts of *sobriety* and the *semiotic of the plane of consistency* (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 263–

[21]See, Soich, Matías. "Becoming-practice. Deleuze and South American Transvestite Theory." *Continental and Comparative Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, pp. 6–20; and "Crónica del pensamiento travesti-trans para una filosofía latinoamericana (Chronicle of transvestite-trans thought for a Latin American philosophy)." *Ideas, revista de filosofía moderna y contemporánea*, no. 15–16, 2022, pp. 104–114.

[22]The original quote reads "un conjunto de prácticas reiteradas, sedimentadas en el tiempo y las instituciones, que sufrimos debido a nuestras identidades de género."

[23]My participation in the Argentinean research group "Deleuze: ontología práctica" ("Deleuze: practical ontology"), led by Julián Ferreyra, has been decisive in this point. This group has been collectively studying the ontology of *Difference and Repetition* and its philosophical, scientific, and artistic sources since 2006. Most of its productions can be freely downloaded at https://deleuziana.com.ar/; some have been translated into English and published. See, Olkowski, Dorothea, and Julián Ferreyra (editors). *Deleuze at the End of the World. Latin American Perspectives*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2020; Jones, David, et al. (editors). "Ideas in Finisterre (special issue)." *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021.

[24]The original quote reads "lo que somos no consiste en lo que nos distingue de las otras formas de ser sino en lo que nos enlaza con ellas."

264).[25] Finally, the Deleuzian concept of *becoming* was linked to transgender identities through the notion of a non-binary, molecular sexuality.[26]

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[25]For Deleuze and Guattari, the plane of consistency is the immanent ontological and metaphysical space that is created and occupied by the multiple processes of difference and becoming (*A Thousand Plateaus* 70–71, 265–267). When a totalizing measure or unit—fixed forms such as the Organism, the Self, the Subject, or the State—is added to this plane, another space is created: the transcendent plane of organization, opposed but inevitably tied to the plane of consistency. For these authors, some linguistic elements and uses express more adequately than others the dynamics of this plane, producing a *semiotic of the plane of consistency*. This semiotic "has freed itself from both formal significances and personal subjectifications" (263). The authors describe three main linguistic components of said semiotic: the infinitive verb, which "expresses the floating, nonpulsed time […] of the pure event or of becoming" (263); the proper name, which "does not indicate a subject" but "fundamentally designates something that is of the order of the event" and "marks a longitude and a latitude" (264); and the indefinite article and indefinite pronoun, which "are lacking a determination only insofar as they are applied to a form that is itself indeterminate […] [but] lack nothing when they introduce haecceities, events, the individuation of which does not pass into a form and is not effected by a subject" (264). What all these elements have in common is that they are obtained by subtraction: one obtains the infinitive verb by subtracting person, tense, and mode; one obtains a proper name or an indefinite pronoun by subtracting subjective and personal determinations (264). For Deleuze and Guattari, subtraction is then a creative process that clears the way for expressing the plane of consistency, as it removes the fixed forms and measures that prevent its constitution: "the multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety. […] Subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted; write at n-1 dimensions" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 6). In this sense, *sobriety* is not just a trait of the semiotic of the plane of consistency, but also an expressive method and a creative treatment of language (104–105).

[26]Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between two regimes: the molar and the molecular. See, Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. U of Minnesota P, 1983. The former refers to the regime of the macro, that is, to formations that involve a central point of unification and, therefore, a localizable and recognizable identity (some examples of molar formations are: at the inorganic level, forms and qualities; at the organic, species and the organism; at the socio-political level, the subject, the signifier, and the State). The molecular, on the other hand, corresponds to the regime of the micro, which is not a scaled reduction of the molar (as if it were a matter of the individual versus the collective). On the contrary, the molecular is affirmed in and of itself (*Anti-Oedipus* 287–288). In contrast with the molar phenomena of unification and centralization, the molecular refers to decentralized processes of differentiation: a proliferation that underlies all actuality, and whose "ultimate" elements are neither localizable nor quantifiable according to statistical laws. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari affirm that all becomings are molecular (275), since becoming is not an identification with another subject, a transformation of one actual form into another, or an act of imitation, but rather "a verb with a consistency all of its own" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 239). It is a process, an impersonal force that passes *between* identifiable forms and subjects, dragging them into new compositions. However, the relation between the molar and the molecular is not of simple opposition. Both regimes coexist and affect or subordinate each other in an ever unstable balance. In this regard, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that molecular becomings always start from molar forms (272), and that there is always a correlation between them, so that "no flow, no becoming-molecular escapes from a molar formation without molar components accompanying it, forming passages or perceptible landmarks for the imperceptible processes" (303).

The distinction between these two regimes, which pervades Deleuze and Guattari's thought, is also operative in sexuality. The authors differentiate a molar sexuality, which unifies and organizes bodies around binary oppositions (male-female, heterosexual-homosexual), and a molecular sexuality, which breaks with this scheme and makes sexual differences proliferate: "The same applies for sexuality: it is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes, and just as badly by a bisexual organization within each sex. Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like *n* sexes […] Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 278). Suggestively, throughout their work, the authors often link molecular sexuality (*n* sexes) with transsexuality and transvestism: "everywhere a microscopic transsexuality, resulting in the woman containing as many men as the man, and the man as many women, all capable of entering […] into

This threefold composite provided the theoretical frame for interpreting the results of a rigorous, exhaustive textual analysis of the corpus that involved the combined use of several qualitative theories and methods. For reasons of space, I can only mention them here: they are the Synchronic-Diachronic Method for the Linguistic Analysis of Texts (Pardo, *Teoría y metodología*), the theories of information hierarchization and tonalization (Lavandera; Pardo, *Teoría y metodología*), Halliday and Matthiessen's classification of process types, and Lakoff and Johnson's classification of conceptual metaphors.[27] Analysis of the corpus through these combined methods revealed a large number of linguistic resources systematically interconnected in several linguistic strategies, which in turn converged in four macro-strategies. In what follows, I will briefly describe each macro-strategy and how it shaped particular aspects of the discursive representation of gender identity.[28]

The first macro-strategy constructed gender identity as a *process* that develops over time: something that, for each person, *occurs* or *passes*. The linguistic resources

relations of production of desire that overturn the statistical [molar] order of the sexes. Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand. […] not one or even two sexes, but *n* sexes" (*Anti-Oedipus* 295–296); "social structure and psychic identification leave too many special factors unaccounted for: the linkage, unleashing, and communication of the becomings triggered by the transvestite" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 278).

[27]Perhaps the most salient feature of the REDLAD's approach to CDA is questioning the Latin American acritical reception of European and Anglo-Saxon theories and methods, that is, the concern with the decolonization of knowledge in Discourse Studies. See, Resende, Viviane de Melo (editor). *Decolonizar os estudos críticos do discurso* [*Decolonizing critical discourse studies*]. Pontes, 2019. Not only our theories about language, but also the problems, bibliography, and analytical methods most frequent in Latin American CDA still show a strong colonising influence from the global North (Pardo, "Decolonização do conhecimento nos estudos do discurso" ["Decolonizing knowledge in discourse studies"]. *Decolonizar os estudos críticos do discurso*, edited by Viviane de Melo Resende, Pontes, 2019, pp. 47–62). In this sense, the current challenge for Latin American discourse researchers is the creation of theories, methodologies, and methods that account for the role of discourse in Latin American problems and contexts, as "decolonizing is not just resisting, but also creating new paradigms" (Pardo, qtd. in de Carvalho, Tatiana Lourenço, et al. "Una mirada hacia los estudios decoloniales y sus impactos en la educación y la enseñanza de lenguas y literaturas: diálogo con María Laura Pardo [A look at decolonial studies and their impact on education and the teaching of languages and literature: a dialogue with María Laura Pardo]." *Revista Leia Escola*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2022, pp. 132–141; the original quote reads "descolonizar no es sólo resistir, sino también construir nuevos paradigmas"). The Synchronic-Diachronic Method for the Linguistic Analysis of Texts was created precisely in this spirit (Pardo, *Teoría y metodología*; "Hate Speech We Live By." *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Discourse Studies*, edited by Shi-xu, Routledge, 2023, pp. 327–345). For a methodological account of how this method was expanded and integrated with the others mentioned above, see, Pardo, María Laura, et al. "El Método Sincrónico-Diacrónico de Análisis Lingüístico de Textos y sus extensiones: una propuesta metodológica desde América Latina (The Synchronic-Diachronic Method for the Linguistic Analysis of Texts and its Extensions: A Methodological Proposal from Latin America)." *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 24–48.

[28]For a full account of these macro-strategies, with linguistic examples and explanations, see Soich, "Los devenires"; "De la esencia al proceso. Análisis lingüístico de la construcción de representaciones discursivas sobre la identidad de género en historias de vida de personas trans (From essence to process: A linguistic analysis of the construction of discursive representations about gender identity in the life stories of trans people)." *Romanica Olomucensia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2018, pp. 21–42; and "La exclusión empieza por casa. Análisis crítico de la construcción de la representación discursiva de la identidad de género trans en relación con la familia y otros actores sociales (Exclusion begins at home. A critical analysis of the construction of discursive representation of transgender identity in relation to the family and other social actors)." *Cadernos de Linguagem e Sociedade*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2019a, pp. 173–200.

involved here emphasized the temporal aspects of gender identity (such as onset, duration, and periodization, in statements like 'I'm doing my construction as a trans person *constantly*'). Gender identity was also defined through actions carried out by the speaker, associated especially with conscious perception (in statements like 'I started to *understand* what was happening to me'), emotions ('going after a *passion*'), verbal activity ('I didn't *communicate* it'), and abstract relations like *being* and *having* ('they told me I *was* so,' 'Everything you *have* is bad').[29] While these actions are discursively highlighted, their "objective" counterparts (the corresponding "objects" of perception, emotion, talk, etc.) were discursively mitigated through the use of infinitive and impersonal verbs, indefinite pronouns and articles, and other "void" words (that is, words with very diffused, abstract, or little meaning, such as 'what,' 'so,' and 'it' in the examples above). In this sense, the discursive representation of gender identity selected the aspect of transience (linked to processes) over the aspect of permanence (linked to discrete participants) (Halliday and Matthiessen). Gender identity linguistically featured as a process that, while appearing to be carried out by a subject, was also fundamentally represented as a "something," closer to the impersonal event—to that which *occurs* or *happens*—than to the permanent existence of a well-defined substance.

The second macro-strategy constructed gender identity as a phenomenon linked to the elaboration and "possession" of images and appearances, the use of clothing, and the performance of physical and verbal behaviour. Since these elements belong to the realm of the manifest, the backside of this representation was the possibility of rendering gender identity invisible (by actions like camouflaging, concealing, and hiding) to avoid the prejudiced stare of others. Thus, whereas the first macro-strategy represented gender identity as a succession of actions and processes, the second represented identity as *a way of carrying them out*. In this sense, different gendered possibilities (among which are masculinity and femininity) appeared as "styles" or "ways" of acting in the world.

The third macro-strategy connected these representations of gender identity with their familial and social context, emphasizing the multiple acts of violence and exclusion exerted on transgender people. This produced a discursive representation that highlighted the nuclear family as a social actor, either by its discriminatory and expulsive role, or by its provision of acceptance and support when presented with disruptive gender identities. Familial agency was further emphasized by the fact that actions from other social groups or spaces—such as the school, work, and health institutions—were discursively mitigated by omitting the concrete mention of their corresponding agents. For example, statements that describe school and work violence in terms such as "there were other hard things" and "there was mistreatment" only allude to that violence through general words (like "things") and nominalizations (like "mistreatment"), which avoid specifically mentioning *what* those "things" are or *who* is actually mistreating. In contrast, a statement such as "my mother had two things: first, hitting me a lot, she hit me a lot. A real lot she

[29]These statements are taken from the corpus of life stories. Among other similar examples, they are analysed in detail in Soich, "Los devenires" 337–360.

hit me," familial violence and its agent are made explicit and are increasingly reinforced through the repetition of verbs like "hit" and quantifiers like "a lot."[30]

The fourth and last macro-strategy constructed a representation of the general social context derived from those violent and discriminatory actions. The communicative goal of this macro-strategy was to present the immediate consequences of social exclusion on the life stories of transgender people, especially in terms of their numerous shortcomings (with lack of stable and well-paid jobs standing out) and of prostitution as one of the few socially tolerated alternatives after expulsion from the familial home.

These are the main aspects of the discursive representation of gender identity, obtained in my doctoral research by the linguistic analysis of transgender people's life stories. In the next section, I will elaborate on several conceptual connections involving these results, which were key to introducing the main proposal of this paper: that the concept of *assemblage* should be used as an interpretative lens for the process of interdisciplinary research.

Gender Identity: The Many Facets of a Concept

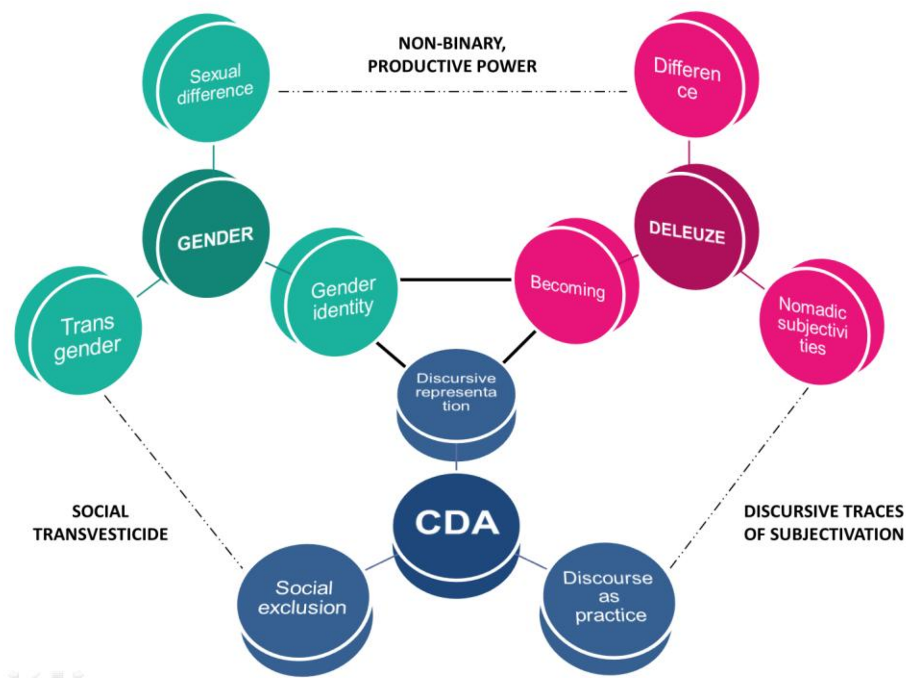

Fig. 1: "Conceptual molecule" of interdisciplinary conceptual connections. Graphic made by the author.

The insights about gender identity produced during this research were linked not only to the linguistic components of its discursive representation (the four macro-strategies described above), but also to profound philosophical and political views on this subject.

[30]These statements are taken from the corpus of life stories. Among other similar examples, they are analysed in detail in Soich, "Los devenires" 377–401 and in Soich, "La exclusión empieza por casa" (see footnote 28 for the complete reference).

In other words, elaborating on these insights implied connecting concepts from the three fields of the theoretical framework. The graphic (Fig. 1) illustrates these connections in the form of a "conceptual molecule."[31] In this "molecule," each coloured cluster represents one of the research's theoretical fields: CDA; (trans)feminist, gender and sexual diversity studies (shortened as "Gender"); and Deleuzian philosophy (shortened as "Deleuze"). The connections between the three central circular shapes, indicated by full black lines, define the core of the research: a critical analysis of the construction of *discursive representations* of *gender identity* in transgender people's life stories, interpreted through the Deleuzian concept of *becoming*.

The broken lines indicate connections between concepts closely associated to the core. The concepts thus connected are not necessarily homologous, and yet, maybe for this reason, they produce a certain resonance that opens up a space of interdisciplinary composition. The first connection links *social exclusion*—a privileged focus of Latin American CDA—with the concept of *transgender*—a major destabilization of the dominant normalization of gender—through the notion of *social transvesticide*. As we said earlier, the latter refers to the effects of social and institutional violence suffered by transgender people on account of their gender identity (Berkins, *Cumbia*).

Secondly, *sexual difference*—a concept belonging to feminist theory—and *difference*—a key Deleuzian philosophical concept—are connected in terms of their *non-binary, productive power*. Here, on the one hand, I agree with Butler in affirming that the social, and hence also discursive, production of sexed modes of subjectivity overflows and contests the binary model of the heterosexual matrix (*Gender Trouble*; *Bodies that Matter*). On the other hand, following Deleuze, difference is the pivotal ontological force that subtends and capsizes all dualistic forms of representation (opposition, contradiction, limitation, etc.), making them the secondary product of the affirmative power of virtual and intensive multiplicities (*Difference and Repetition* 244–245, 266–267). I believe this philosophical view should be extended to the feminist concept of *sexual difference*, to apprehend it as an affirmative power that produces a multiplicity of sexed and gendered subjective modes of being, and to liberate it from the restrictive binary model still predominant in some feminist currents.[32]

[31]The word "molecule" is not intended here as an intentional reference to the Deleuzian concept of the molecular (see footnote 26), but rather arises from the similarity of the Graphic to traditional chemistry diagrams. However, as will become clear in section 5, this use is akin to the concept of the assemblage derived from Deleuzian thought, because it concerns how different connections can define the identity of the whole in a variable way.

[32]In this line of thought, Georgina Bertazzo focuses on the biological sources of Deleuzian ontology and their implications for the feminist concepts of sex and body: "One of the central dichotomies in Western epistemology is the sex-gender system, sustained by the traditional nature/culture distinction. Different feminist currents dwell upon that distinction and, sometimes, reproduce the same oppressive and exclusive logic they are trying to oppose." The original quote reads "una de las dicotomías centrales en la epistemología occidental es el sistema sexo-género, que se sostiene por la tradicional distinción naturaleza-cultura, y sobre ella se montan distintas corrientes feministas que en algunos casos reproducen las mismas lógicas opresivas y excluyentes que tratan de combatir." In her works, Bertazzo addresses, from a Deleuzian perspective, how the dichotomist model of nature/culture, woman/man, masculine/feminine, etc., pervades some radical feminist positions, concerning assisted reproductive technology and the LGBTIQ+ collective, especially intersex and transgender people. See, Bertazzo, Georgina. "Cuerpos y

Thirdly, we have the notion of *nomadic subjectivities*, proposed by feminist Deleuzian philosopher Braidotti as a sustainable basis for the political cartography of contemporary subjects. She characterizes nomadic subjectivities by their fragmentation, their constant displacements and negotiations, the non-coincidence of the subject with its conscience, and the dissolution of its boundaries with other forms of existence. In this sense, subjective identity is a retrospective notion, a collection of traces:

> The nomad's identity is a map of where s/he has been; s/he can always reconstruct it a posteriori, as a set of steps in an itinerary. But there is no triumphant *cogito* supervising the contingency of the self; the nomad stands for movable diversity, the nomad's identity is an inventory of traces. (Braidotti 14)

My research focused on the linguistic materialization of these traces regarding nomadic (gender) identity. By "linguistic materialization," I mean not only the linguistic elements that mark the speaker's presence in the uttered proposition (like the use of shifters, modality and evaluative terms) (Kerbrat-Orecchioni), but the complex convergence of semantic and syntactic resources (metaphors, enforcing and mitigating terms, verbal processes, and word order, among others) within categories that emerge when people engage in a specific discursive activity: talking about themselves and telling their stories. These stories about the self are discursive practices that actualize the identity function of *discourse as a social practice* (Fairclough 64). They are also, following Braidotti, a posteriori reconstructions of a *nomadic subjective itinerary*. Therefore, studying the linguistic resources that make up these stories is a way of accessing the *discursive traces of subjectivation*, conceived as an on-going process.

What do these interdisciplinary connections tell us about gender identity *as a concept*? An image that comes to mind here is that of a gem: each theoretical field allows contemplating a single "facet" of this concept. For example, from the perspective of CDA, we can see *gender identity as a discursive representation*. Discursive representations are produced in particular discursive practices (here, telling life stories), rooted in specific social contexts (here, the Argentinean context of inequality and organized collective resistance). Also, discursive representations are (re)constructed from linguistic resources and strategies that emerge from concrete textual analysis (here, the four linguistic macro-strategies summarized in the previous section). Being part of discursive and social practices, texts are not just finished products, but *events* that take place in and shape a world of dialectically intertwined components (Chouliaraki and Fairclough; Pardo, "Estado del área").[33] In this sense, gender identity as a discursive representation is a product that points out to a larger process: a composition of situated (social, discursive, political) forces.

órganos. Reflexiones sobre la Idea biológica y el dimorfismo sexual en *Diferencia y repetición* [Bodies and organs. Reflections on the biological Idea and sexual dimorphism in *Difference and repetition*]." *Las potencias del continuo. Deleuze: ontología práctica 3* (*The potencies of the continuum. Deleuze: practical ontology 3*), edited by Sebastián Amarilla, Georgina Bertazzo and Gonzalo Santaya, RAGIF, 2021, pp. 141–154.

[33]The full title translates to "Basic state of the art for an introduction to Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis."

But then, from the perspective of transgender theory and activism, we can also see *gender identity as a crucial component of embodied human experience*, which has been historically organized on the basis of binary models of sexual difference. The increasing visibility and impact of transgender politics in the last decades has launched the concept of gender identity as a powerful site of rupture with dominant social models. In this sense, gender identity has provided an integral and far-reaching critical point of view on different aspects of social life, from affectivity and education to income distribution and modes of production. It has allowed articulating new voices, new stances on life, and new sensibilities, a remarkable example being Argentinean transvestism (Berkins, "Travestis").[34] In sum, the concept of gender identity as a component of embodied human experience has placed an immanent, radical critique of how gender contributes to the distribution and organization of power in our contemporary societies.

Finally, from the perspective of Deleuzian philosophy, we can see *gender identity as a momentary arresting point* in the ontological process that is constantly forming and un-forming nomadic subjectivities: the transient substance of being that Deleuze and Guattari call *becomings*. In this regard, the emphasis on the discursive aspects of identity provided an interesting new approach to some of these Deleuzian concepts. For example, in the first macro-strategy described in the previous section, gender identity was discursively produced by alternating between "void" linguistic elements (such as indefinite pronouns and abstract nouns), and "full" linguistic elements that bear traditional gender meanings (nouns and adjectives like 'man,' 'woman,' 'masculine,' 'pink,' etc.). In this alternation, the "void" elements create a space of semantic indeterminacy or *sobriety*, which can be related to the *semiotic of the plane of consistency* that expresses becomings (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 263–264; see also footnote 25). This means that the disruption of the binary norm by transgender identities is textually performed by the strategic use of certain linguistic forms. Conversely, these forms were interpreted as "perceptible landmarks for the imperceptible processes" of becoming (*A Thousand Plateaus* 303; see also footnote 26). In other words, these linguistic forms were considered discursive traces of the molecular becoming of sexuality enabled by transgender identities (Soich, "Sobre los índices discursivos").[35]

Concepts as Assemblages

In the previous section, gender identity has been considered through the metaphor of a gem. Discursive analysis, (trans)gender theories, and Deleuzian philosophy were directed towards the critical study of this concept, each field being a different point of view that revealed one of said concept's "facets." As a result, four linguistic macro-strategies that represent gender identity as a situated phenomenon were detected; transgender identity was interpreted as an instance of the molecular becoming of sexuality; and specific linguistic elements were correlated with ontological concepts, tracing molecular becomings in discourse.

There is a philosophical setback, however, to this gem metaphor. If we think of a complex concept, like gender identity, as "multifaceted," we are assuming it has a hidden

[34]The full title translates to "Transvestites: a political identity."
[35]The full title translates to "On the discursive indexes of the molecular becoming of sexuality."

underlying unity. No matter how complex it is, how many facets we assign to it, we are still invoking a central convergence point that guarantees the concept's coherence as an epistemological "object," and its corresponding adjustment to the faculties of the knowing subject (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 133–134). For the sake of progressive scientific plurality, we can deem that coherence as ultimately unattainable, and yet still desirable as an ideal; we should strive towards simultaneously seeing as many "facets" as possible. The problem with this is that we would still be treating the concepts we use for understanding social phenomena in additive terms, as successive layers of interpretation that add up until eventually reaching a stable configuration. This is not far from the spirit of the transcendent and totalizing ideal that Deleuze called the dogmatic Image of thought (131).

But we are currently living in a world where the relentlessly accelerating forces of neoliberal capitalism promote subjectivation processes oriented towards instant gratification and the consumption of fragmented, fleeting images. A world where ultraconservative liberalism exalts an atomistic and self-subsistent ideal of individuality in the hollowed name of freedom, and collective ideals of social justice barely struggle to resist such impervious eroding forces. In such a world, critical social science concerned with politically emancipatory and epistemologically explanatory goals (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 29–35) must procure concepts that, far from stabilizing differences to produce "complete" objects, can be both flexible and consistent enough to tune in to—and at the same time withstand, modify, or counter—the dynamics imposed by these heterogeneous, conflicting forces at play.

So, if envisioning its concepts as multifaceted totalities is not suitable in the long run for the goals of critical social science, what is? I would like to suggest a Deleuzian-based approach: that interdisciplinary concepts, such as "gender identity" in this case, be thought of not as totalities stabilized around a central unity—even if these totalities are "open"—but in terms of *assemblages*. The concept of assemblage is prominent in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, but here I will specifically resort to DeLanda's take on it (*A New Philosophy* 3–4). DeLanda proposes assemblages as the basis for a realist (but not essentialist) social ontology, in which multiple scales interact in a non-centralized way.[36] He defines assemblages as wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts, which maintain, among themselves and with the whole, *relations of exteriority*.[37] This means, in the first place, that the parts of an assemblage do not relate, neither between themselves nor to the assemblage as a whole, in terms of an internal logic that would bind them necessarily. In other words, assemblages and their parts do not have "essential" properties that depend on maintaining always the same set of relations. Correspondingly, it also means that the parts of an assemblage can be detached from it

[36]What follows is a very partial sketch of DeLanda's definition of assemblages, centered on those properties that specifically inspired my reflection. Invoking these properties does not imply agreement with all of DeLanda's ontological premises (for example, I do not fully agree with the subordinate place he assigns to language in relation with the social).

[37]DeLanda's theory is proposed specifically as a social ontology. However, being based on an immanent philosophy, its central concept, the assemblage, operates at all levels and scales, be it the inorganic, the organic, or the social. Consequently, examples of assemblages given by DeLanda include atoms and genes, words and language, organisms and individual persons, families, network communities, social organizations, and political and territorial institutions.

and put in another assemblage, where they may display different interactions without losing their identity (*A New Philosophy* 10).

Another important point about assemblages and their components is the distinction between their properties and their capacities, a distinction that "is roughly that between *what an entity is and what it can do*" (DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* 52). The properties of an entity may form a given and closed list, but the extent of its capacities remains open, on account of its potential interaction with other entities. In this sense, the exteriority that defines the relations between assemblages and their parts means that the properties of an assemblage cannot be reduced to the sum of the properties of its parts. This is because the properties of an assemblage are derived, not directly from its components' properties (as would happen if they were bound by an internal, "essential" logic), but from the exercise of its components' capacities (what they *can do*), which depend on their potential encounters with other entities and therefore are open to variation (*A New Philosophy* 11).

These definitions, which depend on the exteriority of the constitutive relations between an assemblage and its components, have two important consequences. First, since none of its parts are essentially tied to the whole by a rigid set of internal relations, an assemblage has what we could call a mobile or "flexible" identity. The properties of an assemblage (what it *is*) emerge from the actual exercise of its parts' capacities. And the parts of an assemblage can be removed from it and plugged into another assemblage, where they may exert different capacities. Therefore, an assemblage's identity is flexible and subject to change. Secondly, since the properties of the parts of an assemblage depend on their encounters with other entities, which can trigger new capacities, the interaction between the parts "may result in a true synthesis" (*A New Philosophy* 11). Assemblages have thus synthetic power, in the original sense of the Greek *syn-thesis* (com-position): the mobile compositions and combinations of their parts result in productive and creative effects.[38]

In light of this, I believe critical social sciences, which intend "to contribute to an awareness of what is, how it has come to be, and what it might become, on the basis of which people may be able to make and remake their lives" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 4), should treat its target concepts as assemblages that involve, as their components, different interdisciplinary dimensions. The research I have presented before is intended as an example of this, centered around the concept of gender identity. This concept is not a "multifaceted gem," that is, a unified entity I had to approach from different angles in order to retrieve its ultimate coherence. Instead, gender identity was synthetically produced as a concept by "plugging" together different dimensions: linguistic and discursive (categories, words and structures, word order, etc.), theoretical (methodological, social, and gender concepts), political and activist (participating in a transgender organization, working towards social inclusion, going to demonstrations,

[38]In this sense, DeLanda's use of the word "synthesis" is in line with its traditional philosophical meaning: a union or integration of elements whose result is more complex than the elements themselves. The productive and creative aspects of synthesis were specially stressed by German idealism: "synthesis joins and, in joining, 'produces' what is joined." The original quote reads "la síntesis une y, al unir, 'produce' lo unido." See, Ferrater Mora, José. *Diccionario de filosofía. Tomo II* (*Philosophy Dictionary. Volume II*). Sudamericana, 1999, p. 685.

etc.), interpersonal and affective (relating with others, getting to know them, talking with them about their life stories), and ontological (a particular conception and experience of difference and becoming), into a complex interdisciplinary assemblage. The "conceptual molecule" presented before (see Fig. 1) accounts for the connections between some of these dimensions and their components.

Treating these (linguistic, political, ontological, etc.) dimensions as components of an assemblage means they are not linked by internal logical necessity. As DeLanda says, such a necessity "may be investigated by thought alone"; while the relations here at stake "involve a consideration of empirical questions" (*A New Philosophy* 11). Investigating on gender identity requires more than reflecting on it from a certain theoretical standpoint. To define the parts and relations of the "conceptual molecule," it was first necessary to deal with many practical questions, such as what are the social conditions that define someone as transgender, what are the concrete consequences of that definition and what can be done about them, which specific people should be interviewed and how to approach them, what linguistic forms appeared in their discourses as particularly significant, and so on. The ensuing interdisciplinary dimensions emerged in the process of attending to these questions, as different connections were tried, and the productivity of some of them was gradually confirmed. In this sense, then, the relations that make up the "conceptual molecule" are both contingent and obligatory (*A New Philosophy* 11): they could have been otherwise, but their current disposition was required by the exertion of this particular assemblage's capacities in its given context.

By the same token, since their relations are of exteriority, the dimensions of this assemblage/concept of gender identity are not fixedly interlocked. They could be taken apart and reanalysed, regrouped, subtracted, complemented, or replaced by other components from the same or different theoretical fields, depending on the coordinates of the phenomenon under study. For example, depending on the geographical and cultural location, South American Transvestite Theory could be replaced by other situated theories and concepts on transgender; instead of identity, a different gender-related concept could be explored, which would require an adjustment of the philosophical concepts, and so on. This points to the mobile or flexible identity of the assemblage in the sense described above, that is, as an emergent from its parts' variable capacities. This way, treating concepts as interdisciplinary assemblages can suit the flexibility requirements of CDA theory as "a shifting synthesis of other theories," that aims at "shed[ding] light on the dialectic of the semiotic and the social in a wide variety of social practices by bringing to bear shifting sets of theoretical resources and shifting operationalisations of them" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 16–17). The assemblage's mobility and flexibility could match well these authors' emphasis on the *shifting* quality of theories and operationalisations.

As was said before, the properties of an assemblage emerge from what it can do, that is, from the variable set of its parts' capacities, which are defined by their encounters and interactions with other entities. This accounts for the assemblage's synthetic power. In the case presented here, the properties of the assemblage/concept of gender identity emerged from the interactions between its different dimensions, which imply not only producing a theoretical interpretation of gender identity, molecular becomings, and social exclusion, but also many interactions with different social, political, and governmental

actors. In the context of this research, my active involvement in the LGBTIQ+ social organization Mocha Celis becomes a foremost example of an interaction, without which the theoretical, political, and ontological dimensions of this assemblage would never have entered into their actual relations. Other interactions that defined this assemblage/concept's capacities involved governmental instances, such as the Ombudsman for the Public of Audiovisual Communication Services (where, among other activists, I participated in a consultation session about gender-related violence against transgender people in the media), the National Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity (where I taught a special class on media and gender-related violence for the workers of the national telephone line that provides assistance in situations of gender-based violence), and a National Criminal and Correctional Federal Prosecutor's Office (with which I collaborated by revising an opinion in the first stance that requested the dismissal of a transgender woman accused of lesser drug dealing, my doctoral thesis being quoted as part of the grounds for the request).

Needless to say, an assemblage's consistency and the efficacy of its capacities are not warranted by its mobility alone, but must be gained through situated experimentation, and trial and error. Being dependent on the capacities of its parts and their encounters with other entities, the identity of an assemblage is also inevitably subject to change. In this sense, the assemblage/concept of gender identity presented here as an example is the product of particular circumstances, and is not proposed as a general or permanent solution to the problem of the political and ontological stakes of identity.

Closing Remarks: Assemblages and a Casuistic Approach to Social Science

In the first sections of this paper, I have outlined my doctoral interdisciplinary research on a *discursive representation* intimately connected with subjectivity—*gender identity*—through the linguistic analysis of texts from specific discursive and social coordinates—life storytelling by transgender individuals in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, at the beginning of the 21st century. This analysis allowed selecting the linguistic components of that representation and interpreting them as *discursive traces* of an ontological process of nomadic subjectivation. This process was traversed by the *productive power* of sexual difference as an open, non-binary multiplicity (*becomings*); and at the same time, by the social exclusion and violence of a system based on the reduction of sexual difference to a binary model of sex/gender (*social transvesticide*).

As may be noticed, the above paragraph includes all the notions featured in the "conceptual molecule" (Fig. 1), with those in italics corresponding to its main connections. The concept of assemblage allowed reflecting on these connections and especially on their consistency. This concept was not operative during the research, in the sense that it was not included in the Deleuzian part of the theoretical frame, but emerged afterwards as a revealing interpretative key that allowed considering the investigative process as a whole, from the initial motivation that drove me towards these issues (such as my early personal connections with transgender people, their causes, and their suffering) to the *ex post* outcome of defending my thesis in terms of new personal and social interactions and effects (such as participating in a judiciary process directly aimed at modifying the social stigmatization and actual living conditions of the transgender collective). Through the concept of assemblage, the relations between

different theoretical and experiential fields can be seen as more than a simple aggregation or juxtaposition of elements: they were knit together into a singular, complex, and meaningful whole.

I believe employing the concept of assemblage for this kind of methodological reflection can inform research not just on gender identity, but on many social phenomena. Working on dense concepts like *identity*, *gender*, and *discourse* from this viewpoint enables a more daring and creative grasp of their composing relations. The exteriority of the relations between the whole and its parts defines assemblages as open and mobile entities. By treating concepts as interdisciplinary assemblages, one is more adept to consider previously unexplored, heterogeneous dimensions as possible operative components of the research process. By the same token, the identity of the research process is treated as not merely dependent on the logical relations between its central concepts, but also on their external relations. That is, on what those concepts can do: the extent of their capacities to enter into new relations with other (affective, social, political, etc.) entities.

If treating concepts as assemblages enhances their possibilities of entering into new external relations, it also favours considering them as situated compositions and as triggers for social action. This can result in an opportune blurring of the boundaries between theory and praxis, since working with assemblages can unlock processes of synthetic cooperation and mutual becoming. To mention a few examples, such is the case when a researcher becomes a member of the community under study, while other members become researchers themselves; when the discursive coordinates of academic genres (like thesis and dissertations) pervade other discursive genres and social practices (like judicial rulings, bills, and institutional recommendations) (Soich, "Entre la calle y la ley");[39] or when the dynamics of a street demonstration become an artistic piece of collective thought (Shock and MAfIA).

To conclude, I would like to underline that this approach stems from a line of thought that can be useful for CDA and Discourse Studies, and in general for the more explanatory and emancipatory goals of critical social sciences (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 4). In "The Method of Dramatization," Deleuze asserts that the crucial question in the philosophical exploration of the Idea is not *what is this?*, a question that "prematurely judges the Idea as simplicity of the essence" (*Desert Islands* 95). Instead, he upholds approaching the Idea as multiplicity, which is "much closer to the accident than to the abstract essence, and can be determined only with the questions *who? how? how much? where and when? in which case?*" (*Desert Islands* 96; italics in the original). In this sense, we can say that, for Deleuze, philosophy is not a mirror of essences, but a casuistry of accidents (*Desert Islands* 95). This *casuistic* philosophical approach can suit critical social science, whose aim is not to conceptually "mirror" the social, but to enhance our comprehension of it by intersecting concepts, discourses, and experiences, and by actively engaging in these intersections. In the case presented here, asking *what* gender identity *essentially is* proved less interesting and fruitful than inquiring into the accidental: *who* cares about gender identity and *for what*; *where* and *when* is gender

[39]The full title translates to "Between the street and the law: social and discursive changes concerning gender identity."

identity constructed, and *how*; *what can be done* about it, and so on. Casuistic questions like these are especially relevant when creating and experimenting with assemblages.

This proposal is based on reflections over my experience as a socially engaged researcher. As such, it is then necessarily limited. More limitations will be dictated by future assemblages' degree of success in producing satisfactory explanations and social interactions in their respective scenarios. However, I believe the potential of treating concepts as interdisciplinary assemblages is vast, encompassing gender, class, ethnic, and many other traditional intersectional aspects,[40] as well as institutions and movements operating in different scales. A common saying in Argentinean LGBTIQ+ activism is that *we must create the world we wish to live in*. Concepts as assemblages can contribute to thinking the world we currently live in and the one we wish to live in, in a way that can push thought into its fusing point with action.

[40]Regarding these aspects, Jasbir Puar has maintained that the concept of assemblage, which is "more attuned to interwoven forces," can dispel the still too rigid traits assigned by the intersectional model of identity. See, Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke UP, 2017, p. 212. In this paper, I have endeavoured to make a similar case focusing not on the intersectionality of identity, but on the interdisciplinarity of social concepts.

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The Media "Event" and Erasure of Dialogue: On Image- and Decision-Making in U.S. Elections

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Abstract | As new media emerge, especially social networking, the individual's process of making political decisions will change. Despite early claims that social networking might usher in more participatory forms of democracy, the opposite may be true. This article analyzes the decision-making process of thirteen young, undecided voters in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election to understand how they are using social media to reach decisions. These young voters value an appearance of authenticity in political candidates, but they seem to resolve the "information overload" of news coverage and campaign advertising by focusing on a single random event rather than engaging in dialogue with others or by looking for consistency across events. An analysis of these young voters' processes will demonstrate what is absent from their decisions, which they seem to have made in isolation—made, that is, without showing awareness or consideration of broader political/historical/rhetorical contexts. This leads us to ask, what kind of thinking—and, hence, what kind of decision-making—might have emerged had they engaged more actively in living, face-to-face democratic dialogue? As a corollary, the article raises a key question concerning the nation's political process: In a media-saturated culture, how can we sustain a healthy dialogue about social justice?

Keywords | Social Networking, Aristotle, Jean Baudrillard, *Paradeigma*, Rhetorical Example, Event, U.S. Presidential Elections, Hannah Arendt, Democratic Dialogue, Social Justice

The most famous political advertisement—perhaps, the most effective as well—ran only once. It was 1964. Then-President and Democratic candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson, was running against his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, who opposed the recently-signed Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.[1] Even though U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War had not yet escalated, Goldwater said that he might end it with nuclear weapons. This is the backstory. The advertisement itself, which ran for thirty seconds, showed a young girl standing in a field and counting to ten (incorrectly) as she pulled petals from a daisy. The girl's counting fades to a male voice counting backwards. As the camera zooms in on her eyes, a nuclear explosion—a flash and then a mushroom cloud. Then we hear Johnson's voiceover: "These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark, we must either love each other, or we must die" ("Daisey Ad"). When he recorded these words, Johnson was the Commander in Chief of the U.S. armed forces. Napalm and Agent Orange were already being used in Vietnam. Yet, the complicated ethics of the war were erased with a single girl. A single place. A single viewing. A single image. A single event. And just a few words.[2]

During the 1988 presidential campaign, a political group supporting George H.W. Bush ran the Willie Horton ad repeatedly. Horton, a Black man, serving a life sentence for murder in Massachusetts, was furloughed for the weekend. Instead of returning to prison, he fled to Maryland, where he committed assault, armed robbery, and rape. Michael Dukakis, Bush's Democratic opponent, was then Governor of Massachusetts and had supported the furlough program. An anti-Dukakis ad about Horton's furlough ran multiple times in multiple markets. It told the entire story of Horton breaking into a young couple's house, stabbing the husband, and raping the wife, but what most viewers remembered was Horton's mug shot—a Black man with an Afro. The news media was slow to denounce the ad as racist.[3] Perhaps, the furlough program reformed a number of

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[1]On August 5, 1963, the Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. After U.S. Senate approval, the treaty that went into effect on October 10, 1963, banned nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. See, "Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partial_Nuclear_Test_Ban_Treaty.

[2]In *Daisey Petals and Mushroom Clouds*, Robert Mann argues that the ad became "the most powerful symbol of a new era of politics" (xi). For political ads, it marked a shift from radio to television. The shift in media entailed a shift from ads that included more information about issues to ads that focused on images. For Kathleen M. German's review in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, see, German, Kathleen M. "Review of Robert Mann's Daisey Petals and Mushroom Clouds." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, September 2012, pp. 669–71. To view the ad, see "Daisey Ad (1964)."

[3]The commercial is in color—except for the mug shot, which is shown in black-and-white and just slightly off-focus. The camera angle makes Horton seem as if he's looking down upon the spectator (the effect of which is the heightening of his implicit power and potential for violence). This will not be the first or last time that U.S. media would manipulate the image of African-American males, making them darker in color and seemingly more menacing. In *The Race Card*, Tali Mendelberg argues that the Horton ad was effective because it only implicitly referenced race. When race is evoked overtly, the audience is reminded of

inmates. Perhaps, Dukakis could have explained it better, but the ad was effective, maybe even decisive in Bush's win. A single mug shot. A single image.

We could say that these two ads use example as a form of induction, as Aristotle describes *paradeigma* in his *Rhetoric*.[4] It seems, however, that they are on the verge of something new, not a new form of argument, yet something that persuades, or temporarily resolves a tension between two unsatisfactory choices—they are almost "events." The event, as I use the term in this article, will not fully emerge until the early twenty-first century; it would not be effective until social media appeared. This will not be an analysis of political ads. It will be a discussion, written in the weeks after the 2024 presidential election in the U.S., of how a dialogue about social justice issues can be easily lost in a rhetorical failure, an inability to escape a single—often random—event.

The Example

In our historical moment, my concern for the discussion of social justice issues is that we are unable to move beyond the "one"—that is, beyond an audience's singular focus upon a single, seemingly isolated "event." Let me begin with a short detour to what we call the birth of rationality in Western civilization, the fifth-century BCE, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, particularly to Aristotle's discussion of the example. The example—as Aristotle explains it, rather cryptically, in what were his lecture notes—is a form of induction, a movement from the specific to the general. The example, Aristotle says, is a "part to part" comparison (1.2.19),[5] a form of argument that is essentially a metaphor. Although Aristotle doesn't mention metaphor, he seems to be thinking of rhetorical tropes. He writes that the example is not a comparison of "part to whole" (a synecdoche) or whole to part (a metonymy). This would seem to indicate that the example, as a rhetorical argument, begins with the specific/concrete instance *and stays there*. Yet it is, according to Aristotle, a form of induction. *Paradeigma*, the Greek word for example, more clearly implies that an example is meant to illustrate more than a single event. (We see this in English usage, where paradigm denotes an overarching pattern or model, as well as a singular instance.) As Benoit argues, the "part to part" comparison includes a general term, implied but not stated.[6] The implied general term is similar to the missing term of

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egalitarian values and then rejects the ad. This is a key point I will make in this article, that an "event" (such as the Horton ad) is more persuasive when it is experienced but not processed through reflection or dialogue. For the reviews of Mendelberg's book, see, Frymer, Paul. "Review of Tali Mendelberg's *The Race Card*." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2003, pp. 667–68; Hutchings, Vincent L. "Review of Tali Mendelberg's *The Race Card*." *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2002, pp. 647–48. To view the Horton ad, see "Willie Horton: Political Ads."

[4]As Aristotle notes, "to derive a general law from a number of like instances is in Dialectic induction, in Rhetoric example [*paradeigma*]" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1356b). Donald E. Bushman explains: "When one uses examples in argumentative discourse, one is arguing from particular instances to a general conclusion, or from known particulars to an unknown one. It is important to remember that rhetorical induction does not *prove* anything; it is arguing from probability that known instances are parallel to and illuminating to those less well known" (247; emphasis in original).

[5]I am using George A. Kennedy's translation of the *Rhetoric.*

[6]Benoit is responding to Hauser's "Aristotle's Example Revised." Hauser does acknowledge that the example, in Aristotle, is a form of induction, but Benoit felt he did not adequately explain how the example moved from the particular to the general. See, Hauser, Gerard A. "Aristotle's Example Revisited." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1985, pp. 171–80.

an enthymeme[7] or the warrant in Toulman’s model.[8] Even though not necessarily stated, it makes the comparison of “part to part” work. Furthermore, the two types of examples that Aristotle mentions in the *Rhetoric* are history (we might consider this a nonfiction argument) and fable (a fiction argument). These are both narrative structures. Therefore, the “part to part” comparison is essentially narrative to narrative.

Since the 1970s, whenever the United States is considering war, some American politician will say, “This is going to be another Vietnam.” This is argument from example (history); it is an argument that metaphorically compares a narrative of the Vietnam war to a not-yet-realized narrative of a future war. The “part to part” comparison evokes a number of general statements that can then be used to explore the implications of the new war: “war is unpredictable,” “don’t get involved in a foreign civil war,” or “even superpowers have trouble handling resistance from insurrectionists.” I want to make two points from this detour. First, the example is a form of induction. It might begin with the singular/concrete (a historical event, like Vietnam), but it moves to or evokes an abstract truth. It doesn’t remain within a single event. Second, it invites dialogue and critique. Will Vietnam (a jungle war) be the same as a potential war against Iraq (a desert war)? Should we explore other historical parallels? Etc.

If we substitute the Vietnam War for the Peloponnesian War, this kind of argument could have been delivered in the *agora* or forum of fifth-century BCE Athens. Now, we have other forms of induction: the scientific method and statistics. We have bureaucracies and algorithms to manage Big Data, to attempt to make sense of it, and to develop policies from it. We are at the beginnings of Artificial Intelligence, but it is hard to say where that will lead. We also have other forms of communication: Beyond radio, film, and television (which were revolutionary in the previous century), political pundits and influencers today inhabit such media spaces as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (to name several). These expand, amplify, and digitally record discourse in ways unanticipated by classical rhetorical theory.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle offered advice to a speaker who, without even a microphone, addressed an audience physically present. Now, our political discussions (I am using “discussion” to indicate something less than “dialogue”) rarely happen face-to-face or even in traditional print media. Discussions—*exchanges* is maybe more accurate—typically unfold on social media: Facebook, X, Instagram, etc. As Hannah Arendt argued (*Origins* 409), totalitarianism and propaganda emerged with new media: the daily newspaper, radio, and film. In the early twenty-first century, social media is transforming politics. We have not even begun to understand its implications for democracy and dialogue about social justice.

[7]An enthymeme is a less formal and concise form of logic, wherein the syllogistic “middle term” is generally accepted as true and can be implied (*Rhetoric* 1.2.13). “Being a man, Socrates will die” is an example whose middle term (“all men die”) need not be stated.

[8]In *The Uses of Argument*, Stephen Toulman presented a model for analyzing and constructing arguments. A claim (“there are dogs nearby”) is supported by the ground (“I hear barking and howling”). The warrant, which is often not stated, is the logical tie between claim and evidence (“dogs bark and howl”).

The Event

As social networking emerged, a number of theorists have written about the "event," which seems more suited to our current communication landscape than Aristotle's example. If we consider Sigmund Freud as an origin, the event carries trauma. If we move on to Jacques Lacan, the event spurs development as a young child gazes into a mirror. Gilles Deleuze considered his entire corpus an explication of the event, an explication that challenges traditional views of what is real (Bartlett et al. 117–63; Ford 41–71). In this article, I will focus on Jean Baudrillard, who understands the "ecstasy of communication" better than anyone. These theorists do not compare *event* to Aristotle's *example*, but Baudrillard's theory will help us to understand how our current media (touted, in its early days, as promoting personal expression and participatory democracy) has reduced the scope of political dialogue, flattened it, and randomized it.

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Imagine the difference between reading a daily newspaper at the beginning of the twentieth century and scrolling through the feed of Facebook, Instagram, or X in late 2024, around the time of the U.S. Presidential Election. Social networking platforms include information in print, but they also include sound, video, animation, and memes. If we consider these posts as arguments, they are certainly a different kind of argument than Aristotle's example. They are more like what we might experience in a Broadway theater—more like watching a spectacle. If posts on social media are a form of argument, the speaker seems anonymous or absent, the message seems lost in a series of random effects, and we, as the audience, expectantly wait for a moment that will startle us.

To understand some of the implications of this shift, we can turn to Baudrillard—almost to anything he has written. I will begin with "The Implosion of Meaning in Media," a short essay in *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981, long before the advent of social networking platforms. In the following quote, Baudrillard is exploring what happens when we are overwhelmed with information. We might think that "information produces meaning," but he says the opposite happens:

> Rather than producing meaning, it [information] exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar. The nondirective interview, speech, listeners who call in, participation at every level, blackmail through speech: "You are concerned, you are the event, etc." More and more information is invaded by this kind of phantom content, the homeopathic grafting, this awakening dream of communication. A circular arrangement through which one stages the desire of the audience, the antitheater of communication, which, one knows, is never anything but recycling in the negative of traditional institution, the integrated circuit of the negative. (80)

I am sure that some who read this passage in 1981 must have thought that Baudrillard was a lunatic, like the madman in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* who walks through the middle of town, in broad daylight, lantern in hand, screaming, "God is dead." Reading him in December 2024, Baudrillard seems more like a prophet.

While I could spend a page or two on each phrase in the quote above, I want to emphasize Baudrillard's use of phrases that point to a lost connection with reality (theater, staging, phantom, simulation, grafting, dream), the effect of an assault of information

(exhaustion, recycling, circularity, blackmail) and the word that holds all of this together—event. Baudrillard says, "You are the event." The spectacle might be public. How it affects the audience is idiosyncratic and… I want to say individualistic or personal or interior. None of the words quite works. Perhaps, monologic, as used by Bakhtin.[9] The event is the opposite of dialogue.

Later in the essay, Baudrillard writes, "Behind the exacerbated *mise-en-scène* of communication, the mass media, the pressure of information pursues an irresistible destruction of the social" (81). To bring Baudrillard up to date, which doesn't take much effort, we could say that media, as it exists in our current historical moment, is transforming itself at an ever-accelerating pace, that we are living in a simulation of the social, that we are exhausted with information, and that we are losing connection with the real—if by "the real" we refer to living human bodies moving in time and space through a material world. We are often swept away in an "ecstasy of communication." The only way to protect ourselves is to shut off devices, which most of us are unwilling to do, or to wait for an event to emerge from noise and provide a fleeting sense of meaning. As with eating junk food, this meaning (or, rather, this consumption of information, since "meaning" brings a promise of communication value) is not satisfying or nourishing. We are left with nothing but orange fingertips from eating a bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. Baudrillard writes: "We live by a passionate idealism of meaning and of communication, by an idealization of communication through meaning, and from this perspective, it is truly *the catastrophe of meaning* that lies in wait for us" (83). Baudrillard's reference to "idealization" is on point. Submerged in our failures in communication is a poorly constructed Utopia where absolute good and absolute evil are easily sorted and where actions have no consequences. In social media, we can substitute an avatar for our photograph and then slowly construct a perfect life, post after post. Remaining anonymous, we can hurl insults against anyone who challenges our beliefs.

Undecided Young'uns

Let us see if we can make meaning from Baudrillard by applying his theory to current politics. The 2024 U.S. Presidential Election—as we were told, ad nauseum, by both sides—was about the future of democracy. It is hard to imagine an advancement of social justice without a healthy democracy. If democracy in the United States is not already in its death throes, its future will depend on the young'uns: the Millennials (born 1981–1996), the Gen Zs (born 1997–2012), and whatever else is coming down the pike. Baby Boomers, like me, may stick around a while longer so we can keep mucking things up, but the future is with the young'uns. They are already having an impact, and they may have been the demographic that determined the 2024 election. That remains to be determined, but what do we know, in these early days after the election, about young voters?

From August through the November election, *The New York Times* followed thirteen young voters. In August, they were all undecided. *The NY Times* checked in with them often, but I am going to focus on the post-election article (see, Healy et al.). The

[9]The monologic is best described as what it is not—the dialogic. Emerson and Morson write: "The dialogic sense of truth manifests unfinalizability by existing on the 'threshold' of several interacting consciousnesses, a 'plurality' of 'unmerged voices.' […] The voices cannot be contained in a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather, their separateness is essential to the dialogue" (236–37).

article is rich with quotes and worthy of study. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the group as the Thirteen.[10] Let me make it clear that I am not critiquing the moral or intellectual character of these young voters. I am focused, rather, on their "rhetorical situation" and its texts: specifically, on the characterizations these thirteen have given of their own decision-making processes, each of which, for all appearances, proved singularly reliant upon a single example or event. For it's a *rhetorical* analysis that I'm engaged in, one that aims to demonstrate the inordinate power of the paradigmatic "one." Concomitantly (and perhaps ineluctably), it's a power of persuasion that is purchased at the price of (over)simplification. Where examples reign, the more rigorous modes of logical demonstration fall asleep (as, indeed, do an individual's capacities for critique and self-reflection: these, too, tend to fall asleep). Let me again quote Bushman on the Aristotelian model:

> Whereas full logical induction enumerates all possible instances, the rhetorical argument by example almost always enumerates less than the total. […] If one provides examples, for instance, of the voting records of all one hundred U.S. senators to make a general statement […] one is making use of full induction. In a typical rhetorical situation, however, a writer or speaker hasn't the time and the reader or listener hasn't the patience to deal with every possible example. Instead, one chooses representative examples, the persuasive value of which is strengthened by their relevance and by means of their connection to other rhetorical devices. (247)

In the "rhetorical situation" of the Thirteen, we see this lack of "time" and "patience" taking its toll. In making this last observation, I'm not quarreling with their votes; rather, I'm pointing to an effect of rhetoric that popular media has amplified—to the detriment, I would argue, of reasoned, informed, reflective choice within democratic governance.

What follows, I freely admit, is itself a rhetorical strategy, one that treats the Thirteen as *paradeigmata*, themselves. I am reading and responding to these, not as human histories but as rhetorical *exempla*, each embedded within a larger political narrative. In effect, their texts become themselves "events" that I've chosen to dialogue with, rhetorically. More than analysis, you can call the following an argument—an argument by example.

As a group, the Thirteen seem bright and well informed, but not particularly ideological. Most of them do not speak of themselves as Democrats or Republicans, and they often switch their votes from one party to the other, election to election. They are deeply distrustful of mainstream media, less so of social media. A few of the Thirteen were concerned about inflation and the economy, but this did not seem to drive how they voted. *The Thirteen were most concerned about authenticity*. They found, in my opinion, good reason to question the authenticity—and, hence, the projected image or ethos—of both candidates, Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris.

Jack (22, New York, white, underwriter, voted Biden in 2020, Trump in 2024) said: "The Joe Rogan interview was huge for me. Trump enthusiastically said yes to a

[10]*The NY Times* undecided voters might not be typical of their generation. Indeed, it is hard to find a common thread even among the Thirteen. This will not be an exhaustive analysis. I want to focus on a few insights and use them to say something about what democracy demands of us all, not just the young'uns.

three-hour, open, honest conversation with Joe Rogan, who was a former Bernie bro.[11] I think it's very telling about which candidate is authentic and which candidate is not."[12] I am sure this quote makes many liberals cringe, but Jack is operating from a good value (authenticity) and he is reasonable, at least, in how he explains his decision. Trump sat with Rogan for three hours; Harris did not. Several of the Thirteen mentioned that Harris, in their view, only did interviews on "entertainment" platforms. It is interesting that *The Joe Rogan Experience* was not classified as "entertainment."

In our current media landscape, the distinction between traditional news, entertainment, and social media is blurry. What is unclear is how Jack experienced the Rogan interview. Did he watch the entire interview as an audio podcast? Or, as a podcast with video? Or, as a snippet or two on YouTube? Maybe Jack even saw the same snippets repeatedly. Maybe he viewed most of the interview in fragments, out of sequence. A fragment, a snippet, a soundbite: These are easier to react to as an event. Some voters, for example, watched the entire presidential debate between Trump and Harris. This experience is more complex and nuanced. If viewed as segments on YouTube, Harris might have seemed weaker or stronger, considering which fragment was viewed. Harris started out shaky and gained strength as the debate proceeded. In the vice-presidential debate, Democratic candidate Tim Walz's performance was generally weak, except for one moment, when he asked Republican candidate, J. D. Vance, if the 2020 election had been stolen.[13] Watching only a YouTube clip of Walz asking this question and Vance struggling to answer would make Walz seem stronger than if the entire debate were watched. The snippets, fragments, and soundbites are media-structured events. They are well suited to digital media, which we tend to sample in small bits. To be understood, the complete debates have to be analyzed—reflected on over time or discussed with friends. The event is immediately experienced as complete, self-sufficient, and unambiguous.

With the event, even authenticity, typically difficult to assess in any form of media, seems apparent in the moment. For example, Laura (22, Maryland, white, legal intern, too young to vote in 2020, voted Trump in 2024) said: "I was looking for a candidate I felt I could trust. A key moment that stuck out to me was the 'S.N.L.' skit that Harris did, where she essentially made fun of herself. All of her focus was going to entertainment industries and avoiding interviews. That came off to me as very phony."[14] Again, the importance of authenticity. This is a good value, but we might question her process. Could Harris's willingness to laugh at herself be viewed as authentic? Could Trump's unwillingness to laugh at himself be viewed an inauthentic?[15]

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[11]Jack is referring to Bernie Sanders, the prominent U.S. senator from Vermont whose democratic-socialist views stand radically opposed to Trumpian populism. Sanders was a regular guest on Rogan's podcast, though that in itself hardly makes Rogan a "Bernie bro" or fan. They do, however, share something in common: both Rogan and Sanders are political independents, affiliated with neither major U.S. party.
[12]For the interview, see, "Joe Rogan Experience #2219 – Donald Trump." *The Joe Rogan Experience*, 25 Oct. 2024, https://youtu.be/hBMoPUAeLnY?si=d2trJP2jsKOeCEDG.
[13]For the complete text, see, Becket, Stefan. "Read the Full VP Debate Transcript from the Walz–Vance Showdown." *CBS News*, 2 Oct. 2024. www.cbsnews.com/news/full-vp-debate-transcript-walz-vance-2024/.
[14]In the last days of the 2024 election, Harris appeared on SNL on November 2. See the SNL Wiki page on Harris at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/Kamala_Harris.
[15]Let me add a further observation here pertinent to the "rhetoricity" of rhetoric, itself. As Aristotle notes, rhetoric differs from dialectic in that its arguments aim at probability—not logical/epistemological

Less apparent in Laura's comment is the way that the event, which seems to have triggered an intuitive decision to vote against Harris, comes prepackaged with its own interpretation, which she uses to justify her decision. She said that Harris avoided interviews (she means on traditional news platforms) and only did "entertainment" interviews. In the early days of Harris's campaign, this was a frequently repeated criticism. Laura may have even heard a comment like this before she watched Harris on SNL, which would have shaped her experience with that event. She doesn't have to analyze the event; social media does that for her so seamlessly that event and interpretation are difficult to see as separate.

In point of fact, Harris had 107 days to run her campaign. Most candidates begin preparing a few years out. Harris also needed to formulate policies and strategies before beginning interviews. She did several interviews with mainstream media, including Fox News. Trump cancelled interviews, especially in the final weeks. Presidential candidates often appear on SNL and poke fun at themselves. In 2008, both McCain and his VP candidate, Sarah Palin, went on SNL.[16] In 1968, Richard Nixon tried to make himself seem less stiffly formal by going on *Laugh In* to say, "Sock it to me."[17] In contrast, Trump rarely pokes fun at himself. I have never seen him laugh. Here, in response to Laura, I'm trying to put the event into context and evaluate it. I am trying to construct my own meaning, looking for patterns and consistency across events. This is what seems to be missing from the Thirteen's consumption of media during the election.

While almost all of the Thirteen mentioned authenticity, they were not consistent about what event pushed them to a decision. It is striking how randomly they settled on *their* event. Their processes, however, were remarkably similar. As with Jake and Laura, they tended to focus on one event and emphasize it without qualifications or context. They focused on *the* single event—not so much an issue—as if that alone provided all the information they needed to cast a responsible, informed vote. When prompted toward the end of the focus group, they were able to discuss issues, even in depth. But their take on issues didn't seem decisive. Once they experienced the event, their thought process seemed to end. If one focuses on a single event, then patterns, consistency, and contradiction are never considered.[18] It seems like their view of authenticity is rather flat.

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certainty—and deal with appearances (*Rhetoric* 1.1.354a). Within the classical rhetorical model, *every argument is reversible*. One could in fact argue that "authenticity" is never anything more than an appearance, curated and manipulated by media.

I, personally, embrace an ethic grounded existentially in authenticity, which is itself grounded in the exercise of self-reflection leading in turn to self-knowledge and ethical care/responsibility. Like Jack and others among the Thirteen, *I want to believe in the possibility* of personal authenticity. This is an aspect of ethos that enables us to trust others, even if it requires "a leap of faith." If we cannot place our trust in the politicians whom we vote for, then whom can we trust? Who can deserve our vote?

[16]McCain hosted SNL on October 19, 2002. During the 2008 campaign against Obama, he appeared on Weekend Update on November 1. See the SNL Wiki page on McCain at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/John_McCain. Palin appeared on October 18, 2008. See the SNL Wiki page on Palin at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/Sarah_Palin.

[17]Nixon appeared on *Laugh-In* on September 16, 1968. See, Edwards, Phil. "What Really Happened When Nixon Did Laugh-In." *Youtube*, 11 Dec. 2022, https://youtu.be/RejncCk2QxE?si=QK64B5LlPHXCjBOJ.

[18]It seems like, in an age when almost everything is recorded and available online, that consistency would be key to evaluating authenticity, especially when many politicians contradict themselves. *The Daily Show* is particular adept at collecting a series of contradictory statements on policy and presenting them in a

For example, Lillian (27, Virginia, white, digital advertising, voted Trump in 2020 and 2024) said: "The thing that was really the nail in the coffin for me was when Biden called half the country garbage and then the White House moved to change the record officially. That really bothered me. That made me really want to rally against them." Again, authenticity. I agree that the statement was undemocratic, and the White House should have owned it and apologized. What interested me, however, was the focus on this single Biden comment—a single event. This is the process that candidates and many 24/7 cable news programs model. Fox News, for example, spent days commenting on Biden's "garbage" statement.[19] Trump himself dressed up like a garbage man and, as a photo op, climbed into a garbage truck.[20] The same news media that create the noise of too much information do their best to transform bits of information into events.

For Abigail (23, Virginia, white, graduate assistant, voted Biden in 2020, Trump in 2024), the event was a Harris advertisement "where there are two married couples and the two wives went in to vote secretly and they glanced at each other and then voted for Kamala Harris—oh, my gosh. Is that what you think of married women, that we don't have the confidence to marry men who are our equal partners? I cannot vote for a party that thinks that poorly of me."[21] I see her point. What I find troubling is the focus on this one event. She doesn't move from this statement to other events in Harris's campaign. She doesn't compare it to the other candidate's statements and actions. The spectacle of this one event, to her, explains everything.

Implications

The Thirteen are digital natives. They have been trained—the word is not too strong—to skip from one bit of information to the next. They were also raised in a world with too much information. Much has been said about the way social media rewards us for living in information silos. Not enough has been said about information overload and how we need to become radically and arbitrarily selective to adapt to social media. The Thirteen might not even be representative of their demographic, but their process may very well be typical of how many current voters, regardless of their generation, participate in the democratic process.

I see the Thirteen as hitting a point of information overload, experiencing one event, making their decision, and then shutting down. I don't see evidence of sustained reflection, analysis, or dialogue. None of the Thirteen cited a discussion with family or friends as the event that triggered their decision. Perhaps, the range of what they chose

montage. See, Spocchia, Gino. "Daily Show Supercut Ridicules Lindsey Graham's Attacks on Trump Before He Took Power." *Independent*, 31 Oct. 2020, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/daily-show-supercut-ridicules-lindsey-graham-s-attacks-on-president-before-he-took-power-b1479902.html. While humorous, these contradictions, even when pointed out, seem to have little effect on how the politician is viewed.

[19]See, Wulfsohn Joseph A., and Jacqui Heinrich. "White House Altered Biden's 'Garbage' Transcript despite Concerns from Stenographers." *Fox News*, 31 Oct. 2024, www.foxnews.com/media/white-house-altered-bidens-garbage-transcript-despite-concerns-from-stenographers.

[20]See, WBNS 10TV. "Donald Trump Boards Garbage Truck to Draw Attention to Biden's Remarks." *YouTube*, 31 Oct. 2024, https://youtu.be/-PBPSmqPUtQ?si=oj-kCa-o2stxzx8b.

[21]See, Yang, Angela. "Political Ad Ignites Conservative Anger over Women Possibly Hiding Their Vote from Their Husbands." NBC News, 4 Nov. 2024, www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/political-ad-ignites-conservative-anger-women-possibly-hiding-vote-hus-rcna178584.

to focus on, which seems erratic to me, is an indication of them making decisions in isolation.

If the Thirteen's decision-making process is widely spread, perhaps a growing trend in our rapidly changing media landscape, it will impact the future of democracy and dialogue about social justice issues:

1. *The Thirteen were generally dissatisfied with both candidates.* This tracks with other sources that have reported on "double haters" and erratic shifts in some voter demographics (see, Miller's "How Some Voters Moved from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump"; and Klein's *Doppelganger* 94–113). This may be connected to the kind of family structure that often produces the "authoritarian personality" (see, Adorno et al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality*; Erikson's "The Legend of Hitler's Childhood"; and Hoffer's *The True Believer*).[22] Another cause might be, as Baudrillard contends, a vague sense of Utopia embedded in advertising campaigns.[23] How can we sustain a dialogue about Social Justice issues when voters are disillusioned with the entire political process?
2. *The Thirteen valued authenticity but the value seems poorly developed.* As they focused on one event, they did not look for patterns, consistency, or contradictions. While authenticity is certainly a problematic concept, especially within the context of postmodernism, I think most theorists would agree that consistency is important (see, Jensen's *The Ethics of Nonfiction* 21–55; Jensen's "The Rhetoric of Permanence and Change"). It is difficult to say much about how the Thirteen might define authenticity, but they seem to use it within the context of Political Correctness. As the norms of Political Correctness developed since the late 1950s, most politicians have become increasingly cautious about their public statements. Politicians who seem to ignore the norms of Political Correctness (for example, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders) seem authentic. Have we reached a point where discussion of social justice issues seems, by default, inauthentic?
3. *The Thirteen's anxiety increased until it was resolved, at least temporarily, by an event.* The event allowed them to find enough meaning in the moment to move toward a candidate they already favored or away from one they found troubling. Do extended discussions of social justice issues increase the anxiety of many voters, maybe even make them feel like they are bad people?
4. *The Thirteen's interaction with an event seemed arbitrary.* As I have suggested throughout this essay, the context of the event is less narrative than image, less speaker than authorless messages, less audience than witness, less a political campaign than spectacle. The Thirteen seemed to wait for an event to appear from the background noise of information overload. Why one event attracts attention when so many other events are ignored is hard to say. Maybe, it is highly personal,

[22]On my Substack platform, I published a series of essays that analyzed these works and used them to explain both the MAGA movement and Wokers. For an introduction to the series, see, Jensen, George H. "Divided America: An Origin Story." *Democratic Vistas*, 18 Jul. 2024, https://georgejensen.substack.com/p/divided-america-an-origin-story.

[23]In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard writes: "In ecstasy: this is the object in advertising, as is the consumer in contemplation of the advertisement—the spinning of use-value and exchange-value into annihilation in the pure and empty form of the brand-name" (28).

even idiosyncratic, almost random. The right image hitting the right person who happens to be in the right mood. In an environment of mass media overload, how can Social Justice issues demand attention?

5. *The Thirteen's experience with the event seems, for them, self-sufficient and complete.* The event might provide fleeting meaning, but it erases much more. Consider Laura who seemed to use feminist values to critique the Harris ad about women voting secretly against their husbands but ignored Trump's misogyny. The event is isolated from other issues and comes with its own prepackaged interpretation. Rather than initiate dialogue, it finishes it. How can we have sustained dialogue about social justice issues when networks of issues are reduced to the singular event?

I didn't see any of the Thirteen looking for patterns, placing the event into a context, or weighing the seriousness of the event by thinking through its implications. In other words, the event struck them viscerally—as if it were a slap in the face. We could say that it was not just "an event," it was the "final event." The event resolved ambivalence, provided a sense of meaning, and allowed the witness—this is a good way to describe how the Thirteen processed the event—to act, to cast a vote. The event is but a moment. It soon passes. It has been felt and does not need to be discussed or processed. The randomness of this process might explain why polling has been so inaccurate in recent years.[24]

Rationality as Mystique

It would be wrong to attribute this process to the Thirteen being young or undecided voters, since people from all demographics proceed largely in this unreflective way. In *The Enigma of Reason*, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber wrote that people reason "not to solve the problem—that they had already done intuitively—but to justify their intuitive decision" (44). In other words, people make decisions intuitively and then develop reasons for arriving at that decision, either to justify it to others or themselves. We are less rational, Mercier and Sperber say, than we think. With the Thirteen, the event is what triggers the "intuitive decision." This, in itself, is not necessarily bad. The problem is stopping with a flash of intuition. As Mercier and Sperber explain, "What is problematic isn't solitary reasoning per se, but solitary reasoning that remains solitary. Reasoning, however, is bound to sometimes remain in one's head, as people fully anticipate when they will be called to defend their opinions. […] Modern environments distort our ability to anticipate disagreements" (249).

If we are essentially irrational, what does that say about the future of democracy? Mercier and Sperber also write: "Instincts can be seen as 'natural expertises.' Expertises could be seen as 'acquired instincts'" (69). In other words, not all intuitive decisions are the same, and people can learn how to make better intuitive decisions. Even though our thought process might be rather submerged, even from our own awareness, we can still learn to think better. Doctors, scientists, and engineers typically make better decisions

[24]Political polling will, no doubt, continue, but it has been wildly inaccurate in the last few decades. After the 2024 campaign, Ann Selzer, pollster for the Des Moines *Register,* considered to be the best pollster in the country, retired after her last poll had Harris ahead of Trump in Iowa. See, Reilly, Liam. "Ann Selzer to End Election Polling After 16-Point Miss in Final Iowa Survey." *CNN*, 17 Nov. 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/17/media/iowa-pollster-ann-selzer-retire-trump-harris/index.html.

about their area of expertise. And their expertise deepens as they talk with other experts. Something similar can happen in other domains of life, including politics.

This doesn't necessarily mean going to graduate school to work on a PhD in Philosophy and writing the definitive dissertation on Kant. It can come from engaging in respectful political dialogue with people who have diverse views and experiences, which helps us develop better intuitions (to make more nuanced decisions, even when the decision is made rather automatically) and more accurately anticipate responses (to internalize a dialectic and critique the original decision). This rarely happens in our divided country, which means we will become more divided.

All of the Thirteen said that they enjoyed participating in the focus group. They enjoyed listening to how others were thinking, which suggests that the experience was rare or nonexistent for them. Mark (24, California, Black, chef, voted Bided in 2020) said:

> I grew up in Alabama, and now I'm in California. Seeing a group of people who can actually debate and care about the candidates and aren't loyal to a party but loyal to a set of ideas and real things—it gives me hope for the future of our country. I don't trust the leadership at the top right now. But I think with people like us coming up, real change can come through. I think we can fix problems.

Mark and the others want debate. I don't agree, however, that a focus group is the same as a debate or a dialogue. It is more a means of studying views already formed than it is a way of processing and challenging those views, a give and take, someone saying, "Have you thought about…?" We are living in a world that is so absent of true dialogue that we mistake a series of monologues for a dialogue, an interplay of opposing voices, an open space where nothing is certain, where arguments become transparent instead of assumed or implied, and where everyone emerges changed. This is what philosophers, since Plato, have called the dialectic—arriving at truth through deep and systematic dialogue.

The Danger of Purity

One final point, perhaps the most important. The Thirteen consistently disliked both candidates. They wanted a better choice. We could talk about how mass media, the primary system, and donor money taint the system. Probably all of these factors play a role in the selection of candidates. While they didn't say it, the Thirteen seem to want purity—a candidate they can adore. Baudrillard wrote about the "idealization of communication." The Thirteen seem to look for *the* event that will allow them to overlook the faults of one candidate or *the* event that will produce such emotional outrage that another candidate becomes unacceptable. They don't seem to view the candidates as human and as necessarily flawed. They don't seem willing to evaluate flaws—to decide which flaws are acceptable or benign and which are unacceptable and dangerous, which are normal and which are pathological.

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt wrote that absolute good is as dangerous for democracy as absolute evil (72–75, 80–88). I was stunned when I first read this, but I think she is right. Those who seek purity, who want to be absolutely good, cannot accept even normal faults in politicians. We should not worship our leaders. If we dislike both

candidates, we should view that as part of the democratic process—even as a democratic virtue.

Conclusion

I will return to where I began—political advertising. In "Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising," Baudrillard says that all discourse has taken the form of advertising and propaganda (*Simulacra and Simulation* 87–94). Propaganda, public relations, and advertising all develop a simple message that is repeated endlessly. As the simple message is repeated, W. J. T. Mitchell would say it is also "cloned,"[25] it seems true enough because it is everywhere. If we substitute event for message, we can see that its repetition and cloning move a single event from mere noise to seeming like the experience of a spectacle. It is outside us and shakes us into awareness. It is both singular and everywhere, difficult to resist, too easy to accept as complete. All that is missing is the suffering of human beings living in physical bodies as they move through a material world. All that is missing is ethics.

[25]In *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell writes about cloning, the duplication of images (for example, the photos of prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison) as a disease, a virus, or a metastasizing cancer cell.

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Translanguaging Pedagogy: A Tool for Social Justice and Equity in the Language Classroom

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Abstract | Translanguaging is a powerful tool to address questions of social justice and equity in the language classroom. While teaching dominant languages (in this case English) that automatically operate as hegemonic forces, invisible but powerful language hierarchies get formed that often engulf language practices and identities of learners, especially in a classroom that promotes monolingual norms and expectations. This paper discusses pedagogical translanguaging as a transformative practice that has the power to engage in critical literacy in ESL/EFL contexts. It reports experiences and insights from a writing course offered to adults of foreign nationals learning English as a Foreign Language at EFL University Hyderabad, India. It discusses tasks and reflections from classroom interactions and argues for adopting a process approach to teaching writing that incorporates pedagogical translanguaging to maximise learner engagement by systematically creating opportunities for them to use their full linguistic repertoire and actively bring in their cultural resources to negotiate meaning in the classroom. Data from focused group discussions, reflective journals, and unstructured interviews throw light on the learning process and provide useful insights into translanguaging as a pedagogical tool, thereby creating counter narratives which question and contest power and linguistic hierarchies in the classroom.

Keywords | Pedagogical Translanguaging, Multilingual Pedagogy, Bi/Multilingualism, Codemeshing, Writing Skills, Language Education, Language Equity, ESL, Metalinguistic, Social Justice

Introduction

Language classrooms are rich in linguistic and cultural resources which often remain underexplored due to unscientific ways of approaching language teaching and learning. Monolingual biases and hegemonic practices create opaque boundaries between languages and identities, thereby infusing a feeling of lack or deficiency in the learners who are placed in teaching and learning environments that have a subtractive effect on their bi/multilingual competencies. Even traditional bilingual classrooms typically maintain strict separation between languages, treating bilingualism as double monolingualism where each language operates as an independent system. In contrast, translanguaging acknowledges and leverages the fluid, interconnected nature of bi/multilingual language practices. It creates opportunities for learners to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire and question monolingual norms. As a result, ideas and expressions from multiple language sources become legitimate learning resources and create counter literary practices. Ofelia García states that translanguaging goes beyond code switching and encompasses a view of "'hybrid language use', that is, a 'systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process' […] which is important for all bilinguals in multilingual contexts" (140).

Questions of social justice in language education cannot be addressed without discussing the linguistic codes that are used in the classroom for knowledge creation and meaning making. Classrooms being a space for co-creation of knowledge through dominant languages need to recognise and legitimise translanguaging practices. Without promoting translanguaging in the classroom, the power structures cannot be questioned or disrupted through multiple frames of thinking and being. Traditional classrooms impose monolingual norms even when the teachers or learners share languages other than English. Such practices reinforce linguistic hierarchies and define what is knowledge and non-knowledge in the classroom, further marginalising cultural and linguistic identities of learners. In the classroom, cultural hegemony can be understood "within the framework of *hegemony* developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971), which explains how people acquiesce to invisible cultural power" (García 141, italics in original). This is highly relevant in case of a dominant language classroom where the target language, English, is a language of power, privilege, and prestige. Hegemonic practices are "routine actions and unexamined beliefs that are consonant with the cultural system of meaning and ontology within which it makes sense to take certain actions, entirely without malevolent intent, that nonetheless systematically limit the life chances of members of stigmatized groups" (Erickson 45). As English language teachers, it is essential to approach teaching and learning from a place of critical examination of the power structures and linguistic hierarchies than viewing the classroom as a space to simply reinforce such structures. The types of texts selected in the classroom, the nature and

language of classroom interaction and discourse, turn taking[1] and negotiation of meaning, assessment practices—all these are influenced by the dominant understanding of bi/multilingualism and the way it is reflected in the curriculum and classroom practices. A translanguaging pedagogy will look at all the above aspects of teaching and learning from a critical perspective instead of viewing language as a closed system where only form and accuracy define competence.

Context of the Study

EFL University, Hyderabad, offers one-month English proficiency courses for foreign nationals (non-native speakers of English from countries in the Global South) as part of ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) programmes funded by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Each batch of participants consists of 50 foreign nationals. On the first day of the programme, a proficiency test is administered to identify learner needs and proficiency levels in English. A detailed participant profiling is also done to understand their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and motivations to learn English in India. Based on the performance on the written and spoken tests, the participants are divided into two groups—basic and advanced. The 100-hour proficiency course consists of seven modules planned around the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (LSRW) and language elements), Grammar, Vocabulary, and Pronunciation. This paper focuses on the writing module offered to the basic group over a period of four weeks with 16 hours of instruction.

Data reported from the basic group consisted of 23 participants from various countries of South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. Focused group discussions, unstructured interviews, and reflective journals were the main sources of data. All the participants were working professionals in various ministries in their respective countries. The age ranged from 25 to 45 years. Translanguaging tools were systematically employed to develop their writing skills in English.

Pedagogical Translanguaging

Our understanding of translanguaging in the classroom is still evolving and hence there is a lack of a composite theory or taxonomies that list translanguaging strategies. Therefore, it is important to critically evaluate classroom practices and adopt a bottom-up approach to understand this phenomenon operating in multilingual contexts. Originally the term was coined in Welsh to address teaching in bilingual settings where language mode for input and output was switched deliberately (Lewis et al. 643) but now researchers see it evolving as a distinct pedagogic theory and practice. In United States, the term focuses more on its social justice dimension in the context of empowering minority learners (García and Lin 11). In the Indian context, Lina Mukhopadhyay in her paper "Translanguaging in Primary Level ESL Classroom in India: An Exploratory Study" has reported the use of translanguaging in the context of primary government

[1]"Turn taking is the systematic process by which people coordinate their talk in a verbal interaction such as conversation. It is the set of practices and techniques whereby conversant determine when to speak (once they want to) and when to listen in the interchange of talk, and what happens subsequently in various circumstances. In conversation, there is a situation when a speaker takes the chance to speak that is turn" (365). See, Syafar, Dian Noviani, et al. "Turn Taking Strategies in Classroom Interaction." *TELL-US Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2023, pp. 364–375, https://doi.org/10.22202/tus.2023.v9i2.6882.

schools among low Socioeconomic Status groups. The paper discusses teacher's systematic use of Hindi and Telugu to advance academic proficiency in English by giving inputs through a planned teacher training programme (1).

Translanguaging is defined as "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, understandings and knowledge through the use of two languages" (Baker and Wright 280). Jasone Cenoz and Durk Gorter in their article "Pedagogical Translanguaging: An Introduction" state that translanguaging is often used as an umbrella term to refer to a wide range of practices and theoretical propositions where more than one language is involved (2). It is an approach to language pedagogy and fluid language practices used by bi/multilingual people. García defines translanguaging as "the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential" (140). In his book *A Language Gained: A Study of Language Immersion at 11-16 Years of Age*, Cen Williams offers insights into the cognitive aspect of translanguaging when he states that in translanguaging, input processing may happen in one language, and the output can happen in another. The output can be modified, supplemented, and augmented (37). Referring to the multimodal aspect of translanguaging, Li Wei calls it an instinct and a natural drive that highlights "the multisensory and multimodal process of language learning and language use" (24). Suresh Canagarajah in his book *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* uses the term translingual practices and suggests that translanguaging is part of this broader term (12).

Before making a distinction between teacher vs student-led translanguaging, it might be helpful to define the term pedagogical translanguaging. Traditionally, languages have been taught by strictly separating target language (operating from native speaker norms) and students' first language; thereby, mixing of languages is prevented. However, research in multilingualism has questioned the scientific basis of such strict language separation especially in multilingual settings where fluidity between languages exist and thrive naturally in the language use of multilinguals. Moreover, they cannot be compared to monolinguals, and their language competencies will differ from their monolingual counterparts. This is not to say that they are deficient or inferior language users. Pedagogical translanguaging is based on the tenets of multilingualism. Cenoz and Gorter in their book, *Pedagogical Translanguaging*, state that the three dimensions of multilingualism that feed into pedagogical translanguaging are multilingual speaker, the multilingual repertoire, and the social context (14).

Pedagogical translanguaging has been defined by Jasone Cenoz as "planned by the teacher inside the classroom and can refer to the use of different languages for input and output or to other planned strategies based on the use of students' resources from the whole linguistic repertoire" (194). She has also distinguished pedagogical translanguaging from spontaneous translanguaging, which occurs in natural settings and is a reality of every bi/multilingual. Another important distinction in this area is natural versus official translanguaging. Haven Official translanguaging on the other hand, is teacher-led and consists of planned actions which form a part of the lesson execution. When a teacher expects students to write using their full linguistic repertoire, it is an example of official translanguaging. This is also known as teacher-directed translanguaging, which involves structured and systematically planned activities with an aim to create

meaningful and collaborative dialogue in the classroom. "[T]teacher plans the strategic use of two languages, thinks consciously about the allocation of two languages in the classroom, reflects and reviews what is happening, and attempts to cognitively stimulate students by a 'language provocative' and 'language diversified' lesson." (Baker and Wright 283). Thus, it is "*a process of knowledge construction* that goes beyond language(s)" (Wei 15, italics in original).

Research in this area has thrown light on how translanguaging by teachers is used as a scaffold to allow students to access complex texts and create new knowledge and practices instead of limiting their learning due to emerging proficiency in the dominant language. "Translanguaging as pedagogy refers to building on bilingual students' language practices flexibly in order to develop new understandings and new language practices, including those deemed 'academic standard' practices" (García and Wei 92). The transformative potential of translanguaging has also been highlighted. It is "capable of calling forth bilingual subjectivities and sustaining bilingual performances that go beyond one or the other binary logic of two autonomous languages" (92–93). Thus, leveraging students' developing linguistic repertories forms the cornerstone of pedagogical translanguaging. It is important to note that teachers need not know all the languages in the classroom to set up planned tasks for translanguaging. Instead, the teacher needs to give up her authority in the classroom as the 'knower' and take up a more facilitative role thereby setting up tasks for collaborative learning to maximise interaction. García and Wei further suggest that "the teacher sets up the affordances for students to engage in discursive and semiotic practices that respond to their cognitive and social intentions" (93).

When translanguaging is used to teach content in the classroom, translation tasks are used carefully to differentiate language structures and reflect on new morphosyntactic rules. It can be used to develop new background knowledge to support learning and promote critical thinking through multilingual groups, collaborative dialogues, reading multilingual texts, using multilingual audio-visual resources, and project and research-based learning that demand synthesising knowledge from multilingual resources. Translanguaging can also boost crosslinguistic transfer of skills and raise metalinguistic awareness. It can also encourage cross linguistic flexibility which can manifest in the form of translanguaging in speaking and writing, alternating languages and media.

This paper discusses teacher-led or pedagogical translanguaging in the writing classroom and advocates it as part of transformative pedagogy having the power to address issues of social justice in language education.

Translanguaging and Writing Skills Development

Translanguaging in the classroom leads to authentic language use and supports student writing. Authentic language use refers to using language for the purpose of accomplishing self-defined tasks instead of imitating structured language input for targeted L2 learning. Translanguaging also encourages the use of authentic materials (materials not created for language teaching, and which generate language use that mimics real life communication) such as cultural artifacts, songs, films, social media posts, etc., that are created not just in the target language but in languages of the learners thereby encouraging discussions and reflections across language boundaries. The

presence of multiple languages in the classroom is no longer considered a hurdle or hinderance in learning. Translanguaging in pre-, during, and post stages of the writing process can contribute to student writing in ways that help them to use their complete linguistic repertoire strategically making choices to suit their purpose for writing. Translanguaging is not just a scaffold in the classroom to help students with low proficiency in the target language; instead, it can enable student-writers to fully express themselves creatively, empowering them to develop their own voice in writing. In the pre-writing stage, translanguaging helps in brainstorming, thinking, generating ideas, assessing rhetorical situation, negotiating genre conventions, and critically reflecting on their journeys as writers. Thus, translanguaging is not just a scaffold but an essential part of being a bilingual writer.

Samway defines good writing as "clear and evocative writing that captures [her] attention, whether [her] intellect and/or [her] emotions" (22). A writing class that focuses too much on form, grammar, punctuation, and accuracy tasks based on word lists and sentence construction fails to view writing as a complex, collaborative process that also involves "the development of voice, and writing with power" (Elbow, qtd. in Espinosa et al. 7). The process approach to writing acknowledges the discursive nature of writing and all the efforts and steps that precede the final product. A collaborative and dialogic view of writing within the process approach opens possibilities to incorporate translanguaging strategies to assist student-writers to bring their complete linguistic repertoire into the writing process. Other modalities are intrinsically linked to the process of writing such as reading, speaking, visualising, listening, and performing. Flecher and Heard argue that writing classes need to integrate reading materials and provide opportunities to students to engage in peer interaction which help them to create, reflect, critique, and negotiate meaning (qtd. in Espinosa et al. 7). These pedagogic interventions ensure activation of schema, support idea generation and development, help student-writers to structure their writing, and engage in meaning making process.

For bilingual students, meaning making becomes a holistic process when they participate in interactions that allow them to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire, in other words, *translanguage*. By creating spaces for translanguaging in the classroom, authentic writing and learning can be encouraged. Translanguaging in the spoken discourse is often more acceptable than in writing. However, mixing of linguistic codes in writing is a possibility; or, in other words, in writing, one can *translanguage*. Translanguaging is possible through speaking, reading, writing, and thinking even if the final aim is to compose a monolingual text.

Another strong voice in research literature is that of Canagarajah who has engaged with language choices of multilingual writers who are allowed to access their entire linguistic repertoire. Canagarajah in "Understanding Critical Writing" writes, "We should respect and value the linguistic and cultural peculiarities our students may display, rather than suppressing them. We should strive to understand their values and interests and discover ways of engaging those in the writing process" (14). Therefore, Canagarajah argues that instead of limiting our multilingual students to engage only in one language throughout the writing process, it is possible to create space for multilingual engagement in the classroom. For instance, in the planning stage, a reading material in the student's first language can be used and note taking can happen bilingually, or students may discuss

their ideas with their peers in a common language which feeds into their writing in the target language. Multilingual writers challenge monolingual literacy practices through such acts of translanguaging, leading to better rhetorical awareness.

Canagarajah in "Codemeshing in Academic Writing" reported narrative writing of a bilingual graduate student and found that utilizing her entire linguistic repertoire such as using Arabic words in her English writing, including emoticons and Islamic art allowed her to communicate with her intended audience in a complex manner (403). It was a transformational experience for the student as she was able to critically and creatively compose her text. Moreover, the author highlights the need for educators to carefully study the writing practices of multilingual students so that they can be made into pedagogic strategies (415). Canagarajah also discusses the term codemeshing that refers to fusing a variety of language practices and codes across dialectal choices including diverse symbol systems (403). Translanguaging is thus multimodal, transdisciplinary, and "it emerges from the contextual affordances in the complex interactions of multilinguals" (García and Wei 40).

Translanguaging Pedagogy for Writing: Need of Our Times

The digital age calls for a new paradigm of teaching writing, a perspective that views fluidity between languages and multilingualism as the norm. Translanguaging pedagogy challenges monolingual views of using only the target language in the classroom and rejects the idea that multiple languages in the classroom is a problem that needs to be tackled. Instead, the language and cultural resources of the learners are organically and systematically integrated in the pedagogical process. This view also questions one standard for writing dictated by native speaker norms. The multilingual writer is constantly negotiating the linguistic codes and contributing to the language use. Language cannot exist in isolation; it is constantly evolving as the users shape it through their experiences and ways of being. Drawing from the ideas of Bakhtin and Holquist, writing pedagogy in the 21st century makes space for multiplicity of voices and perspectives (qtd. in Espinosa et al. 9).

Multilingual literacy practices and multimodality are interconnected. Through the integration of technology, the writing classroom also becomes a space for multimodal explorations. Students are free to compose texts through digital media accessing content in different languages. Writing is no longer restricted to words on paper, but integrating sounds, images, videos, data visualisations can make it multimodal. Writing prompts can be designed keeping in mind the new ways of written expression through social media and online networking. The writers of 21st century need to create multimodal texts such as podcasts, videos, photo essays, memes, webpages, social media campaigns, and other forms of digital texts. Our writing classrooms need to reflect this shift in the real world. Genres that draw from the digital space need to find an organic space in the writing curriculum. For instance, in the writing module under discussion, travel blog and social media posts were included that naturally lends itself to multilingual and multimodal explorations.

Translanguaging Strategies Used in the Course

The one-month proficiency course offered to foreign nationals at EFL University consists of a writing module of 16 hours and provides a space for pedagogic innovations. The

participants in the basic group who are identified as having A1 level of proficiency (as per CEFR scale)[2] or beginner users of English took part in this study. The number of participants were 23 and they were all multilinguals. The writing tasks were based on integration of skills approach including all the language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the pre-task, participants listened to audio and video materials and took notes in their mother tongue, followed by peer interactions in a common language or mixed language groups, followed by generating an idea bank for writing to begin. Mind mapping and brainstorming were done bilingually in groups as the teacher did not know the languages of the students. However, it is important to highlight that it is not necessary for the teachers to know all the languages in the classroom to use translanguaging pedagogy. Multimodal inputs in the form of videos, audios, images, and digital content diversified the writing process. Moreover, participants were encouraged to use bilingual online resources to generate ideas. The final writing task was to create a social media post on their travel to India. This task allowed them to finetune their content to an intended audience that knew their languages and therefore created a genuine need to *translanguage*. Use of images, emoticons, and codemeshing in their languages led to authentic expression of their travel experience.

The following translanguaging tools were incorporated in the writing module:

- Double entry journals

This is a "writing to learn" strategy as outlined in the New York City Writing Project (Domini, qtd. in Espinosa 24). This tool allows students to use their entire linguistic repertoire. The paper is divided into two columns. The first column has a quotation from the aural or written text. Then the students are asked to respond to this quotation by writing their views on the right side of the paper. The teacher can give some prompts to help students reflect on the quotation in meaningful ways. Students are encouraged to use their entire linguistic repertoire. They are free to write in their mother tongue or even mix English and other languages.

Example from my class:

In the first week, my students listened to a TedTalk on the power of writing, and based on the listening they were asked to respond to a quote from the talk. The quote given to them was "Writing is a superpower. It is a weapon to change the world." Participants were then asked to get into groups with similar mother tongues and brainstorm in their language groups followed by a double entry journal which led to generation of ideas around this quote. These discussions also brought forth alternate perspectives to literacy practices when speakers of African languages highlighted how many of their languages do not have a written script. Participants also reflected on the politics of writing histories of nations that have been colonised. Therefore, writing is also a matter of privilege and power as many languages in the world do not have a written script. Challenging mainstream written discourse became another point for discussion. Such critical conversations were possible only because the writing classroom became a

[2]For more information on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale, see, www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions.

site for reflections on our multilingual identities and experiences. These discussions were used as the basis for writing an argumentative paragraph.

- Writing from a different perspective

This tool allows students to look at a text from diverse perspectives and engage in critical thinking. It also helps them evaluate purpose, context, and audience while writing. Students can be put in home language groups to be able to use their mother tongue for discussion.

Example from my class:

In the second week of the programme, we discussed informal emails. After reading an email set in a particular context, the participants imagined writing about the same topic but to different people. This led to discussions on how the same topic can be presented in different ways with the change of audience in a writing situation. When we write an email to a relative vs a friend vs a family member, we look at the topic from a different perspective to suit the purpose and needs of the audience. This led to discussions on word choice, register, tone, and inclusion and exclusion of details. Participants varied their content based on this rhetorical awareness and engaged in natural language use drawing from their experiences without focusing on structured language input. They were also encouraged to revise their drafts through self and peer evaluation rubrics. Some students, especially with Spanish as their first language (L1), also *codemeshed* words from their L1 and reflected on those words to find the equivalents in English in their second draft. Since Spanish and English share several cognates (related words such as clase/class, opción/option, universidad/university, mercado/market, examen/exam).

- Writing as Readers—Using Mentor Texts

Exposing students to relevant texts that can inspire them as writers is important. Writers are keen readers taking cues from texts they read and adopting some of the moves in their own writing. Mentor texts are authentic materials that students can analyse, critique, and reflect on to make their own choices while writing. For instance, a social media post can be brought into the classroom as a mentor text. It is an authentic material because it was not composed keeping in mind any instructional setting. It is important to note that mentor texts can also be critiqued. While they may reflect effective language use, they can also be analysed to generate relevant discussions around rhetorical elements. Drawing the attention of the learners to genre conventions through mentor texts can be a powerful pedagogic strategy. The role of a teacher is significant in drawing attention to strategies used by the author in crafting a text, in noticing new forms, and helping learners incorporate or experiment in their own writing (Griffith, qtd. in Espinosa 56). Choosing mentor texts is also a complex process. The mentor texts must reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the learner group. Socially situated texts have a greater impact on learning than texts that alienate learners. Teachers can create a pool of mentor texts with the help of learners to reflect their locally situated literacy practices.

Example from my class:

In the third week of the course, we worked on writing a travel blog. Students watched a video on Indonesian adventure in Bahasa and read travel blog entries of

travellers across the globe. These texts incorporated cultural information, images, words from other languages, and provided examples of mentor texts for the participants to compose their own. These authentic texts were in English and in the languages of the participants which gave them space to reflect on the features of the genre across linguistic codes. This facilitated cross-linguistic transfer of writing strategies. In common language groups, they brainstormed and arrived at the textual features and genre conventions. They also commented on the writing styles. This empowered them to reflect on writing as a process irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds. The participants reported a higher degree of understanding of the genre through this task. In the focused group discussions, they particularly liked watching videos in other languages and claimed that it brought them closer to their classmates, and their languages and cultures. Incorporating videos in other languages allowed participants with diverse language backgrounds to contribute to the class discussion, drawing from their own cultural resources and legitimising the knowledge systems available in their languages as useful and enriching, shaping the classroom discourse.

Apart from the above translanguaging tools, participants also engaged in self evaluation and peer feedback to improve their drafts. Participants' lexical and syntactic choices were accepted even if they reflected deviation from standard language use. This is an important aspect of translanguaging pedagogy.

Student Reflections and Insights

At each stage of the writing process, students engaged in reflective conversation and discussions to understand the effect of translanguaging on their writing. These discussions helped them develop metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness about language use.[3] From the group discussions and reflective entries of the students, the following themes emerged that were significant to understanding the use of translanguaging in the classroom.

Pre-writing tasks	During writing tasks	Post-writing tasks
· Translanguaging helped in idea generation, brainstorming, mind mapping · Written and aural texts in mother tongue as input material facilitated schema activation	· Use of online bilingual resources helped in word choices · Writing double entry journals enhanced written expression	· Peer feedback (focussed on content) through evaluation rubrics was found to be useful and facilitated peer learning · Comparing drafts led to improvement in subsequent drafts

[3]Metalinguistic awareness refers to students' ability to reflect on language and having the meta language to talk about language whereas metacognitive awareness refers to the conscious understanding of one's own thought processes allowing learners to be aware of their strengths in the learning process and achieve better task outcomes.

Consequent Developments and Outcomes		
· Reduced learner anxiety · Gained confidence to express ideas freely · Activated previous experiences and knowledge about the topic · Mixed language groups helped in negotiation of meaning · Same language pairs/ groups facilitated interaction and ideation	· Generating topic sentences in mother tongue helped in organisation and planning · Use of cohesive devices/frequency markers through comparison in mother tongue helped in developing better flow · *Codemeshing* expanded word use and helped in expressing ideas; also facilitated in bringing in experiences across cultures	· Self-evaluation through rubrics helped in self correction and noticing language forms, punctuation errors and lexical gaps · Self-reflection on the writing process allowed participants to understand their fears and blocks around writing · Self-reflection questioned the dominant beliefs of the participants about their native languages as well as English

The above table shows that in the pre-writing stage, translanguaging helped learners in idea generation, mind mapping, address anxiety, free writing, and activating prior knowledge on the topic and genre. The strategies used during writing helped them integrate L1 and L2 language use, raised awareness of language choices, and metalinguistic knowledge through comparison and codemeshing. Post-writing strategies facilitated peer feedback, self-reflection and noticing, as well as questioning dominant beliefs about writing.

In the writing test administered at the end of the course, participants were found to be more aware of their rhetorical situation. Crafting of topic sentences, use of connectors, lexical choices and overall text organisation improved in the final test.

Ideas for Integrating Translanguaging in Teaching Writing

Based on the discussion in this paper, here are some ideas to promote translanguaging in the writing classrooms.

- Plan tasks strategically to ensure that learners use their entire linguistic repertoire to achieve task outcomes.
- Pay attention to the pre-writing stage and encourage students to use multilingual and multimodal resources to brainstorm and plan. Pre-writing can happen in L1 or through codemeshing. One language can be selected later for subsequent drafts.
- Explore language groupings that allow negotiation of meaning and lead to collaborative learning based on genuine information gap that is culturally diverse. Also encourage peer feedback through guided rubrics.
- Create real time writing tasks where learners can experiment with translanguaging in writing for bilingual and monolingual audiences. Integrating digital media can create opportunities for multimodal practices.

Conclusions

This paper argues that translanguaging is a powerful pedagogic tool to ensure inclusivity and strive for social justice in the language classroom, which becomes a site for reflexivity and critical engagement. Specifically in a writing classroom—where writing is viewed as a collaborative and dialogic process—encouraging learners to put in collective efforts in active co-creation of knowledge emerging from their lived experiences and reflecting on their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is a transformative experience. Language classrooms often end up reinforcing the hegemonic practices and dominant beliefs about language hierarchies without critically engaging with the sociocultural context in which the target language (in this case English) is being learnt. A monolingual, target language focussed classroom fails to adopt a contextually reflexive and relevant pedagogy. Both teachers and learners pay a huge price when placed in such teaching and learning environments. They are stripped of their linguistic resources the moment they walk into the language classroom which instils in them a feeling of lack or deficit. This has a negative impact on learning since their cognitive, metacognitive, linguistic, and cultural resources are not integrated in the language classroom. Thus, by embracing translanguaging pedagogy, teachers and learners challenge hegemonic language practices, disrupt established power hierarchies, and validate the complex multilingualism that exists across the world.

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