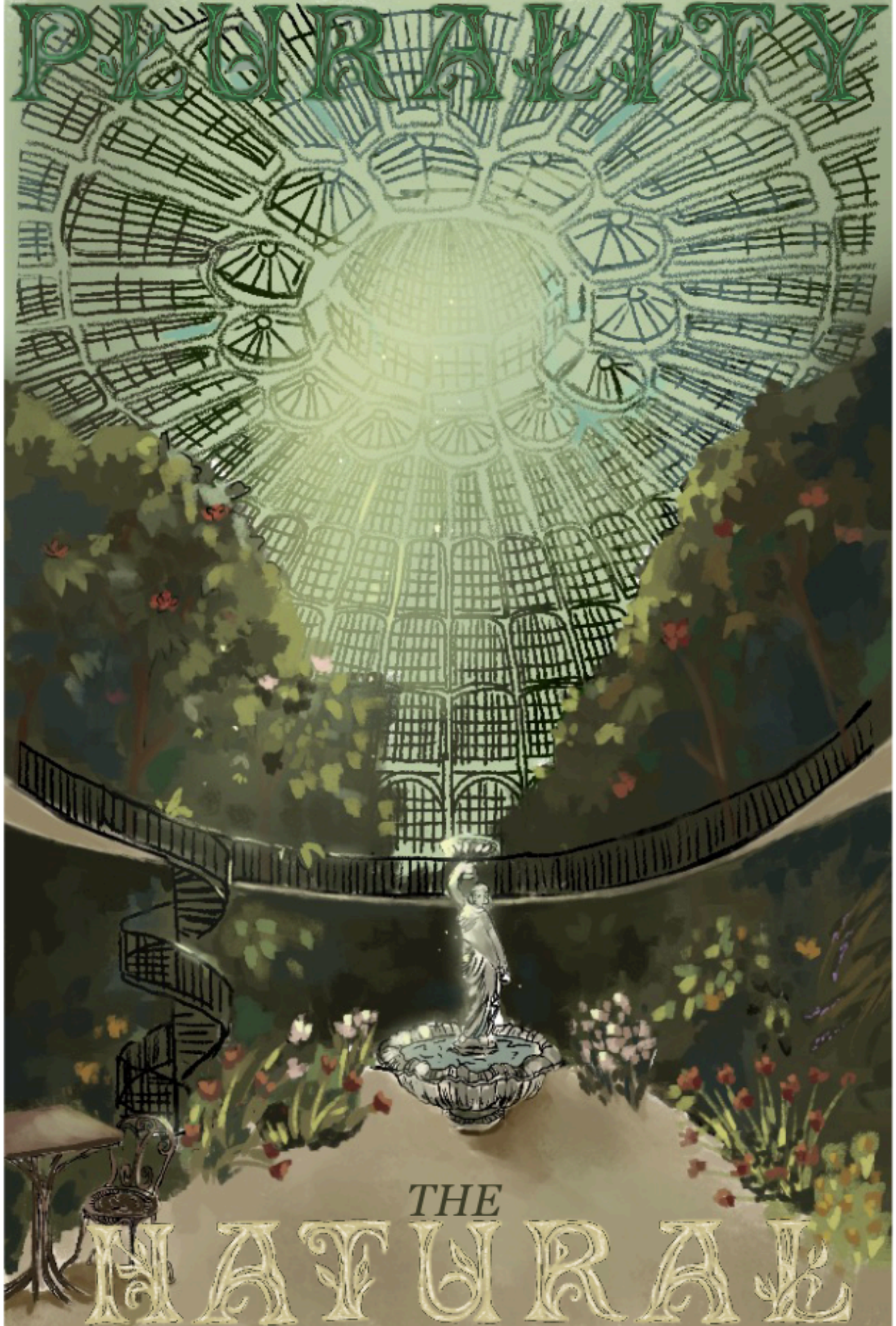


# PLURALITY



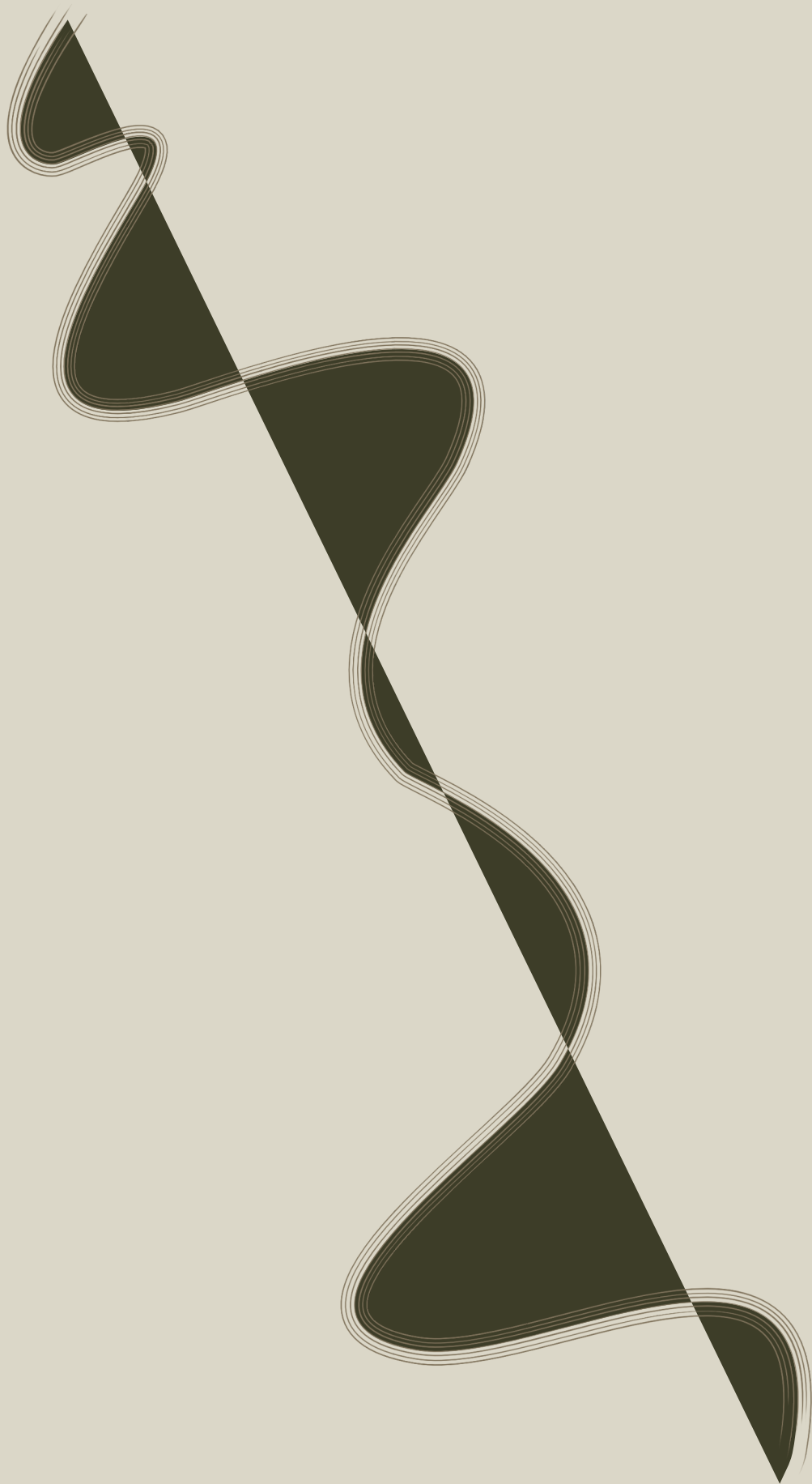
THE

# NATURAL

ISSUE 5



*plurality no. 5*



*the natural*

# table of CONTENTS

p. 3

meet the team

p. 5

note from the *editor*

p. 8

Fragmentation and Igbo Cosmology  
in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*

by Saarvi Sinha

p. 14

Denaturalising the Bildungsroman: Narrative,  
Cinematography and Photography in *Frances Ha*

by Ellie Sutherland

p. 22

Feeling Human Beyond Biology: Embodiment, Orientalism,  
and Postcolonial Critique in Emotional Historiography

by Isabelle Davis

p. 31

Colonised Bodies: How Pre-modern Trans Historians  
Have Aided the Reclaiming of  
the Non-Cisgendered Racialised Body.

by Emma Stinchon



p. 39

**Reimagining the Land: Enclosure  
and the Politics of Exclusion**

*by* Conger Wang

p. 48

**Flickering Bodies: Posthuman Embodiment,  
Visibility, and Power in Cassils' *Becoming an Image***

*by* Zhuyuyue Gao

p. 56

**Feminist Refusal: 4B and The Rejection  
of Scripted Womanhood in South Korea**

*by* Mia Hutchins

p. 62

**Forests of Forgetting, Faces of Erasure:  
Slow Violence, Racial Capitalism and  
Ecological Warfare in North America and Israel/Palestine**

*by* Marlene Ito

p. 71

**"Closer to Nature" : Colonial Anthropology and  
the Sexualisation of Indigenous Woman:**

*How did colonial anthropology construct Indigenous women as "natural"  
– that is, primitive, hypersexual and biologically determined  
– to legitimise racial hierarchy and imperial domination?*

*by* Tara Laize

p. 77

*end credits*

# meet the team

---



Lead Editor  
Emilia Manning-Gaona



Deputy Lead Editor  
Rose Bates



Treasurer-Secretary  
Neha Ajith



Section Editor  
(Art & Literature)  
Zeynep Kilic



Section Editor  
(Social Sciences)  
Ruby Scott



Section Editor  
(Philosophy & Divinity)  
Asher Rose



Section Editor  
(History & Classics)  
Poppy Williams



Assisting Section Editor  
Helena Osie Bishop

# plurality 25/26



Head of Production  
Khoo Yi Xuan



Artist  
Elise Adams



Artist  
Rosy Fitch



Artist  
Madeleine Brady



Copyeditor  
Juliette Pepin



Copyeditor  
Leyla Kaban Bowers



Copyeditor  
Lauren Hood



Marketing  
Maeve Burrell



Marketing  
Daniel Wills

# a note from the editor

*We often take for granted what we consider to be “natural”, often forgetting how such constructions are heavily shaped by our environments, perspectives, and positionality. How we understand history, culture, gender, race, and power cannot be understood in a vacuum, and thus require careful inspection. What is “natural”? And what do we consider to be “unnatural”? These are the questions that sit at the heart of Issue 5, collectively conceptualised by the Plurality team. This issue’s theme was intentionally made to be broad so to invite a range of interpretations, analyses, and reflections from our authors.*

*Against the natural order (and perhaps in spirit of it), this issue begins with the Art and Literature section. Here, Saanvi Sinha dives into an exploration of the fragmented self through Igbo cosmology in Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi’s Freshwater. Ellie Sutherland then employs a queer lens in the analysis of Frances Ha to argue that growing up is not naturally linear. Turning now to History and Classics, Conger Wang reimagines the landscape of the American West to argue that enclosure and agricultural improvement naturalised inequality. In Emma Stinchon’s piece, contemporary Western notions of the naturalised cisgender body are challenged by unearthing the historical presence of diverse gender expressions. Rounding up this section, Isabelle Davies traces the origins and developments of emotional historiography to demonstrate how emotions are historically situated, rooted in power, and heavily impacted by Western ideas. Tending to our Philosophy and Divinity section is Zhuyuyue Gao, who challenges posthumanist theories of subjectivity through the work of the performance artist Cassil. In Social Sciences, Mia Hutchins argues that while the 4B movement in South Korea challenges natural gender norms, its efficiency does not translate globally. We then branch into Marlene Ito’s piece, who, through three case studies examine the shared logic of a racialised othering. Coming to a close with Tara Laize, who unearths how Indigenous women are constructed as hypersexualised through the intersecting forces of gender, race, and empire within the colonial order:*

*I would like to express my gratitude to our authors for contributing their time and labour into this issue, Plurality would not be possible without your brilliance. To the Plurality team, thank you for going above and beyond – your efforts have allowed this journal to grow and flourish! Khoo Yi Xuan, our Head of Production, thank you for curating these wonderful pages, ensuring that they flow with cohesion, and for collaborating closely with our Artists, Elise Adams, Rosy Fitch, and Madeleine Brady, who created the gorgeous artwork for this issue. Thank you to Section Editors, Zeynep Kilic, Ruby Scott, Poppy Williams, and Asher Rose for supporting our*

authors in editing their work, and to Helena Osie Bishop, for lending her expertise to our editorial team and providing support. To Juliette Pepin, Lauren Hood, and Layla Kaban Bowers, the Copy Editors whose attention to detail ensures that *Plurality* meets editorial standards, and to our Peer reviewers for lending their expertise and time to review our authors' work. Thanks to the Outreach Team, Daniel Wills and Maeve Burrell, who continue to sow our seeds by organising events and tending to our socials. And finally, to Deputy Lead Editor Rose Bates and Treasurer-Secretary Neha Ajith, I am eternally grateful for your patience, resilience, and friendship. I have wholeheartedly enjoyed and appreciated my time as Lead Editor for *Plurality*, even in its most challenging moments, and especially in its most rewarding ones – in collaborating with authors and teammates alike to publish important undergraduate work, broadening my horizons as an intersectional feminist, and growing as an individual.


As *Plurality* enters a new season, I am thrilled to announce Neha Ajith as my successor, in whom I have every confidence she will do amazing things for this journal and ensure it continues to bloom. Neha will oversee some exciting changes that the current team and I have democratically agreed upon: we will no longer have sections, and *Plurality* aims to become a society at the University of Edinburgh. In the spirit of stepping out from what has felt natural to the journal, we hope that the removal of sections will allow us to branch out and not restrict submissions to predefined categories. Further, our societal status will not alter our ethos, namely, to publish undergraduate research in intersectional feminism and remaining open-access and accessible to everyone but will allow us to set down roots within the university community.

I wish the best of luck to Neha and the new committee and thank you all for this fantastic year!

Warm Regards,  
Emilia Manning-Gaona

*E. Manning Gaona*





*Art and  
Literature*

# Fragmentation & Igbo Cosmology

in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*

by Saanvi Sinha

Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* chronicles the crises of identity faced by Ada, as she is possessed by Igbo spirits, the *ogbanje*. After growing up in Nigeria, she leaves for America for university, wherein she further feels the rifts between Igbo and Western epistemologies. Emezi renders the manner in which the *ogbanje* possess her as biological, her very existence is an iteration of Igbo cosmologies and its deities. Though Ada initially equates the fragmented identities that reside within her as 'broken', as perpetuated by colonial frameworks, it is upon her return to Nigeria she discovers her own 'place in this world' (Emezi 219). Through an analysis of liminality, imagery, and narrative technique, I argue that embracing the fragmentation of the self offers a more complex, nuanced conception of wholeness, grounded in the 'twoness' and fluidity of Igbo ontological structures.

Edited by Zeynep Kilic, Copyedited by Leyla Kaban Bowers,  
Reviewed by Megan Elaine Fourqurean, Art by Elise Adams

## Introduction

Akwaeke Emezi's 2018 novel *Freshwater* explores the multitudinous struggles of Ada, as she is possessed by the *ogbanje*, Igbo spirits that are said to 'repeatedly die and be repeatedly born by the same mother', birthed at the 'gates' (Ilechukwu 240). Drawing on the kinesis and fluidity of Igbo cosmology, the fragments of Ada's identity exist as distinct, but *interrelated* layers of wholeness. This cosmology is what Emeka George Ekwuru terms a "mythical rationality", a way of life based on man's spiritual needs', creating what Achebe documents as an 'arena for [the] interplay of forces', its art possessing a 'social and kinetic quality' in its reflection of human experience (34–5; Achebe qtd. in Eze 435). Ekwuru's 'twoness model of reality' emphasizes this impulse for kinesis: viewing the universe as 'twofold—each distinct but similar and *interdependent*: "visible" and "invisible"' (Ekwuru 43, italics original). The two-tier structure extends geographically into the Sky and the Earth; the Earth divided into the visible and the invisible, or more simply: the human and the spirit world. Victor Chikezie Uchendu similarly theorises existence for the Igbo as a 'dual but interrelated phenomenon involving the interaction between the material and the spiritual'; it is within this material reality Emezi postulates the presence of 'the gates' (11–12). The gates function as a site of 'liminality', a term Victor Turner explicates as the second, transitional stage within a *rites de passage*, 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age' (Turner 94). While Turner's model predicts a return to a 'relatively stable state', the *ogbanje*, in their cyclical lives, exist permanently 'betwixt and between' the human and spirit world, an inherently 'liminal' entity represented as 'unstable', their behaviour idiosyncratic and precarious (Turner 99).

Having the *ogbanje*'s *iyi-uwa*, a compound object binding them to the physical world, interweaved within the confines of Ada's body, the *ogbanje* describe the spiritual threshold through which they entered her world as 'the gates'. These gates are not only symbolic, but an intrinsic element of birth, their knowledge 'can all be traced back to the gates' (Emezi 33). Thus,

Ada's identity is constructed on the spiritual but decidedly tangible pillars of Igbo ontologies, in turn legitimizing the twoness model of reality as encapsulating the 'totality of "being"' (Mbiti qtd. in Ekwuru 50). This ontology must contend with the fact that modernity, and colonialism have manufactured a 'conventional "philosophy of history"...[that] is still normatively Eurocentric', wherein African history is 'subsumed to the ideological parameters and periodization of the general [colonialist] framework' (Bhabra qtd. in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 1). As the Global South faces the consequences of epistemicide and cultural imperialism, epistemic justice entails the 'liberation of reason from coloniality', to recognize African indigenous knowledge as a valid and legitimate way of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 3). Ada's traumatic life experiences, recounted in Nigeria and America, prompt a mind-numbing crisis of identity. Emezi's distinctive voice urges readers to critically perceive dominant, Western ideologies by displacing these epistemes in favour of Igbo ontologies through Ada's fragmented lens. Emezi's use of diction patterns, constantly evolving imagery and narrative technique cumulatively reconceptualises fragmentation from rupture into a multitudinous, layered selfhood grounded in Igbo cosmology, despite the efforts of colonial modernity to rewrite non-Western epistemologies.

## Liminality and the Gates

From the conception of the *ogbanje*, Emezi immerses the reader into an Igbo cosmology accentuated through Ada's consciousness, using continuously evolving imagery to expand the boundaries of body, spirit and identity. As 'the invisible world presses hard upon the visible', the Igbo 'see that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world' (Mbiti qtd. in Ekwuru 50). This interrelation is grounded in the material: chalk, kola and clay are used for making art that channelled 'a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form' (Achebe qtd. in Eze 436). Igbo art in its contemporary usage seeks to elucidate that 'no condition is permanent', these materials effectively capture the liminality of Igbo ancestral markers (Achebe qtd. in


Eze 436; Frederick).

The gates are a site of birth and liminality, acting as a transitional space between the earthly and the spiritual. Emezi personifies these gates as ‘carved monstrosities’, composed of clay and chalk to echo Igbo ancestral markers—signalling their role as portals between the ‘familiar and unfamiliar, sanctuary and outer world’ (Neaheer 49). Throughout the novel, Ada associates the sensory imagery of chalk and kola with her perception of the *ogbanje*. The gates through which they entered her body stank of ‘sour chalk’ — the combination of the tactile with the olfactory is telling: chalk, as the material of the gates at the point of transition between the human and spirit worlds, inherently links tactile imagery with liminality. Still, their ‘sour’ stink carries, or rather imposes, the *ogbanje* into her selfhood, incorporating these liminal entities into her being, an inherent fragmentation (Emezi 19, 43). To Ada, the *ogbanje* initially felt ‘bitter like kola’, their imposition marked by Emezi’s synaesthesia to distance Ada’s identity from the ‘Igbo-ness’ of kola, but when struck with grief, that distance is collapsed and Ada grieves as *one* with the *ogbanje*, turning ‘cold as chalk’, embracing the ancestral markers she initially rejected (Emezi 36). Teresa de Lauretis conceives the *ogbanje*’s narration to construct a self that is ‘not only multiple, but also “shifting, and often self-contradictory”’; while they were a ‘distinct we instead of being fully and just her’, it is in this distinctive embodiment through ancestral markers the conception of selfhood expands to incorporate the fragments of a cosmological, idiosyncratic spirit (qtd. in Sharma 266; Emezi 5). While Sharma argues that fragmentation implies a ‘perspective of lack’, the *ogbanje* are separated from their brothersisters in the spirit world, Ada is separated from her human mother, they *are* alienated in America, while facing epistemicide and cultural dissonance—there is a lack, there is a fragmentation (274). And it is these fragments that constitute the ‘wholeness’ of her identity, the boundaries of which are expanded by ancestral materials of liminality.

In Emezi’s resistance to aestheticise the *ogbanje*,

they capture ‘the Igbo world in all its aspects—material, spiritual, and sociocultural’ through a depiction of the visceral and biological as messengers of the abstract or spiritual (Uchendu 11). Emezi anchors spiritual fluidity in the biology of the human body. In conceiving the layers of the *ogbanje* via tangible, bodily and earthly imagery, Emezi delineates Ala, the Earth goddess, ‘a physical entity and a deity’; Ala is the scene where humans and gods interact (Ekwuru 65). The *ogbanje* trace their ‘madnesses’ back to the gates. The simile of ‘a slack mouth’ mirrors how they were ‘yawned’ into existence, establishing a link between biological processes and the gates (Emezi 33). The tricolon intensifies the effect of the diction pattern, now evolving, as ‘a pushing out, an expansion, an inhalation’, the body’s reproductive and respiratory system insinuated (Emezi 33). The pathway of the gates, the channel, is soon imagined as an ejaculation ‘into an unexpected limbo’, furthering reproductive connotations (Emezi 34). Emezi envisions the gates as a universally ‘special point of transition’ (Neaheer 49). The gates are gaining layers of spiritual value, in tune with human physicality, while the carved doors and chalk act as vessels, mediating the two realms. The image of ‘freshwater’ evolves later in the novel, initially representing the ‘channel’, or ‘river’, a liminal bridge; the recurring motif is embedded in the idea of the gates (Emezi 33–35).

However, this embodied connection transitions from the vitality of birth, into an open wound. Emezi describes the gates as ‘open sores’; the tactile simile visualises skin breaking apart, overflowing with pus—an unwanted fluid—leading to blood clotting, a recurring motif of Ada’s pain. Still, their knowledge is seen as contaminating—it has an olfactory ‘stink’ when ‘leaked mindlessly’, aligning with the metaphor of the sores, an ‘infected widening’ of space, manifesting as ‘rooms where there should be none’ (Emezi 33, 35). This transition is significant, it marks the spiritual contagion of the *ogbanje*, as they grow possessive of her body. They claim cruelty as their ‘birthright’, when Ada needs them, they ‘spring into sentience’—the sibilance evoking the sound of a hissing snake—they ‘drag’ themselves



‘upright’—connotatively conjuring an eerie sense of the undead, and their ‘grips into the sides of her mind’, underscoring a possessiveness through violent personification (Emezi 37). Because Igbo time is cyclical, as ‘it relates to the content of experience rather than to an absolute duration’: the fluidity of experience renders the *ogbanje* as constant participants of Ada’s reality, rather than being a ‘ghost’ of the past (Nwoga qtd. in Ekwuru 51). As the *ogbanje*’s ‘grips’ grow strong, Emezi articulates Ada’s loss of autonomy through free indirect discourse, a style wherein Ada’s first-person voice emerges within the *ogbanje*’s third person narrative. When Ada’s voice is focalised, her innocent, evocative tone seeks to stir friction between the two ontologies. The narrative style signals their possessiveness over Ada, her vulnerability reflected in the repetition of phrases as she calls to Yshwa, her human mother Saachi and a part of herself she has lost to ‘come back, come back’. The *ogbanje* become an omnipresent, parasitic figure ‘in the marble room of her mind’ (Emezi 36, 41). Their knowledge is also a net—tangible but full of gaps, constantly shifting, and misleading Ada. Through the ‘agentic power of self-naming’, Emezi’s discourse on fluidity, cyclic temporality, and the Igbo cosmology urge the readers to conceive the fragmented layers of Ada’s narrative (Magaqa 24).

### The Contact Zone

By overwriting the Western narrative, and engaging in the ‘contact zone’ where cultures ‘grapple with each other’, Emezi engages in transculturation—the process by which marginal groups ‘select and invent from...a dominant culture’ (Pratt 34–6). Christianity, as a tool for colonialism in Africa, resulted in the creation of ‘cultural standards that sought to erase not only the religious and spiritual beliefs...but their cultures’ (Masombuka 38–9). Ada’s father, Saul, follows the doctrines of colonial consequence and rejects the validity of Igbo cosmology as ‘*mumbo jumbo*’ (Emezi 13). His murder of the snake—a physical embodiment of Ala, the Earth goddess—functions as an allegory for how ‘Western modernity attempted to destroy African spirituality by diminishing it’ (Nwachukwu 98).

While Saul seeks to exclude the validity of Igbo cosmology from his lived experiences, Ada seeks to include Christianity into Igbo cosmology, longing for the order and symbol of morality and redemption that Yshwa provides, ‘in contrast to the chaos that the *ogbanje* cause’ (Masombuka 39). The *ogbanje* are sceptical of this ‘Father lord’, but by renaming Christ as Yshwa and adopting him as another brothersister, Emezi creates a universal mesh of spiritual connections through transculturation; stripping his name of that colonial ‘standard’. Yshwa exists as a spectator, occasionally providing her comfort, in the ‘marble room of her mind’ (Emezi 41). But because Yshwa recognises ‘the curve of her faith’, her body acts as a universal vessel of emotion (Emezi 37). Ada’s curve echoes Emezi’s words emphasising a cyclic Igbo temporality: ‘Curve in on yourself. [...] You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is the end’ (224). In Akan philosophy, *sankofa* is a ‘holistic recovery of one’s personal history’, to reach back to remember what was once forgotten and Ada’s *sankofa* is in this curve, in reflection of individual and colonial histories through religious transculturation (Nwachukwu 105). Thus, Emezi observes colonial epistemicide and reforms one of its mechanisms—religion—to create an identity that is uniquely, and in its totality Ada, composed of a colonial fragment that is remembered, instead of forgotten.

The consequences of coloniality are intentionally and inescapably present, shaping Ada and her surroundings, exemplified by narrative voice, focalisation and imagery. Emezi subverts the colonial impulse for epistemic uniformity by capturing the lived experience of Ada. Ada’s internal turmoil distanced her from the world of Western scientific approaches, as they were ‘solidifying into something lost and bereft’ (Emezi 37). Kwasi Wiredu importantly warns against the comparison of traditional, or spiritistic thought with Western scientific thought, as one effectively compares contemporary individualistic philosophising with relatively static indigenous ancestral knowledge, and since ‘folk conceptions tend not to develop with time’, it implies Igbo cosmology and Western scientific thought are temporally

and metaphysically disparate (qtd. in Eze 197). Wiredu's observation that folk conceptions are relatively static, Emezi presents the *ogbanje* as reactive, and adaptive, entering a 'contact zone' within the therapy office. Therapy does not work for Ada, *for a reason*—each intentional interrogation toward Asughara led to Ada experiencing 'a thousand spikes of pain'—while the comparison is warned against, it remains to be Ada's lived experience (Emezi 148). Emezi suggests an acceptance and embracing of their plurality toward the end of the novel, 'it is a powerful thing to be seen' (213). Malena, her friend from school, *Lęshi*, a Nigerian priest, and an Igbo historian ultimately guide Ada to her 'place on this earth' by seeing and accepting her Igbo identity as 'a village of faces...spirit and human, both and neither' (Emezi 226). Hence, Emezi resists a binary, static perception of Igbo cosmology and interprets healing through a genuine acceptance of the inherent fragmentation and disruption of the *ogbanje* in constituting a plural selfhood.

### **The Totality of Being the Child of Ala**

With Ada's identity in a state of flux, fragments forming and falling apart, her homecoming to Nigeria after studying in America marks her transformation as the child of Ala; the geographical border-crossing acts as a site of 'socio-cultural unlearning and resistance' and as a 'liminal space of deconstruction' (Di Pietro 108). Chinwe Achebe describes that 'man journeys from the spirit land to the land of the living' through a river, and this is the river through which the *ogbanje* 'leak mindlessly' into Ada's life (11; Emezi 33). Water is cosmologically charged for the Igbo, 'Rivers and streams are endued with spiritual potency, and the Igbo believe that "people live in the water"' (Kalu qtd. in Nwachukwu 189). After Ada crosses the geographical boundary and stays there 'too long', the brothersisters reprimand, 'you crossed an ocean and you went far away and you didn't listen to us' (Emezi 134). Being far away from the 'red mud we came from', constitutes the conventional migrant trope, but the explicit anger, and the interrogation from the brothersisters indicates a deeper, metaphysical rebellion, 'the gates were all wrong', 'somebody broke them', because they

could not return to the brothersisters, they could not die—the migration more significantly affected the spiritual world, rather than only being geographical (Emezi 46, 133). Since the gates that mediated that liminal space between the two realms were broken, Ada creates for herself a *new* 'liminal space of deconstruction', one wherein the *ogbanje* are materially integrated into her being: when once the world inside her mind 'has been far more real than the one outside', Ada finds herself turning to the tangible earth, the scene that is *Ala*. The interplay of water and earth imagery underlines this rebirth: freshwater and rivers link Ada to the spiritual realm, but as she looks to the barren future, 'the rest is a road that spreads into the unknown' (Emezi 35). *Ala*, both the goddess of the earth and the source of all freshwater, binds these forces, grounding Ada in the material world, and nourishing her with the fluid of life. This duality is reflected in Emezi's diction, where humans are 'turgid with potential', likened to cells absorbing the fresh force of life from the river (Emezi 34). The *ogbanje* that first 'floated smoothly' and then 'like a paste of palm oil, red and thick', slowing down the river, and staining its water with 'that bright mother colour', the water that carried them transforms into a viscous oil, their movement slowed, undergoing a transition only determined by Ada (Emezi 35). The simile to oil juxtaposes the more persistent water imagery throughout, accentuating their disruption, marking a shift in Ada's identity too. The voices that hold her back, like Saul's call to the gods in 'the grain of his baritone' expands the water imagery to insinuate sand in the water's way through his 'grain', anger the *ogbanje* and resist Ada's eventual reclamation of her plurality; but in this marginal space of friction and viscosity there is 'radical possibility' (hooks qtd. in Di Pietro 112). Ada's turn to earthly imagery maps this transition from Saachi to Ala, from her human birth to her spiritual birth—as she feels the 'flame of the forest blossoms' and sees 'a portal at the top of the plumeria tree' (Emezi 38). The gates, now a portal rooted in the earth, are no longer a spiritual possession as Ada steers away from retreating into 'all the madnesses' to her final resolution (Emezi 33). Ada, the *ogbanje*, and Ala, draw closer to each other,



through her belief, fragments coexisting throughout, as she completely and totally accepts the Igbo cosmologies that define her existence, her identity as the creator of liminality, as the child of Ala who declares: 'all freshwater comes out of my mouth' (Emezi 226).'

### Conclusion

'Where one thing stands, another stands by it' (Achebe 10). Achebe's Igbo proverb finds profound resonance in *Freshwater*, as Emezi's powerful use of fragmented diction patterns, evolving imagery and narrative technique challenges Western epistemologies, immersing readers in an Igbo cosmology, confronting dominant conceptions of identity, trauma, and spirituality. By navigating the impact of colonialism on Ada's consciousness and the interplay between the physical and spiritual realms, Emezi creates a world-making narrative that insists on fragments coexisting as layers of wholeness, 'actively deconstructing the systemic reality of contemporary society' (Di Pietro 111). The cumulative impact of its themes and the power of Emezi's voice create ripples of cultural resonance, inviting readers to question dominant narratives and explore their multifaceted channels of identity, to find their source of freshwater.

### Works Cited

Achebe, Chinwe. *The World of the Ogbanje*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986, Enugu, Nigeria, <https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/cultures/ff26/documents/037>.

Di Pietro, Alessandra. "Crossing the Borders of Genders and Genres: Akwaeke Emeki's *Freshwater* as a World-Making Narrative of Identity Reaffirmation." *Rethinking Identities Across Boundaries*, edited by Mariaconcetta Costantini et al., Springer International Publishing AG, 2023, pp. 107–23.

Ekwurū, Emeka George. *Igbo Cosmology and the Ontogeny and Hermeneutics of Igbo Sculpture: Studies in African Ethnoaesthetics*. Living Flames Resources, 2009.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *Freshwater*. Faber & Faber, 2019.

Frederick, Warren. "The Inescapable, Indivisible Essence of Pottery". *The Art of African Clay: Ancient and Historic African Ceramics*. 2003. Douglas Dawson Gallery, Chicago Illinois.

Ilechukwu, Sunday T. C. "Ogbanje/Abikuand Cultural Conceptualizations of Psychopathology in Nigeria." *Mental Health Religion & Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, May 2006, pp. 239–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13694670600621795>.

Magaqa, Tina, and Rodwell Makombe. "Decolonising Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading Of The Ogbanje Concept In Akwaeke Emeki's *Freshwater* (2018)." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2021, pp. 24–39.

Masombuka, Thobekile, "Both Exist at the Same Time": Reconceptualizing Religious Syncretism in Akwaeke Emeki's *Freshwater* (2018)', *Research in African Literatures*, vol.55, no.2 (2025), 36-49.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. Epistemic Freedom in Africa Deprovincialization and Decolonization. *Routledge*, 2018, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/start-session/idp=https%3A%2F%2Fidp.ed.ac.uk%2Fshibboleth&redirectUri=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.taylorfrancis.com%2Fbooks%2F9780429492204>.

Neaheer, Nancy C. "Igbo Carved Doors." *African Arts*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1981, pp. 49–88. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3336006>.

Nwachukwu, Cristovão, 'A Call to Return: Rerouting Healing Pathways in Akwaeke Emeki's *Freshwater*', *English in Africa*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2024), 91-109.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40.

Roberts, Rodney C. "'African Philosophy: An Anthology", Edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1999, pp. 536.

Sharma, Anke. "'She Is Not Ours, We Are Hers": We-Narration and Embodied Selves in Akwaeke Emeki's *Freshwater*', in *Poetics of Disturbances: Narratives of Non-normative Bodies and Minds*, ed. by Deborah de Muijnch, Jesisca Jumpertz, Ralk Schneider and Teresa Turnbull, (Brill, 2025), pp. 263-282.

Turner, Victor W. "Liminality and Communitas", in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.

Uchendu, Victor Chikezie. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.



# DENATURALISING THE BILDUNGSROMAN: Narrative, Cinematography, and Choreography in FRANCES HA

by Ellie Sutherland

This essay examines how Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* denaturalises and queers the literary coming-of-age genre by rejecting chrononormative models of adulthood in favour of non-linear, affective, and relational modes of living. Utilising queer theory – particularly Elizabeth Freeman's concept of chrononormativity and Jack Halberstam's continuation of queer time – the essay argues that *Frances Ha* subverts the conventions of the Bildungsroman, a genre historically invested in linear progression, heterosexual coupling, and economic productivity as markers of maturity. To come to this conclusion, this essay conducts an interrelated close reading of the film's narrative, cinematography, and choreography. Together, they evidence that meaning is not defined by chrononormativity, but rather can emerge through typically underrepresented bonds, improvisation, and temporal moments of joy. The film ultimately reimagines the natural not as a fixed destination governed by institutional milestones, but as an ongoing, improvisational process shaped by intimacy, affect, and alternative temporalities.

Edited by Zeynep Kilic, Copy edited by Juliette Pepin,  
Peer Reviewed by Angelina Robertson, Art by Elise Adams

Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012) interrogates the false binary between natural and unnatural, heterosexual and queer (Butler 2011), evident in the Bildungsroman genre and chrononormative notions of adulthood through its narrative, cinematography, and choreography. Instead of portraying the linear, 'natural' progression from adolescence into adulthood, Baumbach affirms alternative, queer modes of development and living. As Elizabeth Freeman defines it, "chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (3). This involves regulating time-life schedules, milestones, and narratives for maximum economic productivity. Jack Halberstam identifies queer time as an "opposition to the chrononormative systems of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (12). Through a queer examination of the film's genre and narrative, cinematography, choreography, and privilege, this essay examines how the film rejects naturalised notions of development and adulthood – signalled by marriage, reproduction, and economic productivity – and reconceptualises understandings of the natural in favour of a non-linear, affective mode of queer living.

### 1) Narrative and the Queering of the Bildungsroman

Before analysing how *Frances Ha* subverts the Bildungsroman, it is important to briefly evaluate the genre's motivations. The Bildungsroman is a literary genre characterised by the dramatisation of the passage from adolescence to adulthood. For women, this transition is deemed successful through marriage (Fraiman). Correspondingly, at the time of the genre's legitimisation, "women can rarely have been held in lower esteem" (Dockrell, 339). Women's roles were centred on marriage and motherhood, as they were unable to transgress against sex, gender, and class expectations. The Bildungsroman found cinematic translation in the early nineteenth century, and over time, it evolved into the coming-of-age genre (Schmidt, 2000). The genre is identified by the dramatisation of events that, according to Matthew Schmidt, "relate to the child's initiation into new realms

of psychological experiences and the adolescent's encounters with the joys and challenges of modern life" (Ibid, 1). However, in doing so, the coming-of-age genre concurrently depends upon and reasserts chrononormative notions of ageing: the coherence of childhood into adolescence, and then into adulthood. Alternatively, Baumbach constructs a distinctly queer narrative that subverts the conventions of the Bildungsroman: "the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death" (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 182).



*Frances Ha* immediately subverts chrononormative notions of development by centring its narrative on the initiative experiences of twenty-seven-year-old Frances. Past adolescence, Frances nonetheless exists in the transitory space between adolescence and adulthood. As some reviewers argue, she acts "in the manner of an overgrown toddler" and "fluctuates between the desire for growth and the fear of the demands of adulthood" (Martin, 32). Such reviews highlight the perceived 'arrested development' of Frances, who struggles to fulfil societal expectations. Yet, despite this so-called 'arrested development', Frances does face – and yes, fear – but ultimately overcomes heartbreak, unemployment, and thereby economic precariousness. In spite of these obstacles, Frances avoids the marriage pattern typical of her gender, class, and the Bildungsroman more generally. Indeed, the heartbreak that propels her story does not stem from the end of a romantic heterosexual relationship, but rather from the gradual loss of a close female friendship. In this way, Frances does not fail at

the 'adult' experience: rather, she fails to conform to chrononormative expectations for her gender, class, and age. Friendship – or to use Eve Sedgwick's (1985) term, 'homosociality' – is for women connected to childhood; in turn, heterosexuality is connected to adulthood (Schadewaldt 2019). By centring Frances' homosociality and refusing to provide narrative resolution through the heterosexual systems of family, reproduction, and economic efficiency, Baumbach resists the capitalist temporality Freeman describes; the measurement of success according to one's attainment of heterosexual life narratives and milestones.

Baumbach's subversion of chrononormative structures, such as heterosexuality and marriage, is evident in Frances' monologue (47:26-49:02). In the scene, Frances drunkenly describes her 'far-fetched' hopes for her future relationships. The dialogue by Greta Gerwig – who stars in and co-wrote the film – appears completely improvised as she stumbles and stutters through her delivery. However, Gerwig told *IndieWire* in 2013, "There was no improv. We did lots and lots of takes, and most of what you see is, like, take 38". This deception is a hallmark of the 'mumblecore' style and genre, characterised by a low-budget, unpolished aesthetic and speech (Filippo, 2). Gerwig, considered a founder of the genre, states that mumblecore exists only in response to "people feeling like movies didn't actually show how their lives were actually being lived" (Ibid 4). Paradoxically, the more misrepresented everyday lives are, the more they take on a faraway, unnatural quality, becoming queer. Indeed, in a contemporary culture more receptive to alternative life paths – singlehood, found-family, and delayed or rejected parenthood – *Frances Ha* resonates as audiences seek representations of their own non-linear, non-chrononormative lives. This is reflected in Frances' monologue:

I want this one moment. It's – it's what I want in a relationship... it's that thing when you're with someone... and you love them and they know it... and they love you and you know it... but it's a party... and you're both talking to other

people... and you're laughing and shining... and you look across the room... and catch each other's eyes... And it's funny and sad, but only because this life will end, and it's this secret world... that exists right there... in public, unnoticed, that no one else knows about. It's sort of like how they say that other dimensions exist all around us, but we don't have the ability to perceive them. That's – That's what I want out of a relationship. Or just life, I guess. Love (49:14-50:37)

For some reviewers, Frances exhibits "a huge capacity for denial [and being] touchingly quixotic" (Taubin 2013, 27). However, her 'secret world' keenly expresses the faraway, imaginative aspects of female life in a heteronormative society. Even more, Baumbach and Gerwig depict Frances' world as entirely valid. By the end of the film, Frances finds love as she looks across the room and meets her lover's gaze: "Who are you making eyes at? That... that's Sophie. She's my best friend" (1:17:55). Baumbach and Gerwig told *Flavorwire* in 2013 that they never intended to make a love story between the two friends. Only after numerous readings of the script did they realise the importance of female friendship to the story; they went back and "beat it out like a romcom: she has the girl, she loses the girl, she tries to make the girl jealous. It's like there's a will-they-won't-they tension to the story". Though love is not an uncommon theme in the coming-of-age genre, *Frances Ha* reinterprets its gendering by showing it played out between two women, thereby platforming non-chrononormative experiences and resisting the naturalised, heterosexual resolutions conventional of the Bildungsroman, such as marriage.

## 2) Cinematography and Temporal Drifting

Of the many features of *Frances Ha*, one that immediately stands out is the black-and-white cinematography. This technique allows Baumbach to validate Frances' journey, however subversive of the coming-of-age genre. Contemporarily, films are seldom shot in black-



Fig. 1. Still from  
Baumbach,  
*Frances Ha*  
(34:20)

and-white; as black-and-white film stock becomes harder to purchase and film moves towards digitisation, colour has taken precedence. Baumbach's and cinematographer Sam Levy's decision to go black-and-white initially seems inexplicable. Unlike other contemporary period films, such as *Cold War* (2018), *The Lighthouse* (2019), and *Mank* (2020), there is no clear reason for *Frances Ha* to lack colour: it is set in the modern day and was even shot in colour. Therefore, this choice involved a deliberate reinterpretation and stylisation of reality. As Wheeler Dixon states, "the very act of making a black-and-white film transmutes the original source material, for life, as we know, takes place in colour" (2). Talking to *Collider* in 2013, Baumbach touches upon this reinterpretation of normative life: "It was the inherent romance of the character and her romantic view of the world. It felt like she should have a cinematic document of her life. I mean, it's a kind of an *ordinary life*, but I wanted it to *feel beautiful and joyful*". Here, through the use (or lack thereof) of colour, Baumbach affirms Frances' coming-of-age narrative – however contrary to chrononormative frameworks – as equally deserving of representation, beauty, and joy.

Using camera work and framing, Baumbach underpins Frances' initiation into adulthood – despite her perceived childishness – as she experiences her first heartbreak. One of the reasons *Frances Ha* resonates is because of how the cinematography supports and expands upon

Frances' and Sophie's homosocial relationship. Indeed, in the early parts of the film, Frances and Sophie are almost always in the same frame, side by side. Most of these shots take place in domestic settings, such as in bed together – a space typically reserved for heterosexual partners and sexual activity in the heterosexual romcom genre (Smyth 2014). The companionship captured in these scenes undermines the "enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring the male right of physical, economic, and emotional access" (Rich 1980, 648). However, while this subverts the normative representations for the audience, the characters are unable to upset the system structurally in their individual resolutions: Sophie ends up in a conventional heterosexual relationship, getting married and living a suburban life, which continually attempts to destroy Frances and Sophie's queer friendship. Indeed, as the narrative unfolds, Frances and Sophie are seldom in the same shot. Even in scenes together, we can see Frances' increasing isolation from Sophie. In one example, Frances becomes upset as she realises she is now the 'third wheel' after Sophie starts dating her boyfriend. Baumbach chooses not to frame the two women together: instead, the camera alternates between shots of Sophie and her boyfriend and shots of Frances. During these shots, Sophie is depicted as a blurred, peripheral figure (34:20), highlighting their growing distance and Frances' isolating experience of heartbreak. This is heightened following Sophie's engagement, whereafter we see her

and Frances in complete isolation. By doing so, the film visually represents the dissonance between Frances and Sophie and their response to what it means to grow up chronormatively, making clear the realities of the heteronormative construction of relationships, which privileges the heterosexual couple, causing Frances and Sophie's relationship to wither in comparison. These expectations continually impose themselves on Frances and Sophie's friendship, threatening to destroy their queer alternative of female fulfilment.

### 3) Choreography and Queer Time

Frances' spontaneous sprint through New York City embodies her resistance to chrononormative expectations: she moves purely for the joy of movement itself. Emboldened by her new friends and apartment, she sprints through the streets of New York City as David Bowie's 'Modern Love' plays (21:50-22:40). The scene is similar to Leos Carax's *Mauvais Sang* (1986): the film's protagonist also runs through the streets as 'Modern Love' plays.



Fig. 2. Still from Baumbach, *Frances Ha* (21:50-22:40)

As Calum Marsh finds, "The act of running [in *Mauvais Sang*] has never before looked so expressive, either – he makes it look like a physical necessity, the only way to deal with some inner turmoil, a release as much for him as it is for us watching" (2013). Inspired by this scene, Baumbach frames Frances as a continuation of a lineage of queer characters who use movement to liberate (even momentarily) themselves from oppression. *Mauvais Sang* takes place in an imagined, future society that is infected by AIDS, suggesting that bodily improvisation is itself an inherently queer

form of resistance. Baumbach and his team evoke a similar feeling as Frances runs. The camera swoops in on her as she dashes and dances, surpassing passers-by and cars on the road as if she is untouchable. Her speed and relief reflect the same necessity as Carax's work: Frances runs because, for the first time in a long time, she feels good, unconstrained, and free to be her natural self. In this way, Frances' run through New York City functions as a physical embodiment of queer temporality. As José Esteban Muñoz argues: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality... We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world" (1). Frances' movement underscores Muñoz's argument that queerness is always performative and always anticipatory. Her dance becomes a rebuttal against the naturalised structures of heteronormative society; it is a kinetic enactment of possibility, an insistence that queer living is not only imaginable, but already being embodied in everyday acts of joy and disobedience. It is these acts of freedom that are truly natural. By running and dancing through New York City's streets, ecstatically and absent of any obligation, Frances reclaims her space and time, not marked by social or economic productivity, prioritising affect over the demands of institutional forces. Through her running, Frances temporarily inhabits a queer, utopian space where she is untethered from the demands of adulthood.

### 4) Privilege and the Limits of Subversion

When discussing Baumbach's subversion of the Bildungsroman and naturalised socioeconomic structures, it is important to recognise Frances' privileged experience of such structures. Frances' capacity to pursue a non-linear, affect-driven life is enabled by her proximity to wealth. From the outset, Frances is enabled by her family's financial support – indeed, even if we do not see them, we know she received sufficient funding to attend Vassar College in New York. Further, she repeatedly falls back on the comfort of her trust-fund friends, Benji and Lev, a writer for *Saturday Night Live* and a visual artist, respectively. A turning point in the film, Frances travels to France and stays in her acquaintance's loft, free of charge. Frances

moves through upper-class, rich spaces. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, this is one of the primary determinants of class preservation: individuals tend to meet *in* rather than *between* social classes (Jenkins 2002). Indeed, similar to Baumbach's career, the narrative is propelled by a sense of proximity and shared privilege: "the right upbringing in the right place with the right parents (a cinephile professor and a film critic), the right schools, right connections and right friends" (Cheshire 2013). This complicates the film's subversion of the Bildungsroman and chrononormative tropes, showing that the freedom to resist their impositions is, in part, dependent on privileged access to resources. Thus, while *Frances Ha* effectively imagines new, natural modes of living and belonging, it does not do so indiscriminately but is implicated in the material realities that inform whose nonconformity is allowed and celebrated.

*Frances Ha* effectively queers the coming-of-age genre by resisting chrononormative structures through its narrative, cinematography, and choreography. These aspects of the film are characterised by affect, movement, and relationality rather than normalised, naturalised notions of productivity. Frances' narrative is marked by her experience of homosociality rather than marriage and reproduction that are typical of the Bildungsroman; Baumbach and his cinematography team's framing and colour grading reaffirm Frances' atypical transition from adolescence to adulthood; and Frances' rapturous movement in the 'Modern Love' scene embodies queer temporality, where affect and pleasure are prioritised over productivity. However, these modes of subversion are undoubtedly informed by socioeconomic privilege. As highlighted by the work of theorists such as Freeman, Halberstam, and Muñoz, Frances' coming-of-age arc serves as a replacement model of capitalist chrononormativity. Her narrative reveals that marriage, reproduction, and economic wealth are not evidence of a meaningful life; one can emerge through typically underrepresented bonds, improvisation, and temporal moments of joy. Contrary to many reviews, *Frances Ha* does not tell a story of arrested development; rather,

it offers the possibility of not only queer living, but queer flourishing. Just like Frances' dance through New York City, queer living is not about arrival, but affective becoming.

### Works Cited:

Baumbach, Noah. "Noah Baumbach Talks Frances Ha, *While We're Young*, the Writing Process, and More." Interview by Sheila Roberts. *Collider*, 12 May 2013, <https://collider.com/noah-baumbach-frances-ha-while-were-young-interview/>.

Baumbach, Noah, and Gerwig, Greta. "Flavorwire Interview: Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach on Creating *Frances Ha* Together." Interview by Jason Bailey. Flavorwire, 16 May 2013, <https://www.flavorwire.com/391777/flavorwire-interview-greta-gerwig-and-noah-baumbach-on-creating-frances-ha-together>.

Butler J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1990.

Cheshire, Godfrey. "Frances Ha." *Roger Ebert*, 16 May 2013, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/frances-ha-2013>.

Dinshaw, Carolyn, et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 177-195.

Dixon, Wheeler W. *Black and White Cinema: A Short History*. Rutgers University Press, 2015.

Dockrell, Morgan. "Is the New Woman a Myth?" *Humanitarian*, vol. 8, 1896, pp. 339-350.

Filippo, Maria S. "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement." *CineAction*, no. 85, 2011, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A269691785/LitRC?u=anon~a74501b3&sid=googleScholar&xid=cd26b98d>.

Fraiman, Susan. *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

*Frances Ha*. Directed by Noah Baumbach, performances by Greta Gerwig, Mickey Sumner, and Adam Driver, IFC Films, 2012.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Gerwig, Greta. Interview by Eric Kohn. "Greta Gerwig on *Frances Ha*, Working with Noah Baumbach, and the Art of Collaboration." *IndieWire*, 17 May 2013, <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/05/greta-gerwig-on-frances-ha-working-with-noah-baumbach-and-the-art-of-collaboration-97323/>.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005.

Jenkins, Richard. *Pierre Bourdieu*. Revised edition., Routledge, 2002.

Marsh, Calum. "Classic Scene: A French Dance to David Bowie's 'Modern Love.'" *Esquire*, 11 Mar. 2013, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a19257/mauvais-sang-scene/>.

Martin, Jake. "Unlovable Characters: Transition, Loss and Love in the Films of Noah Baumbach." *America Magazine*, 7 Oct. 2013, pp. 31-33.

Muñoz, José E. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631-660.

Schadewaldt, Anika M. "I'm Not a Real Person Yet': Queering Coming of Age in *Frances Ha*." *Aspeers*, vol. 12, 2019, pp. 97-116.

Schmidt, Matthew P. *Coming of Age in American Cinema: Modern Youth Films as Genre*. University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2000.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire. Thirtieth anniversary edition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Smyth, Sarah. "The Queer Female Friendship of *Frances Ha*." *Bitch Flicks*, 24 Sept. 2014.

Taubin, Amy. "Emotional Pratfalls." *Film Comment*, vol. 49, no. 3, May-June 2013, pp. 24-27.

# History and Classics



# feeling *human* beyond biology:

The emergence of the history of emotions as an academic field in the late twentieth century coincided with the rise of postcolonial and orientalist critique in historiography. Although rarely in explicit dialogue, these intellectual traditions share a similar critical engagement with universalist explanations of human experience and the naturalisation of feeling. This essay examines how postcolonial and orientalist critique reshaped both the methodologies and conclusions of the history of emotions by challenging claims about the biological universality of emotions and the teleological narratives around them.

Early work in the history of emotions often assumed the universality of emotional experience and situated emotional development within a civilising teleology. Postcolonial and orientalist critiques, notably by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, exposed the epistemological violence inherent in such universalising frameworks and revealed how they naturalise power hierarchies. Drawing on these insights and poststructuralist theories of discourse and power, historians of emotions developed analytical paradigms that reconceived emotions as socially constructed, historically situated, and deeply implicated in power relations, challenging assumptions of both universality and linear teleology.

This shift enabled new questions about how emotions circulate, stick to bodies and objects, and serve as technologies of governance and resistance. By systematically engaging sources beyond purely textual analysis and embracing multi-modal archives historians of emotions have responded to critiques about the limits of linguistic and postcolonial methodology. In doing so, the field has opened space to interrogate the embodied and somatic dimensions of emotion and to access the emotional lives of marginalised and subaltern groups in ways that extend and at times transcend postcolonial frameworks.

Ultimately, this essay argues that the history of emotions owes its initial conceptual and methodological toolkit to postcolonial theory, but that its subsequent evolution points beyond those origins to a more dynamic field.

Edited by Poppy Williams, Copy edited by Juliette Pepin  
Peer Reviewed by Arcin Celikesmer, Art by Rosy Fitch

by Isabelle Davis

Embodiment, Orientalism, and Postcolonial Critique  
in Emotional Historiography

The 1980s marked the early developmental phases of both the history of emotions and postcolonial studies, with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) often cited as the genesis of the latter.<sup>1</sup> Although the two fields rarely cite one another directly, one can trace the impact of postcolonialism upon the development of the history of emotions and its subsequent conclusions and methodologies. To establish itself, the history of emotions had to dismantle longstanding claims that emotions were universal, biologically determined, or part of a civilising teleology that celebrated a movement from childish societies to those centred on emotional regulation. Postcolonial critiques of epistemological violence and universalism were central to this shift, demonstrating how seemingly neutral accounts of human nature were embedded in colonial hierarchies. These insights enabled historians to conceive of emotions as socio-cultural constructions and legitimised the study of their relationship to power, authority, and inequality. They also underpinned the field's movement away from biological or evolutionary explanations of affect and its challenge to civilisational narratives that equated emotional restraint with Western modernity. This influenced some of the key works within the history of emotions such as those of Sara Ahmed,<sup>2</sup> and William Reddy which are discussed later.<sup>3</sup> The history of emotions also took on methodological skills from postcolonialism, namely a focus on literature, but has now progressed past this to a much wider range of sources. This progression is part of a wider development of the history of emotions as a reaction to some of the critiques of postcolonialism and orientalism, such as its heavily linguistic analysis of sources. This essay will trace this

development through the field, concluding that while postcolonialism was crucial for the initial development of the history of emotions central tenements, it could now be a limiting factor constraining a discipline that has developed far beyond its initial theoretical inheritance. This paper will specially focus on the methodological borrowings of the history of emotions, their shared based in constructivism and their questioning of power.

Early work in the history of emotions was mainly focused on European history before the twentieth century and rarely touched on topics of colonialism or of the colonial world.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, they reproduced Orientalist assumptions and ideas from their place within Western epistemology. One of the most notable early contributions was an article by Lucien Febvre in 1941 in which he called for the systematic study of feelings using historical methodology, which many historians of emotions mark as one of the first calls for this type of study.<sup>5,6</sup> This article was also a response to Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) which Febvre critiques for relying on artistic intuition as his historical methodology, undermining the rigor of the discipline.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, Huizinga's main argument that the Middle Ages had a childish emotional life, in comparison to his modern world, gained traction within history.<sup>8</sup> Notably, we see this heightened reverence to emotions in historical research throughout Norbert Elias' *The Civilising Process* (1968), which builds off of Huizinga's *Middle Ages* to look at *civilité* through Freudian glasses, focusing on drives and the process of emotional restraint as pillars of the civilising process.<sup>9</sup> This trajectory of the history of emotions has been critiqued and problematised by historians of emotions.

Medieval historian Barbara Rosenwein also posits that Huizinga and Elias' works have

built a ‘grand narrative’ for the history of emotions, which is that “the history of the West is the history of increasing emotional restraint”.<sup>10</sup> Rosenwein’s critiques are based in her rejection of the reductionism and universalism prominent in her field. However the tools used for critiquing this are rooted in postcolonial theory’s dismantling of universalism and modernisation teleology bringing the two disciplines together.

As stated, *Orientalism* was a seminal book for postcolonial theory in the 80s which looked at these issues of universalism and teleology. Said delineated how colonial violence and hegemony were not only achieved through military intervention, but also via culture and ideology.<sup>11</sup> Importantly for the history of emotions, Said exemplified epistemological violence in the construction of the Orient as the ‘Other’ in opposition to the West.<sup>12</sup> This opposition was built upon by postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2008), where he reiterates the use of Europe as the universal template and that the linear progression towards Western modernity must be challenged; we must see Europe as a case study as it ‘is no longer seen as embodying anything like a “universal human history”’.<sup>13</sup> I posit that this linear, civilising teleology of history is not dissimilar to Rosenwein’s critique of what is perpetuated and legitimised in previous histories of emotion. Historians Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim advance this argument, explicitly connecting the practice of assigning emotions to different stages of development with the imperial world order.<sup>14</sup> The aspiration to “emotional self-regulation” and “finer feelings” as markers of modernity and civil society were Western ideas which were spread through colonial contact.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside these Orientalist early histories, the history of emotions subfield has been

instrumental in unpacking a wide range of scientific literature that also reproduced Orientalising epistemologies. Much of this scientific research either saw emotions as neuro-biological actions and/or evolutionary products.<sup>16</sup> It dates back to the research of Charles Darwin (1872), who saw emotions as universal signals within a narrow range of adaptive problems.<sup>17</sup> This trend of universalisation has first been unpacked by postcolonial theorists: by erasing cultural specificity and subjectivity, universalism becomes an epistemological tool that justifies the domination of the many by the few, and postcolonial scholarship has therefore exposed it as a fundamentally colonial mode of knowledge production.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> This acts as another example of the history of emotions and postcolonialisms mutual topics of interest.



In addition, this reduction of emotions to a biological sense and use of evolutionary language also contributes to their emotion’s irrationalisation, which the history of emotions has had to overcome.<sup>20</sup> This has been most productively analysed by the anthropologist Sarah Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.<sup>21</sup> She notes that Darwin’s interpretation sees emotions as signs of a more primitive time which gets linked to non-whiteness so that “becoming less white would involve moving backwards in time.”<sup>22</sup> This is a rhetoric common

throughout justifications for colonialism, the civilising mission and racism.<sup>23</sup> Pernau and Jordheim extend this critique by showing how the teleology embedded in early emotional regimes mirrors the broader modernist narrative that idealises technological progress and quantitative knowledge as markers of rationality.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, they illuminate how both scientific and historical accounts relied on the same evolutionary and civilisational logic that postcolonial theory dismantles. Therefore, the field's shift from universalist to constructivist understandings of emotion is inseparable from these postcolonial critiques. It marks a decisive break with colonial epistemologies, and a central pivot that enables the emergence of the history of emotions as a sub-field in the 1980's – one that understands emotions as socio-cultural products that are historically and linguistically mediated.<sup>25</sup>



This constructivist shift found historians of emotion working within the same theoretical basis as postcolonial scholars, particularly in their shared reliance on poststructuralist accounts of discourse and power. Constructivism is the theory that reality is socially constructed through systems which are actively built upon, and post-structuralism argues in parallel that social and societal structures are not fixed, universal or timeless, with meaning being

constantly negotiated within and between them. These two come together to show how power operates within discourse to create what is regarded as truth. Throughout *Orientalism*, Said directly references poststructuralist Michel Foucault's idea of discourse to sustain his argument about the Occident creating the Orient, rather than it being a reality.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, Homi Bhabha directly builds on poststructuralist theories by Foucault, Jaques Derrida and Jaques Lacan, to argue that colonial identity is unstable, contingent and produced through negotiation in what he calls the Third Space.<sup>27</sup>

These discursive theories are pertinent to the history of emotions, as they help move emotions from their place as universal biological responses, demonstrating that emotional life is never simply interior or biological. Rather, history of emotions explains alongside postcolonial theory that emotions are shaped through the same structures of power that reorganise colonial knowledge. Joanna Bourke's *The Story of Pain* (2014) demonstrates how language can impact the feeling, reception and treatment of pain, returning to questions of discourse throughout her book.<sup>28</sup> Reddy reinforces this by highlighting that emotional expression always involves a form of translation, as it is the effort to communicate a non-verbal experience unobservable to others.<sup>29</sup>

The basis of emotions as constructed allowed the methodological space for the field to question what emotions do for power, where they once again draw from postcolonial conclusions about power, authority and resistance. Ahmed's discussion of these three topics in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004) has been an influential insight, through her idea of emotions 'sticking' to objects.<sup>30</sup> She argues that emotions do not simply exist inside individuals but circulate, through

which they become attached ('stick') to particular groups, objects or ideas over time. She questions what emotions stick to who, where and why across history, demonstrating how emotions as technologies of power impact social hierarchies. Crucially, this sticking is not natural, but once it occurs, it can appear so.<sup>30</sup> In her third chapter, she specifically looks at how fear sticks to the black body and terrorists. She uses excerpts from Frantz Fanon's work to show how fear doesn't simply move from a white body towards the black body but brings the two closer together through a form of shared feeling.<sup>32</sup> However, the emotion that passes between is not the same – it always involves a "(mis)reading [of] the other's feelings" which is especially where power relations come in.<sup>33</sup> Ahmed utilises poststructuralist methodology to study how the language of fear around terrorists intensifies the threat, as it widens the distinction between the threatened and the threatener.<sup>34</sup> Her book demonstrates how emotional regimes were used as tools of governance through power relations. She also focuses on the idea of contact, which directly links with Bhabha's work on hybridity. Hybridity describes the space where identities are formed through negotiation, translation, and the unsettling mixture of coloniser and colonised meanings.<sup>35</sup> Ahmed's focus on contact draws attention to how emotional norms and affective expressions are likewise shaped in these contact zones, producing mixed, ambivalent, and historically contingent emotional formations.<sup>36</sup>

Another facet of power relations interrogated in postcolonial theory is how regimes of power rely on a series of affective oppositions – civil/barbaric, rational/emotional, modern/primitive, black/white, East/West – to construct and maintain hierarchies. These binaries have also become central points of interrogation within the history of emotions. One

particularly productive site of critique is the opposition between emotions as individual experiences and emotions as collective, socially-produced ones. Ahmed cautions against both "inside-out" models of affect, which treat emotions as internal states that radiate outward, and "outside-in" models, which see emotions as merely imposed by social forces; instead, she argues for an understanding of affect that emerges in the relational space between bodies and worlds.<sup>37</sup> Pernau and Jordheim further examine how the civility/barbarism binary intersects with oppositions such as virtue/vice and private/public in the emotional regimes of colonial and postcolonial societies.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, they demonstrate that emotional life is inseparable from the classificatory systems that legitimate power, reinforcing the history of emotions' turn toward interrogating (and undoing) the affective foundations of colonial hierarchies. Across these debates, scholars agree on the necessity of approaching emotions through pluralism, fluidity, and relationality which closely parallels postcolonial theory's own insistence on hybridity, ambivalence, and the negotiated identities of colonial subjects, found within the scholars featured in this essay.

In addition to impacts on the conclusions of histories of emotions, we can trace the impact of postcolonialism and Orientalism on the source material deployed within these histories. Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) is one piece of postcolonial theory that has particular relevance to the archive of emotions.<sup>39</sup> Spivak's essay discusses the difficulties for the subaltern attempting to speak (assert their presence and/ or point of view) within Western knowledge systems, where all attempts are translated, overwritten or Antonio Gramsci, but rather than all

silenced. *Subaltern* builds on the ideas of oppressed peoples, Spivak specifically refers to those who can't access Western society due to the oppression of cultural imperialism.<sup>40</sup> This essay has been influential for encouraging historians to look at silence in the archives, not as an absence but as evidence of power at play. This idea of silence is particularly relevant to the history of emotions, as emotions sit at an intersection between the embodied/ internal, and the verbal/ non-verbal.

This has led to some historians of emotions rejecting this to an extent, convincingly arguing that emotions can provide novel ways to let the subaltern speak. Postcolonial literary critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair identifies postcolonial literature as an 'emotional reservoir' where the subaltern can speak through an outcry of emotions.<sup>41</sup> She argues that literature appears to have no evolutionary purpose and yet persists across history due to its unique creation of visceral reactions, ability to break down emotional barriers and nuanced intimacy which posits it as the perfect vehicle for subaltern expression.<sup>42</sup> Here, Nair is drawing on the long connection between postcolonialism and literature, which has been a key source since Said's development of the 'Orientalist canon' in 1978 and his heavily-textual analysis.<sup>43</sup> This methodology is also adopted by Ahmed who uses close text analysis to draw out her arguments centred around emotions as performances and speech acts.<sup>44</sup> In this way, the use of literary texts becomes emblematic of the larger methodological alignment between the two fields, which focus on language and construction.

Due to their similarities, it is unsurprising that the history of emotions has faced some

similar criticism to those of postcolonialism. Reddy has noted that the basic concepts of emotions, such as feeling and affect, are formulated through Western epistemology, and yet emotions' existence is not restricted to this thought system.<sup>45</sup> Reddy situates this difficulty within a broader tension between writing history and accounting for genuine cultural difference.<sup>46</sup> In relation to this tension is the larger critique directed towards postcolonialism, for being overwhelmingly focused on the Anglo-Francophone world. *Orientalism* begins with a quote from a French journalist in Beirut and then explicitly states that the French and British have the strongest Orientalist traditions, as Said's Orient is mainly restricted to the Middle East and parts of North Africa.<sup>47</sup> Building off of this, Spivak critiques *Orientalism* for its nationalist focus, stressing how integrating more pluralistic methods of thinking, such as Caribbean *créolité* and archipelagic thinking, would be more productive when considering colonial legacies and relationships with ex-metropolises.<sup>48</sup>



However, the history of emotions has taken in this criticism and productively used it to progress the field in various ways, mainly through the rejection of a strong constructivist and linguistic approach which postcolonialism can get stuck within.<sup>49</sup>

Studies of emotion are uniquely capable of highlighting and interrogating the embodied experience of emotions, in addition to their verbal expression. Reddy rejects this split between cognitive emotions and somatic affects in his article *Against Constructionism* (1997), suggesting a grounding of universalism in emotional life.<sup>50</sup> In line with this, Bourke's *The Story of Pain* (2014) operates on a body-language-culture trifecta, repeatedly coming back to the embodied experience of pain, including a chapter on non-verbal expression through gesture and facial expressions.<sup>51</sup> Her book also draws on a large range of sources including textbooks, personal testimonies, legal texts and medical questionnaires to conclude that pain is not a universal biological sensation but a historically contingent, socially mediated experience.<sup>52</sup> Not only does this monograph underline the main claims of the history of emotions, it also demonstrates the wider pattern of using multi-modal sources within the history of emotions. This is equally seen in the work of Gabriele Proglia, who interviewed migrants from the Horn of Africa to Italy, arguing that oral history is the most appropriate way to centralise marginalised voices and avoid the typical institutional power relations at work in traditional archives. His methodology, therefore, not only constitutes another way that focusing on emotions can help the subaltern speak, but how non-textual sources have become vital to histories of emotions. His work on migration also forms part of a wider emotional turn within human geography, which has led to a greater focus on spatiality in the history of emotions, and a move beyond nationalistic conception.<sup>54</sup> Spivak herself noted illegal migrants as the new subaltern, suggesting that, based on historians of emotions conclusions about subaltern interrogation, emotions can be highly productive in this field.<sup>55</sup>

Crucially, these improvements are all based in the interdisciplinary nature of the history of emotions. Many of the key scholars of the history of emotions are in fact not historians, such as Ahmed and Reddy. Yet, their methodologies have been highly productive for the study of emotions. Reddy's use of ethnographies of emotions as the basis for his critique of the narrowness of Western understandings within emotional studies is one example.<sup>56</sup> Insights from feminist theory have also been noted as influential in the history of emotions by Ahmed,<sup>57</sup> Reddy,<sup>58</sup> and Nair.<sup>59</sup> While postcolonialism's permanent discreditation of universalism and its literary methods were enormously productive in the early development of the history of emotions, they now risk becoming limiting orthodoxies.<sup>60</sup> Yet through interdisciplinary borrowings, the field has achieved a methodological flexibility impossible within traditional historical practice alone.

As argued, the relationship between postcolonialism and the history of emotions is a fluid one, much like both of their subjects. The birth of the history of emotions owes much to postcolonial theorists, who provided the conceptual tools that enabled historians of emotion to dismantle universalist and civilising narratives; to scrutinise the power embedded in emotional regimes; and to legitimise literary and discursive analyses as historical methods. Yet, as a more established and praised sub-field in and of itself, it now requires a progression that it has been pursuing successfully through critical responses to the limits of postcolonialism. Through interdisciplinary expansion and methodological innovation, the field has developed new ways of accessing and assessing emotional life,

particularly among subaltern and marginalised groups, that move beyond frameworks of foundational/early postcolonial theory, while still honouring its foundational insights.

#### Footnotes

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1978).
2. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).
3. William M Reddy, 'Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions,' *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (1997).
4. Gabriele Proglia, *The Horn of Africa Diasporas in Italy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 120.
5. Lucien Febvre, 'La Sensibilité et l'Histoire: Comment Reconstituer La Vie Affective D'autrefois ?' *Annales d'Histoire Sociale* (1939-1941) 3, no. 1/2 (1941): 5–20.
6. Barbara H Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History,' *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45.
7. Febvre, "La Sensibilité," 8-11.
8. Rosenwein, "Worrying," 826.
9. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil : Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 1994), 6-8.
10. Rosenwein, "Worrying," 827.
11. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-12.
12. Ibid., 10-11.
13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2008), 1-24.
14. Margrit Pernau and Helge Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions : Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.
15. Ibid., 5.
16. Laith Al-shawaf et al., 'Human Emotions: An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective,' *Emotion Review* 8, no. 2 (2015): 173–86.
17. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Penguin Classics, 1872).
18. Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, 15-17.
19. Faisal Nazir, 'Humanism with a Difference: Universality and Cultural Difference in Postcolonial Theory,'" *Journal of Contemporary Politics* 2, no. 1 (2018): 18.
20. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.,3.
23. Pernau and Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions*, 16.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Zuzana Bujačková, 'Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Language : Linguistics and the History of Emotions,'" *Ethnologia Slovaca et Slavica* 44 (2023), 12-13.
26. Said, *Orientalism*, 3-135.
27. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 217.
28. Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain : From Prayer to Painkillers* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
29. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 331.
30. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 8.
31. Ibid., 1-11.
32. Ibid., 62-3.
33. Ibid., 63.
34. Ibid., 72-4
35. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 111-13.
36. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 5-9.
37. Ibid., 8-11.
38. Pernau and Jordheim, *Civilizing Emotions*, 14.
39. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (Basingstoke: Macmillan education, 1988), 271–313.
40. Ibid.
41. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "This is for you": Emotions, Language and Postcolonialism. Interview by Dorota Filipczak. *Text Matters*, 2013.
42. Ibid.
43. Said, *Orientalism*, 4.
44. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 13-14.
45. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 331.
46. Ibid., 330.
47. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-4.
48. Gayatri Spivak, 'How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today,' *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 19–29.

49. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 329.
50. *Ibid.*, 330.
51. Bourke, *Story of Pain*, 159-92.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Proglío, *African Diasporas*, 121-7.
54. Gabriele Proglío, "Geography of Emotions across the Black Mediterranean: Oral Memories and Dissonant Heritages of Slavery and the Colonial Past." In *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*, ed. iris van huis, Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Sigrid Kaasik-krogerus, and Luisa Passerini (Palgrave macmillan: 2019), 255-57
55. Spivak, 'Heritage,' 19-29.
56. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 328.
57. Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion*, 12.
58. Reddy, *Against Constructionism*, 328-9.
59. Nair, "This is for you."
60. Nazir, "Humanism," 1-18.

### Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004.

Al-shawaf, Laith, Daniel Conroy-beam, Kelly Asao, and David M Bass. "Human Emotions: An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective." *Emotion Review* 8, no. 2 (2015): 173–86.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Bourke, Joanna. *The Story of Pain : From Prayer to Painkillers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Bujačková, Zuzana. "Theoretical and methodological challenges in the study of language : linguistics and the history of emotions." *Ethnologia slovacica et slavica* 44 (2023).

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton, 2008.

Darwin, Charles. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: Penguin Classics, 1872.

Febvre, Lucien. 'La Sensibilité et l'Histoire: Comment Reconstituer La Vie Affective D'autrefois?' *Annales d'Histoire Sociale* (1939-1941) 3, no. 1/2 (1941): 5–20.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. "This is for you": *Emotions, Language and Postcolonialism*:

Interview by Dorota Filipczak. *Text Matters*, 2013

Nazir, Faisal. 'Deconstructing 'Deconstruction': Postcolonial Theory, Postmodernism and Poststructuralism,' *Tehseel* 4 (2019).

Nazir, Faisal. 'Humanism with a Difference: Universality and Cultural Difference in Postcolonial Theory,' *Journal of Contemporary Politics* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–18.

Pernau, Margrit and Helge, Jordheim. *Civilizing Emotions : Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Proglío, Gabriele. "Geography of Emotions across the Black Mediterranean: Oral Memories and Dissonant Heritages of Slavery and the Colonial Past." In *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe* , edited by Iris van Huis , Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Sigrid Kaasik-krogerus, and Luisa Passerini, 249–72. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Proglío, Gabriele. *The Horn of Africa Diasporas in Italy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Reddy, William M. 'Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions,' *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (June 1997): 327–51.

Roper, Lyndal. *Oedipus and the Devil : Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. 'Worrying about Emotions in History,' *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 821–45.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Basingstoke: Macmillan education, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri. 'How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today,' *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 19–29.


# *Colonised Bodies:*

## How Pre-modern Trans Historians Have Aided the Reclaiming of the *Non-Cisgendered Racialised Body.*

by Emma Stinchon

This essay argues that contemporary Western narratives framing non-cisgendered and racialised bodies as “unnatural” are deeply rooted in the enduring legacy of colonial ideology, which privileges a white, European, cisgender norm. In response, it positions pre-modern trans historiography as a critical intervention that challenges and destabilises these narratives by demonstrating the historical presence and cultural legitimacy of diverse gender expressions across time and place. Ultimately, the essay contends that pre-modern trans historiography not only recovers marginalised identities but also actively reclaims the “othered” body as natural, complex, and historically grounded. In doing so, it challenges the authority of contemporary exclusionary discourses and contributes to a broader reimagining of gender beyond colonial binaries.

Edited by Poppy Williams, Copyedited by Lauren Hood,  
Peer Reviewed by Julian Leidy, Art by Rosy Fitch



The residual ideology of Western colonialism has dictated that the white, European, cisgendered body is culturally understood to be the 'natural' body. It is celebrated in beauty standards reflected globally and there remains a societal pressure to reject the bodies that transgress this image. Contemporary political discourse often focuses discriminatory narratives on these 'othered' bodies, attempting to write them out of society, and framing them as 'unnatural'. In the face of this large-scale cultural and political rejection, this essay resists the hateful rhetoric that appears constantly in contemporary political discourse in the West through demonstrating how the work of pre-modern trans historians can negate this narrative and promote the reclamation of non-cisgendered racialised bodies in all their natural beauty.

To best articulate pre-modern trans historiography's reclamation of the 'othered' body, it is important to outline the extent of the field's engagement with racial history in its initial conception. Rebecca Hickman observes that the pioneering historians of pre-modern transgender scholarship, such as Leslie Feinberg, were overly Eurocentric in their literature.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, when justifying his thesis, Feinberg relied on evidence from "far-flung cultures all over the world", citing North American Two-Spirit Indigenous identities and individuals from pre-colonial India who did not conform to strict Western gender binaries.<sup>2</sup> Colonial implications are evident from the conception of this field as he makes little reference to the methodological complexities of relying on this evidence to justify the ever-present existence of a modern Western trans identity. As a result, the scholarship that has emerged from Feinberg's seminal text has a deeply Eurocentric focus and has neglected the implication of race and colonialism in its initial construction. It is

from this criticism that the following literature emerges.

Deborah Miranda and Saylesh Wesley's literature, published in the early 2010s, kickstarts this conversation. This emergence comes as a rallying cry for precolonial Indigenous identities to be accurately located, to be remembered in the face of imperial violence. It is important to note that these authors have borne witness to the impact of colonialism as descendants of the Stó:lō and Indigenous Californians, respectively. Both have seen the diversity of their cultures diminish as Western gender norms were violently enforced. Wesley's "Twin-Spirited Woman" is written as personal act of healing and reconciliation. She describes her grandmother's difficulty in accepting her granddaughter's gender queerness despite being descended herself from a Two-Spirited community. Colonial ideology has criminalised Wesley's identity in her community and forced her grandmother to forget her gender-diverse heritage.<sup>3</sup> She writes this history as a reminder to her own people of their heritage and to challenge the universality of fixed binary gender. Miranda's motivations mirror Wesley's, naming the mass destruction of the *joyas* in California by the Spanish imperial forces in the late eighteenth-century as a gendercide, shifting the narrative of the history. Spiritual leaders were decimated by the Spanish because they did not conform to Catholic gender norms, and thus they have been erased from the

colonial narrative. While the modern Western world searched for their trans ancestors, Miranda notes their ignorance of the spiritual ancestors of Indigenous tribes that the West exterminated for their own imperial gain.<sup>4</sup> This work represents the moment pre-modern trans historiography broadened its scope to engage with the issue of race, however, only when forced to by authors of targeted communities who refused to let their stories be neglected. This has created the space for reclaiming the othered body and reinstating the organic nature of its being.

C. Riley Snorton's 'Black on Both Sides' was a further disruptive text, bringing attention to Black gender experience in postcolonial discourse. Inspired by Africana philosophy, Snorton extends Fanon's claim that the Black body is excluded from personhood to suggest this necessarily excludes the Black man from gender.<sup>5</sup> Colonial narratives manipulate this philosophy, framing the Black body as the opposite to the 'normal' white body of anatomical congruity.<sup>6</sup> This contributes to the celebration of the white cisgendered body and provokes questions about the connections between Blackness and transness in the Western psyche as both are considered radically 'other'. Snorton's observations have inspired a revision of various gender histories that concern race.

Jamey Jesperson identifies this historical ungendering and its fungibility with Blackness in the case of Mary Jones (1836), who was described as a "man-monster" after her lack of vagina was discovered. The British colonial narrative used this example to suggest all Black men in New Orleans dress as women, leading to the demonisation of the

Black transfeminine figure.<sup>7</sup> Sydnee Wagner extends Snorton's argument to the global South, suggesting the Amazonian woman is written into sixteenth-century European travel literature as a transmasculine savage to naturalise white masculinity.<sup>8</sup> While Snorton's work is more a series of political statements and theories, it exposed a truth to trans history: it cannot be understood in isolation from broader histories of systemic racism and colonialism. Snorton's literature proves to be a seminal text, shifting the paradigm of pre-modern trans historiography from its Western-centred focus, to engagement in the conversation surrounding racialised gender. This allows the 'othered' Black body to enter the discussion and expose the problematic relationship it has been forced into with the white body.

The Ottoman eunuch proves to be a figure of constant scrutiny and fascination in this discussion. The eunuch was an elite slave, able to transgress the strict gender-segregation of the harem, presenting a distinct gender category that existed beyond the male-female binary. Historical and literary studies have paid significant attention to the eunuch as a trans figure, yet often, their racialisation is overlooked.<sup>9</sup> Abdulhamit Arvas is the most prevalent voice in disrupting this tendency. Influenced by Snorton's appeal for the trans historian to focus on the Black body, he draws attention to the racial marking of Ottoman eunuchs. Black eunuchs underwent forced castration and were associated with the inner-most feminine spaces of the harem. In contrast, white eunuchs were granted the choice of castration and associated with the masculine duties of gatekeeping.<sup>10</sup> Black eunuchs' forced castration insinuates that the Ottoman imagination conceived of the Black body as enslaved and could more easily conceive of the Black body crossing genders. Therefore,

## Colonised Bodies

Ottoman society could justify stripping them of their autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Necessarily, the white body's masculinity is more permanent. Analysis of the feminisation of the 'othered' Black eunuch exposes the impact of Western colonialism in enforcing their gender norms and how this continues to influence our contemporary understanding of gender norms. This begs the question, can the colonised body ever be free?

Since, this problematic relationship between gender, race, and colonialism has become a major historiographical theme. The investigations of pre-modern trans historians appear to be unavoidably imposed by Western gender norms. At this stage, it appeared impossible to understand non-Western trans identities within their own context. The sources do not provide a window into the lived experience of the gender variant subjects, rather they reinforce the colonial interpretation of race and gender, supporting the larger biopolitical systems imperialism instigated.<sup>12</sup> Kit Heyam despairs that no matter how liberal or pro-queer they are as a historian, the discipline is inherently oppressive as a result.<sup>13</sup> This has presented a significant challenge to pre-modern trans historians in considering if a truly liberated history can be written at all. The narrative of the coloniser is deeply entrenched in both language and social understanding, meaning that any trans history is immediately labelled as other, and therefore perceived as unnatural. From this discussion, pre-modern trans historians have undertaken the task of uncovering this colonial imposition in the scholarship and liberating the othered, colonised body.

In an attempt to rectify this oppression, recent historiography takes on the task of reclaiming marginalised pre-modern gender non-conforming identities. Kai Pyle advocates for the necessity of recovering

Indigenous language and cultural revitalisation to achieve this. Histories of Indigenous tribal identities, such as Ojibwe and Plains Cree, cannot be meaningfully interpreted if the culture is not understood nor reasonably communicated with. Naming and claiming these cultures has power as it opens up space for a trans existence that is separate from colonial language.<sup>14</sup> Jespersen offers an alternative method of reaching past the colonial regime. She reads against the Spanish colonial sources of their invasion of Panama, in the hope that the trans women murdered can speak through the sources and the fragments of the transfeminine past can be pieced back together, subverting the colonialist narrative. While colonialism dismembered these women and 'cistorians' misread them as queer men, Jespersen calls for trans historians to 're-member' them and, therefore, reclaim them.<sup>15</sup> The archival injustice instigated by colonialists promotes ignorance of these women's survival, diminishing their vibrant, multidimensional lives to endorse the idea that all gender is binary. If trans historians can re-instate these silenced women, then the colonial binary falls apart. As a result, recent pre-modern trans scholarship demonstrates that active, healing engagement with the othered body is achievable and it can be reclaimed.

Arvas considers the disappearance of the köçeks as a further striking example of a colonised gender expression uncovered. Once a desired figure of extreme beauty in eighteenth-century Ottoman culture, the köçek demonstrated an understanding of gender determined by age, appearance, and religion rather than by biological indicators.<sup>16</sup> The köçeks represented a queer and desirable performance of gender that could not be understood by a Western imperial gaze. Their criminalisation as sodomitical and their eventual disappearance after the arrival of European colonialists highlights the role of

imperialism in criminalising gender plurality. This criminalisation has informed Western scholarship resulting in a representation of the köçeks as cross-dressers who substituted women in the strictly gender-segregated space, rather than a celebration of androgynous gender expression.<sup>17</sup> Arvas demonstrates the evident preference in the Western scholarship to present these figures as queer and cisgendered, rather than simply inhabiting a gender identity outside the male-female framework. This suggests Western scholarship can make space for queer identities more easily than gender variant ones. This has resulted in a misinformed understanding of gender in the Ottoman world. Pre-modern trans historians must read against this to reinstate and liberate the köçek, allowing them to be perceived as their own form of gender expression, rather than forced into the mould of European gender norms. By pitting the köçek against this Western model, they can easily be perceived as ‘unnatural’ in contrast. What is unnatural to the Western conception has been refashioned to be perceived as universally unnatural. This demands us reject this idea and allow the köçeks identity validity in its own right. Simply because it transgresses a Western gender conception does not negate its natural existence. It is the rigidity of the Western framework, not the existence of the köçeks, that is unnatural in this case.

It is not just the task of uncovering pre-modern trans experiences that this historiography undertakes. Arvas’ research demonstrates the important task of interrogating those figures who enter the canon. Pre-modern trans history has relied on the eunuch as evidence of a pre-modern trans identity. However, as Arvas has demonstrated, the Black eunuch did not exercise consent in their castration and subsequent stripping of gender.<sup>18</sup> Susan Stryker’s definition of a trans individual necessarily relies on a willingness to

transition from “an unchosen starting place”.<sup>19</sup> The pre-modern trans historian can never access the knowledge that the Black Ottoman eunuch disliked their ‘starting place’ and wished to transgress it. Therefore, this highlights a significant issue in the Black eunuch place in this historical canon.<sup>20</sup> This also exposes the Western obsession with genitalia and gender being coherent. Clearly this narrative has been too simplistic for our understanding of gender expression and has allowed us to falsely enforce trans identity onto bodies that the West has made no attempt to understand. Evidently, Arvas’ research demonstrates the implications previous ignorance of race has as his interrogation of the Black Ottoman figure complicates and reframes the picture that traditional pre-modern trans history presented. Scholarly language regarding the eunuch remains unnatural and problematic as it frames the eunuch as a natural trans ancestor, while ignoring the role of enslavement in their experience.<sup>21</sup> While the intention here is well-meaning, it only demonstrates the Western habit of enforcing its own understanding on colonised bodies. In this way, the eunuch is liberated by its exclusion from the canon, rather than its integration to it.

S. P. Gannon observes a tendency of Western scholarship streamlining gender variant expressions into one, generally criminalised identity. His work uncovers the gender diversity of the hijra that had been erased by nineteenth-century British colonisers who shoehorned the various forms of gender expression they encountered in India into a monolithic category of existence.<sup>22</sup> British censures of the Indian population enforced a two-sex model, which proved difficult as they encountered the fluid gender identities of the South Asian hijra. The people who inhabited this space embodied transgender, intersex, and gender fluid identities, yet they were categorised by British colonisers as castrated men, to fit both their census structure and

## Colonised Bodies

their own rigid conception of gender. In addition to this blatant ignorance of hijra gender expression, the colonial gaze criminalised them due to their refusal to comply with 'natural' binary gender norms; their marginalised status prevails.<sup>23</sup> This highlights the necessity of pre-modern trans history in shining a light on the gender expressions that have been silenced by white colonialism. Gannon's research continues the theme of uncovering and liberating silenced gender expressions, highlighting the implications this colonial silencing has had on modern gender non-conforming individuals, as the colonial narrative continues to encumber their lived experience.

Methodologically, pre-modern trans history faces a significant issue of language when engaging with non-Western identities, highlighting the next step the historiography must take in its engagement with race. Aixia Huang draws attention to this, highlighting that most theorising and knowledge production in pre-modern trans scholarship has been produced in the Anglophone sphere.<sup>24</sup> She highlights the difficulty in conveying the complex gender transitions in Ming-Qing China as she is limited to Anglophone pronoun rules. The pronouns and language her subjects would have used have no direct translation into English; as a result, it is virtually impossible to accurately represent these gender experiences in the scholarship. She queries, therefore, how well we can engage with them if we are restricted to monolingualism.<sup>25</sup> Her history of Chinese trans identity focuses on the objects rather than individuals, as she believes focusing on materiality avoids this methodological concern.<sup>26</sup> Centring objects in transgender history is a new way of thinking beyond Western categories and frameworks, allowing us to access the individual on their

own terms. More significantly, this shift in method highlights a turn in the direction of pre-modern trans historiography. If it is to engage meaningfully with race, it must be presented in a dynamic, multilingual discipline. The attempt to understand the broad and varying gender expressions and experiences throughout history in one linguistic sphere is academically problematic. It forces us to express such non-Western identities into models the Anglophone sphere can comprehend, which necessarily denies true expression. This provides a possible conception of how future pre-modern trans historiography might develop as it moves beyond uncovering and reclaiming identities, into letting them speak for themselves in their own natural mother tongue.

Here, we can see an emerging historical field that is working to restructure the narrative surrounding the non-cisgendered racialised body. This work questions the authority of contemporary right wing political claims that impose a hierarchy on the expression of bodies and attempt to force a multitude of identities into a white, European binary that is, in itself, a construction. By rewriting this narrative, and establishing the non-cisgendered, racialised body as a natural and ever-present identity predating modernity, pre-modern trans historians allow this body to speak for itself as it always should have been able to - separate from the confines of European colonialism.



## Footnotes

1. Rebecca Hickman, "What Is 'Trans History', Anyway?: Historiographical Theory and Practice in a Flourishing Field", *Midlands Historical Review* 5 (2021), 22.
2. Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21 and 44.
3. Saylesh Wesley, "Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyoye Smestiyexw Slha:li", *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 338–51.
4. Deborah A. Miranda, "Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (January 1, 2010): 253–84.
5. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 105.
6. Hickman, "What Is 'Trans History', Anyway?", 18.
7. Jamey Jespersion, "Trans Sex Work in Colonial North America", in Catherine Phipps, *Histories of Sex Work around the World* (Taylor & Francis, 2024), 61-64.
8. Sydnee Wagner, "Racing Gender to the Edge of the World: Decoding the Transmasculine Amazon Cannibal in Early Modern Travel Writing", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019), 137-143.
9. Abdulhamit Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 118.
10. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 119-20.
11. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 121.
12. Wagner, "Racing Gender to the Edge of the World", 151.
13. Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans* (Seal Press, 2022), 209-10.
14. Kai Pyle, "Naming and Claiming", *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 586.
15. Jamey Jespersion, "Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604–1821", *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (September 17, 2023), 94.
16. Abdulhamit Arvas, "Performing and Desiring Gender Variance in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire", in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2021), 161.
17. Arvas, "Performing and Desiring Gender Variance", 161-170.
18. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 121.
19. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, 2nd ed. (2008; repr., New York, NY: Seal Press, 2017), 1.
20. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 131.
21. Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 29.
22. S.P. Gannon, "The Colonial Censu(re/ses) of Transbodies in Nineteenth-Century South Asia", in Douglas A. Vakoch, *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experiences* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 77-96.
23. Gannon, "The Colonial Censu(re/ses) of Transbodies", 81.
24. Aixia Huang, "Trans-Gender Things: Objects and the Materiality of Trans-Femininity in Ming-Qing China", *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (January 7, 2024), 55.
25. Huang, "Trans-Gender Things", 66.
26. *Ibid.*

## Colonised Bodies

### Bibliography

- Arvas, Abdulhamit. "Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116–36.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Gordon, Colby. *Glorious Bodies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024.
- Heyam, Kit. *Before We Were Trans*. New York: Seal Press, 2022.
- Hickman, Rebecca. "What Is 'Trans History', Anyway?: Historiographical Theory and Practice in a Flourishing Field." *Midlands Historical Review* 5 (2021).
- Huang, Aixia. "Trans-Gender Things: Objects and the Materiality of Trans-Femininity in Ming Qing China." *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (January 7, 2024).
- Jespersion, Jamey. "Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604–1821." *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (September 17, 2023).
- Phipps, Catherine. *Histories of Sex Work around the World*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2024.
- Miranda, Deborah A. "Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (January 1, 2010): 253–84.
- Pyle, Kai. "Naming and Claiming." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 574–88.
- Ringrose, Kathryn M. *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. 2nd ed. 2008. Reprint, New York, NY: Seal Press, 2017.
- Vakoch, Douglas A. *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experiences*. Cham: Springer, 2022.
- Wagner, Sydnee. "Racing Gender to the Edge of the World: Decoding the Transmasculine Amazon Cannibal in Early Modern Travel Writing." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no.4 (2019): 137–55.
- Wesley, Saylesh. "Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyoye Smestiyexw Slha:li." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 338–51



# *Reimagining the Land:* Enclosure and the Politics of Exclusion

—by *Conger Wang*

This essay argues that enclosure was not a natural or inevitable stage of economic development, but a revolutionary reimagining of landscape that transformed land from a shared ecological resource into exclusive property. In pre-enclosure England, common rights structured collective relationships to land through practices of shared use, which were later delegitimized as inefficient or uncivilized. Through both ideological justifications and material technologies, enclosure redefined what counted as ‘natural,’ recasting communal practices as disorderly while elevating privatized, controlled landscapes as markers of progress. Extending this analysis to the American West, the essay demonstrates how barbed wire and Lockean property theory facilitated the violent exclusion of Indigenous peoples and the imposition of colonial spatial orders. Engaging with Marxist, revisionist, and environmental historiography, it challenges narratives that portray enclosure as agricultural improvement, instead emphasizing how discourses such as the ‘tragedy of the commons’ stigmatized communal land use and legitimized dispossession. Ultimately, enclosure is understood as a process that combined coercion and ideology to naturalize inequality, erase alternative ecological knowledge, and enforce new regimes of access, producing long-term social and environmental consequences.

Edited by Poppy Williams, Copyedited by Lauren Hood,  
Reviewed by Sian Davies, Art by Rosy Fitch

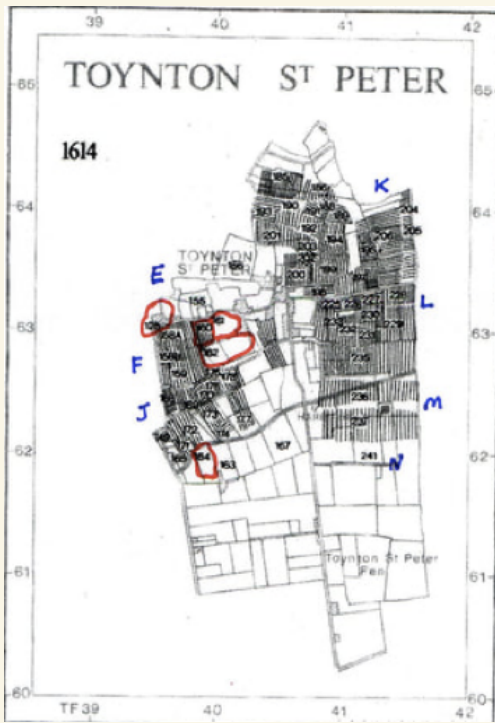
John Clare's poem 'The Mores' lamented the devastating effects of enclosure: "Each little tyrant with his little sign / shows where man claims earth glows no more divine / all sighed when lawless laws enclosure came."<sup>1</sup> Clare's verse registers enclosure, namely the imposition of property rights on the landscape to the exclusion of others' use, as nothing glorious or progressive, but as a profound disruption in the relationship between people, land and what was understood to be natural. In folk memory, enclosure was experienced less as rational reform than as a traumatic process marked by violence, dispossession, and the erosion of customary ecological relations.<sup>2</sup> These memories challenged later narratives that naturalized enclosure as an inevitable or necessary stage in social and economic development. In this essay, 'nature' is understood not as a fixed condition outside human society, but as a historically constructed category shaped by power relations. Rather than arguing that common rights were inherently 'natural' while enclosure was 'unnatural', this essay examines how enclosure became naturalized through legal, technological, and ideological processes. Practices associated with common use were increasingly represented as disorderly, wasteful, or primitive, while privatized and controlled landscapes were framed as rational, productive, and self-evidently legitimate. The question, therefore, is not whether enclosure was truly natural, but how particular understandings of 'nature' were historically produced in ways that legitimized exclusion and dispossession.

Built on such critics, this essay argues that enclosure constituted a revolutionary reimagination of landscape, one that recast land not as a shared living environment but as an abstract, controllable, and improvable resource, mainly regarding its yields per hectare. Central to this transformation was the redefinition of the 'natural' itself: practices of communing, subsistence, and coexistence with non-human life were framed as wasteful or uncivilized, while barbed landscape was crowned as civilization. Through the combined force of material technologies and legitimating ideologies, enclosure expelled disadvantaged groups from the land, stigmatized their modes of inhabiting nature, and rendered their ecological knowledge illegible. In doing so, it enacted what Edward Said described as "imaginative geography"—the process of

constructing and representing places as distinct, often inferior spaces, based more on cultural imagination and power than on their actual geography or realities.<sup>3</sup>

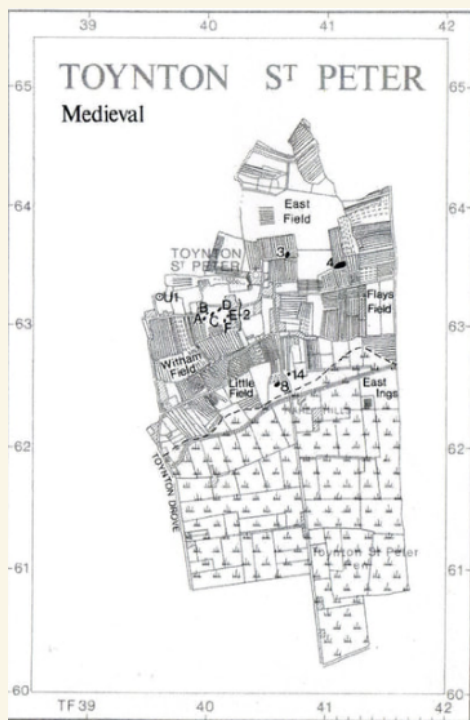
Enclosure is a revolutionary reimagination of landscapes, accompanied by the violent enforcement of such imagination, because the concept of 'property rights over land' enshrined in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* is anything but natural.<sup>4</sup> The concept of property as part of the ideology associated with enclosure, refers to an artificial set of rules governing the access to and control of certain material resources.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the imposition of property rights upon lands is a drastic redefinition of the inclusion and exclusion over spatial accesses, in other words, an intensified form of human control over spaces.<sup>6</sup> Partly as an effort to counter the Marxist argument of enclosure being a step of 'primitive accumulation', from the mid-twentieth century, revisionist historians such as J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay reconsider the significance of enclosure, and reframe it as a rational agricultural improvement.<sup>7</sup> While E.P. Thompson grounds the legitimacy of common rights in the operation of a 'moral economy', this essay instead illustrates that such rights are intrinsically sacred not only because it functions well, but also because it is the common rights, rather than the property rights, that should be regarded as the 'natural'.<sup>8</sup>

Before the late fifteenth century, people in England practiced the open-field system prior to the widespread enclosure movement.<sup>9</sup> The open-field system granted common rights for the communities dwelling on the lands, which was coined early in Roman law as *usus et fructus* ('use and enjoy of the fruits').<sup>10</sup> Literally, it means the rights to use and benefit from the property of someone else, as long as the property is not damaged.<sup>11</sup> The usufruct/common rights in England had various forms: the commoners (inhabitants with common rights) were entitled to graze animals, feed pigs, cut bracken for animal beddings, dig peat or turf, catch fish and collect woods, though probably the land belonged to the local manor within a feudal system.<sup>12</sup> The common rights were so essential and widespread in Medieval England that the 1215 Magna Carta was accompanied by a forest charter accentuating the commoners' rights to use forests (Chapter 47, 48).<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 1.** Toynton St. Peter (before enclosure): Medieval.

Source: “The Toynton Villages Before and After Enclosure,” *Weebly*, accessed October 12, 2024, at <https://theascoughsofeastfen.weebly.com/the-villages-before-and-after-enclosure.html>.



**Figure 2.** Toynton St. Peter: 1614 (after enclosure).

Source: “The Toynton Villages Before and After Enclosure,” *Weebly*, accessed October 12, 2024, at <https://theascoughsofeastfen.weebly.com/the-villages-before-and-after-enclosure.html>.

Figure 1 and 2 shows the comparison between Toynton St. Peter’s landscape pre-and-after enclosure. The large-scale redefinitions and reshaping of landscapes were completed in no more than a century, illustrating how revolutionary and forceful the reimagination and enforcement were. England’s experiences thus evidenced that the enclosure, made practical by the shift in ideology regarding the concept of land from a collective resource to an exclusive possession, was a reimagination enforced on landscapes, rather than something customary or natural.

Even more violent was the enclosure in the American West since the eighteenth-century, where the enclosure was part of a grander state-design to exterminate or exclude the indigenous population and creatures.<sup>14</sup> Animals like prairie dogs who have inhabited the lands for centuries were deemed ‘noxious’ and exterminated by gunpowder, while their cohabited neighbors, the indigenous Americans, were banished from their homelands by the sharp barbed-wires.<sup>15</sup> Barbed wire, invented in 1874, is a strong, twisted wire with sharp-pointed bars, that played a significant role in reshaping landscapes, particularly in the expulsion of native populations to implement the scientific visions of State institutions like the Forest Service.<sup>16</sup> Prior to the invention of the barbed-wire, the indigenous Americans’ retaliations had tangible effects, since their guerilla attacks against the fences severely disrupted the daily lives of the colonisers. For example, the Georgia Gazette reported more than eight raids during the October and November of 1787 by Creeks, that they have ‘stolen some thirty horses, burnt several forts, fences and houses, in addition to cutting down a very considerable quantity of corn, and destroying a number of hogs.’<sup>17</sup> Barbed wire rendered this impossible: The correspondence between C.W. and A.H. Johnson from California in 1876 was revealing, as they agreed that ‘The Indians have bothered us a great deal...since we put up the wire, they have not bothered any.’<sup>18</sup> The notion of the indigenous Americans as a ‘disappearing race’ was accentuated in the decades after the

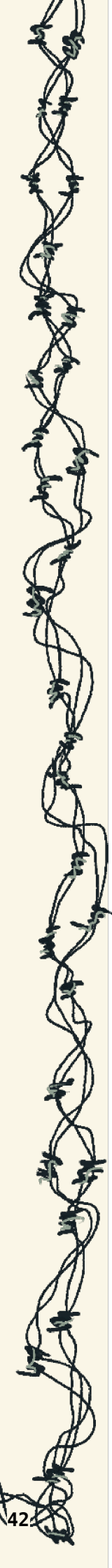
## Reimagining the Land

adoption of barbed wires, as illustrated by Joseph Dixon's photographs of the indigenous Americans as a 'vanishing race', which was funded by the Wanamaker family.<sup>19</sup> The barbed wire, via the successful expulsion of those inhabited the lands for centuries, realized the blueprints drawn by the central authority. The colonisers reimagined landscape as gridded and privatized, redefined the meaning of 'appropriateness to inhabit', and enforced their calculated results on the land by the barbed-wire enclosure. Such enforcement of reimagination of landscapes, assisted by the technology of barbed wire, reshaped the ideological conception of 'nature', and hence backed the legitimacy of the colonization.

Socially and historically, the ideologies associated with enclosure largely stigmatized the victims for decades. The Agricultural Fundamentalism, one of the most influential schools regarding the enclosures' effects, contends that the traditional feudal peasant farms prior to the enclosure hindered the 'modernization of England.'<sup>20</sup> The reformation of rural institutions, namely the enclosure, created capitalism, extended markets, spread commercial attitudes, and ultimately led to a productive agriculture, which fed the industrial growth.<sup>21</sup> Agricultural Fundamentalism, which glorified the enclosure as progressive and necessary and stigmatized those small peasants/tenants as stumbling blocks for the making of the 'empire without sunset', had enjoyed dominant position for decades. Therefore, it had imaginably produced damaging effects to the reputation of the indigenous lifestyles and redefined what seemed to be 'natural' on the lands. Partially built on this social-Darwinian notion, Garrett Hardin's theory of 'tragedy of commons' is a very influential ideology condemning the commoners' practices since 1968, though originally it was written to dissuade people from overbreeding.<sup>22</sup> Hardin argues that when a resource is shared and access is unrestricted, individuals acting in their own self-interests will inevitably overuse and

deplete it, ultimately harming the collective benefit.<sup>23</sup> Despite the arguable reasonability of the theory, Elinor Ostron has exemplified that collective lands could be successfully managed under certain conditions.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, to quote E.P. Thompson's words: 'Despite the theory's common sense air, it overlooks the fact that commoners too had common senses,' which reveal the Achilles' heel of the theory.<sup>25</sup> Hardin's theory hugely impacted the free-market campaigns of the neoliberals (mostly purporting to reduce state-intervention), which worsened the notoriety of the commoners' because under such discourse, they were nothing more than a group of ignorant, selfish and unenlightened 'crowds'. The notorious overfishing of Atlantic cod fish is the most frequently cited evidence backing that theory. Therefore, the ideologies backing the practices of enclosure strategically achieved the legitimization of such practices by redefining what was 'the natural thing to do'.

Similar discourses flowered during the colonization of American West for the purpose of justifying the expulsion of natives, occupying and enclosing the seized lands, which produced effects of stigmatization on the disadvantaged side, namely all the native inhabitants on the land. The labor theory of property, formulated by John Locke, argues that the rights to own land belong to people using their labor to improve the land which otherwise would lie empty or wasted.<sup>26</sup> Putting the ideology into practice, by 1630, John Winthrop (the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony) had used the discourse to justify the taking of American land in New England by violence, though the land had been occupied, pastured and managed by the natives for a long time.<sup>27</sup> The infamous Indian Removal Act 1830 backed by the 'improvement ideology' was not only the physical expulsion of the indigenous Americans from their homelands, but also the condemnation of the memories, defining their past interactions with the landscape as emptiness and waste, waiting to be corrected or



saved by the colonisers.<sup>28</sup> Figure 3 is an advertisement of barbed wire published by Jacob Haish, which was entitled ‘The Civilizing Effects of Barbed Wire’.<sup>29</sup> Under the giant rooster’s barbed stride stands tiny half-naked indigenous American figures. The explicit sense of dominance and superiority of the ‘barb rooster’ and its European master over the native population conveyed the information that the ‘civilized’ Euro-Americans are destined to ‘civilize’ the landscapes and all the native ‘savage’ inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Confiscation, control and exploitation, dramatized by the penetration of the iron-wire into skins, were disguised as education and civilization. In the 1876 San Antonio exhibition, the longhorn bulls, who were deliberately provoked to challenge the surrounding barbed wires, finally resigned the battle after various painful and fruitless attempts.<sup>31</sup> Exhausted and wounded, they ultimately learned the invincibility of the wire, and thus ‘civilized’ to obey the new order, ‘educated’ by the pains incurred by the wire.<sup>32</sup> Henceforth, the basis of the discourse about a ‘triumphant and invincible barbed wire’ was the stigmatization of the native organisms as ‘uncivilized’ barbarians. The ideologies associated with the enclosure system were numerous and systematic, craftly turning extraction to progress, control to civilization, dispossession to integration, and disasters to opportunities.<sup>33</sup> They stigmatized the dispossessed, condemned their interactions with the ecosystems, erased their contributions, making them socially and historically humiliated and silenced, and claimed that the repurposed landscape was its natural appearance.

Technology and ideologies brought power and profits but were not equally enjoyed by all. They created wealth for the landlords and colonisers, leaving misery and poverty for the dispossessed. The word ‘pauper’ first appeared in 1566, referring to an individual without home or livelihoods.<sup>34</sup> In the 1770s, a Welsh minister lamented the shattering dislocation before his eyes: ‘the depriving of the peasantry of all landed property has beggared multitudes.’<sup>35</sup> In *The Deserted Village*, Oliver Goldsmith described the enclosure as a new kind of plague, in which ‘wealth accumulates, and men decay.’<sup>36</sup> The cancellation of common rights was catastrophic for the English small-peasants and tenants. Figure 4 shows that there are two dramatic increases of enclosed acres, namely between 1550-1660 and between 1750-1850. The first wave was followed by some Royal legislations to protect the peasants, which indicates the severity of poverty and vagrancy.<sup>37</sup> The second wave resulted from Parliamentary legislations, and a thorough study of poor laws shows a positive association between the enclosure and rising level of poor relief.<sup>38</sup> The justifications afforded by the ideologies, and the protection offered by the technologies, means that the landlords could bet safely on the policy of enclosure, converting the peasantry from independent or quasi-independent farmers into dependent waged-labors. Those Appalachian mountaineers, who were forced by the Adam-Smithian ideologies about ‘integration into markets’ to become miners, extracted silver for the managers, subsisted their own households with ‘captured gardens’ (marginal lands).<sup>39</sup> Fruits grown

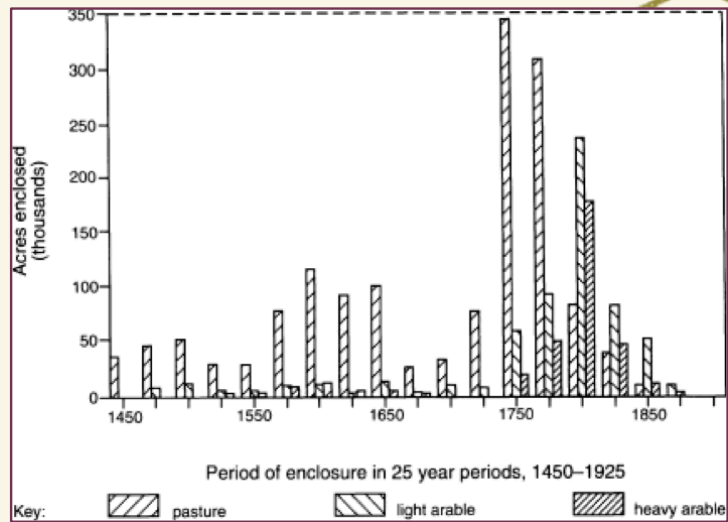


**Figure 3.** Haish’s advertisement: The Civilizing Effects of Barbed Wire.

Source: L.E. Bennett and S. Abbott, “Barbed and Dangerous: Constructing the Meaning of Barbed Wire in Late-Nineteenth-Century America,” *Agricultural History Society* 88, no.4 (Fall, 2014): 576, <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2014.088.4.566>

from the technologies and ideologies about enclosure were reaped by the advantaged, whereas poverty and misery were the central-theme for the dispossessed. Here the history again witnessed the normalization of enclosure—a practice initially alien—to be a naturally legitimate way of land-use, at the expense of a larger disparity of wealth distribution.

Stripped of its “progressive” and “technological” gloss, enclosure represents neither scientification nor progress, but violence, impoverishment, stigmatization and exploitation. It is a revolutionary reimagination and reshaping of landscapes because the concept was neither natural nor customary, but a late-Medieval invention by the landlords. The barbed wires, gunpowder, and all the ideologies associated with it, helped to bring out the physical expulsion, social stigmatization and economic impoverishment of the dispossessed. By foregrounding the entanglement of ideology and technology, this essay has shown how enclosure systematically narrowed social and ecological plurality, transforming commons into controlled spaces and diverse land-use into signs of disorder. Alternative ways of inhabiting land were rendered illegible, while those who failed to conform to the new “natural order” were stigmatized, expelled, or destroyed.



**Figure 4.** Period of Enclosure in 25 years, 1450-1920.

Source: R.C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 30.

To acknowledge enclosure as a violent reimagination of landscape and nature is therefore to challenge the assumption that such transformations are natural at all. It is in itself an effort to recover the silenced voices previously suppressed by the powerful narrative of colonialism disguised as ‘civilization.’ The history of enclosure is in fact a history of a violent enforcement of reimagination over the concept of ‘nature’, which invites scholars to reflect on to what extent ‘nature’ can be defined by human-beings, who was a newcomer to the earth compared to its five billion years of existence.

## Footnotes

1. J. Clare, "The Mores," in *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. J. Barrell and J. Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 415.
2. R. Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), XI.
3. E. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no.2 (2000): 181. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200024%2926%3A2%3C175%3AIMAP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>
4. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Incorporated, 1982), 24-5.
5. *Ibid*, 18.
6. G. Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), XIII.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, chap. 31, 'Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,' *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm> (accessed February 25, 2026); also see See J.D. Chambers, *Laxton: The Last English Open Field Village* (London: H.M.S.O, 1964); G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007).
8. See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).
9. J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Rights, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.
10. D. Wall & M. Egan, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict and Ecology* (London: MIT Press, 2014), 7.
11. *Ibid*.
12. *Ibid*, 8.
13. *Magna Carta* (1215), chaps. 47-48, in *Ibid*, 87
14. N.F. Sayre, *The Politics of Scale: A History of Rangeland Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 18.
15. *Ibid*, 18-20.
16. *Ibid*, 25.
17. Joshua Haynes, *Patrolling the Border: Theft and Violence on the Creek-Georgia Frontier, 1770-1796* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 145.
18. L.E. Bennett and S. Abbott, "Barbed and Dangerous: Constructing the Meaning of Barbed Wire in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," *Agricultural History Society* 88, no.4 (Fall, 2014): 570. <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2014.088.4.566>
19. *Ibid*, 578.
20. Allen, *Enclosure*, 2.
21. *Ibid*.
22. Wall and Egan, *Commons*, 16.
23. G. Hardin, "The Tragedy of Commons," *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research* 1, no.3 (July 2009): 244-5. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.162.3859.1243>
24. See E. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
25. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 107.
26. Locke, *Second*, 24-5.
27. Fields, *Enclosure*, XII.
28. *Ibid*, 15.
29. Bennett and Abbott, "barbed wire", 576-8.
30. *Ibid*, 578.
31. Netz, *Barbed Wire*, 34.
32. *Ibid*.
33. S. Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), 42.
34. Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 59.
35. *Ibid*.

36. Ibid.

37. R.C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 15.

38. K. Snell, *Annals of the Laboring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 138-227.

39. Stoll, *Ramp*, 216-223.

### Bibliography

Allen, R.C. *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

Bennett, L.E. and S. Abbott. "Barbed Wire and Dangerous: Constructing the Meaning of Barbed Wire in Late- Nineteenth Century America." *Agricultural History Society* 88, no.4 (Fall, 2014): 566-90. <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2014.088.4.566>

Chambers, J.D. *Laxton: The Last English Open Field Village*. London: H.M.S.O, 1964.

Clare, J. "The Mores." In *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, edited by J. Barrell and J. Bull. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.

Fields, G. *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror*. Berkeley, CA: 1982.

Haynes, Joshua. *Patrolling the Border: Theft and Violence on the Creek-Georgia Frontier, 1770-1796*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018.

Locke, J. *Second Treatise of Government: an Essay concerning the True Original, Extend and End of Civil Government*. Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Incorporated, 1982.

Mingay, G.E. *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007.

Neeson, J.M. *Commoners: Common Rights, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Netz, R. *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

Ostrom, E. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Said, E. "Invention, Memory, and Place." *Critical Inquiry* 26, no.2 (2000): 175-92. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200024%2926%3A2%3C175%3AIMAP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0>

Sayre, N.F. *The Politics of Scale: A History of Rangeland Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Snell, K. *Annals of the Laboring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Stoll, S. *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2017.

"The Toynton Villages Before and After Enclosure," *Weebly*, accessed October 12, 2024, at <https://theascoughsofeastfen.weebly.com/the-villages-before-and-after-enclosure.html>.

Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Thompson, E.P. *Customs in Common*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

Wall, D. and M. Egan. *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict and Ecology*. London: MIT Press, 2014

Philosophy  
&  
Divinity



# *Flickering Bodies:*

## *Posthuman Embodiment, Visibility & Power In Cassils' Becoming an Image*

*by Zhuuyue Gao*

This essay examines how Posthumanist theories of subjectivity are challenged and reconfigured through Cassils' *Becoming an Image* (2012–ongoing). It begins with the observation that contemporary digital cultures increasingly frame the human subject as an informational pattern rather than an embodied agent, where visibility is assumed to be continuous, transparent, and reproducible. Against this assumption, the essay argues that Cassils' performance introduces a condition of intermittent visibility that disrupts the link between seeing and knowing.

Through close analysis of the work's structure — performed in darkness and revealed only through photographic flashes — the essay demonstrates that visibility is neither stable nor guaranteed but produced through sustained physical effort. Each image emerges from labour, exhaustion, and material resistance, making embodiment inseparable from the conditions of its appearance. In this way, the performance reveals the energetic and temporal cost of becoming visible, challenging the notion of frictionless digital representation.

The theoretical framework draws on the works of N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway to articulate two distinct yet complementary approaches within posthumanist thought. Hayles exposes the risks of reducing subjectivity to disembodied information, emphasising that such abstraction obscures the uneven distribution of vulnerability across bodies. Haraway, in turn, proposes the cyborg as a model for understanding embodiment as relational, hybrid, and politically situated within technological systems. Read together, these perspectives shift the focus from whether bodies persist to how they are mediated, regulated, and made legible.

The essay further situates Cassils' work within the politics of archival visibility, showing how systems of documentation produce the conditions under which bodies become knowable. By separating reproducible photographic images from fleeting embodied perception, *Becoming an Image* exposes the limits of visual evidence and resists demands for stable legibility.

Ultimately, the essay argues that posthumanist frameworks reveal embodiment not as a stable given but as a contested process shaped by power, mediation, and material vulnerability. Cassils' practice demonstrates that visibility is always grounded in labour and risk, insisting on the continued political significance of embodied life.

Edited by Asher Rose, Copyedited by Leyla Kaban Bowers, Lauren Hood & Rose Bates,  
Reviewed by Emmi Wilkinson, Art by Madeleine Brady

In contemporary digital cultures structured by datafication, algorithmic governance, and cybernetic infrastructures, the human subject is increasingly understood as an informational pattern rather than an embodied agent. This abstraction of embodied life into systems of information does not emerge exclusively from digital technology, but extends earlier models of knowledge that prioritised classification, legibility, and empirical observation over lived social experience. As Karl Korsch (2016) suggested, materialist critique risks losing its political force when material social relations are reduced to the neutral accumulation of historical “facts”, detached from the living conditions of labour and production. Within such systems, visibility refers to the subject’s exposure to technological observation and institutional legibility and is assumed to be continuous, transparent, and infinitely reproducible – while bodies appear secondary to the data they generate. Posthumanism emerges as a critical response to this reconfiguration of subjectivity, yet it is internally heterogeneous.

This essay begins from a specific aesthetic condition – the condition of intermittent visibility produced through photographic flash – and argues that Cassils’ *Becoming an Image* (2012 – ongoing) [Figure 1], exposes the limits of Posthumanist theories that privilege information over embodiment, as Hayles argues (1999). Through an analysis of the work’s sustained performance, material resistance, and disruption of visual mastery, I demonstrate how Posthuman embodiment emerges not as disembodied code but as lived, laboring, and vulnerable materiality – manifested through exertion, exhaustion, and relational negotiation within systems of power.

*Becoming an Image* is performed in near-total darkness. Cassils repeatedly strikes a 900-kilogram clay mass, illuminated only by the flash of a photographer’s camera [Fig.1]. Each burst of light produces a fleeting image – muscle contraction, sweat, recoil– before collapsing back into obscurity. Vision here is discontinuous and violent: the flash blinds as much as it reveals, leaving viewers with retinal afterimages rather than stable forms. This visual condition challenges the assumption that visibility automatically produces knowledge. Rather than providing continuous access to the body, only

isolated moments separated by darkness are offered. This poses a challenge to strands of posthumanist thought that assume the increasing transparency, continuity, and legibility of the subject under conditions of technological mediation. If posthumanism often imagines enhanced access to the body through data and imaging systems, Cassils’ work instead foregrounds opacity, interruption, and the failure of visual capture. The subject that appears here is neither fully knowable nor continuously present but emerges only through fragmented and contingent acts of exposure.



Figure 1: Cassils, *Becoming an Image*, 2012-ongoing, Los Angeles, ONE Archives.

Because the image appears only in these brief flashes, attention shifts to the conditions that produce it. Crucially, the images in *Becoming an Image* depend on physical effort. Each flash captures a moment generated through the repeated impact of Cassils’ body against the clay. The image, therefore, emerges from exertion that precedes the flash and from fatigue that accumulates over the course of the performance. What becomes visible is not simply the body itself but the process of labour through which the image is produced. Against digital cultures that understand visibility as immediate and effortless, the work demonstrates that appearing can require time, energy, and physical strain.

N. Katherine Hayles’ critique of cybernetics and information theory (1999) offers a useful framework for understanding this refusal. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles traces how the liberal humanist subject came to be increasingly organised through informational paradigms that privilege pattern, signal, and feedback over

material embodiment (Hayles, 1999). She argues that cybernetic discourse foregrounds pattern and information at the expense of material instantiation, hereby risking the erasure of embodiment as a site of lived experience and vulnerability.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in how subjectivity is conceptualised. It reflects a deeper transformation in how subjectivity is conceptualised. As MacPherson (1962) argues, the liberal humanist subject was historically understood through what he terms “possessive individualism”: a figure imagined as the owner of their body and capacities, treating the body as a form of property even when shaped by social institutions.

Extending Hayles’ concern with abstraction, this framework helps clarify what is at stake in the displacement of embodiment. If both liberal humanism and cybernetic posthumanism risk conceptualising the body as either property or substrate, they share a tendency to instrumentalise embodiment rather than account for its material conditions.

Such models of the human subject are not neutral but shape the forms of knowledge they produce. Mary Midgley (2001) argues that scientific theories are often guided by broader “mythologies” or background pictures of the world that determine what counts as intelligible explanation. These assumptions influence which aspects of human experience are considered relevant and which are excluded from scientific attention.

In the context of Cassils’ *Becoming an Image*, the performance makes these epistemological assumptions materially visible by exposing how dominant visual and technological frameworks privilege what can be captured, stabilised, and reproduced, while marginalising forms of embodiment that are ephemeral, effortful, or resistant to clear representation. The intermittent flashes that structure the work do not simply limit visibility; they actively reveal the conditions under which visibility becomes legible as knowledge. What remains unseen—fatigue, duration, and the accumulation of bodily strain—falls outside the parameters of what such frameworks recognise as meaningful data.

By foregrounding these exclusions, Cassils’ practice demonstrates that the problem is not only what is made visible, but how regimes of visibility are structured in advance by theoretical and technological assumptions. In this sense, the work extends Midgley’s argument by demonstrating that what escapes scientific or visual attention is systematically produced rather than accidentally overlooked. Visibility, therefore, cannot be understood as a neutral or purely technical process, but must be analysed as a site where epistemology, power, and embodiment intersect.

Within informational paradise, the body no longer appears as the grounding condition of agency but as a medium through which information is processed and transmitted. When humans are understood primarily as patterns of information, the body no longer appears as the grounding condition of agency but as a medium through which information is processed and transmitted. Hayles (1999) emphasises that this abstraction does not eliminate power but reorganises it. By separating informational patterns from the material conditions of embodiment, such models tend to overlook how vulnerability and difference remain unevenly distributed across bodies. In practice, the consequences of technological systems – such as surveillance, data classification, or bureaucratic regulation – are experienced differently depending on gender, race, and class. What becomes less visible in informational accounts is therefore not the body itself, but the political significance of embodied limits such as fatigue, dependency, and exposure to risk.

These informational frameworks re-organise subjectivity around circulation, pattern, and productivity rather than embodied presence. Earlier models of the subject often relied on binaries of presence and absence, defining identity through what the subject possessed or lacked. Informational paradigms deconstruct this structure. Instead of grounding subjectivity in bodily presence, they emphasise the formation and circulation of patterns within technological systems. As Hayles’ (1999) analysis of cybernetics demonstrates, informational models tend to treat human beings as configurations of signals, feedback, and pattern recognition rather than as embodied agents.

However, once information is treated as separate from material embodiment, new forms of political and institutional vulnerability emerge. When information is imagined as independent of its material instantiation, embodiment can appear secondary or even unnecessary. Hayles' (1999) work highlights the limits of this abstraction by positing that information is always materially instantiated and historically situated. From this perspective, the apparent neutrality of informational systems begins to unravel. In practice, bodies remain unevenly exposed to institutional power. Those who are seen as "gender queer", for example, often encounter structural barriers in accessing healthcare, legal recognition, and bodily autonomy within bureaucratic and medical systems (Spade, 2015). Informational models that privilege coherence and reproducibility – understood as the standardisation of patterns or gestalts (Koffka, 1935) across contexts – risk obscuring these forms of embodied vulnerability.



The unequal exposure to technological and institutional power constitutes a political condition of subjectivity. This uneven exposure to institutional power is central to the argument of technological embodiment by Donna Haraway (1991). In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway rejects both liberal humanist autonomy and nostalgic appeals to an organic wholeness, arguing instead that "In modern biologies, the translation of the world into a problem in coding can be illustrated by molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology" (p.34). The cyborg, therefore, functions not as a reconciliation of human and machine, but as a critical figure that reveals these boundaries as historically constructed and unevenly distributed.

If bodies become legible only through technological systems, embodiment cannot be separated from infrastructure that classify and govern them. Haraway's (1991) emphasis on hybridity, therefore, carries an ethical implication. If subjects are already constituted through technoscientific systems, agency cannot lie in escaping these structures but in taking responsibility for how they organise power, visibility, and vulnerability. Rather than imagining a return to an autonomous human subject, the cyborg foregrounds the need for situated political engagement within the systems that produce embodiment.

Haraway (1991) situates subjectivity within global information systems shaped by military, scientific, and capitalist logics. Within these systems, power operates through the organisation and circulation of information. Bodies become legible to institutions insofar as they can be coded, transmitted, and managed within technological infrastructures. Haraway's critique is not that bodies literally become information, but that informational systems increasingly treat embodiment as if it could be fully translated into code (1991). Informational systems do not operate neutrally. They reflect and reproduce existing relations of power, determining which bodies become visible, legible, or governable within technological regimes.

If power operates through informational circulation, agency cannot reside in autonomy or withdrawal, but only in situated engagement.<sup>1</sup> The cyborg is accountable precisely because it is entangled. Embodiment is not opposed to technology; rather, technological systems are always encountered, experienced, and negotiated through embodied existence. Read alongside Hayles, Haraway helps clarify the stakes of Posthuman embodiment for this analysis: the question is not whether bodies are mediated, but how mediation distributes vulnerability, visibility, and control.

If posthuman embodiment is shaped by systems that determine which bodies become legible, these dynamics become especially visible in the archival politics surrounding *Becoming an Image*. The work was commissioned in response to the relative absence of trans-identified bodies within institutional archives, drawing attention to the ways in which systems of documentation shape what

becomes historically visible (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Archives do not simply preserve bodies or events; they also dictate legibility by determining what counts as evidence and what may enter the historical record. As Jacques Derrida (1995) argues, the archive is not a neutral repository but a structure that produces the conditions under which knowledge can appear. This insight is extended by Saidiya Hartman (2008), who demonstrates how archival systems not only exclude marginalised represented, often leaving only fragmentary or violent traces of their existence.

Because archives depend upon visual documentation, photographic images frequently operate as forms of institutional evidence. Visibility in this context is therefore closely tied to processes of recognition and record-making, such that bodies not documented risk remaining absent from institutional memory. What is at stake, then, is not merely the deconstruction of representation, but the conditions under which bodies become interpretable within institutional systems of knowledge. Archival inclusion, therefore, depends upon the stabilisation within institutional frameworks of classification and authority. As Michel Foucault (2013) argues, modern institutions do not merely record subjects but actively produce the categories through which they become knowable.

Within medico-legal and cultural regimes, trans bodies have frequently been interpreted through classificatory frameworks that reduce them to typologies, spectacles, or medicalised pathologies. As Paul B. Preciado (2016) observes, modern regimes of knowledge often combine scientific observation with forms of spectacularisation, transforming gender-nonconforming bodies into objects of surveillance and display. Cassils' *Becoming an Image* intervenes in this visual economy by rendering visibility itself unreliable. The photographic flash—commonly associated with forensic evidence and documentary truth—here destabilises the authority of the image it produces.

The performance generates two distinct visual registers: the photograph captured by the camera and the fleeting retinal afterimage experienced by the audience. The photograph appears stable and reproducible and can, therefore, circulate within documentary and archival systems. The retinal

image, by contrast, exists only within the viewer's embodied perception and disappears almost immediately. By separating these two forms of visibility, the work exposes a tension between what can be archived and what can only be experienced, thereby revealing the limits of evidentiary regimes grounded in reproducibility.



By separating embodied perception from reproducible documentation, the work also reinforces N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) warning against treating information as a primary framework through which subjectivity is understood. When informational systems privilege pattern, classification, and reproducibility, institutions gain increasing authority in determining how subjects become legible. However, as Donna Haraway suggests, embodiment cannot be reduced to informational abstraction but must be understood as relational, situated, and materially embedded within networks of power and technology.

Through Cassils' performance, these perspectives reveal the limits of archival logic: while archives depend on stability, repetition, and legibility, the body enacted in *Becoming an Image* remains temporally extended, physically consuming, and vulnerable. Its most significant dimensions—fatigue, duration, and exertion—cannot be fully captured or preserved. In this way, the work resists incorporation into archival systems that privilege reproducible data, insisting instead on forms of embodiment that exceed the structures designed to record them.

Posthumanism does not entail the disappearance of the body; rather, it reveals the instability of the liberal humanist subject within contemporary technological cultures. Instead of asking whether embodiment survives technological mediation, I argue that the central issue lies in how bodies are reorganised, regulated, and made visible within informational systems. Taken together, Hayles and Haraway demonstrate that posthumanist thought does not offer a singular account of embodiment but a set of complementary critical perspectives. Hayles cautions against the abstraction of subjectivity into informational patterns, emphasising the political risks of disembodiment, while Haraway foregrounds hybridity and relational responsibility as strategies for inhabiting technological worlds without surrendering agency. Read together, their arguments frame embodiment as neither purely biological nor technologically transcendent, but as historically and materially situated.

Cassils' *Becoming an Image* materialises these theoretical concerns through sustained bodily exertion, exhaustion, and resistance. The intermittent flashes of the camera reveal a body that becomes visible only through sustained physical effort. Technologically mediated visibility is never immaterial: it is sustained through labour, risk, and the management of bodily limits. Cassils' practice resists both liberal humanist autonomy and technoutopian abstraction by positioning material resistance and endurance as central to the work. Posthuman embodiment therefore emerges not as an escape from the body but as a contested and relational process shaped through power, mediation, and vulnerability. Posthumanism remains most critical when it insists on the persistence – and the politics – of embodied life.

#### Footnotes

1. C.f. Arendt's thesis that action emerges within a shared and plural world rather than in sovereign isolation (Arendt, 2018).

#### Bibliography

- Arendt, H. (2018) *The Human Condition*. Second edition / with a new foreword by Danielle Allen. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Biuso, AG. (2015) "From Internet to Posthuman." *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia e Psicologia* 6, no. 2: 305–10.
- Bogue, R. (1989) *Deleuze and Guattari*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Derrida, J, and Prenowitz, E. (1995) "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* (Ithaca, N.Y) 25, no. 2: 9–63.
- Foucault, M. (2013) *Archaeology of Knowledge. Second edition*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Giovanni, A. and McHugh, S. (2021) eds. *Posthumanism in Art and Science a Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hansen, Phillip. (2018) *Reconsidering C.B. MacPherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Haraway, D.J., and Wolfe, C. (2016) *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. (1999) *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. 1st ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Karreman, L, Stalpaert, C., and van Baarle, K (2021) eds. *Performance and Posthumanism: Staging Prototypes of Composite Bodies*. 1st ed. 2021. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Koffka, K. (1935) *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Lawtoo, N. (2025) "Mimetic Posthumanism: Homo Mimeticus 2. 0 in Art, Philosophy and Technics /," First edition. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Macpherson, C.B. (2011) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Don Mills (Ont.): Oxford University Press.
- Malpas, S, and Wake, P. (2013) *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Menegalle, G. (2020) "Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze Ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall (Review)." *French Studies* 74, no. 3: 505–6.

Midgley, M. (2001) "Mythology, Rhetoric and Religion." In *Science and Poetry*, 1st ed., 199–207. Routledge.

Preciado, PB (2016). "Politically Assisted Procreation and State Heterosexuality." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Durham) 115, no. 2: 405–10.

Steinbuch, T.A. (2022) "Towards a Posthuman Sexuality: Art, Sex and Evolution in Nietzsche, Williams and Mozart." *Journal of Posthumanism* 2, no. 1: 65–78.

Wolfe, C. (2021) *Art and Posthumanism: Essays, Encounters, Conversations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

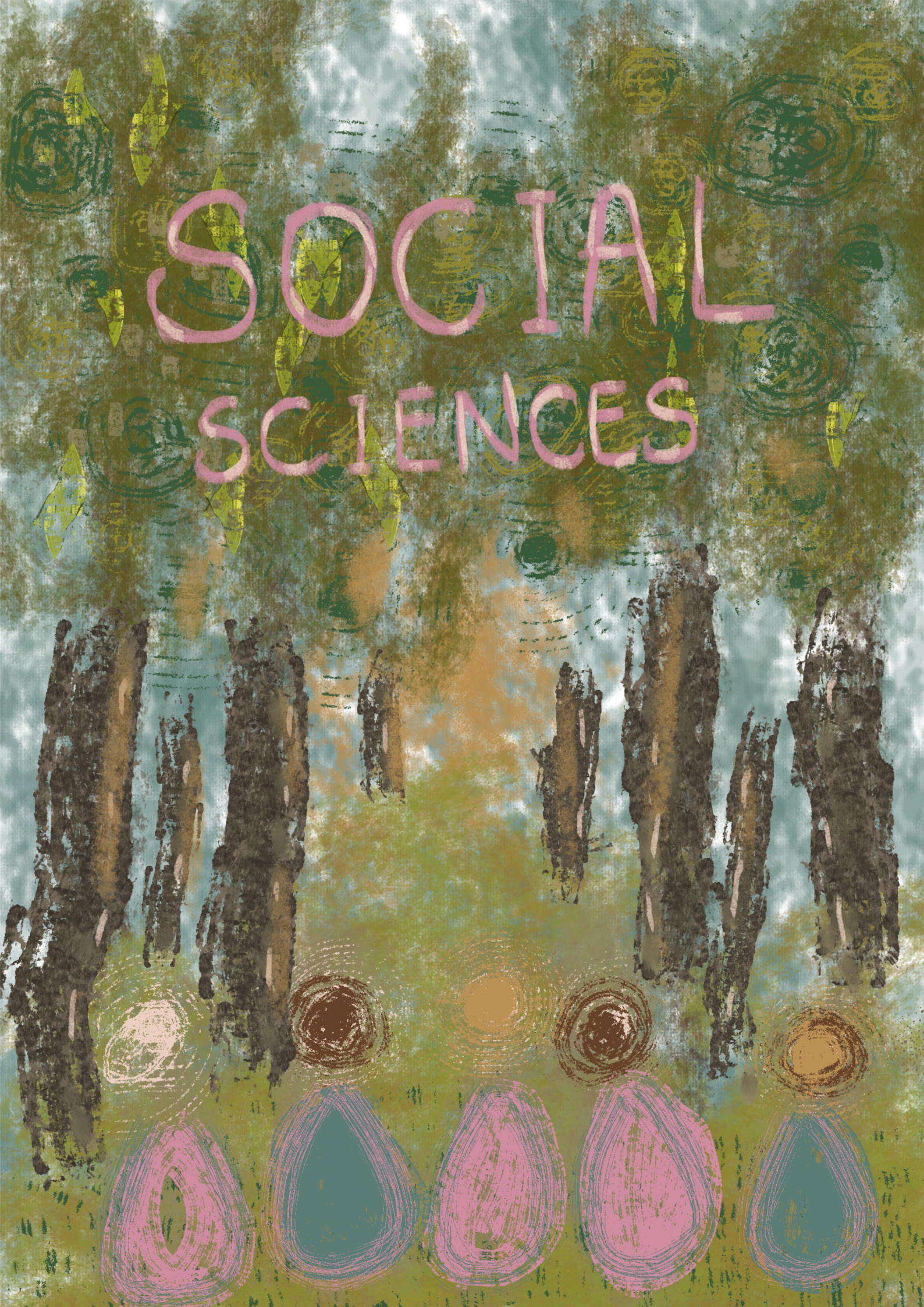
Spade, Dean. (2016) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Revised and Expanded edition. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374794>.

Gill-Peterson, Jules. (2019) *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. <https://login.eux.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctv75d87g>.

Korsch, Karl. (2016) *Karl Marx*. Leiden: Brill.

Hartman, Saidiya. (2008) "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : A Journal of Criticism* (Bloomington) 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

# SOCIAL SCIENCES





---

# Feminist Refusal:

## *4B and The Rejection of Scripted Womanhood in South Korea*

---

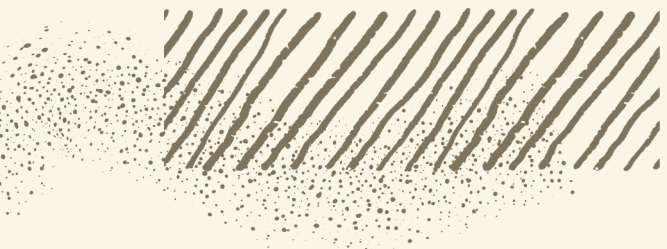
*by Mia Hutchins*

---

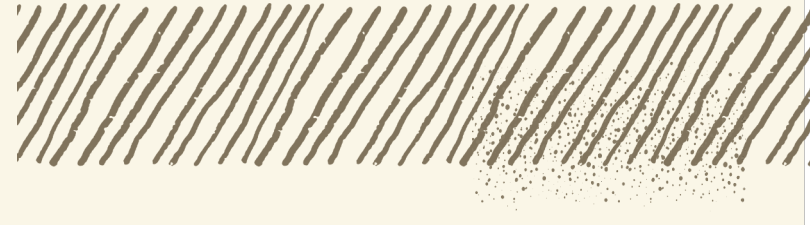
---

This article investigates the South Korean 4B movement as a form of institutional feminist refusal that challenges Korea's patriarchal system. By exploring the history of South Korean women through Confucianism, Japanese colonialism and the 1997 IMF crisis, we can see the origins of South Korean gender inequality. This article then uses John Stuart Mill's theory of institutionalised subjection to expose how female expectations are socially constructed rather than freely chosen. Next, the article analyses the 4B movement and its future impact locally and globally. Ultimately, the essay concludes that 4B is powerful but a context-specific form of resistance.

---



Edited by Ruby Scott, Copyedited by Lauren Hood,  
Reviewed by Seonyeong Baek & JiHye Jeong,  
Art by Madeleine Brady



## Introduction

The 4B movement is a form of feminism that exposes how South Korea's gender order is maintained through the naturalisation of womanhood. Using Mill's theory of institutionalised subjection, this essay argues that 4B effectively challenges these coercive gender norms within Korea but remains globally unsustainable.

Economic development is widely expected to reduce gender inequality. Modernisation theorists argue that as economies grow, labour markets expand, education levels rise and traditional family values erode.<sup>1</sup> South Korea stands in contrast to this assumption. South Korea is one of the most developed economies globally, yet it is home to persistent gender inequality. This essay argues that the movement is best understood as a form of institutional resistance shaped by a specific historical and political context and will assess its success. To develop this argument, the essay will start by tracing the historical construction of gender inequality in South Korea, emphasising that the patriarchy we see today has been reshaped through Confucianism, colonialism and financial crisis. Next, the article introduces John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women' (1869) as a theoretical framework. Thirdly, the article examines the movement itself and explores how it relates to the patriarchal structures Mill identifies. Finally, the essay will consider the global reach of 4B and why its logic resists direct translation to other contexts, such as the USA.

## History of South Korean women

South Korean women's struggles are deeply rooted in the country's history. This has shaped its social and political foundations. Korean society was structured by Confucianism, which matured during the Choson Dynasty (1392 – 1910), taking over Buddhism to become the main political ideology.<sup>2</sup> Under Confucianism, women were placed at a disadvantage and were always seen as subordinate to men. The eldest male was the most respected person in the family, and occupied public, intellectual and political spheres, whereas women were confined to domestic life. These gender norms were not only cultural expectations but were also written into the state law.

However, Confucianism is not the sole reason for

gender tensions in South Korea. Under Japanese rule (1910-1945), Korea experienced systematic repression and increased sexual violence. The colonial policies reinforced male dominance and subjected women to domestic roles, creating 'comfort women'. These 'comfort women' were essentially sex slaves for Japanese soldiers before and during the Pacific War.<sup>3</sup> They were assigned numbers and placed into recreation camps and were as young as twelve years old. After Japan's surrender in 1945, they tried to erase evidence of their criminal acts committed against Asian women. This was done by slaughtering Korean soldiers and the 'comfort women'. Korea split into North Korea and South Korea. In the South, women's rights were deprioritised in favour of rebuilding the nation.

The 1997 IMF financial crisis represented another critical moment in the reconfiguration of Korean gender norms. The crisis created setbacks for the equality of working women in Korea, as the economy was bailed out.<sup>4</sup> Women were the first to be laid off during the mass unemployment due to bankruptcy, pushing them out of stable work and reinforcing the male breadwinner model. As a result, women became forced to work in low-income, non-permanent jobs. This disproportionately disadvantaged women, especially single mothers, as they lacked savings and access to stable jobs. The repercussions of this are still seen today, as women are still pushed out of formal employment, creating one of the worst gender pay gaps in the world.

In a contemporary context, gender inequality has been reinforced rather than dismantled. President Yoon Suk Yeol relied heavily on anti-feminist rhetoric during his 2022 campaign, framing feminism as the destructive force responsible for the country's weak demographic.<sup>5</sup> High-profile officials using language like this places women in South Korea at risk of being further marginalised by society as it legitimises sexist attitudes. The president also planned to remove the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family under his regime, illustrating how gender issues in South Korea were weaponised to gain votes. These discriminatory policies have consequences and are being manifested in everyday life for women in South Korea. Under sexist leadership, more and more men are becoming comfortable with normalising sexism

without any consequence. The implications of these sexist cultural rules in South Korea mute female voices and allow domestic violence to become more common. The consequences of a sexist leader manifest in society as increased misogynistic activity and violence. It is impossible to understand the resistance of South Korean women without recognising the historical and political backdrop. The emergence of the 4B movement was not sudden but rather was inherited by women over the course of years of gender oppression. Gender inequality in South Korea is a system shaped by the Confucian legacy and is reinforced by modern political rhetoric. Many Western societies have gradually become more distant from religious gender norms, but Confucian values continue to contribute to everyday social relations in Korea. The willingness of political figures such as Yoon Suk Yeol to use anti-feminist regimes highlights how these historical norms remain a powerful political tool, undermining the seriousness of discrimination in ways that differ from Western patriarchies. The unique collaboration of Confucian tradition and modern politics creates a form of gender oppression that is distinct to South Korea. Women in South Korea have banded together in this movement to reject the 'natural' sexual roles of women.



### **Normative Femininity in South Korea**

Patriarchy in South Korea operates through explicit discrimination and the institutionalisation of normative femininity. This refers to the socially constructed behaviours and traits that society expects women to embody. It is shaped by expectations of heterosexuality and domestic responsibility. In South Korea, marriage is framed as the natural progression of a woman's life, and motherhood her biological destiny. The labour market is a huge factor that reproduces normative femininity. It reinforces the idea of a male breadwinner model and positions women as

secondary earners whose careers bend around domestic responsibility. This places women's natural position in the home. These gender expectations remain embedded in policy, culture and everyday life. Understanding this system is key for interpreting the 4B movement. It illuminates how 4B is not a rejection of men, but instead a rejection of the institutionalised expectations of women. The movement openly challenges mechanisms that reproduce normative femininity and exposes how deeply patriarchal institutions shape women's choices.

### **Using Mill as a Theory**

John Stuart Mill's 1869 Essay 'The Subjection of Women' provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the emergence of the 4B movement. Mill argues that the subordination of women is harboured by social institutions and is not natural. The expectation that women should marry, bear children and be domesticated reflects the institutionalised subjection Mill criticises. Mill claims that women's consent under patriarchy is shaped by coercive norms. This helps explain why many women in the 4B movement view childbirth and marriage as obligatory conventions instead of a free choice. We can see Mill's argument clearly in the context of South Korea. Mill insists that the patriarchy survives because social institutions have trained women from childhood to see domesticity as their purposeful role in life. Despite modernisation occurring in South Korea, these gender assumptions remain embedded in their society. South Korea's labour market continues to operate around a male-breadwinner model. This model reinforces limitations of women's economic autonomy, tying them to domestic roles.<sup>6</sup> These institutional pressures not only restrict women's choices but also make it a normal expectation for women to be domesticated. Using Mill's theory, we can see that the 4B movement does not act as a rejection of men but rather it rejects the patriarchal structure that continues to constrain women's lives. The movement echoes Mill's idea that true gender equality requires dismantling the systems that bind women to patriarchal service. Despite this, there are limitations to using Mill's ideas as a theoretical lens for 4B. Although Mill wrote in the context of Victorian Britain, not contemporary Korea, his analysis still offers a valuable way to understand how patriarchy naturalises women's subordination.

## The movement

The 4B movement is a movement inspired by ideas in radical feminism that supports the female rejection of dating (biyeonae), sex (bisekseu), marriage (bihon) and childbirth (bichulsan). In a society where a woman's main role is mainly domestic, this collective refusal of heteronormativity functions as a powerful political statement. The movement began online in 2017 and gained attention after it reported on high-profile violent incidents against women. Digital platforms like Megalia have allowed women to connect with others who have experienced the same sexism throughout their lives in South Korea without being under state surveillance. In South Korea, there is a highly monitored digital environment and so being able to speak freely with the safety of anonymity is important for women. In 2022, government retaliation against women and journalists who reported gender-based discrimination and harassment online scored 3/5 for violation of user rights.<sup>7</sup> Online posts also often offer alternative imaginaries of potential womanhood that reject beauty standards, domestic expectations and labour. The rise of this movement has not caused protests or legal campaigns but instead relies solely on peaceful activism brought by the female community.

## Future/global impact and criticism

The rise of 4B has provoked backlash in Korea. Men have started to form their own groups that advocate male rights and oppose 4B and feminism. The group called New Men's Solidarity has gained significant attention because of its violence targeted at women's rights activists, with reports of members chasing feminists and spraying them with water guns.<sup>8</sup> The movement has also started to grow abroad, specifically in the USA, after President Trump's re-election. Many young American women have come together online to join 4B after the speculation of a loss of many of their rights.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, many women in the USA have found it difficult to fully immerse themselves in the movement, finding it non-inclusive. The movement was born as a rejection of the natural script of womanhood in South Korea, and is highly specific to Korean society. South Korean culture and American culture contrast in their attitudes to gender and sex. The whole social context that gave rise to the movement in the two countries are completely different.<sup>10</sup> The USA

has a much more diverse population, with larger proportions of marginalised groups. This means that intersectionality has been a key focal point in American feminist movements. Many South Korean women who are part of 4B movement have chosen 4B over other feminist groups as they believe that other groups have lost focus by allying with other minority groups, such as transgender and queer women. In contrast, the movement growth in the USA is not strictly for supporting cis women only. This limits the global applicability of the 4B movement. To grow as a worldwide movement, South Korea will need to adapt its views on homosexuality and transgender rights.



We can see the contrast between 4B and the American Boy Sober movement. Boy Sober is a social media-driven movement where women are committing to not dating, focusing on self-growth and healing. This movement is individualistic and therapeutic, whereas 4B is collective, strict and political. The main difference between the two movements is that Boy Sober criticises men, but 4B directly attacks institutions and political sexism. The institutions present in South Korea create conditions for communitarian feminism where rejection of expectations of womanhood becomes a collective refusal of the sexist system itself. Going back to Mill's ideas that women's choices are shaped by social institutions helps explain why 4B is so successful in South Korea. In contrast, by looking at Micahale Ferguson's (2009) Essay 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,' we can explore how Boy Sober is more suitable in the neoliberal American world where the focus is about self-optimisation. Ferguson argues that personal decisions are seen as inherently empowering by "choice feminists". This highlights how a direct translation of 4B from South Korea to a country like the USA is not applicable, as the context and history of sexism in each place differ vastly.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the 4B movement has acted as a major support system for South Korean women. In a society where they have historically been marginalised and discriminated against, the movement provides women with a powerful community of feminists. 4B provides emotional refuge and also allows women to reimagine a life without sexist institutions which have oppressed them for a long time. Bounded by the limitations of South Korea, it can be said that the movement has been a success. However, on a global scale, the movement has been less effective as it is too fixed in South Korean culture. As the essay has shown, 4B is more than just a lifestyle choice: it is an attack on patriarchal systems which have been in place since the rise of Confucianism. This makes the movement far less transferable to other countries. I compared 4B to Boy Sober in the USA to show this. Using Mill's argument that true gender equality must come from dismantling sexist structures existing in society, we can see how 4B is non-transferable. The movement will remain a strictly South Korean phenomenon. It cannot be successfully translated to other countries until South Korea ends its own stigma about the nature of women and removes their deeply rooted patriarchy.

## Footnotes

1. Rostow, W.W. 1959. 'The Stages of Economic Growth,' *The Economic History Review* 12 (1): 1–16, pp.12–37.
2. Cawley, Kevin N. 2021. 'Korean Confucianism,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, pp.20–40.
3. Elena Buja, 2021. 'An Image of Korean Women during the Japanese Occupation of the Peninsula, as It Emerges from Literary Masterpieces,' *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 13, no. 1: 73–88.
4. Haejin Kim and Paula B. Voos, 2007. 'The Korean Economic Crisis and Working Women,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 37, no. 2: 190–208.
5. Gunia, Amy. 2022. 'How South Korea's next President Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash,' *TIME*, March 10, 2022.
6. Saxonberg, Steven. 2024. 'Exploring the Alternatives to the Male-Breadwinner Model,' *Social Policy and Society*, p.7.
7. Freedom House. 2024. 'South Korea: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report,' p.20.

8. Chaigne, Thais. 2021. 'The South Korean Men Waging a Vulgar and Violent War against Feminists,' *France 24*, September 9, 2021.

9. Wilson, Brock. 2024. 'What Is the 4B Movement?,' *CBC*, November 9, 2024.

10. Yagoda, Maria. 2024. '4B Is Not the Winning Strategy to Resist the Patriarchy People Think It Is,' *TIME*, November 20, 2024.

## Bibliography

Buja, Elena. 2021. "An Image of Korean Women during the Japanese Occupation of the Peninsula, as It Emerges from Literary Masterpieces." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* 13 (1): 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ausp-2021-0006>.

Cawley, Kevin N. 2021. "Korean Confucianism." Edited by Edward N. Zalta. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. November 24, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/korean-confucianism/>.

Cha, Victor D. 2001. "Strategic Culture and the Military Modernization of South Korea." *Armed Forces & Society* 28 (1): 99–127. <https://doi.org/10.2307/45346909>.

Gunia, Amy. 2022. "How South Korea's next President Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash." *TIME*. March 10, 2022. <https://time.com/6156537/south-korea-president-yoon-suk-yeol-sexism/>.

Inequalities. 2025. "How the 4B Feminist Rebellion Is Taking on Patriarchy." *LSE Inequalities - Expert Views, Opinions and Policy Debate*. May 28, 2025. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2025/05/28/boycotting-men-how-the-4b-feminist-rebellion-is-taking-on-patriarchy/>.

Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511550362.003>.

Jimin, Kim. 2024. "Misogyny and Gender Conflicts in South Korea." *Communications in Humanities Research* 44 (1): 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/44/20240118>.

- Kim, Haejin, and Paula B. Voos. 2007. "The Korean Economic Crisis and Working Women." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 37 (2): 190–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701253874>.
- Kwak Yeon-soo. 2024. "Intimate Partners Account for Half of Violence Cases against Women: Study." *The Korea Times*. March 8, 2024. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/society/20240309/intimate-partners-account-for-half-of-violence-cases-against-women-study>
- Kweon, SugIn. 2014. "Japanese Female Settlers in Colonial Korea: Between the 'Benefits' and 'Constraints' of Colonial Society." *Social Science Japan Journal* 17 (2): 169–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/43920442>.
- Lee, Soohyun Christine. 2024. "Anti-Gender Politics, Economic Insecurity, and Right-Wing Populism: The Rise of Modern Sexism among Young Men in South Korea." *Social Politics*
- Lee, Young-Im. 2025. "4B Movement | History, Context, Critiques, & Impact." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. August 6, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/4B-movement>.
- Mo, Cecilia Hyunjung, and Soosun You. 2025. "The Fight over Gender Equality in South Korea." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 16, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/the-fight-over-gender-equality-in-south-korea?lang=en>.
- Rostow, W. W. 1959. "The Stages of Economic Growth." *The Economic History Review* 12 (1): 1–16.
- Saxonberg, Steven. 2024. "Exploring the Alternatives to the Male-Breadwinner Model – the Implications for Social Policy Study." *Social Policy and Society*. March, 2024. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1474746424000113>.
- "South Korea: Freedom on the Net 2024 Country Report | Freedom House." 2024. *Freedom House*. 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-korea/freedom-net/2024>
- Thaïs Chaigne. 2021. "The South Korean Men Waging a Vulgar and Violent War against Feminists." *The Observers - France 24*. September 9, 2021. <https://observers.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210914-the-south-korean-men-waging-a-vulgar-and-violent-war-against-feminists>
- Wilson, Brock. 2024. "What Is the 4B Movement? Why Some Women Are Boycotting Men after Trump's Election Victory." *CBC*. November 9, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/what-is-the-4b-movement-gaining-appeal-in-the-us-1.7378025>
- Yagoda, Maria. 2024. "4B Is Not the Winning Strategy to Resist the Patriarchy People Think It Is." *TIME*. November 20, 2024. <https://time.com/7177557/4b-us-women-resisting-patriarchy-essay/>.
- <https://www.asiae.co.kr>. 2025. "One in Five Women Reports Experiencing Violence from Partners or Spouses - the Asia Business Daily." *The Asia Business Daily*. December 2025. <https://www.asiae.co.kr/en/article/2025120116092088905>

# Forests of Forgetting, Faces of Erasure:


Slow Violence, Racial Capitalism & Ecological Warfare  
in North America and Israel/Palestine

by Marlene Ito

This essay examines how whiteness operates as a constructed and materialised orientation that legitimises racial capitalism and settler colonialism through practices of erasure. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness and Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence, it argues that these forms of violence are sustained not only through spectacular acts of force but through attritional, mundane infrastructures that naturalise exclusion across time and space. Through an ethnographically staged encounter with three objects - a Kodak “Shirley Card,” a Jewish National Fund (JNF) collection box, and a media excerpt framing Israel as an environmental “startup nation” - the essay traces a shared logic of racialisation that renders black and Indigenous bodies and landscapes as invisible, deficient, or in need of redemption. Across these objects, the essay argues that erasure is not accidental but systemic: a racialised ordering of visibility and belonging that privileges certain bodies while rendering others out of place. This essay concludes by attending to embodied acts of remembrance and resistance, suggesting a slow resistance to counter slow violence.

While slow violence is enduring, it is not absolute.

Edited by Ruby Scott, Copyedited by Juliette Pepin,  
Reviewed by Giuliana Racco,  
Art by Elise Adams



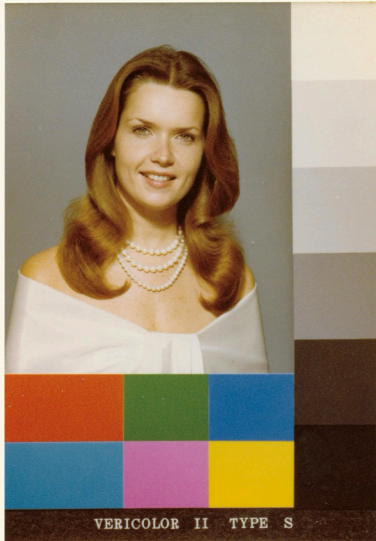
*"Colonialism makes the world 'white', a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them."*

- Sara Ahmed 2007: 153-4

Whiteness, according to Sara Ahmed (2007, p. 150), is not to be assumed as an 'ontological given', but as that which has been 'received or become given', a consequence of racialisation thus shaping what bodies "can do". Racialisation refers to the process by which racial meaning extends to previously 'racially unclassified relationships, social practices, or groups' – an ongoing project predicated on colonialism, conquest, and enslavement, wherein bodies incur classification to uphold and legitimise domination (Omi and Winant, 1986, p. 13). Indeed, whiteness is experienced as deeply habitual and corporeal; as proximate and intimately felt; as ocular. Whiteness orients how one's body can "sink" into spaces comfortably (Rolland, 2003), determining how liberally bodies can navigate the world. Colonialism, as Ahmed writes, lends itself to malleability, shaping the world to be ready for 'certain kinds of bodies' while rendering others out of place; not 'extending to their shape' (Fanon, 1952; Ahmed, 2006, p. 160). This essay seeks to reckon with how whiteness, as a constructed phenomenology, has been historicised and embedded as veridic, materially occluding black and brown bodies. Specifically, I explore how whiteness is legitimised through two main tropes: erasure and the cultural zeitgeist of the 1940s-1990s in North America evidenced in Kodak's film photography, in tandem with ecological warfare and settler colonialism in Israel/Palestine from the 1900s to the twenty-first century.

The nexus of this essay is "erasure", which I examine through *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) where slow violence is defined as a protracted, attritional form of violence that is "not immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, erupting into instant sensational visibility," but rather a "delayed destruction dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). I draw on three "objects" of inquiry: a Kodak "Shirley Card", a Jewish National Fund (JNF) collection box, and a quote borrowed from Claudia Cahalane's (2013) article, positioning Israel as the paragon of environmental innovation. I introduce this essay by situating the reader in a museum setting, presenting an ethnographic dialogue that intends to fold these objects into one another. First, I examine Shirley Cards as racialised calibration tools in North American photography, drawing on Lundy Braun (2014), Lorna Roth (2009), and Shalini Shankar (2020) to explore how they construct whiteness as the standard, isolating and erasing non-white bodies. Next, I analyse the JNF box as another material artifact of erasure, following Irus Braverman (2009) on its role in disseminating settler-colonial narratives. Finally, I turn to Cahalane's (2013) framing of Israel's environmentalism, which reflects how

development discourse obscures histories of displacement. I “implode” these objects, tracing their shared logic of legitimising erasure through subtle yet enduring forms of violence (Dumit, 2014).

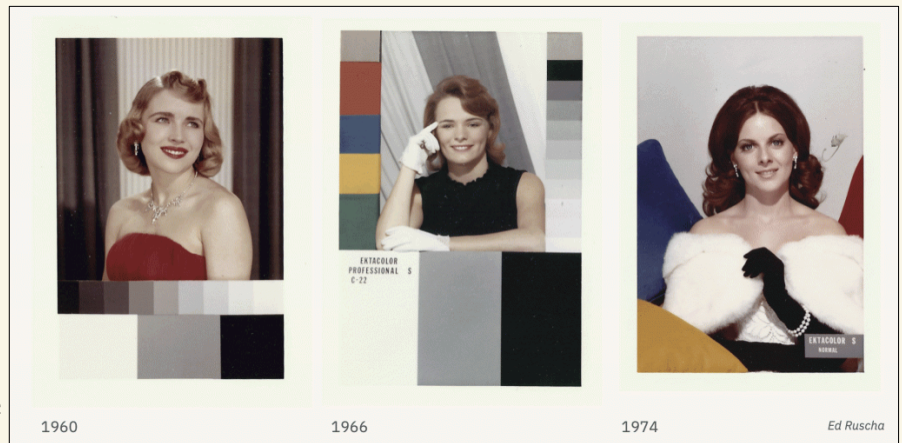


**Figure 1:** Kodak Shirley Card (1978). Courtesy of Hermann Zschiegner.

The sun emits a dry and unforgiving heat, a heat that asks you take refuge in a modest exhibition space nearby. You walk into a room displaying three pieces, first confronted with a large print: a white woman with an arguably gaudy verisimilitude, manicured hair and pearls adorning her neck, looks back at you, smiling. This, according to the placard, is Shirley. Due to the proliferation of photo processing and printing services throughout the mid-twentieth century, Kodak supplied an abundance of labs with printers (McNamee, 2023). However, each Kodak printer needed to be calibrated and standardised to achieve the correct “skin colour balance” (Roth, 2009, p. 112). Thus, Shirley, an employee of Kodak, became the first colour test-strip-card model, widely recognised as the ‘skin ideal for most North American photo labs’ (Roth, 2009, p.112).

While posited as ideologically neutral, colour photography was never a passive medium bound to “faithfully” capture the natural world; rather, deliberate choices were actively made in the development and production of photographic materials (Winston, 1996). Kodak’s calibration practices materialised and oriented the camera to

whiteness as the normative centre to which others must orient themselves, rendering non-white skin tones invisible or queerly exposed and represented. Such embedded bias is similarly delineated by Braun, who examines how scientific “truths” embedded in technological innovation—such as spirometry, a lung function test used to measure breathing capacity—were shaped by racialised assumptions. In *Breathing Race into the Machine* (2014) she argues that these assumptions consequently produced new “truths” about black physiology (Braun, 2014, pp. 127-129). Here, just as Kodak calibrated its film stock to encode whiteness as the standard, medical devices like spirometers were designed with



**Figure 2.** Kodak Shirley Card(s) from 1960, 1966, and 1974. Source: Jim Doty 2023

built-in racial value-laden assumptions. Consequently, quotidian technologies did not simply reflect racial disparities but actively *produced and augmented* them under the guise of scientific objectivity.

Such technological racialisation embedded into seemingly benign infrastructures did not manifest as explosive or spectacular events but instead operated through a more insidious form of attritional violence. As Nixon argues, such acts of slow violence are often obscured by their “drama deficit” (Nixon, 2011, p. 52), unfolding gradually over time, espoused as though it had always been so, “based on science that could not be changed” (Roth, 2009, p. 120). Despite complaints from parents of black schoolchildren, Kodak continued producing new iterations of Shirley cards (Figure 3), each featuring another

white woman labelled underneath as ‘normal’ (Roth, 2009; Lewis, 2019; Wessling, 2023). However, it was not until the mid-sixties and seventies, when chocolate manufacturers complained that film stock failed to differentiate between milk and dark chocolate, and furniture companies struggled to discern between different wood stains, that Kodak acknowledged the issue (Roth, 2009, pp.119-120). In response to complaints from Kodak’s desired clientele—white consumers—Kodak adjusted its film stock to maintain its market dominance. This aligns with what Shankar (2020) describes as the “ultimate consumer aspiration” in advertising: whiteness as the normative centre around which industries orient their products and marketing. This shift, rather than reflecting genuine care or inclusivity,



**Figure 3.** Kodak's multiracial Shirley card from 1996. Source: Kodak via Lorna Roth

imblicates neoliberal ventures and logic where care itself is commodified as “bought or sold; [...] packaged and advertised,” with the sole intention of maintaining capital (Constable, 2009, p. 50).

Here, the lack of acknowledgement or apology of the siloing of non-white bodies in photography emulsion adheres to the ‘corporate technique of “never apologising never explaining” (Hirsch, 2014). Kodak did not *intend* to be racist thus, if the intention of erasure and exclusion was not out of malice, something that cannot explicitly be

disproven, then a flawed execution should be readily forgiven. It is, to echo Shankar, a sensible ‘racial ontologic of diversity’ that any offence felt by people is ‘their own shortcoming’, therefore deflecting corporate responsibility onto those victimised (Shankar, 2020, p. 116). Thus, the Shirley card is emblematic of being solely palatable to white consumers, only fixing erasure and exclusion when their target consumer expresses criticism. Kodak’s calibration practices quietly reinforced whiteness as the universal standard, the onus not on the company, but rather on the individual for not matching this standard. This logic of erasure and exclusion – where structures appear neutral but in fact privilege a particular racial order – extends beyond photography. As Kodak sought to amend its hamartia of erasure in response to risks to its capital, it framed technological change as progress and diversification, promoting this shift through a “diverse” Shirley card (Figure 4). This form of embedding racialisation in material culture is not dissimilar to the object that sits placidly on a raised platform in the room beside the Shirley cards: a blue and white collection box (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Left: Mid-20th-century English JNF tin charity box (1950). Source: Menorah Galleries. Right: KKL Photo Archive (2021). JNF’s Hebrew name, Keren Kayemet Le’Yisrael, translates to “Perpetual Fund/Capital for Israel.”

The following object is also fundamentally implicated in neoliberal ventures and racial capitalism, legitimising whiteness and in conjunction, the white settler, as the most deserving of belonging.

Peeling your eyes away from Shirley’s half smile, you move onto the next piece. You are faced with two iterations of a JNF collection box: a money slot sits at the top, imbued with a nationalist blue, representative of Israel. The older iteration frames the Jewish National Fund as “working for a greener Israel” and visually reinforces this claim through a map indicating that donations contribute to “reclaiming the land” (Braverman, 2009, p. 328) and “building a country” (JNF Canada, 2025). The more contemporary iteration claims to “redeem and reclaim the land of Israel”, iconographically depicting hands nurturing a pine tree with the word “afforestation” – the process of establishing a forest on land that was not previously forested – resting near the top of the tree (Figure 5). Returning to the language printed on the boxes, the phrase “build a country” implies that no country previously existed, while “reclaim the land” suggests prior dispossession. This word choice insinuates a land either arid and barren or occupied. This is insinuated or rather belligerently stated by Chaim Weizmann (1914), “there is a country which happens to be called Palestine, a country without a people, and, on the other hand, there exists the Jewish people, and it has no country” (Braverman, 2009, p. 340). Analogously, such a narrative is reiterated by Theodor Herzl’s (1902) writing:

Jaffa made a very unpleasant impression . . . the town was in a state of extreme decay . . . the alleys were dirty, neglected, full of vile odors. Everywhere misery in bright Oriental rags. Poor Turks, dirty Arabs, timid Jews lounged about—indolent, beggarly, hopeless. . . .

The landscape through which they passed was a picture of desolation. The low-lands were mostly sand and swamp, the lean fields looked as if burnt over. The inhabitants of the blackish Arab villages looked like brigands. Naked children played in the dirty alleys. Over the distant horizon loomed the deforested hills of Judea. The bare slopes and the bleak, rocky valleys showed some traces of present or former cultivation.

**Figure 6.** Excerpt from Irus Braverman’s analysis of Herzl’s *Altneuland* (2009:338)

The semiotics of both Weizmann and Herzl’s narratives carry an almost antinomic quality to them, as they establish Palestine as a country that is both desolate, ‘mostly sand and swamp’, and simultaneously full, constitutive of ‘poor Turks, dirty Arabs, timid Jews’ (Herzl, 1960; Braverman, 2009, p. 338). It is posited as a virgin country denuded of life; inherently neglected, replete with exposed rock, red dirt and extreme decay that bleeds out into the streets. The ‘timid Jews’ are present, but they are hopeless and consequently indolent, succumbing to the Arab influence. They await redemption by their modern peoples, the Israeli Jew, there to repudiate the image of the ‘submissive and passive diasporic Jew’ and create a native subject that is mobile and strong while mending the ‘rupture from the ancestral land of Zion’ (Braverman, 2009, p. 333). As Herzl propounds, ‘much can be done here with afforestation, this country needs nothing but water and shade to have a great future. And who is it to bring water and shade here? The Jews!’ (Herzl, 1902; Braverman, 2009, p. 339). Thus, salvation is to be found in the JNF box (Figure 5), a ubiquitous object disseminated to millions of Jewish households across the world (Bar-Gal, 2003, p. 1). JNF, known to be the largest Zionist organisation in the world, facilitates programs for ‘tree donations, tree planting, tree mapping, and the legal protection of trees’, specifically pine trees, which have led to a fundamental shift of the contemporary Israeli/Palestinian landscape (Braverman, 2009, p. 319). The pine tree has come to be synonymous with JNF, symbolising and embodying the national identity of Israel (Braverman, 2009, p. 318). Yet why pine trees?

Pine trees are known as a “pioneer species”, characteristically distinguishable due to their rapid growth and, from the moment of planting, ‘become invisible, as if it was always there’ (Braverman, 2009, pp. 343). Additionally, their needles ‘enhance the acidity of the soil, preventing the development of most other forms of vegetation’, enabling them to dominate the landscape (Braverman, 2009, pp. 343-5). When the box is full, a sapling is promised, and ‘the forest of Zion thickened in happy response’ (Schama, 1995, p. 5). The proximate and material



omnipresence in the Jewish home is then a cultural promise that embodies a yearning for the homeland; an infinite reminder of the Jewish responsibility to contribute and work towards the redemption of the Holy Land. It transcends its materiality however, operating as a *lieu de mémoire*, where collective memory crystallises and secretes a nostalgia, which is reinforced and reproduced across generations (Nora, 1989, p. 7).



I felt like I was hugging my child.



I'd raised the tree like my child.

While there is a vague understanding of what the JNF project gestures to, there seems to be a parochial comprehension of what the planting of pine trees actually entails, 'while we assumed that a pinewood was more beautiful than a hill denuded by grazing flocks of goats and sheep, we were never exactly sure what all the trees were *for*' (Schama, 1995, pp. 5-6). Therefore, the act of donating legitimises Zionist settlement by rendering 'land reclamation' not as a violent political project but rebranding it under the guise of restoring a 'desolate land'. An innocent disposition is adopted here, framed simply as an attempt to aid and cultivate an abandoned landscape. In this sense, a parallel becomes evident between the Shirley cards and the JNF box: both are embedded within ostensibly benign infrastructures that present themselves as neutral, corrective, or even philanthropic while obscuring the racialised violence they sustain. Consequently, opposition to such ostensibly neutral infrastructures and developmental practices, whether through accessible film printing or the cultivation of 'barren' land, becomes recast as irrational resistance to projects framed as socially beneficial.

However, Figure 6 refutes the narrative of innocence and pure intention. The devastating image of Mahfouza illustrates how such erasure is deliberate and has ongoing violent consequences that naturalise settler presence on Indigenous territory. Above, Mahfouza laments the axing of her child, her olive tree. Her arms wrap around its trunk, her face pressed to its bark. In the background, olive trees lie inert on the ground while Israeli settlers watch. Steven Posen, a JNF

**Figure 7.** Mahfodah Shtayyeh hugging her olive tree, source: Getty Images and Al Jazeera.

Toronto Board Director and North American Jew stated, ‘all I know is that it can only be good to plant trees and [that] it will help the country become a more ecological success’ (Posen, 2005; Braverman, 2009, p. 320). Yet, pine trees bear no fruit and burgeon rapidly. They negate the existence of olive trees—indigenous to the land, requiring decades to mature, and producing vital sources of food and oil—which have come to symbolise Palestinian national identity and connection to the homeland (Malik, 2023). In doing so, they also conceal the existence of Palestinian villages. To make space for the pine trees, to make this seemingly desolate land an ‘ecological success’, axes must be taken to the olive tree trunks and branches must be ‘shorn of their olives by hands that did not plant them’ (Majik, 2023) – they are to be erased, as if they never existed. Again, this resurfaces the settler-colonial narrative that the fields of Palestine lie fallow, and that it is a Jewish duty to make the desert bloom. Yet, this narrative fails to mention that this must come at the cost of uprooting olive trees, and in turn, the Palestinian people.

just about conflict. "Our grandparents kind of created Israel as a start up in the forties. They were creating everything from scratch and they left an entrepreneurial legacy. That's the spirit we have here. We're a small place, with eight million people, and we're very close knit. And, a lot of innovations, like those in water recycling and drip irrigation have been a matter of survival."

**Figure 8.** Screenshot from *Israel's drive for energy independence creating wave of sustainable start-ups* (Cahalane 2013).

An excerpt of a *Guardian* article is framed on the wall of the exhibit, close to the JNF box. It features a quote from Joanna Landau, the founder of Vibe Israel. The placard describes Vibe Israel as an organisation that invites digital influencers with large followings to visit Israel, aiming to shift the country's image from one defined by conflict to one that highlights its ecological innovation and beauty. Such organisations fall under the broader strategy of *hasbara*: a public diplomacy effort aimed at shaping international perceptions of Israel (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). Landau's description of 'creating Israel from scratch' as a 'startup in the forties' refers to the 1948 *Nakba*

(catastrophe), denied by the official Israeli state narrative, wherein at least 750,000 Palestinians were made refugees beyond the borders of the state by the Israeli military. The language deployed here is deeply corporate and neoliberal; framing Israel's creation as a bold economic venture rather than a settler-colonial project, depoliticising and erasing the realities of Palestinian grief and genocide suffered at the hands of this "startup". Such language attempts to pacify news coverage that formulates a critical view of Israel, adducing the Israeli state as a crucial actor in quelling the climate crisis with innovative technologies.

The quote and article reinforce a narrative of Zionist ingenuity that recasts state formation and settler colonialism as an entrepreneurial achievement and national salvation. This narrative mirrors the JNF box, utilising the environment to disguise the violent and attritional implications of what "creating everything from scratch" means. Additionally, Landau speaks of Israel's entrepreneurial nation-building, framing it as an innate spirit predicated on survival, a

rhetoric echoed in the JNF's historical role in land cultivation and afforestation.

However, this framing obscures the land as already cultivated and inhabited, claiming

the land was an untouched, uncultivated and desolate resource, awaiting development. Crucially, these claims racialise Israelis as innovative and caring: tending to the environment to ensure capital profit while also simply "doing a good thing". The antithesis, then, is the Palestinian population, racialised as incapable of cultivating land, portrayed as lazy and lacking innovation, and, as suggested in Cahalane's article, rendered absent altogether.

In conclusion, through the evocation of a museum display this article has sought to examine how racial capitalism and settler-colonialism sustain themselves through erasure – extending not just to people, but also to landscapes. Kodak's photographic calibration practices particularly

rendered black and brown bodies invisible, naturalising whiteness as the default. The JNF's afforestation projects similarly worked to erase Palestinian existence, recasting a landscape already imbued with the Palestinian presence as an empty space awaiting cultivation. Finally, the discursive formation of Israel as a "startup nation" reframes an act of violent dispossession as an economic and ecological triumph. Such forms of erasure are not immediate or spectacular; they unfold in sticky time (Griffiths, 2014), with slow, attritional consequences. As Nixon's *slow violence* suggests, these processes do not announce themselves with dramatic rupture, but instead fade into the fabric of daily life, naturalising injustice as though it were inevitable and beneficial (Nixon, 2011, p.2). The Shirley card does not just reflect racial bias, but it encodes it into visual culture. The JNF box is not merely a device of charity, but a tool of settler-colonial expansion. The language of sustainability is not neutral, but is a tool wielded for justifying displacement and violence. Both of these objects reveal how whiteness, as Ahmed describes, shapes the world to accommodate certain bodies while rendering others out of place (Ahmed, 2007, pp.154-8).

However, these acts of erasure are not totalising, as suggested by the image of Mahfouza embracing her olive tree, which foregrounds the persistence of Palestinian attachment to land and memory despite ongoing dispossession. Read through an anti-colonial framework, the photograph can be understood as unsettling settler-colonial narratives of permanence and control by visually asserting continued Palestinian presence and resistance. Violence and fear then take the form of memory, of fabulated nostalgia, of pride of "development". Yet, to critique such forms of racialisation serves as an ode to the ways in which erasure is met with remembrance, and violence is met with resistance. Thus, while the mechanisms of forgetting and erasure are potent, they are not absolute.



## References

- Ahmed, Sara. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness." *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bar-Gal, Yoram. "The Blue Box and JNF Propaganda Maps, 1930–1947." *Israel Studies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2003.8.1.1>.
- Buell Hirsch, Peter. "Never Apologize and Never Explain." *Journal of Business Strategy* 35, no. 2 (2014): 49–52.
- Braun, Lundy. *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Cahalane, Claudia. "Israel's Drive for Energy Independence Creating Wave of Sustainable Start-ups." *The Guardian*. 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/israel-energy-sustainable-start-ups>
- Jewish National Fund of Canada. (2025) *The Blue Box*. Available at: <https://jnf.ca/bluebox/> (Accessed: February 13, 2026).
- Constable, Nicole. "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38, no. 1 (2009): 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.37.081407.085133>.
- Dumit, Joseph. "Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2014): 344–362. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.2.09>.
- Griffiths, Melanie B. E. "Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 12 (2014): 1991–2009. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2014.907737>.
- Hughes, David McDermott. *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Lewis, Sarah. "The Racial Bias Built Into Photography." *The New York Times*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/lens/sarah-lewis-racial-bias-photography.html>.
- Malik, Ammar. "Of Olive Groves and Pine Trees — The Story of Palestine." *DAWN*, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1798646>.
- Malik, Reem. *The Struggle for the Olive Tree: Symbol of Palestinian Identity*. 2023.
- McNamee, Katie. "Shirley Cards." 99% Invisible, podcast audio, 2023. <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/shirley-cards/>.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Rolland, Jacques. "Getting Out of Being by a New Path." In *On Escape, by Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Bettina Bergo*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Roth, Lorna. "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2009v34n1a2196>.
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Shankar, Shalini. "Nothing Sells Like Whiteness: Race, Ontology, and American Advertising." *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13354>.
- Wessling, Marilyn. "The 'Shirley Card' Legacy: Artists Correcting for Photography's Racial Bias." *National Gallery of Art*, 2023. <https://www.nga.gov/stories/the-shirley-card-legacy.html>.
- Winston, Brian. *Technologies of Seeing: Photography, Cinematography, and Television*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996.

# “Closer to Nature”

Colonial Anthropology and the Sexualisation of Indigenous Women:

*How did colonial anthropology construct Indigenous women as "natural" — that is, primitive, hypersexual and biologically determined — to legitimise racial hierarchy and imperial domination?*

by Tara Laize

This article examines the construction of the figure of the Indigenous woman in the colonial contexts of the nineteenth century, showing that it does not come from an empirical observation, but from a discursive and complex material device at the crossroads of anthropology, iconography, biopolitics and imperial spatialisation. I argue that the representation of the colonised woman as "closer to nature" — hypersexual and primitive — constitutes a central operator of colonial naturalism, making it possible to transform historical relations of domination into supposedly objective biological truths.

First, the article analyses the emergence of physical anthropology and racial taxonomies, which replace religious hierarchies with a scientific classification of bodies, anchoring inferiority in biology. The sexuality of racialised women is constructed there as instinctive and excessive, serving as proof of their alleged civilisational backwardness. The second part examines the iconographic production of this knowledge, showing how figures such as that of Sara Baartman crystallize a racial and sexual otherness, transforming the black body into a pathological sign and an object of knowledge. This process of iconisation erases the historicity of the subjects in favour of a fixation in archetypes.

The article then demonstrates that this construction is a true imperial technology. By pathologising the sexuality of colonised women, colonial knowledge organises surveillance, segregation and reproductive control devices, while stabilising the standards of respectability within European societies. Finally, the analysis of the colonial space as a sexual theatre highlights the interweaving of body and territory, where the feminisation of space and the territorialisation of the body participate in the same logic of domination.

By articulating these different levels, this article shows that the hypersexualisation of colonised women is not a marginal effect, but a structuring mechanism of the colonial order, at the crossroads of gender, race and empire.

Edited by Ruby Scott, Copyedited by Leyla Kaban Bowers,  
Juliette Pepin & Emilia Manning-Gaona,  
Reviewed by Maeva Thibeault, Art by Madeleine Brady

## **Introduction:**

Since the 19th century, the figure of the indigenous women in colonised contexts has occupied a central place in the European scientific and colonial imagination. In travel narratives, treatises on physical anthropology, and medical iconography, her body appears as the privileged site where nature, sexuality, and racial difference are articulated. Presented as “closer to nature”—primitive and hypersexual—the colonised woman is constructed and circulated through anthropological treatises, medical imagery, and colonial exhibitions as visible proof of a racial hierarchy that science now claims to objectify. Far from being a mere ethnographic curiosity, this representation is part of a broader epistemic apparatus through which 19th-century imperialism transforms historical relations of domination into biological certainties.

This article argues that the figure of the indigenous woman “closer to nature” constitutes a central operator of colonial naturalism. By representing the sexuality and fertility of racialised women as instinctive, excessive, and governed by biology rather than reason, colonial anthropology reconfigures sexual difference into a marker of civilisational hierarchy, while simultaneously elevating them to territorial metaphors for imperial conquest. The sexualisation of colonised women is therefore not merely a side effect of scientific racism; it constitutes one of its fundamental mechanisms. By combining the history of anthropology, postcolonial theory, and intersectional feminism, this article demonstrates how the scientific production of “nature” contributes to the simultaneous construction of gender, race, and empire.

## **Building “Nature”: Anthropology, Science and Racial Hierarchies:**

The 19th century marks an epistemological break in which the legitimisation of colonial power shifts from a religious foundation to a rigorous scientific naturalism. Physical anthropology replaces the metaphysical hierarchy of the “Great Chain of Being” (Reynolds, 1974, p. 47), a traditional cosmological structure that classified all living things on a scale of immutable perfection going “from mollusc to God” with a biological taxonomy based on craniometry (Young, 1995, p. 89). This “science of races” uses body measurements to

anchor intellectual inferiority in bone structure (Young, 1995, p. 170). Carl Vogt thus argues that “the place they occupy in relation to cranial capacity and cerebral weight corresponds with the degree of their intellectual capacity and civilisation” (Reynolds, 1974, p. 49). This social Darwinism fosters a deliberate confusion between biology and morality, where the pathologisation of physical traits serves to justify political exclusion. As Young points out, racism no longer operates solely through exclusion, but also through the calculation of deviations from the white norm: “Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face” (1995, p. 169).

In this framework, the Indigenous woman is constructed as the quintessential figure of the “primitive,” whose naturalised sexuality becomes proof of racial backwardness. As “carriers of the race,” women are perceived as the potential vector of a “contamination of dark blood” (Young, 1995, p. 165). Colonial anthropology fantasises about an “uncontrollable sexual drive of the non-white races” (Young, 1995, p. 170), transforming the female body into a territory to be policed. The figure of the “Sable Venus” embodies this biologisation of difference (Young, 1995, p. 142): her “delicious fecundity” is simultaneously the object of fetishistic desire and institutional repulsion (Young, 1995, p. 170). This biologisation of difference transforms the female body into a “phobogenic object” (Fanon, 1967, p. 154), a stimulus of anxiety where territorial conquest is reenacted on the genital level: “in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level” (Fanon, 1967, p. 157). By inextricably linking female sexuality to a “licentious primitive sexuality” (Young, 1995, p. 170), imperial discourse transforms racialised bodies into metaphors for a wild landscape to be conquered and domesticated.

## **The Black Body as a Scientific and Sexual Icon:**

Beyond the general physical taxonomy, the colonial device of the nineteenth century operates a semiotic reduction of the black body, transmuting it into a real scientific and sexual icon (Gilman, 1985, p. 15). Sander L. Gilman demonstrates with surgical rigor that the artistic and medical representations of this period do not constitute neutral descriptions at all, but produce rather than individual types (Gilman, 1985, p. 21). These images act as ideological icons

where the Hottentot woman is erected as an archetype of black sexuality, materialising a radical otherness essential to the definition of the white norm (Gilman, 1985, p. 16). This archetype refers to the Khoisan women of Southern Africa, whom nineteenth-century naturalism positioned as the terminal link in the "Great Chain of Being" to establish a biological antithesis to European paradigms of beauty and virtue. Sara Baartman (c. 1789–1815) historically personified this construction as the "Hottentot Venus". A native of the present-day Eastern Cape region in South Africa, she was torn from her condition as a servant in Cape Town to be exhibited in London in 1810, she undergoes a double reduction: that of the freak show and that of the anatomical specimen (Johnson and Rolls, 2023, p. 171).



This process of fetishisation is based on an iconographic fusion (Gilman, 1985, p. 27) between the figure of the prostitute, paragon of deviant female sexuality, and that of the "Venus Hottentote". The body of the black woman thus crystallises the European anxiety about female sexuality, becoming the receptacle of a libido fantasised as excessive and primitive (Young, 1995, p. 170). By this construction, the body is no longer a living organism but a pathological sign: the bodily features, "steatopygia" (the exaggerated accumulation of fat on the buttocks) and the "apron" (an elongated fold of abdominal skin) become visual "proofs" of moral inferiority, through which specific anatomical features are selectively exaggerated and racialised within a colonial gaze. These embodied markers are not neutral descriptions but are discursively produced as signs of difference, fixing the subject in a racial epidermal

schema (Fanon, 1967, p. 112), where it is "overdetermined from without" (Fanon, 1967, p.116), a condition in which the self is denied individual agency and becomes a "slave of their own appearance". In this sense, Fanon's notion of overdetermination refers to the imposition of externally constructed meanings onto the body, such that the subject's identity is no longer self-defined but constituted through the stereotypes and racial fantasies of the dominant (colonial) other.

Sara Baartman's itinerary, from her exhibition in London and Paris (1810-1815) (Crais & Scully, 2009, p. 172) to her museum posterity, embodies the climax of this reification. The anthropological gaze, obsessed by its nymphs and its steatopygy (Cuvier, 1817, p. 182), transforms its anatomy into an ethnopornographic display (Mattosco, p. 117). After her death, Georges Cuvier completed this undertaking with a dissection aimed at producing a racial specimen (Lyons, 2009, p. 330). By comparing her skull with that of the apes (Cuvier, 1817, p. 186), Cuvier inscribes it in a zone of non-being, between the human and the animal. The exhibition of her remains at the Museum of Man until 1974 (Mattosco, 2015, p. 57) testifies to the longevity of this symbolic crime.

Nadja Durbach and Zine Magubane criticise the propensity of European archives to have essentialised it as the pure embodiment of African sexuality, preferring an analysis of social relations rather than psychological dispositions (Magubane, 2001, p. 48). Research reveals that Baartman possessed an awareness of her economic rights (Magubane, 2001, p. 58), and her categorical refusal to allow herself to be examined naked during her lifetime (Johnson & Rolls, 2012, p. 179) constitutes a sovereign act of resistance against the intrusive curiosity of scholars.

Hence, the iconisation of the black body obliterates the historicity of colonised women (Mattosco, p. 58). By transforming a person into a specimen, anthropology allows a double naturalisation: a racial naturalisation, anchoring inferiority in the skeleton, and a sexual naturalisation, reducing femininity to a primitive organic function, thus legitimizing imperial hegemony.

## Sexuality as an Imperial Technology:

Postcolonial historiography, under the impetus of Ann Laura Stoler, has carried out a critical revision of Foucauldian biopolitics by emphasizing that Michel Foucault has tended to "short-circuiting empire" (Stoler, 1995, p. 7) in his genealogy of Western modernity. Stoler demonstrates that European bourgeois sexuality was not an isolated metropolitan formation, but that it emerged on an "imperial landscape" (Stoler, 1995, p. 5) where class distinctions were inseparable from the contrasts forged by the language of race. The discourse on sexuality thus becomes a dense transfer point of the colonial power: it is no longer just a question of repressing, but of producing a "grid of intelligibility" (Stoler, 1995, p. 11). This grid makes it possible to trace the "interior frontiers" (Stoler, 1995, p. 7) of the nation, delimiting who is an authentic, first-class citizen and who is the other racialised.

Zine Magubane enriches this perspective by specifying that the discourse on degeneration was not only a response to external otherness, but a control technology in the face of the jamming of class hierarchies within the European metropolis itself (Magubane, 2001, p. 49). The figure of the indigenous woman "close to nature" functions here as a lever to stabilise bourgeois identity: by pathologising her libido as a "primitive sexuality" (Gilman, 1985, p. 17), imperial science erects the European woman as a paragon of culture and domestic virtue.

Far from being an epiphenomenon, colonial sexuality is at the heart of what Robert Young defines as the imperial "desiring machine" (Young, 1995, p. 151). This machine does not just extract resources; it produces fantasies of fusion and repulsion that structure the social order. Andrew P. Lyons describes this process as "negative conscription" (Lyons, 2009, p. 328), where data on the sexual practices of "others" are enlisted in metropolitan discourses of power and morality. The obsession with the "apron" or the "steatopygia" is no longer a simple anatomical curiosity, but a semiotic proof of an "excess of fertility" (Young, 1995, p. 91), perceived as a threat of "contamination of dark blood" (Young, 1995, p. 165).

This sexualisation of the indigenous woman then justifies the deployment of specific domination technologies: the constant "monitoring" of the bodies, the spatial "segregation" and the "reproductive control" (Stoler, 1995, p. 4). This device reduces the colonised woman to a racial specimen, erasing her historicity in favour of a biological fiction. In short, the sexual nature of the indigenous is a political construct that allows the Empire to manage its vulnerabilities (Stoler, 1995, p. 2) and to legitimise the guardianship of fertile bodies in the name of the preservation of white hegemony.

## Colonial Space as Sexual Theatre:

The imperial space does not constitute a simple geographical expanse to be administered, but is organised as a real sexual theatre where sovereignty is staged by the mediation of the gaze. Anne McClintock analyses these imperial exposures as a device where Africa is transmuted into a visual spectacle (McClintock, 1995, p. 41). In this economy of visibility, the colonised woman's body is exposed as the metonymy of a territory ready to be conquered, illustrating what McClintock calls articulated categories where gender, race and class are structurally inseparable (McClintock, 1995, p. 5).



This dramatisation of power is based on a fundamental biopolitical asymmetry. As the historiography of the Dutch East Indies suggests, the management of the bodies responded to a highly differentiated gender logic. Frances Gouda demonstrates the emergence of a rhetoric making colonial practices "normal" and "natural", where anthropology served as a substitute for military power (Gouda, 1995, pp. 550-551). This strategy favoured unions with the Nyais (Javanese women) to guarantee a cultural and linguistic acclimatisation of European agents (Stoler, 2002,

p.523), they simultaneously deployed coercive devices to monitor white women. The introduction of measures such as the Crewe Circular aimed to prevent any relationship between European women and Indigenous men, betraying an anxiety of "contamination" (Young, 1995, p. 109). In this device, concubinage becomes an institutionalised access to Indigenous women and the prohibition of relationships with Indigenous men shows the protection of racial hierarchy. This asymmetry reveals that the female body was an object of colonial consumption. The indigenous woman's body is thus mapped as the colonised earth.

The geographical imagination of the body completes this undertaking by merging the indigenous anatomy with the "wild" landscape. McClintock demonstrates how geographical metaphors serve to sexualise imperial space: the feminisation of the soil naturalises European male domination by presenting it as an immutable law of nature (, 1995, p. 41). The colonised earth, like the racialised female body, is perceived as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p. 33).

In this context, the Indigenous woman is not only the object of an exotic libido; she becomes the very place where the imperial project is inscribed. This territorialisation (Young, 1995, p. 161) transforms her body into a political palimpsest where fertility is reduced to an archaic organic function, justifying constant biopolitical monitoring. By thus linking female physiology to a wild nature, colonial anthropology transforms racialised bodies into biological evidence of racial inferiority. The colonial space therefore functions as a vast desiring machine where the capture of land and the surveillance of women are governed by the same logic of predation (Young, 1995, p. 151), sealing the alliance between anatomical knowledge and imperial hegemony.

### Conclusion:

In short, this article has shown that the figure of the Indigenous womanV` ` "closer to nature" does not come from an empirical observation, but from a discursive and material device where anthropology, iconography, biopolitics and imperial spatialisation are intertwined. From the scientific production of racial hierarchies to their visual fixation in archetypes such as that of Sara Baartman, then to

their inscription in technologies for governing bodies and territories, the same process unfolds: naturalisation. The hypersexualisation of colonised women thus appears not as a marginal effect, but as a structuring operator, making it possible to translate historical relationships of domination into supposedly biological truths.

By articulating these different levels of analysis, this article highlights that the "nature" invoked by colonial knowledge is less a given than a product, stabilised by the repetition of scholarly, visual and administrative practices. Therefore, the sexuality of racialised women can only be understood as the effect of a regime of know-how which, by constructing it as instinctive and excessive, simultaneously ensures its management and legitimisation.

Therefore, undoing this heritage does not consist solely in correcting representations, but in disarticulating the structures that continue to make the naturalisation of certain bodies as "others" governable. In this sense, the challenge is not only critical, but epistemological: it is a question of rejecting the very categories through which colonial modernity has learned to classify and prioritise bodies, in order to restore to these subjectivities their historicity and their agency.

### Bibliography:

Crais, C.C. and Scully, P. (2009) *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A ghost story and a biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cuvier, G. (1817) 'Extrait d'observations faites sur le cadavre d'une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Vénus Hottentote', *Mémoires du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle*, 3, pp. 259–274.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1972) *L'Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Fanon, F. (1967) *Black sin, white masks*. Translated by C.L. Markmann. New York: Grove Press.

Gilman, S.L. (1985) *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gilman, S.L. (1985) "Black bodies, white bodies: Toward an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth-century art, medicine, and literature", *Critical Inquiry*, 12(1), pp. 204–242.

Gouda, F. (1995) *Dutch culture overseas: Colonial practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900–1942*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Johnson, C. and Rolls, R. (2012) “Refiguring Sara Baartman: Cultural memory and the afterlife of the Hottentot Venus”, in [edited volume unknown], pp. 175–190.

Lyons, A.P. (2009) “The colonial body and the production of racial knowledge”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18(3), pp. 325–345.

Magubane, Z. (2001) “Which bodies matter? Feminism, poststructuralism, race, and the curious theoretical odyssey of the “Hottentot Venus””, *Gender & Society*, 15(6), pp. 816–834.

Mattosio, I. (2015) *The Hottentot Venus and the politics of representation*. London: Routledge.

McClintock, A. (1995) *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.

Reynolds, H. (1974) “Racial thought in early colonial Australia”, *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 20(1), pp. 45–53.

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

Stoler, A.L. (1995) *Race and the education of desire: Foucault’s history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stoler, A.L. (2002) *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wells, D.C. (1907) “Social Darwinism”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 12(5), pp. 695–716.

Young, R.J.C. (1995) *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*. London: Routledge.



we hope you enjoyed

plurality no. 5:  
*the natural*

special thanks to our peer reviewers:



Angelina Robertson

Sîan Davies

Emmi Wilkinson

Julian Leidy

Arcin Celikesmer

Megan Elaine Fourqurean

Seonyeong Baek

JiHye Jeong

Giuliana Racco

Maeva Thibeault

The page features two decorative, hand-drawn style swirls in a brownish-tan color. One swirl starts on the left side, curves upwards and to the right, then loops back down and to the left. The other swirl starts on the right side, curves downwards and to the left, then loops back up and to the right. Both swirls have a soft, painterly texture.

& stay tuned for  
plurality no. 6  
*coming soon; 2027*

