the iafor

journal of cultural studies

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IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 8 – Issue 2

Edited by: Holger Briel

Table of Contents

From the Editor

If a few issues ago I had expressed the hope that there might be a let-up of crises for humanity in the cards, the last few months have taught us otherwise. If anything, existing crises have intensified or stretched to incorporate even more inhabitants of this planet. Besides the immeasurable pain and suffering visited upon humans by other humans, it would seem that we as a global entity are losing other important ideological liberties in the process. Prominent among them is the freedom of expression, oft-cited to allow inclusion of any and all discursive participants. This topic has indeed been discussed to death (quite literally), as the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict has amply demonstrated. I think though, that this notion of freedom goes beyond "mere" free speech, and also includes a deeper level of freedom, a freedom that philosopher Holm Tetes in one of his lectures defined the following way: "Freedom as a practice is the interruption of (self-)forgotten routines in favour of an astonishment regarding one's own behaviour and a questioning of its reasons." Arguably, it is this is the kind of freedom that has been greatly reduced, to the detriment of all concerned. Mostly, people clamour about their rights to do something or other, entitlements, or hard-fought rights, without pausing for thought, interrupting themselves in these self-forgotten routines and questioning themselves first rather than others. Being astounded by one's own forgotten routines (for better or for worse) strikes me as a good first step towards possible change.

In the light of the aforesaid, let's begin the overview of the articles in this issue with a refreshing thought – absolute annihilation. Mario Rodriguez' "'Blame it on the Black Star': Black Holes in Culture" takes its readers on a delightful tour of the rise and success of Black stars in culture. Einstein, Oppenheimer, Hawking, and a slew of other scientists appear, but he also makes clear the cultural differences existing already in nomenclature, putting paid to the notion of a neutral science. Thus, before the term "black star" became a household vocabulary word, differing terms were used for the phenomenon – "a *collapsed star* in American circles and a *frozen star* in the Russian sphere." But this would not stop in scientists' circles, the collective imagination would be fed by these physical phenomena and engrain themselves in pop culture, ranging from films (*Interstellar)* to TV series (*Dark*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *The Simpsons*, including a cameo by Stephen Hawking); and from music lyrics (from The Pixies, Soundgarden, Radiohead or David Bowie). Philosophy would also chime in, with Baudrillard using the black hole as a metaphor for what the mediascape was doing to society – "A black hole which engulfs the social". Lastly, black hole research would also highlight misogyny and gender disparity in science with the case of Katie Bowman, whose rise to fame and fall due to misogynist practices in science underlined gender fault lines very slow to recede.

Second in line is Xinyi Wang's 'Blindness Challenging Melodrama in *Your Eyes Tell* (2020) and *Blind Massage* (2014), which investigates the (re-)presentation of blindness in two recent East-Asian films. Wang's article demonstrates the breath of presentations of blindness in East Asian films and also delineates reasons of why these films through their different plot outlines question western notions of the filmic genre of melodrama. It therefore posits a prominent

answer to attempts of setting up a trans-cultural, global film theory, an attempt revealed to be fallacious and simply inacceptable today.

"Folklore Goes to War: Folksongs, Yangge and Storytelling in Communist Bases during the Second Sino-Japanese War" by Selina Gao stays in China and investigates the uses of folklore studies in creating an ideologically-tinted version of such studies. In a similar vein to how other countries tie their national identity to narratives, Gao shows how this was done in China as well. In particular, she examines the rise of folklore studies in the 1930s and '40s in China and shows how the Chinese Folklore Movement fragmented into three distinct camps for the duration of the war, once again underlining the far from neutral quiddity of literary and ethnographic studies. Along the way, Gao provides her readers with very interesting historic details about how folklore studies were conducted in the 1930s.

'"Bacha Posh": Gender Construct in Afghan Culture Examined through the Lens of Children in Literature' by Ritika Banerjee and Sharon J remains in Asia, but shifts its focus to Afghanistan. Banerjee and Sharon J. discuss the cultural practice of Bacha Posh, the dressing up of girls as boys until they reach (late) puberty. This is done for various reasons; because parents wanted a boy rather than a girl; to allow girls more freedom of movement; or to perform tasks nobody else in the family can take care of. Not much has been written about this custom in general, but the authors in particular discuss children's literature in order to assess the fall-out from this practice, which is manifold. For one, many girls resist becoming boys for all practical purposes; conversely, many also resist the change back, often forced upon them in order to marry them off, because of a loss freedom associated with it. The authors show how this practice takes its toll on these children and is often associated with the phenomenon of gender dysphoria, the unease associated with the feeling of being in the wrong body (even if only as a disguise). While this might be an opportunity to investigate such an unease in terms of Butler's gender theory, due to the social constrictions under which it is performed, it falls short of being a liberating practice and rather increases dysfunctional gender signalling.

Finally, there is "'Otherized' Migrants in Contemporary Australia: Reflections from Michael Ahmad's *The Tribe* (2014)" by Ait Idir Lahcen. Idir invites us to travel further south-east, to Australia, and presents his study of the novels of Michael Ahmad, who writes about the Arabic diaspora in Australia and its experiences with racism. Contrary to popular self-description, Ahmad charts the ordinary and extraordinary racism raging under the surface of Australian society and exemplifies this with the coming-of-age story of one such immigrant, Bani. Throughout the pages of the novel, Bani advances to an understanding how rigid this racism actually is, disadvantaging him at every corner. Idir reads the story as an accusation of white privilege in Australia and sets out to chart at least some ways of resistance open to the thus marginalised.

Happy reading!

Holger Briel
Editor-in-Chief, *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*

Notes on Contributors

Article 1
"Blame it on the Black Star": Black Holes in Culture

Mario Rodriguez
Mario Rodriguez is Assistant Professor in the College of Media and Mass Communication at the American University in the Emirates (AUE) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. He completed his PhD in Communication & Culture in 2012 at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed articles in international journals of Communication and Media Studies, such as *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, *Americana: The Journal of Popular Culture,* and *M/C Journal*, among others. His research interests span diverse topics, including critical and cultural studies, film studies, popular culture, public understanding of science, and social media privacy. In addition to his work in higher education, Dr Rodriguez has worked previously as a newspaper reporter, as a media researcher, in documentary production, and as a Media Fellow in the U.S. Senate. He also enjoys writing short stories and fiction.
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Article 2
Blindness Challenging Melodrama in Your Eyes Tell (2020) and Blind Massage (2014)

Xinyi Wang
Xinyi Wang is a doctoral candidate in Cinema Studies at Nagoya University, Japan. Her current research focuses on disability in contemporary East Asian films. Wang has published work on contemporary films and art in English and Japanese, including "Redefining the Body: People with Physical Disabilities" in *Transform!* (2020) and *Reunion with You* (2021) in *International Conference for Graduate students on Trans-East Asian Studies (TEAS) Proceedings (2023);* "Complicating the Boundary Between Disability and Non-Disability" in *Pure White* (2017); *Coffee and Pencil* (2011) in *Anthology of Transborder Cultural Studies*, 2021; "Is Technology Liberating Humans? 'Random International: Out of Control"; and "Complete Technology' in Museum of Contemporary Art, Busan" in *JunCture: Chōikiteki nihonbunka kenkyū* 2020.
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Article 3
Folklore Goes to War: Folksongs, *Yangge* and Storytelling in Communist Bases during the Second Sino-Japanese War

Dr Selina Gao
Selina J. Gao is an Associate Professor of History and the coordinator of the East Asian Studies program at Murray State University, Kentucky, USA. Gao is engaged in the study of modern Chinese history in China, Canada, and the United States. Her research interests include popular culture, intellectual history, Sino-foreign relations, and women's studies. Gao's work has appeared in journals and books in Canada, China, the Netherlands, South Korea, the United

Kingdom, and the United States. Dr. Gao is the author of *Saving the Nation through Culture: The Folklore Movement in Republican China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019). She has also recently published her digital exhibit on "Women and Modernity: The Evolving Depiction of Chinese Beauties in Cigarette Cards", a topic she plans to extend further in the future.
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Article 4
'Bacha Posh': Gender Construct in Afghan Culture Examined through the Lens of Children in Literature

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Ritika Banerjee is currently pursuing her PhD from the English Department at Christ University, Bangalore (India). Her topic is "Gender Performativity Through the Tropes of Cultural Diaspora: Examining Texts of Diaspora Literature by Select Authors of the Indian Subcontinent". Previously, she completed her BA in English literature at Sophia College (Mumbai) and received her MA in English Literature from the University of Mumbai. Her research areas include gender and literature, culture studies, philosophy, and postcolonial literature.
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Article 5
"Otherized" Migrants in Contemporary Australia: Reflections from Michael Ahmad's *The Tribe* (2014)

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Lahcen Ait Idir holds a Doctorate in Arab Anglophone Diaspora Literature and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Mohammedia, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco. His research concentrates on diaspora studies, postcolonial studies, and critical discourse analysis. He has contributed to different national and international conferences and has published articles in literary and cultural studies. His latest publications include "Diasporic Voices in Contemporary Maghrebi Literature: (Re)membering, Forgetting, and Identity Transfer" (2023) co-edited with Hassan Zrizi and Soukaina Aouaki and published by the Multidisciplinary Research Laboratory in Humanities and Social Sciences (MRLHSS) affiliated with the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Mohammedia, Morocco.
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"Blame it on the Black Star": Black Holes in Culture

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Abstract

"Black holes" continue to compel the human imagination, as demonstrated by the public reception of the first images of a black hole produced by the Event Horizon Telescope in 2019 or the success of Hollywood science fiction movies like Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar* that depicts what it might be like to fall into one. My study traces the discovery of "black holes" in the 20th century – collapsed stars with so much gravity that nothing can escape them, not even light – regarding how scientists talked about them and their emergence in popular culture. This begins with discussing how influential scientists weighed in on the concept and how the scientific community finally settled on the term "black hole." The study then considers various ways black holes have percolated into every aspect of culture: from TV to movies, popular science to modern rock. It concludes with a consideration of the more recent turn in the cultural meaning of this "exotic object," particularly as it relates to the myth of the lone scientist, women scientists, and the climate crisis, but also the risk of nuclear war.

Keywords: black holes, culture, women in science, climate crisis, Event Horizon Telescope, Christopher Nolan, Oppenheimer, nuclear war

This paper chronicles the rise of *black holes* – collapsed stars with gravity so strong not even light can escape – in the scientific discourse and subsequently popular science and culture throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. We begin by tracing the historical origins of what became known as black holes in the history of science and physics. This entailed three phases of historical elaboration, corresponding to the first conceptions of "dark stars" in classical physics in the late 19th century; their interpretation by theoreticians in the early 20th century coinciding with the development of modern physics; and post-WWII studies that referred to "collapsed stars," "frozen stars," and eventually "black holes" (Thorne, 1995; Hawking, 1988). Indeed, charismatic scientists such as Arthur Eddington and Albert Einstein initially resisted the notion of what became known as "black holes" and discouraged their study.

Next, we utilize qualitative content analysis to understand how "black holes" emerged as a fixture of culture and the popular imagination. We explain that "black holes" attracted the connotation of something that is ominous and negative, as a boundary beyond what we know and what we do not or cannot. We conclude with some reflection on current implications for black holes as "social facts" (Searle, 1995, pp. 33, 34) demonstrating a surprising trajectory. Since 2019, black holes have been directly observable through modern imaging techniques and photography (Figure 1). In relation to this widespread publicity, we suggest that "black holes" have accrued two more specific connotations in recent years: that of women in science on the one hand and ecological catastrophe on the other.

Figure 1
Black Hole in Messier 87 Photographed by Event Horizon Telescope, Which Appeared on the Cover "The New York Times", April 10, 2019 (Source: Wikipedia Commons)

Black Holes: Brief Origins of the Term

This section briefly outlines the origins of the term "black hole, of how it emerged in scientific discourse before being introduced into popular culture. The first descriptions of objects that would eventually become black holes occurred before World War I in the work of famous scientists like Mitchell, Laplace, and others who studied something called a "dark star," culminating in the description of a "dark star" by Karl Schwarzchild (Thorne, 1994). Next,

between WWI and WWII, famous scientists such as Arthur Eddington and Albert Einstein responded to Schwarzschild's idea with their thought experiments meant to refute it. Still, according to Thorne, these were not entirely rational. Finally, in the period during and after the WWII, research on "dark stars," "collapsed stars," and "frozen stars" by Robert Oppenheimer, Stephen Hawking, and Roger Penrose finally solidified black holes research as a credible field of inquiry (Thorne, 1994; Hawking, 1988).

Opposition to "Dark Stars": Einstein & Eddington

Interestingly, according to Thorne, in the 1920s and 30s, astrophysicist Arthur Eddington and theoretical physicist Albert Einstein, the two reigning experts on general relativity, objected to the concept of "dark stars." Einstein, for example, presented two thought experiments, or *Gedankenexperimente*, to disprove Schwarzschild, concluding that "The essential result of this investigation is a clear understanding as to why the 'Schwarzchild singularities' do not exist in physical reality" (quoted in Thorne, p. 136). Thorne dismissed these objections. Eddington was mixing Newtonian, semi-relativistic arguments and sheer "hyperbole," and Einstein did not understand that gravity overwhelms all other forces in the implosion process. He did not yet appreciate the full implications of his theory (pp. 136, 137).

Meanwhile, Eddington tried to persuade a brilliant young, self-taught cosmologist named Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar to study the motion of star clusters instead of "dark stars." In 1983, Chandrasekhar would be awarded the Nobel Prize, mainly based on his studies of the latter. He proved that the "Pauli exclusion principle" (which states that as particles are cramped into a smaller and smaller *space,* their *velocities* must *vary* more and more) could not halt the collapse of a star more massive than his limit. Today, this is known as the *Chandrasekhar limit* on the mass of a star beyond which it collapses into a black hole (Thorne, pp. 146, 148). In fact, in 1939, mere months after Einstein published a paper refuting the idea of black holes, J. Robert Oppenheimer and student Hartland S. Snyder published a paper in which they used Einstein's general theory of relativity to show how black holes form (Bernstein, 2007).[1] Oppenheimer (who would famously go on to become the Head of the Manhattan Project later) and Snyder first showed what happens to a star that exceeds the Chandrasekhar limit. The pair formally demonstrated that as the interior of a star collapses, light can no longer escape from its surface.

"Dark Stars", "Frozen Stars" & the "Black Hole"

While the Second World War put "dark star" research on the back burner in the race to invent the atomic bomb, it was later rediscovered. Between 1965 and 1970, British physicists Roger Penrose and Stephen Hawking showed that there must be a *singularity* inside the "dark star" – a point at which the customary laws of quantum physics break down. This led to the phrase

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[1] Bernstein, Professor Emeritus of Physics at the Stevens Institute of Technology, described Einstein's attempts to discredit the Schwarzchild radius in his 1939 paper, noting: "I was much taken by the fact that the then 60-year-old Einstein presents in this paper tables of numerical results, which he must have gotten by using a slide rule. But the paper, like the slide rule, is now a historical artifact."

"God abhors a naked singularity" in academic circles, indicating that singularities were always obscured by black holes (Hawking, 1988, pp. 85–88). By the 1960s, the exotic object was being referred to by two names: a *collapsed star* in American circles and a *frozen star* in Russian circles (Thorne, p. 254). After work in the 1960s demonstrated that a black hole could, in fact, be formed by a rotating star,[2] Hawking showed in 1971 that after gravitational collapse, a "black hole" could be rotating but not pulsating, the so-called "no-hair" conjecture, that is, nothing bubbling on the surface (Hawking, p. 91, 92).

By 1971, they were called "black holes." General relativity expert John Wheeler was dissatisfied with *collapsed stars* and *frozen stars* because neither name emphasized the *event horizon* – a kind of Rubicon surrounding the singularity – which had become the focus of study in the 1960s. Thus, in a 1967 lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled "Our Universe, the Known and the Unknown," he noted:

> [The star,] like a Cheshire cat, fades from view. One leaves behind only its grin, the other, only its gravitational attraction. Gravitational attraction, yes; light, no. No more than light do any particles emerge. Moreover, light and particles incident from outside…[and] going down the black hole only add to its mass and increase its gravitational attraction.
>
> (in Thorne, pp. 256, 257)

A star was born – a black star. Wheeler coined the term "black hole," and within months, it was being used by relativity physicists (except in France, where the translation, an obscenity, was resisted for a few years longer) (Thorne, p. 257).

Black Holes in the Press and Popular Culture: A Qualitative Content Analysis

This section examines how the term "black hole" moved from astrophysics circles into the vocabulary and the associations the term subsequently absorbed in popular culture. The method is a qualitative content analysis of key newspaper articles in the U.S. media, followed by select examples from culture (e.g., TV, music, film, young adult fiction, etc.). The method for this analysis draws from Krippendorff's definition (2004, p. 18) of content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use." This is to distinguish qualitative content analysis from other qualitative methodologies, like *discourse analysis* or *conversation analysis* (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017), which are closer to examining speech acts and the work of Searle and Austin, e.g., the examination of the scientific discourse. Referencing this definition also distinguishes the method employed in this section from *quantitative content analysis* (with its emphasis on counting). Indeed, many scholars interpret "qualitative" to be "interpretive," and, according to Krippendorff, "ultimately, all reading of texts is qualitative, even when certain characteristics

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[2] This is the Kerr solution (1963) of Einstein's equations. Black holes were thus seen as substantially more abundant than previously thought (Hawking, 1988, pp. 91, 92).

of text are later converted into numbers" (2004, p. 16).[3] Hence, qualitative content analysis in this study refers to the selection of highlights from reportage on black holes in the news and their mention in popular culture, to demonstrate how they entered into mass consciousness.

Early Appearances in Newspapers & the Press: 1960 through 1980

It is interesting to note how black holes first found entrance into newspapers. For example, in an April 14, 1968, article describing the newly discovered pulsars, *New York Times* reporter Walter Sullivan mentioned another exotic stellar object, "the 'black hole," where all physical laws seem to run amok." Pulsars are neutron stars that emit pulses of radiation at regular frequencies. Einstein's theory predicted them, and so among other things it was the discovery of pulsars in 1967 that really got the ball rolling for research on "black holes" to be taken seriously (Hawking, 1988, p. 93). According to Sullivan's news article, a black hole is a star collapsing into something infinitely small and infinitely dense" (Sullivan, 1968). The stage was set for black holes to be of major significance in validating modern cosmological theory. At first, black holes cropped up mainly in the context of science news. These included a range of perspectives, for example, criticism of black holes by two MIT professors who suggested a more straightforward, Newtonian explanation because "the evidence for them so far was ambiguous" (Sullivan, 1975), but later the suggestion that the inner core of the Milky Way might itself be a black hole (Sullivan, 1982). Black holes arose in the context of neutrino detectors (Browne, 1987) and were depicted as potential engines of galactic formation (Gleick, 1987).

Author Madeleine L'Engle was ahead of the curve when she described an object eerily reminiscent of a collapsed star in her 1962 young adult novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (2005), five years before Wheeler first used the term "black hole." The protagonist, Meg, is transported to the far reaches of the universe by hyper-dimensional creatures. She and her brothers ascend through the atmosphere of an unknown, earth-like planet into space to seek out their missing father:

> Meg looked. The dark shadow was still there. It had not lessened or dispersed with the coming of night. And where the shadow was, the stars were not visible. What could there be about a shadow that was so terrible that she knew that there had never been before or ever would be again, anything that would chill her with a fear that was beyond shuddering, beyond crying or screaming, beyond the possibility of comfort...The shadow was still there dark and dreadful.
>
> (L'Engle, p. 65)

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[3] In a parallel to the idea that a "black hole" is what Lackoff and Johnson (1980) called a "container metaphor," Krippendorff suggested that the method of content analysis itself is a kind of "container" of meaning inherent to the text and crisscrossed by a certain interpretive tack between questions and evidence.

TV Popularization and Sagan's *Cosmos* (1980)

Gradually, everything from sports articles (the view from the press box was a "black hole") (Leonard, 1982) to politics (Riding, 1989) to literary snobbery (Taylor, 1989) evoked the "black hole" as knowledge of black holes among non-experts was becoming more sophisticated. This was as black holes had become a topic of discussion in popular science. When it debuted in 1980, Carl Sagan's Emmy Award-winning series *Cosmos* (Sagan et al., 1980) did a lot to bring the vision of modern cosmology into people's living rooms. The accompanying book describes black holes in the context of stellar evolution, galaxies, and quasars (Sagan, 1980, pp. 238, 239, 249–250). Sagan returned to the topic of black holes briefly in *Pale Blue Dot* (1994), noting that black holes might be one more exotic phenomenon awaiting observation as humanity moves into the stars. He speculated that they could even be a future energy source for space-faring humans, though it is uncertain that any lie nearby (i.e., within 10 to 20 light-years) (pp. 393, 394). More recently, celebrity astrophysicist Neil deGrasse-Tyson rebooted Sagan's classic series on Fox, to great critical acclaim in *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (Druyan et al., 2014), during which he takes the audience on a tour of a hypothetical black hole rendered in CGI in his "spaceship of the imagination."[4]

Influence on Postmodern Thought: Jean Baudrillard

Black holes have notably also influenced postmodernism. In 1983, Jean Baudrillard (2005) referenced the physical concept of a "black hole" in his description of deterrence and "disappearance" in the same context as surveillance, advertising, and nuclear power. With deterrence, society will implode like a star.[5] The late philosopher also referred to black holes in his reflections on "the masses" of politics:

> The social void is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline clusters which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an in vacuo aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social."

> (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 3, 4)

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[4] deGrasse-Tyson wrote a book containing a key essay on the subject in 2014, *Death by Black Hole: And Other Cosmic Quandaries*.

[5] Political and social systems, he argues, parallel black hole formation in astronomy: "The stellar systems also do not cease to exist once their radiating energy is dissipated: they implode according to a process that is at first slow, and then progressively accelerates - they contract at a fabulous speed, and become involutive systems, which absorb all the surrounding energies, so that they become black holes where the world as we know it, as radiation and indefinite energy potential, is abolished" (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 72).

Baudrillard also evoked black holes with a somewhat romantic metaphor:

> To love someone is to isolate him from the world, wipe out every trace of him, dispossess him of his shadow, drag him into a murderous future. It is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light.
>
> (Baudrillard 2008, p. 135)

Thus, as the adoption by the provocateur Baudrillard shows, the concept of a "black hole" was simultaneously gaining visibility within the broader intellectual community, including media studies and the social sciences.

Hawking, Thorne, TV, Radio & Film: 1988 to Present

Like Sagan and *Cosmos*, Oxford Physicist Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988) also made black holes accessible to the layperson. His book won him international fame as well as cameo appearances on primetime TV shows like *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Taylor et al., 1993) and even *The Simpsons* (Groening et al., 1999). At the end of the episode that included his cameo, Hawking and Homer Simpson chit-chat while enjoying Duff beers:

> Hawking (in monotone computer voice): Your theory of a donut-shaped universe is intriguing Homer. I may have to steal it.

> Homer (burps): Wow, I can't believe someone I never heard of is hanging out with a guy like me.

After Sagan's *Cosmos* and Hawking's book, in 1994, Kip Thorne wrote *Black Holes and Time Warps* to bring general relativity to a "literate lay audience" (Thorne, p. 15). More recently, Thorne consulted for Christopher Nolan's blockbuster film *Interstellar* (2014) about an astronaut who falls into a black hole to save humanity. Indeed, the visual effects in the movie closely parallel descriptions of a black hole in Thorne's 1994 book, including some of what the astronaut goes through when he falls beyond the "event horizon," or point of no return (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The supermassive black hole "Gargantua" depicted using CGI in the film "Interstellar" (2014). (Source: Paramount Pictures)

References to black holes also began to appear in popular music in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and even today, particularly in indie music. Here are some examples:

- The creature in the sky/Got sucked in a hole/Now there's a hole in the sky/And the ground's not cold (Pixies, 1989)
- Black Hole Sun/Won't you come?/And wash away the rain (Soundgarden, 1994)
- Blame it on the black star/Blame it on the falling sky/Blame it on the satellite/That beams me home (Radiohead, 1995)
- I'm a black star way up on money I've got game (Bowie, 2015)

We live with black holes as an ambient concept: on a recent trip, Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun" video played in the airport Hard Rock Café while I ate dinner. Black holes have also featured prominently in many movies since Wheeler first coined the term. For example, Disney's family film *The Black Hole* (Dir. Nelson, 1979) depicted a team of astronauts who ventured through a black hole, only to emerge on the other side, which resembles heaven. On the other hand, the horror movie *Event Horizon* (Dir. Anderson, 1997) imagined that a team of scientists opened a portal to Hell through a black hole. *Donnie Darko* (Dir. Kelly, 2001) explicitly referenced *A Brief History of Time* and used the book as a prop in the film.[6] Interestingly, in a 2002 essay that articulated his "Chronology Protection" conjecture (i.e., the laws of physics do not permit time travel because the universe will always intervene to preserve causality), Stephen Hawking evoked pop culture to describe time travel at the quantum level:

> In particular, there will be histories in which the particle goes around and around on a closed loop in time and space. It would be like the film Groundhog Day, in which a reporter has to live the same day, over and over again. (in Hawking et al., 2002, p. 103)

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[6] *Wormholes* (black holes directly connecting two distant points in space) is a central device in *Donnie Darko*.

By another kind of loop – a feedback loop – it would appear that popular culture not only reinterprets physics but that physicists reinterpret popular culture! Hawking's notion of "Chronology Protection," as well as black holes and parallel universes, are all themes in the successful Netflix original series *Dark* (Friese & Odar, 2017), produced in cooperation with German TV, which (spoilers follow) centers around a young couple whose ill-fated romance follows a timeline through a black hole that initially emerges over a nuclear power plant (Figure 3). Such examples illustrate the persistent popular appeal of black holes, which are frequently interpreted as something ominous, related to ill-fated human events, and, more recently, environmental themes, such as in *Interstellar* and *Dark*.

Figure 3

Black holes feature prominently in the Netflix original television show "Dark" (Friese & Odar, 2017), which also contains apocalyptic themes associated with environmental degradation. (Source: Netflix)
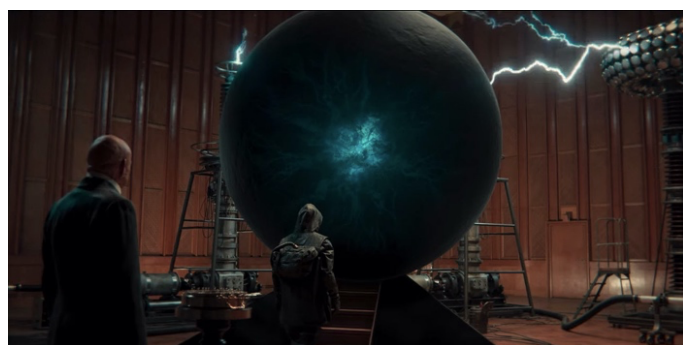
Netflix's original program *Lost in Space* (Drake & Chow, 2018), a reboot of the 1960s original (Allen, 1965) presents another recent example that connects black holes with environmental issues. In the show, the Robinson family is part of a future expedition heading for the Alpha Centauri star system because of the degradation of Earth's environment, but they get lost on route. In one episode, they believe they have found a safe planet, until the mother character, an aerospace engineer, researches strange weather patterns on the planet, ascending in a high-altitude balloon to take some readings (Figure 4). Her instruments indicate, much to her horror: "Hawking radiation detected."[7] The planet's star is in a death spiral with an invisible black hole, and their new home will soon be torn apart. It is interesting that the female scientist is the one to first detect such a cataclysmic threat to the expedition's survival.

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[7] According to Hawking (1988), black holes emit radiation and glow with infrared light, the "Hawking radiation."

Figure 4

Maureen Robinson (Molly Parker) ascends above the atmosphere of a remote planet, only to discover the Hawking radiation from a black hole that is rapidly consuming the planet's star in Netflix's "Lost in Space" (2018). (Source: Netflix)

Fleck (1979) defined discourse as a constrained sequence of texts connected to specialized systems of people (pp. 1-20). Members of a scientific community (physicists, for example) participate in a discourse. Fleck suggested that popularization makes a scientific discourse palatable to the general public and also entices new talent to join the discourse to provide fresh perspectives (pp. 154-165). This is how scientific popularization fits into the larger concept of scientific discourse defined by Searle (1995). Ferris (in Hawking et al. 2002) argued that scientific popularizers play an essential role in socializing people to the modern scientific picture of the universe to reduce "anxiety levels" in developed nations (p. 153). Science is a "white hole" that gushes information (p. 168), much like the one from which the protagonists of Disney's *Black Hole* emerged. Despite the early skepticism of notables such as Einstein and Eddington, the preceding examples demonstrate how the concept of a "black hole" won the hearts and minds of the public. Black holes have become so well integrated into the popular imagination as to make them a household term synonymous with Stephen Hawking. Yet, they are also a phenomenon with ominous popular associations: an unbreachable boundary, death, doom, and ecological catastrophe. And now we know that they do exist through direct observation.

Black Holes Revealed

Much physical data supported the existence of black holes before their direct observation in 2019. For example, neutron stars were discovered in the form of pulsars in 1967, when John Wheeler coined the term "black hole" (Hawking, 1988, p. 93). Hawking also gave further examples of "exotic objects" which have since been observed. For example, the pulsar PSR 1913 + 16 is a binary neutron star predicted by Einstein's theory. The two stars lose their energy at a fantastic rate as they spiral toward mutual destruction by the warped space between them (p. 90). Hawking also referred to the observation of 3C273, the first Quasi-stellar Object (or Quasar) in 1963 (p. 93). Astronomers studying the galaxy RX J1242-11 over a decade confirmed that its center is a supermassive black hole (Britt, 2004).

In a *Gedankenexperiment,* or "thought experiment," Thorne (1994) illustrated how an astronaut could probe the event horizon of a black hole based on simple physical data: its mass, spin, and charge (pp. 23-30). Furthermore, detecting the black hole's after-images, tidal forces, space-time warpage, gravity lensing and red-shifting of light would be possible.[8] Thus, evidence for a black hole was initially indirect, but it could also be thought through in a "thought experiment," such as those initially used by Einstein.

The question whether a black hole can be directly observed has by now also been answered. An international research team revealed the first-ever image of a black hole on April 10, 2019, shown in Figure 1, above. This image has since been enhanced using a different imaging algorithm (Figure 5 below).[9] The black hole depicted in the image is at the heart of galaxy Messier 87, which is 55 million light-years from Earth. According to *The New York Times* (Overbye, 2019), Harvard-Smithsonian astronomer and project director Shep Doeleman announced at a press conference in Washington, DC, that, "We have seen what we thought was unseeable," evoking Virilio's notion that the task of technoscience is to "make the invisible visible" (2007). The image provoked a comparison by *The New York Times* to the "Eye of Sauron," the villain in The Lord of the Rings (Dir. Jackson, 2001), and the article is peppered with references to the paradoxical nature of imaging something "unobservable." Harvard scholar Peter Galison, also a project member, described "a wonderful open-ended sense of being able to see something," not just statistical data.

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[8] Indeed, with a really big black hole an astronaut could approach the event horizon without too much of the pain that is due to the tidal forces of the warped space-time (Thorne, p. 37). He or she could measure these tidal forces and the warping of space-time: as the astronaut descends closer to the event horizon the circumference of their orbit is no longer in a 2π ratio with the radius. They would also observe the night sky above contract into a disk of light as if the black expanse of the hole were welling up around them, but this would be due to the light bending in a gravity field (p. 43). Finally, he or she could drop a robot probe with a laser beacon into the black hole. In the final fractions of a second before the probe vanished beyond the horizon the frequency of the light beam would zoom out of the visible spectrum, from x-rays to radio waves and into oblivion – blackness (32, 33). All this is depicted in a scene in *Interstellar* (Dir. Nolan, 2014), for which Thorne was a consultant, when an astronaut played by Matthew McConaughey descends past the event horizon of a black hole called Gargantua in a last-ditch effort to find a new planet for humanity after Earth's ecosystems have been devastated. Note here, as well, the ecological association of black holes, as we discuss in the conclusion. In his 1994 book, Thorne also elaborated on the interior structure of a black hole. The singularity itself is smaller than a nucleus; the rest from the event horizon down is utter void (Thorne 23–30). According to Thorne, near the singularity space-time oscillates with enormous, chaotic tidal forces. It could be a centimeter thin and light-years wide (p. 36). The interior of the event horizon is also shown in *Interstellar*, though McConaughey's character escaping death by "spaghettification" (i.e., when something is pulled by a black hole's intense gravity into a long string of atoms) is more a matter of poetic license (and, for his character, luck)!

[9] In 2022, the same team released the first-ever image of the supermassive black hole at the center of our galaxy, Sagittarius A* (National Science Foundation, 2022).

Figure 5

Black hole in Messier 87 photographed by EHT from April 2019, and the 2023 enhanced version using PRIMO imaging algorithm. (Source: National Science Foundation)
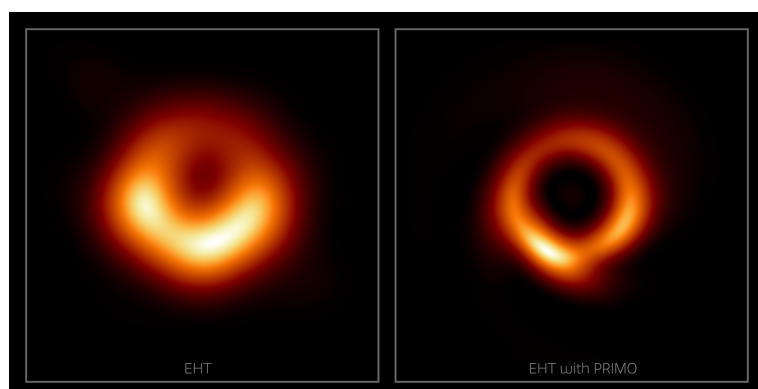
Even if one photographs a hole, it is still an absence as, again, by definition, a hole is just an "opening" or an "area where something is missing" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). What has been rendered in the picture is the accretion disk of superheated charged particles and gas that surround a black hole, demarcating a point of no return, the *event horizon*. Writing for *The New York Times*, Overbye (2004) reiterated that despite it being predicted by his equations for general relativity, Einstein was unwilling to accept the concept of a black hole. However, as predicted by his equations, the shape of the event horizon is circular. Kip Thorne noted in an email to the *Times*: "It is wonderful to see the nearly circular shadow of the black hole. There can be no doubt this really is a black hole at the center of M87, with no signs of deviations from general relativity." The effort required yoking together nine radio telescopes around the globe to turn them into one enormous earth-sized telescope, as well as the actions of 200 researchers. The network was called the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT).

Eight of these radio telescopes watched the galaxy in Virgo for ten days in April 2017, and it took two years to analyze the collected data, during which the researchers reduced and collated. There was so much data that it could not be downloaded through the Internet but had to be put on stacks of hard disks and flown back to M.I.T and the Max Planck Institute in Germany (the South Pole data took until December 2017 to arrive because of the Antarctic winter). Meanwhile, Katie Bowman, a Caltech computer scientist and assistant professor, was a lead researcher on the EHT team who wrote a key imaging algorithm. She initially became involved in the project while she was a graduate student at M.I.T and went on to become the face of the project after the image of the black hole in M87 was made public in April 2019.

Discussion: Shifting Connotations in Culture

Since Wheeler first coined the term "black hole" in 1967, the concept has blossomed both in popular science and popular culture, as demonstrated above. But the connotations of that term have also taken on a darker meaning as something ominous and dangerous, something to be feared and regarded as unknown. In this section, we argue that the idea of a "black hole" has

taken on at least two newer connotations in recent years. The first is that Katie Bouman's participation in the EHT project as a representative of black hole research really made her into a feminist icon and linked black hole research with a broader debate about women in science and the myth of the lone genius. The second connotation that I will argue is more recent: that black holes are associated with ecological catastrophe, that they have become symbolic of the climate crisis, and the growing awareness (particularly among global youth) of imminent environmental catastrophe.

Black Holes & Women in Science

After the Event Horizon Telescope photographed a black hole, project lead Katie Bowman emerged as a larger-than-life figure. This made a new, surprising connection between black holes research and women in science and, concomitantly, evinced public fascination with the role of women in the massive, distributed effort of computation required to render such an image. These two issues are not independent.

As the issue of women in science gains greater traction worldwide, it is fitting that Bouman should become the face of the Event Horizon Telescope, with its throwback to the pre-mechanical objectivity of composites. Her recognition reflects not simply public wonder at the image of a black hole but also with the imaging techniques used to produce it as a team effort. In this way, Bouman's fame undercuts the myth of the lone (predominantly white male) science genius. As is well known today, scientists more frequently make discoveries as part of a group or team (Dunbar, 1997).

Unfortunately, this also explains why, after achieving recognition as the representative for the EHT working group, Bouman became the target of online attacks by trolls who disputed the idea that her algorithm was crucial to the project (Lou & Ahmed, 2019). *Vox* interpreted this to mean that the public needs more images of successful women scientists to counterbalance the notion that women often do not feel welcome in science (Resnick 2019). In the rendering of an actual image, our discussion of the popular representation of black holes takes an unanticipated turn into feminism and women in science. The public fascination with black holes has brought a corresponding turn – that is, from viewing black holes as *ominous* to an association with the role of women scientists and computation in the production of objective science, and indeed, in such a way that it references Daston and Galison's notion of pre-mechanical objectivity.

Galison's participation in the project is notable because he researches the history of objectivity in science. In *Objectivity* (2007), Daston and Galison map different types of objectivity that emerged throughout the history of Western science. Objectivity as a category is, then, historically contingent. According to Daston and Galison, whereas 19th-century scientists attempted to represent nature by cataloging prototypical specimens in "atlases" of knowledge (for example, human skeletons), by the mid-20th century, particle physicists offered the snapshot of a bubble chamber as a form of mechanically reproducible objectivity. Thus,

different forms of evidence predominated in different historical epochs to satisfy the criterion of objectivity.

Note the image of the black hole references this earlier notion of pre-mechanical objectivity because it is a composite image. The production of that image was a feat of data storage: five petabytes of data stored across multiple hard drives. According to *Vice Motherboard*, this is "the equivalent of 5,000 years' worth of MP3s," and a cheeky image of lead developer Katie Bouman grinning over the stacks (Figure 6) went viral in the aftermath of the debut (Gault, 2019).

Figure 6
Lead EHT developer Katie Bouman smiles over five petabytes of data containing the image of the black hole. (Source: Katie Bouman)

As such, a reference to Haraway (2018) and the historical scientist as "modest witness" is apropos since Bouman's role as a feminist icon that does networked science extends to the black hole by association. Scientific giants in history may not have anticipated such dimensions now that an abundance of evidence, physical and theoretical, has established black holes as what Searle called a "social fact," whereas before black holes were depicted as ominous, yet feminism and distributed computing for advanced imaging techniques are now just as much a part of the "social fact" of the black hole as anything.

The "Black Hole" of Climate Crisis

Black holes have become part of the vernacular and synonymous with physicist Stephen Hawking. However, the pop culture and even some of the technical references noted above illustrate another connotation of black holes – that they constitute a boundary beyond which no information can be retrieved. While technically this is not true because black holes emit Hawking radiation, the popular symbolic interpretation of the black hole is that it is somehow *"dreadful"* (L'Engle, 65), the source for universes that should have never existed, to begin with, as in the Netflix show *Dark* (2017), and beyond these connotations of something dark and mysterious, this is precisely what a black hole represents to modern physics – a so-far irreconcilable breach between gravity and the atom. The singularity at the center of a black

hole is where our understanding of modern physics breaks down. In this case, the black hole represents a literal boundary for *all modern cosmology and physics*.[10]

This part of the study requires some reflexive self-report of "lived experience" in the spirit of autoethnography (Bunde-Birouste, Byrne & Kemp, 2019) to better illustrate the relationship between black holes and climate crisis. The renewed inspiration for the present study (initially begun in 2007) came from a personal experience. One morning in early April of 2019 – a bright morning when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom – I waltzed into a Starbucks near where I lived in Portland, Oregon, and almost spilled my dark roast. There it was: the image of the black hole in Messier 87, right on the cover of *The New York Times*, a reflection of humanity's inner darkness as if some shift in the collective unconscious.

At that moment, I imagined a metaphorical *syzygy* of a black hole, rising authoritarianism, and climate crisis. That the black hole image should appear just as the pillars of democratic society were being challenged globally and as the world teetered on the brink of ecological oblivion seemed like what Jung had called a *synchronicity* (2010). This was no mere coincidence, however: Donald Trump's rhetoric feeds both, simultaneously bolstering authoritarianism (a real threat to democracy) (Ingraham, 2020; Ross, 2016) while ignoring the existential crisis of climate cataclysm, a real *existential* threat (Haque, 2022).[11] Trump literally appeared as a shadow when he made his debut at the 2016 RNC in silhouette. Thus, the image of the black hole beamed back to earth took on uncanny significance for me, a harbinger of where our world seemed to be headed politically and *ecologically*. To elaborate on the quote by Searle (1995), and thus refine our understanding of the difference between a "brute fact" and "social fact": "Something can be a mountain even if no one believes that it is a mountain…but for social facts, the attitude we take toward the phenomenon is partly constitutive of the phenomenon" (p. 33).

To unpack the latter, I will go back even further to one of the events that led me to Oregon in the first place. I had the good fortune to witness the 2017 North American solar eclipse reach totality, surrounded by good friends in the mountains of Oregon. It's been over five years, and I remember looking on dumbfoundedly at a black hole in the sky ringed by a frozen wind of plasma a million miles high. Two years later, I marched in solidarity with millions of high school students worldwide on September 20, 2019, in a global "Climate Strike" organized by Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg. It should not have been any surprise, perhaps, when I noticed that the flyer for the march (created by Oregon students, ostensibly) depicted a collage

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[10] Lackoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 25–29) discussed *ontological metaphors*, and Watzlawick (1984) pointed out some examples of "self-fulfilling prophecy," including the interpretation of quantum mechanics: "Similar quotations, referring to the effect of such "unscientific" factors as simple expectations and assumptions in the sciences, could be collated in abundance – the book in hand is itself intended as such a contribution. In this connection, one might recall, for instance, Einstein's remark in a talk with Heisenberg: "It is the theory that determines what we can observe." And in 1959 Heisenberg himself stated, 'We have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning'" (p. 101). Black holes represent a hard problem of reconciling gravity with quantum mechanics.

[11] Indeed, comparisons between Trump's rhetoric as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and a black hole call for closer scrutiny; this should be the subject of a future research paper.

of student protestors around a central black hole. The words "Climate Strike" were depicted as a write-over in white letters, and the black spot itself fringed with a diffuse red boundary (again, reminiscent of "Hawking radiation") (Figure 7).

According to the non-profit National Resources Defense Council (NRDC, 2019), students had a pro-social mandate to skip school that day. The NRDC noted that by the time high school seniors now are 50, the number of average days in the U.S. with a heat index greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit will double, storms will have become more devastating worldwide, and year-round wildfire "seasons" and quickly rising sea levels could displace more than 800 million people. One year later, September 2020, saw an unprecedented number of fires on the West Coast of the U.S., particularly in Oregon outside of Portland, where an estimated half a million residents were displaced ("Oregon Wildfires," 2020); the trend continued with climate fires raging on the West Coast and Oregon earlier than expected in the summer of 2021, and NASA confirmed that the summer of 2023 was the hottest on record (Kuthunur, 2023).

The public has been quick to embrace the reality of the black hole in M87 but slow to embrace the reality of climate change, a comparative case study in science demonstrated (Shepherd, 2019). It is a slow, reluctant embrace that has arguably been held back by oil and corporate interests and the conservative Right, one that has spanned my entire lifetime (Cornwall, 2019).

Figure 8
Climate Strike Flyer, 2019. Note the presence of activist Greta Thunberg, lower right. (Source: Climate Strike Oregon)
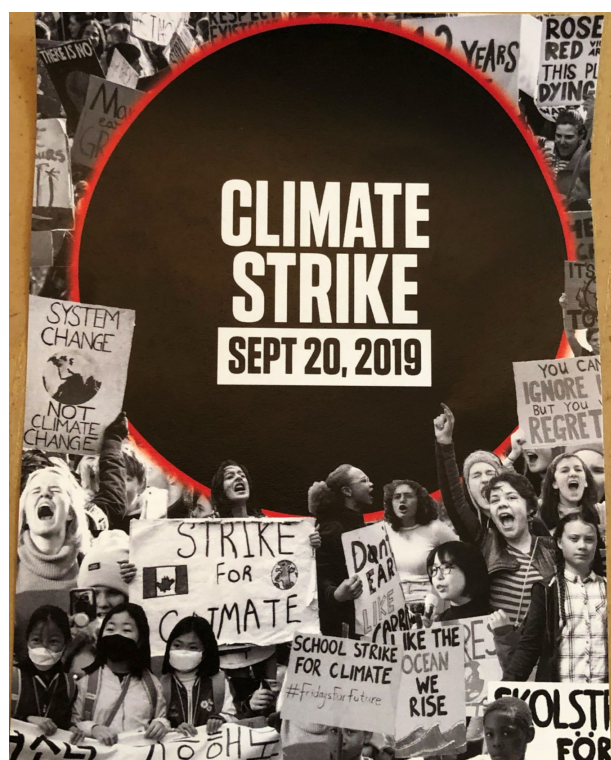
Thus, the image of a "black hole" at the heart of the flyer surrounded by a collage of protestors recalled for me the totality of the 2017 eclipse and functioned as a harbinger of the coming ecological catastrophe of West Coast climate fires in 2020 and beyond.

Conclusion

It is partly this *totality* why I'm still thinking of Mackenzie Wark's essay from September 2017 (a response to Amitav Ghosh's book about climate change, apparently) in which he points out how consumer culture has hollowed out the contemporary novel, robbing it of the possibility for transformative change in favor of a focus on the minutia of everyday life (which might explain my soft-spot for Murakami's writings), while praising genre fiction, weird fiction and in particular climate fiction, or "cli-fi" (note the reference to Ballard's novel in which an imagined 45th President takes on "a role in a climate change story) and including historical anecdotes like how one mid-19th century sea captain correctly predicted the vulnerability of Port Canning in West Bengal three years before a cyclone destroyed it. Wark writes: "[L]et's have a thousand names for the Anthropocene. Ghosh offers catastrophozoic and the penumbral period. Anything of this scale and complexity, not least emotional complexity, needs a whole poetics of its own."

I fancy the latter: Welcome to the Penumbral. This was my reading as I attended the 2017 Oregon eclipse and, given the political climate of the nation at the time and since, it is not difficult to see how the eclipse that crossed the continental United States in 2017 might be interpreted as a warning, or a "spell" resulting from a reductive, positivist worldview (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 134). It was also my reading on the morning in April 2019 when I woke up to an image of a black hole on the cover of *The New York Times* and almost spilled my Starbucks coffee. This dazzling spectacle was the sum of the work of a whole team of experts. It gave rise to a new star, a woman graduate student from MIT who became the face of the project, its interpreter for popular science and, also, sadly, the target of unfounded hate emails suggesting that she was unworthy of being a representative for the team of scientists. Arguably, it also holds up the mirror to the unspeakable turn toward authoritarian-style rhetoric and politics that we are witnessing worldwide, which constitutes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the worst sort, and its twin specter, that of environmental degradation, should it also prove to be nothing short of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In conclusion, the surprising success of Christopher Nolan's 2023 blockbuster *Oppenheimer* (Figure 9) demonstrates the continued audience appeal of science and black holes. But it also goes further to situate research into black holes in the context of what Collins (2013) called "revealing science," and to present black holes in a film that requires audiences to critically reflect on nuclear war. Against the odds, *Oppenheimer* became the highest-grossing biopic in September 2023, earning $900 million at the box office alongside summer competitor *Barbie* (Bramesco, 2023). Indeed, the film briefly depicts Oppenheimer's contribution to black hole research when Cillian Murphy as the titular character explains the concept of an imploding star to a rapt classroom (complete with an accompanying experimental montage). He then encourages a motivated student, Hartland Snyder (portrayed by actor Rory Keane), to puzzle out the limit on

density, telling him with a smirk (and to his surprise), "See where the math takes us. I guarantee it's somewhere no one's been before." Indeed, many famous scientists who contributed to the development of modern physics appear in the film, including two pioneers of black hole research, Oppenheimer and Einstein.

Figure 9
Poster for *Oppenheimer*

The poster art copyright is believed to belong to the distributor of the film, Universal Pictures, the publisher of the film or the graphic artist. (Wikipedia Commons) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Oppenheimer_(film).jpg

The mention of black holes in the context of *Oppenheimer* perhaps signals more than just audiences' continued fascination with them, however. Collins, for example, described the value of "revealing science" (Collins, 2013) that makes new discoveries. He claimed that today's science is not "pioneering science" at all and that furthermore, sciences that do probe the boundaries of what is known and what is possible (such as gravity waves science, Collins' chosen subject for sociological inquiry and one that relies on the physics of black holes for observation and data collection) hold themselves up to an incredibly high standard:

> The triumphal accounts are either retrospective, or refer to sciences that are so well established that they have made all their mistakes and become technologically secure— not reaching, but perhaps reaching toward, the reliability of your fridge or your car. The revealing science—the science which more readily shows us how humans wrest their understanding from a recalcitrant nature—is pioneering science, where things are being done for the first time and mistake after mistake is being made. Gravitational-wave detection physics is a true science in this respect. Here things are being done for the first time.
>
> (Collins 2013, p.4)

Indeed, Park, Leahy and Funk (2023) recently provided evidence of a lack of truly "disruptive finds" in contemporary science. They concluded that despite "exponential growth" in the quantity of scientific and technological knowledge, the pace of major breakthroughs has diminished noticeably from 1945 to 2010. The authors base this conclusion on an analysis of

45 million papers and 3.9 million patents, and they note the pattern holds "universally" across fields. Thus, according to the *New York Times*, there is a drop in "disruptive finds" and, "investments in science are caught in a spiral of diminishing returns and that quantity in some respects is outpacing quality" (Broad, 2023). In a parallel with *Oppenheimer*'s surprising success, the public fascination with the 2019 EHT photograph of the black hole in Messier 87 could be interpreted as public fascination with and longing for a time nearly a century ago when there was arguably a greater ferment in science.

The success of *Oppenheimer* was also a surprise because it required audiences to reflect on the consequences of atomic science. Recall how in January the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (2023) moved the hand of their Doomsday Clock to ninety seconds – closer to "midnight" and nuclear Armageddon than it had ever been since its inception in 1947. The reference to black holes in *Oppenheimer* creates a further association beyond climate crisis: a link between the origins of black hole research and nuclear war. In this sense, the black hole by way of association – to the climate crisis, to nuclear war – perhaps symbolizes and reinforces a call to ethically reflect on technoscience in the 21st century. Is contemporary science, as Ferris argued in Hawking's anthology, a "white hole"? Or is it a black hole?

A black hole is now *confirmed* – as *real* as the "brute fact" of *climate crisis*.[12] In conclusion, more scholars of communication and culture should endeavor to understand how concepts such as "black holes" fire the popular imagination by studying audience interpretations of scientific discoveries like the 2019 EHT photograph of a black hole in Messier 87. With reference to the work of Collins, a sociologist of science who studies gravity waves (2017, 2013), researchers should get embedded with the scientific community, to understand how influential networks of experts refine their ideas and decide how to talk about compelling scientific discoveries in ways that eventually communicate their findings to the public. Scholars should also focus more on stories of successful women scientists.[13]

Finally, and emphatically, researchers should focus on how scientists use language. Krippendorff (1996) noted that "social theories can be said to reenter the very practices they claim to describe." By way of analogy, sociological and linguistic studies of "revealing science" may in turn reveal the ways in which scientific discoveries, even of the pioneering sort, get caught up in language games and lead to a "self-fulfilling prophecy," in terms of how

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[12] Like a menacing sign that reads DO NOT ENTER, the horizon of the black hole demarcates the aspects of the physical universe which, depending on perspective, we have yet to unveil, or that, by the rational epistemological system of Western science and relentless technological advance, *went under* a long time ago. The epistemological assumptions of Western science are deep-seated. Erik Davis (1998) suggested that Judeo-Christian myth has even been re-encoded into modern information technology and genetics. On the other hand, Coles (2001) suggested that modern cosmology, with its emphasis on order that emerged from chaos, is a reinterpretation of the god Marduk in Sumerian creation myth. Therefore, we could say that an ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and Judeo-Christian worldview privileged by contemporary Western science produces the paradox of black holes; Certainly, climate crisis has been driven by the relentless advancement of Western technoscience and industrialization—all encoded in the "social fact" of black holes. And yet, that might still be an oversimplification, historically and philosophically speaking.

[13] This is not just true for Western societies. Where I currently teach in the Emirates, the government has placed new emphasis on encouraging the youth to participate in science, women in particular (ITP Staff, 2021).

those breakthroughs are communicated to the public – again, the public quickly embraced the reality of the black hole in M87 and yet not so much climate change – but perhaps also in terms of where science focuses its resources.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Klaus Krippendorff, the Gregory Bateson Emeritus Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, one of my teachers who, despite his many obligations, took the time to guide me in the paper's development over the years, and who encouraged me to challenge the limits of my own perceptions of language and reality.

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Blindness Challenging Melodrama in *Your Eyes Tell* (2020) and *Blind Massage* (2014)

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Abstract

While blindness has been a recurring motif in melodramatic fiction films, this article argues that some contemporary East Asian films about blindness provide a template for challenging ableism and melodramatic conventions via textual analysis. Based on the work of Peter Brooks, Linda Williams, and other significant studies on melodrama and blindness, I first introduce three main characteristics of and gaps in melodrama (virtue, dichotomy, and the moral occult) while examining the connections between blindness and melodrama in East Asian film history. Then I explore how filmic representation in East Asian can question melodramatic conventions and disrupt the dichotomy between disability and non-disability by using the Japanese film *Your Eyes Tell* (2020) and the Chinese film *Blind Massage* (2014) as case studies. *Your Eyes Tell* begins to problematize the melodramatic dichotomy and ableism by attaching great importance to multiple senses, whereas *Blind Massage* emphasizes the diversity of blindness and challenges melodramatic patterns by representing the body, emotions, affect and sound in very specific ways.

Keywords: East Asian films, blindness, melodrama, film aesthetics

Blindness has been a vital element in many melodramas. The famous classic Hollywood film *City Lights* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1931) is an excellent example. As Lawrence E. Mintz (1991: 99) suggests, *City Lights* can be seen as a melodramatic film in that it has constant contrasts and reversals. There are mainly four melodramatic patterns as Linda Williams (1998: 42–73) suggests: 1) melodrama suggests dichotomies between heroes and villains; 2) melodrama recognizes victim-heroes' virtue; 3) melodrama reveals hidden reality; and 4) melodrama involves melodramatic passion, action and timing [1]. In *City Lights*, there are obvious dichotomies between the virtuous and the villainous. The character of the blind girl who sells flowers portrays a virtuous woman, whose blindness is cured with the help of the tramp (portrayed by Charlie Chaplin). In contrast to the unnamed blind girl (Virginia Cherrill), most rich people in *City Lights* appear to be villainous and selfish. The tramp falls in love with the girl at the first sight. He wants to cure her blindness; however, he cannot afford the operation. Melodramatically, a rich, drunk man is willing to give him money in return for his kindness. After her blindness is cured, the girl becomes confident and independent, which suggests that her virtue is recognized. However, when the tramp encounters her at the flower shop by coincidence, she does not remember him at first, suggesting a conventional melodramatic pattern of timing. After she touches his hand, the girl finally recognizes him as the one who has helped her. The end reveals a hidden truth: that vulnerable people care about each other. No matter whether the film contains a certain degree of discrimination against disability or not, there is no doubt that such melodramatic elements as found in *City Lights* have much in common with many subsequent films about blindness, including East Asian films.

In addition to *City Lights*, many melodramatic films with blind characters have also been created in East Asia. On the one hand, East Asian films share some similarities with Western films in terms of character stereotypes and melodramatic compositions, such as virtuous blind protagonists, moral dichotomies, and timing. On the other hand, there also exist specific differences related to the representation of blindness between Western films and East Asian films, arguably due to mostly cultural differences. For instance, some notable East Asian popular films such as the Japanese series *Zatōichi* (dir. Misumi Kenji, Mori Kazuo, etc., 1962-1989) and the Chinese film *House of Flying Daggers* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2004) have similar melodramatic elements as those in *City Lights*, including virtuous protagonists, moral dichotomies, and timing. However, the *Zatōichi* series and the *House of Flying Daggers* are usually seen as action films, more specifically, *samurai* or *wuxia* films. In both, the blind characters are portrayed as virtuous heroes who eventually defeat the villain and save trapped characters just in the nick of time. Melodramatic compositions and blindness in these films need to be examined in relation to East-Asian conditions. Moreover, there exist varieties of East-Asian films that use melodramatic elements to represent blindness, including some classic Japanese films such as *Shunkinsho* (dir. Nishikawa Katsumi, 1976) and *Seisaku's Wife* (*Seisaku no Tsuma*, dir. Masumura Yasuzō, 1965), the Hong Kong-Chinese action film *Blind Detective* (dir. Johnie To, 2013), the Hong Kong horror film *3 Days of a Blind Girl* (dir. Chan Wing-Chiu,

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[1] Furthermore, Linda Williams (1991: 4) highlights the importance of the body in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*. To be specific, Williams (1991: 4) notes the relationship between the body and emotion, which provides a significant perspective to explore melodrama about physical disabilities.

1993), and the South Korean documentary *Planet of Snail* (dir. Yi Seungjun, 2011). Thus, it becomes incumbent to explore the relationship between blindness and melodrama in East Asian films[2].

How, then, do contemporary East Asian films highlighting blindness deal with melodramatic conventions? I will address this question by closely analyzing two East Asian films: the Japanese film, *Your Eyes Tell* (*Kimi no me ga toikaketeiru*, dir. Miki Takahiro, 2020) and the Chinese film *Blind Massage* (dir. You Ye, 2014). Although these two films of course cannot fully represent the dynamics of East Asian films, *Your Eyes Tell* and *Blind Massage* are significant cases in terms of illustrating the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability and challenging melodramatic conventions via film aesthetics. Some reviewers have criticized or disdained *Your Eyes Tell* as a melodrama (Hosono and Yasuhara, et al. 2020), but a close analysis reveals that this film partially problematizes the melodramatic dichotomy between people with and without disabilities in a significant way. Thus, *Your Eyes Tell* provides alternatives to clear visual signs by emphasizing multiple senses instead. *Blind Massage*, on the other hand, is more obvious in challenging ableism and melodrama patterns by representing diverse relationships among blind people as well as the body, emotions, affect and sound.

A number of previous studies explore how East Asian films represent blindness by focusing on the body representation and symbolism of blindness. For example, from the perspective of postcolonialism, Yi Yonng Jae (2016: 84) pays attention to the body representation of injured war veterans in post-war Japanese and Korean films. Yi (2016: 96-98) also examines how visuality plays an important role in constructing power relations between blind characters and others in *Seisaku's Wife* and the already mentioned *Zatōichi* series. Yomota (2006: 215), on the other hand, argues that blindness in *Seisaku's Wife* and *Shunkinsho* foregrounds the agency of protagonists. Characters become blind so that they can neuter visual power systems and free themselves from patriarchy, either by themselves or with the help of others (Yomota Inuhiko 2006: 216). Based on these analyses of blindness, my study illuminates how contemporary East Asian films represent blindness, which may provide a model for problematizing ableism and melodramatic conventions. These case studies, I hope, contribute to reconsidering the association of blindness with melodrama, and by extension, filmic representation of blindness in an East Asian context. In addition to exploring cinematic techniques and aesthetics, I hope that my study can benefit disability studies by elaborating how blind characters are faced with discrimination and other social problems in contemporary East Asian films.

Historical Representation of Blindness and Melodrama

Melodrama plays an important role in constructing blindness on screen. Therefore, it is necessary to trace the relationship between blind characters and traditions of the melodramatic

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[2] There are other East Asian films featuring blindness and eyes, especially horror and crime thriller films, including the Hong Kong horror film *Ghost Eyes* (dir. Kuei Chih-hung, 1974), the Hong Kong sequel *The Eye 2* (dir. Pang Brothers, 2004), and the South Korean film *Blind* (dir. Ahn Sang-hoon, 2011), and suggesting how blindness and eyes literally can be used as elements to establish horror plots. However, considering this article's focus on melodrama, these films are not further examined in the following sections.

mode in East Asian films. I will illuminate three main characteristics of melodrama – virtue, dichotomy, and the moral occult – by referring to important studies on melodrama, such as Brooks (1976), Elsaesser (1972), and Linda Williams (2001). These melodrama theories are important for us to understand how the melodramatic mode plays an important role in representing blindness in films. But there are also some gaps in these theories, gaps which become apparent when they are applied to East-Asian films. In the following section, I will use some East Asian films as examples to explain the connections between blindness and melodrama and comment on some theoretical disparities and challenges vis-à-vis these Japanese, Chinese, and Korean films under discussion.

A melodramatic lens of seeing virtue in the beauty and purity of blind characters might be typical for many spectators. People may get used to female blind characters who are beautiful and kind in melodrama, such as the blind girl in *City Lights*, Ha Jung-hwa in *Always*, and Michiru in *Waiting in the Dark (Kurai tokoro de machiawase*, dir. Tengan Daisuke, 2006). These beautiful blind women usually help strangers without expecting anything in return and show unconditional trust to the men they help. However, there are risks if we take the mainstream recognition of this virtue for granted. Linda Williams (2001: 14) suggests "racial legibility" that links the quality of being good or evil with race itself in melodramas that depict relations between black and white people. Williams (2001: 15) speaks of a melodramatic "Tom lens", that virtue is highlighted when black male characters suffer from white villains. Based on Williams's framework of "racial legibility", I argue that "blind legibility" assumes the goodness of blind characters and a misfortune of disability itself. As a result, spectators tend to feel sympathy for the blind victims because of their unjust experience. Influenced by the melodramatic tradition of virtue, people without disabilities show their privileges in the disguised form of sympathy.

In fact, those simplified blind characters should be as complex as those without disabilities. Blind characters can be portrayed not only as virtuous, but also as people with different and complicated personalities, which is the first desideratum when discussing blindness and melodramatic conventions in East Asian films. Jacobs (1993: 124) argues that we should reexamine passive protagonists, whose psychologies and points of view are opposed to simplified melodramatic depictions. Some recent East Asian films potentially emphasize a diversity of blind characters and their complicated relationships. This includes *Blind Massage*, which will be discussed further in the third section below.

Dichotomy is another melodramatic convention which draws a clear line between blindness and non-disability. Melodrama focuses on the recognition of heroes' virtue while denying the villainy of villains (Williams 1988: 66). Characters who are vulnerable and victimized, such as the black male body suffering at the hand of white villains, are likely to be viewed sympathetically due to their "good" behavior (Williams 2001: 15). Blindness, as a virtue, is often highlighted in East Asian melodrama. For instance, Sasuke in *Shunkinsho* (dir. Nishikawa Katsumi, 1976) blinds himself to keep his innocence and achieve pure love with a beautiful blind koto teacher, Shunkin (Yomota Inuhiko 2006: 215). In *Seisaku's Wife* (*Seisaku no Tsuma*, dir. Masumura Yasuzō, 1965), Okane stabs her lover Seisaku's eyes out to prevent him from

going to the battlefield. Blindness calms Seisaku down and frees him from the national ideology of being a "model soldier". In contrast to the blind man Seisaku, villagers without disabilities are still brainwashed by pervasive and oppressive militarism.

Although it may be easy for spectators to identify blind characters due to their performance, aesthetic affect, and unambiguous visible signs (Brooks 1976: 62; Elsaesser 1972: 78), some contemporary East Asian films question the clear boundary between disability and non-disability, which is the second gap that western melodrama theories encounter when applied to East Asian films. *Blind Detective* (dir. Johnie To, 2013), a Hong Kong-Chinese romantic comedy film, depicts a humorous blind detective who helps an attractive inspector to solves cold cases. Taking a Korean documentary, *Planet of Snail* (dir. Yi Seungjun, 2011, South Korea) as another example, as it suggests how blind people have alternative ways to perceive the world and fall in love with others.

In addition to virtue and dichotomy, there often exists a dynamic tension in melodrama between reality and an exaggerated melodramatic pattern. Melodrama usually narrates the experience of blind protagonists into a rise-and-fall pattern, which emphasizes human actions, emotions and affect (Brooks 1976: 76). As Williams (1998: 70) suggests, timing is vital to extract dramatic power in melodrama. For example, the South Korean melodrama *Always* depicts how the hero opens a door to protect the blind heroine from being sexually assaulted. On the other hand, melodrama "goes beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of spirit" (Brooks 1976: 2). Melodrama provides a stage for characters to utter the unspeakable and express their deep feelings (Brooks 1976: 4). The domain of operative spiritual and moral values is uncovered and articulated in the mode of melodrama, which is defined as "moral occult" by Brooks (1976: 20). The "Moral occult", also referred to as "hidden moral legibility" by Williams (1988: 51–52), implies that melodrama reveals hidden problems and provides a specific truth for reality. Gunning (1994: 54) further argues that the moral occult determines the exaggerated dramatic pattern in classic melodrama. This "moral occult" is significant because it reveals hidden reality in a melodramatic mode.

However, the "moral occult" may become a cliché in some East Asian films as hidden social problems remain unsolved, which is the third disjuncture between East Asian films and traditional melodramatic theories. For instance, *Waiting in the Dark* (*Kurai tokoro de machiawase*, dir. Tengan Daisuke, 2006) focuses on the powerlessness of minority groups in Japan by representing how a blind girl and a Chinese-Japanese migrant worker save each other. Although the vulnerability of minority groups is revealed and the viewer sensitized, they continue to be excluded from mainstream society.

I will now explore how filmic representation of blindness may set a trend for challenging melodrama conventions in two contemporary East Asian films, Y*our Eyes Tell* and *Blind Massage*. *Your Eyes Tell* is a Japanese remake of a Korean romance film *Always* illustrating a love story between a beautiful blind woman and a boxer. It is a mainstream film with popular stars and celebrities including Yoshitaka Yuriko, Yokohama Ryusei and BTS. The film has attracted fans worldwide, despite some critiques about exaggerated dramatic scenes. I will

analyze how *Your Eyes Tell* represents blindness and questions the melodramatic dichotomy that sets a clear boundary between heroes and villains in comparison with *Always* in Section Two. By contrast, *Blind Massage* is a 2013 Chinese film, which was regarded highly by many international film festivals such as Berlin International Film Festival and Golden Horse Film Awards (Lee 2014; Shea 2014). The film depicts multiple love stories of blind characters in a massage parlor. It provides a template for challenging a melodramatic narrative and breaks the stereotypes of blindness as a virtue. I will examine how *Blind Massage* suggests the diverse relationships among blind people by focusing on sound, body, emotions and affect in Section Three.

Problematizing the Melodramatic Dichotomy: *Your Eyes Tell* (2020)

Your Eyes Tell depicts a love story between a beautiful blind woman Akari and the boxer Rui who used to be a hitman in a criminal organization. Rui accidentally finds that Akari's blindness is the result of his earlier actions, so he tries to cure her blindness by fighting in a match. As a melodrama film, *Your Eyes Tell* displays a number of melodramatic characteristics, including using visual signs to build characters, suggesting the contrast between male and female protagonists, and assuming blindness as a virtue. *Your Eyes Tell* is a significant example, in terms of partially challenging the melodramatic dichotomy between blind people and people without disabilities and emphasizing multiple senses as alternatives to visual signs.

Compared to the original Korean film *Always*, *Your Eyes Tell* frequently uses close-up shots to highlight some visual signs to indicate characters' experience and their personalities, thus following the logic of melodramatic traditions. For instance, Rui has a blurry gangster tattoo on his hand, which is captured by a close-up shot. He tries to hide the tattoo when he has an encounter with Akari in the hospital. The camera follows Akari's point of view when she enters the room where Rui is. She does not recognize Rui at that time while Rui knows her and tries to hide his identity. The camera moves from Akari to Rui. A medium shot frames how Rui refuses to be recognized by Akari. As he turns his back to her and covers the tattoo with the right hand. The tattoo here not only shows his relationship with the criminal organization, but also suggests that he tries to stay away from it. The organization finds the apartment where Rui and Akari live and leaves a mark on the door as a warning. A close-up shot of the mark, which is the same as the sign of the tattoo on Rui's hand, suggests the trouble brewing between Rui and the organization.

In addition to the visual sign, director Miki Takahiro contrasts Akari and Rui by employing montage, which suggests the second characteristic of melodrama – the dichotomy between the two protagonists. At the beginning of the film, Rui is busy delivering goods from one building to another on a rainy day while Akari wakes up at her bright home and prepares breakfast before going to work. It is obvious that Rui usually resides in cold and narrow spaces with dark or cold-tone backgrounds while Akari's house and clothes are often portrayed in warm tones. These clear visual signs effectively portray Akari as a positive blind woman and Rui as a marginal man who may have an unspeakable past. The dichotomy between Akari's brightness and Rui's greyness works as a basis for the build-up of a melodramatic narrative – Akari

becomes Rui's salvation when they fall in love with each other. This melodramatic pattern confirms blindness as a virtue by constructing the blind female protagonist as a virtuous person who is beautiful and cares about others.

Although the film has melodramatic elements, including using visual signs and making the contrast between the protagonists clear, it challenges the melodramatic tradition and suggests gaps in its relation to this tradition by disrupting the dichotomy between disability and non-disability. There is an important scene in which Akari cares for Rui and saves him from suicide. *Your Eyes Tell* and *Always* both share the plot device where the blind female protagonist gives a piece of a round stone to the boxer. Here, the stone serves as a symbol for people who have been hurt multiple times. However, these people become calm and gentle in the end. Akari's behavior passes on the message to Rui that as marginalized people, they are closely connected. Although Akari is blind, she can "see" Rui's pure heart and takes the initiative in expressing her love for him. On the other hand, Rui, as a boxer, is strong enough to protect himself and Akari, but he wants to commit suicide due to his feelings of guilt about the consequences of his crimes. When Rui's sin and guilt push him to want to choose death, Akari's femininity gives him hope and saves him from a precarious situation. They enjoy their lives and care for each other after living together, suggesting the moral occult that a truth for reality is provided in melodrama (Williams 1988: 51–52). The truth suggests that people with and without disabilities are equal and they need to care for each other.

Your Eyes Tell highlights the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability by merging the spaces of Rui and Akari. As mentioned above, the film sets up Rui and Akari in different spaces to emphasize their different character traits and realities. Rui often moves from the dark parking lot where he works to his narrow room while Akari lives in a bright room and works as a customer service representative in a cell office. After Akari and Rui come to know each other, they go to a concert, have dinner in a restaurant and drive to the beach together. Compared to Rui's darkness and Akari's limitedness, all these places are usually open, broad, and full of other people. Akari lights up Rui's darkness and Rui helps Akari to walk out of her tiny space. Encouraged by Akari, Rui also returns to the boxing club and is there trained to be a professional boxer. With BTS's theme song "Your Eyes Tell", the film uses cross-cutting to represent how the couple love each other and work hard for a better life.

Your Eyes Tell does not draw a clear line between disability and non-disability, which shows the second gap between melodrama theories and East Asian films. On the contrary, it depicts how a blind female character is faced with intersectional discrimination in terms of gender and disability. At work, Akari is frequently sexually harassed by her boss. The boss often takes advantage of Akari's blindness and touches her hands. The film uses a close-up shot to show the touch. This shot shows the hand of the boss who is wearing a black suit covering the hand of a female, disciplined employee. It suggests multiple hierarchies between Akari and her boss concerning gender, disability, and class. As a female blind employee, Akari lacks the power to defend herself against the boss. One day, the boss directly comes to Akari's house and waits for her in front of the door without telling her in advance. Because Akari is blind, she cannot see her boss waiting at the entrance. The scene pays tribute to a classical Hollywood film *Wait*

Until Dark (dir. Terence Young, 1967), which also uses the unbalanced power between blind people and people without disabilities to create a sense of horror. After the boss enters the room, he tries to rape Akari. At that time, Rui comes to save Akari and beats up the boss. The intersectionality of gender and disability is well represented by melodramatic convention, especially "an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses" (Elsaesser 1972: 76).

Your Eyes Tell constructs the characters by using visual signs and following some melodramatic modes; however, it challenges the dichotomy between blind characters and those without disabilities by focusing on not one sense, but on multiple senses. For example, Akari is sensitive to sounds and smells. When Akari meets Rui for the first time, she guesses that Rui must be tired by simply listening to his voice. While watching a TV drama with Rui, Akari knows that Rui is wearing new shoes due to the smell of rubber. The film also amplifies the sound heard by Rui when he imagines Akari walking towards him with a white cane. But it is not only the sound effects, but also the music and songs used which attach great importance to highlighting the connections between Akari and Rui. When Akari takes Rui to visit the graves of her parents, they hold each other's hand and sing a song named "Coming back Home". Rui later makes a music box for the song and sends it to Akari. The song thus symbolizes a strong bond of love between Rui and Akari. Akari also immediately realizes that Rui has come back when the music box disappears from Akari's store.

In addition to sounds and smells, haptics provides an alternative to visuality and suggest the ambiguous boundary between disability and non-disability. Akari cannot see, but she is good at perceiving things by touch. For instance, she measures the oil with her fingers while cooking. She reads Braille books to learn massage. After Rui leaves, Akari misses him so much that she decides to make a clay figure of him. She closes her eyes and begins to sculpt as if to recall her memories of touching him. When she finishes the figure, Akari touches the face of the figure and starts crying. In that case, a touch has an emotional impact. Touch triggers an intense emotional reaction, especially for blind people. This scene echoes a previous one in which Akari tenderly holds Rui's head and asks him to look at her eyes. Rui follows what Akari says and then they kiss. The scene also appears in a poster of the Korean film version and explains why the film is titled "Your Eyes Tell". As a metonymy, the eyes here are not only eyes, but stand in for the whole body. The boundary set up by the in/ability to see is collapsed via physical contact and touch. When Rui looks at Akari's eyes, it is not important whether she can see or not, because her emotions and affect are well expressed through the body. Blindness is hence no longer a barrier for characters to interact with each other.

The Diversity of blindness: *Blind Massage* (2014)

Compared to *Your Eyes Tell*, *Blind Massage* (dir. You Ye, 2014) explores how the diversity of blindness challenges ableism and melodramatic patterns in a more obvious way: by paying special attention to the body, emotions, affect and sound. Based on the novel *Massage* written by Bi Feiyu (Lou and Sina Entertainment 2014), *Blind Massage* depicts multiple love stories in a massage parlor. Both the novelist Bi Feiyu and the director Lou Ye have mentioned that

they do not want to represent blind people as a fixed image (Lou and Tengxun 2014). As a result, the novel adopts a scattered perspective to illustrate different stories and the film uses an ensemble cast to represent a group of blind masseurs. Although *Blind Massage* does not have a specific single male or female main protagonist, Xiao Ma is an important character who connects different blind people in the massage parlor. The film usually follows Xiao Ma's perspective to narrate the story. Thus, focusing on the character of Xiao Ma can help us to clarify the diverse relationships among the blind protagonists.

Based on Jacob (1993: 124), I would argue that *Blind Massage* uses a number of film techniques to represent blind characters' complicated points of view (POV). In contrast to the first gap of the typical simplification of blind characters in traditional films, this film uses POV shots to depict different and complex personalities of blind characters. *Blind Massage* from the very beginning mimics via its cinematography and sound to depict how Xiao Ma "sees" the world. The film begins with an extreme close-up shot of spinning engine gears. The image is blurred with white noise and the sound of gears. After the spinning gears are zoomed out, a POV shot captures a bleeding boy cradled in his father's arms. A female voice-over explains that Xiao Ma lost his sight in a car accident. Different from a voice-of-God voice-over, here the voice-over is flat, plain, and emotionless. Lou Ye mentions that the voice-over is recorded by an ordinary staff instead of a professional announcer, which follows the language style of the novel *Massage.* Then the sound of gears returns with an image of a grown-up Xiao Ma in his twenties wearing a hospital gown in a hospital. The hand-held camera follows Xiao Ma while his father, located on the left side of the corridor, blames doctors for being unable to cure his son's blindness. Xiao Ma turns back and gets his lunch from a kind old lady. Then the camera takes on Xiao Ma's point of view, which transits from brightness to darkness. Suddenly, Xiao Ma breaks the bowl and tries to cut his neck with a sharp broken edge. Blood gushes from his neck, which echoes the previous scene of bleeding. Although some spectators complain that they did not feel comfortable with the camera effects (Sun 2014), the experimental combination of cinematography and sound not only represents a blurred and shaky version of blind people, but also illustrates Xiao Ma's complicated mental condition.

In addition to the blurred version of Xiao Ma, *Blind Massage* challenges ableism by representing the body, emotions, and affect of its blind characters, highlighting the second theory gap again and problematizes the dichotomy between disability and non-disability. Peter Brooks (1994: 18) notes that "the melodramatic body is a body seized by meaning", which suggests that in a melodrama, the body must carry a clear message. *Blind Massage*, however, highlights the body itself as complicated terrain, as indicated by different conflicts faced by its characters. The body can be expanded by multiple senses displayed by the blind characters. When Xiao Ma meets Kong in the massage parlor, he falls in love with her at first 'sight'. The "sight", to be specific, mainly refers to the scent of Kong. Although Kong is Lao Wang's girlfriend, Xiao Ma becomes addicted to her scent and cannot help himself smelling her used towel every night. Taihe, another blind masseur in the parlor, catches Xiao Ma's dangerous scent and describes it as "gunpowder on the battlefield". Taihe tries to help Xiao Ma and takes him to a brothel. When Xiao Ma has sex with a prostitute, he keeps smelling his environment and tries to trace the scent of Kong. Then the camera moves from the sexual scene to raindrops

on the window, which suggests that the conflict between Xiao Ma's affection for Kong and the rules in the massage parlor are gradually erased by sexuality.

Different from the oversimplified blind characters in traditional melodrama, *Blind Massage's* characters' sensitive feelings and thoughts are represented by scent and smell. How exactly does the film represent scent and smell? *Blind Massage* provides a synaesthetic way for spectators to imagine how blind characters smell and feel through camera usage. Based on Laura Marks's (2000: 162) notion of "haptic visuality" in film and the arts, a visuality that has the function of touch, *Blind Massage* creates a cross-sensory experience of blindness through camera movements. This is also borne out by Chris Berry (2014), who also analyzes how cinema can become haptic through the movements of the camera in *Blind Massage*. For instance, spectators of course cannot catch the scent of Kong as Xiao Ma does, but they may imagine the scent by the soft music when she passes him. The smell thus transforms into a sound, which can be experienced by people in or out of the screen. In that case, the film moves beyond its visuality to multiple sensualities. *Polyester* (dir. John Waters, 1981) is a good example that suggests how "odorama," so-called by Waters, has the potential to relate smell to films. During the projection of the film, users were asked to scratch certain parts of a card that had been given to them upon entering the cinema, thus interrelating real-world smell with cinematic scenes. In order to further introduce the depiction of smell in a film, *Blind Massage* will be further analyzed from the perspective of the body and blindness.

Blindness enhances the senses of touch, smell, and feel, which enriches the representations of body and emotions. After Xiao Ma releases his stress and anxiety in the brothel, a close-up shot follows a masseur when he moves his fingers on the back of his client. Compared to the intense sexual scene, this massage shot represents gentle pressure to the muscles to ease tension and pain. Spectators may feel comfortable and released when the camera moves to the soft touch, suggesting the healed body and the temporarily settlement of Xiao Ma's desire.

However, a crisis soon exposes the human nature of people in the massage parlor. *Blind Massage* reveals how blind masseurs with different personalities deal with each other in various ways. They are no longer as virtuous and innocent as those depicted in conventional melodramas. After Xiao Ma is caught by the police for engaging in prostitution, some masseurs worry about his reputation, but others insist that Xiao Ma should be allowed to continue the work. Du Hong, a beautiful blind masseur, even confesses her feelings to Xiao Ma, that she has loved him for a long time. But Xiao Ma does not care about what others think about him, he frequently visits the brothel and hits a violent man to protect Xiao Man. The man beats Xiao Ma almost to death. Xiao Ma is punched on the head, but the impact causes one of his eyes to recover its sight. After Xiao Ma comes to realize it, a look of ecstasy appears on his face. He runs down the street and trips a car alarm. When he returns to the massage parlor, Xiao Ma pretends that nothing has happened and deliberately steps on receptionist Gao Wei's foot. Gao Wei forgives him due to his blindness. Xiao Ma hides his secret and looks closely at his own face in the mirror. It is the first time for Xiao Ma to recognize and examine himself by looking in the mirror, shot in the film with a POV shot with shallow focus. Now Xiao Ma has two different eyes with different functions: one is to see the darkness and the other is to see the

light, which suggests the ambiguous boundary between disability and non-disability.

From the above analysis, we can see that *Blind Massage* questions melodramatic patterns by its narrative, cinematography, sound, and character design. The film is constructed with different stories of blind characters in the massage parlor and the complex relationships among them. It even uses different levels of whiteness to design their clothing. On the one hand, the massage parlor itself functions as a micro-version of society where blind people stand in for different kinds of people without disabilities (Lou 2014). On the other hand, the massage parlor is isolated from mainstream society. The isolation of blind characters is related to the third gap of the moral occult. Although the hidden reality of how blind people live in their own community is revealed in *Blind Massage*, they have little contact with people without disabilities. Lou Ye mentions that the massage parlor symbolizes a system with fixed rules while Xiao Ma is an independent free man with desires and emotional impulses (Lou and Sina Entertainment 2014). His subjectivity resists the dichotomy of non-disability and disability. Ableism also fails to work due to the representation of the body, emotions, and affect. Director Lou Ye's unique style of shallow focus, his frequent use of close-up shots, voice-over and POV shots attaches great importance to representing sensitive feelings of blind characters and creating an innovative first-person perspective for spectators to experience blindness (Huang 2016). For example, the film *Imagine* (dir. Andrzej Jakimowski, 2012) depicts how a blind person "sees" the world via sound. Nevertheless, as the character of Ian is faced with discrimination towards blind people in the film *Imagine*, Xiao Ma is excluded from mainstream society by moving from one isolated community to another. Although the moral occult highlights the truth that people with and without disabilities can help each other in *Blind Massage*. It does not provide an answer to the question on how to solve the social problems about the discrimination and exclusion of blind people.

Although the film represents the isolation of blind people, its production thus suggests the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability, especially the process in which people with and without disabilities perform together, which sheds light on the inclusion of blind people. Lou Ye explains that during the shooting of the film, actors and actresses without disabilities wore opaque contact lenses so that they were "blind" and needed to learn how to find their way with the help of blind people, such as actors Qin Hao (Sha Fuming in the film) and Huang Xuan (Xiao Ma) (Zhou 2014). Thus, for the spectators, it is difficult to distinguish which character is actually blind in real life and which is not. In fact, *Blind Massage* has a sound-only version which was screened for blind people in 2014 in Shanghai (Chen and Zhang 2014). The special version also attracted people without disabilities who watched it with blindfolds. Here, the film was explained to them by a commentator. Spectators "watched" the film by its sound. A blind man in his seventies left the movie theater before the screening finished because he was disappointed by the passive depiction of blind people in the film. At the same time, other blind people gave positive feedback about the film and wanted to learn massage. Nevertheless, even sound and words sometimes are not enough to represent how blind people struggle with isolation. It is a pity that blind spectators cannot enjoy the aesthetics of mise-en-scène and cinematography of *Blind Massage*, which is remains an unavoidable limitation of cinema as a form of visual arts for them.

Conclusion

This article explored how representation of blindness in two contemporary East Asian films potentially brings out the shortcomings of traditional melodramatic theories and questions ableist norms. I investigated *Your Eyes Tell* and *Blind Massage* as two different examples to illuminate how filmic representation of blindness can provide a template for reconsidering melodramatic conventions and ableism after tracing the relationship between blind characters and melodrama in these two East Asian films. *Your Eyes Tell* problematizes the melodramatic dichotomy between disability and non-disability and emphasizes multiple senses of blind characters although it also uses some melodramatic patterns to create its characters. *Your Eyes Tell* is a popular mainstream film, but it suggests intersectional discrimination faced by a blind woman in modern society in terms of gender, disability, and class. In contrast to *Your Eyes Tell*, *Blind Massage* provides an alternative to a melodramatic narrative and highlights the diversity of blindness by representing the body, emotion, affect and sound of blind characters. Blind people perceive the world by listening and touching. Their body, captured by close-up shots and other film techniques, helps to express their sensitive and complicated emotions. Both films are significant examples of using film aesthetics to illustrate the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability, which differs from mainstream melodramatic representations by challenging the latter's very conventions.

Furthermore, this study developed melodrama studies further in terms of tracing the connections between blindness and melodrama in an East Asian film context. It also contributed to disability studies by exploring discrimination and other social problems faced by blind people in *Your Eyes Tell* and *Blind Massage*. Three melodramatic patterns were questioned in particular: 1) that blind characters are often portrayed as virtuous people; 2) that a melodramatic dichotomy draws a clear line between disability and non-disability; and 3) that melodrama reveals the hidden reality and social problems about blindness, which is referred to as the "moral occult" by Brooks (1976: 5). However, in a contemporary East Asian film context, three discontinuities could be observed: 1) blind characters can have different and complicated personalities instead of being simplified virtuous types only; 2) the boundary between disability and non-disability is blurred; and 3) in contrast to the repetition of moral occult clichés, solutions to hidden social problems are being suggested.

Taking *Your Eyes Tell* and *Blind Massage* as two case studies, the article illuminated how filmic representation about blindness may set a trend for problematizing these melodramatic conventions and ableist stereotypes. In contrast to some previous film studies about blindness (Yomota 2006; Huang 2016), my study comments on the vulnerability of blind females due to intersectional discrimination in terms of gender, class, and disability. This point was inspired by Yi Yonng Jae's (2016) analysis of the power structure between people with and without disabilities and was then applied to the two films. This study also broadened the geographical range of melodramatic discourse by reviewing the relationship between blindness and melodrama in an East Asian context and analyzing two contemporary East Asian films in detail. Finally, these new perspectives point to further necessary investigations into the complex relationship between blindness and melodrama in world cinema by connecting them with

different research fields such as film studies, gender studies, disability studies, and social-historical studies.

Acknowledgement

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Folklore Goes to War: Folksongs, *Yangge* and Storytelling in Communist Bases during the Second Sino-Japanese War

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Abstract

All across the world, folklore studies are often closely tied to the emergence of modern nation states and were used to (re)build national identities. In post-WWI China, a growing community of academics and enthusiastic amateurs began working on folklore projects as part of a larger cultural effort to stoke nationalist sentiment and, by consequence, encourage resistance to foreign encroachment. After Japan's invasion in the 1930s threw the whole country into crisis, this campaign transformed from the abstract into a strategic component of the Chinese war effort. During China's War of Resistance against Japan, folklore activities played a valuable role in boosting the national spirit and promoting the idea of China as home to a rich cultural legacy. In communist bases of the North China Plain in particular, a New Literature and Art Movement began with the collection and organization of folk literature and art, which was in turn remoulded into effective and highly politicized anti-Japanese and social reform messages to promote mass mobilization. This article examines folksongs, *yangge* and storytelling to reveal how folklore, reshaped by communist intellectuals, was designed to serve political aims and address peasants and soldiers in order to unite the masses against its enemies both foreign and demestic. The Chinese Communist Party used traditional forms of folklore with revised content to launch a mass movement that served its primary political needs: winning support of the masses and spreading revolutionary communist ideology to a broader audience. This wartime revolutionary folklore approach continued into peacetime and greatly affected the People's Republic of China.

Keywords: folk culture, Communist propaganda, nationalism, Second Sino-Japanese War, modern China

A new generation of Chinese academics and enthusiastic amateurs turned their attention to folkore in the immediate aftermath of the May Fourth Movement, a student protest against harsh conditions that supposedly allied foreign peacemakers tried to impose on China at the end of World War I. This demonstration was launched within the context of a broader WWI-era campaign, the New Culture Movement, to sweep away old Confucian vestiges and propel China into the modern world. Early Chinese folklorists were very much part of China's cultural renaissance during the 1920s, one that touched literature, values, journalism, and politics, and the Chinese Folklore Movement evolved in sophisticated new directions over its first decade and a half despite adverse research conditions. They used this time productively, founding research societies and journals, learning from foreign scholars, developing new methodologies, and experimenting with field surveys. These efforts ultimately led to the creation of folklore studies as a new academic discipline in China. However, many years of progress came to a screeching halt when in 1937 full-scale war broke out between China and Japan.

Japan's invasion had already progressed from Manchuria in 1931 into northern China and over the next serval years, the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) government offered what would be charitably described as passive resistance. A clash between Chinese and Japanese forces at Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937 turned into a major conflict. The Nationalists abandoned Beiping at the end of the month. China lost Shanghai in November 1937 and its capital Nanjing fell in December of the same year. Japan then took Wuhan in Hubei and Guangzhou on the south coast in October 1938. The Nationalist govement was forced back into the interior of China, behind the mountain barriers of Sichuan province, where Chongqing became the wartime capital. The Japanese drove southward trying to destroy the KMT, which provided a great opportunity for the Chinese Communists to aggressively expand their own territory in the North China countryside. The Japanese almost ignored the small Communist Party for several years. The far larger and better equipped armies of the KMT seemed the main obstacles to their ambitions.

The war made it impossible for most folklorists to continue their work as they had in peacetime and folklore scholars were increasingly divided by war-related developments (Gao 2019, 163). It was at this point that the Chinese Folklore Movement fragmented into three distinct camps for the duration of the war. There was a small group that remained in the Japanese occupation zone and attempted independent and apolitical folklore studies without unduly provoking the authorities. A second cohort relocated to Nationalist-controlled territory deep in the interior provinces of the southwest, continuing to develop the theoretical underpinnings of their academic discipline while conducting new research on non-Han minoritiy groups of the region. The final collective operated out of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bases in Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia, using their work to buttress the ideologically-driven New Literature and Art Movement and serve the aims of the party.

CCP-aligned folklorists collected and organized folk literature and art, remoulding them into anti-Japanese and social reform messages for popular consumption. In doing so, they transformed folkore studies from an abstract project to boost nationalism into a very practical tool for a new political-military force they felt had the best prospects for beating Japan and

then reunifying the country. They did so based on their political convictions, but also, and most importantly, because they fully embraced the war effort and saw their work as a means of propelling China to victory. The consequence of doing so was sacrificing any pretense that folklore studies should be an independent academic endeavor. When the CCP took control of the entire country in 1949, the academically-minded Nationalist Folklore Movement in Republican China mostly died out once and for all. A small number of folklorists fled mainland China and continued studying folklore in Hong Kong or Taiwan, whereas some stayed behind and began new folklore research under the guidance of Marxist thought and the direction of the CCP.

Folklore Studies and Nationalism

Abroad, and quite a number of decades earlier, folklore had emerged as a new field of learning in the eighteenth century already, when philologists in Germany and antiquarians in England began to take a closer look at the ways of the lower classes (Dorson 1972, 1). The term *folk-lore* entered the English language in the mid-nineteenth century and the meaning of it was the lore of the people. *The Handbook of Folklore* described folklore research as the study of elements of archaic culture surviving in the modern age.[1] Folklore not only embodied the primal origins of the nation, but also linked the past to the present. That is why it was seen as an important resource for the creation of a new national culture.

In nineteenth century Europe and North America, folklore studies became a wide-spread academic pursuit and was closely tied to the emergence of the modern nation states. Alan Dundes writes, "[t]he serious studies of folklore found an enthusiastic audience among individuals who felt nostalgia for the past and/or the necessity of documenting the existence of national consciousness or identity." (Dundes 1980, 1) Later on, folkloric evidence of the primordial and persistent national spirit was evoked by nationalist movements worldwide. In the work of the nation-builders, folklore mostly served two functions: it provided both historical information and a model for future action. The concept of folk was often tightly linked to the rise of modern nationalism.

In China, nationalism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and became increasingly influential thereafter. It held an appeal as Chinese people faced a national crisis. After the Xihai Revolution, the new republic was not able to build a strong nation-state, therefore many nationalist scholars turned their attention to the role of the modern media in the construction of the nation state by discovering Chinese culture and "enlightening" the Chinese people. They believed that China needed to strengthen itself in order to survive in the world of competitive nation-states. They also believed that the Chinese nation could be integrated through the mobilization of mass sentiments, especially those sentiments that strengthened individual identification with a set of goals common to the nation (Hobsbawm 1990, 141–142).

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[1] This handbook was published by the English Folklore Society. This society was founded in 1878 by George Laurence Gomme. It was one of the first organizations in the world devoted to the study of folk culture.

These modern scholars agreed with Western theories stressing that the quality of the common people would finally decide China's destiny (Fitzgerald 1996, 106–108). They were eager to find a new way to save the Chinese nation after they had rejected the Confucian culture and have been frustrated by Western imperialist ideologies. For them, "traditional culture," in particular folk culture, was useful in a nationalist discourse to reach out to the masses and to respond to the cultural dilemmas of Westernized intellectuals. Under the circumstances, the concept of folklore and folk ideas were introduced into China from the West.

From its very beginning, nationalism was closely related to the rising interest in folklore in China, and it also became the dominant theme of folklore studies afterwards. In Wolfram Eberhard's *Folktales of China*, Richard M. Dorson writes that "[t]he relation between the study of the folklore and the rise of nationalism is beautifully illustrated in China" (Dorson 1968, v). Chinese scholars turned to the past in part as a reaction to foreign imperialism, but also to create a sense of an independent cultural identity for the nation (Gao, 14).

Folklore Studies and The New Literature and Art Movement

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, folklore studies spread across the country and developed vigorously. However, the eruption of the War of Resistance in 1937 interrupted this revitalization process and most folklore activities came to a standstill. In the Communist bases of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia, Communists started an ideologically driven New Literature and Art Movement that reflected the political aims of their party. They collected and organized folk literature and art, remoulded them, and used them for anti-Japanese and social reform messages. They then transformed folklore studies into a more developed political movement that became the basis of the system of Communist popular culture. Folk literature and art, presented in a familiar form the populace loved to see and hear, served to unite, mobilize, and educate the people as per the design of its ideological construction. As American Folklorist Richard Mercer Dorson argued, "[t]he propaganda possibilities of folklore for Communist ideology, first appreciated in Soviet Russia in 1936, did not long escape the Chinese Communists, who perceived in folklore a splendid opportunity to identify their cause with the great anonymous mass of seven hundred million people" (Dorson 1965, xii).

The Folk Literature and Art Movement in the Communist bases can be traced back to 1928 in *Jinggangshan* 井冈山, a city named after *Jinggang* Mountain in Jiangxi 江西 province. At that time, the Fourth Red Army, leb by Zhu De 朱德 and Mao Zedong 毛泽东, started to use folk talking and singing formats to bolster the people's fighting spirit. The propaganda team's performances mainly consisted of lectures accompanied by the singing of Red Army songs and folk ditties. If the peasants were the key to bringing about a communist revolution, then the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was obliged to do everything in its power to cultivate their support and loyalty. In December 1929, Mao led a conference in Gutian 古田, Fujian 福建 province in which he laid down his principles and rules for building up the party and its army. This conference also featured discussion on the methods for developing art and literature that rallied the masses and turned them against the enemy. The party demanded that revolutionary

tales and folksongs were to be propagated among the soldiers. This meant that "flower-drum song singing" (*da huagu* 打花鼓), drama performances, and other games were to be encouraged (Yen 1967, 10). To further these aims, the Red Army operated its own play clubs, troupes, and propaganda teams in the Communist areas (Wang 2004, 253). All of these efforts illustrated that the party saw great utility in investing in the arts as a means of winning the hearts and minds of its recruits, cadres, and peasants.

Mao briefly presided over a communist statelet during the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931-1934), opening up a new opportunity to employ some of these ideas on a larger scale. Unsurprisingly, folklore studies conducted there were dominated by Marxist theory and influenced by the Soviet Union. For example, communist theorist Qu Qiubai's 瞿秋白 folk literature thought was influenced by the writing of legendary Soviet writer and Stalin favourite Maxim Gorky, who produced some of the best Russian language literature over the course of his grizzled life. Qu argued that folk literature could reflect social life and also help people understand it better by using the Marxist theory of reflection and historical materialism. He also advocated for revolutionary popular literature and art that created new content and new forms with a tinge of the folk literature that was already so popular with the masses. This would entail a process of using and remoulding old forms of folk literature, such as stories, folksongs, song books, and plays. After he learned more about certain folklore forms, Qu Qiubai set out immediately to communize them. His "A Melody of the October Revolution" (*Shiyue geming diao* 十月革命调), "Soviet Song" (*Suwei'ai ge* 苏维埃歌), "Hateful Japan" (*Kewu de Riben* 可恶的日本), and "A Hero Offering Clever Advice to Shanghai" (*Yingxiong qiaoji xian Shanghai* 英雄巧记献上海), were quite popular amongst the masses. In "Chinese Literary World Review in 1931" (*Yijiusanyi nian Zhongguo wentan de huigu*), Qian Xingcun 钱杏邨 pointed out that Qu's works were written in folk literature form and that they were popular works with profound political significance (Qian 1932).

As an important leader of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese Red Army, Mao Zedong's viewpoint on folk literature carried a considerable weight in the communist bases. As early as 1920, Mao pointed out that the entirty of China still did not possess a new, common culture (Mao 1920). In Mao's view, the products of intellectuals were largely inaccessible to the people, despite their attempts to build bridges across class lines. Their work, by consequence, held no utility in his campaign to liberate and reunify China. Therefore, it was necessary for the movement to unify folk literature, using it to awaken the people and mobilize them to carry out the revolution. In 1937, Chinese Marxist philosopher Ai Siqi 艾思奇 continued to expound Mao's view. He believed that the May Fourth-New Culture Movement only had fragmentary results on a limited audience. The old enlightenment did not make a great effort to establish the new culture among the masses and also did not obtain a stable foundation in its political and economic aspects. Therefore, the saw the need for a new enlightenment (Ai 1999, 171–172). This assessment was unduly harsh, but it did foreshadow a very different approach to folklore under the CCP tutelage.

This new enlightenment certainly had much political significance for Mao Zedong's theory. Chang-tai Hung writes that "[w]ith the eruption of the War of Resistance in the Communist-controlled areas, there is no question that Communist leaders were superb craftsmen in utilizing a rich array of folk culture forms to wage war against Japan, to win public support, and, most importantly, to spread revolutionary ideas and socialist reforms" (Hung 1994, 221). In the Communist Shan-Gan-Ning border regions, Mao proposed nationalizing literature and art in order to remould thought and improve the way it was studied. Many writers, artists, and others climbed up the mountain and went down to the village, which involved a policy of cultural popularization that required intellectuals to remould their thoughts by learning from the masses. Folk culture, as the most important creative source, caught communist intellectuals' attention like never before.

In concrete terms, the literature and art activities in the Communist bases reflected folk literature and art's functions of educating people and uniting them everywhere behind the CCP's political objectives. In 1937, Ding Ling, the chief of the Northwest Front Service Corps (*Xibei zhandi fuwutuan* 西北战地服务团), went to see Mao to ask for working instructions. Mao Zedong told her that:

> The propaganda must be popularized. New liquor in a new bottle or new liquor in an old bottle was fine. The new works should be terse and forceful to suit the war conditions and be liked by the common people. Your corps must learn from the masses and propagandize our party's protest against the Japanese to friendly forces and expand our party and army's political influence. (Zhu 2001, 248)

Ding disseminated Mao's speech to the Northwest Front Service Corps and they began rehearsing dramas, storytelling, comic dialogues, and other genres of folk literature. When the corps passed through remote villages to spread news about the war, it brought emotionally charged short plays like "Joining the guerrilla forces", and "Arresting traitors", along with it (Hung, 228).

In May 1942, Mao Zedong published his "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art". Here Mao clarified his position on literature and art works as an important means of carrying out the CCP's new ideology and of constructing a modern nation-state. Therefore, Mao Zedong raised the question, "who are the people our literature and art are for?" to a political level. He also used political principles to discuss and emphasize how remoulding intellectuals' thought was a very important element of the party's political aims. "Talks" mainly focuses on three aspects: 1. literature and art serve politics; 2. literature and art should be primarily for workers, peasants, and soldiers who are the most important element of the popular masses; 3. literature and art are subordinate to the theory of Marxist-Leninist class struggle (Mao 1980, 57-86). Mao believed that folk literature and art was essential to winning hearts and minds, hence they should fall under the dual command of politics and artistry. In order to improve the effectiveness of communist propaganda and inspire the masses' fighting spirit, folk literature and art could be remoulded. In Mao's view, it was the CCP's duty to

oversee all cultural activities, while literature and art would unswervingly serve revolutionary aims (Gao 2019, 192-193).

Figure 1

Attendees of "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art

https://www.cafa.com.cn/cn/opinions/article/details/8329991

Mao's "Talks" effectively consolidated the CCP's ideological position and provided guidance for all forms of literature and art, folk culture included. Literary and artistic production was subject to party control and direction, and professional writers and artists were recruited periodically to contribute popular work for various mass campaigns (Holm 1984, 3). To forge a unified front on both political and intellectual grounds, Mao's "Talks" was disseminated in different border areas through official documents, media propaganda, and symposia. The intellectuals who were engaged in the production of literature and art in Communist-controlled territories enthusiastically studied Mao's "Talks", comparing reading it to "a sick person suddenly discovering the right medicine" (Hung, 230). These intellectuals engaging in folklore studies learned that the functions of folk literature and art were to educate the masses, while intellectuals could recast the texts and activities to complete these functions. With this development, folklore study in CCP areas emerged as a crafted form of propaganda. During the revolutionary Literature and Art Movement, the first subject to grab the attention of communist intellectuals was folksong; the second was the renaissance of the traditional *yangge* (秧歌 rice-sprout songs); and the third was remoulded storytelling (Jia 1988, 12).

Folksongs and Regional Operas

According to Jia Zhi, a veteran folklorist, interest in folksongs had already been evident during the Jiangxi Soviet era, but systematic collecting did not begin until the Communists were fully in control of northwest China several years later (Jia 1950, 46–57). Understandably, interest grew markedly after Mao's "Talks" (Hung, 256).

One important figure here is He Qifang (1912-1977), a poet, essayist, and graduate of National Peking University who arrived in Yan'an in the summer of 1938 to teach at the Lu Xun Academy of Art (*Lu Xun yisu xueyuan* 鲁迅艺术学院). He joined the CCP in the same year and later became the Head of the Department of Literature at Lu Xun Academy of Art. One of his responsibilities was leading a folksong collecting team in Northern Shaanxi that was typical

of the communist folksong movement in unoccupied areas outside the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang 国民党, KMT) zone. These folksong collecting efforts could be characterized as an artistic exercise, but they would be more accurately described as an overwhelmingly social and political activity. His team produced material that served as the basis for *Selected Folksongs of Northern Shaanxi* (*Shanbei min'ge xuan* 陕北民歌选), a famous collection compiled by the Lu Xun Academy of Art that was first published in 1945.

Selected Folksongs of Northern Shaanxi included five parts. The first three were comprised of traditional folksongs, while the last two contained new folksongs. This book collected 406 folksongs and 97 types of musical scores altogether. The dialects, metaphors, customs in the books had been annotated in detail. The juxtaposition of old and new songs was intended, as the editors admitted, "to mirror past and present life in the Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region". Thus, the collection bore a strong political stamp (Hung, 257). The editing of this collection emphasized folksongs' ideological nature and the artistry behind them. Nevertheless, the principle of collecting folksongs stressed field investigations and keeping records of the folksong's original form.

Figure 2
The cover of Selected Folksongs of Northern Shaanxi

https://www.chinesefolklore.org.cn/web/index.php?NewsID=12740
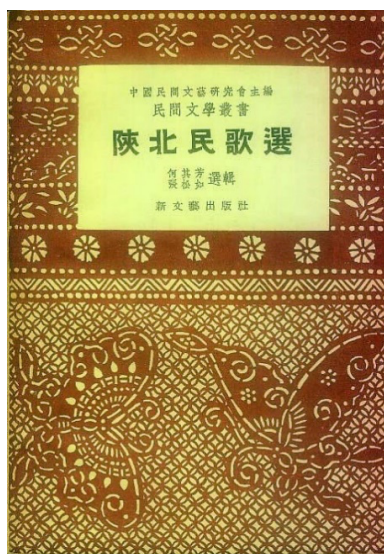
Selected Folksongs of Northern Shaanxi departed from earlier folksong collections both in its method of collecting and in content. He Qifang argued that the earlier collections had assembled mainly children's songs gathered from urban university students and high school teachers, so the Yan'an project dispatched students to the remote countryside to collect genuine folksongs from peasants, and including women. The songs were received, therefore, from the mouths of the people rather than through the memories of intellectuals. This project also linked students to folk. To make the collection a scientific undertaking, collectors were instructed to

record exactly what they heard, and the result was an uncommonly reliable record of folksongs of northern Shaanxi (Hung, 257).

Li Ji 李季, a poet and folklorist, was particularly interested in *shuntianyou* 顺天游 (literally, "follow-heaven-roam", also known as *xintianyou* 信天游), a type of northern Shaanxi folksong. Inspired by Mao's "Talks", Li roamed the countryside to collect them. The *shuntianyou* performer could spin a narrative story, which made it an ideal tool for the Communists. In 1945, Li wrote his famous long poem "Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang" (*Wang Gui yu Li Xiangxiang* 王贵与李香香), based on the *shuntianyou* form. So impressed was Li Ji with *shuntianyou* that he later went on to publish a fêted collection of them entitled *Two Thousand Follow-heaven-roaming Songs* (*Shuntianyou erqian shou* 顺天游二千首). After the Chinese Civil War between the CCP and the Nationalists (KMT), Li enjoyed the party's favour as a poet champion of the working people and wrote a number of well-received poems and short stories, but he was never able to better the success of "Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang" (Hong 2007, 79).

Yet another "Folksong Society" was established in Yan'an in the spring of 1939, though in February 1941 it would rebrand itself as the "Chinese Folk Music Society". Within six years, this society organized roughly ten surveys of folk music and folk artists. It also published nine books, including *Music of the Shaanxi Opera* (*Qinqiang yinyue* 秦腔音乐), *Folksongs in the Central Shaanxi Plain* (*Guanzhong min'g*e 关中民歌), and *Folksongs in the Eastern Guansu* (*Longdong min'ge* 陇东民歌). Its Shanxi-Chahaer-Hebei Border Region (*Jin-Cha-Ji* 晋察冀) branch also published a two-volume folksong collection.

Yangge: Popular Folk Dance

Yangge was a song-and-dance folk arrangement that originated in northern China. The form and style of *yangge* varied from place to place and was performed by amateur troupes of men and boys to celebrate the New Year – more specifically, the period of the Lantern Festival in both cities and villages. *Yangge* was pure entertainment and beloved by all the people thanks to its incorporation of dancing, singing, clowning, and colorful costumes as important elements.

A folk artist, Liu Zhiren 刘志仁, is said to have been the first in Shaanxi to incorporate political content into the old *yannge* as early as 1937, but systematic, communist-led *yangge* reform did not occur until 1943, when the Lu Xun Academy of Art began to experiment with a series of new *yangge* plays (Hong 230). On September 23, 1942, "A Brief Discussion on *Yangge*" (*Yangge jianwen*), was published in *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao* 解放日报) to provide analysis of the characters of *yangge* and advocate using this folk art for revolutionary propaganda. The communists in Yan'an ultimately turned this folk art into an effective tool in their political struggle and social activities (Jia 1988, 509).

The *Yangge* Movement in Yan'an was launched for the Spring Festival of 1943. Based on a solid mass foundation, *yangge* plays appeared in abundance in 1943 and 1944, and about one

thousand *yangge* troupes were founded rapidly throughout the Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region and later in other border regions.[2] Numerous writers, musicians, and dramatists were mobilized to write new works and perform them widely in the countryside, while women participated in *yangge* along with men as another significant departure from tradition. "*Yangge* as a form of 'revolutionary art'" (Holm 1991, 3) forged a functional intellectual-peasant alliance and thereby worked for Communist propaganda purposes in its attempt to realize the Maoist goal of "facing the masses".

Figure 3
Yan'an Yangge Troupe March into the Performance Field

Reproduced from Hu Chuanmin and Zhang Lingnan, *Zhongguo kangzhan huaju tushi*, (2017, 235).

The new communist *yangge* plays manufactured a host of new themes to paint a bright picture of society under CCP rule. It covered sexual equality— *Twelve Sickles* (*Shi'erba liandao* 十二把镰刀), female model workers— *A Red Flower* (*Yiduo honghua* 一朵红花), anti-illiteracy campaigns— *Husband and Wife Learn to Read* (*Fuqi shizi* 夫妻识字), the founding of the new peasant association—*Qin Luozheng* 秦洛正, the harmonious relationship between the Red Army and the people—*Niu Yonggui Is Wounded* (*Niu Yonggui guacai* 牛永贵挂彩), and the correct leadership of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party— *An Honor Lamp* (*Guangrong deng* 光荣灯) (Hung, 231). *Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland* (*Xiongmei kaihuang* 兄妹开荒), the first new *yangge* play, *A Red Flower*, and *Niu Yonggui Is Wounded* were even staged in Nationalist-controlled Chongqing in the spring of 1945 under the auspices of the *New China Daily* (Hung: 232).

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[2] According to *Jiefang ribao*, on December 12, 1944, there were 949 active *Yangge* troupes.

Figure 4
The New Yangge Play – Brother and Sister Clear Wasteland in Yan'an

http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-05/01/c_1127401117.htm

As for the *yangge* songs, new words were set to old tunes in keeping with the propaganda tasks laid down by the party leadership. In many cases, however, the new lyrics were composed in a way that closely followed the format and style of traditional *yangge* songs. A song of the "Seven Flowers" (*Qizhi hua* 七枝花) with lyrics composed by the poet He Jingzhi 贺敬之 was one example. Like its traditional counterpart, it was meant to be sung antiphonally:

> A: Which kind of flower blooms facing the sun?
>   Which kinds of men support the Communist Party?
> B: The sunflower it is that blooms facing the sun.
>   The common people support the Communist Party.
> A: Which flower blooms and is on the body worn?
>   Which the man whose words are engraved in our hearts?
> B: Cotton flowers bloom and are on the body worn.
>   It's Chairman Mao whose words are engraved in our hearts.
> A: Which kind of flower blooms obstructing the road?
>   Which are the demons that should be rooted out?
> B: Gorse it is that blooms and obstructs the road.
>   It's the fascist demons that should be rooted out.

<div align="right">(in Holm 1984, 23-24)</div>

Even relatively minor wording changes such as this could bring a powerful, contemporary message to a seemingly traditional performance.

In October 1944, a *yangge* symposium was held in Yan'an where participants exchanged experiences of the *yangge* movement. This fostered and promoted creation of new *yangge* in a forum that enjoyed Mao's attention and support. A number of retailers such as Xinhua

Bookstore, North China Bookstore, Taofen Bookstore, and others published a series of books on *yangge*, which became an effective propaganda and educational tool for the communists. From the Yan'an period onwards, the *yangge* movement gradually spread from the border area all across the country.

In his study *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*, David Holm argues that *yangge* helped to establish closer links between the Communist Party and the rural population. He states that the New *Yangge* Movement was mostly a success because it brought snobbish intellectuals with new ideas back in touch with peasants and it even borrowed the cosmological imprimatur of New Year's ritual to subtly validate the CCP in the popular mind (Holm 1991, 145).

Storytelling and Its Development beyond Shaanxi

After the Yan'an "Talks" in 1942, Maoist populist policy became a guiding principle for art and literature. In the communist base areas, Mao's "Talks" directed Party workers to take folk artists seriously, especially storytellers. Much storytelling orignated in north Shaanxi province and then became extremely popular in Yan'an. Communists not only consolidated their united front by assembling and educating storytellers, but they also obtained another effective propaganda tool. Ellen R. Judd writes that storytellers "held an important place in rural life, despite their poverty and low social status, and present some distinct features in social organization" (Judd 1990, 282). During the Yan'an period in Northern China, especially in the Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region, almost every county had storytellers and every villager listened to them. The two ingredients of storytelling – popularity and high mobility – made it an ideal tool for mass education, while the abundance of storytellers in north China made them a particularly effective means of reaching obscure corners of the countryside (Hung 1993, 402).

The value of storytelling was recognized officially at a meeting of Communist writers in Yan'an in September 1944, prompting a reform of storytelling immediately afterwards. First, storytelling training classes were set up to assemble folk artists. In 1945, the Storytelling Group (*Shuoshu zu* 说书组) was formed under the direction of the Cultural Federation of the Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region to coordinate the reform movement, establish links between storytellers and the party, and to serve as a school where socialist ideals and revolutionary thought could be transmitted to traditional storytellers (Hung 1994, 259-260).

The most successful cast member to emerge from these reforms was Han Qixiang 韩起祥, an illiterate and blind storyteller who became the most celebrated young folk artist in the border area and a model in the Communist Storytelling Campaign. Under the guidance of the Storytelling Group, Han abandoned his old repertoire and began to compose new stories, producing twenty-four of them between July 1944 and December 1945. Han Qixiang based his stories partly on actual events and partly on fiction, but optimism for a new socialist system knit them together. In his stories, Han sang the praises of the CCP and its leaders and condemned the KMT as the enemy of the people. Among his many "new storytelling" works, "China Red" (*Zhongguo hong* 中国红), "The Reunion of Liu Qiao" (*Liu Qiao tuanyuan* 刘巧

团圆), "Zhang Yulan Participates in the Election" (*Zhang Yulan canjia xuanjudui* 张玉兰参加选举会), "Commentaries on current affairs" (*Shishi zhuan* 时事传), and "Negotiation in Chongqing" (*Chongqing tanpan* 重庆谈判) were the most famous. Both Mao and Zhu De praised his storytelling and encouraged him to spread his stories to more places (Gao 2019, 199).

Figure 5

Han Qixiang Performing Storytelling for the Masses under Baota 宝塔 *Mountain in Yan'an*

http://www.sxsm.gov.cn/zjsm/whys/10515.htm

In fact, Han Qixiang's new works were the result of a cooperation between Communist organizers and himself. Communist officials encouraged intellectuals to help old storytellers immerse their work in the socialist ideal. In essence, intellectuals were asked to act as a bridge between the party and folk artists. At the same time, they were also advised to integrate with the masses. Other well-known storytellers included Yang Shengfu 杨生福, Feng Mingshan 冯明山 and Gao Yongchang 高永常. The marriage of storytelling and politics without question benefited the CCP enormously, because stories traveled among the masses. If the number of 273 reformed storytellers is to be trusted, their influence in rural Shaanxi must have been considerable (Hung 1994, 420).

Other Forms of Folklore and the Contributions of Folklore Studies

At Communist bases, research on folklore theory was relatively one-sided due to its ideological and politicized nature. However, some important works on the studies of folksong, *yangge*, folk artist, and others, were still published, such as Ai Siqi's *Selected Essays on Yangge* (*Yangge lunwen xuanji* 秧歌论文选集), Li Ji's "How I Studied Folksongs" (*Wo shi zenyang xuexi minge de* 我是怎样学习民歌的), and Zhou Yang's 周扬 *Folk Arts and Artists* (*Minjian yishu he yiren* 民间艺术和艺人).

In addition, folktales, jokes, riddles, proverbs, new allegros reflected the communist reality of struggle. New folksongs especially and stories created by writers were frequently published in the newspapers in liberated areas. For example, Zhao Shuli 赵树理, a writer of "Potatoes School" (*Shanyaodan pai* 山药蛋派), wrote novels for peasants. His *Erhei Gets Married* (*Xiao Erhei jiehun* 小二黑结婚) and *Rhymes of Li Youcai* (*Li Youcai banhua* 李有才板话), were highly popular works in both content and form. Zhao's folk writing method won the affirmation and praise of communist intellectuals Zhou Yang and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 as well as the powerful general Peng Dehuai 彭德怀. The poetry domain also had an obvious folksong tendency; in addition to Li Ji's "Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang", Ruan Zhangjing's 阮章竞 "Zhang River Water" (*Zhanghe shui* 漳河水) and Zhang Zhimin's 张志民 "Wang Jiu Pours out His Grievances" (*Wang Jiu suku* 王九诉苦) were the representative works of this trend. Published folklore collections included *Folktales* edited by Hejiang Lu Xun Academy of Art, Chen Shuliang's 陈叔亮 *Paper Cutting Window Guards* (*Chuanghua* 窗花), and Qian Yi's 钱翼 proverbs collection – *Crops Words* (*Zhuangjia hua* 庄稼话).

Liberation Daily in Yan'an also published Hong Yanlin's 洪彦霖 reports on his folk custom investigation and research papers, such as "Marriage Customs in Qingjian County" (*Qingjian hunyin xisu* 清涧婚姻习俗), "Between Households—A Study of Village Customs in Qingjian" (*Jiahu zhijian—Qingjian nongcun fengxi yanjiu zhiyi* 家户之间—清涧农村风习研究质疑), and "Commercial Survey and Trade Customs in Qingjian" (*Qingjian de shangye gaikuang yu maoyi xisu* 清涧的商业概况与贸易习俗). Hong wrote that, "[r]esearching the religious life customs and their evolution in villages has extremely serious significance to the construction of the new democratic society in the future; which kind of form the family life should adopt in the new democratic society, how to get rid of the negative factors in the old customs by using an educational method and legal force, are the topics worth studying for us" (Wang 1987, 111). The CCP's intention, for good or ill, was to manipulate folklore into an effective form of propaganda, but Hong's words indicated that many folklorists in the CCP zone were willing participants in this endeavour. Hong set out to connect folklore studies to contemporary social problems as part of a wider CCP-led campaign to bring about a social transformation. In doing so he employed a revolutionary communist viewpoint and methodology to undertake folk custom surveys and study folklore.

Conclusion

The Second Sino-Japanese War brought great hardships, but it also injected a new level of vigour to folklore study in China. Folklore studies became the embodiment of national spirit and tradition while serving as a cultural link to unite Chinese people during the War of Resistance. Furthermore, the Communists took the nationalist element of folklore study to the extreme during wartime to great benefit for the party. Folklore-related studies at the communist bases were thus re-formatted as an important tool for communist ideology and propaganda.

Prior to this time, an entire generation of Chinese academics had envisioned folklore as a tool to break down class barriers and foster national unity, but they had failed to come up with a practical methodology to bring this ambitious goal about. Folklore did grow naturally in China, but its study was rushed by a handful of intellectuals who were specialists in other fields. These scholars were full of passion for introducing folklore from the West into China in order to bring about national salvation (*jiuguo* 救国) and enlightenment (*qimeng* 启蒙), but they did not fully study and examine folklore. The prewar growth of folklore studies had widened the Chinese understanding of new peoples and new classes within the country's borders considerably, but it was predicated on a lofty, abstract yearning for a better future and lacked the focus or discipline necessary to bring it about.

It was the CCP that unlocked folklore's potential to serve as a tool for national unity during the War of Resistance. The New Literature and Art Movement that soon followed forged a successful alliance between intellectuals and the masses. The highly politicized forms of art and literature were remoulded from the folk arts and traditions and were used to strengthen national cohesion, rouse the national spirit, and raise people's morale. This newly reshaped revolutionary folklore become both a highly effective tool to unite the people and a weapon to attack the Japanese enemy. It helped the CCP win the support of a largely peasant population and established a framework for Mao's political and military victories over the Japanese and then the KMT in the ensuing Civil War. It ultimately served as a means of reconstructing China as a strong nation-state in the international system after the founding of the People's Republic China.

Communist folklorists had affected the sort of real change that the May 4th Movement pioneers could only have dreamed of, but in doing so they arguably surrendered some of their academic and scientific freedom by arguing in politicised terms. Given how the CCP's ultimate triumph in 1949 brought an end to a century of humiliation and war for the Chinese people, in hindsight it is doubtful that many regretted their decision to serve the party through their studies. Those who could not or would not accept this bargain – political relevance in exchange for surrending their independence – chose exile in Hong Kong and Tawain so they could continue their work as they saw best after the CCP won the Civil War and reunited mainland China in late 1949. Those who stayed accepted that new folklore research could only be conducted under the guidance of Marxist thought and the direction of the CCP. The Communists' cultural policy emphasized almost exclusively "revolutionary folklore" or "remoulded folklore" to serve their political aims and the working class. The retention of this form of wartime cultural policy profoundly shaped Chinese folklore studies after 1949.

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"Bacha Posh": Gender Construct in Afghan Culture Examined through the Lens of Children in Literature

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Abstract

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and their return in 2021, Afghanistan has undergone drastic socio-political changes. In many families, children are introduced to the practice of "Bacha Posh" (dressing up like a boy), an Afghan cultural custom where girls are dressed up as boys until they are married off. Despite children being central to this practice, it has not been studied through their eyes. This article examines the custom of Bacha Posh through the children's perspective and situates it within the current socio-political scenario of the country. A textual and cultural analysis of three literary works is carried out through a study of their child characters to examine how Afghan culture creates its own gender construct. Two are significant works of children's literature that revolve around real-life stories of Bacha Posh – Nadia Hashimi's *One Half from the East* (2016) and Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* (2000). The third work is *The Underground Girls of Kabul* (2014) by Jenny Nordberg, a seminal work in the study of Bacha Posh in which Nordberg focuses on the practice of Bacha Posh and presents the voice of children. This article then goes on to study the impact of the restrictive nature of the Taliban regime on girls and its influence on the cultural custom of Bacha Posh. It demonstrates how this practice creates an unstable gender construct among children, as evidenced by the gender dysphoria that some girls experience. It thus demonstrates the impact of culture on gender through filling in the gaps between culture, literature and politics.

Keywords: Bacha Posh, children, Afghanistan, Taliban, culture, gender

Owing to the rise and fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has been experiencing a tumultuous social, political and economic environment. "It followed many forms of failed governance during the last century: absolute monarchy, communism, and an Islamic emirate under the Taliban or no government at all in times of civil war." (Nordberg, 2014, p.17). This troubled state can be traced back to the monarchy of Abdur Rahman Khan during the late 19th century, where "…[in] a series of bloody wars, he created a highly centralised national state that did away with local autonomy" (Barfield, 2018, p.16). However, things deteriorated further when the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In 2001, the Taliban government collapsed, and a new Afghan government was formed, led by Hamid Karzai. More recently, in 2021, the Taliban regained power, bringing back the totalitarian rule that violates many human rights (Maizland, 2023). Women, particularly, face major hardships under this oppressive regime that denies them basic rights, like the right to education. The dominant patriarchal rule, combined with the Taliban's lopsided governance, leads to a strong preference for men in Afghanistan. In this context, this paper examines gender in Afghanistan through the practice of "Bacha Posh".

Bacha Posh is a Dari language phrase that etymologically translates to "dressing up like a boy". It refers to the Afghan practice in which girls are dressed up and raised as boys until they reach marriageable age. There are many superstitions attached to this practice, many of which are followed – for instance, that the practice of Bacha Posh will guarantee the birth of a son in the family. Arguably due to the fact that this practice is a cultural custom adhered to within the closed-off domain of the family, it so far has remained under-researched. "No statistics, however, exist regarding even an approximate number of Bacha Poshes in Afghanistan or in Pakistan, but this age-old phenomenon was widely publicised in 2014 by Jenny Nordberg, a New York-based Swedish journalist" (Bedi, 2021). In her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan*, Jenny Nordberg brings this custom to the front. Through her study of Afghan women, she also arrives at the discussion this practice: "It is indeed appalling to discover that even though it is a system in Afghanistan, most people are reluctant to admit it or even talk about its existence. But Nordberg's studies reveal that it is indeed very much part of the everyday reality in Afghanistan." (Lalthlamuanpuii et al., 2020, p.1). Nordberg herself states: "The bacha posh tradition is not rooted in religion, but rather in the cultures of Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. There are theories that it came from a need for boys or men to fight in times of war but evolved to fill a different "void". It's not happening in every household, but nearly every Afghan I've spoken to knew of a bacha posh in his or her neighbourhood" (Nordberg, 2014, p.15)

Children are central to the custom of Bacha Posh, as it is usually pre-pubescent girls who are made to practice it. If this practice is under-researched as a whole, it is especially so with regard to the children's perspective. Jenny Nordberg's *Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys,* Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* and *One Half from the East,* Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* trilogy and Ukmina Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* (2013) are perhaps the best-known works that are centred on Bacha Posh and offer us a literary glimpse of the phenomenon. Of these works, Hashimi's *One Half from the East* and Deborah Ellis' works are classified as

children's literature. These works are analysed in this paper to examine the perspective of children, along with the analysis of Nordberg's work on the subject used here as an ethnographic frame.

Methodology used in this paper consists of a textual and cultural analysis of the practice of Bacha Posh. These are carried out through the study of the four texts mentioned above. A close textual analysis of these texts is employed to reveal the deep structure of this practice.

The most striking fact about this practice is that there was no formal acknowledgement of its existence in Afghanistan and Pakistan in Western literature and academic studies until 2014. It was in this year that this practice was brought out by Jenny Nordberg as she describes her struggles while attempting to uncover the practice of Bacha Posh. She surveyed citizens, gender experts, health workers, and so forth, but to no avail. She says, "But my searches turned up nothing on any other girls who dressed as boys in Afghanistan" (Nordberg, 2014, p.24). Even the United Nations has not acknowledged the existence of this practice. "But senior officials at the United Nations and experts from both government and independent aid organizations delivered a unanimous dismissal when I approached them: Afghans did not dress daughters as sons to counter their segregated society. Why would they ever do that?" (Nordberg, 2014, p.25). This justifies the need for this study of a practice that is unacknowledged even today, the drastic impact of which is brought out through this analysis.

The generalised gender construct in Afghanistan affects both males and females through its oppressive gendered practices. "Bacha Bazi" is one such practice, which literally translates to "boy play". "Many Afghan boys (around eight years old) are the victims of cultural violence, as tradition establishes them as instruments and objects of pleasure" (Borile, 2019, p.498). This has been a longstanding practice in Afghanistan, where pre-pubescent boys are made to dance for large gatherings of men, particularly for men in the Afghan National Security Forces (Prey & Spears, 2021). These men are known to sexually abuse these boys, a practice established since the 18th century (Prey & Spears, 2021). Under the Taliban rule, this practice was put to an end as the Taliban were against homosexual relations. However, with the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Bacha Bazi came into practice all over again. It is hoped that with the re-emergence of the Taliban rule, Bacha Bazi will come to a permanent end. Practices like Bacha Bazi and Bacha Posh bring out the need to inspect the construct of gender in Afghanistan anew.

In their study of Bacha Posh, Lalthlamuanpuii and Suchi (2020) highlight the subversive nature of this practice: "A *bacha posh* moves beyond the grand totalizing narratives of gender binaries to create a space that is marked by fluidity and freedom" (p.1). However, they only looked at the literature on Bacha Posh meant for adults and the question of gender is therefore looked at through adults' appropriation of a practice that revolves around children. Similarly, a study by Corboz, Gibbs and Jewkes on the factors affecting Bacha Posh observes that aspects like poverty and individual gender attitudes play a role in the decision of families to practice Bacha Posh (Corboz et al., 2019). It provides quantitative evidence to understand the nuances of Bacha Posh, yet does not provide insights into the psyche of the children who undergo this practice.

In the following, this article addresses this gap through its focus on children's literature. Thus, looking at the cultural construction of gender, Padmi looks at "female masculinity" through a case study of Bacha Posh in Afghanistan and observes that gender identities are shaped through the lens of masculinity (2018, p.45). Talking about the gendered space in Afghanistan that is created by the practice of Bacha Posh, Sindhu J. (2018) states that, "While it may seem that the institution of *bacha posh* allows for a kind of free play of gender identity, it actually emerges as a reflection of the extreme rigidity of the heteronormative paradigm that constructs and preserves marriage and family in Afghan society" (p.20). The question of liberation or rigidity attached to this practice is often debated by writers in their works.

Ukmina Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh: My Life as a Woman Living as a Man in Afghanistan* (2013) is a memoir that presents itself as an example of this practice being perceived as liberating and is pertinent to the study of Bacha Posh. It narrates Manoori's journey of living her entire life as a Bacha Posh as at puberty, she refused to be turned back into a woman. "She lived through the war against the Soviets; she ran away into the mountains and helped the *Mujahideen*. She acquired the name Ukmina the Warrior and the eternal respect from the men of her village" (Manoori, 2013, p.10). This memoir presents the rare case of a woman who embraces the gendered practice of Bacha Posh and resists the conventional way of practising it. She finds the gender-fluid nature of this practice liberating in the restrictive patriarchal society of Afghanistan. She says:

> I saw that the gap was widening between the two conditions: the independence and the autonomy that comes with the status of being a man and the confinement and alienation that signifies the life of a woman. In my childhood mind, I did not see anything wrong with envisioning another destiny other than the one I was given by chance at my birth.
>
> (Manoori, 2013, p.22)

This question about the liberating/restricting nature of Bacha Posh has also been addressed through this analysis of the selected texts of children's literature.

"Bacha Posh" and its Impact on Children

Children's literature presents a seemingly simplistic version of reality since it is targeted at children. Allegedly written from the perspective of a child, it demonstrates how children look at the world and interpret situations. *One Half from the East* by Nadia Hashimi and *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis are children's literature which present Bacha Posh through the eyes of their children characters forced to practice it. Set during the Taliban regime, these novels, written in the 2000s, also highlight the condition of women under this oppressive regime.

Both novels have an absent father figure, which gives rise to the need for a daughter to practice Bacha Posh, to be able to go out and earn money for the family. Apart from the need to earn, *One Half from the East* also portrays the stereotypes attached to Bacha Posh in Afghanistan, thus contextualising the origins of this practice. In this novel, the aunt of Obayda (a preteen

girl who is made to practice Bacha Posh), Khala Aziza convinces Obayda's mother to convert her to Bacha Posh, "Then you plan for another baby in the family. Having a bacha posh at home brings boy energy into your household… It's not magic – it's just how it is" (Hashimi, 2016, p.18). Khala Aziza's words bring to the fore the belief in Afghanistan that if a family without a boy child has a Bacha Posh, a son will be born into the family. Thus, a cultural custom is justified through this practice centred around children. This is also thematised in Jenny Nordberg's interview of women who practised Bacha Posh in Afghanistan. She observes, "The health workers also each have at least one example of *magical* son making from their home provinces. They confirm that the prevailing reason to create a *bacha posh* might very well be to beget a real son." (Nordberg, 2014, p.79). In the *Breadwinner,* however, the decision to convert Parvana (the eleven-year-old protagonist) to a Bacha Posh is purely need-based. Her father being arrested by the Taliban leaves their household in dire need of money. Since women are not allowed to leave the house under the Taliban regime without male accompaniment, let alone work, the family decides to make Parvana a Bacha Posh so she can earn for the household.

These works demonstrate the initial state of confusion and resistance that the little girls display, on being told to practice Bacha Posh. Parvana, in *The Breadwinner,* shows a childlike concern for external factors like her hair. "It won't work," she said. "I won't look like a boy. I have long hair" … "You're not cutting my hair!" Parvana's hands flew up to her head." "(Ellis, 2011, p.37). Obayda, in *One Half from the East,* shows a similar childlike concern about letting go of the things that she associates with being a girl. "For ten years I've been a girl. That's a pretty long time. I like being a girl. I like doing girl things. My mother tells me that as a baby, I danced before I walked." (Hashimi, 2016, p.20). Factors like having long hair and dancing, are stereotypical qualities attributed to girls. The initial reactions of these little girls show how they have unwittingly internalised these gendered associations from the adults in their families. They are prevented from behaving naturally, and their actions are governed and manipulated by adults. Furthermore, as children, they are unable to predict the deeper implications of being asked to practice Bacha Posh. This is hinted at in *One Half from the East* when Obayda says, "I don't know how people will react to me. I'm not even sure how I'll react to me. "It won't be forever." Maybe that's where the problem is." (Hashimi, 2016, p.20). Obayda's reaction displays a latent identity crisis, as she is unsure of how she will react to her own self. In fact, she is unaware that she could be facing an identity crisis. The narrator's statement, "Maybe that's where the problem is" (Hashimi, 2016, p.20), shows a sense of foreboding. The fact that these children change back to perform girlhood later is known to create a sense of gender dysphoria, which refers to "psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity" (Turban, 2023), amongst these girls who are unable to cope with the constant changes in their gendered identities. This prediction, or anticipation, is beyond the purview of a child's mind.

A child's understanding of this life-changing practice is further portrayed through their frames of reference, which vary from that of adults. In *One Half from the East,* for instance, Obayda connects the practice of Bacha Posh to pretend play, a concept that is very popular amongst children (Hashimi, 2016):

I would take playful steps toward my sister, grabbing the end of her head scarf just as the actor did in the movie. Hand over hand, I'd pull her closer to me, in a tug-of-war that no woman ever won. I was the victor, the conqueror, the man. But that was pretend, and what my mother is talking about now is very different. She's talking about a real change, not something I'll stop doing at the end of a song.

(Hashimi, 2016, p.21)

During this pretend play, she pretends to be a man by displaying stereotypical male gender attributes like strength and power. This shows an acceptance of conventional gendered associations. Events like these form the foundation of a child's understanding of gender. Therefore, Obayda draws connections to realms that are familiar to her when an unfamiliar idea is introduced in her life.

In *The Breadwinner,* Parvana is seemingly given a choice, as Mrs Weera says to her (Ellis, 2011):

We can force you to cut off your hair, but you're still the one who has to go outside and act the part. We know this is a big thing we're asking, but I think you can do it. How about it?

(Ellis, 2011, p.37)

This appeals to her, as children tend to like a sense of agency where they feel they are not forced into making decisions. The feeling of being given the freedom to make this decision is the primary factor that leads to Parvana agreeing to Bacha Posh. "They could hold her down and cut off her hair, but for anything more, they needed her cooperation. In the end, it really was her decision. Somehow, knowing that made it easier to agree" (Ellis, 2011, p.38). However, this comes across as a tactic used by the adults, who had already made their decision. By presenting Parvana with the cognitive bias of the illusion of choice, they appeal to the child in her. Being a girl child during the Taliban regime strips them of any sense of agency. They are subject to patriarchy combined with the misogynist dictates of the rulers. Therefore, right from an early age, a sense of (stolen) agency becomes immensely valuable to girls in Afghanistan.

As Parvana and Obayda practise Bacha Posh, they are seen to grapple with its complicated nuances. Obayda says, "But then I realized I couldn't be a girl dressed in boy clothes. I had to be a boy wearing my clothes." (Hashimi, 2016, p.51). This shows the realisation that Bacha Posh has a deeper impact than merely external attire. Both these characters are seen to enjoy the sense of freedom that comes with being a boy. Parvana experiences this as she walks in a public space, "As she walked to the marketplace, her head felt light without the weight of her hair or chador. She could feel the sun on her face, and a light breeze floating down from the mountain made the air fresh and fine" (Ellis, 2011, p.43). Obayda, or Obayd, on being instructed by Rahim (another Bacha Posh) about how to behave like a boy, experiences this freedom. "He points at my feet, nudges my chin and my elbows. I listen to his words and feel

my body loosen. It's easier to breathe. Why is that?" (Hashimi, 2016, p. 52). The tactile imagery of flowing fresh air accentuates their feeling of freedom.

In both novels, the characters are seen to cherish this freedom that as girls they were otherwise deprived of. Antithetical to their first reaction, Obayd and Rahim, in *One Half from the East,* wish to remain boys forever. As children, they use their repertoire of knowledge to come up with a solution and turn to mythological stories that are read to or performed for children. One such story states that passing under a rainbow changes the gender of humans. Rahim and Obayd undertake this adventure and try to pass under a rainbow to change into boys permanently. This instance shows the innocence that makes them believe in these legends and do what is in their power to make their wish come true. In *The Breadwinner*, like Obayd, Parvana finds a friend in Shauzia, another Bacha Posh. Shauzia too does not wish to change back to a girl. She says, "I want to still be a boy then… If I turn back into a girl, I'll be stuck at home. I couldn't stand that." (Ellis, 2011, p.70). Her idea of a solution, though not mythical like Obayd and Rahim's, comes across as impractical and thus portrays her childlike attributes too. She wishes to escape to France, and her childlike innocence comes across as she excitedly explains her plan to Parvana (Ellis, 2011):

> In every picture I've seen of France, the sun is shining, people are smiling, and flowers are blooming. In one picture I saw a whole field of purple flowers. That's where I want to go. I want to walk into that field and sit down in the middle of it, and not think about anything…I've got it all figured out. I'll tell a group of nomads that I'm an orphan, and I'll travel with them into Pakistan. My father told me they go back and forth with the seasons, looking for grass for their sheep. In Pakistan, I head down to the Arabian Sea, get on a boat, and go to France!
>
> (Ellis, 2011, p.70)

She bases her entire plan on a picture she has seen and a story she has heard from her father. The narrator observes, "She spoke as if nothing could be more simple" (Ellis, 2011, p.70). This simplicity portrays a lack of experience and exposure to the world. In both novels, the confidence the children show in the plan they devise based on their limited knowledge shows how children are gullible and trusting, making them a blank canvas that adults write on.

It is this aspect of the nature of children that enables the perpetuation of the practice of Bacha Posh. Children are not provided with the agency to make decisions about their own gendered identity. This is brought out through Obayd's observation, "At the end of the day, we both know we're not in charge once we walk through our front doors and back into our homes. Everything changes then. We go from being kings of our own fates to children ruled by parents" (Hashimi, 2016, p.81). The narrative of parents having authority over their children's lives as they know better is exploited for the purpose of the practice of Bacha Posh. This is portrayed through Obayd's mother's words, who, consoling him about Rahim's forced marriage, says, "Obayd, let it be. You know perfectly well these are temporary arrangements. When the time is up, it's up. I explained that to you from the beginning. I'm sure they're doing what's best for her" (Hashimi, 2016, p.101). The reader, however, knows that forcefully marrying off a

thirteen-year-old girl to a reputed warlord is not in her best interest. Hashimi thus implicitly brings out the flaws of this practice, the biggest being that it does not take into consideration the voice of the children who practise it.

In her interview with Azita Jenny Nordberg (2014) comments on this power play between parents and children:

> Azita and her husband approached their youngest daughter with a proposition: "Do you want to look like a boy and dress like a boy, and do more fun things like boys do, like bicycling, soccer, and cricket? And would you like to be like your father?" She absolutely did. It was a splendid offer.
>
> (Nordberg, 2014, p.21)

This portrays how a major life event is trivialised by parents to appeal to children and make them subscribe to the system. In her interview with a doctor, Norberg reveals that,

> Children's rights are a concept unacknowledged in Afghanistan. If parents want a girl to look like a boy, then it is within the right of the parents to make that happen, Dr. Fareiba believes. This temporarily experimental condition will right itself later on. Children…take a predetermined path in life. For girls, that means marrying and having children of their own. For boys, it means supporting a family.
>
> (Ellis, 2011, p.56)

The endings of Hashimi's and Ellis' novels in different ways interact with the impact Bacha Posh has on children. *The Breadwinner* ends on a note of uncertainty. Parvana is shown contemplating the uncertain future that lies ahead of her. "Twenty years from now, Parvana thought. What would happen in those twenty years? Would she still be in Afghanistan? Would Afghanistan finally have peace? Would she go back to school, have a job, be married? The future stretched unknown down the road in front of her." (Ellis, 2011, p.91) This depicts the confusion that children who are forced to practise Bacha Posh. Amidst the chaotic confusion that characterises the political scenario of Afghanistan with the rise and fall and rise of the Taliban, children face uncertainty within themselves as their gendered identities are shaped by society rather than themselves. Parvana's statement expresses this sentiment.

One Half from the East seemingly has a happy ending, as Obayda, despite being turned back into a girl against her wishes, comes to terms with it as her father re-enters their lives. A baby boy is born to the family, thus fulfilling the purpose of Obayda practising Bacha Posh. The birth of a boy brings the family together again, which makes Obayda happy. Obayda's happiness again portrays her childish naivety, as she simply focuses on factors like her father being a part of the family again and the appreciation that she receives from her parents. She overlooks her desire to remain a boy:

> I'm not the special child in the house anymore, but I'm okay with that. I like being one of the sisters, and I'm pretty sure my little brother is going to be in good hands with all

of us looking after him…And in this year I've realized that I have a thing too—I'm the girl that can do some really surprising stuff.

(Hashimi, 2016, p.168)

This exemplifies the gullible nature of children and how easily they can be convinced to carry out life-altering practices. She does not question her future or anticipate the impact this practice has had on her identity. Therefore, this "happy" ending, made possible only through the eyes of a child, makes a deeper comment on the nature of this practice and its lasting impact on children.

Gender Construction through "Bacha Posh"

The practice of Bacha Posh is born out of reactions to gender imbalances in a patriarchal society, and it further perpetuates this imbalance by creating rigidly gendered attributes. Nadia Hashimi (2016) says, "The longstanding bacha posh tradition of Afghanistan is a curiosity for many, but it is also a remarkable way to explore what it means to be a girl" (p.169). It makes concrete gendered stereotypes and thrives on the divide it creates. This practice, therefore, functions as a vicious cycle.

Bacha Posh also demonstrates Judith Butler's concept of "Gender Performativity", in which she views gender as an unstable construct born out of constant performance (Butler, 2006). Butler says, "…gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1988). Bacha Posh is thus an embodiment of Butler's perception and accusation of gender strictures, as they revolve around repetitive performances, thus revealing the unstable nature of gender as a singular and rigid construct. "A *bacha posh* is someone whose identity is chosen for her! She is a female 'veiled' in male clothing. She is sanctioned by society to 'act repetitively' like a boy. The simple act of 'dressing up' as a boy acquires a new political and sociological significance in the context of Afghanistan" (Lalthlamuanpuii et al., 2020, p.5). This practice exists through performativity and constructs notions of femininity and masculinity that are performed into being. Since the sustenance of the practice of Bacha Posh depends on children performing changing gender roles, it creates an unstable gender construct, to the detriment of its main protagonists.

Jenny Nordberg (2014) further comments on the origins of this practice. One of the women she interviews, Azita, talks about the importance of having a son:

Having at least one son is mandatory for good standing and reputation here. A family is not only incomplete without one; in a country lacking rule of law, it is also seen as weak and vulnerable. So it is incumbent upon every married woman to quickly bear a son–it is her absolute purpose in life, and if she does not fulfill it, there is clearly something wrong with her in the eyes of others. She could be dismissed as a dokhtar zai, or "she who only brings daughters".

(Nordberg, p.21)

Nordberg (2014) observes that, "Azita says this as if it is a simple explanation" (p.21). Coming from a woman herself, this shows how deep such conditioning runs in society. There is a ubiquitous acceptance of the preference and privilege given to boys, which generates the need for a practice like Bacha Posh. Najia Nasim, the current Afghanistan country director for the U.S.-based community "Women for Afghan Women", says, "When one gender is so important and the other is unwanted, there will always be those who try to pass over to the other side". (Strochlic, 2021). This gives rise to the superstitious belief that the practice of Bacha Posh will lead to the birth of a boy in a family without sons, as explored in *One Half from the East*.

Girls in Afghanistan, especially during the Taliban regime, are doubly stripped of any agency as a result of their gender, as well as age. Rahim's words in *One Half from the East* portray this double oppression that girls face, "Because I'm a girl. Because people think they can do what they want to us. They think we should have no say in what happens to us. That's why I don't want to be a girl" (Hashimi, 2016, p.110). The practice of Bacha Posh relies on these individuals who are deprived of any agency by society. Norberg (2014) observes, "The ownership of an Afghan girl is literally passed on from one male—her father—to the one who becomes her husband. He will take over the ruling of her life, down to the smallest details if he is so inclined" (p.52). The decision to change back a Bacha Posh is also rooted in the deeply patriarchal nature of the society of Afghanistan. Nordberg (2014) notes, "An Afghan girl who is no longer a child but on her way to becoming a woman should immediately be shielded and protected to ensure her virginity and reputation for a future marriage" (p.101). Therefore, the notion of marriage as the sole purpose of women and the importance given to their virginity to curtail female sexuality is the underlying aspect that drives this practice which only seemingly breaks out of gender restrictions. This portrays how the practice is deeply entrenched in the regressive socio-political gender system of Afghanistan.

The novels *One Half from the East* and *The Breadwinner* portray how a specific idea of gender is constructed in Afghanistan through Bacha Posh. In Hashimi's novel, Rahim instructs Obayd,

> "Stand tall. Stick your chin out like you're daring me to hit it. Set your feet apart… Keep your palms open and let your arms swing while you walk. If you hear something behind you, turn around and look for it. When you run, slap your whole foot on the ground, not just your toes. Are you carrying eggs in your pockets?... Then don't walk like you are. Run like you're not afraid of cracking any shells!"
>
> (Hashimi, 2016, p. 51)

This demonstrates how a certain body language is expected from each gender, an expectation that is unspoken but inculcated among children. Rahim is a child too, who has learnt of these nuances through observation, and is now passing on these learnings to Obayd. The freedom that comes along with being a boy is evident through the body language that Rahim proposes Obayda should display. Loosening of the body, and keeping the chin up, are signs of being confident in one's skin. There is also a sense of pride attached to being a boy that is demonstrated through these bodily gestures. On the other hand, girls are expected to be stiff

and keep their chin down, and head bowed. This symbolises perpetual subservience. These gender roles are amplified in the Taliban regime, as depicted in *The Breadwinner:*

> Parvana would slump down further on the blanket and try to make herself look smaller. She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished.
> (Ellis, 2011, p.9)

The inhumane treatment of women by the Taliban is presented from a child's perspective who witnesses violence carried out against women. Parvana, thus, right from a very early age, learns to live in fear as a little girl and make herself look smaller.

In *One Half from the East,* one sees that to fuel gendered associations of masculinity and strength, Obayda's mother treats her differently once she becomes a boy, Obayd. She feeds him more food and gives him meat, unlike her daughters. "Obayd is a boy. He needs the meat if he's going to get stronger. I don't want to hear any more about it." (Hashimi, 2016, p.29). This shows how an idea of gender is constructed culturally, and these associations are perpetuated through this practice. Masculinity is equated with strength, as seen in the instance where Obayda, during pretend play, would be strong and hence act like a man. This gendered association is turned into reality by feeding sons better and more nutritious food, as portrayed in Hashimi's novel.

In the instance where Obayda engages in pretend play and pretends to be a man, the gendered associations are poignant. Pretend play symbolises the function of Gender Performativity, as children perform the gendered stereotypes that have been incorporated into their daily existence by society. Judith Butler's idea of gender coming into being through performance (2006) is demonstrated through this kind of pretend play. Here, children not only enact gender stereotypes, but bring a culture specific idea into being. Obayda's act of being "strong" and hence, pretending to be a man (Hashimi, 2016, p.21), concretises the stereotype of men being stronger than women.

In Nordberg's (2014) interview with Azita, where she convinces her daughter to practice Bacha Posh by saying, "Do you want to look like a boy and dress like a boy, and do more fun things like boys do, like bicycling, soccer, and cricket?" (p.21), one sees how certain activities are denoted with patriarchal cultural meanings. Simple activities like cycling, playing soccer and cricket, which should be common to all children, are seen as activities that are gender specific and exclusive to boys. These gender stereotypes are used to appeal to girls who are deprived of these pleasures, thus, not only manipulating the girl child into agreeing, but also deeply inculcating these stereotypes and perpetuating gendered associations in society. This is seen in *One Half from the East,* where Obayda's realisation that she can do "surprising stuff" is an outcome of patriarchy (Hashimi, 2016, p.168). Girls and women are made to believe in the "masculine" nature of certain activities, which thus comes as a surprise to children like Obayda when they see that they "can do" them. They remain oblivious to the fact that these are human activities that are not gender specific.

Girls who practise Bacha Posh are reported to experience gender dysphoria, which, according to the NHS:

> … describes a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. This sense of unease or dissatisfaction may be so intense it can lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life.
>
> (NHS, 2020)

A back-and-forth movement between genders and their socio-cultural expectations imposed on children causes lasting damage that a child may not realise immediately. Padmi (2018) observes that despite experiencing a sense of liberation while being a boy, "The Bacha Posh do not have the power to determine their gender preference and position in society" (p.57). Nordberg's encounter with Azita, who herself was a Bacha Posh, evidences this sense of unease as Azita relates the time her mother asked her to change back into a woman to get married. "Azita rebelled as best she could. She screamed. She cried. She was silent and refused to eat for days. She existed in a delirium between sleep and the barest consciousness from lack of food and complete exhaustion. Some things she dreamed and some were real; she could not tell it apart." (Nordberg, 2014, p.61). A study conducted by *The Wire* observes:

> In many instances this transition was obviously hugely traumatic, to say the least, with many Bacha Poshes experiencing untold angst, disorientation and puzzlement; after a nearly decade-long hiatus they were now required to be shy, coy and to act in ways of which they had no notion.
>
> (Bedi, 2021)

Commenting on the nature of gender dysphoria experienced by those who practice Bacha Posh, Mridula Kashyap says:

> The gender dysphoria that a *bacha posh* suffers from is not a genetic disorder as *bacha posh* is an imposed identity upon the girl to perform the role of maleness…The *bacha posh* is reared in an altogether different cultural setting where rather than the fostering of feminine qualities such as compliance and submissiveness, excessively aggressive masculine attitudes are encouraged. The momentary liberty they experience as a result of the isolation from their birth gender creates gender identity conflict in them.
>
> (Kashyap, 2022)

Gender dysphoria due to Bacha Posh, therefore, demonstrates the unstable nature of the gender construct, and leads to a disjuncture in the gendered identity of the individuals who practice Bacha Posh.

Conclusion

Through the cultural practice of Bacha Posh, many Afghanis create their own specific gender construct which then becomes a strong reinforcement of patriarchal gendered stereotypes like women belonging to the domestic realm, incapable of carrying out any activities that demand any physical or, to an extent, mental strength. This gender construct is propagated by moulding children into embodiments of these fixed notions of masculinity and femininity created by Afghan society. An analysis of the selected texts demonstrated the nuances of the practice of Bacha Posh through a study of the children who undergo this transformation. The impact on children reveals the core of this cultural practice, which survives due to the vulnerability and receptiveness of children and their parents adhering to discriminatory social norms. This further enables the creation and perpetuation of the gender construct.

Due to the nature of Bacha Posh which allows for ambiguity and an overturning of gender binaries, some see this practice as subversive in nature: "A *bacha posh* challenges stereotypes that are associated with Afghan women by opening up new challenges and dialogues that were otherwise swept under the complicated knots of the intrinsically woven Afghan society" (Lalthlamuanpuii et al., 2020, p.6). However, this research showed that even though, on a surface level, this practice may seem like it challenges the gender binary, on a deeper level, it perpetuates patriarchy by creating and ensuring the continuity of the construct of gender through performance. Emily Schneider, in her study of Bacha Posh and Nordberg's novel, mirrors this opinion as she says, "The "underground resistance" that Nordberg tries to uncover is neither underground nor an actual resistance. Instead, bacha posh is a way for families who have a girl but need a boy to work within the framework of Afghan society's strict gender norms" (Schneider, 2014).

With the renewed prevalence of the Taliban, the future of this practice, and gender construction in general, remains in limbo. The gender construct that is born out of the cultural custom of Bacha Posh is increasing dysfunctional gender signalling, as portrayed through the experiences of gender dysphoria. The nuances inherent in Bacha Posh need to be scrutinised further in the future, as it is rooted in systemic gender inequality and the manipulation of children. Present practice would suggest that the construction of gender roles and stereotypes in Afghanistan needs to be deconstructed in order to allow for the reconstruction of the roots of dominant disproportionate and deeply patriarchal gender norms.

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"Otherized" Migrants in Contemporary Australia: Reflections from Michael Ahmad's *The Tribe* (2014)

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Abstract

This article provides a close reading of Michael Mohamed Ahmad's *The Tribe* (2014), a Lebanese-Australian novel, which proffers perspectives on the experiences of racialized and ethnicized communities, namely Arab-Australian Muslims, who are subjected to anti-Arab racism and discrimination. *The Tribe* invokes different images of hostility against immigrants and their children in Australia. It studies these forms of racism and discrimination against immigrants of the Lebanese background in public spaces. Related, the question of linguistic terrorism is also discussed. This racism prompts us to ask questions about any Australian "multicultural approach".

Keywords: Lebanese immigrants, Australia, othering, racism, linguistic terrorism multiculturalism

Introduction

Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* was published in 2014 in Australia. It tells the story of an extended Australian-Syrian-Lebanese Shi'ite family similar to a tribe. It is a community that is defined by geographical places, particularly Alexandria and Lakemba in Australia, and their origins, that is, Lebanon and Syria. What relates the members of this tribe to each other is mostly blood and religion. *The Tribe* consists of three parts/stories told by the narrator, Bani, in the form of memorisation. The novel follows Bani as a child. It is as an instance of the *Bildungsroman* in that it deals with the protagonist's development, psychologically and morally. The three parts of the novel are entitled "The House of Adam," "The Children of Yocheved," and "The Mother of Ehud", respectively. The first part offers a description of the house of the tribe's family in Alexandria in Australia, and it introduces each family member. While the second part is a thorough portrayal of a wedding ceremony organized by the tribe, the last part is about the death of Bani's grandmother, the matriarch of the family. Each part starts with the same statement "I was only [seven/nine/eleven] when this happened but it always feels like now," testifying the novel's form of reminiscence.

Written in first-person narrative, the stories communicate the life and culture of the tribe and its struggle with identity and belonging. They put forward perspectives on the experiences of racialized and ethnicized communities, namely Arab-Australian Muslims, who are subjected to anti-Arab racism and discrimination. *The Tribe* invokes different images of hostility against immigrants and their children in Australia. Hence, this paper studies these forms of racism and discrimination against immigrants of the Lebanese background in public spaces. Relatedly, the question of linguistic terrorism is also discussed. This racism prompts us to ask questions about the Australian "multicultural approach".

The Tribe: A Response to Different Forms of Racism

A major number of diasporic texts are woven into unraveling the challenges that diasporic communities face in host communities. They underscore many sites where racism and discrimination are experienced. In doing so, they respond to the negative attributes and stereotypical images ascribed to the immigrants in different spheres of life, particularly media reports. Deemed an autobiographical fiction, *The Tribe* deconstructs the misrepresentation of Arab Muslims in Australia by disclosing how immigrants are rather victims of racism and hostility in public spaces in their host society. In an interview[1] about what prompted him to write *The Tribe*, Ahmad rightly avers that the novel is a response to the vilifying representations of Arab-Australian Muslims. Through the channel of autobiographical fiction, Ahmad taps into the experience of the marginalized communities in diaspora. He undertakes more explicitly the forms of racism encountered by immigrants in the public space. As stated earlier, the novel's preoccupation with contemporary Australia is best reflected in the narrative mode adopted, namely the use of the simple present tense, conveying a disdained interest in the aftermaths of different encounters and interactions in diaspora. The novel is fraught with allusions to

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[1] https://www.kalliopex.com/interview-with-michael-mohammed-ahmad/

contemporary incidents in Australia that have shaped the relations between the immigrants and the host new society. In this, the significance of the novel resides in exploring racisms as well as discriminatory acts against immigrants. Crucially, these practices of social exclusion are incarnated in the Australian Whites' offensive and rude behaviors towards the immigrants of the Lebanese background. In moving from Alexandria to Lakemba, Bani experiences racism at school by his Australian schoolmates:

> The kids at Alexandria Public School have told me there are lots of Lebanese people in Lakemba. 'You'll be going back to where ya came from,' says Matthew Forbes. He calls it 'Leb-kemba'.
> 'But I'm not a Leb,' I say.
> 'You're a sand nigger,' Matthew says.
> 'But I'm not black,' I say.
>
> (Ahmad, 2012, p. 50)

This passage reports on the experience of Bani, a child of two Lebanese immigrants, but claiming different identities; Lebanese, Arab, Muslim, and Australian. In Lakemba, which is predominantly made up of the immigrants of the Lebanese background, these immigrants are victims of racist acts and behaviors. Lakemba is deemed a site wherein xenophobia is best reflected. The portrayal of Lakemba as "Leb-kemba" is telling in that this discourse is meant to propagate that the Lebanese are taking over the place. The Label is loaded with hostility and ire. The attribute "Leb" is also used to instill fear among the Australians that these immigrants are a source of threat to the Australian society. In his novel *The Leb*, which is in fact part of a trilogy including *The Tribe*, Ahmad follows the story of Bani as a "student at the infamous Punchbowl Boys High School in Western Sydney, which regularly appears in the media and is surrounded by barbed wire fences and cameras" (Ahmad, 2016, p.4). He unpacks how the label "the Leb" entails violence and horror. Ahmad exhumes a lot of images of vilifying Arabs and/or Muslims with ingrained prejudice. These images are fueled by media reporting, mainly in moments of conflicts and tensions, portraying immigrants as aggressive, drug dealers, and sexual predators.

These discourses, as *The Tribe* itself testifies, deny the Lebanese immigrants the right to live in the Australian society. The statement "You'll be going back to where ya came from" can be interpreted as a call for the Lebanese migrants to leave Australia. Thus, they feel that they are "outsiders" who need to play the game of identity in order to gain acceptance within mainstream society. In denying being a "Leb," albeit with its derogatory connotation, Bani seeks to hide his Lebanese/Arab or Muslim identity. This stems from the conviction that claiming an immigrant identity will exclude him from the social and economic fabric of the Australian White society.

The Whites' insistence on the idea that the Lebanese are not part of them is informed by the need to draw lines of demarcations with outsiders, particularly Arabs and/or Muslims. This nurtures a binary discourse of "we"/ "they". The reason behind discourse is the claim that the Australian identity is threatened by the immigrants. What is worse is that the Australian state

often does not react to these media calls for violence, conveying the state's "permission to hate".

In her book *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crime,* Barbara Perry argues that "hate-motivated violence can flourish only in an enabling environment [which is] conditioned by the activity—and inactivity—of the state. state practices, policy, and rhetoric often have provided the formal framework within which hate crime—as an informal mechanism of control—emerges" (Perry, 2001, p. 179). In the context of the Lebanese minorities in Australia, the state's inactivity towards the dissemination of a hate discourse through the media further accounts for its permission to hate. The state, as will be detailed later, plays a role in nurturing anti-Arab Muslim sentiments among Australians. Immigrants of the Arab background are subject to discrimination, violence, and racism in the public space. Here, *The Tribe* digs deep into the different aspects of spatial configurations. In the novel, contemporary Australia is represented as tending to claim the public space only for Australians, hence adopting a politics of exclusion against outsiders.

This tendency can be read in relation to attempts to reveal an Australian unitary identity which needs to be preserved against external threats. Accordingly, the Australian identity is viewed as a homogenizing unit by mainstream Australians. This engenders a climate of xenophobia and shapes the emergence of essentialist perceptions of identity as pure, fixed, authentic, and uniformed. This old logic of identity incites anti-Arab Muslim attitudes. In this vein, identity conflicts and violence are associated. That is, identity can be a source of violence when it is understood within certain limited parameters. When subjects aim at unitary identities, they expunge and negate the others. The conception of the subject here is contingent upon essentialist beliefs informed by parameters and meanings shaped by the dominant group. Different strategies are used by the mainstream group against other minorities. Fomented violence and hostility take place this way. The catchphrase "we grew here, you flew here" is often addressed to the immigrants to push them out of the Australian society. The identity of the mainstream Australians is defined in opposition to that of the outsiders. The opposition "we/you" serves to exclude the immigrants socially, culturally, and economically. In fact, different incidents stem mainly from the struggle over public space. These include the "Sydney gang rapes" (2000) and the "Cronulla race riots" (2005) wherein xenophobic beliefs and attitudes to marginalize and deny the immigrants the public space led to conflicts and racist behaviors. This emerges out of the Whites' claim of unified identity that needs to be preserved.

The public spaces that *The Tribe* explores in detail include the schools and the shopping places. Bani reflects on different experiences of racism and social exclusion in the public school. Ahmad writes that "sometimes the kids at Alexandria public school, instead of calling [Bani] a sand nigger, call [him] a sand monkey" (p.71). This indicates the growing racism against the immigrants of the Lebanese background in the public school. Allusions made to acts of discrimination at school are frequent throughout the novel. The children of immigrants always feel stigmatized and vilified. Philomena Essed describes this form of racism "everyday racism", and it refers to the racism faced on a daily basis.

In *Understanding Everyday Racism,* Essed pinpoints that an understanding of how racism is practiced should include both the individual and the institutional and "must acknowledge that the system is continually construed in everyday life" (Essed, 1991, p. 38). In *The Tribe*, the Australian society, including its different institutions, is a space where immigrants experience racism every day and are subject to defamation and segregation. Racism against the children of immigrants is not only practiced by the schoolmates but also by teachers. It is in this vein that institutions perform the function of disseminating racist and discriminatory beliefs against immigrants of other backgrounds.

Racism and social exclusion often include calls by the mainstream society for immigrants to go back where they belong. This reverberates in many a scene, including this one in which Bani reports that the "Lebs should relax or [go] back to Islamabad" (p. 58). This statement is not only a tacit call to leave Australia but associating the Lebanese immigrants' home with "Islamabad" is also critically important. In Western media in general, and Australian media in particular, Islamabad is delineated as the capital of "Islamic violence". Foregrounding it indicates that Islamic violence is transnational. In this context, the local (in Australia) and the international Islamic violence are linked. In other words, when any acts of shelling or violence are recorded in the host communities, it is associated with Muslims. What is more, this violence is read in relation to the violence practiced in the home countries. Any incident involving the Muslim immigrants is easily laid the ground for by the media through an existing bulk of discourses relating Muslims and terrorism.

This question becomes even more complex when it involves children of immigrants born in Australia. These are often labeled as "home-grown terrorists". Shahram Akbarzadeh and Bianca Smith (2005) corroborate this argument in their article "The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media". Examining the extent to which negative images of Islam are reproduced in some Australian newspapers, Akbarzadeh and Smith construe that these home-grown gangs pose a challenge to the binary oppositions that media discourse and the mainstream Australian society tend to construct. Of course, such discourses deny the immigrants of other backgrounds the participation in the public space. They are also strategies through which these immigrants, particularly Muslims, are foregrounded in strong link with the violence produced back at the home country. In their study of racism, gender, and terrorism, Akbarzadeh and Smith write that the

> construction of Muslims and Islam is multi-layered, and is influenced by events overseas and at home. This suggests that the schism between Muslims 'here' and Muslims 'there' is not fixed and clear; it is multi-dimensional and complex and means that the binary between 'Us' and 'Them' is not clear-cut. This is particularly demonstrated by Western governments' concern for what are called 'home grown' terrorists.
>
> (Akbarzadeh and Smith, 2005, p. 33)

The effects of home violence on the construction of the immigrants' identity in the wider Australian society are palpable. Although these immigrants, as in the case of Bani in *The Tribe*,

were born and raised in Australia, they are still deemed a source of threat. In this, the boundaries between Muslims in different places are eliminated because they are turned into a homogenizing entity. The label "home-grown terrorists" demonstrates how the Australian institutions are cautious of immigrants raised in Australia. This category of immigrants is considered the most dangerous because they are enmeshed in society and are barely discernible. Strikingly, governments and media outlets are often held responsible for legitimizing violence against immigrants.

There is evidence that the negative images produced by different institutions affect the ways immigrants perceive themselves. Owing to this bulk of vilifying representations, immigrants develop a sense of inferiority complex. In order to go beyond this sense, these immigrants tend to cut ties with the cultures and traditions of their forefathers. They seek to gain acceptance by identifying with the wider Australian society. They therefore follow different Australian traditions and resist those of the culture of origin. These bids to adopt the Australian mainstream cultural mode of life are interestingly reflected in the acts and attitudes of the children of immigrants. In the novel, we are informed by Bani about how the elders of the tribe hold different celebrations, including ceremonies and funerals. As a young child of two Lebanese, Bani states:

> I feel sorry for men like [them]. They're always trying to get us together, trying to teach us the religion of Islam, but the young people aren't interested. The girls don't dress modestly and the boys get drunk at parties. No one likes to fast during The Holy Month of Ramadan and no one prays as much as they should. We're meant to pray five times a day. Instead we pray once a year.
>
> (Ahmad, 2014, pp. 149-150)

This passage displays the extent to which young people express dismay about the traditions of the tribe. Bani's utterance "I feel sorry" indicates how the acts of the elderly are received with regret. For Bani, the young people are no longer interested in the old identifications. New identifications are forged in response to the Australian dominant culture. This can be read as a path out of the experiences of racism, discrimination and exclusion encountered by the children of immigrants in the public space. Ostensibly, immigrants engage in a process of assimilation to the host culture. Within such a context, culture change is reflected in many aspects, including language, friendship networks, religion, participation in ethnic organizations, food preferences, ethnic celebrations, politics, music, dress, and media consumption. The assimilation process likely occurs as a reaction to the experiences of racism and other forms of social incivility. The passage reveals a desire towards assimilation into the wider Australian society. This acculturative tendency is then meant to gain acceptance therein.

Crucially, the difficulties encountered by immigrants in trying to "feel at home" in Australia inform their attempts to get assimilated. The recurrent incidents of racism and xenophobia bring about different culture changes in the identity of immigrants. Arguing via Giddens' concept of "ontological security," as an experience of comfort, Noble (2005) studies the ways in which the immigrants are made uncomfortable in Australia through different acts of

exclusion, Othering, and vilification. Because immigrants are not confident in their surroundings, that is the mainstream Australia, their "ontological security" and "experiences of comfort" are shaken. Here, difference is rendered strange, and it is a form of incivility. Bani and other children of the Lebanese background deviate away from the family's attempt to reproduce the Lebanese traditions in order to keep ties with the homeland. For them, these affiliations make them outsiders, and hence deny them recognition in public settings. They feel they are inferiorised as a result of mainstream acts of exclusion or what Noble delineates as "the making uncomfortable of difference through the affective regulation of difference forged through uncivil attention on a daily basis […] It is not that mainstream Australians and their institutions are suddenly confronted with radical difference and don't know how to cope; rather, there is an active process of the inferiorising of that difference" (2005, p. 118). The inability to feel at home in diaspora is the result of the Australian society's discourtesy, exclusion, and inability to deal with immigrants of other backgrounds. Accordingly, these challenges drive immigrants to engage in new identifications in order to be acknowledged as Australian citizens.

Interestingly, it is within this context that assimilation is not a choice for the immigrants but rather a prerequisite response to the acts of incivility and racism by the Australian society. Integration loses ground to assimilation, which is manifest in strong identification with the host culture and weak identification with the home culture. As underlined earlier, the tendency to assimilate is prevalent among the children of the immigrants. For immigrants of other backgrounds, identification with the home culture can be futile in that it deprives them of recognition and other opportunities in the host society. In their article, "Life satisfaction of immigrants: does cultural assimilation matter?" (2015), Viola Angelini et al. examine the effect of assimilation on immigrants. They carried out different interviews with different categories of immigrants in Germany. The findings suggest that "Identifying with one's own culture of origin exerts only marginally significant effects [on immigrants], but the self-reported level of life satisfaction is positively and significantly associated with the extent to which immigrants identify with the German culture and can communicate in German language" (p. 4). Interestingly, assimilation is largely associated with life satisfaction in the host societies. Assimilation is not only a reaction to the racist attitudes, but it is also a way to get more opportunities, particularly economic advantages. In the main, racism and discrimination exerted by the mainstream Australian society against the Lebanese immigrants, as *The Tribe* testifies, yields different responses, which articulates different cultural changes among these immigrants.

The Immigrant Minority and Linguistic Terrorism

Language and language practices perform the function of endorsing the immigrants' links to their homeland. When people move to another country, they bring with them different resources, including customs, culture, religion, and language. They also strive to reproduce and maintain these resources in diaspora as a form of identification. In this context, the use of the "Lebspeak" in daily conversations among the immigrants of the Lebanese background is worth considering (Tabar et al., 2010, p. 81). Language thus plays a vital role in negotiating identity

and belonging. Identities are reinvented and reproduced by the means of language use in the host society. Different expressions and words from Arabic and the Lebanese dialects are at use by the immigrants. In *The Tribe*, the use of Arabic by Bani's extended family is a way of binding the community together; it keeps its members in contact with the culture of the country of origin. In this line, language is not merely a means of communication, but it is a way of communicating one's culture and preserving one's identity, particularly within the larger host communities. The usage of language is about a sense of identity and belonging.

However, mainstream Australian society responds to the use of other languages by immigrants of other backgrounds in a negative way. These languages are often the target of suppression and stereotypical clichés. What is more, the use of English by immigrants with the Arabic accent is also a subject of stigmatization. The immigrants' language is rendered "different", "orphan" and "illegitimate." In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), this language is associated with "terrorism" and "linguistic hysteria." In this context, she coined the term "linguistic terrorism," which is the tendency to suppress and oppress the language of minorities by the dominant society. Within the Australian society, different acts and attitudes are developed against the language use by the immigrants. This paper looks at the issue of "linguistic terrorism" as another aspect of minority discrimination reflected in Ahmad's *The Tribe* in which the immigrants' use of language is received with huge stereotypes and derogatory loads. Linguistic terrorism is studied as a form of exclusion from the public space in Australia.

Ahmad's *The Tribe* explores this issue of language terrorism by offering to consider different spaces in which the immigrants' language is "different," "orphan," and only an "import". Because of these perceptions by the dominant group, the Lebanese immigrants have also internalized the belief that their language is a source of stigma for them. Surprisingly, they start to mock at the way their Lebanese mates speak English with an Arabic accent. Doing so demonstrates how the Lebanese immigrants, particularly those who were born and raised in Australia, are affected by the stereotypical discourse disseminated by the mainstream society against "outsiders". Bani constantly derides the way the language is employed by his Lebanese counterparts. Talking about the Lebanese cameraman who is in charge of filming the family's wedding ceremony, Bani informs us that this cameraman "has a heavy Arabic accent and uses clichés. 'Oh yes, very niiice,' he says as he films […] Then he goes into pose two, down to rest, and says, 'Ookaay, who next?'" (p.52). It is as if Bani is speaking through the mouth of the White Australians. Bani's discourse is a duplicate of that of the dominant society. The way the Lebanese cameraman is mocked at reflects the sense of inferiority developed by the children of the Lebanese immigrants.

Thus, Bani can be said to be the product of the inferiority complex that the diasporic subjects endure in host societies. This sense of inferiority complex is not merely the effect of social and cultural exclusion, but it is also related to being economically disadvantaged, nurturing the internalization of inferiority. In his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon demonstrates that, "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic, subsequently, the internalization or, better, epidermalization of this

inferiority" (Fanon, 1970, p. 11). With a "Lebanese skin" and an "Australian mask," Bani's internalization of inferiority makes him develop an ardent desire to "inferiorize" other immigrants. The perpetuation of clichés about the immigrants' language endorses beliefs that promote the immigrants' inferiority. The immigrants clinging to the Australian dominant narratives contribute to disseminating these clichés about other Lebanese people. The way Bani looks at the members of the tribe as "imports" because of the way they speak the language and interact with the Australian culture is telling. The following extract explains how Bani relies on a mimetic process of representing the Lebanese-Australian immigrants:

> Outside our house Uncle Ibrahim and Uncle Osama are talking with Aunty Amina's husband Bassam and Aunty Yasmine's husband Haroun. Haroun is what we call an 'import' which means he's recently come from another country. You can identify an import through the way they talk. They'll mainly speak in Arabic and will only know a few words in English. Even after they've been here for twenty years, they're still called imports because they never lose their accents. [And] There are other ways to identify imports too, especially the ones from Syria and Lebanon.
>
> (Ahmad, 2014, p. 61)

"Import" is a word used to designate those immigrants coming from a different country and bearing the features of outsiders. They are those immigrants who are neither fully assimilated nor fully intergraded into the host country. The "we" used by Bani alludes to the children of immigrants who level much criticism at their first-generation of immigrants, namely their parents, for the inability to get rid of their home culture and assimilate to the mainstream one. Here, we can argue that, because of the mainstream society's attitudes and practices, immigrants have a low estimation of their language and culture. The failure to be cognizant of difference, hence accepting it, makes the immigrants' perception of themselves one of "inferiors," "foreigners," and "imports". These perceptions are the product of the dominant society's narrative that the immigrants' language is not only a means of communication, but it is also a mode of terror.

The issue of language and self-esteem is riveting. It accounts for the idea that when one's language is associated with derogatory attributes, one's self esteem is shaken. This argument can be corroborated by alluding to Anzaldúa's experience, stating that "In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80). In such a context, immigrants face serious challenges in keeping and/or reproducing their culture and other resources in the host society. They are rendered second-class citizens, owing to the different borders drawn by the mainstream Australia. Hence, they internalize the feeling that they are "inferior". These perceptions widen the gap between the members of the diasporic sense of community. The latter is distorted by the images constructed about the immigrants, their language, and their culture. The in-group solidarity is also shaken by the conventions set by the dominant group. Being unable to meet these conventions, the immigrants are ostensibly denied a decent presence in the public space. In the main, one can argue that the immigrants' struggle to belong through different forms of identification is hindered by the White

Australians. Issues of racism, discrimination, exclusion, linguistic terrorism are all revelatory of the hardships that diasporic communities go through. Interestingly, such experiences of exclusion question the Australian multicultural approach.

Migrants in Australia: Understanding the Limits of Multiculturalism

It was stated earlier that *The Tribe* remains a revelatory response to white Australians' racist attitudes and acts towards the migrant communities, namely the Lebanese diaspora. On different occasions are these minorities subject to exclusion and hostility. These discriminatory practices have impacted the way the Lebanese perceive themselves. They have internalized the feeling that they are inferior "outsiders". From this perspective, the immigrants of Lebanese background, especially those who were raised in Australia, have engaged in a process of identity denial in order to gain acceptance and "save face". In light of this, the Australian multicultural approach begs questioning. Australia used to foster a politics of maintaining identities of immigrant communities, articulating the diversity of the Australian social, cultural, and economic fabric. However, drawing on the recent history of migrants in Australia, the limits of multiculturalism cannot go unobserved. This section explores these limits by showing how different discourses perform the function of disseminating the idea that the mainstream Australia is threatened by immigrants. Considerable allusions will be made to Ahmad's second novel, *The Lebs*, which is a sequel to Bani's story in *The Tribe*. This will help in gaining further insights into the question of multiculturalism.

Prior to delving into the main arguments, it is necessary to give some insights into the history of multiculturalism in Australia in order to trace the way it has failed. The debate on multiculturalism continues to look at migration as a security risk. In fact, security resides at the center of Australia's different approaches towards immigrants and foreigners. In tracing the history of security in Australia since the end of the eighteenth century, Burke highlights Australia's various approaches to "secure the Australian subject" (Burke, 2001, p.15). Owing to the thesis' interest in the modern history of Australia, multiculturalism was inaugurated in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s as an alternative to the older policies of assimilation and integration. The aim is to maintain migrant minority identities through embracing cultural diversity (Noble, 2005, p. 108). Yet, this multicultural policy did not last long, and it was met with opposition by political parties by the end 1990s. Of enormous significance to this opposition were new migration policies which centered on reducing the immigrants' presence in Australia through strict strategies and requirements. Tellingly, the aim has been to secure the Australian subjects against the immigrants. The latter are also seen as a burden on the national economy. This has incited discourses of hate and racism against the immigrants, exposing the limits of the Australian multicultural approach.

Questioning multiculturalism is a central element in Ahmad's *The Tribe*. Drawing on different experiences of racial vilification and racial Othering, the novel implies that the multicultural approach is limited. The experience of so many kids in the tribe's community testifies to these limits. In being denied the public space, these kids engage in Othering even those who are of Lebanese background but are part of mainstream Australians. They are ascribed the label of

outsiders. Bani narrates the story of Shady and Rima, two Lebanese-Australian shopkeepers, who were invited into the family's weeding. Shady and Rima are perceived as being different from the tribe's family. Bani states:

> What makes Shady and Rima, who look like us and talk like us and dress just like us, so different is that they're what we call *ghari-been* – outsiders. Even though they've been invited to the wedding, we remind them that they're not like us in the way we look at them and the way we talk to them, or totally ignore them. How pathetic they are, trying to connect with some kid just to hide the shame that they're not like us!
>
> Ahmad, 2014, p. 91)

These perceptions are the product of mainstream Australians. Immigrants of Lebanese background exclude each other from the community of "selves" because of the threatening differences. For these reasons, values of acceptance, recognition and respect fall apart. Discriminatory discourses reveal a significant failure to deal with differences. Here, Australian multiculturalism loses the ground for the white multiculturalism. The latter is informed by white supremacy and the need to protect the white culture. Importantly, the notion of the national space for the Australians emerges as a strategy to secure Australian-ness against foreigners.

In setting out to further explore the pitfalls of the Australian multicultural approach and the paranoid of the white nationalists, we recognize that it is of critical importance to include a discussion of Ahmad's novel *The Lebs* (2016). *The Lebs* is a sequel to Bani's story in *The Tribe*. While the former narrates the childhood phase of Bani, the latter follows his story as a 17-year-old boy at Punchbowl Boys High School, Western Sydney. Bani Adam, as the only narrator in *The Lebs*, portrays different experiences of racism, rape, discrimination, and cultural clashes that "the Lebs" go through in Western Sydney. The novel's title, *The Lebs*, is a derogatory label employed in talking about the immigrants of the Lebanese background in particular and of the Middle Eastern appearance in general[2]. It implies incivility, crime, theft etc. Thus, "the Lebs" is a racist and stereotypical classification of immigrants of the Lebanese background, namely those who were raised in Australia. With this in mind, Bani's narratives share the mundane experiences of the ethnic minorities in Australia. Through the first-person perspective, Bani reflects on scenes in which the immigrant Other is a source of fear, insecurity, hence their threat to the White Australians. Exploring the representation of Arab Australian identity in Australia, Ahmad points out how Bani and his mates make use of cameras and interviews. These construct themselves as "the Lebs" in order to demystify their stereotypical representation by the white Australians. The following excerpt from *The Lebs* is telling:

> I steer clear of Lebo boys because they remind me of Osama and Mahmoud Mahmoud, and I steer clear of old Wogs because they can't speak English, and I steer clear of old

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[2] Of note here is the fact that, given the existence of different ethnicities and races in Australia, acts of discrimination and racism are not peculiar to the Lebanese community. For example, African migrants are no exception when it comes experiences of exclusion by the mainstream Australian society. See Mandisi Majavu's (2017) *Uncommodified blackness: the African male experience in Australia and New Zealand.*

Whities because they don't trust Lebs. Instead I interview two Indian boys in button-up shirts and jeans and two Indian girls in tight, short dresses. 'Are you aware that multinational corporations are exploiting you?' Straightaway one of the boys, in a pink shirt and gelled black hair, looks dead into the eye of the camera and responds, 'Well, basically all this funding goes into generating a consumerist ideology so that half a billion dollars goes into brainwashing people.'

<div align="right">(Ahmad, 2018, p. 23)</div>

The excerpt is significant for different reasons. First, labels such as "Lebo boys" and "old Wogs" are mostly used by the mainstream Australians to refer to the immigrants of the Lebanese background. Pejorative as they are, these labels are endemic to racist attitudes towards minorities. In this line, the Australian Multicultural approach which is White-centered in that it disseminates feelings of hatred vis-à-vis immigrants. Other feelings include lack of trust towards these immigrants who are a source of insecurity towards the Australian subject. Second, the passage explores the stereotypical representation of "the Lebs" as a group of immigrants wearing the latest fashion trends, with pink shirts and gelled hair. Interestingly, the Indians interviewed by Bani are deemed "Lebs" because they also fall prey to multinational corporations and the consumerist ideology. In following certain styles of life, the "Lebs" are portrayed as hungry for fight, violence, and incivility. Third, it should be predicated that in Ahmad's novel, "the Lebs" construct themselves and they are also constructed. Complex as it is, the aim is to unravel the discriminatory representation of immigrants. This idea can be corroborated by Ahmad himself. In alluding to the "Lebs" in his work *Writing the Arab-Australian Narrative*, he states that

> The 'Leb' constructed himself, and was constructed by, the dominant White Australian culture, in relation to local, national and international events, including a series of drive-by shootings and gang affiliations in the late 90s, a series of gang rapes in the year 2000, the September 11 attacks on New York City in 2001, and the Cronulla Riots in 2005.

<div align="right">(Ahmad, 2016, p. iii)</div>

Ostensibly, the "Lebs" are represented through the Whites' eyes in the light of a cluster of events within Australia and across borders. These events are characterized by violence, shelling, and rape. The tendency to relate all these incidents, albeit in different times and by different actors, is imbedded in the White Supremacy Culture which frames the Lebanese immigrants within a context of "threat," "danger" and "ire". This discourse implies that the "Lebs"/ "Arabs"/ "Muslims" are always involved in violent attacks taking place worldwide. It is interesting how Ahmad's *The Lebs* explores this association constructed between Lebs, Arabs, and Muslims. Bani Adam, the narrator, presents graffiti, newspapers headlines and labels whose function is to homogenize, hence demonize, Arab- Muslims, in Australia and overseas. This trope of demonization in *The Lebs* is reflected in the immigrants' behaviors and attitudes in public spaces, namely schools. Surprisingly, many Australian Whites perpetuate a discourse that shifts responsibility to immigrants, accusing them of being racist, sexist, and hungry for violence. Being so makes these "foreigners," according to the mainstream

Australians, a threat to the security of Australia and Australians. In a similar vein, media contributes not only to the perpetuation of such a discourse, but it also constructs other images of immigrants as the source of racism.

What this complex discourse also implies is that that racism exerted against immigrants is a form of resistance by the White Australians. White racism is justified on the ground that it is only a self-defense strategy against racist immigrants. This foments more "riots" and "clashes," conveying the myth of multiculturalism. It also increases opportunities of developing racist attitudes. In this case, White Australians emphasize an ethnocentric view in their representation of the "Lebs" in different discourses. In this, Australians are rendered victims of racism and incivility rather than agents. Ahmad sharply captures such an image through Bani, the constructed "Leb," who harasses and discriminates Australians. The excerpt below is revelatory:

> Next I interview a short, fat Aussie named Dillan who has Down syndrome. His beard is patchy […] A large group of Fobs standing against the railway fence listen in on our conversation, and they make their grins obvious to me as Dillan goes on about being a professional rapper. I ask, 'Are these guys your friends?' turning the camera towards them. 'Yeah,' replies Dillan. 'Which one?' I ask. Dillan points at a Fob in a Bob Marley T-shirt and says, 'Him, the fat one.' Then all the other Fobs belly-laugh at their colossal friend, because only the disabled can get away with such remarks.
>
> (Ahmad, 2014, p. 28)

Words such as "Aussie," "Fobs," "fat," and "disabled" are nasty portrayals of the White Australians. Indeed, it is Bani, the constructed "Leb," who employs these labels. This demonstrates how the "Lebs" are stereotypically represented in that they enact racism and discrimination against Australians. The "Leb," as the passage above shows, enjoys power. This manifests in the "I" of the interviewer as well as the way he puts questions and asks for clarifications. The Australian is deprived of power, and he is seen as naïve and submissive. He is the victim of the incivility of the "Lebs". Such a victimizing discourse has the role of blocking the feeling and the image that Australians are racist. It is a way to justify the stereotypes developed against the "Lebs" as a group of uneducated Muslim criminals and racists. Hence, all incidents where the "Lebs" are involved are informed by prejudice and fuel more hatred towards Arab-Muslims. It is true that the minority group can exert racism over the mainstream Australians, but, as Ahmad states, "the 'racism' of this cultural group rarely has the political, economic or media power to travel beyond prejudiced community discourse" (Ahmad, 2016, p.14). This is contrary to White people as the dominant group that has power. On this basis, minorities are socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged.

In line with the immigrants' desire to reproduce their customs and traditions in the host society, the Australian government developed such discourses as the Muslim immigrants' ungovernability. In his article, "Multiculturalism and the Ungovernable Muslim" (2011), Hage construes that Muslims are seen as the ungovernable of the multicultural governmental process. The reason is that they are seriously religious. In this light, they embody the most menacing

Other to Australia. To include this Other, the Australian multicultural approach proves too limited in dealing with immigrants of other cultural backgrounds. This limitation springs from the fact that the approach is white-centered. Hage writes:

> [M]ulticulturalism is generally very limited as an anti-racist policy. It never stops reproducing the centrality of white Europeans' entitlement to the nation. Nevertheless, multicultural recognition as a form of anti-Eurocentrism and valorization of the other's culture can be seen as a form of anti-racism. The issue […] here is that this form of multicultural anti-racism is far more geared to dealing with migrants who are relatively new to their host country. The pain of 'not being recognized' or 'being recognized negatively' is a predominantly first-generation experience.
>
> (Hage, 2011, p. 167)

The failure of Australian multiculturalism is associated with the idea of the white nation. Multiculturalism is prone to value the white culture against that of immigrants. More than this, Australian multiculturalism has responded differently to different generations of immigrants. While the first generation was denied recognition, the recent generations have received a different reaction, gaining more acceptance and tolerance. In regard to the racism the first generations went through, one can present different reasons underlying this experience. First, there was a tendency among the first communities to resist assimilation and integration, ascribing much importance to the culture of origin. Also, the first waves of immigration to Australia were the product of conditions of wars, famine, and search for opportunities. These communities are, as Hage argues, more inclined to accept the mainstream society's racism or even justifying it on the ground that "it is their country…you know, we have to accept that" (Hage, p.2011, p.171). It is in this way that the Muslim immigrants reacted to the mainstream racism and marginalization.

Sustaining such discourses can only testify to the presence of a powerful political machine, articulating the idea of the White nation. Within this nation, immigrants should be controlled and governed. Under white nationalists' eyes, these immigrants are marginalised, inferiorised, and even deprived of various advantages. Crucially, political parties and political movements have contributed to the shaping of immigrant and Australian identities. As a case in point, the emergence of the "One Nation" political party in the late 1990s has provoked further conflicts and misunderstandings between different ethnic identities. Led by Pauline Hanson, the party's white policies focused first on the Asian immigrants in Australia. However, the shift of focus towards and target of Muslims was observed by the end of 1990s. In corroborating this idea, Hage states:

> It was only at the turn of the century that the 'Muslims' became by far the primary threat. It can be said that this period saw a globalisation of the Islamic other around the world…Thus while 'Islam' was becoming homogenised as the global threatening other, the category that embodied the Islamic threat differed from one country to another: 'Asians' in Britain (there meaning Indians and Pakistanis), 'Turks' in Germany and

'North Africans' in France. In Australia it is the category 'Lebanese' that came to embody this threat.

(Hage, 2012, p. 161)

From this it can be extrapolated that white racist movements worldwide engage in the same discursive discriminatory discourses against Muslims across borders. Indeed, the post-9/11 era witnessed an increase in the debate about Muslims as a source of threat. Muslims are regarded as a homogenous frightening Other. This way, they become subject to racism and discrimination in much the same way in different western societies. They have also been associated with successive terrorist attacks, which have made them "serious enemies" according to different media and political movements. This has subsequently produced similar discourses against Muslims, with a focus on a certain category depending on the country where they reside. These categories, as the passage above testifies, encompass the British Asians, the German Turks, The French North African, and the Australian Lebanese. It is this homogenization of Muslims as the ominous Other that has stimulated the racist discourse of the "One Nation" in Australia. In fact, the "One Nation" party established different relations with various racist organizations within Australia and across borders. "Australians against Further Immigration" and "National Action" are revelatory examples of these organizations that have been associated with the "One Nation" party. Their agendas and plans have laid emphasis on immigrants in general and Muslim immigrants in particular.

With the growing number of people on the move across the globe, particularly in the age of globalization, different issues of language, culture, race, religion, and identity are brought into sharper focus. This is particularly ostensible in communities with immigrants of Arab-Muslim backgrounds. In fact, there has been a frequent mention of Arab-Muslims, especially by the end of the 1990s. A number of cultural policies have been introduced and adopted in dealing with the question of immigration and immigrants. Being mostly polemically adopted policies, the Australian immigrant policies have been proven racist and discriminatory. They have shaped different media and political stereotypes, deeming the Arab-Muslim immigrants the most violent and uncivil Other.

Conclusion

Indeed, the primary concern of Ahmad's novel is to explore different representations of the Arab-Muslim immigrant Other. With more focus on the present situation, Ahmad lays bare discrimination practiced against migrant minorities in Australia. Racism and linguistic terrorism have been studied as the salient problems that immigrants go through, making their experiences in diaspora painful. In this line, the novel is a reaction to different media and political stereotypes that have shaped public perceptions and self-perceptions about the immigrants. These perceptions have excluded the immigrants socially and marginalized them economically. In fact, these discriminatory practices are the product of Australian cultural policies. Led by "evil white nationalists" and informed by "white supremacy," such policies have negatively impacted the experiences of immigrants in Australia. They have, indeed, paved

the way to further feelings of hostility and ire towards immigrants, conveying the limitations of Australian multiculturalism.

As literary and artistic work, Ahmad's *The Tribe* is a paramount contribution to awareness-raising about the immigrants' situation in Australia. This way, it impacts on actual racism and discrimination practiced against migrant minorities. In telling the stories of different characters, Ahmad does not only deconstruct racist ideologies and Australian power relations of inclusion and exclusion, but he invites reflections on the ways in which such problems should be dealt with. Because of its power to mobilize and inspire people, literature can bridge sundry gaps between ethnicities and races, hence establish tolerant and welcoming environments for everybody. It is riveting to note here how Arab migrant writers act as mediators between different worlds and cultures through their "cultural critiques." Both enriching and invigorating, Arab migrant literature enacts channels between different cultural backgrounds. It is profitable to decode different cultural meanings, suggesting a quest for a middle ground which allows for dynamic intersections between different world cultures and spaces. Certainly, the migrants' position endows them with a "contrapuntal consciousness," granting them a transcultural and intercultural perspective. The writing of Michael Mohammed Ahmad remains a landmark in the sphere of Arab-Australian literature lodged within a plural discourse connecting the East and the West as well as Arab Islamic culture and Western culture. In the cosmopolitanism often laden with spirit, Ahmad's writing aspires to draw attention to the peril of essentialist ideas about East/West relations.

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