



Issue three

coalition X interruption

PLURALITY
ISSUE 3

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Coalition and Interruption

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Feminist publication has long played an important role in the development and distribution of critical discourse. Theorists have used the independence of these publications from institutions, particularly their grassroots and independent nature, to question and express important criticisms of paradigmatic thinking. However, while these publications have been important, I sometimes wonder if this is enough to change the material conditions which we live under, and how can we expand our activism to go beyond the page. Along with the importance of not solely residing in critical discourse but also constructing feminist visions to aspire to and lead collective social movements with both an eye towards the ideal and non-ideal theorisation, to ensure that there is a mutual flow of ideas from the ground up and vice-versa. Thus, I am thrilled to present Plurality's third issue on the theme of Coalition and Interruption. As we think in the ways theory and practice can form a coalition for change, along with how each can interrupt and 'call in' the other for the perusal of the project of liberation.

In this issue we have nine wonderful articles, starting off with Aileen Kuang thinking about how we can use Donna Haraway's situated knowledges to expand intersectionality frameworks to consider beings beyond the human. Our other Philosophy and Divinity piece analyses the arguments of Lucrezia Marionella criticising the notion of using women's beauty to argue for their value presented by Roopsha Deshmukh who argues that this fails to interrupt the patriarchal valuations of women based on beauty which cannot be reclaimed. For our Arts and Literature section we have Jada Horan who considers how Zora Neale Hurston utilizes spatial politics to question forms of authority via dynamic spaces and a lens of transformation. Followed by Piper Farmer's piece which explores female solidarity analyzing the figure of the old crone in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* using Le Guin's notion of 'space crone' to show how the crone can be a site to facilitate mutual aid and coalition-building. For the Social Sciences we have Rachel Barlow who looks at how women educators in Afghanistan have used coalition to resist oppression to learn from and apply to other feminist movements. Along with Elizabeth Hamilton analysing how nation branding uses 'nation(ist)' coalitions to define the discursive space of feminisms and who is included in the construction of the Nation. For our History and Classics section, Júlia Norman offers a careful consideration of Yorkshire women welders during the Second World War as agents within power structures who utilized collective resistance and individual acts of defiance to questioning paradigmatic historiographical narratives of women during this period. Grace Law Woodhouse begins the Law section with illustrating how feminist legal coalitions within reproductive rights movements have had to navigate the tension between calls for inclusive representation and increasingly restrictive legislation. Finally, we have Beth Hutchinson who ends off the issue with looking at how morality can be conflated with normative legal framework to restrict the body autonomy of marginalised communities, policing bodies who interrupt understandings of 'the normal body'.

I am proud of where this project has come and the community which I hope it has fostered, even as I move away from leading the publication. I never would have thought that the publication would already be on its fifth issue! Along with the opportunities it has provided authors in being able to publish their work in a publication which attempts to demystify the academic publication process and expand what academic publication can look like. This past autumn we had the first transition to a new committee. While at first I was nervous with the prospective instability this could create, since continuity is often the step where student projects end, my worries were shown to be unfounded. I am humbled by how the new committee has stepped up and continued the important ethics of the publication along with expanding the project to greater heights. In many ways this issue has been a collaborative coalition between the past and future committee, in the sharing of skills, time and labour. It certainly gives me hope that this project may continue long past me being a student at Edinburgh.

The next committee has been diligently working on Issue 4: No Place Like Home, and calls for papers for Issue 5: The Natural are currently open so I thoroughly encourage aspiring researchers and writers to submit as I am confident you will find the editorial process a challenging yet rewarding experience. I write this final letter not as a goodbye but as a starting point for hoping that I have built a platform where future feminist thought can be published to foster the careers of current student feminist theorists and activists.



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Thinking Beyond (More-than-human) Intersectionalities

by Aileen Kuang

THINKING BEYOND (MORE-THAN-HUMAN) INTERSECTIONALITIES

BY AILEEN KUANG

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Outlined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an alternative to divisive identity politics, intersectionality theory acknowledges that different social identities overlap to shape individuals' experiences under systems of oppression. Building on Maneesha Deckha's proposal for a more-than-human intersectionality, this essay examines the limitations of intersectionality theory as a framework for radical social change. Deckha asserts that an effective intersectional politic must consider multispecies and environmental rights; while her argument makes important connections between speciesism, racism, and sexism, it reveals that intersectionality theory is ultimately a politic of recognition. Because it relies so heavily on sanctioned identity categories, it can only be useful for political advocacy within present social institutions and structures – it cannot push for a reevaluation of those same identities. Thus, I turn to Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges to suggest an addendum to intersectional frameworks. Rather than relying on preconstructed identities of race, class, gender, or even species to form relationships and solidarity, we can return to the theoretical body – positioned in networks of care and community – in order to imagine a society outside of existing hierarchies. As intersectionality theory guides us towards material change and reform, (re)grounding ourselves in the theoretical body may lead us towards a world liberated from repressive identities.

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REVIEWED BY VLAD-STEFAN HARBUZ

Intersectionality is a theory that acknowledges the interactions and overlap between different identities and oppressive systems, such as race, class, and gender. It was introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an alternative to exclusionary identity politics, which “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” and consequently overlooks the fact that “the violence many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities” (1242). For Crenshaw and other theorists, intersectionality allows us to explicitly name the multiple identities that influence individuals’ experiences under systems of oppression –Crenshaw, for instance, discusses the overlapping influences of race and gender on the violence and oppression directed against Black women. In this way, intersectionality is a tool for political organizing, as it provides a foundation for coalitions of identity between different marginalized groups. However, as intersectionality theory has emerged as one of the dominant frameworks for feminist political organizing, it has also been critiqued extensively for perpetuating the oppressive systems it purports to subvert. Jennifer Nash, for instance, interrogates scholars’ reliance on Black women as “prototypical intersectional subjects,” which treats Black women as a monolithic group and contradicts the values at the core of intersectionality theory (198). Anna Carastathis further argues that the usage of racialized women as default intersectional subjects establishes those with certain social privileges – namely, men and white individuals – as “at home” in non-intersecting categories of race and gender, and therefore fails to acknowledge race, gender, and class as political relations rather than individual traits (27).

This essay is primarily concerned with the posthumanist limitations of intersectionality theory, particularly with Maneesha Deckha’s call for a multispecies intersectional framework. Deckha argues that an effective intersectional politic must shift towards a consideration of nonhuman species and environmental rights. However, I argue that this posthuman turn is ultimately ineffective – not because Deckha is incorrect in establishing the connections between race, gender, and species, but because her argument’s rhetoric remains anthropocentric in its attempt to apply human assumptions of justice to nonhumans and, consequently, its necessary reliance on pre-constructed categories of

identification. This rhetoric exposes a greater limitation of intersectional politics: whether it is posthuman or not, intersectionality is ultimately a politic of recognition. Here, recognition specifically refers to the construction and acknowledgement of subjugated identities by a dominant social class. When we use an intersectional framework, we rely on social categories that have been predetermined for us – and often predefined in order to uphold an unjust social order – to explain individuals’ experiences. So, instead of pushing us to question the legitimacy of these identities, intersectionality theory increases our dependence on them, which ultimately serves to reinforce hierarchies of race, gender, class, and species. Thus, in order to build a liberated future for all – humans, nonhuman animals, and other entities – we must forgo a politic that relies on external, systemic validation in favor of an alternate mode of relationality. Building on Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges, I call for a gaze situated within the oppressed body – a locus of possibility for connection and community – as an alternative to intersectionality. As we envision futures beyond racist, patriarchal systems, and therefore beyond traditional markers of identity, this new “look” provides an alternative means for forming communities and coalitions.

To begin, Deckha makes her case for a posthuman, multispecies intersectionality by highlighting the entangled relationship between species, racial, and gender hierarchies. Deckha argues that intersectionality currently relies on intertwined anthropocentric hierarchies which undergird structures of race and gender. Her argument illustrates Claire Kim’s concept of the “borderlands,” the liminal, shifting cultural space between the categories of human and animal that is inhabited by all non-white humans and the most human-like animals (24). Kim demonstrates that whiteness is considered “quintessentially human”; therefore, nonwhite humans and nonhuman animals who are excluded from both whiteness and humanity are constructed as racialized subjects (25). Indeed, Deckha describes the historical roots of such a racialized space, and adds gender as a factor shaping these human-animal borderlands – she outlines the notion of “Civilization” as a marker of humanness, a social construction catalyzed by the European desire to preserve their “claim[s] to specialness and humanness” amidst the Darwinian

challenge to species boundaries in the nineteenth century (Deckha 252). As Europeans attempted to distance themselves from their “bestial origins,” they characterized racialized and gendered Others as less-than-human; thus, constructions of race and gender were undergirded by anthropocentric hierarchies (252). These interconnected hierarchies have persisted since then, as humans are racialized based on their proximity to animals, and animals are also racialized and gendered. Black humans, for instance, have been constructed as apes in the Western imagination throughout history, a caricature which served to justify slavery and violence against Black people through dehumanisation (Kim 35). Additionally, the wolf has been gendered as female in order to justify lax hunting regulations and “secure a certain code of human masculinity” (257).

Ultimately, because of the intertwined constructions of race, gender, and species – and intersectionality’s claim to explore sites of injustice – Deckha argues that “intersectionality needs to resist the comfort of the humanist paradigm and reach across the species divide,” to call for both human and animal rights (267).

However, more-than-human intersectionality – as Deckha describes it – will not necessarily be effective in achieving and maintaining “justice” for nonhuman beings. This is due to the fact that her argument assumes the superiority of human modes of justice, thereby privileging anthropocentric views. She frequently references the concept of human/animal “rights” in her response to potential objections to the inclusion of nonhuman animals in intersectionality theory, which include the perceived threat of “animal rights” and posthumanist pleas for deconstructing the animal/human boundary...to still fragile human subjectivities” (259). Deckha argues that because species hierarchies are already innately intertwined with racism and colonialism, animal rights advocacy is necessary for a complete criticism of racial hierarchies (260). Although Deckha is correct in identifying the connections between race and species, the framework of intersectionality remains anthropocentric. The “human subjectivities” that are so precarious are only weak within the context of human social systems, which include both legal institutions and our cultural understandings of being. Indeed, human and animal “rights” only exist within

these systems and human ways of being in the world – a bear, for instance, is not aware of human laws which prohibit violence if it decides to attack a person. This argument for animal rights, then, is rooted in the idea that we need to uplift nonhuman animals within human societal systems – which animals may not subscribe to – in order for them to possess agency and autonomy. Therefore, even the call for a multispecies intersectionality is anthropocentric in reinforcing the perceived superiority of human social systems, as it asks how we might grant animals personhood within our own systems and institutions instead of interrogating human ways of knowing.

Deckha’s anthropocentric rhetoric furthermore underscores the limitations of intersectionality theory itself – it is a non-speculative political framework, a politic of recognition which creates community and coalition using sanctioned identity groups. Intersectionality is useful for working within pre-existing oppressive social structures, as it encourages marginalized groups to unite across shared identities for political advocacy. Crenshaw, for instance, explains that shared racial identities can be used to unite both men and women of color, just as it can be used to unite straight and queer people of color (1299). However, if the collective end goal of political organizing is a society free from hierarchies of identity which undergird and recreate oppression – such as race, gender, and sexuality – intersectionality is limiting because it is heavily reliant on such identity categories. In her article, Crenshaw outlines structural, political, and cultural forms of intersectionality: the three contexts in which different socially constructed identities fuse to create certain experiences for people who hold multiple marginalized identities. Crenshaw demonstrates that the political, structural, and representational treatments of rape against Black women cause harm or fail to provide adequate support for the victims because concerns about Black women “fall into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism” (1282). In recognizing that Black women’s experiences are shaped by both race and gender, we can better organize efforts to provide community and legal support. While Crenshaw’s examples demonstrate that intersectionality can be a useful guide for political advocacy, they also show that intersectionality is reliant on sanctioned

forms of identity. Since intersectionality is primarily concerned with how these externally created identities create certain individual experiences, it can only ever be used and understood within current oppressive social systems and institutions. In the United States, for instance, Blackness is a racial category which was constructed by elite whites during the antebellum period in order to justify and maintain slavery. The category of “Black,” then, still carries these historical connotations even now – and its continued existence signifies the presence of white supremacist social hierarchies which have utilized “Blackness” in order to create division and maintain oppression. Thus, intersectionality is not and cannot be a tool for a radical transformation of oppressive systems, as it inherently reinforces social categorization.

Consequently, we must look beyond even more-than-human intersectionality in order to work towards a liberated future for all. Feminist critic Donna Haraway’s framework of feminist objectivity provides a useful launch point. In her 1988 essay, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Haraway critiques scientific objectivity, or the notion that modern knowledge production is inherently unbiased. She uses vision as a metaphor for this objectivity, arguing that it “has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” – in other words, that this is a disembodied objectivity, rooted in nothing. Its gaze purports to be infinite, and it “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies... [signifying] the unmarked positions of Man and White (Haraway 581)¹. Through a narrative of finality, Western objectivity oppresses “marked bodies” – those belonging to colonized groups of women and people of color. Against this totalizing view, Haraway proposes a feminist objectivity, which is about situated knowledges: a “view from a body” that is one from a “complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body,” one that is partially made and always in relation to other bodies and beings (589). It is a location that “resists the politics of closure” and “finality,” suggesting that Haraway’s body is both physical and intangible (590). It is a view from somewhere rather than nowhere, which can be a singular body as well as a collective one – after all, collectives comprise individuals. But most importantly,

this means that Haraway’s body is both material and theoretical, where physical sensations can be used towards a feminist objectivity, but so can other modes of understanding and seeing, ones that are perhaps less easily understood as sensations. The “body” is not constrained by human ontological limits: it is communal and individual, corporeal and not.

Therefore, I propose a return to the theoretical body as a grounding locus of relationality with both human and non-human beings. While intersectionality relies on sanctioned categories – and consequently a view from above, or from nowhere – the situated body is positioned in networks of care and community. The theoretical body allows us to create a politic of solidarity, a parallel view, by emphasizing mutual care through sensations of feeling, seeing, and hearing – or other modes of nonphysical understanding – which facilitate relationship-building without placing others within a social location. Take, for example, the experience of interacting with a dog or cat, in which one’s responses could be driven by attempting to be in relationship with and understand them rather than assumptions of human superiority. Or even the simple process of forming connections and friendships with other humans, which are driven by sensations of mutuality – both physical and nonphysical. Although intersectionality can be utilized to improve material conditions of living for marginalized communities, we must learn to rely on these relationships with one another in order to construct parallel ways of knowing and move beyond the prescribed, white male gaze. If we only rely on intersectionality, we limit ourselves to the constraints of existing systems.

Overall, although Deckha’s framework of more-than-human intersectionality is useful, it is ultimately ineffective – not because of its inclusion of nonhuman species, but due to limitations of intersectionality theory itself. Intersectionality is a politic of recognition – it is not a radical reimaging of oppressive systems, as its reliance on sanctioned identity categories makes it only useful for political advocacy within dominant social structures and institutions. This essay is not intended to be a critique of the material changes that activists have made using intersectionality theory, nor does it argue that intersectionality theory is useless. In fact, its wide

reach and popularity has provided a foundation for many important DEI initiatives at companies, universities, and other institutions. I am only asking us to (re)consider whether intersectionality can be used to imagine futures beyond the patriarchy, white supremacy, and other forms of bigotry. Beyond intersectionality, I call for a politic rooted in the theoretical body rather than one of recognition. While this may seem like an amorphous concept, my goal is to suggest an alternative to intersectionality, which is a framework that might cease to be useful as we attempt to move towards a world free from restrictive identities and categories. This alternative politic might be developed over time, in tandem with organizing efforts that engage with intersectionality. My hope is that eventually, by locating power within our individual and collective bodies, we can find connection and community with other beings and environments – whether they are human or nonhuman.

Footnotes

1. In attributing the creation of subject and object categories to objectivity, Haraway also highlights that identity categories are used to uphold white male power, underscoring Carastathis' argument that intersectionality theory unwittingly enforces whitemaleness as the default, and therefore superior, subject.

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A BEAUTY COALITION? – DECONSTRUCTING MARINELLA’S ESSENTIALIST BEAUTY

BY ROOPSHA DESHMUKH
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH



This essay argues that, despite her commendable attempt of subversion, Lucrezia Marinella’s thesis that “women possess superior spirituality owing to their higher physical perfection,” while “men who are moderate creatures can raise themselves to the knowledge and contemplation of the divine essence,” ultimately perpetuates a dependency on patriarchal definitions of identity and virtue that cannot be reclaimed as empowering. It becomes critical to make it clear early on that this paper does not assess her project in terms of historical intent or feminist success. Rather, it interrogates the aesthetic logic she mobilises and the structural limits of subversion grounded in visual and bodily hierarchies. To this end, the paper first outlines Marinella’s argumentative strategy, identifying its internal tensions and contradictions, and examines the aesthetic trap of beauty as empowerment and the theoretical implications of failed subversion.

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REVIEWED BY CARLOTTA MORO, ART BY EMMI WILKINSON

I

Lucrezia Marinella's project in her philosophical polemic, "The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men," is to provide a systematic response to the misogynistic indictment presented by Giuseppe Passi in his work, "Il donnechi diffetti - The Feminine Defects." Passi's initiative sought to educate young men on evading women's deceptions. His idea refers to the Aristotelian assertion that "women are mistakes of nature" due to flawed rational or deliberative faculties, as well as the classical patristic tradition's portrayal of women as a "necessary evil" (Campbell, 2011, p. 145). Within this framework, female inferiority is cast as natural and moral, rendering misogyny a matter of philosophical common sense.



In his text, Passi accused women of the vices of "pride, avarice, treachery,cowardice, laziness, and impertinence" and asserts that women have debased themselves as prostitutes, engaged in witchcraft, thievery, deception, and falsehoods. Furthermore, while he employs the Latin phrase "maxim mulla mullier bona," which translates to "no woman is good" (Campbell, 2011b, p.145), his scholarship concerns instances relating to specific women. It is essential to recognize that each vice attributed to women in Passi's list is contingent upon external perceptions. To assert that women have disgraced themselves suggests the presence of an individual before whom they have incurred disgrace; to claim that they are tricksters and liars implies that they have deceived or misled someone (a man). Passi's claims are relational and contingent on the male perception: Women are described as "disgraced" only insofar as they act in opposition to men's expectations and interests.¹ Crucially, many of

these alleged vices depend not on demonstrable actions but on external judgments about women's appearance, conduct, and moral legibility. To claim that women have "disgraced themselves," for instance, presupposes an observing subject who authorises shame, interprets visibility as moral evidence, and transforms perceived deviation into ethical failure. Irigaray theorises women's structural relationality - the state of existing only about men as the "phallocentric symbolic order", or the marginalization of women and their subjectivity, reducing them to an "other" outside of the dominant male-centered system of meaning (Irigaray, 1977).

Lucrezia Marinella uses the strategy of reinterpretation of the same citations and anecdotes used by men to defame women (Campbell, 2011, p.150) to provide a philosophical and rhetorical argument, to effectively object to the misogynistic claims of Passi. Rather than rejecting the terms of the debate outright, Marinella intervenes within them, exposing the contingency of misogynistic interpretation itself. This strategy is made explicit in the chapter "Of the Nature and Essence of the Female Sex," which begins with an outline of Moderata Fonte's attempt "to demonstrate that women are as noble as men, owing to them belonging to the same species or having the same nature"². Marinella advances a much more provocative claim, theorising that "Women's souls were created much more noble than men, which can be seen from the effect they have and from the beauty of their bodies" (1600/1999, p. 55). By grounding spiritual nobility in visible effect and bodily beauty, Marinella elevates women not only morally but ontologically. This move reaffirms the epistemic role of appearance as evidence of inner virtue, a condition that both enables her defence of women and constrains the terms on which that defence can be made.

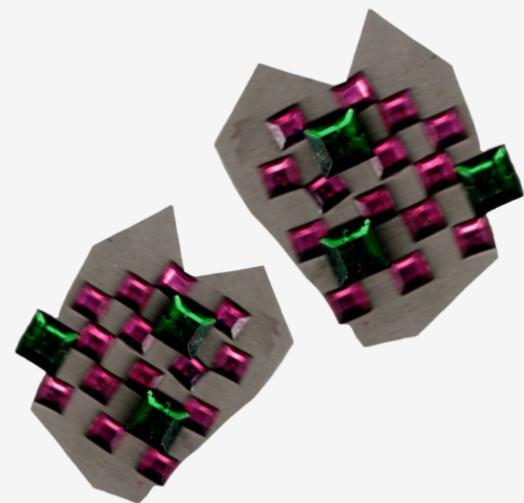
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For the purpose of analyzing her project, Marinella's core arguments can be divided into two categories: arguments for beauty as the manifestation of virtue and arguments regarding the admiration of beauty as leading to spiritual elevation.

Arguments for beauty as the manifestation of virtue
According to Marinella, women's physical beauty is both an effect and evidence of their superior souls, reflecting

their higher spiritual virtue. Her polemic and defence of women shifts the argument from an aesthetic and social account to a teleological and metaphysical claim regarding the physicality and beauty of women. Resting on the claim that "The nobility of the soul can be judged from the excellence of the body" (1600/1999, p. 57). She theorizes that beauty is a "ray of light" emanating from the soul that links the material body to spiritual excellence (1600/1999, p. 57). In order to support this, Marinella references poets such as Remigio Fiorentino and Guarini to suggest that the "eternal mover" may sometimes make beings of remarkable grandeur (1600/1999, p.57). She also references sonnets by Padre Angelo Grillo and Tasso to support the notion that "the soul is the cause and origin of physical beauty" (1600/ 1999, p.57-58). Before pushing her logic even further, to seek the origin and source of the beauty in the divine, referencing Platonist assertion "that external beauty is the image of divine beauty"(1600/ 1999 p.58) and asserts that poets must look to the divine elements (stars, gods) to capture the essence of women's beauty (1600/ 1999 p.64). She also recalls Dionysius's claim that God, as the cause and measure of all beauty, functions as the ultimate source of created form (1600/1999, p. 60). The male-authored literary sources she relies upon play a dual role: they mirror the kind of textual citation used by Passi, thus subverting misogynistic logic from within, but they are also deeply steeped in idealised and symbolic portrayals of women. Marinella adopts these idealisations, largely informed by Neoplatonic thought, and in her intellectual context, this linkage between soul and beauty is not unusual, situated within the epistemic and moral frameworks of early modern thought. Beauty functioned as a legitimate epistemic sign: moral worth was not only expected to be visible, but to become intelligible through visibility. In this schema, seeing was a mode of knowing, and external form served as evidence of inner virtue. Furthermore, Marinella does not naïvely reproduce misogynistic aesthetic norms; she strategically reworks them to defend women's moral and spiritual authority within the constraints of early modern discourse. Yet recognising the radical nature of this move in its historical moment does not exhaust its critical evaluation. If outward beauty functions as an epistemic gateway to virtue, then aesthetic norms not merely reveal virtue; they organise the field of intelligibility within which virtue can be recognised at

all. The critical question, therefore, is not whether Marinella's framework was empowering or intelligible in its own moment, but what structural exclusions are produced when virtue is anchored to beauty itself.



Arguments for the admiration of beauty leading to spiritual evaluation

Marinella further states, "Men are obliged and forced to love women, and women are not obliged to love them back, except merely from courtesy"(1600/ 1999, p. 63); using Platonist traditions, she argues that Women's beauty inspires men's spiritual progress toward divine contemplation. Moreover, she further asserts that "compared to all women, all men are ugly and that which is less beautiful or ugly, is not by nature worthy of being loved"(1600/1999, p.63). This claim is an incredibly heteronormative assertion that operates within a binary male-female paradigm, accentuating a Gender/Sex-Body Dependency. Not only are gendered binaries of beauty conceived as the outward, aestheticized manifestation of virtue, rigid and unforgiving, but there is no room for female contemplation of feminine beauty, nor male contemplation of masculine beauty. In Marinella's paradigm, men are transcended closer to the divine through their appreciation of female beauty. What of men who don't find female beauty, who rather find attraction, love, and the divine in other men? What of women who find beauty in those not deemed beautiful? If beauty is the measure of metaphysical worthiness, where does this leave women deemed "ugly"? Men are often accused of dehumanizing women they do not find attractive. While she attempts to argue that women are closer to the divine, the citations present in her argument do not necessarily affirm that there is an

implicit claim or recognition of ‘women’s beauty’ but rather make the case that regarding a singular ‘woman’ that a poet she cited found beautiful. For Petrarch, Laura might have been the divine ray, but what of her handmaidens or of women who were burnt as witches in the background? Marinella can also be accused, similar to Passi, of chronicling the cases of a woman and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy. It is important to notice that the poets and thinkers cited by Marinella only talk about the singular “*Woman*” and not “*Women*”. While appropriate for her time, Marinella’s evidentiary mode relies on poetic authority. This Poetic authority universalises the particular. While she attempts to argue that women are closer to the divine, the citations present in her argument do not necessarily affirm that there is an implicit claim or recognition of ‘women’s beauty’ but rather make the case that, regarding a singular ‘woman’ that a poet she cited found beautiful.

There are further issues arising with Marinella’s account. She says, “Beauty of a lovely face, accompanied by a graceful appearance, guides every man to the knowledge of his maker” (1600/1999, p.53). Two important statements are made here. *Firstly, women are beautiful because they are pleasing* (1600/1999, p.53). *The question is, pleasing to whom?* Significantly, she also draws heavily on male poets who have commented on the nature of a woman’s soul - the “pure soul” which “lights the sparks of love in beloved eyes” is observed by men (1600/1999, p.56). Therefore, *who decides who is pure?* And who decides who is beautiful? Moreover, Leone Ebero - “the corporeal beauty which shines in bodies is a shadow and image of incorporeal beauty. If it came solely from the body, each body would be beautiful, which it is not” (1600/1999, p.58) Again, *who decides which body is beautiful, and which isn’t?* Marinella distinguishes beautiful female bodies and un-beautiful male ones. But what about the bodies that don’t conform to normative ideas of femininity, be they queer bodies, PoC bodies, or disabled bodies? Even if these are ‘female’ bodies, if they adhere more to ‘masculine’ tropes and are therefore delineated as less beautiful, does this imply that the soul within these bodies is also less pure? According to Susan Sontag, “Beauty is theatrical, it is for being looked at and admired”(2005, P.211). As Marinella relies exclusively on male descriptions of divine feminine beauty, the

understanding is that women are beautiful because they are pleasing *to men*. Further, their pleasurability lies in their loveliness and ‘delicate’ appearances. This idea of the delicate face is inherently exclusionary to a large portion of women, whose facial features, let alone wider body types, do not conform to ideas of ‘delicate’ femininity.

The most obvious example of this is non-European women, whose facial features have been historically delineated as less feminine in comparison with European femininity. Marinella cannot be taken as referring to all women; rather, she assumes a Eurocentric monolith that arguably does not exist among European women, let alone women globally. Here, Marinella can also be accused, similar to Passi, of chronicling the cases of a woman and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy. Marinella’s strategy ultimately complicates the subversiveness of her project. While she elevates feminine virtue, she does so by appealing to already mythologised ideals of femininity. In attempting to dismantle one form of patriarchal constraint, she reproduces another: a symbolic economy in which women’s moral authority remains contingent upon aesthetic legibility. Since if outward beauty functions as an epistemic gateway to virtue—if moral worth must appear in visible form—then the conditions under which bodies become recognisable as virtuous remain governed by aesthetic norms. The question, therefore, is not whether Marinella’s framework was intelligible or even empowering within its historical moment, but what structural exclusions are produced when virtue is anchored to visibility itself and whether these can be reclaimed as empowering.

III

This section turns to the consequences and theoretical implications of linking visible beauty and virtue. If Marinella’s framework renders virtue legible through beauty, the case of Sara Baartman exposes what occurs when bodies are rendered hyper-visible yet denied moral intelligibility altogether. Baartman is not introduced as a historical counterexample to Marinella but as a critical case through which the violent afterlife of aesthetic epistemologies becomes visible once they are absorbed into colonial and racialised regimes of looking.

The example of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited across Europe in the early 19th century under the exploitative pseudonym "Hottentot Venus," epitomizes the problem present in associating physical appearance with virtue. 19th-century Europe was emblematic of scientific racism, sexualised colonial fantasy, and a racialized economy of perception. Baartman's body was pathologized in producing nationalistic and civilisational narratives, where European identity was defined in opposition to the grotesquely imagined 'other.'

Especially prominent in travelogue narratives and, later, photographic anthropological 'studies' which documented Africans during the waves of colonial expansion and development of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, African women - with body fat distribution and facial structures much different from those of the European female comparison, were deemed paradoxically more promiscuous, and closer to masculinity and barbarity. The delineation of female delicacy as equivalent to divinity has never applied to people from the global south, particularly not to Africans or those indigenous to any land desired for colonization, because attributing divinity to their appearance would inherently contradict the brutal forms of domination that were inflicted upon them. Rather, the masculine and barbaric traits assigned to them were used to alienate them from the understood norms of femininity and justify brutalization. Such is especially apparent in how postcolonial literature, the concept of the "colonised body" is more analytically prevalent than gendered binaries like "colonised male" or "colonised female." This framing emphasises that owing to colonialism's primary logic of extraction and labour maximisation, which subjected enslaved and colonised women to equally physically demanding labour as men. The economic value of bodily productivity overrode gendered sanctity, illustrating how colonial subjugation created a vacuum wherein ideological protection typically afforded to 'women' and rationality typically afforded to 'men' in Eurocentric discourse was denied. Both were exploited and brutalised with impunity, though gendered perceptions shaped the methods of domination.

Seen in this light, Marinella's sanctification of beauty relies on an implicit distinction between forms that can

signify virtue and forms that cannot. While this distinction remained largely unspoken within early modern European discourse, colonial modernity renders it brutally explicit. The rigid aesthetic conventions continuously attribute divinity to certain women and barbarity to others.



Echoing Marinella's methodology, the politics of visual perception is cyclical, where even acts of subversion can end up reinforcing the structures they seek to dismantle. This raises a critical philosophical question: When both structure and subversion are complicit in subjugation, what space remains for women to resist? In post-apartheid South Africa, Baartman's image is reappropriated into state-sanctioned narratives of national identity, often reduced to a symbol of victimhood. Though this idealisation differs from that of the Madonna or Laura, it remains another essentialised construct. As Levin notes (2011, pp. 97–99), such reconstructions frequently depict Baartman as a passive object of colonial trauma, erasing her agency, complexity, and voice. This not only exposes the critical flaw in using visual perception as a means of empowerment, but also underscores the danger of uncritical subversion—a subversion that merely inverts, rather than escapes, the oppressive logics it challenges - which has no space for the racialized, colonized, or enslaved female body and their post colonial counterparts.



The Hottentot Venus 1811 Engraving. (Sara Baartman)
London: S. Bateman, Publisher, Lewis Delin et Sculp, March
11, 1811

Moreover, by grounding women's worth in physical beauty, Marinella perpetuates these same essentialist views that tie women's identities and values to their biological traits, leaving little room for diversity or individual autonomy. This logic collapses when considering women like Baartman; her steatopygia was framed as grotesque and "unnatural," violating the Euro-Christian gaze of feminine delicacy. Her perceived physical strength, bodily excess, and lack of refinement positioned her outside the bounds of normative femininity, much like Imane Khelif centuries later. If beauty becomes a metaphysical marker of virtue and elevated soul, which by implication suggests that women whose bodies did not conform to idealized femininity, lacked these spiritual or moral qualities. The legacies of women who continue to be excluded from traditional ideals of femininity— androgenity seen as a compliment for certain women who are told they are pretty for x (*insert a non-European ethnicity of choice*) — all underscore the dangers of relying on aesthetics as

moral indicators, how racialized genealogy of visual logic always upholds the very hierarchies it may seek to invert.

In her seminal essay 'Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure', Maxine Leeds Craig articulates this tension succinctly: "Beauty is a resource used by collectivities and individuals to claim worth, yet it is an unstable good, whose association with women and with sex, and its dependence upon ever-changing systems of representation, put its bearer at constant risk of seeing the value of her inherent beauty or beauty work evaporate" (2006, p. 171). Any framework that intimately binds beauty to empowerment is inherently unstable, vulnerable to the shifting tides of cultural valuation and historical exclusion. As culture itself is not static but a continuous process—"a work of art never meant to be completed," as Guss (1989, p. 67) writes—so too are our ideals of beauty endlessly recreated and recontested. Yet, when beauty becomes the metric of worth, its volatility renders any empowerment derived from it precarious. Thus, the paradigm Marinella suggests is perpetuated to this day.

To conclude, Marinella's framework, despite its rhetorical inversion of misogyny, cannot be reclaimed. Women who do not conform to normative standards of beauty or femininity are excluded from Marinella's framework, reinforcing a narrow and restrictive definition of worth. Her argument hosts no space for the majority of women in the world, towards whom these rigid delineations of gendered beauty have been and continue to be weaponized to ensure their subjugation, not only within the hierarchy of patriarchy but also within race and queerness. I would like to acknowledge the limitations of my argument. Marinella's argument is a response to the misogynistic treatise, and she incorporates similar sources to those that she was refuting. There is a conscientious debate over whether Marienalla can be theorized as a feminist (Deslauriers, 2024, np). Surely, the response to a misogynistic attack does not linearly translate to a feminist work. Regardless, a theory about women's virtue as being associated with their physical beauty seems problematic to be reclaimed as empowering.

Her erasure from the category of the beautiful, thus virtuous, and thus human is not incidental but instrumental to her subjugation. Similarly, there exists a profound frailty in the subversion of this beauty—not the divine fragility so often romanticised in feminine archetypes, but a frailty that signals the structural collapse of agency itself.

Footnotes

1. I think it is interesting that Passi's text, intended to warn men of the perceived threats women pose to their spiritual, economic, and moral well-being (Campbell, 2011b151), can be understood as a Renaissance precursor to contemporary misogynistic discourse found in certain online spaces, such as those propagated by 'Podcast and YouTube bro' figures like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson. Passi's misogyny depends on him chronicling the accounts of a few women and ascribing these to the entire gender—a rhetorical strategy mirrored by modern proponents of hyper-masculine ideologies. In both of these cases, the assertion of masculinity is intimately tied with the wholesale vilification of femininity. Both Passi and the modern-day "podcast and YouTube bros" anchor their perspectives in a reductive and essentialist framework.

2. Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte, in their respective works are not simply attempting to refute attacks of figures like Giuseppe Passi or the Italian society of their time. Their ultimate adversary is Aristotelian teleology which postulates a metaphysical paradigm naturalizing female subordination by interpreting anatomical difference as evidence of *formal* and *final* inferiority. Aristotle's association, utilising temperature difference, associates women with lower divinity and marked by incompleteness laid the groundwork for a hierarchy of binary oppositions—mind/body, reason/emotion, male/female—that justified the gendered exclusion of women from rational and political life. Marinella and Fonte implicitly contest not just the social consequences of these oppositions, but the metaphysical architecture that sustains them or the "god trick" of objectivity that masks itself as neutral but codes male embodiment as universal form and female embodiment as deficient matter (Haraway, 1988, p 575–599).

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Spatial Politics and Locality in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'

By Jada Horan

SPATIAL POLITICS AND LOCALITY IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

BY JADA HORAN

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* sees its protagonist Janie Crawford navigate the stormy American South through three marriages and an all-powerful hurricane in a transformative and volatile journey of self-realization. In the novel, Hurston uses the spaces Janie encounters to both construct and contest power structures, interrogating the validity and reproduction of the oppressive social hierarchies that govern her autonomy.

This essay seeks to analyze Hurston's use of three primary spaces—sorted into the geographical, liminal, and corporeal—as a means of understanding and dissecting intersecting forms of authority. The geographical, explored through the town of Eatonville, is used to visualize class relations and the mechanisms of power. The liminal is represented by porches—key sites of performance and play in which social dynamics are both challenged and maintained—through which Hurston contends with the performativity of power and gendered roles of speaker and subject. Finally, the corporeal sees the body as an active entity through which Hurston explores how violence—both physical and sexual—reinforces ideas of identity and perpetuates subjugation, as well as how autonomy is physically embodied. Crucially, this essay explores how Hurston's use of space is dynamic, meaning the spaces in the novel are not static, fixed entities, but transformative sites in which the rigid structures and hierarchies governing Janie's self-expression can be not only destabilized, but dismantled.

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REVIEWED BY MASHRUR AYON & NONNY JONES

Zora Neale Hurston creates an intimate connection between locality and identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, exploring the underlying values of social power structures by tethering the politics of the text to spaces. The text uses different planes—geographical, liminal, and corporeal—to explore power dynamics, rendering them sites of activity to examine social relations. In the novel, Hurston develops geographical spaces through Eatonville, liminal spaces through porches, and corporeal spaces through the body to both construct and contest social systems. The effectiveness of this technique in dismantling oppressive hierarchies lies in the nature of the spaces Hurston creates; rather than existing as static entities, the spaces of the novel act as sites of transformation either through the subversion or rejection of regimented hierarchies. In this essay, I will explore how Hurston's spatial politics, particularly the use of dynamic spaces as loci of transformation, undermine the legitimacy of intersecting forms of authority.

Geographical Space: Eatonville

Their Eyes, set in early 20th-century Florida, sees its protagonist Janie Crawford traverse three marriages in the pursuit of love and identity. The novel progresses across several key locations, through which Janie's character progression can be tracked. Hurston transforms physical spaces into planes of discourse throughout the novel to manifest her politics spatially. In this essay, I will examine the town of Eatonville, an all-black town where Janie resides during her second marriage to its mayor, Joe Starks, to examine Hurston's class politics. While racial hierarchies seem to be more or less suspended in Eatonville due to its homogeneity, class inequalities are exposed through the town's construction.

The double-edged nature of power is explored in Eatonville's locality, particularly its corruptive potential. The social structures Hurston engages with—particularly class—are inherently hierarchical and rely on systems of subjugation. As such, they are necessarily unequal, a notion that Hurston explores by recreating them. Eatonville, as a burgeoning town, sees power dynamics form from the ground up, through which Hurston explores their mechanisms and maintenance. Upon the arrival of Joe and Janie, Eatonville is in its infancy,

“nothing but a raw place in the de woods.”¹ Joe is quick to capitalize on the power vacuum, commandeering the physical establishment of the town and overseeing its very construction. The resulting geography of Eatonville comes to represent an unequal class dynamic as demonstrated through material status and property ownership.

Joe's social status is irretrievably linked to his material status, but a material status sourced from older, perhaps pre-Civil War-era values. This is exhibited in the text through the descriptions of Joe's house, painted a “promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W.B. Jackson, and the Vanderpools wore.”² The mentioned names are all those of upper-class, respected white men, quietly emphasized by the white color of the house itself. Further, “the rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the ‘big house.’”³ Through a direct reference to slavery, this suggests, to some extent, that the power hierarchies that governed the institution of slavery have been replicated in Eatonville, with Joe stepping into the position of power.

As Joe's material identity resembles pre-Civil War wealth and eminence, it is suggestive that he is sourcing his conception of power from those systems as well. This is best evidenced through the relationship between Joe and the townspeople, as “There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town. It was not because of physical fear... Neither was it because he was more literate than the rest,”⁴ Rather, it has to do with his material status, “...that new house of his,” that made the townspeople “feel that they had been taken advantage of.”⁵ Though Joe and the townspeople entered Eatonville as equals, they are soon divided on the principles of wealth as social hierarchies take root. This wealth disparity quickly influences their social engagements, as Joe practices subjugation over the town. The townspeople note, “He loves obedience out of everybody... He can't help bein' sorta bossy.”⁶ Class division, then, through its innate inequality, sows social division. The townspeople “respected him and even admired [Joe] in a way,” but because of his elevated class and, therefore, increasingly controlling behavior, they begin to resent him, as “...any man who walks with power and property is bound to meet hate.”⁷ Power, then, takes on a more corruptive face as the relationship

between the townspeople and Joe sours.

However, the discontent of the townspeople does not amount to any real resistance as “none had the temerity to challenge him.”⁸ Instead, their resentment continues to build while they continue to feed Joe’s power. Hurston then comments on the self-sustaining nature of power structures, as “[The townspeople] bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down.”⁹ As such, she suggests power dynamics are maintained through a negative feedback loop that relies on the tools of subjugation. Thus, through the development of Eatonville, Hurston explores the nature of power structures as they progress with the town, and the social ramifications of class inequalities stemming from material disparity.

Liminal Space: Porches and Storytelling

Through Joe and Eatonville, Hurston explores the corrosive nature of power, as well as the danger of social hierarchies. While class structures are examined through the locality of Eatonville, gender relations are explored on a more microcosmic level—played out on the porches throughout the novel. Hurston interrogates patriarchal subjugation and gender roles through performative activity on different porches in *Their Eyes*. Janie’s interactions with porches throughout the text signify her transformation into a role of agency by the novel’s end, largely through the act of storytelling.

Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon defines porches as an important transitory space and a significant symbol in Black Southern culture. She argues that the porch is a gathering place, “synonymous with summer socializing.”¹⁰ Contextually, the porch is commonly associated with the South as a place to escape the summer heat and chat with neighbors. As a literary device, the porch functions as a site of relational discourse, acting as a space where “individuals can negotiate an identity within a community.”¹¹ The porch is one of the most versatile spaces in the novel, as it serves as a site of transformation and negotiation. Dale Pattison describes it as “a liminal space... encouraging discursive activity capable of responding to pervasive power structures.”¹² The porch acts as a catalyst for transformation and social mobility in *Their Eyes*,

functioning as the threshold between the house and the world, the inside and the outside. Importantly, it is a place that simultaneously engages with the private and public spheres, a bridge between self-identity and collective identity.

The centrality of porches, and its relationship with social dynamics, is outlined during the very first pages of the novel, a section which is crucial to analyze in more detail to understand the dual nature of the porch, as both a site of contesting and cementing power structures:

“It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.”¹³

On one hand, the porch represents a space to fully embody oneself, freed from the expectations of society, burdens of work, and systems of control, as exemplified by “the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human.” On the porch, the sitters become “lords of sounds and lesser things,” usurping a role in which they can exercise social power and judgment not available to them in their regular lives. However, within this freedom, the resulting activity is not always productive nor empowering; often, it becomes a place to impart harsh judgment and replicate existing social structures from a newfound position of power.

This is largely exemplified through the porches in Eatonville, which become a place to perform a form of masculinity based on the subjugation of women for the men of the town. While the porch does offer the opportunity to subvert power dynamics, whether they be race or class-based, it also becomes a breeding ground for misogyny and the realization of masculinity. While Joe’s institutional power in the town serves as “a symbol of black self-determination,” according to Claire Crabtree, the autonomy of the male in Eatonville fails to extend to the female, who continues to be subjugated under a patriarchal structure.¹⁴ Through storytelling and play-acting, the men of Eatonville reenact and reinforce patriarchal gender roles, instigating inter-male

competition based on subjugating women—as exemplified by Sam Watson and Lige Moss' mock-argument in chapter six. At first a philosophical debate on the porch, “an elaborate show... That draws everybody on the porch into it,” the play-acting turns into a display of masculinity when a group of women walks by.¹⁵ To get their attention, “the boys had to act out their rivalry,” in a display that bleeds into reality as “everybody knew they meant some of it.”¹⁶ As such, the porch comes to function as both demonstrating the performativity of social identity while reinforcing its implications.

Further, the designations of speaker and subject come to inhabit gendered roles in Eatonville, as Joe does not allow Janie to participate in play-acting on the porch. When they first meet, Joe tells Janie, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self.”¹⁷ In other words, Janie, and more largely women, are expected to be props in the performance, rather than actors—visible to others and available for definition. At Joe’s command, Janie is excluded from social activities on the porch as he tells her to go inside. At first, she goes against her wishes, as “Janie wanted to hear the rest of the play-acting and how it ended... [but] she got up sullenly and went inside.”¹⁸ However, while the porch originally reinforces Janie’s submission, it comes to be the site of her transformation into a position of power. Pattinson designates the porch as “Janie’s medium for self-definition,” as Janie’s role on the porch mirrors her increasing autonomy in the world as she comes to resent her role of a passive observer.¹⁹

In a key moment, Janie “[does] what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation,” scolding the men of Eatonville as they ridicule the townswomen on the porch.²⁰ Joe responds, “You gettin’ too moufy, Janie... Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers,” in an attempt to reset the conditions of the porch.²¹ But despite his dismissal, Janie threatened the intrinsic values of the gender-based power structure by inserting herself into the dialogue. This marks a significant step in her transformation, which is fully realized when Janie returns to Eatonville at the end of the novel.

After Joe’s death, Janie leaves Eatonville with her third

husband, Tea Cake, and undergoes her most transformative period in the Everglades. Of Janie’s three marriages—to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake—the latter is the closest to the idyllic relationship Janie longs for throughout the novel. She feels genuine companionship with Tea Cake, and they seem to share an intimacy unfettered by the restrictive marital dynamics that tormented Janie in her prior marriages. Tea Cake and Janie retreat to the Everglades, or the Muck, to escape the restraints of Eatonville. The doorstep of Janie and Tea Cake’s house, like the store porch in Eatonville, is the site of gatherings and storytelling as “all around the doorstep was full,” each night as people came “to talk and tell stories.”²² However, the activity on the doorstep manifests very differently than on the porches in Eatonville, as exemplified by their architecture; unlike the structured, constructed porches in Eatonville, the ‘porch’ in the Muck is not a structure at all, it is open to the natural world. The openness of its architecture translates to its freedom from the power structures that governed the highly repressive Eatonville, further demonstrated by Janie’s participation in the performances. Unlike in Eatonville, Janie is not excluded from the activities on the doorstep. She recounts that while “the men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch... here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to.”²³ As such, the Muck offers a sanctuary, at least temporarily, from the hegemonic structures that dominated Janie’s self-expression. It also marks a transition, from subject to speaker, that was highly transgressive in Eatonville. As such, Janie’s role as storyteller both underscores her transformation and undermines the legitimacy of the gender roles enforced in Eatonville.

Returning from the Muck to Eatonville, the porch again becomes a site of activity to demonstrate Janie’s character progression. As a frame narrative, the book begins with her return to Eatonville, where Pheoby Watson finds Janie “sitting on the steps of the back porch... full of that oldest human longing—self-revelation.”²⁴ Though the townspeople still “sat in judgment,” ridiculing Janie as she walked back into town, she asserts control over her narrative outside of their gaze by taking her place on the back porch.²⁵ Like the architecture of the other porches, it is important to

note the significance of the back porch, rather than the front porches which served as a site of performance for all the people of Eatonville to watch—and judge. It is on the back porch—in her own space, free from the harsh gaze of the townspeople—that Janie finally realizes her final role as the novel's storyteller. With “Pheoby's hungry listening [to help] Janie to tell her story,” Janie usurps the role of storyteller in the novel's ultimate act of becoming.²⁶ From the store porch to the doorstep in the Muck to the back porch in Eatonville, porches are used in *Their Eyes*, through the mode of storytelling, as a liminal space to both construct and undermine gender roles and track Janie's journey of personal agency.

Corporeal Space: The Body

Along with geographical and liminal spaces, the body serves as an important site of hierarchical activity. In *Their Eyes*, the body is used as a site of exploitation and testimony to hegemony, most explicitly through rape. Sexual violence in the text is a weapon of oppression used to assert control forcibly. Janie is a product of generational trauma reaped by supremacism, both racially and patriarchally; Nanny was raped by a white slaveowner which resulted in the birth of Leafy, and Leafy was raped by a schoolteacher which resulted in the birth of Janie. As such, Janie is a physical manifestation of the repercussions of oppressive social structures. This haunts Janie throughout the novel as her attempts to recast sexuality in a positive light are unavailing. Janie's sexuality is a recurrent theme in the text, typically euphemized through the use of nature-based metaphors. She experiences her sexual awakening, “beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees.”²⁷ Janie's further sexual experiences continue to be represented with feminine-coded pear trees and masculine-coded bees, taking the role of the tree while situating her lovers in the role of the bee. She sees Johnny Taylor, her first romantic interest, “through pollinated air,” Joe as “a bee for her bloom,” and Teacake as “a bee to a blossom - a pear tree blossom in the spring.”²⁸ But while the natural connotations of Janie's sexuality superficially place it outside of manmade hegemonic constructions, her experiences are not exempt from the cycles of violence and generational trauma reaped by both white and patriarchal supremacy. Throughout the novel, she is made to be an unwilling participant in the reassertion of male identity through physical violence

and suppressed self-expression, becoming more and more disillusioned with her idealistic vision of love. Even within her own metaphor, the bee takes an active role in pollinating while the tree is passive, alluding to the strictly gendered models of romance Janie comes to find herself in. These structures, reinforced through physical control, are most clearly demonstrated through Janie's marriages, as the most intimate example of male-female relationships, particularly the influence her partners exert over her body.

Hurston explores this notion in the text through Janie's hair as a symbol of her autonomy or, more specifically, her lack of it. Joe forces her to wrap up her hair as he does not want “other men figuratively wallowing in it,” as Janie existed solely “for him to look at, not those others.”²⁹ The regulations placed on Janie's hair seek to curb her self-expression and, as such, assert control over her agency. But, like Hurston's use of liminal spaces in the novel, the body is not just used to reassert power dynamics, but also to challenge them. Joe's body is also a site of transformation, serving as an embodiment of male supremacy. Following Janie's resurgence in autonomy when she verbally confronts him, Joe begins a physical decline as his power over Janie wanes. He loses his dominant standing, physically and socially. His once “prosperous-looking belly” turns into “some helpless thing seeking shelter.”³⁰ He is essentially incapacitated by Janie's words, as “[she] had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish.”³¹ His death, therefore, serves as an important event in Janie's navigation of the social structures imposed upon her; his corporeal death signals the conceptual death of male-imposed dominance. Janie is liberated from the oppressive dynamic of her marriage, symbolically represented by the liberation of her hair as she “burnt up every one of her head rags.”³² She emerges from her relationship with Joe, “basking in the freedom,” relishing in her newfound individualism.³³

Though Janie finds some freedom from the oppressive structures of Eatonville in the Muck, even there her body continues to function as a site of masculine reassertion and violence. Even though her relationship with Tea Cake is more liberating than her other marriages, her body is still used as a site for the reaffirmation of masculine identity. Tea Cake beats her to assert his

dominance over other men in the Muck as “he just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss.”³⁴ The lack of a specified audience in this quote is significant; he did not beat Janie to show her that he was boss so much as he was performing for onlookers. Later, Tea Cake justifies this himself, saying, “Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss.”³⁵ The beating had little to do with Janie at all, expounding her role as an object to bolster male superiority over other males. But, while physical violence is used against Janie to reinforce power dynamics, it is also used to dismantle them and reassert her agency. Like Joe’s death serves to mark Janie’s liberation from his subjugation, Tea Cake’s death—at Janie’s hand—is the final step in her journey of self-actualization. During the hurricane in the book’s conclusion, in which all social dynamics and human control are suspended by the absolute power of nature, Tea Cake contracts rabies and attempts to kill Janie, forcing her to shoot him in the ultimate test of self-preservation. This physical act of violence, with all its tragic irony, forces Janie, albeit unwillingly, to choose herself, signaling her final break from dependence.

Her transformation can be seen through her body as she returns to Eatonville, donning traditionally masculine clothes, “[a] faded shirt and muddy overalls,” and thus her physical appearance subverts regimented ideas of gender. The vigor imbued in her hair, “a great rope... swinging to her waist,” starkly contrasts with her involuntarily wrapped-up, highly-regulated hair with Joe.³⁶ Crabtree suggests, “The three marriages and the three communities in which Janie moves represent increasingly wide circles of experience and opportunities for expression of personal choice.”³⁷ Back in Eatonville, Janie’s transformation is solidified, and she asserts control over her future, “pull[ing] it from around the waist of the world and drap[ing] it over her shoulder,” signifying the completion of her character arc and Hurston’s versatility in using the body as a site of transformation to demonstrate Janie’s relationship with social hierarchies.³⁸

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston interacts with intersecting power structures by situating the narrative within planes of discourse and transformation. She equips three primary sites—geographical, liminal, and corporeal—to construct and

contest power structures. All three spaces are dynamic, demonstrating the variability of these structures to undermine their validity. As such, Hurston effectively uses spatiality in *Their Eyes* to question the pervasive nature of hierarchical social structures and assert the possibility of their dismantling.

Footnotes

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22. Hurston, 152
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24. Hurston, 5, 8
25. Hurston, 2
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38. Hurston, 221

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Into the Queen's Court, Granny:
Crones and Coalitional Possibilities in
The Wife of Bath's Tale

by Piper Farmer



Art by Emmi Wilkinson

INTO THE QUEEN'S COURT, GRANNY: CRONES AND COALITIONAL POSSIBILITIES IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

BY PIPER FARMER

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a knight is assigned by the queen of King Arthur's court to figure out 'what thyng wommen loven moost' as penance for a rape he perpetrates. The women of the court are united in presenting this opportunity for restorative justice, despite its ultimate failure in applying any real consequences to the rapist/knight. The knight, however, wanders to an otherworld, where he finds an 'olde wife' that creates new possibilities for justice in the tale. Taking on motif of the loathly lady, her presence in the court reopens imaginative possibilities for collective action; the body of the crone becomes central to the texts' ability to imagine justice and create possibilities for community, even if that justice remains ambivalent.

Drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Space Crone' and Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid*, this article analyses these imaginative possibilities across critical traditions, reading the old woman of *the Wife of Bath's Tale* as a site of speculation that engenders mutual aid-like coalitions within the court's negotiation. The loathly lady herself, despite the ineffectiveness of feminist justice in the tale, functions as a palimpsest of those possibilities for coalition even in her disappearance. More broadly, I read the Wife of Bath's old woman not only as a site of speculative possibilities for community within her text, but also outside of it in the genealogy of Chaucer criticism: the friction between Le Guin and the Wife of Bath's parables, along with their shared imaginative possibilities, might function as a space to illuminate relationships and form coalitions across the tale's readings.

EDITED BY ZEYNEP KILIC, COPY EDITED BY POPPY WILLIAMS,
REVIEWED BY MASHRUR AYON & NONNY JONES

Within *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a group of courtly women pursue restorative justice for a rape committed by a 'lusty bachelor' knight to questionable efficacy—all prior to the arrival of an old woman, who fundamentally alters the narrative (WBT 883). This crone is not a creature of the court. She belongs to the 'forest syde'; her body is positioned on the margins, indeterminate and uncategorizable to the knights of the tale and, to some extent, the reader (WBT 990). She is a loathly lady—a 'shapeshifting hag [who] becomes beautiful once she gets her own way'—and as such is a motif that 'belongs in the configuration of goddesses who are transversers of stereotype...who expand the meaning of femininity' beyond the usual categories of wife, maiden, and widow in medieval society (Carter 329, 330).¹ Functioning as a literary trope, the loathly lady has been identified as a stock character across medieval texts, such as Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Dame Ragnell in 'The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.' The loathly lady thus has a doubled position. Like the Wife of Bath herself, as a postmenopausal woman, she maintains a unique position of control over her own assets, sovereignty, and role in society; she simultaneously serves as a near-mythic figure (see Turner 2023). The loathly lady as a motif has been imbued with ecofeminist associations for this mythic role: she 'is a woman of the earth, a being whose closeness to her surroundings imbues her with clout, and this mystic goddess must train men... to submit to women's sovereignty and to control the land... [she] springs from an environmental element' (Kordecki 24). Her position is both ambivalent, mythic, and yet a part of a folk tradition (see Passmore and Carter, *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales*).

Even as a loathly lady, there are no boxes the crone fits *neatly*; she replaces a group of many other women and is both multiple and one. Drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin's 1976 essay 'The Space Crone' as both a heuristic for understanding the medieval old woman and as a lens with which to read a potential futurity in her body, I read the Wife of Bath's loathly lady as a crone that has experienced what Ursula K. Le Guin refers to as Change, enabling her to become a site of imaginative possibilities within the tale's narrative. This essay thus examines this old crone not merely as loathly lady or old woman, but instead as Le Guin's 'space crone' and a site for political

movement, figuring her as a character who invites possibility and engenders mutual aid. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in *the Canterbury Tales* uses these speculative possibilities presented by the body of the crone as a mode to facilitate a vision of coalition-building and mutual aid across diverse groups, both those within the text, and those that may be available across the history of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*'s critique.

At the beginning of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a knight rapes a young maiden who is walking alone. She incites a criminal trial for his actions by raising a 'clamour,' and the knight is condemned to death by the court (889). The trial, however, is taken over by the 'queene and other ladyes mo' who 'preyeden the kyng of grace' to give the knight an alternative punishment (WBT 894-5). They determine that he must seek out 'what thynge is it that wommen moost desiren,' or lose his head (905). The queen and her diverse group of ladies, divided into categories—'lige lady' (the Queen), maidens, wives, and widows—are the centre of the description of the court (1037).² Later in the text, the Wife of Bath enumerates the woman by these classifications ('Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, / And many a wydwe... / The queene hirself...') before emphasizing their unity, saying they were 'assembled been' despite these disparate categorizations (1026-1029). Rather than highlighting any particular category of woman, the text emphasizes the procedural shift from social difference to assemblage and community. The negotiation between the women and the King, while a feudal event paralleled across *the Canterbury Tales*, takes particular care to emphasize the women's actions as a coalition.³ They coordinate their efforts to convince the King to allow them to enact their own version of justice, a 'community response to rape by the specific population that has been wronged' (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6; WBT 1037, 1043-4). These collective actions might be read akin to mutual aid, described by Dean Spade as 'collective coordination to meet each other's needs' (Spade 7).

Mutual aid acts as a lens with which to understand the way in which coalition building occurs in this negotiation, as a facet of the women's legal request. The trial of the knight, once directed by the women of the tale, 'address[es] harm and violence...called community accountability' or 'transformative justice' and aims to

give the survivor support to heal, give the harm-doer what they need to stop the behaviour, and assess how community norms can change' (Spade 57). This aid has both benefits and pitfalls, including the possibility that mutual aid work is subject to 'co-optation' by various structures of power, which may render the mutual aid ineffective or harmful (Spade 50). Spade notes that 'there is nothing new about mutual aid' and indeed a form of it appears here. The text focuses not only on not only the women as a bargaining unit but also the women as a coalition, underpinning a mode of mutual support throughout *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (Spade 7). In the opening to the text, the women succeed at providing a seemingly restorative application of justice—the knight is condemned by their collective wishes—which is prompted by their ability to perform a 'community response' (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6). The effectiveness of this justice, however, is immediately called into question by the rest of the tale.

The knight is full of woe upon hearing his fate, and the narrative lends space to his sadness, emphasising how 'sorwefully he siketh' without holding him to emotional account or asking him to display guilt. His affective displays of annoyance and personal injury place him in what Carissa Harris calls the role of the 'victim-survivor' rather than that of a rapist (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 7; WBT 913). He is rewarded for these affective displays and, at the conclusion of the story, does not suffer. He goes on to have a 'herte bathed in a bath of blisse' and sovereignty over the body of his wife, in a parallel to his original crime, at the end of the tale (1253). In addition to the forgiveness the tale levies on the knight, the effectiveness of the coalition of women's proposed justice is also called into question by the complete disappearance of the maiden from the narrative, and by the ambiguity of whether the knight actually learns anything—it is the old woman who eventually teaches him what the queen decreed he should learn by himself, 'what women want most'—and whether he has internalized the meaning of his punishment is unknown (Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 7). By calling into question the validity of the queen's remedy and disappearing the victim from the narrative, the coalition fails to support the specific survivor who was harmed, and whether the knight's capacity for harm has been reduced is not addressed. Their mutual aid is, at best, questionable. The

court of ladies has effectively been co-opted by the ruling structure of the court to protect a male criminal and his status as a knight amidst structures of 'felawe masculinity,' which rewards opportunities for men to verbalize women's desires: the knight's task to speak for women and declare what they desire (see Harris, 'Felawe Masculinity'). The queen, the mouthpiece of their efforts, is herself co-opted entirely, a result that breaks the coalition of women by making her act as King rather than Queen; Crane argues that a 'woman's status in this system [of medieval gender] is closer to that of her man than to that of women and men at other strata in the system,' and the Queen's ineffectiveness effectively subsumes her into the King's masculinity (Crane 98). She is also drawn into the broader rape culture of the tale, and the assemblage of women is made a kind of jape for the pilgrims with Alisoun; felawe masculinity appears even despite the lack of masculine characters in the tale.

The loathly lady, upon entering the tale, provides a different solution. Le Guin defines the crone—a postmenopausal woman—as 'pregnant with herself,' a person who has 'experienced, accepted, and enacted the entire human condition—the essential quality of which is Change' (Le Guin 5-6).⁴ By experiencing the transition from what Le Guin refers to as a 'rite of passage'—from virgin to mature woman—and the transition of the Second Change into an old woman, a 'third and new condition,' the crone bears herself in full (Le Guin 3-4). Her body becomes a site of multiplicities of knowledge and a point of connection to speculative possibilities. Le Guin—envisioning a world in which an alien spaceship asks to take alone an 'exemplary person' and an ambassador of humanity with them—writes that she would pick an 'old woman, over sixty...[with] a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness' (Le Guin 4-6). She writes that the old woman:

knows, though she won't admit it, that Dr. Kissinger has not gone and will not go where she has gone, that the scientists and the shamans have not done what she has done. Into the space ship, Granny. (Le Guin 4-6)

Le Guin's concept of the space crone acts as an envoy to a kind of otherworld; she is a woman who is mortally bound and has confronted death, yet also represents an

inherent futurity. While disparate in time, Le Guin's crone—and her analysis of the old woman's change-bearing potential—bears striking resemblances to and usefulness as a heuristic for the loathly lady of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The space crone and the forest crone both bear potential for change, and indeed have an otherworldly presence.

The old woman first appears on the edge of the forest, a position which establishes her as a character on the margins; this interpretation is strengthened by her association with the forest, dancing ladies, and a 'grene' (WBT 998). Her geographic positionality is displaced both spatially (as a Celtic motif) and temporally; she is tied to the 'elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,' a historical and now-vanished figure who, according to the Wife of Bath, presents an alternate mode of power aside from the court (860, 998). As Carter argues, 'the royal court, seat of patriarchal power, counterbalances the wilderness setting'—a counterbalancing in which the crone, as a representative of the literal other world of the wilderness, participates in (330). The old crone is thus a figure of the margins of the tale's court and of the Otherworld; she is simultaneously a resident in and embodiment of an 'imaginative field' (Byrne 22). Her appearance is fundamentally speculative.

The body of the crone functions as a site of speculative possibility not only through her position in the Otherworld, but through her power as a crone. The crone appears first in the tale when the rapist knight journeys home in defeat. Having failed to find out what women want, he encounters a group of dancing ladies at the crone's 'forest syde' (990). A moment later, the ladies supernaturally vanish and are replaced with the crone: 'save on the grene he saugh sittyng a wyf— / a fouler wight ther may no man devyse,' (998-9). The crone, by the knight's reckoning, is so unspeakably foul that the knight, let alone other men, can barely fathom her existence. The knight, seemingly unsure as to what she is, calls her a 'wyf,' my 'leeve mooder,' 'wight,' and one of the 'olde folk' (1000, 1005, 999, 1004). He can barely 'devyse' her; unlike the other women of the tale, who are neatly segmented into roles of queen, wife, maiden, and widow within the court, the crone is unclassifiable and must be circled around (WBT 999; Scala 117). She is

functionally illegible and opaque, 'not obscure, though it is possible for [her] to be so and be accepted as such. [She] is that which cannot be reduced' (Glissant 191, 193). As a crone, she embodies Le Guin's concept of Change and limitlessness—she is at, and is, the margins, in the sense of the margins of a medieval mappamundi, where imagined creatures and depictions of the Other tend to appear. She is a space undefinable. Her body is also one of multiples: in the moment that the twenty-four-plus other dancing women vanish and she magically replaces them, she is at once singular and multitudinous, a sort of coalition in and of herself, maiden and wife and crone within one—a more complete version of the 'assembled' ladies of the court. She presents both speculative and transformative possibilities, and a multiplicity thereof, through her otherworldly, aged body.

When the crone appears in the court, new possibilities for mutual aid follow. After the knight meets the old woman, she agrees to help him learn what women want most on the condition that 'the nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght' (1010-1011). They journey to see the queen and enter the court, the knight prepared to give his answer to the 'queene hirself sittyng as a justise' (1028). He responds correctly, saying that women wish for sovereignty, and the crone interjects: 'Mercy,' quod she, 'my sovereyn lady queene! / Er that youre court departe, do me right. / I taughte this answere unto the knyght' (1048-1050). As the crone speaks, she implores the Queen to 'done right.' In other words, she calls upon the queen to enact mutual aid by cooperating with her; the presence of the coalition of women ('youre court') must be present for this solution to be enacted. The solution she proposes—that she marries the knight—both meets her needs and does justice onto the work and educative labour she provided the knight. It also does justice for the maiden at the beginning of the story: by transforming the knight from 'lusty bacheler' to husband, he experiences a substantive transformation in his status which mirrors the crime he enacted upon his victim (WBT 883). He is made to marry (a possible 'solution' for rape in Chaucer's period) and is 'denied physical agency' (WBT 883, Harris, 'Rape and Justice,' 6). This solution is in line with medieval ideas of justice, but crucially it is enacted through a coalition, one which re-forms only when the crone appears.

Though her community relationship with the Queen is complicated by the queen's sovereignty, the queen's superiority is questioned by the crone's certainty: earlier, she confidently asserts that 'the queene wol seye as I' (1016; emphasis my own). Her experience of Change has lent her knowledge and powers of prediction. By residing in what Le Guin terms 'Menopause Manor,' the 'Old Woman may do, say, and think [w]hat the Woman cannot do, say, or think' (Le Guin 3). The Wife of Bath's crone is empowered with wisdom. This knowledge, learned from experience, precipitates sovereignty and suggests a kind of community knowledge across the women. It is the crone's body that presents these new possibilities for justice: the text emphasizes her otherworldliness and wilderness connection even as she enters the court, reminding the reader of the green in which she was found right before she appears. The crone presents the capacity for Change—the imaginative possibilities of the otherworld—and thus facilitates mutual aid and community justice both on her own and for the unspeaking victim of the knight.

After the crone makes her request and the knight is given narrative time to complain, the scene ends: 'But al for noght; the ende is this, that he... / And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde' (1070, 1072). At some point, the queen, the crone, and the ladies of the court must have acted to facilitate the crone and knight's marriage. It clearly does *occur*, yet the process by which the crone's request is fulfilled—the inner machinations of the Queen's coalition of women—remain opaque, a speculative possibility. By introducing the crone to the court of women, her ability as a site of imaginative possibilities spreads to the women around her, enabling them to come to a conclusion not through the King's power but through their own ends and means. In dissociating the mechanism of their aid from the text, they also dissociate their aid from the possibility of being co-opted by felawe masculinity present in the Wife of Bath's satire. Instead, the text only refers to the coalition of women as the source of decision that is framed as 'the ende'—effective, irreversible justice (1070). The crone's inherent capacity as agent of Change, and her marginality, allows the court to temporarily become part of the coalition that is her body and to use her body as a site for justice to be rendered. She enables a coalition of women to avoid pitfalls of mutual aid while

simultaneously presenting new possibilities for justice; she creates an otherworld in a literal sense—another world in which the queen and her court may, temporarily, live, or in Le Guin's terms, a new kind of 'space ship' (Le Guin 6).

After the crone appears in court, she does marry the rapist-knight, and the knight vociferously complains about her age and appearance. They argue, and the crone asks the knight to choose between her being a 'trewe, humble wyf' or 'yong and fair' (1221, 1223). He asks her to choose, and she gleefully proclaims that 'thanne I have gete of yow maistrie' (1236). Then, she transforms into a young woman. After she transforms, however, the once-crone 'obeyed hym in every thyng,' and the knight gets all of what he wants and more (1255). The ending of the tale is ambivalent at best: it presents a happy ending for its rapist. Yet the crone's power is maintained up until the point of her transformation. As an old woman, she maintains 'maistrie'; it is only when she transforms that the knight is rewarded. By de-aging the old woman, she reverts away from what Le Guin calls the 'dangerous/sacred condition of being at the Second Change' (2). Yet the crone, up until the moment of her transformation, remains a site of speculation and mutual aid, and the meditation she invites remains a palimpsest.

Just as the Wife of Bath's crone disappears, the space crone of Ursula K. Le Guin disappears, too, at the conclusion of Le Guin's narrative. But in the affiliation between these two figures—constructed as it is—there is a common throughline of speculation. That speculation appears in the long critical history of feminist fantasy and of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Lesley Kordecki describes the Wife of Bath and her crone as 'one of our literary foremothers, a controversial and feisty storyteller,' a description that could just as easily fall for Le Guin as an author as it does Chaucer (Kordecki 19). As Sarah Baechle comments, there is a 'long-standing central tension at the foundations of Chaucer's creation of the Wife, whose stakes themselves reflect critical desire to continue *liking* Chaucer and the Wife' (267). Harris likewise notes a particular ease of reading Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, as a feminist, some aspect of her character that makes us 'feel as though we know' her (Harris, 'Feminism,' 242-3). Just as the crone opens possibilities in the text, her figure and her ambivalence

also invites (and has invited) a critical imagination, speculation, and coalitional thinking which may or may not be reflected in the text.

In reading *The Wife of Bath's Tale* alongside Le Guin's *Space Crone*, the friction between the criticism of the text and the text becomes visible, presenting the crone, in addition to Alisoun, as a site of speculative and indeed imagined coalitions not only between medieval women but between critical theory and its objects. Like the desire to 'like' Alisoun, any analysis of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as a reflection of principles of mutual aid has an amount of desire attached to it. This desire is more visible in the use of Le Guin's essay and the fictions it creates; the feminism of the 1970s is perhaps more legible due to its temporal distance. Baechle notes that 'the writing of ostensibly feminist fictions, we assure ourselves, can enjoy reparatory power... but this framework for asserting reparatory potential is offered from a position imbricated with precisely the hegemony that liberational feminism insists we resist'; to read *The Wife of Bath's Tale* as liberatory is a manoeuvre that demands interrogation (268). At the same time, 'relegating popular medievalisms to the margins of its inquiries in favor of an aesthetic "rigor" that is as often imaginary as it is real' has also been critiqued as an interpretive strategy (Biddick, summarized in Holsinger, 1220). The Wife of Bath's crone may not be possible to rehabilitate or restore with a feminist reading; at the same time, the possibilities invited by *The Wife of Bath's Tale*'s contemporary readings inflects the tale with a sense of coalitional futurity or a desire for one, not only in the text where it remains as a palimpsest but across critique.

Footnotes

1. I wish to thank to Zeynep Kilic for her editorial assistance, without which some of this article's more nuanced points would not exist, as well as the two anonymous reviewers whose feedback contributed greatly to the development of my thinking. Any errors are of course my own.

On these archetypes of femininity, see Beattie, 'Classification in Cultural Context.' As DeVun notes, boundaries of femininity, gender, and sex were not necessarily immutable categories, an observation repeated in Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*: 'Chaucer plays with the gender associations, hermeneutic values, and power relations this structure [of masculine and feminine] suggests' (9). Nevertheless, arguments that the Wife of bath and her tale's protagonist exist outside of easily available categories of stock woman abound, and the Wife of Bath's association with those categories, even in negation, appear across scholarship (see, for example, Emma Lipton's chapter in the 2017 *Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*).

2. Beattie notes that these categories are 'culturally constructed' by 'dominant religious and legal ideas in particular historical contexts' (14). The maid-wife-widow model was in particular related to religious doctrine and chastity; Beattie argues that these models of classification were often extended to the legal (and economic) contexts, especially as an extension of the three estates model (Beattie 16; see also Hallissy).

3. See, for example, the women ('A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye') who plead for help from Theseus at the start of *The Knight's Tale* (898).

4. 'The Space Crone' was published in 1976; Le Guin's thinking on nonbinary and trans identities expanded significantly in her later writings (c.f. 'Is Gender Necessary? (redux), 1988,' in *Space Crone*). Le Guin's essay relates reproductive ability as a marker of femininity and the ability to become a crone—a statement which excludes nonbinary and trans identities, but which *does* broadly apply to medieval conceptions of sex and/as gender (see DeVun, 'Sex and Order in Natural Philosophy and Law.')

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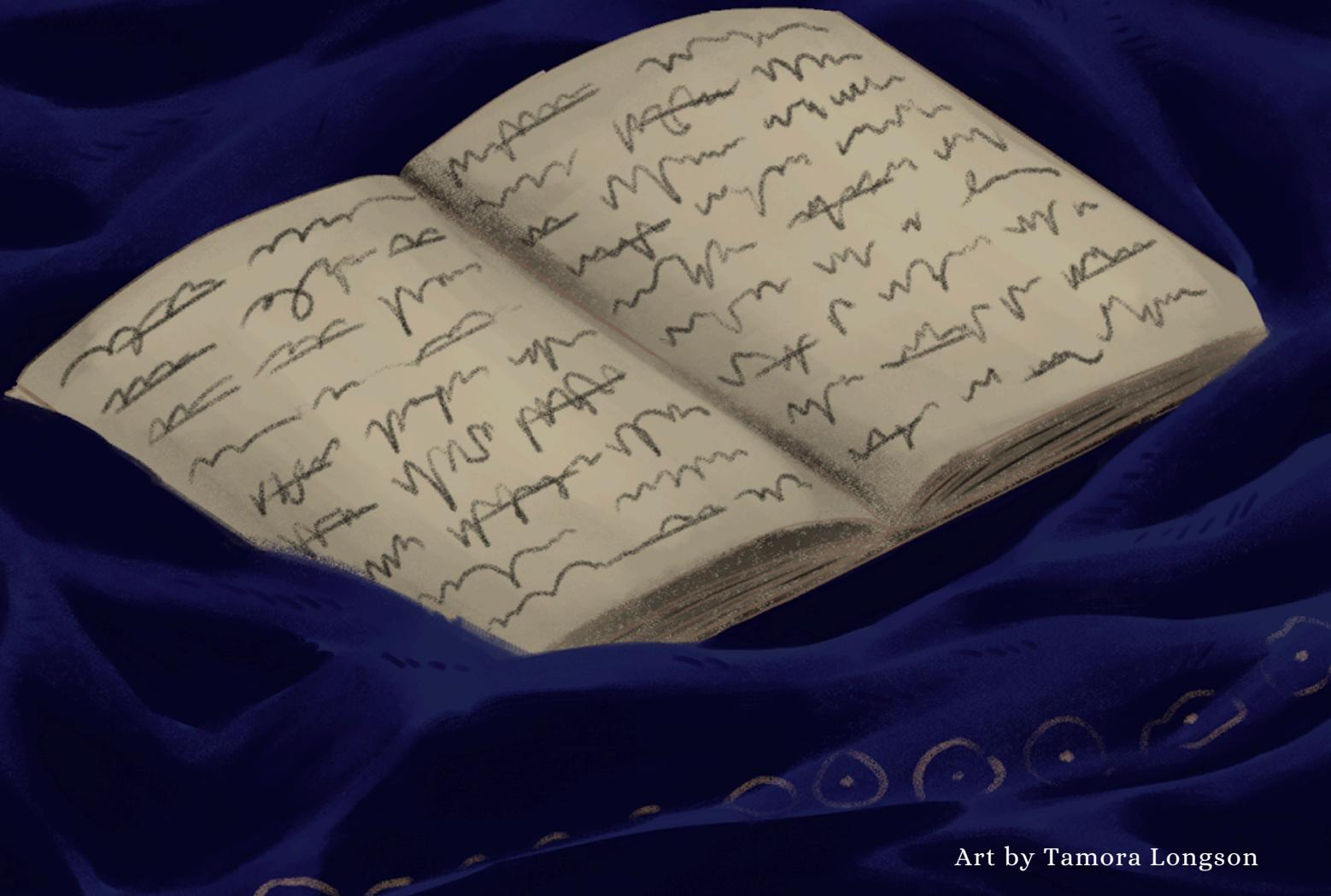
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Knowledge

Is

Power:

Secret Schooling as Feminist Resistance in Afghanistan



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: SECRET SCHOOLING AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

BY RACHEL BARLOW

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This piece examines the role of secret schools in Afghanistan in feminist resistance against gender apartheid, concluding that their functions are not just educational, but political too. In it, I argue that their use in the first and second Taliban occupations has had three major impacts - establishing mutual aid and community, providing an alternative to masculinised conceptions of resistance, and challenging narratives that cast Muslim women as victims. First, I outline extreme legal and institutional efforts to repress Afghan women's voices, control their movements and remove their agency, culminating in a state of 'gender apartheid'. Next, I investigate the characteristics and core functions of secret schools, situating them as coalitions vital to both education and political mobilisation. Finally, I analyse secret schooling through three lenses. The first evaluates secret schools as sites of community and mutual aid, given they build networks, deliver education, and foster political action. The second positions secret schooling as a direct challenge to masculinised conceptions of resistance involving violence and militarisation, given its community and care-based nature. The third, and final, lens presents secret schooling as an antidote to the pervasive narrative that Muslim women are victims in need of saving, as they showcase the agency and activism of Afghan women. This piece concludes that secret schools play a vital role in counteracting the Taliban's gender apartheid by ensuring they are not silenced, and preventing the government from achieving full control over their lives. Their effects extend beyond Afghanistan's borders, though, in helping us to reimagine 'resistance' beyond violent, masculinised images, and reframing Muslim women as actors with agency and strength.

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Introduction

Upon regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban re-instated the extreme misogyny that characterised their previous rule, systematically removing the basic rights of women and girls and creating an apartheid society divided on gender lines. In this article, I will examine the experiences of girls and women in Afghanistan living under these oppressive conditions of 'gender apartheid' with particular focus on their lack of access to education. Next, I will explore the establishment of secret schools led by Afghan women as a form of feminist resistance to misogynistic Taliban policies. I will then contend that these coalitions of educators positively impact the livelihood of Afghan women through community building and mutual aid, providing an alternative to traditional masculinised conceptions of resistance, and effectively challenging the pervasive stereotype of Muslim women's victimhood. Finally, I will conclude that the coalition of secret educators led by Afghan women effectively interrupts the gendered oppression perpetrated by the Taliban regime, ensuring it does not achieve its goals of fully controlling women's lives and silencing them in public and private.

This paper does not suggest that Afghanistan is the only place where women's rights are significantly restricted, or the only regime practicing gendered oppression or even apartheid. Nor does it suggest Afghan women are the only oppressed women in the Middle East or elsewhere whose stories must be told and voices must be amplified. It certainly does not suggest they are uniquely deserving of this. Instead, this paper intends to focus on resistance, studying the coalition of female educators resisting this oppression, and what we can learn from their practice to apply to feminist struggles globally.

Methodology

The majority of information available about secret schools in Afghanistan, particularly during the current Taliban rule beginning in 2021, is in the form of covert reporting by broadcast and print journalists. While this does not provide qualitative data insights, it centres the lived experience of Afghan women via interviews. There is therefore little information about the scale of secret schooling, and given the secrecy involved, detailed facts about specific schools are difficult to come by. This

includes names of interviewees and locations of secret schools, due to the extreme risk to the safety and lives of the women involved if they are caught. As a result, the section of this paper concerning modern secret schools draws from testimonies of teachers and students in its analysis, rather than statistical evidence or academic literature (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Hadid and Qazizai, 2022; Kermani, 2022; Mahmood and Abdelaziz, 2023; Sadid, 2024).

Moreover, the information available about the regime at large is limited due to growing censorship in effect across Afghanistan. The Taliban closed twelve media outlets in 2024, including print, television and radio reporting, detaining several journalists in the process (RSF, 2024). Two provinces have instituted bans on capturing images of living beings, including any human (The Independent, 2024), impacting the availability of photographic evidence. As of 2025, all political and economic broadcasts are banned domestically (CPJ, 2025) making it more challenging to ascertain the overall status of the country or the messages the Taliban is promoting. However, international governmental organisations and aid providers such as the UN have diligently collected evidence, and academics inside Afghanistan have worked to document the situation on the ground.

In addition to restrictions on journalism, academic sources detailing women's experiences of gender apartheid are few and sometimes difficult to locate. This gap in scholarship can be understood as a product of archival silences. Archival silence refers to the omission of particular events and perspectives from an archive, often concerning a particular group (Bruns, 2024, p. 11). In this case, the omission of women's experiences under the Taliban. Trouillot, a central theorist on the concept of archival silence, argues that silences often occur during fact creation i.e. the making of sources (Trouillot, 1995, p. 26) - in a society where women cannot speak outside their homes or obtain an education, it is increasingly difficult for women to record their experiences orally, in print, or digitally. This is a deliberate form of archival violence - under gender apartheid, women's perspectives and experiences are considered unimportant and irrelevant by the Taliban, and are actively suppressed. Moss and Thomas situate Trouillot's analysis in a

political context, arguing that whoever is in power can enforce silence, by deciding what or who is important enough to record. By controlling the archive, governments are able to decide who can exist (Moss and Thomas, 2021, p. 16) - those who are not recorded in the archive are removed from history. This is useful for understanding the Afghan context, because power relations between the Taliban and Afghan women are characterised by extreme control and restriction. By removing Afghan women's agency in every area of life, the Taliban continually minimises their existence, and archival silence is an effective way to do this. A final theoretical insight that can shed light on these archival silences is that of Taylor and Jordan-Baker, who argue marginalised people are most likely to suffer from archival silences. Archives for these groups are unlikely to be created in the first place, and formal institutional archives may be about these groups but not by them, focusing on statistics rather than lived experiences (Taylor and Jordan-Baker, 2019, p. 201). Because the voices of Afghan women are so heavily restricted, the majority of scholarship and archival material concerning their experiences under Taliban rule is generated by external academic institutions and international organisations. This risks not capturing their authentic experiences and contributing further to their erasure in future, because Afghan women themselves do not shape or own this narrative.

Archival silence has shaped the methodology of this article significantly - firstly, because it suggests archives are not neutral or always factually comprehensive, and secondly because it means relevant archival material is limited. However, this paper can be read as an intervention against and direct challenge to archival silences. It aims to centre stories of Afghan women's resistance, as well as detailing their experiences living under gender apartheid. It uses the interviews discussed above to centre Afghan voices as much as possible, and acknowledges the effects of Western-led scholarship in shaping previous narratives about muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783), attempting to address this head-on. The research process included seeking out and compiling archival material detailing women's experiences under 'gender apartheid' and the paper itself could contribute to filling the archival gaps discussed above.

The Taliban Regime - Living Under Gender Apartheid
The Taliban first came to power in 1996, controlling most of Afghanistan until the 2001 US invasion as part of the "War on Terror" (US Department Of State Archives, 2001). The conflict between the Taliban and US-backed Afghan government continued for twenty years (Hollingsworth, 2021), until the Trump administration brokered a deal in 2020, which included a promise to withdraw US troops from the country, intended to be followed by peace talks (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020), which did not materialise. The Afghan army was heavily dependent on US support, and the country fell to the Taliban within weeks (Borger, 2022). After regaining power and territory, the Taliban established the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' by force in August 2021 (Akbari and True, 2022, p. 625) and progressively re-instituted an Islamic fundamentalist regime, despite refusal from the international community to recognise it as a state (rather than a terror group) and significant international sanctions.

Over the last four years, the Taliban has imposed its interpretation of Sharia law, entirely re-shaping the lives of Afghan people, especially women (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 120). Vivin and Prema argue that Islamist extremist groups favour puritanical interpretations of Sharia values, extending it beyond civil law into criminal law and encouraging punishments that reach far beyond what the code permits. These are often targeted at religious minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and women (Vivin and Prema, 2024, pp. 123–127). Many leaders of these groups are untrained in interpreting Sharia law, and use it to rebuke Western influence, implement anti-democratic systems and establish fundamentalist regimes (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 127). While Afghanistan does not have a clearly defined legal or judicial system, Taliban rule has been characterised by severe punishments, limits on the rights of minority groups, and a quest for control, aligning with a more fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia into Islamic law. This fundamentalist legal system is the tool through which the Taliban has orchestrated the restriction of women's rights, framing this as traditional and Islamic. This is despite the fact that the Qur'an as the central religious text of Islam holds women morally and spiritually equal to men (Vivin and Prema, 2024, p. 124), suggesting religion is actually a pretext for

implementing the extreme, misogynistic ideology of the group and creating a ‘gender apartheid’.

Gender apartheid refers specifically to conditions under which women and girls are denied fundamental rights through institutional frameworks, and occurs when oppressive cultural and religious norms are codified in government laws (Safaeimojarad, 2024, p. 2). The term ‘apartheid’ refers to a separation in political, economic and social terms, in which one group is isolated in order to be systematically targeted and oppressed (Safaeimojarad, 2024, p. 25), reflecting the splitting of Afghan men and women into separate classes of citizens with differing rights, freedoms and status. It is firmly applicable to both iterations of the Taliban government, given many of the oppressive policies currently in force are modelled after those of the 1990s. This apartheid has been reintroduced in everyday life and institutions, and consequently the relative power given to men over women, combined with the misogynistic attitude of the state, has ‘emboldened’ men to subjugate women and girls, often via extreme violence. In these conditions, women and girls are not just disempowered and disenfranchised by the state, but in their own communities - this regression of rights is coordinated, and continually enforced by men as fathers, brothers, and husbands (Akbari and and True, 2022, p. 625).

Freedom of movement is largely restricted and women cannot be employed in the public or private sectors, use many public spaces including parks, or see male doctors, stripping away their right to healthcare given they cannot work as doctors either, to provide healthcare to one-another (Bennet, 2024, pp. 5–7). One ‘vice and virtue’ law introduced in 2024 demonstrates the extremity of these regulations, stating: “Whenever an adult woman leaves her home out of necessity, she is obliged to conceal her voice, face, and body.” (Kelly and Joya, 2024) What is and is not a necessity is decided at the discretion of Taliban leaders, creating significant potential for exploitation of this policy to harm women via punishment, especially given the severe penalties extreme groups such as the Taliban favour. The severity of this gender apartheid is reflected in a 2024 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, stating the Taliban’s system of oppressive laws “is motivated by and results in a

profound rejection of the full humanity of women and girls” (Bennet, 2024, p. 3).

Thus, there is clear evidence that Afghan women are living under extremely restrictive conditions and being treated as second class citizens, with this gender apartheid extended to every area of their lives. This demonstrates the Afghan context is particularly severe in its legal and institutional efforts to oppress women, extending beyond misogynistic attitudes or rhetoric.

Secret Schooling

A significant element of gender apartheid that has prompted feminist resistance is the legal ban on girls and women receiving secondary (Akbari and and True, 2022, p. 626) or tertiary (Amiri, 2023; Amiri and Ahmadi, 2023; Toran, 2024) education, as well as a ban on seeking private education or leaving the country to pursue tertiary education elsewhere (Bennet, 2024, p. 5).

This resistance comes in the form of secret schools, which are a familiar method of resistance for Afghan women, having been used to counteract the previous Taliban restrictions on girls’ education during their rule from 1996-2001. A key organisation resisting Taliban policies was the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which used education to deliver empowerment through literacy and political consciousness. In addition to classes, RAWA improved access to information by publishing and distributing a quarterly political magazine (Farhoushmand-Sims, 2005, pp. 118–119), blending their humanitarian aid with consciousness raising efforts and more political acts. RAWA exemplifies the role of education and information sharing in resisting oppressive regimes, as well as resistance that is by nature community-based. Such organisations provide a valuable insight into the continuous work needed to protect and advance women’s education under the Taliban. This practice has been revived across the country in the last four years, with several key impacts.

The main function of secret schools is to ensure girls do not fall behind. A wide variety of subjects including biology, chemistry, physics and maths are taught, often for just an hour a day to avoid detection, but are still instrumental in ensuring education is available at all.

Private schools continue to operate as they did before while evading government attention, whereas informal community-led secret schools are a lower quality option available to those who cannot pay, continuing often with the aim of providing morale and community for young women (Graham-Harrison, 2022; Kermani, 2022). Non Government Organisations (NGOs) championing girls' education such as Shahmama provide practical support - textbooks, stationary, and sometimes teacher wages (Graham-Harrison, 2022) - to keep the schools running, which are especially essential for those that are improvised in homes or mosques (Kermani, 2022). The ability to hold online classes has allowed an expansion of secret schooling and helped it to reach the minority of Afghans who can access the internet (Graham-Harrison, 2022), with online connections playing a key role in increasing access to information, a key element of education as resistance.

A second function is restoring hope to girls who feel their future is constrained and there is little point in resisting. One school teacher told the *Guardian* "I do this as a volunteer, to support the girls and create hope in their future, and the girls also give me hope" and "[I] try to motivate them, with messages like 'no knowledge is wasted'. I tell them I am here to teach and support you, you have to stay hopeful, take your opportunities" (Graham-Harrison, 2022). An education is a key tool of hope in the Afghan political climate - further Taliban legislation that bans women from speaking outside of their homes has been implemented (Kelly and Joya, 2024), adding to the growing effort from their government to silence them. It is important that teachers impress upon young women that their contributions are valuable and encourage them to plan for the future, to counteract government messaging.

A third function is political mobilisation. The political role played by organisations such as RAWA has been replicated in educational resistance throughout the second Taliban government, and students are keenly aware of its transformative social effect. One seventh-grade student reflected to the *Guardian*: "I have my argument ready if a Taliban stops me. I will say 'you didn't study so you are like this, I have to study so I won't be the same'" (Graham-Harrison, 2022). A fifteen-year-old student also attending an underground school told

the BBC: "Be brave, if you are brave no-one can stop you." (Kermani, 2022) Because women are both prevented from holding political office and ostracised from political spaces and discussions, this is a fundamentally important practice for an anti-Taliban coalition. Including girls in those political discussions and communicating political ideas to them further strengthens activist coalitions and builds feminist organisations that can continue to resist. Currently, no woman in Afghanistan holds a political leadership post at the provincial or national level, and women rarely have any input into decisions made in their communities (Penn, 2024). Active and intentional political mobilisation of Afghan girls counters the message that politics is not for them, and the Taliban decree that they should not participate. As Alison Davidian, the US Women Country Representative in Afghanistan, argues "Nothing undermines the Taliban's vision for society more than empowering the very part of the population that it seeks to oppress." (Penn, 2024) These acts of political mobilisation reflect the part Afghan women play in long-term, covert acts of resistance in the spaces between large-scale revolutions. Sharing feminist ideas and delivering empowerment to the next generation is one example of this.

The Impacts of Secret Schooling Community Building and Mutual Aid

The functions of secret schooling in Afghanistan demonstrated above are demonstrative of a wider scope than just academics, and combined they exemplify community building. Social connections between women and girls are in themselves a form of resistance, allowing ideas to be shared and strength to be gained in numbers, particularly in a system designed to isolate and silence women. Given the implementation of laws prohibiting women from showing their faces outside their homes in 2024 (Kelly and Joya, 2024) effectively preventing them from seeing or speaking to each other, covert community building between women is becoming even more important in resisting the Taliban regime. Strong community builds solidarity and faith in 'people power' which fights demobilisation brought on by isolation and "hopelessness-induced apathy" (Spade, 2020, p. 137).

These actions can also be interpreted as a prime example of mutual aid. Mutual aid refers to a form of political participation where community members work together to meet each other's needs and in doing so build political movements, to make change on social issues that concern them (Spade, 2020, pp. 136–137). By providing education, which Afghan girls cannot access from the state, Afghan women support their wellbeing and survival. If this is occurring on as large a scale as news organisations report, Afghan women have begun to create their own underground system for delivering education, albeit disjointed and greatly reduced from the previous public system, but nevertheless tackling the social problem of gender discrimination collectively. This is valuable because it provides tangible, daily impact rather than leaving Afghan girls in limbo. This is an important alternative to waiting for substantive policy overhaul or regime change which is not guaranteed, and necessitate a lengthy process if it were to occur. Afghan women are doing what is necessary to fill the gap of entirely dismantled educational infrastructure, aligning with the mutual aid theory suggesting the most impactful political acts are not necessarily the largest in scope, most publicised or most radical.

Providing an Alternative to Masculinised Conceptions of Resistance

The imagery and events associated with resistance, especially to oppressive regimes, tends to be focused around violent revolt and conflict as a means of 'overthrowing' a government and forcing regime change. This concept of resistance has been explicitly masculinised because the participants in these events have been primarily male, as have the scholars documenting and analysing them. It has also been implicitly masculinised, due to associations often held between masculinity, militarism and the use of force. This masculinised resistance explicitly - due to primarily male participants and scholarly perspectives - as well as implicitly, due to associations between masculinity, militarism and the use of force. However, what is often not accounted for is community-based resistance, focused around mutual aid and mitigating harms. These more social and care-based behaviours are associated with femininity, and often considered less legitimate or sub-par forms of resistance, despite the positive impacts they have, especially in the long term. They may not even

be considered acts of resistance due to the narrow parameters outlined above.

Secret schooling in Afghanistan effectively challenges those assumptions about revolution and its historical masculinisation, proving effective resistance may not fit into this model. Afghan women teachers are providing tangible intellectual and emotional benefit to their communities, with remarkable consistency and at a remarkable scale given the restrictions imposed on their speech and movement. In this case, secret schools as a community-led act of resistance, directly defy the Taliban regime and effectively interrupt the goal it is trying to achieve by banning women from education - control. Underground educators during both the first and second Taliban regimes have also been considered a launchpad for political activities, whether this is by distributing political information (like RAWA) or communicating to young women that learning is a political act of defiance (reflected in the student perspectives represented in print and broadcast journalism). Thus, it can also represent a precursor to more 'active' or typical forms of resistance.

In the Afghan context, it can be argued that community- and care-based resistance is not only necessary but an ideal way to combat gender apartheid. Because gender apartheid is enforced by male relatives and community members in every area of daily life, and in economic and cultural spheres as well as political, it follows logically that resistance should uplift and centre women in the community. When human rights and dignity are denied, care becomes all the more vital. Gender apartheid is also associated, as outlined above, with isolation and a loss of hope for many young women, but education can provide social connection with other women and mobilise them toward organising for change. Secret schooling could also be considered a more sustainable mode of resistance over time, given the secrecy it operates under and the financial backing it garners from NGOs.

Challenging Narratives of Muslim Women as Victims

The phenomenon of secret education, led by Afghan women for Afghan girls challenges the narrative - driven primarily by Western governments and media as a pretext for the 'War on Terror' - that Muslim women are helpless victims; that Western intervention is required to

improve their status and fix ‘backward’ Muslim societies Abu-Lughod argues that Muslim women are continually presented as “neat cultural icons” reified over time by media and public discourse. This has resulted in the West, and in particular Western feminists, developing an “obsession” with the plight of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783). She makes particular reference to the stereotype that Muslim women “shuffle around silently in burqas” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784) reducing them to one-dimensional characters without agency. This fails to reflect the power of Muslim women’s actions, as well as their ability and potential to lead resistance as opposed to being ‘rescued’ or ‘liberated.’

Challenging the Taliban’s oppressive laws and prioritising the human rights of women - even with the threat of extreme and violent retribution - displays incredible strength, and is a bold exercise of agency. In extremely challenging circumstances where they are actively resisting the Taliban regime on a daily basis, anecdotal and journalistic evidence shows Afghan women using the few resources available to make as large a positive impact as possible, and using the medium of schooling to achieve social and political collective benefits. This is antithetical to weakness or perpetual victimhood, indicating a positive impact of these underground schools beyond Afghanistan’s borders - this movement provides a counter-narrative to what has dominated Western scholarship and media in the past.

Conclusion

The coalition of Afghan women currently operating secret schools to counteract Taliban restrictions on girls’ education play an important role in interrupting the Taliban’s ‘gender apartheid’ by defying the government’s attempts to fully control women’s lives and ensuring their voices are not entirely silenced. In addition to carrying out the essential role of academic education, to ensure girls are informed and do not fall behind in their courses of study, secret schools provide three other major benefits to Afghan women as a collective. They build community and establish mutual aid, provide an effective alternative to traditional masculinised conceptions of resistance, and challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as victims that is so pervasive across the Western world. Thus, the impact of secret schools

extends beyond just increased knowledge, with substantive social and political impacts to communities where they are present that become more and more essential as gender-based discrimination worsens over time under Taliban rule. As a feminist coalition, they are instrumental in Afghan girls’ lives and futures.

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TAKEN FOR GRANTED? NATIONAL(IST) COALITIONS WITH GENDER EQUALITY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES THROUGH NATION BRANDING

BY ELIZABETH HAMILTON

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

The gender equality models of the Nordic states Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have been internationally regarded as an ‘egalitarian blueprint’ (Lister 2009, 243). Such perspectives reveal the nation branding efforts of states, advertising their gender equality models. However, some argue that the gender equality model is not as strong as the image of an ‘egalitarian blueprint’ implies (Lister 2009; Dahlerup 2018; Siim and Skjeie 2008; Einarsdóttir 2020; Teigen and Skjeie 2017), indicating a discord between the Nordic nations’ brands and realities.

Nation branding can be understood as analogous to the efforts of companies to distinguish their product from competition (Dinnie, 2008, 14). Dinnie (2008, 15) identifies a nation’s brand as the culturally grounded differentiations and relevance used to distinguish them on the world stage. The process and product of this is complicated. Einarsdóttir (2020, 142) also draws attention to scholarship which emphasises the selective process of including and leaving out features of a nation in its brand. Thus, I define nation branding as the proliferation of culturally-founded narratives, and claims of differences and relevance, which create a distinct national image which is internationally perceived.

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In the following, I will first reveal how gender equality has been established as central to the Nordic countries' national brands. I will then argue that this process has rendered gender equality coterminous with nationhood in the Nordic countries, mutually constituting the meaning of the other. I will then posit that to some extent, this has strengthened domestic and international commitments to feminism. However, I will finally highlight how these nation brands have interrupted feminist efforts against certain gender inequalities, marginalising some women and justifying prejudices used in far-right discourses. Thus, I will show that the strengthening and weakening effects of nation branding regarding the Nordic nations' coalitions with feminism are products of the hegemonic discourses it constructs. Moreover, I will reveal what these discourses emphasise and neglect. Accordingly, I will reveal how the hegemonic discourses are delineated by nation branding emphasis and shape 'national(ist)' coalitions with feminism and gender equality. This can be understood as the simultaneous and mutually dependent constructions and shapings of:

1. Coalitions between the nation-state and feminism.
2. Coalitions between nationalist ideologies and feminism.

I will reveal that both facets of the 'national(ist)' coalitions shaped by nation branding entail interruptions of feminisms outside of and excluded from the national and the nationalist.

2. The Use of Gender Equality in Nation Branding

2.1 Foundations of the Use of Gender Equality in the Nordic National Brands

Firstly, I will discuss the content of Nordic nation branding, the Nordic gender equality model. There are some comparable currents in the Nordic gender equality models, most related to 'state feminism'. State feminism can be defined as the interactive forces of feminist movements and governmental integration policy, which institutionalised feminist goals (Hernes 1987). This process has facilitated an exceptional integration of women into public and political life (Hernes 1987, 9). This was achieved gradually, establishing women in the public sphere through agitation from below (Hernes 1987, 11). Indeed, Nordic countries have centralised

gender equality concerns in their policymaking, constituting the project and goals of state feminism. As a result, there is a degree of democratic parity in the Nordic states that stands out on the global stage, positioning the Nordic states as forerunners (Teigen and Skjeie 2017, 24).



Moreover, Lister (2009, 252), attempting to vindicate claims of a Nordic gender equal 'Nirvana', has argued that the social infrastructure is woman-friendly, facilitating women's economic independence. He also draws attention to the 'daddy quotas' which facilitate more gender-equal parenting by mandating parental leave periods for fathers. This is exhibited in all the Nordic countries ranking in the top ten OECD countries for men using parental leave ("Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers" 2024). Such evidence from policy reveals how the Nordic countries may have earned, to a certain extent, recognition for their gender equality models. In their projects of state feminism and the advances this made, we see the roots of the Nordic gender equality model's exceptional image. This reveals the coalitions between the nations' brands and feminist achievements, which deserve some recognition regarding gender equality.

Foreign policies and Nordic participation on the world stage best exemplify their self-marketing efforts on gender equality issues. This is how they have turned their gender equality realities into an internationally recognised brand. 'Feminist foreign policy' was publicly adopted by Sweden in 2015 as part of their pioneering claim to being a feminist government (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 323). The principles of this approach were described as the promotion of

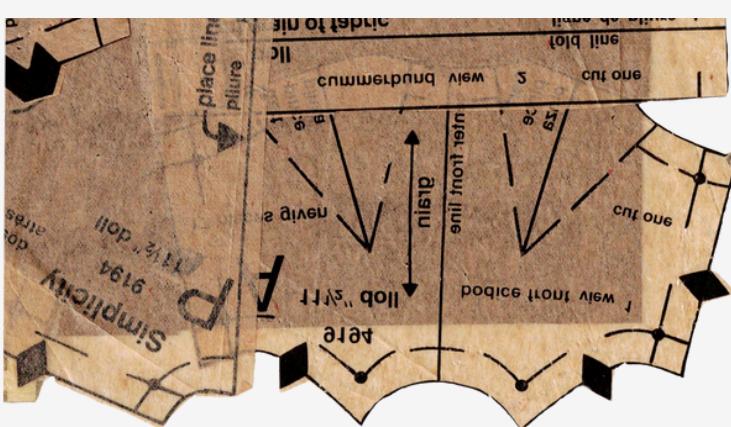
representation, rights and reallocation (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 325). Towns (2002, 162) emphasises Sweden's activities on the international stage in developing its brand. When Sweden joined the EU in 1995, expectations of the state's active role in gender equality issues were apparent (Towns 2002, 164). Moreover, on joining, the issue of gender equality became an EU priority (Towns 2002, 164). This interaction with the global stage exemplifies how the Nordic countries, in this case Sweden, may underscore the gender-equal self-identity globally. It has been seen that Norway has contributed to the proliferation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, achieving international acknowledgement as a result (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad 2018, 516). Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad (2018, 518) discuss how small states like Norway can enact international influence by becoming norm entrepreneurs, and Norway has done this by supporting the WPS agenda. Moreover, Iceland was vocal about participating in the UN HeForShe campaign (Einarsdóttir 2020, 147). In this way, global awareness of Norway is considerably advanced by international interventions on gender equality issues. These examples from Norway, Iceland and Sweden demonstrate the importance of interactions with the global stage on gender equality issues as a source of emphasis and recognition for their gender-equal self-identification. Thus, gender equality becomes a tone to adopt in international relations, further shaping its meaning through its application.

countries are internally and externally regarded as deviating and superior to other nations on disparate measures (Rix 2026). I will now detail the ways world rankings of gender equality and national and international discourses regarding gender equality facilitate this exceptional image.

The successes of the Nordic gender equality models, both domestically and internationally, are reflected in the world rankings of the Nordic gender equality models, which indicate this superior deviation from the international norm. The Global Gender Gap (GGG) Report claimed that Iceland had closed 87.7% of the gender gap, placing it firmly at the top (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). However, Einarsdóttir (2020) highlights how certain biases in this metric, for example, the privileging



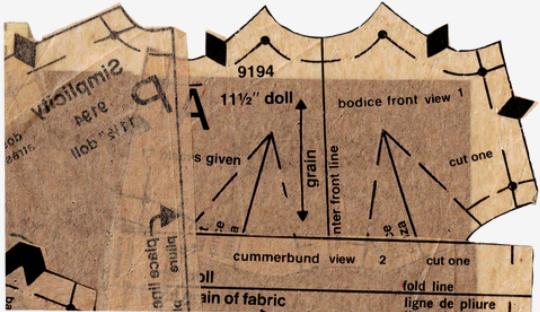
of the metric of ‘female head of state’ facilitate the country’s top-place spot. Einarsdóttir (2020, 145) connects this process to Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo’s (2010) conception of meaning creation, drawing on their ideas of conceptual shrinking and bending, which happens to the concept of gender equality through nation branding. They argue that hegemonic discourses - powerful and hard-to-shake frames of discussion - can restrict and define boundaries for the multifaceted and complex meaning of gender equality, shaping the approaches to and interpretations of gender equality. Shrinking occurs with the concept’s boundaries being restricted, and bending redirects the concept’s goals (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). As such, the concept, in this case gender equality, is given a new meaning, one which, in this case, allows the nation to adopt it as its brand (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). Moreover, Einarsdóttir (2020, 144) argues that the scientific tone in these world rankings gives them more credibility than they are due. The claim that Iceland is the most gender-equal place relies on and proliferates a definition of gender equality which also contains these biases. Moreover, there is a



2.2 Proliferation of Gender Equality in the Nordic National Brands

Nation branding builds hegemonic discourses which form a particular image of gender equality, which accords with Nordic exceptionalism. ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ deals with the ways that the Nordic

certain liberal feminist view in the GGG definition of gender equality, bending the concept to align with feminist goals which emphasise the integration of women in positions of power, e.g. head of state, along the lines of state feminism. In these ways, such world rankings frequently underscore the Nordic states as high up, with only Denmark ranking below the top five in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report (“Global Gender Gap Report 2023”). The process Einarsdóttir (2020) discusses reveals how the realities discussed above are warped in ways that emphasise elements of a nation’s identity, building the nation’s brand. Thus, the rankings partially shape hegemonic discourses about gender equality, making the concept analogous to the Nordic nations’ models. This shapes their nations’ brands by manufacturing their measurable exceptional gender equality.



National and international discourses have built on the evidence in international rankings to turn the realities of Nordic gender equality into claims of exceptionalism and distinction, delineating these national brands. In 2006, headlines described Norway as ‘the world’s most gender-equal country’ (Larsen, Manns and Östman 2021, 625). In Iceland, media headlines described the country as ‘the best place in the world to be female’ (Einarsdóttir 2020, 147). Internationally, the former Finnish Prime Minister was labelled a ‘feminist political icon’ (Einarsdóttir 2020, 143). British feminist analysis held up the Nordic countries as ‘role models’ and globally, this attitude has proliferated (Lister 2009, 243). In 2015, the Swedish government attracted media attention by announcing its feminist foreign policy (Aggestam and

Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 325). Gender equality is invoked as a ‘national value’ in Norway, with government documents highlighting this (Jacobsen 2018, 319). Towns (2002, 162-163) described Sweden’s self-construction as a ‘moral superpower’ and a ‘progressive’ state since the Second World War, and this branding has taken a gender-equal turn since the mid-1990s. The underlying attitude of these discourses highlights that these countries are not just gender-equal countries, but the gender-equal countries. These ideas, alongside the world rankings, invoke gender equality to highlight these nations’ exceptionalism and place the Nordic countries at the centre of international hegemonic understandings of what a gender-equal state is or could be.

Overall, these discourses reflect a hegemonic understanding of the relationship between gender equality and the Nordic countries. Realities of the Nordic gender equality models only go so far as to vindicate the perceptions of the countries’ exceptionalism. Instead, international rankings and discourses have morphed these realities into something that defines and distinguishes the countries. This reveals the coalition between the nation state and feminism, the first facet of national(ist) meaning creation of gender equality. Thus, the use of gender equality in nation branding and these hegemonic discourses regarding the concept have been mutually constitutive.

3. Strengthening Gender Equality Commitments Through Nation Branding

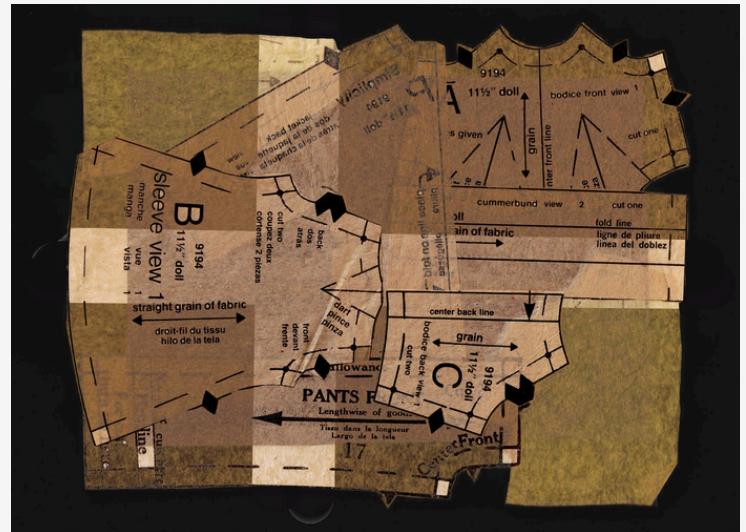
3.1 The International Influence of Nation Branding

Foreign interventions on the issue of gender equality have the dual impact of nation branding, described above, and strengthening commitments to the issue nationally and internationally. Norway combined its domestic commitments to gender equality with its existing, internationally recognised dedication to peacebuilding (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 518). As shown, Norway has become understood as a trusted supporter of gender equality globally (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 522). They have funded UN and civil organisations committed to the WPS agenda and encouraged implementing gender equality in peacekeeping operations in the late 1990s (Skjelsbæk &

Tryggestad 2018, 516-7). Such interventions have advanced the position of gender equality as an international concern, with Norway collaborating with other states for this advancement (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018). Norway has acted as a central actor in peace processes, centralising women's voices, advancing the role of women's issues on the international stage (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 523). Additionally, Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016, 328) have argued that the Swedish feminist foreign policy gives a platform to even the most controversial gender equality issues domestically and internationally. These issues include the promotion of women's sexual and reproductive health rights, which have been resisted by global attempts to roll back such rights (Aggestam et al. 2023, 235). In these ways, Norway and Sweden's foreign interventions have dually solidified their national brand and advanced international commitments to gender equality. The foreign interventions on the grounds of gender equality underscore the self-construction of the Nordic countries as embodiments of gender equality, simultaneously enacting and advancing gender equality ideals. This shows how nation branding practices on the global stage can bring attention to the issues on which the brand is being built. Nation branding is a method of attention-seeking, and in this case, the Nordic countries' ambassador role for gender equality internationally has strengthened the space for commitments in international relations.

As mentioned, Lister (2009) commented on how the Nordic models have been perceived as 'role models' for gender equality. Being role models can inspire advancements for gender equality internationally by embodying and exemplifying the ability to enact gender equality advancements. This role model position is evidenced in the Swiss debates on gender quotas in 2003, with those arguing for great equality referring to the Norwegian policies as examples to aspire to (Ginalski et al. 2021, 147). In this way, the nation branding has centred the Nordic countries as a point of reference when there are national concerns regarding gender equality. This can construct gender equality as a national concern and project, exemplifying the state as an actor on these issues. In claiming to embody gender equality, they draw attention to their national gender equality practices. This also centres the Nordic states in hegemonic discourses

around gender equality policy, creating a synonymous relationship between 'the Nordic state' and 'the gender equal state'. This relationship reveals the meaning creation power of nation branding.



3.2 National Identity and Gender Equality

Nation branding has also tied Nordic national identities to gender equality, proliferating it as a national value. Nation branding can domestically impact attitudes by constructing the national identity as being proponents of, and participants in gender equality. Robert Cox (2004, 207) observes that the nations' gender equality ideals form part of their national identities, and are thus important to their citizens. The Norwegian framing of gender equality as a national value mentioned above indicates how Norwegian nation branding applies to its people and national identity (Jacobsen 2018, 319). Moreover, the Nordic state feminist projects are closely related to the development of the welfare state. Welfare state development was underpinned and advanced by ideology of social cohesion and homogeneity tied closely to national identities (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, and Toivanen 2019, 8). The close connection between gender equality and the welfare state indicates how the understanding of social cohesion may assume gender-equal social relations. Indeed, Lister (2009, 245) argues that equality, solidarity, and universalism are core values that underpin Nordic commitments to gender equality, all of which have a national outlook, with solidarity connecting the national identity to gender equality. Thus, gender equality has become embedded in Nordic national identities, which can solidify these values and commitments in Nordic people. Therefore, this indicates that the shaping of national identity is a key area where hegemonic discourses create new meanings as a result of

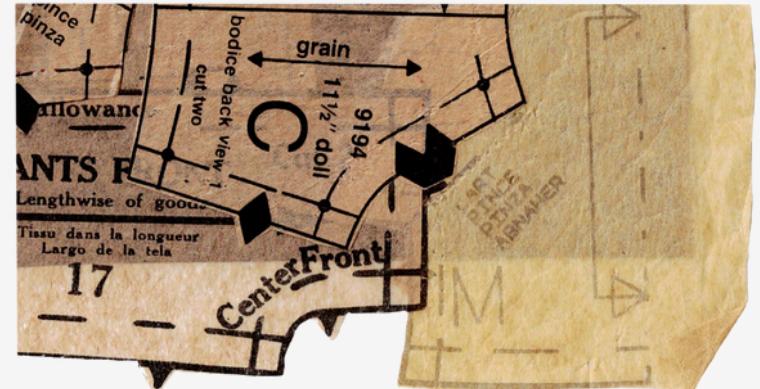
nation branding, with the result being gender equality not as an amorphous concept, but a distinct, performable national value.

Hegemonic discourses within the Nordic states assume the importance of gender equality due to nation branding's impact on national identity, incorporating this issue in the meanings of national identities. A noteworthy manifestation of this is revealed through Nordic scholarship on hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is the proliferated ideal of how best to be a man (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Some have claimed that the Nordic countries are seeing the shape of hegemonic masculinity change in light of their gender equality discussion (Hearn et al. 2012, 47). In this view, there can be distinctly Nordic masculinities which have absorbed certain aspects of gender equality e.g. more emotional and less aggressive (Hearn et al. 2012, 47). Therefore, these national masculinities have become aligned with gender equality by virtue of the painting and proliferation of this as a national value. The positioning of Nordic national identities as orientated towards gender equality can be understood as reshaping the hegemonic masculine identities of these countries, furthering commitments to gender equality. This further indicates the capacity of nation branding to shape hegemonies concerning gender equality positively. This begins to reveal the way nationalist discourses form coalitions with Nordic feminist efforts through nation branding, the second facet of national(ist) meaning shaping of gender equality.

3.3 The National Orientation of Gender Equality in the Nordic Countries

Following the above, I propose that nation branding has constructed gender equality as a national issue, which has strengthened some coalitions with gender equality. The practices and outcomes of nation branding can engender new attitudes on the international stage and among the nations' citizens regarding the possibilities of gender equality. In the cases above, gender equality becomes a national issue, positioning the Nordic states as 'role models' internationally, strengthening their commitments to gender equality to facilitate this image, and inspiring others. Moreover, the national(ist) meaning creation of gender equality engendered by

nation branding creates a coalition between a nation and gender equality through national identities, inspiring commitments to gender equality as a performance of nationality. This is exemplified in the discourses around and performances of Nordic masculinities. In these ways, one can anticipate and observe commitments to gender equality through the shaping of the issue as a national issue resulting from nation branding and the meanings it simulates.



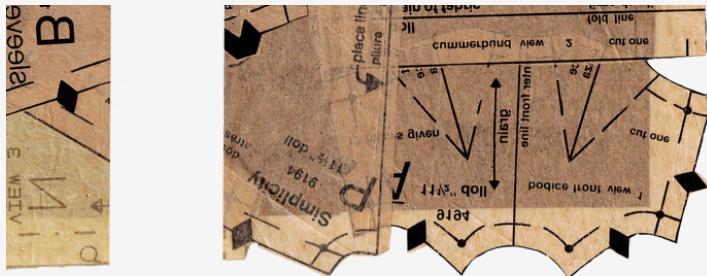
4. Interruptions of Gender Equality Through Nation Branding

4.1 Obscuring Gender Inequalities

It will now be shown that while this may secure some gender equality commitments, nation branding can obscure imperfections in regimes normatively branded as gender equal. This paper's title will be invoked here, 'taken for granted', a quote from Lister (2009, 248) to describe concerned attitudes regarding the assumptions of gender equality, specifically to detail how such assumptions may decentre gender equality as a policy goal. I will show how the 'taken for granted' status of gender equality, which results from nation branding, also risks hiding gender inequalities, undermining them as concerns if gender equality is assumed.

The claim here is that the Nordic countries are not perfectly gender equal. There are many 'paradoxes' identified in scholarship which reveal imperfections in their gender equality models despite the perceptions of the nations' strong commitments to gender equality. One such 'paradox' concerns domestic and male violence, with the Nordic states being late to recognise this as a problem (Lister 2009, 262). Hearn et al. (2005 as cited in Lister 2009, 262) discuss how positive ideals of fatherhood ignore men's violence despite the murder rate of women by male partners and ex-partners being

‘paradox’ concerns gender segregation in the labour high. This can be tied to the above discussion of positive Nordic hegemonic masculinities, exposing how narratives of gender equality in national identities like these may obscure pressing gender inequalities. Another market, with women being largely employed in the public sector and men largely in the private, and this contributes to there being gender gaps in wages (Borchorst et al. 2012, 60). Other ‘paradoxes’ identify themselves when Nordic realities stray from the positive perceptions of the Nordic gender equality model. Indeed, the language of ‘paradoxes’ to describe these imperfections contributes to and feeds off the nation branding, painting them as anomalies from the positive norm, rather than accepting them as straightforward realities. In these ways, the claims of exceptional gender equality have the potential to obscure these issues and so weaken gender equality. This shows that the hegemonic discourses of gender equality interrupt attention to shortcomings by being constructed as conterminous with a nation through its national brand.



4.2 Marginalisation Through Nation Branding

Another ‘paradox’ identified by Siim and Skjeie (2008, 339) is the inclusion of ethnic majority women juxtaposed with the exclusion of women from ethnic minority backgrounds in public, specifically political life. This can be linked to the greater issue of welfare chauvinism in the Nordic countries, where welfare resources are reserved for those perceived as deserving, often the ethnic majority (Keskinen et al. 2019, 13). In this way, I conceptualise a gender equality chauvinism, where gender equality commitments are reserved for the ethnic majority of the Nordic states.

Firstly, claims of gender equality embodied in Nordic nation branding legitimise certain faces and subjects of gender equality and exclude others. The Nordic gender equality model undoubtedly helped certain women's lives, but it can also be observed as legitimising

capitalist, heteronormative, Eurocentric, colonial and nationalistic gender relations (Nygren, Martinsson, and Mulinari 2018, 2), indicating the many fronts on which it excludes. This can be understood by looking at Honkanen (2008, 216), who argues that dominant identities, i.e. the white, heterosexual, middle-class Nordic woman, largely Nordic mother, can become the centre of discourse, in this case, the focus of gender equality. This falls short of genuine feminist efforts by prioritising a neoliberal approach to gender equality over an intersectional one, becoming a feminism for some, not all. Moreover, as shown, the Nordic gender equality model is presented as an example for ‘others’ through nation branding, engendering and stigmatising a non-gender-equal ‘other’ with this construction (Nygren, Martinsson, and Mulinari 2018, 2; Towns 2002, 174). The coalition between gender equality and nationality created through national(ist) branding has the potential to fabricate certain exclusionary meanings to gender equality, resulting in a gender equality model for some.

This exclusion is seen in the treatment of and attitudes towards ethnic minorities in the Nordic countries. In the Nordic gender equality model, the state is positioned as a liberator of women from dependence and the grantor of individual rights and autonomy (Jacobsen 2018, 316). However, the exercising of autonomy is conceived in a distinctly Nordic way, with an ethnic majority bias, meaning minority women's decisions to not participate in paid work, for example, or to wear the hijab, are not conceived as free choices and rather iterations of the dependencies the Nordic model seeks to destroy (Jacobsen 2018, 318). Minority ethnic women are frequently assumed to be living in patriarchal cultures (Mulinari 2008, 172). This further indicates their marginalisation through the understanding of gender equality as a positive Nordic ideal that applies to Nordic (majority) gendered experiences, while othering minority ethnic gendered experiences (Mulinari 2008, 172). The centralisation of the dominant identities in the Nordic brand of gender equality has also alienated indigenous Sámi populations, with their issues not being considered feminist concerns (Knobblock and Kuokkanen 2015, 278). This accords with the view of the Nordic welfare states as an institutionalisation of the subaltern status of the Sámi people by the Nordic welfare states (Scheurell and Dixon 1995). The nationally defined

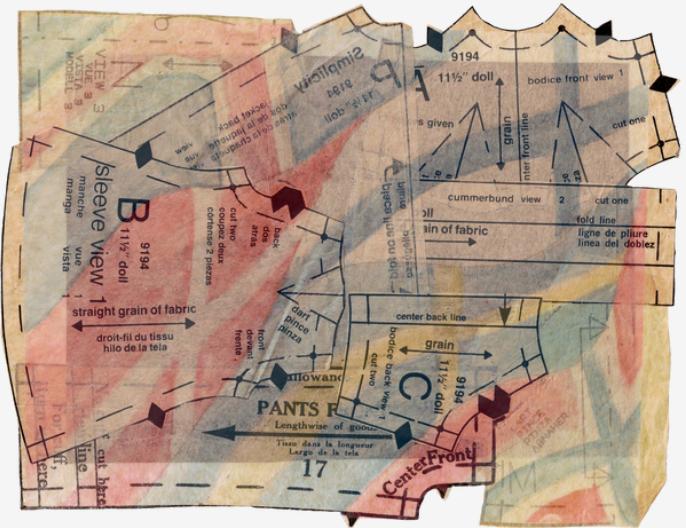
conception of gender equality, which results from nation branding, thus undermines certain women's experiences. This also constructs a distinction between the gender-equality-committed majority, and a gender-unequal minority which further underscores marginalisation and problematic nationalist trends, termed 'femonationalism' (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). This marginalisation of certain women's experiences interrupts efforts for these women's gender equality issues and promotes inequalities. In these ways, hegemonic discourses regarding gender equality, through the process of national(ist) branding, privilege a nation's hegemonic identities, discriminating against the marginalised ones and interrupting equality goals.

4.3 Gender Equality in Far-Right Discourses

These elements of exclusion in Nordic hegemonic discourses regarding gender equality have contributed to far-right discourses, undermining the goals of equality by legitimising these. In far-right discourses, Nordic masculinities shaped by nation branding are juxtaposed against migrants' masculinities, conceived as unmodern (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). These foreign masculinities, as opposed to the Nordic hegemonic nationalities discussed above, are presented as a threat to the nation's women, objectifying women's bodies as a place of the nation, and weakening commitments to gender equality (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). In this way, the nation branding that constructs ideas of gender-equality-oriented masculinities has been co-opted for far-right claims of the threat of immigrants. Femonationalism and homonationalism are two faces of far-right nationalism where defences of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are painted as defences against migrant populations (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). Gender equality is used in these discourses with a distinctly exclusionary and anti-immigration tone, which interrupts general equality goals by legitimising far-right claims which promote inequality. As such, the national(ist) branding warps the meaning of gender-equality in a way that is open for far-right co-optation of gender equality.

Overall, two aspects of nation branding and its use of gender equality, which interrupt certain feminist goals, have been revealed. The first, the capacity it has to celebrate and draw attention to the gender equality

models' successes, taking this for granted and obscuring imperfections. The second is the capacity it has to privilege a certain image of the nation, excluding, marginalising and feeding prejudices against a constructed non-gender equal 'other'. This conveys the nationalist tone gender equality adopts through nation branding and the interrupting effects this has on commitments to gender equality.



5. Conclusion

The above reveals that discourses have constructed gender equality as a claim to exceptionalism for the Nordic nations. These brands are underpinned by the successes of the coalitions between Nordic states and gender equality, the international rankings which emphasise these, and foreign policies which draw attention to and exemplify these. This nation branding has shaped the meanings of gender equality, making it coterminous with the Nordic gender equality models and the Nordic national identities, thus giving gender equality a national(ist) face. The national(ist) element of hegemonic discourses about gender equality can inspire other states and international coalitions with gender equality, and make commitments to gender equality performance of national identity. However, this shaping of gender equality obscures the inequalities in these nations, interrupting feminisms which aid this. Moreover, the distinct national(ist) tone of the meanings attributed to gender equality through nation branding has excluded ethnic minorities and coalesced with far-right arguments. Thus, the use of gender equality in nation branding shapes the meanings, practices, and understandings of gender equality locally and globally, which secures and emphasises coalitions within this framing, but interrupts coalitions outside of it.

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Forging Resistance:
Women Welders,
Workplace
Coalitions, and
Disruptions in
Wartime Britain

By Júlia Norman

FORGING RESISTANCE: WOMEN WELDERS, WORKPLACE COALITIONS, AND DISRUPTIONS IN WARTIME BRITAIN

BY JÚLIA NORMAN

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This article examines Yorkshire women welders' lived experiences during the Second World War through their correspondence with former mentor Valentine Pearson, preserved in the Mass Observation Archive. Analysing letters from women at David Brown's (Penistone) and Hopkinsons (Huddersfield), this study demonstrates how working-class women actively constructed professional identities whilst navigating male-dominated industrial spaces. Employing the framework of coalition and interruption, the article reveals how these women forged tactical alliances to challenge structural workplace barriers and disrupted entrenched gender hierarchies. Moving beyond historiographical debates framing women's wartime employment through liberation-versus-constraint binaries, this study positions welders as active agents exercising agency through collective resistance and individual defiance. The welders established informal coalitions contesting wage discrimination and workplace marginalisation, engaging in sustained negotiations with management whilst creating support networks against male hostility. They challenged gendered assumptions about technical competence by asserting professional skills and demanding recognition as 'fully skilled' workers. The correspondence reveals complex gender identity negotiations, exposing how women subverted feminine stereotypes through masculine-coded qualities—assertiveness and technical expertise—whilst navigating expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour. The article seeks to move beyond traditional historiographical debates, which frame women's wartime employment through a binary lens of liberation versus constraint. Instead, it positions these women as active agents who exercised agency within existing power structures through both collective resistance and individual acts of defiance. These findings contribute to feminist labour histories by illuminating everyday acts of solidarity and resistance that operated below the purview of official narratives, demonstrating the significance of informal networks and tactical agency in the wartime experiences of working-class women.

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REVIEWED BY HANNAH SPEED

The National Service Act (No.2) of December 1941 expanded conscription to include women for the first time in British history, responding to the urgent need for labour in essential war industries. By 1943, women comprised fifty-two per cent of the chemical workers and forty-six per cent of those in metals.¹ This dramatic increase meant women navigated traditionally male-dominated industries in new ways, forming unexpected coalitions and creating strategic interruptions within established workplace hierarchies. Among these women were two groups of welders from Yorkshire. They were trained to weld in 1942 by Valentine Pearson, a former welder and daughter of the managing director of the Welding Rods, Sheffield.² As their former mentor, Valentine occupied a unique position as both mentor and confidante, opening a space where the women could candidly discuss their workplace experience with someone who understood the technical and social challenges they faced. The women were later employed in two factories, David Brown's in Penistone and Hopkinsons in Huddersfield.³ Their letters to Valentine, subsequently archived by Mass Observation (MO), provide a rare glimpse into how working-class women actively constructed their professional identities whilst navigating male-dominated industrial spaces.⁴ MO was a research organisation founded in 1937, where volunteers and investigators were asked to report on the "everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain."⁵ MO's methodology of collecting first-hand experiences and perspectives on everyday life makes these letters particularly valuable for understanding women's lived experiences during the war.

The letters from these two groups of women draftees were written in 1942.⁶ The first group consisted of four women already working at David Brown's as core-makers, casting metal parts for military use: Helena Varley, Dorothy Adams, Joan Baines, and Violet Jessop.⁷ They were selected from sixty women in their unit to weld valves for tanks and ships.⁸ The second group of women worked at Hopkinsons factory welding tank vents and bridges. Many worked in a local mill before conscription; other previous occupations are included below.⁹ The women were Agnes Helme (previously a nanny), Amy Hargate, Emily Castle, Eleanor Hardcastle, Enid Hiley (previously a seamstress), and Jenny and Ethel Kergon.¹⁰ Four women - Amy, Helena, Joan, and

Agnes - corresponded with Valentine most frequently, and their regular communication provides intimate insights into their work lives; thus, my analysis primarily focuses on their letters. Letters provide intimate insights into how individuals construct and present their identities. As Dobson and Ziemann argue, studying letters allows historians to decipher how people in the past have used letters to "establish images of themselves through their relations with others."¹¹ The welders' correspondence with Valentine demonstrates this process of identity construction in action. They simultaneously asserted their technical competence whilst navigating the social constraints of male-dominated workplaces through their letters.

By solely examining these women's voices and experience, this article joins feminist historians' ongoing efforts to reshape labour history beyond male-dominated narratives and expand our understanding of workplace organisation and resistance through individual investigation. This article examines how these women from diverse occupational backgrounds formed tactical alliances while disrupting gendered workplace norms on the factory floor. This article employs this issue's theme of coalition and interruption as a category of analysis. For this article, the definition of coalition is broadened to include both the formal and informal networks women developed to navigate and contest workplace hierarchies. Additionally, interruption denotes their strategic disruptions of gendered expectations and assertions of professional identity. Together, these concepts illuminate how the women welders contended for agency within wartime industries.

Historians of women's wartime employment have often approached the subject through a binary framework, debating to what extent the war was a grand liberation for women. Summerfield contends that traditional exclusionary and dismissive pre-war attitudes prevailed concerning women's access to paid employment.¹² Smith develops this argument by alleging that the war may be better represented as a period of "tug-of-war" between institutions like the government and trade unions, who sought to perpetuate "traditional patterns of sex discrimination", and women's groups who pursued "permanent change."¹³ Walby criticises Summerfield for

underestimating how the war permanently reconfigured women's access to work through aspects like the institutionalisation of part-time work.¹⁴ Regarding the letters, Jolly has transcribed over fifty of them in her *Dear Laughing Motorbyke* (1997); however, her analytical coverage of the letters is relatively limited.¹⁵ This article builds upon Jolly's foundational work with the letters and moves beyond the institutional frameworks of Summerfield and Smith to examine women's lived experiences within the workplace. The letters emphasise the women's lived experience and reveal them as active agents in wartime labour organisation, an aspect often marginalised in traditional historiographical approaches. The strength of using MO sources lies in their ability to capture the "bottom-up" perspective of ordinary people's experiences, making them particularly suitable for understanding how women navigated industrial workplaces during wartime. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to echo Sheridan's call to recognise the "complexity of experience," and present a perspective emphasising everyday acts of resistance and adaptation that characterised women's wartime industrial work.¹⁶

Coalitions of Resistance

The traditional narrative of women's wartime workplace activism has often focused on high-profile, collective action by established organisations, such as the British Federation of Business and Professional Women (BFBPW).¹⁷ However, the welders' letters reveal more informal but equally significant forms of coalition-building that operated below the radar of official histories. This institutional oversight is noteworthy given that MO specifically aimed to document everyday experiences often lost in official accounts. These coalitions were critical given the structural barriers women faced in the factories. For instance, dilution agreements concerning wages were made between employers and unions in most industries. Women doing men's work would begin on a lower "women's rate" before potentially earning the "full male rate" after demonstrating technical competence and independence.¹⁸

To address wage barriers, the women at David Brown's formed a tactical coalition opposing them. In February 1942, Joan notes how their wages increased because they

"kept up until they saw to the matter."¹⁹ Her colleague Helena echoes this collective action, lamenting in her March letter, "the times we have been in the office since Christmas I would not care to count, and after all our efforts, we get a 5/- rise."²⁰ The repeated use of "we" infers how these women formed a unified front when confronting management. Their coordinated office visits suggest an organised approach to challenging institutional wage discrepancies. Their persistence is evident in how they "kept up" these visits until achieving their goal of better pay. Significantly, these actions represent informal collective resistance outside formal union structures, which largely excluded women until 1943 when the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU)²¹ reluctantly extended their temporary membership. Even then, women's membership was marked by their "special white membership cards," which explicitly designated their status as temporary and institutionalised the AEU's resistance.²²

At Hopkinsons, similar collaborative language emerged in response to deliberate workplace marginalisation by management. Agnes writes passionately about confronting hostile administration:

*"I have never been so disgusted in my life at the disgraceful way Hopkinsons Ltd is managed. We are not welding, we are pushed from pillar to post, and today, after asking the foreman for a job, he said, 'Just stand there in that corner'."*²³

Agnes describes how the factory management "pushed from pillar to post," signifying their little respect for the women they employed. The instruction by the foreman to stand in a corner after Agnes asked for work acts as a deliberate form of workplace displacement, as Agnes was withheld from work and implied the disdain men held against women workers.

Phillips and Taylor assess how male workers sought to "[preserve] masculine skills," which were viewed as diluted by women's entry into the workforce, through "open and fierce" hostility.²⁴ This analysis allows for understanding how the women being kept from work by male supervisors at Hopkinsons reflected broader patterns of masculine resistance to women's industrial presence. Agnes's letter clearly illustrates how male supervisors actively undermined women's position to

preserve gender hierarchies within the workplace.

Additional evidence of workplace exclusion appears in Amy's letter about Eleanor (known as Nellie), who was held back from work:

*"Nellie is beginning on Monday. She saw Marflit [supervisor] last week, and she told her to have another week, because they had nothing for her to do, what do you think about that? We have heard the men are playing hell over the women welders, so it looks like more trouble for us."*²⁵

The notion that there was "nothing" for Nellie to do appears questionable when placed within the context of the National Service Act 1941, and the surge in women's employment in essential industries from 16.3 per cent to 36.8 per cent between 1939 and 1943.²⁶ Thus, the claimed lack of work was likely a pretext for exclusion based on the systemic perpetuation of patriarchal workplace hierarchies outlined previously. Importantly, coalition is implied here through the networks the women welders created with one another, in this instance between Amy and Nellie. Amy's concern over Nellie's situation reflects an understanding that any individual's mistreatment threatened the collective position of all workers. Furthermore, Amy's detailed knowledge of Nellie's experience infers a strong and intimate communication network between the women which enabled them to support one another. Additionally, this pattern of delay and obstruction at Hopkinsons reflects what Summerfield identifies as the opposing interests of employers and trade unionists over women's position within the workplace.²⁷ Whilst Summerfield emphasises more institutional barriers, Amy's letter demonstrates how this played out in daily workplace interactions. Mrs Marflit's instruction to Nellie to delay her work implies how management-level decisions were not principally at odds with the exclusionary ideas maintained by trade unions against women. Instead, workplace management willingly reinforced these concepts, which emphasised gender discrimination under the guise of operational necessity. Furthermore, Amy's letter further reveals an awareness of being deliberately held back through the implicit linking of the lack of work for Nellie with male hostility. The fact that the women welders knew how the men were "playing hell" over them suggests how apparent hostility was within their work life. Amy goes on to acknowledge how the men's actions will ultimately

result in "more trouble" for them, which emphasises how men's workplace insecurities negatively impacted women during the war.

The letters also challenge the narrative that portrays women as passive recipients of discriminatory wage policies. While Walby argues that the "opposition of craft unions" posed the most significant challenge to women in technical industries.²⁸ However, the welders' letters directly contradict this narrow institutional view. Their correspondence reveals how these women actively navigated and contested the structural constraints the male craft union imposed through strategic collective action. Their persistent action against management over wages, though less visible than activism by organised groups like the BFBPW and LNSWS, represented women "confronting and resisting various expressions" of male power within wartime industrial settings.²⁹ Thus, the letters provide evidence of women's agency, which is often overlooked in traditional labour histories. Additionally, the letters reveal individual grievances and organised collective resistance strategies. The women welders' unified confrontation of the foreman, evident in Agnes's use of 'we', demonstrates how they transformed individual grievances into coordinated resistance. Thus, by sharing experiences and coordinating collective responses, management countered attempts to subvert, isolate, and diminish them through low wages and being held from work. Moreover, it is an explicit example of working women in a technical industry exercising their agency and self-interest within a system which sought to restrain them.

These examples demonstrate how the welders formed an informal coalition that challenged management authority and male co-workers' hostility. These everyday acts of collective resistance represented significant challenges to workplaces' gender hierarchies. By coordinating responses to management and supporting one another through exclusion, they created networks of solidarity that enabled them to navigate adverse work environments and assert their right to work.

Interrupting Gender Hierarchies

While the formation of coalitions enabled women welders to resist structural workplace barriers collectively, their acts of interruption proved equally

significant in challenging entrenched gender hierarchies in the wartime workplace. These interruptions manifested through deliberate assertions of technical competence, professional identity, and workplace rights. Through everyday acts of resistance and adaptation, these welders engaged in epistemological interruptions that temporarily destabilised the gendered assumptions about technical capability and expertise. The welders contested the institutional frameworks that sought to constrain their workplace participation and advancement.

One example of their epistemological interruptions appears in Helena's March letter, which concludes: "P.S. Please, don't forget to let us know if there are any firms in Sheffield wanting fully skilled and willing working welders."³⁰ By explicitly claiming the term 'skilled,' Helena directly challenged the gendered hierarchy that reserved technical expertise for men.³¹ During this period, women workers typically occupied the "lowest rung on the skill ladder" with inadequate wages due to women's presumed lack of training and ability.³² Therefore, Helena's deliberate self-recognition of her skill represents a conscious act of resistance against the gendered devaluation of skill. Nevertheless, Helena beckons for her skill to be recognised by any firms in Sheffield, that not only is she skilled but 'fully skilled.' Her assertion, like Amy's when she demands welding work, demonstrates how these women perceived themselves as competent professionals whose abilities warranted recognition. These letters reveal how women workers' self-perception fundamentally disrupted societal expectations that their gender identity should conform to passivity, particularly in technical fields dominated by men.

The women's insistence on their right to practice welding further demonstrates their interruption of gender hierarchies. Amy shares her fears of being displaced from welding, confiding with Valentine: "Honest, I am having a fit of fear they would put me on some other jobs to cut out. Tell your father to demand my presence in the welding, will you please?"³³ Her fear of being "cut out" reflects how precarious the position of women in technical industries was, with male trade unions, like the AEU discussed earlier, actively resisting their inclusion. Similarly, Amy's plea for Valentine's

father to intervene in securing her a job welding demonstrates the complex power dynamics, highlighting how women often needed to work through male authority figures to challenge gender-based restrictions. Whilst Amy's use of "demand" may reflect her character, by which she was remembered by Valentine as "forthright," which emphasises how Amy viewed herself as entitled to work rather than work as a privilege bestowed upon her.³⁴ These assertions of skill and professional identity interrupted prevailing discourse, which posited women's wartime workforce participation as temporary and secondary to men. The women welders stood against the fundamental assumptions surrounding gender and technical ability underpinning the wartime workplace.

Negotiating Gender Identity at Work

The women welders subverted and interrupted their 'feminine' identity through possessing typically 'masculine' qualities such as assertiveness, independence, and skill. These masculine qualities were displayed in the examples discussed throughout the article, such as their role in pay disputes, asserting their will and right to work, and self-recognition of skill. Whilst it is apparent that these women subverted feminine stereotypes, there are several examples of women navigating and displaying their femininity in the welding workshop.

Weeks argues that an employer's job involves "actively managing workers' gendered identities."³⁵ This framework provides a basis to contextualise and analyse Amy's behavioural shifts:

*"I have given up [swearing] nearly since that afternoon because Mr. Robinson was disgusted. Also he does not like girls who drink, so for his benefit I have given up all these bad habits and believe me it is not taken much doing. Honest, I would give up anything for him because he is a real good boss."*³⁶

Mr Robinson was a well-liked foreman at Hopkinsons, as evident by Amy's flattering description above. Amy acknowledges several changes in behaviour, such as stopping swearing or drinking alcohol, on the account that Mr Robinson does not like them. The power imbalance between supervisor and worker appears

exemplified through their embodiment of gender hierarchies. Mr Robinson seems to be “actively managing” Amy’s identity by enforcing traditionally feminine ‘ladylike’ conduct through his disapproval of her displaying typically rowdy and masculine behaviours.³⁷ Thus, revealing how male supervisors acted as arbiters of what constitutes appropriate feminine behaviour in the workplace. Overall, Amy’s letter reveals the complex negotiation of gender identity in a wartime workplace and how she navigated expectations of feminine decorum enforced and expected by male superiors.

The welders’ relationship with their work attire reveals another dimension to their gender identity negotiations in the workplace. Amy’s November account of acquiring new overalls highlights how the welders actively managed their presentation at work:

*“We’ve got a new bib and overalls each, except Alice. We have such a performance when we go to the corner, having to take the boiler suit off, we thought we would have a change. So we step all in, and in new battle dress tomorrow.”*³⁸

Whilst the welders’ primary concerns remained practical, Amy’s militaristic characterisation of their workwear as a “battle dress” transformed a symbol of industrial masculinity into a declaration of women’s rightful place in wartime production. This mirrors Summerfield and Crockett’s observations of women in the Services who modified their uniforms to counter “perceived defeminising effects” of the masculine workforce.³⁹ The welders simultaneously inhabited their industrial role through appropriate protective clothing while finding ways to maintain and express their feminine identity through their choices about and attitudes towards that clothing.

This illustrates Weeks’ observation that at times “doing the job is what it means to do gender,” where the workplace becomes a stage where gender identities are performed and contested.⁴⁰ The welders neither wholly rejected feminine norms nor were utterly subsumed by them. Their strategic adaptation reveals how gender performance became inseparable from occupational identity, creating a hybrid form of femininity that challenged traditional boundaries without overtly

rejecting them. Their practices demonstrate that gender is not merely imposed but actively negotiated through daily workplace interactions, where technical skill became both a professional necessity and a means of gender reconfiguration. This complex negotiation of gender identity forms part of a broader pattern of interruption and adaptation which characterised women’s industrial participation in the war. Further, these interruptions were not temporary deviations but rather moments of possibility that exposed the constructed nature of gendered divisions of labour. By simultaneously claiming traditionally masculine-coded technical competence, whilst maintaining certain feminine practices, these women created spaces where gender categories became malleable, revealing how wartime necessity enabled subtle yet significant challenges to gendered work structures.

Conclusion: Reframing Women’s Wartime Agency

The letters from Yorkshire’s women welders provide a nuanced perspective on how working-class women navigated wartime industry through both coalition and interruption. These letters aid in moving beyond the binary lens of liberation versus constraint that has characterised much historiographical debate. They reveal how women exercised agency within existing power structures by forming tactical alliances whilst strategically disrupting gender hierarchies. Their experiences challenge the focus on institutional policies and formal collective action that has dominated historical accounts of women’s wartime work. The informal coalitions they built—from persistent wage negotiations to shared information networks—represent significant, if less visible, forms of resistance. Meanwhile, their interruptions of gendered skill hierarchies, workplace marginalisation, and feminine expectations demonstrate how women actively shaped their professional identities despite structural constraints. In repositioning these women as active agents rather than passive subjects of wartime policies, this article contributes to a fuller understanding of how gender and labour intersected during this pivotal period in British history. Their letters reveal that everyday moments of solidarity and defiance played a crucial role in reshaping Britain’s wartime industrial landscape beyond high-profile activism by established organisations.

Footnotes

1. Robert A. Hart and Elizabeth J. Roberts. "Women Workers in Essential British Metal and Chemical Industries during the Second World War and the Immediate Post-war Years," IZA Discussion Papers, No.16407, (2023): 8; Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, (Routledge, 2013), 151.

2. For more information on how Valentine Pearson began welding see: Margaretta Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke: Letters from Women Welders of the Second World War*, (Scarlett Press, 1997), 10.

3. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 1-2

4. Valentine sent the letters to MO herself as she was part of the Sheffield MO volunteer board.

5. "The History of Mass Observation," About Mass Observation, Mass Observation <https://massobs.org.uk/about-mass-observation/>.

6. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4.

7. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 1.

8. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4, 12.

9. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4, 12.

10. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 3-4, 7.

11. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century History*, Routledge, 2008, 64.

12. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 1.

13. Harold Smith, "The Womanpower Problem in Britain During the Second World War," *The Historical Journal* 27, no.4 (1984): 945.

14. Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment, 1800-1984*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 188.

15. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, see Introduction.

16. Dorothy Sheridan, "Ambivalent Memories: Women and the 1939-45 War in Britain," *Oral History* 18, no.1 (1990): 33.

17. Harold Smith, "The Problem of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work,'" *The Journal of Modern History* 53, no. 4 (1981): 655.

18. Smith, "The Problem of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work,'" 655.

19. Jolly, *Dear Laughing Motorbyke*, 4; Correspondence from Joan to Valentine, February 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex. Note: some letters are better dated than others.

20. Note '5-/' refers to shillings; Correspondence from Helena to Valentine, March 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.

21. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 157.

22. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 157.

23. Correspondence from Agnes to Valentine, August 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.

24. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics," *Feminist Review* No.6, (1980): 86.

25. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, Month Unknown 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.

26. Harts and Roberts, "Women Workers," 6.

27. Summerfield, *Women Workers*, 179.

28. Walby, *Patriarchy at Work*, 191.

29. Penny Summerfield and Nicole Crockett, "'You Weren't Taught That With the Welding': Lessons in Sexuality in the Second World War," *Women's History Review* 1, no.3 (1992): 451.

30. Correspondence from Helena to Valentine, March 1942.

31. Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill," 79.

32. Phillips and Taylor, "Sex and Skill," 79.

33. Correspondence from Amy to Valentine, 11 September 1942, SxMOA1/2/32/3/3, The Keep, Brighton, Sussex.

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FEMINIST LEGAL COALITIONS AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: INTERSECTIONAL RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY LEGAL BATTLES

BY GRACE LAW WOODHOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This paper aims to examine the evolution and efficacy of feminist legal coalitions within reproductive rights advocacy through an intersectional lens. Drawing on critical legal theory and reproductive justice frameworks, it analyses how contemporary coalitions navigate the complexities of inclusive representation while mounting legal challenges to restrictive legislation. By examining case studies of successful intersectional advocacy groups, the research demonstrates how coalition-building strategies that centre marginalised voices strengthen both legal intervention and community mobilisation efforts. The analysis particularly focuses on how these coalitions interrupt oppressive legal frameworks whilst building sustainable, intersectional movements for reproductive justice.

Keywords: feminist legal coalitions, reproductive rights, reproductive justice, legal advocacy, marginalised voices, legal intervention, community mobilisation

EDITED BY HELENA OSIE BISHOP, COPY EDITED BY EMMI WILKINSON,
REVIEWED BY ELISE CORRY, ART BY EMMI WILKINSON

The womb represents one of the most contested and politicised spaces in society, simultaneously subject to intense surveillance and control through criminalisation, legislation, and regulation. In response, feminists have had to fight continuously for what should be a guaranteed and basic set of human rights. Reproductive rights advocacy has evolved over time; gestating from a single-issue focus to an intersectional approach, representing a vital transformation in feminist legal action. Earlier movements centred around reproductive rights often only represented abortion access and primarily reflected the concerns of white women from a middle-class background. This framework was limiting, and failed to address how reproductive oppression intersects with multiple systems of oppression: racism, classism, ableism, and immigration status to name a few.

The reproductive justice movement, pioneered by women of colour in the 1990s (Ross, 2018), was birthed to challenge this narrow focus. A shift that demanded recognition of reproductive freedom encompassing more than the right to abortion, but also the right to have children, to parent with dignity, and to live in healthy, safe communities. This new framework was intersectional and now guides contemporary feminist legal coalitions in developing more inclusive and effective advocacy strategies.

Contemporary feminist legal coalitions are networks of organisations and practitioners that combine legal advocacy with intersectional feminist principles. They are typically comprised of feminist lawyers, civil rights organisations, grassroots activists, and academic institutions working together to advance gender justice through strategic litigation, policy form and community organising. Characterised by their commitment to addressing multiple, intersecting forms of oppression, they emphasise the importance of incorporating diverse voices and experiences in legal strategy development. These coalitions often employ participatory decision-making processes and prioritise leadership from marginalised communities to ensure their legal work remains grounded in lived experiences and community needs.

This paper argues that contemporary reproductive rights advocacy requires movement beyond the traditional

single-issue framework and the adoption of intersectional approaches that more aptly recognise and address how restrictive legislation disproportionality impacts marginalised communities. Without an intersectional lens to examine how systems of oppression intersect and compound, legal advocacy efforts will continue to fail those most vulnerable to reproductive oppression. Through analysis of successful coalition models that centre marginalised voices and employ multi-faceted advocacy strategies, this research demonstrates how intersectional frameworks empower both legal interventions and community mobilisation efforts, whilst continuing to develop sustainable movements for reproductive justice.

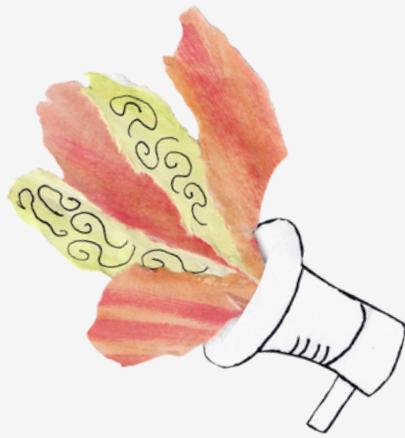
Spanning from early single-issue advocacy to contemporary intersectional movements, I will examine how feminist legal coalitions have evolved in their approach to reproductive rights, specifically within the United States, since this is the global eye tends to rest. I do however wish to stress the importance to the reader of looking also to countries not in the spotlight where similar fights for justice are ongoing. I will trace key transformations in coalition-building strategies, organisational structures, and advocacy frameworks, with a particular focus on how marginalised voices have shaped movement evolution. Specifically, I aim to focus on how contemporary coalitions work to interrupt oppressive legislation through multi-faceted strategies, combining litigation, grassroots organisation, and public education. The examination of successful case studies will additionally demonstrate how centring marginalised voices in both leadership and strategy development can lead to more effective legal interventions and sustainable movement building.

Section I: Historical Context

The early reproductive rights movement in the United States primarily centred on a narrow conception of abortion rights, reflecting a myopic focus on choice-based frameworks. This single-issue approach failed in recognising the multiple systems of oppression that are at play, creating distinct experiences of reproductive oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), and instead reflecting white women's reproductive liberation (Ross, 2018). Dominated by middle-class white feminists, the movement often overlooked the fact that access to

reproductive healthcare was fundamentally shaped by racial and economic inequality (Roberts, 1997).

Earlier feminist movements also exhibited significant blind spots, regarding class and racial dynamics. Mainstream reproductive rights organisations commonly marginalised the concerns of women of colour, who faced additional barriers such as voting rights, freedom of movement, and environmental racism that affected maternal health outcomes (Ross, 2018). These oversights were compounded by 'privileged tunnel vision' (Luna, 2020), the failure to recognise how poverty, lack of healthcare access, and systematic racism creates fundamentally different reproductive justice needs for marginalised communities.



The exclusion of immigrant and disabled women's perspectives further limited the movement's effectiveness. Immigration status creates unique, often invisible vulnerabilities in accessing reproductive healthcare (Spade, 2015), and disabled women faced both explicit discrimination and implicit bias in reproductive healthcare settings. Whilst early movement victories are still cause for celebration, they are an intersectional failure and thus cannot be remembered as championing the needs of those facing multiple, overlapping forms of oppression.

The transition towards more intersectional frameworks marked a critical evolution in the reproductive rights advocacy. Women-of-colour activists, frustrated with the limitations of mainstream reproductive rights discourse, then developed the reproductive justice framework in the 1990s (Ross, 2018). This new paradigm expanded far beyond initial narrow focuses, and began to address the complex interplay of racial, economic, and social factors that are affecting reproductive autonomy.

It directly challenged the choice-based rhetoric that had ran through earlier movements (Luna, 2020) and reflected a growing understanding that "choice" held little meaning if systematic barriers remained unaddressed. This theoretical evolution enabled more effective challenges to structural inequities but also represented a crucial development through the integration of economic justice concerns. Coalitions began to explicitly link reproductive rights to broader demands for healthcare access, living wages, and social support systems (Spade, 2015). This expansion allowed movements to further address the root causes of reproductive oppression, whilst still building stronger coalitions across social justice movements.

Section II: Contemporary Coalition Building

Contemporary reproductive justice coalitions have since developed more sophisticated organisational structures that are prioritising intersectional leadership and community accountability. SisterSong is one such organisation, a pioneering model for coalitions that explicitly centre the leadership of those who are most impacted by reproductive oppression. SisterSong's mission is to "strengthen and amplify the collective voices of indigenous women and women of colour to achieve reproductive justice by eradicating reproductive oppression and securing human rights" (SisterSong, 2025), a form of intentional inclusivity (Luna, 2020) that moves beyond token representation and assures meaningful decision-making power is available for those who have previously been silenced or ignored. Analysis of successful coalition models like SisterSong reveals several key characteristics: (i) funding structures that prioritise community control and reduce dependence on restrictive grant requirements; (ii) implementation of structural inclusion mechanisms (Crenshaw, 2019); and (iii) development of robust accountability frameworks. A deeper dive into these three characteristics reveals the success of these organisations, providing a platform for others to draw from in future efforts.

Firstly, financial autonomy. Traditional nonprofit funding is often attached to funders that may compromise movement objectives or shift priorities away from community needs. Successful coalitions have countered this by implementing diverse funding streams (i.e., membership dues, community-supported

fundraising events, and unrestricted donations). Such a successful model also requires careful vetting of potential external funders to ensure alignment with the movement values, and maintenance of clear boundaries around programmatic autonomy. This autonomy enables “movement-accountable organising” (Spade, 2015), advocacy that is directly responsive to community needs, rather than the priorities of the donors. When organisations aren’t restricted by the requirements of their funders, or deliverables of grants they have been rewarded, they can more quickly pivot strategies based on emerging community needs and take bolder political stances that could have alienated traditional donors. This independence is particularly valuable for providing rapid responses for community needs, removing the requirement for funder approval.

Secondly, the implementation of formal processes that ensures leadership reflects the constituencies of the movement – structural inclusion mechanisms (Crenshaw, 2019). These include specific quotas for board representation, leadership development programs targeting underrepresented communities, and mandatory inclusion of grassroots organisers in executive positions. A prime example of this is Collective Power’s comprehensive structural inclusion framework that has yielded measurable results in representative leadership. Their board composition requirements mandate that both co-president positions be held by women of colour, with 75% of board seats reserved for program alumni to ensure deep connection to community needs. The organisation has also successfully maintained over three-quarters of their partner organisations being BIPOC-led, demonstrating their commitment to centring marginalised voices. Moreso, their intern cohort demographics mirror the communities most impacted by reproductive justice issues: 44% identify as BIPOC, 56% as LGBTQIA+, and 38% are first-generation college students. Their systematic approach to leadership development has helped in the training of over 900 community and student activists spanning 99 organisations, creating a pipeline of representative leadership that spans the reproductive justice movement (Collective Power, 2024). An approach such as this acknowledges that rights of any kind cannot be understood through single-issue frameworks and instead require examination of how

multiple systems of oppression are at play (Collins, 2015). The work requires building coalitions across different communities and movements whilst centring the experience and leadership of those most impacted.



Finally, the most successful coalitions have developed and implemented robust accountability frameworks by drawing on participatory action research methodologies. Through this, these organisations regularly assess their alignment with desired community priorities through “continuous feedback loops” (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Having these in place ensures coalition strategies remain grounded in the lived experiences of those most impacted by reproductive oppression. Achieving meaningful accountability requires the breakdown and rebuilding of traditional hierarchies within such organisations (Luna, 2020), such as by implementing community advisory boards. These are to be composed primarily of individuals directly impacted by oppression, and hold significant power over organisational decision-making, like budget allocation and campaign priorities. Participatory decision-making processes are a further way of democratising strategic planning, thereby maintaining accountability within coalitions. Organisations have undergone a framework of transformative organisation (Spade, 2015), to create consensus-based models that prioritise the voices of marginalised community members. These processes often include regular community assemblies, participatory budgeting initiatives, and collective strategy development sessions. This approach has entirely re-shaped the landscape of reproductive rights advocacy (Roberts, 1997) by ensuring that strategies of change come from those who will most benefit from them, rather than being imposed by traditional power structures that are detached to the actual issue. This dynamic responsiveness has proven vital in navigating the complex relationship between legal advocacy and grassroots organising, ensuring that neither approach becomes disconnected from community priorities.

The complex landscape of reproductive rights expands far beyond the global north. The conceptualisation of

intersectionality as 'praxis' (Collins, 2015) offers valuable insights for understanding these global south movements, illustrating how theory and action interweave in reproductive justice work. Intersectionality functions not just as theory but also as a form of critical praxis that connects knowledge and action. This relationship manifests in how global south coalitions navigate complex cultural, economic, and political landscapes whilst continually addressing reproductive rights. Reproductive justice in India illustrates this critical challenge, demonstrated by research from Rajasthan where the absence of robust state mechanisms and legal frameworks for gender equity creates significant barriers to accessing reproductive care. Two notable coalitions in the area (legal aid interventions) have focused on addressing domestic violence and maternal mortality to bridge the gap between ineffective policies and reproductive rights rhetoric (Madhok et al., 2014). Both efforts reveal the same as all other contemporary coalitions: achieving reproductive justice requires more than isolated legal initiatives by individuals. It calls upon comprehensive policy reforms and coordinated partnerships between state institutions and progressive coalition groups.



Section III: Bridging Legal Advocacy and Organisation

The tension between legal advocacy, coalition and grassroots organising presents unique challenges for reproductive justice organisations that are committed to intersectional approaches. Legal strategies often need specialised expertise and can thereby end up pushing organisations towards professionalisation, which has the potential to create distance from community-based organising. Despite this, successful coalitions have been able to create innovative approaches that bridge this divide.

At the organisational level, top coalitions benefit from the aforementioned financial structures, inclusion networks, and accountability frameworks. Rather than simply treating legal advocacy and grassroots

mobilisation as separate tracks, these models ensure legal strategies emerge from, and remain accountable to, community organising efforts. So, legal teams may regularly participate in community meetings and organising sessions, whilst grassroots organisers contribute directly to legal strategy development. This integrated approach helps prevent the professionalisation trap (Spade, 2015), whereby organisations become overly focused on legal expertise at the expense of community power-building. Regular strategy sessions can bring together lawyers, organisers, and community members to collectively analyse how legal tools can best support broader movement objectives while avoiding approaches that might undermine grassroots power. The success of this model relies heavily on intentionally building legal and advocacy skills within affected communities, alongside ensuring legal professionals develop understanding community organisation principles, a symbiotic relationship of sorts. This bidirectional skill-sharing helps to bridge traditional divides between legal and organising work and still maintains a strong intersectional analysis through both approaches. Additionally, formal inclusion mechanisms ensure that leadership continues to reflect movement constituencies, including specific quotas for board representation and leadership development programs targeting underrepresented communities.

The success of these integrated advocacy models is particularly evident in recent efforts to challenge restrictive legislation. The combination of transformative leadership development, strong accountability mechanisms, and strategic coalition-building has created a strong foundation for organisations to effectively interrupt and challenge oppressive policies. By maintaining a bridge between legal advocacy and organisation, these coalitions are uniquely positioned to mount comprehensive challenges to restrictive legislation through multiple channels simultaneously. The following examines specifically how these organisational structures and principles translate into effective legal and advocacy strategies.

Section IV: Interrupting Restrictive Legislation

Recent legal challenges to restrictive reproductive legislation clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of

intersectional approaches in both litigation strategy and movement building. Successful challenges are increasingly reliant on multi-dimensional advocacy (Luna, 2020), coordinated efforts that combine traditional legal arguments with broader social justice frameworks, and community mobilisation. Analysis of recent cases reveal several key strategic innovations: Legal teams have successfully expanded standing arguments by demonstrating how restrictive policies more-often-than-not disproportionately impact marginalised communities. This approach moves far beyond traditional privacy-based arguments to centre the experiences of those facing multiple, intersecting barriers to care (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Cases increasingly incorporate expert testimony and empirical evidence that documents how restrictions compound existing healthcare disparities, particularly for low-income communities and communities of colour. In *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), extensive evidence was presented to reveal how Texas's TRAP laws would force the closure of clinics that predominantly served low-income and rural communities, forcing patients to travel hundreds of miles for care, a burden that fell disproportionately on women of colour who often lack transportation and flexible work schedules that are more available to white women (Zeytinoglu & Muteshi, 2000).

Amicus brief strategies have evolved to amplify marginalised voices within formal legal proceedings. Drawing on a framework of structural inclusion (Crenshaw, 2019), coalitions have developed more sophisticated processes for gathering and presenting community testimony. These briefs often feature experiential evidence (Spade, 2015), a documentation of how policies impact specific communities, detailing those facing multiple forms of discrimination. An approach like this has proven effective in demonstrating the real-world implications of seemingly neutral regulations.

Public education campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated in their integration with litigation strategies. Successful coalitions have developed coordinated messaging that connects individual cases to broader systematic issues, explicitly addressing the interconnected nature of reproductive education

(Roberts, 1997) and helping both the courts and public understand how apparently discrete restrictions contribute to broader patterns of marginalisations.



The effectiveness of these integrated approaches is evident in several recent victories. For instance, challenges to targeted regulation of abortion providers (TRAP laws) have successfully incorporated evidence of their disparate impact on rural communities and communities of colour. This intersectional framework has been able to transform fundamentally the way courts understand the burden analysis (Luna, 2020) in reproductive rights cases. Similarly, challenges to insurance coverage restrictions have effectively demonstrated their interconnection with broader healthcare access issues, particularly for immigrant communities and low-income workers. These legal wins reflect a paradigm shift in reproductive rights advocacy – one that recognises legal strategy as a single component of broader movement building. Through maintenance of strong connections to grassroots organising and centring marginalised voices, these approaches have proven more effective at securing sustainable policy changes while continuing to build long-term movement power.

Coalition tactics for legislative intervention have likewise evolved significantly to incorporate multiple strategic approaches to challenge restrictive policies. Rapid response networks represent a critical infrastructure for effective legislative intervention, enabling organisations to mobilise quickly when threats emerge. These networks leverage the continuous feedback loops (Ross & Solinger, 2017) to maintain real-time communication between affected communities and legal advocates. Referring to *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), a broad coalition of reproductive justice organisations demonstrated the power of rapid mobilisation by quickly assembling medical experts,

community advocates, and healthcare providers to challenger Texas's hospital admitting privileges requirement. The coalition's swift response included coordinating testimony from dozens of affected clinics, organising community impact documentation, and mobilising unprecedented numbers of amicus briefs from medical professionals (Sam & Harper, 2018). This cooperative effort successfully demonstrated how the admitting privileges requirement would create an 'undue burden' by forcing many clinics to close without any medical justification. The success of the coalition ultimately led to a landmark Supreme Court victory that strengthened the legal framework for challenging similar restrictions nationwide (Greenhouse & Siegel, 2016). This landmark decision not only set important legal precedent but also catalysed the development of more sophisticated intersectional messaging strategies.



These strategies reflect the interconnected nature of reproductive oppression, explicitly connecting individual cases to broader systemic issues, helping courts and public understand how apparently discrete restrictions contribute to larger patterns of marginalisation. The National Network of Abortion Funds' challenge to insurance coverage restrictions exemplifies this approach through their innovative coalition structure. Their consensus-based decision-making model prioritises marginalised voices in strategic planning and budgeting decisions, whilst still maintaining robust community feedback channels through regular surveys and focus groups (National Network of Abortion Funds, 2015). This coalition demonstrated effectively how insurance restrictions create compound barriers for specific communities, particularly immigrant families and low-income workers. Their legal strategy successfully integrated community testimony with empirical evidence, demonstrating how coverage restrictions intersect with broader healthcare access issues. These examples of intersectional coalition-building strategies can directly inform future advocacy approaches. The preceding analysis of rapid response networks and coordinated legal interventions demonstrates how organisations

have successfully leveraged intersectional frameworks to challenge restrictive legislation whilst building sustainable movement infrastructure.

Conclusions

The evolution of reproductive justice advocacy reveals the critical importance of intersectional approaches in strengthening both legal and grassroots efforts. Successful coalitions have managed to revise traditional models simply by centring marginalised voices and experiences. This transformation is evident in the sophisticated organisational structures that have emerged which place genuine community control at the forefront of their work, whilst still maintaining legal effectiveness. Integrated approaches such as these produce more sustainable and far-reaching victories (Ross & Salinger, 2017) than traditional single-issue advocacy.

Looking forward, several key recommendations emerge for future coalition-building efforts. Firstly, organisations must continue strengthening structural inclusion mechanisms to ensure that leadership authentically reflects movement constituencies (Crenshaw, 2019). Secondly, coalitions must further develop hybrid advocacy models that bridge the traditional divide between legal expertise and community organising (Spade, 2015). And finally, movements must expand into global solidarity networks to effectively address the increasingly transnational nature of reproductive oppression.

These findings suggest that the future of reproductive justice advocacy lies in deepening intersectional analysis alongside advancing and expanding transnational coalition-building. As reproductive rights face unprecedented and building challenges across the world, the sophisticated integration of legal advocacy and grassroots organising developed by these movements offers crucial lessons for advancing reproductive justice across borders and communities. As we continue to build intersectional coalitions and challenge oppressive systems, we must work to transform not just the womb, but also the woman, the community, and the wider world from a site of political contestation and control into a space of reproductive freedom, autonomy, and justice for all.

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How does the Conflation of Morality and Legality Hinder Marginalised Communities' Bodily Autonomy?

by Beth Hutchinson

‘HOW DOES THE CONFLATION OF MORALITY WITH LEGALITY HINDER MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES’ BODILY AUTONOMY?’ AN AMERICAN ANALYSIS.

BY BETH HUTCHINSON
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This essay explores how morality, particularly that of religious morality, interacts with both U.S. legislatures and judiciary to inform socially significant legal decisions upon marginalised communities' bodily autonomy. These legal decisions relate primarily to that of women's reproduction rights, transgender individuals' access to healthcare and state intrusion upon non-normative sexual practices within queer communities, introducing a comparative evaluation within the UK's legal system. Morality, when interpreted literally, is understood to be “a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behaviour and character.”¹ Meanwhile, bodily autonomy can be understood as one's right of “self-governance” over the body, free from external influence.² Thus, when a concept as inherently subjective and variable as morality- shaped by individual beliefs or ever-evolving societal standards- is imposed upon the more concrete and tangible right of bodily autonomy, conflict becomes almost inevitable. Further, it is often those already marginalised, whose autonomy challenges prevailing moral norms, who face the greatest threats under morally driven legal decisions.

EDITED BY HELENA OSIE BISHOP, COPY EDITED BY EMMI WILKINSON,
REVIEWED BY ELISE CORRY

Reproductive Rights and Religious Morality

Originalism can be defined as a mode of legal interpretation in which constitutional meaning is derived from “the original public meaning that it would have had at the time that it became law.”³ Accordingly, the focus of originalism in constitutional interpretation is one centred upon the initial intentions of its drafters. In the hypothetical, this may appear as a logical, objective choice of interpretative style for an unelected body to opt for, yet, in practice, it has proven itself to be a tool for justices to insert private morality into a public setting. Within the case of *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization* 2022, U.S. Supreme Court justices applied such a mode of constitutional interpretation, ruling that the U.S. constitution did not explicitly protect the right to an abortion.⁴ In turn, this removed an almost 50 year old constitutional protection of abortion, established by *Roe v Wade* 1973.⁵ When discussing *Dobbs*, Trau observes that justices displayed a fractured recounternance of historical evidence to achieve a “result-oriented” outcome, thus applying originalism inaccurately.⁶ Trau’s suggestion here of a wilful ignorance in the justices’ reading of abortion’s legislative history to achieve their desired result (that is, of removing the constitutionally protected status of women’s reproductive rights established in *Roe*) is best understood within the leading ratio decidendi of the case. For instance, Justice Samuel Alito maintained that in reversing the constitutional protections established by *Roe v Wade*, the U.S. was restored to “an unbroken tradition of prohibiting abortion on pain of criminal punishment [that] persisted from the earliest days of the common law until 1973.”⁷ Alito’s dismissal of abortion’s cultural legacy within the United States is perhaps indicative of a one-dimensional understanding of its historical evolution, which, when analysed more comprehensively, reveals a more nuanced response.

For a more holistic understanding of abortion’s historical relevance, we can look to Reagan, who cites a plethora of examples depicting abortion’s historical significance as not only a present practice, but as a morally acceptable one.⁸ She points to a mid-18th century salesmen selling drugs solely to induce miscarriage and texts such as *Domestic Medicine* (1774) or *The Married Lady’s Companion*, or *Poor Man’s Friend* (1808) offering advice on how to induce menstruation.⁹ The presence of

aborts, irrespective of their difference to the modern understanding, is indisputable. In fact, it was only by 1910 that abortion was criminalised nationally and became a pressing issue only within recent decades.¹⁰ Thus, the reality of abortion’s more nuanced role in U.S. history when compared to the Court’s reductive understanding of it, indicates the justices’ reading of the public meaning of ‘liberty’ in the Fourteenth Amendment, as a rather illegitimate application of originalism, displaying a gross ignorance towards real women’s liberty found within a centuries-old practice of exercising reproductive rights. Whilst there was validity in asking the originalist question of the public meaning of liberty at the time of constitutional ratification, as Trau notes, in answering that question, “[The Court] ignored a substantial amount of history that, if considered, would have led to a much more complicated answer.”¹¹

Yet, the Court’s arrival at such a contestable conclusion raises a more troubling question: how can the likes of Alito even stand to deliberate on questions with such comprehensive legislative histories, when they themselves are in such moral opposition? In the leading *Dobbs* opinion, all justices were conservative Christians, each believing that life commences upon conception and thereby criminalising any stage abortion.¹² Gold theorises that the conservative Christian departure from *Roe* reflects a broader judicial trend.¹³ For instance, the 2014 Supreme Court ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores Inc.* that the contraceptive coverage under the Affordable Care Act must yield to a corporation’s Christian views opposing such assistance.¹⁴ Thus, the significance of personal religious bias within *Dobbs*’ legal reasoning should not be understated on account of its reflection of broader judicial trends.

This paradigm signals a disconcerting progression in U.S. law from a supposed ‘land of the free’ to a nation becoming increasingly governed by conservative Christian rhetoric. Thus, Alito’s failure to acknowledge women’s history and the prior moral neutrality towards abortion comes as no surprise- a court interwoven with moral-religious doctrine cannot neutrally and holistically evaluate a history which directly challenges this view. Greenhouse writes “It was not constitutional analysis, but religious doctrine that drove the opposition

to *Roe*,” and when analysing the Court’s leading opinion, it becomes difficult to disagree.¹⁵ Within the leading opinion, Justice Alito referred to abortion as a “profound moral question,”¹⁶ a phrase which Greenhouse argues reveals an assumption that the moral gravity of abortion is singular and self-evident- an assumption reflective of the majority’s Catholic upbringing.¹⁷ In assuming the objective nature of abortion’s relationship to morality, the Court signals its own religious bias in answering the legal question at hand. Therefore, the question of abortion’s constitutional status within *Dobbs* was arguably already answered. When a conservative-Christian court inserts morality (and, as a result, its subjective definition of morality), ‘cherry-picks’ through women’s history in a shallow attempt at originalism and rejects evidence pointing to the contrary, it is rather inevitable that the Court will come to a decision that aligned with the asserted morality of the judges - that is, to restrict bodily autonomy by curtailing the right to an abortion.

However, the implications of removing abortion’s constitutional status are more comprehensively accounted for when analysing the racial and financial disparities between varying groups of women. For instance, 60% of Black women and 59% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) women live in states with abortion bans or restrictions, compared to 53% of white women,¹⁸ who make up 53% of the U.S. population of women.¹⁹ Consequently, the removal of constitutional protections disproportionately hinders the bodily autonomy of women already vulnerable to adversity on the grounds of race. Despite white women being the majority demographic of U.S. women, Black and AIAN women are still more likely to live in states with abortion bans. Additionally, women of colour are more likely to suffer from economic barriers than their white counterparts. For instance, white women aged 18-49 are nearly half as likely to have low incomes than AIAN and Black women.²⁰ On this basis, it follows that women of colour are not only less able to afford an abortion, priced at over \$500 in 2021, but those living in states with restrictive abortion laws, are less likely to have the means for cross-state travel as a mode of obtaining care.²¹ Thus, whilst *Dobbs*’ confusion of morality with legality undoubtedly hinders all women’s bodily autonomy, it is perhaps women of colour who are

left the most vulnerable by the Court’s ruling.

Moral Panics and the Policing of Transgender Bodies

The conflation of moral values within legal frameworks has not singularly influenced reproductive rights and has gained additional notoriety through vehicles of moral panic when regarding the transgender community in both the U.S. and United Kingdom. Whilst this essay seeks to confront U.S. legal trends, evaluating such trends in comparison to a similarly western state, may aid in demonstrating this phenomenon more comprehensively.

According to Cohen, a moral panic occurs when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [emerge] to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.”²² Pepin-Neff and Cohen argue that such an occurrence has been engineered by Trump in the U.S. via the ‘trans debate’, dating back to July 2017 when President Trump tweeted from his ‘X’ account that transgender individuals would no longer be able to serve in the military, citing the supposed burden of medical costs.²³ This sentiment has been embraced by members of congress, with the likes of Congresswoman Rep. Vicky Hartzler claiming the cost of trans healthcare within the military to be “over a billion dollars.”²⁴ Contrary to Hartzler’s claims, a 2016 study found the actual costs to be between \$2.4 million and \$8.4 million - a sliver of the pentagon’s annual budget.²⁵ By Cohen’s definition, the disparity between the actual costs of trans healthcare and U.S. politicians’ narrative of such costs is illustrative of a moral panic - transgender individuals are cast as threats to traditional societal order, to the strength of the American military, and to broader social progress, despite the empirical reality suggesting the falseness of such claims. Pepin-Neff and Cohen assign responsibility to Trump for a “moral panic presidency”, utilising social media as a vehicle for fear directed at the supposed transgender “deviant.”²⁶ Through providing a climate of moral fear and threat, such policies can be viewed as a necessity, legitimising state intrusion, and with it the authorised regulation of transgender bodies.

Further, the influence of religious morality within the U.S. has served to evolve this moral panic, arguably providing a climate in which restrictive transgender legislation is encouraged, rather than challenged.

Opposition to transgender individuals is perhaps most prevalent within Christian communities, with 75% of white evangelical Christians believing gender to be determined by sex at birth, compared to just 24% of atheists in the U.S.²⁷ Despite not embracing traditional Christian family values within his personal life, having been thrice married and allegedly establishing complex legal arrangements to hide multiple affairs within his current marriage,²⁸ Donald Trump attained around 80% of the white evangelical Christian vote in the 2024 Presidential Election.²⁹ This is a fact of which President Trump is expressly aware as within the first day of his second presidential term, he signed an executive order recognising only two genders,³⁰ despite 9 years ago vocalising his support for transgender individuals using whichever gendered toilets they feel appropriate.³¹ Trump's changing policy position from relative apathy to ardent opposition towards transgender individuals, paired with his accumulation of white evangelical support, is perhaps indicative of a strategic use of religious pandering. This suggestion can be further observed within the 2024 election cycle, in which Republican candidates spent more than \$65 million on anti-transgender advertisements,³² despite transgender people making up less than 1% of the U.S. population.³³ Given the disproportionate prominence of transgender bodies in contemporary political debate compared to their small demographic presence in U.S. society, it is arguable that legislatures' efforts to restrict trans bodily autonomy (whether that be removing access to gender-affirming health care or exclusion from military service) are not rooted in legal necessity, but rather serve as a strategic appeal to conservative- Christian ideologies, amplified in the context of an engineered moral panic. The dangers of conflating legality with religious morality are imminent, with journalists such as Katherine Stewart noting Trump's recent establishment of a Faith Office, designed to tackle anti-Christian bias as a "further perversion of the institutions of justice."³⁴ In forsaking the separation of Church and state to appease distorted religious narratives, administrations such as Trump's compromise transgender individuals' fundamental right to bodily autonomy, inviting an unwelcome intrusion by the state.

The legitimising of state intrusion upon transgender individuals via moral panics has found a similar footing

amidst the UK's domestic politics, indicating the growing influence of U.S. religious-morality amongst western states. Within the case *For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v The Scottish Ministers (Respondent)* 2025, the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom (UKSC) held that a woman is defined by biological sex under the Equality Act 2010.³⁵ When taking interventions, the Court's exercise of discretion over who should participate in the litigation of the case is revelatory of the growing presence of religious-moral doctrine within the UK's legal system. For instance, the Court refused to take interventions from any transgender individuals, but did accept submissions from a number of gender-critical groups.³⁶ British feminist groups have increasingly found themselves to be in ideological agreement with the U.S. religious right. The primarily U.S. organisation 'Hands Across the Aisle Coalition,' for instance, has sought to unite both feminist thinkers and groups from the religious right in their pursuit of combating 'gender identity ideology.'³⁷ Amongst these UK gender-critical groups are 'Transgender Trend' and the 'LGB Alliance.'³⁸ Further, the influence of such groups should not be understated. During the litigation of *For Women*, the LGB Alliance were consulted through written submission, indicating a degree of institutional influence offered to such groups.³⁹ Whilst gender-critical groups evidently embracing elements of religious doctrine have been passionate advocates for the Court's ruling, medical experts have not embraced such a view. NHS resident doctors, for example, denounced the Court's ruling as "having no basis in science."⁴⁰ Additionally, at the British Medical Association's Resident Doctor's Conference, medics passed a motion criticising the ruling for imposing a "rigid binary."⁴¹ Whilst the Court may not have explicitly indicated religious ideals in their judgement, their prioritisation of ideological groups, interwoven with echoes of religious doctrine above medical professionals and transgender individuals themselves, is revealing of the U.S. religious right's growing influence within the UK's legal frameworks. Through prioritising the voices of gender-critical groups such as the LGB Alliance within a legal setting, and consequently the U.S. religious-moral doctrine they are aligned with, such doctrines are implicitly afforded legitimacy.

Following the Court's judgement, Prime Minister Keir Starmer endorsed the Court's view, stating that a woman "is an adult female, and the Court has made that absolutely clear."⁴² This provides a stark contrast to the Prime Minister's position just a few years prior, where he affirmed "a woman is a female adult and, in addition to that, trans women are women."⁴³ Starmer's rapidly changing political position regarding the transgender community is demonstrative of a wider trend in UK policy making, reflecting a familiar shift observed within his U.S. counterpart. Despite no recorded complaints against transgender patients in hospitals, in October 2023 then-Health Secretary, Steve Barclay, committed to banning trans patients from male and female-only wards.⁴⁴ In spite of making up just 0.5% of the English and Welsh population in 2021, proposed legislation of gender self-identification in the Scottish Gender Recognition Act 2022, was met with the similar panic-narrative of the 'trans predator.'⁴⁵ When commenting on the bill, then-Minister Kemi Badenoch suggested that such legislation would give rise to predators.⁴⁶ Duffy notes of Badenoch's sentiment that the "implied threat... is clear...If trans people are allowed to self-identify, predators will exploit the system."⁴⁷ Yet, in spite of the narrative that the transgender community presents a 'threat' to the safety of cisgendered women, transgender individuals are twice as likely to be victims of crimes than their cisgendered counterparts, a statistic revealing of the predatory rhetoric's panic policy basis, rather than actual legal concern.⁴⁸ As Cohen theorised, such moral panics do not find their basis in empirical evidence, but in the casting of perceived deviant groups as "folk devils" threatening normality.⁴⁹ The seismic shift towards transphobic attitudes is self-evidential within the UK's contemporary political setting. The very notion of trans autonomy, whether that be self-identifying or accessing medical care, is framed as an imminent threat to safety, and with it, normality. When discussing such restrictive policies, Duffy notes: "The reason the law must uphold normality is that it is seen as the arbiter of respectability and the regulator of deviance: in short, law as protector against chaos. To the law, queerness is chaotic. Cisgender heterosexuality is stable."⁵⁰ Thus, when a moral panic dominates the western political landscape, it presents a troubling reality: it is often those most vulnerable to marginalisation and whose existence challenges prevailing traditional norms whose

autonomy will be sacrificed in legal decision-making in order to soothe manufactured societal fears.

Judicial Morality and Non-Normative Sexual Practices

The intrusion upon bodily autonomy by the state has further revealed itself within cases of non-normative sexual practices, where subjective judicial opinions on deviant behaviour have been conflated with more objective legal reasoning. This phenomenon is particularly apparent within the 1967 Californian case of *People v Samuels*,⁵¹ highlighting the use of personal moralism in legal decision-making as a more practiced behaviour, as opposed to a passing trend. Samuels was found guilty of aggravated assault after whipping a masochist in the production of a 'blue film' to satisfy the victims masochistic desires, with the Court rejecting consent as a defence.⁵² In articulating their judgement, the Court emphasised that it is a "matter of common knowledge that a normal person in full possession of his mental faculties does not freely consent to the use, upon himself, of force likely to produce great bodily injury."⁵³ As Kleining notes, though sadomasochism may be unconventional, there was no evidence to substantiate the conclusion that participants of sadomasochism are "not mentally competent."⁵⁴ Thus, in imposing a standard of normality, a construct defined by subjective social norms, the Court implicitly signals its personal interpretation of social standards. Similarly, in the UK case of *R v Brown* 1994, a group of homosexual men who had engaged in consensual sadomasochistic sex were subsequently charged with assault, in spite of freely consenting, conducting their behaviour in private, and leaving no lasting harm.⁵⁵ However, in dismissing consent as a relevant defence, the Court's judgement was saturated with morally charged language. Lord Templeman, for instance, referred to sadomasochism as both "an evil thing" and "uncivilised."⁵⁶ The emotive language utilised by Lord Templeman, indicates an overt moral disapproval from the Court, not merely on the act of inflicting harm, but of the very nature of the practice itself. Kerr contends that the prosecuting of private, consensual sexual activities is evidence of an overly paternalistic state that undermines personal autonomy, as deciding what is socially acceptable removes "the right of the individual to decide which conduct they are willing to consent to."⁵⁷ Thus, when Courts, such as

those of Samuels and Brown, utilise moralistic language, rather than articulating their judgements on the basis of more objective legal principles, a dangerous precedent for individuals who challenge the Court's personal moral values is presented- their autonomy will be impeded on, not out of legal necessity for the public interest, but rather, on account of the Court's subjective interpretation of moral norms.

In spite of the firm stance taken in *Brown*, the courts departed from this judgement within the case of *R v Wilson*, concerning a married, heterosexual couple similarly engaging in violent sexual conduct.⁵⁸ On account of Mr Wilson's branding of his initials onto his wife's buttocks, the nature of violence in Wilson was permanent and required medical attention,⁵⁹ unlike *Brown* where harm was temporary.⁶⁰ Yet, the couple's actions were not deemed to pose a threat to the public interest.⁶¹ Kerr submits that this disparity reflects significant judicial discretion, where "the moral standards of the judges involved often influence their decisions."⁶² In *Brown*, Lord Templeman described the appellants actions as responsible for "the corruption of a youth," a statement reflective of familiar narratives regarding homosexual men as threats to the sanctity of children's innocence.⁶³ For instance, in 2019, nationwide protests arose against LGBTQIA+ education in British schools, fueled by parental fears that their children might be "recruited to be gay."⁶⁴ In contrast, when articulating their judgement, the Court in *Wilson* opted for a more neutral stance, holding that "what goes on between consenting adults in the privacy of their home is a matter for them, not the law."⁶⁵ This shift in language is indicative of a notable inconsistency in judicial approach. As Chan and Gommer observe, the Court in *Wilson* was able to deliberate "without resorting to strong moral language and with recognition of the heterogeneity of heterosexual relationships, neither of which they were able to do with the homosexual relationships in *R v Brown*."⁶⁶ Arguably, such a discrepancy highlights the moralistic standards imposed upon queer identities by the Courts, which are notably absent in the treatment of their heterosexual counterparts. The divergence in legal reasoning between *Wilson* and *Brown* signals the dangers of morally charged legal judgements. If courts conflate legality with morality, they risk infringing upon the autonomy of

those who challenge dominant moral norms thereby exposing them to greater state intrusion. This threat is only heightened when such challenges arise from non-traditional identities.

Furthermore, the intensity of moral stigma directed at practitioners of sadomasochism appears to vary depending on sexual orientation. A 2022 study by Boyd-Rogers and Maddox revealed queer BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) practitioners experienced a greater severity in discriminatory experiences arising from their sexual practices than their heterosexual counterparts.⁶⁷ Kushwah argues that the public expression of kinks such as BDSM within queer spaces are met with greater moral opposition as they disrupt heteronormative ideals on the "respectable" expression of queerness.⁶⁸ Thus, it is arguable that queer BDSM practitioners face greater hostility than heterosexuals as their sexual expression challenges both sexual norms and heteronormative ideals of 'sanitised' queerness. Contextualising *R v Brown* and *People v Samuels* within this debate, the basis of asymmetrical judicial application of moralism is highlighted. In *Brown*, for instance, the Court faced non-normative homosexual sex that directly confronted the traditional, socially palatable presentation of homosexuality such a confrontation to social and moral norms simply did not exist within the confines of *Wilson*'s heterosexual marriage. This, in turn, is further revelatory of the vulnerability to state intrusion that those who challenge moral and social norms face. Through providing a moral disapproval of such non-normativity within judicial decisions, courts risk further legitimising social othering.

Conclusion

The interaction of morality with legality in the U.S. has presented itself to be a dangerous conflation to those whose autonomy challenges moral norms, whether that be persons assigned as female at birth exercising their reproductive rights, transgender individuals exercising their right of identification, or individuals who participate in non-normative sexual practices exercising their right to a private life. When the law operates in response to moral anxieties, the soothing of societal discomfort operates at the expense of those whose simple exercising of autonomy confronts such comforts.

Inserting subjective ideals into legislative direction, particularly when regarding judicial decisions, affords such ideals a degree of legitimacy, and in turn, objectivity. If morality becomes legality, those whose autonomy challenges the status quo, will continue to be at the mercy of an intrusive state, volatility and engineered political fiction.

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Special Thanks to Our Peer Reviewers

Vlad-Stefan Harbuz

Carlotta Moro

Mashrur Ayon

Nonny Jones

Sherine Ebadi

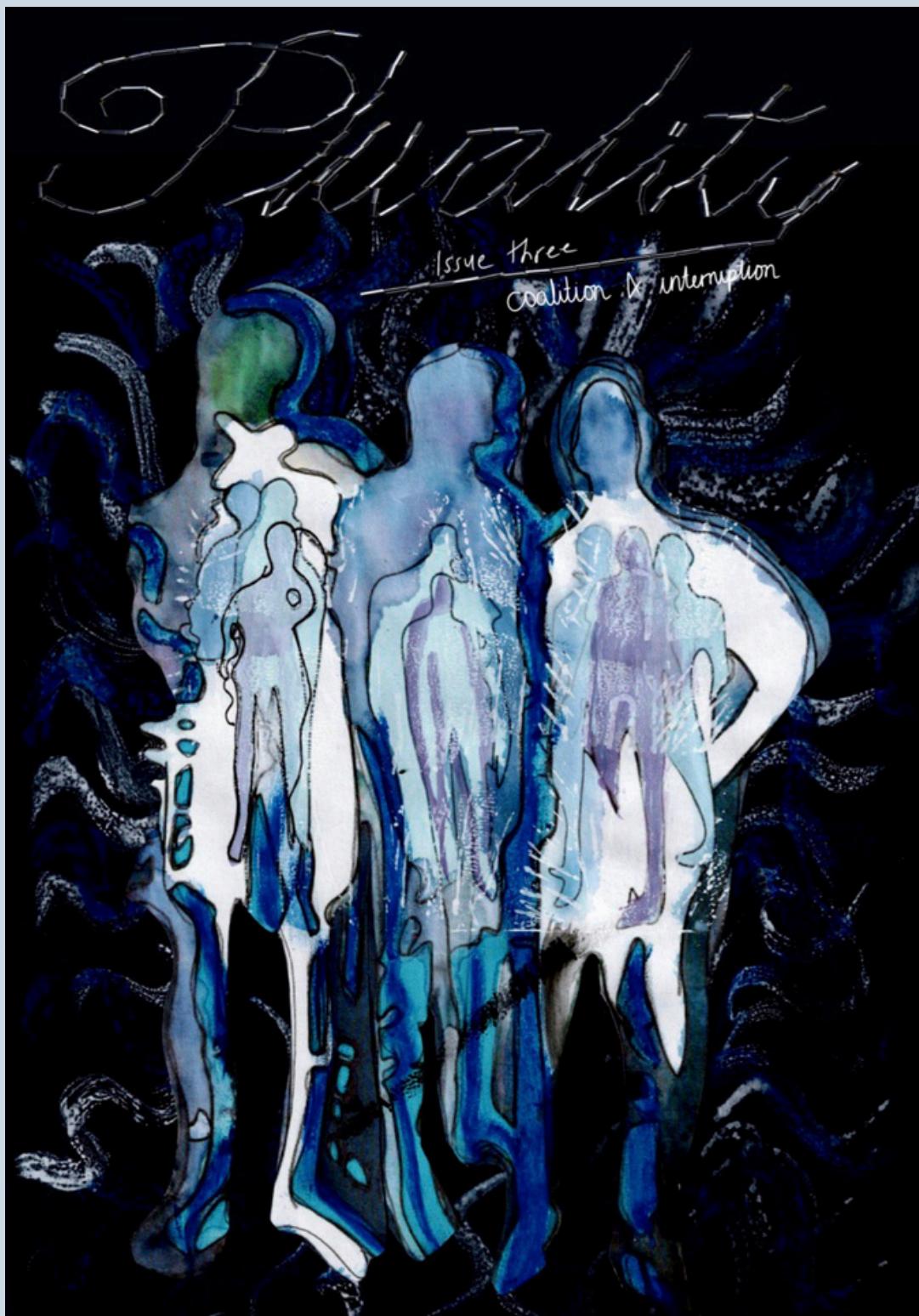
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Nivi Chawda

We hope you enjoyed Plurality Issue 3:
Interruption & Coalition



COVER ART BY EMMI WILKINSON

And finally.



thank you to everyone who was at the
Issue 3 & 4 launch party!

