(Un)Disturbed:
A Journal of Feminist Voices

FEMINIST FUTURITIES: COLLECTIVE AND DIGITAL (RE-)IMAGINATIONS

EDITORIAL TEAM

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Feminist Futurities in/and the Digital

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We write these editor's notes at a moment of profound uncertainty and possibility. As digital technologies continue to increasingly mediate our social, political, and intimate lives (and at a time when no one bats an eye to this claim), questions of who gets to imagine, build, and inhabit digital futures have never felt more urgent. Amidst rising authoritarianism, climate crisis, and the consolidation of platform power in the hands of the few, feminist voices continue to insist that other worlds are possible and that these worlds are being built through acts of digital resistance, care, and collective imagination. As such, as we continue to forge a path into the precarious, chaotic futures that lie ahead, we must, now more than ever, carve out time and space to gather in feminist community and share with each other in coalitional solidarity how we might envision the past, present, and future. This second issue, "Feminist Futurities in/and the Digital," of the special double feature of *(Un)Disturbed: A Journal of Feminist Voices* imagines, through queer, feminist, de-colonial, and anti-racist scholarship, activism, and creative work, renewed forms of feminist futurities within the context of the digital. This issue brings together scholars, artists, and activists who are doing the vital work of envisioning and enacting feminist futures through digital means. Building on the foundations laid in the first issue of this volume ("Feminist Futurities: Living in Queer and Feminist Bodies"), this collection examines how feminist community, action, and identity take shape in and through digital spaces that are simultaneously sites of oppression and liberation, surveillance and solidarity, erasure and reclamation. The articles, creative works, and collaborative reflections gathered here ask what becomes possible when we approach the digital not simply as a tool but as a contested terrain where feminist futures are actively negotiated.

From this context, we open this issue by discussing how feminist community, action, and identity is shaped in and by digital contexts and spaces in the present moment. This issue is a celebration of the articles contained within it and how they generate feminist discussions with curiosity and imagination. Throughout we offer careful considerations of how the elements of community, action, and identity, shape and are shaped by curiosity in/of digital spaces. In staying curious, we are able to imagine feminist futurities through shared voices and stories that work towards preferred future worlds where feminist ideals—such as abolition, freedom from patriarchal and white supremacist structures, disability justice, and gender equity—are realized. We see this issue as celebrating and creating open-ended speculations on feminist becoming that challenge existing power structures by reflecting on collective digital spaces as sites of resistance and envisioning alternative feminist epistemologies that empower marginalized voices, especially women, non-binary people, and those affected by intersecting oppressions.

Importantly, as we learn from each other, we discover that imagining feminist futurities necessitates the conception of a world where the past, present, and future are entangled. This entanglement is explored throughout this issue in digital spaces, where writers are pondering what feminist community, action, and identity looks and feels like on the internet or through digital technologies. The digital is conceived of as both a space and a tool of storytelling, resistance, design, research, and care. As such, we encourage readers to speculate on what becomes of us as feminists in imagining our digital communities, actions, and identities as sites of collective resistance and reflection.

Getting Here, Moving Forward

Much of feminist organizing and discourse in the digital present reflects a long-standing impulse to reject patriarchal norms and work towards preferred, not yet realized, feminist futures. Indeed,

at many points in feminist history you can find groups of people working in collaboration to bring about more equitable structures and livable lives for those most impacted by heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist systems. This is equally true of the digital cultural context in the last decade. In *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture* (2018), Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan suggest that the 2010s reflected "a sudden reappearance of feminist concerns," that brought strident critiques of gendered inequalities back into popular discourse (2). This fourth wave of feminism offers forms of organizing around racial justice, reproductive justice, anti-rape cutlure, anti-misogynyst, anti-capitalist organizing that relies on the digital for its community building and critical dissemination. This emergent moment of feminist activism coalesced around the deeply impactful work of Black, Indigenous, and women of colour activists at the head of social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullor, Opal Tometi), Idle No More (Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon, Nina Wilson, Sheelah McLean), and MeToo (Tarana Burke). As Keller and Ryan (2018) note, within new forms of participatory culture and convergence culture brought about by internet technologies (Jenkins 2006), we are in "a convergent media landscape where content travels quickly across media, including television, film magazines and various digital platforms" (12). The effect of this is that "[w]hat is produced in one medium will likely be shared on, and amplified across, a range of other media—and in this context, emergent feminisms (as well as anti-feminisms) can take hold with unexpected force" (12). Within this moment of emergent, or perhaps now well-established, feminist activism, we see important collective feminist snaps repeatedly (Ahmed 2017, 188). Here, we are compelled by the sense that our digital performances of rage, frustration, and refusal —our snaps—can "become a spectacle" (Ahmed 2017) of sorts within their online presence and circulation.

This framing of digital feminist spectacle connotes ideas of visibility that are relevant to our focus in this issue. When we make our politics visible, there is risk of censure and violence but, at the same time, there remains the promise of kinship and community as we draw in new collaborators and friends to our causes. Spectacle, in this sense, can also mean that our resistance becomes spectacular, announcing itself to a world that, in its technologically dominant and mediated presence, demands spectacle to gain notice and traction. Thinking about Ahmed's uses of the feminist snap and spectacle together suggest, to us, that digital feminism can outline how our worlds are inequitably organized and demand the necessary changes required to achieve more just futures. In taking up Ahmed's question of how worlds are organized along lines of power but also along lines of spectacle for potentially spectacularly feminist means, we hope to organize the world in ways that, while limiting, are also full of other kinds of joyful, feminist possibilities. What does the spectacle and spectacular joy of communities of resistance open us up to as feminists? How does it encapsulate all of our affective states, the fullness of our rage and mourning, humour, pleasure, and joy? How do these affective states shift into forms of collective survival, make themselves manifest, and find their way into the visual traces of our activist practices in the digital present?

At its core, feminist futurity coalesces around visionary acts of imagining more equitable worlds for all, and this in itself is a revolutionary act, rather than a reformist one (hooks 1984; Coleman and Jungknicle 2023). In this way, feminist futurities are directly concerned with building forms of community, developing methods for effective action, and forming our identities in ways that align with the futures we hope to move into. We invite you into this issue with your own sense of what it means to live with and within community, identity, and the affective articulations of digital feminist resistance.

Speculative Feminist Becoming

In this issue, you will find ruminations of speculative feminist imaginings that reflect on depictions of canonical figures of women, women and sex, women and writing, and what happens when we unsettle our usual understandings of these things in the past and present for the purpose of imagining alternative futurities of feminist becoming. In today's digital landscape, feminist becoming unfolds in public, viral, and unpredictable ways—through tweets, memes, videos, and hashtags that spark recognition, refusal, or solidarity. These becomings are not singular awakenings but iterative acts that link the embodied and algorithmic, the intimate and infrastructural. Drawing on canonical works like

Butler's performativity (1990, 1993), Braidotti's nomadic subject (2011, 2012, 2022), and Muñoz's queer utopia (2009), we understand feminist becoming as an ongoing negotiation with power—one that resists fixed identities and embraces fluidity, failure, and potentiality. In networked life, subjects, technologies, and affects co-constitute one another: a viral hashtag or protest livestream becomes a material site where bodies, code, and emotion converge to make meaning and enact resistance. As such, this issue attends to the hopeful, insurgent energies pulsing through feminist digital culture. We focus on feminist response, rather than solely on proliferation of hate and despair, because it is hope that fuels this work. Our hope is that feminists' blueprints will guide us toward more equitable, livable futures. To trace these forms of becoming is to witness feminism constantly in motion, alive to the contradictions and possibilities of our digital.

In the first part of this issue, Ayra Thomas, for example, interrogates how Western art historical conventions perpetuate historical amnesia and racist ideologies by erasing non-white bodies from visual histories. Thomas, along with artist Ielyzaveta (Lisa) Unova, reimagines and reclaims, through a feminist praxis of Black visuality, the Ethiopian figure of Andromeda, accompanied by digital illustrations of the figure that challenge the ways in which gendered and racialized bodies become invisibilized over time. To expand on cultural imaginations, Haley Down tackles the auditory with an analysis of sound and soundscapes in audio erotica to explore how new understandings and imaginations of feminist sex might be shaped. Down investigates how the 2019 subscription-based erotic fiction app Quinn presents a potentially unique avenue for exploring personal desires while hearing and visualizing sexuality free of the threat of gender-based violence that is usually tightly interwoven with heteropatriarchal representations of erotic fiction. How we see, hear, and feel feminist praxis comes together in Carmen Warner, Alison Schultz, Sam Bean, and Barbara Leckie's collaborative meditation on radical care in the practice of writing. Warner, Schultz, Bean, and Leckie present a journey through feminist methods of co-writing that unsettle divisions and logics that inherently reinforce individualistic mentalities that only serve to separate us from one another, and from the environment that surrounds us. These authors consider how radical care and solidarity emerges when we gather to break down these long-established boundaries.

## The Entanglements and Contradictions of Feminist Praxis in Digital Spaces

The digital space as an arena for collective liberation and feminist futurities is foregrounded in Sarah Rewega's piece, which kicks off the third part of this issue, where Rewega examines the collective spaces that emerge in emotionally charged digital arenas of communication and public opinion, such as comment sections on digital social media platforms. Rewega suggests that these digital arenas act as vital sites of feminist praxis, demonstrating this through an analysis of comment-based data on the 2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C. These digital arenas, for Rewega, act as spaces where emotions, histories, and politics are entangled, providing fertile ground for feminist solidarity to both flourish, and be limited by heteropatriarchal narratives. Carolyn Wang provides a meticulous study on how feminist approaches to data can frame large language models (LLMS) in the mental healthcare industry as potential allies, if reimagined and reframed through a techno-optimistic lens. Her approach shows that, if pervasive biases, structural assumptions, and power imbalances are unraveled, explored, and resisted in combination with attentive human passion, potentially equitable methods of integrating LLMs into mental healthcare may be possible. Feminist activism in the digital sphere can often present contradictory challenges, and as Blaze Welling demonstrates through research creation, it must always grapple with the limitations of hegemonic, colonial narratives. Welling's project on digital de-colonization demonstrates invisiblizing algorithmic bias in practice, and how feminist counterpublics can foster solidarity and resistance in response to the amplification of narratives that align with settler colonial ideologies. Welling shows how feminist futurities in the digital context can and must create spaces for relationality, care, and identity formation, a sentiment that is echoed throughout the other articles in this issue.

Toward Collective Feminist Horizons

As this issue demonstrates overall, feminist futurities in and through the digital are neither utopian fantasies nor predetermined outcomes. Instead, as these articles, together, suggest, they are collective practices of resistance, care, and imagination that unfold in the messy and contested spaces where technology meets embodied experience. Across three interconnected sections—speculative feminist becoming, community formation and solidarity, and the entanglements of digital feminist praxis—the contributors to this issue trace how feminist futures are being imagined, negotiated, and enacted in digital spaces. The articles gathered here reveal that digital feminist work is fundamentally relational, thriving in the reclamation of erased histories, in the reimagining of intimate desires, and in the networks of diasporic survival and the classrooms where students learn to design otherwise. Throughout these articles, we see how feminist community, action, and identity are continually remade through digital engagement, sometimes limited by algorithmic bias and colonial logics and yet persistently generating new forms of solidarity and resistance. The digital emerges not as a neutral tool, of course, but as a site of contradiction and possibility where the visibility of feminist activism co-exists with ongoing struggles against erasure and violence. What remains constant is the feminist commitment to curiosity, to staying open to the unexpected forms that liberation might take. To this point, we close our editor's note with gratitude for the scholars, artists, and activists whose work appears here, and with recognition that imagining feminist futurities is an ongoing, collective project. These contributions remind us that the futures we seek are being built right now, in every act of storytelling, every refusal of oppressive narratives, and every moment of radical joy, and are shared across screens and communities. We invite you to carry these visions forward, to add your own voices to these conversations, and to continue the work of forging feminist futures that centre justice, equity, and collective flourishing.

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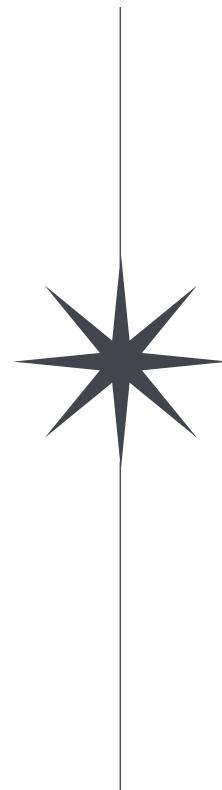
EX TENEBRIS:

Black Fugitivity, Archival Whitewashing, and the (Re)imagination of Andromeda

Written by Ayra Alex Thomas
Illustrated by Ielyzaveta (Lisa) Usanova

Dark Matter(s): Introduction

Her body is the whitest and most illuminated thing on the canvas. Her nudity, a distinct form of (un)dress, is offered up for the spectator's pleasure. She tilts her head away from our view, her torso lightly wrung, and her figure contorted with limbs arranged precariously to face us. Chained to a rock and the painting's edge, she remains calm—almost coy—while the sea behind her heaves and a fully armored rescuer gathers to fell the monster that keeps her. Andromeda is, above all, a visual antithesis in the enveloping scene. "Do you see," she seems to say to Perseus, "this is the beauty I have been cursed with from birth. Come, claim your prize."

Fig. 1.1 — *Perseus and Andromeda*, Titian, c. 1554-1556, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

Fig. 1.2 — Details of *Perseus and Andromeda*, Titian, c. 1554-1556, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

The lore behind Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* painting, currently housed in the Wallace Collection in London, finds its original sources in the Greco-Roman myth of the same name. As the myth is most widely told, Andromeda's mother, Queen Cassiopeia, provokes the gods' fury by boasting that her daughter's beauty surpassed that of the Nereids, the sea nymphs who often attend Poseidon, god of the oceans. To punish Cassiopeia's hubris, Poseidon unleashes a great flood and the sea-monster, Cetus, upon the kingdom of Aethiopia (Ethiopia). Seeking to appease the gods and save their land, Andromeda's parents chain the princess to a rock by the shore as sacrificial offering. There, exposed against the waves, Andromeda is transfigured into her most enduring image: bound and bare; awaiting death by monstrous appetite; suspended between the violence of the sea and that of divine vengeance. At this moment, Andromeda's fate is interrupted by none other than Zeus' son: the demigod Perseus—fresh from slaying Medusa and fleeing the Gorgons—catches sight of the captive maiden while riding his winged horse, Pegasus, over Aethiopia. Struck by Andromeda's beauty, he bargains with her father, King Cepheus, promising to kill the monster in exchange for Andromeda's hand in marriage. Ultimately, Perseus succeeds, Andromeda is freed, and the myth ends with their marriage and the many children (seven sons and one daughter) they are said to have raised together.

The painting by Titian, for all intents and purposes, indeed captures the *locus classicus* of the original myth, namely, Andromeda's captivity and rescue.

Except, this is *not* Andromeda, or at least, not the one given to us by our sources from antiquity. Where is the Black princess in Titian's painting? What happened to Andromeda from Ethiopia?

Drawing from Frantz Fanon's post-colonial psychoanalytical theories in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Saidiya Hartman's (2008) treatment of the archive (especially archives regarding the condition and treatment of Blackness) as a haunting ground in dire need of "critical fabulation," this essay interrogates the slow erasure of Andromeda's Ethiopian identity in Western visual and literary traditions, tracing the transformation of a mythological Black princess into an archetype of European whiteness. From mapping the disregarded classical myths of Andromeda "from darkest Ethiopia," as posited by mythographers such as Ovid, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder among others, the paper emphasizes how Andromeda's African heritage was systematically erased and reduced to a "fugitive" element in both mytho-historical and contemporary artistic representations.

By interrogating how Western archives, museums, and galleries perpetuate historical amnesia and racist ideologies by erasing non-white presences, it becomes imperative to challenge the ways in which gendered and racialized bodies may be marginalized or rendered invisible altogether, effectively giving rise to (pre-)modern modes of racial erasure. Equally important, however, are the acts of resistance that emerge in the reception of such art and whitening phenomena. Accompanying my analysis of Andromeda are a sequence of original portraits drawn by Lisa Usanova that reimagines, re-edits, and reclaims Andromeda's Blackness. While the artworks aim to 'do the practical work' of uncovering the 'white mask' and participating in feminist (re-)editing praxes of Black visuality, the pieces also serves as a direct intervention against Andromeda's aesthetic Black erasure by visually claiming a past, present, and future that asserts otherwise.

On the Violences and Silences of the Archive

Many things are lost to us in the archive; in the process of deciding our own historicity. The archive promises preservation and memory by teaching us most acutely how forgetting works. To enter the archive, to read a museum placard or catalogue raisonné, or even to attempt reckoning with the (disfigured, fractured, and often ephemeral) stories that shape our knowledge of the past, is to contend with a breathing tomb.

Like any necropolis, the archive's mortuary labor inheres simultaneously through practice and place. On a cultural level, the archive functions as a site of identity-making: collecting voices and timestamps, safeguarding certain bodies of memory, and casting others into obscurity. On a state level, it functions as a site of authority: governing how and which records are classified, what merits classification, and how all these fragments are arranged into legible systems that confer legitimacy on what becomes the 'official record,' be that law, property, sovereignty, social order, or so on. On a structural level, the very act of archiving—projecting or exporting memory outward to a secondary place or medium—is inseparable from praxes of selection, reproduction, curation, control, classification, displacement, and loss. From this understanding, the archive may be further read as an epistemological experiment:

> ...*as a strong metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections [...] for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of the primary originary, and untouched entail (Stoler 94).*

Drawing on Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Ann Stoler (2002) recasts the archive as a system that authorizes the lineaments of social order: "the law of what can be said," and the governance of that enunciability. If, however, the archive acts as a disciplinary tool of sociohistorical power, what are the subterranean impulses that drive the possibility of archiving at all? What are the forces which eat away at the conditions of preservation?

For Jacques Derrida (1995), the self-consumptive and constitutively paradoxical capacity of the archive to house the very forces that seek to erode it is, as Sigmund Freud would classify, a "death drive." "There is no archive," Derrida (1995) claims, "without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority" (78). While such exteriorization makes hypomnesic preservation possible, it also exposes memory to decay, misremembrance, exploitation, and

erasure. Reading Freud, Derrida (1995) insists that the conditions which permit archivization become tied to "archiviolithic" impulses that thrust destruction and forgetting "into the heart of the monument," so that preservation is already a rehearsal of loss, so much so that the "archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself" (79). The archiviolithic impulses in the archive may manifest as routine curatorial acts which chip away at non-white presence or convert their disappearance into aesthetic 'fact', such as the 'purification' of certain pigments; privileging of white marble; downplaying polychromy, and bolstering canons which idealize fair-skinned beauty. More menacing, however, is the systemic, methodological acts of silencing and erasure which seep into archive. Considering how historical products are valued in both the context of their production and their consumption, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) provides us with a clear model for locating "where" erasure happens:

> *Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance) (26).*

The economies of violence which saturate the archive are slow yet spectacularized, non-neutral yet normalized. In these vaults, exclusions of Blackness do not occur by accident, and indeed not only *reflect* but *manufacture* ideologies of 'whiteness' as well as the conditions of (in)visibility. Through this process, BIPOC or non-white bodies and stories are consigned to the shadowy margins, assigned a "narratively condemned status" (Wynter 1994, 70), and reduced to decorative, marginal, fugitive symbols.

Although the ephemerality of stories sharpens our hunger for containment, the desire to master memory, lore, or history is itself destabilizing; and indeed, one must always be cautious of any 'mastery narrative' seeking to flatten or totalize historical narratives, especially ones where only fractures exist. As Joan Scott reminds us in *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), "appeals to evidence as if it were transparent... create the illusion that meanings

are fixed and knowable" (35); and similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) warns that history written as total mastery is often a "myth of the West," denying the radical openness of events to confine them into prefigured plots, and ultimately effacing "traces of the other to preserve the self as transparent" (202). Such mastery narratives seduce with the promise of coherence and 'fact,' however, that very coherence is symptomatic and (re-)generative of archival violence: the sanding down of ambiguity, the disavowal of rupture, and the excision of the unassimilable, the unwanted, and, what Judith Butler labels, the "ungrievable."

The fundamental motivations of the archive (and by extension, the energies expended by the archivist to meticulously select, contain, standardize, and organize) are by nature, exclusionary and impartial. In "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman (2008) highlights how the "libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent" in the archive, but particularly in archives that define or call into question the state of Blackness and constructions of whiteness:

> *Infelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands give birth to the characters we stumble upon in the archive. Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry (Hartman 2008, 6-7).*

Hartman's formulation of the archive builds upon the conjoined dyad of Blackness and fugitivity central to much of Black aesthetic critique, theories on Black poesis, and the studies and practice of Black radical tradition. For Hartman, Black fugitivity embodies a will to (re)fashion life in the interstices of domination so that we may tend to what the archive has been unable to hold (2008; 2019). Reflecting on the fugitive resolve of Blackness, Fred Moten (2009) claims that "fugitive movement" occurs "in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic," and it is within this "zone of unattainability" to which Black figures are relegated, that there persists a "movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen," which—because it "inheres in every closed circle"—can be said to "break every enclosure" that seeks to contain it (179). In other words:

Fugitivity (…) becomes a way of 'fleeing' historical and immediate confines, to imagine conditions otherwise of unrelenting oppression (Prempeh 2025, 2)

Importantly, Nana Prempeh (2025) underscores how African worldmaking—and conceptions of Blackness—predate colonial capture and persist past it. For Prempeh, Blackness and fugitivity are too often framed through and constrained by nineteenth-century (U.S.) plantation and carceral optics alone; so much so that other "comprehensions and experiences of Blackness, especially in the case of Africa" become illegible (2025, 12). Against this reductive narrowing, Prempeh (2025) insists that fugitivity should mark any Black world-making which "eludes absolute capture and disfigurement" so that ongoing articulations of Black being slips the grasp of hegemonic standards, even when there is no exit from colonial modernity's frame; even when archival narratives pronounce the subject dead, missing, cast away, or, as in Andromeda's case, misclassified.

Although Hartman's main concern lies in probing (the violences of/in) records of enslaved Black women—particularly within the transatlantic slave trade—in order to question whether a history of the oppressed can be read, written, and heard from archives produced by the oppressors, Andromeda suffers "the same fate as every other Black Venus" (2008, 2). Despite her mythic, fictional identity, Andromeda is legible as one of the archival "characters" Hartman alludes to insofar as her Blackness predominantly survives through spectacle and subtraction. In the visual art-historical archive, Andromeda is preserved through European Enlightenment logics and post-Renaissance aesthetic traditions which systematically normalized whiteness as the standard, objective, ideal for beauty, while the Ethiopian specificity and Blackness of her figure that the classical-textual archive insist upon is disqualified, bleached away, rendered fugitive.

In "Africana Andromeda" (2020), Kimathi Donkor treats the figure of Andromeda as a masked Black presence whose Ethiopian origin becomes a fugitive instance of Africana. Certainly, Black Andromeda is no stranger to the gallows of archival logic and stands in the wake of Butler's "ungrievable" space: where records of her mythos and image perform, as Derrida (1995) would suggest, paradoxically 'against themselves,' preserving her beauty while eroding her Blackness. Donkor employs the term "fugitive" deliberately,

not only to describe the physical "fading of certain painting pigments" that lose their color, texture, or appearance over time, but also to evoke:

[…] the relationship between many Western artworks and those enslaved plantation workers whose oppression and resistance were embodied by questions of presence and absence […] the terrorized lives of those forgotten victims remained fugitive in the visual language of the painting, perhaps reflecting the imposition of social invisibility on both the enslaved and those fugitives from the law who fled plantation captivity (180-181).

While myth does not, and cannot, equate to the lived realities of enslavement or the violences endured by women under the transatlantic slave trade, Andromeda's (mytho)historical afterlife in the art-historical archive may nevertheless be traced through a parallel kind of erasure. Through the lens of Black fugitivity, her repeated "whitening" does not only operate as a distinct form of archival violence but showcases how archival necro-power manufactures legibility by routing the (once) Black woman "at the limit of what can be known" (Hartman 2008, 10-11). It is, however, precisely against this condition that Andromeda's Blackness continues to assert itself, insisting on being (re)membered and (re)seen.

On the Myth of the Negro

The silences in our archives and absences in our museums may be best described as what Frantz Fanon called an "all-white truth" in 1952. Not at least, literally, insofar as the majority of influential figures we encounter—both fictional and historical—as well as the artists and writers featured in prominent galleries and art exhibitions are, in fact, white. Also, however, because these silences and absences are often taken as the truth, self-evident and universal. That museums, libraries, and galleries—particularly in the West—continue to claim neutrality, apoliticality, and objectivity in the face of historical whitewashing and racist amnesia is itself an upshot of the root problem. The weightier, fleshier, and Darker problem. The "all-white truth" that currently plagues our literature and art (as well as our study of that literature and art) is, unquestionably, a bleaching of the truth—a lie. The fact that such white

predominance exists in the Western literary-visual canon reflects a racial-colonial system functioning exactly as it was designed, so that non-white, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Peoples of Color) are left to have no "truth," or at least, not a stable and visible one.

The "white masking" and racialization of Western culture that Fanon critiques in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is quite different to the phenomena of racial erasure and 'whitewashing' in the arts. Though the exact phrase "white masks" does not make a singular appearance in Fanon's text, Kimathi Donkor (2020) accurately reads and crystallizes its meaning: "a hegemonic demand that Black or African diaspora people assimilate into a false 'all-white truth'" (163-164). Arguably, whitewashing in the arts is the visual and literary corollary of this demand, absorbing not (only) the pressure to wear a "white mask," but the recoding of the object itself so that whiteness appears originary and axiomatic. Fanon's logic regarding the racial-colonial condition and the seemingly excessive, scandalous, but always violent 'weight of (my) melanin' directly calls into question our modes of (archival) representation, and the very optics of race and racialization that takes place in both historical production and consumption. Black Skin is pocked with Fanon's many aphorisms that seek to expose and puncture through the violent, seductive coherence behind colonial reason:

> ... *When it comes to the case of the Negro... he has no culture, no civilization, no 'long historical past.'* (21)
> ... *the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him.* (22)
> ... *a kind of lactification... in a word, the race must be whitened... Whiten the race, save the race...* (33)
> *Where am I to be classified? ... Or, if you prefer, tucked away? Where shall I hide?* (85)...
> ...*at its extreme, the myth of the Negro, the idea of the Negro, can become the decisive factor of an authentic alienation* (158).
> *For the Black man, there is only one destiny. And it is white.* (178)

When Fanon describes the Black schoolboy in the Antilles who, in speaking of his ancestors, rather "identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth" (114), he is indeed asking us to consider the racial legacies which exist in the death chambers of the archive and in the cannibalistic regimes of 'looking'. For Fanon, the desire to be represented—and represented as one's true-self—is quite simply the desire to be considered. The desire to no longer be "merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness," but rather a demand that one's presence be acknowledged even in one's absence (170).

As a symbol of fugitivity, Black Andromedas are boundless in both proto-colonial and colonial archives. The racialized, exposed, enslaved, female body particularly (un)covers herself in slavery archives (amidst other nooks) of the trans-Atlantic world.[1] We can find her in various different inventories of beauty or brutality: a line in a ship's ledger; a master's diary; an overseer's aside; a shadow in the corner of a family portrait; a traveler's taxonomy; a brief nod to the "Negro" or *"La Brune / La Noir"* in the painting's title; a pornographic vignette; a plantation; a cage; in the hollows of empire. Hers is a slow and silent act of forgetting; and she shares the same fate and "untimely story told by a failed witness" as every Black Andromeda after (and before) her: where it may be "centuries before she would be allowed to 'try her tongue'" (Hartman 2008, 8-9).

And yet, equally, she is also a ghost and a haunt(ing). How do we read, reflect, resist, and reclaim Black Andromeda's (her)story in a manner that shifts away from concluding or 'mastering' her subject and towards more reparative justice pedagogies? How do we acknowledge her presence *even in* her absence?

Dead Girl, Incarnate: Andromeda Unmasked

The notion that Andromeda was a Black woman, explicitly characterized as Ethiopian, originates from now-lost plays composed by Sophocles and Euripides in the fifth century BCE. Despite subtle reworkings of her myth during classical antiquity, subsequent texts from Greco-Roman tragedians and mythographers continued to uphold this tradition and, in all instances, regarded Andromeda as the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia of Ethiopia. In fact, Pliny the Elder (in *Naturalis Historia*, c. 1-100 CE); Strabo (in *Geōgraphiká*, c. 1-100 CE); Hyginus (in both his

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[1] By Atlantic World, I refer to the interlocked social circuits, economies, and cultures of Europe, Africa, and the Americas forged by trade, conflict, and slavery during the 15th and 19th centuries.

collection of myths entitled *Fabulae*, c. 1-100 CE, and his book of poems citing myths about the constellations, *Poetica Astronomica*, c. 30-40 CE); pseudo-Apollodorus (in *Bibliotheca*, c. 1-200 CE); and Heliodorus (in *Aethiopica*, c. 225-250 CE) all assert and re-assert Andromeda's Ethiopian identity.

Her ethnicity was so ubiquitously upheld and so widely recognized that when the Roman poet Ovid slightly deviated from his own typical reference and implied an eastern rather than a southern origin to her heritage, A. D. Melville was inclined to leave an editorial gloss in his 1986 translation of *The Love Poems* stating: "Andromeda was in fact Ethiopian, but in Latin poetry, "Indians" and "Ethiopians" are more or less interchangeable" (216). Melville's note here, regarding the "fact" of Andromeda's ethnicity, may demand too much of the reader's imagination. Can there really be a "fact" in something as dynamic as mythology? To this, Kimathi Donkor (2020) responds:

> [F]rom a twenty-first century historical perspective, Andromeda appears to be a mythical character from the realms of belief, art, and fictional literature rather than a historical person. But, of course, Melville's Andromeda "fact" was not intended to convey information about an everyday, real-life person: he meant "fact" in the specific sense of classical, literary continuity. Andromeda was Ethiopian "in fact" because she was said to be so, not only in Ovid's first-century *Metamorphoses* but [...] as well as by many other leading mythographers of antiquity. (167)

So then, how did Andromeda—a figure who made recurring and universally acknowledged appearances in Greco-Roman classical culture as a princess of Ethiopia, and therein, as a woman of African ancestry, as a Black woman—come to be widely portrayed for thousands of years by virtually all Western visual artists, as a pale-skinned, often blonde or auburn-haired white woman? To what extent can we view the narrative and geographic incongruities in Andromeda's mythology—in her very myth-*making*—as a gradual form of whitewashing? Or, as a fugitive instance of Blackness, where the African connections in her story are deliberately overlooked or erased?

Once more with feeling: *What happened to Black Andromeda?*

There were frequent misconceptions about Ethiopia's geolocation, affluence, and power

in classical antiquity, it was largely understood to be a site in India or Africa and chiefly populated by dark-skinned peoples (Simons 2022). In fact, the very etymology of the word 'Ethiopian' or (now-archaic) 'Ethiop' [Αἰθίοψ in ancient Greek and *Aethiops* in classical Latin] derives from and primarily means "burnt-face" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2014). When mentioned by Homer in the *Odyssey* (c. 700 BCE), 'Ethiopians' referred to people living in remote locations of Asia and the Far East—a space/place incongruent with Africa. It was only until a couple centuries later that the term shed its more general denotations of dark-skinned people or people "born under the sun's path" to more specifically become affiliated to a region in Africa, south of Egypt and west of Arabia (Bekerie 2004).

In this light, by the time Ovid was writing in the late first century BCE and early first century CE, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, who believed that 'Aethiopia' bordered his new Egyptian province in what is now continental Africa (Donkor 2020, 195), Ovid's emphasis on Andromeda's dark complexion alongside her Ethiopian identity served something of a distinct purpose. In Ovid's fifteenth letter of the *Heroides*—a collection of fictional love poems (or 'amatory epistles') addressed by mythological heroines to their lovers—the Roman poet chooses to write by the hand of Sappho, a real historical figure and famous lyric poetess in her own right. In the letter, Sappho mourns the departure of her (imaginary) lover, Phaon, and implores him to return to Greece, emphasizing her artistic talents to compensate for her perceived shortcomings—one of which being her complexion. In a notable passage, Ovid-as-Sappho writes:

*If unkind nature has denied me good looks, offset that
    lack by taking my talent into account.
I may be small, but I have a reputation that fills every
    land on earth; I'm as big as my reputation.
I'm not fair-skinned, but Perseus found Cepheus' Andromeda
    attractive, and she was dark (from darkest Ethiopia);
and white doves often have mates of a different color,
    and black turtle-doves are loved by green parrots.[2]*

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[2] That Andromeda is "dark (from darkest Ethiopia)" is alluded to twice more in the Heroides (c. 25-16 BCE) and once in the *Ars Amatoria* (c. 1 BCE). Ovid even labors to recount her myth in Book IV of his most renowned work, the *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE).

Likewise, in *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid thrice references Andromeda's dark skin (with *fusca* directly translating to 'black' or 'brown'), and notes that Perseus finds her among "the black Indians" (i, line 53); that her complexion was no obstacle to Perseus' love given that "white suits dark girls" (iii, 191-92). The implicit color-prejudice and concurrent proto-feminist impulses that Ovid shows us are not easily lost on the contemporary reader; but there is also no simple assumption we can make here about racial controversy in classical antiquity (Brophy 2010).

Ovid's portrayal of Andromeda notably treats her Blackness as an advantage, rather than a detriment, to her beauty or desirability, however, tensions do exist even in antiquity between textual descriptions of the Ethiopian princess and her visual depictions. On a 5th-century BCE red-figure vase currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, for example:

> *Cepheus is depicted as an old man of mixed race. He has the thick lips, upturned nose, and curly hair of an Ethiopian, but the complexion of a European. His African slaves are rendered in an outline technique that emphasizes their dark skin. Andromeda has curly hair but has a complexion like the Greeks represented on other vases in this case. All the figures on this pelike wear costumes that would have indicated to the ancient Greek viewer that they were foreigners. The tight-fitting garments with zigzag designs worn by Andromeda and her father were used commonly in antiquity to differentiate between Greeks and "barbarians" (MFA Boston).*

The modern eye is likely to be tempted into reading the 5th-century BCE painter's choices as, in some capacity, racially motivated or perhaps even racist, however, the conflation of "race" with skin color is a modern phenomenon. Many classicists such as Denise McCoskey (2006) and Sarah F. Derbew (2022) argue against diminishing the broad concept of race to myopic and biologically reductive definitions that hold skin pigment and chromatic appearance as primary signifiers, and rather, claim that "race is a slippery phenomenon in ancient literature and art" (Derbew 2022). As we comprehend from the vase, conceptions of race in antiquity are indeed diachronic and dialogic, (as seen in both painterly conventions or aesthetic hesitations) however, the idea of Black people as decisively marginal or "the coding of dark brown skin as innately threatening" has no immediate roots in the sixth century and further, remains anachronistic to the larger transactions, cultural exchanges, and social interactions of Greco-Roman antiquity (Derbew 2022).
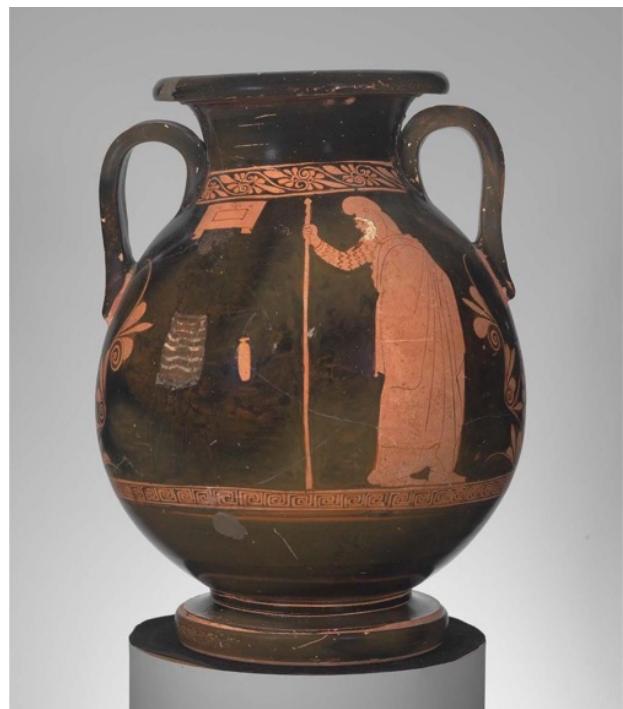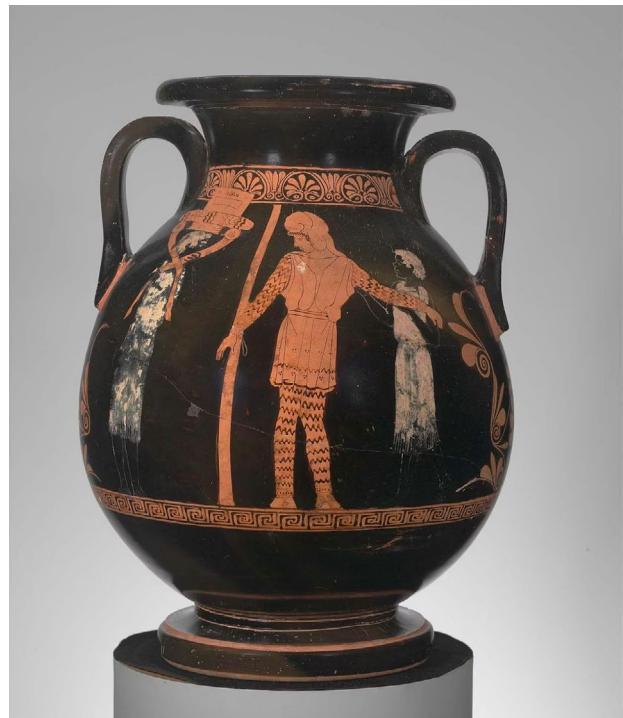

Fig. 1.3 & 1.4 — Pelike, Workshop of the Niobid Painter, Classical Greek Period, ca. 450–440 B.C. Ceramic, red-figure; height 44 cm, diameter 32 cm. Arthur Tracy Cabot Fund. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

What remains clear, however, is that Renaissance readers did indeed register Ovid's—and other classical writers'—explicit identification of Andromeda as Black, and one cannot overstate the influence, reception, and profound transmission of Ovid's legacy, across Europe, during the Renaissance (c. 1500-1600 CE). Still, despite Ovid's widespread readership and the common study of Latin during this time, many poets, writers, sculptors, and artists of the period still chose to portray Andromeda as white. "So extensive was this practice," Donkor (2020) contends, "it might almost seem plausible to construct a potted history of canonical Western art entirely through depictions of Andromeda as white."

During the early modern period (c. 1500-1700), European writers or scholars revisiting classical myths confronted Andromeda's Black identity but often chose to erase or explain it away. For instance, when the fourteenth-century poet, Petrarch, described Andromeda as a "dark virgin beauty" ('*vergine bruna*'), by the mid sixteenth-century, one of Petrarch's commentators declared that Perseus "fell in love with Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, ugly and black as she was" ('*tutta brutta e negra*') (McGrath 1992, 11; 16). In the commentator's eyes, Blackness was disqualified from beauty and—under the consolidating age of empires and amidst a hardening trans-Atlantic imperial logic—from civilizational virtue.

Fig. 1.6 — *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, Paolo Veronese, c. 1576-1578, oil on canvas, 260 x 211 cm — Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, Rennes, France

Fig. 1.5 — *Perseus and Andromeda*, François Lemoyne, 1723, oil on canvas, The Wallace Collection in London

Fig. 1.7 — *Perseus and Andromeda*, Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1639-1640, oil on canvas, 265 x 160 cm — Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Fig. 1.8 — *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510-1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
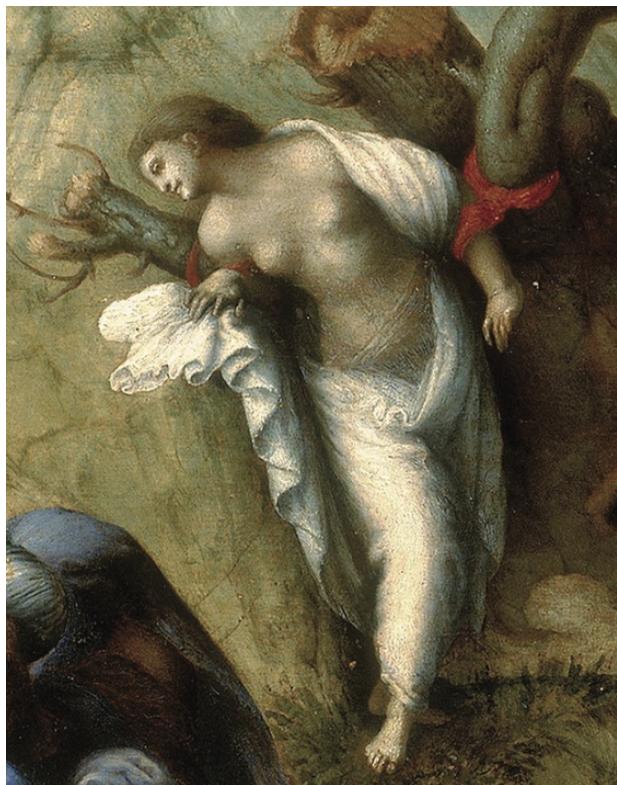

Fig. 1.9 — Details of *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510 —1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
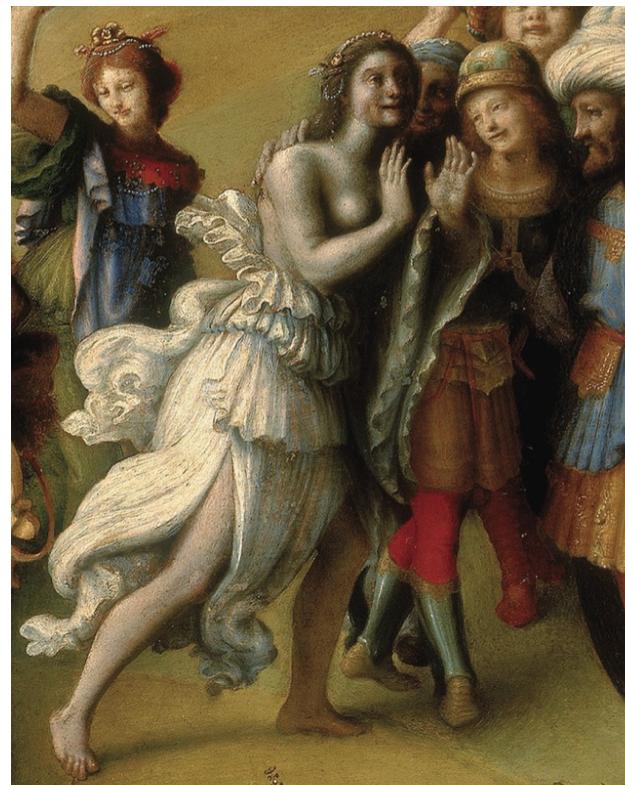
Fig. 1.10 — Details of *Perseus Freeing Andromeda,* Piero di Cosimo, ca. 1510 —1515, tempera on wood panel — Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Art historian Elizabeth McGrath's "The Black Andromeda" (1992) is, to date, one of the most extensive modern analyses into Andromeda's African identity and iconology. McGrath (1992) unravels the various artistic, aesthetic, national, racial, and religio-political complexities which led to the commonplace practice of Andromeda's whitewashing in art and art history. That Andromeda's Black and female identities intersect to manufacture a distinctly "insidious mode of racial invisibility" is clear to McGrath from the very beginning of her exposé. For McGrath (1992), understanding how Andromeda's ethno-racial identity stands in contradiction with her artistic and aesthetic traditions necessarily requires the recognition that, throughout the history and canon of Western art, figures of female beauty "whether virginal or provocative, sacred or secular, are regularly assimilated to an ideal of European whiteness, even where ethnic origin might suggest they should be represented otherwise" (7). In her own archival research, McGrath can ultimately only track two major (Western) seventeenth-century artists, namely Abraham van Diepenbeeck and Joachim von Sandrart, who were the exception to the rule and chose to depict Andromeda in all her Blackness.

Fig. 1.11 — *Andromede*, Abraham van Diepenbeeck, c. 1635-1638, engraving/etching on paper, 276 mm x 178 mm, The British Museum

Fig. 1.12 — *The Rescue of Andromeda from Metamorphosis*, Joachim von Sandrart, 1698

Insofar as 'whiteness' (its treatments, conditions, and constructions) became a cultural and colonial tool by the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, Andromeda's 'beauty' from the fifteenth century onward became routinely equated with pallor. In 1655, for instance, Michel de Marolles wrote an extensive commentary on Andromeda in *Tableaux du Temple des Muses* castigating van Diepenbeeck's depiction of her as Black. While the Parisian commentator rebukes the Flemish artist, he admits that Andromeda was likely "from a Black family" though she "presumably would have been white, albeit African" (de Marolles 1655, 314-22; qtd. in McGrath 1992, 12). By the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—precisely as European overseas empires and Atlantic slaving intensified—the compromise collapses into a standardized norm and white Andromedas populate renowned canvases and statues by Titian (1556), Veronese (1578), Rembrandt (1630), Rubens (1639), and Puget (1684), among others.

Through this understanding, there becomes increasing support to track the long early modern "whitening" or "white masking" of Andromeda's figure as a racial-colonial progression, and her later refashioning (or rather, disfiguring) as an imperial product. The period's visual and textual traditions repeatedly "solve" the problem of Black beauty by relocating beauty to whiteness and by framing Blackness as the baser surroundings (the Ethiopian crowd, the exotic court, the African shore) which only work to heighten the pale heroine's appeal.

The whitewashing of Andromeda and Andromeda's assumed whiteness continues even now in modern twenty-first century popular culture. To name a few portrayals of Andromeda,

completely bleached of her color, there is: Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's 1933 film *King Kong* (see Kilinski 2012); MGM's 1981 *Clash of the Titans* and later Warner Bros' 2010 rendition of *Clash of the Titans*; closely followed by Jonathan Liebesman's 2012 blockbuster *Wrath of the Titans* (see Galer 2019; Donkor 2020; Castell 2024).

Black Visuality: (Re)figuring Andromeda

Andromeda's character and appearance was "whitened" in a *longue durée*. The image of Andromeda—beginning in antiquity with tensions between mythic ethnicity and painterly conventions, then amplified and racialized by the neoclassical resurgence in aesthetic traditions during the early modern period and long eighteenth century, and finally institutionalized under colonial modernity—is indeed a product of racial-colonial appropriation, even if her earliest visual cues predate colonialism proper.

How do we recognize the slower and subtler violences of racial erasure and colonial history while also 'practicing a mode of refusal' which decidedly bears witness to the freedom drives beneath the cracks? How do we, in the phraseology of Maggie Nelson (2021), "allow ourselves to wander away—if only for a spell—from the exclusive task of exposing and condemning domination" so that we may find "sometimes ecstatically, sometimes catastrophically" that there is more to be said "in the knot of freedom and unfreedom than a blueprint for past and present regimes of brutality" (9).

Which is also to ask, in Andromeda's case, how do we listen for her silences, phantoms, haunts, and hauntings without reproducing her death or digging up her various archival graves by committing further acts of injustice in our own narrations? If "to read the archive is to enter a mortuary" as Hartman (2008) claims, then how do we maneuver opening the casket without subjecting the dead "to a second order of violence"? (8). Might there be new counter-historical approaches to "listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives" as a praxis of freedom and the continuous search for justice? (Hartman 2008, 3). How do we exercise our response/abilities toward

silence, absence, and nothingness; towards a politics of care that respects what we may never know?

We are not only haunted by the tragedies, erasures, and violences of our past and present, but we bring these 'ghosts' into our negotiations with, hopes for, and anxieties of the future. In distilling from the past and imagining for the future, sites of struggle and acts of resistance seep past temporal boundaries and linearity. In "Responsibility to Nothingness," Aytak Dibavar (2024) urges us to (re)member that which colonial history has cleaved into oppression and oblivion, noting that "the ghosts of our pasts are a memory in need of being remembered" (16). Negotiations with history, therefore, are not only forward-facing into the future but also forward-facing into the past. If our evolving knowledge of the past is constantly in talks with our history of the present and vice versa, then relaying (counter-)histories necessarily involves the ongoing and incomplete project of freedom.

Thus far, my task has been to answer such a call to counter(-)history: to reclaim, at least textually, Andromeda's Blackness in the wake of the archive's "all-white truths" and to "unmask" some of the ways through which her disappearance and (re)appearances as a fugitive symbol of Blackness have been staged in the canon. Nonetheless, to fully capture the spirit of what Saidiya Hartman terms "critical fabulation"—a method not only *necessary* to but *mandated* by feminist (re-)editing praxes of Black visuality[3] which aims to "listen for the unsaid" and refashion fugitive, "disfigured lives" without committing further acts of violence—simply 'unmasking' Andromeda is not sufficient. So then, how do we figuratively bring Andromeda (back) to life amid the archive's mortuary labours? How do we unsettle the archive from within (and without) the confines of its own authority? Most crucially, how do we (re)imagine and (re)figure Andromeda's myth and myth-making in ways that are critically aware yet responsive to her inherited iconography?

In late May 2024, when Lisa Usanova and I first began working on this project together, Andromeda's erasure was one of the case studies we investigated for our publication, *Flesh Fields* (2024), which probed the gendered dynamics of whitewashing and its associations in literature and art history. With *Flesh Fields*, we delved into five instances of literary-historical BIPOC women who

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[3] Black visuality, here, names both (a) the power-saturated ways Black people are made visible or invisible and (b) the counter-practices by which Black subjects see, look back, and make themselves and their worlds visible otherwise (Fleetwood 2010; Mirzoeff 2011; Sharpe 2016; Browne 2015).

have been hyper-feminized, hyper-sexualized, and racially 'purified' in the canons of art/media history, in order to uncover dominant ideologies of both 'old' and 'new' racism within (past and present) ocular cultures as well as present our reader with decolonial counter-visualities. In a similar vein, while the crux of this paper has considered the *long durree* of Andromeda's racial and aesthetic erasure, our collaboration developed out of a practice-led methodology which sought to toil against that very current so that new re-imaginations may enter our streams of conversation.

The artistic renditions of Andromeda created by Lisa Usanova for this project stand, first and foremost, as a counter-visual studio practice that complements my counter-historical literary one. The artworks visually translate the aims of decolonial archival studies into the language of portraiture, remembering Andromeda's scenes of capture, abjection, and disfiguration even as they refuse to reenact them in full. Across the series, a different way of 'looking' and ultimately, 'being looked at' is demanded from the viewer by: recentering Andromeda's gaze; muting Perseus and Cetus to the background; hybridizing (analogue) pencil mediums with digital layering; and attending to the quiet, affective registers held within images of Black fugitivity.

At first, Lisa's early sketches of Andromeda too closely echoed those depictions made by post-Renaissance painters such as Titian's *Perseus and Andromeda* (c. 1554-1556). "In a way," she reflects, "I was still pushing Andromeda to the margins, and the narrative once again became too encumbered by Perseus' role, despite his removal from the scene [...] The real pivot took place when I altogether abandoned attempts to simply *replace* the white woman with a Black body" (see Appendix A). Following Elizabeth McGrath's own arguments in "The Black Andromeda" (1992), wherein Andromeda's Blackness itself became the pretext for both her mythological punishment and canonical erasure, Lisa began to restructure the compositions entirely. Reflecting on Andromeda's first portrait, "Afterthoughts of Salt," Lisa notes:

I have always loved portraiture, and in combination with the conversations Ayra and I had regarding Black feminist critiques of aesthetic representation, it seemed right to change the initial plan. The composition was now a close-up of Andromeda, aspiring to disturb her canonical narrative; deliberately...

...assigning the presence of Perseus and the sea monster to the shadows and situating our princess as the central, self-possessed subject of her own myth (Usanova 2025).

With this (new) Andromeda, the violence remains legible, but only as a residual shadow. Our Andromeda is neither fearless nor idealized, but rather, partially guarded and tender with her hand raised in defense and her eyes remaining alert. The absent eyebrows and deliberate omission of a male rescuer work to disarm the portrait of 'seamless mastery,' withholding any promise of aesthetic polish or heroic completion for the viewer.

Rejecting oil, Lisa turned to colored pencil—a medium historically excluded from 'conventional' fine art traditions—to allow for a gradual process of layering and hatching that built into the works a vital sense of texture and movement. The analog mediums were later interlaced with the digital in order to create both a temporal and material palimpsest that merges the classical past with artistic tools of the present. This, too, was an act of critical fabulation on Lisa's part: to take a familiar image and reorient it towards a radical, oppositional charge, as well as to make the medium itself complicit in the refusal of aesthetic 'purity'.

After completing the primary portrait, Lisa began a series of more surrealist explorations using a limited four-color ballpoint pen palette (Figs 1.16, 1.8 & 1.20). "This deliberate limitation," she argues, "combined with the unforgiving nature of the medium, required bolder compositional decisions":

The second ballpoint portrait (see figure 1.18) introduces Perseus physically, for the first and last time, his bloodied hand reaching towards Andromeda's face, a gesture full of uncertainty. The unnatural blue hair color is again meant to reference oceanic unrest, while the strategic blending of blue and red inks nod towards the lasting marks of violence in Andromeda's art-historical archive. While our Andromeda appears to lean into the touch, her expression conveys a contradictory impression. Andromeda was punished for her beauty, saved, and subsequently promised to Perseus for slaying the monster. There is no romance in the story, no tenderness, and most importantly, no autonomy given to her. This is the conflict we attempt to showcase within this illustration (Usanova 2025).

In all pieces except "Vincula", background scenery is deliberately removed in an attempt to strip the story to its core. The environment and world-making of Andromeda's myth is rather echoed through deliberate choices such as hair color, negative space, shadowing, and the positionality of the body. Although a lot of the vibrancies in color and texture were lost during the digital scanning process, Lisa belabored to recapture this by, fittingly, returning back to digital alterations and layering. Such practices of negation, subtraction, re-figuration, and ultimately, refusal enabled Lisa's works to take part in an "emergent witnessing" that seeks to unlearn the colonial logics of (violent) looking (Fleetwood 2010), but once again re-orients Andromeda's status as a symbol of Black fugitivity:

> *In the final illustration (figure 1.20), I wanted to showcase a rare moment of repose to humanize Andromeda. This time, in a pre-tragedy scene, vibrant hues contrast the narrative's heaviness and what we know is awaiting her. Across this triptych, fractured lines, unresolved forms, and muddied colors are meant to evoke tension, highlighting the imperfections and instability as contemporary reflections and reinterpretations of Andromeda's myth (Usanova 2025).*

Across the series, Andromeda's body becomes the sole site where the aesthetic, the historical, and the mythic converge. In these artworks, Andromeda is a Black figure that remembers her own erasures, that indeed "tries her tongue" (Hartman 2008), and that demands to be seen otherwise. Lisa's portraits ultimately refuse the canonical injustice in Andromeda's myth that renders her beauty incompatible with Blackness. In re-imagining Andromeda through both counter-visualities and a process of counter-historicization, we take seriously the right to look back as well as the right to remain partly veiled. The counter-archival charge here is, at once, artistic renditions which tend to a figure who cannot fully be recovered while insisting that she be seen, despite this, as Black, alive, and unmastered.

Fig. 1.14 —"Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.15 — Process of "Unbinding the Tide" // "Vincula Maris" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.13 — Details of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.16 — "Unbinding the Tide" // "Vincula Maris" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art

Fig. 1.17 — Process of "A Study in Dissolution" // "Vestigia Nullius" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art
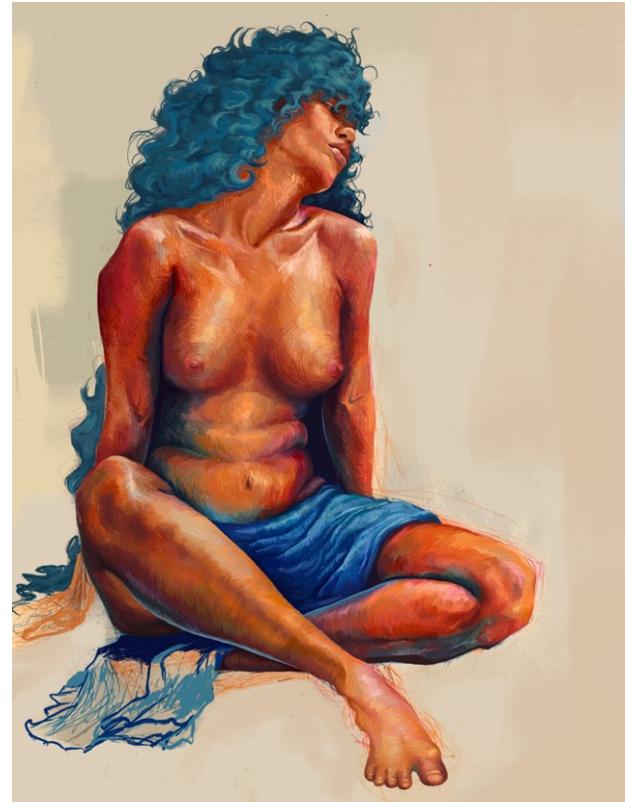
Fig. 1.19 — Process of "Unbinding the Tide" // "Carne Tenbrae" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, ballpoint pen and digital art
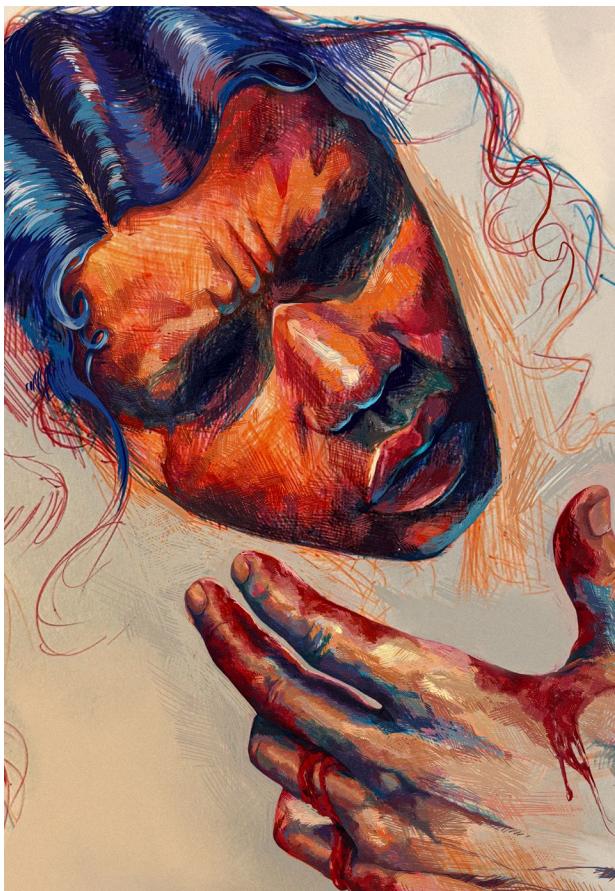
Fig. 1.18 — "A Study in Dissolution" // "Vestigia Nullius" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, Pencil and Digital Art
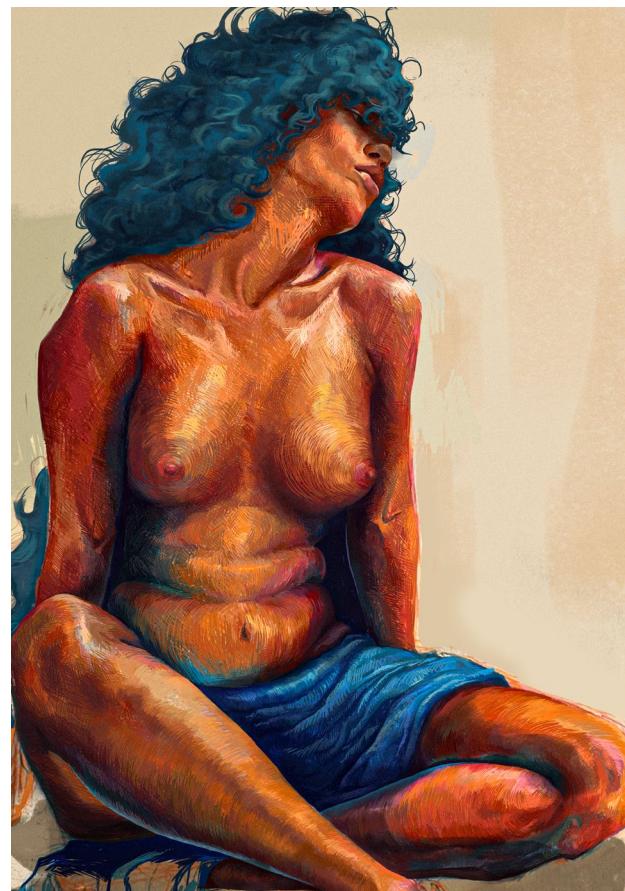
Fig. 1.20 — "Unbinding the Tide" // "Carne Tenbrae" – Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, ballpoint pen and digital art

Appendix A: Process Photos
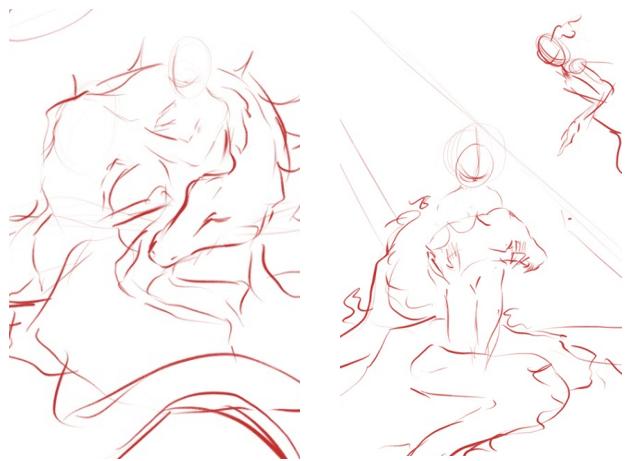
Fig. 1.21 &1.22 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 2024, digital art

Fig. 1.23 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 2024, digital art

Fig. 1.24 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

Fig. 1.25 – Initial Sketches — Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil
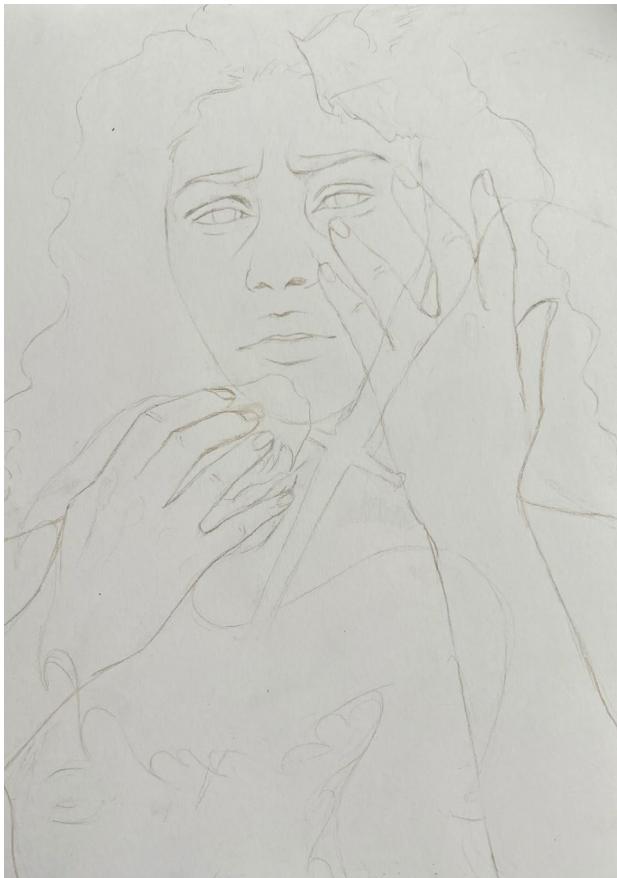
Fig. 1.26 – Process of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso"— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil
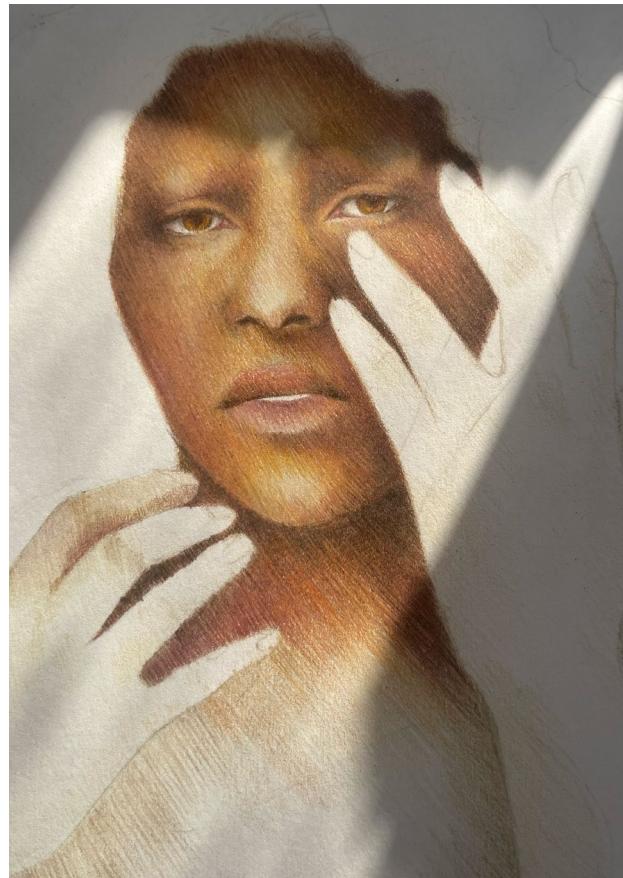
Fig. 1.28 – Process of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso"— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil
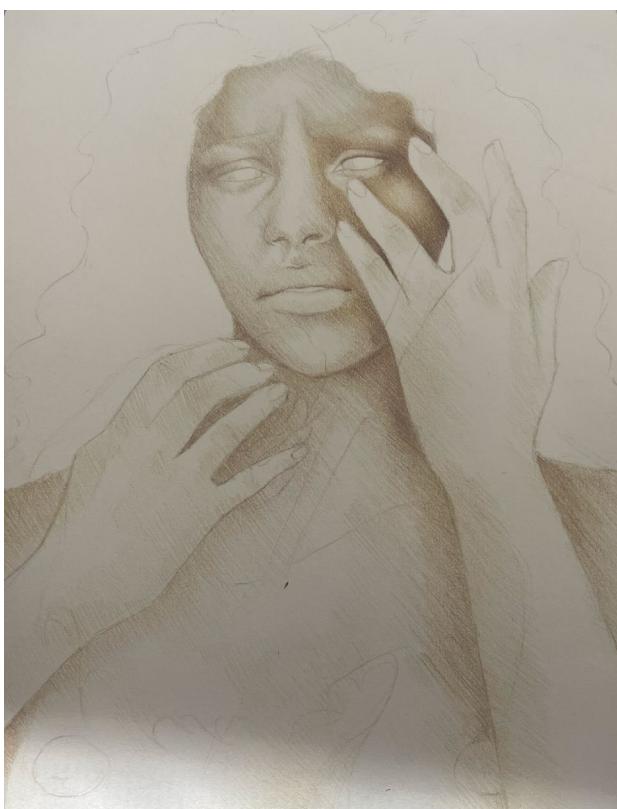
Fig. 1.27 – Process of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso"— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil
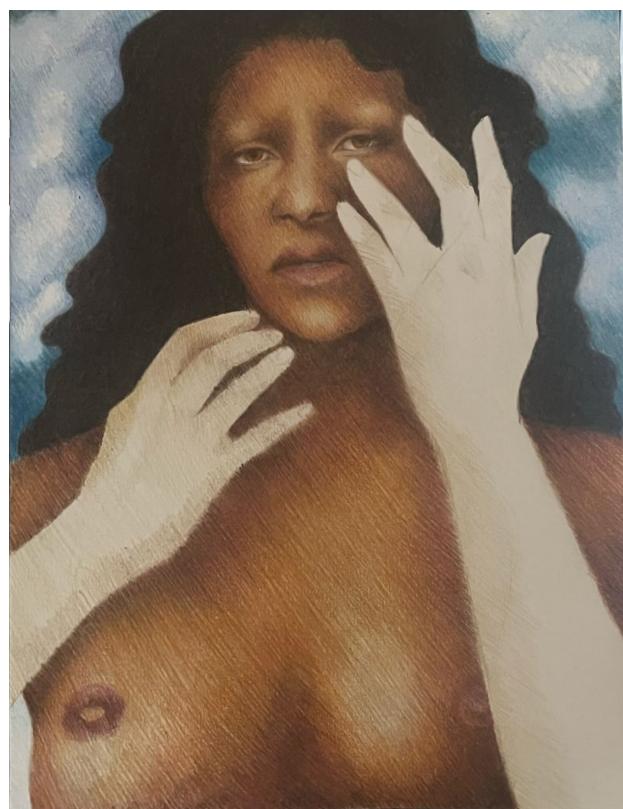
Fig. 1.29 – Process of "Afterthoughts of Salt" // "In Caelum Verso"— Usanova, 8 x 5 inc, 2024, pencil

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REFLECTIONS OF A #UNSETTLEDSCHOLAR

By   Blaze Welling

Introduction

In a classroom in the summer of 2024, professor Dr. Aparjita Bhandari asked our class, "what is race?" We offered conjectures, ideas, queries, and ended up with more questions than answers. Considering the course was called Rhetorics of Race and Identity, we knew this question was bound to arise. We discussed whether race is biological, socially-fabricated and maintained; whether it is an ethnic or cultural production and how globally, we have succumbed to "race thinking" (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, 180). This way of thinking about the world leads us to conceptualize our relation to others through a lens of difference that is distinctly biological (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013). These deliberations were thought-provoking, stimulating, and enraging. When Wendy Chun's pivotal, "Race and/As Technology; or How to Do Things to Race," was introduced, the spark that would lead to my term reflection research project was ignited. Chun's formulation of race "and/as technology" led me to question how race exists within, mediates, perpetuates, and limits such identifiers as gender, culture, ethnicity, and identity in digital spaces. I combined this inquiry with other concepts, theories, and methodologies for thinking and "doing" race. William Frey et al. (2022) pushed me toward the answers to these questions in their discussions of race as a tool mediated in both physical and digital spaces. This just led to further questions, perhaps more reflective and digressive ones, but questions, nonetheless. The question that permeated my thoughts most was how I might be engaging with racial politics of identity (Jardina 2019) passively and imperceptibly in my use of digital platforms. This led me to see if I could be more critical and more conscious of my engagement with the identifiers of race and identity and how both relate to a banal colonialism (Davis 2012; Murphyao and Black 2015; Dlaske 2017;

Carlsson 2020) imbued in my every click of the keyboard or like of a post. This concept, as noted by Carlsson, describes the "structural, everyday, invisibilized, and routinized nature of colonial operations" (269). In many ways, I see a correlation between a sense of banal colonialism and algorithmic bias – colonialism is literally programmed into the function of digital sites. Through a specific focus on blogging as a mode of engagement, my research drove me to consider and trace race and identity through the curation of a Tumblr blog. Entitled *Unsettledscholar*, my blog ran from May to July 2024 and was curated to engage with concepts of decolonization, Frey et al.'s "white racial socialization," and a critical awareness of my position and engagement with(in) algorithms (Philips and Ng-A-Fook 2024). Through multimedia observation, commentary, and reflection I considered these concepts, engaged with many unanticipated ones, and was driven to *even more* questions. The goal of this kind of reflective work was to consider my positionality reflexively as I continue to embark on my academic journey as a settler scholar committed to understanding and perhaps unlearning settler colonialism in the racial discourse I exhume. To focus on these goals, I was guided by the following questions primarily: *How do whiteness, settlerism, and gender impact my perceptions of race and identity in a digital context? How might algorithms reflect the values of colonialism and continue to invisibilize marginalized voices?*

This paper mirrors the form of the blog, part reflection, nearly always critical, and in perpetual evolution. To sustain critical engagement, I employed the Reflective Practice Method (Moon 2004; Brookfield 2017; Institute of Development Studies) both in my blog posts and in this reflection. Revisiting the blog after the course, I recognized that my work could have been more critical and that feminist interventions and praxis might provide a key pathway forward. My aim here is to acknowledge the strengths of the reflective project while also noting its limitations, particularly in grappling with expansive concepts such as race and identity, which inevitably raise as many questions as they answer. As a settler scholar, I situate myself in relation to digital spaces, seeking to destabilize my assumptions about them. I reflect on how blogs function as both liberating and confining, and I apply a pedagogical lens to consider how such spaces can support both learning and *un*learning, even when they appear passive and uncritical.

Ultimately, this paper is about my own experience of being unsettled – about perspective, critical inquiry, and the possibilities that emerge through reflection.

What The Blog?

It is certainly worth asking: why blogging? Or, perhaps, what is blogging? I asked myself these questions at the outset of my project. My understanding of blogs had always been that they were unacademic, often female discursive spaces about things that mainstream media couldn't (or wouldn't) include in their "reputable" sources. (I imagine you wouldn't find Danielle de Lange's blog, *Style Files*, suddenly in a reputable academic journal, although, it would be wonderful. Can you imagine such a journal?) In search of an antidote to this unproductive way of thinking about blogging, I sought out research that may relate blogging to the entanglements between race, identity, and social media use through the investigations of how racist discourse is reified and amplified in digital spaces (Nakamura 2008; Chun 2009; Kotliar 2020). I wanted to investigate how the emergence of community, protest, education, and awareness might be emerging on a communal blogging platform, and, how this might open the possibility of intersections between identifying entanglements and these aspects of community, protest, education, and awareness. To my delight, I encountered recent scholarship that has begun to consider the microblogging site Tumblr as a location of both cultural repertoire and an archive (Bourdaa 2018; Hoch et al. 2020). Contemporary research has also yielded insights into how Indigenous, BIPOC, and folks experiencing gender-based violence are making use of these blogging platforms for community and advocacy (Pham 2011; Carlson and Frazer 2021). This research alongside other considerations of race and identity in the blogging form has yet to examine what kind of personal reflection can be yielded when Tumblr is used purely for reflection on race and identity.

So why not another platform? I considered using other platforms but due to personal experience and perspective as well as some critical scholarship, Tumblr seemed the most logical option. Thinking about the other "big three" social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X (will be henceforth called Twitter), I had to assess what each site really offered in terms of engagements with race and identity. For me, Facebook has always been a graveyard of memories reminding me of embarrassing vignettes of my pre-teen self; for this reason, it has always felt more visible and regulated due to the connections I have with my family. Haimson et al. (2021) validates this feeling suggesting that Facebook is characterized as authentic and comprised of "'real life' networks" (351). For these reasons, it did not feel like the place to try to contest and question ideas of race and identity without the risk of being censored. Twitter, on the other hand, feels more like the wild west of social media where you might be bombarded with political content, news updates, or pornographic GIFs. The last of the big three, Instagram, was a valiant contender for the research platform. With its visual and community-oriented dimensions, it could have offered a logical space to question, challenge, and maintain everyday histories (Carlson and Frazer 2021, 197). However, Instagram felt limited to the visual and I was looking for a platform that enabled a wide variety of engagement, notably discursive, visual, aural, conversational among others.

As previously mentioned, my experience of Tumblr before this research project was certainly less critical and more expressive. Still resistant… in that teenage angst kind of way. Tumblr offered me a space to express myself, realize my sexuality through the #NSFW (Not Safe for Work) section, and maintain my obsessions with boy bands. Arguably, this introduction to blogging may be the infection that led to the unproductive thinking of Tumblr as uncritical. In any case, this reintroduction to Tumblr, like reuniting with an old friend again, was conducted with a more critical, mindful, and reflective approach. This version of Tumblr has been canonized/memorialized/remembered in current cultural memory as a "2016 Tumblr aesthetic" that is like, so nostalgic! In this way, Tumblr has maintained its position in our present culture and memory as a space to express identity, opinions, and connect with others. Beyond this aesthetic perception, Tumblr as a platform has a deeply profound impact on its community, encouraging advocacy and sociocultural commentary.

According to Mélanie Bourdaa's article, "Tumblr as a Methodological Tool for Data Archiving: The Case of Calzona Tumblr," Tumblr is not only a useful research tool, but the site "permits the aggregation of content as animated images (GIFs), video, drawings, and text" and is valuable to uses for its fluidity, community, and user-friendly navigation (np.). The functionality of Tumblr has also "facilitated the development of 'counterpublics' on the platform, those who are marginalized in the public sphere and/

or who are in conflict with it ideologically" (Hoch et al. 2020, 2). This curation of a digital community largely appeals to people who are both "socially and politically disenfranchised," resulting in the use of this platform for community and advocacy against societal ails and ideologies (Hoch et al. 2020, 2). Minh-Ha Pham (2011, 2-3) investigates this and purports that blogs can "create new subject formations, reveal hidden histories, and reconstitute public culture [...] through a radical politics of sentimentality that refuses neoliberal fictions." Carlson and Frazer (2021) elaborate on this and specifically apply the context of the Indigenous community on social media. Their case study on the Indigenous gay community determined that some social media platforms afforded users identity affirmation, exploration of relationality, and a sense of care and support (Carlson and Frazer 2021, 68).

Putting the reflective methodology and the reflective potential of blogs together, Tumblr was the most logical option for the goals of my project. Tumblr's participatory and dialogic nature enables a sense of reflection that allows non-linear thinking and analysis (Pham 2011, 4). Through the critical reflection of the user then, the blog has the potential to become a "significant cultural site in which the struggle over the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and political action [can] happen every day" (Pham 2011, 28). In the following section, I will assess my specific reflections on @Unsettledscholar and attempt to answer the project's guiding questions.

METHODS

This project required a methodological approach that extended beyond purely textual analysis, one that could account for the intersections of knowledge, feeling, experience, digitality, and reflection. Entering an already ongoing community dialogue on Tumblr demanded a framework that was both critical and dialogic, attentive to multimodal representations of race and identity while remaining reflexive about my own positionality. Given the academic context, a pedagogical dimension was essential: this project involved not only examining how race and identity are performed online but also learning how to engage with social media as a site of meaning-making. At the same time, an ethnographic stance was necessary to facilitate mindful entry into the Tumblr-sphere and to acknowledge my role in

shaping the digital field site (Murthy 2008: 849). Finally, reflexivity was central, as the research required sustained critical self-inquiry into questions that exceeded easy resolution.

This section outlines my initial attempt to employ digital ethnography (DE), my challenges with fully realizing that method, the role of the reflective practice method (RPM) in shaping the project and post-project synthesis, and feminist methodological interventions that reoriented my understanding of the function of the blog as a research object and mode of inquiry.

Unsettling Digital Ethnography (DE)

In establish and operating the blog, I initially turned to digital ethnography (DE) to situate myself in the digital field and engage in "true situated learning experiences" (Ferster 2016: 157, qtd. in DeHart 2016). DE appeared promising as it allowed me to critically position myself as a researcher on Tumblr, leveraging the platform's "vast stores of multimedia material" (Murthy 2008: 844–45). Such affordances enable researchers like me to participate in the platform's public sphere and foster "a space of mutual accountability" (Bohman 2004: 136, qtd. in Murthy 2008: 847). However, time constraints in the course and my inexperience in ethnographic fieldwork shaped (and limited) my engagement. Rather than conducting a prolonged, collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Murthy 2008: 847), I functioned more as a "cyberstealth[y]" observer (Ebo 1998: 3, qtd. in Murthy 2008: 840). My practice largely involved passive engagement: analyzing existing posts, reflecting through my own contributions, and posing questions without directly interacting with other users. This experience revealed the difficulty in pinning down a singular methodological framework for the project. While I began with the intention of conducting ethnographic inquiry, what emerged was a hybrid and, in some ways, resistant methodology, one that defied "conventional research methodologies" (Murthy 2008: 849) and instead foregrounded reflexivity, pedagogy, and the limits of ethnographic practice in time-constrained research.

The Reflective Practice Method (RPM) and Retrospective Feminist Interventions

Given the relative failure of my ethnographic endeavours and my intention to use *Unsettled scholar* to reflect critically on how race and identity emerge in online spaces, the RPM emerged as a bright light in my research process. This goal required a method that would ensure an investigation of mine and others' experiences and actions on the platform in a way that was continuous and experiential (Institute of Development Studies). The Reflective Practice Method (RPM) offered the entrance into such critical, reflective work and prompted in-depth considerations of things I had not considered before in my use of the Tumblr platform. The methodological and pedagogical dimensions of RPM enabled this entry and offered opportunities of deep reflection through writing and reflecting. Moreover, the element of critical critique and the possibility of revising "meaning structures" so preexisting judgements and assumptions might be transformed was entirely appealing for this project (Moon 2004, 96). I envisioned this project as a form of personal experiential learning that might help me question knowledge, and my understanding of the ways certain concepts are programmed and replicated in digital spaces (Moon 2004, 71).

It is important to note that the concept of reflection in this method has various levels as highlighted by Hatton and Smith. Particularly, to do the RPM effectively and achieve "positive outcomes," you must move through the levels of descriptive writing, to descriptive, dialogic, and critical reflection respectively (Hatton and Smith 1995, 34-35). These levels demonstrate attentiveness to alternative viewpoints, and the production and maintenance of historical and socio-political perspectives through actions, events, and materials (Moon 2004, 97). In choosing this method, I was interested in the possible outcomes of a such a reflection. Moon notes that many possibilities can arise from the RPM, particularly, but not limited to learning and understanding; continuing development; meta-cognition; and empowerment to make decisions (Moon 2004, 84). Given the focus on the interplay between race and identity, these possible outcomes resonated with me and my research ambitions. If, at the baseline, I could possibly learn and understand the impact and representation of race and identity in

a digital space, this method would be sufficient. Developing knowledge on these subjects and interacting with them provides valuable insights into my own positionality within the system that dictates these concepts. This empowers me to make informed decisions about whether to subscribe to or perpetuate these ideas and ideologies, making this method nearly perfect.

While the Reflective Practice Method is intended to be a pedagogical tool for educators in the classroom and educational setting, its experiential learning and methodological framework can be grafted into the context of my digital media engagement. Particularly, the focus on learning in this method and the possibility of "transforming conceptions" through its attention to knowledge accumulation across social agreements (Moon 2004, 17; 20) is relevant when considering the concept of "racial socialization" (Frey et al. 2022, 924) that oriented my project. This concept of becoming socialized by and through Tumblr's platform offered an "outlet for developing complex understandings of race, offer access to helpful information about racism's socio-historical roots, and lead to healthy intra- and interracial experiences" (Frey et al. 2022, 924). In the uncomfortable space of hindsight, I realize that the RPM did offer a pedagogical and practical way of engaging with content on a personal level; however, it was not critically engaging with the sociocultural, political, and historical matrixes that existed in the atmosphere just outside of and programmed within physical, digital, and psychological spaces. For this reason, and, for this reflection, I knew I had to excavate these matrixes through methods that considered how power is mediated in society and replicated in online spaces. This led me to feminist interventions, which resulted in, as you guessed it, *many other* questions. Following the completion of the course and the project, I realized that this method could have been elevated through the consideration of feminist praxis and media studies. This led me to question: *How might a combined reflexive and feminist approach to digital media provide a deeper understanding the power imbued in online spaces?*

While this work required a reflective dimension, it also begged for a combined approach that investigated the dimensions of power and gender and really pushed the boundaries on the pedagogical aspect of such project. This is where I believe feminist praxis and media studies should have emerged in my process. Given the focus

on race throughout the course, my project was heavily guided by interpretations, manifestations, and embedded aspects of race emerging in the digital space. I did not consider the ways in which feminist alterities might offer more nuanced and productive engagements in the use of such a platform. However, in keeping with the RPM, recognizing this gap in my research focus and acknowledging the possibility of such a combined analytical lens is a part of the critical reflection stage of the method.

In my investigation of feminist interventions, I encountered the concept of "critical media pedagogy," which can enable the intervention "into and against the domination of the status quo" in both traditional political power and the many social media "micro-practices" (Berliner and Krabill 2019, 5). This pedagogical stature in the context of my project would encourage me to consider my posts, reposts, and responses as micro-practices through an engagement with participatory media that should inform how I learn about, understand, and engage with the world (Berliner and Krabill 2019, 5). An element of the work that I conducted that was almost always secondary or tertiary to my engagement with Tumblr as a platform was the power embedded and literally encoded into the platform itself. This felt obvious, like a big flashing red light that I should have seen when I first began. Many media studies and feminist scholars recognize this subterranean hegemony that actively enact cultural assumptions and is embedded with stereotypes and the biases of the settler colonial system and agents that produced it (Negin and King 2019; Johnson 2020; Haimson et al. 2021). This is evidenced by Haimson et al.'s research which noted the ways that Tumblr's revisions to their platform in 2018 recontextualized the meaning of the platform for trans users by censoring what was deemed as pornographic content, when this perception and codification of the trans body was being censored using a heteronormative, Eurocolonial conception of what is deemed "inappropriate" content. It is obvious by this example, that my preconceived notions of Tumblr as a queer, liberatory, and revealing space, while being true, is also impacted by heteronormative, Eurocolonial ideas about propriety and safety. As previously mentioned, my own exploration of my sexuality took place in the annals of the #NSFW part of Tumblr. Naively, I had never considered the reasons these materials

were considered "not safe;" never considered who determined the safety, and who was the one needing to be saved. These insights offered me an entirely new outlook on the platform that I had chosen to investigate. It also led me to question my own enmeshment in the system of settler colonialism and suggested that perhaps the choices I was making for this space encouraged a re-coding of materials as safe or unsafe for users who thought of this platform as a safety net.

Overall, the Reflective Practice Method has allowed me to continue to be critically reflective of my use of *Unsettledscholar* and in producing this paper, the understanding that other alternative, critical praxis are necessary to make this excavation meaningful. These excavations will continue because this project seems to be one that is in constant evolution.

SCOPE

Self–Identification and Self–Positioning

When I sat down to make the *Unsettledscholar* account, I considered the ways I would introduce and identify myself. The allowance of anonymity or pseudonymity on Tumblr made the possibilities for self-identification vast and, arguably more difficult than other platforms that require your personal details (Haimson et al. 2021, 350). I did realize that complete anonymity felt like a veil of protection that wouldn't result in online backlash or the threat of being "cancelled." Instead, I opted to identify myself by name, pronouns, and academic position in my introductory post entitled "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled" (See Figure 1). I attempted to orient myself in this post, particularly outlining my settler scholar positioning, the anticipation of perhaps less than ideal results, and a sense of being unsettled. The entitled address was, for the most part, self-directed as I anticipated lingering in a state of discomfort and feeling unsettled with who I am and what I may have been contributing to this space.

Curating the Experience

Building from this introductory post, I realized that if I was attempting to engage with specific forms of

media and ideas on the platform, I must be conscious of what accounts and hashtags I follow. I began the project by following accounts and tags that specifically related to race and that I was interested in reflecting on. I specifically followed the tags #academia, #canada, #colonization, #indigenous, #indigenousrights, #racialjustice, #resistance, #settlercolonialism. These allowed me to refine the content I engaged with, so I didn't fall into the trap of doomscrolling and engaging with largely meaningless content. Additionally, I began following accounts that I noticed posted on these topics consistently. This resulted in me following five accounts:

1. @intersectionalpraxis
2. @olowan-waphiya
3. @alwaysbewoke
4. @allthecanadianpolitics
5. @enbycrip

These accounts largely engaged with the topics of race, identity, gender, and oppression through social commentary (@intersectionalpraxis), combined anger and celebration (@Olowan), overt anonymity (@alwaysbewoke), a pseudo news source (@AlltheCanadianpolitics), and as individual thoughts (@Enbycrip). The combination and varied approaches to similar and related topics helped me gain a more fulsome picture of the way content is produced and perhaps how these large concepts are being tackled. Notably, most of these accounts also reference other blogs they have that might differ in terms of content and commentary. This connotes an understanding of what the function of their blogs might achieve. Particularly, each expresses the desire of sharing thoughts on topics that might be otherwise undiscussed or unaccepted on other social media platforms. Here, we see folks recognizing Tumblr's capacity to produce counternarratives that operate as both self-expression and self-representation among marginalized communities (Curwood and Gibbons 2009; Jenkins et al. 2013; Gonzalez 2019). Each of the accounts I have selected use their "bio" section to self-identify themselves as queer, non-binary, disabled, neurodivergent, leftist, or Indigenous. @alwaysbewoke is the anomaly here where they have omitted any self-identification and have utilized the anonymous element that differentiates Tumblr from other social media sites (Haimson et al. 2021, 350) (See Figure 5).

Many of my own posts related to the content discussed in our class and responses to content found on Tumblr through the "re-blog and comment" functions. Eventually, I was presented with content that related to concepts discussed in class and within the scope of my research. In Figure 2a and Figure 2b, I noted similarities to our discussions of Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor" which I had previously reflected on in the blog weeks before. These forms of multimodal engagement allowed me to draw connections between course concepts, my positionality, and experiences presented online within this the supposedly nonhierarchical and uncensored media environment.

The affordances that Tumblr could allow for my reflection made it an ideal platform for me to exercise my reflective practice on what it means to be a white settler scholar and how digital media impacts my perceptions.

Unsettling the Scholar: Reflective Engagement Through Hatton and Smith (1995)

Using the levels of reflection outlined by Hatton and Smith (1995, 34-35), I wanted to map how my engagement with the RPM evolved through distinct stages: from descriptive writing to critical reflection.

Step 1: Descriptive Writing

My introductory post to the blog, entitled "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled" (See Figure 1), served as a form of descriptive writing according to Hatton and Smith's stages. This foundational stage that "merely reports events or literature" provided an overview without engaging in analysis or interpretation (Hatton and Smith 1995, 40). I used this post to set the scene for my engagement, selecting a knowledge base that could help my audience (and myself) begin to grasp what the blog would be doing. This aligns with Hatton and Smith's (1995, 41) observation that descriptive writing often "serves to establish a context in an initial accounting for what took place," offering a foundation upon which further reflection might develop.

Step 2: Descriptive Reflection

I suggest that my meme analysis and commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" represent a progression into

descriptive reflection. While this stage does not fully engage in critical reasoning, it begins to hint at personal interpretation, albeit limited, and shows an awareness of broader implications (Hatton and Smith 1995, 40-41). At this point, I was engaging with content that required interpretive work, but my reflections remained largely grounded in description and surface-level judgement.

Step 3: Dialogic Reflection

Dialogic reflection emerged more fully in my re-blogging activity. By "stepping back" through this interactive process, I began to explore my own position and role within the discourse. I questioned the meaning and weight of my contributions, especially in comparison to those who are more directly impacted by racism, colonialism, sexism, transphobia, among many other issues. This phase resonates with Hatton and Smith's (1995, 41) notion of reflection as a "form of discourse with one's self [sic], an exploration of possible reasons." The tension I experienced, particularly around the idea of Albert Memmi's (1991) "colonizer who refuses," prompted deeper internal dialogue about positionality, voice, and complicity in digital spaces.

Step 4: Critical Reflection

I situate this paper itself in this final stage of critical reflection. Though still evolving, this phase reflects my increasing ability to interrogate my own biases, recognize my omissions (particularly my lack of early engagement with feminist praxis and media studies), and contextualize both my work and the Tumblr platform within larger ideological frameworks. Hatton and Smith (1995, 41) define critical reflection as involving "reason giving for decisions or events which takes account of broader historical, social, and/or political contexts," and my analysis is increasingly shaped by this approach.

I now understand both my personal engagement and Tumblr's infrastructure as part of a system that produces and reproduces ideologies tied to colonialism, "race thinking" (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013, 180), and structural oppression. Critical reflection "demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives but are located and influenced by multiple historical, and socio-political contexts" (Hatton and Smith 1995, 49). This progression demonstrates my developing ability to critically reflect, and suggests

that reflection is an iterative, ongoing process – one that requires continued attention and accountability as a writer, participant in digital discourse, settler scholar, and as a human being.

Discussion: Finding Direction Toward Answers

Despite working on this project very consistently over the last few months, I still feel like I haven't yet grasped definite answers to my questions. What has shifted, however, is my perspective. I now approach my research with greater critical awareness and see clear "evidence of learning or change in behaviour" (Moon 2004, 83). Importantly, the affordances of Tumblr enabled me to explore and share ideas that might be less socially acceptable, or even censored, on other platforms like Instagram, where user surveillance and neoliberal aesthetics tend to shape what is deemed appropriate discourse (Hoch et al. 2020, 5).

What follows are critical reflective response to my initial guiding questions, acknowledging that these answers are tentative, partial, and still unfolding. *How does my whiteness, settlerism, and gender impact my perceptions of race and identity in a digital context?*

At the outset of my project, I felt like a voyeur – observing conversations around race, identity, and gender safely from the periphery. This discomfort pushed me to explicitly self-identify on the blog as a white settler scholar, recognizing the importance of positionality in digital spaces. I chose not to include a photo of myself, maintaining a degree of anonymity, but this decision, too, deserves interrogation. Was this about safety, discomfort, or the privilege of choosing visibility? Does anonymity, in this context, obscure accountability?

In reflecting on my role, I return to Albert Memmi's (1991) concept of the "colonizer who refuses," a figure who rejects the colonial system, yet remains implicated in it and privileged by this ability to reject and critique it. While I self-position as critically engaged, I am wary of whether this identification cushions or absolves me. Am I, in naming my complicity, merely distancing myself from the systems I benefit from, rather than critically engaging with them? Emma Pérez's (1999) notion of the "decolonial imaginary" comes to mind here as it urges us to imagine beyond colonial logics,

yet I still question whether this project is creating space for such futures or reinforcing existing hierarchies. Who does this work serve? Who might it harm? Is my voice, even unintentionally, speaking over others?

Much of the content I engaged with centered on Indigenous sovereignty, history, and lived experience, fields all closely tied to my own academic work. This alignment allowed for a deeper and more sustained reflection, particularly as my research traditionally focuses on rhetorical representations of Métis nationhood. However, the emotional labour of reading, viewing, and thinking through difficult content associated with the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in North America was at times overwhelming. I found myself turning to platforms like Instagram or TikTok to consume "lighter" content, a shift that underscored my privilege of being able to disengage when things get heavy. I can close the tab and leave it behind. This very act is refusal, but I'm still unsure of it is allied and critical.

The fact that many of the Tumblr accounts I followed explicitly self-identify as BIPOC highlights the weight of their digital expressions. These platforms often reflect the lived reality of their users, not simply curated performance. This recognition has prompted me to consider what it means to be accountable in digital spaces, not just as a viewer or researcher, but as a participant with the power to disengage when others cannot.

So, I suppose I should address the guiding question of this section. In short, yes, those things that identify me within this colonial system do impact my perceptions and engagements in digital spaces. Particularly, they manifest through my ability to refuse and disengage and to hold the reality of these lived experiences at arm's length, or I guess at a closed tab's length.

How might algorithms reflect the values of colonialism and continue to invisibilize marginalized voices?

Despite applying specific criteria for engagement through a careful curation of the blogs and hashtags I followed, I was still presented with content that fell outside of the scope of my intended focus. Notably, some of this content appeared under general or misleading tags like #resistance, which were often attached to posts unrelated to race, identity, or colonialism. More strikingly, my "For You" page frequently suggested posts that I "might like," regardless of the tightly structured framework I had designed (see Figure 3). This experience reflects what Johnson (2020,

9951) describes as machine learning systems that "predict, adopt, and utilize patterns from the external social landscape." These predictive mechanisms do not simply mirror our explicit actions but are shaped by broader data inputs, user behaviours, and cultural assumptions that the algorithm interprets as relevant.

As Johnson (2020, 9942) further explains, algorithms often emerge from "innocuous patterns of information processing," where machine learning intersects with and reinforces human cognitive biases. This interaction became especially visible when my feed began to suggest content about disabled bodies, empathy, and emotional healing. These recommendations were unexpected given the specificity of my engagement with topics like settler colonialism. However, they prompted me to reflect on possible algorithmic linkages between discourses of vulnerability, marginalization and resistance, and how these connections might be culturally coded into the platform. This, in turn, reveals important questions about the intersections of colonialism, resistance, disability, gender, etc., and how these ideas are flattened or misrepresented through algorithmic logic.

Simultaneously, the platform also offered me targeted advertisements, often jarringly disconnected from the context I was building. One repeated example (see Figure 4) invited me into a "journey of love and loss," a phrase loaded with emotional appeal but devoid of relevance to my project. The appearance of such content raised deeper concerns about the ways commercial logics intersect with algorithmic ones. Even as I attempted to structure my account to prioritize a focus on race, identity, and anti-colonial discourse, the algorithm intervened with content optimized for capitalist consumption. This reflects the ways algorithms not only track interest but also infer desire, constantly shaping digital experience through speculative assumptions rooted in profit-making and mainstream norms.

Ultimately, these moments reinforced the idea that digital platforms, even those perceived as open, decentralized, and community-driven, are shaped by systems of visibility and erasure that echo broader structures of colonialism and capitalism. The algorithm does not only reflect what we seek; it also constructs meaning through optimization logics, privileges normative voices, narratives, and affective tones while marginalizing *many* others. In this way, the digital terrain remains complicit in colonial epistemologies, amplifying

voices aligned with dominant ideologies while continuing to obscure or marginalize others.

Conclusions

This project feels less like an endpoint and more like a beginning. The questions that guided the project have not been "answered" in a traditional sense but have continued to catalyze ongoing reflection and helped surface tensions that I am still working to understand.

In considering how my own positionality shapes my perception of race and identity online, I became increasingly aware of my own privilege and my ability to step away from such emotionally demanding content, the power to remain anonymous, and the authority to remain silent. I questioned whether my self-positioning as a "settler scholar" functioned critically or acted as a form of self-protection. Similarly, considering how the system, particularly Tumblr's algorithms reinforced colonial logics and obscured marginalized voices became a dominant thread in my reflection. Despite my curation, I encountered content shaped by commercial interest and speculative correlations.

Reflecting on these experiences through Hatton and Smith's (1995) four-stages toward critical reflection allowed me to trace the progression of the project:
- My initial Tumblr posts and meme analysis operated at the descriptive level.
- As I engaged more intentionally with content, I was able to begin interpreting and situating what I was seeing, though still without sustained critical reflection.
- The acts of re-blogging, questioning my own authority and position, and recognizing my discomfort marked a shift that became dialogic. This space operated as a personal and critical excavation of my own complicity, motivations, and voice in a more relational and uncertain way.
- This paper represents my step toward critical reflection, where I attempt to account not only for my own thinking but for the wider historical, social, political, and technological contexts in which that thinking occurs.

Importantly, the "failure" of my use of digital ethnography was itself a methodological revelation. My limited engagement with users and reliance on passive observation meant that I could not realize the collaborative and dialogic potential that ethnography aspires to. Yet this failure also revealed how ill-suited conventional ethnographic expectations can be in ever-evolving, algorithm-drive digital environments like Tumblr. Rather than producing findings in the traditional sense, *Unsettledscholar* underscored the instability of the field site itself and highlighted the necessity of reflexive, hybrid methods.

I now see Tumblr not only as a social media platform, but as a digital archive and repertoire, acting as a living record of discourse, affect, and refusal. It stores knowledge and enacts it through performance, repetition, and curation. Engaging with the platform as both scholar and user pushed me to reimagine digital research as something deeply embodied and ethically charged.

Moving forward, I will carry this critical posture and the discomfort of methodological failure into my archival and scholarly work, asking not only what is visible, but what is rendered invisible and why. I will continue to interrogate the platforms I use, the voices I amplify, and the histories I contribute to. Though this project didn't yield definitive answers, it reshaped questions, and that is certainly evidence of growth.

Figures
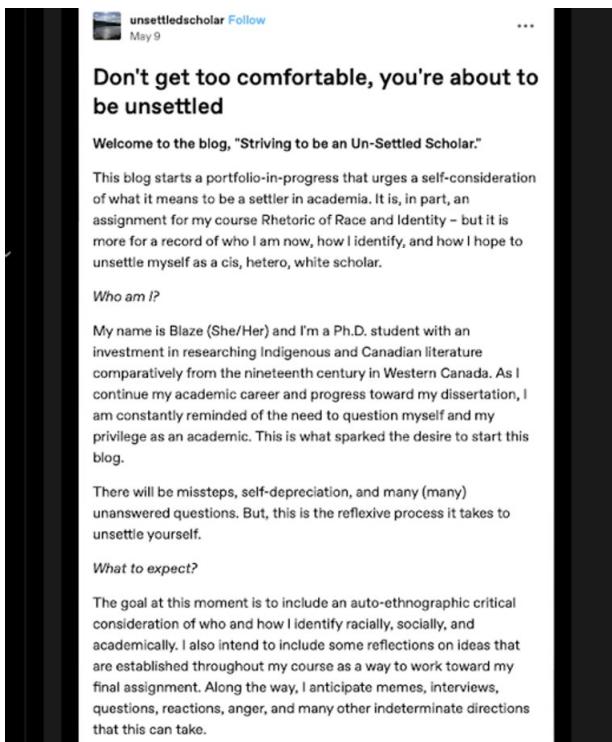
Fig. 2.1 – Introductory blog post, "Don't get too comfortable, you're about to be unsettled," *Tumblr,* @unsettledscholar, May 9th, 2024.

Fig. 2.2 – "Do you support decolonization as an abstract academic theory? Or as a tangible event?" Image carousel, *Tumblr,* @ghoularchive, Oct. 7th, 2023.

Fig. 2.3 – Response to "Do you support decolonization as an abstract academic theory? Or as a tangible event?" Image carousel, *Tumblr,* @ghoularchive, Oct. 7th, 2023.

Fig. 2.4 – "A photo of a blue surgical mask letter stamped with red text that reads: 'It is recommended to care about disabled people but it is not mandatory.'" *Tumblr,* @aropride, June 20, 2024.
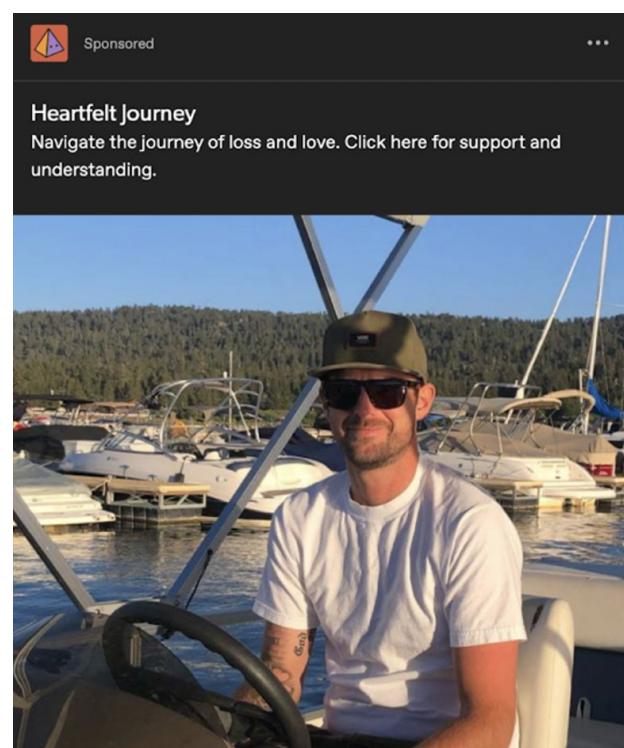
Fig. 2.5 – Advertisement entitled: "Heartfelt Journey Advertisement," showing male-presenting person, on a boat. *Tumblr,* 2024.
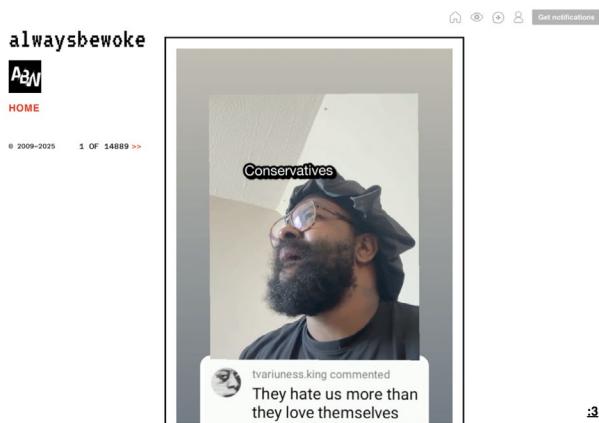
Fig. 2.6 – Account Home Page. @alwaysbewoke, *Tumblr*, 2025.

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AUDIO RECORDING AND THE CO-WRITTEN SELF:

Reflections on an Experimental Methodology for Climate Justice

By

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Sam Bean
Barbara Leckie

We sit in the living room, the four of us in our usual spots on the couch, chair, rocking chair, trying to forget the phone recording on the coffee table between us. We've been gathering for months now, experimenting with different methods and practices of co-writing in the humanities that might open up to more feminist forms of climate justice. Over steaming cups of tea and coffee, we've engaged in experimental writing prompts, co-editing sessions, and now this: recording our conversation.

The idea at the heart of these experiments is to shake up the way we think about climate justice and the autonomous subject. The autonomous subject, or the liberal self, goes hand-in-hand with Western histories of liberalism, capitalism, and their intertwined legacies. Private property, corporations as legal subjects, individual rights: all of these appear in the West as common sense, as ingrained and inevitable ways of being together in the world (see, for example, Graeber & Wengrow 2021; Liboiron 2021; McKittrick 2021). This definition of the subject of course, has had massive repercussions on the climate and on climate justice. Capitalist and liberal logics are key driving forces behind linked oppressions such as environmental racism, classism, and speciesism. In particular, the denial of Indigenous knowledges has been central to Indigenous peoples' continued displacement and disenfranchisement all over the world. When the liberal self appears as common

sense, so too do individualized responses to the climate crisis. As such, the liberal self is also embedded in our climate humanities methods, particularly in our usual and often unquestioned understandings of writing. Even in their collaborative forms, we often imagine individuals with sealed boundaries lined up next to one another, like closed tomes on a bookshelf.

Our research group begins from the premise that the autonomous subject does not empirically exist, that the self is fundamentally co-written, and that acknowledging the co-written self will better serve climate action and equity. The co-written self pushes back against these individualized responses. What does it mean to truly recognize the co-written self in the context of climate change? This is the question we've been experimenting with, to see what happens when we unsettle our usual methods of co-writing in the humanities. Today, the experimental methodology is recording: what happens when you listen back, without the expectation that the recording will be transcribed? What happens when you centre oral communication as an essential form of cowriting in climate humanities work? Many scholars, especially Toronto School Communication theorists such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong have, to varying degrees, revered oral communication for being amenable to fostering dialogue, presence, and critical exchange (Sterne, 2011). These scholars, however, were also eurocentric, and in their focus on "dominant" communication transitions from orality to literacy to electronic eras, failed to engage seriously with concurrent and continuing oral cultures and traditions, particularly of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world. By positioning oral cultures as primitive and/or irrational and in need of "civilizing," binary understandings of orality and literacy and the equation of oral/written with past/present have been used to justify colonialism (see Biakolo, 1999; Teuten, 2014). In response to this, Biakolo (1999) in particular, called for a non-hierarchical, continuum-based model of orality and literacy.

The privileging of the written word over oral communication is obvious in academia, where conversation, meetings, and discussions, both in person and recorded in forms like podcasts and webinars, are "worth less" than the written word, particularly on CVs where the solo-published article or book reigns supreme. This general devaluing of orality raises questions for how we might align our feminist values with our climate

humanities methods and work. Can we imagine different avenues for and understandings of peer review? Part of the task here is to see the ways this colonial ordering of things has subsisted in our methods; our experiment in recording is an attempt to engage seriously with oral communication as a methodology in the climate humanities.

Barbara starts us off with a question about the etymology of care being tied to grief and lament and we go from there. The discussion takes us from Nordic culture and collective care of "charon" to the rise of Protestantism and capitalism, to forms of neoliberal care, putting kids in "care," modern healthcare as lack of care in Christina Sharpe's (2016) *In the Wake*, how care breaks off from the community as the idea of the autonomous subject emerged. What stories of care do we tell now? Are these histories shadows still running through words? Maybe we should map care as a site of struggle for meaning never resolved. Can we feel different variations of care all at once? Do meanings ever leave words?

We talk about Angela Davis and how social movements need to change vocabulary (Soriano-Bilal, 2012). Speaking of Angela Davis, we need to talk about labour and who care labour falls on. Who has the duty to care? And then we're talking about Raymond Williams and keywords (Williams 1985). Yes, yes, they are useful, but what keywords do we need for the climate crisis? Barbara asks another question: does paying attention to something constitute care? No, care is praxis, action. But can you pay attention to something without caring about it? And oh, how we're burnt out from all this paying attention. We come back to definitions: what about care as community? What meanings do we want to invoke when we talk about care and co-writing? What meanings should we leave behind?

The conversation continues in this way for an hour, orbiting the central issues of language, care, meaning, and climate. During it all, the phone, seemingly innocuous, sits partly wedged under a plate of cookies, its screen deceptively black, which helps us all, if only a little, to ignore that it is there, taking into its little speaker everything we say.

When Carmen gets home, she sends the recording to everyone and we all listen back over the course of a week, reflecting on both the content of what we talked about, and the feeling that results from the playback. When we meet the next week, we are all surprised. We find it definitively distinct from simply reading over meeting notes that we usually take. The difference, as we discuss, seems

to be largely in the flow of conversation: thoughts that trail off, questions that don't actually get answered, and perhaps most distinctly, all of the "mmms" and "yeahs," the interruptions and voices weaving together and layering that are punctuated throughout. This, for us, bring to the fore what often gets suppressed in the usual forms of scholarly output such as transcripts or conference proceedings: that undisciplined conversation is vital to cowriting. It enables forms of generous thinking that are fruitful for dispelling the myth of the liberal self as it lays bare the unavoidably intertwined nature of co-writing.

Listening back, we also found that we could fully invest in what others were saying. We weren't waiting for our turn to speak or trying to formulate a thought to add. In effect, we felt more fully oriented to the other, a state of deep reflection that doesn't often feel possible in the moment. In short, what we found was that the conversation we listened back to was not the same as the conversation we had had in person. It was a different experience altogether. Here, the gap between memory and recording is revealed: a kind of co-writing with our past selves and others.

Significantly, our audio recording experiment turned us toward the idea of feminist radical care. Through its grounding in "non-hierarchical collective work" (Hobart & Kneese 2020, n.p.), radical care as a concept actively departs from forms of self-care that are increasingly being co-opted by neoliberalism. This conception of care aligns with our research group's understanding of co-writing as diametrically opposed to the autonomous, liberal self and, instead, grounded in respect for each part of the co-written self, human, and more-than-human alike. While we approached every group meeting from this non-hierarchical perspective, we found that when we listened back to the recording the pressures of performance were alleviated, and we could focus even more on the other's voice in our ear.

Yet, also at the centre of all of these feelings and reflections—though often forgotten—is the everyday technology of the cellphone. This too, is an essential part of the co-written self. Sure, we write on our phones all the time, opening our notes app to scrawl down or voice dictate an idea, a grocery list, a memo. But a more capacious understanding of co-writing, the kind of co-writing we are thinking about, includes the technology itself: the tiny built-in microphone converting sound waves to electronic signal; the audio-processing hardware that transfigures analog sound into digital

data; the 'iPhone girls' working in Chinese factories (Nakamura 2011) whose "small hands" are used to build these devices using cobalt from exploited labour in the Congo and other minerals made into precious substances by technological desire (Angus 2024). The phone on the table recording our conversation about care and climate justice is co-written, just as we are with its materials and with each other, with our past selves and past others, with the community and environment in which we live and do this work, with climate change itself.

This experiment, for us, is part of a broader push to rethink the co-written self in the climate humanities and we hope to try this experiment again in a different setting to see how those things usually omitted from our humanities methods—like setting—affect our cowriting. It's worth noting that the liberal self is so embedded in every crevice of Western academia that it easily slips in through the back door of our climate humanities work. Even while centring our co-writtenness, we often caught ourselves slipping back into familiar habits of writing and editing, including in the writing of this reflection which one person wrote, and others suggested comments and edits individually due to time and funding constraints. We also had to reckon with larger power relations in academia where first author *does* matter and so had to choose accordingly. At every turn, the liberal self appears. Yet, it is worth noting these places where we are pulled unwillingly toward autonomy, because if we are co-written, then equitable responses to climate change must also be understood as co-written too. We must attend to interconnections that push against the usual divisions and logics that enable us to think about ourselves as separate individuals, of the phone as a discrete object, about social issues as separate from one another and from the environment. It may seem a simple thing, to record a conversation, but from the perspective of co-writing, it provokes us to rethink the very methods that inform feminist climate justice work.

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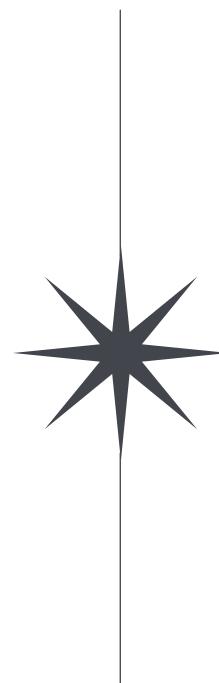
THE RISKS AND POTENTIAL OF LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE:

A Critical Analysis through the Lens of Data Feminism

By   Carolyn Wang

Introduction

Over the past four decades, artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed from a relatively niche field of computer science to a ubiquitous technology dominating academic research publications as well as our daily lives; AI applications continue to be implemented across myriad sectors. In particular, there has been significant interest in the use of large language models (LLMs), which are AI models that can interact with human language, in the context of mental healthcare. Famous LLMs include OpenAI's GPT series (which powers ChatGPT), Meta's Llama, and Google's Gemini, among numerous others. Researchers and mental health professionals alike are excited by the increased accessibility that AI could bring if applied to mental healthcare (Feng, Hu, and Guo 2022). Previous work has proposed the use of LLMs to aid clinicians in diagnosing and monitoring patients; to train new clinicians; as well as to provide support to patients through direct interaction (Muetunda et al. 2024; Sweeney et al. 2021; Koloury et al. 2022; Olawade et al. 2024). Recent work shows that people are talking to general purpose chatbots for mental health support (Zao-Sanders 2025; Jung et al. 2025; Rousmaniere et al. 2025), with one survey finding that nearly 50% of respondents, consisting of a sample of adult residents of the United States who had used at least one

LLM before and self-disclosed being diagnosed with a mental health condition, had turned to an LLM for psychological support within the last year (Rousmaniere et al. 2025). Because LLM-powered chatbots, such as ChatGPT, are not subject to the same regulations as other technologies geared specifically towards mental healthcare, the safety of their use in mental health is unverified. The apparent prevalence of the use of chatbots in this way is thus especially concerning.

Mental health is a historically biased field (see Section 4) in which marginalized communities continue to suffer from lower access to and quality of care (Shim and Vinson 2020). Given the plethora of biased behaviours LLMs have demonstrated (for example: Busker, Choenni, and Bargh 2023; Kotek, Dockum, and Sun 2023; Salinas, Haim, and Nyarko 2025), it is important to examine the safety and ethical implications of its application in a field already wrought with injustice. One lens through which we can begin this important analysis is that of data feminism, described in the next section. Exploring this use of LLMs critically is the first step to implementing these technologies responsibly and in a way that challenges oppressive norms, rather than reinforcing them. This essay will first introduce the framework of data feminism, then critically analyze the process of building and using LLMs for mental healthcare applications through that lens, and close with musings on alternative approaches to augmenting the mental health system in alignment with data feminist principles.

Data Feminism

Lauren Klein and Catherine D'Ignazio are self-described "data scientists and data feminists" (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 8) who published an influential book called *Data Feminism*. *Data Feminism* argues that in our increasingly digital world, data is power. Those with access to vast amounts of peoples' data, such as big tech companies recording our purchasing habits and social media use, are commanding this power unjustly to reinforce societal power structures and perpetuate systemic oppression. *Data Feminism* presents a set of seven principles (later expanded with two additional principles that address AI-specific concerns), thought of collectively as data feminism, which

seek to challenge the current hegemonic norms of data work. Data feminism is "a way of thinking about data, both their uses and their limits, that is informed by direct experience, by a commitment to action, and by intersectional feminist thought" (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 8). I will describe the principles briefly but defer to the original book (Klein and D'Ignazio, 2020) and supplementary article (Klein and D'Ignazio, 2024) for in depth explanations and examples of each of them.

The principles are as follows:

1. **Examine Power**

> *Examining power means naming and explaining the forces of oppression that are so baked into our daily lives— and into our datasets, our databases, and our algorithms— that we often don't even see them.*
>
> *- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 24)*

The concept of the *matrix of domination* was introduced by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins and states that power operates through intersecting domains to oppress marginalized communities: structurally, via legal frameworks and public policy; disciplinarily, through institutional regulation and bureaucratic oversight; hegemonically, by shaping consciousness through cultural institutions such as the media and education; and interpersonally, through individual lived experiences of oppression. This matrix, Klein and D'Ignazio propose, is a useful framework through which we can begin to examine power and dissect the various ways that power interacts such that data often becomes a tool for oppression.

2. **Challenge Power**

> *Challenging power requires mobilizing data science to push back against existing and unequal power structures and to work toward more just and equitable futures.*
>
> *- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 53)*

Equipped with an understanding of power from the first principle, the second principle asks us to use data to challenge power. This can involve using data to enhance our understanding of issues relating to societal power imbalances. Of greater relevance to this essay, this may also involve re-examining the ways that we build and evaluate AI

models. For example, who decides whether an AI model is 'good'? Without a thorough examination of this simple question, these systems pose a serious threat of harming the communities and voices that are overlooked.

3. **Rethink Binaries and Hierarchies**

> *Data feminism requires us to challenge the gender binary, along with other systems of counting and classification that perpetuate oppression.*
>
> *- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 8)*

Historic tendencies to classify people into the gender binary, racial categories, and in many other reductive ways are being empowered by AI systems. For example, researchers at Stanford claimed to create 'gaydar' able to predict whether someone is gay based on a photo of their face more accurately than a human can (Wang and Kosinski 2018). It's easy to imagine how this technology could be dangerous in the hands of oppressive regimes in which homosexuality is still criminalized. However, even in other applications of such an AI which are not explicitly dangerous, its design is still reductive and ignores the many other sexualities that exist. Unfortunately, data and technology are often portrayed as 'objective' and the assertion that there are only two sexualities (for example) thus gains validity as a result of the ignorant design of the algorithm. Data feminism asks us to resist perpetuating these rigid classifications by questioning the goals of the algorithms we create and use.

4. **Elevate Emotion and Embodiment**

> *Rebalancing emotion and reason opens up the data communication toolbox and allows us to focus on what truly matters in a design process: honoring context, architecting attention, and taking action to defy stereotypes and reimagine the world.*
>
> *- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 96)*

To any AI algorithm, data of all types end up being converted to numbers before they can be processed. However, not all knowledge can be represented in numbers and the insistence on scientific proof can itself become a form of epistemic oppression, particularly when it dismisses or devalues the knowledge derived from the lived experiences of marginalized people. This is especially true

because these communities often don't have the resources to produce the quantitative evidence demanded of them This results in a vicious cycle wherein the lack of 'evidence' prevents issues from being addressed, thereby enabling the continuation of harm. By elevating forms of knowing outside of traditional empirical frameworks, we create space for voices which would otherwise be overlooked.

5.   Embrace Pluralism

Embracing pluralism in data science means valuing many perspectives and voices and doing so at all stages of the process— from collection to cleaning to analysis to communication. It also means attending to the ways in which data science methods can inadvertently work to suppress those voices in the service of clarity, cleanliness, and control.

- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 130)

Building on the previous principle, this principle advocates for data workers to embrace the plurality of ways of knowing enabled by elevating emotion and embodiment. Combining wisdom from multiple perspectives, it argues, results in deeper knowledge.

6.   Consider Context

Rather than seeing knowledge artifacts, like datasets, as raw input that can be simply fed into a statistical analysis or data visualization, a feminist approach insists on connecting data back to the context in which they were produced. This context allows us, as data scientists, to better understand any functional limitations of the data and any associated ethical obligations, as well as how the power and privilege that contributed to their making may be obscuring the truth.

- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 152-153)

This principle highlights the fact that data is not objective or value neutral; it is created within a societal context which informed not only how the data was to be collected, but what data was collected in the first place. Without this context, it is easy to overlook the implicit values and norms embedded in data. Consequently, these norms may be propagated en masse by AI systems built on these imperfect datasets, abstracting the sources of this harm into seemingly 'neutral' AI outputs.

7.   Make Labor Visible

Behind the magic and marketing of data products, there is always hidden labor— often performed by women and people of color, which is both a cause and effect of the fact that this labor is both underwaged and undervalued. Data feminism seeks to make this labor visible so that it can be acknowledged and appropriately valued, and so that its truer cost— for people and for the planet— can be recognized.

- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 185)

The effort involved in building AI extends far beyond software engineers with high salaries at prestigious companies in Silicon Valley. It includes the labour of workers maintaining data centers, miners (many of whom are in the global south and suffer from dangerous working conditions) who source the rare-earth minerals necessary for the hardware AI runs on, data annotators who prepare the data to be inputted into the AI system, and many more. However, most of this labour is undervalued, underpaid, and workers often suffer from precarious working conditions (atlas of AI), echoing the labour hierarchies of colonialism wherein certain jobs are glorified while others are devalued and rendered invisible. Highlighting this invisible labour is a critical step in rectifying these capitalist and colonial dynamics.

8.   Environmental Impact

[AI] systems seem positioned to benefit elite users in the Global North, even as they exact their cost on those in the Global South. This is an environmental issue, but it is also a feminist issue, as these effects are not only experienced unequally in terms of geography, but also in terms of gender.

- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 14)

Though this principle is self-explanatory, its importance in the context of feminism is difficult to overstate. The global south, especially women and people of colour, experience the negative consequences of AI development, through the ecological toll it extracts on the environment, most intimately. Therefore, it is inherently feminist to critically examine and push back against the negative environmental impacts of AI.

9.   Consent

> *As we await the development of informed guidelines for fair use, we can be certain that something other than the current system—in which Big Tech steals people's work, exploits it, makes money, and facilitates structural violence along the way-is required."*
>
> *- (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020, 14)*

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a well-known issue. Women and gender minorities are subjected to disproportionate harms enabled through technology, such as cyberstalking, cyber-bullying, and online harassment to name a few. AI has continued to empower those perpetrating these harms. Specifically, non-consensual deep fake porn is created with the likeness of real people using image generation models (Moreau and Rourke 2024). The issue of consent persists in the realm of AI through this and other non-consensual interactions with AI systems, including through the theft of data.

By examining the potential of AI in mental health care through the lens of data feminism, I hope to contribute to the scholarly conversation around the ethics and safety of this use case. The purpose of this essay is not to advocate for or against implementing AI in the mental health space, but to examine this proposition critically from the perspective of those most at risk of experiencing harm as a result of it.

Data Feminism

There are several practices that are foundational to building industrial LLMs such as the GPT models from OpenAI, Grok from xAI, Claude from Anthropic, and any other model with comparable performance. For example, engineers require data to build any AI model which can be challenging to obtain. This section explores the questionable ethics of data practices and other processes shared by the development of all industrial-scale LLMs including ones being proposed for use in mental health.

LLMs are trained on vast amounts of text data scraped from the internet. For example, OpenAI's GPT-3 was trained on a set of text data with nearly 375 billion words (Brown et al. 2020) - to give you a sense of scale, this is approximately equivalent to 375,000 times the length of the

entire Harry Potter series (OpenAI has stopped releasing details on the data used to train its models since GPT-3, but experts believe that the datasets have only grown). Often, the legality of the use of this data is sketchy; the New York Times famously launched a lawsuit against OpenAI and Microsoft, the producers of two of the most famous LLMs, for their unauthorized use of New York Times articles to train their LLMs. The lawsuit is ongoing at the time of writing this essay, however it highlights an important issue surrounding the creation of AI technologies: where are technology creators sourcing the huge quantities of data needed to build their models, and is this process ethical? Many artists and authors have voiced concerns over the use of their work to train generative AI models (Lamb, Brown, and Grossman 2024; Jiang et al. 2023). In fact, in addition to the New York Times, OpenAI and Microsoft have been sued by the Authors Guild as well as other well-known authors, including George R.R. Martin and Jodi Picoult, for infringing on copyright laws by using the authors' works to train their language models. As a consequence of the opacity surrounding AI's training data, the labour of creating it may be considered 'ghost work,' a term coined by anthropologist Mary Gray and computer scientist Siddarth Suri to describe the hidden labour powering many technological systems which is obfuscated from end users through non-transparent labour practices. Another form of ghost work is data cleaning and annotation, which prepares raw data to be used for model training. Importantly, this work is often outsourced to workers in the global south who face precarious working conditions, are underpaid, and are often women of colour (Klein and D'Ignazio 2020; Crawford 2021; Gray and Suri 2019). The breadth of ghost work required to develop and maintain 'innovative technologies' is out of the scope of this essay, however *Ghost Work* by Mary Gray and Siddarth Suri is a good starting point to learn about the often overlooked and unethical labour powering the technological conveniences that have come to be ubiquitous in our daily lives.

Beyond these data practices, the training process of LLMs are riddled with other concerns as well. Environmental activists have called out the 22 million liters of water used to train Meta's Llama 3 model. In one case, this tremendous water usage left residents nearby a data center,

which had been newly built by Meta, without access to water in their home (Tan 2025). Additionally, machines used to train LLMs (and other AI models) are built using resources extracted at a similarly devastating cost to the environment as well as to the communities surrounding extraction sites and the labourers working in them (Crawford 2021). These topics similarly deserve to be considered deeply but are not specific to the topic of this essay (that is, these concerns are applicable to any LLM and many also extend to other types of AI models) and comprehensive discussion is out of the scope. Researcher Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI* is a good place to begin if you'd like to learn more.

Once an LLM has been trained, it is often fine-tuned to optimize its performance in a particular domain or task. This requires yet more data. In a field such as mental health, this is especially problematic - the data for fine-tuning must be domain specific. Though casebooks exist for training purposes, they are limited in scope and quantity; therefore, the data in question would likely have to include actual patient data to be sufficient in quantity and scope. Data like this is ethically and legally complex to collect and use as it would include sensitive, deeply personal information about real individuals' mental health experiences. The already significant concerns around data privacy and consent are heightened in this context. Whose data is being used? Was meaningful consent obtained? Can such data ever truly be anonymized in a way that protects those individuals? In addition, is this the data we want to collect? As we will see in greater depth in the next section, this data is often riddled with biases. For example, researchers found in an analysis of medical records from the New York City jail system over 2011 to 2013 that Black and Hispanic inmates in jails in New York City were less likely to receive mental health services compared to their White counterparts, but more likely to be subject to solitary confinement (Kaba et al. 2015). Reflecting on their results, Kaba et al. express concern that "some groups in the jail system are more likely to elicit treatment responses whereas others are more likely to meet with a punishment response" (Kaba et al. 2015). Systemic disparities such as this risk being perpetuated if we do not examine what data we are collecting and using to train these models.

Without even discussing the development of LLM systems, we've already run up against fundamental practices which run counter to several of the principles proposed in data feminism. Specifically, power is not being examined or challenged if the practice of data collection continues to exploit the most vulnerable. Ghost work is labour not made visible, and the question remains on the consent of those whose data is being collected. In particular, poverty and oppression are significant social determinants to poor outcomes in health and specifically mental health. Putting people, who are most often already members of marginalized communities, in precarious, underpaid working conditions runs counter to the goal of implementing LLMs mental healthcare in the first place. If using LLMs to improve mental healthcare services rests on the exploitation of people without the power to resist it, is it worth pursuing? Is it still in service of the fundamental goal of improved mental health if it results in the deterioration of the mental health of those workers? The answer may very well be yes depending on the philosophical lens through which these questions are answered (for example, a utilitarian perspective might argue that the benefits to many is worth the cost of a few), however calling out this hypocrisy is the first step to finding an alternative solution that doesn't rely on ghost work.

LLM APPLICATIONS

Bias in Mental Health

The field of mental health care is built on decades of psychological research which scholars argue has contained systemic inequality from at each step of the process: Roberts et al. (2020) queried over 26000 empirical articles in top-tier psychological journals over the years of 1974 to 2018 and found significant racial imbalances in those contributing and editing the journals, as well as in the subjects being included in studies. Unsurprisingly, white people were disproportionately overrepresented in each of these categories. Dr. Lonnie Snowden (2003) argued that these racial biases also manifest in practise through the diagnosis and treatment of patients from different racial backgrounds. Similarly, gendered stereotypes around mental health have long existed and influenced mental health research. In fact, the first description of hysteria dates to 1900 BC. Hysteria was a term

generally used to describe mental unwellness in people with uteri and which carried heavy stigma due to its connotation that the suffering was due to feminine weakness or vulnerability. This view of hysteria as a 'female disease' and consequent effect on the perception of "mental disorder, especially in women, [being] so often misunderstood and misinterpreted, [and generating] scientific and / or moral bias, defined as a pseudo-scientific prejudice" persisted for 4000 years, until the 19th century (Tasca et al. 2013). In modern times, similar prejudiced views on mental health persist. For example, researchers Bacigalupe and Martín found in a 2020 study that women's mental health is being 'medicalised,' meaning that women with depression or anxiety are prescribed psychotropic medication at a disproportionate rate compared to men (the study did not consider nonbinary/gender diverse people). Clearly, there is a long history of inequity in mental health research and care.

These biases have permeated North American social consciousness as well. For example, in clinical settings the stereotype that black people feel less pain, a belief originally used to justify slavery, results in the underdiagnosis and treatment of patients. However, this stereotype persists outside of the clinical context as well (Trawalter and Hoffman, 2015). Biases do not exist in silos. As a result, LLMs have been found to replicate these biases in conversational contexts as well (for example: Busker, Choenni, and Bargh 2023; Kotek, Dockum, and Sun 2023; Salinas, Haim, and Nyarko 2025). Given the long legacy of bias in mental health care and early but substantial evidence of bias in LLMs, the risk that for these inequities to be further exacerbated by an unexamined implementation of LLMs in mental health care is clearly present.

Clinician Assistance

Several uses of LLMs in mental health have been proposed to interact with and assist clinicians. Many researchers have examined the abilities of LLMs to diagnose patients with mental health conditions and severity labels (for example: Yang et al. 2024; D'Souza et al. 2023), create treatment plans (Elyoseph, Levkovich, and Shinan-Altman 2024; Berrezueta-Guzman et al. 2024), and manage patient profiles.

Because bias has been the historical norm, unbiased data is scarce. Therefore, LLMs rely on biased data for training and fine-tuning. The process of LLM training and fine-tuning can be understood intuitively as finding the optimal parameters for a model to predict the sequences of words that were observed in the training data - it is trained to replicate what it is fed. By design, if the training data contains sexism, racism, or any other type of bias, an LLM will learn to replicate it. Given the historical legacy of injustice in mental health care, the substantial body of literature and text containing these biases, both in research and practise, it is unsurprising that researchers have already begun observing differences in LLMs' responses to queries on mental healthcare for people of different genders and sexualities (Soun and Nair 2023). One study presented an LLM with case vignettes of patients with anorexia/bulimia nervosa and evaluated the consistency (or lack thereof) of its assessment of the patients through psychometric tests - the study found that the LLM's output was biased based on the gender of the patient described (Schnepper et al. 2025). Similarly, patient monitoring risks being less accurate for marginalized communities and clinician training applications (eg. practising patient interactions by conversing with a chatbot) risks lacking diversity in the patient profiles the LLMs present.

Given the current interest in deploying LLMs to diagnose and potentially triage patients, a process in which accuracy and fairness are essential to ensuring that patients receive the care that they need, these biases pose severe risks to the patients whose wellbeing is at stake. Patient monitoring could fail at a disproportionately high rate for some patients compared to others, and clinician training systems may not be representative of the full range of patients that clinicians should be prepared to treat. In the context of mental healthcare, a field in which marginalized communities have historically faced and continue to face higher barriers to accessing mental health services and lower quality care, the prospect of reinforcing the status quo is alarming to say the least. Without examining the data being used to train systems that could have life-changing impacts on patients in need of mental health care, we run the risk of embedding biases into opaque algorithms that perpetuate harmful norms. At a broader level, failing to rigorously test these systems for embedded bias and to develop strategies for mitigation risks exacerbating

existing mental health disparities rooted in systemic social determinants and perpetuating cycles of social injustice.

Direct Patient Interaction

Sewell Setzer III was just 14 when he tragically committed suicide moments after a chatbot which he had been having intimate conversations with told him to "come home to me as soon as possible" (Roose 2024). This was not the first time an AI chatbot had been accused of contributing to the death of its users, highlighting the profound impact interactions with LLMs can have. Clearly, it is unacceptable for a chatbot to be outputting this dangerous rhetoric and robust safeguards must be implemented and continuously monitored. Knowingly or not, many LLM-powered chatbots are being used in mental health contexts (Roose 2024; Rousmaniere et al. 2025) and interacting directly with users to address their mental health needs. Unfortunately, LLMs risk causing more subtle damage as well since they have been found to demonstrate racism, sexism, and western-centric values among other types of biases. Some of these biases have been quantified by researchers (Straw and Callison-Burch 2020). Recall the hegemonic and interpersonal arms of the matrix of domination; by replicating these biases en masse with marginalized individuals, especially those seeking psychological care, LLMs act as a tool through which oppression continues to proliferate.

Beyond bias, the dangers of bias, some researchers have also expressed concern about the ability of an algorithmic technology to fulfill the needs that traditional mental health treatment methods address. The therapeutic alliance describes the relationship between a patient and their therapist; evidence has consistently shown that "the quality of the therapeutic alliance is linked to the success of psychotherapeutic treatment across a broad spectrum of types of patients, treatment modalities used, presenting problems, contexts, and measurements" (Stubbe 2018). The therapeutic alliance emphasizes "the affective bond between patient and therapist" (Stubbe 2018); the ability of an LLM to form a bond with a human is dubious at best, at least as these technologies currently stand. Additionally, researchers emphasize the importance of non-verbal cues in general mental health treatment

(Guzman-Santiago et al. 2024). Since LLMs can only process textual data as input, they are unable to account for these non-verbal cues. The illusion of having a capable algorithmic system for mental health support overlooks, perhaps even suppresses, our inherently embodied experiences as humans as technology is unable to engage on that level.

Especially given the unregulated use of chatbots for therapeutic purposes, which appears unsettlingly common as found in the aforementioned study by Rousmaniere et al. (2025), the concerns around bias and the constraint of text-only interactions with any type of 'therapeutic' LLM technology could be a real threat to patient wellbeing.

Data Feminist Analysis

So which data feminist principles are being violated? We have established that the unexamined use of LLMs in mental healthcare does not examine or challenge power, rather reinforcing its current state. Part of this current state includes the assertion of binaries and hierarchies, violating the third principle, and there remains no space to implement principles 4 or 5 either as alternative, embodied ways of knowing continue to be overlooked. The deeply flawed context of the data LLMs are currently trained on is decades of racism, sexism, and capitalism but it is overlooked if the data is not interrogated and amended adequately before its use. Clearly, much work should be done before LLMs can be safely implemented in these settings. Table 1 below summarizes the reflections on the use of LLMs in mental health care discussed throughout this essay.

Data Feminist Principle	Reflections from the use of LLMs in mental health care
Examine Power	LLMs reflect past data, thereby perpetuating past biases which have been pervasive in the field of psychology and mental health care.
Challenge Power	Because LLMs are trained to reflect the data they are trained on, they propagate the status quo by design as opposed to challenging power in any way.
Rethink Binaries & Hierarchies	Because LLMs 'think' within the box constructed by the data they are given, there is no way to challenge or change any dominant binaries or hierarchies that exist in this data. As we explored through the example of prison mental health records, there appears to be a hierarchy in mental health treatment (in this context and in the context of broader mental health inequities) which must be challenged and dismantled consciously.
Elevate Emotion & Embodiment	LLMs are unable to form bonds with the people turning to them for emotional support, and cannot even engage with the patient in any way beyond the exchange of text. Therefore the experience of engaging with an LLM is inherently disembodied and runs counter to this principle.
Embrace Pluralism	As we saw in Section 4.1, there is a long legacy of injustice and exclusion in the field of psychology and mental health. To embrace pluralism, we must think beyond the selective perspectives represented in existing literature, which is not possible within the current paradigm of LLM development which largely acquires the requisite training data from existing records.
Consider Context	The context in which the vast majority of mental health literature and records was created is one of pervasive bias, such as racial and gender-based exclusion. With this context in mind, it is scarcely possible to imagine that an LLM could be created which is mindful of this context and makes its users aware of it as well. The context behind an interaction with an LLM is rich, and perhaps too rich for the average user to grasp meaningfully.
Make Labor Visible	As discussed in Section 3, much of the labor powering LLMs, and by extension any LLM-enabled mental health technology, is invisible and oppressive. Though not specific to mental health use cases of LLMs, this principle is broadly violated by the current norms of the AI industry.
Environmental Impact	LLMs are incredibly extractive and resource intensive on the environment and the effects of the environmental damage are not distributed equally. Those already most oppressed and vulnerable, such as citizens in the global south, bear a disproportionate amount of this impact (Ren and Wierman 2024). This injustice conflicts with fundamental principles of equity in addition to ignoring the effects of the environmental impact of LLMs.
Consent	Data theft is an ongoing and very prevalent issue in the development and training of LLMs. Often, companies' data use is non-consensual and the lack of consent practices does not reflect trauma-informed computing practices (Chen et al. 2022). This may be harmful or triggering to users, particularly those whose mental health concerns involve traumatic experiences.

Table 1 – Summary of the reflections on the use of LLMs in mental health care discussed throughout this essay.

Techno-Optimist Possibilities

Techno-optimism refers to "the view that technology, when combined with human passion and ingenuity, is the key to unlocking a better world" (Danaher 2022). Scholars have critiqued this perspective for a variety of reasons (Danaher 2022) including that it is too broad to be widely applicable or that it needs specific caveats to ensure the safety and equity of any implementation of techno-optimist ideas. A data feminist techno-optimism might look like techno-optimism which honours the nine principles set forth by Klein and D'Ignazio. It might encompass the view that yes, technology is incredibly powerful and may well unlock a better world, but only if this better world is defined by a pluralistic view that transcends the normative hegemonic silos in which most technologies are currently built.

May of the risks of a blindly techno-optimist approach to LLM-powered mental health care solutions were discussed in this essay. Despite these risks however, LLMs have the potential to bring large-scale and highly impactful improvements to mental healthcare. They could increase access to psychological care, particularly in underserved communities; assist clinicians, who are often under-resourced, by streamlining their operations; and provide patients with additional support between regularly scheduled visits with clinicians. This would allow mental healthcare providers to dedicate more time and attention to the areas of care where human expertise and empathy are most essential.

Considering the pervasive biases within the current mental healthcare system, an LLM specifically engineered to be equitable (assuming these efforts are successful) could actually improve upon the status quo. In this very optimistic case, deferring certain clinical decisions to the LLM could mitigate the risk of bias introduced by human clinicians. Existing mental health care systems are already unjust, as evidenced by large mental health disparities between different communities (Aneshensel 2009) – perhaps these injustices could be challenged with the help of technologies designed and proven to be equitable.

To be somewhat more realistic, LLMs could begin by being applied to the low-risk use-cases such as patient monitoring under the direct supervision of a clinician. In this case, the system would only be a supplement to the current standard of care and researchers could study its

benefits without risking inadequate treatment. Bit by bit, as further research establishes the safety or danger of LLMs in the mental health context, greater agency could be granted to the LLMs.

Building equitable models from biased data is a challenging task, and developers can look to the principles of data feminism for ideas to achieve this goal. For example, the context can be consulted to inform changes that can be made to the datasets to reflect the ideal, rather than current, state of mental healthcare. Embodied knowledge from a plurality of communities can be consulted as well. The process of building these models should employ ethical data collection practices which emphasize consent and fair labour practices for data workers. The environmental cost of model development should be minimized as much as safely possible. Importantly, the communities most at risk of being affected by these technologies should be consulted in the development process; if technological solutions are undesirable to the community, they should not be developed.

Of course, this vision can only be realized if the models it relies on are able to provide care at a quality at least equal to that provided by human clinicians. The LLMs should be audited to ensure high accuracy across all demographic groups and for patients with intersectional identities. In case this is not feasible or the LLM displays bias, it should not be used for patients whose care could be compromised.

Conclusion

While the integration of LLMs into mental healthcare offers the potential of increased accessibility and support, particularly for underserved communities, their use cannot be divorced from the long history of bias and inequity embedded within both artificial intelligence and mental health systems. Applying a data feminist lens reveals not only the potential harms of deploying LLMs without accountability, but also the structural assumptions and power imbalances they risk reinforcing. Rather than rushing to embrace these tools as solutions, we must consider who benefits, who is harmed, and whose voices are being excluded from their development and deployment. If we are to leverage LLMs in ways that truly support mental health, particularly for those most marginalized by the existing system, we must look to alternative ways of building technology

grounded in equity and justice. A path forward requires balance between innovation and safety, which iterative deployment could help us strike. In the best case, this path could lead us to a future in which AI is an ally as we reach towards equitable mental health systems for all.

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HEARING FEMINIST SEX:

Imaginative potential in the soundscape of audio erotica

By   Haley Down

Introduction

In the heterosexual patriarchal imagination of sex and sexuality, women are vocal, men are visual, and violence against women is standard (John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis 1996; Nicole K Jeffrey 2022). Given the ubiquity of violence in our culture's sexual imagination and modern technological landscape as well as the degree to which the sounds we encounter impact our behaviour in the world, I will examine the components of the soundscape of audio erotica applications and suggest the alternatives this soundscape offers to listeners: the ability to experience and explore sexuality free of the violence of heteropatriarchy. I will do this through a close reading (rather, listening) of an erotic audio narrative from the Quinn application, which was made available in 2019. Quinn, along with Dipsea, are North America's leading applications in subscription-based erotic fiction (Sarah Larson 2019). This reading will establish three elements of the soundscape of audio erotica—naturalistic modality, voice grain, and the gender reversal of the frenzy of the visual and audible (Theo van Leeuwen 1999; Roland Barthes 1977; Corbett and Kapsalis)—as primary contributors to their atmosphere of pleasure, safety and calmness (Larson 2019). These features of the sexual soundscape enable listeners to, perhaps for the first time, meaningfully explore their personal

desires while witnessing sexuality free of the threat of violence which usually accompanies the heteropatriarchal imagination.

Part One: The Sexual Imagination of Heteropatriarchy

I learned too young that real sex—not movie or marriage sex—is about a woman, moaning, and a man, ejaculating onto her loud and rhythmic body. To reach that end, he slaps her in various fleshy places; if he speaks, he growls about possession; in his best moments, he has his hands over her throat. She screams pleasure and coos words of encouragement to him. It is entirely spontaneous; they ask no questions.

Culturally, we ascribe roles to men and women in, what Jenny Sundén and Sara Tanderup Linkis call, "our sexual norms and imaginaries" (2024, 3). There are two significant components of this imagination which are evident in the scenario I have just described. The first is that, as Nicole K Jeffrey quoting Nicola Gavey writes, "hegemonic heterosexuality functions to obscure clear 'distinctions between what is [sexual violence] and what is *just sex*'" (2022, 477, emphasis original). To define this violence I turn, again, to Jeffrey, who says:

> I purposely do not define the boundaries of what is and is not sexual violence in this paper because doing so risks [...] perpetuating the very systems that obscure it. [...] sexual violence is not a lack of consent but gendered power relations [including] men's entitlement, superordination, and denial of women's desires and ability to meaningfully co-determine the conditions and quality of their sexual relations and experiences. (2022, 477)

The second component of the heteropatriarchal sexual imagination is the belief that "men's pleasure is absolute, irrefutable, and often quiet, while women's pleasure is elusive, questionable, and noisy" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 104). Female pleasure is almost entirely "deferred to the aural sphere" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 103). Linda Williams attributes this to "the enduring fetish of the male money shot," wherein the money shot, the most important moment of heterosexual intercourse, is the visible ejaculation (1989, 185). Corbett and Kapsalis identify this gender discrepancy as the masculine "frenzy of the visible" versus the feminine "frenzy of the audible"

(1996, 103). In heterosexual sex, women's sounds verify both "her pleasure" and the "prowess" of her lover (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 104). Women are often blamed for the perceived impotence or inadequacy of her lover. We have seen enough women pleading forgiveness and wrestling pillows off their faces from angry, humiliated lovers in television, film, and pornography to know that this misattribution, that *her* sexuality signifies something about *him*, often results in violence.

Part Two: Being Sexual Under Heteropatriarchy

I am writing this essay when I get a call at 10:30 pm. I answer to find my stoic friend crying hard, asking me to come pick her up. She has gotten off the train halfway through her commute because a man standing inches from her face made repeated throat-slicing gestures. I have never heard her cry before. We are both shaking with familiar adrenaline. When she is home, she says "my outfit was so cute today. I shouldn't wear cute outfits." We remain in knowing silence. As she falls asleep, I am awake, fixating on my impotence at the sound of her crying alone on a dark street.

No amount of intellectualization or sharing stories will protect women from the violence we encounter in the ordinary routines of our lives. Knowing this, women often turn to fiction to experience safety and pleasure. We see this in the skyrocketing sales of romantasy, smut, and erotic literature and scholars have known that romantic fantasy has offered something "pleasurable and restorative" to women since Janice A. Radway's book "Reading the Romance" came out in 1984 (119). Radway went so far as to say that some romance readers find it not only "generally enjoyable but also emotionally necessary as well" (1984, 10). Radway sought a method of romance reading that could "encourage" and "strengthen" its women readers; I suggest that these apps may offer the necessary form of narrative delivery that in doing so "might lead to [the] substantial social change" Radway called for (1984, 18).

To fully immerse themselves in safe pleasure, women are rapidly adopting usage of app-based audio erotica, such as "U.S.-born forerunners like Dipsea […] and Quinn" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 4). In 2021, Quinn reported "3.2 million minutes" of user listening, with listenership increasing to "14 million minutes each month" in 2023 (Sarah Diamond 2023). These applications use "sound and listening to create a safe space for sexual imagination and exploration" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13). These apps are "reinventing the genre of erotic storytelling" by focusing on "audio details that enhance a sense of pleasure, safety and calm" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 4; Larson 2019). The vitality of each of these three words cannot be overstated: pleasure *and* safety *and* calm.

It is not frivolous or scandalous that so many women are listening to sexual scenarios in their free time. These applications are advertised as both pleasurable and political. adrienne maree brown writes that pleasure "is a measure of freedom," and many feminist movements consider pleasure to be "essential to liberation" (brown 2019, 3; Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13).

The locations in which women listen to audio erotica is also relevant in the opportunity to experience the world without violence. Women's bodies are sexualized and thus threatened no matter where we go: the grocery store, the library, the bus. While reading is considered a solitary, private experience, women are listening to erotic audio fiction in public spaces, becoming agents over their public eroticism (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13). The nature of audio narrative means that the listening experience is highly mobile; the scenarios and sounds of the erotica infuse "everyday movements and spaces with erotic potentials and possibilities, allowing for desire at a low frequency to reverberate through the body in in-between spaces" (Sundén and Linkis 2024, 13-14). The potentials of this kind of listening are significant. Imbuing daily life with pleasure, safety, and calmness through aural fiction may allow women to experience those routinely threatening spaces as pleasurable, safe, and calming. It may also offer ways to imagine possible futures that are different from our present, both culturally and in listeners' own sex lives. As the mind is enveloped in the sounds of agentive desire, the body experiences it, too. This embodied (though also disembodied) reimagining of ordinary life allows a listener to experience that agency, both by hearing the participants in their ears demonstrating it and through enacting agency of where, when, and what they hear.

The question then becomes *how* can sex sound feminist, pleasurable, safe and calming?

Part Two: Being Sexual Under Heteropatriarchy

The only way to understand how these narratives can impact the listener is by experiencing it firsthand. So, I download the Quinn app. There is a free story to trial, before you decide whether to pay $4.99 per month for unlimited access. The audio file is titled "The Library (Preview Audio)." I sit at my desk with headphones on and press play. The narrative unfolds at a public library, hidden in a back aisle, and occurs between an unnamed young man (the narrator) and the listener ("you"). You are a librarian and he asks you for a recommendation. After helping him locate a book, you are both interested in and enthusiastic about having sex. You agree that he will be dominant and you submissive. You remain in this soundscape for forty-three minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

The term 'soundscape' was coined in 1977 by R Murray Schafer in his book The Soundscape: *Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World*. In it he writes, "The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape" (Schafer 1977, 7). My analysis of the erotic soundscape follows Schafer's guidance that "what the soundscape analyst must do first is to discover the significant features of the soundscape" (1997, 9). The three features I have identified of this feminist sexual soundscape are its naturalistic modality, the grain of the narrator's voice, and the gender reversal of the visible and audible frenzies (van Leeuwen 1999; Barthes 1977; Corbett and Kapsalis 1996).

Theo van Leeuwen, in his book *Speech, Music, Sound*, identifies several modalities of sound. The feminist sexual soundscape of the Quinn audio is firmly situated in a naturalistic modality, that is, while an artifice, the hearer agrees to its appearance of naturality. Van Leeuwen defines naturalistic sounds as the way the "roar of a waterfall or the whine of an engine can disclose the presence of an actual waterfall or engine nearby, but may also be used to signify 'waterfall' or 'engine' in the absence of an actual waterfall or engine" (1999, 36). The naturalistic modality of the Quinn soundscape means that the listener hears the unfolding erotic scene as if it were natural, real. For example, the narrator addresses you as if you were having a real conversation, and despite never hearing a response from you, he carries on as if he does. The narrator reminds you throughout the encounter that you are in a public place by making shushing noises and saying, "oh s*** someone's coming" or "they're right over there." The ambient noise reminds you of the presence of other people as well. You are reminded that this is happening to *you*. When you, the librarian, first help him find a book, you hear flipping pages. You hear him unzip your pants. When the intensity of the sex increases, the narrator tells you that you have knocked a book off the shelf and you hear it crash to the floor. The sex, too, sounds lifelike. As he performs cunnilingus, you hear tongue against flesh, you hear a sucking mouth. When the penetration becomes frantic, you hear the smacking of damp skin. The soundscape becomes hyper realistic in the way the sound moves around it. Your ears are always the focal point, his voice moving around you unambiguously. When the narrator says he is kissing the left side of your neck, you hear his voice only in your left ear. His voice becomes distant when he is on his knees, it draws near when he stands.

The narrator's voice plays a significant role in the atmosphere of the Quinn soundscape. Roland Barthes introduced the concept of the grain of the voice in his 1977 book *Image-Music-Text*. He defines the voice's grain as the audible "materiality of the body" (1977, 182). To identify grain, Barthes is looking to hear not only the lungs but also "the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose" (1977, 183). The voice of the Quinn narrator has so much grain that at times it verges into distraction. He introduces himself in a whisper (you are in a library, after all) and you can hear the saliva in his mouth, you hear each laboured inhale and exhale as his pleasure mounts, you hear his whimpering, his moans, his growls. You hear where his tongue is positioned in his mouth and when a breath catches in pleasure. His voice is not only intended to convey "clarity of meaning," despite his detailed descriptions of what he is doing to you because he frequently interrupts his coherent language with an insuppressible moan or by vocalizing both of your orgasms (Barthes 1977, 184). Barthes criticizes "art that innoculates [sic] pleasure (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion)" (1977, 185). The Quinn narrator's voice is the antithesis of rote, as his

orgasmic vocalizations infuse the moment with "the blissed-out sound of broken-down speech" (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 102). The narrator's voice is particularly significant in contributing to the pleasurable, safe and calming experience of the listener. He often makes noises which, in the heteropatriarchal imagination, are reserved for women. His whimpers and moans alternate between being growly and masculine, and delicate and feminine. He pleads, a lot. He nervously stumbles over his words as he tries to seduce you. He giggles after he climaxes. His nervousness serves to indicate your agency, your safety in this situation. The narrator's giggling and unthreatening dominance create a relaxed and calm environment. His voice signals the kind of true pleasure, beyond physical pleasure that emerges between two people enjoying themselves and you, the listener, share in it.

Perhaps most significant about this erotic soundscape is the complete reversal of Corbett and Kapsalis' masculine "frenzy of the visible" and feminine "frenzy of the audible" (1996, 103). In this narrative, a female voice is never heard. However, the narrator's voice ensures that you are both kept present. He is identified only through his sounds, with no description of his appearance. His body is not introduced until halfway through; it is at the twenty-minute mark that his penis is first mentioned. Before that, he draws your attention to his pleasure by hearing him vocalize, by how much he takes delight in your physicality. In contrast, you become known almost entirely through visual description. You know that you are wearing jeans, have long hair, and how you are being (re)positioned. You climax twice before his singular orgasm, and his moaning crescendos similarly for all three. He makes your orgasms tangible, too, saying, "I can feel you coming" and asking you to give him "all of it." This suggests a visuality to the female orgasm that, as previously established, is often only the domain of the male money shot. This is a radical shift from sex in a heteropatriarchal imagination. The narrator is assured of his ability to please you, and he checks frequently that you are enthusiastically consenting, asking "is it okay if I…?" and "how does it feel if I…?" It is clear he wants his voice to sound sexy, deepening it, making it husky. He instructs "here's what's going to happen, you're going to listen to everything I tell you," and affirms that "you're such a good listener." Instead of relying on the money shot

as the concluding signal as it so often is, after he climaxes, he sweetly kisses you, giggles and chats about how much he enjoyed your encounter and his hope that you might see each other again. The audio fades to the sound of him kissing you passionately.

Conclusion

Men's attribution of women's sexual noises to their achievement of masculinity continues to result in a violent cultural landscape. However, the proliferation of erotic audio fiction is undeniably remarkable in presenting the opportunity for a listener to experience sexuality free of violence, the threat of which most women have likely never been without. She could scroll a porn site for hours trying to find one video which *might* depict an agentive woman, but the violent environment she must wade through means it is, in part, a violent experience. The ability to open an application and trust that her pleasure and safety have been prioritized is already significant. But entering the feminist soundscape of Quinn's audio erotica offers more than prioritization, it serves to reorganize and expand listener's sexual imaginations. The soundscape's naturalistic modality enables the listener to experiment, away from another body, the emotional potential of pleasurable, safe, and calm sex and what it might entail, in a setting that is lifelike, at least to our ears. Of course, there is the question of the body. But it is my experience that the disembodiment offers opportunity to further experiment, temporarily, in the safety of the mind. The detailed grain of the narrator's voice offers listeners the opportunity to experiment with how they experience various power dynamics or scenarios, and to practice witnessing what ongoing consent sounds and feels like within them. While in the heteropatriarchal imagination, women are relegated to the aural realm, the Quinn soundscape firmly plants her in the visual and him in the audible domain. This is a dramatic reimagination of what sex for women can look and sound like and reveals the prescribed limitations of heteropatriarchal sexual scripts as well as opportunities for the listener to reevaluate how they relate to them.

Imagine a world where curious girls learn that real sex is pleasurable and safe, where men are not trained to be aroused by barely consensual sex. Imagine that encountering sex on the internet is safe at worst and delightful at best, and that

violence has no place in sexuality. This paper and the soundscape it maps are, of course, only a starting point. Future research should listen to this soundscape with the considerations, limitations, and opportunities of trans women and nonbinary people in mind. As a population whose relationship to sexual violence is often both heightened and dissimilar to that experienced by cisgender women, the observations I have made and my experience of being in this soundscape may not be entirely transferrable. Some of the limitations of this research could potentially be aided by purchasing a subscription and hearing a much greater variety of erotic narratives, for example I would look for depictions of sex with nonbinary, trans, disabled or queer partners. But—and this, too, is something to be further considered—the taboo of doing so remains with me. Not to mention a future conversation about who can afford such a subscription and the time and privacy required to use it.

Acknowledgements

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DIGITAL FEMINIST FUTURITIES FROM THE MARGIN:

Refugee Women Experiences with Juxtapolitical Publics

By   Dr. Katty Alhayek

Introduction

In the context of the 2011 Syrian uprising-turned-war, I left Syria in the spring of 2012. I was in my early twenties, and the hope I had held for a fairer, more inclusive future—free from authoritarianism, sexism, inequality, and other forms of oppression—had vanished.

I was learning—through my own experiences and the shared struggles of fellow feminist and young activists who had also believed in the early promise of the "Arab Spring" movements in countries like Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—that achieving structural change is profoundly difficult. Authoritarian, classist, capitalist, and patriarchal forces always seem to find their way back to power in one form or another.

This lesson was reinforced during the years I spent in the United States (2012–2021), where I witnessed and participated in the racial justice movement. There, I observed firsthand how white supremacy—as a system and structure—reasserts its dominance through ideological co-optation, institutional durability, and adaptive strategies manifested in the rise of Trump (Alexander et al. 2017; Brown 2015; Giroux and McLaren 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Zeno 2017).

During these years, I lived through the displacement of half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million, which includes over 7.4 million internally and more than 6 million around the world in more than 130 countries (UNHCR 2025). In the diaspora, I was following how Syrian women, like myself, in countries such as Germany and the United States faced economic, social, and cultural challenges in integrating into their new societies, while also contending with the colonial gaze and the dehumanization of "Arab" and Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Alhayek 2014). In facing such challenges, I witnessed the resilience of many Syrian women who formed digital communities, such as *Syrische Frauen in Deutschland* (i.e. Syrian women in Germany) (SFD) and *Let's Stand Again* (LSA), to process their past, improve their present and imagine a better future.

While these groups endorse a diverse range of feminist beliefs, I found it intriguing that they avoid using the label "feminist," likely to maintain the apolitical, self-help appearance of these communities (Zucker 2004). Still, I found these digital communities to offer a more grassroots, genuine understanding of the real experiences of women from Global South countries such as Syria who moved to Global North countries such as Germany and the United States. In this article, I apply Lauren Berlant's concept of *juxtapolitical publics* to understand how Syrian diasporic women use digital media to navigate survival and community in contexts of displacement—without necessarily engaging in formal or overtly recognized political activism. In doing so, I focus on the experiences of the leaders of two Facebook communities—SFD and LSA—by examining the mechanisms and motivations behind their creation, as well as the inner workings of the admins team to manage these pages.

Theoretical Context

In the context of Western societies, scholarship on women, self-help, and media, emphasized the neoliberal, individualistic nature of self-help messages aimed at women and described them as part of a postfeminist neoliberal ideology (Barker Gill & Harvey 2018; McRobbie 2008). The depoliticization of self-help discourses is seen as one way of how neoliberalism operates culturally by normalizing values such as self-sufficiency and personal branding while obscuring structural inequities and intersectional oppressions (Wilson 2018; Ouellette Hay 2007). In this ideological environment, scholars such as Brown (2015), sees self-help industry as a cultural technology that translates neoliberal values into the intimate

language of individual empowerment while disciplining individuals into accepting the unfair market's terms. Classic self-help books such as *The Secret, Atomic Habits*, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* reframe structural social problems (like unemployment, precarity, alienation) as personal ones not as a symptom of deeper social malaise.

In such neoliberal contexts where both the state and market systems are failing ordinary people, Berlant (2011) uses the concept of *juxtapolitical publics* to describe groups of people who are proximate to politics but not directly engaged in traditional political activities. Instead, they operate in adjacent cultural and affective spaces, where they respond to political conditions indirectly by negotiating survival, belonging, and collective life. This understanding of *juxtapolitical publics* is central to Berlant's theorization of hope, in the current times, as *cruel optimism*. In this framework, hope is a double-edged force: people cling to it amid the erosion of public institutions and civic life in the United States—not because they are naive, but because, even when recognized as "cruel," hope provides structure and meaning to everyday life during uncertain times. Without outright dismissing hope, Berlant critiques *juxtapolitical publics* for enabling people to endure unjust conditions rather than mobilizing to challenge or transform them through direct political activism. While Berlant's concept of *juxtapolitical publics* was developed in the context of American society, I explore, in this paper, how it can be applied to understand the experiences of women from the margin, such as Syrian refugee women who use digital spaces and technologies to form *juxtapolitical publics* as a way to process their past, improve their present and imagine a better future beyond patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures.

Methodology and Methods

I draw on Standpoint theory as a feminist epistemological framework for this article by centering the lived experiences of those on the margins (Harding, 1991; Collins, 2000). Standpoint theory serves as a theoretical tool not only to foreground marginalized perspectives but also to reveal the structural limits of dominant ways of knowing. Standpoint theorists do not romanticize oppression or marginalization; rather, they expose

the ways canonical epistemologies have privileged elite, Western, masculine voices under the guise of universality (Lugones, 2003). Additionally, they demonstrate how subjugated standpoints render visible the blind spots and naturalized assumptions that structure hegemonic knowledge formations (Harding, 1991). In this vein, intersectional feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), theorize power from the margins, producing complex, situated, and historically grounded forms of knowledge.

Utilizing Standpoint theory, I focus on the lived experiences and histories of Syrian women as sources of theory and critique. This methodological orientation informed the questions I asked, which centered around the experiences and stories of Syrian women leaders of digital communities— aiming to foster a community of support and to produce knowledge grounded in their lived, embodied realities.

I conducted in-depth interviews, with the two leaders of SFD and LSA, as part of a broader study between 2018 and 2021 that focuses on small-scale media initiatives post the 2011-Syrian uprising-turned-war (Alhayek, 2025).

Standpoint theory emphasizes situated knowledge and how researchers' positionality affect research outcomes. Without my insider membership in the Syrian diasporic women community, this research would not have been possible. Analysis of the stories I share about SFD and LSA reveals insights into the broader social structures, inequalities, and resistance that Syrian displaced women experienced.

Results

Syrian diasporic women created both SFD and LSA in 2016 in response to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016[1] and the increasing influx of refugees to Germany, the United States and other western countries. The women used the privacy settings for Facebook groups to create a private group where only members can see who else is in the group and what they post. To protect the privacy of group members, Facebook does

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[1] According to Nordland (2015), in modern history the year 2015 witnessed the biggest influx of migrants to Europe from outside the continent. However, as Trilling (2018) explains, the name "European migrant crisis" is problematic because it obscures the underlying causes of the refugee crisis that existed long before 2015 and continued long after it.

not allow private groups to be changed to public. Admins can choose to make their groups visible or hidden and both SFD and LSA are visible which means anyone can find the group in Facebook search but only members who are admitted can see the content of the groups. Below I share the stories of the Syrian women leaders of these two digital communities and the mechanisms and motivations that led to their creation.

Syrische Frauen in Deutschland
🔒 Private group · 21.4K members

About | Discussion | Announcements | Rooms | Members | Events | Media | Files

About This Group

أهلًا وسهلًا فيك معنا في مجموعة سيدات سوريات في ألمانيا
هي المجموعة للتعارف على بعضنا بألمانيا ..
وللفائدة بأي معلومة مهمة .. أو السؤال عن شي م... See More

🔒 Private
Only members can see who's in the group and what they post.

👁 Visible
Anyone can find this group.

📍 Germany

👥 General Group

🕐 History
Group created on June 9, 2016 See More

Fig. 3.1 – A screenshot of Syrische Frauen in Deutschland's "about" section without any personally identifiable information (February 10, 2021).

Syrische Frauen in Deutschland (SFD)

Syrische Frauen in Deutschland (i.e. Syrian women in Germany) (SFD) is a private Facebook group that was created on June 9, 2016 by a group of young Syrian refugee women in Germany. It is a women-only online space. As of July 2, 2025, the group has 22,700 members and 7 admins. On June 9, 2019, I interviewed via Skype Sarah Shammaa (30 years old) the co-founder of the group, who explained that she came with her family to Germany in 2014 to escape the war in Aleppo city (in northern Syria). Shammaa has a Bachelor's degree in English Philology from Aleppo University (2011). After

moving to Germany, she recognized the need for newcomers like herself to learn the host country's language and continue their education. At the same time, Shammaa and her female friends were part of an open, mixed-gender online group for refugees in Germany, which did not provide a safe space to find and discuss, in their native language Arabic, the information they needed to build their new lives.

The lack of positive, supporting online space for refugee women to exchange much-needed information and expertise in Arabic motivated Shammaa and a group of 15 young women to create SFD as a private Facebook group. In her interview with me, Shammaa clarified her goal from co-creating the page: "I felt that a lot of women are like me, they don't have a safe space to talk about the issues they want, thus I tried to create such a space and see if it will be successful" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Over the first six months, the group dramatically expanded from 15 members to thousands of members. Membership in SFD is not allowed for anonymous accounts, and the administrators only approve requests to join the group from people who use accounts that seem real and authentic. If members violate the page's rules, the administrators engage in private online chat conversation with them to either abide by the page rules going forward, or otherwise, they revoke their membership if violations were repeated.

To encourage the members to stay in the group and develop affects of connections and usefulness, the admins started to generate hashtags around themes like "#معيشتي_في_ألمانيا my life in Germany," "Study #دراسة," "#أمومة_وطفولة motherhood & childhood," and "#صحة health." Each admin chose a hashtag to construct as an archive and expand by adding under a single stream all the relevant information and links so the page's members can easily find and add to the stream by clicking on the hashtag.

The goals of the page developed over time; according to Shammaa, at the beginning the page's main goal was "to create a positive online atmosphere under which Syrian women can exchange information with respect and freedom to express their opinions" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019). However, from day one of starting the page, any topic related directly to religion or the political situation in Syria was banned from discussion on the group. Shammaa

clarified the reasoning behind that decision:

> *We wanted to build a feeling that we have things in common other than the things that divide us as supporters or opponents [of the Syrian government] or as religious or atheist individuals; here in Germany we are all equals, we are all in need of learning the language and finding jobs to integrate into society (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).*

This editorial decision proved to be successful in the long term, but at the outset of the page in 2016 it was a very challenging situation (Zeno, 2021). The year 2016 was a turning point in the Syrian conflict because it witnessed the end of the "Battle of Aleppo," a four-year major military confrontation between the Syrian government and different armed opposition groups in addition to the Kurdish-majority forces People's Protection Units (YPG). The admins of SFD put significant amount of time and effort to maintain peace at the page. As Shammaa describes the Syrian online tension in 2016:

> *We were very strict [about the rule of no political discussions] even when Aleppo was at its worst situation and people were very emotionally charged and wanting to post on the group about their feelings. Both parties [supporters and opponents of the Syrian government] called us traitors" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).*

The administrators put a lot of time and emotional energy into attracting diverse Syrian women from across the political spectrum to join and stay in the SFD group. Shammaa recalls that time: "2016 was very difficult, you cannot imagine! I didn't sleep for some days because I felt an argument or a problem might erupt in the page and I didn't want any tension to happen among the members" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).


#جرعة_تفاؤل
4.2K people are talking about this

Fig. 3.2 – Hashtag "#جرعة_تفاؤل A dose of optimism." Source: SFD, September 3, 2020.

The year 2016 was also very challenging for refugees in Germany; they were mostly newcomers under huge mental and emotional stress to adapt to their new life in that country and at the same time to cope with separation from their families in Syria and the news of suffering and death there. The administrators aimed for the page to be a space of hope and encouragement. Thus, according to Shammaa, the most successful themes on the page were the posts she managed containing inspiring stories related to positive thinking and empowerment under hashtag "#منوعات Varieties" and hashtag "#جرعة_تفاؤل A dose of optimism." In this type of hashtag, women tell of what they have achieved in Germany. For example, they organized an online event within the group on January 6, 2017 to share what the women accomplished in 2016 and what they wish to achieve in 2017, hence the hashtags "Our beautiful achievements #إنجازاتنا_الجميلة, Our sweetest dreams #أحلامنا_الأجمل."

At the end of 2016, the administrators felt the success of their approach to managing the page. Shammaa noted that "As admins we started to feel happy when we see, for example, a woman whose profile picture has the Syrian government flag and a woman whose profile picture has the opposition flag, interacting and exchanging information impartially" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Women in the group don't discuss possibilities to return to Syria, but instead are focused on building their new lives in Germany. Shammaa claims that "women were able to integrate and succeed faster than men," and explains that some women who are new mothers used their maternity leave to focus on learning the German language and enrolling in education or professional programs.

Using communication technologies to create a women-only online space is empowering for displaced women so they can discuss and share intimate details about their mental and personal lives. Shammaa clarifies: "we wanted women to not feel embarrassed to discuss their mental health because there are men in the group." She adds

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[2] Maternity leave is Germany is very generous and can be extended in some circumstances to three years https://germanculture.com.ua/daily/maternity-leave-law-in-germany/

We wanted as much as we could to create a space where women can talk about anything, including their problems with their husbands. Some women shared their experiences with domestic violence.. We had members who are activists in the field of violence against women and they supported the other members who identified as victims." (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Also, having a women-only online space alleviates possible negative gender dynamics, like men who want to intervene in how the page is managed and control the direction of topics and discussions.
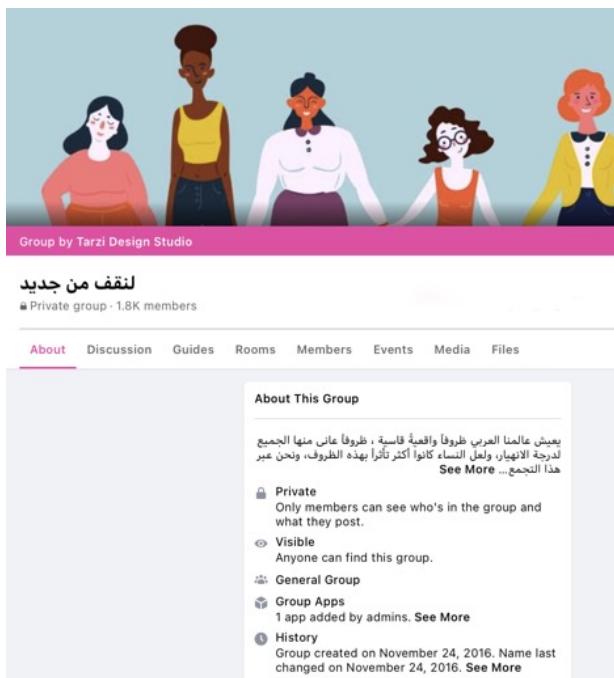

Fig. 3.3 – A screenshot of Let's Stand Again's "about" section without any personally identifiable information (February 10, 2021).

Let's Stand Again (LSA)

Let's Stand Again is a private Facebook group that was created on November 24, 2016 by a Syrian immigrant woman in the United States. It is a women-only online space. Currently, the group has over 1,800 members and 7 admins. I interviewed the founder of the group Nour Tarzi (35 years old) twice: the first time through in person interview in Long Beach, California on August 8, 2018; and the second time through an online interview on September 28, 2020.

Tarzi came to the United States with her parents as an immigrant in 2002. For over 10 years, she suffered from lack of integration into the American society. Thus while studying graphic design in the US, she co-founded "Shabablik Forum," an online forum with more than 10,000 members that focuses on Syrian culture, music, history, daily life, and heritage.

With the inception of war in Syria, Tarzi stopped her media activism for a few years. However, in 2016 with the influx of refugees to the United States and other western countries, she observed that many young women who are newcomers are going through the integration problems that she faced when she first arrived in the US. Tarzi wanted to create an online space only for Syrian and Arab women because she felt that "women suffer more than men. Men have more social experiences and courage and openness to the other. Many women come [to the US] with no desire to study or work or to learn the [English] language" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, August 8, 2018). Tarzi's observation can be explained by the traditional gender roles in her conservative community that provide men with skills in public space to adapt into new social settings faster than women whose skills are more limited to the domestic, private space. Tarzi describes her greatest achievement, saying "to encourage women to be more open, to explore, to dare, to study and to work" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, August 8, 2018).

The first main activity in the group was that Tarzi started to produce learning videos about each chapter of her favorite book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The book was first published in 1989 and is considered a classic neoliberal self-help book written by Stephen Covey.[3] Unhappy with the existing Arabic translations, Tarzi's videos are based on her own translations and understanding of the book. In a couple of days, the number of members increased from 10 to 400 members. LSA's founder and members started to post invitations to join the group on larger diasporic women-only Facebook groups. Tarzi, who comes from a conservative Muslim family in Syria, was expecting a strong repudiation of her online videos and appearances from her extended family. But to her surprise, relatives and friends around the world were very supportive praising her efforts and demanding more encouraging, empowering content: "I was surprised with the interactive responses, many

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[3] Stephen Covey was an American educator and businessman who lived between 1932 and 2012.

women were telling me 'please do more, we want someone to encourage us'" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

While Tarzi arrived into the US a year after September 11, a time with significant hostility against Muslims and Arabs, she notes that the situation under Trump's rule is more challenging: "I have been in the US for almost 18 years, I never experienced the level of racism that I saw in Trump era" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020). She adds: "I felt a huge difference in how people treat me and other Muslims and Arabs, people became very rude, and racism has become extraordinary" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

Between 2016 and 2020, Tarzi produced and broadcasted over 100 live and recorded videos on the page that focuses on empowering messages. Her videos tackle issues that reflect experiences specific to the US context like racism in Trump era, classism within the Syrian immigrant and displaced communities in Southern California (where she's based), and interaction with injured victims of the Syrian war who are brought to the US for medical treatments. However, the larger themes of the videos and online discussions on the group are around themes of self-help like the positive impacts of technology; self-care and reproductive health; overcoming depression; fighting racism; combating bullying behaviors; dealing with divorce; and surviving domestic violence. In 2020, Tarzi launched a program on the page titled "For you and othersإلك ولغيرك-" where members suggest a topic to discuss on each episode and Tarzi will host a member who is an expert on the topic. Some of the themes discussed in the episodes include postpartum depression, infertility and pregnancy loss, the educational role of social media, and COVID-19.

Fig. 3.4 – A screenshot of opening title of the program "For you and othersإلك ولغيرك-." Source: LSA, (December 26, 2020).

Discussion

In contrast to Western scholarship on women, self-help, and media—which often emphasizes the neoliberal, individualistic nature of self-help messages aimed at women—I have shown in this paper how women from the margins form juxtapolitical publics centered on community care and collective future-making through shared, self-help-inspired digital discourse and practice.

Syrian diasporic women use digital media to navigate survival and community in contexts of displacement—without necessarily engaging in formal or overtly recognized political activism. However, their efforts to create community and network of knowledge, care and support contribute to challenging some of the existing power structures in their lives and to imagining a better future—efforts that can be considered political acts because they expose broader systems of domination in the women's lives. For example, both SFD and LSA groups were formed in 2016 in response to deeply political conditions in their home country, Syria—where the war was at its peak—and in their host countries, such as Germany and the United States, where refugees and immigration were central to political discourse and electoral debates.

While the leaders of the two Facebook communities—SFD and LSA—hold certain privileges in terms of education and access to technology, the stories they share about their motivations for founding these digital spaces reveal forms of resistance to intersectional oppressions. On one level, they were navigating racism and growing hostility in their host countries due to intersecting factors such as national origin, religion, economic conditions, and limited language skills. On another level, within their own diasporic communities, they were resisting traditional gender roles, limited experience in public space, and the dominance of men in mixed-gender online forums. Thus, forming digital communities such as SFD and LSA around themes of affect, survival, and everyday knowledge enabled connections among women from diverse educational backgrounds and professions, shifting power dynamics in their lives in empowering ways. These communities provide women not only with a means of imagining collective futures beyond the constraints of the difficult present but also with the tools and connections to actively pursue them. However, a persistent challenge for these digital communities is that they continue to operate under

the constraints of corporate governance, where companies like Facebook monitor, store, and monetize user data. Moreover, such social media conglomerates often collaborate with oppressive states to unilaterally shut down pages or hand over user data, thereby facilitating the surveillance of marginalized communities and limiting the margins in which they work toward a better collective future.

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Declaration of interest statement

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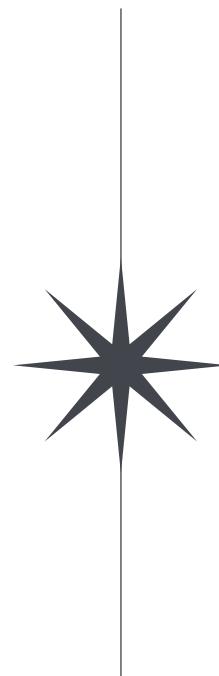
UTOPIAN NIGHTMARES:

Speculative Design and Feminist Futuring with Design Students

By

Alison Place
Piper Schuerman
Caroline Leigh
Anna Kate Minichiello

Introduction

Written by Alison Place

The role of design in our lives has exploded in recent decades to become nearly ubiquitous and almost entirely unavoidable. It mediates our relationships, our work, our communication, our health, our communities, and our sense of self. Few if any aspects of our existence are untouched by the design of artifacts, spaces, systems, and technologies. Today, designers are increasingly called upon not only to create artifacts, but also to reckon with the systems, communities, and futures they shape. As their role expands, emerging and future designers face a world that is increasingly complex: rising global fascism; climate collapse; increasing wealth inequality; multiple genocides and wars; the rapid advancement of AI; the domination of technology corporations; anti-feminist backlash against women's rights and reproductive justice; and the ongoing persecution of marginalized people, including those who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrants, disabled, trans, and non-binary. We are entering a period of uncertainty that we have not experienced in our lifetimes. The world that we previously knew has ended, and a new reality is emerging.

The feminist economist Denise Ferreira da Silva called the end of the world a point of departure for a new kind of imagining, one that supplements the traditional work of critique with that of the imagination. "This new world will have to be rebuilt and recuperated from the destruction caused by the extractive tools and mechanisms of global capital," she said (Leeb and Stakemeier, 2019). In other words, the world we have known is a world that is bound up with the movement toward greater destruction. But what about a world we are yet to know? How do we begin to give shape to a new vision? How do we move away from destruction, and toward healing and renewal? As gender scholar Judith Butler argues, this question is at work when we ask about the future and try to fathom its possible forms. "Imagining the future beyond the end of this world is part of what it means to live life now," they wrote (Butler, 2025).

If a new world is to be built, designers will be central to its imagining, inception, and production. However, as colleges and universities move away from the humanities and toward a focus on career preparation, design education has shifted to prioritize job readiness skills, such as software literacy and portfolio-building, over critical theory and systems thinking—skills that are essential in the practice of futuring. If design students attain only measurable job-ready skills, their expertise will be narrow, their visions of the future will be short-sighted, and their imaginations will be unremarkable, if not dangerous. They will be prepared only to perpetuate the status quo. To meet the challenges they will face and to solve the problems they will encounter in the long term, designers need the complex problem-solving and critical thinking skills that the humanities foster. In the design classroom, feminist theory is a productive site for engaging creativity with radical speculation, and futurism with radical empathy.

In the spring semester of 2024, I had the privilege of developing and teaching a special topics course in the graphic design program at the University of Arkansas called Design and Feminism. The course was a hybrid studio-seminar format, and a total of 18 students enrolled, including both undergraduate and graduate students. The course examined the intersection of design and feminist theory, with an emphasis on critical thinking; questioning norms; and imagining design tools, methods, and artifacts in alternative ways. The content of the curriculum spanned three modules:

theory, hacking, and speculation. This case study describes the context of the course, and elaborates on the speculation module and the final project. Threaded into this case study are the perspectives of three students, two undergraduates and one graduate, who share their experiences of the course and the outcomes of their final projects. Their incisive work illustrates how feminist approaches to design and futuring can nurture the kind of reflective and critical thinking that is needed now more than ever.

Feminist Utopian Nightmares

Written by Alison Place

Futuring is an exercise in picturing possible outcomes in the future in order to plan for it. In design, it is an endeavor that involves much more than simply using creativity to imagine the world a different way. It is a deeply fraught process shaped by who is in the room, the tools used, and the belief systems that are reinforced. Futuring has traditionally been dominated by white, mostly European men, primarily with the objective of reifying their power within the status quo, and with little concern for what the future holds for marginalized people. In addition to its exclusionary tactics, feminist cultural studies scholar Sarah Kember argues that futurism is inherently problematic due to its adherence to technology-driven visions that play out a limited dualism of utopias and dystopias (Kember, 2012). For people who are oppressed or harmed by the perpetuation of the status quo, much more than technology is at stake when thinking about the future.

How, then, can we enlist our collective abilities to both imagine *and* build the worlds people want? An instructive site for exploring this question is feminist utopianism. The feminist human–computer interaction researcher Shaowen Bardzell asserts that utopianism with a feminist lens is particularly well positioned to engage practices of futuring at scale. Utopian thinking in general is roundly critiqued as well-intentioned but naive attempts to solve complex social problems with simplistic technological solutions. Bardzell observes that "in both design and utopia, there is a historical failure to deliver results that meet real human needs" (Bardzell, 2018). Feminist utopian thinking, however, reconstructs the idea of a radically better future without attempting to define it, viewing utopianism as an activity rather than a completed image by holding "multiple possible futures-in-process" (Bardzell, 2018). It is emergent and contingent rather than comprehensive, and it embraces conflict as a driver of the process rather than eliminating it. Unattached to a particular medium or outcome, it demands the "continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet the also un-representable" (Bardzell, 2018). Futuring through the lens of feminist utopianism emphasizes plurality over individualism, and relationships over solutionism. For designers, then, the path to enacting a more just and equitable society lies not in the endless creation of speculative artifacts, but in how we build relationships and respond to issues collectively over time.

As feminists, we are always imagining what could be. Feminist theorist Vikki Bell calls feminism an "alternative vision" that entails a display of imaginative faculty. She asserts that feminist organizing is not a path that always leads forward, but rather a strategy that leads to the "otherwise" (Bell, 1999). Following the thread of the "otherwise," students in the Design and Feminism course addressed the imaginative component of feminist design through a speculative design project entitled Utopian Nightmares. We started by asking: who gets to imagine the future? Whose voice and vision are included in the worlds we want to build? We read Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and collectively explored feminist futuring, feminist utopianism, and the unequal power relations embedded in the fields of speculative and critical design. Students then generated an imagined scenario 30 years into the future, and wrote about it in the form of a day-in-the-life narrative written in the first person. Their imagined future could be plausible, possible, preferable, or none of the above. Using their written narrative as a guide, they developed a speculative design intervention that responded to a need or a situation in their imagined future, taking into consideration how it grapples with feminist concepts of power, knowledge, care and liberation. With the understanding that one person's utopia might be someone else's nightmare, students were encouraged to engage with Donna Haraway's definition of irony: "the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary or true"

(Haraway, 1991). Rather than designing from their own perspective as the "right" perspective, they held their subjective view of the future in tandem with multiple possible other views. They applied an ironic approach to the solutionism of design, with a satirical nod to the propensity of many designers to enshrine a single solution in response to a massive problem, disregarding its complexity, and homogenizing audiences.

The final projects were presented as ironic research posters that positioned their imagined future as if it were current reality, and featured their design interventions as tongue-in-cheek solutions to a problem. Students' design interventions ranged from the practical (bioengineered architectural housing systems, mutual aid systems for growing food during climate collapse); to the improbable (community settlements on Mars, a digital galactic archive for celestial bodies); to the undesirable (A.I. brain implants that control emotions, forced cyborgian transmutation in lieu of death). Their proposals represented multiple possible futures-in-process that enact critical making as a means to reconsider the role of design in addressing our collective liberation. What follows are the perspectives of three students from the course who describe their proposed projects in response to the prompt.
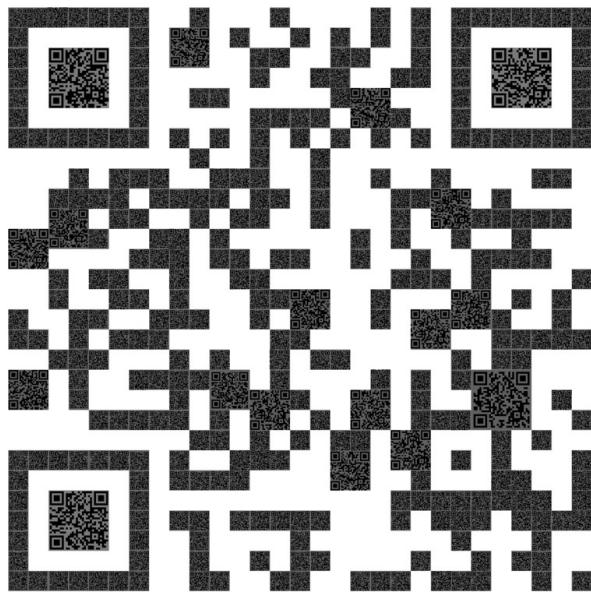

Fig. 4.1 — *Speculative design poster*. Student work by Caroline Leigh & Anna Kate Minichiello.

An Undergraduate Student Perspective

Written by Caroline Leigh & Anna Kate Minichiello

When initially reading the project brief for *Utopian Nightmares*, we were unsure how to respond. Imagining a feminist future raised more questions than answers, especially considering today's reality. We wanted our response to reflect on personal moments that have shaped how we understand feminism. These moments often aren't loud or outwardly political, but they reveal how deeply care is connected to larger systems. This insight prompted the question: What if the ideal feminist utopia wasn't about achieving goals, but rather celebrating care-based realizations and transformations?

That's where our concept of "J(QR)dan" began. After the two of us met in college and collaborated on different projects surrounding our past experiences, we discovered we had the same childhood therapist. Our experiences with him were remarkably similar—he was dismissive, made us uncomfortable, and was ultimately unhelpful to us. We both remember feeling unheard in those sessions, which ultimately shaped our early perceptions of our value as young women. In naming our project after him we weren't honoring his work but rather reclaiming something that once made us feel overlooked. The project turned into counter-therapy for us, less centered around being "fixed" and more about being understood.

This act of reclaiming connected with Donna Haraway's notion of irony as a feminist tactic. Holding contradictions in tension creates space for resistance. By naming the project J(QR)dan, we envisioned a liberatory reframing of a past that was once limiting to us. Haraway writes that irony "is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes," and in our case, irony became a method of transformation by turning a source of discomfort into a space for self-care (1991).

We began our process by exchanging stories and piecing together our shared experiences that shaped our ideas of care, growth, and autonomy. These conversations became the foundation for the speculative journaling stage of our project. We wrote journal entries that envisioned a feminist future built on support that was mutual, and self-care that was non-institutionalized.

Visually, our piece took the form of a large QR code made up of many smaller QR codes, each

one linking to a personal experience relating to care. The large QR code directs viewers to our initial speculative journal entries, while the smaller codes led to digital artifacts—music, writing, images, and resources—that explore mental health and identity. This format encourages a user-driven experience where viewers construct their own journey through the material and decide which stories to access. This felt inherently feminist to us, emphasizing agency and reflection.

One of the biggest challenges was navigating visibility and vulnerability. We didn't want to make a spectacle out of our lived experiences. The QR code format allowed us to embed layers of intimacy and access, offering both lighthearted content and deeply personal reflections. The act of scanning, listening, and sharing became its own form of care and connection.

J(QR)dan embodied an idea of a feminist future that doesn't offer one perfect solution but instead invites self-reflection and care. By layering personal narratives through scannable artifacts, we created a participatory experience grounded in emotional honesty. Our project didn't aim to fix what currently exists but instead raised a question: what would happen if care were central to imagining feminist futures? *Utopian Nightmares* pushed us to see care not as an afterthought, but as a radical foundation for reimagining the world.

Fig. 4.2 — *Speculative design poster.* Student work by Piper Schuerman.

A Graduate Student Perspective

Written by Piper Schuerman

Leading up to the *Utopian Nightmares* project, our class had numerous discussions about the systems of oppression that feminism addresses. These systems are so ingrained in our culture that it can be hard to imagine a realistic path towards a feminist alternative. Someone in the class was always asking whether feminism could occur within the current systems that are in place, or if it must break those systems in order to exist. Inspired by that point of discussion, my "utopia" imagines a future state of the United States government where the Feminist Party has risen to power.

Initially, a future society that includes not just a Feminist Party, but a successfully elected Feminist president, sounds like a win for feminism, *right*? Not everybody thinks so. Leading up to the president's re-election for a second term, a movement of opposition is growing, critiquing the Feminist Party for not upholding truly feminist values. Based on this speculative scenario, I created a poster featuring a visual identity for the Feminist Party alongside protest material for a Feminist Rebel Group demonstration.

The idea of 'branding' feminism had an inherent irony to it. All semester long, our class explored the diversity of perspectives that exist within the movement of feminism, and even read an essay by Aggie Toppins entitled "On the contradictions of feminist branding (Toppins, 2023). By proposing a visual identity for the Feminist Party, I set the stage for a critique of how they used branding to universalize feminism when it needed to be more nuanced. In contrast, the designs on the demonstrator's posters were not meant to be cohesive; rather, their plurality is a statement in opposition to a universal feminist identity. Messages on the signs position the United States under the Feminist Party as an illusion of a feminist society. One poster quotes Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," arguing that the electoral system is inherently flawed and at odds with feminist principles.

The demonstrations described above were first imagined in a narrative written as part of a futuring exercise. I wrote the narrative from a first-person perspective of a top advisor to

the president. Her account of how this scenario was unfolding was riddled with doubt and self-negotiation, as a reality she once thought of as utopian became much more complicated. Describing the future from this perspective enabled me to articulate my own complex feelings about how progress can be made towards a more feminist society. Embedded into the narrator's account are questions I asked myself in earlier class discussions: *Is dismantling established systems of power on such a large scale realistic? Can a feminist ethically operate within those systems? How can a movement with so many diverse identities and agendas unify to create positive change?*

None of these questions were resolved by the time I completed this project. The scenario leaves the audience hanging, feeling just as conflicted as I did. This realization surprised me. As a designer, communicating my ideas requires a clear point of view. I'm accustomed to building an argument that convinces someone of my creative direction. Designing through the lens of a feminist utopia reframed how I thought of my role. My work went from being an answer to being a provocation, a shift that was both exciting and unsettling.

Looking forward, as I enter my first academic position, I believe that provocation and contradiction can be addressed more regularly in the design classroom. What if, instead of a typical project brief, which anticipates a solution presented and pitched confidently, students were asked to intentionally design something that would prompt a lively debate? My experience with *Utopian Nightmares* reinforced the idea that design enables discourse, and I plan to continue that exploration.

Conclusion

Written by Alison Place

The practice of critical making is simultaneously a reflexive and recursive practice. It calls on designers to continually reflect on their role within oppressive structures through responsive acts of making. The process aims to generate discourse and provoke moments of reflection, which operates in direct resistance to the typical ways in which designers' creativity is exploited for market-based value. When enacted in a feminist design practice, critical making reimagines creative skills as tools for liberation.

Students in the Design and Feminism course were challenged to not only shift their perspective of themselves as designers, but to shift their perspective of design itself. By exploring the practice of feminist futuring, they revealed multiple ways in which speculative design can resist, rather than enable, the techno-solutionism that design suffers from. As Caroline, Anna Kate, and Piper's projects demonstrate, visions of feminist futures reject a singular solution and the typical designer-as-heroic-problem-solver ethos. They embraced questions, discomforts, and relationships. They sought to stir up trouble, rather than cement a resolution.

As an educator teaching this course for the first time, I was initially surprised by the discomfort students felt when thinking about the unknown of the future—and equally surprised by the ease with which they took ownership of their ability to intervene in it. They showed up as their whole selves and saw each other as whole beings, capable of shaping and imagining the world otherwise. Arguably, by completing the course, students did not gain any job-ready skills, software expertise, or polished portfolio pieces—but many of them eagerly announced on our final day of class that their understanding of design had completely changed, and they would never see the world the same way again. As their teacher, cultivating the next generation of designers, that's more than I could ever ask for.

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THE WOMEN'S MARCH AND THE BORDERS OF BELONGING:

Rethinking Collective Space Through Transnational Feminism

By   Sarah Rewega

Introduction

On January 21, 2017, at the Women's March in Washington, D.C., a photograph captured two protestors standing shoulder to shoulder, fists raised, holding signs that promoted intersectional feminism (Cargle 2018). Their pose echoed the iconic 1971 image of Dorothy Pitman Hughes and Gloria Steinem, creating a striking visual continuity that linked past and present feminist struggles. This image quickly spread across social media, sparking thousands of responses marked by gratitude, anger, solidarity, and critique. Initially posted on the Women's March Instagram account, where it received over 246 comments, the image was later reposted on X by Feminist Frequency, prompting 54 comments, 1.3k retweets, and 2.5k likes. These metrics point to both its significant reach and its capacity to animate digital feminist discourse.

Given its widespread circulation and emotional resonance, this image does more than simply reference history or pay homage to pioneering feminists. I argue that it serves as a vital bridge, linking the ongoing struggles around inclusion and intersectionality from earlier feminist movements with those that continue to shape feminism today. By invoking this familiar pose and gesture, the photograph creates a compelling visual connection across generations, inviting viewers into what I theorize in this article as a collective space: an emotionally charged digital environment where feminist discourse unfolds in complex and vital ways.

While my research identifies this phenomenon most clearly on Instagram and X, I believe it can still emerge within digital discourse platforms that have comment sections such as Facebook, Reddit, or other platforms. Based on my methodology and research, its defining features include emotional resonance that holds participants' attention, dialogic exchange where support and critique coexist, visibility of difference that prevents the erasure of unequal lived realities, and the potential for mobilization as digital interactions spill into broader feminist activism. Recognizing and naming the collective space allows us to see comment sections not as incidental noise, but as key spaces for transnational feminist praxis, where the tensions and possibilities of solidarity are worked through in public view.

Building on Sara Ahmed's concept of emotional stickiness (Ahmed 2004), this collective space is where emotions, specifically those expressed by Instagram users, circulate and "stick" to both the image and its viewers. Because this image resonated so deeply with me when I first encountered it, I became curious about how others emotionally responded as well. This curiosity gave rise to the case study, aimed at understanding digital reactions to feminist viral images. As I engaged with the social media comments, it became clear that the image functioned as more than just a comment thread. Instead, it created a "collective space"—an emotionally sticky environment within comment sections where feminist discourse unfolds in response to messages about women's rights and related social justice issues. In this space, solidarity, conflict, and identity negotiation continuously emerge and evolve through the interactions of viewers.

Aware of the subjective nature of interpretation, my methodology focused on the emotional tone and recurring themes within the comments. Employing a close reading of the comments, I evaluated the emotional valence of the comments by self-coding. This coding approach, informed by affective science frameworks such as PANAS (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988), allowed me to identify key emotional expressions and thematic patterns. In this way, viral protest images like this one become more than snapshots: they act as sites for negotiating feminist identities and solidarities across differences. Exploring the

comments and reactions that surround these images reveals the complex emotional and political labor involved in sustaining intersectional feminist communities, especially within digital public spheres.

In this article, then, I trace the diverse responses to this image to test and develop the concept of a collective space, theorizing its significance for digital feminist activism. I argue that digital feminist activism creates such collective spaces that simultaneously amplify marginalized voices and foster solidarity, while also reproducing exclusionary dynamics rooted in existing power structures.

To navigate these tensions productively, I focus on implementing ongoing critical engagement, that is, reflexive attention to how privilege, visibility, and voice operate online and a reflexive feminist practice, informed by Carolyn Enns' transnational framework. Together, these practices allow me to engage digital feminist spaces with ethical awareness, recognizing both their limitations and significance, and call for critical attention rather than rejection of digital feminist solidarity practices. First, to situate this analysis, it is important to understand the broader context in which this image and movement emerged.

POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Women's March 2017 (Origins, Leadership Tensions)

The protest that produced this image was itself unprecedented. One day earlier, Donald Trump had been inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States, prompting outrage over his long record of misogynistic and violent comments about women, including the resurfaced 2005 recording in which he bragged about sexual assault (Felmlee et al. 2020, 1). In response, retired lawyer Teresa Shook created a Facebook event calling for a women's march: an individual act of resistance that quickly went viral (1). By January 21, millions of women and allies were marching in the largest coordinated protest in U.S. history, with over 500,000 people in Washington, D.C., alone, and 680 sister marches around the world (2).

Yet, the Women's March also inherited tensions embedded in U.S. feminist history.

Shook's initial name for the protest, "The Million Woman March," unintentionally invoked a 1997 protest organized by and for Black women, sparking criticism that the new event reflected the same white-centered tendencies that marginalized and continues to marginalize women of color (2). In response, the organizers invited three women of color—Carmen Perez, Tamika Mallory, and Linda Sarsour—to serve as national co-chairs and to expand the march's leadership and mission to include explicitly intersectional feminist principles. It is these kinds of tensions of inclusion and exclusion that inform digital feminist spaces more broadly. It is precisely within such spaces where solidarity is celebrated but exclusionary dynamics persist that I theorize and test the concept of the "collective space." Here, collective space functions as an analytic lens for understanding how feminist communities negotiate belonging, voice, and visibility across differences.

Women's Rights in America: A Legacy of Exclusion (links to earlier feminist movements and racial politics)

To understand the controversy and hesitancy surrounding the Women's March, it is important to contextualize it within the history of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), which has long grappled with embedded racism. Beginning in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention, early feminist activism focused on voting rights and broader gender equality but was marked by divisions over race (Boylan 2016, 45). For example, many white suffragists opposed Black men's voting rights after the 15th Amendment, leading to a split into two organizations: the National Woman Suffrage Association, which opposed the amendment, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which supported it. White suffragists often employed racist strategies, prioritizing white women's votes as a counterbalance to African American men, reflecting the movement's focus on white middle-class women's interests (Boylan 2016, 45). Meanwhile, Black women such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell formed their own groups advocating for racial and gender equality. The exclusion did not stop there: Black women were often left out of suffrage organizations and

events. Although the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920, discriminatory practices like poll taxes and literacy tests continued to restrict African American women's voting until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Boylan 2016, 46). This enduring legacy of exclusion and marginalization has informed the critiques and hesitations of women of color toward feminist movements, including the Women's March. In response to these concerns and early criticisms, the Women's March organizers took deliberate steps to revise their mission to explicitly embrace intersectionality, inviting women of color such as Carmen Perez, Tamika Mallory, and Linda Sarsour to take on key leadership roles. Despite concerns about marginalization, the 2017 March saw record-breaking attendance with diverse participation and speeches by figures such as Angela Davis and Kamala Harris. It was the largest protest in U.S. history, with attendance far surpassing previous movements (Felmlee et al. 2020, 1).

These historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion do more than provide context; they also shape the dynamics of contemporary digital collective spaces. Just as women historically organized in physical spaces to assert recognition and negotiate power, comment sections on platforms like Instagram and X function as inherited arenas for similar practices. Hence, the collective space I am establishing here is not built on neutral grounds; rather, it inherits the emotional orientations of past struggles and gains and can be understood as a digital extension of earlier feminist activism in the U.S. The next section introduces transnational feminist theory as a lens for analyzing the complexities of feminist solidarity, identity, and activism in a globalized, digital era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transnational Feminist Theory

Transnational feminist theory emerged in the early 1990s as a critical response to the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, particularly the idea of a universal womanhood embodied in Robin Morgan's slogan "sisterhood is global." Spearheaded by scholars like Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, this approach highlights how women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting factors such as race, class, and nation—forces deeply immersed in global structures of colonialism and capitalism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Morgan 1984).Transnational feminism centers the voices of women often marginalized in mainstream feminism, particularly those from the Global South and immigrant or displaced communities, emphasizing how their lived realities transcend national boundaries (Horne and Arora 2013; Enns et al. 2021).

At its core, transnational feminism seeks to challenge earlier feminist assumptions that tended to universalize oppression and privilege without accounting for historical and structural inequalities on a global scale. Scholars like Srila Roy and Chandra Mohanty have been influential in framing this perspective, showing how global capitalism and colonial legacies disproportionately shape women's labor and lives worldwide (Roy 2021; Mohanty 2003). However, despite its inclusive aims, transnational feminism has faced important critiques. Leela Fernandes points out that, originating in a U.S.-centric academic context, it sometimes risks replicating the exclusions it aims to dismantle (Fernandes 2013). Furthermore, Janet Conway warns that the heavy use of academic jargon, rooted in poststructuralist theory, can alienate activists and communities, limiting the theory's practical reach (Conway 2001). These critiques have prompted calls for clearer, more accessible language, and greater engagement with grassroots movements to ensure transnational feminism's relevance beyond scholarly circles.

In addition, some feminist scholars argue that intersectionality, with its detailed focus on overlapping power structures such as race, class, gender, and ability, offers a framework that better captures the complexity of women's diverse experiences. Increasingly, theorists emphasize the importance of integrating intersectionality with transnational feminism to form a more comprehensive approach to feminist activism and scholarship (Nash 2021; Thayer and Tambe 2021; Chowdhury and Philipose 2016). This integrated perspective acknowledges the global forces shaping women's lives while also attending to the nuanced intersections that produce distinct forms of privilege and oppression.

Transnational feminism also addresses specific issues such as globalization's impact on migration, particularly how stricter border controls

disproportionately affect women from the Global South seeking safety or better opportunities (Mason n.d.). Representation and voice are central concerns, focusing on how narratives about marginalized women are constructed in media and literature, and how these stories carry emotional weight and influence social perceptions (Mason n.d.; Hall 1997). Finally, the theory critically examines violence against women—especially Indigenous and racialized women—highlighting how systemic neglect and misrepresentation obscure the severity of these issues (Mason n.d.). Today, as nationalist and right-wing movements gain strength worldwide, transnational feminism's global perspective is more relevant than ever, offering tools to resist exclusionary politics and support diverse feminist solidarities (Tambe and Thayer 2021). Reflecting on this, it is essential to recognize the long history of exclusion of women of color in feminist movements, as Elora Chowdhury and Liz Philipose (2016) emphasize. Beginning feminist conversations with an awareness of this exclusion lays a crucial foundation for more inclusive activism and scholarship.

As I write this article and explore the history of women's rights in the U.S., I remain acutely aware of the longstanding critiques of white feminism and the exclusion of women of color and other marginalized groups from these movements. Given this history, it is vital to practice reflexivity and acknowledge that all women at this march have varied experiences and face different degrees of oppression. In recognizing the exclusionary nature of historical women's rights movements in the United States, I adopt Elora Chowdhury and Liz Philipose's (2016) approach of starting discussions with an awareness of the historical exclusion of women of color. This recognition is crucial for understanding how feminist discourse continues to be shaped by these exclusions, informing my analysis of contemporary feminist narratives.

Emotional Stickiness and Collective Space

Integral to this approach is Sara Ahmed's concept of emotional "aboutness," explored in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed argues that emotions such as anger and sadness are not simply shared identically but are experienced *about* others' suffering, allowing us to feel connected while recognizing differences in experience. She argues that "the negative emotions of anger and sadness are evoked as the reader's [...] that we "feel sad about their suffering," creating an "aboutness" that ensures they remain the object of "our feeling" (Ahmed 2004, 25).This distinction prevents the erasure of difference, fostering an ethical stance where we acknowledge others as the subjects of our emotions rather than assuming equivalence (25). Ahmed emphasizes the distinction between "the reader and others," noting that the reader's emotions are merely a version of what others experience, but never identical. This nuanced understanding of emotional connection mirrors transnational feminism's emphasis on empathetic listening and solidarity that respects diverse and often unequal lived realities (Roy 2021; Horne and Arora 2013; Enns et al. 2021). Building on this foundation, I call these sites of emotionally charged encounters, such as online comment sections on women's rights, collective spaces: digital arenas where users gather, exchange perspectives, and connect across differences through the emotional stickiness of shared images and stories.

Elaborating further on this framework of emotional connection and listening, I theorize the collective space as a dynamic, emotionally charged arena within digital feminist activism (most visibly in the comment sections of viral protest images) where solidarity, critique, and identity negotiation occur in real time. It is "collective" not because everyone agrees, but because diverse participants are brought into relation through shared engagement with a feminist issue, often mediated by a highly affective image or message. In this space, emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, and empowerment circulate and "stick" to both the image and to those engaging with it. These affective exchanges draw people together, even when they disagree, which in turn creates a shared, if contested, sense of investment. The collective space, then, is not a perfectly harmonious "safe space," but an active site where feminist solidarities are built, challenged, and reimagined across lines of difference.

METHODOLOGY

Case Selection: The Viral Protest Image

Recognizing and naming the collective space allows us to see comment sections not as incidental noise, but as key arenas for transnational feminist praxis, where the tensions and possibilities of solidarity are worked through in public view. It is through engaging deeply with one such viral protest image that the contours of this collective space became clear to me. This photo stayed with me long after I first saw it. It struck a deeply personal chord, sparking the very thread of thought that would grow into this project. I kept returning to it—not just for its composition or message, but for the way it seemed to collapse time, creating a visual bridge between past and present. In its deliberate echo of earlier feminist iconography, it carried the weight of history while speaking directly to contemporary struggles. When I began reading the comments beneath it, I realized I was not alone: others felt that same spark, though they expressed it in countless different ways. Some responses echoed my sense of connection across time; others revealed entirely different readings, grounded in personal histories, politics, or cultural contexts. It was in that swirl of converging and diverging reactions that the idea of the collective space began to take shape for me, a place where disparate voices could meet, challenge, and transform each other. Looking back, this was how I began weaving the threads together. To deepen my understanding of how this collective space operates in practice, I turned to the rich conversations unfolding beneath the image itself.

Data Collection and Coding Process

The social media comments, as I will show in the next section, offer diverse emotional responses and debates, all marked by how users engage, resist, and connect in digital feminist spaces. To capture this complexity, I undertook a careful manual coding and thematic analysis of the comments, focusing on their emotional tone and recurring patterns. I chose positive and negative as nuanced terms to categorize the comments

more generally. To clarify, the terms "positive" and "negative" emotions are understood and used here primarily to describe the emotional tone or valence expressed, rather than to pass judgment on the political or ethical value of those emotions. For example, emotions typically seen as "negative," like anger or sadness, can actually be powerful drivers of political critique and protest, while "positive" feelings such as gratitude and empowerment help build solidarity.

Using a coding framework loosely informed by affective science scales (such as PANAS), I identified emotional keywords and phrasing to categorize comments. Examples of positive comments included expressions of admiration (e.g., "brave," "strong"), gratitude ("thank you," "appreciate"), empowerment ("she represents us"), and collectivity ("we rise together"). Neutral comments were typically brief or emotionally flat, like emojis or hashtags without clear affective content. Negative comments conveyed disapproval or dismissal (e.g., "pointless," "just for show"), or offensive language such as misogynistic or aggressive remarks.

Emotional Valence in Online Responses

In this dataset, out of 168 comments, 84 were coded as positive, demonstrating strong themes of solidarity, inclusion, and support for women's rights, particularly intersectional feminism. For example, one commenter expressed gratitude for the emphasis on inclusion and solidarity, highlighting a shared identity of equality among women. Another commenter passionately acknowledged the neglect of women minorities, emphasizing their increased oppression within society and underscoring the intersectional nature of the feminist message.

Meanwhile, 57 comments were coded as negative, many containing offensive or misogynistic language. For instance, some comments used belittling tropes such as "make me a sandwich," reducing women to stereotypical domestic roles. Others expressed aggressive and hostile sentiments toward the activists pictured, reflecting attempts to silence or punish women for their activism. This opposition frequently centered around exclusionary attitudes and resistance to intersectional feminism. A large portion of the comments, 77 in total, were categorized as neutral, often consisting of polite suggestions or

general observations that did not explicitly engage emotionally or politically. An example includes a respectful comment encouraging person-first language to promote inclusivity within disability discourse.

Several positive comments also directly responded to negative critiques—particularly those questioning the inclusion of white women. These rebuttals invoked historical context to explain feminism's legacy of centering white, cisgender, able-bodied women and argued that calls for intersectionality do not exclude them but rather correct these historical exclusions. All comments were manually coded using consistent affective and thematic criteria applied across the dataset. This method, I suggest, allows for a deeper understanding of the digital conversations around this image, highlighting a dynamic but often contested collective space where feminist solidarity, exclusion, and identity politics come together.

Thematic Overview and Analytical Approach

The coded comments reveal three key themes that shape this analysis: solidarity and inclusion, exclusion and hostility, and historical critique paired with intersectional awareness. These themes suggest the complicated emotional and political dynamics sparked by viral protest images in online spaces. Positive comments tend to cluster around expressions of solidarity, affirming inclusive feminist values and highlighting support for marginalized groups such as women of color, women with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQI+ communities. In doing so, these responses show how the image acts as a site of collective affirmation and identity formation, resonating with Sara Ahmed's concept of affective stickiness.

Using a close reading and manual coding approach, I examine individual comments to unpack how these themes emerge in language, tone, and context. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the affective investments and contestations shaping feminist solidarity and exclusion in digital feminist spaces. The negative comments on Figure 1 reflect significant opposition to the message of the Women's March, focusing on perceived exclusion of certain groups such as white women or men, alongside broader criticisms of the feminist movement. Thematically, many comments highlight perceived hypocrisy and exclusion, particularly targeting white and Indigenous women. However, the primary focus of exclusion centers on white women being left out.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
White Women and Perceived Exclusion

First, there is a clear repetition of the phrase "white women," with many users expressing anger about their perceived exclusion. In fact, 23 out of 57 negative comments mention white people. This repeated questioning of "Where are the white women?" reflects a strong sense of anger and interrogation, demonstrating that many commenters feel the movement is selectively excluding white women. For instance, @calland_manning_lee states, "Pretty sure we are women too last time I checked," while @micher723 asks, "'All women' not including white women?? Why are we being discriminated upon?!" This questioning is a telling example of white feminism, a concept explained by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as women "individually seeking to protect [their] source of privilege within the hierarchy" (Schuller 2021, 18). When their perceived superiority becomes threatened, a sense of panic often ensues. Similarly, Ruby Hamad argues that white women in America and across the British Empire have historically been deeply invested in maintaining white power structures (Hamad 2019). Within this context, the frustration expressed by these commenters reacts to the movement's focus on amplifying the voices of women of color and other marginalized groups, which they perceive as a threat to white women's power. As Kyla Schuller explains in *The Trouble With White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*, "Intersectional feminism pushes back against white feminism and advances new horizons of justice" (55). White feminists who aim to preserve their standing within existing power structures resist these new horizons because they challenge the status quo of white supremacy embedded within feminist movements. Thus, the repeated questioning of "Where are the white women?" illustrates this resistance to intersectionality within American feminism, where white women have historically occupied a central role. It is clear,

then, that this repetition and questioning reveal a significant misunderstanding of intersectionality within these comments.

Indigenous Women and Historical Erasure

Returning to the earlier mention of Indigenous women being left out, several commenters express concerns about their exclusion as well. For example, user @lydi.an notes, "These 'intersectional' feminists seem to forget about Native American women just as much as the rest of America does. I don't see how, considering Native American women are the demographic most likely to be sexually assaulted." Similarly, @nmosss363 raises concerns with the comment, "What about Native Women?" These remarks underscore the long history of settler colonial violence and systemic erasure faced by Indigenous women. As reported by The Beacon, a news source for Maine residents, "Indigenous women in the U.S. are murdered at 10 times the national average, and they also disappear at a disproportionate rate—often without a missing person report even being filed, leaving Indigenous families searching for answers" (Neumann 2019). This alarming statistic highlights not only the neglect Indigenous women face in media coverage but also their marginalization within so-called intersectional movements. Importantly, the concern about Indigenous women differs fundamentally from that regarding white women. Whereas the latter reflects a defensive reaction to losing privilege, the former stems from a long history and ongoing reality of severe underrepresentation and violence.

While there are 57 negative comments overall, the remaining 34 include offensive or misogynistic language. For instance, user @alecchrys comments, "make me a sandwich," a misogynistic trope that belittles and undermines women, reducing them to traditional gender roles by implying their primary value lies in domestic tasks. Another user, @peterhensonjr, offers a highly aggressive and disturbing wish: "These two need to get breast cancer and brain tumors," likely reflecting a desire to silence and punish women for their activism.

A large portion of comments, with 77 in total, were categorized as neutral. These typically offered observations that did not engage directly with the political discourse or interacted in a non-emotional way. For example, user @queen.elizabeth.ann comments on inclusivity by stating, "Using person first language it should be 'women with disabilities' or 'people with disabilities' not 'disabled' it is offensive to some and person first language identifies that person instead of identifying them by just 'disabled' first. Just a thought.. #nohatejusteducate 😊." This functions as a polite suggestion encouraging respect for diverse perspectives within the disability community. Here, the commenter demonstrates an affective attachment to respectful identification of people with disabilities, revealing how comments categorized as "neutral" are *still* shaped by histories of exclusion. By acknowledging that the term "disabled" can be "offensive to some," the user traces a through line of emotional injury that sticks not just to particular words, but to the ways they are ordered and used. In suggesting "people with disabilities" rather than "disabled people," the commenter shows how emotions orient not only around people and histories but also around the subtle structures of language itself. In Ahmed's terms, the emotion of offence circulates through linguistic order, orienting speakers toward more inclusive practices and signaling how linguistic choices carry the emotional residue of past exclusions.

Despite the significant amount of dissenting commentary, there remains a robust contingent of commenters supporting the movement and affirming the messages displayed. Overall, 84 comments were categorized as positive, with prominent themes of solidarity, support, inclusion, and highlighting marginalized women. These positive comments stand in stark contrast to the exclusionary focus of many negative ones. For example, user @gsugerma writes, "Thank you for the emphasis on inclusion. We must all support each other. We are all equal women." This comment can be analyzed across three dimensions: gratitude, solidarity, and equality. The opening phrase, "Thank you for the emphasis on inclusion," expresses appreciation to the individual holding the sign, recognizing the central message of the movement's embrace of diverse identities and experiences. This sentiment contrasts with the exclusionary frustration voiced in negative comments, reflecting a strong understanding of intersectionality's goals. Next, "we must all support each other" invokes a moral imperative: the word 'must' signals an essential duty which emphasizes that solidarity among women is crucial to the movement's success. Finally, "We are all equal women" asserts a universalist

feminist identity, underscored by the grouping of "equal," "all," and "women," which together evoke a shared collective belonging.

Another positive comment by user @ eliiiprincesss echoes this sentiment: "Exactly. We forget about our women minorities. And they are the more oppressed in our society!!" The opening "Exactly" signals immediate agreement with the inclusionary message. This commenter highlights the neglect of minoritized women, directly stating, "We forget about our women minorities," and invoking collective responsibility by using "we," implicating broader society. By acknowledging this neglect, the comment highlights a core concern of intersectional feminism—that certain groups face heightened oppression within the broader women's rights movement. The comment concludes emphatically: "they are the more oppressed in our society!!" The double exclamation points convey strong emotional investment, signaling passionate support for this issue.

Some positive comments go further, directly responding to negative critiques about the inclusion of white women. For example, user @tufutapa offers a historically grounded rebuttal: "ok i see all these white women in the comments like 'what about us white/skinny/cis/abled women???!?!" here's a little history lesson for y'all: Feminism has ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT WHITE WOMEN. it has a long fucking history of excluding transwomen, women of colour, black women, fat women, disabled women etc all the women mentioned in the pic above. So no, when they are saying 'fight for these women too!' you, as a white woman, are not being excluded because its always been about you." This comment directly challenges the negative comments with an assertive historical critique of feminism's legacy. The tone is confrontational, with phrases like "here's a little history lesson for y'all" mocking the entitlement some white women express when feeling excluded. It emphasizes that feminism has historically centered white, cisgender, able-bodied women while marginalizing trans women, women of color, women with disabilities, and others—groups represented in the image. In this comment, the affective attachments to whiteness become clear: fear and anger adhere to white femininity as it feels its historical privilege threatened, while frustration and corrective insistence attach to marginalized identities claiming space within the movement. This affective encounter exposes clearly how white supremacy itself operates as a "sticky" surface, gathering emotions that both protect and challenge

its dominance. By rejecting the idea that white women are now excluded, the commenter reframes calls for inclusion as a necessary corrective to feminism's history. The concluding line, "you, as a white woman, are not being excluded because its always been about you," encapsulates this argument, urging a shift toward an intersectional feminism that prioritizes those most oppressed. Overall, this comment highlights that expanding the feminist movement to focus on marginalized groups does not exclude anyone but addresses long-standing inequalities within feminism itself. Similarly, many positive comments reaffirm intersectional feminist principles while responding to concerns about exclusion.

Emotional Circulation and the Formation of Collective Spaces

This fear of exclusion can be further understood through Sara Ahmed's theory of the "stickiness" of emotions in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed argues that emotions circulate between bodies and shape social relations rather than residing solely within individuals. She writes: "Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others" (Ahmed 2004, 8). In the context of these comments, fear and defensiveness attach to the idea of exclusion, revealing how whiteness has historically been associated with dominance. Ahmed describes how certain words, like racial slurs, accumulate emotional weight through repeated harmful use (8). Similarly, whiteness becomes "sticky" in discussions of exclusion, where its historical centrality causes feelings of threat when it is challenged or marginalized. In these exchanges above, we see how emotions are not just circulating, but accumulating around certain bodies, shaping how these bodies are read within the discourse. For instance, this repeated defensiveness of commenters invoking "white women" reveals how affective attachments to whiteness begins to shape bodies. Here, fear and anger adhere to the idea of hierarchical white femininity; when this hierarchy is challenged, its historical centrality is threatened including all of the times when it was presumed "default," and "ideal." In this analysis, these emotions of fear orient women away from solidarity like a reverse magnet and draw them toward self-preservation in order to maintain this hierarchy. In turn, this orientation is

one way of witnessing what Kyla Schuller suggests: how white feminists preserve their standing within existing power structures is to resist any change because any shift may challenge the status quo of white supremacy within feminist movements. On the other side, frustration expressed by feminists who support intersectionality also circulates and sticks, creating a contrasting emotional current. Many positive comments respond to fear and anger with irritation or disappointment, highlighting the tensions within feminist discourse. For example, @brainwa.shed's comment states: "Well said. Until we have equality for everyone, we don't have equality. It's really sad that so many people calling yourself feminists forget about it."

Here, sadness signals emotional weight behind the disappointment, illustrating the affective investment in inclusive feminism. The emotional valences identified in the comments—fear, defensiveness, frustration, sadness—reflect this circulation and stickiness of emotions that shape feminist identities and solidarities in online spaces, building what I call a collective space. By examining the responses to viral protest images, transnational feminist scholarship is able to expand, helping us scholars understand how feminist solidarity is both formed and challenged in digital public spheres. These discourses, as seen in the results, highlight ongoing tensions around inclusion, identity, and power that are often invisible in more traditional accounts of feminist movements. Far from being merely sites of fragmentation or negativity, online comment sections can actually reveal the emotional and political labor involved in negotiating collective spaces across differences. Engaging with these digital conversations is therefore an important step toward understanding how transnational feminism operates in practice, acknowledging both its possibilities and its limits. Hence, I suggest that a step towards developing transnational feminism in the context of digital spaces could be to begin recognizing online comment sections as essential arenas that reveal ongoing exclusions and power imbalances, making visible what many would prefer to remain hidden or ignored.

By examining these digital conversations, we begin to see why it is important to name and theorize these essential online arenas—what I have been calling collective spaces throughout this paper. These are digital spaces, as we have seen, where users come together collectively to engage in feminist discourse, regardless of their social positions or perspectives. Because emotions circulate and stick within these spaces, the images become more than just pictures; they become adhesive, viral sites that hold people together through shared feeling and contested meaning. Naming these spaces helps us better understand how solidarity and conflict unfold simultaneously in digital feminist activism.

Limitations and Conclusion

Finally, while this analysis offers us a small glance of the importance of digital feminist discourse within a specific U.S.-centered context, it is still important to acknowledge the limitations of this single case study. Because transnational feminism demands attention to diverse regional, cultural, and linguistic contexts beyond North America, future research should examine viral protest images and their comment threads from a variety of global locations to better understand how digital collective spaces operate across different feminist histories and socio-political environments. Such comparative work is imperative because it will show both shared and distinct challenges faced by feminist movements worldwide. In this way, the analysis of viral images and their comment threads becomes more than a snapshot of digital culture: it becomes a critical site for transnational feminist praxis, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities of building solidarity in an era marked by persistent inequalities and digital mediation.

Figures

Fig. 5.1 — Two individuals holding signs and clenching their fists in a resistance pose. The signs state, respectively: "Protect: Black, Asian, Muslim, Latinx, Disabled, Trans, Fat, Poor, WOMEN" and "If you don't fight for all women, you fight for no women."

Fig. 5.2 — Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes raising their fists in solidarity, circa 1971. The image has become an iconic representation of interracial feminist alliance and activism in the United States.

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