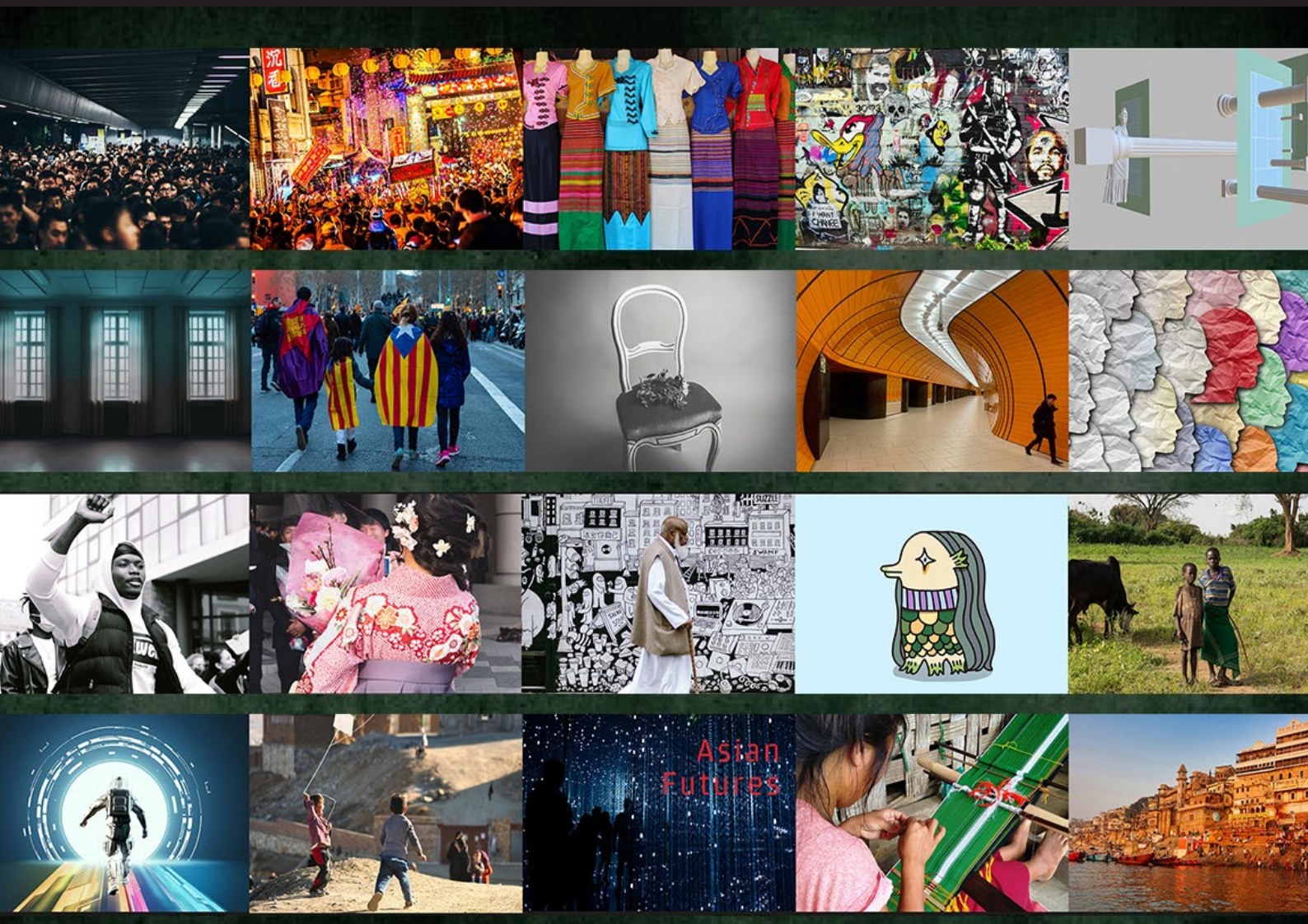
the iafor

journal of cultural studies

Volume 10 – Issue 1 – 2025

Editor-in-Chief: Holger Briel



ISSN: 2187-4905

iafor

The IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies
Volume 10 – Issue – 1

IAFOR Publications

IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies

Editor-in-Chief

Holger Briel
Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College (UIC)

Editorial Assistant

Andy Lihua Chen
HKBU, PRC

Editorial Board

Senka Anastasova, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Republic of Macedonia
Yasue Arimitsu, Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan
Sue Ballyn, University of Barcelona, Spain
Gaurav Desai, University of Michigan, USA
Gerard Goggin, University of Sydney, Australia
Florence Graezer-Bideau, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland
Donald E. Hall, Lehigh University, USA
Stephen Hutchings, University of Manchester, UK
Eirini Kapsidou, Independent Scholar, Belgium
Graham Matthews, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Baden Offord, Curtin University, Australia
Tace Hedrick, University of Florida, USA
Christiaan De Beukelaer, University of Melbourne, Australia
Katy Khan, University of South Africa, South Africa

Published by The International Academic Forum (IAFOR), Japan
Executive Editor: Joseph Haldane
Publications Manager: Nick Potts
Publications and Communications Coordinator: Mark Kenneth Camiling

IAFOR Publications
Sakae 1-16-26 – 201, Naka Ward, Aichi, Japan 460-0008

IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies • Volume 10 – Issue 1

Published July 2025

IAFOR Publications © Copyright 2025

ISSN: 2187-4905
Online: jocs.iafor.org

IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 10 Issue 1

Edited by: Holger Briel

Table of Contents

From the Editor **1**

From the Executive Editor **5**

Notes on Contributors **6**

Special Anniversary Articles –

Wither Cultural Studies? **17**
Holger Briel

The State of Cultural Studies Today – Challenges and Opportunities **33**
Contributors – in no particular order
Hans-Georg Moeller
Mieke Bal
Charles Shiro Inouye
Patrick Colm Hogan
Anne M. Cronin
Catherine Evans
Mark James
Jeffrey Williams
Doris Bachmann-Medick
Paola Bacchetta
Baden Offord
Sue Ballyn
Lai Fong Yang
Charles Lowe
Marko Pajević

Main Articles –

Becoming Tribal, Thinking Beyond Myth: Ecuadorian Indigenism as Performative Givenness and the Postmodern Event **63**
Miguel A. Orosa
Yamileth Arteaga Alcívar
Nancy G. Ulloa

Telling "The World Changes": Artist Stories of Envisioning Global Citizenship **83**
Ruth Bateson-Ardo
Ann Rogerson
Stephanie Denne
Leigh Coombes

A Preliminary Exploration of Chinese Digital Nomads' Life and Workstyle **105**
Jingyi Lou
Hyun-Kyung Lee

Appropriating Me. A New Emerging Aesthetic in the Indian Diaspora of South Africa **129**
Nalini Moodley

Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence **157**
Santanu Sarkar
Anuradha Choudry

The Queer State of Being: Navigating the Neoliberal City through *Kari* **191**
Nanjani Gandhi
S. Visaka Devi

Understanding the Multi-Sensory in a City's Cultural Attractions: The Museum Experiences of Istanbul's Historical Urban Texture **211**
Asiye Nisa Kartal
Hasan Basri Kartal

Fragments of Broken History: Misrepresentations of Dahomey in Contemporary Culture **239**
Ron Lawrence Anderson

Preserving Tradition: Motif Design Development for Batik Tulis Lasem **269**
Vera Jenny Basiroen
Grasheli Kusuma Andhini
Ida Bagus Kerthyayana Manuaba

Preserving Sacred Space: Identity of the Chinese Temples in Thailand **295**
Khemarin Pensaengon
Tawan Wannarat
Pipat Suya
Watcharin Anekpongpan

Women's Politics in La Galigo: A Bugis Manuscript **321**
Nurhamdah Zain
Rahmi Djafar
Nur Nahdiyah
Norhan Farouk
Nabilahumaida

From the Editor

It is with great pleasure that we offer our readers Issue 10.1 of the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*. This is no ordinary issue, though; rather, it marks the 10-year anniversary of the publication of the journal and thus is a testimony to the resilience, but also to the need for such a journal. What you see on your screen (or indeed hold in your hand, should you have printed out the PDF) is the 21st issue of the journal (after 18 regular issues plus two special ones).

As is the case with any anniversary, there are many people deserving thanks. First and foremost, I would like to thank IAFOR and Joseph Haldane at its helm. When Joe and I discussed the possible launch of a cultural studies journal, he was very enthusiastic from the start and gladly greenlit the project. While the start of the journal was a rocky one, with few articles submitted, we have since gone from strength to strength and have become an international high-quality publication noted around the globe. Joe's enthusiasm has not waned a bit over the years, even through the COVID years, which were particularly challenging for IAFOR. So thank you, Joe, for believing in cultural studies and allowing us to continue publishing to an ever wider global audience under IAFOR auspices!

Next, we would of course need to mention our contributors, who trusted us with their work and had the patience to deal with slow publication processes and satisfying my oftentimes nit-picky editorial comments. Thank you very much for choosing IJCS as an outlet for your imaginative and innovate ideas, all of which immensely helpful in strengthening and broadening the field of cultural inquiries and thus propel them into the future! The whole IJCS team learned so much from you and we look forward to seeing more of your work!

Our thanks also go out to the IAFOR Publications and Communications Coordinator, Ken Camiling and IAFOR's Publications Manager, Nick Potts. Without their expertise, patient prodding and humour, not one of the IJCS issues would have seen the light of day. So thank you both for a sterling job!

Then there are two people who I have been working with very closely over the last few years. The first is Andy Chen, the long-time editorial assistant for IJCS. Actually, I am more of an assistant to him than he for me, as he keeps oversight over all the submissions and the fanning out of them to our reviewers, something I could never do in as detailed a way as Andy does. Very well done, thank you! The second person to thank is Izzie Zhou, who acted as Editor-at-large for this issue. In particular, she approached and interacted with all the professors and culture workers who she convinced to share their specific take on the state of cultural studies, a pivotal feature in this issue. This was a big task and you performed it admirably, so thank you very much, Izzie!

We also do not want to forget another group of contributors without whom IJCS would not be possible – namely all the reviewers who laboured hard to give feedback on the many submissions we received throughout the years. For various reason, a number of them preferred to stay anonymous but we would like to thank them nonetheless for their work. You know who you are! The others who were willing to see their names here, thank you very much as well and

remember that your willingness to spend an insubordinate amount of your free time making the field of cultural studies stronger yet does not go unnoticed. They include Martial Fanga Agbor, Musab Alamri, Sue Ballyn, Bharti Sanjukta Chakraborty, Noelia García Castillo, Rizki Damayanti, Jeconiah Dreisbach, S.Ganesan, Edward A. Irons, Nur Atirah Binti Kamaruzaman, Anilesh Kumar, Xiaoqing Liu, Sankarsan Malik, Baden Offord, Samidha Pusalkar, Rahul Rastogi, Bruno Brandão Silva, Sushma Trivedi, and Karminn C.D. Daytec Yañgot.

When it comes to the special feature in this 10th anniversary issue, we asked top scholars in the field of cultural studies where they would locate its study and practice today and how they would see its future. As one can see from the responses, cultural studies are alive and well and continue to thrive in a (culturally) divided world, providing important *Stichwörter* for reflected interventions. Respondents included Hans-Georg Moeller (University of Macau), Mieke Bal (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)), Charles Shiro Inouye (Tufts University), Patrick Colm Hogan (University of Connecticut), Anne M. Cronin (Lancaster University), Catherine Evans (Carnegie Mellon University), Mark James (Molloy University), Jeffrey Williams (Carnegie Mellon University), Doris Bachmann-Medick (Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) of the Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany), Paola Bacchetta (University of California, Berkeley), Baden Offord (Curtin University, Australia), Sue Ballyn (University of Barcelona), Lai Fong, Yang (BNBU, China), Charles Lowe (BNBU, China), and Marko Pajević (Lund University, Sweden). We are very thankful for your varied and highly pertinent input.

This is also our "thickest" product yet, with 11 authors contributing to the regular section. True to IJCS style, the issue is a mix of the writings by more experienced, established scholars and upcoming talents.

We begin with Miguel A. Orosa, Yamileth Arteaga Alcívar and Nancy G. Ulloa's "Becoming tribal, thinking beyond myth – Ecuadorian Indigenism as Performative Givenness and the Postmodern Event". In their text, these scholars approach and analyse the concept of Indigenism insofar as it applies to Ecuador and Andean culture. While they are hinting at the hybridity of specific Christian festivals held by the indigene population, they refuse to stick specific labels on such events, as this would apply a problematic foreign/western taxonomy to indigenous practices taking place in Homi Bhabha's *Third Space*. What they do offer instead is a Deleuzian theoretical reading of such phenomena.

The second article, "Telling 'The World Changes': Artist Stories of Envisioning Global Citizenship", by Ruth Bateson-Ardo, Ann Rogerson, Stephanie Denne, and Leigh Coombes speaks to the previous one by also investigating this Third Space. In their article, though, they investigate artists and artistic practices navigating this space precisely due to their non-native origin. They analyse the interplay between spaces of "origin" and their present location and underline how their individual state of affairs is marked by their individual history, but then this also aids them in creating specific inter- and transnational kinds of art.

"A Preliminary exploration of Chinese Digital Nomads' Life and Workstyle" by Jingyi Lou and Hyun-Kyung Lee is also indebted to Bhabha's theory. The authors discuss the rise and challenge of being a Chinese digital nomad, providing a psychogramme of individuals, exemplifying the lifestyle of an ever larger group of generational contemporaries. While many, especially those in the tech world, glorify this lifestyle, their article also shows the flipside of the phenomenon, – loneliness, precarity of work situations and a possible neo-colonolisation of local communities.

Nalini Moodley's "Appropriating Me. A New Emerging Aesthetic in the Indian Diaspora of South Africa" discusses the rising (self-)understanding of the Indian community in South Africa. She introduces the term "mypropriation" to designate cultural practices by people of Indian origin and how they interlace cultures of their place of abode with those from India, leading to a new *pavaam* aesthetic. Pertinent examples include fashion, visual art and reality TV shows, among others.

Staying with Indian culture, "Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence" by Santanu Sarkar and Anuradha Choudry, explores seven Bollywood films for their aspects of *Rasa* aesthetic and its emotional framework as opposed to, but not excluding, western film theory with its cinematic traditions, its postcolonial discourses, and the arrival of transnational cinema in a global context. Films include the classic *Pather Panchali* (1955) and stretch all the way to the 2024 Cannes Grand Prix winner *All We Imagine as Light*.

Still remaining within Indian Culture, a queer graphic novel is the focus of Nanjani Gandhi's "The Queer State of Being: Navigating the Neoliberal City through *Kari*". Her text examines Amrutha Patil's graphic novel *Kari* (2008), focusing on the eponymous heroine's interactions with Mumbai's atypical spaces (sewers, dubious alleys, and the residence of an ill acquaintance/friend), and deciphers how these locales amplify a sense of detachment from mainstream society, but at the same time bringing her closer to the material texture of the city, thereby negating and rejecting the neo-capitalist usurpation of the city. Rather than accepting alienation passively, the study looks at Kari's positive engagement with such spaces.

"Understanding the Multi-Sensory in a City's Cultural Attractions: The Museum Experiences of Istanbul's Historical Urban Texture" by Asiye Nisa Kartal and Hasan Basri Kartal analyses urban walks, something they term "sense-walking", as a methodology of better understanding the actual materiality of an area and its various edifices. The area in question here is the Fener and Balat neighbourhood of Istanbul, an area rich in multicultural diversity and present-day museums. In particular, the article describes the multi-sensory experiences beyond the visual senses encountered by the sense-walkers and how museums of the future can help further support all of the senses.

"Fragments of Broken History: Misrepresentations of Dahomey in Contemporary Culture*"* by Ron Lawrence Anderson analyses recent films involving African heritages, such as the *Black Panther* franchise (2018, 2022) and *The Woman King* (2022) and demonstrates Hollywood's shortcomings therein, such as wrongly conflating cultural elements and falsifying history.

Using the country of Benin (erstwhile Dahomey) as an example, he then goes on to show how particular local artistic work can indeed make a more positive difference by highlighting the more authentic indigeneity of this art and its ability to set the record straight(er).

The article "Preserving Tradition: Motif Design Development for Batik Tulis Lasem" by Vera Jenny Basiroen, Grasheli Kusuma Andhini, and Ida Bagus Kerthyayana Manuaba investigates specific Batik cultures in Lasem, central northern Java. In particular, it analyses why the Batik industry is losing customers and offers remedies. For one, Lasem Batik is special, as it interweaves Chinese and Javanese themes. For another, it takes many of its motives from local flora and fauna, thus making it unique. In the specific project, the researchers worked with local batik artists, resellers and government functionaries in order to come up with more modern and innovative designs. These designs have been produced and the future will tell whether this worthwhile cultural intervention will also be a successful economic one. This is not the first article IJCS has run on clothing industries; previous ones analysed the industry in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India and even in this issue, at least part of Nalini Moodley's *Appropriating Me* concerns itself with the production of clothing as an act of local and mostly female empowerment. While the (high) fashion industry has garnered much attention in western cultural studies, it is these more local intermediations promising better conditions for its practitioners and the preservation of otherwise lost material and immaterial heritage that offer more sustainable conditions and hope for the future in otherwise underrepresented regions of the world.

The next article also treats preservation, and specifically Chinese cultural preservation, in Thailand. "Preserving Sacred Space: Identity of the Chinese Temples in Thailand" by Khemarin Pensaengon, Tawan Wannarat, Pipat Suya, and Watcharin Anekpongpan studies the temples erected by Chinese immigrants to Nakhon Pathom Province, located in central Thailand. They use a functionalist approach and delineate the various functions these temples served – worship, cultural centres, places of learning. They decry the fact that these temples are slowly fading into nonexistence, sometimes quite literally due to land grabbing and the diffusion of the Chinese communities and hope that their work can sensitise local communities and government agencies to preserve at least some of them.

Lastly, Nurhamdah Zain, Rahmi Djafar, Nur Nahdiyah, Norhan Farouk, and Nabilahumaida revisit one of the most important manuscripts of epic literature, the Bugis culture's "La Galigo. Their Women's Politics in *La Galigo*: A Bugis Manuscript" treats this globally forgotten masterpiece, arguably the longest epic in existence, and uses it to juxtapose its female characters and their, at times, very exalted places in society and ruling governments with the way traditionalists view a woman's place in society in today's Indonesia. They conclude that, while governments gladly use this text to arouse national sentiments, they are much less willing to use it as an example of how it can aid women's liberation. This exercise in sensitisation is hoped to begin further discussions among modern-day Indonesian citizens.

Please do enjoy this issue!

Holger Briel, Editor-in-Chief, IJCS

Message from the Executive Editor

Dear Readers and Contributors,

It gives me great pleasure to write an introduction to this very special tenth anniversary issue of the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*, and to report that this publication is both in excellent health and lies at the heart of IAFOR's DNA: its international, intercultural, and interdisciplinary mission.

I am perhaps preaching to the choir writing in the pages of a cultural studies journal of the importance of the interconnected fields that make up whatever "this" cultural studies "is", but if you will indulge me, the finest scholars, practitioners, thinkers, and so forth, who engage in and around cultural studies can be characterised as among the most curious and innovative questioners and truth seekers in the academy. They are perhaps the most widely travelled, in both the figurative and very often literal sense, and among the most open to colours, experiences, and the senses. They see with eyes that are open, innocent, and critical. In their work, they make the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar familiar; imagining new possibilities, alternative paths, and futures. They help discipline disciplines, although rarely their own, and introduce, explore, and chart new worlds, mining their own lives, loves, and stories into the mix. But, and there is nearly always a but, nothing in this endeavor is easy. Engaging in cultural studies nearly always involves existential questions of becoming, and of belonging.

In the semi-autobiographical novel, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit,* the émigré author, Judith Kerr, has the protagonist Anna ask her father, 'Do you think we'll ever really belong anywhere?', and to which he replies: *'I suppose not. [...] Not the way people belong who have lived in one place all their lives. But we'll belong a little in lots of places, and I think that may be just as good.'*

I would like to thank the Editor-in-Chief, Professor Holger Briel, for his tremendous work in founding and guiding this publication, nurturing it through its precarious early years and through to its current rude health. Professor Briel has been steadfast in his commitment to promote and publish excellent scholarship and has made this journal something of which I am extraordinarily proud. I would like to thank his superb team, and those who have helped edit and administer the journal over the past ten years, and of course the many contributors who have helped ensure the strength of this journal. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Ken Camiling and Nick Potts of the IAFOR publications team, whose work behind the scenes has been instrumental to the success of the journal.

May IAFOR, and the pages of this journal, be one of the places in and to which you belong a lot.

Happy reading!

Dr Joseph Haldane, Chairman & CEO, The International Academic Forum (IAFOR)

Notes on Contributors

Special Anniversary Article 1
Wither Cultural Studies

Holger Briel
Professor Holger Briel is Dean of UIC's Division of Culture and Creativity. He holds a PhD in Cultural Theory from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, an MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and a BA in English and German from Eberhardt-Karls-Universität Tübingen, Germany. A portion of his graduate studies was also undertaken at the Université de Paris, Sorbonne. Previously, Dr Briel has taught at New York University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Aristotle University Thessaloniki, the University of Innsbruck, the University of Surrey, Indiana State University and Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University. He has held numerous Visiting Professorships and lectured at Oxford University, UC Berkeley, CUNY, Ateneo de Manila, the National University of Malaysia, the National University of Singapore, Universität Rostock and many others. He has published copiously in media and cultural studies, philosophy, the social sciences, and international management studies and remains active a as journalist for several international newspapers.
Email: publications@iafor.org

Special Anniversary Article 2
The State of Cultural Studies Today – Challenges and Opportunities

Contributors – Listed in no particular order

Hans-Georg Moeller · University of Macau
Mieke Bal ·Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)
Charles Shiro Inouye ·Tufts University
Patrick Colm Hogan · University of Connecticut
Anne M. Cronin · Lancaster University
Catherine Evans · Carnegie Mellon University
Mark James · Molloy University
Jeffrey Williams · Carnegie Mellon University
Doris Bachmann-Medick · International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) of the Justus Liebig University Giessen
Paola Bacchetta · University of California, Berkeley
Baden Offord · Curtin University
Sue Ballyn · Honorary Professor, University of Barcelona (Rtd)
Lai Fong Yang · Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University
Charles Lowe · Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University
Marko Pajević · Lund University

Email: publications@iafor.org

Regular Articles

Article 1

Becoming Tribal, Thinking Beyond Myth: Ecuadorian Indigenism as Performative Givenness and the Postmodern Event

Miguel A. Orosa
Miguel A. Orosa is an Associate Professor of Performance and the Philosophy of Art at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, specialising in the former's evental and metaphysical dimensions. He is currently exploring new perspectives on the study and research of difference and the margins, focusing particularly on indigenism in Latin America from philosophical and postmodern standpoints. He is also conducting research in this area from the perspective of quantum mechanics and ontological-mathematical commitment. Miguel is also a writer of contemporary literature and drama with numerous publications in prestigious international journals and publishing houses. Above all, Miguel views himself as an artist. He has taught on the Master's in Advanced Theatre Studies programme at UNIR, an international university with campuses in Spain and Latin America. He is a member of several international associations, including the British Society for Phenomenology, the European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance, and the Singapore Drama Educators Association. In 1985, he received the First National Research Award, "La Ley", for his pioneering research on Inverted Accession.
Email: maorosa1@pucesi.edu.ec

Yamileth Arteaga Alcívar
Yamileth Andrea Arteaga Alcívar is an Ecuadorian academic and researcher specializing in international relations, diplomacy, and public policies. She holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from the National Institute of Advanced Studies (IAEN) and a Master's degree in Public Policy from FLACSO-Ecuador. Her professional trajectory includes teaching at higher education institutions, managing research projects, scientific publishing, and developing educational materials based on artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. She has held leadership roles as General Manager of Iyayku Technological Innovation and Coordinator of the Research and Innovation Unit at the International Technological Higher Institute (ITI). Her scientific production includes more than 35 articles published in journals indexed in SCOPUS, Latindex, MIAR, ERIHPLUS, and other high-impact databases, covering topics such as digital education, academic cybersecurity, artificial intelligence applied to education, and the development of inclusive educational policies. Additionally, she has participated as a speaker at international conferences in the United States, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. Currently, she collaborates as an external researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE), integrating interdisciplinary projects in social engineering and university security.

Nancy G. Ulloa
Nancy Ulloa Erazo hods a degree in Social Communication and a Higher Diploma in University Teaching. She also has a diploma in Business Administration, Quality and Productivity with ISO Standards from the Pontificia Catholic University of Ecuador, Ibarra. She also holds an

International Master's in the Integral Development of Tourist Destinations from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and a PhD in Communication and Contemporary Information from the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. She has been Director of Communication and Public Relations, is the Official Spokesperson for the Catholic University of Ecuador, its manager of inter-institutional and international relations and a Member of the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana Núcleo de Imbabura. She is an undergraduate and graduate university professor, a researcher in media and communication, organisational communication, organisational culture, Corporate stories and storytelling; and contemporary communication and information.

Article 2

Telling "The World Changes": Artist Stories of Envisioning Global Citizenship

Ruth Bateson-Ardo

Ruth Bateson-Ardo is an Assistant Lecturer and PhD candidate in the School of Psychology at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, teaching into social psychology courses. Her research focuses on global citizenship as creative exercises of connectivity and ethical commitments of bringing different memories and imaginations of the world together in new synchronisations.

Email: R.Ardo@massey.ac.nz

Ann Rogerson

Ann Rogerson is a Lecturer at Massey University, Palmerston North campus, Aotearoa, New Zealand, where she teaches critical social psychology and feminist psychology at undergraduate level. She has a commitment to social justice and missing voices research and her research interests also include feminist methodologies, gendered violence, care ethics and technologies of care.

Stephanie Denne

Stephanie Denne is a Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Massey University, teaching principles of research design and practice at under-graduate and post-graduate levels. Stephanie's work advocates for ethical non-violence and transforming narratives of accountability to challenge the conditions of possibility that enable violence and marginalization in communities.

Leigh Coombes

Leigh Coombes is an Associate Professor in te Kura Hinengaro Tangata (School of Psychology) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her research focuses on the everyday conditions of gendered violence as a commitment to ethical activism to transform social power relations, including historical, social, and cultural conditions of gender and the effects of colonisation in our communities.

Article 3

A Preliminary Exploration of Chinese Digital Nomads' Life and Workstyle

Jingyi Lou

Jingyi Lou is currently pursuing a joint Master's/PhD in the Department of Innovation, Yonsei University, South Korea. She earned her Bachelor's degree from Yonsei University in 2019, majored in Culture Design Management. Her academic focus lies in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Human-AI Interaction (HAI), Design Thinking, creative branding and marketing. Her research interests focus on innovation within the social sciences, with a particular emphasis on understanding human behaviour as shaped by current technological advancements and global mobility. Currently, her research focuses on exploring the lifestyle, challenges, and behaviours of digital nomads—a growing demographic in the modern workforce—while intersecting with global mobility and cultural adaptation, with the aim of understanding how different cultural contexts influence human behaviour in diverse ways.

Hyun-Kyung Lee

Hyun-Kyung Lee is currently a Professor in the Division of Culture & Design Management, Department of Innovation at Yonsei University, Seoul, Republic of Korea. She received his Ph.D. in Arts Administration from Florida State University, FL, USA in 2007, and Masters in Museum Studies from Syracuse University, NY, USA in 2004, and Bachelors in Visual Communication Design from HongIk University, Seoul, Korea in 2000. She has worked at industries as junior design researcher at LG Electronics, Inc. from 2000 to 2002, as post-doctoral researcher at Paul Getty Museum at Los Angeles, CA from 2007 to 2008, and as adjunct professor at Art Center College of Design at Pasadena, CA from 2008-2009. Professor Lee's research interests include service/product/user experience design where science and technology research are grafted in cultural space. She is known for her work in research for art and design education and creativity, exhibition design and design museum studies. Dr. Lee is an author of the book "Design Museum, here" published by Ahn Graphics (2016), and "Design Museum Management" published by VDM Verlag (2009), and co-authors of the book "Basic Design Textbook" published by Ahn Graphics (2015) and has published 49 journals, and 40 conference papers in mostly the top art and design education journals and conferences.
Email: hyunkyunglee@yonsei.ac.kr

Article 4

Appropriating Me. A New Emerging Aesthetic in the Indian Diaspora of South Africa

Nalini Moodley

Nalini Moodley is currently the Executive Dean and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. She holds a B.A (Fine Arts), an M.A. (Art History) cum laude, a UPGCE (cum laude) and has completed her PhD in Art History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The latter focused on visual art produced by South Africans who graduated from a former Indian institution, the University of Durban Westville. She also holds an MBA in Higher Education Management from the Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Finland. Her present areas of research include the politics of minorities as well as the complexities of race and identity politics within a transforming South

Africa. Within this broad area, she focuses on the challenges of being Indian in a post-apartheid South Africa and how this position is realised through visual culture. She has published papers in peer-reviewed journals on Hindu art and artists in South Africa, Indian dance, and the multiplicity of positionalities of South Africans. She also leads the Research Niche Area "Addressing GBV Through Artivism the Tshwane University of Technology. Lastly, she is also Bharatha Natyam dancer.
Email: moodleydiarn@tut.ac.za

Article 5
Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence

Santanu Sarkar
Santanu Sarkar is currently a doctoral scholar at the Rekhi Centre of Excellence for the Science of Happiness, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, West Bengal, India. His interdisciplinary research focuses on storytelling, emotional engagement, and comparative aesthetics and poetics, examining how different narrative structures evoke emotional responses in readers. Grounded in classical Indian theories of dramatics and aesthetics—particularly the Nāṭyaśāstra (a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts) and Rasa Theory—his work offers a comparative analysis of Western narrative frameworks, including Aristotle's Poetics. He holds a BA (Hons.), an MA, and an MPhil, all in Sanskrit Literature. His research interests include Indian knowledge systems, classical Indian poetics and dramatics, literary criticism, narrative theory, film aesthetics, and the psychology of storytelling. He has presented his researches at multiple international conferences, such as the IEEE International Conference on Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Memory Studies and Digital Technologies (India/UK, 2022); the 5th Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture (Spain, 2024); the International Capital Conference on Multidisciplinary Scientific Research (Portugal/Turkey, 2022); the 2nd International Azerbaijan Congress on Life, Social, Health and Art Science (Azerbaijan, 2022); and the 2nd International Conference on Humanities, Education, and Social Science (Indonesia/Japan/New Zealand, 2022).
Email: sanatnus383@gamil.com or santanus383@iitkgp.ac.in

Anuradha Choudry
Dr Anuradha Choudry is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India. With an academic foundation in Sanskrit, Psychology, and Yoga, she specializes in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Vedic psychology, and Indic approaches to happiness, development, and well-being. She received her PhD in Sanskrit from Pondicherry University and has since gained international recognition for her contributions to Indian psychology and cultural philosophy. Her interdisciplinary work emphasizes the relevance of classical Indian thought in contemporary global discourse. Dr Choudry edited *Perspectives on Indian Psychology* (2013) and co-authored *Happiness: Indic Perspectives* (2017), among other scholarly works. Her teaching and research integrate traditional Sanskrit texts with modern frameworks in psychology, linguistics, and sustainability. As Co-Principal Investigator, she is actively involved in several international research collaborations, including AQUAMUSE (IHE Delft), ENGAGE (Swiss National Science

Foundation), and V2V (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). Her current research explores Indic worldviews as alternatives to mainstream Euro-American paradigms, drawing upon primary Sanskrit sources to rediscover the contributions of Indian thought across diverse fields.

Article 6

The Queer State of Being: Navigating the Neoliberal City through Kari

Nanjani Gandhi

Nanjani Gandhi is a Research Scholar in the Department of English at Pondicherry University, India. She completed her undergraduate studies at Delhi University, and her postgraduate studies at The English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad. Her current research is focused on examining heteronormative narrative strains within urban spaces in South Asian literature. In particular, she is interested in exploring the representation of conjugal relationships and alternative family structures in contemporary literature from South Asia. Her research interests also include queer theory, Marxist and feminist theories, gender and sexuality studies, Indian English literature, and Weird Fiction.
Email: nanjani1998@pondiuni.ac.in

S. Visaka Devi

S. Visaka Devi is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Pondicherry University, India. Her areas of specialisation and current interest are comparative literature and translation studies. She has published papers in reputed journals and edited books on topics such as translation theory, comparative literature, Canadian Indigenous Poetry, and Children's literature.

Article 7

Understanding the Multi-Sensory in a City's Cultural Attractions: The Museum Experiences of Istanbul's Historical Urban Texture

Asiye Nisa Kartal

Asiye Nisa Kartal (PhD in Architecture, University of Nottingham, UK) is currently an Assistant Professor. at Nevsehir University's Faculty of Engineering and Architecture. Her research interests are based on Sensory Urban Mapping and Ethnography, Sensory and Multi-sensory methods in Museums and Museum Studies.
Email: a.nisa.gunduz@gmail.com; ankartal@nevsehir.edu.tr.

Hasan Basri Kartal

Hasan Basri Kartal (PhD in Architecture and Neuropsychology, University of Nottingham, UK) is an Asstistant Professor in Mimar Sinan Fine Art University's Architecture Department. He qualified as an architect in Istanbul, Turkey. His current research areas are Indigenous World Architecture, Architecture in Evolutionary Perspective, and the Biological Dimensions of Human Architecture.

Article 8

Fragments of Broken History: Misrepresentations of Dahomey in Contemporary Culture

Ron Lawrence Anderson

Ron Lawrence Anderson was born in South Africa, where he completed postgraduate degrees in History and Journalism at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Stellenbosch respectively. In 1991, his academic studies, which focussed on South African history, were interrupted by certain events, as he sought to find ways to avoid compulsory military conscription in South Africa, which was then still under apartheid rule. Following South Africa's transition to multi-party democracy in 1993, he worked as a creative copywriter, and occasional Creative Director, in South Africa, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. However, in recent years he has returned to academic pursuits, completing a PhD in Archaeology at the University of Sydney by studying rare artefacts from the Kingdom of Dahomey. Today, he is affiliated with the University of Sydney, exploring research topics related to History, Historical Archaeology, Anthropology, Archaeometallurgy, History of Art, and Heritage Studies more broadly. He maintains a very strong interest in West African and South African history and material culture.

Email: ronlawrenceanderson@gmail.com or rand4707@uni.sydney.edu.au

Article 9

Preserving Tradition: Motif Design Development for Batik Tulis Lasem

Vera Jenny Basiroen

Vera Jenny Basiroen, is a lecturer and graphic designer from Pangkal Pinang, Bangka, Indonesia. She holds a bachelor's degree in Graphic Design from Trisakti University and a Master of Fine Arts in Computer Arts Multimedia from the Academy of Art University, San Francisco. She has been dedicated to empowering Batik Tulis artisans in Lasem Regency, Central Java, for over eight years. She has played an important role in developing sustainable, contemporary batik motifs that preserve and innovate Indonesia's cultural heritage. Her expertise combines art, technology, and sustainability, encouraging creative collaboration and knowledge sharing among artisans. Currently, She is the Course Content Coordinator for the Graphic Design & New Media Program in the Visual Communication Design Department at the School of Computing and Creative Arts, Binus University. Her research interests include sustainable design, visual communication, and empowerment of traditional artisans through modern design approaches.

Email: nonjane@binus.edu

Ida Bagus Kerthyayana Manuaba

Ida Bagus Kerthyayana Manuaba is a well-known Computer Science lecturer at Bina Nusantara University, international Program specializing in Human Computer Interaction, Web Technology, artificial intelligence, machine learning and data science. He earned his undergraduate degree in Engineering (S.T.) from Udayana University, followed by a Ph.D. in Computer Science from The Australian National University. With over 10 years of academic experience, Dr. Manuaba has authored numerous publications in academic journals, guided

award-winning student projects and received accolades for outstanding teaching and research contributions. His expertise and passion inspire innovative solutions, fostering the next generation of tech professionals.

Grasheli Andhini
Grasheli Andhini graduated from Birmingham City University, UK, with a Master of Arts in Design Management: Entrepreneurship and Innovation. She also has practical expertise in the fashion industry, where she runs her own ready-to-wear label. Currently, Grasheli serves as the Subject Content Coordinator for the Fashion Design Program in the Product Design Department at Binus International University, Jakarta. Her areas of expertise include entrepreneurship, fashion management, retail operations, and fashion production.

Article 10
Preserving Sacred Space: Identity of the Chinese Temples in Thailand

Khemarin Pensaengon
Khemarin Pensaengon is a full-time lecturer in the Social Sciences Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand. She earned her doctoral degree from the Graduate School of International Development at Nagoya University, Japan. She also holds a Master's degree in International Development Studies from Chulalongkorn University. Her research focuses on aging societies and social welfare in East and Southeast Asia. While studying in Japan, she developed a strong interest in elderly welfare issues. She has published work on social protection programs and elderly care. As a Thai of Chinese descent, she also researches Chinese community identity in Thailand. She has presented her research at various international conferences and academic for a. Her work combines development studies, social policy, and cultural identity.
Email: pensaengon_k@silpakorn.edu

Tawan Wannarat
Tawan Wannarat is an Assistant Professor in the Social Sciences Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand. He holds a Master's degree in Economics from Chulalongkorn University and a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from Kasetsart University. His research interests center on Thai labor studies and economic history, with a recent emphasis on Chinese cultural and heritage in Thailand. By combining insights from development studies and labor history, Tawan's research offers a unique interdisciplinary perspective on Thai society and culture. His work aims to deepen understanding of the evolving roles of labor and cultural identities in Thailand's social landscape. He continues to explore these topics through research, teaching, and community engagement.

Pipat Suya
Pipat Suya is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand. He received his Ph.D. in Philosophy and Religion from Kasetsart University, where his dissertation explored the ethics of belief. He also holds an M.A. in Philosophy from Chulalongkorn University, where he wrote on the philosophy of language. His primary research interests lie in epistemology and analytic philosophy, with particular focus on questions

concerning belief, language, and normativity. In addition to his philosophical work, Pipat engages with Thai cultural and intellectual discourses, especially in examining the role of Chinese cultural and heritage in Thailand. Through his interdisciplinary research, he brings fresh insights into how philosophy intersects with cultural identities and social dynamics in contemporary Thailand.

Watcharin Anekpongpan
Watcharin Anekpongpan is a full-time lecturer in the Modern Eastern Languages Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand. He earned his master's degree in Area Studies from the University of Tsukuba, Japan. His academic interests encompass a broad range of topics within Japanese studies, including Japanese linguistics, ancient history, and the rich tapestry of Japan's cultural practices. Currently, he is completing a research project examining the role of Shinto shrines within Japanese society, shedding new light on their historical and cultural significance. Through his work, Watcharin bridges the past and present, offering nuanced perspectives on Japan's dynamic cultural heritage.

Article 11
Women's Politics in La Galigo: A Bugis Manuscript

Nurhamdah Zain
Nurhamdah Zain is an Associate Lecturer at the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Parepare, Indonesia, where she also serves as Head of the Language Development Center. In addition to her academic duties, she is the Finance Manager of Muslimat NU Parepare and a seasoned qualitative researcher. Her academic background in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) intersects with a strong research focus on gender studies, particularly within educational and sociocultural contexts. She employs qualitative methodologies to explore issues related to identity, power, and representation in language and pedagogy. Committed to inclusive and community-engaged scholarship, her work integrates feminist perspectives into both academic research and institutional practice, with the aim of advancing gender equity through education and discourse.
Email: nurhamdah@iainpare.ac.id

Rahmi Djafar
Rahmi Djafar is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Educational Technology at Universitas Megarezky Makassar. She holds a Master's degree in English Education from Universitas Negeri Makassar. Her academic interests center on the relationship between language, literature, and cultural identity, with a particular emphasis on gendered narratives and literary expression. In addition to her scholarly publications in language and literature, she is an accomplished fiction writer. Her novels include *Elang* (2020) and *Inti Samudra* (2020), and she has contributed to the anthologies *Rahasia Keluarga* Volumes 1 and 2 (2022, 2023). She is also the author of the online novel *Roti dan Kopi* and a contributor to the essay poetry collection *Penyair yang Mati Gentayangan di Catatan Kaki*. Through workshops and public engagement, she actively promotes gender-conscious creative writing across academic spaces in Indonesia.

Nur Nahdiyah
Nur Nahdiyah is a Junior Expert in State Budget Financial Management at the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Parepare, Indonesia. She earned her Master's degree in Accounting from Universitas Muslim Indonesia. Her professional role involves the implementation and oversight of national budget systems (APBN) in higher education, with a research agenda that critically examines the intersections of gender and financial governance. Her work explores how financial systems and accounting practices reflect and reinforce gendered power dynamics. Nur Nahdiyah is committed to fostering gender-inclusive approaches in both institutional finance and academic research, contributing to discourses on equity and representation within the field of public sector accounting.

Norhan Farouk
Norhan Farouk is a bilingual translator, writer, and facilitator based in Cairo, Egypt. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Power Engineering from Zagazig University and a Translation Diploma from the American University in Cairo (AUC), with additional studies in liberal arts at the Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences. With a professional background that spans engineering, content development, and intercultural facilitation, she has translated and written for leading organizations, including GoDaddy, Lafarge Egypt, and the National Reading Project. She is currently working as an English–Arabic translator at Aseer AlKotob and a freelance researcher and writer focusing on youth development, civic engagement, and cultural education. Norhan has also facilitated numerous workshops across Egypt and internationally, promoting dialogue, coexistence, and youth empowerment. She participated in exchange and volunteer programs in Bulgaria and Bangladesh, and has collaborated with NGOs such as Soliya and International Initiatives for Cooperation. Her diverse skill set includes translation, workshop facilitation, research, and public engagement on sociopolitical and educational topics.

Nabilahumaida
Nabilahumaida is a Research Assistant and emerging clinical psychologist based in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Universitas Negeri Makassar and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Psychology at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). Her research interests span clinical psychology, cultural mental health, and gendered experiences of emotional wellbeing. At IAIN Parepare, she has contributed to qualitative research, proposal writing, and academic publications. She also works as an Assistant Psychologist, involved in therapy, psychological assessment, and peer counselling. Her scholarly work explores academic anxiety, gender and cognition, and psychological resilience in post-pandemic contexts. She has participated and continues to participate in academic programs hosted by Harvard University, with ongoing research focused on gender and emotional regulation in higher education settings.

the iafor
journal of cultural studies
Volume 1 – Issue 1 – Spring 2016
Editor: Holger Briel
ISSN: 2187-4905
Volume 1 – Issue 2 – Autumn 2016
Editor: Holger Briel
Volume 2 – Issue 1 – Spring 2017
Editor: Holger Briel
Volume 2 – Issue 2 – Autumn 2017
Editor: Holger Briel
Volume 3 – Issue 1 – Spring 2018
Editor-in-Chief: Holger Briel
Guest Editor: Markus Heidingsfelder
Editor's Essay
Wither Cultural Studies?
Holger Briel, Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University
Volume 3 – Issue 2 – Autumn 2018
Volume 4 – Issue 1 – Spring 2019
Volume 4 – Issue 2 – Autumn 2019
Volume 5 – Issue 1 – Spring 2020
Volume 5 – Issue 2 – Autumn 2020
Volume 6 – Special Issue – 2021
Guest Editor: John Nguyet Erni
Volume 6 – Issue 1 – 2021
Volume 6 – Issue 2 – 2021
Volume 7 – Issue 1 – 2022
Volume 7 – Issue 2 – 2022
Volume 8 – Issue 1 – 2023
Volume 8 – Issue 2 – 2023
Volume 9 – Special Issue – 2024
Guest Editor: Marcus T. Anthony
Asian Futures
Volume 9 – Issue 1 – 2024
Volume 9 – Issue 2 – 2024

Anniversaries present a good opportunity to invoke editor's privilege and look at the changes cultural studies has undergone over the last years or so, highlight some of its milestones, and connect these to the responses by eminent colleagues collated below. In the following, cultural studies appear as a success story, but one that also comes with a number of tasks attached. But first, please allow me to digress a bit.

A long time ago, I was an undergraduate reading English and German at Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, one of the oldest universities in Germany, dating back to 1477. One could not have surmised this from the Faculty of the Humanities, based in a purpose-built edifice and called the Neuphilo or Brechtbau, built in 1974 and located on Wilhelmsstrasse. It was close to the Mensa and the library, so its location came in quite handy, despite its lack of patina or its location outside the old town. Other faculties were luckier, with theology, for instance, based in the old town where one would also find the Hölderlin-Turm, situated directly on the banks of the river Neckar where the eponymous poet spent much of his old age (whether voluntarily or involuntarily so is a matter of ongoing discussions). During my studies, the tower was used by German Studies and was a very-sought after seminar location, as it was in sharp contrast with the modern building used otherwise.

Even more impressive as a university location was the Schloss Hohentübingen, the palace-castle on the aptly named Schlossberg, which dominates the town to this day. In this castle, the Ludwig-Uhland-Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaften (Institute for Empirical Cultural Studies) was and is located. As this was one of the romantic vista points of the town, I did spend some time there and always envied the Institute its location. Of course, given the hubris of youth, at the time we humanities students thought we were studying the "real thing" and especially the "empirical" in the name of this field of study was treated with suspicion in the town of Hegel, Schlegel, Uhland, Hölderlin and other representatives of Early Romanticism. Our view of castle empiricism was not far off from that described by Kafka in his own version of the Schloss – intriguing, but ultimately *unheimlich*.

And yet, the Institut survived and continues to have many students today, but still not as many as German Studies has. If humanities were the most popular discipline to study at the time, especially Germanistik, the humanities were fractured into different disciplines, all anxiously guarding their supposed unique disciplinarities. In this, this science war was similar to the one fought out in philosophy with continental philosophers not really willing to talk much to their colleagues in analytical philosophy. If one looks at the offering of the Institut today, one can see that it has become a much broader field of studies, with empirical studies (methodologies) proper being a mere part of its present wider remit. From the other side, one might point to similar development in literary studies as well, as they have integrated into their curricula other areas of inquiry besides their "core" courses of literary studies and linguistics, such as Feminist Studies, Film, TV, Critical Race Studies, Comics, Fashion and a host of others. Tellingly for both, their tertio comparationis is cultural studies.

While this is a positive development, other broader changes within society and universities are worrying. As humanities courses have opened up to develop and launch a much broader inquiry into cultural offerings, this development, beginning in the 1980s with the Thatcher/Reagan

years, coincided with the overall scientification and businessification of universities. Using buzzwords such as "professionalisation" and "Europeanification", the European Credit Transfer System, PISA and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK (renamed Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014, but still equally reviled by many), all were implicated in drastically changing the university landscape. And while this is not a popular subject, standardisation, Scopus, SSI, university rankings, and so on. have all done their part in helping academics and the public better understand academic processes. Especially due to ever increasing government defunding, the politics of these finance procedures became much more transparent, and that is laudable. Up to a point that is. If such initiatives are undertaken in good faith and in order to offer a wider, diversified field of cultural inquiry to students, who could be against it? But if such tools are primarily used by university administrations, and more and more by government agencies to discipline/dismiss staff and pummel wider open-ended inquiries into cultures and the arts, then such developments serve neither students, nor faculty, nor society at large. Interdisciplinarity, so important for cultural studies, is a wonderful thing, but if used to downsize its traditional disciplinary bases, as is the case at the moment with many UK universities, then there is a problem. Equally, university administrations' increasing insistence on falling in line with publishing-industry-driven rankings of specific "top" journal over book-based publications and the refusal of backing basic long-term studies and realia collation in favour of a quick incubator/start-up money-driven culture, then core principles of (humanities') research are definitely under threat.

We therefore find ourselves in the paradoxical situation that, globally, cultural studies subjects are thriving, but increasingly have to do so under the huge shadow of business studies and hard sciences dominating university administrative agendas. Especially with recent developments in the USA, the study of the humanities has become an even more precarious undertaking. Funding is drying up and whole disciplines seem to be at risk. As strange as this sounds, it is the success and mainstreaming of cultural studies that has brought about the ire of traditionally-oriented politics. Cultural studies are targeted because they have begun to alter the social fabric and that is something to cherish.

Thus, not all is lost. And it just might be that the ubiquity and infiltration of cultural studies theories in many other disciplines might save the critical aspect of institutionalised academic inquiry as a whole. Cultural studies associations abound. There are the CSAA: Cultural Studies Association of Australasia, the Cultural Studies Association (CSA), based in the United States; the International Association for Cultural Studies (IACS); the Association for Cultural Studies (ACS), based in the UK; the European Association for Cultural Studies (EACS); and the Australian and New Zealand Cultural Studies Association (ANZCA)**.** This development in itself is already showing the strength of cultural studies, but might be considered "normal science" as these associations are mostly based in the global north. But, significantly, the development of cultural studies is no longer relegated to the global north; local developments are also taking hold in the global south. Thus, there are the Cultural Studies Association of South Africa (CSASA); the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO); the Association of Cultural Studies in India (ACSI); the Cultural Studies Association of the Caribbean (CSAC); and the Asian Cultural Studies Association (ACSA). All these speak to the

strength of cultural studies worldwide and might just reverberate back to and rejuvenate western cultural studies.

As the countries which arguable contributed most to the mainstream of cultural studies previously, the USA and the UK, are experiencing significant pushback against liberal cultural agendas, these agendas have found their way into the curricula of many universities globally. It is thanks to the development of cultural studies in North America and Europe that wherever one goes these days, even at small universities on even smaller islands, one easily encounters the names of Foucault, the Frankfurt and Birmingham School, postmodernism and feminism and similar. It is especially the ubiquity of these thinkers and schools that fuels the ire of traditionalists. How refreshing to hear a student ask me at a recent visit to the National University of East Timor whether I could spare some time discussing with her how Foucault's theories of power apply to the culturescape of her country! It seems that, at least globally, the genie is out of the bottle and it does not seem to want to return to it, as much as (western) traditionalist would like it to. There is yet another important aspect to this. In his much lauded book *Die Schule des Südens* (2024, no English translation yet), Onur Erdur demonstrated how the experience of especially the Maghreb was constitutive for the thought of postmodernism and the more political thought of deconstruction. Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Cixous and Rancière – all of them spent a significant amount of their lives in Northern Africa and had their thinking influenced by this experience. One might therefore say that the experience of the Other and of alterity is already inherent in cultural studies from the start.

By and large, this sentiment is also shared by the respondents to the question of challenges and opportunities to cultural studies. Hans-Georg Moeller calls it a "truly global" undertaking and thereby already an important player in academic fields. Mieke Bal reminds us of her intervention to use the term **"**cultural analysis" rather than "cultural studies" in order "to make that field more specific, and the practice of it, more precise and solid." What is important for her as for us is the way she sees the object of cultural studies: "The object must be allowed to qualify or even resist an interpretation… As I have been phrasing it: the object has the last word." This thought would certainly benefit any investigation of cultural phenomena and would bring out higher levels of equity than more traditional anthropologies might be able to.

Charles Shiro Inouye stresses the fact that**, "**Creativity requires a willingness to be inappropriate", a clarion call not to follow academic fads and also extending to the difference between "mis-understanding and missed understanding." Succinctly, he points out that, "If diversity is our reality, all of us should be frowning, at least some of the time," chastising earlier versions of multiculturalism claiming that its practice would inherently make everybody happy, and neglecting the fact that cultural encounters also entail an aspect of cultural confrontations within themselves. Patrick Colm Hogan describes his own socialisation to cultural studies the following way:

> I was moved by the puppet plays of Chikamatsu, the dramas of Kālidāsa, the enigmatic narratives of Bororo storytellers; I felt that I learned as much about ethical reflection from Indic theories of dharma or Chinese discussions of rén as from Mill and Kant;

> Abhinavagupta and al-Fārābī provided insights into the human mind unmatched in the West until the advent of cognitive science.

Here he points to basis of cultural studies, its reliance on the approach of manifold cultures and relating them to each other. At times, identities can get in the way, and he differentiates between, *categorical* and *practical* identity. As several others, Anne M. Cronin comments on the fact that one of the challenges for culture studies are the lack of definition, but she also notes that "Cultural Studies has long wrestled with the issue of definitions and disciplinary boundaries and has not yet imploded from the associated tensions!", offering hope that this is not a disadvantage, but rather an asset. Along similar lines, Catherine Evans argues with Stuart Hall that "Cultural Studies is a space with 'permanent tension', … holding room for theoretical development, materialist engagements, and ongoing political and politicized questions". Mark James takes us back to the inaugural issue of IJCS and reminds us of the perseverance of the utopic "desire" of cultural studies that Jameson had already invoked in the early 1990s and that are still relevant today, especially in cultural studies' ability to produce counterstories.

Jeffrey Williams comments on the "dediscipliarnry impulse of cultural studies", but also on the necessity **"**to sustain its intellectual rigor and its commitment to a critical cultural politics", as Paul Smith has argued. It is exactly this tension that keeps it relevant. Doris Bachmann-Medick credits cultural studies for its de-colonial work, in which "Widespread European (scholarly) categories that used to claim universal applicability should be critically re-examined, as they are always subject to "cross-categorical translation", fine-tuning "closeness and distance in its practice". Paola Bacchetta points out that cultural studies excel in ongoing analyses of power, that working "collectively, across geographies, differential situatedness in relations of power, across generations, … will allow … inventions of modes of resistance, liberation and transformation". Baden Offord invokes a famous phrase by Angela Davis**,** *Arriving at this moment*, and argues that due to this concept, "cultural studies is well placed as an intellectual, creative and activist approach to these overwhelming dilemmas". Sue Ballyn calls cultural studies **"**a testament to our resilience in the face of uncertainty and adversity". In her submission, Lai Fong Yang in particular looks at recent developments in technology and charges cultural studies with thematising them for the following reason:

> **"**The growing reliance on online platforms for news consumption, self-representation, and social engagement has introduced new dynamics in journalism, misinformation, empowerment, mobility, resistance, and negotiation. This shift opens avenues for scholars to investigate how cultural narratives are constructed and contested in digital spaces and how public perceptions are shaped by algorithmic curation".

Due to the global occurrence of these technological disruptions (here applied in its original *negative* meaning), it needs to embrace especially interdisciplinary approaches. The poet Charles Lowe remains agnostic about any definition of cultural studies, but remarks the following:

> Whatever Cultural Studies may be, its theorists and practitioners interrogate power relations and explore resistance—including resistance to the very academic discourses that attempt to define and encumber a field like Cultural Studies.

He sees it as an ever-evolving domain and ends with these words of hope: "The very definitional fluidity that complicates Cultural Studies is precisely what ensures its continued relevance and vitality." Lastly, Marko Pajević invites cultural studies to participate in what he calls with Henri Meschonnic a "poetological anthropology" providing and applied in "laboratories of meaning."

In most of these statements, then, we encounter the first major development in recent cultural studies, its global ubiquity and applicability. Starting in the 1990s, cultural studies did globalise, and based on the work of the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, began using strands of feminist studies, deconstruction, Critical Race Theory, and post- and de-colonialism to study a host of phenomena such as media, social constructs, power politics, the abject (Kristeva), identity and migration issues, tourism, and globalization and its fallout. Intersectionality began informing cultural studies and, applying the work of Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture***,** 1994), reflected the hybrid environment of culture in a globalized world, leading to what he calls the "third way". Arguably, it is precisely the political aspect deeply embedded in cultural studies that makes it a strong and attractive candidate for globalised practices.

It is therefore fair to say that for the last 40 years or so, cultural studies have been a thriving academic subject.[1] The very fact that many prefer to use it as a singular phrase already makes it clear that it has become, for better or for worse, thoroughly institutionalised. From its inception – closely travelling together with its adjacent fields of sociology, ethnography and anthropology–, it has offered ever more specific insights into social, media and linguistic phenomena. Historically, important work had already been done by members of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung (founded 1923/4 and thus just having completed its centenary); the Birmingham School; the Yale School; and many other researchers. In Europe, others had already begun this work earlier on, for instance Walter Benjamin with his ground-breaking work on radio, film and urban studies. Later on, one can point to Henri Levebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), and then Roland Barthes' work on the image and advertising agencies (1964) and *The Fashion System* (1967). In my mind, one particularly pivotal date for cultural studies was the publication of Leslie Fiedler's, *Cross the Border, Close the Gap* (1969), in which he demanded that academia start looking at ordinary cultures and reject the traditional bifurcation of high and low culture. If this was a call to arms mostly for American literature professors at first, it would in turn also stretch to practitioner artists, film makers and reviewers, and those involved in the then fledgling fields of feminist and race studies. Over the next few years, with the liberating, albeit only partially successful student revolutions of the 1960s and early 1970s, curricula would change rapidly and become more inclusive. Spurned on also by the arrival of "irreverent" post-modernist theories, reversals in anthropological work and

[1] Good general starting points for an overview of cultural studies are the following: During, S. (2007). *The cultural studies reader* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge. Hartley, J. (2003). *A short history of cultural studies*. London: Sage. Lewis, J. (2008). *Cultural Studies: The Basics* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. Miller, T. (Ed.) (2006). *A Companion to Cultural Studies.* Malden, MA: Blackwell. Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, Otago: University of Otago Press.

theories (cf.) the incredibly important work by Geertz on "thick description" (1973), the work by Benedict Anderson on *Imagined Communities* (1983); Shulamith Firestone's 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex;* and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) – all of these milestones expanding and further focusing cultural studies early on. Another important development would be the rise of audience studies, and with it the rejection of viewing the audience as a passive mass easily misled, a theory already pioneered by Jauss and Iser in the 1960s with their reception theory and then further popularised by Henry Jenkins and his 1992 *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

One other central publication that truly focused cultural studies was Grossberg/Nelson/ Treichler's massive 1992 *Cultural Studies*. On over 400 pages, its 21 contributors magisterially demonstrated the large scope but also deep quality cultural studies had achieved over the previous decade or so. This was also the time that more and more universities established discrete departments of Cultural Studies, for example, New York University in the 1980s; the Universities of East London, Melbourne and Sydney, in the 1990s and a slew of others in the 2000s, including a Cultural Studies programme within the School of English at Aristotle University, Greece, one I had the privilege of co-developing. More importantly, cultural studies began to move out of the Anglo-American sphere and its studies expanded to many other countries and cultural canons (cf. Briel 2002).

This development was of course far from linear, and input arrived from many disciplines and individuals. Eminent Berkeley anthropologist Laura Nader's 2018 introduction to her book C*ontrarian Anthropology* had this to say about the vagaries of her own discipline, something that by and large would also fit the timeline of cultural studies:

> Thomas Kuhn was at Berkeley and had written his book on paradigm shifts, *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), in which he distinguished "normal science. But within anthropology, as in the larger society, there are always trends and trendiness. First, functionalists were fashionable; so were Marxists, interpretive anthropologists, and later European social philosophers like Foucault, Gramsci, or Derrida… For an anthropologist, a fundamental examination of science mindsets would start with the comparative assessment of science quality in Western and other cultures…. Professional mindsets, within and outside of anthropology, tend to exclude a look in the mirror.

Cultural Studies is also always contrarian. It cannot rest upon its previous laurels, but rather has to earn them anew every single day.

However, this is not to say that all is well in cultural studies land. When we had approached eminent experts on cultural studies to contribute to this issue, while most were happy to comply, a number of them declined to participate because they felt (in good faith, one assumes) that their research took place outside the disciplinary remit they imagined for cultural studies to exist. This is of course reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's disdain when he was asked whether he practiced cultural studies and he replied that he did not, as he practiced sociology. These rivalries continue today. Thus, upon the launch of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, in the late 2000s, David Inglis, one of its founders declared:

> "I think that outside of the culturally oriented sociology world, the perception was that this was another cultural studies journal being launched. It would also have meant avoiding the situation that happened sometimes, when some authors, who had received comments to the effect that their paper was not 'sociological enough', said that they hadn't realized how rooted in the discipline of sociology the journal was." (2022)

For IJCS, this means that we also do not see ourselves as "just another cultural studies journal", but rather as one with the remit to cover large swaths of intellectual and cultural territories inclusively while giving voice particularly to many emergent scholars, especially those from the global south, something that we promise to continue doing.

So, the question still remains, what are the challenges and opportunities for cultural studies today? As we have seen, most scholars here mention the positive fuzziness of cultural studies and its subjects and the interculturality at its heart. For me, one of its starting points remains the quote variously (mis-)attributed to Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels, "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun."[2] The impetus to react to such statements, alarmingly common once again, remains and has taken on a new urgency. Culture wars in one of the originating country of cultural studies, the USA, are continuing and intensifying globally, with the USA becoming a blueprint for other countries' populist cultural policies.[3]

If the establishment of a globalised, intersectional and institutionalised practice of cultural studies had been the main development during the 1970s and 1980s, another development within the field would begin in the late 1980s. This would have to do with the increasing hold digital technologies began exerting over society, with its digital media and networks and global flows of information. This constitutes a "deep mediatization" of society, as noted by Couldry and Hepp (2017, 7)

One of the most important recent theoretical texts discussing technology is Benjamin Bratton's 2015 *The Stack* (2015), a blueprint for how technology is impacting our lives – individually and collectively, cocooning us involuntarily in pseudo-social engagement extremely difficult to disentangle from. It is also a good example of how it has become necessary for cultural studies to incorporate at least some software and hardware studies to its canon.[4]

Another aspect here is the sheer amount of study material available due to digital repositories. Especially in internet times, this material has grown exponentially and has led to the necessity of. The person that needs to find mention here foremost is Manuel Castells, whose *Rise of the Networked Society* appeared in 1996 and prepared the ground for cultural studies' increasing

[2] The actual correct quote stems from a play by Nazi playwright Hanns Johst from his play *Schlageter* (1933) and actually reads *"Wenn ich Kultur höre...entsichere ich meinen Browning"* (*"When I hear culture...I unlock my Browning").*

[3] On culture wars, cf. here James, Plaice and Toren (eds) (2015).

[4] While software studies garner much attention, this is less the case for hardware studies which are of equal importance. Especially the fact that we are increasingly perceiving our lives in and through screens deserves mention and analysis. Cf. here the important work by Friedberg (2006) and Ng (2021).

treatment of technological topics. Another important text here is Manovich's *Software Takes Command* (2001), arguably the first text to claim technological superiority in discussing culture, its systems, practitioners and artefacts

As much of our cultural life has moved onto cyberspace, cultural studies have to follow. This is not an easy task, as technology is shifting rapidly and what was important yesterday might not be so today. Figure 1 is a good example is the meme I recently received in my Instagram feed:

Figure 1
Social Media Meme

If in 2005 you had placed all your investigative marbles in writing books on ringtones, these texts would only be of cursory interest today. In my mind, this meme then neatly sums up some of the vagaries and hypes of technological development, including its present champion, AI.

This does not mean that we should disregard or even disparage technology and its social implications, as the humanities were want to do for many years; far from it. We know from Heidegger that we cannot escape technological enframing. And while ringtones and the metaverse (remember that one?) have been relegated to the scrap heap of technological history, rapid technologisation is increasingly enframing our relationship with ourselves and the world we inhabit. This is a pressing issue for cultural studies, and it was a bit worrying to note that only one respondent to our query mentioned it as an important field for cultural studies to examine.

Within the technologically driven inquiries into cultural studies, it seems there exists one particularly underestimated area that has still not been investigated sufficiently despite the fact of its function as a central plank of our digital social life: the area of visual studies. If the 1970s encountered the cultural turn in sociology, leading to the establishment of cultural studies proper, in the 1980s, we would encounter what W. J. T. Mitchel has coined the *Iconic Turn* – the realisation that images have become the main way in which we encounter ourselves (recently: Selfies) and our surrounding realities (recently: food pictures). This does not stop with the content of images; rather, it goes back to framing theories of media and their underlying technologies. This case has been expertly made by Shane Denson's work on *Discorrelated Images* (2020), where he demonstrates that it is the technology behind the lens that does not afford us the opportunity to take a critical stance, thereby connecting with Debord, the early Manovich and Bratton.

As important as these works are, it seems that cultural studies needs to move beyond this status quo. And there are signs that it is doing so. To begin with, one might rightfully ask whether it is not exactly this discorrelation (or, to use a trendier word, *disruption*) that affords us the opportunity not to jettison everything we have, but to rather examine the new perspectives such a situation affords us. The work of Mackenzie Wark is a good example for this. His *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) re-evaluates the importance of hackers and their rejection of capitalist values and the role of knowledge production towards a more collaborative effort in the digital world. Equally, his *Gamer Theory* (2007) examines video gaming, one of the most ubiquitous media trends in the digital world. Gaming, argues Wark, affords us the opportunity to re-examine concepts such as "play, competition, and the nature of reality" in a digital context, even providing a site of resistance to and a debunking of dominant cultural narratives.

My own work also investigates digital phenomena as sites of resistance. The edited volume *The Piracy Years* (2023) investigates how internet filesharing is questioning dissemination and production modes of cultural material and how society has profited from new digital models having been available for only 20 years or so. Additionally, elsewhere the term *VisionBytes* was introduced (Briel 2017; 2026) for the visual arrays and assemblages we are encountering today on a historically unprecedented level. It is used as an example to demonstrate how a change in nomenclature can serve as a centrepiece for modes of visual resistance. One can also point to Yuk Hui's *Cosmotechnics* (2019) in which he examines digital practices but refuses to only discuss them in the light of western theories. Rather, he applies Daoist-based theories, arguing that such kinds of necessary technological de-globalisations open up new venues of understanding, and thereby demonstrating how cultural differences and a reflected study of technology as a tool and metaphor allows us to denaturalise and domesticize it.

Another very profitable activity is the re-evaluation and practical criticism of the academic (publishing) industry. Many collectives, oftentimes going back to publishing collectives early on in the Soviet Union or during the 1918 short-lived revolution in Germany has provided the blueprint for such developments. Contemporary efforts include Gary Hall's academic work with the Open Humanities Press; Christian Fuchs' work and publishing with University of Westminster Press; or any number of open access publishing undertakings.

Other recent initiatives embedded in cultural studies practices are coproduction practices in the cultural fields in Europe[5], applying ethnography to study film co-productions and their cultural-political roles in European identity and history), collaborative film festivals such as the one in East Timor or the creation of an Opera Village in Burkina Farso, replete with a KIFIFE Kids Film Festival in 2025, a school, a small clinic, a future opera house, and workshops for and with local artists. The list could be continued.

During a recent meeting with one of my PhD students, we were discussing the application of Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction (again!) to a Chinese cultural phenomenon, and one of the other professors exclaimed, "Bourdieu, why always the European theoreticians, why not use local ones!" I wholeheartedly agree and there are more and more of them of course, while

[5] Cf. *Coproducing Europe: An Ethnography of Film Markets, Creativity and Identity* by E. Sideri (2021).

Bourdieu still remains important. Local and hybrid efforts abound, with many authors gladly and expertly standing on the shoulders of and referring to Fanon, Lumumba, Anzaldúa, Freire, Octavia Butler, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Soyinka, Nnedi Okorafor, Agamben, Walcott and many others. Such local and hybrid forms of engagement prove to be extremely effective, with theories being used from all over the global south. Isn't it exactly the confrontation between different cultural situations that provide us with realisations of how right (or wrong) we might be? This is not to suggest a hodgepodge of a bad fusion meals, but rather a decisive questioning of how much fusion can, should or should not be used in assessing a specific cultural feature.

When it comes to cultural studies' engagement with technology, and in a more normative vein, one could point to the AI legislation brought about in 2024 by the European Union, much derided and decried, but also feared by US Tech companies. It seems the fight here is not so much over how much (writing about) technology the world needs, but rather who owns the sovereignty over its narratives. Here I think it is of utmost importance for cultural studies to clinch back this narrative and not leave it to Alphabet, Meta or Microsoft to dominate research in this area with their own think tanks. History provides ample examples of how tobacco research by the tobacco industry or wine research by wine associations turned out. It seems to me that critical techno-engagement is one of the main areas cultural studies needs to involve itself in as an active and activist stakeholder.

In sum, one can ascertain that cultural studies are thriving, have been mainstreamed and institutionalised in many countries, and provide an at times quirky but very necessary reassessment of (digital) cultural practices. If institutionalisation, mainstreaming and globalising of cultural studies had been the main agenda items for the 1970s and 80s, one might state that this has been a success. As we have now entered the age of "social" media, there now exist new challenges for cultural studies. Here, especially the advent of AI has already begun to exert much influence on society in general and and its institutions of learning in particular, but it would seem that even here, cultural studies can be helpful to put things into perspective. One of my favourite recent films, Rainer Kohlberger's challenging yet entertaining *It has to be lived once and dreamed twice (D/A,* 2019) describes a world via AI eyes, AIs who are trying to understand who these humans were, now only embodied in film snippets. Theirs is a search for origins. With AI sensors upon us, perhaps it is a good idea to turn this around and ask who we are vis-à-vis AI, cherishing probability over computability.[6] Once again, cultural studies can readily and meaningfully assist.

As I am writing these lines, sitting in an international chain-café, my gaze falls upon this writing on the wall (Figure 2):

[6] Cf. here Appadurai (2013).

Figure 2
Writing on the Wall of a Chain-Café

No doubt, a valid statement, one that might even fit prominently for one of the basic tenets of cultural studies and all the sciences beyond it. However, I encounter this phrase in a decidedly economic stetting, one that, using it against itself, is not there to help me question what I write, but contribute to creating a specific atmospheric buzz for a hip Café. If it weren't there, perhaps there would be pictures of puppies. And yet we can learn something from it: Arguably, traditional cultural studies would have cried "co-optation", invoked Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and its culmination of the unopposable "integrated spectacle", and might be done with it. Today, this will not suffice. While the starting-off point would perhaps still be Debord, we would also summon a whole slew of theoreticians, beginning with Roland Barthes, bell hooks, W.J.T. Mitchell, and ending perhaps with Chuck Klosterman's *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (2003), all of whom aid us in expertly dissecting this image. And that is a good thing.

But now, enjoy reading IJCS 10.1 and we will see you back here for the launch of 10.2 later this year.

NB: Attentive readers will have noticed that I have refrained from being consistent in assigning cultural studies a singular or a plural number. For me this is a liberty owed to it/them
NBB: What follows is an arbitrary, even capricious selection of cultural studies text and should by no means be considered to be a comprehensive list. It is and remains a subjective selection

References

Abbas, A., & Erni, J. N. (Eds.) (2005). *Internationalizing cultural studies: An anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Adorno, T. W. (1978). *Minima moralia: Reflections from a damaged life* (E. F. N. Jephcott, Trans.). Verso. (Original work published 1951)

Anderson, B. R. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised and extended. ed.). London: Verso.

Appadurai, A. (2013). *The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition*. London: Verso.

Barthes, R. (1967/1990). *The fashion system*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Barthes, R. (1964/1977). Rhetoric of the image. In: *Image Music Text* (Essays Selected and Translated by Heath, S., pp. 32–51). London: Fontana.

Benjamin, W. (1936, 2008). *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bratton, B. H., et al. (2016). *The stack: On software and sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262029575.001.0001

Bredekamp, H. (2017). *Image acts: A systematic approach to visual agency.* Translated, edited, and adapted by Elizabeth Clegg. *Berlin:* De Gruyter.

Briel, H. (2002). *German culture and society: A glossary*. London: Arnold, 2002

Briel, H., High, M., & Heidingsfelder, M. (Eds.), (2023), *The piracy years,* Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv33b9vkf

Briel, H. (forthcoming, 2026). *The age of the VisionByte*. Amsterdam: Brill.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the networked society*. London: Blackwell.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality.* London: Polity.

Denson, S. (2020). *Discorrelated images.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012412

During, S. (2007). *The cultural studies reader* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Erdur, O. (2024). *Die Schule des Südens*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

Fiedler, L. A. (1969). Cross the border, close the gap. *Playboy* 16, 12, pp. 151, 230,252–58.

Firestone, S. (1970). *The dialectic of sex.* New York City, NY: William Morrow.

Friedberg, A. (2006). *The virtual window*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*: *Selected essays*. New York City, NY: Basic.

Grossberg, L. (2010). *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Grossberg, L., Nelson, C., & Treichler, P. (Eds.) (1992). *Cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (1992). Race, culture, and communications: Looking backward and forward at cultural studies. *Rethinking Marxism* 5(1),10–18.

Hartley, John (2003). *A short history of cultural studies*. London: Sage.

Hoggart, Richard (1957). *The uses of literacy: Aspects of working class life*. Chatto and Windus.

James, D., Plaice, E. & C. Toren (eds) (2015). *Culture wars: Context, models and anthropologists' accounts.* New York City, NY: Berghahn. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781845456412

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hui, Y. (2019). *Cosmotechnics: The transcendence of technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Klosterman, C. (2003). *Sex, drugs, and cocoa puffs: A low culture manifesto.* New York City, NY: Scribner.

Kristeva, J. (1980, 1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Translated by Leon Samuel Roudiez. New York City, NY: Columbia University Press.

Lane, J. (2022). *Reception theory and reader-response: Hans-Robert Jauss (1922-1997). Wolfgang Iser (1926-) and the School of Konstanz.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1947/1991). *Critique of everyday life*. London: Verso.

Lewis, J. (2008). *Cultural studies: The basics* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Miller, T. (Ed.) (2006). *A companion to cultural studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1987). *Iconology: image, text, ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226148052.001.0001

Nader, L. (2018). *Contrarian anthropology: The unwritten rules of academia.* New York, NY: Berghahn. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04j6x

Ng, J. (2021). *The post-screen through virtual reality, holograms and light projections. Where screen boundaries lie*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv23985t6

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York City, NY: Pantheon.

Sideri, E. (2022). *Coproducing Europe - An ethnography of film markets, creativity and identity.* New York: Berghahn. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800739864

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples,* Otago: University of Otago Press.

Storey, J. (2021, 9th ed.) *Cultural theory and popular culture*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003011729

Storey, J. (2019, 5th ed.) *Cultural theory and popular culture*: *A reader*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315226866

Thorpe, C., & Inglis, D. (2022). What's up with cultural sociology? From Bourdieu and the mainstream to 'productive weirdness'. *Cultural Sociology*, *16*(3), 318–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755221112625

Wark, M. (2004). *A hacker manifesto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044845

Wark, M. (2004). *Gamer theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, R. (1966). *Culture and society, 1780-1950.* New York: Harper & Row.

Williams, R. (1985). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (revised ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Holger Briel
Editor-in-Chief, *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*
Zhuhai, June 2025
Email: publications@iafor.org

The State of Cultural Studies Today – Challenges and Opportunities

The State of Cultural Studies Today – Challenges and Opportunities

For the 10th year anniversary issue of the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies* we asked a number of prominent shapers of the field of cultural studies about its status quo and the challenges and opportunities they foresaw for its futures.

Contributors – Listed in no particular order

Hans-Georg Moeller · University of Macau

Mieke Bal ·Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)

Charles Shiro Inouye ·Tufts University

Patrick Colm Hogan · University of Connecticut

Anne M. Cronin · Lancaster University

Catherine Evans · Carnegie Mellon University

Mark James · Molloy University

Jeffrey Williams · Carnegie Mellon University

Doris Bachmann-Medick · International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) of the Justus Liebig University Giessen

Paola Bacchetta · University of California, Berkeley

Baden Offord · Curtin University

Sue Ballyn · Honorary Professor, University of Barcelona (Rtd)

Lai Fong Yang · Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University

Charles Lowe · Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University

Marko Pajević · Lund University

Email contact: publications@iafor.org

Hans-Georg Moeller
University of Macau

Academic Cultural Studies have finally become more truly global. The *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies* is a very good example of this important development: An increasing number of scholars from the Global South are now able to publish internationally and to participate in the production of research. This has made the field of Cultural Studies more diverse both regarding the academics who contribute to it and the range of topics addressed by them. Obviously, the globalization of Cultural Studies is not an isolated phenomenon but has taken place within the wider context of the globalization of the academic system as a whole – which in turn happened in the context of an accelerated transition to a fully-fledged "world society" (*Weltgesellschaft*).

Next to increased diversity, another consequence of the globalization of academia in general and of Cultural Studies in particular is an ever-closer integration of the humanities and the social sciences into a world-wide "academic industry" which has been shaped in close coupling with the economic, political, and media systems around it. Cultural Studies, too, could not escape the general need of the academic industry to perpetuate its functioning in a self-referential manner.

Mieke Bal
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)

Critical Encounters

When "cultural studies" was being established firmly as an academic field, I stubbornly decided to make a slight change in its name, and a bigger change in its practice. My proposal, over 25 years ago, to call the work we do in the Humanities "cultural analysis" rather than "cultural studies", was motivated by the wish to distinguish it primarily from the frequently methodologically dogmatic fields of the separate disciplines, but also, from the frequently somewhat under-defined and over-politicized habits of many who labelled their work "Cultural Studies". This small change is not a rejection of "cultural studies" but an attempt to make that field more specific, and the practice of it, more precise and solid. I was in search of an approach to our contemporary socio-cultural environments, including aesthetic ones, that would comprise both particular methodological guidelines and intellectual freedom. That combination would, I surmised, encourage encounters: between people, between people and artworks, and between artworks. But also, between the two keywords of the term: "cultural" and "analysis". The former describes the objects of study, be these literary, cinematic, musical, ritual or visual, in their socio-cultural functions; the latter the manner in which these are studied. The importance of encounters resides in its liveness, relationality, and, most importantly, its futurality. One can never determine what, precisely, will happen among the encountering people or elements, but that uncertainty constitutes just what matters: what keeps the participants alive and ready to continue.[1]

With the first and most important element of that "manner", interdisciplinarity, which is not a rejection of disciplines but a conversation, or encounter, among the different academically cultivated fields of study, the concept of cultural analysis states the autonomy of the objects or artefacts, independent from the organized approaches and their methodological knowledge bases. There also needs to be a theoretical base, not as a master discourse but as one of the participants in the conversation. And then, another crucial element: the encounter needs to bring forward an argument, a demonstration, that both the analysis and the cultural object have social relevance. Both emerge from, and function within the social environment within which the analyst is embedded as well.

And then, the analysis must be a true analysis: detailed, convincingly connecting the elements and aspects of the object to the aspects mentioned so far. This is the most specific feature that distinguishes cultural analysis from the less specifically defined cultural studies. The object must be allowed to qualify or even resist an interpretation. As I have been phrasing it: the object has the last word. It must be enabled to "speak back". Usually, in our writing we first give an argument, then follows the quote, meant as evidence. My point is that quotes should not be used to confirm what the student says about it, but rather, to complicate it. If we develop the

[1] See the extremely short video in the "About" section on my website, (3 minutes) in which I explain the approach through the five aspects I mention here.

habit of systematically revisiting a quote and carefully check to which point it does confirm our reasons for quoting it and in what way it does not, we will easily notice that the confirmation is rarely completely "right". But instead of panicking, or thinking we were wrong, or even worse, repress the differences, such complications can help us to move beyond what we (think we) already know. Rather, carefully listening, treating the object as a "second person", in other words, as an interlocutor, is the apprenticeship of cultural analysis as a critical practice. There is no more concise way to explain how I imagine the difference between cultural analysis and other approaches.

And then, the most controversial yet crucial aspect: the temporal starting point of the analysis is the present. The past matters as what brings the present and the past together, in dialogue – a temporal encounter. This challenges the usual chrono-logic with its straight arrow as its symbol and the idea of development as its ideology. These five principles produce a specific attitude both towards the objects of analysis and towards our "others": colleagues, students, lay interlocutors: an attitude of reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility; what can be summed up as dialogue. This implies an attitude of responsiveness to the appeal and the contribution of others to the theme of the analysis and to its object.

But such encounters must be helped by tools that are methodologically responsible. If not, the analyses would depend entirely on the competences of the individual analysts, without the standards, motives of comparison, and the intersubjectivity (to recall Karl Popper's guidelines) that makes them teachable. Nevertheless, among the disciplines, the concepts and tools for intersubjectivity are not rigidly fixed. Their meanings, usefulness and specific uses, their scope and operative value all differ. Those processes of differentiation must be openly discussed, before, during and after each attempt. In this way students are working on an equal footing with their teachers. Such flexibility helps to avoid rigidity, bossiness, as well as arbitrariness and neglect. At the same time, it mobilizes the imagination and identification. With the help of such serious discussions, it becomes possible to develop research questions outside of the pre-established paradigms within each of the singular disciplines. That equality between teachers and students is crucial to the educational result. Another of my academic slogans says: if you don't learn from your students you are a bad teacher.

Instead of such a priori positions one can accept to be guided through distinct disciplinary fields in relation with one another, without the need to become experts and obtain diplomas in each discipline encountered, and without the need to obey the rules of methodology that are boss in each participating discipline. It was with this view of concepts that I have developed my book Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide (2002). Concepts are the primary tools of interdisciplinarity. They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. But they travel, among disciplines, individual researchers, historical periods, academic environments, and even those that are geographically scattered.

Such flexibility will help to avoid rigidity, arbitrariness, sloppiness and neglect. At the same time, it helps to mobilize the imagination and identification with others and their ideas. With the help of such serious discussions it becomes possible to develop research questions outside

of the pre-established paradigms within each discipline. Instead of such fixed convictions, it becomes attractive to let oneself be guided through different disciplinary fields in relation to one another, without the necessity to become a specialist in each discipline encountered, and without having to obey the rules of methodology that reign in each one. This conviction has been the basis of my 2002 book, which I subtitled “A Rough Guide”, with “rough” indicating the necessary flexibility. Concepts are the tools of interdisciplinarity in that they facilitate discussion on the basis of a shared language.

Charles Shiro Inouye
Tufts University

From cultural comparisons come insights. From insights come opportunities to learn, adjust, create. When sushi came to America it took on unimaginable new forms – some grotesque, some surprisingly good. The same can be said for what happened to spaghetti in Japan. Creativity requires a willingness to be inappropriate. But does refreshing newness come from ignorance of the real or from knowing reality all too well? “You forgot the wasabi potato chips!”

There is a difference we need to take seriously – between mis-understanding and missed understanding. Just as there is a distinction to be made between “so bad it’s good for you” and “so good it’s bad for you.”

Diversity as an agenda item isn’t diverse at all. The picture of actual diversity can never be a composite rainbow of happy varietals, all of them smiling. If diversity is our reality, all of us should be frowning, at least some of the time. Think about it. If we really are different from each other, how are we going to get anything done? Realism? Been there done that. I say we reset and go back to animism. Hello Kitty meets L.L. Bean.

Patrick Colm Hogan
University of Connecticut

The remit for this section concerns "challenges and opportunities" facing cultural studies. The following essay focuses on challenges. Prefatory to addressing such challenges, however, the essay outlines two different—even opposed—ways in which the concept of *culture* is used today. In one sense, a society's culture may be organized into distinct and internally contested traditions of, among others, knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics. The value of culture in this sense is primarily a function of the society's unusual achievements as these are or should be available to humanity generally. The other sense of culture refers to the distinctive routines of daily life, routines that take their proper place locally--not for humanity generally, but for a specific group at a specific time and place. The latter use has become increasingly prominent in the humanities and social sciences. The essay acknowledges that this second, anthropological use of the idea of culture does respond to some pernicious ethnocentric attitudes that have been recruited to rationalize colonial violence. However, it goes on to argue, this anthropological usage has contributed to other forms of human division, thereby restricting everyone's access to the wealth of knowledge, ethical thought, and aesthetic production that should flow from an ever-widening range of traditions to benefit all of us.

I have for decades argued that the study of other cultures is enormously valuable and should be pursued vigorously by anyone who wishes to be educated. Though I often wrote as if my motivations were political, that was true only to a limited extent. Rather, my motivations were in the first place aesthetic and intellectual. I was moved by the puppet plays of Chikamatsu, the dramas of Kālidāsa, the enigmatic narratives of Bororo storytellers; I felt that I learned as much about ethical reflection from Indic theories of dharma or Chinese discussions of rén as from Mill and Kant; Abhinavagupta and al-Fārābī provided insights into the human mind unmatched in the West until the advent of cognitive science.

Some readers might infer from the preceding list is that I had in mind only "high culture." But my interests have not been in distinguishing elite from popular practices or artifacts. Rather, my concerns in this area have always been with works that, in my view, constitute scientific, philosophical, aesthetic, moral, or other achievements. These certainly could, and indeed do include popular works. The crucial point was that I was urging study of these various works for the same reasons I would advocate attention to particular Western works of philosophy, psychology, and so forth. I also maintained that—in the long run and allowing for differences in size of a population and similar factors--different cultural traditions were likely to produce literature, philosophy, and so forth, with comparable frequency. In other words, I was interested in cultures—European, Chinese, Amerindian, and so on—principally as they have implications for humanity generally (regarding ethics, psychology, and so forth), and I saw cultural traditions as roughly equivalent in this regard. Initially, the main opposition I encountered in expressing these views came from ethnocentric or racist Westerners, who shared Macaulay's (1958) notorious view that, "a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (p. 45).

Still, however I might explain my concerns, this sense of "culture" was clearly narrower than the anthropological sense, concerned as the latter is with the daily existence of ordinary people. Due in part to such anthropological concerns, the standard use of the term "culture" in the humanities and social sciences has come to be centered on the distinctive practices in a given society without attention to their implications for humanity generally—or even in contradistinction to their continuity with the experiences and interests of humanity generally. In this way, the usual idea of culture today is not only different from, but in many ways opposed to my use of the term. Indeed, considered in contrast with the anthropological sense of *culture*, my use of the term may be seen as basically a shorthand for work in arts and humanities—verbal art, music, visual art, historiography, ethics, aesthetics—as well as some work in the social sciences (e.g., philosophical psychology).

This is not to say that I ignored the anthropological idea. However, when treating an anthropological sense of *culture*, I have most often used the phrase, "cultural identity." My use of this phrase derives from a distinction I have drawn between *categorial* and *practical* identity (see chapter one of Hogan 2023 and chapter one of Hogan 2009). One's categorial identity is simply the label or labels one accepts for oneself (e.g., "male," "Indian," "Catholic," and so on). One's practical identity is one's set of habits, propensities, skills, and so on, as these enable one's life in a material and, more importantly, a social world. Drawing on these concepts, I was able to articulate a technical definition of "culture" in the anthropological sense, a definition that, I believe, helps to clarify this notoriously vague and ambiguous notion. By this definition, culture is simply the distinctive overlap across the practical identities of the people in a given society. For example, being able to drive an automobile and owning an automobile which one drives, for which one pays insurance, etc., are properties shared across the practical identities of most American adults. That is what makes these properties part of "American culture." In my estimation, something along these lines is probably the only way that the anthropological concept of culture can be plausibly defined. For example, I cannot make sense of any notion of culture that assumes the existence of culture as some supra-individual entity. (This idea is often put forth specifically for that part of culture termed "language." I have argued against a range of such proposals regarding language in Hogan 2008, pp. 43–63.)

Even with this definition, however, I doubt the wisdom of construing practices and products of art, philosophy, law, psychology, and other fields as part of "culture" rather than as art, philosophy, and so on, *per se*. The problem is that we tend to think quite differently about, for instance, the writings of Abhinavagupta, if we think of them as aesthetic philosophy or philosophy of psychology than if we think of them as "culture." As I have discussed in "What Literary Universals Are and What Culture is Not" (Hogan, in press a) and "The Problem of 'Culture' and the Future of Universals" (Hogan, in press b) several—to my mind, unfortunate--attitudes tend to be elicited by the characterization of any work as "culture" today. Specifically, "culture" suggests, in the terms just introduced, a distinctive set of competencies, beliefs, interests, emotional dispositions, and so on, common to the members of some community. In short, the term, "culture," calls to mind, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's popular phrase, a *form of life* shared by some group. This is not simply a philosophical, aesthetic, or other similar group, a group that cuts across national, ethnic, and other boundaries, sharing only some limited set of

properties in practical identity, perhaps preferences in fiction or in moral reasoning. It is, rather, a group whose practical identity is broadly pervaded by a particular form of life.

The elements of practical identity shared by the members of any group, however, tend to be partial and variable. Despite this, we often assume uniformity, especially when the group in question is delimited by some prominent categorial identity—national, ethnic, racial, religious, and so on. A crucial point here is that there is no intrinsic or necessary relation between a categorial identity label and a distinctive, shared practical identity (e.g., between identifying as "American" and sharing a distinctive, culture-defining practical identity with other "Americans"). Insofar as there is anything approaching a shared practical identity or form of life for persons in a particular identity category, it is likely to be unevenly distributed, and very limited. This is obvious when we think of cases from "our own" culture, rather than those from a different culture. When non-Indians think of Abhinavagupta as part of Indian culture, they are likely to assume that he is very much like everyone else in the culture. But we cannot adequately appreciate Abhinavagupta's achievements if we view him simply as an instance of 10th-Century Indian culture. Moreover, it is inconsistent to approach Abhinavagupta in this culturalist way if we do not do the same thing with, say, Immanuel Kant and 18th-Century European culture. Of course, there are partial overlaps between the practical identities of a writer and various groups of which he or she is a member. Moreover, these can be important, even crucial to making sense of that writer, whether that writer is Abhinavagupta or Kant. But, even for that understanding, we need to recognize their divergence from their culture no less than their continuity with it. After all, Kantian and Benthamite ethics are quite distinct from each other even if, by one measure, they share a common, 18th-Century European culture. (One could similarly cite Abhinavagupta and Śaṅkācārya.)

Perhaps more important, as the last point begins to suggest, neither cultural convergence nor cultural divergence in itself tells us anything about the value of any of these writers. That value is given, most significantly, in the insight provided by the descriptions, explanations, norms, analyses, and arguments that they articulate. Perhaps the best way of coming to understand this value is by not considering such writers under the (potentially homogeneizing) rubric of "culture," but rather locating them in, say, aesthetics, cognitive science, or some other area of knowledge or experience, whose value is clear today. If we consider Abhinavagupta as a philosopher of aesthetics, then we are likely to stress the aspects of his work that appear to have valid implications for people's responses to art generally, comparing his work to that of other theorists who stressed the role of recipients' emotions. In other words, we would in that case view Abhinavagupta's theories as part of an ongoing research program. In contrast, empirical studies of literary response undertaken in recent decades and concurrent developments in affective science would be unlikely to enter our discussion of Abhinavagupta if we are treating his work as "culture."

Yet, it seems that cultural identity categories are routinely viewed as the main or even the sole appropriate context for studying artifacts, theories, practices, and so on, that arose outside Euro-American traditions. In contrast, the assessment of such work in terms of transcultural, human

value is rare, perhaps increasingly so.[2] For instance, this seems to be the case with Abhinavagupta's work on memory, which is vastly more likely to be treated as an expression of Hindu culture, than as a contribution to the ongoing study of the human mind.

This is not the only challenge faced by cultural studies today. In addition, cultural identity categories are widely invoked to underwrite specific relations between groups of people (e.g., Hindu Indians) and the cultures that they are seen as embodying. That relation—tacitly drawing on the conceptual metaphor or cognitive model of a group as an individual person—is frequently understood today as including proprietorship. Group A and Culture A are bound together in this view of cultural identity, such that the group exercises a sort of collective ownership over the correlated culture (for an explication and critique of this view, see chapter six of Appiah 2018). This, in turn, fosters a sort of segregationist attitude toward inter-group relations. As one white professor explained to my wife (who is South Asian), he didn't believe someone from another country could really understand (thus teach) American literature; he illustrated his point by explaining that his grandfather had fought in the Civil War. Today, it seems more likely that such identity-based criticisms will come from the left, with white writers who draw on African, Asian, or Native American traditions accused of "cultural appropriation." Of course, there is a genuine history of appropriation of non-European cultural artifacts by Europeans, as well as denigration and destruction of non-European cultures by Europeans. But it is, I believe, only a good thing for, say, non-Indians to study and draw on Indian culture (and vice-versa). Once again, this becomes obvious if we simply construe the works in question as instances of philosophy of mind or verbal art, rather than as expressions of Hindu, Chinese, or whatever culture.

Along the same lines, contrary to the grandson of the Civil War veteran, I do not believe that being part of a culture—a member of the cultural in-group--gives one's interpretations of related literary works or one's evaluations of related ethical principles automatic authority over the interpretations or evaluations of out-group members. It also seems to me false and intellectually harmful to assume some sort of natural affinity between an ethnic or other cultural identity category and the various practices—of verbal art, ethics, and so on—that constitute culture. At the very least, such an assumption restricts the open exchange of ideas that is so important for the advancement of knowledge.

These points are related to something that seems to have become a central, if largely implicit doctrine of left-liberalism today--that a society's culture should never be judged from outside, that cultures as forms of life define their own value systems and any attempt at judging another culture is nothing more than the imposition of one culture's norms on that other culture. This is no doubt salutary advice when directed against the hypocritical, colonialist practice of ignoring faults in one's own society while criticizing those in a society one wishes to dominate. However, salutary self-criticism and a recognition that there are often numerous, equally good ways of doing things, do not mean that we should refrain from critically analyzing, say, the

[2] Of course, not everyone takes a culturalist approach, as we see in the very limited, but valuable work done in such areas as comparative ethics (see, for example, the essays in Shun and Wong 2004).

disabilities imposed on minority populations in another society. This is related to the misguided, tacit assumption of the uniformity of "a culture," as if everyone subjected to the dominant norms of a society must necessarily agree with those norms. After all, the principles rationalizing mistreatment of minorities almost certainly are not revered by members of the minority groups in question.[3] Even if we say that there is no fact about the "right way" to organize society, it is at least possible to engage in rational dialogue on the possibilities. The rationality of the dialogue depends on finding shared principles and mutually agreeable particular judgments, assessing the compatibility of one with the others, and so forth, seeking what John Rawls referred to as "reflective equilibrium" (for a clear, concise explication of the idea, see Dworkin 2006, p. 639). Moreover, there is not even a prima facie benefit to excluding out-group interpretations that do not criticize the works they study, but rather seek to demonstrate their broader, cross-cultural relevance and insight.

In short, the study of culture is clearly of great importance today—intellectually, politically, and in many other ways. Unfortunately, characterizing works (practices, beliefs, and so forth) as "culture"--rather than as "ethical theories," "aesthetic theories," "law," "works of verbal art," and so on—can all too easily incline us to view culture not as multiple and contested, but as homogeneous; not as benefiting from rational dispute, but as an object of reverence; and, what is most debilitating, not as potentially benefiting everyone, but as the property of one identity category. Researchers in culture, it seems, have their work cut out for them.

[3] For a compelling argument against cultural relativism as a justification for the denial of full equality to women specifically, see Canetto and Burn (2020). Among other things, they anticipate and more fully develop the preceding points. They explain that cultures are not "homogenous," but internally diverse "and even contradictory" (p. 126). Cultures only appear homogenous, they point out, because members of the society's dominant stratum are most often the only ones who are allowed to speak for the group.

References

Appiah, K. (2018). *The Lies that bind: Rethinking identity*. New York: Norton.

Canetto S., & Burn S. (2020). Whose culture? Challenging the idea of an opposition between women's human rights and the right to culture. In N. Rubin, & R. Flores (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Psychology and Human Rights* (pp. 121–134). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108348607.009

Dworkin, G. (2006). Theory, practice, and moral reasoning. In D. Copp (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (pp. 624–644). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195147790.003.0023

Hogan, P. (2008). *On interpretation: Meaning and inference in law, psychoanalysis, and literature*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Hogan, P. (2009). *Understanding nationalism: On narrative, identity, and cognitive science*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Hogan, P. (2023). *What is colonialism?* New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003449010

Hogan, P. (In press a). "What literary universals are and what culture is not: The example of descriptive ethics." *Style*.

Hogan, P. (In press b). "The problem of 'culture' and the future of universals: A Rejoinder." *Style*.

Macaulay, T. (1958). Minute on education. In W. de Bary (Ed.), *Sources of Indian tradition*, vol. 2 (pp. 44–49). New York: Columbia University Press.

Shun, K., & David Wong D. (Eds.). (2004). *Confucian ethics: A comparative study of self, autonomy, and community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511606960

Anne M. Cronin
Lancaster University

Cultural Studies has always been a wide-open discipline. By that I mean that it has attracted scholars from a broad range of academic disciplines who have been excited by its scope, politics and vibrancy − perhaps because their "home" disciplines have disciplined them too strongly in terms of appropriate topics of study, approved methods, conventions of thinking, standardised ways of writing. To take one example, Donna Haraway, from her early work onward (Haraway 1997), has pushed the boundaries of what academic writing can be and how we can imagine transformative politics.

But Cultural Studies has not had a public profile in the way other academic disciplines have (certainly in the UK where I'm based), some of which, such as Media Studies, have suffered what we could think of as "public shaming" for their attention to areas often seen as trivial and worthless (a judgment that is laden with class, race and gendered assumptions about value). Lauren Berlant (1997: 12) illustrated this point when discussing a comment made by a fellow academic who admired her thinking but "hated" her objects of study, suggesting that those who "waste thought" on popular materials (rather than the classics of literature) "threaten to degrade the value of intellectual life in general".

In some national contexts this may be changing as "culture" has gained a new popular traction through the circulation of concepts such as "culture wars" which bring to the fore themes that Cultural Studies has long analysed, such as gender, post-colonialism and the legacies of slavery, and the multiform politics of race. Equally, "culture" has been tagged to various areas of study such as "promotional culture" or "surveillance culture" in ways which namecheck "culture" but may not always explore precisely what it means to be a cultural phenomenon. In effect, while these dynamics raise the profile of "culture" as a topic worthy of study − and highlight how cultures are saturated with political and economic resonances – they also risk emptying out the concept of culture as an object of study such that it becomes amorphous or is understood simply as a neutral backdrop to what should properly be analysed as "society" or "politics" or "economics". But Cultural Studies has long wrestled with the issue of definitions and disciplinary boundaries and has not yet imploded from the associated tensions!

As an academic discipline Cultural Studies is faced with other existential challenges related to student recruitment to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. In the UK, it appears that Media Studies is enveloping or displacing Cultural Studies, and many degree programmes that were once badged as "Media and Cultural Studies" are now becoming "Media Studies". This is perhaps indicative of the "deep mediatization" of society noted by Couldry and Hepp (2017: 7), and it is certainly the case that young people live highly mediatized lives and are curious to analyse what this means for them and for society. But it is also indicative of the power of market trends in UK Higher Education in which student recruitment drives intense marketing and branding initiatives and universities are pushed to give students what they think they want. More generally, "culture" has become further integrated into the scope of a range of academic disciplines, and many have had a "cultural turn", for instance, Sociology or Geography.

Personally, I welcome the intellectual openness of cross-disciplinary developments. My recent work (Cronin 2018; 2023) has examined public relations' interface with democracy, corporate culture, journalism, and practices of secrecy and transparency, and I needed to draw on the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Sociology, Organisation Studies, Media Studies, Politics, and Communication Studies in order to capture the significance of what my empirical work uncovered. Cultural Studies has always been enlivened by an interdisciplinary ethos which fosters creative thinking and it's precisely this that draws me to it. For this reason, I have optimism for the intellectual project of Cultural Studies, but that optimism it tempered by the challenges posed by market logics which are increasingly driving the viability of academic disciplines.

References

Berlant, L. (1997) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822398639

Couldry, N. & A. Hepp (2017) *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cronin, A. M. (2023) *Secrecy in Public Relations, Mediation and News Cultures: The Shadow World of the Media Sphere*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003369585

Cronin, A. M. (2018) *Public Relations Capitalism: Promotional Culture, Publics and Commercial Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haraway, D. J. (1997) *Modest witness@second millenium: femaleMan meets OncoMouse: feminism and technoscience*. New York & London: Routledge.

Catherine Evans
Carnegie Mellon University

Usable/Abusable: Queer Cultural Studies Today

In 2017, Jack Halberstam called the type of work he does as "Queer Cultural Studies." He pointed to the rise of queer public intellectuals, those "who refuse boundaries between community and campus, activism and theory, classroom and club" (67). As a phrase, Queer Cultural Studies appears today across calls for papers, in graduate student circles, and in larger conversations in Cultural Studies. Queer public intellectuals continue to gain standing, in some cases to academic celebrity status, in others they are weaponized by the neoliberal university or targeted for their work altogether. To do Queer Cultural Studies in 2024 is to walk the line between usability and abusability.

In the words of one college administrator at my university, "We have room for all kinds of research," but "we need the work of your program (Cultural Studies) to be more synergistic rather than antagonistic with the mission of the university." What does it mean to be antagonistic or synergistic with the mission of a university? As Stuart Hall reminds us, Cultural Studies is a space with "permanent tension" holding room for theoretical development, materialist engagements, and ongoing political and politicized questions (1992, 284). It is an easy target for administration. Those of us who do Queer Cultural Studies or Critical University Studies or Critical Race Studies or Postcolonial Studies or *insert critical X studies here* are in permanent tension with the university as it exists today. At the same time, I witness the absusability of Queer Cultural Studies by the university as I walk past out-of-context quotes from Black queer feminist radicals painted on university buildings built over historically Black neighborhoods. You can do your work, but just don't look too closely at how the captains of the university abuse it.

For my generation of Cultural Studies scholars, working through graduate school during pandemics and genocides, we have an obligation to ensure the survival of this "thing" that gives power to understand and resist, even if it means going down with those departments that house us. Queer Cultural Studies still has radical teeth, and we Queer Cultural Studies scholars and queer public intellectuals will carry on.

References

Halberstam, J. (2017). *Queer studies. In a companion to gender studies* (pp. 62–70). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165419.ch4

Hall, S. (1992) Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies, in P. Treichler, (Eds.), *Cultural Studies*. Routledge.

Mark James
Molloy University

The introduction of the inaugural issue of IJCS cites Fredric Jameson's observation of the utopic "desire" of cultural studies in the early 1990s. However, one may argue that the reactionary forces seeking to blot out that starry firmament of utopias has gotten bolder (and perhaps more desperate?) since then, perhaps owing to the successes of cultural studies in destabilizing the dominant hierarchies of knowledge. Here in the US, the right has specifically targeted Critical Race Theory (CRT), though it stands in for all of the related interdisciplinary fields that share an animating desire for a better and more just future. CRT emerged as a way to expose how the practice – or the culture, if you will – of the law reinforces biases that it claims to disavow, notably of racial bias in the US since the 1950's, rather than serve the kind of justice many of us seek.

Similarly, Critical University Studies (CUS) lays bare the myth of the university as a site of objective, disinterested knowledge production. Most of us have spent a good part of our adult lives in institutions of higher education and we are keenly aware of the ways institutional cultures shape all aspects of our lives, including the scholarship we produce, or don't produce. So, with Jeffrey Williams, I think one current utopic desire of cultural studies finds itself in CUS.

Drawing on the insights of CRT, one method I use to infuse cultural studies and CUS is to produce counterstories. In her 2020 book *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*, Aja Y. Martinez shows how that method "rejects notions of "neutral" research or "objective" research and exposes research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" and "recognizes that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices" (3). One way I have described the culture of precarity in higher education is by exploring what it meant to have accumulated massive student loan debt, and then the ambivalence I felt when it was forgiven (a continuing condition that I call "post-debt"). Another has been describing my struggles against the corporate neoliberal ethos – which seeks to capture and commodify knowledge, killing the utopic desire Jameson describes – of my university as a Black man serving as a member of faculty leadership.

Jeffrey Williams
Carnegie Mellon University

In 1986, Richard Johnson published, "What Is Cultural Studies, Anyway?" which aimed to define the then-new impetus, especially its Birmingham incarnation, where Johnson was the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Study, succeeding Stuart Hall. For me, one current challenge is the inverse: "What isn't cultural studies?" The de-disciplinary impulse of cultural studies is no doubt a strength, but it can also be a weakness, as it sometimes leads to intellectual amorphousness as well as political vacancy. In many cases, cultural studies has been absorbed as a convenient brand for the neoliberal university and has been subject to "elite capture," in the words of Olúfémi Táíwò, conscripted into the corporate juggernaut.

So, one task, as Paul Smith has argued, is to sustain its intellectual rigor and its commitment to a critical cultural politics. That is very broad, but has often turned its sights to class, race, nation, gender, sexuality, ability, or combinations thereof. While that work might at times be negative, it also carries a dialectical imagination of a culture that works for equality and justice.

For me, one crucial wing of contemporary cultural studies is the new field of critical university studies (CUS). Critical university studies, notably in its emergence in the 1990s and early 2000s, has pointed to the conditions of knowledge production and research entailed by the "corporatization of the university," as well as the degradation of academic labor, the rise of student debt, and the mercantilization of knowledge under neoliberalism. More recently, it has further exposed the racialization and colonialism of the university, past and present, as well as mounted substantial policy initiatives such as the forgiveness of student debt. CUS pushes to sustain the oppositional space of and impulse in the university – particularly as it now tends to quell criticism under the banner of civility. Finally, I see CUS as a descendant of CS because it understands higher education as a central dimension of contemporary culture. For instance, with more than 80% of people attending college at some point in the US, higher education is hardly an ivory tower but webbed through our culture and economy.

Doris Bachmann-Medick
International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) of the Justus Liebig University Giessen

Translation Matters. A New Perspective for the Study of Culture

Facing cultural differences and inequalities in a globalized world we desperately need – and often resort to – translation as a social practice. For the study of culture, however, a translational approach presents an epistemological challenge: Our categories of analysis themselves should be examined and made translatable into the different knowledge systems.

To modify a formula by Homi Bhabha: The study of culture is both, transnational and translational. Here, to "translate" demands an opening up of the monolingual hegemonic field of Anglo-American cultural studies with respect to other knowledge traditions outside the U.S. and Europe. To the fore comes a complex emerging network of reciprocal absorptions, transmissions, interactions, but also of dominations. Widespread European (scholarly) categories that used to claim universal applicability should be critically re-examined, as they are always subject to "cross-categorical translation" (as Dipesh Chakrabarty has called it). At issue here is the translatability of the mainly Western categories of the study of culture itself.

However, such an approach to translation still operates at a conceptual macro level. Yet, translation is above all a stimulating methodological tool: for exploring one's own objects of investigation in terms of how they are a priori constituted by translation processes. Don't complex general concepts (such as modernization, industrialization, globalization) become clearer and closer to action when they are examined in terms of stages of development and broken down into translation processes? The translational lens needs to be turned back to smaller-scale interaction scenarios that constitute "society as translation" (this, incidentally, is the working title of my new book in progress). We need to highlight the potential of intermediate steps, interruptions and breaks that go along with context changes – especially in our accelerated times with their demands for immediacy.

But in this enterprise translation serves not only as a category of analysis, but is also considered as an important social practice, a mode of negotiating social differences: Migration can be seen as a matter of translation and self-translation, human rights as a challenge for global translational efforts, wars as tough "translation zones" (Emily Apter). Last, but not least, the difficult experiences with scientific communication during the recent pandemic have proven translation as a practice of managing diverse contexts and mediating communication as fundamentally indispensable in an ever more complex world. It allows us to tackle the crises that are piling up today. Especially if translation is understood not as a mere topic, but as an effective operating tool – be it the translation of scientific findings into political decisions, of cultural-analytical concepts into societal-political concepts, of the humanities into public discourses. Even more, an idea of the Anthropocene as a "displacement-translation of 'force' into 'power'" (Chakrabarty 2018) could be taken as a translational challenge – meaning the translation of physical-geological categories into social categories of action and responsibility.

A provocative question emerges from this insight: Could the study of culture/Cultural Studies not itself be conceived as transgressive translation studies? Taking this approach transcends the practice of working with concepts beyond the academic sphere towards a deeper involvement with cultural realities and emerging topics (global migration, climate change, ecology, ageing, illness, the meaning of the non-human, digitalization, AI etc.). These existing challenges absolutely need points of reference and standards for action to translate them into concepts for the future: Sustainability, global cooperation and solidarity, resilience, sustainable economic practices, regional re-anchoring, ethical responsibility.

I advocate a committed attitude of cultural research, but in doing so I would like to address an indispensable condition: Despite its subjective components, its capacity for empathy, its recognition of ambiguities, a scientific distance should be maintained instead of entering directly into the arenas of public discourse and social problems. The study of culture should not seamlessly assume the position of a moralizing, empathy-filled, position-taking identification with its subjects. It should remain a "study" that fine-tunes closeness and distance in its practice.

Paola Bacchetta
University of California, Berkeley

Many congratulations and thanks to IJCS for 10 years of publishing brilliant critical and constructive trans regional, transnational translocal, interdisciplinary scholarship, with heartfelt best wishes for continuing far into the future.

Our times are increasingly more challenging, making the lives of IJCS colleagues and all authors associated with the journal ever more difficult albeit of course unevenly so Across the planet multiple varieties of extreme right wings are quickly expanding and are voted into power in numerous states. But, moreover, their impact is extended in civil societies with the multiplication of extreme right groups, the establishment of institutions, consolidations of control over old and new media, the expansion of right-wing cultures (music, attempts at literature, video games, clothing and other consumer brands). In many places the right has incited vast epistemic shifts. It is increasingly imposing its own resignification of categories in public discursive space. For instance, across Europe and the United States, a term such as "immigrant" which officially is simply to designate a subject with a specific juridical status in relation to the State, is now massively, primarily understood through the lens of individual and collective criminalization, pathologization, and cultural incompatibility. Often, the right functions as the thought police with its desires to fully inhibit the very kind of production of critical knowledge that IJCS has enabled. In one among other extreme cases, in the United States, Donald Trump has announced a war on "wokeness," with plans to fully dismantle the Department of Education, privatize instruction and federally defund institutions that teach about colonialism, racial capitalism, slavery, racism, and queer and trans subjects. Far beyond a solely discursive intervention, Trump's administration is committed to enactments such as massively expelling undocumented immigrants, and abolishing all transgender health care.

We are living in a time of accelerated and ongoing premature, death. The planet is presently the scene of some largely un-noticed mass murdering, for instance in Sudan. Simultaneously, since October 8, 2023, the world has directly witnessed a relentless, spectacularized genocide in Palestine, and what my colleague Samera Esmeir has rightly called *obliteration* wherein the objective is the total erasure of all signs of Palestinian life. Meanwhile many other kinds of killing machines advance, too, such as the toxification of land, air, food and water that coloniality and total insertion into racial capitalism facilitates. Perhaps most dangerous of all is the widespread indifference to death that many earlier associated with the right but which is now quite visibly found across the entire political spectrum.

Living with these ongoing yet ever quickening and intensifying horrors, we can easily lose sight of what and where the openings are onto other possible ways of life. Yet, we will do well to recall that we come to this situation at the apex of a long genealogy of struggle. We know that injustice, death, destruction, will not prevail as long as the will to survive, to live, and to live in total freedom, is alive. To face these challenges, I wonder if everywhere we can begin with the very local scale to bring like-minded, like-hearted people in conversation and action together. There are already many such clusters across all scales in every region across the planet.

The IJCS itself has spent 10 years inciting, bringing into existence, enabling, supporting, an important community of scholars, a beautiful gathering of radical critical thinkers and their thought. It has given space and voice to new tools to think with. Ultimately, this community, these tools, and those of our future, are perhaps some of our most immediate, most helpful, openings, lines of flight, potentialities, during this murderous period. They are animated by our shared, uncompromising *freedom-exigency* desires and capacities. It is my deepest hope that collectively, across geographies, differential situatedness in relations of power, across generations, we will allow them to inform and to materialize in our ongoing analyses of power, and in our inventions of modes of resistance, liberation and transformation. In the end, we are all we have. And, in the words of my late colleague the professor and poet June Jordan: “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Baden Offord
Curtin University

Humanity presently faces existential crises that cannot be (but which are) ignored; perilous futures are at our door with civilizational and planetary integrity teetering. Democratic institutions are in chaos and technological disruption is dominant. We are sleep walking into self and planetary destruction.

Given this, what mindset and energies are now required to deal with the enormous complexity, scale, and implications posed by problems such as nuclear weapons, global warming, AI, epistemic violence, ongoing ethnonationalism and colonialism, political impunity, widespread poverty, extremism, authoritarianism and cultural infallibility? By what means and with what intellectual and creative tools can we respond to these urgent matters about human society and its survival?

Arriving at this moment, to use Angela Davis's words, cultural studies is well placed as an intellectual, creative and activist approach to these overwhelming dilemmas.

Activated from within the humanities, at heart ethically and radically inter, cross and trans disciplinary, cultural studies is a non-linear field of enquiry, scholarship, art. It leans into understanding culture as the fabric of human society and meaning making. What gives cultural studies its signature is its unabashed and unflinching focus on the relationship between culture, power, language and knowledge as the provocation for coherence, solidarity and action. Cultural studies rejects sleepwalking, amnesia and formulae.

At this moment, cultural studies invokes an horizon resting on: (1) the urgent necessity to create new narratives of co-existence; (2) developing and enabling robust intellectual and creative spaces for the emergence of salient ideas; and (3) forming a collective common cause, framed through muscular, critical, but also humble, sensitised conviviality.

Sue Ballyn
Honorary Professor, University of Barcelona (Rtd)

Cultural Studies emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, although it had been subtly present in academic curricula for some time. Its rise to prominence in England can be attributed to two prominent factors. Firstly, the discontent among students who found a significant portion of their educational material disconnected from their societal context and excessively narrow in scope. Many secondary and tertiary level educators experienced a period of dissatisfaction, not only due to inadequate compensation and limited opportunities, but also driven by a shared aspiration to broaden academic content and modernise the curricula. After all in Britain, the 80's still echoed with what was and has continued to be known as the "winter of discontent"[4]; the 1978-1980 political turbulence in England and the USA, coupled with one of the most severe winters Britain had ever experienced.

Ironically, as we commemorate the ten-year milestone of the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies* (IJCS), it is evident that the world finds itself engulfed in what can be described as another "winter of discontent." This phrase aptly captures the prevailing sense of fear, uncertainty and dissatisfaction that permeates our current social landscape. In times like these, the significance of cultural studies becomes increasingly important, emerging as a vital component that warrants inclusion in our educational curricula, scholarly research, and awareness of our own social responsibility.

Cultural studies serve as a lens through which we can navigate the complexities of our contemporary world, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of human experience. By delving into various cultural practices, and discourses, it enables us to critically analyze and interpret the social dynamics that shape our identities, beliefs, and interactions. For instance, a study of popular media can unveil the underlying power structures and ideologies that influence public perceptions and behaviours.

Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies encourages collaboration across different fields of study, fostering a holistic understanding of social phenomena. By integrating perspectives from a multiplicity of sources both in the humanities and sciences, it provides a comprehensive framework for examining the intricate interplay between culture, power, and representation. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our academic discourse but also equips us with the tools to address pressing issues such as social justice, diversity, and globalization.

In essence, the enduring relevance of cultural studies lies in its capacity to illuminate the interconnectedness of human experiences and foster critical engagement with the world around us. As we navigate through these challenging times, the insights gleaned from cultural studies serve as a beacon of intellectual inquiry and a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and transformation. Embracing cultural studies as an integral part of our intellectual pursuits is not

[4] A paraphrase of the opening lines of William Shakespeare's *Richard lll*, Act 1, Scene 1

only a testament to our commitment to knowledge and understanding but also a testament to our resilience in the face of uncertainty and adversity.

Lai Fong Yang
Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University

In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting sociopolitical forces, cultural studies remain as vital as ever in deciphering the intersections of media, culture, and power. The articles published in the *IAFOR International Journal of Cultural Studies* demonstrate how the field has expanded beyond traditional concerns of representation to address emerging issues such as digital media discourse and algorithmic bias. As a researcher examining media framing across diverse cultural contexts – including mental health, aging, national identity, and diplomatic relations – I recognize both the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities in cultural studies today. A key challenge lies in advocating for more inclusive and responsible media discourses that reflect the complexities of diverse societies while upholding ethical reporting practices.

At the same time, cultural studies present significant opportunities, particularly in exploring how digital and social media reshape public discourse. The growing reliance on online platforms for news consumption, self-representation, and social engagement has introduced new dynamics in journalism, misinformation, empowerment, mobility, resistance, and negotiation. This shift opens avenues for scholars to investigate how cultural narratives are constructed and contested in digital spaces and how public perceptions are shaped by algorithmic curation. By embracing interdisciplinary approaches and integrating insights from media studies, communication, and political discourse analysis, cultural studies can continue to evolve as a field that critically examines power, representation, and identity in contemporary society.

Charles Lowe
Poet, Professor of English, Beijing Normal Hong Kong Baptist University

When I received the request to reflect on "The State of Cultural Studies Today – Challenges and Opportunities", I was struck by the breadth of the field, a realization that led me in two interdependent directions. First, the irony: whatever Cultural Studies may be, its theorists and practitioners interrogate power relations and explore resistance—including resistance to the very academic discourses that attempt to define and encumber a field like Cultural Studies. Second, from the foundational work of the Birmingham School—Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams—to theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Henry Jenkins, who examine how media constructs reality and audience engagement, to feminist and gender scholars like Judith Butler and bell hooks, who explore how culture shapes identity and intersectionality, Cultural Studies remains a vast and ever-evolving domain.

Yet my commitment to Cultural Studies deepens as a literature scholar precisely because it spans multiple fields while resisting hierarchical structures, refusing to privilege certain texts over others. Instead, it situates literary works—however one defines *literary*—within a wide constellation of power relations and cultural discourses that have tangible consequences for global societies. In a fitting irony then, I experienced an apparent recognition—an epiphany, in Joycean terms. The very definitional fluidity that complicates Cultural Studies is precisely what ensures its continued relevance and vitality.

However, this openness also presents a central challenge—one that the journal's query implicitly raises. What is Cultural Studies, or more precisely, what *isn't* Cultural Studies? Where do its boundaries lie, and at what point do we step beyond them? Perhaps, paradoxically, the ongoing attempt to define its scope marks the limits of this protean field. Its growth and adaptability are not incidental but intrinsic to its significance—its refusal to be static is, ultimately, its defining characteristic.

This resistance to a singular definition is both Cultural Studies' greatest opportunity and its enduring conundrum. It ensures that the field remains dynamic, capable of responding to cultural shifts, yet it also raises questions about coherence and disciplinary boundaries. Rather than a limitation, however, this paradox is precisely what makes Cultural Studies indispensable in contemporary scholarship.

Marko Pajević
Professor, Lund University

Understanding Meaning Making Processes

Armed conflicts, climate catastrophe, economic crisis – many elements of our times seem to suggest that there are more pressing things than "culture", let alone cultural studies. However, all these disasters are culture and products of culture, as anything else in the human world. By definition crisis means a decision between stark alternatives – that always implies challenges and opportunities. Studying cultural narratives and discourses to analyse the reasons why a society in a certain situation opts for certain paths not only helps to understand the ways of the world, it also demonstrates their consequences and thus provides an informed and well-funded vision for the future. That is a first step.

Particularly in our challenged times cultural studies are important. They show their relevance exactly when people tend to dismiss of them as unnecessary luxury. Contrary to such wide-spread ideas, times of ease and well-being could do without cultural studies, while times of distress are in dire need of understanding what is going on. Cultural studies in the widest sense should do exactly this: they should be in charge of explaining the mindset of a culture and the decisions it takes, consciously or unconsciously. They analyse narratives. And it is always narratives that are behind the events. No matter whether in words, images or other forms, it is always the way things get presented that decide on what action is taken. War is the result of conflicting narratives. The way we deal with the environment, as well. And every economist knows that the entire stock market is pure narrative.

All of this is related to what I call a poetological anthropology. As Henri Meschonnic defined poetics, it is the interaction of the form of language and the form of life. We are talking about poetics in the original sense of the Greek *poiein*: to make/to create. This gives our words and even our thoughts a terrific responsibility: they shape our actions as much as our actions shape our use of language. I call it *poetic thinking* when subjects constitute themselves in creative and dialogical language, transforming their ways of feeling and thinking, in short, their ways of perceiving the world. And since our perception of the world is largely "our world", it is poetic thinking makes it. These are the meaning making processes that create the human world and that need to be understood. If we do not understand these processes, how should we ever understand anything, let alone the risky state of the world?

That means, alas, that there are tremendous opportunities for cultural studies today. We need to dissect and explain our historical situation and why people clearly act against their interests in behaving in certain ways or voting for certain people. Taking a close look at cultural forms – any forms of culture, symbolic forms – allows a close insight into what drives humans to feel, think, act the way they do. Literature and the Arts can provide such insights at times in a privileged manner. They are, in the best cases, more reflected or more sensitive to the developments in the air. They must be taken seriously as laboratories of meaning. But the transformations of meaning can also be detected in the way people walk, and talk, and dress,

which sports they like, which entertainment they choose, etc. When we cultural analysts do our work, we should keep in mind that no matter which cultural form we consider, they are always charged with societal and political meaning. And in times like ours, it might be even more important than usual to bring that out, to connect seemingly innocent cultural forms with the societal forming mindset it is mutually entangled with.

Cultural studies are part of the Humanities, they deal with what it means to be human, they are disciplines of meaning, and meaning is what makes the world our world and what makes humans human. This is a lot; this is what matters.

Becoming Tribal, Thinking Beyond Myth: Ecuadorian Indigenism as Performative Givenness and the Postmodern Event

Miguel A. Orosa
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Ibarra, Ecuador

Yamileth Arteaga Alcívar
Instituto Superior Universitario Japón, Ecuador

Nancy G. Ulloa
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Ibarra, Ecuador

Abstract

This inquiry will explore native-inspired practices through the lens and hosting of performance driven by contemporary events. Particularly, it will be argued how Andean rituals and practices might have some a link and extension to 21st century art of performance. The purpose is to grasp Andean practice*s* out of heterogeneity, replacing an old outlook based on myths with a philosophical one in line with postmodern culture. In this "transition" lie the research questions and the enquiry of the problem: whether and by what means it will be possible to embrace Indigenism from heterogeneity and "performative art*",* and how this journey from myth to philosophical thought will be executed. This issue and the questions that follow point to a knowledge vacuum, a gap that needs filling. Such scenes of existing on the age-old fringes might welcome "givennesses"—in the present case—as a matter within reach of the lifeworld; and therefore these *expressions* and *experiences* are now to be grasped in terms of performativity within a postmodern event sphere. The event works as an intertwining of nothingness, being and the outburst of difference, which is indeed concrete, specific, experiential; yet it cannot be reduced to, encapsulate into or abridged to practices, specifics or manifestations. The concepts or thoughts in this text—as in Deleuze's—are not alleged to be abstract, speculative; rather, they take place where the forces—the difference—become without the ideas or theories drawn out of such expressions being detached from their infinite potential movements. By means of a line of flight, a novel sense beyond magic and myth is found in such recomposition: a new meaning of a philosophical-artistic seal regarding the same practices already mentioned. The consequence of such Greek-inspired abandonment would result in the performance becoming tribalised.

Keywords: Ecuador, Indigenism, Latin American/Ecuadorian performance, performance, the event, performative Indigenous culture

In the context of various secular and spiritual galas that take place in Andean Communities (AC hereafter), this text seeks to shed light on what, at this point, might be called *Latin American Indigenous performance factors*, particularly those found in Ecuador. This first statement and façade are decisive.

If such "performing factors" were to elucidate Andean culture—to unveil the hidden—it would mean using a "critical" and "philosophical-artistic" approach "to reality" and no longer a legendary or mythical one. The displacing process that turns one's *home culture* into another from the *alienworld* (Steinbock, 1995)—so that Indigenism may become a key factor of contemporary thought—is what this paper seeks to do. This will be the first purpose of this work.

Consequently, the *topic of this essay* will be related to the inquiry of *how* and *if* the singular and ritual expressions of Ecuadorian Andean world—or those that fall under its own inspiration—could be seen from the multiple perspectives of the fleeting, the ephemeral or the vagrant, "the itinerant life", that is, from that which cannot be systematised because it belongs to the domain of *repetitive difference*.

It is not the aim of this essay to carry out a search for an original Andean culture and the practices that configure it, the traditions themselves can be expanded; they are dynamic, they give rise to elements that had not previously been considered as being such.

In the religious-spiritual area, the festivities of *St. Peter's Day* in Peguche (Ecuador) and the celebration of *Chimborazo* will be analyzed as illustrative examples, so to speak, of these *performance*-based occasions.

At the San Pedro *event* in Peguche, in the Ecuadorian province of Otavalo, the people worship the saints in a ritual that goes back to colonial times. The central feature of this cult event is dance, which is performed in a group by different members of the community dressed in costumes and outfits with a variety of symbols. The performers convey all their corporal strength and impulses through their actions in time with the rhythms of the instrumental band, as if they were connected to something or someone beyond or below the visible. They all take part in these events to pay tribute to the old villagers of the "haciendas", the homesteads to which the Indigenous families belonged. Among the onlookers, different characters from Andean myths come to the fore. Rituals, folklore and the veneration of saints are part of a heritage that endures and strengthens the "identity" of the inhabitants from Peguche (Maldonado, 2018).

"Chimborazo"—a central province of Ecuador—, on the other hand, holds its harvest festival, the "jaguay"—in the Kichwa language, an expression of motivational impulse—, as a sacred ritual that takes place in free agricultural cooperation (*minga*), during which various chants are sung and the participants continue the celebration by drinking "chicha de jora", a fermented concoction typical of Latin America, particularly Ecuador and consisting of jora corn, chancaca tapa (dried sugar cane juice, also known as panela), honey and water. In the "jahuay", the

participants honour the earth, the wind, the water, the sun and the animals, as well as the owners of the harvest, to whom they express their gratitude and censure. After the song in *Quichua* (the indigenous language) sung by the oldest person in the group, the accompanying harvesters join in the chorus of "jahuay, jahuay, jahuay", which means "go up, go ahead, go on", which are nothing more than hymns and shouts to motivate the farmers.

Similarly, in the secular sphere, but in honour of Our Lady of Mercy, the celebration of Mama Negra—in Latacunga city—and the archaic myth-ritual dances and baths (Armay Chisi) of the Inti Raymi (Sun Festival), as well as the spiritual and thus human practices of the Andean Days of the Dead, may be seen as foreshadowing and embodying the images of Ecuador's indigenous culture "on stage", without neglecting other festivities and cultural memorials that are inspired by them and that somehow share their "civilising" context (Travel Pills, 2012).

This fiesta of Mama Negra (Black Mamma) in Cotopaxi is held in honour of the Virgen de la Merced (Virgin of Mercy), and although it is a very popular and sacred celebration, it has many profane elements, such as dances, music and characters, which enrich the celebration. Just as the November fiesta has a markedly secular character, the September one is deeply rooted in the sentiments of the Catholic Christian faith professed by the traders at the main popular markets of the city and by the people at large (Travel Pills, 2012).

Furthermore, the liturgical dances and ritual baths typical of the Inti Raymi (Sun Festival), as well as the indigenous rites of the Day of the Dead, are materialised and entirely practised at a very human and secular plane, all within a performing scene with a very strong ethnic and national stamp (Latvecuador, 2014; Terry, 2019).

In light of the above, and given the aim of this paper, this essay attempts to approach Andean practices from a range of views rather than a single focus; in terms of *difference* instead of a purposive standpoint: after all, guided by non-conceptual "realities" (*singularities*) as opposed to determinations—however abstract or eidetic—these replace a legendary, myth-based view with a philosophical one at the heart of contemporary culture.

It is precisely here that the *problem of research* and its agonising inquiry rapidly arises: *whether*, and in *which way*, it should be possible to capture Andean rites from the heterogeneous and performance; and *how*, if so, this scientific *transferring* from myth to philosophical thought could be both made feasible and brought to fruition. Once the *conflict* is cleared up, and only then—meaning the philosophical strategy of this journey—, would one achieve that "void knowledge content", that gap in science-cognition to be reached.

The *evental register*—"the sphere of *the event*"—in which indigenous expressions unfold—once the *performative givenness* has taken place[1]—, is shaped by *connections of forces* that dispense with *unity* and also with *meaning*—both terms understood from a metaphysical point of view. It is also made up of constellations of junctions, called "assemblages", as well as linkages that extend from the vivid genesis to the necessary disappearance. (Heidegger, 1975). There is a reference here to the outburst of *difference* that reflects the *unique* as much as the *singular*; as it were, a life without *concepts.*

Such an event *works*, operates in an experiential, specific, concrete way (the bottom line is "works", not "what is it?"); yet by no means does this entail that it is reducible to practices, nor to certain "manifestations" involving affects, singularities or perceptions; on the contrary, it goes beyond the mere concreteness or *occurrence* of a performing nature. Furthermore, the concepts or thoughts included in this text—as in so many of Deleuze's—do not claim to be *abstract*, speculative, but they exist where *forces*—the repetition of difference—are ceaseless at work, without the *ideas* or *theories* arising from such *indigenous expressions* being detached from their infinite potential movements.

There is no allusion in this essay to the quest for *identity*—an issue that deserves, in any case, all respect and attention; not least since, in Deleuze's texts, such *identities* either do not exist or have been displaced outside the *event* itself. In the field of post-structuralism, the object of interest turns out to be "what happens" or "what occurs" *plus* the *heterogeneous* forces that in one way or another underlie and traverse it.

In consequence, *relevance*—in this particular case—does not lie in "the search for truth, for *identity"* or on its political or social genesis, yet in the fact that "indigenous culture"—namely in Ecuador—can move from *myth* to *philosophical thinking* or undergo a major shift through the suitable strategy. *Should* and *when* this transformation be duly justified, it would lead to the conversion of a marginal culture into a philosophical problem of the first international order.

To make clear again the boundaries of this study, the inquiry at hand does not enter on *descriptions* bounded by the necessary *epoché* and *phenomenological reductions*. Moreover, the essay does not claim to discover any truth, as said, nor to practice any kind of demonstration. As already mentioned, this essay is not set in a transcendental area.

What springs up beneath surface is a single "intuition," an unbreakable bond of thought and life, an abiding connection between mind and being (Ezcurdia, 2016). Indigenous expressions

[1] The world of traditions learnt since childhood—and coined by the ancestors—now gets a cultural gift or "givenness" from outside and hosts it in its "neighbourhood" and thereby transforms its surroundings. Consequently, this traditional old world is now controlled and reshaped by practices or codes coming from other cultures. In this particular case, this donation or *givenness* ends up happening on the part of *performativity*, which cohabits with the *event*. It is therefore given as a gift for the benefit of Andean culture, which in turn is duly and conveniently transformed by the new philosophy of *performance* (Steinbock, 1995).

do not speak of unity, of an Olympian culture, but rather of uniqueness, the repetition of difference, the juxtaposition of multiple and heterogeneous elements.

It is a matter of revealing something that had been hidden: indigenism in Latin America as a pre-Western culture inspired by *difference* and therefore located in postmodernity; this is what it is all about, unveiling the concealed to one's own world and its naive visitors. This is not only a rebellion, but a political revelation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 2005). The purpose is to get to see the invisible where everything seemed still and comfortable (Henry, 2009).

Methodology

A further intention of this paper is to fuel a set of narratives based on questions and despair, rather than spur on some kind of premises assuming that everything is soundly right and that therefore success is guaranteed. The *event*, and consequently the *performance*, is not *described* "speaking as to the order and manner of things": it is not *explained*. It might only happen to "resonate":

Discussing discourse hints not only at the death of the master-narrative and the closure of processes branded by cattle irons and sealed by their limits—beginning and end—, but also refers, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) suggests, to the parting of a means of representation: a "desire" based on shortage (endless pursuit) and hopeful lust instead of fertile thought. Desire, not wish: just desire. The latter builds, erects, forges homes and cities. Worlds! It connects and produces realities..., rather than filling a long void.

This should be borne in mind when reading the following: The event could happen, but it almost never does.

It does not mean that such methodological "triangulation" is intended to provide a more holistic and profound vision of Andean culture. The reason for approaching this essay with a cultural studies methodology and a variety of pathways, means and strategies lies in the fact that the use of disparate methodologies allows for the collection of knowledge that would otherwise be unattainable.

When reference is made to *origins*, it is in terms of their *spiral motion* and also their *genealogy*, not as some sort of *limit* or *determination* that would be more suitable to any kind of metaphysical approach. Estermann (1999, 2021) suggests that Quechua "is not a pure, truly indigenous and native culture, but a hybrid space and a syncretic universe that reflects the diverse cultural heritage of the vast majority of Quechua people" (p. 50).

At the outset of this text, it was said how anxious one was to understand indigenism in Ecuador, not as a *mythical* but as an "evental occurrence" (the *evental register*: a sphere of the postmodern event), and also "how it"—this *event*—and "if so" it could be approached from the multiplicity, *objective* and then *problem* of the quest; this opens the floodgate of a contemporary dam of knowledge to fill the previous *cognitive void* of this inquiry.

Surely the most relevant reason not to overlook this issue—the one posed by the *research problem*—deals with the passionate endeavour of this essay to provide an interpretation of *indigenous* customary *practices* in Ecuador from a decidedly post-structuralist perspective. It is hoped that such an approach will contribute not only to a central, first-order relocation of indigenous culture in Latin America, but also to a compilation of previously inaccessible knowledge on the subject.

Such an intellectual stance, if followed, will lead to the reception of new "elements" that were previously hidden, which would become the projection of a dynamic vision—through a *line of flight* (Deleuze, 1990; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983)—with respect to the *homeworld*, and beyond it, towards a place distant from one's own culture or tradition.

This paper is not about reaching, arriving at, let alone proving any kind of truth; no attempt to demonstrate anything in the context of a "rigorous science" (Husserl, 2002). Rather, it has to do with a walk through *indigenous experiences*—in the same way that one can be moved by a scent, a gesture, a gaze—and feeling—as "éprouver", in French: to be touched, to be moved, to yield to the temptation "to prove" the idea crossing the mind and body of what is glimpsed; but it is not an *affection* of the subject, who is merely part of what is happening, nor a degree of *force* around the *object*, pushed to the margins by what has taken place; it is simply a matter of being affected by what is being done.

The "Andean expression" arises, it is coming up, it is not related to the unitary organisation of the parts; it is not unity or identity, but rather something *prior* "genealogically" speaking: a concept that is not assembled into unity. In this "*expression* of experiences" there is no interiority that comes out at all—like a corpse surfacing to the surface; it is only an arising of the world, an awakening, a epiphany, a *vibration* or a *force* that manifests itself beyond *modern representation*—in Greece, however much some may insist, there was "no re-presentation", only born as a result of the *modern age*, of *modernity* –. Consequently, this experience alluded to is one…, that is to say, that goes on before anyone possesses it—it is not something that belongs to me, it does not happen "to-me".

What comes about is an unfolding on a *plane of immanence* (a non-transcendent surface where everything is linked without any hierarchy), on which there are a myriad connection of countless number (*forces, intensities, vibrations, becomings*). It is not a "thing" that happens, but an *ontological structure* (that is, a world-related framework) in which there is no *hierarchy* or *unity* and which *does not belong to anyone*, to a subject, ever! It is the world's happening. That is why *transcendental empiricism* (a theory of how something new comes about) can be spoken of *prior* to the subject, and even "prior to" any judgement or perception. But there will be *captures of beings*, absolutely: one body will seize another out of *vibration*, out of *affection*, not out of mutual recognition. There will be a grasping of *becoming*.

I would not speak of this *transcendental empiricism* in terms of *universals*, but rather about *singular* conditions of experience that will make "the new" possible. Nor is the method intended to propose a *theory of knowledge*, but of *difference* (becoming), of how something

"new" *becomes* (all this, of course, in the sphere of *performance*—of art—and by projecting this "dramatic" process into the domain of a postmodern event). The *subject*, or rather *subjectivities*, do not know the here called "experience", which is thought to be "without *self*"; as a "transcendental subject" it turns out to be *immanent* to experience, it does not point to any kind of truth resulting from an *intentional correlation* between subject and world.

This research therefore aims to say something that has not yet been thought of, either in its integrity or in its approach; in this regard, it lacks objective references, solid evidence, databases or rich and stable background information to contribute to the study. Undoubtedly, it is worth stating that, even if there are "captures of beings", as has already been said, this study is not a *descriptive* one, of a phenomenological nature, in a *transcendental-aesthetic* scale of a pre-reflexive/reflexive nature, in no way is this the issue at stake. By "transcendental" here is meant, in popular terms and within a phenomenological context, a relationship between subject and world that points to a kind of truth that will never be abstract or separate from life.

Therefore, no attempt is made in this essay *to describe* "indigenous expressions" that, from a pre-reflective realm—the *Lifeworld* or *Lebenswelt*—and through the historical development of a science, should arrive "at a full-life of a reflexive nature" that would guarantee the impartiality of observations through *epoché* and phenomenological *reduction*.

By not attempting to *describe*, *poetics* becomes an irreplaceable element of the *event*—and, therefore, of *performance*—ensuring its rejection of representational language and its collusion with creation itself.

The event is something concrete that cannot be reduced to the concrete itself, but this does not mean that reflections on the event should be something abstract. The significant Deleuzian "*intuition*", whose inspiration, structure and method are followed, is not a mere *cognitive function*—as Ezcurdia (2016) points out—but an *ontology* irreparably conjoined with life. That is, *indigenous expressions* and the *reflections* that result from them are two inextricably linked sides of the same coin. The transit or passage from *living matter* to *consciousness*, that is, the shift from the *unconscious* to the *conscious*—which is the *content of intuition*—would be precisely where *matter* would come to "satisfy its form" as *becoming*, as *difference*, according to Ezcurdia (2016) (exactly where *the return*—of *becoming*—transpires as an *event*). For Deleuze, *matter* is a constant process of variation, not a passivity: and knowledge is certified by "reality", while reality is corroborated by knowledge.

In the particular case being discussed, *indigenous expressions* are first and foremost hermeneutically stripped of their mythical import in order to keep exclusively with those *practices* that are object of public manifestation and study. Then, through a *line of flight*, a *desiring process* is produced (meaning a *productive force* that always remains within immanence; it does not aim at an ideal objectuality), like a *transformation* leading to the abandonment of age-old Greece, of a metaphysical meaning (Hegel, 2018). Hence the path of *multiplicity* is found, which, from *performance* (*alienworld*) makes a donation (*givenness*) of itself to the ancient and mythical *homeland* of indigenism (Steinbock, 1995). In so doing, an

unprogrammable, non-categorical transformation is introduced, to the detriment of *abstractions* or in favour of singular multiplicities and any kind of assemblages that spill over into familiar indigenism.

The need to approach this study with concepts that match the nature of its ontological structures will allow, in terms of *contextual relevance*, to make visible institutions that, due to their complexity and everyday nature, have been hidden or displaced to the margins, as is the case of indigenous manifestations.

It should be stressed that these methods are subject to some inherent limitations and possible biases related to the diversity of perspectives involved in this analysis and to a philosophy of *the event* intrinsic to postmodernism—even in the 21st century. This already could imply a certain ideological implication or influence on the ongoing investigation.

Literature Review, Analysis, and Possible Gaps

To get an insight into the panorama and ideas of contemporary European post-dramatic expressions, the central text here would be Lehmann's Postdramatic theatre (2006) and definitely *The Logic of Sense* (Deleuze, 1990), the latter with a wider range of interests and trying to reconstruct new logics of meaning with implications in many areas of contemporary life, specifically in the art world. Some further classics in the field are Fischer-Lichte's (2008) book on performance aesthetics and Schechner's (2003) on performance theory, with additional philosophical contributions by Ramsés Leonardo Sánchez Soberano (2016). Also of particular merit is the academic literature by López-Antuñano (2023), who specializes in contemporary theatre, mainly in Europe, and has written a number of important publications on this subject.

Indeed, there exist countless scientific essays on post-drama, contemporary theatre and performance, but not so many that bring together, or at least succeed in doing so, theories, ideas—be they performative, literary or philosophical—on the one hand, and the concrete experience of evental performance art on the other.

One of Latin America's most renowned thinkers, Quijano (2007), has been trying to ascertain the meaning of "decoloniality," which is nothing less than an epistemic and political disengagement from European and colonial power. Additionally, Walter Mignolo (2010) is one of the main figures and exponents of decolonial thought in this region. As for Enrique Dussel (1995), who was one of the great continental thinkers and philosophers of 20th century: while educated in Europe, his work is highly regarded for its philosophical and political commitment to his native land.

Reference to European humanists is part of the processes of cultural hybridisation that are so present and widespread in contemporary thought. Through the *line of flight flight* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Guattari, 2015), the aforementioned indigenous expressions would be tactically displaced from their homeworld (Steinbock, 1995) towards the *aionic* time inhabited by the

event in contemporary thought: *Logic of Sense* (Deleuze, 1990), *Event and World* (Romano, 2009), *Event and Time* (Romano, 2013), *There is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearance* (Romano, 2015) amongst others.

Indeed, different philosophical tendencies are currently moving in the same direction, while others—from different standpoints—are trying to overcome this transdisciplinary perspectivism, which is not committed to the world itself beyond what is implied by the fact of being just another perception in the middle kingdom of non-being.

Theoretical Framework

A Brief Note on Identity in Indigenous Latin America

The *Nepantla* symbolises an intermediate "space", a transit zone—a liminal place and non-place between existence and non-existence, and between what is and what is not. This means the indefinable, that which cannot be determined or identified in the nucleus of individual essence, which would define what something is. (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1990; Gallegos, 2024; Sánchez de Tagle, 2022). The Nahuatl (an indigenous Mexican language) word "nepantla" is central to indigenous worldviews in Latin America."

The following is not about thinking the *nature*, the *identity* of Indigenism, (never!), but of "what it is" that Indigenous embodiment *does or is doing*; "what is seen here" of what is being performed, what one *"encounters*," what *there is*....; what *happens*, what *becomes* of it, "how it all runs" from inside—not from outside—of what is taking place. Once again, it is emphasised that the essay attempts to explore the confluence of times, spaces and events that constitutes the *encounter* and the *performance* (Bhabha, 1990; Steinbock, 1995).

For the people known today as the Aztecs and their descendants, time and space were not abstract concepts, intellectual ideas that existed outside of "reality", but rather points at which they converged as *places* and *events* (the event is studied and analysed below in this same essay). In other words, time and space were elements that participated in the formation or constitution of the *nepantla*. Therefore, there is no radicality, extremism or compromise in the *nepantla*, but rather a nature of threshold, frontier or liminality: an intermediate zone.

Indigenism happens precisely through this interstitial space.

Deleuze's Lines of Flight

To "describe" the process being followed, according to Habermas (1984, 1987) and his theory of communicative action, this essay aims to get a sense of language within the very dynamics of the *homeworld* (Steinbock, 1995), through *practices* that would give a tangible meaning to the so-called *expressions*; the latter, meaning such practices, more genuine than the linguistic expressions themselves. These pragmatic statements are not only language, but they also become culture. In other words, the approach that crystallises here is related to the "voiding or

inward stripping" of any hermeneutic vestige that remains stuck to the homeworld or its rules. The path opened up here is tied to the cutting off of those muddy flows that lead to the so-called *molar plane*—as it were: the denial of the smiling approval of… this "system", for instance, and others of the same kind—and, in turn, their revolutionary severance from it; this in order to focus on what Indigenous Peoples "do", for this "doing" that is being talked about is their own form of expression. The *molar* plane or activity refers to predefined and established structures such as concepts or institutions that can be identified, recognised and understood. These structures can be categorised or named and are abstract. By contrast, the molecular level focuses on movement and difference.

To get a sense on the *forces* involved in these *practices* could be considered as one of the scientific goals now under full serious discussion. Such "practices"—the Andean ones—when deprived or stripped of a mythical touch or content, will offer—through "givenness"—a tangible "new meaning" to such expressions of an indigenous stamp, now based on *singularity*, that of a *guest culture* inherited from an *alienworld*.

These elements, *evental elements*, or, if one wishes, those *events* whose *expressions* carry an artistic trait or sign, come to constitute "a doing", they are an effective "being done", and such "being doing" naturally invites, one might say, interpretation itself; that what is "to be seen" is there...—there is (Romano, 2009, 2013, 2015)—to be interpreted. In other words, and for the sake of emphasis, in the context of generative *pre-givenness* (Steinbock, 1995), the issues involved are habits, practices and pre-theoretical structures: those *alienworld* manifestations (*difference, becoming*) that now spill over into the ancestral and familiar myth-world are also part of the same *world of life*.

It is the same "self" that *lives life*, that lives the world, and whose experiences will be constitutive of the *intentional* world (of a *transcendental*, reflective *world*). Already in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* in 1936 (Husserl, 1970) it is observed how in these two spheres—the *pre-reflective* and the *intentional*, the transcendental one—there is an inextricable interplay and unity. It is not feasible to speak of practical expressions on the one hand and reflexive utterances on the other. This spilling over or "givenness" is the only phenomenological instant in the whole process which, in what remains, follows a pure *ontology of the event*.

The issue and the *course of action* under *investigation* is that *something is happening,* takes place: an "indigenous expression", so to speak. Consequently, an "idea" comes up: a *thought conjoined to said expression* makes it known that such an Andean celebration "*is* not"—formally speaking—part of *unity*: the oneness, the identity. On the contrary, it seems "to be" a pre-Olympic liturgy, or rather, *it functions* like a *multiplicity*. At this point a *vector of deterritorialisation* is being drawn, in other words, a *line of flight*. This "fleeing" could refer to the evasion of *borders*, of a *teleology*, of a *determination*, in short, to a disruption and a destruction of the so-called "closed concepts". Let the methodological tract be continued: a *line of escape*, a *disorganisation* does not imply *only* a *shift*, in this case a *transformation* of *indigenism*; it also entails what one might call—in the framework of Deleuze's philosophy—a

redistribution of the possible. The latter opens the path to a *reconfiguration of forces* and foreshadows *the state of novelty* within the structure of *difference* (Deleuze, 1990; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Parr, 2010; Zourabichvili, 2012).

Guattari's (2015) *line of flight* may well be the most appropriate strategy for the case at hand, since it is not so much a matter of *reterritorialising* a concept or destroying the meaning of metaphysics itself, but of daring to break all the possible paths leading to an *end*, and stumble—without predetermination or groundwork—upon the unexpected or revolutionary discovery.

Vectors of deterritorialization are processes of *becoming*, if this expression is allowed; *devises* of breaking those particular and codified lines that intertwine the world in order to move away from those means of elaborating knowledge that have a hierarchical, arboreal identity and opt for the *rhizomatic* (like the ginger plant, which has a robust rhizome below); in other words, choose *difference*. It is about breaking or shifting these foreseen or possible processes in a direction not presumed in the route and making them independent of an old/future sequence of actions; a way of finding—through *encounters* beyond the feasible—a discovery or a new, unpredictable and unexpected element (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). The line of flight would be that dazzling moment or flow in which something or someone deviates from established processes and habits to embark on a new path, direction or set of ideas. This would not only imply novelty or transformation, but also a state of becoming.

The surrounding worlds, traditions, homeworlds can be expanded, they are dynamic, and come to *produce* elements that were not previously defined as such. Through the use of *cartographies*—those deserted charts that are not imprinted but chanted, as in the oral tradition (Anzaldúa, 1987)—one tries to locate new spaces, but *without naming them*, perhaps by using *nomadic* and *dynamic* concepts, *percepts* and *affects* as well (Deleuze, 1990).

This is precisely the pivot, the fulcrum; the *lines of escape* are thrust out of that liminality between what exists and what does not exist (the boundary between being and not-being); it is not something that "is" but "is not complete" (that would be a *simulacrum*), but something that *is born into being and simultaneously is not*, and the cycle begins over again. It is the ongoing and inexorable cycle of being born and of concurrently perishing (Heidegger, 2015).

This *finding*, should it be deemed pertinent to be thought of, might also be taken as relevant, since, if so—and given that Andean culture is on the edge of Western abstract forms—it would lead to the perception of *indigenous practices*, in this case Ecuadorian ones, as being appropriate to be located and interpreted in the sphere of *contemporary event* (Badiou, 2007).

The mythical concepts that were used to approach indigenous expressions are now replaced by *nomadic concepts*, by *cartographies*—the treatment of which will be the subject of a later study. It is precisely in the Lifeworld, so intimately bound up with that steady flowering of the natural, world-living self, that *givenness* takes place, right in the happening of that performative existence of a pre-reflective and, moreover, practical character. And it is exactly in this space that the *matter* of the event, which asserts itself as the will to power, hosts this return as a

differential fact, as multiplicity, as something heterogeneous in the heat of the *intuitive form* of the event, the central axis of Deleuze's ontology.

Something quite similar happens with *poetics* in the "evental site" (Badiou, 1988), where *thought*, willing to remain active, marginal, singular multiple, rebels against the very fact of being a *concept* (an abstraction) and seeks only the light of *intensity* (a vibration), which is always prior to the idea. Certainly, in other schools of thought, knowledge may be transmitted as content, but not in the approach taken here, where doctrine is only a gesture to be performed, a mode of becoming. Indeed, in other spheres of existence—it is insisted—the world is academically "described". But in the one that is the subject of this study, the happening "resonates", and this *resonance*, before any concept or idea, must open itself to *poetics* (Ezcurdia, 2016; Farges & Perreau, 2012; Husserl, 1970). This is just a way of thinking, far from being verified; the challenge will be whether it is possible to be thought, to be construed in this way.

The Event

With regard to the *event* covered in this section, it should be said that the term usually called *homeworld*—the pre-givenness itself (Steinbock, 1995)—would in this case be typified by its unwavering commitment to the traditional community and the distinctive elements that make it up: clothing, dances, the sounds uttered, music, all the gestures, attitudes or other actions that are performed. Non-linguistic expressions or practices are culture, as Habermas (1987) points out. In other words, whatever interpretation one makes of pre-givenness—this latter concept meaning the culture or tradition of a group—will of course be assuming the so-called homeland, the *homeworld*, via a *line of flight*. The door is opened to a discovery that is not possible, foreseeable, not announced in the traditional circle or its prospects; the latter—in French: *ligne de fuite*—leads the *cultural practices* of one's own world—by cutting them off from the expected processes—towards an adventure that would reach this alleged *absence* on its way to a definitive rebellion.

It all suggests that indigenous culture does not refer to a *distinct*, *abstract* form or concept, such as a *fundamental* or *logos* of immutable nature that refers to the *substance* of all that exists (Estermann, 2021). Rather, we are dealing with an interwoven system of co-dependent, cross-related, anarchic and heteronomous, non-substantial entities. For Andean thought, there are no absolute entities—in a narrow sense. Such a notion of the "absolute" is one of a Western origin and does not belong to an Andean cosmovision.

Regarding *infinity*, Estermann (2021) states that in the ontological scope of the Andean world, such an infinity is not understood as an endless line, but instead is seen as a cyclic motion or endless spiral... Each loop is then closed by a cosmic cataclysm (pachakuti) which in turn gives rise to another "spin"; an age that could be called ... *new*. In contrast to dominant modern Western conception of *time*, Estermann argues, an Andean time conception stresses quality, cyclicity, reversibility, discontinuity, and lack of linear progress.

Somewhat similarly, the same author goes so far as to claim that Andean temporality reflects the Greek notion of *kairos* (the fitting time). It is clear that, in the context in which he expresses himself, this author is addressing a time of *ceaseless present* (aion time), a time without *privileges* (neither of the *subject* nor of the *thematisation*), without *hierarchies*; that is, an *event* of *heterogeneity*.

As Claudio Romano points out in the *Introduction to Event and World* (2009, p. 4), with reference to a fragment by Nietzsche (2005) in which this author critically relates "what happens" (*Lightning flashes*) with an *activity* and a *subject*:

> …Nietzsche attacks what he calls a 'fundamental belief, 'the belief that 'there are subjects.' Indeed, by interpreting every appearance in relation to a *subject*, for example, every 'action' in relation to an agent, every 'effect' in relation to a 'cause,' it is implicitly asserted that 'everything that happens relates as a predicate to some subject. '*Assigning an event to an ontic substrate entail reducing the event to a pure 'predicate,' which is therefore used in connection with a* '*subject*'.

Then there would have arisen this confusion, also pointed out by Heidegger, between being and entity. The *poetic word* is worded without agents—the *poetics* that makes the event *resonate*: it just happens! It is not a matter of relating what is happening to an *activity* behind which there would always be a *subject*; it is not a question of assigning *predicates* to a subject, but of letting it happen, of disappearing (the subject) altogether (Romano, 2009). What is expressed in *the event* cannot be determined by the past, nor by the present or the future, because the event (Heidegger, 2013) speaks of what is not yet.

In the same way that Eric Alliez (1998) has written in relation to philosophical thought in Deleuze in its connection with the concept "image of thought" and a pre-philosophical understanding linked to the creation of concepts, the *language of the event* would not be a descriptive one; it would be a pure one without images—which Deleuze calls the faculty of essences –, heterogeneous, unbalanced, to free life where it is imprisoned and to draw *lines of flight* (Bene & Deleuze, 1979).

On the other hand, that said sort of *understanding*—the *momentum* of the *lines of flight*—might also give rise to a possible "new event" that would refer, once again, *to the supreme incarnation*, now and then,

> …of that *tiny instant* abaft a dance, *more* than just a solitaire gesture; to the lifting of a *gulp…* to one's dry lips,—or *to despair* at her sudden loss: at that secret burden of such endless death, under the twinkling Night...

In other words, have a go at writing the event down.

Besides, the *void* of individual identities in Ecuadorian indigenism, plus those borders and frontiers (neither *starting* nor *ending*) from which one *enters and exits*, similar to *birth* and

perishing (Heidegger, 2015) to which one is called by *difference*, invite one to interpret such Ecuadorian indigenous practices as "something that happens" in the sphere of the contemporary *event*.

Findings and Discussion

Ecuadorian Event and Performance

Castilla Cerezo (2014) points out that Deleuze suggested the following in a course at the Université de Vincennes—now Université Paris-VIII-Vincennes-Saint-Denis:

> ...speak of art, of an art, be it painting, music or any other, means, according to this author—that is to say, Deleuze –, *to form concepts that are in direct relation with that art and only with it*, ... Consequently, *art*, even if it is *mimesis*, fiction and imagination, *is not merely imitation of action* (as the Aristotelian definition of fiction asserted) but, on the contrary, 'production' of a *second surface*, *no longer physical*...[2]

In the same vein, Deleuze (2000) poses the following key question: beyond the revelation of the essence (of art)—beyond the *object*, beyond the *subject* itself—(the posed question…) belongs only to the sphere of *art*. If revelation is to be achieved, it will only be accomplished in this sphere.

As reflected in the introduction to this essay, a factual journey through the most relevant indigenous expressions of Ecuador reveals a dramatic process of *deterritorialisation* that produces a dual fracturing at the heart of these rites, with these indigenous expressions being both the margin and the absence, whereas Greece and West are referred to as the centre and presence of that which is metaphysically significant.

On the one hand, the cleavage between aesthetic and organic processes tends to trigger the *destruction* or *deconstruction* of Western metaphysical and unitary composition. *Minor* art, stemming from *"minor"* themes, languages, *"minor"* perspectives and cultures, leads to the dismantling of Western power structures and hierarchies and the exaltation of *difference*. Conversely, there is a genuine political *amputation*, which alters the balance of power: in this case, the obliteration of Greece's cultural and aesthetic categories will unleash the political potential of theatre. This was the first observation upon encountering the aforementioned Andean performance-event (Bene & Deleuze, 1979).

A second aspect that draws significant attention when one is introduced to the events of the already mentioned Andean celebrations has to do with the modern concept of *representation*.

[2] All texts referenced in French and Spanish in this essay have been translated into English by the main author of this manuscript.

The *self*, that transcendental schematism which does not exist in Greece and which synthesises all representations in Kant (1998), or the Cartesian (Descartes, 2009) idea of *internal consciousness*, the *ego cogito*—where representations reside—is translated into absentia; it declines as a non-representational force in indigenous expressions: there is no *theatre of the word* or *character incarnation*. Needless to say, there is no *mimesis* (imitation or logos) in the perfume or constitution of the expressions under study in this essay. The *event* and *performance* of indigenous expression signifies an immediate rupture with metaphysics and, consequently, with any compositional process. This is so obvious when you consider the indigenous expressions in Ecuador that you just let it resonate in the context of the event. No further analysis is needed (Cull, 2009).

Indeed, this is the finding and the insight—the starting and the *denouement*—one is definitely faced with: to have made it possible to intuit Ecuadorian indigenism, not from a museum gallery, not from a crowded bistro, but through a postmodern viewpoint not hinting at Greece or its philosophy of the spirit (Hegel, 2018). The relinquishment of colonial power is apparent and in favour of a new distribution of potentials, an indismissable claim.

Concluding: The Bleeding Feet, Becoming Tribal

In conclusion, all of the above shows that indigenous culture is not a set of *distinct* or *abstract forms* and concepts, such as *intellectual* terms, *foundations* or *logos* of an unchanging nature that aim at a *substance* of all that exists or at the basic order of the entity as *being* (Estermann, 1999, 2021). Rather, it is an interwoven system of co-dependent, interrelated, anarchic and heteronomous, non-substantial entities... For Andean thought, there are no *absolute* entities—in the strict sense –. Such a notion of the "absolute" is of Western origin and does not belong to the cosmic world referred to, the so-called Andean cosmovision.

The *objective* of the existing research was to explore the potential nexus between these indigenous celebrations and the realms of stage performance along with 21st-century postmodern culture. This would suggest, firstly, that these indigenous performative ceremonies may have possessed a certain "Dionysian" quality from their very beginnings and, secondly, that this kind of interpretation—drawing on contemporary European philosophy—might serve to illustrate the imprint of this inherent *difference* within the context of performative Andean indigenism. It would appear that the arts associated with the former *margin* adhere to paradigms that can reasonably be understood in terms of *liminality* and also *event*. It seems that the concept of "liminalness" was diverted—by the authority of Greek culture—to metaphysics and, eventually, "to re-presentation".

How a Western culture, the European one, has so often brushed beauty—allure! –, with its rosy pads, through arts, science, philosophy, and yet stain its feet with blood in the repeated absence of those who have been moved to the margins on the altar of Foundation, Order, Metaphysics is a huge question that holds an enormous contradiction. The Hegelian approach to history—the Greek, the meaning—was conceived only on the basis of the conqueror's mindset. If dialectics is the internal motor of history, then Hegel's thought –European thought—justifies

wars, and even more: the annihilation of peoples, which would be necessary for the full development of history, that is to say, such an effective extermination would be required for the presence of the spirit in History (Hegel, 2018). This would be a tremendous paradox even for a convinced European soul.

Should that be the case, then there can only a single answer: to desert the homeland, to become tribal.

With regard to Artaud's oeuvre, Deleuze makes the following observation: to write for the illiterate—to speak for the aphasic, to think for the acephalous. […] It is a question of becoming. The thinker is not acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate, but becomes so. He becomes Indian and never stops becoming so—perhaps "so that" the Indian who is himself Indian becomes something else and tears himself away from his own agony. This feeling of shame is one of philosophy's most powerful motifs (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 232–309; Ezcurdia, 2016).

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

No generative AI has been applied to this scientific work. None of the data or information used in this essay has been processed using any version or possibility of AI, nor is it necessary to enter into an agreement to this effect relating to the regulations of the University of Oslo. As the author of the paper, I take full responsibility for the originality of its content, statements and references.

Acknowledgments

I am passionate in my gratitude to Prof. Dr Ramsés Leonardo Sánchez Soberano for all the many encounters that have so enlightened the framing of this essay. The authors would also like to thank the *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*, its editors and review staff for their consideration and analysis of this paper. The thoughtful meditation induced by all their precious comments has led these essayists to a truly more nuanced and mature rewrite.

References

Alliez, É. (1998). Sobre el bergsonismo de Deleuze (E. Hernández, Trad.). En *Gilles Deleuze: Una vida filosófica* (pp. 100–112).

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza* (1st ed.). Aunt Lute Books.

Badiou, A. (1988). *L'être et l'événement*. Éditions du Seuil.

Badiou, A. (2007). The event in Deleuze (J. Roffe, Trad.). *Parrhesia*, (2), 37–44.

Bene, C., & Deleuze, G. (1979). *Superpositions* (J.-P. Manganaro & D. Dubroca, Trads.). Les Éditions de Minuit.

Bhabha, H. K. (1990). *Nation and narration*. Routledge.

Castilla Cerezo, A. (2014). Vista de La cosa en su presencia. Gilles Deleuze y la pintura. *Fedro. Revista de Estética y Teoría de las Artes*, 13, 49–69.

Cull, L. (2009). *Deleuze and Performance*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/j.ctt1r22j2

Deleuze, G. (1990). *The logic of sense* (M. Lester, Trans.; C. V. Boundas, Ed.). Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G. (2000). *Proust and signs* (R. Howard, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2005). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trad.). University of Minnesota Press.

Descartes, R. (2009). *Meditations on first philosophy* (M. Moriarty, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Dussel, E. (1995). *The invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the myth of modernity* (M. D. Barber, Trans.). The Continuum Publishing Company.

Estermann, J. (1999). *Andine Philosophie: Eine interkulturelle Studie zur autochthonen andinen Weisheit*. IKO Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation.

Estermann, J. (2021). *Filosofía andina: Sabiduría indígena para un mundo nuevo* (4th ed.). Arkho Ediciones.

Ezcurdia, J. (2016). *Cuerpo, intuición y diferencia en el pensamiento de Gilles Deleuze* (1st ed.). Editorial Ítaca y UNAM.

Farges, J., & Perreau, L. (2012). Edmund Husserl, Husserliana XXXIX. Die Lebenswelt. *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie*, *20*, 213–222. https://doi.org/10.4000/alter.1122

Fischer-Lichte, E. (2008). *The transformative power of performance: A new aesthetics*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203894989

Gallegos, L. C. (2024). Shifting towards decoloniality: Transfronteriza nepantlera rasquache tactics in new media art and expanded animation. *Animation Practice, Process & Production*, *12*, 185–211. https://doi.org/10.1386/ap3_00049_1

Guattari, F. (2015). *Lines of flight: For another world of possibilities* (A. Goffey, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Vol. 1: Reason and the rationalization of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action. Vol. 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). *The phenomenology of spirit* (M. Inwood, Trans.). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139050494.002

Heidegger, M. (1975). *Early Greek thinking* (D. F. Krell & F. A. Capuzzi, Trans.). Harper & Row.

Heidegger, M. (2013). *The event* (R. Rojcewicz, Trans.). Indiana University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2015). *The beginning of Western philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander and Parmenides* (R. Rojcewicz, Trans.). Indiana University Press. https://doi.org/10.2979/10934.0

Henry, M. (2009). *Seeing the invisible: On Kandinsky* (S. Davidson, Trans.). Continuum.

Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, E. (2002). Philosophy as rigorous science. *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, *2*, 249–295.

Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason* (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Eds. y Trads.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804649

Latvecuador. (2014, November 2). *Día de los Difuntos en Otavalo 02/11/14 LA TV ECUADOR* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2OF6rPPdXo

Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre* (K. Jurs-Munby, Trad.). Routledge.

López Antuñano, J. G. (2023). Dramático y posdramático: Dos caminos en el teatro contemporáneo. *Pygmalion: Revista de Teatro General y Comparado*, *15*, 115–136. Retrieved from https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=9250119

Maldonado, A. (2018, July 19). *San Pedro en Peguche 2018* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQjP0Yetqz4

Mignolo, W. (2010). *Desobediencia epistémica: Retórica de la modernidad, lógica de la colonialidad y gramática de la descolonialidad*. Ediciones del Signo.

Nietzsche, F. (2005). *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (R. Bittner, Ed., K. Sturge, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Parr, A. (Ed.). (2010). *The Deleuze dictionary* (Rev. ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2–3), 168–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353

Romano, C. (2009). *Event and world* (S. Mackinlay, Trans.). Fordham University Press.

Romano, C. (2013). *Event and time* (S. E. Lewis, Trans.). Fordham University Press.

Romano, C. (2015). *There is: The event and the finitude of appearing* (M. B. Smith, Trans.). Fordham University Press.

Sánchez de Tagle, G. (2022, January 9). Nepantla o la muerte del tiempo nahua. *Cultura Nexos*. Retrieved from https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/nepantla-o-la-muerte-del-tiempo-nahua/

Sánchez Soberano, R. L. (2016). From transcendental phenomenology to transcendental aesthetics: Originality and primordiality in lifeworld. *Revista de Filosofía Open Insight*, *7*(11), 139–163. Retrieved from https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S2007-24062016000100139

Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance theory*. Routledge.

Steinbock, A. J. (1995). *Home and beyond: Generative phenomenology after Husserl*. Northwestern University Press.

Terry, J. L. (2019, June 26). *Baile del Inti Raymi—Estudiantes del Bachillerato Internacional del Colegio Fiscal Guayaquil* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGrhFPvUIl8

Travel Pills. (2012, August 23). *Fiesta de la Mama Negra—Latacunga—Ecuador* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ym5_3ekWglI

Zourabichvili, F. (2012). *Deleuze: A philosophy of the event together with the vocabulary of Deleuze* (K. Aarons, Trans.; G. Lambert & D. W. Smith, Eds.). Edinburgh University Press.

Corresponding author: Miguel A. Orosa
Email: maorosa1@pucesi.edu.ec

Telling "The World Changes": Artist Stories of Envisioning Global Citizenship

Ruth Bateson-Ardo
Massey University, New Zealand

Ann Rogerson
Massey University, New Zealand

Stephanie Denne
Massey University, New Zealand

Leigh Coombes
Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

Third culture kids (TCK), also called global citizens, are a highly diverse population connected through shared experiences and senses of the world from in-between and across countries and cultures. Tracing visions of self and the world through reflections with creative works, our research in collaboration with third culture/global citizen artists offers cartographic figurations of transcultural memories and desires that articulate experiences of cultural marginality through affirmative imaginations. Artful storylines challenge cultural "realism" as a paradigm that enables monocultural dominance, deconstructing and reconstructing experiences of self through explorative articulations, emerging with creative becomings that empower and enable speaking back to the world. Bringing postcolonial theory of hybridity as rhizomatic processes of exchange to bear through posthuman ethics of transformation and politics of location, we resist the division of stories of difference and exclusion from stories of hope, joy, and community, as we follow affirmative flows of embedded and embodied resistance that disrupts the silencing of cultural *others*. Our gathered stories include accounts of contemporary colonialism in international spaces, navigation of stereotyped bodies, amalgamating spaces and skylines, writing to care, becoming-jellyfish, and more. With an emphasis on strengths and empowerment as processes, the stories that draw together this project of encountering difference differently attend to the not-so-missing voices of those who flow over and beyond cultural categories into emergent bodies of contemporary citizenship in a globalising world.

Keywords: arts, cartography, global-citizen, migration, posthuman, third-culture-kid

> *"Differently or differentially generative, art transmutes chaos into form that is evocative of living capacity. It stimulates patterns that operate kaleidoscopically rather than mutagenically. In this sense, we would suggest that art as an expressive capacity of living immanence holds a counterweight to capital…" (Fancy & Skott-Myhre, 2019, p. 7).*

In an increasingly globalising world, where inter-group divisions and conflicts invoke polarising politics of identity, problems and potentias of cultural multiplicity are immanent in the life stories of third culture kids (TCKs), also called global citizens. As people who spent childhood years living as expatriates and embedded in what often feel like chaotic patterns of cultural dis/placement, TCKs occupy precarious and privileged positions within global tensions of experiencing and expressing possibilities of emergent citizenship. Notions of space, nationality, and belonging articulate cultural boundaries in complex and fluxing relationships with our changing global landscape. Through narrative processes, subjectivities of global citizenship are constructed as meaningful and made coherent in relation to cultural references and contemporary visions of the world, and, conversely, may become increasingly incoherent as they challenge or resist established cultural borders (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024). My own[1] location lends affective flows of urgency to attending to these struggles for articulation as projects of re-negotiating our visions of the world.

Struggles of marginal and emerging subjectivities to become widely coherent highlight the presence of experiences that do not yet have common languages to be articulated by- or rather, that are disruptive to dominant languages of cultural identification. Colonial powers to represent cultural identification extend authority to meaningfully describe and define international issues through privileged Anglo-American and Eurocentric traditions (Bhabha, 1994), visible through the nationalistic structures and monocultural languages of positioning that pervade dominant TCK literature (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024). Crafting TCKs as a distinct (predominantly white) expatriate/repatriate population (Pollock et al., 2017), TCK literature portrays pioneers of global citizenship through figures that remain largely embedded and institutionally contained in neoliberal frameworks of individual abnormality (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024; Cranston, 2017). Such dominant approaches organise cultural difference through enquiry with individual traits, development, and outcomes (Tan et al., 2021), producing paradigms that retain monocultural and nationalist assumptions through accounts of inherent pain of identity troubles and non-belonging (Fanoe & Marisco, 2017; McKeering et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Moore & Barker, 2012; Pollock et al., 2017; Rangoonwala, 2019; Thomas et al., 2021; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). Previously, we have considered the modes of representation in TCK literature as both emblematic of wider tensions of cultural multiplicity and as spaces of memory: glimpses of cultural becomings point to ethical potentias of listening as a process of response-ability (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024). Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial theory, we further consider the emergence of TCK studies as a historically-located

[1] Refers to the first author, who grew up as an expatriate child in several countries. First-person pronouns throughout refer to the first author.

field of work, within global power relations and patterns of cultural negotiations with Eurocentric representative traditions. Postcolonial concepts of hybridity as interdependent constructions of subjectivities are extended through posthuman relational ethics that emphasize and affirm the rhizomatic proliferation of subjectivities-in-becoming through ever new and fluid political assemblages (Braidotti, 2018). Cultural hybridity as a process of enduring, resisting, and responding to colonial histories (Bhabha, 1994) across the world therefore frames our conceptualisation of TCK lived memories as networks of intercultural and intersubjective becomings, embedded in processes of disconnecting from "habitual patterns of identity" (Braidotti, 2017, p.19). Shifting from the binary modes of identity that describe and define struggles and potentias of TCK life (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024), by framing cultural hybridity in networked and generative modes, we enter articulative processes of renegotiating terms and meanings of difference.

Listening to othered voices, then, as a political and reciprocal process of becoming able to think and relate differently (Braidotti, 2008) underpins the orientation of our project towards arts as cartographies of these movements out of habitual identity patterns and towards networked becomings. With two key TCK texts (Faleiro, 2018; Fehr, 2015) that have accompanied and inspired our processes of charting TCK memory and imagination as joyful articulations of difference, we configure arts as the convergence of critical and creative processes. The decolonial potentias of posthuman ethics of enquiry are then discussed as the cartographic tracing of embedded and embodied power relations in which artist participants thread transformative configurations of emergent cultural subjectivities. The stories shared with us by participants in our research assemble here as a project of situating and responding to the troubles of making sense of cultural marginality, reaching out across borders and boundaries with movements towards different ways of becoming.

Art Narrative as Response-able

To subvert the normative measures and codes of meaning that dominate TCK studies with nationalistic interpretations, our processes and spaces of encountering TCK narratives become a primary ethical matter of articulating knowledge as embedded and response-able with global issues and through specific memories. In posthuman theory, ethical tensions of articulating difference are recognised as transformative negotiations that combine critical and creative thinking (Braidotti, 2017) and Bhabha (1994) frames the discursive production of cultural differences as struggles for signification at the edges of human imagination. Questions of cultural difference are therefore positioned as responsive interstitial spaces of opportunity for new cultural thought, where cultural symbols and signifiers are immersive processes rather than fixed re-presentations of the static same. Staying with incomplete and negotiable questions of cultural difference as grounded in histories from which difference is emergent, and resisting oppositional binaries of the *other* as negative, generative recomposition of subjectivities requires imaginative creativity (Bhabha, 1994; Braidotti, 2018). Inspiring accompaniments to the task of orientating toward creative potentia as affirmation and empowerment (Braidotti, 2018) in TCK research, two particular texts offer a compelling case for the possibilities of

imagining embedded and embodied transformation of global relations through TCK creative works; their accounts centre artistic narrative as response-able to cultural margins of the world.

The first text is Fehr's (2015) reflexive article about the creation of a Chinese garden in Vancouver, Canada. Fehr explores tensions of space, belonging, and positioning that emerge in her TCK life stories through material creativity, feeling "nameable departures and destinations to define the in-between" (p. 170). She embraces the in-authentic precarities of a space that carries memories and artefacts of other places, using building and decorative materials as tools to confront and play with myths of cultural purism, and open possibilities to engage in the messy experiences of negotiating the in-between as sufficient and sustainable. Disrupting the moral politics of authenticity, Fehr's account inspires joyful and playful modes of resistance, reflecting on the ironies and incongruities that feature in TCK experiences; she leans into tensions between access and isolation that arise from temporary migration and privileged expatriate lifestyles. The transmuting of space and materiality through curation and extension of cultural edges reflects the affirmative potentia of taking difference out of oppositional frames (Bhabha, 1994), enabling intimate and delicate tangles of intersecting TCK memories to play in articulable formations. Articulative potentias of working these complex affects are extended through a second text, "On being a third culture kid", by novelist and poet Faleiro (2018). She reflects on the social conditions of her migration experiences and locates struggles of articulating her stories within interpersonal systems that enforce harmful disciplines of dominant expectations. Threading stories between experiences of marginalisation and social conditions that produce and discipline her life stories as different, Faleiro (2018) counters the normalising powers that emphasise assimilation, simultaneously compounding and silencing her pain. Rejecting individualising questions of identity crises, she argues instead that her creative writing "across boundaries" articulates her difference, including the cultural constructs in which her difference has been troubling (Faleiro, 2018, p. 399). In these negotiated spaces, the rich and complex experiences of marginal and interstitial cultural positioning flow in dynamic relations and temporal rhythms among cultural formations and their shifting boundaries. Making space to acknowledge and articulate memories of grief, loss, and trauma, Faleiro's (2018) writing affirms pain, demonstrating the ethical potentias of relations of transformation, where pain composes desire for alternatives (Braidotti, 2008).

Creative works like Fehr's (2015) and Faleiro's (2018) engage and respond with challenges in TCK lives beyond pathologizing or binarily opposed labels associated with their differences, through creative domains, highlighting the empowering potentias of alternative and open-ended knowing of multiculturalism. The challenges of knowing oneself through frames of difference are unravelled in stories of global power systems that condition liminal cultural zones as rhizomic breaks through which responsive bodies seep out in new relational shapes. As we move with the possibilities of creative re-configurations in TCK stories, we conceptualise arts as relational processes of un-fixing "habits of thought" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 83) in embedded, embodied expressions that are situated and moving against dominant codes to generate kaleidoscopic becomings (Fancy & Skott-Myhre, 2019). Possibilities to produce different bodies capable of different kinds of movement and connectivity through rhizomatic ethics (Braidotti, 2006) frames kaleidoscopic becomings as interstitial processes of entering

into new relations and alliances that more adequately allow us to recognise and qualitatively transform the habits and conditions that compose our subjectivities. Recasting and relinking forms of self and other, we understand TCK art-work as driven by generative potentia of creativity to reclaim difference into affirmative relations, crafting new kinds of knowing subjects that bear out these relations (Braidotti, 2018).

Methodology

Cartography

Taking the politics of posthumanism, where the human is non-neutral and non-universal−but embedded in social power relations that string together systems of thinking and knowing (Braidotti, 2018) – we open spaces to critically consider taken-for-granted cultural boundaries and categories. Postcolonial politics of missing voices emphasise situated critiques of traditional figures of the human (Bhabha, 1994; Braidotti, 2018), framing possibilities for TCKs to speak from cultural margins with embodied understandings of dominant structures of culture and nation in which our voices become missing, or our experiences become homogenised (Bateson-Ardo et al., 2024). Gathering threads of memory through responsive imaginations, we therefore trace located understandings of cultural negotiations through a cartography, a fluid and always incomplete "theoretically-based and politically-informed account of the present" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 33). Resting on process ontology, cartographies assume connectedness and privilege motion, which takes place away from the centres of human dominance and proliferates in spaces of marginality, liminality, and bodies of otherness (Braidotti, 2006).

As a researcher, I am also positioned with insider memories of entanglements that emerge in TCK living, informing my ethical relations of reflexive enquiry and careful movements between institutional platforms and less powerful community spaces. Listening to lived experiences, and able to hear and feel them through intersecting relations between stories of others and self, we trace the structural and personal conditions of speaking. We begin with missing voices (remembering that they are not missing everywhere) and the goings-on in liminal places, looking for affectual alliances with many concerns, peoples, and politics that link TCK stories, to de-territorialise and re-territorialise along cartographic lines: cracking open the surface narratives to engage the power relations beneath (Braidotti, 2018). Seeking opportunities to follow TCK voices as they have developed politically situated responses, we designed this study to hear stories through artworks already created by TCKs, to disrupt dominant patterns of knowledge by centring community imaginations- after all, "artists and activists respond more promptly to the call for more creativity than professional academics do" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 90).

Encountering the Artists

The project aim given to participants was "to understand and explore the processes, values, meanings, and conditions of expressing and narrating creatively from a transnational / multicultural position". We sought to encounter TCK voices on their own terms; this meant our conversations began and centred around the art they were already creating, rather than predetermined questions or structured guidance of creative activity. I invited – directly or through mutual contacts – four artistic people who grew up transnational and transcultural to collaborate and gift stories to this research about their creative practices of telling about the world. They each chose a pseudonym to go by: Abby, Alanah, Cole, and Saul. We did not require them to be professional artists, resisting the hegemonic superiority of institutional structures of creativity that organises artistic value through dominant colonial and patriarchal assumptions (Grierson, 2007), nor that they used any specific identifying title (like TCK). We welcomed contributions from anyone who had lived outside of their passport country before the age of 18, felt significantly impacted by that experience, and had engaged in some kind of creative activity they felt reflected stories about those life experiences. Each conversation began with a question about how the participant preferred to talk about their cultural and international experiences and was followed up with a question about what it was like to tell people about these life experiences. From here, the conversation and my questions and reflective comments flowed from the stories participants chose to tell and what they deemed important about their creative exercises.

As this was an international study, all conversations were conducted online through recorded video-calls. Participants were offered opportunities to meet informally with me (online) to ask questions about the study before the recorded conversation (an unstructured interview), which one participant did. All conversations lasted between one and two hours, and through further correspondence several participants also added comments to go with the transcript. I disclosed my own TCK identity in the information sheet and was the sole communicator with the participants.

We intentionally sought diversity among our participants, as the literature is dominated by stories of white migration (especially North American) (Tan et al., 2021; Tanu, 2015), tracing wider patterns of colonial authority over international representations (Bhabha, 1994). Between them, the participants had significant connections with 12 countries, and although we do not identify them by their country of nationality, we are attentive to the intersections of colour and race in global mobility and that these intersections are rarely noted in the literature (Tanu, 2015). Three participants (Abby, Cole, & Saul) are people of colour of Asian descent, and they offer stories of international conditions that are absent in dominant western texts about TCKs or global citizens. At the time of the interview, Alanah and Abby were living in their countries of national citizenship (both western settled nations), and Cole and Saul were living on visas as immigrants in western settled nations, where they were working or studying. Abby was the only participant to strongly identify with the identity label "TCK", Alanah had not been aware of particular names for people growing up transnational, and Cole and Saul both expressed more affiliation with the term "global citizen". Because of this, the terms "TCK",

"global citizen", and "multicultural" are used here interchangeably to refer to people who experienced formative international and intercultural lifestyles.

Inspired by Oakley's (2016, p. 208) presentation of research as a "gift relationship", we treat the time and stories shared by participants as valuable gifts of embedded and embodied expert understanding of the complexities and possibilities in their life experiences. This framework acknowledges what the participant is giving (in terms of ability to represent their stories), and also that they decide what is gifted and what is withheld. The notion of a gift also reminds researchers of the ethical responsibilities of care we have as receivers of gifts to treat them with dignity and to reciprocate the gift with safe, generative encounters and, in this case, by bringing the stories into a new academic space through publication.

Framework of Analysis

We present the stories gifted by the participants in conversation with each other, weaving in discussion about the implications of these stories to understand our world, and the *others* in it differently. Although Abby, Alanah, Cole, and Saul had not met one another, their stories assemble in this research project and take collaborative stances as they sound harmonies of feeling and memory, emphasising political threads and affective chords common across global citizen life stories. The stories are presented below in three progressive sections, drawn together in collaboration with the four participants. The cartographic framework follows a narrative progression inspired by Alanah, who shared a collection of paintings displayed across three art-boards, as an assembly of creative pieces contributing to a story that weaves and develops across them. She explains: "The first of my art boards is more like realism… like it's how exactly what things are. And the second board became a bit more disconnected, and the last one was… completely abstract. It was kind of showing a journey". These journeys illustrate the tensions, relations, resistances, aspirations and geopolitical imaginings that have been crafted in the creative storytelling of all participants. Alanah's paintings, therefore, become the structure of the gathered stories below as they trace movements and interconnection of silencing norms, distortions, and becomings, which Abby, Saul, and Cole speak into and elaborate with their own creative telling. The stories told through and facilitated by their art form cartographic accounts of becoming multicultural in contemporary conditions of international geopolitical systems.

Realism: Experiences of Silencing

The first set of Alanah's paintings begin in a style she calls "realism", with objects and self-portraits grounded inflexibly in representations according to dominant perceptions and cultural standards of recognition. This style figures how recognisable accounts of herself are discursively constrained by dominant frameworks, shaping the "outward reflection of what everyday people see", as she puts it. Engaging with realism through postcolonial questions of frames and histories in which cultural difference is signified and confronted (Bhabha, 1994), the tensions of outwards reflections reveal nationalistic discourses of cultural distinction that

patrol borders of the *other.* Narratives of troubling encounters with colonial references to universals and cultural purity thread through the stories of the artists as issues of navigating networks of cultural thought that produce difference as incoherence.

Growing up as they had between countries and cultures, the global citizen stories are punctuated by memories of encountering themselves as foreign, different, or unable to sufficiently answer identifying questions that draw on nationalist assumptions and fixed categorisations. In a refrain familiar through TCK literature (Tan et al., 2021), Saul reflects that "yes, you might belong everywhere, but sometimes you don't belong anywhere". Even though he often felt that he could relate with people (through inside jokes and conversation topics) from the countries he grew up in, he was not considered "qualified" to express that belonging due to his nationality. However, speaking beyond the binary friction of belonging everywhere and not anywhere, Saul attends to the social measures that hold power to "grant" or withhold belonging through notions of cultural purity that disciplined his imagination of his own subjectivity as one of perpetual *other*ness. The apparently contradictory simultaneity of belonging everywhere and belonging nowhere can be made sense of by considering how these two positions both transgress mythologies of national identity and the exploitative divisions in western designs of globalisation (Bhabha, 1994). Rather than being contradictory or opposed, "everywhere" and not "anywhere" are both interstitial modes of living that undermine the constructs of borders that work to qualify and disqualify expressions of belonging. Discursive disciplines that resist the porousness of borders in migrant memories appear similarly in Alanah's stories, where her passport country peers pressure her to account for herself according to terms embedded in nationalist and monocultural expectations. Alanah recalls feeling accepted and included growing up as a visible foreigner in her host country, pointing out how it was only after repatriation that she encountered rigid and non-permissive paradigms of identity that limited cross-cultural expressions and participation. She was told that "you should do the stuff that, you know, you culturally belong to", remarking to me how cultural identities are "separated" by dominant western individualist paradigms in her passport country. The social displacement that follows rejection of multiple cultural affiliations Saul felt was "sometimes quite disturbing", and Alanah remembers sensing "something's not quite right", wondering "what about me, where do I fit in?", between insufficient and unwelcoming nationalist borders of legitimacy.

For Abby, as an Asian-decent western national who was raised outside of her country of national citizenship, the layers of cultural ambiguity are many. Although in her metropolitan host city with its substantive migrant community Abby didn't feel out of place, after repatriating to her passport country she was confronted with complex racialised and normative stereotypes that are absent from popular TCK representations (Tanu, 2015), which assume TCKs look local in their passport county (Pollock et al., 2017). Abby highlights missing TCK stories of entanglements of colour and minoritisation, talking about the restrictive capturing stereotypes of migration patterns that socially organise her body as different in specific ways. Although her family have been citizens of her passport country for many generations, Abby finds that among white communities "people read me as foreigner and as other", based on racializing stereotypes informed not by Abby's life stories of expatriation, but by her

appearance. Simultaneously, other Asian citizens sometimes look for shared minoritised experiences that Abby doesn't relate to due to growing up overseas, she says, "not understanding that having that experience has shaped me in different unique ways". This layering of invisibility through convergent and intensifying cultural boundaries traces complex collective processes of making sense of *other*ness through re-inscription of identity, stemming from universalising Eurocentric histories of describing humanness and accordingly arranging hierarchies of exploitation (Braidotti, 2010). The cultural memories of Asian migrants and the imaginations of white citizens (with masked and euphemised stories of their own migration) on the political landscape are arranged through pervasive colonial systems of diversity that represent "totalised cultures" related through comparison with western supremist assumptions (Bhabha, 1994, p. 34); Exceeding and disturbing the socially-embedded assumptions about citizen categories and ways of being *other*, Abby's life stories pose troubles to nationally-inscribed languages of difference. While Abby's racialised identity and the stereotyped assumptions that follow it are "externalised" and "obvious", she says her own memories of cultural difference and nuances through which she understands tensions of *other*ness as a TCK retreat, becoming "more hidden or secret".

Tracing further the threads of erasure of complexity and western discomfort with cultural ambiguity, Cole suggests that social processes to arrange global citizens into "a box of a certain identity", arise from a desire to "understand through their notions who you clearly are", a process of building recognisability and "kinship". However, where recognition remains embedded in hierarchical cultural systems of sameness, repetition, and mythologies of purity, the everyday lives of cultural *others* navigate edges of identity paradigms and systems of kinship. The anthropocentric shapes of cultural realism construct norms that simultaneously impose negative and deficit oppositions to the norm, weaving privilege and discrimination in the same motion (Braidotti, 2018), subjecting multicultural life stories to filtering that, in seeking sameness, discards difference. This can place global citizens in precarious relational positions, where insistence on too much of the difference, or resistance to overriding languages of the same can overturn the (offered) conditions of kinship: In order to "to tell the stories of the cultures that I come from", Cole says, "there's a bunch of pre-conceived notions that are broken" by the end of the conversation. The breaking of dominant knowledges as a risk borne by already-other bodies becomes an inevitability at cultural locations of hybridisation.

Ongoing processes of cultural becomings, always already hybrid and liminal, undermine colonial dreams and desires for supremacy that depend on division (Bhabha, 1994). The problem of disciplined and limited access to participating in cultural stories arises here for global citizens as a tension of social resistance to the re-working of networks of connection that are involved in re-thinking our subjectivities (Braidotti, 2006). The artists recall discourses of cultural appropriation (alleging misrepresentation of cultural artifacts or aesthetics) that emerge as disciplining, admonishing tactics for preserving ideas of cultural purism. The underlying assumption in – or perhaps insistence on – in these discourses, is that cultural convergence must be a matter of domination. Usually referring to colonial conditions of commodification and inequitable powers of representation, the parameters of the offence of cultural appropriation are, however, increasingly blurry, which can lead to overzealous and

harmful rebukes of genuine cross-cultural engagement (Lenard & Balint, 2020). Alanah recounts trepidation she felt about the risk of this accusation, when her memories of growing up in her host country were questioned because she did not "fit… the appearance profile". When she would talk about her multiple cultural affiliations, she remembers how "people will be very quick to tell you 'no', even if that's like all you know". Learning the patterns of judgements and rejection, Alanah reflected on her anticipatory uncertainty about telling her stories, wondering aloud "what gives me the right to do that, if I'm not actually a part of that culture?". In near unison, Saul similarly reflects on challenges to his entitlement to speak beyond his nationality, telling me: "[the] first thing they will say [is] 'hey, you are a foreigner, what gives you the right?'". Essentialised cultural borders and moralising patrols of outsider-ness highlight complex power relations inherent in cross-cultural exchange – but also the challenges that global citizenships raise to taken-for-granted cultural and national borders. Cole also recognised tensions of cultural rights and positions of (il)legitimacy, describing encounters with discourses of suspicion surrounding the "culturally ambiguous", resulting in erasure of unexpected or disruptive "cultural innovation". Rogers (2006) points out that cross-cultural relations reconfigure into trans-cultural shapes through relational processes, where culture is not discrete, owned, or bounded, but is engaged in extensive and shifting power relations through which appropriation is better understood as a contextualised process and socially dynamic. Therefore, accusations of cultural appropriation readily levelled at multicultural people can be understood as embedded in social processes of preserving perceived cultural boundaries and the positions of power these boundaries (and their distinction from "outsider" positions) offer. Moralising discourses of rights serve as effective cultural mechanisms to exclude narratives that may unbalance dominant insider/outsider structures or warp the "profile" of a group. This social discipline of what Alanah calls the "outwards reflection" can function to suppress TCK stories: Alanah remembers feeling compelled to keep her life stories vague, saying "it's a lot easier to just not say anything, I think".

These collective stories gather from across continents and many cultural experiences to shape common memories of global structures of identification that resist multiculturalism and constitute unreceptive conditions for complex cultural stories. More than just speaking into silent gaps in literature about TCK conditions of life, the stories that populate this panel of "realism" point to the silence and explain how it comes to be silent- the cultural paradigms that discipline expressions of affiliation, and social rejection of differences that have muted and deflected their voices. As we remember together these troubles of the silence and displacement of visions for "everywhere" into nationalist captivity of not "anywhere", a pressure and friction builds between normative "realism" and persisting and generative memories of living beyond. The artists share this pressure as an affective and interpersonal struggle for articulation, narrating the everyday and embodied tensions of negotiating with contemporary nationalist codes of difference that prop up exploitative myths of human hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994; Haraway, 2006). Their formative positions within centres of this trouble lend a depth of comprehension to the subtle and enduring disciplines of bodies that are culturally liminal, becoming a necessary and urgent starting point in the artists' stories of finding alternatives. Generative modes of transformation begin with "recognition of one's limitations" as potentia that mobilises "an ethical and political sensibility" towards a desire to explore, know, and

become differently in relation to the world and others in it (Braidotti, 2006, p. 163). The artists' stories, then, beginning as they do with reflexive configurations of their marginalised positions as socially threaded and grounded, carry potentias for alternative perspectives on pathologizing accounts of struggle in TCK literature by situating global citizenship within tensions between nationalist realism and always-emerging experiences of culture beyond. Intertwined memories of reduction and silencing of life experiences with subsequent creative movements interrupt and re-mobilise narrative forces. "They try to put you into these categories", Alanah says, 'you overlap a little bit'.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing: Finding Creative Alternatives to Silence

In her second collection, Alanah's paintings begin to distort and fragment: In self-portraits, her face pulls away from her head and divides, paint drips from a globe and runs off-page (we don't know where it ran to – that must be another story), and a floating house loses its walls among clouds. Alanah explains how recognisable shapes of "realism" "become broken down… move[ing] out of confinement". Challenges to realism and imaginative deconstruction of barriers of cultural identity emerge now through stories of arts as an epistemological site in which experience is thought transformatively by recasting subjective relations through signifying processes of experimenting with difference (Braidotti, 2017; Grierson, 2006; 2007). These experiences and experimental responses crack open dominant culturally locating accounts, picturing more open territories to explore and express global citizenship. "Putting yourself [in the art] makes it more personal", Alanah says, of her disintegrating self-portraits, "it shows my feelings about things… I'm not just this person, like, you know, I'm kind of moving through things and you can pull me apart and that sort of thing." While binary opposition reinscribes the politics of sameness (Bhabha, 1994), "moving through" is a responsive processes of reconstruction and recomposition of potentias that emerge from trouble, an open-ended mode of expression for Alanah: "Art's one way that you can kind of explain things without actually having to explain it", and, therefore, people can "take what [they] want". Respectively, Abby and Cole chime in: "Arts [are] a way of impacting people and creating change… to communicate in ways that transcend language", "most artists are trying to… understand their colloquial surroundings through their art… it's a response".

Saul's own textual crafts develop as an important response to his silenced "foreign" voice, where language was repressed through interpersonal pathways and he re-diverted into writing the flows that were being stopped up: "I really like writing because I feel it's very hard for people to listen to you". When Saul writes, readers are able to respond to his voice rather than his foreignness: "They have no access to my face", he says, and in this protective textual format he slips past the barriers of *other*ness to make himself heard. Often in the form of fiction and metaphor, Saul's texts address local and international issues without being directly critical, a tactic he developed to engage in political discourse without being "too sensitive", while also "express[ing] everything without constraints". The constraints on Saul's voice as a foreigner were not only social, but practical, as he encountered language barriers growing up in different countries. "With writing you have the opportunity to proofread and search up the vocabulary, things like that", he explained, allowing him to craft his expression more carefully, avoiding

misunderstandings and missed understandings. Saul has saved pieces of his writing, often not seen by anyone else, for years, as documents that matter "to show that I care, show that I know something", which he discusses as a process of developing a sense of belonging to all the countries he has lived in. "That's why I produce these works", he told me: "I think that sort of qualifies me as a citizen of whatever country". Saul's creative writing and reflective essays affirm his position as a knowing and caring insider of the countries and cultures he grew up among. His texts replace traditional documents of belonging and deconstruct the confining paradigms of citizenship by designing new entrance pathways, writing into being his own positions with, within, and between cultural groups.

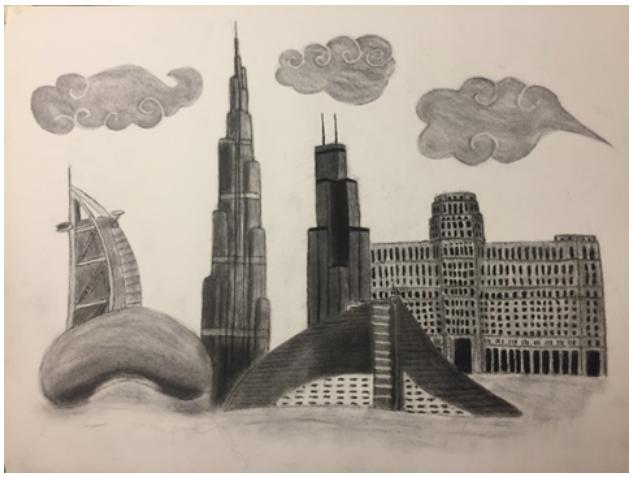
Further illustrating how sites of otherness "are also empowering instances of emergent counter-subjectivities" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 15), Cole tells his own stories of designing new styles of belonging. Cole describes growing up in a part of Asia that bears evident marks of historical colonisation alongside contemporary attitudes of colonialism (where western culture is seen as "king of all", or "supreme", he said), in art and architecture. He recalls looking around his city in Southeast Asia, seeing classic European architecture and statues of European figures, wondering where the cultural "identity" of the communities was. "It doesn't tell me anything about who you are, about your own culture", he told me, of the homes in his city. As a biracial and multicultural child, Cole began searching for the muted "language" of Asian arts, collecting artifacts from his countries of affiliation to "sort of weave together those two elements" overlaying western architecture with Asian décor and furniture in his own home to create "their own aesthetic language".

A distinct racialised divergence in experiences of globalisation arises as apparent, immediate, and urgent as Cole speaks to me, further troubling the production of TCK as a western-bound figure. In colonial histories, hybridity has been associated with colonised peoples, in a negotiation of assimilation and Europeanisation (Young, 2017), as seen in the ongoing westernisation of internationalism. Understanding the structural power relations embedded in assumptions of hybridity as cultural negotiation (Bhabha, 1994) therefore matters to following the tensions that it carries in rhizomic lines of cultural becoming. In traditional discursive production of TCKs, this tension is confronted through reference back to cultural categories of an original and additive cultures (Bateson-Ardo et al, 2024), however western national myths of purity also produce expectations of assimilation of colonised bodies and knowledges into dominant western ones. While Alanah was cautioned against expressing familiarity with the *other*, her memories diverging from Anglo-centric sameness rejected, Cole describes cultural difference structurally marked on the living landscapes of his colonised city, a "double" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 54) that belies its colonial mythologies and opens up this possible space in which Cole writes in new aesthetic languages. The power he discovered, through his creative interactions with in-between space, gave him 'the sense that environments can change for the better', and a desire for "amalgamation" of cultural styles and "imperfect warmth" that extend from his childhood home interior designs into his furniture and architectural projects.

Abby also emphasises the potentia of amalgamation as a creative movement that crafts new shapes of the world, sharing with me a sketch (see Figure 1) that she has made where she

merged the skylines of cities she knew well from different countries. She has done a series of skyline designs, "kind of merging all three of those ideas or identities", to reflect how the different countries and cultures she grew up in became "enmeshed" to "form who I am in a way that is inextricable". Overhead, the traditional Asian art styles in the clouds represent her distinct yet connected conditions of life as a TCK and also an Asian woman, and her emerging connection with her heritage as she grew up. Making visible the TCK identity that has been hidden by race-based assumptions, Abby recalls thinking about "permanence, impermanence", engaging hybridity in its unfinished sense. Her skyline is narrated not as a convergence of fixed multiples, but a negotiation of migratory process as temporal and spatial movements that do not become settled – the skyline does not leave behind memories.

Figure 1
Abby's Charcoal Sketch, "My skyline"



Cole and Abby's re-imaginations of space make possible cultural worlds where the divisions and distinctions that have organised their life stories according to segments of culture, racialisation, and nationality no longer hold the same structural power. Where monocultural and nationalist constructs have made their TCK and global citizen life stories incoherent or confusing by assigning labels and binary positions, the breaking down of these constructs enables the stories of living between and among to flow out. By overlaying the "boxy", "minimalist", and "limited" modern western interior designs and architecture that prevail internationally (due, he said, to both assumptions of western supremacy and to cheap mass production), Cole explains how he "wanted to have the power to change the language" of spatial meaning. Through subverting normalising languages, spaces for ethical relations emerge to disrupt the interconnective powers of advanced capitalism and nationalism that structure diversity through commodifying values (Braidotti, 2006). Changing the language through aesthetic arrangements that undermine capitalist and colonial trends, Cole re-introduces Asian art-pieces to westernised spaces, designing his own original furniture and architecture to incorporate traditional Asian styles of craftsmanship. Recalling the lack of "balance" in art education, embedded in global systems of representative hierarchies of institutional knowledge (Grierson, 2007), Cole understands the absence of Asian traditional

arts and histories as a matter of structural power, and, too, highlights the potentias for movements of inclusion in creative spaces for offering systemic epistemological transformation. To be able to "interface" with diverse knowledges, he explains, would enable us to "go through different spectrums or ways of life that you would never have thought to experience". Empowered by this desire, Cole contributes to aesthetic languages that influence "the contexts in which a space is used", thereby altering the feeling and experience of a space, and opening possibilities to experience life and living in new ways. The convergence of the material, symbolic, and relational emerge as dynamic with potentia in the stories of Cole and Abby, grounded in colonial and nationalistic settings, yet building new visions of migratory imagination to disrupt the landscape. By re-creating their spaces, Cole and Abby build habitable zones of transnationalism and multiculturalism, worlds where geographical and cultural boundaries are disrupted to make room for the world as they know it – in formations that overlap. In the breaking down of divisive constructs, the stories of living between and among flow out to offer new shapes.

With her own visions of entanglement, Alanah's drips and flows of her painted worlds intertwine as she concurs: "they aren't separated". The fragmentation of her life stories into paradigms of identity and belonging that mute the unexpected is washed over by droplets of water that Alanah follows with her paints to blend them into harmony. Alanah's paintings move into fluid and morphing figures as she narrates herself out of the deficit paradigms of not fitting in: "I don't really get homesick or anything because I can make a home out of anywhere. I think it's not – you aren't really defined by one space. Well, for me, I kind of just am where I am". Tracing the movement from grounded "realism" towards fluid and flowing visions of subjectivity, Alanah points to the unique trails of water droplets that she allowed to guide the shapes of her paintings. "You know", she says, "you can't really physically pick up water, you can't pick it up as a certain shape… So I think blending related to my life. It's kind of blending with my different environments where I've lived, and the blending of the different people who've impacted me."

Transcending the paralysis of pain to take it as a starting point of transformation "constructs hope as a social project" (Braidotti, 2008, p. 24) as the artists' stories contribute textures that disrupt and overwrite local and global conditions. Responding to silencing conditions with creative alternatives, they each design spaces of living in which their experiences are legitimate, pronounceable, and have room to flow through multiple, moving, and unconstrained relationships with places, people, and dimensions. Categories for being and for knowing constructed by dominant cultural narratives cannot contain the growing figures of difference as they gather up memories in violation of the norm and breathe life into different global formations to express "that which the system had declared off-limits" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 170). As we follow the flows, says Alanah, "the world changes."

Becoming: Stories of Empowerment

In the third collection of paintings, tentacles sprout out of a house, spill from a cup, and curl off Alanah's disintegrating self-portrait. From her closed lips, they trace to the body of a

jellyfish that – despite constraints, disciplines, and not fitting in – was inevitably "going to come out, because… it's just who you are". The de-constructive work of the artists, finding moments and movements of life in-between and beyond dominant cultural paradigms of belonging and identity, unfurls stories of emergent and empowered visions of the world. The "radical repositioning" required for affirming transformative politics (Braidotti, 2008, pp. 19–20) traces through aspirational world-building constructed by the generative forces of creative counter-stories to taken-for-granted cultural systems and boundaries.

Escaping the constraints of the human formed in the expectations of others, Alanah, free, mobile, and translucent, reflecting and altering her environments without fixing to them, is becoming-jellyfish. In her flowing world, Alanah figures herself morphing continuously in and out of different shapes, reflecting the world through a body whose only constant is the "distortion" it creates to its surroundings. In this free form, a "transparent blob floating through the world" and winding her tentacles around a globe, she finds "relief" from the silencing constructs of cultural deficit and nationalistic imperatives: "the jellyfish coming out is like speaking, and it's telling, like, this is who I am." The interstitial pose of the jellyfish in relation to the *real* human body and the outside *other* troubles nationalist visions of institutionalised identity, replacing the problems of identity with "the challenge to see what is invisible" as a continual processes of movement and exceeding of imaging frames (Bhabha, 1994, p. 47). As a speaking jellyfish, Alanah circumvents socio-cultural demands embedded in inappropriate assumptions (like the trap of an unsolvable maths problem, she described it), resisting the impossible and captivating "need" to "know exactly" and "need to prove" herself through representations of a motionless human form. Instead "this is who I am" becomes an affirmative recasting of self through an already transforming, undefined, fleetingly visible "this".

Exceeding or shifting from fixed, normative, stereotypical recognitions towards subjectification processes that form imaginations with memories displaces colonial cultural binaries and opens spaces of hybrid citizenships. The double (but not binary) visions that root in marginalised memories, to understand both dominant and insurgent worlds, are always in-between and therefore always in process (Bhabha, 1994), a privileged space that Cole takes up as opportunity to "interface with different wisdom traditions" through his art. Becoming-artist as a response to colonial suppression of diverse aesthetic languages, Cole's work engages radical repositioning of his oppositional/different location in Euro-centric arts spaces by enduring their "coldness" towards Asian art histories as a process of activating spaces for alternative "beauty and meaning". "I haven't truly shown myself yet", he reflects, although "I think there is a supreme opportunity that I have to represent [Asian arts]… I find it really important for me to truly be part of this". Dominant market conditions combined with limitations imposed on the work and working conditions of (some) immigrants meant that Cole needed to develop creative approaches to producing his designs. Exploring virtual online spaces unrestrained by materials, costs, and consumer demands, Cole seeks "to open the scope of the scale, time, and the craziness" of his aesthetic opportunities to expand cultural languages. Illustrating the tensions of living between mass rapid production, colonial establishment in creative imagination across the world, and technological advancement, Cole carves out new spaces to preserve traditional ways through virtual extensions that are both rooted in and

moving out from inequitable conditions of contemporary globalisation. Becoming able to artfully remember missing knowledges and the powers that contextualise their relations of (il)legitimacy, Cole composes cultural languages as affirmative ethical processes of expressing historical struggles that connect us (Braidotti, 2010; Grierson, 2006). Picturing decolonial potentias of imaginative work to "evolve and analyse", Cole affirms: "Asian craftsmanship… was born out of the richness of creativity, of a story to tell."

Saul, too, discusses how his art not only enables him to be personally heard, but to connect to others and to participate in global transformation. Writing about different places as a process of materialising records of belonging, Saul describes this work as constituting his sense of global citizenship. To Saul, global citizenship is an active enterprise of "eagerness to travel, to explore", and "willingness to understand… different ideas". The silencing conditions of foreignness therefore become transformed through textual movements into new forms of citizenship that are defined by attitude and stances of curiosity, rather than nationalistic qualifications or racialised assumptions. Becoming-global citizen is an ethical "calling" for Saul, developed through his creative writing practices as a project of considering and exploring possibilities for the world. Describing his commitment "to benefit society as a whole", community responsibility is made sense of through Saul's memories at an international scale, producing citizenship as capacities to respond, to "take whatever is good" and share it between countries and continents through the privileged locations of expatriates. Textually developing these records of the "good" and the troubles of different countries, Saul's "protected space" of his notebooks host a strengthening of voice and creation of sustainable and flexible belonging that follows alongside his life stories of silencing and exclusion. "For my personal stories, it is quite a crucial element of life, of how I successfully get through everything", he says: "Pen is a powerful tool to spread awareness and messages".

Abby's arts are a way for her to explore and reconcile her multiple and interconnected subjectivities as a TCK and woman of colour in her passport country. Among significant national and international movements for racial justice, she describes how her art becomes a part of her political mobilisation, drawing her own experiences of migration and racialisation into ethical critiques of community relations. Abby's migrating skyline extends through her stories of becoming increasingly connected with communities of difference, generating rhizomic openings to attend to the tensions and interactions of cultural groups as negotiations of citizenship and space in colonized land. These negotiations take the form of community artworks and personal pieces that become communal through "the articulation between viewer and viewed" (Grierson, 2007) in which their subversive and aspirational meanings thread Abby's imagination into an emerging and ambivalent landscape of racial and cultural differences. Her TCK-ness is both hidden and revealed through the ethical forces of response-ability to displacement in "the normative narrative" of cultural categories from which she was always already "pushing boundaries a little bit". In her affectual and political engagement with a variety of community arts projects, where she has repeatedly collaborated with underprivileged communities and women of colour, Abby describes becoming-activated: "It activates the space and involves people within the community as well… feeling more connected to the movement and to what was happening and to the conversation". Reaching

towards communities through social lines of change-making, Abby re-deploys her outsider and in-between positions through creative channels to design new styles of connection across multiple marginalised communities as their collective experiences flow through her and become visible in the art she produces. Abby expresses her dreams of a world becoming accessed more through creative pathways, reflecting how "art has a lot of power to connect people and to communicate in ways that transcend language… art can be so accessible". Arts, Abby argues, offer opportunities for radical change: "In many ways, I see the role of an artist as one of resistance and telling an alternative narrative."

Conclusion

"I think people should be intrigued about these stories."

We open the beginning of the end of this article with a line from Saul, an invitation for this not to be an end at all. Artistic projects of responding to nationalist and monocultural assumptions, gathered here as a collaboration of memories and imaginations, develop a cartography of generative potentia that unfurls in processes of becoming different kinds of citizens of the world. Art-work enables the movement of memory through aspirational transformations that reveal the world through opening movements, rather than representing in capturing modes of dominant vision (Grierson, 2007); creative visions of the world that root in cultural margins weave relational links informed by desires for alternative articulations of multicultural possibilities. Encounters with the silencing and excluding processes of nationalist and colonial identity paradigms matter in TCK or global citizen stories as political knowledges that trace understandings of borders as negotiated and negotiable spaces of possibility. Narratives of in-between navigations in postcolonial worlds "require the experience of anxiety to be incorporated into the analytic construction" of border living and liminal subjectivities as juxtaposing, fragmenting emergence into new global spaces (Bhabha, 1994; pp. 213–214). Re-constituting their experiences beyond normative disciplines of identity and its limiting anxieties, the artists who collaborated in this project affirm potentias to work troubled experiences into sustainable engagements with global conditions through articulation of the liminal and multiple memories that are fluid pathways outwards from rigid centres. Tracing and mapping shapes of the world between memory (of troubling monocultural "realism") and desire (for new styles of citizenship and belonging), these artful stories generate meaningful ways of knowing and responding to "what we are ceasing to be and what we are in the process of becoming" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 49).

Embracing distortion and unlikely amalgamations for their power to disrupt entrenched global systems, this research glimpses life that lives in gaps in-between, that articulates pathways around silence, that knows how to be sustainable in a changing world. Braidotti (2006) describes the synchronising of multiple consciousnesses of the world, explored through these interwoven cartographies, as "not about the confirmation of steady identities, or the claim to counter-identities, but about the creation of alternative thinkable and shareable subject positions" (p. 95). Thinking in different and sharable patterns, as processes of becoming different kinds of subjects, dripping globes, migrating skylines, rooms furnished with imported

artifacts, and written pages emerge as territories capable of harbouring alternatives to nationalism and old colonial-imposed borders. We are offered maps to a world of flowing partiality, of colliding continents, of homes and bodies that look and feel and move differently: more freely, in tune with emerging relational rhythms. Desiring and designing networks of connection with the spaces and bodies that become possible in this world, creative work to renegotiate through culturally marginal spaces generates thinkable and liveable modes of moving together into a changing world.

References

Bateson-Ardo, R., Rogerson, A., Denne, S., & Coombes, L. (2024). Ab-normalising projects of third culture kids: Troubling the god-trick. *Theory and Psychology, 34*(6), 736–756. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543241271023

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions. On nomadic ethics.* Polity Press.

Braidotti, R. (2008). Affirmation, pain and empowerment. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 14*(3), 7–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2008.11666049

Braidotti. R. (2010). Nomadism: Against methodological nationalism. *Policy Futures in Education, 8*(3–4), 408–418). https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.3.408

Braidotti, R. (2017). Posthuman critical theory. *Journal of Posthuman Studies, 1*(1), 8–25. https://doi.org/10.5325/jpoststud.1.1.0009

Braidotti, R. (2018). A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities. *Theory, Culture, and Society, 36*(6), 31–61. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0263276418771486

Cranston, S. (2017). Self-help and the surfacing of identity: Producing the Third Culture Kid. *Emotion, Space and Society, 24*, 27–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.07.006

Faleiro, J. (2018). On being a third culture kid. *InterDISCIPLINARY Journal of Portuguese Diaspora Studies*, 7, 391–400. Retrieved from https://journals.library.brocku.ca/index.php/ijpds/article/view/3294

Fancy, D., & Skott-Myhre, H. A. (2019). Introduction. In D. Fancy & H. A. Skott-Myhre (Eds.) *Art as revolt: thinking politics through immanent aesthetics* (pp. 3–26). McGill-Queen's University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvn96hhn.3

Fanoe, E. S., & Marsico, G. (2017). *Identity and belonging in third culture kids: alterity and values in focus.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70506-4_5

Fehr, K. (2015). Representing other: Finding reflections of myself from a space in-between a garden and a museum. *Research Informing the Practice of Museum Educators Diverse Audiences, Challenging Topics, and Reflective Praxis*, 165–181. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-238-7_13

Grierson, E. (2006). Cultural identities in a state of becoming. Questions of art and art education in a global knowledge economy. *Australian Art Education*, *29*(2), 5–19. Retrieved from https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/ielapa.200709094

Grierson, E. (2007). Difference: A critical investigation of the creative arts with attention to art as a site of knowledge. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 39*(5), 531–542. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00246.x

Haraway, D. (2006). A cyborg manifesto. Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In S. Stryker, & S. Whittle (Eds.). *The Transgender Studies Reader* (pp. 103–118). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203955055

Lenard, P. T., & Balint, P. (2020). What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation? *Ethnicities, 20*(2), 331–352. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819866498

McKeering, P., Hwang, Y.-S., & Ng, C. (2021). A study into wellbeing, student engagement and resilience in early-adolescent international school students. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *20*(1), 69–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409211006650

Miller, S. T., Wiggins, G. M., & Feather, K. A. (2020). Growing up globally: Third Culture Kids' experience with transition, identity, and well-being. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 42*, 414–423. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-020-09412-y

Moore, A. M., & Barker, G. G. (2012). Confused or multicultural: Third culture individuals' cultural identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 36*(4), 553–562. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.11.002

Oakley, A. (2016). Interviewing women again: Power, time, and the gift. *Sociology, 50*(1), 195–213. http://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515580253

Pollock, D. C., Van Reken, R. E., & Pollock, M. V. (2017). *Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds.* Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Rangoonwala, M. (2019). *Negotiating third culture kid identity gaps: an (inter)cultural communication perspective.* [Unpublished Masters Dissertation]. California State University.

Rogers, R. A. (2006). From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation. *Communication Theory, 16*(4), 474–503. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x

Tan, E., Wang, K. T., & Baker Cottrell, A. (2021). A systematic review of Third Culture Kid empirical research. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 82*, 81–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.002

Tanu, D. (2015). Toward an interdisciplinary analysis of the diversity of "Third Culture Kids". In S. Benjamin & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Migration, Diversity and Education. Beyond Third Culture Kids* (pp. 13–35). Palgrave MacMillan.

Thomas, J., Humeidan, M., Barrack, C., & Huffman, K. (2021). Mindfulness, stress reactivity, and depressive symptoms among "Third Culture Kids" in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 52*(2), 192–208. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022022120987620

Walters, K. A., & Auton-Cuff, F. P. (2009). A story to tell: the identity development of women growing up as third culture kids. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 12*(7), 755–772. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670903029153

Corresponding author: Ruth Bateson-Ardo
Email: r.ardo@massey.ac.nz

A Preliminary Exploration of Chinese Digital Nomads' Life and Workstyle

Jingyi Lou
Yonsei University, South Korea

Hyun-Kyung Lee
Yonsei University, South Korea

Abstract

The rise of digital nomadism, driven by technological advancements, has redefined work and lifestyle flexibility. While much of the existing research focuses on Western contexts, the experiences of Chinese digital nomads remain underexplored. This study fills the gap by examining the workstyle and lifestyle of 15 Chinese digital nomads aged 23 to 34 years old, all of whom are well-educated, financially independent, and maintain a digital nomadic lifestyle. The study uncovers two key findings that contrast with Western experiences. First, participants pursue this new lifestyle while facing familial resistance rooted in traditional Confucian values, which emphasize stability and family proximity. Despite this, they actively seek a family bond and a sense of home within their mobile lifestyle, creating a tension between the desire for freedom and the longing for familial bonds. Second, despite engaging in nomadic behaviors, participants lack understanding of the concept of digital nomad, unlike their Western counterparts who tend to have a clearer sense of identity. The predominance of Western-centric perspectives on digital nomadism has not been fully expanded into the Chinese context. The study contributes to a broader understanding of digital nomadism workstyle and lifestyle in non-Western cultural contexts.

Keywords: Chinese digital nomad, digital nomad, digital nomadism, remote work

The Background of Digital Nomadism

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and globalization has opened the possibility of new flexible working arrangements (Šímová, 2022). Remote work has long been a popular way of flexible working. The convergence of leisure and work has become increasingly prominent with the rise of remote work accompanied by advanced digital tools. Beatty and Torbert (2003) postulate that the new world of work has seen an increase in work perceived as a positive, intrinsically determined, and meaningful activity, more similar to leisure, and leisure as an attitude rather than an amount of time off (Rainoldi et al., 2022). This shift reflects a broader change in mentality, with people prioritizing freedom and flexibility over the rigid working structures of the past. Today, many people are looking for opportunities to combine work and travel either to gain skills or simply to have exciting and fun experiences (Šímová, 2022). Based on this premise, digital nomadism is one of its outcomes. According to the statistics from The Instant Offices (Instant, 2023) portal, the number of digital nomads worldwide has reached 35 million, and this population is expected to exceed 1 billion by 2035. The MBO Partners State of Independence found that in 2024, 18.1 million American workers currently describe themselves as digital nomads, an increase of 4.7% year over year (MBO Partners, 2024). These numbers attest to the growing numbers of digital nomads every year.

The Three Evolutions of Digital Nomad

From around 1990 to 2009, the first stage can be seen as the birth of a technological utopia and a fantasy of freedom. Makimoto and Manners (1997) foresaw that advances in technology would allow people to work from anywhere, leading to the rise of a mobile, location-independent workforce. They were the first to conceptualize the notion of the "digital nomad," which means that technological development would liberate human beings from spatial constraints and enable individuals to work while traveling globally. Makimoto and Manners' (1997) exploration of digital nomadism emerged during the ascendancy of globalization, following the end of the Cold War and the increasing infiltration of neoliberal thought into policy-making and corporate management. As a result, individual choice and autonomy began to attract growing attention, and workers were increasingly imagined as creative agents capable of freely choosing their lifestyles. On the one hand, this vision offered both enterprises and individuals a new imaginary for talent mobility and work arrangements, encouraging remote work, co-working spaces, and the rise of digital freelancers. On the other hand, the imagination of digital nomads also embodied the illusions of neoliberalism by intertwining technology, personal freedom, and labor creativity, while overlooking the deep structural inequalities in class, ethnicity, gender, and geographic mobility.

The second stage, from 2010 to 2019, witnessed an economic globalization, and the reconstructed fantasies of free labour within the digital nomad discourse at the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, Reichenberger (2018) found that many respondents perceived "becoming a digital nomad" as an act of escaping office culture, corporate norms, and urban pressures, which frames it as a form of identity construction and

lifestyle de-institutionalization. However, this pursuit of freedom also came with risks of loneliness, marginalization, and income insecurity. Furthermore, in digital nomad practices, the boundaries between work and life, mobility and residence, and privacy and publicity became increasingly blurred and difficult to define (Gregg, 2013). At the organizational level, even though digital nomads are not directly monitored by traditional employers, they remain embedded in dual mechanisms of platform control and market competition (Wood et al., 2019). While platforms ostensibly free workers from corporate hierarchies, they themselves function as new centres of power. Platforms regulate visibility and access to job opportunities by adopting user ratings, task matching, and ranking algorithms. To remain competitive, digital nomads must engage in large amounts of "invisible labour" (e.g., responding to messages, bidding for tasks, revising profiles, etc.) which often go unrecognized as official working hours. As a result, digital nomads are not truly "free subjects," but are instead bound by neoliberal forms of self-governance and productivity anxiety (Mancinelli, 2020).

Due to the post-pandemic social transformation, the third stage of digital nomadism has entered into a major transformation. In particular, the impact of COVID-19 has blurred the boundary between "digital nomads" and "remote workers." Mobility is no longer confined to freelancers in tech or creative industries, but full-time employees in traditional corporations have also begun to participate in global remote work (MBO Partners, 2021). As a result, the digital nomad identity has shifted from a countercultural lifestyle to an instrument of urban marketing and digital governance. Many countries have ceased to regard digital nomads as marginal anomalies and have instead actively crafted policies to attract this highly mobile, well-educated, and affluent group. Examples include Portugal's "Digital Nomad Village" in Madeira, which provides high-speed internet, co-working spaces, and housing support; long-term nomad visas introduced by Thailand and Indonesia (Bali) that permit legal residence for several months to a year; and remote work visa schemes with tax exemptions offered by Dubai, Georgia, and Estonia. As an increasing number of digital nomads gather in cities across the Global South such as Chiang Mai, Ubud, and Mexico City, there are the latent issues underlying this trend. As Nash and Gorman-Murray (2018) noted, digital nomads' "free mobility" seemingly depoliticized and gender-neutral conceals deep-rooted forms of cultural hegemony and exclusion. Digital nomad enclaves, such as those in Bali or Chiang Mai, often produce "Western lifestyle bubbles" that reproduce colonial legacies and class stratification in local contexts.

Table 1
Three Evolutionary Stages of Digital Nomadism

Period	**I 1990-2009**	**II 2010-2019**	**III 2020-present**
Evolution	Birth of Technological Utopia	Free Labour Fantasy	Major Transformation
Practice	1. Digital nomads are firstly conceptualized 2.Imagination of talent mobility and work arrangements	1.Individual escaping office job 2.Subject to algorithmic control and market competition of platform	1.Digital nomads are expanded to the Traditional corporations 2.Digital nomads are not marginalized phenomenon in many countries
Context	Neoliberalism	Economic globalization	Post pandemic

The Current Digital Nomad in a Chinese Context

Digital nomadism has increasingly emerged over the past few years and is now a recognized global phenomenon (Müller, 2016). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 led to economic stagnation in the world. It has simultaneously highlighted the significance of remote work, catalyzing a re-evaluation of traditional work structures and amplifying the allure of a more flexible, digital nomad lifestyle (Orel, 2023). Even though digital nomads are often seen as a rather homogeneous group of Westerners with powerful passports (Hannonen, 2024), the number of digital nomads in China has also shown a rapid growth. China's status as a technologically advanced country with a robust internet infrastructure has significantly contributed to the rise of remote work and digital nomads. According to the 50th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet, as of June 2022, the number of online office users in China has reached 461 million, accounting for 43.8% of the total Internet users (CNNIC, 2022). In China, an increasing number of young people are choosing to become digital nomads in order to strike a better work-life balance, following the steps of their Western counterparts (Linao et al., 2024). This shift towards flexible and location-independent work lifestyles highlights the importance of studying digital nomadism in China with a non-western perspective.

Literature Review

Definition of the Term "Digital Nomad"

The term "digital nomad" originally refers to mobile professionals who perform their work remotely from various locations worldwide, driven by the "urge to travel" and the ability to do so (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). However, a digital nomad is distinct from traditional

migrants and expatriates. Migrants often face stronger institutional constraints and class backgrounds, such as seeking better economic conditions or fleeing conflict zones, with relatively lower agency. Expatriates carry a certain global privilege, often associated with multinational corporations, professional skills, and high social capital. However, digital nomads lie at the intersection of multiple identities, representing a lifestyle choice based on digital work models that is typically not tied to a specific country or organization (Reichenberger, 2018). In particular, they can be a remote worker in fields such as technology, design, writing, and consulting, or a producer and consumer of cultural content, such as travel vlogs, freelance survival guides, or online courses.

The Paradox of Work-Life Integration

With the increasing loss of control over time, and the imbalance in labour relations that characterizes contemporary work systems (Sennett, 1998), work and life have usually become clearly separated. However, this division leads to a confrontation and tension between the two, making it difficult for individuals to achieve true "work-life balance" (Lewis, 2003). Digital nomads, motivated by the desire to "escape the conventional social/work structure," idealize a lifestyle of freedom, anti-institutionalism, and de-responsibilization. However, while "flexibility" appears to be a key advantage of digital nomads, it also signifies the ongoing commodification of time and space. Digital nomads continually self-discipline to pursue high performance, and in reality, they have not truly escaped the control of "work ethics." Instead, there is a new lifestyle, and it is essentially a form of self-discipline (Foucault, 1979). The boundary between their "working time" and "leisure time" is becoming increasingly blurred, as people are forced to be "always online" wherever they are, and this has become the new norm. This shift alters their sense of time and work rhythms, as discussed by Gregg (2013) in relation to the cultural impact of "always being online" on modern workers, which applies to the context of digital nomads.

The Sense of Rootedness in Mobility

Digital nomads, who move freely around the globe and autonomously choose their residence and work locations, are often depicted as "unrooted workers" (Cohen et al., 2015). This "deterritorialization" of mobility is idealized by neoliberal platforms as a model of "self-governance" for workers, but it heavily relies on existing technological and spatial infrastructure, as well as practical visa systems (Gregg, 2013; Richards, 2015; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Therefore, as a "highly mobile subject," the digital nomad constructs a "sense of rootedness" through constant movement, while simultaneously facing the challenges and contradictions of local belonging, community connection, and the possibility of long-term settlement. Digital nomads experience two different types of rootedness in their mobility: one is a "virtual rootedness," based on a high reliance on stable digital platforms, and the other is a "real rootedness," from "settling for a period of time" in a specific city (Hannonen, 2020; Thompson, 2021). The vulnerability of the former is dependent on platform policy changes, algorithmic preferences, and digital infrastructure, while the latter's vulnerability is influenced by political, economic, visa, and community power relations (Cohen et al., 2015).

Burnout in the Pursuit of Achievement

As already mentioned above, digital nomads appear to have autonomy over time and spatial control. However, they heavily rely on self-discipline to maintain work efficiency and productivity in reality. Consequently, digital nomads often experience a profound contradiction between self-fulfilment and real-life burnout (Cohen & Gössling, 2015). First, remote work environments make it difficult to separate work from life, and being in a constant state of "always online" can easily lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout (Thompson, 2022). Moreover, the identity of digital nomads often depends on continually "displaying achievements" and "performing a successful lifestyle" through social media, forming a performative self. This kind of identity management corresponds to what Hochschild calls emotional labour, in which workers are required to regulate their internal feelings to meet social expectations (Hermann & Paris, 2020; Hochschild, 1983). When there is a gap between real life and public display, nomads may experience a "dual self": outwardly maintaining the image of a "free and successful individual," while inwardly facing loneliness, anxiety, and a lack of belonging. On a deeper level, digital nomads' mobility is in fact exclusive, predicated on privileges such as class, nationality, and education. Their so-called freedom lifestyle is shaped by structural constraints and is not universally accessible, particularly to individuals from the Global South, as well as to racial minorities, women, and gender/sexual minorities. When digital nomadism is constructed as an ideal and normalized lifestyle, it reinforces a singular notion of the "successful choice," causing individuals to interpret structural constraints as personal failure, thus generating anxiety and internalized pressure.

Analytical Framework of Digital Nomad

Based on the preceding literature review, digital nomads can then be analysed within a four-quadrant framework that intersects two key dimensions: work–life and nomadic–settled, categorizing two workstyles and lifestyles of digital nomadism, respectively (see Figure 1). For the sake of clarifying the framework, the terms mobility and rootedness have been replaced with the more accessible contrast of nomadic and settled in the Figure 1.

Digital nomads are often seen as people who actively create a "free-form lifestyle," imagining themselves as escaping traditional office jobs (Urry, 2007). This lifestyle is commonly described as mobile and flexible, but it also raises concerns about disconnection, loneliness, and the lack of long-term relationships. Although commonly perceived as rootless, many digital nomads exhibit what can be termed selective rootedness: they frequently settle in specific cities or regions, where they build temporary routines, form friendships, and maintain a sense of order and belonging.

However, this rootedness is selective—not everyone can choose where to stay. Factors like visa policies, cost of living, digital infrastructure, and cultural familiarity shape these choices. In this sense, "selectively-settled workstyle" reflects a certain kind of privilege. It often leads to digital nomads staying in isolated communities (e.g., co-working spaces, expat cafés) rather

than integrating with the local population. Their presence may bring economic activity, but the social connection with local communities is often limited or surface-level.

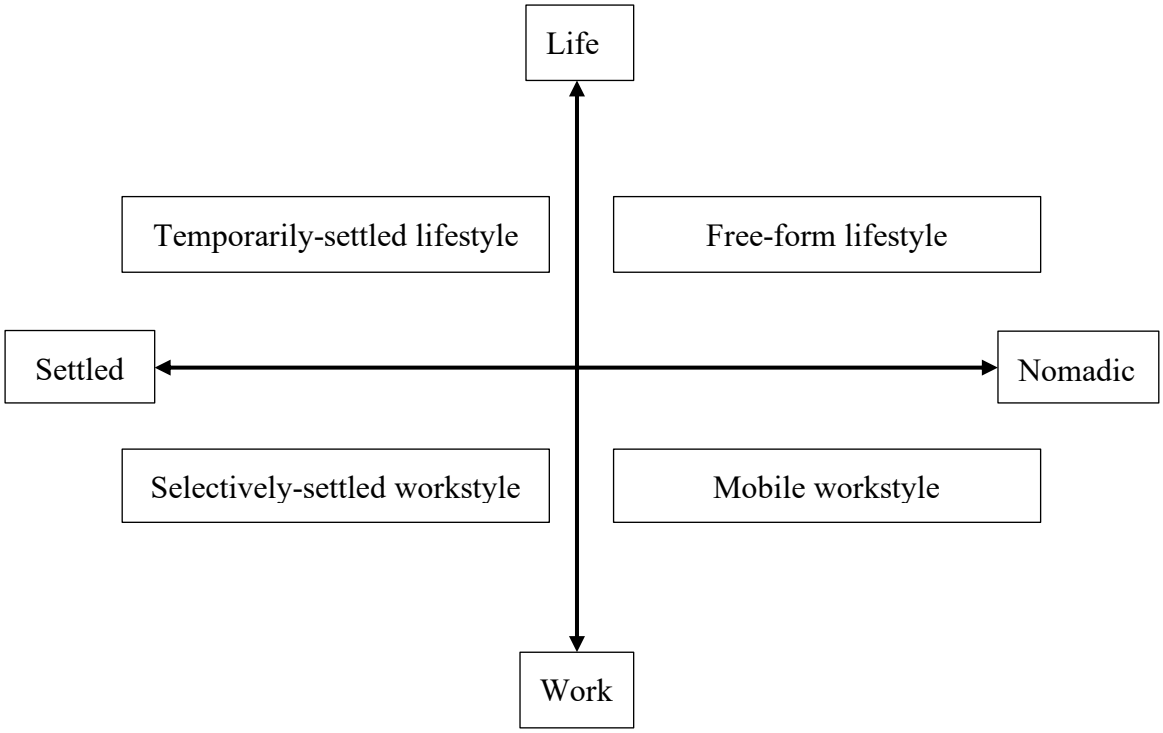
Reichenberger (2018) suggests that digital nomads seek holistic freedom—not just freedom of movement, but also the power to choose when to settle or stay mobile. While this idea sounds positive, it should be questioned more carefully. What kind of freedom is this, and who has access to it? In reality, not everyone can live this way. Many digital nomads are able to do so because they have high levels of education, work in tech or creative industries, and hold passports that allow international travel. This shows that freedom is unevenly distributed, often depending on nationality, income, and professional status.

Further, although digital nomads adopt a "mobile workstyle" and have escaped the discipline of traditional workplaces, they have entered another type of "de-institutionalized but highly self-demanding" environment. Digital nomads must manage their own work hours, maintain a professional image, collaborate across time zones, and deal with income instability. They must work self-sufficiently in cafés, guesthouses, and shared spaces. The constant state of being "always online" can also lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout.

Additionally, digital nomads must constantly update their personal brand, maintain online visibility, and perform continuous identity performances. Hermann and Paris (2020) point out that this display of authenticity can also fall into a cycle of re-commodification. The more authentic you are, the more marketable you become. It seems free but emphasizes personal responsibility and self-optimization in a new form of neoliberal self-discipline. Are digital nomads living for themselves, or living for algorithms and followers? In such a context, digital nomads experience a psychological split, like a "dual self," where the "temporarily-settled lifestyle" might be expected to offer a sense of healing and life satisfaction through temporary place attachment.

Overall, the four characteristics of digital nomads influenced by mobility and rootedness in work and life are not isolated. Instead, these characteristics reflect a dynamic range depending on the varying contexts of work, life, mobility, and rootedness. Therefore, this framework can contribute to the understanding of digital nomads and serves as an important foundation and basis for further exploration of the nomadic phenomenon in this study.

Figure 1
Digital Nomads' Life-Work-Style Framework in Mobility and Rootedness



Source: Authors

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this paper is based on qualitative research. In-depth interviews were being conducted. The main criteria for selecting interview participants were based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Participants were selected based on two characteristics as a digital nomad: remote workers using technology, which enables them to travel and work from various locations; also encompasses those with more semi-permanent work arrangements, who may find local employment or reduce their dependence on technology in their destinations. Participants were recruited from Xiaohongshu (RedNote), a popular social media platform in China. According to the data from Stairs (2024), Xiaohongshu has shown strong growth momentum in 2024, the platform boasts over 300 million monthly active users. Xiaohongshu has a large number of tags related to digital nomads. For instance, the tag #Digital Nomad has received more than 200 million views, #How to Become a Digital Nomad has 347.86 million views, and #Digital Nomad Lifestyle has 640.4 million views, and so forth. This is the fastest way to recruit because digital nomadism as a lifestyle is promoted by themselves through active online presence (Hannonen, 2020). As for the specific type of nomads or differentiating factors of nomadic lifestyles, the study will set a tolerable examination of each participant, because self-identification is one factor that delineates different types of digital nomads (Cook, 2023). The ability to self-identify allows digital nomads to embrace their unique circumstances while still belonging to a broader, flexible community that values autonomy and exploration. Some

digital nomads may choose to constantly travel from one location to another, while others prefer to stay in a foreign destination for an extended period; some digital nomads might even hold a fixed job within a semi-permanent location but still maintain the flexibility and independence associated with the lifestyle (Orel, 2023).

A total of 15 participants were recruited for this study. All participants were Chinese citizens with overseas nomadic experiences, and they still maintain a digital nomadic lifestyle. Among the 15 participants, there were 4 men and 11 women with an age range from 23 to 34 years old. All of them are well-educated with mostly bachelor's and master's degrees. Detailed demographic information of the participants are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Participants' Profile

Participant #	Gender	Age	Education	Main Job	Duration (continuing)
Participant 1 (P1)	Male	30	Bachelor	Strategic Consultant	10 Months
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	34	Master	Insurance Agent	3 Years
Participant 3 (P3)	Male	25	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	10 Months
Participant 4 (P4)	Male	29	Bachelor	Web3 R&D	1 Year
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	29	Master	Marketing & Sales	5 Years
Participant 6 (P6)	Female	27	Bachelor	Stock Investor	9 Months
Participant 7 (P7)	Female	30	Master	Entrepreneur	2 Years
Participant 8 (P8)	Female	23	Bachelor	Web3 Developer	8 Months
Participant 9 (P9)	Female	24	Bachelor	Content Creator	1 Year
Participant 10 (P10)	Female	24	Bachelor	Model/ Therapist	1 Year
Participant 11 (P11)	Female	28	Master	Web3 Operation & Sales	7 Months
Participant 12 (P12)	Female	30	Bachelor	Content Creator	2 Years
Participant 13 (P13)	Male	28	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	8 Years
Participant 14 (P14)	Female	29	Master	Project Manager	4 Years
Participant 15 (P15)	Female	31	Associate Degree	E-Commerce Entrepreneur	9 Years

Research Procedures

Based on the participant's selection criteria and the targeted social media platform outlined above, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Through Xiaohongshu, we initially identified 11 Chinese digital nomads. Their email addresses were obtained from their

profile pages, and we sent out the research proposal to them via email. The remaining 4 participants were introduced by those we had already contacted. Interviews were conducted after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval together with participants' signatures on the consent form through eformsign. The in-depth interview was divided into eight sections: Background and Motivation, Work Practices and Professional Identity, Social-Cultural Identity, Work-Life Balance and Personal well-being, Mobility and Travel Preferences, Financial Practices and Stability, Future Plans, and Reflections. A total of 23 questions were asked. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later translated into English. Transcripts were converted from video or audio recordings of the interviews. The first author was the coder using inductive coding. Key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were underlined in the interview transcript. Underlined contents were used to create the codes. In the process, a stable set of codes and categories was developed mainly based on eight sections identified in the interview questions, as well as some behaviors, commonalities, or other themes relevant to the research topics.

Findings

Contingent Motivation

At least for some participants, the key motivation to become a digital nomad was contingent motivation. The contingent motivation behind some participants' decision to become digital nomads was often a combination of remote work opportunities and passion for travel.

> Before becoming a digital nomad, I really liked traveling and had a strong yearning to see the world. I have always longed for such a lifestyle. There is such an opportunity at work that provides remote working conditions. (P1)

For most participants (10), the decision stems from contingent decision-making, triggered by a strong desire to escape the traditional workstyle. Among those participants, the transition into digital nomadic lifestyle is seen as an experimental phase, where they test out nomadic lifestyles to determine if they suit them. Their motivation was shaped by a combination of factors: the urge to break free from traditional work structures, the opportunity to find remote work, and a broader desire for lifestyle change. Interestingly, participants P7 and P5 began this lifestyle before they even became aware of the "digital nomad" concept, highlighting the spontaneous nature of their decision-making.

> I was already traveling while working for a longtime. One day I met someone who told me that you were a digital nomad. I had never heard of this term, and I did not understand what a digital nomad was. (P5)

Work and Life

Two workstyles: Remote Employees & Freelancers

There are at least two types of workers among digital nomads: some work remotely for companies, or, more likely, as freelancers or entrepreneurs (Green, 2020). All participants, whether remote employees or freelancers, reported there are significant differences in workstyles. The biggest difference is that working hours have become more flexible, there is a stronger autonomy of scheduling. Everyone mentioned that the efficiency is much higher than before. They can complete tasks in less time, and the rest of the time they can do what they want to do instead of continuing to be in the office.

> Before, my effective working time every day was only three to four hours. The rest of the time might be slacking off and being inefficient in the office. But as a digital nomad, I can choose the most effective few hours to finish work, and go out to see the scenery or meet friends afterwards. (P4)

For participants who are freelancers, the nature of their work becomes more entrepreneur-oriented. They are independent and self-directed, manage their own clients, projects, and set up goals and schedules without having to listen to company or higher-ups. This brings them a greater sense of achievement and they do not feel forced to work. They are also willing to explore different industries or learn new skills. P12 mentioned that she has changed from a state of merely outputting to having the opportunity to absorb new knowledge. Nevertheless, complete freedom and flexibility cause them to intentionally set working schedules and tasks. P8 mentioned that she needs to have a very strong self-control ability to maintain efficiency. She will force herself to work at least a certain number of hours every day. P6, a stock investor, mentioned that before she did it as a hobby but now she will feel guilty if she does not trade every day which causes stress.

Work-Life Integration

When asked about work-life balance, 13 participants said they have a good work-life balance. They believe that work and life are not in a confrontational relationship which need to be strictly defined and separated. In other words, there is no clear boundary between work and life, and they may switch between the two continuously.

> Many of us in Chiang Mai are like this: after working in a cafe, they immediately move to a place where they can go to a party. When they are tired of partying, they find a place to work at night. Why are work and life constructed into an opposing relationship? (P13)

The state of full integration of work and life is not always positive. P12 is a content creator, her content and her travel are tightly connected. She needs to consider her shooting content when changing destinations. Even if she goes to a place for relaxation, she may end up thinking

about what that place can do with her content creation. Over mixed state caused her to wonder whether she is living for life or work.

> It seems that making money and spending money, traveling and my social media account are all integrated together. Sometimes I do not know why I am doing this, it is a bit too mixed. I wanted to pursue work-life balance, but I had no way to achieve this distinction between work and life. (P12)

Co-working Space for Social Needs

Most participants (11) use a combination of individual working and working in co-working spaces. Fulfilling social needs is the main reason for people to work in co-working spaces. In co-working spaces, they can meet many different remote workers or digital nomads, allowing them to network with like-minded people and share resources. But they prefer to work alone in terms of productivity. For them, the working space is shared with the aim of minimizing possible social isolation while facilitating integration into social networks (Rus & Orel, 2015). Moreover, co-working spaces are not the only public workspaces they like to visit to meet more people. P15 and P11 indicated that they would go to different cafes to work instead of just co-working spaces because they can meet diverse people, while people in co-working spaces are more of a unified group of remote workers. As a result, an established leisure infrastructure of cafes and coffee shops are transformed, in terms of meaning and language, through the specific needs and requirements of a working nomad (Green, 2020).

> I will not only go to co-working spaces specifically provided for digital nomads or remote workers. I like to work independently, because every time I go to a coffee shop it is very easy for me to meet new friends and everyone is so different. (P15)

4 participants (P2, P6, P9, P12) who prefer to work alone or have never tried co-working spaces. P9 and P6 addressed that the basic facilities or functions such as internet speed are not well developed. P2 felt that there were many young workers or artists socializing in the co-working spaces which was overwhelming to her. P12 mentioned that co-working spaces recreate the feeling of office, which she does not prefer.

> I do not like to go to co-working spaces that are set up for digital nomads. I already wanted to escape from the traditional working environment, but then a feeling of office set up again in those spaces. (P12)

Mental Health

A Healthier Mental State

14 out of 15 participants stated that they had entered a healthier mental state after becoming digital nomads; freedom to control work and life, and varied travel experiences made them emotionally stable and less stressed. P2's time in nature makes her mental state more positive;

P14 said that her attitude towards life has changed, and she is more willing to try more things, whether it is hobbies or work, which has improved her mental state. Only one participant (P5) stated that she is having a hard time keeping a healthy mental state because of higher work pressure and the difficulty in meeting colleagues offline. Besides, P9 mentioned that even though her overall mental health is better, her emotions are becoming more sensitive and unstable.

> This lifestyle makes my whole heart very clear to the touch of the outside world. I thus became very sensitive, as if all five senses are fully opened, which makes my mood very easy to fluctuate. (P9)

Loneliness

All participants are living digital nomads on their own without companionship. Most people are single. Only two participants explicitly mentioned that their partners are settled in China. When talking about loneliness, the majority of participants (11) said that they would feel lonely sometimes, but they also felt that loneliness was a very normal emotion as an independent digital nomad. They do not see loneliness in a negative way but as a common mental state in their life. They will call family and friends, do their hobbies such as reading and exercising, or go out to participate in different activities etc. to eliminate loneliness.

> At this stage of my life, I do not think such an encounter with loneliness is a negative state, it just be interspersed in my life. (14)

> Loneliness is the essence of life, a very normal state. (P8)

Challenges

Instability & Uncertainty & Home

The most mentioned challenge as a digital nomad is instability and uncertainty (11). In a state of constant movement and relocation, they mentioned the need to constantly establish new social circles and routines (P3, P5, P14). Also, they lose a stable social framework (P7, P11), risk more physical fatigue (P1, P9), and lose a sense of belonging (P10).

> I will be more tired physically. Not only does my body need to adapt to such an intensity of moving, but also encounter uncontrollable factors on the road. (P1)

> The biggest challenge is my life drifting, homeless, and displaced. The feeling that you belong to a place is very thin. (P10)

Because of this instability and uncertainty, participants will develop a sense of home and stability (9). They return to their home in China regularly after a few months on the road, to

rest and visit family and friends, or they have a fixed location as their base and will travel back and forth when they feel the need to take a rest.

> You will find that every time I go to a place, I always return to Shenzhen to stay for a while. Because Shenzhen is where my relatives and friends are, it is like a place to take a break. (P7)

Instability not only refers to lack of settlement, but also financial instability. The latter is mentioned by 7 participants as a big challenge when being digital nomads. Among them, 6 participants who are freelancers stated that the income is unstable depending on different opportunities or projects they have. Whereas P5 currently lives in Australia where the cost of living is higher than the income she earned from her company.

Conflict with Cultural Values

Chinese digital nomads' pursuit of freedom by constantly moving without a fixed abode and job are contradicted by the traditional collectivist values that prioritize social harmony and community over individual pursuits (Linyan & Boqing, 2023). All participants admitted that they felt their lifestyle was contradictory to traditional social norms in China. 12 out of 15 participants indicated that their family was not supportive. Only 3 participants' families (P5, P13, and P14) were open-minded about their decision from the beginning. Although the majority of families did not flatly disapprove of the participants' choice, they did express hesitation, doubt and concern. After seeing that they could survive independently, the family gradually accepted and respected this lifestyle. Some participants had to persuade their families for a long time to be understood, while others said they felt it was unnecessary to explain their lifestyle choice to their families because they were living their own life and have certain achievements to show for their choice.

> They were worried at first. It is more about being able to get results. If you want to get support from your family, show them the results and say that I can completely support myself, and I am living a good life, and they will respect your decision. (P8)

Two participants commented that digital nomads are still a niche group of people and not welcome in Chinese society. When society's acceptance of digital nomads is not high, it is difficult to return to the original workplace or find a stable job again in China because they lose the competitiveness without enough experience.

> The cost of trial and error is very high. If you want to go back to find a job, the company will wonder what you did during the past years. (P12)

> Our country may not be friendly to this thing (digital nomadism), basically you cannot turn back once you shoot the arrow. Your resume will be blank, it is impossible to return to the workplace with no experience. (P6)

Structural and Social Barriers

Furthermore, the difficulty of getting a visa in certain counties as a Chinese citizen was cited by 4 participants as a disadvantage. As an overseas Chinese digital nomad, getting visas is the most essential need (P13) but it is relatively hard for Chinese nomads to get as many visas as they want, and visa-free countries are far and few in between. Their work status as independent freelancing individuals makes it even harder to get visas.

> I am a single, unemployed female, my visa application might be easily rejected. (P6)

Besides, there is a lack of community for either socializing or resource exchange mentioned by most participants (11). They implied that there is a lack of platform or community currently while many western digital nomad communities already existed. When they tried to find activities for digital nomads in the destination, they were all held by western digital nomad groups. P14 addressed that digital nomads are still western-dominated when she was abroad, and she felt discomfort that the atmosphere is not Asian-friendly when participating in social events for digital nomads.

> Digital nomad groups in Bali are white-dominated, it actually causes discomfort. For example, when you go to a bar on weekends to relax, but the atmosphere is not very enjoyable. You will not always meet like-minded Chinese nomads or Asian nomads, and the majority are white males. (P14)

The lack of platform or community for Chinese digital nomads also refers to resource hunting in terms of job opportunity. Participants mentioned that the source of income as a freelancer is very unstable, which echoes the challenges mentioned earlier. The information they gather on their own is not comprehensive without guidance from an expert in the industry. They wish to have more job opportunities or viable side jobs through a platform targeted at Chinese digital nomads.

Discussion & Conclusion

The Dilemma Between Belonging and Escape

The Chinese collectivist culture has been significantly shaped by Confucian values, with family bonds and stable life cycles remaining high on the list of ideals (Chan et al., 2022). As repeatedly mentioned by our participants, their decision to be a digital nomad was not supported by family. They were trying to break away from such a culture and adopt an individualistic and flexible lifestyle and workstyle. Whereas individualistic values are said to be largely unique to Western countries, where there is greater economic, political and social freedom allowing for higher levels of autonomy (Bauman, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2010, as cited in Humphrey & Bliuc, 2022). Under more individualistic cultural values, western digital nomads are eager to escape from traditional norms by radically expressing flexibility, fluidity, and novelty (Green, 2020). However, the findings reveal a paradox. Although the Chinese

digital nomads seek to break from traditional lifestyles, they simultaneously attempt to retain a sense of home, either temporarily or through longer-term settlement, to regain stability. This ambivalence reflects the enduring pull of Chinese cultural norms, particularly the importance of family and rootedness. This finding contrasts with De Loryn's study on western digital nomads' perceptions of home. According to De Loryn (2021), while western digital nomads also emphasized the importance of home in times of crisis, they believed that home could be anywhere, as long as there is internet access and meaningful connections, such as with friends or loved ones. This comparison highlights the cultural differences in how digital nomads from Eastern and Western cultural contexts perceive the concept of home differently.

Identity Ambiguity of Chinese Digital Nomads

In addition, the findings reveal that participants began adopting the digital nomad lifestyle without fully understanding this concept. As they mentioned, although their lifestyle already exhibited characteristics of digital nomadism, they were unaware of the term "digital nomads" and did not identify themselves as such. In contrast, digital nomads in western countries have a clearer sense of identity and awareness, as this lifestyle was first popularized in western culture. Since 2018, digital nomads have been categorized as a distinct group in the State of Independence in America Report (Hannonen, 2020). Additionally, MBO Partners conducts annual surveys on digital nomads. Many structured communities, such as co-living and co-working spaces, create a bubble-like existence that transports a more western lifestyle to locations around the world (Thompson, 2018). Like Beats, these early backpackers pursued freedom, exploration, and cultural exchange but existed on the fringes of mainstream society, lacking structured communities or labels that contemporary western digital nomads enjoy. The emerging digital nomads in China are similarly pioneering a lifestyle that Western culture had already named and structured. Thus, the delayed recognition and formalization of digital nomads in China mirrors the earlier stages of the Beat Generation's impact on travel culture. This lag in identification and the absence of established community structures among Chinese digital nomads reflect broader cultural dynamics, highlighting that digital nomadism is not a universally uniform experience but is deeply shaped by cultural context, identity formation, and access to community.

Western Cultural Dominance: Integration Challenges for Chinese Digital Nomads

Based on the findings, Chinese digital nomads find it difficult to integrate into the lifestyle of digital nomads at their destinations because it is dominated by Western culture. Back in 1997, Makimoto and Manner (1997) predicted that portable computers would allow some people from wealthy countries (mainly the global North) to live and work in cheaper countries (global South) by using strong passports and money to enjoy a better lifestyle with lower living costs (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). This vision has continued to reinforce existing global inequalities. Digital nomadism and remote work continue to highlight long-standing divisions, separating elite professionals who can work remotely and leverage stronger home currencies to live comfortably in low-cost countries from others who do not have these privileges (Hong 2021; Megan, 2016; Ozimek, 2021). It relies on outdated colonial systems to create a world

where racial and economic inequalities are treated as commodities, hidden behind the promises of technology and freedom (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019). In this context, Chinese digital nomads often find themself marginalized, with many participants describing a lack of community structures for resource exchange and socializing catering to non-western digital nomads. The Western-centric atmosphere made participants feel excluded. Additionally, the absence of platforms dedicated to Chinese digital nomads exacerbates professional instability. Participants' difficulty accessing stable income sources emphasized the need for better support systems and networks that can offer curated job opportunities and industry guidance. These challenges further illustrate how digital nomadism, though marketed as a borderless and liberating lifestyle, remains shaped by entrenched structural inequalities that limit who can fully participate and benefit—especially those from non-Western contexts.

In conclusion, this study selected 15 participants and provided rich qualitative data. Of course, the limited sample size may not fully represent the broader population of Chinese digital nomads. For future research, the study offers several potential directions. It could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample with a balanced gender ratio to improve generalizability. Moreover, the research topic could be explored in greater depth by focusing on specific aspects discussed in this paper, such as co-working space usage, productivity and efficiency, work-leisure balance, and cultural identity. Expanding the focus to include digital nomads from other Asian countries would also provide valuable insights for comparative studies with Western contexts. This study also contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of digital nomadism as a transnational and multicultural phenomenon. It highlights the need for further interdisciplinary research to better capture the evolving realities of digital nomadism in a globally interconnected world and to make it a more sustainable alternative to traditional ways of living and working.

References

21YunBox. (2024, September 9). The 50th CNNIC statistical report on China's Internet development. Retrieved from https://www.21cloudbox.com/statistical-report-on-china-internet.html

Admin.staiirs. (2024, June 28). 2024 Xiaohongshu consumer trends & operation strategy. *STAiiRS.* Retrieved from https://staiirs.com/2024-insight-xiaohongshu-consumer-spending-trends-operation-strategy/

Atanasoski, N. and Vora, K. (2019). Surrogate humanity: race, robots, and the politics of technological futures. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478004455

Beatty, J. E., and Torbert, W. R. (2003). The False Duality of Work and Leisure. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 12*(3), 239–252. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492603256340

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.

Chan, K. S., Lai, J. T., & Li, T. (2022). Cultural values, genes and savings behavior in China. *International Review of Economics & Finance, 80*, 134–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iref.2022.02.009

China Internet Network Information Center. (2022, August). The 50th statistical report on China's internet development. Retrieved from https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202212/P020221209344717199824.pdf

Cohen, S. A., & Gössling, S. (2015). A darker side of hypermobility. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 47*(8), 166–1679. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518x15597124

Cohen, S. A., Duncan, T., & Thulemark, M. (2015). Lifestyle mobilities: The crossroads of travel, leisure and migration. *Mobilities, 10*(1), 155–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2013.826481

Cook, D. (2023). What is a digital nomad? Definition and taxonomy in the era of mainstream remote work. *World Leisure Journal*, *65*(2)1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2023.2190608

de Loryn, B. (2021). Not necessarily a place: How mobile transnational online workers (Digital Nomads) construct and experience 'home'. *Global Networks, 22*(1), 103–118. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12333

Foucault, M. (1979). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Green, P. (2020). Disruptions of self, place and mobility: Digital nomads in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Mobilities, 15*(3), 431–445. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1723253

Gregg, M. (2013). Work's intimacy. John Wiley & Sons.

Hannonen, O. (2020). In search of a digital nomad: Defining the phenomenon. *Information Technology Tourism, 22*, 335–353. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00177-z

Hannonen, O. (2022). Towards an understanding of digital nomadic mobilities. *Transfers, 12*(3), 115–126. https://doi.org/10.3167/TRANS.2022.120310

Hannonen, O. (2024). Emergent geographies of digital nomadism: Conceptual framing, insights and implications for tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2299845

Hermann, I., & Paris, C. M. (2020). Digital nomadism: The nexus of remote working and travel mobility. Information Technology & Tourism, 22(3), 329–334. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00188-w

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling Arlie Russell Hochschild*. University of California Press.

Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture and organizations. *International Studies of Management & Organization, 10*(4), 15–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.1980.11656300

Hong, R. (2021). Road warriors to digital nomads: portable computers, habitats, and remote work. *Cultural Studies, 37*(3), 508–535. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1992462

Hormazábal, C. (2001). Review of Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press. *Athenea Digital. Revista de Pensamiento e Investigación Social*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenea.10

Humphrey, A., & Bliuc, A.-M. (2021). Western individualism and the psychological wellbeing of young people: A systematic review of their associations. *Youth, 2*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.3390/youth2010001

Instant. (2020, April 2). Digital Nomads: A new way of working. Instant Offices Blog. Retrieved from https://www.instantoffices.com/blog/featured/digital-nomads/

Lewis, S. (2003). The integration of paid work and the rest of life: Is post-industrial work the new leisure? *Leisure Studies, 22*(4), 343–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/0261436031000159413 1

Linao, P. A., Heimtun, B., & Morgan, N. (2024). Digital nomadism, gender and racial power relations. *Annals of Tourism Research, 106*(May), 103770. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2024.103770.

Linyan, L., & Boqing, C. (2023). Hope and paradox in contemporary Chinese society: A moment for cultural transformation? *The American Sociologist*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-02309568-1

MBO Partners. (2024, August 28). 2024 Digital Nomads Trends report: Nomads are here to stay. Retrieved from https://www.mbopartners.com/state-of-independence/digital-nomads/

MBO Partners. (2021, September). The digital nomad search continues. Retrieved from https://info.mbopartners.com/rs/mbo/images/MBO_Partners_2021_Digital_Nomad_Research_Brief.pdf

Makimoto, T., & Manners, D. (1997). Digital Nomad. Chichester: Wiley

Mancinelli, F. (2020). Digital nomads: Freedom, responsibility and the neoliberal order. *Information Technology & Tourism, 22*(3), 417–437. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00174-2

Megan, R. (2016, August 6). Nouveau poor: My daughter is a digital nomad. Twenty Secrets. Retrieved from http://www.twentysecrets.com/nouveau-poor-dropping-society/.

Müller, A. 2016. The digital nomad: Buzzword or research category? *Transnational Social Review, 6*(3), 344–348. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2016.1229930

Nash, C., Hossein-Jarrahi, M., Sutherland, W., & Phillips, G. (2018) Digital nomads beyond the buzzword: Defining digital nomadic work and use of digital technologies. In G. Chowdhury, J. McLeod, V. Gillet, & P. Willet (Eds). *Transforming digital worlds* (pp. 207–217). Berlin: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78105-1_25

Orel, M. (2023). Wanderlust workforce: A journey into understanding digital nomadism. *World Leisure Journal, 65*(2), 143–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2023.2210017

Ozimek, A., 2021. The great resignation: from full-time to freelance. Upwork. Retrieved from https://www.upwork.com/research/the-great-resignation.

Rainoldi, M., Ladkin, A., & Buhalis, D. (2022). Blending work and leisure: A future digital worker hybrid lifestyle perspective. *Annals of Leisure Research, 27*(2), 215–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2022.2070513

Reichenberger, I. (2018). Digital nomads – A quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure. *Annals of Leisure Research, 21*(3), 364–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2017.1358098

Richards, G. (2015). The new global nomads: Youth travel in a globalizing world. *Tourism Recreation Research, 40*(3), 340–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2015.1075724

Rickly, J. M. (2016). Lifestyle mobilities: A politics of lifestyle rock climbing. *Mobilities, 11*(2), 243–263. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.977667

Rus, A., & Orel, M. (2015). Co-working: A community of work. *Teorija in Praksa, 52*(6), 1017–1038.

Sennett, R. (1998). The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism. Norton.

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A, 38*(2), 207–226. https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268

Šímová, T. (2022). A research framework for digital nomadism: a bibliometric study. *World Leisure Journal, 65*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2022.2134200

Thompson, B. D. (2022). *Firefighter mental health & wellness: Calling 9-1-2 (Order No. 29399449)* (Doctoral dissertation). The Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Retrieved from https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/firefighter-mental-health-amp-wellness-calling-9/docview/2753523078/se-2

Thompson, B. Y. (2018). Digital nomads employment in the online gig economy. *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, (1). https://doi.org/10.12893/gjcpi.2018.1.11

Thompson, B. Y. (2021). Laptops, sunscreen, surfboards, and selfies: Travel, tourism, and leisure. *Digital nomads living on the margins: Remote-working laptop entrepreneurs in the gig economy (Emerald Studies in Alternativity and Marginalization) (pp. 59–79).* Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80071-545-520211006

Urry, J. (2007). Mobilities. Cambridge: Polity Press

Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Networked but commodified: The (dis)embeddedness of digital labour in the gig economy. *Sociology, 53*(5), 931–950. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519828906

Corresponding author: Hyun-Kyung Lee
Email: hyunkyunglee@yonsei.ac.kr

Appropriating Me. A New Emerging Aesthetic in the Indian Diaspora of South Africa

Nalini Moodley
Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

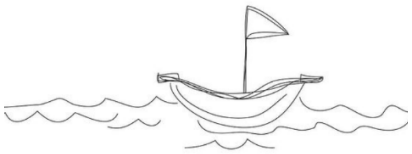
Abstract

This article aims to examine the production, consumption and interpretation of visual texts that were generated from within the Indian diaspora of South Africa. These images are located in and engaged with through social and popular media that democratise access to these visual texts. Within this diasporic community, the desire for the imaginary of home is foregrounded and explicated through the types, styles and discourse emerging within this community. This paper presents a critical analysis of three case studies: a suit of garments, a film franchise, and a body of artificially generated visual art. Using an insider's reflexivity and a postcolonial framework, this ethnographic inquiry explores the critical interweaving of identity construction, appropriation, and the development of a new aesthetic. This research, located within the body of Cultural Studies, frames, and deepens an understanding of cultural appropriation as a socio-political phenomenon. The study offers a new form of appropriation submitted as *mypropriation*, where the creator appropriates from inside their own community, religion, tradition or culture as they exist "inside": thus, an intra-community appropriation. This form of appropriation leads to a new *Paavam* aesthetic that creates space for creative works that celebrate history, culture and traditions of diasporic communities through an internalised view of the authentic. While diasporas are considered deterritorialised, this aesthetic reinscribes an identity of ownership in navigating the complexities in moving from the periphery to the centre. This study finds that as a conceptual framework, paavam practices are complex and contradictory and could frame how diasporic communities envision their narratives.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, misappropriation, mypropriation, Paavam practice, South Africa, visual texts

they have no idea what it's like
to lose home at the risk of
never finding home again
to have your entire life
split between two lands and
become the bridge between two countries

immigrant - rupi kaur



(R. Kaur, 2019)

In 2025, Indian South Africans commemorate 165 years in their country. This anniversary marks the arrival of the *SS Truro*, the first ship transporting 342 indentured labourers on November 16 1860, from the south of India to the coast of KwaZulu-Natal (Desai & Vahed, 2007). Reflecting on this long history, there have been notably profound transformations in cultural practices in the evolution of visual culture among South African Indians as expounded by scholars such as Hansen (2012) and Vally (2001). Today, newer generations, born into a post-apartheid democracy, have limited engagement with traditional customs, often opting instead for new ways of self-expression that diverge from the practices of their forebears. This cultural shift manifests in various spheres, such as wedding rituals, that have become complex amalgamations of diverse cultural influences; funerals that serve as displays of social and economic status; and Hindu celebrations like Deepavali, which have grown increasingly elaborate and commercialised. In these shifts of habitus, the notion of belonging evokes an emotional attachment to a homeland, a place of origin, whether real or imagined. However, as this paper will show, home is never static and is not always conceptualised as a specific location (Moodley-Diar, 2017; Sigona et al., 2015), but rather as the visual texts in this paper reveal, home is constantly transforming.

This paper critically examines the interplay of cultural identity and appropriation in the creative expressions of the South African Indian diaspora, highlighting how artistic endeavours both reflect and shape the community's cultural heritage and identity. This research further seeks to explore the dynamics of cultural expressions recently foregrounded in the text *The Indian Africans* (David et al., 2023), the implications of cultural appropriation as regularly illuminated in the popular local Indian newspaper *The Post*, and the role of visual texts in narrating the unique experiences of the diaspora within the multicultural landscape of South Africa. It considers how these cultural shifts create a distinct space for an aesthetic that reflects the unique place of the Indian community within South African society. In doing so, the paper frames these cultural expressions as markers of identities that offer insights into the complex and evolving landscape of Indian South African visual culture. In this way an emerging new aesthetic within South Africa and the Indian diaspora is offered.

This research finally seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways do cultural appropriation and hybridity influence the construction of a distinct South African Indian aesthetic? How do creative, visual texts within the South African Indian diaspora reflect and shape cultural identity, heritage, and a sense of belonging? How do visual texts serve as narratives of diasporic experience, positioning the Indian community within South Africa's multicultural landscape?

South Africa's Indian Diaspora

The term "diaspora" is used to describe any population considered "deterritorialised" or "transnational" that has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides (Oonk, 2007; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). Currently, there are approximately 35.4 million Indians living outside of India, either as non-resident Indians (NRIs) or People of Indian Origin (PIO), making this diaspora one of the largest in the world. While the term "diaspora" was initially an umbrella term for victimised communities, the concept was revived within the social sciences and humanities during the 1990s (Georgiou, 2006). More recently, it has become increasingly useful in describing communities worldwide that maintain "strong collective identities and links with their homeland" (Fazal & Tsagarousianou, 2002).

In *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, Jayaram & Atal (2004) describes one of the key implications of human migration as the retention of what he terms "sociological baggage" (p. 16), where migrants maintain a connection to their homeland through what he refers to as "the myth of return" (p. 16). Within the South African Indian community, this concept is particularly relevant, as historical and contemporary cultural expressions often reflect a persistent, though evolving, sense of connection to India. Despite generations of settlement in South Africa, elements of Indian heritage continue to shape identity, social practices, and artistic expressions, illustrating how the "myth of return" influences the construction of cultural belonging in a diasporic context. South African Indians were notably shaped by the segregationist frameworks of indenture and apartheid, which imposed a sense of exclusion and constructed their identity as distinct from the dominant societal groups.

Consequently, the cultural politics of the diaspora became marked by an underlying sense of anxiety about their sense of home and these can be seen throughout the scholarship of Indian South Africans from Arkin et al. (1989) to Vally's (2001) expansion and more recently in David et al. (2023). This state of anxiety about notions of home leads to a constant negotiation of cultural identity where the legacies of historical oppression continue to inform the place of Indians within the South African socio-political landscape. In this regard, the current dialogue about the memorialisation of the Indian South African in Durban is pertinent (Perumal, 2025).

Thus, in the global landscape of culture and identity, the South African Indian diaspora has emerged as a distinct yet diverse community that is reshaping traditions, reinterpreting religious practices, and reimagining notions of "home". For diasporic communities, Brah (1996) explains that the concept of home is not solely a geographical marker but a space of belonging,

memory, and cultural negotiation. In navigating these cultural spaces, diasporic communities inevitably encounter cultural misappropriation, a concept traditionally viewed as a form of exploitation that dilutes or distorts cultural authenticity. However complex cultural misappropriation might be, it also introduces a paradox: that within the discomfort it creates, lies the potential for diasporic communities to construct new cultural platforms where hybrid identities and unique creative expressions can find expression and flourish. These expressions materialise where culture, religion, and the memory of home intersect. This intersection gives expression to distinctive modes of representation, that narrativize identity in a space where adaptation is as important as cultural preservation.

The Indian diaspora, spanning generations and continents, exists at the intersection of preserving ancestral traditions and adapting to the norms of host societies. This dual existence fosters a dynamic cultural identity that is both adaptable and resilient, as diasporic communities navigate the balance between continuity and change. In negotiating these spaces, the diaspora engages in a creative process that gives rise to unique visual texts or artefacts, including films, textiles, artworks, and other forms of cultural expression that blend traditional and contemporary influences. This article contends that within this space of innovation a new form of cultural appropriation emerges. Here, appropriation does not simply signify borrowing or adapting from a dominant culture but rather, it involves a complex reimagining of heritage, where elements of tradition are reshaped and recontextualised to resonate with diasporic realities. Such appropriation has the potential to challenge conventional narratives, creating artefacts that reflect both a reverence for cultural roots and a response to present-day realities.

The term “cultural appropriation” is perhaps one of the most disputed and, at times, polarising terms of our age. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines cultural appropriation as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another”. However, Gebru (2024) clarifies that what one person considers cultural appropriation may well be cultural appreciation for another, as these issues involve aesthetics as well as ethics.

In his exhaustive text, *Cultural Appropriation in the Arts*, Young (2010) argues that artworks resulting from cultural appropriation are likely to be aesthetic failures, while alternatively asserting that acts of cultural appropriation are immoral. Furthermore, he posits that aesthetics, and moral objections could be intertwined as aesthetic failure, but this may inflict wrongful harm on members of a specific culture. Notably, he asserts that many acts of cultural appropriation are morally unobjectionable, with some resulting in artworks of significant aesthetic value.

Cultural appropriation has also been described as a “pervasive” and “multidirectional phenomenon” and is often viewed as an exploitative practice, particularly in the cases of “white” artists adopting elements of a minority culture without demonstrating any understanding of or respect for the original culture and context (Young, 2010). Markers of cultural appropriation, especially concerning the visual and cultural idioms of India, proliferate in the realm of popular media (Moodley-Diar, 2017).

Framing the Study: Method and Theory

This article explores an often-overlooked dimension of cultural appropriation i.e. the appropriation of cultural elements by Indian artists from their *own* communities. Drawing on a postcolonial theoretical framework, this article questions how power dynamics, identity formation, and cultural exchange operate within intra-community interactions, challenging traditional views of cultural appropriation as an external and unidirectional phenomenon. Here the concept of hybridity provides a foundation for problematising authenticity and cultural ownership within the diaspora.

Methodologically, this research adopts a digitally grounded ethnographic approach informed by Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology, as introduced in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz's (1973) notion of "thick description" guides the analytical focus on symbolic meaning within cultural expression, even when observed through mediated forms. Instead of physical immersion, I engaged as a participant-observer within online social platforms such as Facebook, Indian-focused television programs targeted at the Indian community in South Africa, e.g. the programme *Sadhana*, Indian-focused cinema, and newspapers such as *The Post*.

Three case studies were selected based on their prominence and focused resonance within these media sites for community engagement. As a member of the Indian community, I had access to these platforms and identified cultural expressions that attracted significant public engagement or debate, marking them as sites of intra-community appropriation and identity negotiation. This purposive sampling enabled a focused exploration of cultural artefacts that were widely circulated, available and discussed within the South African Indian community.

Data collection involved observing and documenting relevant social media posts, television content and newspaper articles. I employed qualitative content analysis and visual analysis to examine themes, symbolisms and discourse emerging from these creative texts. Reflexivity remains central to the methodology, particularly through my autoethnographic engagement, as a member of the community and a visual cultural scholar. In this way, I reflect on how my interpretations are shaped by personal and cultural proximity.

I conducted participant observation over a period of five years. This dual role aligns with the concerns raised in Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), where the ethnographers positionality and interpretative lens are made transparent. Thus, the combination of digital ethnography, interpretative analysis and autoethnographic reflection enables a nuanced reading of how cultural meaning is made and contextualised.

Following the methodological focus this research is situated within the domain of Cultural Studies, as it plays a significant role in framing and deepening the analysis of intra-community cultural appropriation. As an interdisciplinary field, Cultural Studies provides the tools to critically examine how cultural artefacts and practices are produced, consumed, and interpreted within specific socio-political and socio-historical contexts. In this framework, cultural appropriation is therefore understood as a socio-political phenomenon (Hall, 2005; Williams,

2009), where questions of power, identity formation, and resistance are central to ethnographic inquiry. These power dynamics, seen as fluid and socially constructed, shape the ways communities define and represent themselves. Through Stuart Hall's lens, acts of appropriation are not static but rather are part of ongoing processes of identity negotiations. Similarly, Williams (2009) draws attention to the complexities in how meaning is made and interpreted in visual texts, recognising that cultural production is always embedded in broader structures of meaning and power.

This article recognises the complexities within which diasporic communities' function, particularly through interweaving power, identity, memory, history, and audience interpretation. These dynamics shape the construction of belonging and create new understandings of 'home' and belonging, particularly where meaning, agency, and identity are constantly negotiated.

As an insider-researcher and practising artist from within the community under study, I engage in a reflective, autoethnographic practice that enables the articulation of emic (insider) insights while maintaining critical distance through an etic (outsider) analytical lens. My position allows for cultural fluency in interpreting artistic practices while also providing the necessary distance to examine the tensions between normative and appropriated creative expressions within South African Indian communities.

While cultural appropriation is traditionally understood as the adoption of elements from one culture by individuals or groups outside it, this article shifts the focus to appropriation within the appropriated culture itself, noted as intra-community appropriation. Specifically, it investigates three forms of cultural appropriation, the appropriation of archival photographs of indentured Indian labourers; cinematic representations that construct a version of Indianness; and the use of religious iconography in contemporary visual art. These case studies produced by Hindu South African Indian artists were selected based on their public visibility and the significant interest they have generated across media in recent years.

This article thus reinterprets cultural appropriation, not as an external imposition, but as an internal artistic strategy that re-engages cultural material for aesthetic and identity-based purposes. Through this lens, appropriation is reimagined and becomes a conscious act of cultural negotiation and reinterpretation by those within the community. These artistic practices shed light on how South African Indian artists navigate inherited cultural symbols to articulate new forms of belonging, agency and self-determination within the South African Indian diaspora.

Cultural Significance and Identity Construction

In this section, I explore some of the discursive issues surrounding South African Indian identity, beginning with Appiah's (2009) assertion that racial identity involves tracing the history of a signifier, a label, and the history of its effects. This analysis is particularly useful

for exploring the identity and cultural significance of visual texts associated with this diasporic community, as identity is regarded as an essential part of human nature (Sunarti, et al., 2022, p. 6).

The challenge for the Indian community in contemporary South Africa is to establish an identity within a climate where identities are complex and highly contested (Moodley, 2013, p. 24). Rastogi (2008) argued that Indians in South Africa desire citizenship in the fullest sense of the word, viewing it as a "national anchorage" due to the complex history of Indenture and subsequent apartheid. As the Indian community transitioned from apartheid to democracy, negotiating identity became inevitable (Govinden, 2008, p. 32). For both Rastogi (2008) and Govinden (2008), the term "Indian identity" is highly contested and anything but stable. While notions of identity are continuously reinvigorated through ongoing debates, questions surrounding Indian identity draw considerable interest worldwide.

The term "cultural identity" can be defined as the feeling of affinity with a particular group that shares common cultural traditions, diverse cultural symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. It is an aspect of an individual's self-conception and self-perception, associated with concepts such as religion, ethnicity, social communities, social class, and nationality (Behere, 2019). A neo-Indian identity is realised through the lens of a hybrid, optic-shifting identity formation, as described by Balirano (2008, p. 87), wherein different media and idioms produce original forms of self-identification with the homeland.

Social media and Indian identity in South Africa

Indian identity in South Africa is increasingly shaped and expressed through social and popular media, reflecting a complex dialogue between tradition and modernity, especially as these platforms become ever more accessible and influential. The rise of Facebook and TikTok culture has profoundly impacted how Indian South Africans articulate their identities, creating vibrant digital spaces for community interaction, cultural expression, and social engagement. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, these platforms have served as essential tools for community bonding, offering a form of virtual connectivity that became indispensable during the lockdowns.

Facebook, in particular, emerged as a significant forum where Indian South Africans could connect with family and friends, share experiences, and participate in a shared cultural life. Through the exchange of culinary creations and recipes, as well as attendance at virtual concerts, Facebook enabled people to maintain cultural traditions and social rituals in a new digital format. A noteworthy example is the establishment of the Facebook page *SA Musicians Against COVID*, which launched on 28 March 2020. This initiative, with approximately 59,000 followers in 2025, provides a virtual stage for both established and emerging dancers and musicians within the Indian community to showcase their talents. The page describes itself as "a personal initiative to give musicians and dancers a platform to offer our precious arts to bring about healing, positivity, and upliftment to all during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond".

Through this initiative, artists have been able to reinforce cultural identity, bridging generational and social divides while creating spaces where the heritage and contemporary expressions of the Indian diaspora blend seamlessly. Beyond artistic showcases, Facebook also became a crucial support system for religious and communal life. Temples and priests adapted to pandemic restrictions by offering online prayer services, allowing devotees to participate remotely and maintain spiritual connections. Such digital engagements do more than just entertain. They reinforce cultural identity, community bonds and the transmission of heritage in ways that were unprecedented. For Indian South Africans, these online platforms foster a sense of belonging and continuity, thereby becoming crucial sites for evolving conversations on identity. These platforms host collective identities, influencing how they are perceived both internally and externally.

This article examines the visual texts posted and engaged with across various social media platforms, analysing how these images and responses contribute to the construction and expression of communal identity noting that social media platforms can also create a "hall of fame" (Sunarti, et al., 2022, p. 2) used to recollect the past, celebrate the present, and establish a memory and archive.

Cultural expressions of Indianness

The public performance of Indian culture serves as a vital platform through which South African Indians reinterpret and adapt the meanings of "Indianness", making them relevant within a post-apartheid context (Radhakrishnan, 2005, p. 270) . A poignant example of this occurred in 1994 when the Surialanga Dance Company, a group traditionally trained in the classical Indian dance form of Bharatha Natyam, performed at the inauguration of former President Nelson Mandela. This performance, set to a live rendition of *Asimbonanga* by South African singer Johnny Clegg, was broadcast live across the nation. While this unique fusion of classical Indian dance with South African musical elements sought to symbolise unity, the Indian community had mixed reactions. For many, the adaptation of Bharatha Natyam[1] in this context felt like a misrepresentation, falling short of capturing the authenticity and cultural richness of Indian heritage.

This dance maintained the pure, structured elements of the south Indian classical dance of Bharatha Natyam yet incorporated English and Zulu lyrics, which is a departure from the usual Tamil or Sanskrit verses that accompany this style. While this fusion was likely intended to represent inclusivity and unity within a multicultural South African context, many viewed it as a misappropriation of Bharatha Natyam. The classical art form, which carries deep cultural, religious, and historical significance, was seen as compromised by this blending of languages and styles that were foreign to its origins. For some within the Indian community, this hybridisation detracted from the authenticity and spiritual essence of Bharatha Natyam,

[1] Bharatha Natyam is a form of classical Indian dancing from Tamil Nadu in Southern India. It is the most popular and well-known of all the classical dance forms performed in India today. It is a highly regarded dance form in South Africa and has been taught and performed in South Africa since the 1950s.

reducing it to an instrument of cultural assimilation rather than a true representation of Indianness in South Africa. This performance highlighted the challenges of maintaining cultural integrity while navigating the expectations and values of a broader, multicultural audience. The performance also underscored the delicate balance between honouring tradition and adapting cultural expressions to new social and national landscapes.

Currently, three decades after South Africa's transition to democracy, the Durban Diwali Festival has emerged as a major cultural event, showcasing a range of dance styles that span traditional and contemporary genres. Costumes, music, and choreography at the festival often blend elements from different cultures, creating hybrid performances that reflect the multicultural spirit of South Africa. For instance, traditional Indian attire may be modified to incorporate Western or African designs, while classical Indian music and dance forms, such as Bharatha Natyam, are frequently fused with contemporary genres or African rhythms, resulting in a vibrant, inclusive aesthetic that resonates with diverse audiences.

This embrace of hybridity finds resonance with concepts explored by scholars like Bhabha (1994), who argue that hybrid cultural spaces can generate new identities that transcend single ethnic or cultural origins, creating "third spaces" where meaning and identity are negotiated. In the context of the Durban Diwali Festival, hybridity serves as a form of cultural adaptation and innovation, celebrating inclusivity and fostering shared identities. Popular Durban-based newspapers like *The Post* and *The Sunday Tribune* often highlight these elements, showcasing performances as a testament to South Africa's ethos of unity in diversity while acknowledging that such hybridity is complex and sometimes contentious.

While many view this blending of cultural elements as a positive representation of inclusivity, symbolising South Africa's post-apartheid values of reconciliation and multiculturalism, others in the Indian community express concern over the potential dilution of traditional forms.

Scholars such as Pieterse (2001) describe this form of cultural hybridisation as "global *mélange*", wherein distinct cultural elements intermingle to create new, composite identities. The Durban Diwali Festival, in this light, becomes a space where Indian heritage adapts to South Africa's multicultural environment, embodying a dynamic blend of tradition and innovation. However, as Pieterse notes, such hybrid forms are often contentious, as they can either empower or marginalise cultural identities, depending on how they are interpreted and received by their audiences.

Thus, while the Durban Diwali Festival celebrates hybridity as a source of creative expression and unity, it also underscores the complex, often sensitive negotiation between cultural preservation and adaptation in a multicultural society. For South African Indians, the Durban Diwali Festival provides a space for exploring these evolving cultural identities, even as the festival's cross-cultural fusion challenges traditional boundaries and prompts discussions on authenticity, appropriation, and community representation. Though remarkably slow, this shift began almost 30 years ago at the inauguration and was frowned upon; yet today, cultural diversity is celebrated in embracing the rainbow dialogue (Barnett, 1999; Muller et al., 1999).

Turning the Aesthetic Dial

In 2023, South Africa witnessed an explosion of creative expressions that brought forth artworks that deeply engaged with the particularities of the Indian South African community. One of these was the film *Kandasamys: The Baby* which is the fourth in the popular Kandasamy franchise. When considering the film industry, it is unsurprising to note the popularity of Bollywood films among the Indian community globally (Smets et al., 2012, p. 4). However, in recent years, these local offerings have highlighted a different and more nuanced Indian diasporic aesthetic that has garnered significant popularity.

These films expand on narratives rooted in Indian culture yet are crafted with the diasporic experience in mind. Such films are not merely stories; they are artefacts of identity, identity construction, recognition, and approval that bridge cultural gaps, offering diasporic audiences a chance to see their stories play out on the big screen while simultaneously inviting the Western gaze to recognise the marginalisation of visual texts through hybridised productions (Balirano, 2008, p. 87). While showcasing Indian culture and history, they incorporate language, humour, and peculiarities from within the community, further interpreting and reflecting these hybrid identities.

This phenomenon is not limited to cinema. With a range of new designs emerging from Kanya Designs, showcased and launched at Durban's Coco de Mer Hotel, it is evident that fashion, too, serves as a powerful means of cultural articulation within the diaspora (Kaur, 2003). Derrington explains that it is through our garments that we express who we think we are, who we aspire to be, and who we believe others will appreciate. Garments such as *saris*, *kurtas*, and *lehengas* are often worn at celebratory events, yet they hold a deeper significance beyond aesthetic appeal. They become symbols of heritage, reinterpreted in a diasporic context where tradition mingles with the contemporary (Amin & Govinden, 2012).

Similarly, in visual art or fine art, diasporic artists frequently reflect themes of memory, belonging, and hybridity as signs of their identity in their diasporic homes. They might incorporate traditional motifs or iconography such as lotus flowers, mandalas, or Hindu deities in ways that resonate with the personal and collective experiences of displacement and adaptation, as seen in the modern art of Indian Bengali artist Mithu Sen (Figure 1) or in the works of South African artists like Reshma Chibba (Figure 2), Riason Naidoo (Figure 3), or Selvan Naidoo (Figure 4).

Figure 1
Mithu Sen (Thomas)

Source: Thomas (2017)

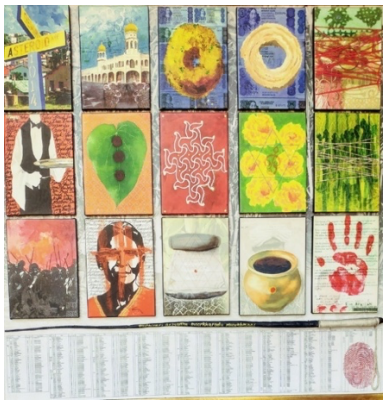
Figure 2
Reshma Chibba, "*The Infinite Form" (Digital print on fibre paper, dimensions 1360x900mm)*

Source: *Joburg Fringe* (n.d.)

Figure 3
Riason Naidoo, Beans Bunny

Source: Naidoo (1997)

Figure 4
Selvan Naidoo, I am an African



Source: Moodley (2013)

The above artworks are not only aesthetically strong and conceptually challenging (perhaps because the artists are all formally trained fine artists), but they are also visual texts that reclaim, reinterpret, and recontextualise cultural heritage for new audiences. These texts challenge simplistic notions of cultural purity, suggesting that identity is an ever-evolving concept shaped by myriad influences, as suggested earlier by Brah. By doing so, these artists offer a counter-narrative to the commercialisation and appropriation of cultural symbols, asserting the right of diasporic communities to define their own cultural expressions (Young, 2010).

The convergence of culture, religion, and home within these artefacts underscores the distinct position of the Indian diaspora. Religion, as one of these intersecting elements, plays a central role in shaping diasporic identity. For many in the diaspora, religious practices are not only linked to their heritage but are also a means of building community in unfamiliar environments (Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). In diasporic contexts, these practices often evolve, as religious festivals, rituals, and symbols adapt to new cultural environments. However, these adaptations can sometimes be misunderstood or co-opted by mainstream culture. When elements of Hinduism, for example, are commodified, such as the yoga rebranding and the sacred symbols used as mere fashion accessories, it can feel like a reduction of complex traditions to trendy commodities (Moodley-Diar, 2017). Nonetheless, diasporic communities find ways to reclaim these elements, reinterpreting their religious heritage in ways that honour both tradition and the realities of their lived experiences. Such reinterpretations are reflected in artefacts that articulate a diasporic spirituality that is shaped by the memory of home yet grounded in a new reality (Ratnam & Arambewela-Colley, 2024).

Thus, the creation of these artefacts within the Indian diaspora serves a dual purpose. The artefacts are not only expressions of cultural pride but also acts of resistance against the forces of misappropriation and commercialisation. By transforming elements of their heritage into films, garments, artworks, and other forms, diasporic communities assert their right to define and reshape their own identities. In doing so, they transform cultural misappropriation from a potential threat into a powerful catalyst for creativity, producing artefacts that reflect the

complexity and resilience of their identities (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). By reframing cultural misappropriation as a source of inspiration rather than merely a site of conflict, I highlight the transformative potential of the diasporic experience in embracing the hybrid nature of identities. These experiences challenge narrow definitions of culture while also creating a space where identity can be fluid, adaptive, and richly nuanced (Hall, 1997) expressing the lived experiences of the artist.

A New Appropriation: *Mypropriation*

In redefining and creating new spaces for engagement, I submit that the moment has arrived to define a new form of appropriation that emerges from within a community. This submission is not a commentary on high or low-brow art, or on the quality of the artworks, as that would be commentary for an entirely separate article. This is a commentary on the South African Indian, who is constantly refocusing, redirecting, and re-presenting themselves either to reflect their uniqueness through humour and exaggeration, or through historical challenges of second-classness, disenfranchisement, or through the lens of reclaiming the imaginary of Benedict Anderson's (2007) "imagined communities". This inward-facing, inward-directed appropriation is a unique offering in the landscape described above, which I propose to call *mypropriation.* This term encapsulates the act of internal cultural appropriation that is appropriating from my culture, religion, or tradition. *Mypropriation* leads individuals to draw upon their own community's heritage to reshape identities and narratives within a shared social and historical framework. As members of the community, there is a proximity of blindness to critically engage with the types of appropriation, and therefore appropriating from themselves is not seen as a form of appropriation, but merely a way of reclaiming their history, thus avoiding the real challenge of erasure from the historical narrative and, in this case, from the South African art historical archive.

Therefore, mypropriation must be understood as a layered process, which Rastogi (2008) identifies with the concept of an "Afrindian identity", where elements of African and Indian heritages interweave to form a unique cultural tapestry. This form of expression allows the Indian South African community to celebrate its history and artistic achievements, moving from societal margins toward a more central and recognised identity. However, as these creative works continue to surface, they demand a careful, critical approach to ensure that this journey of internal appropriation acknowledges the community's history with respect, complexity, and genuine empowerment.

The following analysis is structured around three case studies that reflect distinct modes of intra-community cultural appropriation among Hindu South African Indian artists. Each case study is described and examined to uncover how cultural symbols are reinterpreted, contested or reclaimed within diasporic identity.

Case Study 1: Ancestral Kaftans and the Aestheticization of Indenture: Khanya Designs

In September 2022, Verushka Pather, acclaimed South African Bharatha Natyam dancer, announced the expansion of her artistic practice[2] into the world of fashion through her brand, Khanya Designs (Soobramoney, 2023). Although she has no formal training as a fashion designer, she frames her brand as a form of Indo-African fashion, combining Indian textile motifs with African prints and design. For Pather, the CEO and owner of Khanya Designs "Khanya is a medium for social cohesion," (Coetzee, 2022) and although established in 2019, her launch in 2023 positioned clothing as a medium for "storytelling" and "heritage fusion."

Amongst the harem pants and halter necks showcased at the launch hosted at Coco de Mer Hotel in Durban were flowing "ancestral kaftans" (Subroyan, 2024) which featured archival images of Indian indentured women printed onto fabric (see Figures 5, 6, & 7). These photographs were sourced from the 1860 Heritage Centre in Durban, South Africa and the Apravasi Ghat in Mauritius. Both these historic sites reflect on and are tied to Indian indentured labour migration. While Pather and her team may have purchased the rights to these images, the ethical implications of repurposing such deeply emotionally charged photographs remain complex.

Figure 5

Mauritian women with the print on the left (Newman, 2023)

Note: The photograph of the lady was taken by a photographer from Mauritius. We wanted to look at original moments that capture ancestral heritage, so it was not just about creating modern images. We wanted to look at things that are unique to our heritage and culture. We have now purchased the rights to this image."(Newman, 2023).

[2] "The name Khanya was inspired by my love and time in India and the boons of my birthland of Africa. Khanyakumari is the southern tip of India and *inkhanisya* is 'shining light' in isiZulu. The merging of the two gave birth to Khanya Designs – 'Let your soul shine'" (Soobramoney, 2023).

Figure 6
Khanya Designs

Source: *Verushka's Khanya Designs Honours Our Vibrant Heritage* (2024)

Figure 7
Khanya Designs launch

Source: Facebook post

At face-value, the kaftans may be read as forms of cultural remembrance foregrounding heritage (Apaydin, 2020). Described by Pather as a garment to "celebrate the past with honour" she further describes this design as an opportunity to "wear my past" *(Verushka's Khanya Designs Honours Our Vibrant Heritage*, 2024). In this way Pather asserts her positionality as an artist inside the community who can appropriate imagery that is part of the Indian collective. This suit of garments with textiles and embedded motifs certainly bring ancestral histories into current narratives of the Indian community in South Africa. However, a deeper, more nuanced reading complicates this interpretation and offers a rich site of *mypropriation*. Undoubtedly, the kaftans rely heavily on imagery of women captured in their moments of hardships such as working in the sugarcane fields, carrying heavy loads or engaged in forms of domesticity. This aestheticization of their subjugation and suffering raises questions about whether visual texts

such as these ancestral kaftans honour these women or risk their re-victimisation. The imagery used, of women who were central to the survival and success of early Indian communities in South Africa and in some cases Mauritius, are visually compelling yet provoke discomfort through their melancholic representations.

As a South African woman of Indian ancestry and an artist-researcher within this community, I find myself navigating a conflicted response. One the one hand, I recognise the importance of retrieving, archiving and re-presenting overlooked Indian female histories, but on the other, I am concerned about how these histories are selected and mobilised in popular culture through the lens of *mypropriation*. The kaftans do not show these women as complex beings but rather as fixed symbols of the struggle idiom, familiar in South African visual culture (Williamson, 1990). Their solemn expressions evoke sympathy while reinforcing their silence and their marginality. As a result, the pivotal question arises: do these garments invite a critical remembrance of ancestors or do they commodify and reiterate pain through their intra-community appropriation?

This becomes especially disturbing in the broader climate of gendered violence, women's rights and the complex questions of equity in present-day South Africa. The visual re-inscription of women's suffering, especially of these women whose lives were shaped by the structural violence of the indentured system, a heightened racialised workforce, and patriarchal control (Desai & Vahed, 2007; Hiralal, 2014), raises ethical concerns about representational justice. Undoubtedly, the garments may be seen as visually compelling, but they also reinscribe a narrative of women as victims without agency.

Reflexively, I problematise the absence of the descendant voices in appropriation of images from the archives of indentured Indian history. It is unknown if any of the families linked to these women gave consent to the use of these images? Further, would these women have approved of their images and legacies embodied in this way as they are worn, photographed and circulated on social media and runways? Evidently, in trying to honour these women, there is the risk of repeating the very exploitation they endured.

The archive is notoriously silent on the experiences of Indian indentured women in their own voices (Desai & Vahed, 2007; Hiralal, 2014; Lal, 1985), but there is no shortage of literature on the treatment and abuse that indentured women endured from the moment they boarded the ships to their destination country (Beall, 2012). This compounds the issue. Kalpana Hiralal, a South African scholar in the field of experiences of indentured women, recognises the tensions in the scholarship around this topic. Both Hiralal (2014) and Govinden (2008, p. 35) argue that the historical record of these women's narratives often renders them invisible or flattens their existence into unidimensional characters. Nevertheless, these women were not just passive victims. They resisted, negotiated and survived in deeply difficult conditions. Therefore, to represent them solely through the lens of victimhood, reduces our collective memory and perpetuates a tragic narrative of women without agency.

Thus, while the ancestral kaftans present a striking visual appropriated from within the Indian archive and framed as heritage reclamation and remembrance, it also opens up urgent questions about who decides what is remembered and how? Critically, who speaks for the women in the images and who profits from their silent visibility? As a researcher deeply embedded in this context, I argue that heritage work must centre not only on ensuring visibility but also on presentation of voices, establishment of context and recognising the critical issue of consent. Otherwise, the visual homage may realise aestheticized erasure rather than recognition and empowerment.

Case Study 2: Filmic *mypropriation* and the Kandasamy's Franchise

Keeping Up with the Kandasamys (2017) is a family comedy co-written and directed by Jayan Moodley and was the first cinematic feature in mainstream South African cinema to be set in the Indian township of Chatsworth, Durban, a township shaped by apartheid's segregationist spatial planning. This film delves into the matriarchal rivalry of neighbouring families while showcasing the unique subculture of one of the oldest Indian townships in South Africa. Described as a "love letter to Chatsworth" (Newman, 2021), this franchise generated a staggering R16.3 million at the box office thus leading to the sequels: *Kandasamys: The Wedding* in 2019, *Trippin' with the Kandasamys*, (2021) and *Kandasamys: The Baby* (2023), breaking sales records along the way (Moodley & Govender, 2020), and now streaming globally on Netflix.

Figure 8
"Kandasamy" Series Poster

Source: Wikipedia Commons

The *Kandasamy* franchise (Figure. 8) represents more than artistic expression. It is a cultural platform that challenges conventional narratives around authenticity and ownership, exploring a community's feelings of in/visibility and nostalgia. This franchise functions as a potent site of filmic *mypropriation*. This franchise reflects a community's acceptance of its language-ing, quirkiness and particularly their style of self-deprecating humour. The creators and actors are part of the community they portray which blur the boundaries between re-presentation and appropriation. Therefore, the films function as performances of "Indianness" through the lens of entertainment and nostalgia.

While this insider storytelling is not unique, it resonates with the audiences because it offers self-recognition through the choreography of temple visits, the use and overuse of incense in Indian homes, the exaggeration of familial politics between mothers and daughters in-laws or the performative competitiveness of Indian matriarchs. However, even when storylines or humour hinge on caricature and stereotypes, the audience celebrates purely for being seen on the "big" screen. This creates catalysing memories and moments that reinforce Indianness through the social act of collectively watching a film in a mainstream cinema (Tolia-Kelly, 2001).

This raises the important question of whether visibility on a macro scale justifies reductive portrays of a minority community? And at what point does intra-community cultural celebration become recognised as self-parody.

As a reflexive scholar I am conflicted by an obvious sense of pride in seeing the lives of the Indian minority playout in mainstream cinema and more recently on the global platform of Netflix, but more importantly by how this visibility might perpetuate minority stereotypes. Taking its cue from such storylines, other platforms such as radio now also thrive in what has become predictable Indian tropes and comedic exaggerations of South African Indianness. Yet beneath the humour lies a concern about whose stories are being narrated and whose are being silenced while the complex diasporic identity is evidently slowly being reduced to superficial and digestible narratives thereby cultivating.

In the use of comedy this franchise also leans into the patriarchal dynamics of the Indian community. While there are the two gossipy and controlling matriarchs, there is the subtext of their agency being circumscribed by familial roles of mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. As a researcher advocating for careful and nuanced representation of women in South Africa, there is the concern that these narratives unintentionally reinforce gender normativity.

The Kandasamy's franchise becomes a site of intra-community cultural appropriation, as it is a compelling example of how members of the Indian community can appropriate their own cultural forms for cultural and commercial benefit. Noting that the line between reflexivity and re-producing is fine, it is critical as members of the diaspora, to ask if the image that is being sold is one that is highly populist and marketable but ultimately rather limited in authenticity.

Case Study 3: Mypropriated Visual Art and the Sacred Image

Figure 9

Visual Appropriation Through Images Created by Ash Naidoo Using Artificial Intelligence

Source: Somduth (2024)

In 2024 graphic designer Ash Naidoo produced a series of digitally generated artworks using artificial intelligence (AI) platforms. Having garnered much interest, it sparked robust deliberations on social and popular media platforms. These images (Figure 9) represented Naidoo himself walking with Hindu Goddesses such as Luxmi and Saraswathi, sometimes hand in hand. While these images are visually engaging and current in its use of innovative technologies, they elicited a sharp response from the South African Indian community. When it featured in the popular Indian newspaper *The Post* (Somduth, 2024), the following comments were presented:

> Dr Lokesh Ramnath Maharajh, the chairperson of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha Priest's Council, said: "Hindu deities are sacred and revered. Devotees worship at the feet of the Gods. Any attempt to present humans as equal to Gods via digitisation would be offensive. Devotion can be expressed by different forms of worship, and especially seva to those in need.

On social media the comments were even more visceral. One user Vadthoughts wrote:

> You need to feel ashamed that you dare to show yourself walking beside the Great Goddess. Only and only Shri Hari is capable of walking beside her. No one else. You sick, low-life, evil, kalyugi person. Feel ashamed.

Another user, Shivavishnu2022, commented "…maa Saraswati, we all belong under her feet. This is not the correct way."

This outrage and wave of vitriolic resistance suggests that the boundaries of acceptable appropriation is somehow internally guarded and this is particularly sharp when deities and sacred imagery is involved. The reaction to Naidoo's visual art showcases a resistance to *mypropriation* as presented earlier, due primarily to his work being contentious by collapsing the boundaries between being human and divine. As an insider-researcher this moment is instructive. Unlike the ancestral kaftans and the Kandasamy franchise case studies, this form

of *mypropriation* was not met with communal pride and celebration. In fact, it was met with outrage as seen in the above quotes. It is evident that there is a line that cannot be crossed when it comes to divinity and self-representation. Religious imagery has its limits within the South African Indian community. Naidoo's work had created a collective anxiety about the desecration of the divine mother and more sharply perhaps because technology like AI was used in generating these images. Had this been an oil painting it is doubtful that it would have yielded such a response. This signals distrust or a threat, in showcasing a spiritual connection in a visual reproduction.

The paradox in the three case studies is striking. Delegitimised women printed on kaftans or caricatures of women on screen are embraced, while iconographic representations of deities are seen as unacceptable transgressions. This questions the boundaries of authenticity within diasporic communities in establishing identities that are fluid and constantly transitioning.

In reflecting on this backlash that Naidoo received, it is important to recognise that South African Indians have been in South Africa for 165 years. During this time, it is undeniable that Hindu practices have hybridised since indenture, yet there is a strong desire to protect religious sanctity to ensure stability. As a minority community carefully holding on to religious and cultural practices, symbols become anchors for the community and even when these symbols are appropriated by insiders, it is certainly not welcomed.

Reflecting on this case study, as an artist and researcher-observer, conflicts emerge. One the one hand I appreciate Naidoo's desire to use available modern technologies to engage with his religion and yet on the hand I understand the burden of maintaining stability in the diaspora. Perhaps the tension between artistic freedom and cultural appropriation from "inside", along with accountability, is at the core of the concept of *mypropriation*. It shows that *mypropriation* is not above critique but is in fact held to a much higher standard of scrutiny particularly when dealing with imagery of sacredness and to a much lesser extent when dealing with secular representations of the community.

Tuning the Dial to a Paavo Aesthetic

The three case studies, Kanya Designs, the Kandasamy's franchise and the AI generated art works, can be approached as sites that reinscribe identity. Intra-community appropriation, conceptualised in this article as *mypropriation*, is evidently a complex process where South African Indian identities are negotiated and re-imagined. These contribute to redefining a new aesthetic in the visual culture of South African Indians.

As South Africans, one of our distinctive responses to expressions of concern or sympathy is the widely used and endearing phrase "Ag shame". This uniquely South African expression serves as a versatile term that conveys empathy, understanding, or gentle amusement in response to various situations. In her article, *Uniquely South African Sayings That Confuse Other Countries*, Arderne (2016) describes several variations of this expression, including "ag shame", "shame man", "hai shame", and "shêm". Arderne notes that these expressions are used

across a range of contexts, from responding to something endearing or unfortunate to filling conversational pauses. In this way, "Ag shame" operates as a social tool, reinforcing shared understanding and solidarity within interactions, and often serving to soften or mitigate potentially awkward conversational gaps.

Within the lexicon of South African Indian communities, a similar expression, *paavo*, emerging from *paavam*, occupies a comparable role. Colloquially, *paavo* conveys sentiments akin to "ag shame", evoking empathy, gentle resignation, or sympathetic support for a given situation or person. Although generally a very popular colloquial term in many Indian homes, there is no literature on the emergence or designatory use of the word. However, Kenny Sebastian, in his comedy skit, interestingly presents the use of this word in American Indian communities, thereby recognising the universality and global appeal and understanding of *paavam* or *paavo* (Sebastian, 2016). According to the Urban Dictionary, *paavam* refers to someone who is innocent or naïve. While the term carries cultural nuances, suggesting an acceptance of something unfortunate or reluctantly acknowledged, often accompanied by an understanding of hardship or adversity, the linguistic parallels between "ag shame" and *paavo* illustrate how colloquial expressions of empathy can reinforce communal bonds, conveying nuanced cultural sentiments that align with both solidarity and gentle compassion. These expressions contribute to a uniquely South African linguistic identity, where colloquialisms bridge cultural differences and serve as markers of belonging within diverse communities.

Mypropriation, as discussed, opens a dialogue for a new aesthetic, a *paavam* aesthetic, or *paavam* practice, that provides an inclusive space for innovation within a community, allowing for the creation of works that celebrate and recognise their history, culture, and traditions. This *paavam* practice is an aesthetic that is particularly pertinent in diasporic communities for narrating and retelling the stories of indenture, migration, and the longing for an imaginary home, through mypropriation. The *paavam* practices will create spaces for minorities to reinscribe themselves into the dominant culture, where sensitivities and sensibilities are part of the practice of acceptance. Through mypropriation, these images have created a platform for a *paavam* practice that celebrates the re-victimisation of indentured women, the exaggeration of Indianness depicted in films, and the acceptance of artists' freedom to reimagine their religious beliefs as they wish. Through mypropriated imagery articulated in the *paavam* practice, these creative works reveal a community that desires moments to celebrate or resist their cultural texts in an attempt to offer stability within a hybridised environment.

Conclusion: In South Africa I Am Indian, In India I Am South African

This paper embarked on an exploration of the concept of *mypropriation*, the appropriation of culture, identity and memory within the South African Indian community using three case studies of visual culture. What emerged was a nuanced and problematic uneven landscape of representation, where visual forms of expression functioned not only as sites of cultural reflection and celebration, but more critically as sites of tension, constant negotiation and discomfort.

Reflecting on these findings it is clear that creative undertakings within this diaspora cannot simply be understood only through the parameters of authenticity and visibility. Khanya Design's suit of garments raised ethical concerns around the inscription of victimhood and the commodification of pain and as a female researcher I am acutely aware of how such narratives can inadvertently silence and lead to erasure of the very women they claim to pay homage to. This case though, invites a more feminist reading that might foreground historical accountability and the critical issue of consent in representation.

In contrast, the Kandasamys franchise, through humour alerts me to ways in which visual culture exaggerates stereotypes and perpetuates cycles of representation that entangles lived experiences with cinematic experiences. As a celebratory form of *mypropriation* it offers a flattened sense of Indianness in South Africa.

In Ash Naidoo's AI generated visual art, tensions around *mypropriation* comes into sharp focus. The harsh criticisms he received from the Indian community revealed a clear internal boundary between art and religion. Therefore, this body of visual texts revealed how mypropriation can function on a broad spectrum from humour and celebration, to pain and discomfort.

In uniting these cases, a *paavam* aesthetic emerges that is firmly grounded in empathy, sensitivity and affective practices by those communities who practice on the margins. *Paavam* practice, in this article, is offered as a lens, not as an excuse for poor quality sentimentality, but rather as a conceptual framework to understand more deeply how visual texts navigate and construct identity within the diaspora. In doing so they locate themselves between home and the imagined homes, between histories and identities, and between complex forms of hegemonies. Therefore, as a conceptual framework, *paavam* practices create spaces of complexity and contradiction.

Finally, this article raises important questions about notions of belonging and identity in the visual cultural practices of South African Indians in post-apartheid South Africa. Often this minority is caught between existing on the margins of South Africa and the homeland of India. This duality requires greater reflexivity, not only in the reception of visual culture, but more critically in the production thereof, as a way to resist essentialising and recognise the spaces for discomfort.

In revisiting my lament "In South Africa I am Indian, In India I am South African", I do not offer this as a poetic refrain, but rather as a reminder that in the impermanence of identity, belonging is never guaranteed. Rather it is continuously transforming through stories told, visual produced and histories we invite into remembrance as well as those we tend to forget.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I hereby declare that I have used ChatGPT to assist in the writing of a number of passages of this paper to improve readability and flow only.

References

Amin, N & Govinden, D. (2012). Sari stories: Fragmentary images of Indian women. In R. Moletsane, C. Mitchell, & A. Smith (Eds), *Was it something I wore? Dress, Identity, Materiality* (pp. 323–340). HSRC Press.

Anderson, B. (2007). *Imagined communities: Nationalism's cultural roots* (S. During, Ed., 3rd ed.). London: Routledge.

Anon. (2024, 1 February). Verushka's Khanya Designs honours our vibrant heritage. *The Bugel*. Retrieved from https://thebugle.co.za/whatshot/view/20189/verushka-s-khanya-designs-honours-our-vibrant-heritage

Apaydin, V. (2020). *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage.* UCL Press: London. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xpsfp

Appiah, A. (2009). Racial identity and racial identification. In L. Back & J. Solomos (Eds.), *Theories of race and racism: A reader* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Arderne, M. (2016, June 29). Uniquely South African sayings that confuse other countries. *Oxbridge Academy*. Retrieved from https://www.oxbridgeacademy.edu.za/blog/uniquely-south-african-sayings-that-confuse-other-countries/

Arkin, A. J., Magyar, K. P., & Pillay, G. J. (1989). *The Indian South African*. Pinetown: Owen Burgress Publishers.

Balirano, G. (2008). Indian diasporic aesthetics as a form of translation. *Anglistica*, 12(2), 87–96.

Barnett, C. (1999). Broadcasting the Rainbow Nation: Media, democracy and nation-Building in South Africa. *Antipode, 31*(3), 274–303. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00104

Beall, J. (2012). Women under Indentured Labour in Colonial Natal, 1860-1911. *South African History Online*. Retrieved from https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/women-under-indentured-labour-colonial-natal-1860-1911-jo-beall

Behere, D. (2019). Indian South Africans: Challenges of cultural identity in South Africa. *Research Review: International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, *4*(5), 107–110.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.

Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. London: Routledge.

Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (Eds.). (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520946286

Coetzee, N. (2022, September 23). Dancer to designer: Verushka Pather blends her Indian and African heritage to create stunning garments. *News24.com*. Retrieved from https://www.news24.com/life/relationships/dancer-to-designer-verushka-pather-blends-her-indian-and-african-heritage-to-create-stunning-garments-20220922

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

David, P., Choonilall, R., Naidoo K., and Naidoo, S. (2023). *The Indian Africans.* Durban: Micromega Publications.

Derrington, S. P. (2014). *Diasporic fashion space: Women's experiences of 'South Asian' dress aesthetics in London* (Doctoral dissertation). University of London.

Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2007). *Inside Indian indenture: A South African story, 1860–1914*. Cape Town: Madiba Publishers.

Fazal, S., & Tsagarousianou, R. (2002). Diasporic communication: Transnational cultural practices and communicative spaces. *Javnost—The Public*, *9*(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2002.11008790

Gebru, A. K. (2024, September 10). Cultural appropriation as passing off. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4966783

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Georgiou, M. (2006). *Diaspora, identity and the media: Diasporic transnationalism and mediated spatialities*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.

Goodhart, D. (2004, February 24). Discomfort of strangers. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/feb/24/race.eu

Govinden, D. (2008). *Sister outsiders: The representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African Indian women*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.

Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1992). Beyond "culture": Space, identity and the politics of difference. *Cultural Anthropology, 7*(1), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1992.7.1.02a00020

Habib, A. A. *(n.d.). Adam Habib interviewed by Nalini Moodley.* Authorised share of personal communication.

Hall, S. (1997). *The Spectacle of the Other*. New York: Sage Publishers.

Hall, S. (2005). Who needs identity? In E. J. Du Gay & P. Redman (Eds.), *Identity: A reader* (pp. 1–17). London: Sage Publications.

Hansen, T. B. (2012). *Melancholia of Freedom. Social Life in an Indian Township*. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691152950.001.0001

Hiralal, K. (2014). 'Rebellious sisters': Indentured women and resistance in colonial Natal. In *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (p. 309). Delhi: Manohar.

Jayaram, N., & Atal, Y. (2004). *The Indian diaspora: Dynamics of migration*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Joburg Fringe. (n.d.). Joburg fringe catalogue. Retrieved from https://joburgfringe.com/catalogue/reshma-chhiba/

Kaur, J. (2003). *The Sari* by Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, *7*(3–4), 451–431. https://doi.org/10.2752/136270403778052032

Kaur, R. (2019, January 14). Being an immigrant. *Facebook*. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/rupikaurpoetry/posts/being-an-immigrant-is-a-funny-little-thing-ive-spent-a-lot-of-time-thinking-abou/2117692458325019/

Lal, B. (1985). Kunti's cry: Indentured Indian women on Fiji plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *22*(2), 55–71.

Moletsane, R., Mitchell, C. & Smith, A. (eds). (2012) Fragmentary Images of 'Indian Woman.' In *Was It Something I Wore? Dress Identity Materiality* (pp. 323–340). HSRC Press.

Moodley, N. (2013). *Culture: Politics and identity in the visual art and education of Indian South African graduates from the University of Durban-Westville in KwaZulu-Natal, 1961-1999* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Durban-Westville.

Moodley, S. G., & Moodley, A. (2020). The role of place and identity as core contributing success factors in Jayan Moodley's *Keeping up with the Kandasamys* and *Kandasamys: The Wedding*. *Journal of African* Cinemas, *12*(2–3), 229–246. https://doi.org/10.1386/jac_00038_1

Moodley-Diar, N. (2017). The spell of indophilia in the imagination of South Africa. *Nidan*, 2(2), 61–77.

Moodley-Diar, N. (2021). Integrated lives? A reading of selected photographs as a phenotype for being Indian in South Africa. *Political Integration in Indian Diaspora Societies*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092155-4

Muller, V., Dickow, H., & Harris, M. (1999). South Africa's 'Rainbow People', National pride and happiness. *Social Indicators Research, 47*(3), 245–280. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006945108139

Naidoo, R. (1997). *Beans bunny*. Enamel paint on pegboard.

Newman, L. (2021, June 9). Kandasamys got SA trippin'. *The Post*. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/NetflixSouthAfrica/videos/trippin-with-the-kandasamys-drivin-with-the-kandasamys-episode-2/851287835786846/

Newman, L. (2023, December 14). Durban fashion brand, Khanya Designs, set to take on the world, starting off with a launch event in Ballito. *The Post*. Retrieved from https://www.iol.co.za/thepost/news/durban-fashion-brand-khanya-designs-set-to-take-on-the-world-starting-off-with-a-launch-event-in-ballito-9a804e69-b624-4877-8b39-30176cfa94af

OED. (n.d.). Cultural appropriation. *OED Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved from https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=cultural%20appropriation

Oonk, G. (Ed.). (2007). *Global Indian diasporas: Exploring trajectories of migration and theory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048501069-002

Perumal, Y. (2025, February 20). New Monument commemorates Indian Indentured Labourers. *IOL News Online*. *The Post*. Retrieved from https://www.iol.co.za/thepost/community-news/new-monument-commemorates-indian-indentured-labourers-0f995314-4a55-4c0b-a6ac-9df6851abdf5

Pieterse, J. N. (2001). Hybridity, so what? *Theory, Culture & Society*, *18*(2–3). https://doi.org/10.1177/026327640101800211

Radhakrishnan, S. (2005). Time to show our true colours: The gendered politics of 'Indian-ness' in post-apartheid South Africa. *Gender and Society*, *19*(2), 200–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204272861

Rastogi, P. (2008). *Afrindian fictions: Diaspora, race and national desire in South Africa*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Ratnam, C., & Arambewela-Colley, N. (2024). Diasporic belonging in religious spaces: Insights from within the Sri Lankan diaspora. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 45(4), 722–740. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2024.2307949

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Sebastian, K. (Director). (2016). Being Indian in America: Customer service and why we are 'Paavam' [YouTube video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ulfoqB7cmQ

Sigona, N., Gamlen, A., Liberatore, G., & Kringelbach, H. N. (Eds.). (2015). *Diasporas reimagined: Spaces, practices and belonging*. Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme.

Smets, K., Vandevelde, I., & Meers, P. (2012). Diasporic film cultures from a multi-level perspective: Moroccan and Indian cinematic flows in and towards Antwerp (Belgium). *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *29*(1), 1–18.

Somduth, C. (2024, October 6). Phoenix artist under fire for AI images with Hindu deities. *The Post.* Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/postnewspaper/posts/my-idea-was-to-create-the-images-as-a-personal-tribute-to-the-various-deities-my/1056003669871460/

Soobramoney, C. (2023, December 6*).* It brings me joy to share the weave of my land with the world. *IOL News Online.* Retrieved from https://www.iol.co.za/thepost/news/it-brings-me-joy-to-share-the-weave-of-my-land-with-the-world-64553bcb-b543-409b-bf11-02b5dfbb6ec3

South African Musicians Against COVID. (n.d.). *Facebook*. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/SAMagainstCovid19/SA

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Subroyan, A. (2024, July 19). Durban designer's collection included in hotel's luxury concept store in Mauritius. *IOL News Online.* Retrieved from https://www.iol.co.za/thepost/news/durban-designers-collection-included-in-hotels-luxury-concept-store-in-mauritius-98e1e367-b077-48f6-a99e-94164a254ed5

Sunarti, L., Haghia, R. S., & Lastika Sari, N. F. (2022). The Bugis diaspora in Malaysia: A quest for cultural identity on collective memories through social media. *Cogent Arts and Humanities, 9*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2066765

Thomas, S. A. (2017, May 25). Mithu Sen: 'I constantly change my mediums so the market will not be able to trap me. *Studio International.* Retrieved from https://www.studiointernational.com/mithu-sen-interview-i-constantly-change-my-mediums-so-the-market-will-not-be-able-to-trap-me

Tolia-Kelly, D. (2001). Iconographies of identity: Visual cultures of the everyday in the South Asian diaspora. *Visual Culture in Britain, 2*(1) 49-67.

Urban Dictionary. (n.d.). Paavam. Retrieved from https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Paavam

Vally, R. (2001). *Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South Africa*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Vertovec, S., & Cohen, R. (Eds.). (1999). *Migration, diasporas and transnationalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Williams, R. (2009). The analysis of culture. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (4th ed., pp. 13–20). Harlow: Pearson.

Williamson, S. (1990). *Resistance Art in South Africa.* Cape Town: Double Storey Books.

Young, J. O. (2010). *Cultural appropriation and the arts*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

Corresponding Author: Nalini Moodley
Email: moodleydiarn@tut.ac.za

Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence

Santanu Sarkar
Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Anuradha Choudry
Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Abstract

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has played a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity by blending traditional storytelling with contemporary cinematic techniques. Recent scholarship on Indian cinema has increasingly focused on Indian identity, cultural hybridity, transnational cinema, and Bollywood's role as a vehicle of soft power in global media. Following this, the present study explores how Indian cinema negotiates the intersection of tradition, modernity, and globalization through a multidisciplinary approach that integrates classical Indian aesthetics—particularly *Rasa* Theory's emotional framework, alongside Western cinematic traditions, postcolonial discourse, and transnational cinema as a global context. Seven films—*Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960), *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001), *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), *Rustom* (Desai, 2016), Gully *Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) and *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024)—are analyzed to examine how Indian filmmakers sustain aesthetic continuity while adapting to evolving global conventions. Findings reveal that Indian cinema blends indigenous aesthetics with contemporary cinematic forms, resulting in culturally hybrid and emotionally resonant narratives. *Rasa* aesthetics shape the emotional and visual texture across all seven films, while localized Western conventions address themes of resistance, aspiration, and social justice, alongside postcolonial concerns such as nationalism, caste, and gender. Moreover, its growing global reach reflects a shift toward transnational storytelling rooted in cultural specificity. This study contributes to broader discussions on cultural hybridity, national identity, and global cinema, underscoring Indian cinema's dual role as both a preserver of tradition and a dynamic, evolving force in the international media landscape.

Keywords: Bollywood, cultural identity, globalization, Indian cinema, *Rasa* Theory, transnational cinema

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has emerged as one of India's most influential cultural exports, significantly shaping global perceptions of the country. The global film industry is often categorized into producers and earners, with the United States leading in box office revenue, followed by China and India, while Europe lags slightly behind. In 2024, the U.S. and Canada released 569 films, while China produced around 406 in 2024 (Statista, 2025). India remained a leading producer, releasing 1,823 films in 2024. International distribution also expanded, with 359 Indian films released across 38 countries, including 60 direct-to-digital releases. The OTT sector saw increased consolidation as companies aimed to scale content and strengthen technological capabilities. India's box office revenues surpassed INR 100 billion in 2024, with international theatricals contributing INR 20 billion—a 5% year-over-year growth and underscoring Bollywood's growing influence on the global entertainment landscape (Ernst & Young [EY], 2025; Ganti, 2004). Indian films are now being screened in a wide range of countries, including Japan, New Zealand, and the United States, while also expanding into emerging markets such as Peru, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Notably, some Hindi films have found greater profitability in regional Indian markets than in international sales, particularly independent and art-house productions. At the same time, Indian regional film industries such as Tamil, Bengali, and Malayalam cinema continue to play a crucial role in preserving indigenous storytelling traditions while integrating modern cinematic techniques, reinforcing Indian cinema's position as one of the most diverse and prolific film industries in the world (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014).

To better grasp the artistic and structural uniqueness of Indian cinema, it is essential to understand its deep-rooted connection to the *Natyashastra*, the ancient Indian treatise on performance arts. A central concept of this text is *Rasa* theory, which defines the aesthetic experience evoked in audiences (Bharata Muni, 2016). Derived from the word *rasa*, meaning essence or flavor, it describes how a successful dramatic performance transports the spectator into a transcendental state of enjoyment (Gupt, 2006). According to Bharata, performance is an imitation of life, where emotions must be heightened to allow audiences to fully experience pleasure and pain. The phrase *"Vibhāvanubhav-vyabhichāribhav-samyogādrasanispattih"* explains that *Rasa* emerges from a combination of determinants (*vibhāva*), consequents (*anubhāva—physical or emotional reactions triggered by vibhāva, such as weeping in response to sorrow*), and transitory emotions (*vyabhichāribhāva*) (Ghosh, 2016; Gnoli, 1968). Much like a well-prepared dish combines different ingredients to create a distinct taste, a performance blends emotions to generate a dominant mood (*sthayibhāva*). The eight classical *Rasa(s)*—शृंगाररसः (Śṛṅgāra Rasaḥ) – Romance/Love, हास्यरसः (Hāsya Rasaḥ) – Humor/Laughter, रौद्रसः (Raudra Rasaḥ) – Fury/Anger, करुणरसः (Karuṇa Rasaḥ) – Compassion/Sorrow, बीभत्सरसः (Bībhatsa Rasaḥ) – Disgust, भयानकरसः (Bhayānaka Rasaḥ) – Horror/Fear, वीररसः (Vīra Rasaḥ) – Heroism/Courage, अद्भुतरसः (Adbhuta Rasaḥ) – and Wonder/Amazement—are not just emotions but states of being that arise in the spectator (Buchta et al., 2010). Indian cinema, deeply influenced by the Natyashastra, has long reflected this emotional structuring (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy, 1980; Dudrah & Desai, 2008; Ganti, 2004; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Morcom, 2017; Pendakur, 2003; Roy, 2017; Thomas, 1995). Though initially overlooked in film studies (Dwyer & Patel, 2002), *Rasa* theory has gained increasing recognition for its

ability to explain some of Indian cinema's unique storytelling mechanisms (Booth, 2008; Jones, 2010; Massey, 1992; Mullik, 2020).

Aesthetics serve as the defining characteristic of Indian cinema, shaping its storytelling approach and cultural impact. Scholars such as Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (2014) and Vasudevan (2000) argue that Bollywood is not merely a genre or a film industry; rather, it represents a multifaceted entertainment ecosystem, influencing television, music, advertising, fashion, and digital media. While Hollywood also operates as a transmedia industry with global cultural influence, the distinction lies in how each industry is embedded within its respective historical development, cultural positioning, and industrial structure. Hollywood typically emphasizes genre purity, realism, high production values, technological innovation, and formalized global distribution systems; in contrast, Bollywood is deeply embedded in Indian cultural life, blending multiple genres and emotional tones to resonate across diverse regions and communities (Davids, 2023; Dwyer & Pinto, 2011).

However, Raghavendra (2020) and Mehta and Pandharipande (2010) continue to assert that only Hindi cinema qualifies as the dominant form of Indian popular and national cinema. Although this perspective may reflect Bollywood's historical visibility and influence, it may overlook the linguistic and cultural plurality of Indian cinema. As Somashekar and Pinto (2024) emphasize, equating Indian cinema often solely with Bollywood erases the significant contributions of other language industries—such as Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam—which have achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success, as evidenced by the global recognition of *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022) and *The Elephant Whisperers* (Gonsalves, 2022) at the 95th Academy Awards in 2023. Nevertheless, Indian cinema as a whole maintains its distinctiveness, resisting the conventional narrative structures of Western filmmaking (Thomas, 2015). Unlike mainstream Hollywood films, which are largely driven by linear plots and character arcs, Indian cinema integrates a vibrant fusion of action, humour, melodrama, and music, a format deeply rooted in traditional performance arts (Breckenridge, 1995). As Anjaria (2021) notes, Hindi cinema occupies a distinctive place in Indian cultural life, drawing from Parsi theatre, folk traditions, and epic storytelling. These elements not only reinforce a sense of "Indianness" tied to nationalist discourse but also create space for more inclusive and pluralistic representations of national identity.

However, Bollywood has historically dominated India's domestic film market, recent trends indicate a more competitive global landscape. In 2023, North America led with $9.07 billion in box office revenue, followed by China at $7.71 billion, while Japan trailed at just a fraction of both (China Daily, 2024). India, meanwhile, set a new record with ₹12,226 crore ($1.5 billion) in 2023, a 15% rise over 2022 (*The Economic Times*, Farooqui, 2024), reaffirming Bollywood's continued strong domestic presence amid global shifts. Bollywood's emotionally resonant, music-infused model has shaped various regional film industries, further diversifying Indian cinema while maintaining its core aesthetic sensibilities. Indian films seamlessly integrate music, poetry, and visual spectacle, a tradition that can be traced back to classical Sanskrit theatre and literature. The continued significance of songs as narrative devices in Hindi cinema is a direct legacy of this tradition (Lal & Nandy, 2006; Mishra, 2013). Furthermore,

Indian cinema's narrative structures and artistic philosophies often remain misunderstood by Western scholars unfamiliar with Indian philosophical traditions and aesthetics. While Western film theory is rooted in frameworks such as phenomenology, structuralism, modernism, and psychoanalysis, Indian film narratives often align with indigenous philosophical concepts that predate these theories (Murthy, 2020). Scholars such as Basham (1954) have observed the structural continuity between Sanskrit theatre and contemporary Indian cinema, drawing parallels between Kalidasa's *अभिज्ञानशाकुन्तलम् (Abhijñānaśākuntalam)* and Raj Kapoor's *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* (Kapoor, 1978).

Similarly, Indian filmmakers often engage in a hybrid cinematic approach, negotiating between Western cinematic realism and Indian aesthetic traditions (Vasudevan, 2000). For example, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) aligns with Italian neorealism, depicting everyday struggles while retaining *करुणरसः* (Karuṇa-Compassion/Sorrow) to ensure emotional resonance (Cooper, 2000; Dwyer, 2014). Likewise, Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ghatak, 1960) employs exaggerated soundscapes and fragmented storytelling to evoke *Raudra* (Fury/Anger) and *करुणरसः* (Karuṇa-Compassion/Sorrow), deviating from Western psychological realism (Vasudevan, 2000). However, contemporary Indian filmmakers, particularly those engaging with globalized cinematic formats, increasingly merge these traditions, creating a hybrid storytelling approach that warrants further scholarly investigation (Gopalan, 2019). On the other hand, Indian cinema has historically served as a medium of anti-colonial resistance, nationalist discourse, and cultural assertion. During the colonial era, early silent films such as *Raja Harishchandra* (Phalke, 1913) and *Bhakta Vidur* (Rathod, 1921) acted as allegorical critiques of British rule, embedding Hindu mythological themes within nationalist frameworks (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998).

The post-independence era witnessed a shift toward nation-building narratives, with films like *Mother India* (Mehboob, 1957) and *Do Bigha Zamin* (Ray, 1953) reinforcing socialist ideals and national unity (Chakravarty, 2011; Ingawanij, 2012). Scholars such as Prasad (1998) and Dwyer (2014) argue that Indian cinema continues to engage with nationalist and postcolonial themes, particularly in films addressing globalization, diaspora identity, and political resistance. However, there is a research gap in examining how post-2010 Indian films engage with digital colonialism, AI-driven narratives, and globalized film markets, necessitating further study (Majumdar, 2021).

The globalization of Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has positioned it as a significant tool of soft power, drawing audiences from Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Ganti, 2004). However, in catering to international markets, Bollywood has incorporated Westernized aesthetics, sometimes altering traditional Indian storytelling methods (Dudrah, 2012). Films such as *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) exemplify this shift, adopting Hollywood-style underdog narratives while retaining Indian cultural elements through music, language, and setting. In contrast, regional cinemas such as Tamil, Malayalam, and Bengali industries continue to thrive, preserving indigenous storytelling while integrating experimental filmmaking (Gooptu, 2001). Directors like Mani Ratnam, Rituparno Ghosh, and Pa Ranjith have challenged Bollywood's

hegemony by addressing local socio-political issues, caste struggles, and feminist narratives (Sengupta, 2024; Vijayan & Akshayaa, 2025). Despite extensive scholarship on Bollywood, regional cinema's evolving relationship with global media platforms remains underexplored, making it a crucial area for further study.

In a mediatized society, film analysis is crucial for understanding how cinema reflects and shapes socio-cultural structures and collective experiences. As communicative media, films are embedded within discursive practices that demand analysis beyond aesthetics, encompassing production, reception, and broader cultural contexts (Benshoff, 2015; Mikos, 2014). Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in Indian film has grown much, focusing on identity, hybridity, transnationalism, and Bollywood's role in global media. Building on this scholarship, the present study explores how Indian cinema negotiates the intersection of tradition and modernity by integrating indigenous aesthetic principles, particularly *Rasa* Theory, with global cinematic conventions. While prior research has addressed hybridity and Western influences, limited attention has been given to how cultural, social, and regional identities are preserved within transnational contexts—an area this study seeks to address. Moreover, by analyzing seven influential films through postcolonial and transnational lenses, the study offers a nuanced understanding of Indian cinema's aesthetic evolution, creative adaptability, and expanding global presence. To achieve this, the study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology, using seven films—*Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960), *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001), *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), *Rustom* (Desai, 2016) *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) and *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024)—were selected as case studies to represent diverse historical periods, thematic richness, varied storytelling approaches, critical acclaim and socio-political concerns, offering a cross-section of Indian cinema's engagement with cultural identity, aesthetic tradition, modernity, and transnational influence.

The analytical framework integrates four interrelated critical theoretical perspectives: 1) *Rasa* Theory, rooted in Bharata's *Natyashastra,* which explains how Indian cinema evokes emotional engagement through music, movement, and visual aesthetics, distinguishing it from Western realism. 2) Western cinematic traditions, particularly Hollywood's narrative structures, Italian neorealism, and European minimalism, highlighting how Indian filmmakers have adapted global storytelling conventions while maintaining indigenous aesthetics. Beyond narrative and aesthetics, 3) Postcolonial discourse explores how Indian cinema engages with nationalism, resistance, caste, gender, and socio-political critique, positioning films as a medium of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Lastly, 4) Transnational cinema examines Indian cinema's global reach, analysing its engagement with diaspora audiences, streaming platforms, and international markets while balancing cultural authenticity with global cinematic trends. Each film is examined through close textual analysis, focusing on narrative construction, aesthetic techniques, emotional resonances, and embedded socio-political themes. This multi-theoretical approach enables a layered interpretation of Indian cinema's evolution, highlighting how filmmakers negotiate traditional aesthetics and contemporary cinematic forms. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *How does Indian cinema negotiate the tension between traditional aesthetic frameworks and global*

cinematic conventions in the construction of cultural identity? The corresponding hypothesis is that Indian cinema, while influenced by global influences, continues to be rooted in indigenous aesthetic traditions and cultural values.

Theoretical Frameworks

The *Natyashastra* posits that an ideal drama should evoke multiple *rasas* (emotional essences), a principle that perhaps can explain the "*masala*" (Melodrama) nature of Indian cinema, where diverse emotions, genres, and tonal shifts coexist. Reginald Massey (1992) notes that while Bharata's dramaturgy reflected the high culture of his time, modern Indian films, driven by commercial success, mirror contemporary tastes while retaining the *Natyashastra's* core ideals. Despite *rasa* theory's foundational role, it remains underutilized in mainstream film criticism, though post-2000 scholars like Hogan (2008) and Cooper (2000) have revived interest in its relevance, arguing that Hindi cinema prioritizes affective realism—emphasizing emotions over narrative logic—unlike Hollywood's cognitive realism. Studies applying *rasa* aesthetics have examined auteurship (Cooper on Satyajit Ray), genre classification (Hogan on *Mother India* and *Bandit Queen*), and narrative impact; Gerow's *rasa dhvani* analysis of European films (Roy, 2017). Scholars such as Roy (2017) and Kudva (2019) emphasize Bollywood's continuity with the *Natyashastra*, challenging Western critiques that dismiss heightened emotions, song, and dance as excessive. Instead, they advocate for a *rasa*-centered framework to evaluate Indian cinema on its own terms. Roy examines the historical continuity of expressive acting, melodrama, and genre-blending, demonstrating their alignment with *Natyashastra* principles rather than Western cinematic realism. Similarly, Kudva analyses films like *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra, 1995), illustrating how Bollywood's storytelling reflects *rasa*-based emotional engagement. This tradition persists in *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) (*Śṛṅgāra Rasaḥ & Vīra Rasaḥ*), *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) (Karuṇa-Compassion/Sorrow), and *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), which, despite Western influences, employs *rasa* for emotional depth. Ultimately, *rasa* theory remains integral to Indian cinema's narrative style, emotional resonance, and cultural identity.

Indian cinema has also drawn structural inspiration from Western cinematic traditions, particularly Hollywood, European arthouse cinema, and Italian neorealism. While Bollywood follows a unique, episodic storytelling format with song-and-dance sequences, the rise of parallel cinema in the mid-20th century marked a shift toward realism, influenced by filmmakers like Vittorio De Sica and the French New Wave (Anjaria, 2021; Dasgupta & Clini, 2023; Mishra, 2013; Virdi, 2003). These traditions introduced linear narratives, structured character arcs, and socio-political realism to Indian cinema. The significance of this framework lies in narrative hybridization, where Indian filmmakers absorb Western storytelling techniques while retaining indigenous aesthetics. For instance, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) follows neorealist conventions such as non-professional actors and location-based cinematography but retains Indian emotional depth through करुणरसः (Karuṇa-Compassion/Sorrow). Similarly, *Lagaan* (Batra, 2001) incorporates Hollywood's sports-drama structure while weaving in postcolonial and folk storytelling traditions (Chakravarty, 2011). In contemporary cinema,

Gully Boy (Akhtar, 2019) merges the Hollywood underdog narrative *8 Mile* (Curtis, 2002) with Indian socio-political realities, demonstrating Bollywood's evolving global appeal. Rather than a process of Westernization, this framework highlights aesthetic negotiation, where Indian cinema selectively incorporates global influences without erasing cultural specificity.

Postcolonial discourse provides a socio-political lens to examine Indian cinema's role in shaping national identity, resisting cultural imperialism, and reflecting post-independence struggles. As a former British colony, India's cinematic history has been deeply influenced by colonial censorship, nationalist movements, and post-independence nation-building (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Langah & Sengupta, 2021). This framework is crucial for tracing the evolution of Indian cinema from colonial subjugation to postcolonial assertion. Early films such as *Raja Harishchandra* (Phalke, 1913) used Hindu mythology as an allegory of resistance against British rule, while *Mother India* (Mehboob, 1957) reinforced nationalist resilience and sacrifice (Prasad, 1998). Parallel cinema, in contrast, critiqued socio-political realities, as seen in *Jana Aranya* (Ray, 1976), which exposed post-independence corruption, and *Kaala* (2018), which reclaimed Dalit identity through subaltern resistance (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2022**;** Raghavendra, 2020; Sengupta, 2024). Postcolonial themes continue to shape contemporary Indian cinema, particularly in response to globalization, cultural hybridity, and neo-colonial economic structures. Films like *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) reinterpret colonial oppression through cricket, transforming an imperial sport into a symbol of indigenous empowerment (Dwyer, 2014), while *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) reframes urban marginalization through globalized hip-hop culture. This framework reinforces Indian cinema's role as a medium of historical reflection, social critique, and identity politics.

Transnational cinema explores how films operate beyond national borders through globalization, diasporic networks, international festivals, and digital platforms. Traditionally catering to domestic and diaspora audiences, Indian cinema has undergone a major shift with the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar, enabling filmmakers to reach wider global audiences (Chatterji & Washbrook, 2013; Ganti, 2004; Gehlawat, 2015; Menon, 2024). This shift marks the transition from a national to a transnational cinematic identity. While transnational cinema is often associated with cultural exchange and hybridity, Higbee and Lim (2010) argue for a "critical transnationalism" that views it as a space where power, identity, and cultural negotiation converge—an approach especially relevant to Indian cinema, which maintains strong cultural specificity while engaging global audiences.

The growing presence of Indian films at international festivals signals their increasing integration into global cinema discourse. *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), which was screened at Cannes Critics' Week, exemplifies how Indian independent cinema engages with global arthouse aesthetics (Dwyer, 2014), while *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022) demonstrated that Indian films can integrate Hollywood action tropes while maintaining mythological storytelling traditions (Menon, 2024). However, globalization has raised concerns about the dilution of Indian storytelling traditions. Some scholars argue that Bollywood's growing reliance on Westernized narratives and big-budget spectacles threatens its indigenous aesthetics (Dudrah,

2012). Conversely, regional cinema has leveraged global platforms to assert linguistic and cultural diversity, evident in the global success of Tamil, Malayalam, and Marathi films on streaming services (Shohat & Stam, 2014; Vijayan & Akshayaa, 2025). This framework highlights the dual nature of globalization—as both an opportunity for cultural exchange and a challenge to cinematic authenticity. Rather than merely adapting to Western frameworks, Indian cinema has emerged as an active force in global storytelling, demonstrating its ability to adapt, hybridize, and innovate within a transnational media economy.

Integrating these four theoretical frameworks, this study provides a comprehensive approach to understanding Indian cinema's artistic continuity, structural hybridity, political significance, and expanding global impact. Examining Indian cinema through these perspectives allows for a deeper appreciation of its complexities, ensuring it is recognized not just as an entertainment industry but as a cultural force shaping national and international narratives. The following discussion will explore these aspects in detail through case studies of seven selected films. Each case study highlights a distinct phase in Indian cinema's evolution, demonstrating how filmmakers integrate Natyashastra principles, Western cinematic influences, postcolonial narratives, and transnational storytelling to craft a cinematic language that is both culturally rooted and globally resonant.

Mughal-e-Azam (1960): Classical Indian Aesthetics and *Rasa* Theory

K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) remains a quintessential example of Indian cinematic grandeur, showcasing the enduring influence of Natyashastra aesthetics and *Rasa* Theory in mainstream Indian cinema. As a historical romance set in the Mughal era, the film revolves around Prince Salim's love for the courtesan Anarkali and the ensuing power struggle between love and imperial duty. Its visual opulence, poetic dialogues, and meticulously composed frames recall Indian classical theatre and miniature painting traditions, reinforcing Bharata's emphasis on the performative nature of storytelling (Rangacharya, 2005). Unlike Western historical dramas, which often prioritize psychological realism and character-driven arcs, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) embraces a distinctly Indian aesthetic vocabulary, where performance, spectacle, and heightened emotion become primary modes of cinematic engagement (Dwyer, 2014). The grandeur of the film is not merely an aesthetic choice but a narrative device that enhances its emotional and philosophical dimensions, aligning with Indian traditions of *rasa*-based storytelling. One of the most defining aspects of *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) is its masterful use of *Rasa* theory to evoke deep emotional engagement from the audience. *शृङ्गाररसः (Śṛṅgāra* (Romance/Love) is at the heart of the narrative, embodied in the passionate yet forbidden love between Salim and Anarkali. Their love is accentuated through soulful gazes, poetic dialogues, and expressive Kathak dance performances, all of which align with Bharata's notion of *Śṛṅgārarasa* (Romane/Love) as an aesthetic experience that transcends mere romance to evoke a profound emotional response in the viewer (Bharata Muni, trans. Ghosh, 2016). The song "*Pyar Kiya Toh Darna Kya",* translated as "We have loved so why fear" is a striking example of how the film integrates visual spectacle, music, and movement to amplify *rasa*. In this sequence, Anarkali's defiant stance against royal authority

is not just conveyed through lyrics but also through her body language, eye movements, and spatial positioning within the grand Sheesh Mahal (Palace of Glass) set, where reflections multiply her presence, symbolizing the defiance of an individual against an empire (Vasudevan, 2000). This moment exemplifies *Rasa* Theory's emphasis on theatrical immersion and sensory engagement, where emotions are not merely felt but viscerally experienced by the audience. On the other hand, *वीररसः* (*Vīra*-Heroism/Courage) manifests in the ideological conflict between Emperor Akbar and his son Salim, where imperial duty clashes with personal desire. Akbar embodies the stoic, authoritative ruler, his measured speech and unwavering expressions reinforcing his unyielding commitment to statecraft, whereas Salim, driven by love and rebellion, counters his father's rigidity with fiery dialogues and emotional intensity (Chakravarty, 2011). The confrontations between father and son serve not only as moments of heightened drama but also as philosophical debates on individual agency, love as defiance, and the moral authority of the ruler, themes that resonated deeply with post-independence India's struggles with tradition and modernity (Prasad, 1998). Unlike Hollywood historical epics of the time, which relied on realist acting and psychological depth, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) amplifies emotional intensity through exaggerated facial expressions, stylized dialogues, and symbolic gestures, reinforcing its theatrical origins and rootedness in Indian classical aesthetics (Dwyer, 2014).

Beyond its performance and narrative structure, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) also demonstrates a sophisticated use of cinematic technology to enhance *rasa*-based storytelling. While much of the film remains in black and white, key moments—particularly the *Śṛṅgārarasa*-infused love sequences—are rendered in Technicolor, a strategic aesthetic choice that heightens emotional impact (Virdi, 2003). The transition between monochrome and colour cinematography mirrors the shifting emotional tones, symbolizing moments of dreamlike romance in contrast to the stark realities of imperial power. This visual innovation can be seen as a continuation of Indian miniature painting traditions, where colour played a crucial role in depicting emotional intensity and thematic contrasts (Gopal & Moorti, 2008). Walia (2014) further suggests that the film's digital colorization enhanced its visual grandeur while reconfiguring its historical aura, positioning *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) as a hybrid cultural artefact that bridges analogue cinematic tradition with contemporary digital aesthetics.

Moreover, the film's aural landscape reinforces its engagement with classical Indian aesthetics. The dialogues, written in highly stylized Urdu, imbue the film with poetic gravitas, making conversations feel like lyrical recitations rather than conventional exchanges (Ganti, 2004). The use of Hindustani classical music, particularly the compositions of Naushad, reflects the mood-based structuring of traditional Indian ragas, where melodies are carefully selected to align with the dominant *rasa* of a given scene (Menon, 2024). The film's use of silence, particularly in moments of deep emotional turmoil, further emphasizes the impact of *अभिनयः (Abhinayaḥ*-Dramatic representation, allowing gestures, facial expressions, and musical cues to convey unspoken emotions (Lutgendorf, 2006). This may contrast with Western method acting, which, following Stanislavski, emphasizes the actor's empathetic immersion and identification, whereas *Abhinayaḥ* (Dramatic representation) relies on aesthetic distance and

controlled expression to evoke *rasa* without personally experiencing the emotion (Cuneo & Ganser, 2022).

Another critical aspect of *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) is its political and cultural significance in postcolonial India. Released in 1960, a period marked by Nehruvian socialism and efforts to forge a unified national identity, the film's celebration of Mughal history was both an act of historical reclamation and a subtle assertion of India's composite cultural heritage. At a time when Hindu nationalist discourse sought to marginalize India's Indo-Islamic past, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) presented the Mughal court as a site of grandeur, discipline, and philosophical depth, countering reductionist narratives of Muslim rulers as tyrants (Chatterjee, 2012). The film's nuanced portrayal of Emperor Akbar as a just but rigid ruler, alongside its emphasis on Persianate aesthetics, Urdu poetry, and Islamic architectural grandeur, reinforced a vision of India as an inclusive civilization that had historically integrated diverse cultural influences (Vasudevan, 2000). Despite its historical and cultural specificity, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) continues to resonate with contemporary audiences, not merely as a relic of classical Bollywood but as a template for cinematic storytelling that balances tradition with innovation. Its influence can be seen in films such as *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, 2008), which adopts similar visual and thematic tropes while infusing a more contemporary sensibility to historical storytelling. Even in contemporary Bollywood's globalized cinematic landscape, where Westernized storytelling structures dominate, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) remains an example of how Indian filmmakers can integrate traditional performance aesthetics with modern cinematic techniques without losing their cultural specificity (Ganti, 2004). Ultimately, *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) exemplifies how Indian cinema preserves classical aesthetic traditions while embracing technological advancements and changing audience expectations. Through its elaborate mise-en-scène, masterful use of *Rasa* Theory, and integration of music, performance, and spectacle, the film represents the pinnacle of Indian cinematic artistry, reinforcing the idea that cinema, much like classical Indian drama, is not merely a vehicle for storytelling but an immersive, emotionally charged experience that transcends time and cultural shifts.

Pather Panchali (1955): Realism and the Hybridization of Indian Aesthetics

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) represents a radical departure from the melodramatic and spectacle-driven aesthetics of Bollywood, opting instead for a neorealist storytelling approach influenced by Italian filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini (Vasudevan, 2000). Unlike mainstream Indian cinema, which integrates song-and-dance sequences, exaggerated dramatic arcs, and larger-than-life characters, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) focuses on the small, intimate moments of everyday life, portraying the struggles, joys, and tragedies of a poor Bengali family with stark realism. The film's minimalist aesthetic and observational style redefine Indian cinematic language by placing emotional authenticity over theatricality, an approach that significantly contrasts with Bollywood's reliance on heightened sentimentality and spectacle. However, while the film is deeply influenced by Western cinematic realism, it does not entirely abandon Indian aesthetic sensibilities. Instead, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) embodies a hybrid cinematic form, incorporating elements of

Natyashastra and *Rasa* Theory, which structure the film's emotional engagement (Dwyer, 2014).

The dominant emotional tone of the film is करुणरसः (*Karuṇa*-Compassion/Sorrow), a core element of Indian dramatic theory, which evokes compassion, sorrow, and the beauty of suffering. This *rasa* is carefully woven into the childhood innocence of Apu and Durga, the quiet endurance of their mother Sarbajaya, and the omnipresent realities of poverty and displacement. Ray masterfully creates a poetic contrast between moments of joy and inevitable tragedy, reinforcing the Natyashastra's emphasis on emotional contrast and heightened dramatic impact (Chakravarty, 2011; Cooper, 2000; Mason, 2006). One of the most poignant scenes in the film—where Apu and Durga dance gleefully in the monsoon rain—initially conveys a sense of freedom, playfulness, and wonder, yet simultaneously foreshadows the fragility of their existence and the impending sorrow of Durga's untimely death (Vasudevan, 2000). The juxtaposition of nature's abundance with human fragility reflects a deeply Indian aesthetic sensibility, which, while framed through Western cinematic realism, remains rooted in traditional modes of storytelling. This ability to seamlessly blend realism with poetic emotional depth is what distinguishes *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) as a landmark in Indian cinema. Furthermore, Landy (2010) highlights the film's lyrical, humanist approach and its ability to capture transience, cultural memory, and social change through minimalist aesthetics and emotional subtlety, positioning it as a cinematic response to post-Independence India's evolving national identity.

Ray's rejection of Bollywood's studio-controlled aesthetics in favor of spontaneous, location-based compositions further enhances the film's naturalistic authenticity. Inspired by Italian neorealism's emphasis on non-professional actors, handheld camerawork, and real locations, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) captures the textures of rural Bengal with an unfiltered, documentary-like immediacy (Ganti, 2004). By choosing real village settings over artificially constructed sets, Ray eliminates the artifice of commercial cinema, creating a world that breathes with organic detail. The film's cinematographer, Subrata Mitra, pioneered the use of natural light and soft-focus cinematography, lending the visuals a lyrical, painterly quality while maintaining a raw sense of realism (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014). This aesthetic choice not only reinforces the film's commitment to authenticity but also marks a pivotal shift in Indian cinematic technique, influencing future directors who sought to break away from formulaic, studio-driven filmmaking. In its narrative structure, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) departs from the cause-and-effect logic of Western storytelling, instead embracing an episodic, fluid form that mirrors the rhythms of life itself. There is no clear protagonist or singular dramatic arc; rather, the film is a series of loosely connected moments that accumulate emotional weight over time. This narrative form aligns with Indian oral storytelling traditions, where events unfold gradually, emotions take precedence over action, and stories flow organically rather than adhering to strict structural conventions (Gopal & Moorti, 2008). In this way, Ray's film resists both Hollywood's three-act structure and Bollywood's spectacle-driven melodrama, forging a distinctly Indian yet universally resonant mode of storytelling.

While *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) is often celebrated for its departure from commercial Bollywood norms, it also serves as a challenge to the notion that Indian cinema is defined solely by Bollywood's extravagant style. Ray's work opened up space for parallel cinema, a movement that prioritized subtlety, realism, and socio-political consciousness over escapist entertainment (Virdi, 2003). The success of the film—both critically and internationally—demonstrated that Indian cinema could operate on multiple aesthetic registers, engaging with both local traditions and global cinematic movements without losing its cultural distinctiveness. Moreover, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) paved the way for future filmmakers such as Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and Shyam Benegal, who expanded on Ray's socio-realist approach, using cinema as a means of political critique and cultural reflection (Vasudevan, 2000). Despite its alignment with Western neorealist techniques, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) remains profoundly Indian in its spiritual and philosophical undertones. The film's quiet meditation on life, impermanence, and human suffering echoes themes found in Indian classical literature and aesthetics, particularly in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's 1929 Bengali novel *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), from which the film is adapted (Majumdar, 2021). The depiction of human resilience amid suffering, the reverence for nature as both nurturing and indifferent, and the emphasis on cyclical time rather than linear progress are deeply embedded in Indian philosophical traditions, particularly within Hindu and Buddhist worldviews (Kītā & Rājaturai, 1998). In this way, Ray's film, while borrowing Western cinematic language, ultimately tells an Indian story in an Indian way, proving that realism need not be synonymous with Westernization. In the broader discourse on Indian cinema, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) stands as a landmark of aesthetic hybridization, demonstrating that Indian filmmakers could simultaneously engage with international film movements while retaining indigenous storytelling traditions. This balance between local and global influences continues to shape contemporary Indian cinema, where filmmakers such as Ritesh Batra (*The Lunchbox,* 2013), Nagraj Manjule (*Fandry,* 2013), and Chaitanya Tamhane (*Court,* 2014) draw inspiration from both Ray's realism and indigenous narrative forms to create cinema that is at once intimate, political, and culturally rooted. *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) thus remains a timeless example of how Indian cinema can bridge artistic traditions, resist mainstream conventions, and offer a deeply humanistic vision that resonates across cultures and generations.

Lagaan (2001): Postcolonial Resistance and Transnational Appeal

Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) was another a landmark in Indian cinema, blending historical narratives with global storytelling structures to create a film that resonates both domestically and internationally. Set during British colonial rule, the film follows a group of villagers in Champa (Central India) who challenge their British oppressors in a high-stakes cricket match, transforming the sport—an imperial import—into a symbol of anti-colonial resistance (Prasad, 1998). The film's narrative structure simultaneously reflects postcolonial resistance, Indian folk traditions, and Hollywood-style sports drama, making it a unique fusion of indigenous storytelling and global cinematic techniques. While the film primarily speaks to Indian nationalist sentiment, it also engages with transnational audiences, carefully negotiating between local authenticity and global accessibility (Dwyer, 2014). This balance contributed to

its global success, making it one of the few Indian films to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film, reinforcing the idea that Indian cinema can engage with global audiences without losing its cultural specificity (Ganti, 2004).

The postcolonial resistance in *Lagaan* is evident in its portrayal of वीररसः (*Vīra* (Heroism/Courage) and करुणरसः *(Karuṇa*-Compassion/Sorrow, both of which structure the emotional engagement of the film. The villagers, despite their socio-economic hardships, caste divides, and subjugation under colonial rule, unite against the British exploiters, transforming the game of cricket from a symbol of imperial hegemony into a tool of liberation (Chakravarty, 2011). The use of वीररसः *(Vīra* Heroism/Courage) is particularly striking in the character of Bhuvan (played by Aamir Khan), who embodies the ideal of the fearless, resilient leader, echoing the archetypal Indian warrior figures from epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana (Rangacharya, 2005). Bhuvan's strategic thinking, moral conviction, and ability to inspire unity among disparate social groups reinforce the film's nationalist undertones, positioning him as a postcolonial hero who challenges British superiority through intelligence, teamwork, and an assertion of indigenous agency. The करुणरसः *(Karuṇa*-Compassion/Sorrow), on the other hand, is evident in the villagers' suffering, highlighting the exploitative nature of British taxation policies, the brutality of colonial governance, and the deep inequalities of rural Indian life (Virdi, 2003). These emotional elements make *Lagaan* more than just a sports drama—it becomes a historical parable of resistance, echoing both Gandhian ideals of non-violent defiance and postcolonial struggles for cultural and political sovereignty.

While *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) is deeply rooted in Indian history and nationalist discourse, it also strategically employs Hollywood-style sports drama conventions, which contribute to its global appeal. The film follows a classical three-act structure, incorporating training montages, character-driven subplots, and a climactic underdog victory, aligning with the narrative structures commonly seen in Hollywood sports films such as *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976) and *Remember the Titans* (Yakin, 2000) (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). This hybridization of Indian and Western storytelling ensures that *Lagaan* is accessible to international audiences, who can recognize familiar genre tropes while being introduced to Indian historical and cultural contexts. The film's use of English-speaking British characters, particularly Captain Russell (played by Paul Blackthorne), allows for a more fluid narrative transition between colonial and indigenous perspectives, further bridging local and global cinematic traditions. Additionally, the panoramic cinematography of rural India, executed by Anil Mehta, provides an epic visual scope, reminiscent of classic Hollywood period dramas, reinforcing its grand, transnational cinematic appeal (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014).

A crucial factor in *Lagaan*'s (Gowariker, 2001) global success was its deliberate positioning as an "Indian film for the world", which aligns with transnational cinema theory. Unlike many Bollywood productions, which cater primarily to domestic and diasporic Indian audiences, *Lagaan* was designed to reach a wider global market, reflected in its multilingual elements, hybrid storytelling approach, and meticulous attention to historical authenticity (Dudrah, 2012). This positioning was not incidental but a conscious strategy to ensure the film's success

on the international festival circuit, particularly at Cannes and the Academy Awards, where it was shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Film (Ganti, 2004). By aligning with both Indian and Western cinematic traditions, the film created a new blueprint for how Indian cinema could engage with global audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Despite its broad accessibility, *Lagaan* has also been critiqued for its idealized representation of Indian unity, which some scholars argue sanitizes the complexities of caste, gender, and internal social hierarchies within Indian society (Chakravarty, 2011). The film presents a utopian vision of rural India, where caste divisions are temporarily set aside for the greater good, reinforcing a simplified nationalist narrative rather than a nuanced critique of India's own internal struggles (Vasudevan, 2000). The presence of Elizabeth Russell (played by Rachel Shelley), a British woman who sympathizes with the Indian cause, further complicates the film's postcolonial stance, as some scholars argue that her role serves to soften British culpability, presenting colonial figures in a more humanized light rather than as outright oppressors (Shohat & Stam, 2014). However, these critiques do not diminish the film's impact; rather, they highlight the ongoing debates within postcolonial cinematic discourse about how nationalist narratives should be framed within global film industries. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) also raises important questions about the globalization of Indian cinema and its role in transnational storytelling. The film's success demonstrated that Indian historical narratives could be repackaged for international consumption, a trend that has continued with films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008) and *RRR* (Rajamouli, 2022), both of which use Western cinematic techniques while foregrounding distinctly Indian themes. In doing so, *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) paved the way for a new genre of Indian cinema that balances local storytelling with global accessibility, influencing subsequent historical epics and sports dramas that adopt a similar transnational aesthetic. Karmakar and Catterall (2025) similarly position *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) within a broader shift in Hindi cinema—from inclusive, anti-colonial storytelling to more assertive nationalist themes—arguing that Bollywood has long served as a space for both constructing and contesting national identity in response to shifting socio-political dynamics. Ultimately, *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) serves as a powerful example of how Indian cinema can negotiate between tradition and modernity, history and entertainment, nationalism and transnational appeal. By combining postcolonial resistance with Western cinematic conventions, it offers a compelling case study in aesthetic and ideological hybridization, proving that Indian filmmakers can reclaim historical narratives while engaging with global cinematic frameworks. Its enduring legacy lies in its ability to speak simultaneously to Indian nationalist sentiments and international cinematic sensibilities, making it a film that continues to resonate across multiple cultural and historical contexts.

The Lunchbox (2013): Minimalism, Globalization, and Indian Emotionality

Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) also represents a significant departure from mainstream Bollywood, embracing a minimalist, contemplative narrative style that aligns more closely with European arthouse sensibilities than with the melodramatic and spectacle-driven traditions of commercial Indian cinema. The film's restrained storytelling, its reliance on unspoken emotions, and its meticulous attention to everyday details demonstrate a shift in

Indian cinema's engagement with globalized, intimate narratives. Unlike conventional Bollywood romances, which often rely on elaborate song sequences, exaggerated expressions, and grand romantic gestures, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) builds its emotional depth through subtle glances, handwritten letters, and daily rituals, crafting an intensely personal yet universally resonant cinematic experience (Dwyer, 2014). By prioritizing understated performances and naturalistic dialogue, the film moves beyond Bollywood's theatrical traditions, signaling the rise of independent Indian cinema on the global stage. At the heart of *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) is its use of food as a metaphor for longing, nostalgia, and human connection, an element deeply embedded in Indian cultural and cinematic traditions. The premise of the film—where an accidental mix-up in Mumbai's famously efficient *dabbawala* lunchbox delivery system sparks an unlikely epistolary romance—serves as both a narrative device and a symbolic reflection on urban loneliness and longing (Majumdar, 2021). The preparation, delivery, and consumption of food in the film operate as a means of emotional expression, reflecting unspoken desires, disappointments, and small joys (Ganti, 2004). Ila (played by Nimrat Kaur), a neglected housewife, infuses her cooking with care and affection, attempting to revive her failing marriage, but when her food mistakenly reaches Saajan Fernandes (Irrfan Khan), a lonely widower on the brink of retirement, a silent yet profound bond begins to develop between them. This interplay between domestic rituals and emotional intimacy echoes Indian cultural traditions, where food is not merely sustenance but an expression of love, memory, and relationships. The film's reliance on visual storytelling and sensory engagement resonates with Indian aesthetic philosophy, particularly *Rasa* Theory, wherein *Śṛṅgārarasaḥ* (romantic longing) and करुणरसः (*Karuṇa*-Compassion/Sorrow) dominate the emotional landscape. Despite its deep roots in Indian traditions of emotional storytelling, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) is also emblematic of Indian cinema's growing engagement with transnational narratives, marking a shift away from the commercially driven, spectacle-heavy model of Bollywood filmmaking (Dudrah, 2012). The film's narrative structure, characterized by slow pacing, lingering silences, and minimal dialogue, bears similarities to European cinematic traditions, particularly the works of French and Italian neorealist directors, as well as the Japanese aesthetics of Yasujiro Ozu, who similarly explored quiet moments of human connection amidst the chaos of everyday life. Batra's direction places emphasis on subtle, interior performances, using muted color palettes, natural lighting, and unobtrusive camerawork to enhance the film's introspective quality. This cinematic approach distances *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) from Bollywood's hyper-expressive style, reinforcing its alignment with global arthouse sensibilities (Gopal & Moorti, 2008).

The film's global reception and success at international film festivals, including its screening at Cannes Critics' Week, further underscore Indian cinema's evolving participation in transnational film discourse. Unlike many Bollywood films that cater to diasporic nostalgia or domestic mass appeal, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) found an audience among international cinephiles, critics, and festival-goers who appreciated its nuanced storytelling and cross-cultural accessibility (Dwyer, 2014). Its recognition also reflects the growing space for independent Indian filmmakers in global cinema, challenging the notion that Bollywood is the sole representation of Indian filmmaking. By moving away from musical interludes, high

melodrama, and formulaic storytelling, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) aligns itself with a new wave of Indian cinema that prioritizes subtlety, realism, and universal themes, engaging with the emotional complexities of modern urban existence. Through the quiet exchange of lunchbox notes between Ila and Saajan, the film explores urban loneliness, emotional disconnection, and personal transformation. Its minimal dialogue, ambient sound, and subtle performances reflect a shift toward global arthouse aesthetics and universal storytelling.

The themes of isolation, missed connections, and existential yearning explored in *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) also speak to larger socio-cultural anxieties in contemporary India, particularly regarding urban alienation, shifting gender roles, and the erosion of traditional social structures (Vasudevan, 2000). The film critiques modern life's mechanical routines, showing how Saajan's bureaucratic job, Ila's monotonous domesticity, and even the hyper-efficient *dabbawala* system become metaphors for the disconnect experienced by individuals in a rapidly changing society (Chakravarty, 2011). Unlike conventional Bollywood films, which often romanticize urbanization and modernity, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) subtly critiques the emotional emptiness that accompanies economic progress, portraying a city where millions live in close proximity yet remain emotionally distant. This thematic engagement with urban loneliness, nostalgia, and unfulfilled longing positions the film within a broader global trend of minimalist, character-driven storytelling that transcends national boundaries. Moreover, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) challenges traditional gender roles in Indian cinema, particularly through the character of Ila, who, unlike many Bollywood heroines, is not defined by her relationship to a male protagonist but by her own quiet journey of self-discovery. While she initially seeks validation through her husband's affection, the film gradually portrays her growing sense of agency, culminating in her decision to leave Mumbai in search of a new life (Ganti, 2004). This portrayal aligns with a broader shift in Bollywood, where women are increasingly depicted as active agents of change. As Yadav and Jha (2023) argue, recent Bollywood films have begun to reposition women as agents of transformation rather than passive figures, highlighting a significant cultural shift in gender representation. Similar representations of female subjectivity appear in independent films like Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (Shrivastava, 2016) and Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* (Tamhane, 2014), which explore the subtle ways in which women navigate societal constraints and personal aspirations (Menon, 2024). By integrating elements of *Rasa* Theory, neorealism, and transnational cinematic aesthetics, *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) successfully bridges local storytelling traditions with global cinematic trends, proving that Indian cinema can thrive beyond the Bollywood paradigm. The film's success demonstrates that Indian filmmakers need not rely on spectacle or formulaic narratives to engage international audiences, but can instead find new modes of storytelling that emphasize quiet emotions, everyday interactions, and deeply personal experiences. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, films like *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013) pave the way for a more diverse and globally relevant cinematic landscape, proving that the essence of Indian storytelling can flourish in intimate, minimalist narratives just as powerfully as in epic, grand spectacles.

Rustom (2016): Navigating Betrayal, Law, and Nationhood

Rustom (Desai, 2016), directed by Tinu Suresh Desai, tells the story of a naval officer whose life becomes a legal and moral battle after he discovers his wife's disloyalty, betrayal and commits murder. Set in post-independence India, the film delves into themes of loyalty, justice, emotional conflict, and national integrity. The film weaves together multiple *rasas—vīra* (Heroism/Courage), *karuṇa* (compassion/Sorrow), *Raudra* (Anger), *Śṛṅgāra* (Romantic/Love) and *Hāsya rasa* (Humor/Laughter)—creating a layered emotional narrative that aligns with classical Indian aesthetic principles. The dominant *vīra rasa* (Heroism/Courage) is embodied in the protagonist Commander Rustom's dignified resolve, moral courage, and refusal to compromise his integrity, even as he faces a murder trial. His commitment to personal and national duty reflects the archetype of the righteous hero. *Karuṇa rasa* (Romantic/Love) unfolds through Cynthia's remorse and emotional vulnerability, reflecting compassion as the couple navigates betrayal and reconciliation. *Raudra rasa* (Anger) delves into Rustom's measured yet intense anger, particularly in his reaction to Vikram's betrayal and corruption, framed as a righteous and disciplined response rather than uncontrolled rage. On the other hand, *śṛṅgāra rasa* (Romantic/Love) is subtly expressed in the affectionate bond between Rustom and Cynthia, which, though strained, is ultimately reaffirmed through forgiveness and emotional reconnection. Furthermore, the *Bhayānaka rasa* (Fear) is evoked through the film's pervasive atmosphere of tension and unease, reflected in the uncertainty of Rustom's trial, the threat of institutional scandal, and Cynthia's psychological distress. It reaches its peak during the murder scene, where Rustom's quiet intrusion, the abrupt gunshots, and the servant's horrified discovery of Vikram's body create a profound sense of fear, not merely of the violence itself, but of its ethical, emotional, and legal implications. Although the film is primarily a courtroom drama, it integrates *hāsya rasa* (Humor/Laughter) through satirical media portrayals, witty courtroom exchanges, and humorous side characters, using comic relief to critique the performative nature of justice, heroism, and public spectacle.

The protagonist, Commander Rustom Pavri, embodies the postcolonial subject who negotiates loyalty to the nation-state while confronting corruption embedded in institutions shaped by the colonial legacy. His moral stand against bribery and systemic decay aligns with what Partha Chatterjee (1993) describes as the postcolonial tension between national sovereignty and inherited colonial frameworks of governance. The film critiques the comprador elite—figures like Vikram Makhija and Rear Admiral Kamath (film's characters)—who exemplify Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry, imitating colonial authority for personal gain while destabilizing national integrity. This mirrors similar dynamics in *Madras Café* (Shoojit, 2013), where internal betrayal and political manipulation reflect neocolonial entanglements. Rustom's resistance, framed as a patriotic and ethical stance, serves as a counter-narrative to such disillusionment, akin to the moral complexity explored in *Raazi* (Gulzar, 2018), where personal sacrifice intersects with national duty. Moreover, the courtroom drama, structured around a jury system modeled on British legal tradition, highlights India's ongoing entanglement with colonial legal structures. This resonates with Upendra Baxi's (1982) critique of legal colonialism and is echoed in *Court* (Tamhane, 2014), which exposes the alienating and archaic nature of Indian judicial systems derived from colonial rule.

Rustom (Desai, 2016) strategically employs Western cinematic conventions, particularly those of courtroom drama, the anti-hero archetype, and noir aesthetics, to frame its narrative of personal betrayal and institutional corruption within a globally recognizable form. The film follows a classical three-act structure—exposition, confrontation, and resolution—rooted in Aristotelian narrative theory (Chatman, 1978), which is a staple in Western cinematic storytelling. Its courtroom scenes, centred around moral debates rather than procedural accuracy, resemble Anglo-American legal dramas such as *12 Angry Men* (Lumet, 1957) and *A Few Good Men* (Reiner, 1992), where truth is revealed through rhetorical confrontation and character-driven revelations. The film also adopts noir stylistics—emotional restraint, flashbacks, suspenseful pacing, and a shadowy visual palette—that evoke classic Western thriller techniques (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). In doing so, the film demonstrates how Bollywood can appropriate and indigenize Western narrative models to tell distinctly Indian stories.

Within a transnational lens, *Rustom* (Desai, 2016) operates not merely as a crime thriller but as a vehicle for reaffirming idealized notions of nationalism and institutional integrity at a time when India's global identity is increasingly mediated through its cultural exports. The protagonist, Commander Rustom Pavri, is emblematic of the disciplined, incorruptible national subject—his naval uniform, integrity, and self-sacrifice reinforcing the symbolic power of the Indian armed forces within a postcolonial nation-building narrative. The film's historical setting (1959 Bombay) and the inclusion of English dialogues, military protocols, and geopolitical concerns (such as naval procurement) further delves it within a global imaginary that transcends national borders. However, *Rustom* (Desai, 2016) also indulges in nationalist myth-making, ultimately justifying extra-legal action under the guise of patriotism and emotional righteousness. In doing so, it aligns with a broader trend in Indian popular cinema that blends indigenous narrative forms (like melodrama and *Rasa* aesthetics) with global cinematic styles to produce a hybrid narrative form. Regarding accolades, *Rustom* earned significant recognition; at the 64th National Film Awards, Akshay Kumar received the Best Actor award for his portrayal of Commander Rustom Pavri. The film also achieved commercial success, grossing over ₹218 crore worldwide. Additionally, it won a Silver Lotus Award for Best Actor (Akshay Kumar) and a Bollywood Business Award for the 100 Crore Club. It also won a Lions Gold Award for Best Film. These accolades underscore the film's impact both critically and commercially.

Gully Boy (2019): Bollywood's Engagement with Global Youth Cultures

Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) exemplifies Bollywood's increasing engagement with globalized youth subcultures, particularly through its integration of hip-hop music, urban narratives, and Hollywood-inspired underdog storytelling. Loosely inspired by the lives of Mumbai-based rappers Divine and Naezy, the film functions as both a coming-of-age story and a social critique, blending Indian cinematic traditions with Hollywood's *rags-to-riches* formula, akin to films such as *8 Mile* (Curtis, 2002). While the film's structure and character arcs align with global cinematic conventions, its dialogue, socio-political commentary, and use of Hindi-Urdu rap firmly root it within Indian cultural realities (Ganti, 2004). This interplay

between local authenticity and transnational aesthetics allows *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) to transcend the boundaries of conventional Bollywood storytelling, making it a case study in how Indian cinema is evolving to engage with global youth cultures. At its core, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) employs *वीरसः* (*Vīra*-Heroism/Courage) and *Raudra* (Fury/Anger) to construct a gritty, socially conscious portrayal of class struggle, youth aspirations, and artistic rebellion. The protagonist, Murad (played by Ranveer Singh), embodies the quintessential underdog, navigating economic hardship, family oppression, and societal constraints, yet finding an outlet for self-expression and defiance through rap music. The film's use of *Raudra* (Fury/Anger), particularly in Murad's confrontations with his abusive father, systemic inequalities, and his own internalized fears, serves as a catalyst for his artistic and personal transformation (Chakravarty, 2011). His ability to channel anger and frustration into creative expression mirrors the origins of hip-hop as a form of resistance, linking Mumbai's underground rap movement with global traditions of musical activism (Dudrah, 2012). At the same time, *वीरसः* (*Vīra*-Heroism/Courage) *manifests* in Murad's journey from a disempowered slum resident to an empowered artist, reinforcing Bollywood's enduring fascination with aspirational narratives of self-actualization and triumph over adversity (Dwyer, 2014). Unlike traditional Bollywood musicals, where song-and-dance sequences serve as diversions from the narrative, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) integrates music as a primary storytelling device, using rap as a form of social commentary and self-expression. Tracks like *Apna Time Aayega* and *Mere Gully Mein* ('Our time has come' and 'in my gully/lane) are not merely entertainment interludes but are deeply embedded in the film's thematic concerns of class conflict, ambition, and the search for identity (Menon, 2024). This shift toward diegetic musical storytelling, where songs emerge organically from the characters' realities, signals Bollywood's increasing alignment with global filmmaking trends, particularly in the way it merges narrative and musical elements without disrupting cinematic realism. By placing rap music at the center of Murad's journey, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) departs from Bollywood's traditional, often escapist use of music, instead positioning it as an act of defiance, empowerment, and cultural assertion (Gopal & Moorti, 2008). The film also stands out for its social critique and commentary on urban India, providing a more nuanced portrayal of contemporary youth struggles than mainstream Bollywood narratives typically allow. Set in Mumbai's Dharavi slums, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) confronts issues of economic disparity, religious discrimination, domestic violence, and patriarchal oppression, all of which shape Murad's experiences and motivations (Vasudevan, 2000). The film critiques the structural inequalities that limit social mobility, portraying a city where opportunity exists but remains stratified along class and caste lines. Unlike earlier Bollywood films that romanticized poverty or framed success through idealistic, meritocratic narratives, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) acknowledges that talent alone is insufficient without access, privilege, and systemic change (Ganti, 2004). Murad's journey is not merely about personal ambition but about collective empowerment, reflecting the broader ethos of hip-hop culture as a voice for marginalized communities. Kulkarni (2020) argues that *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) appropriates Mumbai's rap culture, softening its political edge to suit Bollywood's commercial framework; drawing on Stuart Hall's articulation theory, she shows how elements like the song *Azaadi* (Freedom) are reconfigured into marketable narratives that underscore the tension between cultural resistance and mainstream assimilation.

Another aspect that distinguishes *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) is its treatment of masculinity and gender dynamics, challenging Bollywood's traditional depictions of male protagonists. While Murad's journey adheres to the hero's arc, he is neither hypermasculine nor aggressive, unlike the archetypal Bollywood hero. His quiet resilience, emotional vulnerability, and non-violent assertion of identity contrast with the dominant representations of male heroism in mainstream Hindi cinema (Dudrah, 2012). His relationship with Safeena (Alia Bhatt) further subverts expectations, as she is bold, outspoken, and fiercely independent, actively shaping her own aspirations rather than merely existing as a romantic subplot. By redefining masculinity in Indian cinema, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) contributes to an emerging trend in Bollywood that foregrounds introspective, emotionally complex male protagonists, moving away from hypermasculine, action-driven narratives. Beyond its thematic and narrative elements, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) also exemplifies Bollywood's increasing participation in globalized content production. The film's distribution on international streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, its screening at the Berlin International Film Festival, and its selection as India's official entry for the Academy Awards highlight Bollywood's growing engagement with transnational film networks. Unlike traditional Bollywood exports that primarily catered to diasporic Indian audiences, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) resonated with non-Indian viewers, particularly those familiar with global hip-hop culture and youth activism. This cross-cultural appeal demonstrates the evolving nature of Bollywood, which is no longer confined to national or diasporic audiences but is actively shaping and responding to global film discourse. Moreover, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) challenges previous assumptions about Bollywood's role in global cinema, proving that Indian films can engage with youth culture, urban struggles, and contemporary socio-political realities while maintaining commercial viability. It aligns with a broader trend in contemporary Bollywood, where filmmakers like Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, and Zoya Akhtar herself are experimenting with grittier, more socially engaged storytelling, moving away from formulaic masala films (Gopal & Moorti, 2008). The film's success further validates the rise of indie-spirited Bollywood productions, proving that commercial success and artistic integrity are not mutually exclusive. Ultimately, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) represents a critical moment in Bollywood's engagement with globalized youth cultures, demonstrating how Indian cinema can negotiate between hyper-local authenticity and transnational aesthetics. By incorporating Hollywood's underdog narrative, the stylistic elements of hip-hop culture, and the emotional depth of Indian storytelling, the film carves a unique space in contemporary global cinema. More than just a Bollywood adaptation of hip-hop culture, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) is a testament to how Indian cinema can absorb global influences while maintaining its distinct socio-political and emotional depth. It reinforces the idea that Indian films are no longer simply "exotic exports" for Western audiences or nostalgic artifacts for the diaspora but are active participants in global storytelling movements, contributing to international discourses on class, youth identity, and creative rebellion.

All We Imagine as Light (2024): *Rasa*, Resistance, and the Poetics of Feminist Realism

All We Imagine as Light (Kapadia, 2024), directed by Payal Kapadia, is a contemplative and lyrical drama that interweaves the lives of three women—Prabha, Anu, and Parvaty (Characters of the film)—as they navigate urban solitude, displacement, belonging, and emotional

resilience in contemporary Mumbai. Their collective search for "light" operates as a metaphor for hope, intimacy, and the pursuit of emotional survival amid the alienation of modern city life. Echoing the emotional intimacy of *The Lunchbox* (Kapadia, 2013) and drawing from European arthouse sensibilities, Kapadia employs a minimalist narrative style to foreground the subtle emotional rhythms of her characters. The film can be seen as reinforcing a culturally rooted Indian aesthetic through its evocation of emotions, while simultaneously drawing on Western arthouse conventions to craft a globally resonant cinematic form. The film's affective sense can be compellingly understood through the lens of classical *Rasa* theory, as it evokes multiple *rasas*, notably *karuṇa* (Compassion/Sorrow), *śṛṅgāra* (Romance/love), *śānta* (Calmness/tranquility), and *vīra* (Heroism/Courage), *Śānta rasa* (Calmness/tranquility), as inner peace; a contemplative detachment from worldly pursuits, which is emphasized in post-*Bharata* (Author of Natyashastra) aesthetics, particularly by Abhinavagupta, and resonates with the film's minimalism and quiet interiority (Gnoli, 1968; Pollock, 2016), creating a nuanced emotional experience that transcends conventional melodrama. *Karuṇa rasa* (Romance/Love) dominates the film, particularly through Prabha, whose life is marked by emotional abandonment and suspended intimacy and mental attachment with an absent husband. Her experience of sorrow is encapsulated in the rice cooker sent from Germany and the silence of unreturned calls and absences that function as *vibhāvas* (emotive triggers). Her quiet rejection of a doctor's proposal advances further deepens the viewer's empathetic engagement. Similarly, Parvaty's looming eviction and her status as a widowed domestic worker without legal documentation highlight systemic precarity, reinforcing *karuṇa rasa* (Sorrow) through her dignified endurance. Anu's character further deepens this emotional tone, embodying *karuṇa* (sorrow) through her silent struggle for love and belonging within a socially fractured world. *Śṛṅgāra rasa* (Romance/Love) is delicately rendered in Anu's secret affair with Shiaz, marked by the burden of communal tension. In parallel, Prabha's hallucinatory encounter with a drowning man, whom she imagines to be her estranged husband, becomes a moment of emotional sublimation, wherein longing transforms into psychological closure. This inner transformation ushers the film into *śānta rasa* (Calmness/tranquillity), particularly in the coastal sequences where the women, distanced from the chaos of Mumbai, find moments of introspective clarity and peace. Prabha's epiphanic release of the past, combined with Kapadia's evocative use of elemental imagery—wind, sea, and shifting light—and the final scene of the three women quietly sharing a meal by the sea, encapsulates a profound sense of solidarity, reflecting emotional maturity, mutual recognition, and the tranquil detachment that defines the essence of *śānta rasa* (Calmness/tranquility). Although understated, *vīra rasa* (Heroic/ Courage) also permeates the narrative, not through spectacle but through everyday acts of moral courage: Prabha's integrity, Anu's defiance of social taboos, and Parvaty's autonomous decision to return to her village; Kapadia redefines heroism as a domestic ethic rooted in emotional endurance and ethical conviction. Her documentary-informed aesthetic further reinforces this layered emotional architecture; the film's opening montage features anonymous voices reflecting on the struggle for survival in Mumbai.

The film subtly critiques the everyday realities of working-class women in postcolonial urban India. Central to this discourse is its focus on internal migration, with the three protagonists embodying a transregional movement of female labor from rural or semi-urban spaces to the

sprawling metropolis of Mumbai. Their lives unfold not in centers of power but in rented flats, overcrowded chawls, and sterile hospital corridors—spaces that render them visible only through their labour and invisible in every other sense (Desai, 2005). Rejecting the romanticized notion of the "spirit of Mumbai," Kapadia instead centres female interiority, aligning with postcolonial feminist thought that challenges the historical silencing of *Subaltern* women (Spivak, 2023). The film foregrounds suppressed desires, quiet acts of resistance, and emotional vulnerability as central to these women's experiences. Anu's hidden relationship, curtailed aspirations, pressure to marry, and fear of social judgment, alongside Prabha's emotionally void arranged marriage and the symbolic rice cooker sent from abroad, reflect how patriarchal norms and global capitalism co-produce emotional alienation. Parvaty's displacement due to the demolition of her chawl, despite decades of residence, exemplifies the ongoing processes of postcolonial dispossession, where the urban poor are consistently erased to make way for speculative capitalist development, echoing colonial patterns of spatial control and displacement (Roy, 2009). The final image—three women sharing a meal by the sea—critiques the envisioning of alternative kinships grounded in emotional solidarity, care, and shared womanhood.

The film aligns closely with Western arthouse cinematic conventions through its minimalist structure, meditative pacing, and emphasis on mood over plot. Echoing the aesthetics of filmmakers like Chantal Akerman and Michelangelo Antonioni, it favours long takes, ambient sound, and intimate gestures over dialogue-driven exposition, drawing viewers into moments of solitude and fleeting connection (Mulvey, 2006). Kapadia foregrounds the interior lives of her female protagonists through observational realism and resists melodrama in favour of a slow, reflective emotional rhythm. Her visual style—marked by natural light, sparse mise-en-scène, and understated performances—evokes the sensorial realism of slow cinema. The film also features moments of nudity, presented with quiet honesty and without eroticization, underscoring vulnerability as part of emotional authenticity (Williams, 2008). A hallucinatory episode in which Prabha imagines reconciling with her estranged husband serves as both personal epiphany and symbolic release, recalling the metaphysical ruptures of Tarkovsky or Malick (Bird, 2008). Rather than offering overt social critique, Kapadia humanizes marginal lives by centring their desires, doubts, and quiet resistances. In doing so, she reframes resilience as a deeply personal and often unacknowledged form of survival, offering a luminous example of global art cinema articulated through a distinctly South Asian lens.

Furthermore, as a transnational film, *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024) bridges the local and the global, rendering its narrative both culturally specific and universally resonant. Its emotional depth and aesthetic have made it accessible to audiences beyond Indian contexts. As an international co-production involving France, India, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy, with dialogue in Malayalam, Hindi, and Marathi, the film exemplifies a new model of global Indian cinema. Kapadia's feminist perspective, emotional restraint, and resistance to exoticism mark a significant departure from conventional representations of Indian womanhood. The film has received 47 wins and 92 nominations worldwide, including the prestigious Grand Prix at Cannes, Best International Film from the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics, and nominations at the Golden Globes, BAFTAs, and Asian Film Awards.

Kapadia has been widely celebrated for Best Director and Screenplay, while lead actress Kani Kusruti received multiple accolades for Best Actress and Best Ensemble. Recognition from the National Society of Film Critics, Gotham Awards, and the Directors Guild of America further underscores the film's impact, weaving a moment for Indian arthouse cinema on the global stage.

Conclusion

Indian cinema has continuously evolved as a dynamic force that negotiates the complexities of tradition, modernity, and globalization. The selected case studies—*Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960), *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001), *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), *Rustom* (Desai, 2016), *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) and *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024)—serve as pivotal examples illustrating Indian filmmakers' development and ability to adapt, innovate, and assert a unique cinematic identity within shifting cultural and socio-political landscapes. *Mughal-e-Azam* (Asif, 1960) epitomizes Indian cinema's deep-rooted connection to classical aesthetics, particularly through its reliance on *Śṛṅgāra Rasa* (romantic love) and *Vīra Rasa* (heroism/courage). The film's opulent mise-en-scène, poetic dialogue, and grand historical narrative reflect an enduring link to the performative traditions of Indian classical drama, positioning it as a timeless work that continues to inform historical filmmaking in India. However, its theatricality and overt spectacle contrast with later realist movements in Indian cinema, highlighting the diversity of aesthetic approaches within the industry. Conversely, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955) represents a radical departure from mainstream Bollywood's melodramatic excesses, embracing a restrained, neorealist aesthetic. While the film is often discussed within the framework of Italian neorealism, its emotional core remains deeply Indian, structured around *Karuṇa Rasa* (compassion/sorrow). By prioritizing naturalistic performances, real locations, and an episodic narrative structure, Satyajit Ray challenged conventional storytelling norms, paving the way for parallel cinema in India. The film's quiet yet powerful portrayal of poverty and resilience speaks to a broader commentary on socio-economic realities, illustrating how realism can function as a form of political critique. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) bridges historical and postcolonial narratives, utilizing the Hollywood sports drama template while reinterpreting it within an Indian nationalist framework. The film's emphasis on *Vīra Rasa* (heroism/courage) recasts the British colonial game of cricket as a metaphor for indigenous resistance and self-determination. While its cinematic style aligns with Western storytelling conventions, it remains deeply Indian in spirit, underscoring how globalization enables hybrid storytelling models. However, *Lagaan* has also been critiqued for presenting an idealized vision of Indian unity that overlooks caste, class, and gender complexities, raising questions about the limitations of nationalist narratives in mainstream cinema. A shift away from spectacle-driven storytelling is evident in *The Lunchbox* (Batra, 2013), which embraces a minimalist, introspective approach reminiscent of European arthouse cinema. By centring its narrative on human relationships and everyday routines, the film's use of *Śṛṅgāra Rasa* (romantic longing) and *Karuṇa Rasa* (sorrow) creates an intimate and contemplative cinematic experience. The use of food as a metaphor for emotional connection reflects deep-rooted Indian cultural values while demonstrating the increasing influence of transnational aesthetics on independent Indian cinema. The film's international

success suggests a growing acceptance of non-traditional Indian narratives in global arthouse circles, positioning Indian cinema beyond the constraints of Bollywood's dominant format. *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) represents Bollywood's engagement with global youth cultures, integrating hip-hop as a narrative tool to critique class inequality and social marginalization. The film's interplay between *Raudra Rasa* (anger/fury) and *Vīra Rasa* (heroism) underscores its protagonist's struggles within an urban landscape defined by economic disparity and systemic oppression. While it follows a recognizable Hollywood underdog arc, *Gully Boy* (Akhtar, 2019) remains uniquely Indian in its treatment of aspirations, familial tensions, and localized artistic expression. The film's international reception demonstrates how contemporary Bollywood films are increasingly incorporating global cultural influences without entirely abandoning their Indian identity. Furthermore, the film *Rustom* (2016) weaves together emotional depth, aligning with *Rasa* aesthetics with dominant evocations of *vīra* (heroism), *karuṇa* (compassion), *raudra* (anger), *śṛṅgāra* (romantic love), and *Bhayānaka* (fear)—alongside postcolonial critique, Western cinematic form, and transnational aesthetics to explore justice, identity, and moral complexity. Other hand, *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024) stands as a transformative work that blends classical *Rasa* aesthetics, particularly *śānta* (tranquility), *karuṇa* (compassion), and *śṛṅgāra* (love) with postcolonial critique, and minimalist global cinema to portray women's lives with rare emotional precision. Kapadia's observational realism transcends national boundaries while remaining rooted in Indian cultural specificity. The film marks a quiet yet powerful redefinition of Indian arthouse cinema on the world stage.

While the study provides a comprehensive analysis, a key limitation is its reliance on a limited selection of films and the application of four specific theoretical frameworks—*Rasa* Theory, Western cinematic traditions, postcolonial discourse, and transnational cinema—which may not fully capture the breadth and diversity of regional and genre-specific practices in Indian cinema. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating alternative frameworks such as reception theory, gender theory, psychoanalytic film theory, or media industry studies, particularly those aligned with cultural studies and postmodern perspectives. Additionally, the research adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach and does not incorporate audience reception data, empirical surveys, or box office analytics, which could have further validated the emotional and cultural impact of these films. Moreover, while transnational cinema has been contexualised, the paper does not extensively address emerging developments such as AI-driven storytelling, algorithmic content curation, or the transformative role of OTT streaming platforms in shaping production and viewership trends. Future research could expand the film sample, adopt mixed methods, and explore how emerging technologies—such as AI-driven filmmaking, virtual production, and blockchain distribution, are reshaping narrative structures and audience engagement in Indian cinema. Comparative studies with industries like Nollywood and Korean cinema could also offer insights into how film cultures navigate identity and globalization. As Indian cinema continues to evolve with technological innovation and global trends, sustained research on its increasingly diverse forms and contents is vital to examine its negotiation of cultural authenticity and its position in the global media landscape.

Declaration of Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used ChatGPT (*https://chat.openai.com/*) for proofreading the manuscript, with minimal use in the Literature Review section. ChatGPT, an AI language model, assisted in identifying typos, grammatical errors, passive voice, redundancy, and unnecessary adverbs. The final output was further refined to maintain the author's original intent and writing style.

References

Abraham, J., Kumar, S., Lahiri, R., & Vats, S. (Producers), & Shoojit, S. (Director). (2013). *Madras Café* [Film]. JA Entertainment; Rising Sun Films.

Abraham, J. K., & Misrahi-Barak, J. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge companion to caste and cinema in India*. London: Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003343578

Akhtar, Z., Akhtar, F., & Sidhwani, R. (Producers), & Akhtar, Z. (Director). (2019). *Gully Boy* [Film]. Excel Entertainment; Tiger Baby Films.

Anjaria, U. (2021). *Understanding Bollywood: The grammar of Hindi cinema*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2022.2036404

Arora, P., Arora, V., Bhatia, A., Bhatia, S., Chawla, A., Kapoor, A. N., Kapoor, I., Keni, N., & Mishra, D. (Producers), & Desai, T. S. (Director). (2016). *Rustom* [Film]. Zee Studios; KriArj Entertainment; Cape of Good Films; Plan C Studios.

Asif, K. (Producer & Director). (1960). *Mughal-e-Azam* [Film]. Sterling Investment Corporation.

Barnouw, E., & Krishnaswamy, S. (1980). Indian film. India: Oxford University Press.

Basham, A. L. (1954). *The Wonder that was India; A survey of the history and culture of the Indian Sub-Continent before the coming of the Muslims [by] AL Basham*. USA: Grove Press.

Baxi, U. (1982). *The crisis of the Indian legal system*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Benshoff, H. M. (2015). *Film and television analysis: An introduction to methods, theories, and approaches*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203129968

Bharata Muni. (2016). *Natyasastram Ascribed to Bharata Muni: A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics* (M. Ghosh, Trans.). India: Chaukhamba Surbharati Prakashan.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551

Bird, R. (2008). *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of cinema* (p. 255). London: Reaktion Books.

Bohra, S., Kashyap, A., & Shukla, A. (Producers), & Kashyap, A. (Director). (2012). *Gangs of Wasseypur* [Film]. Viacom18 Motion Pictures; Tipping Point Films; AKFPL; Phantom Films; Elle Driver; Bohra Bros.

Booth, G. D. (2008). *Behind the curtain: Making music in Mumbai's film studios*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195327632.001.0001

Bordwell, D.& Thompson, K. (2010). *Film Art: An Introduction (9th ed)*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Breckenridge, C. A. (Ed.). (1995). *Consuming modernity: public culture in a South Asian world*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Brown, D., Reiner, R., & Scheinman, A. (Producers), & Reiner, R. (Director). (1992). *A Few Good Men* [Film]. Castle Rock Entertainment.

Bruckheimer, J., & Oman, C. (Producers), & Yakin, B. (Director). (2000). *Remember the Titans* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures; Jerry Bruckheimer Films; Technical Black Films.

Buchta, D., Schweig, G. M., & Jacobsen, K. A. (2010). Rasa theory. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, *2*, 623–29.

China Daily. (2024, June 28). *Domestic films account for 83.8% of China's 2023 box office revenue*. Retrieved from https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202406/28/WS667eacfca31095c51c50b696.html

Chakravarty, S. S. (2011). *National identity in Indian popular cinema, 1947-1987*. USA: University of Texas Press.

Chatterjee, P. (2012). *The black hole of empire: History of a global practice of power*. USA: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400842605

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzgb88s

Chatterji, J., & Washbrook, D. A. (Eds.). (2013). *Routledge handbook of the South Asian diaspora*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203796528

Chatman, S. (1980). *Story and discourse: Narrative structure in fiction and film*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Chitrakalpa (Producer), & Ghatak, R. (Director). (1960). *Meghe Dhaka Tara* [Film]. Chitrakalpa.

Chopra, Y. (Producer), & Chopra, A. (Director). (1995). *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* [Film]. Yash Raj Films.

Colson, C. (Producer), & Boyle, D. (Director). (2008). *Slumdog Millionaire* [Film]. Celador Films; Film4.

Cooper, D. (2000). *The cinema of Satyajit Ray: between tradition and modernity*. UK: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173148

Cuneo, D., & Ganser, E. (2022). *The emotional and aesthetic experience of the actor: Diderot's Paradoxe sur le comédien in Sanskrit dramaturgy*. In F. Sferra & V. Vergiani (Eds.), *Verità e bellezza: Essays in honour of Raffaele Torella* (pp. 193–272). Università di Napoli "L'Orientale".

Danayya, D. V. V. (Producer), & Rajamouli, S. S. (Director). (2022). *RRR* [Film]. DVV Entertainment.

Dhanush (Producer), & Ranjith, P. (Director). (2018). *Kaala* [Film]. Wunderbar Films.

Dasgupta, R. K., & Clini, C. (2023). The cultural industries of India: an introduction. *Cultural Trends*, *32*(4), 341–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2023.2247368

Davids, E. L. (2023). The evolution of film genres: A comparative analysis of Hollywood and Bollywood. *Art and Society*, *2*(4), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.56397/AS.2023.08.04

Desai, V. (2005). NGOs, gender mainstreaming, and urban poor communities in Mumbai. *Gender & Development, 13*(2), 90–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332290

Dudrah, R. (2012). *Bollywood travels: Culture, diaspora and border crossings in popular Hindi cinema*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125649

Dudrah, R., & Desai, J. (2008). *The Bollywood Reader*. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.

Dwyer, R. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to contemporary India*. London: Reaktion Books.

Dwyer, R., & Patel, D. (2002). *Cinema India: The visual culture of Hindi film*. USA: Rutgers University Press.

Dwyer, R., & Pinto, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Beyond the boundaries of Bollywood: The many forms of Hindi cinema*. London: Oxford University Press.

Ernst & Young (EY). (2025, March). *Shape the future: Indian media and entertainment is scripting a new story*. Retrieved from https://www.ey.com/en_in/insights/media-entertainment/shape-the-future-the-revolution-in-indian-media-and-entertainment-sector

Farooqui, J. (2024, January 22). *India's box-office collections reach an all-time high of Rs 12,226 crore in 2023*. The Economic Times. Retrieved from https://m.economictimes.com/industry/media/entertainment/indias-box-office-collections-reach-an-all-time-high-of-rs-12226-crore-in-2023/articleshow/107035317.cms

Fonda, H., & Rose, R. (Producers), & Lumet, S. (Director). (1957). *12 Angry Men* [Film]. Orion-Nova Productions.

Grazer, B., Hanson, C., & Iovine, J. (Producers), & Hanson, C. (Director). (2002). *8 Mile* [Film]. Universal Pictures; Imagine Entertainment; Mikona Productions GmbH & Co. KG.

Ganti, T. (2004). *Bollywood: A guidebook to popular Hindi cinema*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203643945

Gehlawat, A. (2015). *Twenty-first century Bollywood*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315761048

Gnoli, R. (1968). *The aesthetic experience according to Abhinavagupta*. India: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series.

Gokulsing, K. M., & Dissanayake, W. (1998). *Indian popular cinema: A narrative of cultural change.*UK: Trentham Books.

Gomber, V. (Producer), & Tamhane, C. (Director). (2014). *Court* [Film]. zoo entertainment.

Gooptu, N. (2001). *The politics of the urban poor in early twentieth-century India* (Vol. 8). UK: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139252256

Gopal, S., & Moorti, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi song and dance*. USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Gopalan, L. (2019). *Cinema of interruptions: Action genres in contemporary Indian cinema*. India: Bloomsbury Publishing India pvt. Ltd.

Graff, J., & Hakim, T. (Producers), & Kapadia, P. (Director). (2024). *All we imagine as light* [Film]. Petit Chaos; Chalk & Cheese; BALDR Film; Les Films Fauves; Another Birth; Pulpa Films; Arte France Cinéma.

Guha, S. (Producer), & Ray, S. (Director). (1976). *Jana Aranya* [Film]. Indus Films.

Gupt, B. (2006*). Dramatic Concepts Greek & Indian: A Study of the Poetics and the Nāṭyaśāstra*. New Delhi: DK Printworld.

Hansen, K. (1989). The birth of Hindi drama in Banaras, 1868–1885. In S. B. Freitag (Ed.), *Culture and power in Banaras* (pp. 62–92). USA: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520313392-008

Higbee, W., & Lim, S. H. (2010). Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies. *Transnational cinemas*, *1*(1), 7–21 https://doi.org/10.1386/trac.1.1.7/1

Hogan, P. C. (2008). *Understanding Indian movies: Culture, Cognition, and Cinematic Imagination*. USA: University of Texas Press.

Ingawanij, M. A. (2012). Mother India in six voices: Melodrama, voice performance, and Indian films in Siam. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, *3*(2), 99–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/097492761200300202

Jain, A., & Monga, G. (Producers), & Gonsalves, K. (Director). (2022). *The Elephant Whisperers* [Short documentary film]. Sikhya Entertainment.

Jain, V., Johar, H. Y., Johar, K., & Mehta, A. (Producers), & Gulzar, M. (Director). (2018). *Raazi* [Film]. Junglee Pictures; Dharma Productions.

JB Angels, & Jha, P. (Producers), & Shrivastava, A. (Director). (2016). *Lipstick Under My Burkha* [Film]. Prakash Jha Productions.

Jones, M. (2010). Bollywood, Rasa and Indian cinema: Misconceptions, meanings and millionaire. *Visual Anthropology*, *23*(1), 33–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/08949460903368895

Kapoor, R. (Producer & Director). (1978). *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* [Film]. R.K. Studio

Cinema; Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg; Aide Aux Cinemas Du Monde; CNC; Le ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, Institut Français.

Karmakar, G., & Catterall, P. (2025). Nation, Nationalism and Indian Hindi cinema. *National Identities*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2024.2440753

Kashyap, A., Monga, G., & Rangachari, A. (Producers), & Batra, R. (Director). (2013). *The Lunchbox* [Film]. DAR Motion Pictures; NFDC; Essel Vision Productions; Sikhya Entertainment; AKFPL; The Match Factory; Rohfilm; ASAP Films; Arte France Kītā, V., & Rājaturai, E. V. (1998). *Towards a non-Brahmin millennium: from Iyothee Thass to Periyar.* USA: The University of Michigan.

Khan, A. (Producer), & Gowariker, A. (Director). (2001). *Lagaan* [Film]. Aamir Khan Productions.

Kudva, S. S. (2019). *It's Not All About Song and Dance: How the Natyashastra Informs Contemporary Bollywood*. USA: Kent State University.

Kulkarni, D. R. (2020). Appropriation and Articulation: Mapping Movements in Gully Boy. *Cinergie–Il Cinema e le altre Arti*, (17), 87–96. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/10508

Lal, V., & Nandy, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Fingerprinting popular culture: the mythic and the iconic in Indian cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Landy, M. (2010). The Apu Trilogy: Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *27*(5), 408–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2010.494998

Langah, N. T., & Sengupta, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Film, Media and Representation in Postcolonial South Asia: Beyond Partition*. London & New York: Taylor & Francis.

Lutgendorf, P. (2006). Is there an Indian way of filmmaking? *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, *10*(3), 227–256. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-007-9031-y

Majumdar, N. (2021). *The world in a grain of sand: Postcolonial literature and radical universalism*. London: Verso Books.

Mason, D. (2006). Rasa, 'Rasaesthetics' and Dramatic Theory as Performance Packaging. *Theatre Research International*, *31*(1), 69–83. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883305001860

Massey, R. (1992). From Bharata to the cinema: a study in unity and continuity. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, *23*(1). 59-71

Mehboob, K. (Producer & Director). (1957). *Mother India* [Film]. Mehboob Productions.

Mehta, R. B., & Pandharipande, R. V. (Eds.). (2010). *Bollywood and globalization: Indian popular cinema, nation, and diaspora*. London: Anthem Press. https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9781843318897

Menon, D. (2024). Beyond binge-watching: How the OTT video streaming platforms have transformed Indian television culture. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2024.2442863

Mikos, L. (2014). Analysis of film. In *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 409-423). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243.n28

Mishra, V. (2013). *Bollywood cinema: Temples of desire*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203951392

Morcom, A. (2017). *Hindi film songs and the cinema*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315092980

Mullik, G. (2020). Bharata's theory of aesthetic pleasure or Rasa: Classical Indian theories of "aesthetics" and their relation to cinema. In G. Mullik (Ed.), *Explorations in cinema through classical Indian theories* (pp. 197–277). UK: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45611-5

Mulvey, L. (2006). *Death 24x a second: Stillness and the moving image*. London: Reaktion Books.

Murthy, C. S. H. N. (2020, March). Negotiating Semiotics of Mise en Scene is the Real Challenge of Indian Cinema: A De-Westernizing Approach to Visual Culture. In *De-Westernizing Visual Communication and Cultures* (pp. 99–124). Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748906933

Navalakha Arts, & Holy Basil Productions (Producers), & Manjule, N. (Director). (2013). *Fandry* [Film]. Zee Entertainment; Reliance Media Works.

Pendakur, M. (2003). *Indian popular cinema: Industry, ideology, and consciousness*. New York: Hampton Press.

Phalke, D. G. (Producer & Director). (1913). *Raja Harishchandra* [Film]. Phalke Films Company.

Prasad, M. M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Raghavendra, M. K. (2020). *Philosophical Issues in Indian Cinema: Approximate Terms and Concepts*. London: Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344411

Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemen, P. (2014). *Encyclopedia of Indian cinema*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315062549

Rangacharya, A. 2005. *Introduction to Natyashastra.* Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Rathod, K. (Director). (1921). *Bhakta Vidur* [Film]. Kohinoor Film Company.

Ray, B. (Producer & Director). (1953). *Do Bigha Zamin* [Film]. Bimal Roy Productions.

Ray, S. (Director). (1955). *Pather Panchali* [Film]. Government of West Bengal.

Roy, A. (2009). Why India cannot plan its cities: Informality, insurgence and the idiom of urbanization. *Planning Theory, 8*(1), 76–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099299

Roy, P. (2017). *Aesthetics of emotional acting: an argument for a Rasa-based criticism of Indian cinema and television* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh).

Sengupta, R. (2024). Interrogating "marginality" in Bombay cinema: An exhaustive historiography. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *41*(8), 1475-1500. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2218146

Screwvala, R. (Producer), & Gowariker, A. (Director). (2008). *Jodhaa Akbar* [Film]. Ashutosh Gowariker Productions Private Limited.

Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (2014). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315771441

Sippy, G. P. (Producer), & Sippy, R. (Director). (1975). *Sholay* [Film]. United Producers; Sippy Films.

Somashekar, I., & Pinto, M. S. (2024). Beyond Bollywood and Hindi: Making a case for other language films in India. *Media Asia, 51*(1), 153–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2023.2243415

Spivak, G. C. (2023a). Can the subaltern speak? In H. C. Peter & H. Mark (Eds.), *Imperialism* (pp. 171–219). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003101536-9

Statista. (n.d.). *Film production worldwide - statistics & facts*. Statista. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/topics/5431/film-production-worldwide/

Statista. (2025, January). *Number of new movies shown in the cinemas in China from 2019 to 2024*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/642414/china-number-movie-shown/

Thomas, R. (1995). Melodrama and the negotiation of morality in mainstream Hindi film. In C. Breckenridge (Ed.), *Consuming modernity: Public culture in a South Asian world* (pp. 157–182). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Thomas, R. (2015). *Bombay before Bollywood: Film city fantasies*. USA: State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438456775

Vasudevan, R. (2000). Making meaning in Indian cinema. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Vijayan, T., & Akshayaa, R. B. (2025). Cinematic Tapestry: The Evolution and Global Influence of Indian Cinema With a Spotlight on South Indian Films. In *Global Development of Asian Cinema in the Film Industry* (pp. 189–212). USA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6940-1.ch010

Virdi, J. (2003). *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. USA: Rutgers University Press.

Walia, R. (2013). Techno-Nostalgia: Colorization of K. Asif's Mughal-e-Azam. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, *4*(2), 137-158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927613503233

Williams, L. (2008). *Screening sex* (p. 34). USA: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw2ct

Winkler, I., & Chartoff, R. (Producers), & Avildsen, J. G. (Director). (1976). *Rocky* [Film]. Chartoff-Winkler Productions.

Yadav, S., & Jha, S. (2023). Bollywood as a site of resistance: Women and agency in Indian popular culture. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *25*(3), 1–13.

Corresponding Author: Santanu Sarkar
Email: santanus383@gmail.com

The Queer State of Being: Navigating the Neoliberal City through *Kari*

Nanjani Gandhi
Pondicherry University, India

S. Visaka Devi
Pondicherry University, India

Abstract

Cities, marked by the strains of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, direct bodies in specific directions and orient themselves to regulate what counts as "good" and "poor." While neoliberalism promotes individualism, neoconservatism is centered on conserving specific ways of life. The life of the social, impressed upon by these two strains, results in the process of embodiment vis-a-vis these influences. The city is mapped according to certain ideological frameworks, and it is difficult to feel at ease for bodies that do not subscribe to them. The current text analyses how urban spaces can foreclose themselves to queer people due to their inability to navigate life according to social norms. This paper endeavors to unravel the intricate dynamics between spatial exploration, feelings of estrangement, and the potential for reconnection within the neoliberal and neoconservative urban environments. It does so by a close reading of Amrutha Patil's (2008) graphic novel *Kari*. Within the theoretical framework of phenomenology, the paper argues that after Kari's engagement with the unproductive and unconventional spaces helps her reintegration into society as a more evolved version of herself. Focusing on Kari's interactions with atypical spaces such as the sewers, dubious alleys, and the residence of an ill acquaintance/friend, the research aims to decipher how these locales amplify a sense of detachment from mainstream society, at the same time connecting her to the city. Rather than accepting alienation passively, the study looks at Kari's engagement with such spaces.

Keywords: Amrutha Patil, graphic novel, neoliberalism, neoconservatism, phenomenology, South Asian queer fiction

Beginning in the early 1980s, the Reagan administration and Thatcher government introduced a set of neoliberal economic policies to address the persistent stagflation witnessed in both the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1970s. Later, following a balance of payment crisis, India embraced neoliberalism in 1991. In 2004, after Dr Manmohan Singh became the prime minister, he further expanded and accelerated his neoliberal reforms. Neoliberalism is capitalism's new social structure wherein citizens are encouraged to think for themselves as separate units, to care for themselves, and to take personal responsibility (Brown, 2003; Huxley, 2008). It is a political, economic, and social arrangement within society that emphasizes market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility. Most scholars tend to agree that "neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and society" (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). The ascent of neoliberalism coincided with the rise of neoconservatism.

Neoconservatism combines the principles of traditional conservatism with a commitment to political individualism and a full endorsement of free markets. More importantly, neoconservatism is centred on enforcing meanings, conserving certain ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire. The contemporary norm privileges hetero-nuclear relationships where the sexual dimension is safely restricted to the confines of the institution of marriage. According to Brown (2006), neoconservatism allegedly appeals to a strong "moral-political-rationality" (p. 691). Anne Norton (2004) states that neoconservatives "encourage family values and the praise of older forms of family life, where women occupy themselves with children, cooking and the church, and men take on the burdens of manliness" (pp. 178–179). The confluence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has resulted in the transformation of political problems into individual problems with market solutions. A subject is meant to be responsible for her own risks and promote individualism on the one hand. On the other hand, there is a fear that the country is being infiltrated by foreign cultures, and there is a need to strengthen "our" culture (Brown, 2006; Gopalakrishnan, 2006).

Amrutha Patil's (2008) graphic novel *Kari*, written during the heyday of neoliberalism in India, also subtly hints at the characters' alignment with this complex mindset shaped by the two ideologies, while concurrently underscoring the identity of the eponymous protagonist's incongruence with its principles. The work is set in Bombay, today's Mumbai, a city undergoing significant changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries due to economic growth. This growth expanded the Indian middle class and transformed urban landscapes with new apartment buildings, office complexes, and malls. However, these changes co-existed with the presence and rise of Shiv Sena in Bombay and BJP in India, both conservative pro-Hindutva groups, whose politics especially challenge Bombay's historical cosmopolitanism. Amid the widespread prevalence of neoliberal and neoconservative politics across India, particularly palpable within the urban landscape of Bombay, the protagonist finds themselves at the margins. *Kari* is a magic realist text that focuses on the eponymous protagonist, who is currently based in Mumbai and employed by an advertising agency. Twenty-year old Kari rents a two-bedroom house called the Crystal Palace, which she shares with two other women. Her alienating experiences in the smog city serve as the book's focal point, and her past relationship with Ruth acts as a translucent background via which her actions are sketched. The novel begins

with an attempt to suicide by the protagonist and her partner after their relationship falls through. The reason for the failure is not disclosed and henceforth, her ex-partner, Ruth, is only present in the narrative via memories. However, her absence is so strong that it becomes a reference point via which Kari's actions can be studied. In fact, the text begins with reference to Frida Kahlo's oil painting, *The Two Fridas*. One of the more popular understandings of the double self-portrait is that it depicts the loneliness and duality of the artist's own identity (Andersen 2009; Kettenmann 1993). We can understand the relationship between Kari and Ruth within the context of Kahlo's painting as an interdependent relationship, with at least Kari seeing the two as a unit. Loneliness becomes a reigning theme in the graphic novel after the fallout of her relationship reflected in Kari's interactions with different characters, and through the visual elements. In an interview with Paul Gravett, Amruta Patil states that her "visual influences include: Indian temple art, Mughal Miniatures, Japanese Silkscreen prints, Egyptian funerary art, Mahayana Buddhist imagery, Iconic art from Medieval Europe. The artwork of Dave McKean, Gustav Klimt, Frida Kahlo, Paul Gauguin" (Gravett, 2012). This set of diverse visual influences reflect within the text as they emerge intermittently, swiftly punctuating the major visual style of the text adding meanings, as discussed in the case of the panel inspired by Kahlo's painting, or by adding swift punctures that serve to highlight the prepotent monochromaticity of text.

Figure 1

*Kari (*Amruta Patil*,* 2008, p. 3)

While the predominant grey and black palette supports to highlight Kari's inner desolation, on rare occasions, Patil (2008) has also used colours, relatively vibrant ones for moments where the weight of isolation is momentarily absent. Throughout the novel, we find Kari continually and majorly engaging with the black and grey scheme of the smog city.

Figure 2
*Kari (*Amruta Patil*,* 2008, p.16)

This paper endeavors to unravel the intricate dynamics between spatial exploration, feelings of estrangement, and the potential for reconnection within the neoliberal and neoconservative urban environments via Patil's (2008) *Kari*. Focusing on Kari's interactions with atypical spaces such as the sewers, dubious alleys, and the residence of an ill acquaintance/friend, the research aims to decipher how these locales amplify a sense of detachment from mainstream society, at the same time connecting her to the city. Rather than accepting alienation passively, the study looks at Kari's engagement with such spaces. In the aforementioned interview with Gravett, Patil stated that "the book is not a coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey" (Gravett, 2012). It's crucial to acknowledge that while the protagonist is not limited by her queer identity, it still holds significance in a heteronormative society. Her identity and experiences in this smog city are influenced to a great degree by her queerness, even if it's not the primary focus of her journey. The paper argues that recognition and acceptance of her queerness play a pivotal role in reshaping her connections and understanding of the world around her.

Literature Review

Kari is the first Indian graphic novel created by a woman and is a pivotal work within the realm of Indian queer literature. Scholars have extensively analyzed Patil's work from various viewpoints, encompassing its themes, narrative techniques, and cultural influences (Singh 2022; Sivakumar & Patchainayagi 2022) highlighting its profound significance. This essay specifically benefited from works such as Pia Mukherji's essay, which discusses Amruta Patil's adept use of postmodern intertextuality to navigate feminist identity politics, foregrounding the pivotal role of language in shaping subjectivity (Mukherji, 2015). Similarly, Surangama Datta's (2008) analysis discusses the protagonist's unconventional nature and voice and argues that it challenges masculinist viewpoints and accentuating Patil's innovative use of artistic forms to craft a unique reading experience. The current paper borrows from the aforementioned works and highlights the protagonist's unconventional lifestyle but interprets it within the framework of neoliberalism using Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology*. The present work

benefits greatly from Sandhya Devesan Nambiar's (2013) exploration of spatio-literary intermediality in *Kari*. Nambiar's paper draws on the figure of the flâneur and theoretical works by Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault (2013). Furthermore, scholars have examined the intricate relationship between the city, modernism, and subjectivity, providing nuanced insights into Kari's socio-cultural landscape (Davies 2019; Nayar 2016). The theme of home and belonging has also received scrutiny in discussions surrounding Indian graphic novels, including *Kari*. Ira Sarma (2017) discusses how these narratives challenge conventional family structures and societal norms. Additionally, Mumbai's queer community has garnered considerable scholarly attention especially through the analysis of works such as R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (Das 2021). Works such as Parmesh Shahani's (2008) *Gay Bombay: Globalisation, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India* provide invaluable insights into the lives of gay individuals in Mumbai, shedding light on their endeavors for social acceptance and enriching our understanding of the city's diverse cultural tapestry. This paper adds to the ongoing literary dialogue surrounding *Kari* and broader queer experiences in India by exploring the unconventional spaces navigated by the protagonist within the novel's narrative framework. Specifically, this analysis situates these spaces within the broader socio-economic context of neoliberalism, providing fresh insights into the intersections of individual agency, societal norms, and economic ideologies portrayed in the graphic novel.

Discussion

To study Kari's relationship with the city of Mumbai, and with people that inhabit the city, the paper uses the philosophical concept of queer phenomenology as theorised by Sara Ahmed (2006). Phenomenology emphasizes a focus on the immediate structures and everyday experiences. The discipline is interested in the embodiment; it understands bodies as sites of affect and feelings, sites of sensory apparatus to take in the world that affects us and understand it via their perception. Since understanding the world is based on sensory experience and perception, there is no objective world. From there arises a possibility to queer phenomenology, something that scholar Sara Ahmed (2006) does in her work *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed (2006) makes an effort with queer phenomenology to "offer a different 'slant' to the concept of orientation itself" (p. 4). Orientations, she states, are how we begin, how we proceed from the "here," which is the "zero point of orientation." It is the point at which the body inhibits or dwells. The body is then shaped by the "zero point of orientation." The world starts to take shape at this point, and the distinction between this side and that side is significant (Ahmed, 2006, p. 8). Since the idea of orientation necessitates adhering to a pre-decided perception of objects, the lives of bodies are guided in specific directions through the orientation of social structures. The paper employs these theories on queer phenomenology and affect to better understand the experiences of exclusion faced by Kari in Mumbai. A reason for applying this philosophical approach is voiced by Lizabeth During and Terri Fealy (1997), who write, "To claim phenomenology for lesbian and gay theory, we need to begin with the everyday experience of homosexual subjects, to consider their situation in the world and their relations to others" (p. 121). This work uses the experiences of the queer protagonist Kari to make a case for how alienating urban environments can be, and phenomenology helps accomplish this by

enabling a thorough examination of the commonplace structures. The paper argues that the neoliberal and neoconservative set-up, the strains of which run continuously in the background of the novel, orient the social in a way that impacts the protagonist's position.

Cities, marked by the strains of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, direct bodies in certain directions and orient themselves to regulate what counts as "good" and what counts as "poor." To quote Ahmed (2006) again, "The concept of 'orientations' allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good…" (p. 21). While neoliberalism promotes individualism through self-regulation and self-responsibility, neoconservatism is centred on enforcing meanings, conserving specific ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire. In accordance, a "good life" within a pan-Indian context would be roughly marked by objects such as a prosperous career, a heterosexual family unit, the notion of personal autonomy, and recognition of moral conformity through societal approval. The life of the social, impressed upon by these two strains, results in the process of embodiment vis-a-vis these impressions and influences. The queer person, then, who does not enjoy the same returns and fails to sustain a "good life" can find the world foreclosing around them. The city is mapped according to certain ideological frameworks, and for bodies that do not subscribe to it, it is difficult to feel at ease.

Neoliberal discourse necessarily sees individuals as "entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (Gill, 2007, p. 74), as agents who take complete responsibility for how their lives turn out regardless of the severity of the constraints that determine their choices and actions (Walkerdine et al., 2001). However, the protagonist's work-life is tainted by her cynicism, which alienates her from those around her deeply entrenched in career advancement. She immerses herself in work as a distraction from her entanglement with Ruth, with aspects of her work reflecting fragments of Ruth herself. The fairy princess character bears resemblance to Ruth, yet Kari displays a blatant disregard for conventional career progression. Lacking motivation to ascend the corporate ladder, Kari holds a cynical perspective toward her assigned clientele. Information about her work-life coalesces with a sneering commentary that positions her as a neoliberal dissident because the neoliberal subject is an achieving subject (Clack & Paul, 2019, p. 10). Assimilation is coveted by people around her, who mix freely and become a part of the crowd. She fails to share an orientation towards networking for career advancement and therefore, falls out of line. This failure to share an object considered "good" alienates her. Sara Ahmed (2010), in her essay *Happy Objects*, states,

> Happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We are alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap (p. 37).

Kari, however, makes no effort to fill the gaps. She does not share the same orientation of those objects being "good." It estranges her from the people around her, which further impacts her, for she only sincerely works for relationships in her life. However, the relationships that she pursues are seen as less significant forms of attachment in a neoliberal and neoconservative set-up.

The Primacy of the Heteronormative Family

A model relationship, if there ever was one, in such a set-up is understood as a monogamous, heteronormative relationship, wherein partners are seen as units. Both neoliberalism and neoconservatism agree on the primacy of family. Author Melinda Cooper (2017) explains how family responsibility connects neoliberalism and neoconservatism when she writes, "Neoliberals instead envisage the private paternalism of the family as a spontaneous source of welfare in the free- market order; a state of equilibrium that may be disturbed by the perverse incentives of redistributive welfare but also restored through the diminution of state paternalism" (pp. 62–63). By promoting the family system, the neoliberal government steps back from its responsibility of welfare and puts the provision of care onto the private family. The "natural obligations" and "altruism" of families would replace the welfare state and function as a mutual contract, wherein the child will also have to report to the family and be bound to share the family ideals and orientation. Family, therefore, becomes equally important for the proponents of neoliberalism as for neoconservatives.

Kari's surroundings are filled with traces of heterosexual intimacy that can act as points of pressure for a queer individual. The pressure, in fact, is explicit, for she is forced to share orientation with the people around her. In an effort to make her life "livable," Kari's flatmates set her up on a blind date, which predictably is a failure.

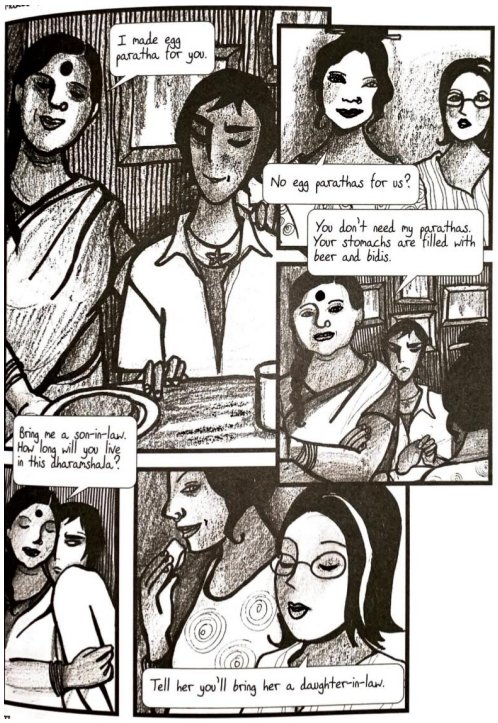
> The girls are eager to make me their project. They endeavour to couple me up so as to make my life livable. At the table on one such evening are Delna, Billo. Orgo, Zap, a Vicky…and a random other man who conveniently 'happens' to be single. Single man and I spend the rest of the evening in silence, trying to be inconspicuous and not eavesdrop on the amorous. (Patil, 2008, p. 74)

They express unwavering confidence in the belief that a woman's loneliness can only be resolved through a relationship with a man. A man, related to Billo, remarks, "Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman" (Patil, 2008, p. 81). The narrative unfolds to reveal unconventional dynamics within the protagonist's social circle, characterized by non-traditional living arrangements, decisions about abortion, and adulterous affairs, all of which challenge mainstream societal norms.

Figure 3
Kari (Amruta Patil, 2008, p. 3)

These departures from conventionality position the characters outside the bounds of neoconservative ideals. Yet, amidst these deviations, the text illuminates the complex interplay between shifting global influences and traditional cultural values on sexuality. While the women demonstrate agency in choices such as abortions, their understanding of queerness, as exemplified by Kari's sexual orientation, remains unrecognised. Delna's remark about informing Kusumtai, their househelp who favors Kari, that she would be bringing a daughter-in-law instead of the son-in-law Kusumtai expects, is delivered in a mocking tone. This reluctance to recognize alternative forms of connection underscores the enduring influence of traditional norms in the face of evolving socio-cultural landscapes and offers a straight reading of the world.

Figure 4
Kari (Amruta Patil, 2008, p. 95)



Ahmed (2006) writes about how,

> The affinity of the couple form is socially binding: premised as it is on resemblance and on the 'naturalness' of the direction of desire, which produces the couple as an entity, as a 'social one'(from two). The repetitions of these statements work to push heterosexuality into the background until what is in the background is overlooked (pp. 84–87).

What it does is that it allows "the straight body, and the heterosexual couple, to extend into space. The queer body becomes from this viewing point a "failed orientation": the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple. The queer couple in straight space hence looks as if they are "slanting" or are oblique (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 97–98). Efforts are invested in cultivating romantic, heterosexual relationships that hold the promise of evolving into a family unit in the future. Other connections are frequently not sought with the same fervour. Kath Weston (1991) argues that,

> Far from viewing families we choose as imitations or derivatives of family ties created elsewhere in their society, many lesbians and gay men alluded to the difficulty and excitement of constructing kinship in the absence of what they called 'models' (p. 116).

Sara Ahmed (2014) notes how "More casual forms of friendship and alliance could become seen as failures, or less significant forms of attachment" (p. 154). In the beginning, we find Kari disappointed at the lack of sisterhood in her rented house. While introducing the Crystal Palace to the reader, she comments,

> You would imagine that with so much clutter, the one thing you wouldn't miss was company. But that isn't true. When I first came here, I had expected a walk-in sisterhood. Head massages and face packs and fusion, end-of-the-day comparing of notes (Patil, 2008, p. 18).

Her expectations about having a "walk-in-sisterhood," in part, can be attributed to the place she migrates from. A possible assumption is that the streaks of neoliberalism are fainter in the place she comes from. In Bombay, she is "another jostling shoulder in the railway python…In this city, no one talks" (Patil, 2008, p. 42). Moreover, her two flatmates are deeply immersed in their own romantic endeavors. With unmet expectations about non-romantic relationships, she nevertheless pursues them earnestly. She is concerned about her flatmates. When Delna, one of her two flatmates, expresses her interest in her boss, Kari is perturbed and says, "I wouldn't want Delna to go home to a man who beats her up" (Patil, 2008, p. 63). Kari invests her time and energy in platonic connections:

> Today is one of those rare hearty suppers at Crystal Palace - without Orgo and Zap attached to the girl's body parts. I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier and a lot more interested in one another…On such days, the conversation

> wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears (Patil, 2008, p. 58).

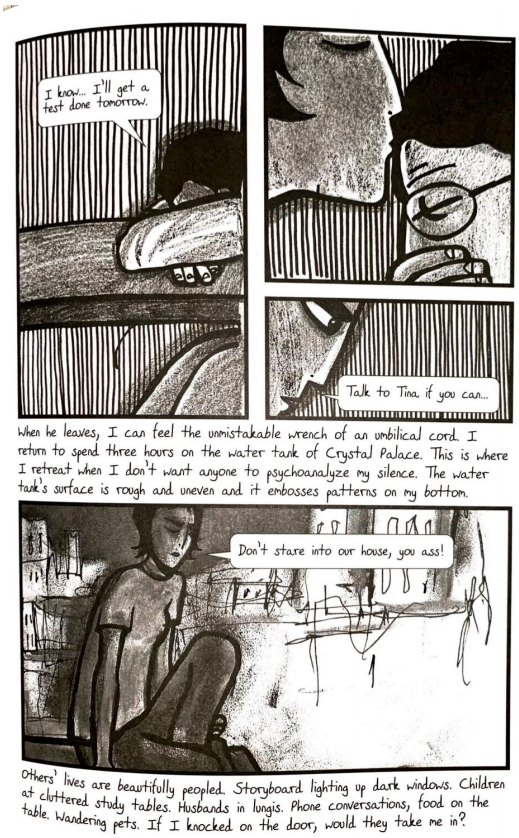
However, such suppers are far and few in between. Anna Dasgupta (2023) in *The Art of Amrutha Patil's "Kari"* states that Patil's reworking of the Klimt painting is used when she feels "alienated as her roommates indulge in bacchanalia" and Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper is from "when she really enjoys her roommates company when their boyfriends are not around" (pp. 58–59). However, the latter as she mentions herself is rare. Unable to replace the conventional family unit with her own relationships, Kari is left with a lingering sense of the family as a cherished and happy space, which persists despite her circumstances. She experiences a pang of longing as she observes how effortlessly others seem to fit into societal norms, leading seemingly more satisfactory lives. However, she is quickly pushed out of these spaces. The panel, strategically placed between Kari's loneliness and her yearning for conventional belonging, features the statement, "Don't stare into our house, you ass!" (Patil, 2008, p. 89).

However, due to the placement of the speech bubble, it could also be interpreted as Kari distancing herself from the conventional heteronormative life. It is intriguing to observe that she not only underscores the markers of heteronormativity within the interior scenes of the residences she portrays. The presence of children, husbands, and the setting of food on the table subtly conveys the existence of a conventional family structure. In doing so, she tacitly aligns with the societal notion that the "family" represents a quintessential "happy object" and subtly indicates her inclination towards it and the panel suggests her distance from it. Amidst this inclination, there lingers an awareness of her status as an outsider, leaving her hesitant regarding her potential acceptance within this social unit. Sara Ahmed (2010) argues,

> The family would be happy not because it causes happiness, and not even because it affects us in a good way, but because we share an orientation toward the family as being good, as being what promises happiness in return for loyalty. Such an orientation shapes what we do; you have to 'make' and 'keep' the family, which directs how you spend your time, energy, and resources (pp. 37–38).

She wants to be adopted into the same system, for the idea of a family and happiness are intertwined. She spends her time, effort, and resources seeking out individuals she can be loyal to in return for happiness. It would be appropriate to discuss her relationship with Ruth at this point.

Figure 5
Kari (Amruta Patil, 2008, p. 85)



The Two Fridas

Kari's bond with Ruth can be read as akin to a heterosexual partnership. Her recollections of the relationship suggest that it was a homonormative relationship. According to Lisa Duggan (2003), homonormativity,

is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (p. 50).

Homonormativity, therefore, will align itself with heteronormativity by fitting itself within the institution of marriage and promoting productivity and procreation. We see a similar discourse in their relationship as well. Kari's reference to their relationship via Frida Kahlo's oil painting, The Two Fridas, which depicts them connected, suggests that she saw Ruth as a part of herself. Kari wrote of them as a unit. In the course of the novel, during one of the intimate moments, Kari further expresses a desire for procreation with her partner when she states, "I'd give anything in the world to be able to knock you up, Ruthie" (Patil, 2008, p. 100).

Figure 6
Kari (Amruta Patil, 2008, p. 100)

This wish to impregnate Ruth can also be read as Kari's longing for a gender identity other than cisgender woman. However, in either case, the procreation will bring them closer to the conventional family unit.

Further, the suicide attempt is framed within the context of the falling through of the relationship. French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that suicide was a product of the anomie and alienation of modern urban living. Suicide rates spiked in late nineteenth-century France among migrants to cities dislocated from the protective care of the family and community. As Ramachandran Guha (2023) mentions, it also happened in the "late twentieth-century Bangalore, among young software professionals stressed out by the long hours of work or the rapid success of their colleagues" (p. 666). The new consumer society places a high premium on success and failure, which can be measured in ways such as career advancement, respect within society, financial stability, and stability within the family. A family has to be cultivated, and efforts are to be put into its maintenance. Perhaps it can also be argued that Kari is unable to participate in a neoliberal life and perform optimally in her career because of her agony of separation, something that had destabilised her. For Kari, Ruth was her sustenance, someone she could start a family with. It can be argued that she shares the orientation of a couple as a unit and that coupling as a positive object, as what promises happiness in return for loyalty. She feels more deeply and intensely cut off from others due to her relationship's dissolution. Her orientation can be ascribed to the pervasiveness of the heterosexual family as the ideal unit (Amato, 2005; Popenoe, 1996).

In Ruth's absence, loneliness becomes palpable for her, as within the framework of a neoliberal, neoconservative environment, their relationship establishes them as a unit, albeit one that society may not necessarily endorse. In her absence, Kari is once again surrounded by extreme loneliness and is perturbed by the lack of meaningful relationships. Amid a society

steeped in neoliberal values and neoconservative norms, she navigates a city that often ignores those on its margins.

The Murkiness of It All

Separated from a world to which she wishes to belong, Kari makes an effort to find solace and a sense of belonging in more ambiguous surroundings. Kari is introduced to Angel in her office space. Angel, a dying cancer patient, living alone, initially comes across as rude and later displays a somewhat brusque demeanor. However, Kari remains steadfast in an effort to foster a friendship with Angel. In a neoliberal world, where productivity and self-sufficiency are highly prized, a dying individual, too ill to actively participate in society, is often viewed as undesirable. Investing in a relationship where efforts aren't reciprocated, and one party becomes progressively more dependent is seen as counter to neoliberal rationality. Extending market principles to relationships, Kari's bond with Angel may be interpreted as a liability—a relationship with no tangible returns. Angel made it clear that she couldn't offer the security of a romantic relationship or financial rewards for their friendship, in advance, "Don't know why you are here, but you should know two things. One, I am bald because I am sick, not because I am butch and two, all that I own will soon be gone on hospital bills" (Patil, 2008, p. 38).

Angel's characterization of Kari as the Ferryman of the Dead, a nod to Charon from Greek mythology, holds significance. Sivakumar and Patchainayagi (2022) argue that via "Charon," Patil conveys that "the dead or dying souls present in Mumbai have now become Kari's responsibility" (p. 850). It is Angel's status as a dying subject that specifically attracts her. Kari confesses "Do you mind that it was your dying that I was drawn to?" (Patil, 2008, p. 39) and Angel later recognises it and states "Looking for your fix of decay again?" (Patil, 2008, p. 72). Kari is fascinated by the city's underground realms, including its deceased and cast-off inhabitants. This multifaceted characterization adds layers to Kari's complex relationship with the city and its darker elements. Nambiar (2013) mentions how "The intermediality implicated within the act of flâneuring between the streets of the city and the columns of the graphic novel present apposite resistances to frenzied consumption". Kari observes the city on the street around her. Nambiar suggests that moving between the real city streets and the pages of the graphic novel creates a unique way to resist the rush of consuming things quickly. Kari, as she walks through the city, embodies this idea by observing her surroundings closely. "Laz and I have been walking around the city at night, camera in hand, watching homeless people deep in slumber…If our subjects were wealthier, we'd be arrested for being peeping tom" (Patil, 2008, p. 78). It is because the sullenness of the city is easier to access that Kari is able to fully participate in it.

Navigating the Waters of the Smog City

In her essay, *Can You See Her the Way I Do?*: *(Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's "Kari"*, Surangama Datta (2020) aptly notes that the text presents two spaces within "smog city"—organised spaces on the one hand, hidden alleyways and the sewer on the other. The former, such as Kari's advertising agency, denote order and organisation. Initially, it is the

organised spaces that she comes to after the parting of her relationship with Ruth. However, it is the sewers she returns. She gifts herself a swimming membership on her 21st birthday, but the clean waters make her a mere observer rather than a participant. It is with the sewers that she fully interacts with, that she traverses in.

Her fall, which marks a severance with her partner, ties her to the sewer, and she assumes the role of a boatman, in a way, she sporadically goes to clean the city's waters. She personifies the water and initiates a relationship with it in lieu of her absentee partner. "I, Kari, twice born, who trawl the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere. My thoughts keep returning to the city's lower intestine" (Patil, 2008, p. 41). It is her unconscious that is clogged because of Ruth's absence. Interestingly, this relationship with the sewer strictly defies the neoliberal and neoconservative paradigm; first, she gets no monetary value out of it, and the environment is only seen as a space to exploit for financial gains; second, the cleaning of sewers in India has historically been forced onto the Dalits, who largely remain a marginalized and oppressed caste. Therefore, her relationship with the sewer is unconventional. Loose parallels can be drawn between her relationship with the sewer and that with Ruth, for both relationships are stigmatized, and both relationships have, in a way, helped her survive the neoliberal city, literally and figuratively. Her connection can also be seen as a projection of her own feelings, as a reflection of her queer feelings, which may be perceived as repugnant. The sewer can also be linked to the definition of the abject as propounded by Julia Kristeva (1982). This linkage with the sewer, it can be argued, is a result of the loss of a significant relationship and her subsequent failure to take account of it. It is essential to acknowledge, here, Kari's failure to acknowledge the loss of her relationship fully. In a community strongly dominated by heterosexuality, she is unable to mourn the loss of her partner. As Sara Ahmed (2014) states in *Queer Feelings*, "One has to recognise oneself as having something before one can recognise oneself as losing something" (p. 156). Kari's relationship with Ruth is not recognised as a significant bond, and she is "a heterosexual who has 'failed to be'" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 156). Queer lives are often seen as non-productive and "Queer loss may not count because it precedes a relation of having" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 156). In a heteronormative society, Kari is not allowed to experience grief. Instead, in the absence of her relationship, she puts her energy and resources into the service of a part of the city that is considered repugnant.

Kari's orientation towards the family unit and her queerness that places her outside the conventional family system is partly responsible for this experience. She equates the idea of the family with happiness; at the same time, her unconscious registers her position as an outsider. However, instead of accepting her alienation, she renews her relationship with the city's topography via the sewer. Towards the end of the novel, as she hints towards giving up the PVC suit and subsequently her position as a boatman, it is only because she acknowledges her feelings for Ruth and in a way, connects to her again. "I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore" (Patil, 2008, p. 115). The narrative nears its conclusion as Kari reconnects with Ruth, even in Ruth's absence, reaffirming the importance of their relationship. This affirmation comes after Kari's journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Throughout the narrative, she gradually embraces different aspects of herself, becoming more confident, as evidenced by her decision to leave the award

shows on recognising how different the people are from her there, by changing her hairstyle, despite resistance from the hairdresser. In a society that pressures her to conform to conventional roles, Kari persists in authentically embodying her true self, continuously striving to live her life on her own terms. While the major part of the novel is represented in black and white, there are colourful dreamscapes and certain colourful elements in certain panels. Scott McCloud (1993) in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, writes that colour is used to objectify subjects as it draws attention to the physical form more than black and white does (p. 192). When Kari goes to the hairdresser to get a buzz cut, the colors become vivid and vibrant, her expressions signal a newfound confidence. The hairdresser's hesitation is depicted in black and white, contrasting with the initial colorful assertion of Kari. Despite the challenges she faces in asserting herself, Kari retains the vibrant pop of color, symbolizing her resilience and self-expression.

Figure 7
Kari (Amruta Patil, 2008, p. 107)

It's notable that this is the final instance of color in the text, suggesting that this moment marks a significant resolution in Kari's journey of self-discovery and empowerment.

Conclusion

Patil (2008) introduces a young, unconventional protagonist to the Indian comic scene, the coming out is not central Kari's journey of self-acceptance involves grappling with her inner struggles, including a persistent urge to end her life by jumping. However, witnessing someone else's suicide serves as a profound epiphany for her. In this moment, she stops resisting her emotions, she shows no intention to forge other serious platonic relationships especially since they are not reciprocated with the same intensity in a neoliberal city. Instead, she acknowledges

her feelings for Ruth. It's after reaffirming her place in the romantic relationship, irrespective of Ruth's presence, that Kari declares the urge to jump off ledges vanishes. This suggests a newfound readiness on Kari's part to embrace society more wholly, as she now feels a deeper sense of security and self-assurance. Perhaps she realizes that suicide wouldn't transport her to "a faraway land of safety." It's the acknowledgment of finality after a long journey of self-reflection and acceptance following the breakup.

In the long journey after the breakup, Kari discovers her true self in unconventional spaces marked by murkiness and disarray: the bathroom stalls where she shares intimate moments with another girl, the sewers she finds solace in, the alleys she navigates, her friendship with Angel, and finally in witnessing a suicide. These spaces, avoided by many and lacking in organization or clarity, serve as the backdrop for Kari's most authentic expressions of herself. These locales amplify a sense of detachment from mainstream society, at the same time connecting her to the city. Rather than accepting alienation passively, the study looked into Kari's engagement with such spaces. These unconventional spatial encounters offer opportunities to redefine her relationship with the urban landscape marked by the neoconservative and neoliberal strains. Despite the alienation she feels from mainstream society, Kari embraces these marginalized spaces as her own, finding clarity and connection within their shadows. After engaging with these rather unproductive, unconventional spaces that are often overlooked, Kari begins to accept her reintegration into society as a more evolved version of herself. By deliberately distancing herself from the well-trodden paths of societal norms, she reaffirms her identity and reclaims her relationship with the city's landscape. These unconventional choices, born out of her experience as a young queer individual, represent her refusal to accept societal alienation, instead embracing the richness of her own journey, if only to participate in the neoliberal, neoconservative spaces, again.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I hereby declare that I used Grammarly solely for language improvement purposes, which were limited to spelling checks and occasional sentence structure changes, to help improve the clarity and flow of the article. I declare that I have not used any other AI tool for any purposes whatsoever in this article.

References

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074

Ahmed, S. (2010). Happy objects. In M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The affect theory reader* (pp. 29–51). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393047-001

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd ed). Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Amato, P. R. (2005). Family change: Decline or resilience? In Bengtson, V. L., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (Eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, (pp. 112–118). Sage.

Andersen, C. (2009). Remembrance of an open wound: Frida Kahlo and post-revolutionary Mexican identity. *South Atlantic Review, 74*(4), 119–130. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/41337719

Brown, W. (2003). Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event, 7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020

Brown, W. (2006). American nightmare: Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization. *Political Theory, 34*(6), 690–714. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591706293016

Clack, B., & Paul, M. (2019). Introduction: Welcome to the neoliberal life cycle. In B. Clack & M. Paul (Eds.), *Interrogating the neoliberal lifecycle: The limits of success* (pp. 1–18). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00770-6_1

Cooper, M. (2017). *Family values: Between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism.* Zone Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1qft0n6

Datta, S. (2020). "Can you see her the way I do?": (Feminist) ways of seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4*(1). https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7917

Das, S. (2021). Gay subculture and the cities in India: A critical reading of select works of R Raj Rao. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 13*(3), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v13n3.40

Dasgupta, A. (2023). The art of Amruta Patil's *Kari*. *Impact: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature, 11*(7). Retrieved from https://www.impactjournals.us/index.php/download/archives/26-07-2023-1690364277-6-IMPACT%20:%20IJRHAL-03.IJRHAL%20-%20THE%20ART%20OF%20AMRUTA%20PATIL%E2%80%99S%20KARI.pdf

Davies, D. (2019). *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the global city in contemporary graphic narratives*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054492

De Vuyst, S. (2022). Creating a patchwork of unruliness. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 25*(1), 102–118. https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779211041378

Duggan, L. (2003). *The twilight of equality?: Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy.* Beacon Press.

During, L., & Fealy, T. (1997). Philosophy. In A. Medhurst & S. Munt (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay studies: A critical introduction.* Cassell.

Durkheim, É. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (G. Simpson, Ed.; J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). The Free Press.

Gill, R. C. (2007). Critical respect: The difficulties and dilemmas of agency and "choice" for feminism. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*(1), 69–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506807072318

Gopalakrishnan, S. (2006). Defining, constructing and policing a "New India": Relationship between neoliberalism and Hindutva. *Economic and Political Weekly, 41*(26), 2803–2813. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418408

Gravett, P. (2012, September 4). Amruta Patil: India's first female graphic novelist. *Paul Gravett: Comics, graphic novels, manga*. Retrieved from http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil

Guha, R. (2023). *India after Gandhi* (3rd ed.). Picador.

Huxley, M. (2008). Space and government: Governmentality and geography. *Geography Compass, 2*(5), 1635–1658. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00133.x

Kettenmann, A. (1993). *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: Pain and passion.* Benedikt Taschen.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics: The invisible art.* Kitchen Sink Press.

Mukherji, P. (2015). Graphic écriture: Gender and magic iconography in *Kari*. In B. Mehta & P. Mukherji (Eds.), *Postcolonial comics: Texts, events, identities* (pp. 157–168). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315817576-10

Nambiar, S. D. (2013). Spaced out: Visuality and the city in the contemporary Indian graphic novel. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, 36*(1), 69–77. Retrieved from https://elibpondiuni.remotexs.in/user/login=?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/spaced-out-visuality-city-contemporary-indian/docview/1809899381/se-2

Nayar, P. K. (2018). *The Indian graphic novel: Nation, history and critique*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429489563-23

Norton, A. (2004). *Leo Strauss and the politics of American empire.* Yale University Press. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq4pm

Patil, A. (2008). *Kari.* HarperCollins.

Popenoe, D. (1996). *Life without father.* Simon & Schuster.

Rose, N. (2007). *The politics of life itself.* Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827503

Shahani, P. (2008). *Gay Bombay: Globalisation, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India.* Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132100140

Sarma, I. (2017). Negotiations of home and belonging in the Indian graphic novels *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee and *Kari* by Amruta Patil. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, 16.* https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4384

Singh, A. (2022). Reflections on queer literary representations in contemporary Indian writing in English. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 24*(2). Retrieved from https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2892&context=jiws

Singh, P. (2016). Between legal recognition and moral policing: Mapping the queer subject in India. *Journal of Homosexuality, 63*(3), 416–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1124700

Sircar, O. (2022). A brief prehistory of queer freedom in the New India. In P. Kumar (Ed.), *Sexuality, abjection and queer existence in contemporary India* (pp. 226–251). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003193531-15

Sivakumar, A., & Patchainayagi, S. (2022). Tracing Western transnationalism in Indian graphic novels. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 12*(5), 846–853. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1205.04

Springer, S., Birch, K., & Macleavy, J. (2016). *The handbook of neoliberalism.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730660

Steger, M. B., & Roy, R. K. (2010). *Neoliberalism: A very short introduction.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199560516.001.0001

Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H., & Melody, J. (2001). *Growing up girl: Psychosocial explorations of gender and class.* Macmillan Education UK. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350392793

Weston, K. (1991). *Families we choose.* Columbia University Press.

Corresponding author: Nanjani Gandhi
Email: nanjani1998@pondiuni.ac.in

Understanding the Multi-Sensory in a City's Cultural Attractions: The Museum Experiences of Istanbul's Historical Urban Texture

Asiye Nisa Kartal
Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Turkiye

Hasan Basri Kartal
Mimar Sinan Fine Art University, Turkiye

Abstract

Museums and their peripheries are hubs of intangible heritage, cultural memory and creative narratives in cities. The "sensory" is often overlooked, yet plays a vital role in museum experiences. This study focuses on the multi-sensory visiting experiences of Istanbul museums on its historical peninsula. Fieldwork was based on public participatory, "in-situ", and mobile methods, "sensewalking" to collect data. We aimed to provide a new insight into understanding the sensory reflections of Istanbul's cultural attractions. The findings on the visual, haptic, olfactory and auditory museum experiences were helpful for further elucidating adaptable, individual or customisable cultural museum design principles. We understand that the multi-sensorial nature of the museum visiting experiences is related to the historical urban texture, and the transformations in the place re-coded the multi-sensory attractions in the museums. The discussion revealed that the sensory approach needs to be embedded in examining cultural centres, especially museums. This study is the first on the multi-sensory museum experiences of Istanbul's historical peninsula. Its outcomes are helpful in identifying positive socio-cultural changes in sensory museum models in Turkey and internationally. The study's impact thus provides opportunities for opening up new perspectives in architecture, museum design, and intangible heritage studies. Sensory experiences-based policymaking and design in Istanbul's museums can evoke a new understanding.

Keywords: cultural hubs of Istanbul, Istanbul, multi-sensory experiences, museum sensory environments, sensewalking, Turkey

The sensorial interpretation of human experience in urban living began to be discussed after World War II (Benjamin, 2021; de Certeau, 1984; Lynch, 1960; Tuan, 1977). The "sensorial phenomenon" has undergone a revolution in different fields of study (Zardini, 2005), but the "sensory" is still in its infancy as an object of research and professional practice (Thibaud, 2011; Vasilikou, 2016), and there are some gaps requiring further study.

Although vision is dominant in research and practice (Mattern, 2008; Zardini, 2005), the human body is a sensory organism, and we experience our surroundings through our ears, noses, skin, taste buds, and eyes (Mags & Guy, 2007; O'Neill, 2001; Pallasmaa, 2005, 2011). Sensory experiences may refer to the perception, definition, or assessment of information through our body when we see, hear, touch, smell, or taste something. Sensory experiences happen in contact with the environment and are "multi-sensorial". They shape the feelings, emotions, evaluations, and descriptions related to the surroundings in which we live (Howes, 2005; Paterson, 2009; Zardini, 2005). sensory matters were discussed in studies on olfactory experiences (Barbara & Perliss, 2006; Henshaw, 2013; Kubartz, 2014); haptic experiences (Herssens & Heylighen, 2012; Lobo, 2021; O'Neill, 2001); auditory experiences (Bull, 2020; Henckel, 2019) and gustatory experiences (Fernando, 2005). However, museums' sensory issues are still overlooked, although some recent studies on multi-sensory experiences do discuss auditory experiences (Bubaris, 2014), haptic sensations (Vi et al., 2017), olfactory sensory qualities (Stevenson, 2014), and taste occurrences (Brown, 2018). They show that the sensory visiting experiences of museum sites would be an innovative area to study.

Sensory interactions emerge from experiencing a place, and place experiences are translated into sensory qualities that influence feelings, attitudes and behaviours (Degen, 2008; Howes, 2005; Mattern, 2008). Sensory qualities of a place occur through socio-cultural and psychological processes. They emphasise the place's attributions, atmosphere, social interactions, and knowledge (Rhys-Taylor, 2016, 2020). People's interventions in a place create the multi-sensory dimensions that negotiate their experiences (Cresswell, 1992; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006). A place is the centre of sensory spatial attachments corresponding to sensory dimensions (Borer, 2013).

We know that sensory phenomena are vital for the urban texture (Mattern, 2008) because physical form, activity, and meaning emerging within a place contribute to multi-sensory experiences (Abusaada, 2020; Agnew, 2011;). Multi-sensory experiences link to the ability to recognise a place's sensory features. A place's multi-sensory character relates to its authentic characteristics linked to sensory properties (Low, 2015; Salah Ouf, 2001). The built environment is an ample source for sensory perspectives based on spatial connections, practices and interactions (Kent et al., 2017; Urry, 2011; Yaneva, 2018). Connections between sensory qualities and people's personally experienced perceptions create urban, textured features (Beidler & Morrison, 2016; Torabi, 2015). Multi-sensory experiences have a significant impact on portraying a deeper understanding and conception of the urban texture (Howes, 2005; Howes & Classen, 2013).

The city of Istanbul is located on a historical peninsula surrounded by the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus on the east, and the Marmara Sea on the south. The distinctive urban texture of Istanbul has been built up over many centuries. The Fener and Balat region in the historical peninsula lie within the boundaries of today's Fatih district and is one of the most important places in Istanbul, having cultural significance and possessing intangible heritage. Studies on Istanbul's museums so far have included museum and city image relationships (Altınbaşak & Yalçın, 2010; Ozorhon & Ozorhon, 2015), earthquake risk mitigation (Erdik et al., 2010), and accessibility, to mention only a few (Dincer et al., 2019). The study at hand is a fundamental one, based on the sensory experiences of Fener and Balat, Istanbul's museums, focusing on one of the cultural attraction points of the historical peninsula. Fieldwork used the qualitative, humanistic and public participatory method of "sensewalking". The main question was how multi-sensory museum qualities beyond the visual senses were experienced by museum visitors. The main aim was to investigate how the multi-sensory museum experiences might help to shape the historical urban texture of Istanbul. The central hypothesis is that a walking-based, humanistic method generates valuable insights into the multi-sensory perception of the historical peninsula's museums. Based on the outcomes of this study, we propose increasing public awareness about the multi-sensory museum qualities related to historical urban textures. Also, the study used a novel approach to collect data on multi-sensory museum experiences. This method helped us to assess the museums' non-visual sensory identifications and intangible features.

Literature Review: Cultural Attractions' Sensory Experiences in the Transforming a Place

The Spatial Story of Fener and Balat Under Global Development Waves in Istanbul

In Turkey's 1950s, the migration from villages to cities rapidly increased with industrialisation and mechanisation. Rapid changes in land purchases and sales emerged with the Second World War. Especially with the transition to a multi-party system since 1945, the big cities of Turkey, primarily Istanbul, have witnessed enormous urban projects. The wide streets of Istanbul were opened in parallel with modern urbanism movements, and various historical areas were destroyed. By the way, providing cheap labour to the rising industrial sector and allowing the workers to build their dwellings supported unplanned urban regions of the city. The first "shantytowns" (Turkish: *gecekondu mahalleleri*) outside of Istanbul's urban areas emerged with migration and were supported primarily by political power (Enlil, 2011; Enlil et al., 2015; Karaman, 2008).

Since the 1970s, the neo-liberal order has begun to affect the free market economy, and the largest city in Turkey has started to become an open market. Liberal planning approaches were developed in this direction, granting broad rights to local governments. After the 1980s, liberalist economic systems led to the neo-capitalist urban planning approaches. In the 1980s, globalisation increased its power in architectural projects (Dökmeci & Berköz, 1994; Marquart, 2014; Uzun, 2007). The urban transformation projects in Istanbul offered solutions to allow global capital to flow into the city (Dinçer, 2011; Esen & Rieniets, 2008). Urban policies

worked to help the domestic market integrate with the world. Various strategies have become more visible in this period to avoid being left behind by globalisation. The change in historical urban areas was visible in Istanbul after the 1990s (Dinçer, 2011; İnan, 2017; Keyder, 2005; Turgut, 2010). Opening the door to the private sector on spatial planning has led to projects that bring more income and prestige (Akın et al., 2015; Uzun, 2007). Physical, economic and socio-cultural changes have occurred in historical urban textures. Istanbul's historical areas started to transform within the new social and spatial dynamics framework, especially with the economic restructuring after 1990 (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011; Marquart, 2014).

In the 2000s, we witnessed the integration of globalisation into the city's historical texture together with the challenges of urban morphology, identity and characteristics (Akın et al., 2015; Can, 2013; Islam, 2010; Keyder, 2005). The 2000s were the period when the abandoned central regions of the city, such as Fener and Balat on the historical peninsula of Istanbul, were re-articulated to provide capital for urban transformation projects. Notably, Fener and Balat have a distinctive past and different socio-cultural and architectural features. The region's narrow street pattern (see Figure 1) and colourful building facades (see Figure 2) are critical features of the urban texture**.** Red brick, stone, and wood are the most common building materials in the area (see Figure 3). The bakeries, cafes and candy shops shape the olfactory characteristics of the surroundings **(**see Figure 4**)**. The region is a cosmopolitan place, with many mosques and churches located there. The sound of *ezan* (call to Islamic prayer) and church bells beside the street vendor's voices and people talking are ordinary occurrences any time of day. The region has been the place of assemblages of activities within multi-layered confrontations; therefore, different sensory experiences simultaneously occur here. Through the years, different variables have impressed the place changes based on the multiple interrelated factors. Unlike other periods, the period that began in the 2000s was when the state tried to change cultural interaction points through urban transformation projects. Remarkably, Fener and Balat, on the historical peninsula of Istanbul, witnessed visible transformations in which tangible and intangible modifications have influenced diverse art galleries and eclectic museum places.

Figure 1

Streets in Fener and Balat

Note: The pictures show the authentic narrow streets in Fener and Balat. The photos were taken in April 2024, during the sensewalkings. The close relationship between the spatiality is directly linked to the multi-sensory atmosphere of the place.

Figure 2

Building Facades in Fener and Balat

Note: The figures reveal colourful building facades in the Fener and Balat area. The photos were taken during the walks in April 2024. Some buildings were approached for designing new local museums, but the urban policies did not allow for this.

Figure 3

Building Materials in Fener and Balat

Note: The figures show some of the distinctive facade materials of the building; we see red brick, stone and wood on the facades of Fener and Balat's houses; the photos were taken during the time of the walks of April 2024. The graffiti and wall paintings are visible as many young people visit the area daily.

Figure 4

Front Displays of Stores in Fener and Balat

Note: Some of the area's bakeries, cafes and candy shops; the photos were taken during the walks of April 2024.

Body Senses and Cultural Attractions

We already mentioned that people experience places through their eyes, ears, noses, and skin, and they judge a place by following socio-cultural and individual expectations based on how these look, sound, smell, feel, and taste. The human body is a sensing organism that draws from sensory qualities when experiencing surroundings. The starting point of this understanding is derived from French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's ideas about place, body, experience, and sensation. Merleau-Ponty defines his spatial conceptualisation as unclosing the link between the body and place. He identifies the body as the mediator between self and place, where the self uses and transforms the surroundings through the body (Hale, 2016; Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Seamon, 2018).

The study's starting idea is that cultural attractions make it possible to understand the sensory notifications of a place. It is only through our bodies that we have direct access to place, so we cannot experience place unless our bodies. Our body opens a world where we can approach cultural attractions, so our body is our anchorage in the world. The concept of the body is part of a system of sensory activities capable of reforming—the role of the body as the origin of the experience of multi-sensory interactions in museums. The study hypothesis is based on the idea that we comprehend the sensory relations in museum environments through our bodies. Due to the bodily interactions in the place, we capture how the body directs, navigates and uses places' multi-sensory elements. A place is shaped through bodily experiences with perceptual components (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Pallasmaa, 2011). The dynamic relationships corporeally involve us in the museum places. The body inhabits the museums' cultural codes, identities and characteristics to capture the sensory relationship in the place based on our bodily experiences.

The Fener and Balat region's cultural activities relate to its background, derived from socio-cultural identities, because it is not only a place of Turkish people but historically a place of cosmopolitism. Minorities (Greek, Jewish and Armenian), the elites, and migrants from different origins have all lived here during various historical stages. Thus, the urban texture reflects Istanbul's historical, architectural, and socio-cultural evolution. The place is a region where people can encounter layered, diverse sensory experiences. The place's sensory-spatial richness is related to its dynamic cultural encounters, such as museums, which evolved through the years. There exists something special in this area, something that exceeds the place's boundaries. The cultural attractions are the marks of the urban texture of this specific region of Istanbul. The museum environments' sensory reflections are products of cultural, individual and social processes, so they are the container of cultural, social, and individual relationships with the senses. Sensory experiences offer valuable ways to study sensory interactions in the historical urban texture. The sensory qualities determine the urban texture's social and cultural values, particularly the inhabitants' experiences, and provide continuity and sustainability of the sensory values. The intangible attributes and activities are part of the urban texture, besides the form and activities in the place.

The Museum Environments of Fener and Balat in Istanbul

Museums "are centers of learning, community centers, social hubs, even places of healing and contemplation" (Levent & Pascual-Leone, 2014, p. xiii). Fener and Balat offer vital museum services for Istanbul. The sensory museum visiting experiences are experiential agents and vital for community life and practices in the museum environment; thus, museums' habitats are the key laboratories to be examined for sensory perspectives (Velasco & Obrist, 2020). However, the debates on how visitors experience, perceive and assess museums are still in the infancy in the humanities, social sciences, and museum studies, even if the multi-sensory dimensions closely relate to museum studies.

The Fener and Balat zone is a cultural hub at the apex of the historical peninsula (Fatih district), which, as already mentioned above, used to be a sanctuary for Turkey's Armenian, Greek, Italian and Jewish communities (Bezmez, 2007; Gur, 2015). It is surrounded by late Ottoman-era buildings (mainly from the 19th and early 20th centuries) and several more recent examples of architecture. Significant historical buildings surround the cosmopolitan area, including cultural activities and museum environments. After the 2000s, the municipality decided to revitalise the museums in Fener and Balat to attract locals and tourists and bring back its old character from the late Ottoman era. Due to government-driven implementations, Fener and Balat museums have embodied these changing spatial situations. Different variables have impressed the museums' sensory qualities, and the spatial transformation of Fener and Balat museums has gained momentum since the 2000s. With new urban policies, veteran museums have begun to be changed in terms of spatial identities. Notably, the small-scale museums in the place have been facing severe challenges. New kinds of museum-visiting activities have been added to some of the restoration projects in the area. While the characteristic landmarks that made the museum experiences remarkable have changed, the transformation has affected sensory museum visiting experiences.

Fener and Balat museums were re-functioned following the vision of Istanbul becoming a world city. With globalisation, the Fener and Balat district was no longer a passive element of cultural accumulation but has become an actor in Istanbul's performance. With the acceleration of the urban transformation of Istanbul, the gentrification of museum places emerged. This situation caused municipalities to develop new district cultural attraction strategies. The local municipality has developed various approaches to increase the number of falling cultural tourism destinations in the area. With the gentrification efforts, the area's museums and art galleries were restored. This study problematised the ineffectiveness of common sense in sensory experiences' transformations of the museums, which have just witnessed the changes in the cultural attractions' changes. After completing these big renovation projects, the place began to lose its originality, and a strange homogenisation seems to have taken place through these prestigious museum projects.

How do visitors sense, experience, and connect with museums in the historical texture of Istanbul? How do the non-visual experiences of museum experiences affect intangible heritage, cultural memory, and community life? These were guiding questions for this study on a

partially neglected area in place of museum studies, sensory urbanism and architecture. To address these questions, this study followed linked thematic strands of investigation by re-exploring museums through the lens of intangible heritage elements.

Research Design and Method: The Sensewalking in the Museum Environment

What Does "Walking" Mean in the Built Environment, and What is Sensewalking?

Walking is a bodily performance to experience the lived attributions of the surroundings (Hein et al., 2008). Walking is a way of experiencing a place (Wunderlich, 2008); people immerse their bodies in a place as they walk in it (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Powell, 2020).

As a qualitative study method, sensewalking allows mixed-type data-gathering ways for people to define and interpret the sensory experiences of being in a location while they walk (Adams & Askins, 2009). While the attention was on the human-centric approaches, ecological perceptions, and phenomenological investigations of the environment in the 1960s, the method of sensewalking was used to discover people's bodily and cognitive experiences while walking in a certain area (Adams & Askins, 2009; Henshaw, 2013). The first examples of sensewalking were "soundwalks" to catch the sounds and auditory features of the surroundings. In 1969, some sound-based data was collected by way of walking to examine auditory features of the built environments (Porteous, 1985; Southworth, 2020); in 1974, artist and sound ecologist Westerkamp initiated the study to create auditory awareness of the environment (Westerkamp, 1974).

Various studies used the sensewalking method to understand sensory experiences beyond the visual senses (Henshaw, 2013; Henshaw et al., 2009). For example, smellwalks have been conducted to discover ecology-oriented artworks via aromatic discoveries (Berrigan & McBean, 2008); the urban places' environmental olfactory factors and sniff-based information were analysed with nose-trained experts through sensewalking (Porteous, 1985). McLean (2015) and Diaconu (2011) made sensory-based discoveries by smellwalks. Henshaw and Bruce (2012) investigated sound and smelling experiences and expectations. Degen and Rose (2012) undertook sensewalks by focusing on multi-sensory sensations of the transformed, built environment. Overall, sensewalking is a phenomenological approach for exploring the built environments' sensory dimensions. It is a valuable practice to understand how people experience built environments beyond the visual senses in terms of aural, olfactory, haptic, and gustatory, alongside visual experiences. The fieldwork of sensewalking is devised for the direct experience, identification, and investigation of the sensory conception of a place.

The museum environment's sensory dimensions beyond the visual senses were the central theme of this research. The sensewalking method was proposed in this context to gather responses about sensory museum experiences. The objective contributing to attaining the study's aims was using a public participatory approach to generate humanistic data (focusing on people, meaning, actions and experiences in a qualitative way) about the museum environments.

Sensewalking in the Museums of Fener and Balat

When we enter a museum, we are continuously immersed in its different but integral sensory compositions. The modes, connotations, definitions, and practices happening between our body and the museum environment create our multi-sensory experiences. Sensory museum visiting experiences are based on our surroundings' sights, sounds, smells, and textures. We used this sensory-spatial, mobile investigation method to analyse visitors' sensory experiences, including how they look, sound, smell, and haptically sense the museum environment.

In our project, the method of the sensewalking was devised in two phases. There was an initial phase before conducting the sensewalking in the museum environment. In this period, we concentrated on the concept underpinning the design of the museum environments. Speaking to some key informants helped the study grasp the principles behind the visiting strategies of the case museums. In the initial phase, a question template was designed for museum visitors, including questions to analyse the sensorial relations between the museum environment and visitors. The template included questions to ask the walkers (study participants), photograph the surroundings and write down some notes while they experienced the museums while walking.

The second stage (the main stage of sensewalking) covered the sensewalking sessions in the museums. The participants and researchers gathered at the agreed location (Balat Bus station: https://maps.app.goo.gl/8CZh8RWn5s9YRBm48) prior to the beginning of the walks where the details and purpose of the task were explained to the participants, along with their role in the research and the walking procedure. For the basis of sensewalking, the participants were required to walk in selected streets (in Fener and Balat) under the guidance of the researchers. Some points for stopping and discussions during walks were selected. They were the central nodes of the walks; they were Saint Stephen's Orthodox Church, Private Fener Greek High School, Mesnevîhâne Mosque, Coloured Houses of Balat, Ferruh Kethuda Mosque, Ebuzer al-Gıffar Tomb, Arapzade Apart, Vlaherna Meryem Ana Church, Ayvansaray Street, and Yusuf Secaattin Ambari Mosque (Route: https://maps.app.goo.gl/PQc2h6CD2FKw2XH66). The walkers concentrated on observing and experiencing the sensory dimensions of environments during walking.

Furthermore, two types of sensewalking designs were used to conduct the fieldwork. Group walking involves more than two people, while couple walking includes just two people. One "group sensewalking" and two "couple sensewalking" sessions were undertaken in April and November 2024. The sensewalks were conducted with different groups of people, so each person participated in one walk only. The participants gathered at the agreed location before the beginning of the walk, where the details and purpose of the task were explained. The meeting point for all walks was Balat Peron station. A primary route was followed in all walks (see the route https://maps.app.goo.gl/oNMaMAt3h9EuGdMKA).The participants provided informed written consent for their data to be used. As a qualitative method, sensewalking fits well with including a small number of participants. During the walks, participants took photos,

answered questions (some were open-ended, some were based on a 0 to 10 Likert scale), and took notes on the forms provided.

For the "group sensewalking" session, 19 adults (14 female and 5 male) who experienced Fener and Balat participated in the fieldwork. In the "couple sensewalking", a total of 4 adults (2 female and 2 male) walked the built environment of the place. The age range of participants in this study was between 18 and 40 years of age. Twenty-one of the participants were Turkish. All the walkers resided in Istanbul during the walks. More than half of the participants were university students.

In the context of this study, the multi-sensory walks included qualitative data acquisition of individual-centric experience within the two museum environments in Fener and Balat. The case museums were Rezan Has Museum and Feshane ArtİstanbuI. Four sensory modalities (visual, auditory, olfactory and haptic) were studied during the walks. The participants walked into the museum environment and observed and experienced the museums' sensory qualities. The participants were asked to focus on visual (colour, form), haptic (pattern, texture), auditory (sounds, voices) and olfactory qualities (smells, scents, odours) of the place. The method investigated walking-based explorations and the sensory qualities of the museum environment.

We followed the multi-sensory characteristics with a qualitative perspective considering multi-sensory elements. From a multi-sensory perspective, the Fener and Balat museums (Rezan Has Museum and Feshane ArtİstanbuI) of Istanbul disclosed the distinguishing characteristics of the district. The Rezan Has Museum offers distinctive spatial experiences in terms of urban sensations of Fener and Balat area, including an 11th-century Byzantine cistern, a 17th-century Ottoman *hamam*, and a 20th-century tobacco factory (Babazadeh Asbagh, 2018; Ozdemir & Gokmen, 2017). In its original form, ArtİstanbuI was the historical "Feshane-i Amire" building on the shore of the Golden Horn. The building was one of Istanbul's most significant industrial heritage buildings from Ottoman times, producing various textile products, primarily fezes, fabrics, rugs, and carpets. Restoration and re-functioning efforts were made to transform the historical building into ArtİstanbuI, a centre for the region's multi-sensory experiences and socio-cultural activities (Çelen, 2023; Robins, 2023).

The method sensewalking—to understand how people sensed place beyond the visual experiences— revealed the "multi-sensory" thresholds of the place. "Multi-sensory" thresholds refer to individuals' sensory perceptions as they experience the place through visuals, sounds, smells, and haptic components (Degen & Rose, 2012; Howes, 2010, 2012, 2021; Low, 2015). During the walk, all the walkers filled out the questionnaire to respond to the questions on the perceived sensory dimensions of the museum environments; ten questions were asked of the walkers. Five were open-ended, three requested simple definitions from the walkers, and two were based on a 0 to 10 Likert scale. The walkers took photographs of the surroundings and wrote down some notes while they experienced the museum environment while walking.

Findings and Discussion

Multi-Sensory Museum Experiences and Critique of the Study

The multi-sensory experiences comprise the built environment's physical, spatial and structural dimensions (Degen, 2008; Merlino et al., 2023). The sensory experience is significantly mediated by bodily mobility, mainly by walking practices (Bassett, 2004; Degen & Rose, 2012). Walking ensures a sensorial interaction between the body and its environment (Henshaw, 2013; Middleton, 2010). As an inescapable element of daily life, walking is a bodily performance with defined lived attributions. It is a profound spatial performance which designs a sense of the place (Wunderlich, 2008).

Rezan Has Museum is a private museum in Fener and Balat, Istanbul, situated in the Kadir Has University on the shore of the Golden Horn. The collection of Rezan Has Museum consists of thousands of objects and artefacts. The walkers said the entryway and entrance of Rezan Has Museum have distinctive visual features as the building was designed with modern and traditional building materials (see Figure 5). The walkers defined the historical outlook of Kadir Has University as visually distinctive; the university building was once a tobacco warehouse and cigarette factory, then restored and transformed into the university campus.

Figure 5

Entering the Case Place, Rezan Has Museum

Note: From left to right, the first photo shows the way to Rezan Has Museum, and the second photo depicts the entrance of the Rezan Has Museum.

Feshane ArtİstanbuI uses a historical building built in 1833 during the Ottoman era. Feshane was established as a textile factory named "Feshane-i Amire", which was transformed into a museum after re-functioning the building. The walkers stated that the harmony between the historical texture and modern architectural elements was visible in terms of the visual experiences of the place (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Entering to the Case Place, Feshane ArtİstanbuI

Note: The four photos display the exterior areas of Feshane ArtİstanbuI

We had brief "walk and talk" sessions (open-ended questions-based fifteen-minute interviews with the walkers) after each walking session. The walkers shared their initial assessments of the built environment's sensory experiences. Most of the walkers (study participants) stated that walking was a valuable way to experience the built environment's sensory qualities. They said Fener and Balat district has had opportunities to wander around and meet friends. The area's museums were important, as cultural activities such as going to cinemas, participating in festivals, and visiting exhibitions were related to museum visits when experiencing the area. The participants also stated that they encountered several tourists while they walked around the place. The Fener and Balat area is a key tourist destination in Istanbul's historic core, showcasing a multicultural region where non-Muslim communities coexist with Muslim residents. The place is characterised by the coast, narrow streets, alleyways, historical religious sites, and colourful houses. The area features boutique hotels, art galleries, cafes, and notable sea traffic, attracting tourists.

More than half of the participants (14 people) described the present visual environment of Fener and Balat museums as positive (by giving ten on a scale from 0 to 10). We used a 0-10 rating scale where 10 signifies "positive sensory environment" and 0 means "negative sensory environment". Thirteen people defined the distinctive wall colour as first in terms of visual sensory experiences. The recognisable entry places of the museums were defined as visually dominant by the walkers (see Figure 7). The historical texture of the facades, ceilings, and ornate windows was described as iconic in terms of the visual experiences of Fener and Balat museums. The walkers said the plan of the building was legible to experience. The metal structures and wide windows were combined with the place's historical texture, modern design and concrete outlook. The walkers defined the historic stone and brick walls of the museum's characteristics. In the "walk and talk" interviews, most walkers stated that the visual-based patterns (such as the direction and route of the place) of the museum's exhibition places were designed efficiently to see the artefacts. They said the distinct colour of exhibition panels makes the exhibition objects more visible. The light quality was favourable to the walkers as they said the interior lights are efficient for experiencing the place. Through the results related to visual features, we may say that unique visual features such as colours, forms, and patterns

are distinguishable elements of the museum environments. Notably, newly renovated surfaces of the museum environments were defined as pleasant. The historical museum environments' visual features showed the implementation of restoration procedures. One participant stated,

> I am pleased that the restorations at the Rezan Has Museum have not harmed the authentic visual textures of the place. I notice contemporary elements that complement the historical aspects of the museum environment well.

We think visual characteristics of the museum environment must be carefully considered when designing further applications in this place. Another walker said that "visual interiors of the ArtİstanbuI museum is fabulous. The historical walls guide me through my museum journey and enhance the museum's sentimental atmosphere." We think the visual properties of the museum walls, windows, roofs and facades must be approached cautiously (by considering the materiality and sensory sides of the spatial properties) in further museum development.

Figure 7

Exhibition Areas' Entrances in the Museums

Note: The photos show the entrance of the exhibition areas; the left photo is from the Rezan Has Museum, and the second of Feshane ArtİstanbuI.

The *ezan* (Islamic call to prayer), church bells, footstep sounds, talking, coughing, giggling, and laughing were the most authentic sounds observed by the participants as they walked in and between the Fener and Balat museums. More than half of the participants (14 people) found the auditory environment of the museums favourable. The walkers stated that the division and separation inside the museum places make the auditory quality positive. The rate of "human-based sounds" such as talking, coughing, giggling, and laughing could present the crowd of visitors. The museum environment's sounds, which come from the installations on exhibition stands, walls and display panels, were defined as pleasant due to the harmony of the sounds in the place. The result says the auditory experiences in the museum environments are linked to the implementations based on the place's latest conversion, restoration, and renovation procedures, which have been stated as pleasant. We think that future decisions and practices related to urban planning and management must consider museums' auditory characteristics.

The walkers defined red brick, stone, marble, wood, and metal as the most distinctive surface materials, which were sensed as pleasant by the walkers. The red brick was defined as the most common building material element regarding haptic experiences in museum environments. The walkers said the smooth floor and colourful exhibition panels directed the walkers to connect to the haptic identity of the surroundings. The massiveness of the interior walls was the most typical material feature of Fener and Balat museums. The opaqueness of the surfaces came from the most typical material quality. In terms of museums' haptic experiences, the unique sensory characteristics of the museum environments were the imageable facades, symmetric windows, recognisable entries, height ceilings, and luminous interiors. The haptic characteristics of the museum environments were experienced with a higher rate of pleasant statements and definitions regarding the sensations of the walkers. The result may say the museums have pleasant haptic elements due to the latest implementations that may need to be improved as much as possible.

The dust smells, paint smells, paper smells, stone smells, metallic smells, perfume smells, coffee and tea smells, and cigarette smoke smells were considered important authentic smells as walkers wandered through and in between the Fener and Balat museums. The walkers said the authentic smells were experienced as episodic, not continuous, but they were strong. We can see the olfactory experiences of the place sensed pleasant during walking. The dust, paint, metallic odours, and artificial flower smells defined the most recognisable olfactory experiences of the Fener and Balat museums. The sea smell is dominant at the entry gate of the museums; tree and fresh flower smells could be experienced, as there are some green areas near the museums' locations, and the small percentage of nature-based pleasant smells was appreciated. Most of the walkers defined a distinct sweet candy smell experienced in the museum environments' galleries; it may derive from the room odours. The participants defined the smells of the museum environments as positive due to the connection with the authentic interior design and architectural atmosphere. The olfactory experiences were pleasant, and the result could be due to the effect of the museum's newly restored exhibition spaces. The positive olfactory environment of the exhibition areas was more recognisable at midday; the participants experienced the crowded cafes outside of exhibition spaces and galleries of the museums. These results underline that the olfactory features were shaped mainly by the objects, artefacts, and building materials.

We also learned how the walkers perceived and assessed the "sensory" dimensions of Fener and Balat museums. The study method supported qualitative data gathering via individual and group-centric experiences, but we also learned that it was impossible to decode the total sensory experiences of the museum environments through the walks. Sensewalking did help, however, cope with visually-oriented museum assessments and move beyond the visual museum experiences' data.

The museums provided positive sensory experiences in terms of four sensory modalities of the place, according to the participants' sensewalking results. A sensory walk does not fully picture all sensory dimensions of the museum environments, even though they can be recorded using the available technological tools. For this study, considering the relatively small sample of

participants (23 adults), the results could not draw a whole picture of all types of sensory experiences in the museum environment. We may say sensory experiences according to the daytime and seasonal weather elements would affect their sensory perception of the environment. In this study, a sensewalking session lasted nearly 3 hours. The group sensewalking session started at 11 am on a weekday in the spring session, the first couple sensewalking started at noon, and the second couple sensewalking began at 4 pm on a weekday in the autumn session. The multi-sensory approach helped the sensory elements that shaped the experiences in the museum environment. The individual interactions within the museum environments were the product of architectural, structural, and physical aspects besides sensory relations. However, the physical health (Zhang et al., 2019), mood (Coyne, 2016), demographic elements (Kent et al., 2017; Machingura et al., 2020), emotions (Abusaada, 2020), familiarity with the place (Swanwick, 2009; Degen & Rose, 2012) may also affect induvial sensory perception, considering these aspects within a qualitative method would provide extra advantages to future studies.

As mentioned already, the participants were between 18 and 40 years old. If the participants' age distribution or socio-cultural groups were extended in the examination, it would give more dimensional results as more than half of the participants said they experienced the museums for the first time. The participants were not sufficiently diverse regarding nationality, as 3 of the total participants were not Turkish. We know familiarity with the place would affect the perception of the built environments, and the assessments would change. We think the participants' moods, physiological health, and psychological situations will be important in evaluating the museum environment's sensory qualities. Maybe a small interview would be conducted after the walks (this would provide further I'nformation on the sensory characteristics of the place).

The overall sensory experience findings of Fener and Balat museums confirm that the area has been covered with pleasant (such as colours of the walls, distinctive surface materials and textures, *ezan* sound, sea smell) and unpleasant (such as dust smells, paint smells, cough and laughing sounds) sensory factors due to different implementations, planning decisions and technology-related issues. The place has its unique sensory elements, some of which are inherited from its past. When someone walks around the place, tourists, musicians, students, or locals can be encountered. The place has staged interesting sensory interactions that come from the surroundings. The sensory encounters were the place's unique sensory elements that marked the cultural attraction points' social diversity and sensory patterns. The result of the overall sensory experiences of Rezan Has Museum and Feshane ArtİstanbuI underline that the multi-sensory features were mainly shaped by the architectural elements of the place. The increasing number of exhibition places, galleries, and cafes in these places profiled cultural interactions. The place's small but veteran bookstores were also experienced positively. One walker who has lived in Istanbul since she was born said,

> I cannot imagine this place without historical stores. Every corner presents exciting opportunities to discover unique bookshops. I am addicted to wandering through the second-hand shops hidden away down small side streets.

We investigated the sensory experiences and focused on the museum environments' sensory characteristics of Fener and Balat district. The multi-sensory descriptions of the walkers gave us the sensory properties of the museum environment. They were related to multi-sensory perception and recognition of the museum environments. Fener and Balat museums have a spectrum of haptic features, visual components, and odour associations that guide experiences. For instance, the smells of rust and dust blend with the authentic textures and colours of the walls. The roofing materials harmonise with the metallic and paint-based aromas of the surroundings.

What Was the Novel Side of This Study?

While some humanities-based studies may today still disregard "sensorial phenomena" (Mattern, 2008; Pink, 2015), these nevertheless can contribute to new understandings in museum studies besides architecture and urban studies. This study contributed to such knowledge of sensory museology as we investigated how Fener and Balat museums provided sensory qualities beyond their visual senses. The findings were significant for knowing the place's qualitative value and intangible qualities.

Since its entrance in the late 1960s, sensewalking-based perspectives have been used by various disciplines in distinct approaches for search, educational or documentation aims. At their core, it was Benjamin who ignited 20th-century interest in urban walking as his "flaneur" suggested. This figure represents someone who walks through the city aimlessly, keenly observing and experiencing the built environment and natural composition. The flâneur embodies both the pleasures and the contradictions of modern city life. Benjamin emphasised the significance of a sensory approach to understand the novel experiences offered by a modern city's rapidly evolving landscape (Birkerts, 1982; Shields, 2014). Through "everyday urbanism", De Certeau explores the relationship between the sounds of the city and the act of walking. He articulates the connection between walking activities and auditory experiences. De Certeau asserts that walking ought to be regarded as an embodied means of engaging with the world, with sounds enhancing our comprehension of the sensory links within the environment as we walk (de Certeau, 1984, 2010). Situationist Artist and theoretician Guy Debord added the visual and cartographic aspects of walking (Debord, 2024). More recent sensewalking techniques emerged after the attention to ecological perception, humanistic geography, and phenomenological approach was raised to better understand the sensory human experience of the environment. In the late 1960s, Schafer's "World Soundscape Project" at Simon Fraser University organised various soundwalks to examine the acoustic environment of cities, investigating the sounds that contribute to the auditory landscape of urban areas (Schafer, 1993).

This study used the sensewalking approach, which was helpful for intangible heritage perspectives on museum scenarios, particularly for a new understanding of how people sense museum environments beyond the visual senses, which can be turned into a new urban design toolkit. The method was a flexible way to catch such multi-dimensional experiences. It triggered people to define individual bodily interactions with the place while people walked.

The method's advantage lies in discovering the recognisable sensory features available through directly experiencing the museum environment and commenting upon it.

There are several different conceptual ways to grasp or decode sensory modes of the museum environment. The study's method benefited the visitors' "in-situ", "immediate", and "bodily" responses while they experienced their surroundings. The methodology design was creative as the data collection enabled a mixed-methods-way to gather data on the visitors' museum experiences. Sensewalking is a method by which we may better understand how we experience cultural attraction points. It focuses on the multi-sensory aspects of the environment using holistic walking experiences. The method allowed participants to define and interpret their experience of the built environment through their visual, haptic, olfactory, and auditory sensations.

The discoveries were linked to the shortcomings and advantages of a public participatory approach in generating human data about museums. The approach provided viable solutions to challenge the one-sided and mostly visual-based assumptions of the museum environments' investigations. This point is essential and is hoped to prompt creative thinking for innovative museum models such as multi-sensory adaptable or customisable museums, also from the municipalities of Istanbul. The data can help create new solutions for the decision-making processes for museum environments in Istanbul. Policymakers may benefit from visiting sensory experiences in museum environments; collaborations may be envisaged with local or general museum offices. The study's reflections may also increase museum areas' design criteria used by architects and museum designers.

Conclusion

At the end of the 2000s, Istanbul took its place among the world's top global cities (Can, 2013; Islam, 2010). Its historical peninsula presents a crucial part of the unique texture of Istanbul's historicity (Elicin, 2014; Eraydın et al., 2017). When a new government was elected in 2002, the rapid strategies to put Istanbul's historical areas on the global stage first targeted the central and local governments (Dinçer, 2011; Dökmeci & Berköz, 1994). Afterwards, the cultural hubs of Fener and Balat were targeted for change due to the challenges of improving the city's many cultural spaces (Dökmeci & Berköz, 1994; Karaman, 2008). This led to the fundamental problem of socio-spatial changes and their sensory effects on the urban texture.

The study's perspective focused on walkers being active in the museum environment of Fener and Balat. The multi-sensory experiences-based methodology of the study is considered a novel approach as there was no prior investigation on the combined visual, haptic, auditory and olfactory phenomena experienced in the Fener and Balat museums. The "multi-sensory" is often overlooked, although vital in experiencing built environments. The approach considered bodily multi-sensations and answered the questions of museum environments' multi-sensory qualities.

The visual experiences-based result says the distinctive wall colours and the museums' entry places were recognisable. The historical texture of the surfaces, the height of ceilings and the specific windows seen were found to be some of the most striking visual experiences of Fener and Balat museums. Walkers also found the interior illumination of the museums positive in terms of lighting quality. The building materials, such as metal, glass, stone and bricks, were considered pleasant. The walkers said the combination of the modern design and historical texture gave off a pleasant atmospheric sense. The historic stone and brick walls of the buildings were also appreciated. Thus, the study makes clear that the visual characteristics of the museum environment must be carefully regarded in the museums' futures.

Auditory elements, such as "human-based sounds", talking, coughing, giggling, and laughing, were found to be central by the walkers. The walkers also experienced the sounds coming from *ezan* and church bells. The museum sounds, which came from the museum installation areas, were defined as delightful. The sensewalking result mentioned that the museums' auditory experiences were related to the place's conversion, restoration, and renovation procedures. We think further museum applications and practices the sound characteristics of the museums besides their physico-spatial features.

Olfactory phenomena encountered included dust, paint, paper, stone, metal, perfume, coffee and tea smells, and cigarette smoke, which the walkers recognised. Sea, sweet candy, tree, and fresh flower smells were also mentioned. The walkers found the olfactory environments of the museums generally pleasant and thought that some smells and spatial features merged. The olfactory atmosphere of newly restored exhibition areas, including the galleries, stands, and panels, was defined positively.

Haptic phenomena discovered included building materials, such as red brick, stone, marble, wood, and metal. The sensewalking sessions resulted in the appreciation of the smooth floors and exhibition panels, creating unique, haptic experiences in the museum environment. The enormity of the thick walls and opaqueness of the surfaces beside the distinctive coloured facades, symmetric windows, recognisable entries, height ceilings, and luminous interiors were defined as positive haptic features. We may say the design of the museums after its latest renovation work were found to be pleasant by the walkers, and further developments would need to engage even more the haptic sensory relations the walkers apparently sought.

Regarding the method's shortcomings, we knew that obtaining the desired level of data on the multi-sensory museum properties was challenging. The walking method produced new insights and encounters on multi-sensory place qualities, parameters and values. The sensewalking method was developed as a qualitative study tool for bringing together multi-sensory museum environment attainments while the walkers interact with the surroundings. We discussed how a sensory method could help improve study affordances. We asked how the advantages of a qualitative data-gathering gathering could reveal the sensory experiences in the built environment. The first advantage of the sensewalking method was that it made sensory experiences available while walkers were directly connected to the museum environment. The "walking" method benefited the visitors' "immediate" experiences while they experienced

their surroundings. It would have been difficult to reach "bodily" responses using other qualitative methods. The methodology design was creative in considering multi-sensory experiences. The four sensory modalities-based information may show the advantages of this public participatory method in generating humanistic data about places. The approach provided viable solutions to overcome the ordinary comprehension of the museum environments' spatial features.

Here, we must mention that finding participants with diverse profiles for our *in situ*, mobile, human-centred, and ethnographic sensory walk was challenging. Identifying suitable hours for the sensewalking proved difficult due to the heavy visitor traffic in the museums where it took place and the participants' availability. Due to the internal and external conditions in museum environments, there was overwhelming sensory stimulation at once—the abundance of sensory dimensions made focusing on individual senses or experiences challenging. Walking for extended periods may result in physical fatigue; to avoid this, we provided additional breaks to maintain the quality of mindful engagement while sensewalking. We also faced issues related to insufficient budget for the acquisition, installation, and use of technological equipment during the sensewalking.

This study began by questioning how a museum's multi-sensory features in a city's historical urban texture might be experienced. The findings specifying the relations between the sensory impressions will benefit the literature of sensory studies, sensory museology, architecture, and urban studies. This in turn will aid in thinking about new adaptable or customisable museum design scenarios for museum councils, policymakers, and urban designers. Multi-sensory experiences-based knowledge will contribute to museums' sensory concepts. Museum practitioners and policymakers in Istanbul's museums and beyond might consider creating new multi-sensory placemaking concepts to develop with the help of sensory experiences-based inquiries in mind. New solutions for museum places' sensory coding and branding for local or universal may thus become feasible. The obtained knowledge may benefit museums' sensory qualities and their understanding of design guidelines, toolkits, and models.

References

Abusaada, H. (2020). Strengthening the affectivity of atmospheres in urban environments: the toolkit of multi-sensory experience. *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, *14*(3), 379–392. https://doi.org/10.1108/ARCH-03-2020-0039

Adams, M., & Askins, K. (2009). Sensewalking: sensory walking methods for social scientists. In *Proceeding of the RGSIBG Annual Conference* (pp. 26–28).

Agnew, J. (2011). Space and place. *Handbook of geographical knowledge*, *2011*, 316–331. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446201091.n24

Akın, A., Sunar, F., & Berberoğlu, S. (2015). Urban change analysis and future growth of Istanbul. *Environmental monitoring and assessment*, *187*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-015-4721-1

Altınbaşak, İ., & Yalçın, E. (2010). City image and museums: the case of Istanbul. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *4*(3), 241–251. https://doi.org/10.1108/17506181011067628

Babazadeh Asbagh, N. (2018, April 5). The Adaptive Reuse of Cibali Tobacco Factory, Kadir Has University. *Kadir Has University*.

Barbara, A., & Perliss, A. (2006). *Invisibile Architecure: Experiencing places through the Sense of Smell*. Skira.

Bassett, K. (2004). Walking as an aesthetic practice and a critical tool: Some psychogeographic experiments. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, *28*(3), 397–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309826042000286965

Beidler, K. J., & Morrison, J. M. (2016). Sense of place: inquiry and application. *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, *9*(3), 205–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2015.1056210

Benjamin, W. (2021). *One-way Street: And other writings*. Verso.

Berrigan, C., & McBean, M. (2008). The Smelling Committee. *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, *16*(2–3).

Bezmez, D. (2007). The politics of urban regeneration: the case of the Fener and Balat initiative. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, *37*, 59–86. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600004738

Birkerts, S. (1982). Walter Benjamin, flâneur: A flanerie. *The Iowa Review*, 164–179. https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2961

Borer, M. I. (2013). Being in the city: The sociology of urban experiences. *Sociology Compass*, *7*(11), 965–983. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12085

Brown, K. (2018). Touch, taste, smell: Fostering museum visitor engagement with multi-sensory spaces. In *The interior architecture theory reader* (pp. 202–211). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693002-25

Bubaris, N. (2014). Sound in museums–museums in sound. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, *29*(4), 391–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2014.934049

Bull, M. (2020). Sounding out the City: An auditory epistemology of urban experience. In *The auditory culture reader.* Routledge, 73–86. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003086895-7

Can, A. (2013). Neo-Liberal urban politics in the historical environment of İstanbul-The issue of gentrification. *Journal of Planning*, *23*(2), 95–104. https://doi.org/10.5505/planlama.2013.79188

Coyne, R. (2016). *Mood and mobility: Navigating the emotional spaces of digital social networks*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10357.001.0001

Cresswell, T. (1992). *In place-out of place: geography, ideology, and transgression* (Vol. 2). U of Minnesota Press.

Çelen, M. (2023). documenta onbeş, Sanat Kurumları ve Ötesi: İstanbul Odağında Lumbung Pratiğini Düşünmek. *REFLEKTİF Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, *4*(3), 565–585. https://doi.org/10.47613/reflektif.2023.125

Debord, G. (2024). *The society of the spectacle*. PM Press.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley.

de Certeau, M. (2010). Walking in the City (1980). *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, 264–273.

Degen, M. M. (2008). *Sensing cities: Regenerating public life in Barcelona and Manchester* (Vol. 24). Psychology Press.

Degen, M. M., & Rose, G. (2012). The sensory experiencing of urban design: The role of walking and perceptual memory. *Urban studies*, *49*(15), 3271–3287. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012440463

Diaconu, M. (2011). Mapping Urban Smellscapes. In M. Diaconu, E. Heuberger, R. Mateus-Berr, & L. M. Vosicky (Eds.), *Senses and the City. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Sensescapes* (pp. 223–238). LIT Verlag.

Dincer, F. I., Ozcit, H., Cifci, I., Sezer, B., Kahraman, O. C., & Sahinoglu, S. (2019). Accessible museums for visually impaired: a case study from Istanbul. *Journal of Tourismology*, *5*(2), 113–126.

Dinçer, İ. (2011). The impact of neoliberal policies on historic urban space: Areas of urban renewal in Istanbul. *International planning studies*, *16*(1), 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2011.552474

Dökmeci, V., & Berköz, L. (1994). Transformation of Istanbul from a monocentric to a polycentric city. *European Planning Studies*, *2*(2), 193–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/09654319408720259

Elicin, Y. (2014). Neoliberal transformation of the Turkish city through the Urban Transformation Act. *Habitat International*, *41*, 150–155. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2013.07.006

Enlil, Z. M. (2011). The neoliberal agenda and the changing urban form of Istanbul. *International Planning Studies*, *16*(1), 5–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2011.552475

Enlil, Z., Dinçer, İ., Akyos, C., Can Çetin, B., & Gospodini, A. (2015). Changing spatialities of Istanbul: from a bottom-up informal development towards a state-led flexible urban transformation. In *Gospodini A. (2015). 2nd International Conference on Changing Cities, Spatial Design Landscape and Socio-economic Dimensions* (Vol. 22, No. 26, 30–39).

Eraydın, A., Demirdağ, İ., Güngördü, F. N., & Yenigün, Ö. (2017). Divercities: Dealing with Urban Diversity–The Case of Istanbul. *Middle East Technical University, Ankara*.

Erdik, M., Durukal, E., Ertürk, N., & Sungay, B. (2010). Earthquake risk mitigation in Istanbul museums. *Natural Hazards*, *53*, 97–108. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-009-9411-2

Esen, O., & Rieniets, T. (2008). Fortress Istanbul: Gated communities and the socio-urban transformation. *Public Istanbul: Spaces and Spheres of the Urban. Bielefeld: transcript*, 83–111. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839408650-004

Fernando, N. (2005). Taste, smell and sound on the street in Chinatown and Little Italy. *Architectural Design*, *75*(3), 20–25. https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.72

Gur, E. (2015). Regeneration of the historical urban center and changing housing market dynamics:'fener-balat'. *ArchNet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research*, *9*(1), 232–246. https://doi.org/10.26687/archnet-ijar.v9i1.459

Hale, J. (2016). *Merleau-Ponty for architects*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645438

Hein, J. R., Evans, J., & Jones, P. (2008). Mobile methodologies: Theory, technology and practice. *Geography compass*, *2*(5), 1266–1285. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00139.x

Henckel, D. (2019). Soundwalks as sensewalks: The case for integrated sensewalks. In *Inter-Noise and Noise-Con Congress and Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 259, No. 6, pp. 2995–3005). Institute of Noise Control Engineering.

Henshaw, V. (2013). *Urban smellscapes: Understanding and designing city smell environments*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203072776

Henshaw, V., & Bruce, N. (2012). Smell and sound expectation and the ambiances of English cities. In *Ambiances in action/Ambiances en acte(s)-International Congress on Ambiances, Montreal 2012* (pp. 449–454). International Ambiances Network. Retrieved from https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/smell-and-sound-expectation-and-the-ambiances-of-english-cities

Henshaw, V., Adams, M., & Cox, T.J. (2009). *Researching Urban Olfactory Environments and Place through Sensewalking*. In PhD Colloquium on Understanding Places; The University of Westminster, Marylebone Campus: London, UK. Retrieved from https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/researching-urban-olfactory-environments-and-place-through-sensew/fingerprints/

Herssens, J., & Heylighen, A. (2012). Haptic design research: A blind sense of space. *The Place of Research, The Research of Place*, 374–382.

Howes, D. (2005). Architecture of the Senses. *Sense of the city: An alternate approach to urbanism*, 322-331.

Howes, D. (2010). *Sensual relations: Engaging the senses in culture and social theory*. University of Michigan Press.

Howes, D. (2012). The cultural life of the senses. *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, *3*, 450–454. https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2012.30

Howes, D. (2021). Afterword: The Sensory Revolution Comes of Age. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, *39*(2), 128-137. https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2021.390209

Howes, D., & Classen, C. (2013). *Ways of sensing: Understanding the senses in society*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315856032

İnan, C. G. (2017). Urban problematic of cultural management in historical fragments in Istanbul: a case study in Fener-Balat and Süleymaniye. *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, *223*, 357–366. https://doi.org/10.2495/SC170311

Islam, T. (2010). Current urban discourse, urban transformation and gentrification in Istanbul. *Architectural Design*, *80*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.1011

Jorgensen, B. S., & Stedman, R. C. (2006). A comparative analysis of predictors of sense of place dimensions: Attachment to, dependence on, and identification with lakeshore properties. *Journal of environmental management*, *79*(3), 316–327. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2005.08.003

Karaman, O. (2008). Urban pulse—(re) making space for globalisation in Istanbul. *Urban Geography*, *29*(6), 518–525. https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.29.6.518

Kent, J. L., Ma, L., & Mulley, C. (2017). The objective and perceived built environment: What matters for happiness? *Cities & health*, *1*(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2017.1371456

Keyder, C. (2005). Globalisation and Social Exclusion in Istanbul. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *29*(1), 124–134. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2005.00574.x

Kubartz, B. (2014). Urban smellscapes: understanding and designing city smell environments. *The AAG Review of Books*, *2*(3), 99–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2014.919152

Levent, N., & Pascual-Leone, A. (Eds.). (2014). *The multi-sensory museum: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on touch, sound, smell, memory, and space*. Rowman & Littlefield. https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881816100

Lobo, M. (2021). Encountering the city: Haptic images of suburban Darwin. *Area*, *53*(2), 201-210. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12530

Lovering, J., & Türkmen, H. (2011). Bulldozer neo-liberalism in Istanbul: The state-led construction of property markets, and the displacement of the urban poor. *International Planning Studies*, *16*(1), 73–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563475.2011.552477

Low, K. E. (2015). The sensuous city: Sensory methodologies in urban ethnographic research. *Ethnography*, *16*(3), 295–312. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138114552938

Lynch, K. (1960). *The Image of the City*. The MIT Press.

Machingura, T., Kaur, G., Lloyd, C., Mickan, S., Shum, D., Rathbone, E., & Green, H. (2020). An exploration of sensory processing patterns and their association with demographic factors in healthy adults. *Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *48*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOT-12-2018-0025

Mags, A., & Guy, S. (2007). Editorial: Senses and the city. *The senses and society*, *2*(2), 133-36. https://doi.org/10.2752/174589307X203047

Marquart, V. (2014). Insurmountable Tension? On the Relation of World Heritage and Rapid Urban Transformation in Istanbul. *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, *17*(19). https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.5044

Mattern, S. (2008). Silent, invisible city: Mediating urban experience for the other senses. *Media City: Situations, Practices, Encounters.* Berlin: Frank & Timme.

McLean, K. (2015). Ex-formation as a method for mapping smellscapes. *Communication Design*, *3*(2), 173–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/20557132.2015.1163081

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Sense and non-sense*. Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610

Merlino, S., Mondada, L., & Söderström, O. (2023). Walking through the city soundscape: an audio-visual analysis of sensory experience for people with psychosis. *Visual Communication*, *22*(1), 71–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/14703572211052638

Middleton, J. (2010). Sense and the city: exploring the embodied geographies of urban walking. *Social & cultural geography*, *11*(6), 575–596. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2010.497913

O'Neill, M. E. (2001). Corporeal experience: A haptic way of knowing. *Journal of Architectural Education*, *55*(1), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.1162/104648801753168765

Ozdemir, N., & Gokmen, H. S. (2017). The role of University museums in the formation of new cultural layers: the case of Golden Horn, Istanbul. *University Museums and Collections Journal*, *9*, 40–50.

Ozorhon, I. F., & Ozorhon, G. (2015). Investigation of the relationship between museums and cities in the context of image: cases from Istanbul. *Journal of architecture and urbanism*, *39*(3), 208–217. https://doi.org/10.3846/20297955.2015.1088418

Pallasmaa, J. (2005). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses*. John Wiley & Sons.

Pallasmaa, J. (2011). *The embodied image: Imagination and imagery in architecture*. John Wiley & Sons.

Paterson, M. (2009). Haptic geographies: ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions. *Progress in human geography*, *33*(6), 766–788. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132509103155

Pink, S. (2015). *Doing sensory ethnography*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473917057

Porteous, J. D. (1985). Smellscape. *Progress in Physical Geography*, *9*(3), 356–378. https://doi.org/10.1177/030913338500900303

Powell, K. (2020). Walking refrains for storied movement. *Cultural Studies↔ Critical Methodologies*, *20*(1), 35–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619884975

Rhys-Taylor, A. (2016). The essences of multiculture: A sensory exploration of an inner-city street market. In *Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space* (pp. 46–59). Routledge.

Rhys-Taylor, A. (2020). *Food and multiculture: A sensory ethnography of East London*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085423

Robins, K. (2023). Art Istanbul: The Burden of Myth and the Hope in Art. *REFLEKTİF Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, *4*(3), 587–606. https://doi.org/10.47613/reflektif.2023.126

Salah Ouf, A. M. (2001). Authenticity and the sense of place in urban design. *Journal of Urban Design*, *6*(1), 73–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574800120032914

Schafer, R. M. (1993). *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Simon and Schuster.

Seamon, D. (2018). Merleau-Ponty, lived body, and place: Toward a phenomenology of human situatedness. *Situatedness and Place: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Spatio-temporal Contingency of Human Life*, 41–66. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92937-8_4

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and planning A*, *38*(2), 207–226. https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268

Shields, R. (2014). Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on flânerie. In *The Flaneur (RLE Social Theory)* (pp. 61–80). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203420713_chapter_4

Southworth, M. (2020). Listening to the city. *Journal of Urban Design*, *25*(5), 556–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2020.1809884

Stevenson, R. J. (2014). The forgotten sense. *The Multi-sensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space,* eds N. Levent and A. Pascul-leone Lanham. Rowman and Littlefield, 151–166. https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881816100.ch-10

Swanwick, C. (2009). Society's attitudes to and preferences for land and landscape. *Land use policy*, *26*, S62–S75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2009.08.025

Thibaud, J. P. (2011). The three dynamics of urban ambiances. *Sites of sound: Of architecture and the ear*, 43–53.

Torabi, Z. (2015). Explaining the concept of identity and sense of place in residential environment and lifestyle. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (Kuwait Chapter)*, *4*(5), 27–43. https://doi.org/10.12816/0018961

Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. U of Minnesota Press.

Turgut, H. (2010). Urban dynamics and transformations and their impact on urban housing: The case of Istanbul. *open house international*, *35*(4), 76–84. https://doi.org/10.1108/OHI-04-2010-B0009

Urry, J. (2011). City life and the senses. *The new Blackwell companion to the city*, 347–356. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395105.ch30

Uzun, C. N. (2007). Globalisation and urban governance in Istanbul. *Journal of Housing and the built environment*, *22*, 127–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-006-9069-y

Vasilikou, C. (2016). Sensory Navigation in the City Centre. Perceptual paths, sense walks and interactive atmospheres. In *Ambiances, tomorrow. Proceedings of 3rd International Congress on Ambiances. Septembre 2016, Volos, Greece* (Vol. 1, pp. 559–564). International Network Ambiances; University of Thessaly. Retrieved from https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/69916/

Velasco, C., & Obrist, M. (2020). *Multi-sensory experiences: Where the senses meet technology*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198849629.001.0001

Vi, C. T., Ablart, D., Gatti, E., Velasco, C., & Obrist, M. (2017). Not just seeing, but also feeling art: Mid-air haptic experiences integrated in a multi-sensory art exhibition. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, *108*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2017.06.004

Westerkamp, H. (1974). Soundwalking. *Sound Heritage*, *3*(4), 18–27.

Wunderlich, F. (2008). Walking and rhythmicity: Sensing urban space. *Journal of urban design*, *13*(1), 125–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574800701803472

Yaneva, A. (2018). New voices in architectural ethnography. *Ardeth. A magazine on the power of the project*, (2), 17–24. https://doi.org/10.17454/ARDETH02.03

Zardini, M. (2005). *Toward a Sensorial Urbanism*. In Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism. Canadian Center for Architecture: Montreal, QC, 17–27.

Zhang, T., Liu, J., & Li, H. (2019). Restorative effects of multi-sensory perception in urban green space: A case study of urban park in Guangzhou, China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(24), 4943. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16244943

Corresponding author: Asiye Nisa Kartal
Email: a.nisa.gunduz@gmail.com

Fragments of Broken History: Misrepresentations of Dahomey in Contemporary Culture

Ron Lawrence Anderson
University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

As a discipline, history has only been introduced into Africa relatively recently, and there are still many challenges when researching the African past. The pre-colonial kingdom of Dahomey on West Africa's Guinea Coast, today part of the Benin Republic, has a documented history based overwhelmingly on accounts from slave traders and colonial administrators, or other questionable sources. This has helped to create inverted historical narratives about the region and its peoples—sometimes favouring European perspectives over African ones, and sometimes emphasizing false stories built into local oral traditions. However, history as a disciple offers greater clarity over time, since the past is continually being re-assessed and refined with new evidence. Consequently, in modern times many errors have been corrected through dedicated research by historical specialists. Unfortunately, at the same time popular media—the internet, cinema and street art among them—continue to compound errors still in the historical record, and often even introduce new ones. The chasm between popular and academic perspectives on Dahomey seems to be widening. This article explores the dangers presented by the unvetted historical impressions conveyed through contemporary culture and popular art. It does so by contrasting informed academic knowledge with popular perspectives on the kingdom, mostly conveyed through mass media—both within the Republic of Benin, and around the world.

Keywords: African history, Amazons, Dahomey, Republic of Benin, The Slave Coast, West Africa

History was introduced into Africa by Europeans and remains a highly unreliable tool for understanding African societies before they were radically transformed through European contact. As the discipline of history is based overwhelmingly on written European sources, history in West Africa only really begins in the 1500s, when Europeans first arrived on the Guinea Coast (Mitchell, 2005). This preceded the rise of the kingdom of Dahomey, today part of the Republic of Benin, and so European accounts remain the single most utilised form of historical evidence on this pre-colonial kingdom. Though flawed, European reports are still the most insightful source materials at hand.

Regarding Dahomey, today part of the Republic of Benin, historical misrepresentations by Europeans go back a very long way. Slave traders in the 18th century often promoted narratives on Dahomey that favoured the slave trade (Dalzel, 1793; Norris, 1789; Snelgrave, 1734). In fact, some of the most important historical sources from the era are really polemical arguments written in support of slave trafficking, designed to influence authorities in Europe. Unfortunately, the slave trade affiliations of some of these writers, most notably Archibald Dalzel, have only been exposed in relatively recent decades (Rawley, 1984; Waldman, 1965). Thus, sources once regarded as objective and credible have been integrated into the historical record for centuries, even though they are contaminated with bias and blatant self-interest.

Conversely, European slave abolitionists in the 18th century tended to skew the narrative the other way—to favour Africans. Their motive was simply to show white slave traders in the worst possible light, often in efforts to influence law makers (Law, 2008). So, the fact is, Europeans on both sides of the slave question tend to be historically unreliable. Furthermore, in the 19th century the historical data has been distorted by other ideologies—Christian evangelism or colonial greed among them.

Not all the misrepresentation was completely conscious or made in bad faith. Most Europeans were simply ignorant about the Africans they were documenting (Law, 1991). African life was often interpreted in the light of the European experience, with assumptions that African history mirrored European history in some way, or that African development represented some point on an evolutionary continuum that Europeans had already passed (Lane, 2005, 2015; Stahl, 2005). Racism, and Europe's sense of civilizational superiority, inspired many of these damaging assumptions, which are still built into the written sources that form current historical perspectives on pre-colonial Africa. Consequently, history as a discipline has never served Africa well.

Unfortunately, African oral tradition can also be unreliable, even while offering valuable historical insights able to complement or counteract written sources. In Dahomey, in particular, much of the collected oral tradition of the kingdom was created by the royal dynasty as propaganda to legitimise its rule (Law, 1991; Le Hérissé, 1911). Today, modern historical scholars are still trying to untangle fact from fabrication, and myth from historical truth (Blier, 1995a; Law, 1991).

The fact is, the history of Dahomey is only being investigated by a small number of scholars, many of them not African. For most people, the subject is off the map of their lives, on some far-off and under-explored continent. This makes it vulnerable to new kinds of misrepresentation or manipulation. Inside Benin itself, people have far more pressing preoccupations, since the country remains alarmingly poor and undeveloped. What's more, with a literacy rate of only 42.4%, standards of education in Benin aren't helping (BTI Transformation Index, 2024). Knowledge on the history of Dahomey, so central to understanding the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, remains sorely lacking—across the globe, and among the people living there. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary depictions, which have rushed in to fill the vacuum—either online, through movies, or in public artworks.

Interrogating Popular History: A Methodology

Since the 1990s many of the errors riddling the historical literature have been rooted out. Historian Robin Law has demonstrated the strengths of traditional historical methods, emphasizing orthodox primary sources (Law, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2004). However, others have taken an inter-disciplinary approach. Edna Bay, Suzanne Preston Blier and Gaëlle Beaujean have extracted historical data from Dahomey's material culture (Bay, 2008; Beaujean 2019; Blier, 1995a, 2018). They and others have also embraced anthropological field research, harvesting new oral data from family or lineage histories (Bay 1998, 2008; Blier 1995b). These have provided entirely new streams of historical evidence, distinct from the oral tradition first collated by Auguste Le Hérissé (1911).

Today, while there are still large gaps in historical knowledge, there's also relative consensus. By the 1990s, most of the substantive disputes within the literature had been settled in favour of Robin Law, who argued successfully against I.A. Akinjogbin's assertion that Dahomey had been an unwilling participant in the slave trade (Akinjogbin, 1967; Law, 1991). Bay (1998, 2008) and Blier (1995a, 1995b, 2004, 2018), among other scholars, have added important chapters to the historiography, but without inspiring any major schisms.

However, accurate knowledge of Dahomey tends to preside with just a few subject matter experts in what is now being called the "global north". These consist of historians, art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists or people who combine these disciplines. Whatever the precise research tools used, recent insights on Dahomey have not filtered down to the masses, either within Benin, or anywhere else. So, while there are no longer any great divides in the academic literature, a chasm divides specialist scholars on Dahomey and everyone else.

This paper contrasts more recent academic insights with the messaging of popular media, delving beyond history as a siloed discipline by also referencing studies on the kingdom's material culture. As a great many people in the Republic of Benin now live in a highly inter-connected world, with access to the internet and international cinema releases, street art and public artworks within the Republic of Benin have also been included. These are contemporary works that, typically, only people in Benin see, and thus they offer the ideal opportunity to assess local perspectives on the Dahomean past, exclusive of any global messaging.

Consequently, as part of this research, travel to the Republic of Benin was undertaken in January 2024. Street art and public artworks were selected for discussion from three key locations: a) Cotonou, the country's largest urban centre; b) Ouidah, an important historical slave port; and c) Abomey, the pre-colonial capital of the kingdom. As this is not a discussion of Beninese artwork in general, only contemporary works that reflect back on Dahomean history have been discussed.

A Brief Historical Background

European involvement in the region that became Dahomey, today part of the Republic of Benin, goes back to about the mid-1500s when, according to local accounts, a fisherman named Kpate spotted the first Portuguese sea-faring vessel at the coastal town of Ouidah. According to local legend, this was the very beginning of the trade relationship that would develop between Europeans and West Africans (Burton, [1864]1966; Law, 2004; Rush, 2013).

Initially, the Portuguese traded for local ivory, pepper and cloth, but soon they also started buying slaves (Law, 1991). In fact, slave trading came to dominate mercantile activity on the Bight of Benin—so much so that by the late 17th century it became known the "Slave Coast" (Law, 1991). This was done with the complicity of African slave merchants, principally from the kingdoms of Allada and Hueda (see figure 1). However, even at this early point, the newly emergent kingdom of Dahomey was supplying slaves acquired in wars and raids in the interior, sometimes using the kingdoms to its south as intermediaries (Law, 1991).

Figure 1
The Bight of Benin

By the early 1600s, Portuguese traders were being superseded by Dutch traders. By the later 1600s, British, French, Danish and Brandenburg trading companies were also operating

permanent "slave factories" in the port of Offra, which was controlled by the kingdom of Allada, (Law, 1994). From 1671, the locus of that trade began to shift to the neighbouring kingdom of Hueda, with its little coastal town of Ouidah (Law, 2004). The Kingdom of Dahomey, to the north, had come into being only about 50 years before—on the Abomey Plain, about 115 kilometres inland (Law, 1991).

Local oral tradition maintains that the founding chief of Dahomey was named Dakodanu. According to tradition, his people were immigrants who, through a process of conquest and assimilation, built a new power base among the autochthonous Gbe-speaking peoples of the Abomey plain, who eventually came to identify as the "Fon" (Le Hérissé, 1911). Some scholars question this narrative, but most acknowledge that Dahomey had become a powerful, independent force on the Abomey plain by the mid-17th century (Argyle, 1966; Law, 1991).

The real ascendancy of Dahomey began with King Hoegbadja (1645–1685), who is hailed by the Fon people as the first true king of Dahomey (Argyle, 1966; Beaujean, 2019; Hazoume, 1938). However, it was only about a half century later that Dahomey truly caught the attention of Europeans, and the rest of the world. That happened in 1724, when King Agaja invaded Allada in dramatic fashion, slaughtering the inhabitants *en masse*. Graphic testimony from Europeans stationed there detailed the sheer brutality of the genocide. According to an English eyewitness in Allada at the time: "there was scarce any stirring for bodies without heads, and if it had rained blood it could not have lain thicker on the ground" (Lambe, [1724]1851).

In 1727, three years later, Agaja's army attacked and defeated the kingdom of Hueda – first the inland town of Savi, and then Ouidah on the coast, where slaves were onboarded for the Atlantic crossing (Snelgrave, 1734). Effectively then, from the early 18th century onwards, Dahomey had taken over the slave trade industry on the Bight of Benin and began dealing directly with European slave traders. By most estimates, it became the most significant slave trading state in West Africa, and this continued well into the 19th century. As late as the 1860s, Dahomey was still defying what had become a concerted international abolition effort (Law, 2004; Newbury, 1961).

However, in 1894, after a resounding defeat in the second of two wars against France, Dahomey became a French protectorate. Along with every other African territory, with the exception of Liberia, Dahomey would experience terrible socio-political disruption as the scramble for Africa intensified. In 1899, France formerly declared the dissolution of the kingdom. A conquered territory, with most of its historical monuments disintegrating through neglect, Dahomey's former strength and renown faded.

As the colonial era dawned, Dahomey soon became amalgamated into a more extensive territory as France expanded north to access the Niger River (Obichere, 1971). By 1900, the borders of an entirely new African domain were established—one that incorporated territories from earlier kingdoms and caliphates to the north and west. It would be called French Dahomey, but the region did not correlate to the old kingdom of Dahomey and incorporated many more peoples and cultures (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Size of Dahomey Relative to Benin

For over 60 years, Dahomey remained a property of France. In some areas, such as Ouidah and Porto Novo, the French ruled directly. In others, such as Abomey, France ruled indirectly by manipulating traditional authority structures (Ronen, 1975). Regardless, colonialism required social re-engineering on a vast scale. The current *departements* that divide Benin up politically are still based on France's canton system. The region's economy was also re-structured to induce taxation based on monetary currency (Ronen, 1975). While many of the traditional institutions remained resilient, most aspects of daily life were truly transformed. Dahomey was thrust into a new context that included a new system of education, a new economic structure, and new relationships within the French colonial network (Ronen, 1975).

When the idea of African independence caught fire around the continent in the 1950s, the heat could be felt in Dahomey too. However, Dahomey was less prepared to make that leap than most of its near neighbours in West Africa. Kame Nkrumah of Ghana spearheaded the independence process in the region by introducing a fiery new nationalism into local politics. This became the template for political change in Africa, as new populist leaders rose at the head of nationalist movements everywhere (Meredith, 2005). However, there was no strong nationalist feeling in French Dahomey (Ronen, 1975).

A lot had changed since the rulers of Dahomey Kingdom had imposed their wills on the region with blood and iron. Dahomey was now subsumed into a much more heterogenous polity that had become a relatively poor and insignificant partner within the French Union (Ronen, 1975). Politically, it was more isolated than other regions of French West Africa, for German Togoland sat to its West and British Nigeria to its East, cutting it off from the other Francophone colonies. In fact, when Dahomey grasped at independence in 1960 it was simply

because its eastern neighbour Togo had done so first. However, Togo had a very different history, with a very different developmental arc (Ronen, 1975).

From the start, the new Republic of Dahomey struggled to balance the various power interests in the nation. There was a natural North-South divide, with the polytheistic Vodun practitioners in the south clashing sharply with Islamic populations to the north. Quickly, politics came to be based on ethnic power blocs. Though there were many ethnicities, the three main groups formed a regionally-based triumvirate that consisted of the Fon people, previously of the kingdom of Dahomey, the Goun people, previously of the kingdom of Porto Novo, and the Bariba, once aligned to the deep interior and the ancient Borgou empire (Ronen, 1975). This situation would prove extremely unstable. The resultant political dysfunction led to six coups d'état in just 12 years, ending finally in a Marxist military takeover in 1972.

In 1975 the Republic of Dahomey became the People's Republic of Benin, led by Mathieu Kérékou. The shift in name from Dahomey to Benin was an effort to be more representative, since most of the population had no historical links to the kingdom of Dahomey. The name Benin derives from the Bight of Benin—the coastline, named after the kingdom of Benin in current-day Nigeria.

The new Marxist-Leninist state embraced a radical new left-wing agenda and developed new ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea, shifting dramatically away from both the free market and multi-party democracy (Ronen, 1975). However, in 1990, with the country on the brink of bankruptcy, the Marxist experiment was abandoned, just as communism was collapsing all over Eastern Europe. Impressively, Benin became the first newly independent country in Africa where a military leadership was removed from power by civilians, as well as the first country where an incumbent president was defeated electorally (Meredith, 2005).

Since 1990, the country has been a multi-party democracy, known simply as the Republic of Benin. However, while most elections have been deemed free and fair, the 2019 election was criticised for exclusionary policies that limited participation to two pro-government groups (Freedom House, 2024). Today, the North-South divide remains entrenched in the national psyche, contributing to continued instability. Though there has been economic progress in recent decades, Benin is still one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 166th out of 189 on the Human Development Index (BTI Transformation Index, 2024).

History Re-Edited for Hollywood

For decades, the history of Benin has remained obscure to most. However, today the internet makes it easy to investigate histories and cultures anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, much of the available online history of Dahomey is still contaminated by European bias and historical misrepresentation, much of it centuries old. Some of it came from slave traders, some from Christian evangelists, and some from colonial ideologues. Nor is the internet the only modern technology promoting misleading narratives about Dahomey. Arguably, cinema has created

even more historical confusion, with the recent release of the big budget *Black Panther* movie (Coogler, 2018), as well as *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022).

The first of them, *Black Panther* (2018), is one of many high-profile superhero movies released by Marvel over the last decade. The original *Black Panther* comic book character was created in the 1960s (see Lee & Kirby, 1966), shortly before the Black Panther Party was established in the USA (Roy, 2011). So, the congruity of the name with the political movement of the same name is entirely coincidental.

On its launch in 2018, the movie was lauded as an overdue celebration of black pride in Hollywood. With a black superhero and strong anti-colonial themes, *Black Panther* (2018) provided a refreshing change from the dozens of movies based on white superheroes. Furthermore, the movie's depiction of Wakanda, a technologically advanced African kingdom, combatted stereotypes of Africa as inferior in civilizational terms. With box office takings exceeding $1.3 billion worldwide, it seems quite clear that many viewers warmed to that message (Hughes, 2018).

However, Wakanda had no historical basis, nor was it unique in fictional terms. There are dozens of imaginary kingdoms in the Marvel universe, most of them set in Europe (Marvel Database, 2024). Though Wakanda is set in Africa, depictions of Africa in the movie are too generic to be useful in understanding Africa or its history. The use of Africa as a platform is simply a narrative tool to drive the plot—mere entertainment, despite its pro-African socio-political themes.

Among the supporting characters in *Black Panther* is a caste of warrior women from Wakanda inspired by Dahomey's famed female warriors, the *ahosi*, otherwise known as the Dahomean "amazons". The name "amazons" references famous female soldiers of ancient Greek myth. In European reports, that's precisely how the *ahosi* were initially depicted, for European observers were fascinated by the kingdom's unique female warrior corps. In reality, however, the women warriors of Dahomey were different to any possible European parallel, mythical or otherwise.

The *ahosi* were not actually soldiers until quite late in Dahomey's story, and evolved from a tradition of royal polygamy, also observable in other pre-colonial West African kingdoms (Law, 1991). In Dahomey, these "wives" were not necessarily conjugal spouses, but rather part of a system of patronage that allowed women to serve the royal court (Bay, 1998). While they were trained as warriors as early as the 18th century, even making up the armed palace guard, it was only under King Ghezo (1818–1859) that *ahosi* numbers swelled into the size of a standing army (Alpern, 1998).

In the movie, the woman warriors of Wakanda are called the Dora Milaje. They don't actually resemble historical *ahosi*, nor is there any reference to *ahosi* or "amazons" in the movie. However, a direct link was made in many of the online promotional articles at the time of release. Some of these feature photographs of so-called Dahomean "amazons" in group portraits taken in France—portraits with a very unfortunate colonial history. One shows a

portrait of Dahomean "amazons", together with a few male Dahomean soldiers, standing against the backdrop of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero in Paris (Black History Buff, 2019). This was the location of the city's first anthropological museum, which later became the Musée de l'Homme.

On close inspection, the swords being held up are European cavalry sabres from the mid-to-late 19th century. Detailed zoom shots clearly identify these as having standard European cavalry stirrup hilts (Anderson, 2023). However, Dahomey had no cavalry. The "amazons" were foot soldiers, as were other fighters in the Dahomean army. Rather than European swords of this kind, Dahomeans used short machetes in well-documented frontal infantry assaults (Alpern, 1998; Edgerton, 2000). In other words, these swords were mere props, handed to the photo participants to add to the spectacle.

As it turns out, these Dahomeans were part of a delegation sent to Paris by King Behanzin in a bid to sue for peace in the dying months of the second Franco-Dahomean war (Bay, 1998; Le Petit Journal, 1893). A similar photo owned by the Musée de l'Homme shows what appears to be the same people in the city's zoological gardens, also posing with cavalry swords (Bay, 1998; Radar Africa, 2024). This photo was also widely used in *Black Panther* (2018) promotional material to show what was claimed to be historical *ahosi* (I Am History, 2018; Johnson, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). Today, a number of photo portraits in the same vein, taken in other European centres as far afield as Hamburg and Vienna, can still be found online. Unfortunately, no diplomatic meeting ever transpired between the Dahomean delegation and French authorities and it seems that members of the delegation were later exploited as paid curiosities all over Europe. From a historical perspective, this is quite simply fake material, for though the people pictured were real Dahomeans, the context was completely inauthentic.

Other photographic portraits on the internet that were also used in *Black Panther* (2018) promotional material are even more spurious, and perhaps even more demeaning (see Boakye, 2018). At the time, there were cultural expositions all over Europe and America—"human zoos" with circus-like exhibits of "primitive peoples" in fabricated costume, frequently displayed within makeshift sets meant to represent tribal or village life (Bay, 1998; Oliviera, 2016). In these photos, it wasn't merely the props that were fake—most of the time so were the portrait subjects. Though the antique character of these photos gives them a patina of authenticity, they were shot in European studios or at European "people shows" and are completely fake. Fabulous examples of low art, they've endured for well over a hundred years and are now embedded within the popular consciousness as if they were artefacts of genuine history, brought to life again by internet search engines.

Over time this content has saturated online discussions about the movie—so much so that it's been taken up in the course of reporting by credible news organisations like *The Guardian* (Jones, 2019). So, what started out as mere movie promotion has gradually been accepted as popular historical truth. To make matters worse, in 2022 the release of the sequel *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (Coogler, 2022) instigated a flurry of follow-up content, once again

featuring the same photos, some by publishing brands as reputable as *National Geographic* (Jones, 2022).

It is of course deeply ironic that fake colonial tropes have emerged as supporting evidence for stories critiquing colonialism. While it's true that movies have always superimposed their theatrical storylines onto history, today the internet gives those fictions more oxygen. This is especially problematic when it comes to African history, which is still a relatively neglected field. Unfortunately, with so few films about Africa, misrepresentations like this are simply more likely to stick, and they have.

That brings us to the next movie—*The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022). Whereas *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) is fantasy, quite unapologetically, *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) has claimed to be based on historical fact. However, there are many huge historical headscratchers throughout. While a lot of effort was expended in capturing the material culture of Dahomey, resulting in a nomination for Best Costume Design at the 28th Critics' Choice Awards (IMDb, 2023), there was no real effort to present a credible history.

At the culmination of the movie the protagonist General Nanisca, the leader of the *ahosi*, is invited to share the throne with King Ghezo. Though Ghezo was a true historical figure who reigned from 1818 to 1858, this aspect of the plot is pure fiction. There never was a 'woman king', not at any point during the reign of Ghezo. At best, that dramatic element leans on a different episode in Dahomean history—the existence of a Queen Hangbe, said to have been regent after the death of her twin brother Akaba from about 1716 to 1718, over a hundred years before. However, connecting this story to that moment in history is also a stretch.

Hangbe's biography bears no resemblance to that of General Nanisca. She was not a military leader of the *ahosi*—an institution that almost certainly did not exist in that form at that time. What's more, unlike Nanisca, her rise to power was a consequence of her royal birth. Some scholars posit that, as twin sister to Akaba, Hangbe was a co-sovereign during Akaba's reign, from about 1685 to 1716 (Alpern, 1998). Others argue that she held a different position—that of *na daho*, or "great princess" (Bay, 1998). For the most part, oral tradition doesn't include her in Dahomey's king list (Le Hérissé, 1911). Indeed, following Akaba's death, she supported the son of Akaba in the ensuing dynastic dispute, suggesting that she endorsed kingship through the male line (Bay, 1998). Arguably then, Hangbe was merely a regent during the interregnum between kings Akaba and Agaja"—thus, not even a queen, never mind a "woman king".

Telescoping these two distinct periods into one storyline is hardly the movie's only historical expedient. According to the accepted historical timeline, by the time King Ghezo assumed the throne in 1818 the Oyo Empire had started to disintegrate into a handful of smaller competing Yoruba kingdoms. Far from facing the existential threat of a formidable Oyo Empire, as happens in the movie, Dahomey under Ghezo was free from Oyo hegemony for the first time in nearly a century (Law, 1991). Again, history here has been horribly mangled to fit the exigencies of the plot.

There are also many smaller discrepancies in the narrative detail beyond these major plot departures. For instance, Ouidah, the slave port that features prominently in the movie, is in reality about three kilometres from the ocean (Law, 2004). At no point could anyone have leapt from the town into the sea to escape, as General Nanisca and her charge Nawi do at the tail end of the story. Equally erroneous are the impressive palatial spas and baths shown in the king's palace in Abomey. In fact, Abomey was a significant distance from any water source (Randsborg et al., 2011). Water had to be carried from shallow pits bounding the town plateau to the north and northwest (Newbury, 1966).

As commendable as the costumes were, the depiction of the material culture of Dahomey was not flawless. One sword held up by Nawi in promotional posters is not a fighting weapon, but a *gubassa*—a votive object used in ritual to the iron god Gu (Anderson, 2023; Palau-Marti, 1961). Similarly, a brass cast sword held up by Nanisca is not Dahomean at all, but of neighbouring Yoruba design. A brass cast sword with a hilt identical to this, identified as Yoruba, was sold at the European auction house Zemanek-Munster, with an old European collection provenance. The facial scarification lines cast into the cheeks of the figural element confirm it as a Yoruba weapon, not a Fon weapon, for these are Yoruba facial scarification patterns. Viewable online, this object is likely the direct inspiration for the movie prop (Zemanek-Münster, 2016). Clearly, much of the extraordinary costume design of *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) wouldn't have been possible before the internet.

Like *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) before it, *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) offered a refreshing change of subject for an industry that had neglected African stories up to that point. However, within the Republic of Benin the reception was mixed. For one thing, *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) was not filmed in Benin, but in South Africa, with American Viola Davis playing the lead role. Furthermore, even while expressing pride that Hollywood had chosen to focus on Benin's history for once, Beninese viewers were critical of the movie's suggestion that Dahomey's King Ghezo was against the slave trade (Boko, 2022).

The scorn is well founded. There is plenty of evidence to show that Dahomeans were supplying slaves to slave traders at the coast even before the kingdom took direct control of the region's slave exports in the early 18th century (Law, 1991). State involvement in that trade continued until the mid-to-late 19th century, even under Ghezo, with estimated exports of 8,000 slaves annually from 1840-1848 (Law, 2004, pg. 202).

To help sanitise the story, a Beninese academic named Leonard Wantchekon was brought in as the movie's historical advisor. Wantchekon has suggested that Dahomey under Ghezo was merely a secondary player in the slave trade, and a reluctant one (Boko, 2022; Gibbs, 2022). Unfortunately, few if any current historical specialists on Dahomey would agree. According to Wantchekon, an economist: "only 457,000 of the 16 million slaves sold between 1400 and 1900 left the Beninese Coast" (Boko, 2022). However, Law calculates that Ouidah alone supplied over a million slaves between the 1670s and 1860s—second only to Luanda in Angola (Law, 2004). That doesn't even account for other pre-colonial slave embarkation points, such as Jakin, later called Godomey, or Bagadri, Cotonou and Porto Novo (Newbury, 1961).

To be fair, it is likely that Ghezo faced strong resistance to reform from a faction within his court – the 'national faction', which would ultimately consolidate its conservative position under his heir Glele (Law, 1997). However, the fact remains—in 1850, the British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston offered to compensate the kingdom £400 per annum if it replaced the slave trade with palm oil production, and Ghezo declined (Coates, 2001). After all, the income from slave trafficking amounted to an estimated £60,000 a year (Soumonni, 1995). Perhaps even more importantly, Dahomey's slave raiding also supplied human victims for ritual sacrifice—a central part of Dahomey's state religion.

When change did come it was enforced by Britain's gunboats. In 1852, Ghezo signed a treaty formally abandoning the slave trade, but only after a successful blockade of Ouidah by British ships. Even then, private slave traders within Dahomey continued to operate from the Bight of Benin. In fact, right up till the mid-1860s, there were still slave ships departing from Ouidah and Jakin (Law, 2004; Newbury, 1961).

The movie is also silent on the issue of human sacrifice. *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) shows no skulls lining the palace walls, against a wealth of eye-witness reports from visiting Europeans in the 19th century (Forbes, 1851; Newbury, 1966). Likewise, there's no portrayal of the kingdom's elaborate customs, where people were sacrificed to the ancestors. Clearly, explaining the phenomenon through the lens of Vodun belief was simply too difficult, and so the entire issue was whitewashed.

On this subject, reports from Europeans do suggest that towards the end of Ghezo's reign the number of human sacrifices had declined. In 1849, the visiting British Officer Frederick Forbes remarked that the skulls lining the portals of the palace were not being replaced and claimed that human sacrifice was "fast vanishing from Dahomey" (Coats, 2001, p. 30). However, Ghezo later had ten or eleven victims decapitated in his very presence, as if to make a point (Coates, 2001; Hazoume, 1938). A temporary reduction in human sacrifices could have many explanations other than reform. According to numerous sources, Ghezo did start to restrict the practice to criminals (Law, 1997). However, human sacrifice itself was never abolished. A recent archaeological study of some of Ghezo's palace huts within the Abomey palace complex has confirmed that human blood was mixed into the building structure (Radley, 2024). Moreover, human sacrifices continued at scale under Ghezo's son Glele (Burton [1864]1966; Law, 1997).

It seems these awkward historical realities are readily accepted by Beninese today, even if they're not being embraced by foreign film makers. Note how the African in the modern mural in figure 3 is armed and co-operating with the European slave traders. Displayed on a prominent street in Ouidah, there's certainly no denial of collusion here. Likewise, the pre-colonial bas-relief on the mission building in figure 4, showing an execution image, suggests a disarming lack of social self-consciousness about the darker aspects of Ouidah's history.

Figure 3
Street Art in Ouidah (26 January 2024)

Figure 4
Execution Bas-Relief in Ouida (27 January 2024)

A Land of New Anti-Colonial Alliances

Public artworks in Cotonou, Benin's urban centre, reveal much more manipulated social messaging. In July 2022, two months before the international release of *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) a giant *ahosi* statue was unveiled in Cotonou, just a short distance from the Marino Palace (figure 5). At once people associated the statue with the movie, with some online articles describing the new artwork as the "woman king statue", and identifying the figure as Tassi Hangbe, mirroring some of the historical confusion created by movie commentators (Wilkins, 2023). It speaks volumes that even African journalists were basing their understanding of local history on foreign film promotions.

Figure 5
New Ahosi Statue in Cotonou (25 January 2024)

A towering 30 metres high, and made of cast metal with a bronze envelope, the statue was initially reported to be the design of Chinese sculptor Li Xiangqun (Bird, 2022). In fact, evidence of manufacture actually points to a company called the Mansudae Art Studio—not Chinese, but North Korean. This company has built giant bronze statues all over Africa, which the BBC has called "North Korea's biggest export" (BBC News, 2016). Here, the Mansudae Art Studio used a Chinese front company called the Blue Dragon International Development Company (Wilkins, 2023). With a style readily identifiable as socialist realism—a genre associated with the early Soviet Union—the studio has specialised in creating idealised, larger-than-life public artworks that have a strong socialist message (Jackson, 2023). While the style has fallen from favour in most former Soviet states, socialist realism remains an effective propaganda vehicle in a number of other communist countries, including Laos, Vietnam and North Korea (Gabriel, 2024).

Even before the exposé, the United Nations (UN) had sanctioned the Mansudae Art Studio for helping to fund North Korea's nuclear program. However, the studio is allegedly associated with other well-known public statues in the Benin Republic, including one of Behanzin, the last independent king of Dahomey (CBS News, 2018). Standing in Abomey, once the Dahomean capital, the bronze Behanzin holds out his hand in implicit defiance of French colonial incursion, as if saying "this far and no further". Throughout the Republic there are many lesser statues in a similar style. Figure 6, at a crossroads in Bohicon near Abomey, features a group of women holding up a massive cauldron, displaying a socialist ideal that would not be out of place in North Korea. On entering the *departement* of Ouémé, historically associated with the kingdom of Porto Novo, there's a similar bronze statue, though newer and better, with an identical theme.

Figure 6
Statue in Bohicon (29 January 2024)

These artworks now speak in the same way to divergent ethnic groups with distinct cultures and histories within the Republic of Benin, drawing them into a broader nationalism that didn't exist before the creation of the Republic of Dahomey. On the surface they seem to bear the hallmarks of the Marxism adopted in 1972 and discarded in 1991. Remarkably, however, they also integrate an old symbol of the kingdom—a message first issued in the early 19th century by the great King Ghezo.

The statue in figure 7 is a more traditional execution. Standing in the centre of Quidah, it shows several hands holding up a bowl full of holes. This visual idiom first appeared as a palace bas-relief after King Ghezo overthrew his brother Adandozan in 1818. It was as a call for unity and co-operation at a tricky and divisive time, the idea being that the bowl can't hold water unless each person in the kingdom plugged one hole with one finger (Piqué et al., 1999, pg. 5).

Figure 7
Bronze statue in Ouidah (27 January 2024)

In fact, there has always been a strong ethic of social co-operation among the Fon people. This was epitomised by ancient mutual help associations like *dokpwe*, a communal work society that organised corvée labour, where young men helped other community members in building, harvesting or other tasks. It is believed *dokpwe* existed in the Abomey region even before the Dahomey kingdom arose (Herskovits, [1938]1967). In fact, the institution is common to other peoples in the region, and not just the Fon. There are still *dokpwe* in operation among neighbouring Yoruba (see Oyotunji, 2024). Thus, on the face of it, the socialist messaging implicit in many of these public artworks is inherently compatible with elements of the local culture.

At the same time, the statues speak out against one of the common historical antagonists of Africans and the Asian communist bloc—namely, European colonialism. French influence is still pervasive in West Africa, even now, more than half a century after its West African colonies secured their independence. After all, French is still a regional lingua franca, gluing together nations with a common currency, and a common experience as members of what was once termed "Greater France".

However, Chinese influence in the region has been growing since the 1990s, when China began funding local infrastructure projects in earnest (Meredith, 2005). It seems that China occupied the vacuum created by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. So, in spite of the move to multi-party democracy within Benin, Chinese influence only increased—not just in Benin, but throughout Africa. In this context, in 2020 French President Emmanuel Macron authorised the return of 26 Dahomean artworks—objects seized during the Franco-Dahomean wars of the 1890s. These included three statues of particular note, representing three of the last kings of Dahomey (figure 8).

Figure 8

The Three Statues Seized by France (Photo by Waterlot, 1926)

According to one major think tank, French president Macron's primary motivation was to counteract China (Manuel, 2020). Certainly, Europeans have often used the restitution of cultural objects acquired in the colonial era to gain favour or advantage with Africans (Stahn,

2023). However, given Macron's energetic efforts to initiate returns on a much larger scale, the gesture was also a sincere attempt to redress historical wrongs. In that moment, Macron even called colonialism a crime against humanity (Sarr et al, 2018, p. 1).

In Benin, the response to the repatriation was emotional. Initially, the returned artworks were exhibited in the presidential palace in Cotonou, where President Patrice Talon exclaimed that the moment captured "pride and faith in what we once were, in what we are, and in what we will be" (SBS News, 2022). However, as Culture Minister Jean-Michel Abimbola acknowledged at the same unveiling, the repatriated artworks had been taken from a kingdom, but were returning to a republic (SBS News, 2022).

A Brave, New Republic

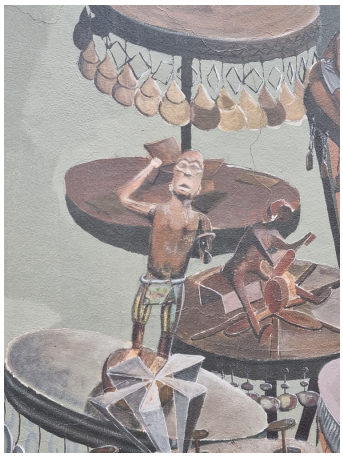
Today, Benin is searching for a new narrative. In the process, the realities of the past are being recast. Anti-colonialism has emerged as one of the common unifying messages and the new *ahosi* statue in Cotonou, referencing their heroic defiance of the French Army in the 1890s, is just one example.

Running along the Boulevard de la Marina in Cotonou, only a short walk from the statue, is what has been described as the world's longest mural fresco (Kana, 2022). This colourful landmark has been painted slowly over many years and was extended further during a graffiti festival in May 2022—two months before the *ahosi* statue was unveiled, and just four months before the release of *The Woman King*. Consequently, there are many fascinating correlations between all these artworks.

Though the theme of the graffiti festival was "New Benin", some of the street artists who worked on the mural chose to focus on Beninese history—evidence that the past and future of the country were viewed as being inextricably entwined (Kana, 2022). One depicted a famous half-man half-lion statue representing King Glele—once a centrepiece of the Musée du quai Branly-Jacque Chirac in Paris, and one of the three royal statues then being exhibited at the nearby presidential palace (figure 9). In a less conspicuous part of the mural, another of the three statues is depicted—the more anthropomorphic figure said by some to be King Ghezo (fig. 10).

Figure 9
Mural Detail Depicting Glele Statue (25 January 2024)

Figure 10
Mural Detail of Ghezo Statue (25 January 2024)



In fact, the original statues are no mere artworks. Two are *Fa-bocio*, representing the kings Glele and Behanzin, connected to their *Fa* divination signs, which incorporate empowering materials inside the statues believed to enable them to move and talk (Blier, 1995a). The third, the more anthropomorphic figure of the three, has been identified with King Ghezo, though some dispute the royal connection there (Kelly, 2015; Waterlot, 1926). Seized by the French Commander General Dodds after occupying Abomey, all three were nonetheless power figures that could be used as part of the kingdom's magical arsenal against the enemy (Blier, 1995a). Whether by accident or intent, their replication on the wall seems to update the conflict between Dahomey and colonial-era France to a new epoch, with new conflicts and flashpoints.

Elsewhere, the mural showcases images of warriors in Arabian-style garb, perhaps referencing the anti-colonial hero Bio Guéra—a Baatombu warrior who fought French incursion in the country's interior, far to the north of Dahomey. There's also a new statue of Bio Guéra at the Cotonou Airport, and it too has a strong socialist realist aesthetic (Africanian, 2022). Clearly, the Beninese government has been enlisting an array of cultural heroes from right across the Republic's cultural spectrum.

Dahomey's *ahosi* warriors have a prominent presence on the mural too, though in greatly modified form (figure 11). Bald and with comic-book action poses, these *ahosi* do not possess any historical verisimilitude, but look more like the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther*. Here Dahomean history is being celebrated vicariously through contemporary Hollywood art, and yet these fantasy images share a space on the wall with faithful representations of ancient Dahomean icons. In a strange way, these outlandish depictions of *ahosi* are not all that different from the human zoo stereotypes of the early colonial era. They too are bizarre Western re-imaginings of a unique local phenomenon.

Figure 11
Modern Hollywood-inspired ahosi in Cotonou (25 January 2024)

The strange image painted in figure 12, also on the mural, offers further evidence of the influence Westerners have had in shaping local Beninese views of their own art and history—in this instance, through the internet. This is a depiction of a terracotta mask, a specific antique object that garnered prominent attention in 2014 at a Sotheby's auction in the United States, where it fetched the astonishing sum of US$305,000 (Sotherby's, 2014). Though it had provenance to an old European collection, it had no firm provenience, nor was it a part of any known archaeological assemblage, making its precise origin and nature hard to establish.

Figure 12
Mural Detail of a Terracotta Mask Sold at Sotherby's (25 January 2024)

Subjective estimates of the mask's age, suggesting an 18th century origin, were supported by a C-14 test conducted at the University of Oxford. However, radiocarbon dating has widely acknowledged margins of error, especially in dating artefacts that aren't more than a few hundred years old (Renfrew & Bahn, 2019). This object would not have gone through expensive C-14 testing to begin with had it not been part of "an old European collection"— a

common term in the Western art market, but one with a great deal of variability. In reality, most African objects were taken out of Africa during the colonial era. So, "old European collections" usually suggest a late 19th or early 20th century provenance, and not the early 18th century origins hinted at here. If the record of provenance had been more concrete, that would have formed part of the lot description.

Even if this mask had had a strong provenance dating it to the 18th century, it would never have been represented on the mural if the street artist had not discovered it online. However, its online presence, based on an SEO ranking, was determined by Google bots, and not on its objective historical significance. Quite by chance then, that clay mask is now forging new historical trajectories within Benin, based on the opinions of art consultants in the West, as well as by SEO metrics—not on any inherent significance that it may once have had in Dahomey.

Unfortunately, knowledge within Benin about Dahomey's early material culture appears to be fading, along with many other cultural memories. Today, many Beninese people look to the West to tell them what to value about their past. This mask, by virtue of the price it fetched in the USA, has already been elevated over other objects. So, whether or not it was an important cultural object once, it has certainly become one now. Whatever it really is, the mask is also a fine example of something able to inhabit a Western gallery or collection, for it conforms broadly to the characteristics of what Errington has identified as "high primitive art"—non-European art with certain characteristics prized by Western curators and collectors (Errington, 1998). For the Cotonou artist who re-contextualised it on the mural, this mask is proof that Beninese people were once able to create things that the West values. However, just the fact that it had to be researched online is evidence of the vast gap between pre-colonial and post-colonial realities.

Today, Benin's cultural identity is largely being framed in relation to what has been lost. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, there seems to be a trend in the country towards identifying with cultures that have distinct pre-colonial histories but shared colonial experiences. The image in figure 13 is a fine example. This mural detail depicts an Edo/Bini bronze casting of a 17th century Portuguese rifleman (see figure 14). It is among the most recognisable Benin Kingdom objects currently being held in the British Museum, looted in the infamous Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897.

Figure 13

Mural Detail of a Benin Kingdom Bronze on a Dahomean Asen (25 January 2024)

Figure 14
Line Drawing of Benin Kingdom Bronze (Roth, 1903)

Benin Kingdom isn't to be confused with Benin today. They are distinct places, from different eras. Benin Kingdom represented the Edo or Bini culture, which is now part of neighbouring Nigeria—a pre-colonial kingdom that came to an end when British troops invaded in the late 19th century. The Republic of Benin, on the other hand, is the modern African nation to the West of that, previously known as French Dahomey and only associated with the name "Benin" since 1975.

In the mural art, the Benin Kingdom statue has been placed upon a Fon *asen* from Dahomey. *Asen* are metal shrines unique to Dahomey that feature figural tableaus telling a particular ancestral story. In painting this interesting hybrid image, two distinct kingdoms united in one represented artefact, perhaps the street artist merely googled "Benin art", and confused Benin Kingdom with the Benin Republic. Regardless, it features another stolen artwork from another African culture, representing another famous colonial injustice, and that seems noteworthy. Here colonial injustices blend together seamlessly, blurring historical lines. The specific historical context matters far less than the artist's identification with Africa's broader struggles.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to study pre-colonial Dahomey by examining the kingdom through the lens of contemporary popular culture. It's a novel approach, not found elsewhere in the academic literature. There's a relative paucity of analysis on postcolonial art in or about Africa, and no known study anywhere that assesses it as a source for history. While there are studies on the art of pre-colonial Dahomey (Beaujean 2019; Blier, 2004), this study has different methods, subjects and objectives. It is hoped that there may be more studies like this in other African cultures. Though the selection and interpretation of art works examined here has been inherently subjective, the findings have been conclusive—experts in Dahomean history or material culture are not driving the narrative when it comes to mass media portrayals of the

kingdom, which should be concerning. This may be because non-academics are not getting their information from books, but online.

This study adds to a decades-old discussion of the malaise in the study and development of African history. There's been no shortage of concern by both academics and educationalists about the marginalization of the African past. As long ago as 1938, AV Murray (1938) noted that: "The absence of indigenous history in Africa has had two effects. It has prevented the growth of a self-conscious culture, and it has lowered the status of the African in the outside world" (p. 19). The fact is, without a past Africans will continue to have a very impoverished present.

This study confirms that the causes for this malaise are not only located in Africa but are global. Africa is still perceived as a peripheral continent—a place without a dynamic past, where things have always been the way they are now, and implicitly always will be (Derricourt, 2011; MacEachern, 2015). Debilitating foreign attitudes that Africans exist outside of history, or what Stahl has eloquently called "the circle of we" (Stahl, 2005, p. 8), is a form of othering that has no basis in reality.

Today, more informed perspectives prevail in African studies, especially among historians and historical archaeologists. Slowly, the message is gaining traction across academic disciplines, and even in political circles in Europe. There have been important initiatives in finding alternative sources of history that can deepen knowledge of the African past without relying on European accounts. These include developing methods to unlock historical data from African art (Vansina, 1984), and decoding the ways cultural memory in Africa has been preserved through mnemonic devices, some built into oral tradition, and some embedded in the African landscape (Schmidt, 2006). More recently, important strides have been made in the study of *Ajami*—an indigenous West African written language based on Arabic script, in much the same way that European writing relies on the ancient Phoenician alphabet (Calahan, 2022). These efforts are making a difference, however irresponsible portrayals of African history in mass media only hamper that progress.

No matter how it is assessed, *The Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022) doesn't align with any accepted historical narrative about Dahomey today. It is negligent in the extreme to misrepresent known history so blatantly – as if the makers were stating that gross deviations from the historical record don't matter at all and aren't likely to be noticed. That might be less damaging in other contexts, but unfortunately it only compounds existing problems in Dahomean history.

Whereas *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) and its sequel don't contradict historical fact, they also don't serve Dahomean history well. In fact, inadvertently, they have helped to promote old colonial tropes that were given new life by the internet. Still, the movie version of the *ahosi* has been well-received in Benin, as evidenced through street art. Clearly, there is a hunger in Benin for a history that can help give its various peoples a sense of pride, direction and unity.

It seems that some people in Benin feel that any attention given to Dahomean history is better than no acknowledgement at all.

Today, an alternative national narrative has developed—one focused on the country's traumatic colonial experience. It's a narrative that has found unusual allies internationally—in both the West and East. On the one hand, Hollywood-funded blockbusters have presented the world with false histories of Dahomey, whitewashing inconvenient elements of Dahomey's past to portray Dahomeans as noble victims of colonialism. On the other hand, Chinese and North Korean interests have tapped into anti-colonial sentiment in Benin. Socialist realist art now substitutes the evils of capitalism for the evils of colonialism, and the class struggle for the struggle for dignity and prosperity.

The real casualty in all this is historical truth. The kingdom of Dahomey was no utopia. Once, much of the population within what is now Benin would have been victims of that despotic kingdom—either sold into slavery or sacrificed at its annual customs. Thus, public artworks recalling a pre-colonial golden age don't tell a convincing story.

In context, things in the Republic of Benin aren't uniformly bleak. While it is still extremely poor, economic prospects in Benin are improving (BTI Transformation Index, 2024). However, it's hard to imagine a future for people who don't know their past. As Robin Derricourt (2011) states: "A harsh way to deny an identity is to deny a history" (p. 149). The solution, though by no means easy, can only lie with continued education, both within the Republic of Benin, and in the so-called "global north", for they are both part of the current problem. The fact is - history, though a flawed foreign discipline, still offers the best hope to the people of Benin in their drive for identity.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that there was no AI used in the development and review of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Dr James Flexner for creating the map in Figure 1. Thank you to AbstractIllusions on Wikimedia Commons for the map in Figure 2 – available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Kingdom_of_Dahomey.jpg.

Thank you to Constant Legonou for his guidance in Abomey.

Finally, thank you to Dr Gaëlle Beaujean and Dr Neil L. Norman for their advice on travel in Benin.

References

Africanian (2022). Benin: Things to know about the Bio-Guéra Monument. Retrieved from https://africanian.com/livenews/benin-things-to-know-about-the-bio-guera-monument/. Accessed on 9 February 2025.

Akinjogbin, I. A. (1967). *Dahomey and its neighbours 1708-1818*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Alpern, S. B. (1998). Amazons of Black Sparta. *The Women Warriors of Dahomey, London: Hurst*.

Anderson, R.L., (2023). *Sword and Snake: The Edged Weapons of Dahomey.* [Doctoral Thesis, The University of Sydney]. Restricted access to university members.

Argyle, W. J. (1966). *The Fon of Dahomey: a History and Ethnography of the Old Kingdom.* Oxford University Press.

Bay, E. G. (2008). *Asen, ancestors, and vodun: Tracing change in African art*. University of Illinois Press.

Bay, E. G. (1998). Wives of the Leopard: Gender. *Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*. University of Virginia Press.

BBC News (2016). North Korea's Biggest Export. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35569277

Beaujean, G. (2019). *L'art de Cour d'Abomey. Le Sens des Objets*. Presses du réel (Les).

Bird (2022). Benin's 30-foot tall "Amazon" Statue Honours The Women Warriors of Dahomey. *BellaMaija.com*. Retrieved from https://www.bellanaija.com/2022/08/benin-amazon-statue-dahomey/

Black History Buff (2019). The Dahomey Amazons – the Most Feared Women in History. Retrieved from https://www.blackhistorybuff.com/blogs/the-black-history-buff-blog/the-dahomey-amazons-the-most-feared-women-in-history?srsltid=AfmBOor82NhihV2I4s7xroxHcHw_cner5pe1OWvgOWJz9srFp7yTo8i4

Blier, S. P. (1995a). *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. University of Chicago Press.

Blier, S. P. (1995b). The Path of the Leopard: Motherhood and Majesty in Early Danhome. *The Journal of African History*, *36*(3), 391–417. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700034472

Blier, S. P. (2004). The Art of Assemblage: Aesthetic Expression and Social Experience in Danhomé. *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, *45*(1):186–210. https://doi.org/10.1086/RESv45n1ms20167627

Blier, S.P. (2018) Asen: Memoires de Fer Forge, Art Vodun du Danhome. Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

Boakye, B., (2018) The Legendary Dahomey Amazons are the Real-life Women's Army in Black Panther. *Face2faceAfrica.com*. Retrieved from https://face2faceafrica.com/article/the-legendary-dahomey-amazons-are-the-real-life-all-womens-army-in-black-panther

Boko, M.H. (2022). In Benin, 'The Woman King', an Ode to Female Empowerment, Gets Mixed Reception. *The Africa Report.com.* Retrieved from https://www.theafricareport.com/250253/in-benin-the-woman-king-an-ode-to-female-empowerment-gets-mixed-reception/

BTI Transformation Index (2024). Benin Country Report 2024. Retrieved from https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BEN.

Burton, R.F. ([1864]1966). *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomey*; Newbury, C.W, (Ed). Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Callahan, M. (2022). Unearthing a Long Ignored African Writing System. The Brink Boston University. Retrieved from https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/fallou-ngom-discoveres-ajami-african-writing-system/

CBS News. (2018). North Korea Builds Monuments Around the World. Retrieved from https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/north-korea-mansudae-art-studio-monuments-around-the-world/

Coates, T. (2001) *King Guezo of Dahomey, 1850-1852.* Uncovered editions. London: The Stationary Office.

Coogler, R. (Director). (2018). *Black Panther* [Film]. Marvel Studios.

Coogler, R. (Director). (2022). *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* [Film]. Marvel Studios.

Dalzel, A. (1793). *The History of Dahomy, An Inland Kingdom of Africa; Compiled from Authentic Memoirs; with an Introduction and Notes*. ECCO print editions.

Derricourt, R. (2011). *Inventing Africa: History, archaeology and ideas*. Pluto Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p9r7

Edgerton, R. B. (2000). *Warrior Women: The Amazons of Dahomey and the Nature of War.* Westview Press.

Errington, S. (1998). *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art: And Other Tales of Progress*. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520920347

Freedom House (2024). Benin 61/100. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/country/benin/freedom-world/2024

Forbes, F. E. (1851). *Dahomey and the Dahomans Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey.* British Library, Historical Print Editions. https://doi.org/10.5479/sil.257101.39088000286781

Gabriel, D. (2024). Socialist Realism in the Abstract: North Korea and the Problem of Cultural Reception Among Socialist Countries in the 1950s. *selvajournal.org.* Retrieved from https://selvajournal.org/article/socialist-realism-in-the-abstract/.

Gibbs, A., (2022). The Woman King's Official Historian, Leonard Wantchekon,Talks Controversy and History. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/adriennegibbs/2022/10/28/the-woman-kings-official-historian-leonard-wantchekon-talks-controversy-and-history/

Hazoumé, P. (1938). *Doguicimi*. Larose.

Herskovits, M. ([1938]1967). Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom.(Vol. 1 and 2). Northwestern University Press.

Hughes, M., (2018). 'Black Panther' Stalks $1.3 Billion At The Worldwide Box Office. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2018/04/02/black-panther-stalks-1-3-billion-at-the-worldwide-box-office/

I Am History. (2018). The Dahomey Warriors. Retrieved from https://www.iamhistory.co.uk/home/the-fearless-dahomey-warriors

IMDb. (2023). The Woman King Awards. Retrieved from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8093700/awards/

Jackson E., (2023) Exploring the History of Socialist Realism. *Art & Object.* Artandobject.com. Retrieved from https://www.artandobject.com/news/exploring-history-socialist-realism

Johnson, J., (2018) If You Loved Black Panther's Dora Milaje Meet the Dahomey Amazons. *Teenvogue.com.* Retrieved from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/black-panther-dora-milaje-dahomey-amazons

Jones, E. E., (2019). Warrior Women with Lupito Nyong'o Review – A Kick-ass Tale Worthy of an Oscar. *Theguardian.com*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/oct/23/warrior-women-with-lupita-nyongo-review-a-kick-ass-tale-worthy-of-an-oscar

Jones R., (2022). Who Inspired Wakanda's Women Warriors? *Nationalgeographic.com*. Retrieved from https://www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts/overheard/article/who-inspired-wakandas-women-warriors#:~:text=And%20he's%20the%20king%20of,also%20known%20as%20the%20Agojie

Kana, L.N.V. (2022). Massive Cotonou Mural Tells Benin's History. *Africanews.com*. Retrieved from https://www.africanews.com/2022/05/21/massive-cotonou-mural-tells-benin-s-history//

Kelly, J. (2015). "Dahomey! Dahomey!: the Reception of Dahomean Art in France in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries. *Journal of Art Historiography*, *12*. The University of Birmingham.

Lambe, B. ([1724]1851). "From the Great King Trudo Ardati's Palace of Abomey, in the Kingdom of Dahomey". In F.E. Forbes (Ed.), *Dahomey and the Dahomans Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey* (pp. 81–85). British Library, Historical Print Editions. https://doi.org/10.5479/sil.257101.39088000286781

Lane, P. (2005). Barbarous tribes and unrewarding gyrations? The changing role of ethnographic imagination in African archaeology. In A. B. Stahl (Ed.), *African Archaeology. A Critical Introduction* (pp. 4–54). Wiley-Blackwell.

Lane, P. (2015). Iron Age imaginaries and Barbarian encounters: British prehistory's African past. In S. Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, J. (Eds.), *Theory in Africa, Africa in Theory: Locating Meaning in Archaeology* (pp. 175–200). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315716381-11

Law, R. (1991). *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/3601668

Law, R. (1997). The politics of commercial transition: Factional conflict in Dahomey in the context of the ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade. *The Journal of African History*, *38*(2), 213–233. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853796006846

Law, R. (2004). *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port 1727-1892*. Ohio State University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782049760

Law, R (2008) *The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade upon Africa*. Lit Verlag GmBH & Co.

Law, R. (1994). The Slave Trade in Seventeenth-century Allada: A Revision. *African economic history*, *22*(1994), 59–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/3601668

Lee, S. & Kirby, J. (1966). *The Fantastic Four:* Introducing the Sensational Black Panther (#52). Marvel Comics Group.

Le Hérissé, A. (1911). *L'ancien Royaume du Dahomey: Moeurs, religion, histoire*. E. Larose.

Le Petit Journal. (1893). 22 Avril. Numero 126.

MacDonald, F. (2018) The Legend of Benin's Fearless Female Warriors. *BBC.com*. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20180826-the-legend-of-benins-fearless-female-warriors

MacEachern, S. (2015). African models in global histories. In S. Wynne-Jones & Fleisher, J. (Eds.), *Theory in Africa, Africa in Theory* (19–37). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315716381-2

Manuel, C. (2020) *Artefacts Paving France's Return to Africa*. Lowy Institute. Retrieved from https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/artefacts-paving-france-s-return-africa

Marvel Database (2024). Fictional Countries. Retrieved from https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Fictional_Countries

Meredith, M. (2005). *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence.* Free Press.

Mitchell, P. (2005). *African Connections: An Archaeological Persective on Africa and the Wider World* (Vol 7). Rowman Altamira.

Murray, A.V. (1938). *The School in the Bush: A Critical Study of the Theory and Practice of Native Education* (2nd ed.). Longman.

Newbury, C. W. (1961).*The Western Slave Coast and its Rulers: European Trade and Administration among the Yoruba and Adja-speaking Peoples of South Western Nigeria, Southern Dahomey and Togo*. Oxford University Press.

Norris, R. (1789). *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy*. Sabin Americana.

Obichere, B. I. (1971). *West African States and European Expansion: The Dahomey-Niger Hinterland, 1885-1898*. Yale University Press.

Oliveira, C. (2016). Human Rights & Exhibitions, 1789-1989. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 29, 71–94. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/43915939

Oyotunji. (2024). Report to Dokpwe (Able-bodied Men). Retrieved from http://www.oyotunji.org/report-to-dokpwe-able-bodied-men.html

Palau-Marti, M. (1967). Sabres, Décorés du Dahomey. Extract from *Objects et Mondes*. Tome VII, Fasc. 4; Hivier.

Piqué, F., Rainer, L. H., Alladaye, J. C., de Souza-Ayari, R., & Blier, S. P. (1999). *Wall Sculptures of Abomey*. Thames & Hudson.

Prince-Bythewood, G. (Director). *The Woman King* [Film]. TriStar Pictures and Entertainment One.

Radar Africa. (2024). The Legacy of Dahomey Amazons: Benin's Female Warriors. Retrieved from https://radarafrica.com/africa/the-legacy-of-dahomey-amazons-benins-female-warriors/

Radley, D. (2024). Study Confirms Funerary Huts at King Ghezo's Palace Built with Blood of Human Sacrifice Victims. *Archaeology News.* Retrieved from https://archaeologymag.com/2024/06/king-ghezo-palace-built-with-blood-of-human-sacrifice-victims/

Randsborg, K., Merkyte, I., Moller, N. A., & Albek, S. (2011). *Bénin Archaeology: The Ancient Kingdoms*. Centre of World Archaeology–Publication 7. *Journal of African Archeology, 9*(1), 107–108. https://doi.org/10.3213/2191-5784-10174

Rawley, J. A. (1984). Further Light on Archibald Dalzel. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, *17*(2), 317–323. https://doi.org/10.2307/218609

Renfrew C. & Bahn P., (2019). Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice. London: Thames & Hudson.

Ronen, D. (1975). *Dahomey: Between Tradition and Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Roth, H. L. (1903). *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors*. F. King. https://doi.org/10.5479/sil.126862.39088002687994

Roy, T., (2011). Stan Lee's Amazing Marvel Interview! *Alter Ego* (#104). Tomorrow's Publishing, (pp. 38–39).

Rush, D. (2013). *Vodun in Coastal Bénin: Unfinished, Open-ended, Global*. Vanderbilt University Press.

Sarr, F., Savoy, B., Maréchal, I., & Négri, V. (2018). The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relatonal Ethics. Ministére de la culture. Retrieved from https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf

SBS News (2022) Prized African Artefacts Exhibited in Benin after Treasures Returned by France. *Sbsnews.com.* Retrieved from https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/prized-african-artefacts-exhibited-in-benin-after-treasures-returned-by-france/y7zf2f8r1

Schmidt, P. R. (2006). *Historical archaeology in Africa: Representation, social memory, and oral traditions*. Rowman Altamira.

Snelgrave, W. (1734). *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea: And the Slave-trade, Containing I. The History of the Late Conquest of the Kingdom of Whidaw by the King of Dahomè The Author's Journey to the Conqueror's Camp; where He Saw Several Captives Sacrificed, &c. II. The Manner how the Negroes Become Slaves. The Numbers of Them Yearly Exported from Guinea to America. The Lawfulness of that Trade. The Mutinies Among Them on Board the Ships where the Author Has Been, &c. III. A Relation of the Author's Being Taken by ...*. James, John, and Paul Knapton, at the Crown in Ludgate Street. Sabin Americana.

Sotherby's. (2014) (#372) Fon Divination Sculpture, Kingdom of Dahomey, Benin (Country). Retrieved from https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/african-oceanic-n09146/lot.372.html

Soumonni, E. (1995). The Compatibility of the Slave and Palm Oil trades in Dahomey, 1818–1858. In R. Law (Ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce*, (78–92). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511523861.004

Stahl, A. B. (2005). Introduction: Changing Perspectives on Africa's Pasts. *African Archaeology*: *A critical introduction*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1-23.

Stahn, C. (2023). *Confronting Colonial Objects: Histories, Legalities, and Access to Culture*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192868121.001.0001

Vansina, J. (1984). *African Art and History*. Longman.

Waldman, L. K. (1965). An Unnoticed Aspect of Archibald Dalzel's the History of Dahomey. *The Journal of African History*, *6*(2), 185–192 https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700005600

Waterlot, E. G. (1926). *Les bas-reliefs des bâtiments royaux d'Abomey (Dahomey)* (Vol. 1). Institut d'ethnologie.

Wilkins, H., (2023) North Korean Company Behind Benin 'Woman King' Statue. *voaafrica.com.* Retrieved from https://www.voaafrica.com/a/north-korean-company-behind-benin-woman-king-statue/6915437.html

Zemanek-Münster (2016). 84 Tribal Art Auction - 5 November 2016. *Issuu.com*. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/zemanek/docs/tribalart84/233

Corresponding author: Ron Lawrence Anderson
Email: ronlawrenceanderson@gmail.com, rand4707@uni.sydney.edu.au

Preserving Tradition: Motif Design Development for Batik Tulis Lasem

Vera Jenny Basiroen
Bina Nusantara University, Indonesia

Grasheli Kusuma Andhini
Bina Nusantara University, Indonesia

Ida Bagus Kerthyayana Manuaba
Bina Nusantara University, Indonesia

Abstract

Batik Tulis Lasem, a cherished local heritage, embodies the rich Javanese-Chinese acculturation and cultural narratives embedded in each piece. Amid rapid modernization, preserving this tradition is crucial to sustaining cultural identity, passing it down to younger generations, and supporting local economic growth. The Batik Tulis industry has long provided employment for local communities and artisans. However, the lack of innovation in motif design has diminished its appeal among younger generations, threatening its continuity. This study employed an exploratory approach using the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method, integrated with the IDEO design thinking process, to develop new motifs for Batik Tulis Lasem. The research explored potential sources of inspiration and innovation to revitalize Batik Lasem's design tradition. Through collaborative efforts between authors and artisans, this initiative fosters cultural pride, strengthens community engagement, and enhances the economic sustainability of the Lasem community. The newly developed motifs reflect the historical and cultural essence of Lasem but also ensure the adaptability of Batik Tulis to contemporary aesthetics. By integrating traditional craftsmanship with innovative design approaches, this study contributes to the ongoing efforts to sustain Batik Lasem as a vital cultural and economic asset for future generations.

Keywords: Batik Lasem, motif design development, cultural sustainability, IDEO design thinking, Indonesia

Birthed by the acculturation between Javanese and Chinese communities, Lasem is a coastal area in Rembang, Central Java, Indonesia, with a specific cultural significance. The interethnic marriages between Chinese and Javanese resulted in the hybrid culture known as the "Chinese Peranakan" society. It is known for the famous artifact *Batik Lasem* (Lukman et al., 2019), a hand-drawn batik (*Batik Tulis)* with unique motifs and colors reflecting the harmonious blend. Batik *Tulis* is an Indonesian traditional art that used a tool called *canting* to apply wax and dyes hand drawing intricate designs on to a fabric. Lasem is the only area in Indonesia that uses hot wax canting, while all other coastal regions use stamped batik (Basiroen, 2023). *Batik Tulis Lasem* extends beyond its artistic value; it also represents the heritage of the Indonesian people, preserving the authenticity of traditions.

Historically, Lasem Batik was the backbone of the local economy, employing around 90% of the region's population in its heyday in the 1900s before suffering a setback during crisis in the 1998-1999 (Liong et al., 2010; Rahayu & Alrianingrum, 2014). Most artisans were women, and most played a central role in the industry, balancing batik making with agricultural work to supplement household income (Tahwin & Mahmudi, 2018). Batik Lasem, as a local treasure, contributes to cultural sustainability by integrating intangible narratives and community-based symbolism in its motifs. However, the prestige and popularity of Lasem Batik have declined, partly due to stagnation in motif innovation and a lack of appeal to younger generations. Sustainable development of new motifs rooted in Lasem's heritage is necessary to preserve its cultural identity and maintain public interest. The younger generation's declining interest in pursuing careers as Batik artisans or entrepreneurs poses a threat to the continuity of the Lasem Batik industry. The allure of modern careers has drawn them away from traditional crafts. Combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the industry's turnover, Batik Lasem now faces a dual challenge of cultural and economic survival.

This study seeks to preserve the cultural identity and heritage of Batik Tulis Lasem through the creation of new motifs while maintaining the authenticity of traditional motifs rooted in Javanese Chinese acculturation. The development of contemporary designs aims to revitalise the industry through sustainable motif innovation that aligns with current tastes of the younger generations. This will eventually help recovering market interest and artisan livelihoods. This study aims to empower local artisans economically, recognising and strengthening their central role in batik production and as key drivers of the local creative economy. Through this study, local knowledge, symbolism, and stories of Batik Lasem could be documented ensuring these cultural codes to be preserved and understood by future generation.

Literature Review

On September 30, 2009, UNESCO declared Indonesian Batik a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Winata, 2021). As a form of gratitude and to encourage the preservation and development of national batik, the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, through Presidential Decree No. 33/2009, established October 2 as National Batik Day. Since then, National Batik Day has become an annual moment to remember, maintain, and preserve batik as an Indonesian cultural heritage (RRI, n.d.). Various government and private offices

also set a day in one work week to wear batik. The excitement of including batik in the world list by UNESCO is shown by the increasing number of Indonesians who use batik on various occasions (UNESCO, 2017).

Batik art is a hereditary skill, which since it began to grow is one of the sources of livelihood that provides a wide range of positions for the Indonesian people as well as a growing appreciation of its creation engendering its own meaning associated with traditions, beliefs and sources of life that thrive in society (Sewan Susanto, 2018). The artisan sector is still a significant contributor to the economy in developing countries, including Indonesia, with estimates indicating that it is the second largest employer after the agricultural sector (Artisan Alliance, n.d.). It should be noted that most artisans are women, underscoring the role of this sector in promoting gender-inclusive economic empowerment (Ballard Brief, n.d.; International Labor Organization, n.d.).

Cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible, are essential resources that shape regional identity and contribute to sustainable development. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, a policy framework has emerged to protect cultural heritage. The Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Development Policy propose a strategy based on the 5Ps of Sustainable Development (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership) to strengthen cultural heritage preservation initiatives (Labadi et al., 2021). In addition, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) highlights four sustainable development goals (SDGs) that are directly related to traditional batik making: poverty alleviation (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). To achieve these goals, empowering batik artisans, innovating sustainable motif designs, and encouraging cultural sustainability is necessary (MacCannell, 2021).

Figure 1

The 5 P's of the Sustainable Development Strategy (United Nations, 2022)

When the Batik Lasem business was at its height, almost every home in Lasem town and the nearby Rembang Regency villages was powered by it. Then about 90% of Lasem's female population was employed as batik craftspeople (Liong et al., 2010), stemming from 25 villages

across four sub-districts (Indonesia, 2006). Furthermore, female farm laborers also create batik to supplement their family's income in their spare time between planting and harvesting. This demonstrates how rural residents can also find employment and escape poverty, thanks to the Batik Lasem business, with women comprising approximately 75% of artisans worldwide (Ballar Brief, n.d.). Indonesia's garment and textile industry employs about 5.2 million workers, with women dominating the workforce in these factories (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

As a local treasure, Batik Lasem, contributes to cultural sustainability by integrating intangible cultural narratives and the stories behind them embedded in its creative motifs. The values of life visualized in Lasem batik function as a cultural code, regulating various signs that reflect the community's heritage (Langi et al., 2024). In addition, batik production helps preserve local expertise while supporting regional economic development. This raises questions about its preservation in modernization and globalization. Creativity is one of the determinants of the survival of a culture, including the batik culture in the city of Lasem, Rembang Regency (Central Java). The decline in the prestige and popularity of Lasem handmade batik is very likely due to the cessation of efforts by batik artisans to create new and more interesting motifs (Basiroen, 2023; Nurcahyanti et al., 2021). The motifs used in Lasem handmade batik are mostly motifs that have long been recognized by batik lovers. In order for Lasem hand-drawn batik to remain attractive to the public, it is necessary to create sustainable designs of new motifs that still have the originality and cultural characteristics of Lasem, in an effort to preserve Lasem hand-drawn batik.

The decline of the Lasem hand-written batik industry at present is further worsened by the low interest of the younger generation to pursue Lasem hand-drawn batik business activities, both as entrepreneurs and as artisans. The younger generation tends to choose to work in other professional sectors, both within and outside Rembang Regency. This has led to the following two critical problems: (1) Reduced employment and income for residents in poor rural areas; (2) The threat of extinction of Lasem batik culture due to the decline in industrial competitiveness and the difficulty of regenerating Lasem entrepreneurs and artisans. Many artisans preferred to leave the unstable Batik business and moved to factory workers in the factories nearby (Santi, 2021). Batik makers today are almost not bothered about the symbolic meaning contained in a piece of batik cloth with its artistic-aesthetic value, while preferring to focus on its economic value (marketability).

It is believed that the lack of innovative and creative developments by artisans might in part be attributed to the decline of the Batik industry, which are essential for capturing the interest of younger generation (Agustin, 2009). Additionally, the waning interest among younger generations has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Basiroen et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the batik industry in Lasem, causing a significant drop in turnover for producers. This decline is significantly impacted the batik industry in Lasem, causing a significant drop in producer turnover (Ningsih & Aryani, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges for the batik industry, causing a drastic drop in sales and threatening artisans' livelihoods (Anggia et al., 2021). The artists

struggle to develop new motifs that integrate high historical and acculturation values. Designing new designs that maintain the unique quality of Lasem Batik motifs while maintaining authenticity and cultural spirit to ensure continued public appeal is essential.

According to research, millennials prefer to buy things that would make them feel unique while also helping out local craftspeople and environmentally conscious businesses. When it comes to more conventional forms of handicraft, they lean towards more modern designs, particularly when those designs reflect the current clothing styles (Muñoz & Pinedo, 2023). Therefore, new approaches are required in Batik Lasem motif design development in order to produce contemporary designs. The developed motifs would have to be able to influence young consumers feeling more connected to Batik as a living practice rather than as a mere historical relic (Kumar et al., 2021). By adding a modern touch, the richness and distinctiveness of Batik Lasem could thus be made more attractive and trendier while still retaining its traditional heritage. This way it is hoped that cultural products can attract younger generations and build their sense of tradition so the legacy could be passed down through generations.

Piliang (2018) stated that the development of cultural heritage must be based on the spirit of preservation, to protect it from the threat of extinction or loss of its original identity. The development of the cultural heritage must open the door to the widest possible freedom of ideas, as part of the creative process itself, but based on the mission to maintain its own identity, character and cultural resilience. Creativity in local wisdom forms an idea, behavior, sign, image and meaning in everyday life. The context in local culture becomes the cultural roots of identity, values, and wisdom.

The creation process discussed in this study encompasses a visual communication design approach, creativity theory, aesthetic theory, and semiotics theory. The creativity and aesthetic approaches are used as a starting point to explore the concept of art creation through various stages of exploration (both inspiration, ideas, forms, techniques, media, and aesthetics) in constructing motif design creation. The creation of sustainable designs for Batik Lasem motifs is also carried out through the stages of visual experimentation aimed at producing new motif designs, as well as semiotic theory for the concept of meaning of new motifs. The creation uses creativity, exploration, and innovative thought processes in order to create novelty in the motifs, and still be able to maintain the natural environment, identity, local cultural character, and local wisdom.

Piliang (1989, as cited in Walker, 1989) stated that aesthetics is a special approach with an emphasis on aspects of art and design in relation to aesthetic appeal. This aesthetic appeal can arise from aspects of form (formal), content (symbol) and emotional expression (expression). This results in analyzing models of formalism, symbolism and expressionism. Formal analysis of artworks considers first and foremost the aesthetic effects created by the formal component parts of art and design. Parts that are called formal elements are line, shape, texture, space, color and light, which, arranged in a variety of different ways, produce art and design compositions.

A composition produces the design principles of unity, balance, proportion, pattern and rhythm, which, via the components of the elements, evoke a certain response in the viewer. The final arrangement created by a designer is referred to as the composition of the design work. A formal analysis of a design composition looks at how each element in the composition contributes to the overall impression that the work produces (Walker, 1989). In this study, the basis of aesthetic theory was used in building motif shapes and colors by considering the elements and principles of visual communication design, in the design of motif shapes which are then arranged to produce a Lasem batik motif in a new form.

Here, semiotics becomes very central in the study of modern objects (Walker, 1989), as the study of signs as part of social life, which explains the inseparable relationship between the sign system and its application in society. Since the sign is always forged with in social and cultural life, semiotics is very central in cultural studies. Charles Morris (1979, as cited in Piliang, 2018) stated that semiotic analysis has three dimensions, namely syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, where all three have their own objects of study, but are interrelated and can produce deep meaning. Semiotic theory is used to interpret new motifs from the creation of Lasem batik motifs, from historical stories, nature, Javanese Chinese culture, and the daily activities of the Lasem community. The semiotic theory will interpret the meaning of the motifs in Lasem handmade batik, which are new motifs created by the crafters after receiving assistance in motif creation.

In semiotic theory, denotation conveys the most obvious meaning of a sign. Connotation is the interaction that occurs when a sign meets a person's feelings or emotions. It rather has a subjective meaning according to the culture of the individual concerned. In other words, denotation is what the sign describes about an object, while its connotative meaning rests on how it describes it. Connotative meanings are often read by individuals as denotative facts. Therefore, one of the goals of semiotic analysis is to provide an analytical model and framework and thus overcome the occurrence of misreading or misinterpreting the meaning of a sign. In a second stage of signification relating to content, signs work through myth. Myths are how cultures explain or understand some aspects of reality or natural phenomena. In a myth, a sign can have several signifiers. Myths are not only messages conveyed in verbal form (spoken or written words), but also in various visual forms or a mixture of verbal and nonverbal forms, something that could also be applied to Lasem batik motifs and thereby convey specific messages (Sobur, 2013).

This research seeks to describe the creation process of sustainable design motifs by combining the history, nature, and culture of Java and China, as well as the daily activities of the local community. (Lukman et al., 2019). Creating sustainable design motifs for Lasem batik is a strategic part of making creative batik artifacts—one of the critical efforts in maintaining and preserving the batik tradition, entirely in line with the philosophy behind the motif (Basiroen et al., 2023). Every motif carries cultural meanings and stories, making the design process fosters artisans' prides and intergenerational knowledge transfer. This preservation is also supported by cultural history, acculturation that grows and strengthens in society, and the empowerment of the Lasem Batik community (Kudiya et al., 2014). These new findings are

intended to be used by artisans as a measure for success in the motif development process and to pass on the creative spirit and culture of batik making to the next generation so that they can continue to explore the potential for ideas and innovation in Lasem batik motifs (Jha, 2024; Li & Min, 2024). In addition, these new motifs can support local business growth with innovations that appeal to the younger generation (Maziliauske, 2024). The creation of new motifs for Batik Lasem uses creativity, exploration, and innovative thought processes in order to create novelty in the motifs, and still be able to maintain the natural environment, identity, local cultural character, and local wisdom.

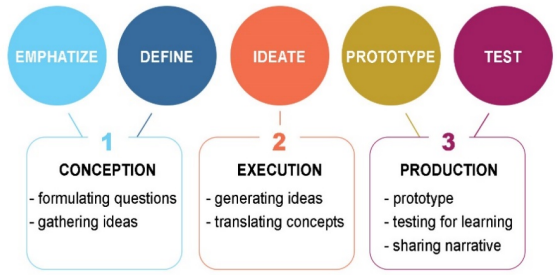
Methodology

This study used the Participatory Rural Approach (PRA) on two Batik artisan groups, integrating the IDEO design thinking process to create a motif design. To improve the competence of the labor force in Lasem, mentoring was carried out since 2020 using the approach of the village community participation method, or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which is a method devised by Robert Chambers to encourage rural communities to participate in improving and analyzing their knowledge and tailored to their conditions and needs (Chambers, 1994). This participatory framework allows artisans to contribute to developing motifs actively, ensuring that new designs remain rooted in culture while appealing to contemporary markets (Basiroen & Manuaba, 2023). PRA engages the artisan community in a creative process where the artisans are, together with the authors, positioned as research subjects fully involved throughout the motif development process. Batik motif design assistance was provided by creators and artisans interactively and communicatively. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach in this research aimed to build awareness among Lasem batik artisans to realize community empowerment by creating a tourism village based on local cultural potential (Chambers & Dunn, 1997). The authors position the artisans as research subjects (not as objects) in an effort to develop motifs through the role and participation of artisan to participate in choosing, determining, and making what motifs will be developed, according to their wishes and needs. The study also highlights the role of design thinking in revitalizing traditional skills, emphasizing an iterative, user-centered approach to creating motifs that are modern yet culturally authentic (Brown, 2009; Brown et al., 2020).

The study involved two artisan groups from Jeruk Village and Karas Kepoh Village, with each 4 artisans from Jeruk Village and 14 artisans from Karas Kepoh Village, all currently active in Batik Lasem production. The artisans were recruited using a purposive sampling method, facilitated by community networks and existing relationships with local batik groups. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in batik production and their willingness to engage in the participatory design process. Also, the two artisan groups have younger family members who could potentially inherit and continue the batik making process allowing for regeneration. Everything that took place was directed according to the plan, creative concept, and stages of creation developed and according to the division of work duties and responsibilities. Based on IDEO design thinking, the design thinking process conducted in this study was down to five stages for the research framework, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Research Framework Based on IDEO Design Thinking



Through the participatory approach, the authors accompanied the artisans from the sketching stage (conception), the realization and execution of the motif design (execution), to the implementation of the new motif into a batik (production). This allows artisans to share, develop, and analyse their knowledge about the motif development influenced by the conditions and environment of their respective villages. Rather than being mere passive workers who are given the finished designs, they become subjects involved in motif design creation from initial to final stage. Using PRA, this eventually increased the involvement of the Lasem community in the development of new and sustainable motifs while preserving existing local wisdom and values. Throughout the PRA, discussions and interviews were conducted with the artisans and elders in Lasem to better understand and express local heritage while also paying attention to the latest visual communication trends.

The creation of Batik Lasem motifs through assistance to artisans in relation to motif development, aimed to open up insights and develop the creativity of the local artisans. It is categorized as the "art through metamorphosis" (Graburn, 1979), where the creator produces works of art that are deliberately made for the needs of Batik Lasem's artisans in Jeruk and Karas Kepoh Village. The final results of the creation of Lasem batik works can be analyzed and categorized based on the principles of visual communication design. Each category, with the development of new motifs, has new visual characteristics with interpretations of meanings, messages, and acculturation values that are implicitly attached to the resulting batik works. Formal analysis can describe the philosophical meaning of the main motif and *isen-isen* (filled background) that can be directly linked to the appearance of the motif.

The study employed a qualitative analysis approach that integrated visual, thematic, and semiotic methodologies to evaluate the outcomes of the participatory motif development process. The analysis combined visual, thematic, and semiotic approaches. Visual analysis examined sketches and motifs using design principles like line, shape, and balance to assess the transformation of traditional Lasem elements. Thematic analysis of interviews and discussions identified recurring themes such as cultural preservation, artisan empowerment, and youth appeal. Semiotic analysis explored the symbolic meanings of motifs, interpreting them as cultural codes that reflect narrative, emotion, and identity.

Discussion

Creativity and aesthetic approaches were used as starting points to explore the concept of art creation through various stages of exploration (inspiration, ideas, forms, techniques, media, and aesthetics) in constructing motif design creation. The creation of the sustainable design of Lasem batik motifs was also carried out through the stages of visual experimentation aimed at producing new motif designs, as well as semiotic theory for the concept of meaning of new motifs. Semiotic theory is used to interpret the meaning of each Lasem's hand-drawn Batik motif at is used in the new motif creation by the artisans during participatory study. Although the post-COVID younger generation's overall interest in Batik is declining, it is noted that motifs that depict local heritage are still increasingly popular as they connect them with the cultures of their roots (Yulianingrum et al., 2022). Four visual categories of motifs were created for this study: patterns of nature, patterns of everyday life in Lasem, patterns of historical stories, and patterns of Javanese Chinese acculturation. The acculturation becomes one of the key visual categories since Lasem is renowned for its Javanese Chinese culturation. A clear example of the acculturation process that is transformed into batik motifs is Cheng Ho's fleet when it docked at Lasem harbor in 1413.

New motifs were explored from the usual artisans' motifs while maintaining Lasem's characteristics, complete with its underlying philosophy. The composition of the motifs could vary, such as series of dense, loosely twisted, symmetrical, asymmetrical, and repetitive motifs or spread motifs across the fabric. The fabric used to make batik is called *mori* (white woven cloth), while the surrounding edge is called the border and is usually filled with the typical Lasem *isen. Isen-isen* is the background filling in a motif to make the batik cloth more attractive. The *isen* is generally simple in shape and relatively small, and can fill any space on the fabric. An example can be found in Figure 3.

The chosen motifs to be developed were the popular classical motifs in the market, such as sekar *jagad* (universe), slopes with *kawung* (palm fruits) or *parang* (a type of knife) motifs, *pagi sore* (morning-evening) cloth, *tumpal* (triangle-shaped motif on batik edges), phoenix, dragon, and butterfly. These motifs were highly influenced by Chinese culture. The chosen *isen-isen* motifs (filled background) include *watu pecah* (broken stone or pebbles), *gunung ringgit* (ringgit mountain), *kembang mlaten* (mlaten flower or jasmine), and *latohan* (seaweed-like plant). *The primary* colors are *bang biron* (red and blue) and *abang gethih pitik* (the red color of chicken blood)

Figure 3
Batik Lasem by Pusaka Beruang (Source: own documentation)

Through the PRA approach, authors and artisans sat together to discuss and explore the new design development by visualizing the desired designs by KUB Srikandi artisans. The group leader acted as the motif designer, producing a series of drawings that visually represent the motifs' stories through sketches. Those sketches do not necessarily need to be in the form of full illustrations. The same activity was then also conducted with the Pesona Canting artisans.

Authors broadened the artisans' horizons by introducing and exploring the forms of the main motifs, outside of the habitual motifs created by the artisans, while still maintaining the characteristics of Lasem. The motif size on the fabric would then be adjusted to the design layout. This process facilitated the authors' communication with the batik artisans who helped realize the design in the batik-making process. With a twist on the color combination and lines, the new motif was drawn and traced onto the cloth, and the artisans would apply the filled background motifs directly using a *canting. Canting* is a tool used to inscribe wax and create hand-drawn batik. It requires precision, toughness, and patience.

Developing a new batik motif during the conception stage was based on the desire for in-depth exploration, flexible visual adaptation, and innovation efforts, contributing to the economic movement's sustainability. Innovation was achieved by improving the existing motifs and seeing them from different perspectives to create new ideas. In line with the IDEO philosophy, the creation steps involved going back and forth in proposing new innovative designs by expanding the inquiry in and open-ended fashion (IDEO U, 2021). The idea here was to seek creative solutions, particularly in creating visual objects that become a source of inspiration. Driven by the lack of innovation in Lasem batik and the use of old motifs, this study's inspiration was taken from the natural environment of Lasem—its flora and fauna—and the community's daily life. The authors assisted artisans in exploring various motifs and the conceptual background as well as the philosophical meaning of the motifs that appear as typical Lasem batik motif patterns, to formulate several design concepts for Lasem batik motifs. The authors and artisans explored and brainstormed together to develop as many ideas as possible by conducting visual experiments and making sketches to produce innovative and novel sustainable design motifs without losing the cultural characteristics of Lasem, resulting in a list of motifs to be developed.

Figure 4
Exploring and Brainstorming Session Between Authors and Artisans (Source: own documentation)

Sources of inspiration were found from visual sources such as the natural flora and fauna of Lasem's surroundings, Lasem objects and life, historical stories, and Javanese and Chinese acculturation motifs, which were obtained from images seen either from television, social media, or from websites. Audio sources were obtained from natural sounds and sounds made by fauna. Literal sources of ideas, such as historical stories, Javanese and Chinese acculturation motifs, emerged from literatures from journal articles, books, and webinars, such as from the manuscripts of Sabda Badra Santi, Fengshen (a storybook of temple murals in Lasem), Journey to the East, The Story of Eight Gods, photographs of shipyards during the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie – Dutch Trade Association) era, and others. In-depth observations were conducted to obtain all visual data on the development of Lasem hand-written batik in the literature and directly find batik products with various batik patterns developed so far in Lasem. Ideas were also engendered from discussions with local elders, religious leaders, and cultural experts, providing more inspiration.

The results of the visual exploration of motifs are then summarized in five classifications of motifs to be created, namely: (1) flora motifs of Lasem's environment, such as fruits that grow in Lasem, kawis fruit which is a typical fruit of Lasem, beautiful colorful flowers endemic in Lasem, Teak forests that can be found around people's abodes, corn, bitter melon, ferns, and banana trees; (2) natural fauna motifs such as roosters, birds of paradise, various marine fauna, tigers, chef goldfish, spiders, jaguars, and peacocks; (3) motifs of life activities in Lasem such as *dokar* (dogcart)*, windmills, lelet coffee, lawang ombo* (wide door)*, lontong tuyuhan* (tuyuhan rice cake) *and tempe tuyuhan* (tempeh) sellers, batik artisans, farmers and fishermen, and salt farmers; (4) motifs of historical stories such as typical Lasem house doors, the eight gods, Cheng Ho ships, Lasem fighters, and ancient boat sites; (5) motifs of Javanese and Chinese acculturation such as the lion dance, temples, Champa ceramics, dragons and Hong birds, zodiac, and Little China. With these findings, mapping the potential and distinctiveness of Lasem hand-drawn batik motifs with five categories of pattern creation was carried out in the previous research while also considering the current trends so that the younger generation will like these new motifs (Basiroen & Oetojo, 2018). Each motif is meant to have a unique value

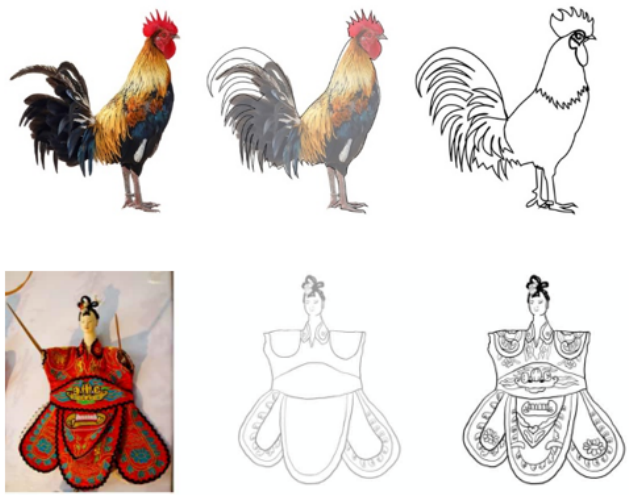
and story that would inspire the youngsters of Lasem to continue and maintain the traditions of Batik while also creating sustainable design motifs.

Sketching during the execution stage was a simple way to record what the artisans see and hear. It would help draw and develop ideas for later use by the artisans and the next generation. Sketches were then perfected by using design elements, namely points, straight lines, curved lines, geometric shapes (circles, triangles, and rectangles), non-geometric shapes (water, stone, and other inanimate objects), and organic shapes (living things). Figure 5 shows the design execution process. Using design principles and elements in shape and color, the authors then analyzed the artisan's stories. Important elements were extracted from the story and made into simpler drawings. While narrating the drawing, the authors discussed with the artisan's the motifs and alternative unique composition designs on the fabric inspired by the story.

The artisans' hand-drawn sketches were simplified into outlines by first taking the visual data as the source of inspiration, duplicating (tracing) directly from the image, or drawing a visual form, and the far-right image is the final result of the creation of the motif work. Adobe Illustrator software and a Wacom tablet were used to perfect the hand-drawn sketches and various alternative motif design creations for the final motif.

Figure 5

Design Execution Process: Source of Inspiration, Contour Shaping, and Shape Refinement (Source: own documentation)



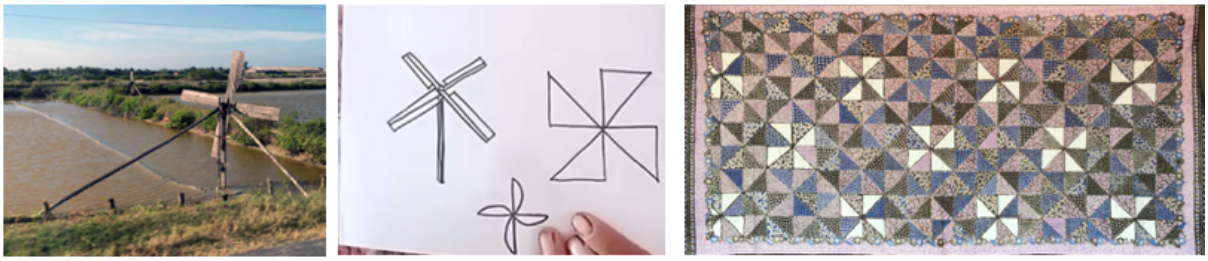
During the production stage, motifs were translated into the batik cloth without losing the identity and character of the filled background *(isenisen)* of Lasem's hand-drawn batik cloth. The signature *isen–isen* included *latohan* (seaweed-like plant), *watu pecah* (broken stone or pebbles), *gunung ringgit* (ringgit mountain), *aseman* (tamarind), *nyuk pitu* (seven dots), and *seritan* (fine-toothed comb). The traditional *canting* technique was then used to inscribe the motif into the cloth with precision, as seen in Figure 6. At this point, the authors were still working together with the two artisan groups.

Figure 6
Artisans Inscribed the Final Motif on Mori (Source: own documentation)

During the interviews, the authors immersed themselves in discussions with the artisans. For example, in Figure 7, the artisans discussed the local windmills, which are widely used to irrigate the salt fields in Lasem, to create motifs. Then experiments were conducted by playing around with geometric shapes such as squares and triangles. The sketches were successfully visualized in the simplification of triangular shapes as windmills and implemented in the form of geometric compositions on long fabrics.

The windmill shape was implemented in the composition of the patchwork box patterned fabric (*kotak tambal*) by using four triangular shapes arranged in a circle within the box. Sketches were successfully created by combining new forms of geometric triangle visuals with the classic Javanese patchwork box motif. Similarly, for the other motifs, exploration and experimentation on the visuals were conducted using design principles and elements on the shapes, resulting in sketches of new motifs. The artisans extracted the essential elements of the creator's story and drew them simply, in accordance with their habits. The artisan must understand the core of the story, but space can be left open for imagination.

Figure 7
Images of Windmills, Sketches, and the Final Motif Creation (source: own documentation)



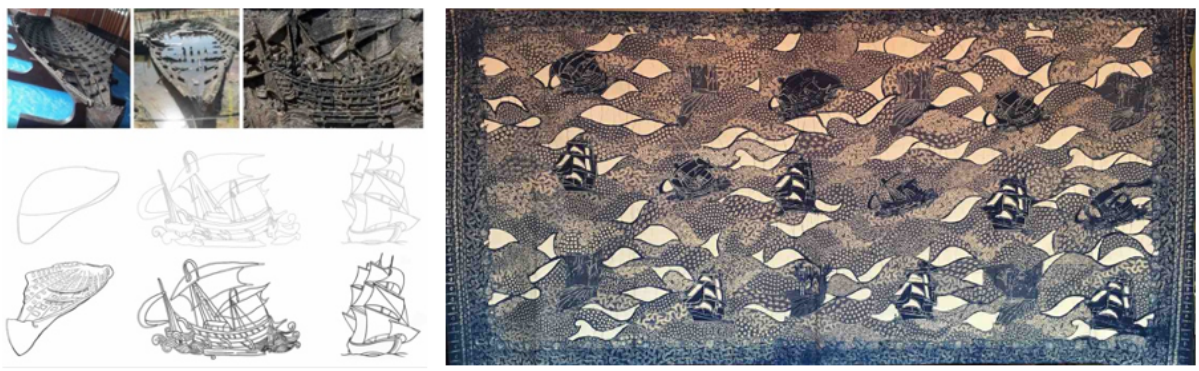
In the end, there are four categories of design objects produced in this study, namely nature (flora and fauna), the daily life of the Lasem community, Lasem's historical sites, and Javanese and Chinese acculturation motifs. The design of natural motifs is based on the inspiration of the flora that grows around Lasem and the fauna that lives on land, in the air, in fresh water, and the sea. The flora used as inspiration was the group closest to the lives of Lasem's Batik Artisans. Fauna is an interesting and flexible object and was processed in a deformative, imaginative, and exploratory way. Some flora that are often used as inspiration for motifs included *latohan* (seaweed), that reflects the livelihood of coastal communities and abundance in Lasem culture, as well as teak and mangrove plants that reflect the sustainability of the local environment. Meanwhile, animals such as swallows, closely related to the economic life of the community, are often used as motifs that represent abundance and good fortune.

Various objects and activities of daily life found in Lasem, such as windmills in salt fields, slow coffee, the *Lawang Ombo* house (wide door house), batik artisans, farmers and fishermen, and salt farmers, were all used as inspiration for the design of motifs for the category of daily life in Lasem. These motifs not only represent the socio-economic life of the community but also illustrate the involvement of women in the batik industry and the agricultural sector. The use of these symbols aims to increase appreciation for a traditional lifestyle that continues to evolve in a modern context.

The historical heritage in Lasem, also known as "Little China", is not only in the form of temple buildings but also legends and discoveries of historical sites. Both the authors and the artisans have incorporated several historical objects and stories into the design of the motifs. These motifs represent the glory of Lasem as a center of trade and the gateway for Chinese culture to enter the archipelago. The use of dragon symbols, trading boats, and classical Chinese building motifs aims to connect the past and the present in a visual work of high historical value. Figure 8 below shows the motif development inspired by the historical object, ancient ship.

Figure 8

Images of Chinese Ancient Ship, Sketches, and the Final Motif Creation (source: own documentation)



The main motif of this fabric depicts a seascape with white waves surrounding an ancient Chinese ship as the central element. The background of the fabric features a *sekar jagad*

(universe) pattern filled with various traditional Lasem *isen-isen*, adding intricate detail to the design. This combination of the main motif and background creates a dynamic impression while connecting maritime cultural elements with Lasem batik's rich historical symbolism. The outer border is deep blue, adorned with the *pucuk rebung isen* (bamboo shoot shapes on the edges of the fabric), symbolizing growth and resilience. The inner frame contains *latohan isen* (seaweed like plant filled background), providing balance and distinctive texture. The body of the fabric showcases the main motif of the ancient ship, combined with the *sekar jagad* (universe) background, enriched with various *isen* patterns such as *palangan* (cross), *ungker* (circle), *ungker tumpuk* (layers of circles), *seritan* (fine-toothed comb), *cacingan berantai* (worm in chain shape), *semanggi* (clover), *biji sawo* (sapodilla seed), and *tanahan* (ground like dots). This diverse array of *isen* not only adds visual complexity but also represents the depth of philosophy and cultural richness embedded in Lasem batik.

In terms of design elements and principles, color plays a dominant role in creating harmony within this motif. Deep blue is used as the primary color, evoking stability and strength. A grayish-blue hue serves as the background for the *isen-isen*, creating a smooth gradient effect. The combination of white, light blue, and deep blue establishes a calming balance, with a striking contrast between the white waves and the blue-toned *isen* background. The use of light and dark blue follows a monochromatic color scheme, reinforcing the visual cohesion of the design. This new motif applies the design principle of positive and negative space, where the interplay of shadows and blue gradients creates the illusion of moving ocean waves. By utilizing various shades of blue, the design achieves depth and fluidity, making the waves appear more dynamic. This principle enhances not only the fabric's aesthetics but also its overall sense of movement, reinforcing the maritime theme and historical journey symbolized by the ancient Chinese ship motif.

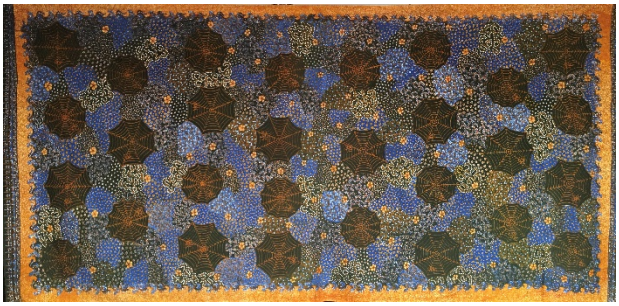
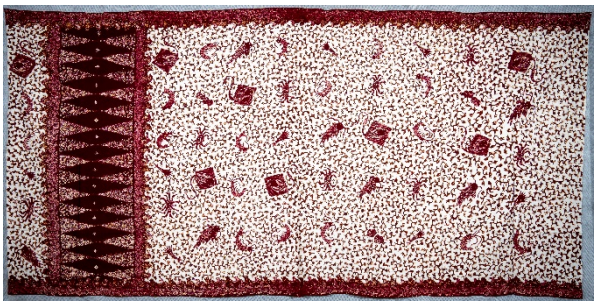
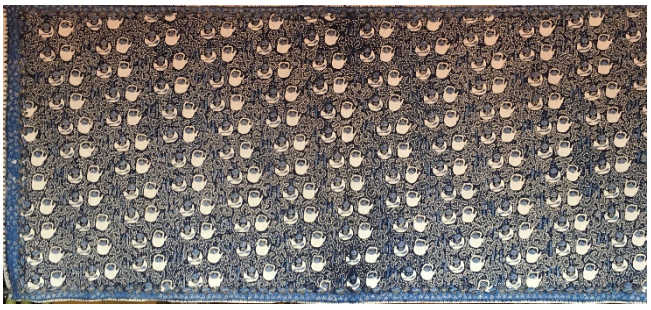
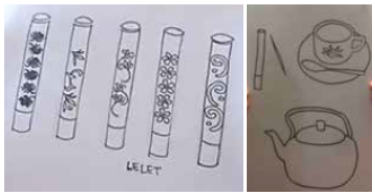
Javanese Chinese acculturation motifs can be seen in the form of lion dance, temples, Champa ceramics, dragons, *hong* (phoenix) birds, zodiac signs, Little China, and *wayang* Potehi (traditional Chinese cloth puppet). All of them illustrate the interaction and harmonious relationship between Javanese and Chinese people from the time of Cheng Ho to the present 20th century. In addition, innovation in acculturation motifs has also been developed by adapting elements of Chinese calligraphy combined with distinctive coastal batik patterns. The result is a motif that reflects the artistic fusion of two cultures, reinforcing Lasem's identity as a city with a rich and evolving cultural heritage.

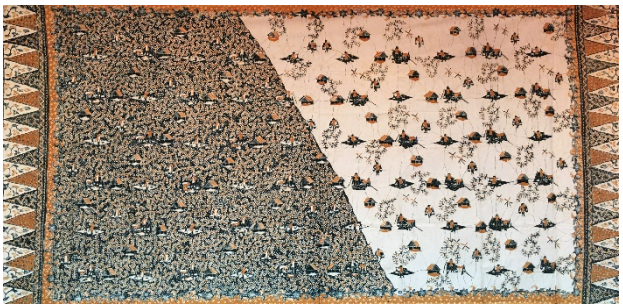
Findings

Visual communication design principles were taken into consideration throughout the process. Each motif element was placed alongside other elements while looking into the shapes, colors, balance, emphasis, repetition, contrast, and proportion. This would then result in a cohesive motif that still holds the intended story from the artisan on a batik cloth. The size of the motifs was slightly modified and adapted to the design layout of the fabric. This is because the *mori* cloth artisans generally use measurements around 230 cm x 110 cm. Table 1 below shows the final new motifs created under four visual categories.

Table 1

New Motifs Developed

Patterns of Nature	
	Teak forest motif with *isen latohan* (seaweed like plant filled background)
	Spider web motif with *isen sekar jagad* (universe filled background)
	Water animal motif in *gethih pitik* (red colour of chicken blood) with *isen latohan* (seaweed like plant filled background)
Patterns of Everyday Life in Lasem	
	*Lelet* cigarette motif with *isen latohan* (seaweed like plant filled background) 



Salt farmer motif *pagi sore* (morning evening motif)

Patterns of Javanese-Chinese Acculturation

Dragon and phoenix motif with *isen bledak* (white base)

Patterns of Historical Stories

Little China motif with *isen latohan* (seaweed like plant filled background), *tapak kuda* (horse hoof), *tanahan* (ground like dots)

Findings show that the newly developed motifs successfully combine traditional Lasem elements with contemporary design principles, maintaining the integrity of cultural heritage while introducing innovation. These motifs incorporate *isen-isen* (background patterns) such as *latohan* (seaweed), *watu pecah* (broken stone or pebbles), and *sekar jagad* (universe), and explore new compositions, symmetries, and aesthetic arrangements. A semiotic analysis revealed that motifs conveyed both denotative and connotative meanings. Symbols such as phoenixes, dragons, and ancient ships were not only decorative but also conveyed historical narratives, beliefs, and communal identity. The strategic use of design elements like color, shape, rhythm, and contrast amplified the motifs' emotional and symbolic appeal, encouraging cultural pride among artisans and viewers. Moreover, combining traditional motifs with new elements would give new meaning to the fabric, adding value to the traditional story. Through visual experimentation using Adobe Illustrator and manual sketching tools, traditional patterns were refined into fresher, more dynamic designs that appeal to younger consumers. By referencing historical sources, oral traditions, and community insights, the designs bridge

generational gaps and embody the continuity of cultural expression, aligning with the aesthetics and values of environmentally and culturally conscious youth.

The participatory design process highlighted the crucial role of artisans as co-creators in motif development, engaging them from ideation to production. Through brainstorming sessions, interviews, and collaborative sketching, artisans shared personal stories and visual interpretations that were refined into motif concepts. This inclusive, co-creative approach not only preserved local wisdom but also fostered community empowerment. Throughout the process, artisans expressed renewed enthusiasm for batik making, with their involvement in creative decision-making boosting confidence, ownership, and motivation. The resulting visually compelling, story-driven motifs are expected to enhance market appeal, increase artisan income, and contribute to the revitalization of the Batik Lasem industry through sustainable design practices.

Conclusion

In response to the declining interest of the younger generation in Batik Lasem, this study made an effort to sustain the local heritage. The classic motifs of hand-written Batik Lasem were developed to bring a sense of novelty to the final batik cloth without leaving the cultural meaning and story of the motif behind. The design process of sustainable batik motifs was carried out through cultural background studies, trends in Lasem batik motifs developed in society, and efforts to maintain distinctiveness with sustainable motif design in Lasem hand-written batik. Batik motif design assistance has been conducted two-way by the authors and artisans interactively and communicatively. Both sides shared sketches in creating visual images by reflecting on the historical narrative of Lasem, the value of living in nature, the blending of cultural values, and the daily activities of the Lasem community. The concept of creating Batik Lasem motif designs was based on a deep desire for exploration, flexible visual adaptation, and innovation efforts that elevate values for the region's economic movements using the creativity of Batik Lasem artisans.

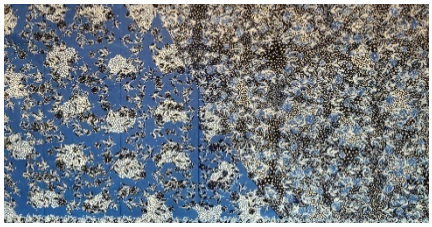
This study identified four primary categories for Batik Lasem motif development: nature (flora and fauna), daily life in the Lasem community, historical stories, and Javanese-Chinese acculturation. Each category reflects the rich cultural heritage and local environment of Lasem. The flora and fauna motifs were inspired by the natural surroundings of Lasem, such as teak forests, *latohan* (seaweed), birds of paradise, and tigers. The daily life category includes motifs derived from salt farmers, batik artisans, and local traditions such as *lelet* coffee and windmills.

The creation of new motifs was done in three stages: taking visual references as the ideation, sketching that incorporates visual design principles, and arranging the motif and filling it with backgrounds ready for inscription of wax onto the batik cloth. Table 2 shows the new motif developed from the classic Batik Lasem's motifs, expanding the possibilities of motif designs without forgetting the local narratives. From the analysis of the works, both individually and combined, two important things can be seen. First, it takes a long process and a lot of patience

to create new motif designs for Lasem batik. Second, the design of new batik motifs with different sources can lead to different types of batik in different clumps.

Table 2

New Motifs Developed from the Classic Batik Lasem's Motif (Source: own documentation)

Lasem's Classic Motif	New Motif
Chinese Character motif by Sekar Kencana	Twelve Chinese Horoscope figures with Chinese Characters
Dragon by Sekar Kencana	Dragon & Phoenix motif
Sekar Jagad (universe) motif by Lumintu	 Blue Kawis motif with *isen Sekar Jagad* (universe filled background)

Beyond the creation of the new motif, a warm mutual symbiotic relationship was created throughout this study, encouraging the spirit, enthusiasm, and productivity of Batik artisans in Lasem. The mentoring process was conducted in a family-friendly cooperative and relaxed way. The artisans could feel the psychological impact as they felt the support given by the authors. This study eventually helped push the desired business advancement by transforming various inspirations into new, fresher, freer, and more interesting motifs with contemporary nuances. The positive responses of artisans were spontaneously grasped during the discussion in obtaining visual images that have meaning and significance. The extraordinary enthusiasm of the artisans is the basic capital for improving creative human resources and the way out towards achieving community empowerment that can be carried out sustainably.

The development of the new motif design results in a reinterpretation of various philosophical meanings poured into batik motifs. The general trend of Lasem hand-drawn batik patterns or motifs is a fusion of Javanese and Chinese cultural elements combined with natural conditions, historical stories, and life in Lasem, giving birth to products that have their characteristics in Lasem hand-written batik works. New motifs emerge in various forms, *isen* (filled background), ornamental varieties, using Javanese and oriental colors.

In the creation of Lasem batik design motifs, three types of findings were obtained, namely technical findings and general findings. One, technical findings were found in two elements of visual communication design, namely in visual form (geometric, layout/composition, technical illustration), nine design principles (balance, emphasis, repetition, rhythm, unity, harmony, proportion, contrast, variation), and color. Two, general findings were of a historical, sociological, and cultural nature. Findings on visual forms such as geometric shapes, seen among others in the triangular shape of the windmill, are now found in the patch box motif. Other visual form findings include the trapezoidal shape on the morning-afternoon (*pagi sore*) cloth, the parallelogram shape on the water animal motif, and the circular motif centered on the tiger motif. The new isen-isen shape is in the form of elongated straight lines, a series of short broken lines, which has a contemporary style like a painting. Other new isen-isen are circular centered like the shape of windmills in the form of geometric triangles in the square patch motif and an arrangement of ferns forming a *kitiran*/propeller-like a windmill that is often found in the salt fields of Lasem.

Through a participatory approach, mentoring the two artisan groups began with the initial process of motif design to implementing new motifs into batik works (production stage). This approach provided synergistic opportunities for artisans to be involved, share, develop, and analyze their knowledge of motif development from the conditions and environment of their respective villages. The ultimate goal was to improve the quality and welfare of batik small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Lasem. Through this study, it is hoped that the collaborative work between authors and artisans can help foster cultural pride and improve the Lasem community's economy in achieving the locals' cultural sustainability.

The revitalization of Batik Lasem also has economic implications, as unique and innovative motifs create market differentiation, attracting collectors and contemporary fashion designers. The integration of digital marketing and e-commerce platforms increases market reach, ensuring that Batik Lasem can compete globally while maintaining its cultural roots. Future research should focus on the integration of technology in batik production, such as digital tools for motif design and pattern making with the help of artificial intelligence (AI), which can streamline production while maintaining traditional expertise.

Reflecting upon this study, it was discovered that local communities and artists tend to keep their local pride – which includes the backstory of each batik motif – to themselves, preventing them from potentially reaching a broader market. Therefore, future studies might benefit from testing the new Batik Lasem motifs on the acceptance of the younger generation and the current market to see if these collaborations are worth continuing to induce more innovations.

Moreover, creating publicity for the new motifs could benefit the local economy while preserving the tradition amid modernization.

Ultimately, the findings of this study highlight the need for continued support from various stakeholders, including the government, cultural institutions, and the private sector, in preserving and promoting Batik Lasem. The collaborative process between artisans and designers ensures that Batik Lasem remains relevant, not only as an artifact of the past but also as a living and evolving art form. Through continuous innovation and education, Batik Lasem can continue to evolve and preserve Indonesia's rich textile heritage for generations to come.

Author Contributorship

Conceptualization, V.J.B, G.K.A, and I.B.K.M; methodology, V.J.B; formal analysis, V.J.B, G.K.A, and I.B.K.M; data curation, V.J.B and G.K.A; writing, G.K.A; visualization, V.J.B and G.K.A; review final draft, V.J.B, G.K.A, and I.B.K.M; project administration, V.J.B.

Acknowledgement

This paper was supported by the International Research Grant BINUS (PIB) 2024 entitled "Design Thinking Process and Ai Chatbots Technology Based on Batik Knowledge Embedding for Batik Motif Development in Karas Kepoh And Jeruk Village, Lasem, Rembang Regency", contract No. 097/VRRTT/VII/2024.

References

Agustin, R. (2009). *Industri Batik Lasem di Lasem, Rembang, Jawa Tengah, Tahun 1970-1990*. Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta.

Anggia, F., Panjaitan, B. K., Mokhtar, S., Achmad, M., & Tri, A. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Batik industry: An empirical study in Indonesia. *Journal of Asian Finance*, *8*(5), 923–0930. https://doi.org/10.13106/jafeb.2021.vol8.no5.0923

Artisan Alliance. (n.d.). Artisan Sector: The second largest employer in the developing world. Retrieved from https://www.artisanalliance.org/sector?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Ballard Brief. (n.d). *Income instability among artisans in South Asia*. Retrieved from https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/income-instability-among-artisans-in-south-asia

Basiroen, V. J. (2021). Creating Batik Lasem through a comparative study of Batik Lasem and Champa in the 15th to 19th century. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, *729*, 12064. https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/729/1/012064

Basiroen, V. J. (2023). Creating Batik Lasem through a comparative study of Batik Lasem and Champa in the 15th to 19th century. Retrieved from https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/729/1/012064/pdf

Basiroen, V. J., & Manuaba, I. B. K. (2023). The sustainability of Batik tulis lasem through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in the new motif design. *AIP Conference Proceedings*, *2594*, No. 1. AIP Publishing.

Basiroen, V. J., & Oetojo, J. O. (2018). Digital campaign as a solution to educate millennial about Javanese Batik Pesisir. In D. H. Durahman & K. R. S. Putri (Eds.), *Artesh Proceeding*. Visual Art Study Program.

Basiroen, V. J., Wahidiyat, M. P., Suhendra, F. M., & Carolina, D. (2023). Bridging tradition and innovation: Exploring design thinking for Lasem Batik Tulis motif creation. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *426*, 02080. https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202342602080

Brown, T. (2009). *Change by design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation*. Vol. 1. HarperBusiness.

Brown, T., Clayton, M. C., Indra, N., and Vijay, G. (2020). *HBR's 10 must reads on design thinking.* Harvard Business Publishing.

Chambers, R. (1994). The origins and practice of participatory rural appraisal. *World Development*, *22*(7), 953–969. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(94)90141-4

Chambers, R., & Dunn, A. M. T. (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last* (Issue 2). Practical Action Publishing. https://doi.org/10.3362/9781780440453.000

Dibia, I. W. (2020). *Panca Sthiti Ngawi Sani: Metodologi Penciptaan Seni* (1st ed.). Denpasar: ISI Denpasar Press.

Graburn, N. H. (Ed.). (1979). *Ethnic and tourist arts: Cultural expressions from the fourth world*. Univ of California Press.

IDEO U. (2021). What is Design Thinking? [Video recording]. In *IDEO U*. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/QWdgcpAHRlM?si=9ipKZR9sj3PMYSVG

Indonesia, I. P. (2006). *Hasil Analisis Tim Peneliti Berdasar Studi Lapangan di Kabupaten Rembang, Jakarta.*

International Labour Organization. (n.d.). *Indonesias garment industry combat gender inequality and empower women*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/indonesias-garment-industry-combat-gender-inequality-and-empower-women?

Jha, A. (2024). Cultural diversity for sustainable development in art and design through new-age media. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, *4*(2CDSDAD), 186–197. https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2cdsdad.2023.569

Kudiya, K., Sabana, S., & Sachari, A. (2014). Revitalisasi Ragam Hias Batik Keraton Cirebon dalam Desain Baru Kreatif. *Panggung*, *24*(2). https://doi.org/10.26742/PANGGUNG.V24I2.116.G116

Kumar, P., Jain, V. K., Gupta, A., & Verma, H. (2021). Modelling drivers of millennial green consumption behaviour: An interpretive structural modeling (ISM) approach. *International Journal of Economics and Business Research*, *1*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJEBR.2021.10035993

Labadi, S., Giliberto, F., Rosetti, I., Shetabi, L., & Yildirim, E. (2021). *Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy guidance for heritage and development actors* (M. Duong & L. Smith, Eds.). International Journal of Heritage Studies.

Langi, K. C., Ningsih, Y. S., Carolline, G., & Bahaduri, B. A. (2024). Influence of contemporary fashion developments on the shifting meanings of hand-drawn Batik Lasem, Indonesia. *International Society for the Study of Vernacular Settlements*, *11*(3), 146–156. https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSEJ-2024-11-03-11

Li, J. & Min, G. (2024). Art Design of Non-Heritage Cultural and Creative Products Based on the Concept of Sustainability. *International Journal of Information System Modeling and Design*, *5*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijismd.349881

Liong, W. K. H., Rosina, D., & Hadi, A. (2010). Eksplorasi Sejarah Batik Lasem. In *Institut Pluralisme Indonesia*. IPI.

Lukman, C. C., Setyoningrum, Y., & Rismantojo, S. (2019). Revealing the intangible values in Lasem Batik Motif. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, *8*(9), 64–72.

MacCannell, D. (2021). The time of the sign: A semiotic interpretation of modern culture. In *The Time of the Sign: A Semiotic Interpretation of Modern Culture.* Indiana University Press. https://doi.org/10.2979/thetimeofthesignasem.

Maziliauske, E. (2024). Innovation for sustainability through co-creation by small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (SMEs): Socio-cultural sustainability benefits to rural destinations. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *50*, 101201. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.TMP.2023.101201

Muñoz, A. M. E., & Pinedo, M. G. D. (2023). Creating methodological design processes for empowering artisans of Cali, Colombia. *Diid*, *1* (Digital Special Issue 1). https://doi.org/10.30682/diiddsi23t2k

Ningsih, Y. S., & Aryani, D. I. (2024). Fashion design as a method to improve the sustainability of Batik Lasem industry. In M. N. Tunio, J. M. Chica Garcia, A. M. Zakaria, & Y. M. L. Hatem, (Eds.), *Sustainability in Creative Industries. SCI 2022. Advances in Science, Technology & Innovation*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52726-5_5

Nurcahyanti, D., Sachari, A., Destiarmand, A. H., & Sunarya, Y. Y. (2021). Artisans regeneration model: Culture sustainability effort for creativity and indigenous skill. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences, 15*(3), 45–52. https://doi.org/10.9734/arjass/2021/v15i330260

Piliang, Y. A. (2018). *Medan Kreativitas, Memahami Dunia Gagasan* (1st ed.). Yogyakarta: Cantrik Pustaka.

Rahayu, M. D., & Alrianingrum, S. (2014). Perkembangan Motif Batik Lasem Cina Peranakan Tahun 1900-1960. *Journal Pendidikan Sejarah*, *2*(2), 36–49.

RRI. (n.d). *Menilik Sejarah Hari Batik Nasional 2 Oktober*. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.rri.co.id/daerah/1022407/menilik-sejarah-hari-batik-nasional-2-oktober

Santi, J. T. (2021, February 16). William Kwan, Kisah Membangkitkan Batik Lasem. Kompas, 16. Retrieved from https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2021/02/16/william-kwan-kisah-membangkitkan-batik-lasem/

Sewan Susanto, S. K. (2018) *Seni Batik Indonesia* (1st ed.). Yogyakarta: Andi Offset.

Sobur, A. (2013). *Semiotika Komunikasi*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.

Tahwin, M., & Mahmudi, A. A. (2018). Mengukur Probabilitas Industri Batik Tulis Lasem Berorientasi Ekspor (Probability Measurement Batik Tulis Lasem Industry Export Oriented). *Kokus Ekonomi, 8*(2), 2013.

UNESCO. (2017). *UNESCO Jakarta marks "Batik Day" by wearing batik to work*. Unesco Jakarta. Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/new/en/jakarta/about-this-office/single-view/news/unesco_jakarta_marks_batik_day_by_wearing_batik_to_wor/

United Nations (2022). *Key features and principles of the 2030 Agenda.* United Nations. Retrieved from https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/4.Ms_.%20Carol.Pollack-Key%20features-and-principles-of-the-2030-Agenda_CP%2027%20March%20Version.pdf

Walker, J. A. (1989). *Desain, Sejarah, Budaya* (1st ed.). Yogyakarta: Jalasutra.

Winata, D. (2021). *Young Indonesians take their cultural heritage forward onational Batik Day | United Nations in Indonesia*. United Nations Indonesia. https://indonesia.un.org/en/151362-young-indonesians-take-their-cultural-heritage-forward-national-batik-day

Yulianingrum, V., Ranita, S., Basuki, L. S. K., Wijaya, A. L., & Pandin, M. G. R. (2022). Batik fashion trends and national identity. *Philosophica: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya*, *5*(2), 46–58. https://doi.org/10.35473/PO.V5I2.1454

Corresponding author: Vera Jenny Basiroen
Email: nonjane@binus.edu

Preserving Sacred Space: Identity of the Chinese Temples in Thailand

Khemarin Pensaengon
Silpakorn University, Thailand

Tawan Wannarat
Silpakorn University, Thailand

Pipat Suya
Silpakorn University, Thailand

Watcharin Anekpongpan
Silpakorn University, Thailand

Abstract

Chinese temples serve as enduring symbols of Chinese identity that have been faithfully passed down through generations of ancestors. In the lives of Chinese diaspora communities, the preservation of their identity is a fundamental element. The Chinese community has been settled in Thailand for more than two centuries. Many studies proposed that the Chinese were assimilated by the Thai, but this work found that there remains a strong identity through Chinese temples in Thailand. To understand the roles of these Chinese temples in preserving identity, the study embraces a qualitative case study methodology which includes document analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interview. This study explores how Chinese shrines sustain their identity through the community engagement in Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand. The study also identifies the challenges that occur with Chinese temples trying to sustain a Chinese identity. The study found that Chinese temples in Thailand actively engage with the community in various ways, fostering a sense of belonging, cultural preservation, and community support. Chinese temples in Thailand also play a multifaceted role in the lives of the Thai Chinese community. They serve as religious centers, cultural hubs, educational institutions, and support networks, all of which contribute to the cultural vibrancy and cohesion of the community while also enriching the broader Thai cultural landscape. However, Chinese temples or shrines in Thailand face several challenges, some of which are unique to their cultural and religious context in the country.

Keywords: Chinese identity, Chinese shrines, Chinese temples, community engagement, Thailand

The history of Chinese migration to various parts of Southeast Asia has ancient roots, tracing back through the annals of time. It is imperative to underscore that the timing and magnitude of Chinese immigration displayed substantial variation among Southeast Asian countries. Especially noteworthy are the significant influxes of Chinese immigrants during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a period characterized by a surge in Chinese arrivals to Thailand. There are indeed Chinese temples in Thailand that date back earlier than the 19th century, but many of the surviving structures, particularly in urban areas like the Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom, were either established or underwent significant reconstruction during the 19th century when Chinese migration intensified. While some earlier sites do exist, the 19th century marks a notable period of growth in Chinese temple construction due to increased migration and trade activities. This surge was primarily precipitated by the promise of economic opportunities and the backdrop of political turmoil in China.

Chinese temples or Chinese shrines, known as *Saan Jao*, serve as enduring symbols of Chinese identity that have been faithfully passed down through generations of ancestors. In the lives of Chinese diaspora communities, the preservation of their Chinese identity is a fundamental element. This identity finds expression through a rich tapestry of rituals, including those associated with marriages, funerals, ancestral worship, the observance of hungry ghost festivals, and the celebration of feast days dedicated to the regional gods of various dialect groups (Yan et al., 2020). Over time and across diverse geographical locales, a multitude of preservation strategies have emerged. These strategies are aimed at either preserving or redefining what it means to be “Chinese” in the context of changing cultural landscapes and global connections.

Despite the passage of time and the evolution of generations, Chinese temples continue to stand as steadfast indicators of Chinese cultural identity. These sacred places can be found scattered throughout the various port cities of Southeast Asia. Thailand, in particular, boasts a significant presence of these important temples across many of its provinces. Nakhon Pathom province, second only to the capital city of Bangkok, holds the distinction of having the second-highest number of Chinese temples in the country (Thai Department of Registration Administration, 2024).

Understanding the role of Chinese temples in community engagement is crucial for safeguarding Chinese cultural identity. This research seeks to explore the significant functions of Chinese temples in maintaining Chinese identity, while also addressing the challenges these temples face in Thailand. Despite the complex process of Chinese cultural assimilation into Thai society, Chinese shrines have shown remarkable adaptability, embracing these changes and promoting harmonious coexistence. Chinese temples serve as shared spaces where Chinese cultural practices are integrated into the broader Thai cultural landscape, fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding. Rituals and festivals held at these temples are often attended by both Chinese descendants and Thai locals, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual respect.

Literature Review

The preservation of Chinese identity within diasporic contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Although numerous studies have examined various aspects of Chinese identity in the region (Kesmanee, 2013; Nilsanguandecha, 2018; Song, 2020), there is limited research specifically addressing Chinese identity preservation in Thailand (Skinner, 1957; Thomson, 1993). Much of the literature emphasizes the role of Chinese shrines in sustaining cultural continuity, underscoring their historical, cultural, and social significance. For instance, Nilsanguandecha (2018) analyzed 124 Chinese shrines in Bangkok, illustrating their role in fostering community cohesion, while Pattranupravat (2008, 2009) explored how shrines in Samutsongkhram Province reinforce social bonds through ritual practices.

Recent studies have focused on the adaptation of Chinese shrines to urbanization pressures. Phumpij and Bualek (2023) examined transformations in Bangkok shrines under urban development, while Juntaronanon and Thongsamrit (2018) highlighted the role of sacred spaces in preserving cultural identity in Samut Prakan. Similarly, Krueaphat and Laeheem (2021) and Krueaphat and Jong (2018) explored the preservation of cultural heritage through Mahayana Buddhist shrines in Phuket, while Chanasakun (2017) and Zhengwei and Kaewbucha (2024) discussed shrine architecture's integration into tourism and heritage promotion. Saengthong et al. (2025) documented the revival of Chinese cultural practices in Nakhon Sawan, branding it a "Chinese Culture City."

Early scholars, including Skinner (1957) and Thomson (1993), focused on assimilation trends, suggesting that Chinese identity faded by the third or fourth generation in Thailand. However, more recent scholarship has shifted to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of identity preservation, which is shaped by religious rituals, language, education, technology, and collective memory. For instance, Hamilton (2008) observed that festivals such as Chinese New Year and Qingming help Sino-Thai communities maintain ancestral ties despite assimilation pressures, while Pattranupravat (2012) and Li et al. (2024) documented how generational changes influence youth engagement with cultural and religious traditions.

The tension between cultural preservation and adaptation remains central to the literature. Intermarriage, social integration, and the desire for acceptance among younger generations often lead to the dilution of traditions and linguistic fluency (Kesmanee, 2013; Pattranupravat, 2012). These challenges reflect broader issues faced by diasporic communities striving to preserve cultural distinctiveness in a globalized and assimilative world.

Language has emerged as a particularly vulnerable pillar of cultural continuity. Amrit (2022) highlights language erosion due to the dominance of the host society's language. In response, community and complementary schools play a vital role in transmitting language skills and traditional values, offering spaces for the active negotiation and preservation of cultural identity (Archer et al., 2010). Technological advancements have also transformed cultural preservation strategies. Khun Eng (2008) explored how collective memories are reconstructed

in new contexts, facilitating identity reconstruction among diasporic populations. Cultural projects and remittance practices further demonstrate ongoing connections with the homeland, suggesting that cultural identity is actively curated (Chan & Cheng, 2016).

Given the shifting landscape of Chinese identity, it is necessary to explore the transition from earlier assimilation models to more dynamic frameworks of hybridity and negotiated identities. These evolving conceptualizations of Chinese identity are crucial in understanding how Chinese communities in Thailand preserve and adapt their cultural heritage.

Evolving Concepts of Chinese Identity in Thailand: From Assimilation to Hybridity

The study of Chinese identity in Thailand has evolved alongside broader discussions on diasporic identity across Southeast Asia. Early frameworks, such as Skinner's (1957) assimilation model and Coughlin's (1960) concept of "double identity," emphasized the gradual absorption of Chinese communities into Thai society while allowing for the selective retention of cultural elements. However, subsequent scholars have challenged the notion of inevitable assimilation. Wickberg (1988) and Wang (1991) argued that Chinese identity is not singular but manifests in multiple forms, influenced by generational, geographical, and social factors. Building on these insights, Tan Chee-Beng (2004) emphasized the hybridity and adaptive strategies that characterize diasporic Chinese identities, highlighting how Chinese-Thais fluidly negotiate their cultural affiliations.

In the Thai context, Eaksittipong (2023) offers a contemporary perspective, noting that since the mid-1990s, the "assimilating China into Thailand" paradigm has gained considerable influence. He argues that the Chinese-Thai middle class, in particular, has increasingly sought to assert a Thai identity, often blurring the boundaries between "Thainess" and "Chineseness." This shift reflects a broader trend of integration, especially among the middle class, which has been instrumental in shaping Thailand's capitalist economy since the 1950s. Szanton's (1983) observations on the enduring presence of Chinese religious and economic associations in Bangkok further support the view that cultural distinctiveness can persist despite strong pressures toward integration.

These contemporary analyses align with Hirschman and Edwards' (2007) critique of traditional assimilation models, proposing instead that processes such as segmented assimilation better capture the diverse experiences of Chinese-Thai communities. Finally, Anderson's (1991) notion of "imagined communities", with his research based on the Thai example after all, offers a useful framework for understanding Chinese-Thai identity as a socially constructed and evolving phenomenon shaped by collective memories, rituals, and national narratives.

In summary, while earlier studies emphasized assimilation and the gradual erosion of Chinese identity in Thailand, more recent scholarship highlights a complex, negotiated process of cultural preservation shaped by rituals, language, education, technology, and collective memory. Shrines, schools, and digital spaces have all emerged as crucial arenas for sustaining cultural distinctiveness. Nevertheless, persistent tensions between adaptation and preservation

underscore the fragility of identity maintenance in a globalizing society. These insights point to the need for a deeper exploration of how contemporary Chinese-Thai communities navigate identity formation, particularly in localized cultural spaces such as Chinese temples.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of Chinese temples in preserving Chinese identity in Thailand, particularly in the context of ongoing cultural negotiation and integration. Drawing from insights in previous literature that emphasize the importance of rituals, spatial practices, and social institutions in sustaining diasporic identities (e.g., Skinner, 1957; Pattranupravat, 2008; Eaksittipong, 2023), this research integrates document analysis, field observation, and in-depth interviews to capture multiple dimensions of cultural preservation within temple spaces.

Table 1

Research Design and Data Collection Process

Step	Method	Description
Phase 1	Inventory and Sampling	Compiled registered temples; selected 10 based on using official registration records from the Department of Provincial Administration under the Ministry of Interior
Phase 2	In-depth Interviews	In-depth interviews with temple stakeholders
Phase 2	Observation	Non-participant observation of ceremonies and daily activities
Phase 2	Document Analysis	Review of temple records, publications, and online content
Analysis	Content & Thematic Analysis	Coding and thematic interpretation of data

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, an inventory of Chinese shrines in Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province was compiled using official registration records from the Department of Provincial Administration under the Ministry of Interior. The selection of Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province, as the study area was informed by several key considerations. The Mueang District serves as a central location that historically attracted significant Chinese migration, resulting in a concentration of Chinese temples and shrines. It ranks as the second highest location of registered Chinese temples in Thailand, after Bangkok, reflecting its prominence in Chinese religious and cultural life. Additionally, the urban character of the district ensures dynamic community engagement, making it an ideal site to examine the role of Chinese temples in preserving cultural identity within an urban setting. A purposive sampling method was employed to select ten registered Chinese temples based on criteria such as historical significance, active community engagement, and ritual practices. Data collection was conducted from 2022 to 2023, a period that allowed for year-round observation and documentation of Chinese-related festivals and ritual practices, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing cultural transmission within these temple communities.

Table 2

Selected Registered Chinese Temples in Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province

No.	Name of Shrine	Subdistrict	Selection Criteria
1	Bho Nguan Tung Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Historical significance, ritual practices
2	Pun Thao Kong Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Active community engagement, rituals
3	Sam Oung Ia Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Historical significance, community rituals
4	Pao Geng Teng Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Community engagement, cultural events
5	Pun Thao Ma Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Ritual practices, community involvement
6	Ta Pae Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Historical role, ritual activities
7	Chit Sie Ma Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Community-based rituals, cultural continuity
8	Ko Be Shrine	Bo Phlap	Active engagement, heritage preservation
9	A Niao Shrine	Wang Taku	Ritual practices, cultural relevance
10	Chao Mae Thap Thim Shrine	Phra Prathon	Historical significance, ritual celebrations

In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 key informants, including temple caretakers, community leaders, ritual specialists, and regular temple participants, aged between 42 and 79 years old. These interviews sought to elicit perspectives on the role of temples in cultural transmission, changes in ritual practices, the involvement of younger generations, and the interaction between tradition and modern influences. The interviews were conducted during 2022-2023, with participants revisiting and participating in temple activities throughout the year in Muaeng, Nakhon Pathom Province. Non-participant observations were carried out during temple events, religious ceremonies, and routine activities to document embodied practices, spatial usage, and intergenerational interactions. Complementary document analysis included the review of temple histories, event programs, newsletters, and online communications to trace narratives of cultural continuity and adaptation.

The data were analyzed through content analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were systematically coded by the primary researcher, beginning with open coding to generate primary and secondary codes, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes related to identity preservation, hybridity, and negotiation processes. This methodological design ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted role Chinese temples play in the contemporary cultural landscape of Thailand.

Overseas Chinese in Thailand and the Establishment of Temples

The migration of Chinese people to various countries in Southeast Asia occurred continuously during the early Rattanakosin period, up until the reign of King Rama V. The primary reasons for Chinese migration to new lands were famine and the suffering caused by wars. Chinese communities thus emerged in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The Chinese who migrated to Thailand came from various groups, including the Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Cantonese, among others. Regardless of their group or language, these Chinese migrants often brought with them their traditional culture, especially ancestor worship and temple rituals. Consequently, as they settled in Thailand, Chinese people began establishing temples as religious centers, providing spiritual support to the overseas Chinese who had left their homeland behind.

Since the early Rattanakosin period, the Thai government supported Chinese migration because it needed Chinese laborers. At that time, the Thai people were still tied to the feudal corvée labor system, preventing them from easily working as hired laborers. The influx of Chinese workers significantly benefited Thailand's growing economy and trade, particularly after the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855. However, during the nationalist economic policies of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's government, Chinese and other foreigners were prohibited from engaging in certain professions, such as barbers.

The Chinese migrants played a crucial role in Thailand's economic development. They were involved in various economic activities, including agriculture, manufacturing, and especially trade. Although the Chinese tried to maintain their cultural identity, over time, they gradually assimilated through intermarriage and, whether willingly or under pressure, lost parts of their Chinese identity. Skinner (1975) noted that Thai people of Chinese descent born in Thailand for two or more generations tend to experience higher levels of assimilation and acceptance in Thai society.

The majority of Thai-Chinese ancestors were migrants from southern and southeastern China. Their beliefs and way of life were deeply influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism. These spiritual traditions were woven into their daily rituals, helping to solidify and maintain the strong bonds within the Chinese community in Thailand. As the Chinese population grew and formed distinct communities, they began constructing temples to practice their religious activities, replicating the customs they had followed in China. Consequently, Chinese temples became an integral part of these emerging Chinese enclaves. According to Nilsanguandecha (2018), overseas Chinese established temples for several key reasons: to provide spiritual and communal support, to preserve their cultural traditions, and to uphold the religious faith and devotion of their people.

It's also worth noting that many Sino-Thai individuals frequented both Thai *wats* (Buddhist temples) and Chinese *saan* (shrines or temples), reflecting a blend of cultural practices. Chinese migrants and their descendants became known for their strong work ethic and entrepreneurial

spirit. Many prominent business families in Thailand have Chinese roots, and they have played a significant role in shaping the nation's economic development.

The Migration of Chinese People to Nakhon Pathom

Chinese migrants have been settling in Thailand for a long time, establishing themselves in various provinces, especially in the capital city of Bangkok, as well as in other regions such as Nakhon Pathom and Nakhon Sawan Province. The Chinese community in Nakhon Pathom is diverse, consisting of various Chinese groups, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Hainan, and Cantonese. However, the largest Chinese group in Nakhon Pathom is the Teochew. The Chinese immigrants in Nakhon Pathom participated in various economic activities, including running businesses such as restaurants, shops, markets, and small enterprises. Like other parts of Thailand, some Chinese people in Nakhon Pathom engaged in agriculture due to the favorable geographical conditions.

Chinese settlers began arriving in Nakhon Pathom during the early Rattanakosin period, starting as laborers in sugarcane plantations and sugar mills in Nakhon Chaisi city (Jindamaneerojana, 2002). According to the study by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2003), Chinese immigrants began cultivating sugarcane for sugar production in two key areas: Nakhon Chaisi and Chonburi, since the 19th century. There is evidence of sugar mills being established in Nakhon Chaisi during the reign of King Rama III when the sugar industry flourished. According to Pallegoix (1854) Nakhon Chaisi city, before 1855, had as many as 30 sugar mills, each employing around 200–300 Chinese laborers. This growth followed the end of the sugar trade monopoly between 1826-1842 due to the Burney Treaty in 1826. During the reign of King Rama IV, the sugar industry along the Tha Chin River expanded, leading to an increasing number of Chinese immigrants working as hired laborers.

As more Chinese migrants from various regions settled in Thailand, particularly during the 19th century, the formation of secret Chinese societies—such as the "Ang Yi" brotherhoods—became significant (Jindamaneerojana, 2002). These societies often arose as a means of mutual aid and protection for Chinese immigrants who faced both economic hardship and social marginalization. However, they also carried political implications, and the Thai state viewed them with suspicion, fearing potential insurrection or challenges to royal authority. The relationship between Thai rulers and the Chinese community was therefore complex, oscillating between pragmatic cooperation in trade and governance and wary suppression of potential unrest. Some of these secret societies were linked to Chinese temples in Nakhon Pathom. By 1898, only 21 sugar mills remained in operation, with many closings due to the lower prices of Javanese sugar, which was cheaper because of forced labor used by the indigenous population (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2003). Sugarcane laborers and sugar mill workers shifted to other agricultural sectors. After the Bowring Treaty in 1855, the Chedi Bucha Canal was dug in 1858, followed by the Maha Sawat Canal in 1860. These canals played a crucial role in expanding sugarcane cultivation along the Nakhon Chaisi River, eventually

extending to areas such as Wang Taku (now Wang Taku Subdistrict, Mueang district, Nakhon Pathom Province).

Since the Chinese immigrants had no land or other assets to start with, their initial occupation was working as hired laborers, commonly referred to as "coolies (Kulī in Thai)." Over time, as they lived and worked in the area, they built relationships with locals and accumulated some capital. Some Chinese immigrants were then able to purchase land and transition into agriculture, such as vegetable farming or pig raising. Meanwhile, another group of Chinese started small trading businesses. As they gradually amassed more capital, they became middlemen in rice trading, tax farmers, owners of opium dens, mill owners, and shopkeepers, often setting up their businesses near Phra Pathom Chedi. Those involved in agriculture tended to live further from the city, in areas like Lam Phaya Subdistrict.

Figure 1

Map of Nakhon Pathom Province

Patamajaroen (2001) found that, "When the early Chinese immigrants arrived, some worked as hired laborers wherever they could find work, while others raised pigs or grew vegetables and worked on farms". Eventually, after saving enough capital, they transitioned from being hired laborers who raised pigs to becoming independent pig farmers and ultimately expanded their operations into full-scale pig farms.

As the Chinese diaspora in Nakhon Pathom settled and worked their way from laborers to business owners, the Chinese immigrants and their descendants, the Thai-Chinese, could be broadly divided into two major groups based on their occupations. The first group is Chinese merchants (*Chin Talad*) who resided near the center of the city or near the market. This Chinese group usually lived in the building in the market. They earned their income as middlemen. usually living near the town center or close to Nakhon Pathom market (now the Treasury

Department market, located on Sai Phra Road). This group of Chinese often established associations to provide consultation and mutual assistance, such as the Tang Si Association and the Wang Si Association. Some of these associations still exist today, though not all of them are still active. However, others, like the Tang Si Association, continue to hold meetings and conduct activities.

The second group comprised Chinese who engaged in agriculture, referred to as "Chinese farmers (*Chin Suanpak*)." This group lived about 5-10 kilometers away from the city center, as they needed space for farming, particularly for growing vegetables. However, they could not live too far from the city, as it would create difficulties in transporting their goods to the market. Despite the distinction between these two groups, they maintained close contact and intermarried regularly in the past as well as the present. Family businesses shared between siblings, close relatives or people who speak the same language have the propensity to become larger business units, possibly with investors who are not just relatives. The emergence of investors who were not direct relatives suggests a level of openness and integration with broader Thai society and economic networks. This dynamic indicates that Chinese businesses did not always remain isolated within the Chinese community, but rather adapted to include external investment sources to facilitate business expansion. Furthermore, the sale of these businesses did not only bolster the owners' savings, but also allowed them to borrow from various sources to expand investment. This pattern aligns with the broader context in Southeast Asia, where Chinese trust-based networks, while traditionally family-centered, have demonstrated the capacity to extend beyond immediate kinship ties. These networks can incorporate non-relatives and individuals from other ethnic groups when it is mutually beneficial, fostering broader partnerships and facilitating business growth within multicultural settings.

Chinese Temples in Nakhon Pathom

Chinese immigrants have long migrated to Southeast Asia. These communities brought with them their traditional culture from their homeland to the destination countries. When the Chinese settled in Thailand, they established Chinese temples to serve as religious centers and spiritual anchors for the Chinese diaspora who had left their homeland for Thailand.

According to the most recent data available from the Department of Provincial Administration's temple registry in 2000, there were 657 registered temples across 58 provinces in Thailand. The central region had the highest concentration, with 347 temples, followed by the eastern region with 132 temples, and the southern region with 119 temples. In contrast, the northern and northeastern regions had fewer temples, with 36 and 23 temples respectively. Additionally, there were 18 provinces where Chinese temples were not under governmental supervision. This typically means that these temples function as private or community-run religious spaces without formal registration or state recognition. While not necessarily illegal, they fall outside the official registry and oversight system. This data highlights that the central region has a higher number of Chinese temples compared to other regions. Skinner (1957), who studied Chinese society in Thailand, attributed this to the dense

settlement of Chinese immigrants in the central region, facilitated by modern transportation systems like cars and trains, making it conducive for business operations. During both World Wars, the number of Chinese immigrants in the central region tripled, contributing to the high number of temples.

When looking at individual provinces with more than 20 temples, 10 provinces stand out, with central provinces dominating the list. Bangkok ranks first with 78 Chinese temples, followed by Nakhon Pathom, which has 48 temples (Department of Registration Administration, 2024). The earliest Chinese temples in Thailand can be traced back to the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767), when Chinese merchants and settlers began to establish permanent communities in the kingdom. One of the most significant early examples is the Leng Buai Ia Shrine in Bangkok's Chinatown, believed to have been founded in the mid-17th century (circa 1658), during the reign of King Narai (Chaiyapotpanit, 2014). It is widely considered the oldest Chinese shrine in Thailand, reflecting the early presence of Chinese communities and their religious practices.

Following the fall of Ayutthaya and the rise of the Rattanakosin Kingdom in the late 18th century, Chinese migration increased significantly. This led to the construction of more Chinese temples and shrines, such as Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (or Wat Leng Noei Yi), built in 1871 in the heart of Bangkok's Chinatown. These early temples served not only as religious centers but also as community hubs, fostering Chinese identity and social cohesion.

The many Chinese temples in Nakhon Pathom vary greatly in terms of history and age. Some temples, like Pho Nguan Teung Temple, have been in existence for over a century. This temple was established in the 1900s, shortly after the construction of Leng Noei Yi Temple or Mangkon Kamalawat Temple in China Town, Bankok. Others, such as the Black Horse Temple or Sam Oung Ia Temple, were built after World War II in the 1950s, starting as small shrines but later expanded. More recent temples, like Tieng Si Niao Temple, built in 2002 due to the devotion of followers to Master Ouypiew, are newer constructions.

However, many temples have deteriorated, and some have even been abandoned, whether they are ancient or recently built. One significant reason for the decline of many old temples is the changing lifestyle of the community. Original residents have relocated, and new people have moved in. Over the past 20 years, many suburban areas of Nakhon Pathom have seen the development of residential villages. These villages emerged because local residents sold their land and moved away, altering the communal lifestyle that once connected people closely to the temples. In areas that were once far from urban centers and had low land prices, roads and transportation routes have caused land values to rise, leading locals to sell their land and relocate. As a result, small community temples, once venerated by local residents, have been neglected. Meanwhile, new temples often arise from the faith that followers have in individuals, usually Chinese spiritual masters or mediums who practice healing while acting as intermediaries for deities. When these masters, who are the focal points of their followers' faith, pass away, their temples often fall into decline as their descendants are unable to maintain the same level of devotion.

Community Engagement: Religious vs Public Space

Chinese temples have long served as vital pillars of the Thai-Chinese community, offering far more than religious spaces for worship. Embedded in both rural settlements and urban centers, these temples function as hubs for cultural preservation, social organization, and community support. Through religious ceremonies, educational initiatives, charitable activities, and public events, temples actively sustain Chinese traditions while fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging. Their continued presence highlights the dynamic role of religion and heritage in shaping the social fabric of Thailand's multicultural society.

Religious Space

Chinese shrines serve as religious spaces primarily for the worship of Chinese deities and ancestral spirits. These shrines play a significant role in Chinese folk religion and are a common sight not only in China but also in other countries with Chinese communities, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Religious Space, Worship, and Ritual Practices

Chinese shrines form the heart of Chinese folk religious practice both in Thailand and across other diaspora communities. Within these shrines, altars are dedicated to revered figures such as *Guan Yu* (the God of War), *Mazu* (the Goddess of the Sea), and *Caishen* (the God of Wealth), among others. Worshippers bring offerings – such as incense, fruit, and flowers—to honor these deities and to express devotion to their ancestors, seeking blessings, protection, and guidance.

In addition to daily acts of worship, shrines are vibrant centers for ritual activities, especially during major cultural and religious festivals. Events such as Chinese New Year, the Ghost Festival, and the Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day) draw large gatherings of the community for elaborate ceremonies, collective prayers, and traditional performances. These occasions not only reinforce religious faith but also revitalize communal bonds and sustain cultural traditions across generations.

Moreover, shrines provide an important source of emotional and spiritual support during times of uncertainty. As one shrine caretaker, aged 75, explained,

> *"People come to the shrine for the mental result, especially when they feel unlucky. They follow the tradition to visit and pray to the gods, seeking reassurance and comfort."* (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2025.)

Many worshippers believe that even a simple act of prayer can restore a sense of hope and balance in their lives, helping them cope with personal difficulties or bad fortune. In this way, shrines function not only as religious centers but also as spaces for psychological healing and community resilience.

Healing and Blessings

Chinese shrines are often sought out by individuals seeking spiritual healing, blessings, and protection during times of illness, hardship, or uncertainty. Certain shrines, such as Pho Nguan Tueng and Tieng Si Niao, have long been associated with practitioners who offer services like divination, fortune-telling, and healing rituals. In earlier times, worshippers would pray to the gods and cast lots to receive divine prescriptions for their ailments. At Tieng Si Niao Shrine, for example, a medium traditionally communicated with the deity to diagnose illnesses and prescribe treatments.

Visitors typically bring offerings—such as incense, food, or flowers—and recite specific prayers or mantras, seeking divine intervention to alleviate their suffering. The shrine provides both spiritual guidance and emotional reassurance, offering people a sense of control and comfort over their well-being. Some shrines also suggest or provide traditional herbal remedies, rooted in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), such as herbal teas, poultices, or medicinal concoctions believed to possess healing properties.

A female caretaker (aged 65) reflected on these practices during an interview:

> Many Chinese descent people come to ask for blessings. When a woman is about to deliver a child, they come to pray. Some even come to pray for their mother to recover from cancer. Actually, it helps people feel secure – it gives a mental result. (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2023.)

Similarly, another elderly caretaker explained:

> If you are sick, you can ask the gods to drive away your illness and receive medicine through casting lots. If the sickness persists, you must return, cast lots again, and receive a new prescription. (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

These testimonies highlight the important role that Chinese shrines play not only as religious institutions but also as centers of emotional and psychological support within Thai-Chinese communities. The blend of faith, ritual, and traditional healing practices continues to offer comfort and hope across generations.

Chinese temples in Thailand serve as important centers for religious worship. They offer spaces for prayer, rituals, and festivals that strengthen cultural identity and connect people to their heritage. Beyond religious functions, these temples provide emotional comfort and spiritual healing, helping individuals cope with illness, misfortune, and life’s uncertainties. Despite facing challenges from urbanization and changing social dynamics, Chinese temples continue to play a vital role in maintaining traditions and supporting the well-being of Thai-Chinese communities.

Public Space

Chinese temples in Thailand have transformed from purely religious sites into dynamic public spaces that support cultural preservation, social services, and community engagement. Serving as hubs for cultural education and charitable work, these temples play an essential role in maintaining Chinese heritage and fostering strong communal ties within the Thai-Chinese population, while also contributing to Thailand's broader multicultural society.

Cultural Education and Preservation

Chinese temples in Thailand play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Many temples offer programs that teach traditional arts such as Chinese calligraphy and Chinese language. These activities are often open to individuals of all backgrounds, helping to strengthen ties between the Chinese diaspora and the broader Thai society. Through these efforts, Chinese temples not only sustain Chinese cultural practices but also contribute significantly to Thailand's multicultural fabric.

One prominent example is the Pho Nguan Tueng Shrine, which actively promotes cultural education through Chinese language courses. These classes are offered to both primary school students and older community members who wish to learn Chinese. As a caretaker of the shrine (aged 72) explained:

> At Pho Nguan Tueng Chinese Temple, we provide Chinese classes for primary school students and for older people who would like to learn Chinese. It is a free course provided with the support of Silpakorn University. When the students come to the temple, they pray to the gods, learn the names of the deities worshipped here, and participate in cultural activities held at the shrine. (Chinese Temple Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

By integrating religious practices with educational activities, the temple not only teaches language skills but also instills cultural pride and spiritual connection among the younger generation. This approach ensures that Chinese traditions are actively transmitted to future generations while strengthening the role of the temple as both a religious and cultural center within the community

Community Engagement, Charitable Activities, and Networking Functions

Chinese temples in Thailand fulfill critical roles beyond religious practice, acting as cultural, charitable, and social centers within their communities. Regularly organized events—such as food fairs, cultural exhibitions, and traditional performances—not only celebrate Chinese heritage but also serve as important fundraising mechanisms for temple maintenance and charitable initiatives. Ceremonies such as the "Feeding the Hungry Ghosts" or Sigo Festival, which combine ritual prayer, Chinese opera performances, and charitable donations to the

underprivileged, exemplify the temples' dual function as sites of religious devotion and community welfare.

In addition to cultural preservation, many temples actively engage in direct charitable work. This includes the distribution of food, clothing, and financial assistance to disadvantaged populations, as well as participation in disaster relief efforts. Through such activities, temples reaffirm their importance as both spiritual and humanitarian institutions within the Thai-Chinese community.

Temples also function as key venues for community meetings and networking. Long-established shrines often host gatherings of local organizations and serve as important hubs for political and business connections. Temples such as Pho Nguan Tueng, Sam Oung Ia, and Tieng Si Niao have received substantial support from local business leaders, reflecting the sustained interconnection between religious, economic, and civic spheres.

As noted by the President of a Chinese shrine during an interview:

> During important yearly events like the Sigo Festival, many businessmen come to join the event. They meet local leaders and business owners of Chinese descent here. Moreover, they donate money, and the list of donors is displayed on a board that everyone visiting the shrine during the festival can see. It's like a weapon – they can demonstrate their power and wealth. (President of Chinese Shrine, personal interview, 2023)

This testimony highlights how religious festivals not only strengthen communal and cultural ties but also act as platforms for reinforcing social status, economic influence, and political visibility within the community. Serving both as sacred sites and public spaces, they strengthen community ties, support social welfare, and contribute to the richness of Thailand's multicultural society.

Challenges of Preserving Identity through Chinese Temples

Chinese temples have historically served as religious, cultural, and social hubs for Thai-Chinese communities. However, rapid urbanization, generational shifts, and broader socio-economic changes have placed considerable pressure on these institutions. Through field surveys and interviews conducted in Nakhon Pathom Province during 2022-2023, this study identified key challenges threatening the survival and cultural significance of Chinese temples. These challenges include changing social contexts leading to land sales and migration, a shortage of temple personnel, the loss of historical knowledge, and insufficient funding for temple operations. Each of these factors contributes to the vulnerability of Chinese temples as spaces of identity preservation in contemporary Thai society.

Changing Social Contexts Leading to Land Sales and Migration

Nakhon Pathom is a rapidly growing city due to urban expansion driven by the development of highway and motorway projects, with the city serving as a transit point to Bangkok and Kanchanaburi. Additionally, new rail transit routes (double-track railway) are being constructed, further improving travel convenience. The expansion of Silpakorn University and Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University has attracted students from other areas, leading to the growth of businesses such as dormitories and restaurants.

According to data from the Real Estate Information Center ([REIC], 2024) of the Government Housing Bank, in the second quarter of 2024, Nakhon Pathom's land prices had the highest year-on-year increase, with a growth rate of 82.1%. This increase has been ongoing for over a decade, causing many residents to sell their land and relocate. A clear example is Lam Phaya Subdistrict, about 5km from the city center, where land that once hosted vegetable gardens and pig farms is now used for housing developments, hotels, and dormitories. The new residents in these developments are mostly outsiders, unfamiliar with the local Chinese temples. Meanwhile, the original community members who once supported the temples have gradually sold their land and moved away, leaving the temples increasingly abandoned.

In the central area of Nakhon Pathom, while there is less land selling and migration, the changing social context has led to cultural assimilation. Younger generations, especially those born in Thailand to Chinese descendants, have distanced themselves from traditional customs. As Skinner (1975) noted, second-generation Thai-Chinese tend to assimilate into Thai society, whereas those aged 50 and older still maintain traditions such as ancestor worship during Chinese New Year or Tomb Sweeping Festival (Qingming). However, these rituals are more likely to be conducted at home rather than in the temples. People under 25 years of age often do not participate in these ceremonies as they are mostly occupied with work or studies in Bangkok.

Lack of Personnel for Temple Operations

The shortage of personnel in temple operations stems from broader social changes affecting the Thai-Chinese community. In the past, temple workers were typically volunteers with strong religious devotion, often serving without pay. Many were either deeply faithful or financially secure enough to contribute their time and resources. Today, as religious devotion among the younger generation declines and economic pressures grow, temples are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new volunteers and leaders.

Several temple committees reported persistent difficulties in recruiting new presidents, a role that demands not only financial capability and social standing but also a significant time commitment. A study by Pattranupravat (2008) on Chinese temples in Samut Songkhram noted that presidents and committee members now tend to serve longer terms due to the lack of new candidates. Similarly, Wutthichai Arakphochong's (2016) research emphasized that temple leaders must command both community respect and financial resources to maintain temple

operations and religious activities. At Pho Nguan Tueng Temple in Nakhon Pathom, for instance, the current president, Mr Sumet Chatchavalakitkul, is now serving his third term because no suitable successor has been found. Field observations reveal that most committee members across various temples are over 60 years old, with some nearing 90, highlighting the pressing issue of leadership aging and the absence of younger replacements.

Interviews conducted with temple caretakers and committee members consistently echoed these concerns. One caretaker lamented:

> I am getting old and will soon be unable to look after the Chinese temple. What worries me most is the loss of knowledge. No one seems interested in preserving cultural heritage or understanding the true history of Chinese traditions. The younger generation visits the temple very little. (Chinese Temple Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

These testimonies illustrate how demographic changes, declining faith, and generational shifts are putting the future of temple operations and cultural preservation at significant risk.

Loss of Knowledge about Temple History and Deities

Many Chinese shrines in Thailand are increasingly facing challenges in preserving their historical narratives and cultural heritage, largely due to the loss of knowledgeable individuals from older generations. Traditionally, temple histories and the identities of deities were passed down orally. However, as elders pass away or become less active, valuable historical knowledge is at risk of being distorted, fragmented, or entirely lost.

For example, while Pho Nguan Tueng Temple was established in 1899—as indicated by a tablet placed before its main deities—much of its detailed history has been obscured. The original tablet was replaced during a renovation in 2015, and critical historical evidence may have been lost in the process. This issue is not isolated; many Chinese temples across Thailand face similar struggles in maintaining accurate historical records, particularly those relying solely on oral traditions without written documentation.

Language barriers further complicate efforts to preserve temple history. Many inscriptions, scriptures, and rituals are conducted in Chinese, yet younger generations, who primarily speak Thai, often lack the proficiency to understand or continue these traditions. Even in temples like Pho Nguan Ting Shrine, where Chinese-speaking personnel remain active, transmission is limited by the scarcity of comprehensive written records and conflicting oral accounts.

Moreover, the preservation of architectural and cultural heritage depends not only on the availability of historical knowledge but also on sufficient financial resources. Shrines of significant historical value often face difficulties securing the funds needed for proper maintenance and restoration, placing their continued existence at risk.

Interviews with temple caretakers and committee members highlighted growing concerns over these challenges. One committee member noted the alarming decline in worshippers:

> The number of worshippers has decreased so much that we could not hold certain ceremonies this year. Next year might be even harder. (Chinese Temple Committee Member, personal interview, 2023)

This decline in participation not only threatens the temples' religious functions but also accelerates the erosion of historical memory, further endangering the continuity of Chinese cultural traditions within Thailand's multicultural society.

Insufficient Funding for Temple Operations

Financial instability remains a major obstacle to the sustainability of Chinese temples. Running a temple entails significant costs, including land ownership, ritual activities, maintenance, and staffing. Shrines often rely solely on voluntary donations, which have declined sharply in recent years.

Comparative experiences from Singapore illustrate the severity of financial pressures. As Song (2020) notes, there city planning regulations and land scarcity force many smaller shrines to operate informally in residential buildings due to their inability to secure permanent locations. In Thailand, the financial pressures are similarly acute. The decline in donations can be attributed to two key factors: the passing of founding patrons, leading to a reduced donor base, and the declining religious engagement among younger generations. Unlike larger religious institutions, most Chinese temples lack alternative revenue streams, leaving them vulnerable to economic downturns. Without sufficient funding, temples face the threat of neglect, compromising not only physical structures but also the religious and cultural practices they support.

The preservation of Chinese identity through temples in Thailand faces mounting challenges stemming from urban expansion, demographic shifts, generational change, and financial constraints. Changing social contexts have weakened traditional community ties, while the shortage of personnel, loss of historical knowledge, and insufficient funding have placed significant stress on temple operations. Without targeted interventions—such as promoting cultural education among younger generations, strengthening documentation efforts, and developing sustainable financial strategies—the role of Chinese temples as centers of religious and cultural life may continue to diminish. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for safeguarding Chinese heritage but also for maintaining the rich multicultural fabric of Thai society.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the critical role Chinese temples in Thailand play in preserving the cultural identity of the Thai-Chinese community. Beyond their religious functions, these

temples serve as important centers for cultural transmission, education, social interaction, and community support. Through their activities, Chinese temples foster a strong sense of belonging and continuity of heritage while contributing to the broader multicultural landscape of Thai society. At the same time, the study identified major challenges that threaten the sustainability of Chinese temples, including urban development pressures, demographic shifts leading to the outmigration of traditional supporters, declining interest among younger generations, financial instability, and the gradual loss of historical knowledge. Without strategic interventions, these challenges risk diminishing the temples' ability to act as vibrant cultural institutions.

Based on the findings, two key recommendations are proposed for the sustainable adaptation of Chinese shrines in Nakhon Pathom. First, Chinese temples should enhance their accessibility as public spaces. Traditionally, shrines have been closed to the public except during specific religious ceremonies. Expanding their use to include community activities and educational programs – such as Chinese language classes for both youth and elders, as successfully piloted during this research – could revitalize community engagement and attract broader participation. Second, shrines should diversify their sources of income. While some temples have initiated activities such as astrological deposit services and collective ancestral rites (Gong Teck) during major festivals, the research proposes a broader strategy of "cultural capital transformation" to convert cultural assets into sustainable economic resources.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, it focuses on a case study within a specific geographic area – Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom – which may not fully represent the experiences of Chinese temples elsewhere in Thailand. Additionally, the research largely relies on qualitative data, and while in-depth interviews and observations provided rich insights, the absence of broader quantitative data limits the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should explore comparative studies across different provinces to capture regional variations in the challenges and adaptations of Chinese temples. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into how temple roles evolve over time as demographic and socio-economic conditions continue to change. Further examination into how younger generations perceive and reinterpret Chinese identity within temple spaces would also deepen understanding of the possibilities for cultural continuity.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The manuscript submitted contains original work by the authors. AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, were used to assist in improving the clarity and fluency of the English language. These tools were not used to generate content, ideas, or interpretations. The authors take full responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions presented in the article.

Acknowledgements

This research project is supported by Silpakorn University (Fundamental Fund: fiscal year 2022 by Thailand Science Research and Innovation (TSRI). This document has been reviewed and edited using ChatGPT, an AI-assisted language tool, for the purpose of improving grammar, spelling, and readability. No substantive content has been generated or altered by the AI. The author remains fully responsible for the accuracy, interpretation, and originality of the content.

References

Amrit, A. (2022). The Chinese diaspora: Language maintenance and loss. In S. S. Mufwene & A. M. Escobar (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Contact* (Vol. 1: Population Movement and Language Change) (pp. 690–715). Cambridge University Press eBooks. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316796146.029

Anderson, B. (1991). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism (2nd ed.). London and New York: Verso.

Arakphochong, W. (2016). The development of management approach for nonprofit organization like shrines that under The Ministry of Interior's rule toward the sustainable organization. [Doctoral dissertation, Silpakorn University].

Archer, L., Francis, B. & Mau, A. (2010). The culture project: Diasporic negotiations of ethnicity, identity and culture among teachers, pupils and parents in Chinese language schools. *Oxford Review of Education*, 36, 407–426. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054981003775293.

Buakaew, J., & Janjula, J. (2015). Adaptation of Chinese New Year tradition among Thai Chinese in Songkhla province amidst modernization. *Asian Social Science*, *11*(12), 144. https://doi.org/10.5539/ASS.V11N12P144

Bun, C. K., & Kiong, T. C. (1993). Rethinking assimilation and ethnicity: The Chinese in Thailand. *The International Migration Review*, *27*(1), 140–168. https://doi.org/10.2307/2546705

Chaiyapotpanit, A. (2014). *Chinese Shrines and their Reflection of the Chinese in Society of the Rattanakosin Period.* Nakhon Pathom: Silpakorn University. Retrieved from https://sure.su.ac.th/xmlui/handle/123456789/459

Chan, H. L., & Cheng, C. (2016). Building homeland heritage: Multiple homes among the Chinese diaspora and the politics on heritage management in China. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *22*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1068211

Chanasakun, P. (2017). Double identity representation of Chinese shrines in Phuket Muang District. *Journal of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University*, *7*(1), 179–196. Retrieved from https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jis/article/view/113694

Chee-Beng, T. (2004). *Chinese overseas: Comparative cultural issues*. Hong Kong University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbzp1

Coughlin, R. J. (1960). *Double identity: The Chinese in modern Thailand.* Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.

Dean, K. (2015). Parallel universes: Chinese temple networks in Singapore, or what is Missing in the Singapore model? In P. van der Veer (Ed.), *Handbook of religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and urbanization in the twenty-first century*. Oakland, CA: California Scholarship Online. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520281226.003.0015

Eaksittipong, S. (2023). Being Chinese as it feels: The newly constructed history of the Chinese migrants with nothing but a mat and pillow. Bangkok: Matichon.

Hamilton, A. (2008). Performing identities: Two Chinese rites in southern Thailand. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, *5*, 161–185. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591408000028.

Hirschman, C., & Edwards, J. (2007). Social change in Southeast Asia. In George Ritzer (Ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Vol. 9) (pp. 4374–4380). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss138

Jindamaneerojana, S. (2002). The Social History of Communities in the Tha Chin River Basin. *Damrong Journal*, *1*(1), 439–471.

Juntaronanon, P., & Thongsamrit, P. (2018). *Paknam the old port: Chinese believes and the way of life*. Samut Prakarn: Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. Retrieved from https://has.hcu.ac.th/jspui/handle/123456789/1368

Kesmanee, S. (2013). Thai literatures reflecting Chinese identity in Thai society. *Journal of Social Sciences, 9*(4), 136–145. https://doi.org/10.3844/jsssp.2013.136.145

Khun Eng, K.-P. (2008). Collective memories as cultural capital: From Chinese diaspora to emigrant hometowns. In *Cultural capital and economic development* (pp. 111–127). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230591622_7

Kittitornsakul, K. (2021). Thai Chinese in Chiang Mai and identity construction through cremation volumes published from 1957 to 2014. *Journal of Mekong Societies*, *17*(2), 161–178. Retrieved from https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/246617

Krueaphat, K., & Laeheem, K. (2021). Variables predicting ritualization of the spring festival among Chinese Thai youth in Hat Yai. *Journal of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, 23*(1), 188–203.

Krueaphat, K., & Jong, P. D. (2018). Cultural preservation of Mahayana Buddhism identity in the dimension of Chinese shrines: Case studies of Muang Phuket District, Phuket Province. *Journal of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University*, 8(2), 109-144.

Li, L., Sriruksa, A., & Yamcharoen, N. (2024). Cultural Identity of Ethnic Chinese Youth in Khon Kaen, Thailand. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences,* 22(2). https://doi.org/10.57239/pjlss-2024-22.2.001322

Nilsanguandecha, J. (2018). Chinese shrines: Faith in Thai society. *Journal of Language and Culture, 37*(1), 46–70. Retrieved from https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JLC/article/view/189764

Pallegoix, J. B. (Jean Baptiste). (1854). Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam. Paris: Au profit de la mission de Siam.

Patamajaroen, R. (2001). *Roles of Chinese shrine in maintaining Chinese identity: A study in Amphoe Muang Nakhon Pathom Province*. (Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University.)

Pattranupravat, R. (2008). Globalization and change of Chinese shrines in Samutsongkhram Province. *University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce Journal*, *28*(3), 79–105.

Pattranupravat, R. (2009). Festivals and rituals of Chinese shrines in Samutsongkhram Province. *University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce Journal*, *29*(3), 113–138.

Pattranupravat, R. (2012). *The transmission of the Chineseness (through understanding the meaning and religious symbols) to the descendants of the Chinese in Thai society*. University of Thai Chamber of Commerce: Bangkok.

Phongpaichit, P., & Baker, C. (2003). *The Political Economy of Thailand during the Bangkok Era*. 6th Edition. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

Phumpij, T., & Bualek, P. (2023). Change in the functions of Chinese shrines in inner Bangkok. *RMUTK Journal of Liberal Arts*, *5*(1), 41–54. Retrieved from https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/larts-journal/article/view/262646

Real Estate Information Center. (2024). Housing market situation in Bangkok and the vicinity: Q2 and the first half of 2024. Retrieved from https://www.reic.or.th/Research/Index/320

Saengthong, S., Vongkamjan, S., & Jedaman, P. (2025). Cultural identity revival of Nakhon Sawan Province toward Chinese Culture City. *Interdisciplinary Academic and Research Journal, 5*(1), 983–1002. https://doi.org/10.60027/iarj.2025.284283

Skinner, G. W. (1957). Chinese assimilation and Thai politics. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *16*(2), 237–250. https://doi.org/10.2307/2941381

Song, S. G. Z. (2020). Making space for the gods: Ethnographic observations of Chinese house temples in Singapore. *Religions*, *17*(7), 349. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070349

Song, X., Cheong, K. C., Wang, Q., & Li, Y. (2020). Developmental Sustainability through Heritage Preservation: Two Chinese Case Studies. *Sustainability*, *12*(9), 3705. https://doi.org/10.3390/SU12093705

Szanton, C. B. (1983). Thai and Sino-Thai in Small Town Thailand: Changing Patterns of Interethnic Relations. In L. A. Gosling, & L. Y. C. Lim (Eds.), *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Maruzen Asia.

Thai Department of Registration Administration. (2024). Registry of shrines throughout the kingdom. Bangkok: Territorial Defense Volunteer Printing House.

Thomson, C. N. (1993). Political Identity among Chinese in Thailand. *Geographical Review*, *83*(4), 397–409. https://doi.org/10.2307/215822

Wang, L. L. (1991). Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States. *Daedalus*, *120*(2), 181–206. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20025379

Wickberg, E. (1988). Chinese organizations and ethnicity in Southeast Asia and north America since 1945: A comparative analysis. In W. Gungwu, & J. W. Cushman (Eds.), *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press.

Yan, Y., Dean, K., Feng, C.-C., Hue, G. T., Koh, K., Kong, L., Ong, C. W., Tay, A., Wang, Y., & Xue, Y. (2020). Chinese temple networks in Southeast Asia: A webGIS digital humanities platform for the collaborative study of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. *Religions*, *11*(7), 334. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070334

Zhengwei, H., & Kaewbucha, M. (2024). The development and management of tourism projects featuring Chinese-Thai for Chinese-style shrine architectural elements. *Journal of Roi Kaensarn Academi, 9*(12), 3436–3451. Retrieved from https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JRKSA/article/view/275028

Corresponding author: Khemarin Pensaengon
Email: pensaengon_k@silpakorn.edu

Women's Politics in *La Galigo*: A Bugis Manuscript

Nurhamdah Zain
IAIN Parepare, Indonesia

Rahmi Djafar
University of Megarezky, Indonesia

Nur Nahdiyah
IAIN Parepare, Indonesia

Norhan Farouk
The American University in Cairo, Egypt

Nabilahumaida
University of Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Abstract

This study investigates the political roles of women and gender constructions in *La Galigo*, an epic central to Bugis culture. Contrary to contemporary gender norms, which often marginalize women's political participation, *La Galigo* portrays women as influential decision-makers in governance and state affairs. Employing a qualitative, textual analysis, the study focuses on key female figures in the manuscript, such as Datu' Palingeq, We Nyili' Timo, and We Adi Luwu, examining their roles in political leadership, diplomacy, and governance. The analysis highlights how these women challenged the male-dominated power structures typically seen in historical Bugis society. The findings suggest that women's contributions were valued in political spheres, reflecting a cultural framework of gender balance that prefigures modern ideals of gender equality. By examining these representations, the study underscores the importance of literary narratives in shaping gender roles and proposes that revisiting historical portrayals of women in leadership can inform contemporary efforts toward more inclusive political systems.

Keywords: Bugis society, gender equality, *La Galigo*, women in politics

The persistent underrepresentation of women in political leadership is a global phenomenon that reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and institutional structures. Across numerous societies, women face multifaceted barriers, both cultural and systemic that hinder their access to political power. These barriers manifest themselves in the form of traditional gender roles, limited economic independence, and political systems that inadequately accommodate women's participation (Forman-Rabinovici & Nir, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2001; Ramos & Da Silva, 2020). As a result, women are often confined to domestic spheres, while politics remains associated with masculine traits such as competitiveness, authority, and rationality. These associations reinforce exclusionary practices that marginalize women's political voices (Hentschel et al., 2019; Nussbaum, 2003; Sluga, 2023).

This exclusion is not merely a contemporary phenomenon but reflects historical narratives that have long positioned women as secondary to men in the public sphere. Stereotypes portraying women as emotional, irrational, and conflict-averse continue to shape their political prospects (Fadli, 2018). These narratives perpetuate stigma and inequality, resulting in disproportionately low representation of women in parliaments, local governments, and executive leadership roles (Amira nurifkah m et al., 2021; Iftinan & Putra, 2021; Mikail, 2015; Nuraeni & Lilin Suryono, 2021; Wahyudi, 2019).

In the context of Indonesia, however, there exist alternative historical and cultural narratives that challenge these dominant constructions of gender and politics. One such narrative is found in *La Galigo*, a pre-Islamic literary manuscript originating from Luwu, South Sulawesi. As one of the longest epic literatures in the world, *La Galigo* presents a socio-cultural system in which women are depicted not as passive subjects but as central figures with influence in political, spiritual, and familial domains (Kesuma, 2019; Mahmud, 2015). The manuscript illustrates how gender roles were constructed within Bugis cosmology and how women were actively involved in leadership and governance (Ennaji, 2016).

This study argues that *La Galigo* offers a culturally embedded framework for understanding gender equality that predates modern feminist discourses. By exploring how women are positioned within this epic, the research aims to reveal the indigenous values that have historically supported women's strategic roles in society. This focus contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on gender, literature, and political agency by situating a local textual tradition within global debates on equality and representation.

Furthermore, while historical figures such as R.A. Kartini, Cut Nyak Dien, and Dewi Sartika are often cited as pioneers of women's emancipation in Indonesia (Aspinall et al., 2021; Mayasari-Hoffert, 2023; Nimrah dan Sakaria et al., 2015; Oktarina & Yulianti, 2022; Susanti & Lubis, 2015; Yuspin & Aulia, 2022), literary evidence from *La Galigo* indicates that the foundations of women's agency were already embedded in precolonial indigenous knowledge systems. These narratives suggest that the marginalization of women in modern Indonesian politics may not stem from traditional culture per se, but from a selective reading of it.

In this light, literature becomes not only a reflection of social realities, but also a powerful medium for contesting and reconstructing gender ideologies. *La Galigo* functions as both a historical document and a cultural artifact that encodes alternative possibilities for gender relations. It invites a critical reconsideration of how past gender constructions can inform present efforts to achieve justice and equality in political representation.

Based on these considerations, this study sets out to explore two core research questions:

1. What is the strategic role of women in *La Galigo*?
2. What cultural, social, or spiritual factors underpin the representation of women's leadership within the manuscript?

To answer these questions, this study analyzes the gender roles of prominent female characters in *La Galigo*, such as Datu' Palinge', Datu Sinaung Toja, We Nyili' Timo, We Tenri Jelloq, We Adi Luwu, Sanrima Wero', We Datu Sengngeng, We Cuda'I, and We Tenri Abeng. These figures are examined for their involvement in decision-making, governance, and social influence. Through this analysis, the research aims to demonstrate that Bugis literature contains embedded ideals of gender inclusivity and political balance that remain relevant today.

Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies in its interdisciplinary engagement with literature, gender studies, and political theory. By reinterpreting *La Galigo* through a gender-political lens, the research offers a localized perspective on gender equality that complements and critiques dominant Western paradigms. It proposes that revisiting indigenous texts can enrich our understanding of gender justice and inspire new paradigms for political inclusion grounded in cultural authenticity.

Literature Review

Gender as a Social Construct in Bugis Society

The concept of gender has undergone significant theoretical refinement over the past decades, shifting from essentialist definitions to more socially constructed frameworks. Gender is no longer viewed merely as a binary or biological distinction but is understood as a performative and dynamic identity shaped by social, cultural, and political structures (Butler, 2011; Patel, 2022). It encompasses the expectations, roles, and behaviors culturally assigned to individuals based on perceived sex differences. In Southeast Asia, particularly in Bugis society, gender constructions are deeply embedded in indigenous philosophical values and kinship-based social organization.

Empirical research has demonstrated that Bugis society recognizes gender not through rigid binaries but through a nuanced system that includes multiple gender identities (Davies, 2010; Hasriani, 2018). Traditional concepts such as *Siri'* (honor), *Pangaderreng* (customary order), and *Sipakatau* (mutual respect) serve as normative foundations that regulate gendered roles and influence perceptions of leadership and social participation (Fathimah et al., 2022;

Mahmud, 2015). These cultural principles promote a relational and proportionate understanding of gender equality, one that prioritizes balance in social roles rather than rigid parity. In this system, women are not merely passive members of the domestic sphere but active agents in familial and communal decision-making. Mustadjar and Dirawan (2017) emphasize that Bugis women have long participated in both private and public domains, facilitated by religious and customary legitimation.

Recent empirical studies also highlight that Bugis gender norms are undergoing transformations, influenced by globalization, education, and democratization (Ford & Parker, 2008; Sarmento, 2012). However, traditional values remain resilient in shaping gendered participation in leadership and politics. These findings reinforce Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of "gender regimes," where institutions uphold gender practices that reflect larger power structures. In conclusion, gender in Bugis society cannot be separated from its cultural context. It is a dynamic, context-dependent system that balances tradition with negotiation. This suggests that Bugis society embraces proportional gender roles, fostering a cultural openness to female leadership that challenges dominant patriarchal norms.

Women and Politics Based on a Bugis Cultural Perspective

Women in Bugis culture have always played crucial roles in both the home and political spheres. Historically, Bugis women have held vital positions within the governance systems, actively shaping political decisions. Women in Bugis kingdoms like Bone and Wajo not only held roles as wives and mothers but were also respected rulers in their own right (Nur & Komariah, 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021). The presence of female leadership in these societies is indicative of Bugis culture's long-standing recognition of women's roles in political governance, thus challenging traditional patriarchal norms.

A key cultural principle that underscores the active political participation of Bugis women is the concept of "*siri' na pacce*", which embodies the importance of upholding dignity and self-respect (Ekawati et al., 2022). *Siri',* which refers to a sense of shame, is intrinsically linked to personal integrity, while *pacce* speaks to solidarity, empathy, and mutual respect that are integral to community life. In the political domain, this concept encourages Bugis women to maintain the dignity of their families and communities, urging them to engage in the political process to protect the honor and welfare of their society. As Ekawati et al. (2022) and Pelras (1996) note, these cultural values form a moral foundation for women's participation in political life, positioning them as active agents of change within their communities.

Yet, despite these cultural affirmations, Bugis women today face diminishing political representation, influenced by modernization and external gender norms. While traditional Bugis values promote gender-balanced leadership, shifting societal perceptions often obscure women's roles. To reverse this trend, there is a pressing need to reassert gender equality by drawing from cultural frameworks that have historically empowered women. Reinforcing these indigenous gender ideals can help address contemporary barriers and reaffirm women's rightful place in public leadership.

Women and Politics in Literary Works

The relationship between gender, politics, and literature continues to be a critical area of academic exploration. As gender equality and justice remain pressing social imperatives, particularly in patriarchal societies, literature plays a pivotal role in reflecting and challenging socio-political realities. In Indonesia, the entrenched patriarchal culture often hinders women's full participation in political life, despite their legal entitlement to equal rights. The struggle for women's political agency is not only institutional but also discursive, as reflected in cultural narratives and literary representations.

Indonesia has institutionalized the right to women's participation in politics through Article 65, paragraph 1 of Law No. 12 of 2003, which affirms the equal status of women and men in governance. Despite these formal guarantees, women's representation in the legislature remains below the 30% threshold (Fernando, 2021), hindering effective advocacy for gender-sensitive policymaking. This underrepresentation reflects broader structural and cultural challenges, including persistent stereotypes that question women's leadership abilities (Zahruddin, 2021).

Recent empirical studies suggest that legal empowerment must be complemented by cultural shifts and discursive interventions that challenge patriarchal norms (Assaad et al., 2022; Rhoads, 2012). Enhancing women's political participation requires both structural reform and symbolic representation, wherein literature functions as a vital medium for negotiating gender roles and political identities.

Scholars such as Kollo (2017) and Priandi and Roisah (2019) emphasize the integration of gender perspectives in public policy and political platforms, highlighting the need for women to actively claim their space within political institutions. Civic engagement and educational empowerment are pivotal strategies to address gender gaps in representation (Tridewiyanti, 2012). Moreover, fostering awareness of existing opportunities and ensuring equitable access to political participation are essential in realizing substantive equality. The literary domain provides a reflective and often critical lens through which political gender dynamics are explored. Literature does not merely mirror society, it actively constructs gendered narratives that influence public consciousness (Blackwood, 2010; Wijayanti, 2020). Women's experiences in literature, particularly in political settings, serve both as representations of historical realities and as interventions in gender discourse.

Kleden (2004, as cited in Ahyar, 2019) posits that writers grapple with political, metaphysical, and existential anxieties each of which shapes literary portrayals of gender and politics. In the Indonesian context, literature has become a site of resistance and negotiation, especially concerning women's roles in the public and political spheres. The following literary examples, while not comprehensive, yet illustrate well how literature can engage with the political dimensions of women's identities:

Table 1
The Role of Women in Literature

No.	Literary Works/Titles	Character Name	Role	Author/ Reference
1	Novel/Putri Rajapatni (Felisia, 2019)	Gayatri	A depiction of Gayatri, a woman who participated in the politics of the Majapahit kingdom, affirming women's right to public agency and education.	A novel that tells the story of Majapahit (Yeni, 2022)
2	Novel/Gadis Jakarta (Kaelani & Bukhori, 2006)	Fatimah	A politically conscious character opposing Communist ideologies, symbolizing intellectual courage and public resistance.	Najib Kaelani (Wijayanti, 2020)
3	Novel/I Forgot That I'm a Woman (Qodir, 2020)	Suad	A political activist prioritizing collective emancipation over personal life, illustrating commitment to political participation.	Ihsan Abdul Quddus (Maksum et al., 2021)
4	Trilogi Divergent (Roth, 2011)		Challenges male dominance in politics; critiques failures in both male and female political narratives that lack moral integrity.	Veronica Roth (Roth, 2021)
5	Short stories/Wakyat (Wijaya, 2019)	Bu Amat	A woman whose political insight motivates her husband's activism, reflecting the indirect yet powerful influence of female voices.	Putu Wijaya (Salsabila, 2018)
6	Novel/ Tarian Bumi (Rusmini, 2017)		Explores women's roles within both familial and societal contexts, revealing the intersection of domestic life and civic identity.	Oka Rusmini (Yanti et al., 2018)

Drawing on Judith Butler's (2011) theory of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's (2014) notion of "becoming" a woman, these literary portrayals suggest that gendered political identity is performative and socially constructed. In *Putri Rajapatni* (Felisia, 2019), Gayatri is portrayed as a woman of intellect and influence, subverting traditional narratives of female domesticity. Gadis Jakarta's (Kaelani & Bukhori, 2006) Fatimah stands as a counter-voice to masculine political orthodoxy, intertwining faith with resistance. Suad in *I Forgot That I'm a Woman* (Qodir, 2020) embodies the feminist assertion that "the personal is political," (p. 27) foregrounding political commitment over conventional femininity.

Western literature, such as Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), further complicates political binaries by critiquing both male-dominated and superficially feminist political structures. This aligns with poststructural feminist thought, which emphasizes intersectionality and resists essentialist dichotomies. Meanwhile, in *Wakyat* (Wijaya, 2019), Bu Amat's influence within the private sphere illustrates Gayatri Spivak's idea of subaltern agency, revealing how marginal voices negotiate power. *Tarian Bumi* (Rusmini, 2017) explores the

complex roles of women in a deeply traditional society, positioning the domestic as a site of both constraint and resistance.

These literary portrayals reveal that women, both real and imagined, are central to political transformation. They challenge traditional gender narratives and call for deeper reflection on structural inequalities in both the political and cultural realms. Through literature, the political voice of women is not only preserved but amplified, urging society to reimagine gender and power through a more inclusive lens. To provide a theoretical framework for analyzing these representations, Judith Butler's (2011) theory of gender performativity offers a valuable lens for understanding how gender identities and roles in literary texts are not innate, but rather produced through repeated social and cultural practices. In addition, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulation of hegemonic masculinity also clarifies how power is sustained or resisted within literary imaginaries.

Indonesian feminist scholarship further enriches this discussion by offering culturally grounded perspectives. Thus, through her concept of "state ibuism", Julia Suryakusuma (2004) critiques the ideological positioning of women primarily within domestic and supportive roles under state policy, thereby revealing the patriarchal underpinnings of both political and cultural institutions. Ratna Megawangi (Nurhilmiyah, 2017) also contributes to this discourse by advocating for women's empowerment through education, policy transformation, and a reinterpretation of gender roles that align with Indonesian social and religious contexts while promoting gender equity.

Through the intersection of legal, cultural, and literary discourses, the portrayal of women's political subjectivities in Indonesian literature reflects the complex ways in which gendered power is constructed, negotiated, and potentially transformed. Literature emerges not only as a reflection of sociopolitical conditions but also as a dynamic space for imagining and legitimizing alternative forms of gendered political agency.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, integrating a library-based approach to investigate women's political involvement within Bugis culture, particularly focusing on the *Epic La Galigo*. As a foundational literary work in Bugis literature, the *Epic La Galigo* (specifically Manuscript Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootschap 188 (NBG 188)), a catalogued handwritten Bugis-language manuscript preserved at Leiden University Library and regarded as one of the most comprehensive and authoritative versions) offers profound insights into the socio-cultural and political roles of women in Bugis society. This manuscript is a critical primary source because it documents the interplay of gender roles and political power dynamics, making it an ideal focus for exploring women's political agency in a historically patriarchal context.

Text Selection and Coding Process

The selection of texts for this study is rooted in the cultural and historical significance of the *Epic La Galigo*. The manuscript, through its various editions (first published in 1995 and 2000, with revisions in 2017-2020), serves as a crucial source for understanding how women's roles in political and leadership domains have evolved over time. By incorporating multiple editions, this study follows a diachronic approach, which facilitates an analysis of the textual shifts in the portrayal of women's political agency over several decades.

For data collection, relevant passages that depict or allude to women's political involvement, ranging from governance, leadership, to diplomacy are systematically extracted from the text. The coding process is guided by thematic analysis, focusing on recurrent motifs such as "*female leadership*," "*political representation*," "*gendered diplomacy*," and "*the role of women in governance*." The extracted passages are categorized to discern patterns and track how representations of women's political agency have evolved across the different editions of the manuscript.

The coding follows a systematic and iterative process, ensuring the identification of both explicit and implicit representations of political power. This approach allows for a rigorous examination of gendered themes and their manifestation in Bugis. By utilizing qualitative coding techniques, the study ensures that each selected passage is analyzed in the context of both its historical and contemporary significance.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of the extracted data follows a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on the thematic categorization of passages and their subsequent interpretation within the chosen theoretical frameworks. The primary aim is to identify recurring patterns of women's political agency and to understand how these representations align with or challenge the gender norms of Bugis society. For example, the study explores how women in the *Epic La Galigo* are portrayed as political leaders, diplomats, and decision-makers, and whether these roles reflect or resist patriarchal constructions of female agency. The analysis also explored whether the political roles of women in the text align with or resist traditional notions of female passivity in Bugis society. Additionally, the study pays attention to the temporal evolution of these representations, examining how changes across the three editions of the *Epic La Galigo* reflect evolving cultural attitudes toward women's political participation in Bugis society.

Figure 1
The Front Covers of the Epic Manuscript La Galigo

Results

Bugis Literature: *La Galigo*

La Galigo, also known as Sureq Galigo, is a classical epic that dates back to the 14th century. In 2011, UNESCO recognized it as the longest literary work in the world and designated it as a memory of the World (UNESCO, 2011). Various manuscripts of *La Galigo*, found in a number of locations in South Sulawesi and owned by nobility, traditional leaders, or royal families. These manuscripts are written in the ancient Bugis Lontara script. Retna Kencana Colliq Pujie, a Bugis noblewoman bearing the title Arung Pancana (ruler of Pancana), transcribed the *"La Galigo"* manuscripts in the mid-19th century after they had been collected by Benjamin Frederik Matthes, a Dutch missionary. Upon returning to the Netherlands, Matthes handed over the "*La Galigo*" manuscripts to the Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootsschap (NBG, the Dutch Bible Society).

The "*La Galigo*" NBG 188 manuscript consists of approximately 6,000 folio pages and 300,000 verses. Originally, it was an oral tradition recited through singing or chanting, known as "sureq", during ceremonies or traditional events in the Bugis community of South Sulawesi. In Bugis culture, sureq refers to a sacred poetic chant used to transmit ancestral stories and cosmological beliefs. This extensive epic contains numerous episodes, characters, and stories within its mythology. However, the overarching theme is the cosmology and the origin of the first humans being sent to Earth, referred to as the "middle world" in "*La Galigo*". Sureq *La Galigo* is written on lontara leaves and is a blend of Sanskrit and Buginese languages. In a 2011 interview, the late Muhammad Salim, a renowned translator of *La Galigo*, noted that many foreign linguists and literary scholars were fascinated by this unique fusion, which reflects deep historical and cultural layers. Salim, in a YouTube Video (P. K. R. S. Indonesia, 2021), explained that certain phonological features and lexical elements in Sureq *La Galigo* point to possible cultural connections between the Javanese and Buginese peoples.

The late Dr. H. Muhammad Salim translated Sureq *La Galigo* over five years, from 1988 to 1993. The first volume was subsequently published in 1995 by Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia. As of 2017, only three volumes of *La Galigo*, according to Manuscript NBG 188,

have been published. As of 2025, nine volumes remain untranslated and unpublished. However, the continued commitment of Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia publishing house and its collaborators indicates that the complete twelve-volume epic is anticipated to be published in the near future. To date, there is no complete English translation of the entire *Epic La Galigo*, largely due to its extraordinary length and complexity, as it is recognized as the longest epic poem in the world.

Nurhayati Rahman has extensively worked on refining the translation of the *La Galigo* manuscript from the late Muhammad Salim (P. O. Indonesia, 2020). This effort was necessary because Salim's translation did not fully capture the literary essence of the original manuscript. *La Galigo* is considered a literary work because of its characteristics. It comprises over 300,000 verses, each constructed with precisely five syllables, reflecting a highly stylized poetic form. This syllabic structure is central to the Bugis oral tradition and enhances the rhythmic quality of the text, making it suitable for oral performance. The *La Galigo* manuscript is also chanted by *passureq*, a ritualized singing performance characteristic of Bugis oral tradition. Additionally, the manuscript contains flashbacks and foreshadowing events predicting future occurrences. According to Professor Nurhayati Rahman's explanation on Pustaka Obor Indonesia's YouTube channel (P. O. Indonesia, 2020), the manuscript provides vivid and nuanced portrayals of its characters, capturing their complexity and depth.

According to Nurhayati, *La Galigo* can be considered the holy book of the Bugis people before they embraced Islam. The *La Galigo* manuscript narrates the lives of the king and queen from the sky kingdom (Boting Langiq), the king and queen from the underwater kingdom (Buriq Liu/Peretiwi), and the middle kingdom (Ale' Lino), which represents the union of the powers of the sky and underwater kingdoms.

The Epic Story of *La Galigo*

Its history begins with the kingdom of Boting Langiq, led by King Patotoqe and Datu Palingeq, alongside Guru Ri Selleng and Datu Toja as the king and queen of Peretiwi (the Underwater Kingdom). Patotoqe and Datu Palingeq negotiated to send their descendants to earth, as no divine offspring could descend without lineage from both Boting Langiq and Peretiwi summoning Sri Paduka Batara. These two deities agreed to send their descendant, Batara Guru, to inhabit the earth.

The discussions among the divine figures revolved around determining which divine descendant would inhabit the earth (Ale Lino). As agreed, Batara Guru was sent down as the first human on Ale Lino. While on Earth, Batara Guru faced trials of hunger, suffering, thirst, being buffeted by winds, and sleeplessness. Subsequently, Batara Guru's sacred heirlooms were sent down, followed by his wives: We Lele Ullung, Apung Talaga, Saung Riuq, Tenri Latunru, and Apung Ritoja. One day, Batara Guru dreamt of ascending to the sky, stopping to bathe in Limpo Majang, a sacred space in *La Galigo* symbolizing purification before entering the divine realm. He then continued to the palace of Sao Kuta Pareppaqe, where Patotoqe commanded him to summon his descendants. Following his dream, Batara Guru went to the

seashore, where he saw a bright expanse of the vast ocean to the east. There, We Nyiliq Timoq emerged from the water with her retinue, and Batara Guru took her as his wife.

For a long time after Batara Guru was sent to Ale Lino, his sacred heirlooms and wives were also sent down to complete his life on Earth. The deities from Peretiwi decided that We Nyiliq Timoq should follow Batara Guru to become his wife in Ale Lino. The arrival of We Nyiliq Timoq was in line with the agreement made by the assembly of deities, where Guru Ri Selleng and Sinaung Toja (We Nyiliq Timoq's parents) planned for her to be made queen of Uriq Liu. Among Batara Guru's wives, We Lele Ullung gave birth to La Pangoriseng and La Temmauqqek. Apung Talaga had I La Lompongeng and La Sappe Ule. We Saung Riuq gave birth to We Oddang Riuq, the first child who passed away on the seventh night after birth and transformed into rice known as Sangiang Serri, followed by the births of La Temmalureng and La Tenriempeng. Tenri Latunru had La Pattaungeng and La Tenrioddang, while Apung Ritoja gave birth to We Temmadatu.

Batara Guru hoped that the descendant of We Nyiliq Timoq would succeed him. After a long wait, We Nyiliq Timoq became pregnant and faced excessive abdominal pain during her pregnancy. She eventually gave birth to a son named Batara Lattuq, who would succeed Batara Guru. Batara Lattuq grew up near Ale Luwuq.

For many years, Batara Guru and his wives had many children and descendants. Batara Lattuq, being the direct descendant of We Nyiliq Timoq from Todang Toja, would become the ruler in Luwuq. In another region, in Tompoq Tiqqak, the daughters of La Urung Mpessi and We Pada Uleng, named We Adi Luwu and We Datu Sengngeng, grew up. After the death of their parents, the two sisters left the kingdom and went into exile. La Urung Mpessi and We Pada Uleng died under unfortunate circumstances. Following their deaths, their aunt, We Tenrijello, and her husband took over the kingdom of Tompoq Tiqqak.

Having obtained permission from his mother, We Nyiliq Timoq, Batara Lattuq set off on a voyage to Tompoq Tiqqak. His objective was to choose one of the orphaned sisters, either We Datu Sengngeng or We Adi Luwu, to be his wife. These two sisters, We Datu Sengngeng and We Adi Luwu, were both direct descendants of Sawerigading and *La Galigo*. Batara Lattuq embarked on a journey to Tompoq Tiqqak, passing through territories previously conquered by Batara Guru, including Maloku and Gima. Upon their arrival in Tompoq Tiqqak, Batara Lattuq dispatched his half-siblings, La Pangoriseng and La Temmalureng, to meet with the caretaker of the orphaned sisters, We Temmalaq. Initially, We Temmalaq hesitated to accept Batara Lattuq and his entourage due to the kingdom being abandoned by its ruling couple, We Tenrijello and her husband. However, after the orphaned sisters pleaded with We Temmalaq to allow Batara Lattuq and his party to stay and propose to one of them, We Temmalaq eventually agreed. Batara Lattuq married We Datu Sengngeng, while her sister, We Adi Luwu, was wedded to a king of divine lineage named I Lajiriu.

Not long after Batara Lattuq's marriage, the power of Tompoq Tiqqak passed to the two daughters of the kingdom. Subsequently, Batara Lattuq prepared to return to Ale Luwuq with

his wife, We Datu Sengngeng, leaving her sister, We Adi Luwu, in charge of Tompoq Tiqqak. Upon their arrival in Ale Luwuq, Batara Lattuq and We Datu Sengngeng were warmly welcomed by Batara Guru and We Nyiliq Timoq with celebrations and bissu dances of the Luwuq Kingdom. After spending some time in Luwuq, We Datu Sengngeng had a dream that signified the impending birth of twins. Batara Guru and We Nyiliq Timoq planned to ascend to Boting Langiq and descend to Peretiwi to seek permission from the rulers of Boting Langiq and Peretiwi regarding their descendants. Patotoqe and Guru Ri Selleng, from Boting Langiq and Peretiwi, informed Batara Guru and his wife that their daughter-in-law, We Datu Sengngeng, would give birth to twin children, a boy and a girl. Batara Guru was instructed to name the boy Sawerigading and the girl We Tenriabeng. They were also advised to separate the twins to prevent them from falling in love and marrying each other. Sawerigading was prophesied to become a king on earth by marrying a princess from the Kingdom of China, I We Cudai, who would become the mother of *La Galigo*. Meanwhile, his sister, We Tenriabeng, was taken to Boting Langiq.

After the birth and maturation of the golden twins, Patotoqe instructed Batara Guru and his wives to ascend to Boting Langiq, leaving their offspring on earth. Sawerigading grew into a formidable warrior, while We Tenriabeng embraced the sacred role of a bissu. Sawerigading married one of his cousins, We Pananrangeng. The epic revolves around the central character, *La Galigo*, who is the son of Sawerigading and I We Cudaiq.

Female Political Figures in the *La Galigo* Epic

Several female characters in the *La Galigo* epic NBG 188 have familial connections with one another. Starting with Datu Palingeq, the wife of Patotoqe, she is described in the epic as the first queen of the sky kingdom (Boting Langiq). Her sister-in-law, Datu Toja, who is the twin of her husband, is also depicted as the first queen of the underwater kingdom (Buriq Liu/Peretiwi). Both women were the first to give birth to children who would rule the Middle World (Ale' Lino). Below is a table listing the notable female political figures in the *La Galigo* manuscript:

Table 2

The Political Role of Women in the La Galigo Epic

No.	Name	Political Role	Information
1	Datu Palingeq	Advisors to kings and rulers should be smart, honest, brave, and assertive (*macca' na malempu', warani na magetteng*)	When To Manurung, also known as Patotoqe, the divine ruler of fate and cosmic order in *La Galigo* cosmology, sought permission from his wife to send their descendants to Earth, Datu Palingeq advised Patotoqe to invite their siblings, cousins, and nephews from Todang Toja and Boting Langiq to gather at the Sao Kuta Pareppaqe palace for a discussion on placing their descendants on Earth. She requested her husband to give complete heirlooms upon their son, Batara Guru, on Earth. Datu Palingeq also requested Patotoqe to provide offspring to We Nyilik Timo (their daughter-in-law). She suggested sending a disaster to the kingdom of Tompok Tiqqak because of its tyrannical ruler. Additionally, she recommended taking the life of We Tenrijelloq, who intended to seize her nephew's wealth. She asked her son, Batara Guru, to pray to her before she granted his request to send a boat to Batara Latuq, her grandson. Furthermore, she commanded Batara Latuq to separate Sawerigading and his twin, Tenri Abeng. Finally, she ordered Batara Guru and his descendants to ascend to the celestial kingdom to allow her grandson, Batara Latuq, freedom on earth.
2	Datu Sinaung Toja	A smart ruler (*Macca)*	She made preparations for her nine descendants to assume the roles of rulers in smaller kingdoms. She predicted that her granddaughter-in-law would give birth to twins and advised her grandson, Batara Latuq, to separate the twins immediately after they were born.
3	We Nyilik Timo	Ruler	She advised the people of the earthly kingdom to ensure a smooth childbirth process.
4	We Tenrijelloq	A shrewd ruler *(macca)* who wants to seize the kingdom from his nephew	Upon the death of her sibling, she sought to seize the kingdom from her nephew by instructing the people to conduct mourning ceremonies for her deceased sibling. Additionally, she incited the populace by proclaiming that anyone who showed kindness to orphans would face destruction.
5	We Adi Luwu	A smart, honest, brave and assertive princess (*macca' na malempu', warani na magetteng*)	She requested her guardian, for various reasons, to permit Batara Latuq to stay in their kingdom. She devised a plan to eliminate her aunt because of her malevolent actions towards her and her brother (Datu Sengeng). She instructed the royal officials to approach the king of the heavens to stop the storm that was causing distress for the farmers.

No.	Name	Political Role	Information
6	Datu Sengngeng	The princess is smart, honest, brave, and assertive (*macca' na malempu', warani na magetteng*)	She requested her guardian to allow Batara Latuq to stay at their kingdom. She lodged a protest against her aunt, who controlled the state taxes. After marrying Batara Latuq, the prince of the earthly kingdom, Datu Sengngeng refused to be greeted by royal messengers when visiting the celestial kingdom, except for being welcomed by his own father-in-law. This stance was taken to maintain the status of his underwater kingdom. She ruled the earthly kingdom during her father-in-law's visit to the celestial kingdom. Upon the birth of Sawerigading, Datu Sengngeng ordered the performance of a land-walking ceremony for his child. Datu Sengngeng altered Sawerigading's voyage to Dusung.
7	Sanrima Wero'	A smart queen who loves her people (*Makkunrai macca na magetteng*)	She boldly rejected Sawerigading's proposal, citing her desire to remain in her own kingdom and live in the celestial kingdom with her people.
8	We Tenriabeng	The king's daughter and the king's twin sister (Sawerigading). A woman who is intelligent, honest, brave and has principles.	She convinced Sawerigading not to marry her, explaining that they were twin siblings. We Tenriabeng significantly assisted her twin in finding a match with We Cudai. We Tenriabeng was regarded as a sacred woman with supernatural powers not possessed by most women.

Discussion

The intersection of gender, power, and politics has been a central discourse within gender studies, particularly when examining the role of women in political and social spheres. Despite significant advances in gender equality in many regions, including Indonesia, patriarchy remains a potent force that obstructs the full implementation of gender-equal policies. The inconsistency in implementing these policies highlights a persistent gap between formal commitments and actual practice. The discrepancy between policy and practice speaks to a need for deeper engagement with both historical and contemporary discussions surrounding gender, power, and political participation.

In this context, the *La Galigo* manuscript provides a critical lens through which to examine the role of women in political and societal decision-making. The epic offers a portrayal of gender relations that is strikingly progressive for its time. Written during the Srivijaya era, *La Galigo* challenges the prevailing patriarchal structures by depicting women not as passive figures confined to domestic spheres, but as active and influential participants in governance and decision-making processes. This early representation of female agency provides a stark contrast to the exclusionary gender politics that would later characterize many political systems, including that of modern Indonesia.

The role of women in *La Galigo* invites a critical theoretical discussion informed by feminist and poststructuralist thought. Judith Butler's (2011) concept of gender performativity is particularly relevant to understanding how gender roles in the epic are not biologically predetermined but socially constructed through repeated acts. The female characters in *La Galigo* perform their political roles with agency, defying the gender expectations typically associated with their societal positions. They do not passively accept the roles assigned to them, but actively engage in political matters, challenging the assumption that women's participation in governance is peripheral or secondary to that of men.

Michel Foucault's (1990) theory of power also provides a useful framework for analyzing how authority operates in *La Galigo*. Foucault's notion of power as diffuse and relational rather than hierarchical can be observed in the way that female characters in the epic influence political decisions (Foucault, 1990). While men may hold formal power in the narrative, women exert influence in a subtler, more relational way, through counsel, advice, and strategic action. This relational aspect of power is critical for understanding how the female characters in *La Galigo* navigate and negotiate their roles in a system that is, ostensibly, male-dominated.

The female characters in *La Galigo* illustrate various forms of political leadership and agency that complicate traditional conceptions of power and governance. Datu Palingeq, the queen of the celestial kingdom, exemplifies a model of governance based on consultation and deliberation. In her interactions with her husband, Patotoqe, she plays a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of the epic, not through unilateral decision-making, but through a partnership that emphasizes mutual respect and shared responsibility. This collaborative model of governance challenges the hierarchical, male-dominated political systems of both the past and the present, offering an alternative vision of leadership that is grounded in equality.

Datu Palingeq's role resonates with feminist theorists who believe that real gender equality in political representation can only happen when both men and women have equal access to decision-making spaces. This idea is echoed by Chandra Mohanty (2003), who argues that political agency shouldn't be seen as something only for men. Rather, women's participation in political processes is essential for any democratic society (Eschle, 2004). Datu Palingeq's active involvement in political discussions embodies the kind of gender-inclusive governance that is often missing in today's political systems, where women's voices are still too often overlooked.

Another key figure**,** Datu Sinaung Toja, the queen of the underworld, represents a powerful form of female leadership by governing the lower kingdom and strategically preparing her nine descendants to become rulers. Each of her children took on significant leadership roles: We Nyiliq Timoq became the king of Uriq Liu, Sangiang Mpareq ruled the distant land of Peretiwi, La Wero Ileq governed Toddang Soloq, and Dettia Langiq oversaw Uluwongeng. I La Samuda reigned over Marawennang, while La Wero Unruq ruled at the edge of the sky. I La Sanedda served as the overseer of Uluwongeng, and her youngest child eventually became the king of Lapiq Tana. Through these figures, Datu Sinaung Toja illustrates the depth of female

leadership in governance, an influence that, while not always visible in the traditional sense, is both far-reaching and enduring.

This portrayal of women in *La Galigo* stands in stark contrast to modern perceptions of women's roles in leadership in Indonesia. Rather than relying on direct authority, Datu Sinaung Toja's approach emphasizes the importance of preparation and succession. Her influence was not based on exercising power herself but on strategically positioning her descendants to take the reins of leadership, ensuring her legacy continued through the generations. This subtle, yet potent, form of leadership highlights a different kind of power, one that doesn't demand visibility but secures influence from behind the scenes. In this way, Datu Sinaung Toja's leadership aligns with R.W. Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic femininity, where women exert power within patriarchal systems, not by overtly challenging them, but by nurturing and maintaining influence through family bonds and generational ties (Schippers, 2007).

We Tenrijelloq provides another critical example of female agency in the epic. Her decision to reject the marriage proposal of Sawerigading, choosing instead to remain a sovereign queen in her own right, highlights the tensions between personal desire and political autonomy. We Tenrijelloq's refusal to conform to societal expectations, which typically prioritize women's roles as wives and mothers over their roles as political leaders, critiques the patriarchal notion that women's political authority is subordinate to their relationships with men. Her actions call into question the gendered expectations that often define women's political careers in contemporary societies, including Indonesia, where women are often expected to balance political roles with familial obligations.

Similarly, We Adi Luwu exemplifies a model of leadership grounded in empathy and responsibility. Her intervention to halt destructive weather patterns affecting farmers illustrates a form of leadership that prioritizes the welfare of the people over personal or political gain. This type of leadership aligns with feminist ethics of care, as described by Carol Gilligan (1982, as cited in Gabriel, 2015), which emphasizes the importance of empathy, responsibility, and relationality in leadership. We Adi Luwu's actions suggest that political authority need not be defined by domination or control but can be grounded in a profound commitment to the well-being of the community.

The character of Datu Sengngeng further complicates the notion of female leadership within patriarchal structures. While living in the Ale Luwu kingdom and pregnant with her child, her husband, Batara Latuq, secluded himself in his chamber. In response, his parents, Batara Guru and We Nyilik Timo, left the kingdom and traveled to the Boting Langiq and Peretiwi kingdoms to seek prayers and blessings for Datu Sengngeng's pregnancy. During their absence, Datu Sengngeng took charge of the Agung Manurung Palace and oversaw the conquered territories of Opunna Luwu, also known as Batara Latuq's domain.

By stepping into this leadership role in her mother-in-law's absence, Datu Sengngeng challenges traditional gender norms and assumes political power, despite the lack of male authority figures. Her actions demonstrate that women, even within patriarchal societies, can

rise to positions of leadership when the situation demands it. However, her assumption of power is not framed as an act of rebellion against patriarchal norms but as a pragmatic response to the temporary absence of male leadership. This highlights the complex dynamics of female agency, showing that while women can wield power, their authority is often contingent on the specific circumstances and the structure of the society they inhabit.

The role of Senrima Wero' in the *La Galigo* manuscript is not extensively detailed, but her character stands out for her bold decision to reject Sawerigading's proposal. Choosing to remain a queen in a smaller kingdom in the upper world (the sky), Senrima Wero' prioritizes her political leadership and dedication to her people over becoming the wife of the great king. Her bravery and steadfastness in this decision earn Sawerigading's respect, a reflection of her own agency. This mirrors the character of Saud in the literature, who similarly chooses to pursue a political career rather than marriage. In contrast, We Tenriabeng emerges as a key female figure and advisor to Sawerigading, further cementing her influence in *La Galigo.* As a policymaker, she exhibits remarkable autonomy, particularly when it comes to decisions about marriage. She advises Sawerigading to marry I We Cudaiq, the daughter of the Chinese king, whose appearance is said to closely resemble her own. To support her request, We Tenriabeng even appears in Sawerigading's dreams, convincing him to follow her counsel.

When Sawerigading encounters a challenge in traveling to China (Tana Ugiq)—no ships being available—We Tenriabeng steps in once again. Demonstrating her significant influence, she suggests that Sawerigading cut down trees from the upper world to build ships. Her advice is taken, showcasing her power in shaping the course of events. Later, when Sawerigading prepares to meet I We Cudaiq, she sets a peculiar condition for him: he must enter her chamber in the dark of night, wearing seven woven sarongs sewn together at the top and bottom, along with seven layers of clothing. Puzzled, Sawerigading turns to We Tenriabeng for guidance. In response, she provides him with a firefly and a striped cat named Meong Mpalo Karellae from the heavens to guide him to I We Cudaiq's room.

We Tenriabeng's influence over Sawerigading, a powerful figure, is unmistakable. Her role extends beyond marriage advice; she is integral in guiding major decisions. For example, Sawerigading sends La Dunnung Sereng to the upper world to request her assistance in lowering a complete kingdom to the lower world. Amidst adverse weather conditions, the heavenly kingdom of Malimangeng is brought down to the middle world. Additionally, We Tenriabeng advises the cutting of the sacred Anynyiwan tree in Latimojong, which is used to build the command ship for *La Galigo*, a descendant of Sawerigading, in preparation for an impending war. Through these actions, We Tenriabeng emerges as a central figure, shaping both political and personal realms within the epic.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the *La Galigo* manuscript highlights the empowerment of women, even without formal legal frameworks, by providing opportunities for their involvement in politics and public policy. This depiction of women's roles predates modern discourse on gender equality, offering a powerful example of women participating in governance long before the 14th century.

The seven key female characters in *La Galigo*, each characterized by qualities such as *macca, malempu, warani na magetteng* (smart, honest, brave and assertive), embody a vision of leadership that reflects gender equality in the political realm. In Bugis lontarak, they are described as *"Makkunrai macca na malempu, warani na magetteng"*, which denotes a woman who embodies intelligence (*macca*), honesty (*malempu*), brave (*warani*), and assertiveness or strong moral conviction (*magetteng*). The resolve of these female characters is clear throughout the epic. Their strength of character is exemplified through their actions. Senri Mawero and We Tenriabeng, in particular, demonstrate unwavering resolve in their decisions—Senri Mawero rejects Sawerigading's proposal to remain queen in her own kingdom, while We Tenriabeng turns down her twin brother's proposal due to his violation of crucial rules. These figures exemplify the ways in which women in *La Galigo* assert their autonomy, defying the traditional expectations placed on them by their societies.

This portrayal of female agency in *La Galigo* underscores the mutual respect and cooperation between men and women in decision-making processes, which was embedded in the social fabric of Bugis society. The manuscript highlights the valuable role that women's perspectives played within governance structures, offering a historical model of gender equality. However, in contemporary media, the representation of female politicians often introduces them as novelties rather than full participants in the political process. Sazali and Basit (2020) point out that the portrayal of female politicians remains ambiguous across various global contexts, suggesting that the gendered treatment of politicians still persists in media, despite legal advancements aimed at promoting equality.

By examining *La Galigo* from a gender perspective, this research illustrates how women's roles in politics were integrated into the world's largest epic long before the establishment of gender rights and protective laws. While the epic showcases women's involvement in critical decisions, it also leaves room for further exploration into the underlying factors that shaped their political roles. A deeper investigation into why the political roles of women in *La Galigo* have evolved (or diminished) in the contemporary context would offer important insights into the shifting dynamics of gender and power.

The female characters in *La Galigo* collectively present a model of political leadership that is relational and gender-inclusive, suggesting that political authority need not be exclusive to men. Their involvement in governance challenges the traditional assumption that leadership is inherently male, offering a vision of political equality that remains relevant today. These depictions, though rooted in a mythical and historical context, provide valuable lessons for understanding the relationship between gender and political power in contemporary societies.

In modern Indonesia, the political landscape for women is still marked by significant challenges. Despite efforts to increase female representation in parliament, the gap between legislative intent and practice remains wide. Women continue to be marginalized in political spaces, highlighting the continued relevance of *La Galigo*. The epic critiques patriarchal power structures and offers a historical precedent for gender equality in governance. The seven principal female characters, with their wisdom, courage, and integrity, serve as powerful

symbols of leadership based on equality, mutual respect, and strategic action—principles that are still needed today in the fight for women's political empowerment.

Future research should explore how the gendered power dynamics in *La Galigo* reflect broader societal and political structures, particularly how women's political agency has evolved. This exploration would offer important insights into the ongoing struggle for gender equality in governance, both in Indonesia and globally, and provide guidance for how gender equality in politics can be achieved and sustained in the future.

Conclusion

The discourse on women and politics, particularly regarding gender equality, has long been a central issue in feminist studies, especially in the context of the enduring influence of patriarchal structures on political systems. Although recent Indonesian legal frameworks aim to enhance women's political engagement, historical and cultural narratives remain essential for understanding the evolving roles of women throughout history. The *La Galigo* manuscript, provides a profound example of how women's political involvement was portrayed within traditional Bugis culture. This text is significant not only for its rich depiction of South Sulawesi's traditions and cosmology but also for its subtle yet powerful representation of gender justice and female leadership.

Within *La Galigo*, gender roles are depicted as fluid rather than rigid, with women portrayed as equal partners with men in governing the three realms of the universe: the upper world, middle world, and underworld. Through its characters, the epic offers a vision of society where women play crucial roles in political decision-making, even serving as rulers, advisors, and key figures in major decisions. For instance, Datu Palingeq, the queen of the celestial kingdom, exemplifies a female leader who advocates for deliberative decision-making, advising her husband, Patotoqe, to convene a council on how to populate the Earth. This depiction underscores the importance of consultation and gender inclusivity in governance, which aligns with modern democratic principles. Similarly, Datu Sinaung Toja, the queen of the underworld, demonstrates the power and influence of women in preparing their descendants to become rulers, shaping the political landscape of their domain.

The representation of women in *La Galigo* challenges the notion that political leadership is solely a male domain. The role of women like We Tenriabeng, who advises the protagonist Sawerigading on critical matters such as strategic military and diplomatic decisions, highlights the agency and autonomy that women possessed in this narrative. Women in *La Galigo* are portrayed as capable decision-makers and custodians of wisdom, balancing personal desires with political responsibilities. This stands in contrast to current depictions of women in Indonesian politics, where gender bias often persists, fueled by cultural and religious interpretations. However, the manuscript's portrayal suggests that gender roles in Bugis society were far more fluid and balanced than the rigid patriarchal systems seen in contemporary politics.

Further, the leadership styles exhibited by female characters like We Adi Luwu, who demonstrates compassion for her people, provide a model of ethical governance grounded in care and responsibility. The strategic decisions taken by these women, including We Adi Luwu's intervention to stop natural disasters affecting farmers, reflect a governance model in which empathy and the protection of vulnerable populations are central to leadership. This stands in stark contrast to modern political systems where women's leadership, even when present, is often marginalized or undermined.

The portrayal of women in *La Galigo* offers historical precedents for gender equality that predate modern discussions on the topic. It demonstrates that long before the existence of formal laws and political rights for women, there was a cultural recognition of the importance of female participation in political and social spheres. The attributes of *macca, malempu, warani na magetteng* (smart, honest, brave and assertive) embodied by these female figures suggest that these qualities were integral to leadership, regardless of gender. This serves as a historical counterpoint to the marginalization of women in contemporary politics.

In conclusion, *La Galigo* offers a profound reflection on the political empowerment of women, presenting them as integral to decision-making processes long before the modern discourse on gender equality. The manuscript challenges contemporary gender norms by illustrating that women once held positions of authority and influence on par with men. The nuanced depiction of gender roles in *La Galigo* provides a powerful example of historical gender justice, offering inspiration for current efforts toward achieving gender equality in politics. However, this study also recognizes the need for further exploration into how these historical roles have evolved or been eroded over time. More specifically, research could examine the factors that contributed to the diminishing roles of women in Bugis society and explore the reasons behind the modern underrepresentation of women in political leadership.

Future research could extend this study by employing a comparative approach with other indigenous manuscripts from Southeast Asia, such as the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* from Malaysia or *the Chronicles of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya* from Thailand, to critically examine regional models of female political agency within traditional cosmologies. Despite the expansive textual corpus of *La Galigo,* key female figures such as We Tenriabeng and Datu Palingeq have received limited critical attention in current scholarship. This scholarly neglect has obscured the complexity of gendered power and its intersections with sacred authority in premodern Bugis narratives.

While foundational ethnographic contributions by Pelras (1996) and recent studies by Nur and Komariah (2023) offer valuable insights into Bugis gender identities, a significant gap remains in literary analyses that examine how these identities shape and legitimize women's political participation and leadership within the epic's cosmology. Future research addressing this gap should adopt an interdisciplinary framework that integrates literary hermeneutics, historical anthropology, and gender theory. Such an approach will deepen understanding of the mythopolitical structures influencing women's roles in governance and authority, tracing their evolution from traditional cosmologies to contemporary political contexts in Southeast Asia.

Declaration of Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to enhance the clarity and quality of the language. Specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT and ProWritingAid were utilized to support language refinement, grammar correction, and paraphrasing. These tools were employed solely for editorial and linguistic purposes. All research ideas, conceptual frameworks, data interpretation, and conclusions presented in the manuscript are the original and sole work of the author(s). No AI tools were used to generate research content, perform analysis, or draw scholarly conclusions. The final version of the manuscript was thoroughly reviewed and verified by the author(s) to ensure its academic integrity and originality.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank the International Academic Forum (IAFOR) for the opportunity to present this article at The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture (KAMC2024). The conference provided an invaluable platform for scholarly exchange and critical discussion, which has significantly enriched the development of this work. We also extend our deep appreciation to the Direktorat Pendidikan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (DIKTIS) for their generous financial support. Their funding has been instrumental in facilitating this research and advancing our academic contributions in this field.

References

Ahyar, J. (2019). *Apa itu sastra (Jenis-Jenis Karya Sastra dan Bagaimanakan Cara Menulis dan Mengapresiasi Sastra)*. Penerbit Deepublish.

Amira nurifkah m, Somad, M. A., & Budiyanti, N. (2021). Pandangan islam mengenai stereotip perempuan dalam dunia politik. *Tadris : Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam*, *15*(1), 85–94. https://doi.org/10.51675/jt.v15i1.115

Aspinall, E., White, S., & Savirani, A. (2021). Women's Political Representation in Indonesia: Who Wins and How? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, *40*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103421989720

Assaad, A. S., Qudsy, S. Z., Hasyim, B., Badollahi, M. T., & Haddade, A. W. (2022). Gender Equity in Inheritance System: The Collaboration of Islamic and Bugis Luwu Customary Law. *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pranata Sosial*, *17*(2). https://doi.org/10.19105/al-Ihkam.v17i2.6761

Blackwood, E. (2010). *Falling into the lesbi world: Desire and difference in Indonesia*. University of Hawaii Press. https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824834425.001.0001

Butler, J. (2011). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979

Connell, R. (2005). *Masculinities*. Routledge.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity rethinking the concept. In *Gender and Society*, *19*(6). https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Davies, S. G. (2010). Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and queer selves. *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203860953

De Beauvoir, S. (2014). The second sex. In I. Marsh, R. Campbell, & M. Keating (Eds.), *Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315840154

Ekawati, S. A., Ali, M., Lakatupa, G., Asfan, L. O. M., Manga, S., & Sari, F. R. (2022). Siri' na pacce: The Local Wisdom of Coastal Community Settlement Patterns and Its Existence amid COVID-19 Pandemic. *Civil Engineering and Architecture*, *10*(1), 55–70. https://doi.org/10.13189/cea.2022.100105

Ennaji, M. (2016). Women, gender, and politics in Morocco. *Social Sciences*, *5*(4), 75. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5040075

Eschle, C. (2004). Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. *American Anthropologist*, *106*(3), 627–628. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.3.627

Fadli, Y. (2018). Islam, Perempuan dan Politik: Argumentasi Keterlibatan Perempuan dalam Politik di Indonesia Pasca Reformasi. *Journal of Government and Civil Society*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.31000/jgcs.v1i1.267

Fathimah, E., Lusiana, L., & Abdillah, M. (2022). Siri' sebagai motivasi dan etos kerja perempuan bugis dalam peningkatan ekonomi keluarga. *Jesya*, *5*(2), 2125–2138. https://doi.org/10.36778/jesya.v5i2.786

Felisia, P. (2019). *Putri Rajapatni*. Loka Media.

Fernando, A. S. (2021). Hak Politik Perempuan di Indonesia dalam Perspektif Hukum Positif dan Hukum Islam. *Jurnal Pemikiran Politik Islam*, *4*(1), 37–52. https://doi.org/10.21043/politea.v4i1.10058

Ford, M., & Parker, L. (Eds.). (2008). *Women and work in Indonesia*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932360

Forman-Rabinovici, A., & Nir, L. (2021). Personalism or party platform? Gender quotas and women's representation under different electoral system orientations. *PLoS ONE*, *16*(9), e0257665. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257665

Foucault, M. (1990). The History of Sexuality: An introduction (Vol. 1). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Gabriel, Y. (2015). The caring leader – What followers expect of their leaders and why? *Leadership*, *11*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715014532482

Hasriani, A. (2018). Bissu rituality on bugis community in sub district segeri pangkep regency south sulawesi. *Journal on Leadership and Policy*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.32890/jlp2018.3.2.3

Hentschel, T., Heilman, M. E., & Peus, C. V. (2019). The multiple dimensions of gender stereotypes: A current look at men's and women's characterizations of others and themselves. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*(JAN). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00011

Iftinan, N., & Putra, D. K. S. (2021). Peran Perempuan Sebagai Pemimpin Dalam Aktivitas Komunikasi Politik (studi Tokoh Pada Ketua Dprd Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat). *e-Proceedings of Management*, *8*(5).

Indonesia, P. K. R. S. (2021). *Wawancara Drs Muhammad Salim - Penerjemah I La Galigo [Video]*. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nodntmiIUQ

Indonesia, P. O. (2020). *La galigo menurut naskah NBG 188 [Video]*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIyasGjypSM

Kaelani, N., & Bukhori, P. M. (2006). *Gadis Jakarta*. Navila.

Kesuma, A. I. (2019). *Role of Women According to Ancient Text Perspective and Bugis Community Historical Context (Finding Relevance in the Modern Context Society in South Sulawesi)*. https://doi.org/10.2991/icamr-18.2019.120

Kollo, F. L. (2017). Budaya Patriarki dan Partisipasi Perempuan dalam Bidang Politik Budaya Patraiki. *Prosiding Konferensi Nasional Kewarganegaraan*, *III*(November).

Mahmud, M. (2015). Exploring gender roles in the story of i la galigo. *Sosiohumaniora*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.24198/sosiohumaniora.v16i1.5681

Maksum, L. A., Lamusu, S. A., & Didipu, H. (2021). Emansipasi wanita dalam novel aku lupa bahwa aku perempuan karya ihsan abdul quddus. *Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.37905/jbsb.v11i2.10100

Mayasari-Hoffert, S. (2023). R. A. Kartini and the many faces of colonial female subject. In K. Baker & N. Walker (Eds.), *A Space of Their Own*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003270102-15

Mikail, K. (2015). Politik dan perempuan: Perjuangan Politik Perempuan di Iran Pasca Revolusi Islam 1979. *ADDIN*, *9*(2).

Mohanty, C. T. (2003*). Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity.* Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822384649

Mustadjar, M., & Dirawan, G. D. (2017). *Gender Perspective in Bugis Makassar*. https://doi.org/10.2991/icest-17.2017.18

Nimrah dan Sakaria, S., Kunci, K., & Budaya Patriarki, dan. (2015). Perempuan Dan Budaya Patriarki Dalam Politik (Studi Kasus Kegagalan Caleg Perempuan Dalam Pemilu Legislative 2014). *The POLITICS: Jurnal Magister Ilmu Politik Universitas Hasanuddin*, *1*(2).

Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2001). Cultural obstacles to equal representation. In *Journal of Democracy, 12*(3), 126–140. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2001.0054

Nur, R. J., & Komariah, S. (2023). Gender Dynamics Analysis: Uncovering the Roles and Identities of Bugis-Makassar Women. *The Journal of Indonesia Sustainable Development Planning*, *4*(1), 216–226. https://doi.org/10.46456/jisdep.v4i2.432

Nuraeni, Y., & Lilin Suryono, I. (2021). Analisis Kesetaraan Gender dalam Bidang Ketenagakerjaan Di Indonesia. *Nakhoda: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan*, *20*(1). 68–79. https://doi.org/10.35967/njip.v20i1.134

Nurhilmiyah. (2017). Merefleksi Emansipasi Kartini. *Jurnal Fakultas Hukum Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara*, *0*(5).

Nussbaum, M. C. (2003). Emotions and women's capabilities. In M. C. Nussbaum & J. Glover (Eds.), *Women, Culture, and Development* (pp. 360–395). https://doi.org/10.1093/0198289642.003.0015

Oktarina, T. N., & Yulianti, A. (2022). The Role of Women in Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection: A Discourse of Ecofeminisme in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Environmental Law and Sustainable Development*, *1*(2) 107–138. https://doi.org/10.15294/ijel.v1i2.58137

Patel, V. (2022). Gender in world perspective. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *29*(6), 894–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2021.1954407

Pelras, C. (1996). *The Bugis*. Blackwell.

Priandi, R., & Roisah, K. (2019). Upaya meningkatkan partisipasi politik perempuan dalam pemilihan umum di indonesia. *Jurnal Pembangunan Hukum Indonesia*, *1*(1), 106–116. https://doi.org/10.14710/jphi.v1i1.106-116

Qodir, I. A. (2020). *Aku Lupa Bahwa Aku Perempuan*. Alvabet.

Ramos, L. D. O., & Da Silva, V. A. (2020). The Gender Gap in Brazilian Politics and the Role of the Electoral Court. *Politics and Gender*, *16*(2). 409–437. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000879

Roth, V. (2011). *Divergent*. Katherine Tegen Books.

Rhoads, E. (2012). Women's Political Participation in Indonesia: Decentralisation, Money Politics and Collective Memory in Bali. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, *31*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341203100202

Roth, V. (2021). *The 10 th National Online Seminar on Linguitics , Language Teaching and Literature Narasi Politik Perempuan dalam Trilogi Divergent Karya*. 214–222.

Rusmini, O. (2017). *Tarian Bumi*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Salsabila, S. N. (2018). Feminisme Dalam Politik Pada Cerpen Wakyat. *Lakon*, *7*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.20473/lakon.v7i1.19773

Sarmento, C. (2012). Culture, Politics and Identity: Critical Readings on Gender in Southeast Asia. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, *19*(3), 437–467. https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151201900305

Sazali, H., & Basit, L. (2020). Meta analysis of women politician portrait in mass media frames. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *36*(2). https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2020-3602-19

Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, *36*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4

Sluga, G. (2023). What Do We Learn about War and Peace from Women International Thinkers? *Global Studies Quarterly*, *3*(1), ksad018. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad018

Suryakusuma, J. I. (2004). *Sex, Power, and Nation: An Anthology of Writings*. Metafor Publishing.

Susanti, S., & Lubis, A. (2015). Partisipasi Politik Perempuan pada Partai Keadilan Sejahtera Kota Medan. *JPPUMA: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan Dan Sosial Politik UMA (Journal of Governance and Political Social UMA)*, *3*(1).

Tridewiyanti, K. (2012). Kesetaraan dan Keadilan Gender di Bidang Politik " Pentingnya Partisipasi dan Keterwakilan Perempuan di Legislatif." *Jurnal Legislasi Indonesia*, *9*(1).

UNESCO. (2011). *La Galigo – Memory of the World*. UNESCO. Retrieved from https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/la-galigo

Wahyudi, V. (2019). Peran Politik Perempuan dalam Persfektif Gender. *Politea : Jurnal Politik Islam*, *1*(1), 63–83. https://doi.org/10.20414/politea.v1i1.813

Wijaya, P. (2019). *Wakyat*. Kompas. Retrieved from https://www.kompas.id/baca/utama/2019/04/28/wakyat/

Wijayanti, D. E. (2020). Perjuangan Perempuan pada Masa Pergolakan Politik Indonesia Tahun 1965 dalam Novel Gadis Jakarta Karya Najib Kaelani dan Novel Amba Karya Laksmi Pamuntjak. *Aphorisme: Journal of Arabic Language, Literature, and Education*, *1*(2), 73–91. https://doi.org/10.37680/aphorisme.v1i2.402

Yanti, M. F., Hayati, Y., & Zulfadhli, Z. (2018). Peran perempuan dalam novel tarian bumi karya oka rusmini. *Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra*, *6*(1). https://doi.org/10.24036/81008980

Yeni, A. A. G. K. (2022). Peranan gayatri rajapatni dalam novel putri rajapatni karya putu felisia (kajian feminisme liberal). *BAPALA*, *9*(5), 60–73.

Yuspin, W., & Aulia, S. E. (2022). Traces of Gender Equality in Indonesia. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, *5*(10), 279–284. https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v5i10.601

Yusuf, M., Wekke, I. S., Salleh, A., & Bukido, R. (2021). Legal Construction of the Buginese Understanding. *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Syir'ah*, *19*(2). https://doi.org/10.30984/jis.v19i2.1530

Zahruddin, A. (2021). Perempuan dalam buadaya politik patriakhi. *JURNAL DINAMIKA*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.54895/dinamika.v1i1.769

Corresponding author: Nurhamdah Zain
Email: nurhamdah@iainpare.ac.id

the iafor

journal of cultural studies

ISSN: 2187-4905