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Edited by: Holger Briel

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From the Editor

As 2024 is quickly winding down, many of us are involved in the final academic chores of the year, be that grading papers, examination boards, research reports or, indeed, taking finals. During all these hectic endeavours, it is good to pause once in a while and remember the pivotal moments the year had in store for us for us. Of course, these moments are very much location-dependent. If you were living in Gaza or on the front in the Ukraine, you will want to bring 2024 to a close as quickly as possible and hope for betterment and an end of the atrocities in the new year. Those of us living more privileged lives, we might remember elections having taking place around the globe, and also those that have not taken place, both outcomes perhaps equally worrisome. It is hoped that the current issue will give you the abovementioned pause, as the contributions to this issue strives to make a little bit more sense of our world and add to its knowledge bases.

The issue opens with Muh Adnan Malewa's text, **Foucault in Sulawesi: Challenging the Roots of Ethnic Discourse in South Sulawesi.** In his article, Malewa artfully and knowledgeably challenges the traditional view taken by many Indonesian historians that conflicts having taken place in Sulawesi hundreds of years ago can be traced to two ethnicities fighting each other for power. Employing Foucauldian power theories, he demonstrates that rather than ethnic differences, the struggle came from two political factions fighting for power, engaging two overlaying conflicts: that of Dutch colonization and the Muslim conquests. The lessons to be learned from these conflicts have a deep meaning for today's continuing struggles in Sulawesi. Malewa cautions against using history as a divisive tool and, rather, to seek healing commonalities. False dichotomies only play into the hands of larger forces trying to instrumentalise the historic discourse, which itself needs to be pluralized.

The following text, **The Home and the World: Analysing Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Identity-Formation in Indian Picturebooks** by Aditi Bhardwaj and Devjani Ray, follows along the lines of cultural development, albeit this time, Indian children's development. In their magisterial inquiry, they investigate a large number of Indian picture books regarding their ideological underpinnings. They find, perhaps to their own pleasant surprise, that especially recently, Indian children's picturebooks have become rather enlightened and display to their childhood readers many desiderata of an equally enlightened 21st century. Not only do they treat similar themes as their international counterparts regarding gender relations and racism, they also localise their content for their particular readership and tell stories of fighting casteism and relating to the jungle many of them have grown up with, both topics not typically found in their western counterparts. Giving examples of the wonderful artwork on display in these picture books, they also comment on one of the main turns in cognition development – that from the linguistic turn to a pictorial one. For the longest time, many believed that picture books were something you graduated from to engage in written texts only, but Bhardwaj and Ray's intervention amply demonstrates that it is exactly this multimodal and relational display of text and image that makes these picturebooks so valuable for the development of children, who in their later lives will continue to interact with image realms, be that in the memes they view or in the emojis they themselves will use.

If placemaking was already a topic in the preceding article, thematising (and fighting against) traditional spaces assigned to Indian men and women, in **Placemaking through Sensory Engagement: Assessing Cultural Essence of Assi Ghat, Varanasi for Virtual Environments,** Tejaswini Rai, Suruchi Modi, and Neena Zutshi take this topic to the next level and explore the space of Assi Ghat, the steps leading down to the Ganges river in Varanasi. They present a thick description of the multisensory atmosphere created during various times of the day in this place and in a further step discuss how such a placemaking can or cannot be transferred into the virtual realm. Citing examples from other places of deep meaning making in China and other Indian cities, they provide a roadmap for such digitalisation, making their readers ponder the general bifurcations between virtual and not so virtual spaces and places.

Moving further into the virtual realm is Weinan Yuan's **Online News, Public Health and Misinformation: Their Impact on Foreign News Consumers Living in China.** As this editor knows too well, living in China brings with it its own special challenges – a very difficult language, a very low take-up of English even in urban space, and a tight control of the internet, with more than 60% of internet webpages underlying some kind of restriction. While this does make daily life difficult, living under the further restrictions of COVID conditions was especially arduous. Interviewing a number of non-Chinese Key Informers living in China, Yuan shows how these individuals nevertheless were able to gain information for their daily lives and thus stayed up-to-date on the relevant issues, especially these they needed during these special times. The text is an homage to the power of the internet as it helps us see things from different perspectives. Given the results of the COVID infection, it becomes clear that while restrictions might stop us from getting information on things, it also protects us from getting fake news, thereby fostering further critical engagement with this still recent phenomenon.

Lastly, Jakob Jurisch's **David Lynch's Los Angeles: Control and Liberation through the Cinematic Image** takes us on a virtual tour of Los Angeles as seen through the eyes of David Lynch. This is no easy tour to, say, the Bel Air Houses of the rich and famous, but rather a tour de force of the down-and-out spaces and their inhabitants. Based on his expert reading of Lynch's L.A. trilogy, Jurisch demonstrates how Lynch interweaves the locale with its virtual-visual representations and how he, ever so slightly but insistently so tilts realities until they (and we) become their virtual other. Disconcerting, but certainly not far from the virtual cinematic truth.

Enjoy your reading!

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

Notes on Contributors

Article 1

Foucault in Sulawesi: Challenging the Roots of Ethnic Discourse in South Sulawesi

Muh Adnan Malewa

Muh Adnan Malewa is a Lecturer at the History Department of Hasanuddin University, Indonesia. He also serves as the president of the Rumah Budaya Bahari Foundation. He has worked with The Nature Conservancy as an environmental consultant focusing on social culture and has worked as an editor for several local news companies. His research interests include environmental sustainability, coastal community livelihoods, feminism, history and film. He has contributed to many national and international conferences and has published research in cultural studies journals. His latest publications is *Ecological Hegemony: The Transformation of the Dayak Wehea Tribe* (2022), in which he details the challenging relationship between indigenous tribes and palm oil conglomerates in Indonesia. In addition, he also works on his own music projects and has recently released a first album. Finally, he is also active as a director of documentary films.

Article 2

The Home and the World: Analysing Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Identity-Formation in Indian Picturebooks

Aditi Bhardwaj

Aditi Bhardwaj holds a graduate degree in English Literature from Miranda House, University of Delhi (India). She is an independent researcher of memory cultures in South Asia and postcolonial childhood studies. Her research interests also include transnational feminist studies, diaspora studies and digital humanities.

Devjani Ray

Devjani Ray is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Miranda House, at the University of Delhi (India). Her research interests lie in childhood studies and its intersections with other cultural projects, particularly critical literacy, pedagogy and nationalism.

Article 3

Placemaking through Sensory Engagement: Assessing Cultural Essence of Assi Ghat, Varanasi for Virtual Environments

Tejaswini Rai

Tejaswini Rai is a PhD scholar specializing in the integration of technology and culturalheritage, with a focus on digital placemaking and sensory engagement. Holding a Master degree in Architecture (Built Heritage) and a Bachelor degree in Architecture, her expertise spans heritage conservation, digital placemaking, and sustainable urban conservation. With over two years of consultancy experience in cultural heritage and a background as an Assistant Professor, Tejaswini integrates academic rigor with practical insights. Her research interests include sensory engagement in heritage spaces, accessibility challenges, and the

transformative role of technology in preserving living heritage. She employs interdisciplinary methodologies, including ethnographic studies, geospatial analysis, and qualitative coding, to explore innovative solutions for heritage conservation in both physical and virtual environments. Currently engaged in advanced studies and research in Ontario, Canada, Tejaswini contributes to the global discourse on heritage through scholarly publications andcollaborations. Her work emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, sustainability, and technology-driven strategies in reimagining heritage spaces for diverse audiences.

Suruchi Modi

Suruchi Modi, an architect and urban designer from CEPT University, India, specializes in Tall Building Design. Her research focuses on social spaces for children in residential high rises, emphasizing the significance of architecture and neighbourhood in supporting their cognitive and social development. With over 10 years of association with Sushant University, she fills out various roles and promotes research in design-oriented fields like architecture. Dr Modi has received awards for her sustainable city model project and Passivhaus skyscraper design in New York City. She currently runs the Participatory Urban Design Studio in collaboration with URJA and the IUDI DNCR Chapter, addressing real-time architectural challenges in Delhi. Her work also includes collaborations with international offices, aiming to introduce sustainable concepts and technologies to high-rise development.

Neena Zutshi

Neena Zutshi has shifted from practice to academia to explore architectural imaginations. She pursued architecture at the School of Planning & Architecture, New Delhi at the undergraduate and doctoral levels and has a postgraduate qualification in Advanced Architectural Studies from UCL, London. Having lived and worked in diverse locations, she has taught at Sushant School of Art and Architecture, Bilkent University, Ankara and Amity University among others and headed the school of architecture at Goenka University. She has presented her work on prestigious platforms globally and continues to engage with history and theory as well as design processes in architecture. Her research interest focuses on architectural treatises in the subcontinent and their contemporary relevance. Currently, she is the Dean (Academics) at the World University of Design engaging in design and art intersections with architecture.

Article 4
Online News, Public Health and Misinformation: Their Impact on Foreign News Consumers Living in China

Weinan Yuan

Weinan YUAN is a veteran cinematographer, who has been involved in the production and promotion of film projects such as Dragon Nest: Warriors' Dawn, Dragon Blade, Red Amnesia, and Good People; he is also a keen media sociologist, who has organized international academic events such as the UN Internet Governance Forum, focusing on digital health and technology regulations. He holds an MA in Media and Communication from the University of Liverpool and is presently working on his PhD at RMIT. Additionally, he has served as a tech advisor for art exhibitions and takes pride in mentoring competitions like the *China Daily News Campus*

Awards. His research interests span cinematography, disconnection studies, digital well-being, and artificial intelligence.

Article 5
David Lynch's Los Angeles: Control and Liberation through the Cinematic Image

Jakob Caspar Jurisch
Jakob Caspar Jurisch received his B.A and M.A. from Humboldt University, Berlin He works as a film critic reviewer for the pre-eminent German film news outlet Moviebreak.de. For the last few years, he has been busy covering the Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Sundance and SXSW film festivals as an accredited journalist. Academically, at the moment he is working on Gus van Sant's death trilogy, consisting of the films "Gerry", "Elephant", and "Last Days", where he sets out to re-conceptualize youth culture and death ideologies at the start of the 21th century.

Foucault in Sulawesi: Challenging the Roots of Ethnic Discourse in South Sulawesi

Muh Adnan Malewa
Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

Abstract

The conflict between the Bugis and Makassar ethnic groups in South Sulawesi can be described as a silent conflict that could become the catalyst for the birth of a bigger war. To this day, this silent war continues through hate speech created from collective memory and even summarized in national historical writings. This cannot be separated from the local history of the 17th century, which did not yet have the idea of Indonesia as a united nation at its root. This idea only appeared as a manufactured development in the 20th century and was inscribed into the previous time period retroactively, creating a false national historical continuity. This was the state of things when in 1973 Sultan Hassanuddin (1631-1670), a representative of the Makassar ethnic group and someone who did not contemplate the idea of a unified Indonesia, was named a national hero with support from historians. He was viewed as a national hero because of his struggle against the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), and then automatically labeled his opponent, Arung Palakka, a member of the Bugis ethnic group, as a "traitor" for joining the VOC. To this day, this interpretation is Indonesia's dominant historical narrative and is often portrayed as a singular and absolute fact. This article attempts to answer how this metanarrative was formed by reviewing and questioning the narrative of the birth of ethnicity in South Sulawesi and by revisiting the two narratives of the great war between what ethnographers call the Bugis and the Makassar. In searching for the roots of this conflict, the researcher used a historical research methodology by interacting with various historical archives and research results heuristically, which were then deconstructed according to a metanarrative of source criticism in order to analyze the chronology of the birth of the ethnic identity of the people of South Sulawesi. Additionally, the 1609-1669 conflict is addressed, using Michel Foucault's theory of power relations and knowledge. This research discovered how ethnic polarization occurred and offers possible corrections and additions to previous historians' historical interpretations based more on national interests than historic facts. It is hoped that through this article, cultural historians can better review and separate historical facts from national interests that emerged in dominant historical writings, and might even help to reduce possible ethnic unease which might have occurred as a result.

Keywords: Bugis, deconstruction, ethnic conflict, historiography, Indonesia, Makassar, Sulawesi

Ascertaining the roots of tribal conflicts in and through history is never an easy task. It requires in-depth excavation and appropriate methods to reach the point where the seeds planted become solid roots as historical sources. Here one can point to Michael Foucault who was one historian able to penetrate time and space in his search to find the roots of conflicts occurring in historic times but whose results discovered were still pertinent during his time. In his book *History of Sexuality: An Introduction" Volume I* (1978) for instance, Foucault described sexual conflicts that occur(ed) in earlier societies as a form of power relations expressing differences in discourse toward the birth of contemporary conflicts. (Foucault, 1978, p.3) Right on the first page of his book, he states that sexual expressions prohibited from being expressed publicly changed their location to the domain of privacy, which then became the morals for today's society, despite having been born from the policies established by Victorianism. The hegemony thus created would for instance stipulate that the dominant discourse should express that it is wrong to engage in sexual discussions in public.

Using a similar archaeological method, I used the archives at the South Sulawesi Regional Archives and Library and the History Laboratory of Hasanuddin University, trying to examine the temporal basis for the emergence of tribal conflicts still occurring today. Arguably, in the 17th century there existed two major conflicts involving two large ethnicities in South Sulawesi, the Bugis-Makassar conflict which included the Islamic War of 1609-1611 and the Makassar War from 1666-1669, which then spread further to become the basis and blueprint for the birth of additional ethnic conflicts.

In historical literature, these two wars are generally viewed as conflicts from an economic and political perspective. But as other wars teach us, this might not suffice as there exists a complex background to such conflicts and economic reasons do not suffice as explanation. Take for instance Genghis Khan's 1209 command to attack the Xia-Xia Kingdom in China, where the main goal was not just political and economic but also ethical change, based on Genghis Khan's belief in Tengri ideas.[1] The same is true for Hitler's attack on Poland in 1939 which was based on Hitler's belief in racial purification, a cornerstone of fascism. Despite the fact that in a number of historical analyses the idea of conflict that arises from one party's ethics is seen only as secondary reason for the outbreak of concerted violence[2], the author believes that ethics is indeed an important driver, an episteme for the formation of knowledge regarding conflicts when studied from a position engaging power and knowledge relations.

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[1] In *The History of the Mongol Conquests*, J. J. Saunders explained that Genghis Khan did not unite the Mongols and conquer the world solely for economic or political reasons. Rather, he believed in the concept of the "mandate of heaven" as an idea of truth from the Tengri as a god of the Mongols.

[2] If one examines the shifts in historical paradigms, especially at the beginning of the 20th century by the French *Annales* School, many scholars criticized historiography for focusing solely on historical documents while neglecting the ideas behind these documents, a concept termed "Mentalités." This idea was later refined by Foucault in his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Existing historical works in Indonesia, especially those I will discuss below, are ensconced in relying solely on documents or *Méthodique* historiographic writing which might lead to problematic historical constructs. Foucault viewed the *Annales* historians as a group of historians whose work was dated, whose methodology was flawed and whose concern with history (meaning that it was the best and only way to foster a sense of nationhood) became highly problematic in light of developments in more recent international politics. (Noronha-Divanna, 2010, p.1).

Foucault (1978) stated, "We must write the history of this will to truth, this petition to know that for so many centuries has kept us enthralled [...] Or had this knowledge become so costly-in political, economic, and ethical terms-that in order to subject everyone to its rule, it was necessary to convince them, paradoxically, that their liberation was at stake?" (p. 80). Historical facts have a price, and those which are within the circle of moral ethics created for the narrative of the Islamic and Makassar Wars, will typically reject the new ethics approach arising from such an analysis. For decades, the traditional historic ethic has been ingrained in people and has taken strong root as a metanarrative, for many scholars and the Indonesian public alike. Here, especially scholarly influence is important due to their responsibility as they are tasked with creating enlightenment, but at times find themselves unable to break away from older and, arguably, more problematic ethical standards.

Newer historiography views history as disparate fragments, disconnected, as something which cannot be viewed as a singular united event based on any singular cause. However, there is also continuity in history, a continuity which flows into ideas, into ethics which become historical patterns that are carried onwards, from time period to time period so that it seems that history is a repeating event, leading to a vicious circle. In fact, it is only the applied ethics as knowledge that repeats itself, becoming a historical pattern, while the causes of events can arise from various factors which then allows researchers to separate an event A from an event B. However, many individuals use the same historical circular pattern in their thinking. This kind of knowledge creation also constructs and determines the minds of scholars in 'seeing' historical patterns and making interpretations based on a single-cause thought framework, leading to a singular deduction or goal even, increasing human control over the world for the sake of their own ideas. For an example of such thinking one might point to the physics of light. Before traditional physics were challenged by Planck, then Einstein, and others early on in the 20th century, physics texts had taught that light was transverse wave motion, a conception rooted in a paradigm that derived ultimately from the optical writings of Young and Fresnel in the early nineteenth century. Nor was the wave theory the first to be embraced by almost all practitioners of optical science. During the eighteenth century the paradigm for this field was provided by Newton's *Opticks*, which had taught that light was material corpuscles. As Kuhn tells us, at that time physicists sought evidence, as the early wave theorists had not, of the pressure exerted by light particles impinging on solid bodies (Kuhn, 1970, p. 12), leading to the debunking of the earlier (and faulty) concept.

Similarly disrupting and challenging the existing metanarrative that had persisted for decades regarding the two wars mentioned above, this text aims to present a new thesis to aid in discussions of current events by considering multiple underlying variables based on causality and possibility. Attempting to narrate the history of decision-making, division, and differences runs the risk of portraying division as an event or structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby reinforcing metaphysical notions in their fundamental operation. As explained by Derrida (1978), "Truthfully, for one or the other of these hypotheses to be true and for there to be a real choice between them, it must be assumed in general that reason can have a contrary, that there can be another of reasons, that reason itself can construct or discover, and that the opposition of reason to its other is symmetrical" (p. 40). In order to confirm this

new approach, a first step is to deconstruct the two major war discourses on South Sulawesi by exploring the birth of ethnicity and the beginning of the birth of kingdoms in South Sulawesi.

Based on historical sources, Matuladda (2015, p. 74) divides the two periods of civilization in South Sulawesi into two; first is the La Galigo era estimated to run from the 13th to the 17th century, where history was borne along by oral history accounts; second, the Lontara era from the 17th to the 19th centuries, where history was written on Lontara leaves. It is estimated that during the La Galigo era, South Sulawesi had a long history stretching back to the birth of its own Kingdom of Gods, as is evident also in various other civilisations. Oftentimes, these were described with the term of "stranger king".[3] The Stranger King in South Sulawesi is considered to be the incarnation of a god who descended from the sky called *Tomanurung and lead the human and being as human on earth*. It is estimated that Tomanurng's presence in historical records ranges from the 13th to the 14th centuries. It was thought that the god,[4] who later became Tomanurung, came down to earth because they were unable to overcome their loneliness, and who then decided to meet the people of earth. Almost all kingdoms in South Sulawesi share the Tomanurung myth. Gowa and Bone are two of these kingdoms and later on, these two kingdoms would become the largest kingdoms in South Sulawesi, in the areas called Tanah Ugi for the Kingdom of Bone and Butta Makassar for the Makassar Kingdom[5].

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[3] To further understand the concept of Tomanurung as a Stranger king, cf. the article 'King and Covenants: Stranger-kings and social contracts in Sulawesi' by Henley and Caldwell (2008).

[4] It is not clear what the animist and dynamism belief system adhered to by the people of South Sulawesi is, but what is certain, is that they believed that there is a kingdom above the sky and below the earth, which they called the spheres of the Gods. Pelras (1996, p. 37) also indicated that their beliefs took the form of idol worship.

[5] The author defines Tanah Ugi and Butta Makassar as areas of royal power, not as ethnic entities.

Figure 1
Antique Maps of Celebes (Sulawasi) by Bellin (1757)
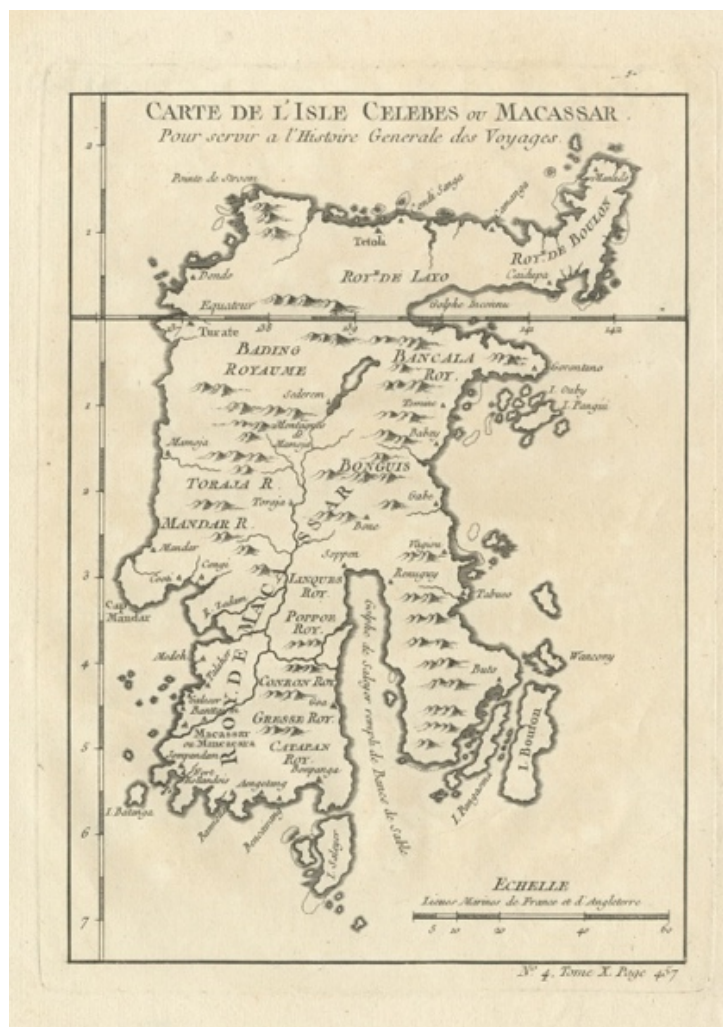
Butta Makassar was located in the southern part of the South Sulawesi island, and is called Makassar City today. As recorded in historical text, the enlargement of the Gowa Kingdom begins when nine ruling groups[6] discussed uniting their powers to form a strong and mutually beneficial federation led by a Paccallaya,[7] and which consisted of nine tribal groups or small kingdoms and included the regions of Blunto, Lakiung, Saumata, Parang-parang, Data, Agang Jekne, Bisei, Kassi, and Seru. However, this system did not provide significant enough progress, and thus a proposal was put forward to establish a monarchy instead. But the ruling groups could not agree on a common candidate to become king. This resulted in chaos for the federal system they had built. Besides that, attacks from other groups disrupted the regional. In

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[6] These nine groups are from the regions of Tombolo, Lakiung, Saumata, Parang-parang, Data, Agang Jekne, Bisei, Kassi, Seru.

[7] Paccallaya can be seen as a leader with the specific roles of mediator and coordinator within the federal state structure. However, Paccallaya's responsibilities are limited to mediating and adjudicating conflicts among the nine kingdoms, without authority to determine policies or issue legal regulations. This role differs significantly from that of a federal leader like the President of the United States, who possesses broader prerogative rights and policy-making powers.

the end they reunited and agreed to unity as a kingdom under one condition: the king should be someone chosen by the Gods. Thus, in a ritual they asked the Gods to send down their representative to become their King. This request was granted with the news that a royal princess called Tomanurung had descended from the sky (Pelras 1996, p. 32). The presence of this princess was welcomed by Paccallaya and the nine regional rulers, and they then asked the princess to become the Queen to rule with full power over the nine regions. This request was granted, automatically removing the partitions of the nine regions and thus establishing the unified kingdom of Gowa. Meanwhile, the leaders of the nine regions then changed their status to Kasawiang Sallapang, meaning 'nine servants'.[8] Not long after the Queen's coronation, a foreign man named Kareng Bayo appeared who came to the Gowa Kingdom. With his charisma, Kareng Boyo was able to convince the Paccallaya and Kasawiang Sallapang to allow him to marry the newly appointed queen. This request was accepted and thus completed the positions of king and queen for the kingdom of Gowa.

Figure 2
Place Names in The Cenrana Valley Geneologies[9] (from Finding Cina, Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen)
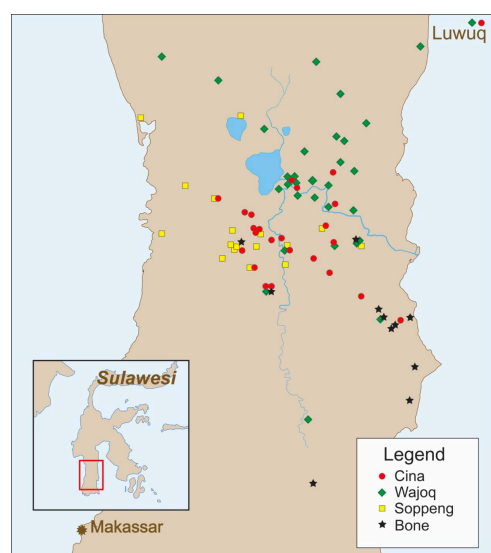
A similar story is told in the Tanah Ugi area,[10] where there were seven areas experiencing endless conflict. When the conflict between these regions reached its peak, it suddenly began to rain, which was accompanied by a tornado, as well as lightning. This did not stop for seven days and seven nights. When everything returned to normal, many people had seen a figure wearing a white cloth standing in the middle of the field. This figure was later named Matta Selompo'E (Block, 1817) or better known as Tomanurung, because he was thought to be a

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[8] This myth serves as the primary reference for historians to establish the initial time of the founding of the kingdoms in South Sulawesi, estimated to have occurred around the 13th century.

[9] In Caldwell/Wellen (2017, p. 301).

[10] The seven areas or Wanuwa are Ujung, Tibojong, Ta', Tanete ri Attang, Tanete ri Awang, Ponceng, and Macege.

person who came down from the sky. The presence of this figure then led the seven regional rulers to unite and come to meet him. During their meeting, Tomanurung was asked to mediate the dispute between the seven regional rulers and to become their King to lead, but this request was rejected, because this figure turned out to just a slave; but he had a master who was then considered to be more suitable to be appointed as King. Then he guided the seven regional rulers to meet with a figure dressed in yellow sitting on a flat rock. The same request was made by seven regional rulers, "Can you be our king?" and the request was immediately accepted by Tomanurung.

The story of Tomanurung's presence in the Gowa kingdom in Butta Makassar and the Bone Kingdom in Tanah Ugi is almost the same, which is possibly due to the copying of stories forming the written history of the early monarchical system. This would also be in line with the opinion of David Henley and Ian Caldwell (2008) who see the concept of the Stranger King as a way to attach dignity to a history of conquest and oppression. These two kingdoms were adept at embracing this concept, yet the challenge lies in the lack of historical records prior to the arrival of the Stranger King, making it difficult to substantiate the genesis of the conflict before the appearance of the Stranger King. Anthropologists face a similar predicament, with no trace existing in the history of the area and only being able to construct a pattern wherein the Bugis and Makassar ethnic groups, originating from the Deutro Malay ethnic group, migrated and settled in South Sulawesi around 300-200 BC. They were primarily divided by internal conflicts, giving rise to various small groups. The existence of these small groups was only documented during the La Galigo period in the 13th century and later unified through the arrival of the Stranger King in the same century. If this pattern serves as our reference, then the question of the origins of the current Bugis and Makassar ethnic strife may be traced back to internal conflicts within a kingdom, subsequently separating into the Kingdom of Gowa and Bone. However, there is insufficient evidence to definitively support this pattern. Therefore, we will commence our inquiry from a stage that can be better substantiated academically and scripturally.

The conflict is evident in the Lontara script when it states that the two kingdoms were both involved in military expansion. The Kingdom of Gowa, at that time led by King Gowa IX Daeng Matanre, made a treaty with King Bone La Ullio BotteE MatinroE ri Littering around the beginning of the sixteenth century. During the early days of the King of Gowa X, I Manriwagau Daeng Bonto Karaeng Langkiung, who reigned from 1545-1565, the influence of the Gowa Kingdom was evenly distributed throughout the kingdoms in South Sulawesi. However, after twenty years of his reign, or to be precise, in 1559, the long-standing treaty between them began to be ignored by both parties, giving rise to the first conflict between the kingdom of Gowa and the Kingdom of Bone. The war between the two parties lasted for six years and ended only in 1565 after a new agreement known as the Caleppa agreement was signed by the King of Gowa XII, I Manggorai Daeng Kaneta Karaeng Bontolangkasa Tunijallo, and the King of Bone VII, La Tenrirawe Bongkannnge. The contents of the agreement included the division of their common territory, with the area north of the Tangka River in Sinjai being stipulated as the territory of the Bone Kingdom, and the area south of the Tangka River the territory of the Gowa Kingdom.

The division of territory based on the Caleppa agreement gave the two Kingdoms clear administrative boundaries. However, this regional division did not give birth to Bugis and Makassar as ethnicities. In fact, after the Caleppa Agreement, relations between the two kingdoms improved further until finally the two kingdoms decided to join in a brotherly alliance. The agreement states,

> "Musuh-musuh seorang diantara mereka itu adalah juga musuh-musuh mereka bersama bersama dan orang-orang Gowa yang. berkunjung ke Bone adalah mereka itu seperti dating ke-negerinya sendiri dan orang-orang Bone yang berkunjung ke Gowa adalah mereka itu bagaikan dating di negerinya sendiri.
>
> (The enemies of each of them are also their common enemies and the Gowa people. Visiting Bone is like visiting their own country and Bone people visiting Gowa is like visiting their own country" (Abd Razak Daeng Patunru 1983, p. 15).

Until the end of the 16th century, the conflict between these two kingdoms was not a conflict over ethnicity, but a conflict over territory. This view is supported by the analysis of the use of the words Makassar and Bugis (ugiq) in various sources. The word "Makassar", appears in the Pra Panca manuscript in Nagarakertagama in 1365, as an island or region (Pelras, 1996; Hadimuljono & Muttalib M, 1979), as well as in the notes of Francois Valentyn, in his book *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indie met Aanteekeningen* Vol. III. 1858 (cf. Patunru, 1983; Sumarah Adhyatma, 1980), which explains that Sultan Mahmud Syah (1424-1445) had mentioned the Makassar kingdom in his Shipping Law. All the sources above refer to Makassar only as a kingdom, whose name was most likely bestowed upon the area by sailors who had arrived in the Kingdom of Gowa. However, this context presents a contradiction in the usage of the term "Makassar." According to the local manuscript Lontarak Bilang (Kamaruddin, Mangemba, Parawansa, & Mappaseleng, 1986), the Kingdom of Makassar is here even referred to as the Kingdom of Gowa. There is no clear and unequivocal explanation as to whether the term "Makassar" refers to either a kingdom or an ethnicity.

Meanwhile, the word "Bugis" appeared in 1511 in a text by Tome Pires. a pharmacist, colonial administrator, and Portuguese diplomat, who also found it difficult to separate the Bajoe maritime community and the Bugis one (Pelras, 1996). It also appears as a geographical denomination, as the trans-South Sulawesi Channel location (Pelras, 1996). But this expression does not designate the Bugis as an ethnicity, but rather as a group of traders. This word is also mentioned in the Lagaligo manuscript, where the word "Ugiq" or "to ugiq" appears, as one of the areas thought to be in China[11]. According the recent research by Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen (2017)[12] hypothesized that China or Ugiq was located around the upper reaches of the Cenrana valley which was surrounded by small, newly developed kingdoms such as Bone,

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[11] Based Cenrana Valley Genelogies, Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen (2017: 296-324) also provide additional arguments for this discussion, and thereby indirectly providing one important argument for this article.

[12] Regarding Cenrana Valley Genelogies, Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen (2017, p. 296-324) also provide additional arguments for this discussion, and thereby indirectly providing one important argument for this article.

Wajo and Soppeng which were later destroyed by the military expansion of the three kingdoms. However, this research also does not confirm that the word "Ugiq" or "to Ugi", changed to "Bugis", denotes an ethnicity; rather, it refers more to the location or the people who inhabited the area or a community, a group that is united and composed of various ethnicities who united behind the royal banner called "Bugis". So the question for the following century would be, where did the change from a word that specifically denotes a region to a word that is used as a descriptor of an ethnicity actually originate?

To answer this question, and thus break away from the current meta-narrative, in the next section we will analyse the discourse of the two major wars that occurred between the Kingdom of Bone and the Kingdom of Gowa in the seventeenth century, and which up to now were interpreted as the birth of ethnicity and the reason for ensuing conflict.

The Roots of Conflict in Historical Narratives

Three Kingdoms Alliance (Bone, Soppeng and Wajo)

The process of the birth of MattelumpocoE or MallammumpatuE ri Timurung in 1582, known as the alliance of three kingdoms in South Sulawesi, is often mentioned as the birth of the Bugis kingdom as an ethnicity. In the first chapter of his book Andaya (1981) explains that Makassar, Bugis, Toraja and Mandar are ethnicities, before he enters into a discussion in the same chapter about the birth of MattelumpocoE. Here he situates ethnicity in the royal structure he builds, despite the fact that, as we have seen, various pieces of evidence show that the Kingdoms of Gowa and Bone did not classify their kingdoms as ethnic entities but rather were groups of kingdoms that had their own territories.

A similar idea was expressed by Mattuladda (2015), who clearly, in the first chapter of his dissertation, framed the kingdoms in South Sulawesi within the concept of Tanah Ugi as the territory of the Bugis (ugi) ethnic group, encompassing the kingdoms of Luwu, Bone, Soppeng, Wajo, and Sidenreng. However, it is not clearly understood why this ethnicity emerged from different kingdoms, which raises further questions. Could the division of ethnicity in this work be influenced by the societal logic of the 20th century, where ethnicity has already been separated between the two? Did South Sulawesi society really become polarized ethnically during the 14th to 16th centuries? Let's imagine ourselves in that era using our zeitgeist logic based on the historical and literary sources. When Tomanurung became the concept of forming a monarchy used by all kingdoms in South Sulawesi, there was a unification of different groups. For example, in the Kingdom of Gowa and the Kingdom of Luwu, there were nine united groups, in the Kingdom of Bone, there were seven groups, in the Kingdom of Wajo, there were forty groups, and in the Soppeng Kingdom, there were three groups (Hadimuljono & Muttalib, 1979). All of these groups formed new kingdoms between the 13th and 15th centuries. If we use this historical fact, this initial group should have formed its own ethnicity based on their kingdom. However, there is not enough evidence that would prove that these new kingdoms were born from and based upon a particular ethnicity.

MattelumpocoE was formed in 1582 as an alliance of the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo, which were firmly identified as Bugis ethnic kingdoms (Matuladda, 2015). According to Patunru (1979), this unity was focused on shared interests regarding the threat from the Gowa kingdom. Similarly, Noorduyn (1955) explained that the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo were essentially divided into different domains with their respective interests, but they had to compromise to oppose the supremacy of the Gowa kingdom. This necessity prompted Bone to form an alliance for mutual benefit.

A detailed examination of the formation of MattelumpocoE as an alliance reveals that it came into existence when the Wajo Kingdom became fully integrated into the territory of the Gowa Kingdom, while the Soppeng Kingdom was under Gowa's influence during that period. These two kingdoms were thus subjected to the authority of the Gowa Kingdom. The Bone Kingdom, the primary initiator of MattelumpocoE, had actually entered into a brotherhood agreement in 1565, initiated by Manggorai Daeng Mammeta, the XIIth King of Gowa (1565-1590), and the VIIth King of Bone, La Tenrirawe Bongkange MatinroE Rigucinna (1568-1584). However, in 1582, the XIIth King of Gowa violated this agreement by succeeding in expanding his political influence into the Bone Kingdom, sparking a new conflict that was supported by the VIth King of Bone, who viewed it as Siri'.[13] This was due to the XIIth King of Gowa's failure to honor the VIIth King of Bone. This aligns with the words of Latoa (Matuladda, 2015), which state that a king who brings greatness to himself will also bring greatness to his country, with the primary ethic of a king being to honour other kings. Consequently, the breach of the agreement and violation of ethics led to widespread disappointment among various groups. In 1590, as he prepared to attack Wajo, King Gowa Manggorai Daeng Mammeta was attacked and killed by his follower, I Lolo Tammakkana.

This historical record serves as the foundation for understanding how historical ideas from the past continue to influence contemporary society. Without recognizing the ongoing impact of these ideas, this history might be perceived simply as a narrative of war, similar to other conflicts. Agusalim (personal communication, July 12, 2023), a person of Bugis ethnic descent, illustrates how the historical conflict between the Makassar and Bugis ethnic groups remains ingrained in his family:

> *"Pada saat saya memasuki umur dimana saya siap untuk menikah, orang tua saya berpesan dan melarang saya untuk menikahi orang dengan etnisitas Makassar.*
>
> When I reached the age of marriage, my parents advised me against marrying someone of Makassar ethnicity."

The origins of this ethic are unclear, and unfortunately, discussing this deep-seated animosity openly is highly taboo between these ethnic groups. Consequently, there is no discourse

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[13] *Siri* can be translated as an identity of values, ethics. and morals that have the same meaning in every ethnic community in South Sulawesi. Siri' literally means shame and self-respect, which is interpreted as ethics and rules that greatly influence the character of Sulawesi society (Andaya, 1981, p. 18; Hamid Abdullah, 1985, p. 37).

available to challenge or gain a complete understanding of the genesis of this conflict. However, through various historical writings on MattelumpocoE and the oral transmission of ideas within society, this event is regarded as evidence and an initial impetus for the formation of an alliance between the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo with Bugis ethnicity. This alliance opposed the expansion of the Gowa Kingdom, which supposedly had a Makassar ethnic background. This idea subsequently evolved into an ethnocentric ethic and today continues to have the potential to perpetuate contemporary conflicts between the two ethnicities.

The evidence provided above and its various historical records do not support the existence of classifications based on royal ethnicity until the mid-16th century. Additionally, it has been clearly stated that ethnicity did not serve as the basis for the MattelumpocoE alliance; rather, this alliance was forged from a shared circumstance and vision of liberating themselves from the Kingdom of Gowa. Examining the evidence through the lens of Foucault (1978), is also helpful. He stated: "We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information" (p. 51). Based on this perspective, the metanarrative of ethnocentrism emerges as a product of knowledge consciously and unconsciously constructed by those historical scholars who hold power. This leads to the generation of new knowledge, indicating that history provides a conduit for the continuity or transmission of ideas and serves as a justification for the ethical behavior within today's society.

Entering the early era of Islam's arrival, MatellumpoccE, or the alliance of the three kingdoms, supported each other in resisting the attacks of the Gowa Kingdom during the "Islamic War" from 1609-1611 (Patunru, 1983). This conflict stemmed from the Gowa Kingdom's attempts to introduce Islam to all the kingdoms in South Sulawesi, which at that time practiced animism and dynamism. However, the MatellumpoccoE alliance perceived this Islamization as a political tool used by the Gowa Kingdom to assert its dominance in South Sulawesi. This strategy bears similarities to the "God, Glory, Gold" approach adopted by numerous European kingdoms during the 16th and 17th centuries, which was employed during colonization across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Colonial endeavours were often justified by ethical values promoting discipline and moral order. Europe's ability to discipline its colonies enabled its maintenance of power through the establishment of a new colonial social order. Based on these principles, the members of the MatellumpoccoE alliance agreed to reject the religion imposed by the Gowa Kingdom. In response to this rejection, the Gowa Kingdom launched its initial attack in 1608 on Sawitto, the territory of the Soppeng Kingdom. However, the combined forces of the three kingdoms successfully repelled the Gowa Kingdom. Three months later, another attack was carried out on the Wajo Kingdom, resulting in yet another defeat for the Gowa forces (Andaya, 1981; Noorduyn, 1955).

However, Gowa's resentment of its previous defeats triggered a full attack in 1609, and this time it was successful. It ended with the XIV Soppeng King Datu Soppeng Beowe embracing Islam, followed by the Wajo Kingdom in 1610. Finally, the Bone Kingdom became the last

Bugis kingdom having to accept Islam after a crushing defeat in 1611 (Mappangara, Suriadi, & Irwan Abbas, 2003).

The Islamic War has also become a pivotal reference point for ethnic divisions depicted in the overarching narrative of historical writing concerning the MatellumpoccoE alliance. Presently, the majority of the population in South Sulawesi identifies as Muslim, and the perception of the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo, with their Bugis ethnicity, rejecting Islam, juxtaposed with the Kingdom of Gowa, associated with Makassar ethnicity, as the proponents of Islam, has evolved into a precarious collective memory utilized as discourse among the people of South Sulawesi. However, it is crucial to clarify that until 1610, it does not seem that the concept or presence of ethnicity in historical records can be verified beyond doubt. Hence, it can be inferred that the Islamic War of 1609-1611 was primarily waged based on religious and political motives rather than ethnicity. Language here becomes a tool for articulating power at a time when power must take the form of knowledge, through moral means and through the facts ascertained by objective researchers. This particular metanarrative might even be tied to the ethical indoctrination and discipline of the body as transmitted by family, environment, and education (Foucault, 1978,) as a single historical fact, as an absolute truth. As such, this historic myth might in turn be used as a basis for conflict.

Hardline Islam: The Thirteenth King of Bone

Since the 14th century, each kingdom has possessed its own Tumanurung, embodying unique ethics and morals that govern and distinguish the various kingdoms. However, following the Islamic War, the Gowa kingdom achieved complete dominance through a Panopticon, employing supervisors formally appointed and as spies dispersed across the kingdoms under its control. This system brought order and reduced internal conflicts in South Sulawesi. Foucault (1977) elucidates that the Panopticon is a "marvelous" (p. 202) machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.

Nevertheless, the internal order established since 1611 faced external challenges with the arrival of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or the Dutch East India Company, with the aim of monopolizing trade at the Port of Somba. Historically, the VOC had engaged in various negotiations and trade ventures already since 1601 with the Kingdom of Gowa. However, in 1607, Dutch Admiral Cornelis Matelief, fresh from the conquest of Malacca, openly expressed the company's intent to establish a new colonial monopoly. Abraham Matysz was dispatched as an envoy to negotiate military cooperation in conquering Banda. Yet, this request was rebuffed. The Gowa Kingdom opted to remain an open country, welcoming all ethnic groups interested in trade. This refusal led to escalating tensions that persisted until 1639 during the reign of the XVth King of Gowa, Sultan Malikusaid.

In the midst of tensions between the VOC and the Kingdom of Gowa, the XVth King of Gowa also confronted internal issues involving the Kingdom of Bone. Led by the XIIIth King of Bone, La Maddaremmeng in 1640 (Andaya, 1981), the Kingdom of Bone implemented Islamic religious law by opposing slavery, contradicting the prevalent desire among its members to

maintain the tradition of slavery. The XIIIth King of Bone enacted strict penalties for slavery violations, a policy resisted by the nobles of the Bone kingdom and his own biological mother, We Tenrisoloreng Makkalarue Datu Pattiro. This marked the first instance since 1611 that the unified adherence to a single Islamic ideology wavered, despite the XVth King of Gowa's approval of the XIIIth King of Bone Islamic reforms (Patunrru, 1983). The XVth King of Gowa also acknowledged the necessity for gradual cultural diffusion (Matuladda, 2015), recognizing the political and legal challenges confronting the nobles of the Kingdom of Bone.

In addition to his own kingdom, the XIIIth King of Bone advocated for the application of Islamic law regarding slavery to the neighbouring Kingdoms of Soppeng, Wajo, Massepe, Sawito, and Bacukiki. Furthermore, he pursued military expansion, as evidenced in the chronicles of the Wajo Kingdom, which documented Bone's attack on Paneki, a territory of the Wajo Kingdom. These kingdoms were targeted not only due to their proximity to the Kingdom of Bone, but also because of the historical bonds of unity established among them through MattelumpocoE in 1582. According to the regional hypothesis proposed by Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen (2017), the regions of the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo had longstanding political relations and were situated around the territory of the Chinese Kingdom[14], which exerted significant influence in South Sulawesi during the 13th to 16th centuries. However, the enduring history of this alliance ultimately dissolved with the XIIIth King of Bone's adoption of hard-line Islam, leading to the resurgence of separate kingdoms defending their autonomy against the domination of the Bone kingdom.

Amidst escalating political tensions in 1640, the Bone royal nobility, who opposed the XIIIth King of Bone, sought the XVth King of Gowa's mediation. However, the XVth King of Gowa's attempt at peace, through a letter, proved unsuccessful (Noorduyn, 1955; Patunru, 1983). Consequently, the XVth King of Gowa decided to declare war on Bone Kingdom with the assistance of Soppeng and Wajo in 1643. This move further consolidated Gowa's hegemonic power under the XVth King of Gowa's rule, leading to continued total domination, as described by Antonio Gramschi (1971). In 1644, the XIIIth King of Bone was finally defeated and fled to the Luwu area, where he was subsequently captured and exiled to Gowa (Andaya, 1981). The most significant consequence of this war was the designation of the Bone Kingdom as the Palil Ata ri Kalle Region, effectively placing it under the complete control of the Gowa Kingdom (Andaya, 1981). Consequently, the Kingdom of Bone appeared to have been erased from the map of kingdoms in South Sulawesi, prompting the next generation of the Bone Kingdom to initiate a rebellion and demand its renewed independence.

In contemporary society, it is widely accepted that the Kingdoms of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo represent the Bugis ethnic group, while the Kingdom of Gowa represents the Makassar ethnic group. This categorization is based on two main variables: history and language. However, once we challenge the historical metanarrative, which serves as the central plank for historical

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[14] Before Ian Caldwell and Kathryn Wellen's (2017) article was published, the interpretation of the Chinese Empire recorded in the Lagaligo Epic referred to the entity commonly understood as the People's Republic of China today.

consciousness in the area and in official discourse today, different facts emerge. Specifically, until 1664, there is no evidence of Bugis and Makassar ethnicity being manifested in the kingdoms of South Sulawesi, as described in the ethnic division based on kingdoms by Matuladda (2015) and Andaya (1981). However, upon closer inspection, it appears that this metanarrative undermines itself via its own internal narratives. As Derrida (1997) explains, deconstruction does not operate externally to a textual structure, but rather within it; we merely borrow its cues to elucidate the error.

Despite the self-destructive nature of the research mentioned, the meta-narrative persists as a historical fact due to the influence wielded by renowned researchers. This influence often leads us to overlook the essence of each layer of history and merely engage in the uncritical copying and pasting of narratives. Such practices are heavily criticized by Foucault (1989), who argues that we need to ignore the power to designate, name, show, reveal, or represent truth, and instead advocate for a focus on the moment. By interpreting anew each layer of history, we gain a better understanding of how to employ a more appropriate narrative in our writing.

Sultan Hasanuddin Versus Arung Palakka

The debate surrounding the Makassar War of 1666-1669, which implicates the VOC as the orchestrator behind the division of ethnicities, using the divide and conquer method and leading to the initial conflict and the 'formation' of the Bugis and Makassar ethnicities, with the objective of monopolizing the market managed by the Kingdom of Gowa, remains inconclusive. Thus, we will once again employ Derrida's *différance* to further analyse this historical metanarrative, aiming to understand the dynamics of knowledge and power within it.

Let's delve into the early years of Sultan Hasanuddin Raja Gowa XVI's reign, specifically the year 1655, when the Gowa Kingdom openly attacked the VOC troops in Buton. This victory by the Gowa Kingdom raised alarms for the VOC. However, the VOC responded by sending Wiliem Van Der Beek to propose a new agreement, which was deemed advantageous for both parties, yet it was rejected by the Kingdom of Gowa. In retaliation, in 1660, the VOC dispatched a war fleet comprising 22 ships, carrying 1064 VOC troops and 1700 allied troops, which successfully occupied Panakkukang Fort. The defeat suffered by the Gowa Kingdom compelled them to accept a new agreement greatly favouring the VOC. Subsequently, Kareng Popo was sent as a royal envoy to renegotiate the terms of the agreement, while Sultan Hasanuddin and Kareng Karunrung, acting as royal advisors, oversaw repairs and reinforcements of the fort's defences.

The pressing need for labour in fort construction led to a policy of recruiting workers from the subordinate kingdoms of the Gowa Kingdom. Around 10,000 workers from the Bone kingdom arrived to dig the ditch, which separated Panakkukang Fort from the Gowa mainland (Andaya, 1981; Patunru, 1983). However, due to the arduous nature of the work, these workers eventually fled, without permission from the Gowa kingdom. One reason for their departure

stemmed from the Siri' social value, which perceived of this labour as slavery, causing the people of Bone to feel their self-esteem had been tarnished.

This incident elevated the significance of Arung Palakka, a prince of the Bone Kingdom, within his people and kingdom, long subjected to domination by the Gowa kingdom. Arung Palakka's understanding of the knowledge-power relationship discerned the advantageous position of the Gowa Kingdom, under pressure from the VOC, and the ethical turmoil arising from the rebellion of workers from the Bone Kingdom. In a role akin to a messiah, Arung Palakka offered hope to his people oppressed by these circumstances. Through the discourse of rebellion, Arung Palakka underscored the importance of self-respect as the highest ethic and identity of the people of South Sulawesi, a principle considered invaluable and worth sacrifice. Arung Palakka's utilization of knowledge as a form of power imposed itself upon the subject without seemingly originating from a specific source, as its authenticity appeared inherently independent. Foucault's (1977) analysis sheds light on how knowledge functions as a form of power, disseminating its effects through processes like region, domain, implantation, displacement, and trans-position. The unity forged between oppression and resistance served as a tool in shaping a cohesive group, born out of the historical context known as The Bugis or To Ugi in Lagaligo. This term finds support in various historical archives, as elucidated by Andaya (1981), particularly during the onset of the Arung Palakka rebellion, as documented by Stapel (1922) and Speelman (1670) (KA 1122b, p. 245r).

Arung Palakka's power catalysed a series of rebellions through military campaigns. During this phase, the term "the Bugis" became more prevalent in various historical sources, distinguishing it from the preceding conflicts. However, this term primarily denotes a collective movement against the dominance of the Gowa Kingdom, rather than signifying the unity of the Bugis ethnicity against the Makassar[15] ethnicity. The growing resistance movement attracted the interest of individuals and local kingdoms to join, driven by an inherent wish for just change that underscores the influence of knowledge-power relations. Consequently, individuals and local kingdoms reacted vehemently to the domination exerted by the Gowa kingdom, with the Soppeng Kingdom being the first to openly support the rebellion (Andaya, 1981; Patunru, 1983).

At the outset of the rebellion in August 1660, Arung Palakka initially received support from La Tenribali, the king of the Soppeng Kingdom, and Jannang of the Bone Kingdom. However,

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[15] In Pelras's article "The Bugis" (1996), the term "Makassar" carries two distinct meanings depending on the time period of its usage. In the 16th century, "Makassar" was primarily interpreted as a geographical location or place (Pelras, 1996, p. 5, 13, 17, 24, 73), a usage that persisted into the early 17th century, specifically in 1625 (Pelras, 1996). However, its meaning shifted in the subsequent century to denote an ethnic identity. Conversely, Pelras employs the term "Bugis" (p. 17) to refer explicitly to ethnicity and identity, as evidenced by data from Pelras (1996). For instance, Tom Pires, a Portuguese colonial administrator in Malacca in 1511, used the term "Bugis" to denote ethnic identity while using "Makassar" to refer to the place. Another example cited by Pelras (1996) highlights Manuel Pinto, a Portuguese sailor, who, upon hearing of a conflict between Bugis kings involving the Kingdom of Gowa, did not use the term "Makassar" to describe their opponents. This inconsistency in the usage of "Makassar" and "Bugis" persisted from the 16th century to the mid-17th century but gradually solidified into identity labels, notably during the Arung Palakka rebellion as documented by Speelman (Andaya, 1981).

Sultan Hasanuddin dispatched his troops to confront the 11,000 rebel troops from the Bone and Soppeng Kingdoms. The Gowa Kingdom, allied with the Wajo Kingdom under Kareng Sumanna, adopted a diversion strategy. The Gowa kingdom divided its troops into two groups: the first army confronted the rebels in Lamuru, located in the Bone Kingdom area, while the second army invaded the Soppeng Kingdom.

Aware of this diversionary tactic, Arung Palakka and his forces departed Lamuru and regrouped in the North Bone Kingdom area. Here, a significant battle ensued, resulting in the death of Tobala in October 1660. Subsequently, the morale of Arung Palakka's troops declined further, leading to their defeat. Arung Palakka fled and went into hiding to regather strength, planning an attack on the Wajo Kingdom. However, the attack failed, and Arung Palakka was forced to continue evading capture, becoming a fugitive.

By December 1660, with South Sulawesi deemed unsafe, Arung Palakka sought asylum in the Buton Kingdom. Meanwhile, La Tenribali surrendered and was subsequently exiled to the Kingdom of Gowa.

After three years under the protection of the Buton Kingdom, in 1663 Arung Palakka and his followers departed for Batavia aboard the Dutch ship De Leeuwin to establish cooperation with the VOC. Notably, no records were found regarding any meeting between the VOC and Arung Palakka prior to his departure for Batavia. Consequently, there exists confusion regarding whether the VOC had organized or planned a divide-and-conquer policy to seize the monopoly of the Gowa kingdom. However, it is certain that the Buton Kingdom maintained a flexible foreign policy, enabling it to forge alliances with various entities, including the Kingdom of Ternate, the VOC, and the Kingdom of Gowa (Hasanuddin, 2020). This flexibility allowed Arung Palakka several geopolitical options for alliance formation.

Upon arriving in Batavia in 1664, Arung Palakka expressed his intention to the VOC to become independent from the Gowa Kingdom. The VOC welcomed this intention warmly. Patunru (1983) and Andaya (1981) describe how pleased the VOC was to gain a new ally, subsequently rewarding Arung Palakka with a shelter area in Batavia known as Angke. After two years of settling in, restoring self-confidence, and solidifying its hegemony in South Sulawesi, the VOC sought to test Arung Palakka's loyalty, who had previously been associated with the Kingdom of Gowa. In 1666, the VOC asked Arung Palakka to demonstrate his loyalty by aiding them in quelling the resistance of the Acehnese in Sumatra. This task was executed flawlessly (Andaya, 1981), thereby dispelling any suspicions of Arung Palakka being a spy for the Kingdom of Gowa.

After having deconstructed the historic facets presented in the above texts, often constructed with a single truth intended to lead to perceived absolute knowledge, it becomes evident that scholars have constructed a narrative that Derrida and Moore (1974) consider systematic regarding the idea of "appropriateness" or "what is appropriate". This notion of appropriateness is then interpreted based on the political and social interests of the time, shaping historical writing to accommodate only one possible interpretation. In this case, the narrative often

revolves around the development of a national idea aimed at uniting ethnic diversity in Indonesia, with the VOC portrayed as the mastermind behind the division of this unity in order to foster Indonesian national unity.

Linking local history to political narratives of nationalism and consistently portraying the Kingdom of Buton and Arung Palakka as either aligned with the VOC or traitors to the Indonesian nation represents a flaw in historical methodology. This is because the prevailing mindset during the 16th and 17th centuries was geared towards the idea of separate local kingdoms rather than a unified state. The concept of a unitary state, which eventually led to the formation of the Republic of Indonesia in the 20th century, was not present during this earlier period. Therefore, it is more accurate to view the zeitgeist of local kingdoms as distinct entities, each operating autonomously and pursuing its own interests, rather than being inherently linked to nationalist agendas or colonial powers such as the VOC.

Historians have often favoured the long view, with the aim of uncovering enduring systems of checks and balances, irreversible processes, constant readjustments, and underlying tendencies beneath the surface of political events. They endeavour to reveal movements of accumulation and slow saturation, along with the silent, motionless bases that traditional history has obscured with layers of events. Foucault (1989), however, argues for a different approach, suggesting that we should not focus on periods of "longue durée" such as centuries, but rather on "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (p. 165). According to him, the problem lies not in tradition or tracing a line, but in division and limits. Instead of presenting a monolithic version of a given period, Foucault (1989) proposes that we uncover how any given period reveals several pasts, forms of connection, hierarchies of importance, networks of determination, and teleologies. Historical descriptions are thus ordered by the present state of knowledge, evolving with every transformation and continually breaking with themselves.

In addition, divide-and-conquer politics theoretically only applies if the VOC initiates it from the start through plans, actions, approaches, seduction, and deception. Therefore, the incident of Arung Palakka's arrival in Batavia, where he explicitly sought help from the VOC, can be interpreted as a strategy to reclaim his kingdom through the Mate Siri' movement. This demonstrates that the VOC was not involved in and did not intend to carry out divide-and-conquer politics, but rather received a request for assistance from Arung Palakka. Thus, this clearly refutes the existence of such a form of divide-and-conquer politics.

In examining this discourse, historians who focus too much on the subjectivity of VOC behaviour are out of step with the spirit of their era, ultimately leading to the problem of an incoherent history. Foucault (1989) explains that history should not be wielded as a tool to uphold a rationality that contradicts the reality of power conflicts and ideology. By scapegoating the VOC as a political instigator of divide-and -conquer policies in the archipelago, especially during the Makassar war, historical scholars have been forced to choose between nationalism and factual accuracy, a predominantly resulting in methodological errors in their historicisations. Fragments of historical events arise from discontinuity, fortifying them against being generalized and thus closing off other possibilities. While it cannot be denied that

there exists incontrovertible evidence of atrocities and forms of colonialism carried out by the VOC and the Dutch, at times their scapegoating might just be an attempt to gloss over alternate, more localised, but equally problematic agendas. It is thus not appropriate to use them as a sole argument to generalize all periods of the archipelago's history as events that were part of the VOC's strategy.

On December 19, 1666, Cornelis Speelman, Arung Pallaka, and Captain Jonker found themselves in the waters of Makassar. Sultan Hasanuddin anticipated an impending attack on Somba Opu Harbor by the coalition formed by the VOC, Bone, and Ambon. Arung Palakka's pursuit of the Mate Siri' mission, aimed at restoring his pride, was poised to be rewarded by the Bugis troops. With his growing hegemony and his endeavour to reclaim his kingdom gaining momentum, the imminent war transcended the scope of previous conflicts between the VOC and the Kingdom of Gowa over the past decade. This time, the VOC had troops stationed on the mainland of South Sulawesi, mobilizing under the directives of Arung Palakka. During this stage, references to "The Bugis" and "Tanah Ugi" became increasingly prevalent in VOC reports concerning the Gowa-Tallo Kingdom, located in Makassar. However, in this process the distinction between Bugis and Makassar, whether as place identity or ethnic identity, became progressively blurred (Andaya, 1981).

Penetrating the fortress of the Gowa Kingdom proved to be a formidable challenge. Despite attempts to suppress the Somba Opu and Panakukang Forts, Speelman and Arung Palakka redirected their efforts towards Laikang, only to face defeat once again. Undeterred, they sailed towards Bantaeng, where fierce fighting ensued. Despite employing strategies such as burning villages and rice barns, vital supplies for the Gowa Kingdom troops, Speelman found the Gowa Kingdom troops resilient and able to withstand the onslaught.

By January 1, 1667, Speelman and Arung Palakka reached the Buton/Butung kingdom, which had been under the control of the Gowa Kingdom along with its subordinate realms, including the Luwu Kingdom, the Mandar Kingdom, and Sultan Bima. Arung Palakka's presence alone was pivotal in swaying the allegiance of the 5,000 troops stationed in Buton away from the Gowa Kingdom, prompting them to join the rebellion (Andaya, 1981). Consequently, the Gowa Kingdom, led by Kareng Bontomarannu, was compelled to surrender unconditionally, enabling the recapture of Buton through a peace agreement and the detention of all high-ranking officials and remaining troops of the Gowa Kingdom.

Following the conflict in Buton/Butung and the transfer of 5,000 Gowa Kingdom troops, now identified as "The Bugis," the trajectory of the war underwent a significant shift. Originally rooted in the alliances and oppositions formed by various kingdoms based on their interests, the conflict transformed into a struggle marked by increasingly pronounced ethnic divisions, epitomized by the terms "Bugis" and "Makassar." Historically, these words underwent a linguistic evolution, transitioning from denoting geographical locations to signifying ethnic identities. Furthermore, the emergence of two prominent figures, Arung Palakka representing the Bugis and Sultan Hasanuddin embodying the Makassar, underscores the distinctiveness conveyed by these terms in historical records. Additionally, the historical meta-narrative

further delineates these identities, portraying Arung Palakka as a rebel and Sultan Hasanuddin as a national hero. Notably, one of Andaya's (1981) quotes explicitly categorizes "The Makassar" and "The Bugis" as ethnicities, "The Dutch, personally led by Speelman, attacked the Makassar positions at Galesong, while the Bugis army confronted yet" (p. 87).

As a consequence, various tribes emerged based on their respective kingdoms, with linguistic differences that were actually quite minimal, as Mathes observed (Pelras, 1996). If one examines the La Galigo epic[16], it becomes apparent that most of these kingdoms share similar origins, although this aspect remains subject to debate in anthropological studies. Nevertheless, the division among these tribes can be attributed, at least in part, to knowledge itself. Power generates knowledge – not merely by promoting it for its utility to power or by applying it because it is advantageous. Instead, power and knowledge are inherently intertwined; power relations necessitate the concurrent constitution of a knowledge domain, and conversely, knowledge presupposes and shapes power relations (Foucault, 1977).

However, penetrating Somba Opu Fort proved challenging. Consequently, Arung Palakka and Speelman's troops redirected their attention to Fort Galesong, which they successfully captured. The war campaign pressed on towards Barombong and its environs, encountering fierce resistance that led to significant casualties on both sides. Subsequently, Speelman proposed negotiations, resulting in the Bongaya Agreement on November 18, 1667. Consisting of 29 articles highly advantageous to the VOC, it was agreed upon by Sultan Hasanuddin. However, shortly thereafter, many nobles refused to recognize the VOC's legitimacy, leading to the Gowa Kingdom's resistance from 1668-1669. Various battles ensued until June 12, 1669, when Somba Opu Fort fell entirely into the hands of the VOC. Following this event, on December 20, 1669, the Bongaya Agreement was renewed, marking a victory for the VOC and Arung Palakka.

To this day, the meta-narrative of the Makassar war remains a significant symbol of ethnic division in South Sulawesi, often associated with the concept of colonial divide-and-conquer. Furthermore, Sultan Hasanuddin's designation as a national hero, through the Decree of the President of the Republic of Indonesia dated November 6, 1973, No. 887/TK/Year 1973, implicitly portrays Arung Palakka as a rebel. However, it's worth noting that during that period, the notion of nationalism and Indonesia as a unified country was not present in the hero's mindset or in historical records in South Sulawesi.

The history of the Makassar War serves as the primary lens through which the people of South Sulawesi perceive ethnic conflicts in the region. One notable consequence of this historical narrative is the occurrence of bullying and discrimination against individuals of Makassarese ethnicity residing in Bugis-dominated areas, and vice versa for ethnic Bugis individuals in predominantly Makassarese areas. Muhaimin (Personal Communication, October 23, 2023), an ethnic Makassar residing in a Bugis community, has frequently experienced mistreatment

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[16] The La Galigo epic is one of the most remarkable works of literature found in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. As a literary work, La Galigo is considered the longest written epic in the world, consisting of 300,000 text lines and 12 manuscript volumes. It comprises a large body of poetry written in an old form of the Buginese language, recounting a series of linked stories from the 14th century.

due to his ethnic identity. This inter-ethnic tension has persisted through generations, representing a form of silent conflict. Muhaimin further observed that this polarization becomes particularly pronounced during gubernatorial elections in South Sulawesi.

> *Ethnic sebagai political preferences menjadi alat kampanye paling ampuh bagi masyarakat Sulawesi Selatan. Walau tingkat pendidikan orang Sulawesi Selatan termasuk rendah di Indonesia, namun cerita-cerita sejarah itu diturunkan dari mulut kemulut dikelompok ethnic masing-masing, khususnya Arung Palakka yang menurut orang Bugis pahlawan, tapi menurut orang Makassar pengkhianat, sehingga nampak tidak ada masalah, tapi sebenarnya semua orang tau, cuma tidak dibicarakan.*

> (Ethnicity serves as a potent political tool among the populace of South Sulawesi. Despite relatively low levels of education compared to other regions in Indonesia, historical narratives are transmitted orally within their respective ethnic groups, particularly stories surrounding figures like Arung Palakka. While regarded as a hero by the Bugis, he is deemed a traitor by the Makassar people. Although this may not be openly discussed, it is widely acknowledged among the populace.)

This discourse illuminates how the relationship between knowledge and power has shaped a metanarrative entrenched in nationalism, often without recognizing the resultant side effects and internal conflicts in affected regions. Knowledge serves as a tool through which power operates, and reciprocally, power relies on knowledge for its efficacy. This equilibrium is reflected in our narratives of knowledge, influenced both directly and indirectly by the interpretations of authors. The coherence of such historical narratives arises not from the revelation of a predetermined project, but rather from a dialectic of conflicting strategies. The archaeology of the human sciences has to be established through studying the mechanisms of power which have invested human bodies, acts and forms of behaviour. And this investigation enables us to rediscover one of the conditions of the emergence of the human sciences: the great nineteenth-century effort in discipline and normalization (Foucault, 1980).

Conclusion

History evolves through historians' interpretations of historical evidence. However, when these "facts" are intertwined with nationalist propaganda, historiography itself becomes a tool for distorting the past in order to serve power interests. Concrete evidence reveals how power dynamics shape historical narratives, perpetuating ideas and ethics that support those in power. This flawed historical metanarrative is evident in contemporary Indonesian history books, which present a linear narrative of the struggle for independence, particularly in South Sulawesi, starting from the 17th century, long before the concept of a unified Republic of Indonesia had crystallized. In reality, the kingdoms that later merged into Indonesia in the 20th century were primarily focused on their own interests, akin to the VOC and Dutch colonizers.

The initial advantage of the power and knowledge that supports this historical metanarrative at the beginning of independence is the avant-la-lettre rise of the 18th century French revolution

in the spirit of *liberté, egalité, fraternité*, uniting all the groups in one common cause to fight oppression and seek independence. However, in the case of the Republic of Indonesia and especially South Sulawesi, subsequent regional and ethnic conflicts emerged from this historical metanarrative. In the case examined above, there was a silent war being fought between the Makassar and Bugis tribes in South Sulawesi, a cold war which nevertheless had the potential to negatively influence future developments.

This ethnic division is intertwined with how historiography is presented as a single historical truth. While ethnic divisions existed, much research is biased, applying 20th-century national concepts to 17th-century developments. It's crucial to understand the Bugis as a combination of the Bone Kingdom and opposing areas, now known as the Bugis ethnicity, while the Gowa-Tallo Kingdom and its loyal followers are now known as the Makassar ethnicity. Negotiations with the VOC labelled the Bugis as traitors, contrasting this with the portrayal of Sultan Hasanuddin's opposition as heroic. These kingdoms and the VOC pursued their interests and were not driven by notions of national unity until the 20th century.

The fallacy of viewing these groups as ethnicities and firmly under VOC hegemony perpetuates a divide-and-conquer narrative. Historical facts do not support this, as the Bugis negotiated with the VOC based on shared interests. Careless interpretations risk fuelling a nationalist discourse unsupported by historical evidence, underscoring the complex relationship between power and knowledge.

For this reason, it is hoped that this article can make a small contribution to reorganizing the historical narrative, which has been influenced and interpreted through the lens of nationalist propaganda, as explained by Foucault (1980). In a sense, this reflects the nature of historical study itself. Making visible what was previously unseen can be likened to using a magnifying glass. Therefore, the contemporary task of history, as the author contends, is to reposition and deconstruct these historical developments by engaging in a more critical examination of sources and historical writings, and thus challenging some of the more questionable tenets of main-stream history proposed in Indonesia. This is an important undertaking, as the official history constructs the reader's metanarrative which in turn might foster dangerous nationalism and feed the fostering of divisions among ethnic groups. The persistence of this phenomenon clearly demonstrates the need to continue engaging historical enquiries not as a means to arrive at precluded fact, but rather as a laying bare of complex practices within a matrix of colonialism, localised interests and the lives of the many. Such a historiography can then be assigned the task to contribute to the preservation and practical use of historical narratives in everyday life.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage Statement

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com/) to proof-read my own work on this article. ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot that uses natural language processing to create humanlike conversational dialogue. The language model can respond to questions and compose various written content, including articles, social media posts, essays,

code and emails. My use of AI was limited to identifying in this essay the typos and grammatical errors, sentences with passive voice, repeated words or sentences, and all unnecessary adverbs. The output was then modified further to better represent my own article.

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Arsip Dinas Perpustakaan dan Arsip Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan No.01/MKH/12/Unhas/UP Tolo' Arung Palakka

Arsip Dinas Perpustakaan dan Arsip Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan No.01/MKH/16/Unhas/UP Sejarah Gowa

Arsip Dinas Perpustakaan dan Arsip Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan No.01/MKH/22/Unhas/UP Sejarah Gowa

Arsip Dinas Perpustakaan dan Arsip Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan No.01/MKH/28/Unhas/UP Arung Palakka Ke Jakarta

Arsip Dinas Perpustakaan dan Arsip Provinsi Sulawesi Selatan No.01/MKH/36/Unhas/UP Tolo' Rumpa'na Bone

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Appendix

Gowa Tallo Kingdom in the 17th Century
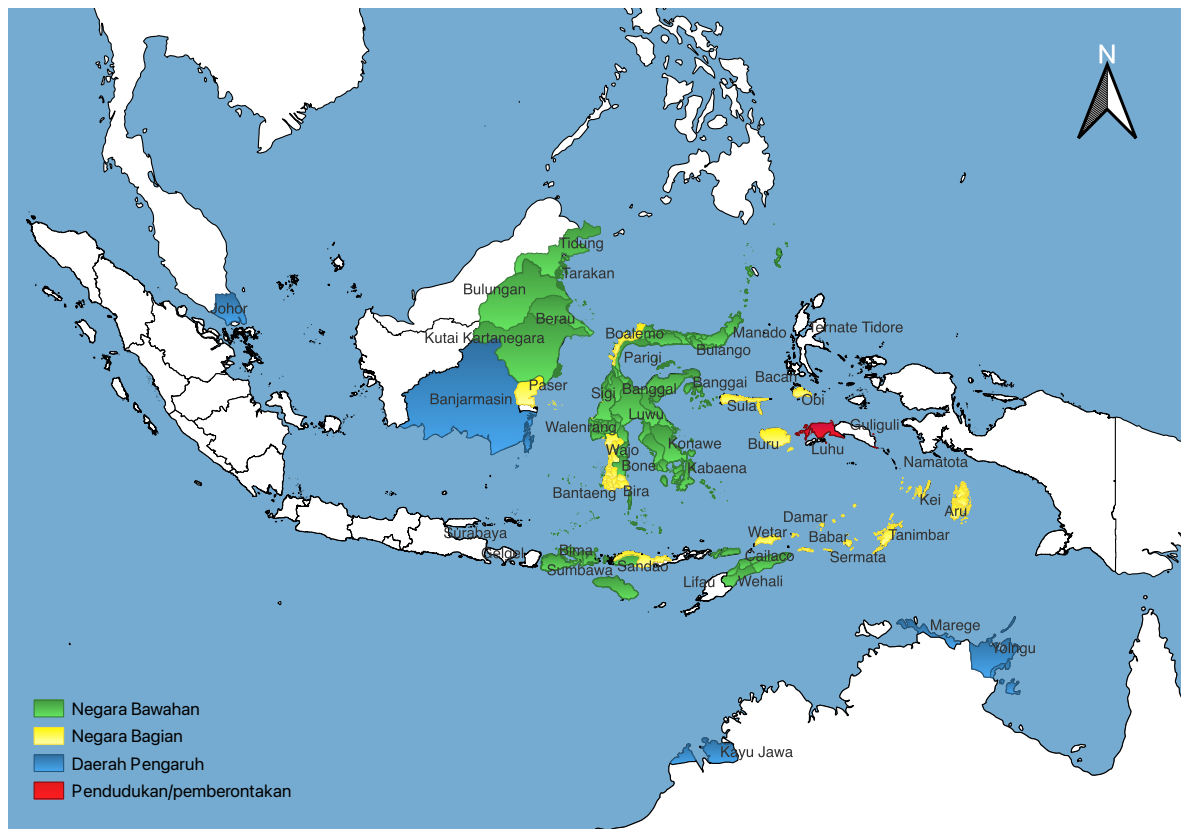
Source: Author

The Home and the World: Analysing Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Identity-Formation in Indian Picturebooks

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Abstract

Place identity constitutes a crucial component of children's sense of self as they learn to locate themselves and others around them in relational social networks. Picturebooks – owing to their multimodality – can be employed to decode the meanings that the spaces inhabited by children are imbued with, and how they, in turn, shape children's spatial experiences of the world. An exploration of the intersection of identity with the sense of place in children's literature begets various questions – of access and attachment, belonging or a lack thereof, curtailment within and transgression of spatial boundaries, and the ways in which these negotiations shape children's sense of self-identity. This paper locates fourteen contemporary Indian picturebooks within two arenas of conceptual enquiry – space and self-identity within childhood, and the multicultural experientiality of childhood as encompassing differences and structural inequalities – and studies the links between marginalisation and space in children's literature. As the systematic disparities of caste, class, gender and indigeneity add a note of dissonance into a universal notion of childhood, children's experiences of their physical surroundings become diverse and political. By coalescing Developmental and Environmental Psychology with content analysis, the paper addresses the spatial manifestations of marginalities within childhood and makes a case for identity-affirming, democratic and diverse socio-spatial representations of childhoods in multicultural children's literature.

Keywords: caste, gender, Indian picturebooks, indigeneity, multicultural childhoods, place-identity

One of the most significant factors which help people determine their identities and locate themselves in relational social networks is a sense of belonging – to groups, cultures and places. Scholars of Human Geography have studied the fundamental role of spaces in the creation, affirmation and negotiation of social identities (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Pratt & Hanson, 1994), insisting that life-stories have a geography too (Soja, 1989). Forces of globalisation insist on porous borders, cross-cultural connectivity and the subsequent weakening of territorial pulls on identity; however, the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959) necessitates milieux and locales, implying that place-identity, that is, the physical-world socialisation of an individual (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987), comprises an indispensable part of their self-identification right from childhood. The processes of individuation and socialisation of a child evolve through their sensory and perceptual experiences, and the spaces that a child inhabits – beginning from the home to larger spaces like the neighbourhood, school and the city – influence their place attachments and self-identity determination (Chawla, 1992; Spencer & Wooley, 2000). As children repeatedly experience places, along with the personal, cultural and social meanings attached to them by themselves and others (e.g. parents, teachers and peers), they gradually develop and affirm their sense of self in socio-spatial terms, forming deep associations with their physical surroundings.

Thus, it becomes imperative to assess the heterogeneity in the experiences of childhood through the multifarious ways in which a child's self-identity is shaped by their associations with the spaces they inhabit. Cognizance of the "politicised spatiality of social life" (Soja, 1989, p. 2), that is, the ways in which ideology acts upon physical spaces and imbues them with socio-cultural meanings, problematizes the seemingly apolitical relationship between a child and their physical surroundings and reveals the spatiality of intersectional marginalities that fracture a universal and normative notion of childhood. Addressing the contours of this socio-spatial dialectic (Sheppard, 2019), that is, the complex interrelationship between social and spatial structures as they influence each other, and the ways in which this dialectic influences the quotidian experiences of childhood may, therefore, also reveal the politics in perceiving space as a mere concretized abstraction, devoid of any meaning (Soja, 1989). Assessing children's literature, especially visual formats like picturebooks and graphic novels that use spatial organisation and visuals to compliment (or replace) the written narrative, can help study the negotiations between identity and space within multimodal representations of childhood. An exploration of the intersection of identity with the sense of place in children's literature may include questions of access – within the domestic space and in the outside world – and attachment, a sense of belonging or lack thereof, curtailment within and transgression of spatial boundaries, and the ways in which these negotiations shape children's sense of self-identity.

This paper aims to explore this crucial link between place-identity and multicultural childhoods by critically analysing fourteen contemporary picturebooks published by Indian publishers known for critical and inclusive representations, like Pratham, Katha, Tara, Tulika, Karadi Tales, Eklavya and Duckbill, and study the ways in which they construct meaningful relationships between characters and spaces. By assessing the representations of socio-spatial relationships in picturebooks, questions of place attachment and "place identity" as influential contributors to a child's self-identification can be addressed. Moreover, an examination of

"difference" and marginality within the experiences of childhood through their manifestations in spatial terms may also help understand otherwise complicated – and often inexplicable – experiences of inequality for a child in their most evident manifestation – their physical environment. By exploring space as political and assessing "how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life" (Soja, 1989, p. 6), the experientiality of childhoods that are non-normative and tainted by ramifications of their gender, caste and class identities can be understood. Ultimately, through a thorough examination of socio-spatial representations in picturebooks, a case for the need for identity-affirming, democratic and enabling socio-spatial representations of childhood can be made. The existing scholarship on children's literature in India lacks a deliberate engagement with identity and space, especially for multiculturalist deconstructions of diverse experiences of childhood. Therefore, to study representations of socio-spatial relationships and how "spaces" can be read like – and in conjunction with – narratives in contemporary Indian picturebooks, this paper will coalesce analyses of narratives as well as visuals concerning space and marginality in childhood. The multimodality of picturebooks imbues them with the potential to develop critical as well as visual literacy in children. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis of picturebooks, with a focus on space as a subtext in the multimodal narrative, can show what representations include and omit, and what kind of differences they create between people, spaces and cultures (Jewitt & van Leeuwen, 2000, p. 8). At the same time, through an emphasis on the complex transactions between visual literacy and cultural ideology, the paper aims to open up not just the textual narratives but also the illustrations to a critical scrutiny and assess the underlying ideologies of intersectional marginalities operating within spatial contexts – domestic as well as social – in the picturebooks.

Using existing interventions in Developmental and Environmental Psychology, and coalescing them with critical content analysis, the paper explores the "spatiality" of childhood as constructed and represented in the literature for children. It locates the selected picturebooks within two arenas of conceptual enquiry – space and self-identity within childhood, and the multicultural experientiality of childhood as encompassing differences and structural inequalities – and studies the links between marginalisation and space in children's literature. A few picturebooks selected for this study represent the construction and affirmation of the "place identity" of the protagonists, while some problematize a simplistic notion of spatial associations as they bring gender, caste and class marginalities to the surface. Through an analysis of the textual and visual representations of space, the paper ultimately argues for the necessity of diverse and democratic representations of the socio-spatiality of multicultural childhoods.

The selection of picturebooks for this study meaningfully adds to the aim of arguing for representations of childhood which are democratic and diverse. It includes six picturebooks from Tulika – *A Home of Our Own* (2018), *Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why* (2015), *My Name is Gulab* (2021), *The Why-Why Girl* (2003)*, I Will Save My Land* (2017) and *The Trickster Bird* (2016) – a publishing house known for its emphasis on inclusive representation – of different childhoods, social milieus and cultural contexts. It also includes two picturebooks from Pratham – *Ma! Hurry Up!!* (2004) and *Goal* (2022); *Abba's Day* (2011)

and *Dotted Lines* (2019) from Katha; *The Girl Who Was a Forest* (2021) and *The Girl Who Loved to Sing* (2021) from Duckbill; *Sadiq Loves to Stitch* (2018) from Karadi Tales; and *Mother* (2009) from Eklavya. With their critical focus on intersectional identity factors like gender, caste, class and indigeneity, along with compelling and layered visuals of spatial dynamics of these identities to supplement the text, these picturebooks offer pertinent insights into the multifarious ways in which the category of childhood becomes complicated and heterogeneous in the Indian cultural and literary context.

Scholars of Human Geography have continued to establish links between identity and space by exploring the psychological cognitions about the physical world that get incorporated in the self and serve as sources of security to an individual (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). The affiliations resulting from these spatial negotiations, that is, "place attachments", become a substructure of an individual's overall identity and combine memories, beliefs and meanings associated with places to develop their sense of self (Proshansky et al., 1983). In turn, space has also been conceptualised as a product of collective socio-spatial practice, thereby "shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements through continuous political process" (Lefebre, 1976, translated 1991). Soja (1989) calls this the "politicised spatiality of social life" (p. 2). Therefore, as cultural geography literature proposes, space and place are "in a constant state of transition as a result of continuous, dialectical struggles of power and resistance among and between the diversity of landscape providers, users and mediators" (Aitcheson, 1999, p. 29; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Social power as well as social resistance are, thus, always spatial, and within this nexus of power, society and space co-create each other (Cresswell, 1996). Drawing on this "political psychology of space" (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006), scholars have studied the macro and micro-spatial ways in which communities develop a sense of home with respect to dwelling, community, and region (Cuba & Hummon, 1993).

Critical interventions in the field of Developmental Psychology have traced the roots of place-identity in childhood in which the process of physical world socialisation supplements the development of a child's self-identity (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). Repeated experiences of places in childhood, together with the social meaning attached to them by children and others (e.g. parents, teachers and peers), shape their place-attachments which deeply influence their well-being (Chawla, 1992; Jack, 2010). For an empirical assessment of children's sense of place, Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) have devised *attachment*, *identity* and *dependence* as the three space components to represent the affective, cognitive and conative components of attitude towards spatial settings. While empirical and theoretical studies of spatial attachment have enriched the field of developmental and environmental psychology, an effort has also been made to decolonize the very category of childhood while assessing children's place-attachments and focusing on postcolonial questions of indigeneity and diasporic belonging (Cecire et al., 2015; Doughty & Thompson, 2011).

However, despite an extensive existing framework, a greater focus on spatial affiliations in multicultural childhoods remains largely absent, especially in the South Asian cultural fabric which is fraught with gender, caste, class and regional marginalities. Though the discursive engagement with space as integral to identity formation has given scholars a ground upon

which they can coalesce Human Geography and Environmental Psychology with children's literature, the gaps in multicultural representation and the lack of intersectional approaches make the Western critical observations limited at best and gravely hegemonic at worst. Not only is the cultural and literary engagement with children's place-identity within the Indian multicultural landscape insufficient, but critical interventions specifically in the domain of Indian picturebooks also remain meagre. This paper aims to draw on the existing conceptual scholarship on identity and space and assess the diverse socio-spatiality of childhoods in the Indian picturebooks. This paper aims to fill some of these gaps by addressing the interplay of identity factors such as space, gender, caste and class in multimodal representations of childhood in Indian picturebooks. By specifically looking at the verbal-visual interface of picturebooks, it will deconstruct the politics of space in childhood, both in the narratives and the visuals of intersectional marginalities and their spatial manifestations.

Space and Identity

The physical environment fosters identity – individual as well as collective – and in turn is imbued with new meanings as people enact culture in it. *Dotted Lines* (2019), a visual autobiography of Bhuri Bai Bhil, makes a cogent case for space as a fundamental entity on which culture is performed and lived. The account of Bhuri Bai's journey of becoming an accomplished Bhil folk artist foregrounds her culture, customs and her own identity as a Bhil woman in physical spaces. From the domestic arena of the house and the courtyard to the fields and the forest in the village, spaces acquire meanings as people perform culture within and on them – from the Rakhi Pithora festival where the house becomes a site for performing Bhil rituals and the canvas for Bhil art, the gendered division of spaces which disallows women to participate in the *puja* (rituals of worshipping), to the various other festivals that reassert the human-nature relationship. The significance of spaces – especially for indigenous communities like the Bhil – in imagining and performing culture automatically extends to the construction of the individual – in this case, a Bhil woman. *Dotted Lines* delineates the interrelationship between cultural identity and space, as spaces – with their nuances of gendered divisions and cultural meanings – both inform an individual's (and a community's) self-identity and come to embody layers of meanings through the communities that inhabit them. Therefore, space is produced and consumed by collective social practice (Lefebvre, 1991) and becomes an essential constitutive part of cultural identity, as "the affirmation, creation, and negotiation of social identities occur within and through spatial relations of places" (Santos & Buzinde, 2007, p. 322). The construction of the Bhil cultural identity – both individual and collective – in this picturebooks represents this innate relationship between identity and space.

While *Dotted Lines* highlights Bhil spatiality and cultural belonging, *A Home of Our Own* (2018) depicts the "placelessness" of marginal childhoods without a physical home. The children in the picturebook are shown inhabiting spaces that are peripheral within the sociospatial urban landscape. They recreate the traditional children's game of playing house, but there is a tragic difference – Dulari brings a sack of old plates and bowls in exchange for sweeping outside a house, Sunehri pulls out empty bottles for the kitchen from her sack of rag collected from the railway station, Deepa usually gets food from the discarded boxes of leftover

food outside a hotel, Manohar brings scrap pieces from the mechanic's shop for utensils, Salman brings a paint bucket to use it as a chair, Aseem pulls out a cardboard box to make it their television, and Reshma brings the flowers for decoration that nobody bought from her at the traffic signal. Home – which embodies belonging, security and the primary basis of identity for a child – for these children is the tatters of gathered "waste", pieced together to replicate a semblance of a house. The game becomes an evocative reminder of marginal childhoods that are marked by socio-spatial ostracization, economic privation and cultural erasure, and together, these "traditionally disenfranchised" (Superle, 2011, p. 28) children, far removed from the protection of homes and dispossessed of their childhoods, become each other's family as they scramble inside an abandoned car and go to sleep in "a home of their own". The stark contrast in Figure 1, between the well-lit houses that symbolise stability and protection, and the abandoned car right across the street which is temporarily sheltering the children from the torrential rain, evocatively deconstructs the placelessness that not having a physical home begets. Conventional notions of the house as a private physical space and home as a "place" of one's own are, thus, fractured in the makeshift home that these children assemble.

Figure 1
Spatial Juxtaposition Between Conventional Homes and Dulari and Her Friends' "Home"
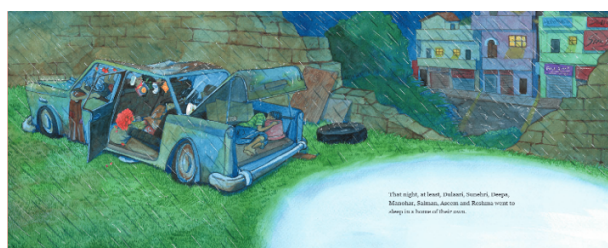
Home as a Gendered Space

As spaces embody meanings and politics, informing and being informed by a nexus of identities of those who occupy them, the very act of occupation of those spaces becomes a non-neutral performance. A close study of the performativity of gender reveals how spaces undergo gendered divisions and come to signify the cultural and social meanings of genders as mutually exclusive. The division of the domestic space as feminine and the public space as masculine is both informed by and further informs the gender expectations that box individuals not just culturally but also spatially, and the assimilation of the individual in the ideology of gender begins right from their childhood. *Ma! Hurry Up!!* (2004) portrays the domestic space as perceived by the child to be the mother's space and all domestic chores her responsibility as he is shown to be calling out to her for everything as the mother relentlessly moves across the kitchen and the bathroom, getting both her children ready and simultaneously doing the other household chores (Figure 2). One sees both the division of labour as well as space as domestic responsibilities become solely the mother's domain. *Abba's Day* (2011) challenges this conventional gendered division and portrays Aaisha's *abba* (father) undertaking domestic chores like cooking and cleaning with his daughter and the family sharing responsibilities

(Figure 3). A delinking of the domestic space with solely the women (primarily the mother) opens up the "space" for a redefining of the home as a gendered space.

Figure 2

A Conventional Representation of a Mother in the Domestic Space, Managing All Household Chores with Little to No Help
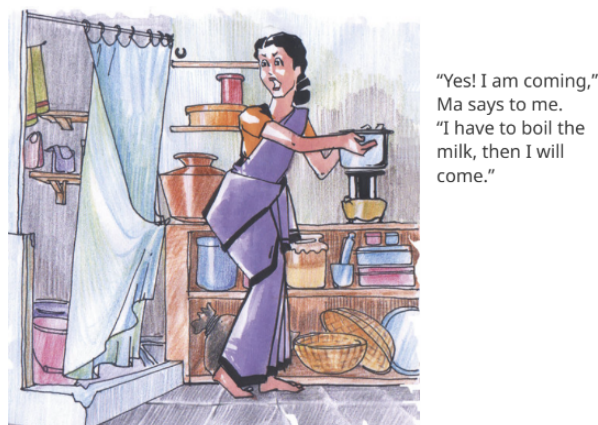
Figure 3

An Alternate Representation of the Entire Family Sharing Domestic Responsibilities, Challenging Gender-Roles

For children, as the home conventionally becomes a feminine space, limiting both the mother and the daughter to the domestic domain, public places like the playground come to embody a "masculine" character. *Goal* (2022) begins with establishing the domestic space as reserved for Heena as she is expected to help her mother in the kitchen while her brother plays cricket in the playground. However, the window that allows her to see other girls her age playing football, like Bishop's "window" (1990), exposes her to a possibility previously unknown to her – that she, too, can access the public domain of the playground (Figure 4). However, her initial act of transgression of her assigned "place" ends with her brother commanding her to go back home. Finally, as her parents eventually agree to let her play in the playground, she proves her talent and, along with the other girls, sows the seed for her family and neighbours to allow girls to transgress the peripheries of gender roles and gendered spaces. *Sadiq Loves to Stitch* (2018) similarly portrays the gendered divisions of labour in Kashmir's Bakarwal community

in which "men tend, feed and guard flocks of sheep and goats…[while] the women of the community are known for their unique embroidery skills". As a consequence, the home and the outside world are divided along the lines of gender roles, boxing boys like Sadiq in their traditional "masculine" roles. Therefore, Sadiq's desire to embroider with his mother is met with disagreement from her as she exclaims, "because, in our community, it is the women who stitch. Men tend to the sheep". Sadiq's eventual transgression of his gender roles dissolves not only her mother's apprehensions as she flaunts her child's creation to the entire community but also the presumed spatial boundaries that curtail the Bakarwal men and women in the outside and the domestic world respectively. Thus, both Heena and Sadiq need to transgress spatial boundaries of gender to redefine themselves beyond their assigned "places" in society.

Figure 4
The Window, a Liminal Space Between the Home and the Outside, Allows Heena to See, and Then Imagine for Herself, An Alternate Way of Life Characterised by Freedom and Access

What?
Are those girls playing football?
Girls like me? Girls my age? Girls from my Mumbra?

Every Sunday, Bhai plays cricket there with his friends.
Every Sunday, I help Ammi in the kitchen after I finish my homework.

The Spatial Order of Caste

The most evident manifestation of marginalities in culture happens in spatial peripheries and physical segregation. *Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why* (2015) introduces the reader to the spatial experientiality of caste through Babasaheb's negotiations with deeply divided social spaces, including the community well, pond, temples and even the school, right from his childhood. The picturebook begins with a spatial representation of the caste-society as a ladder on which the likes of Bhim are forever riveted to the lowest step (Figure 5), directing the child reader's (and Bhim's) initial introduction to caste to the most apparent manifestations of caste in society – curtailed physical mobility and unequal access to public spaces. Bhim *literally* occupies the margins (Figure 6) as he watches children his age flying kites and sitting on benches in the classroom while he is given a gunny sack to sit on along with a few other children at the back of the classroom. Similarly, the cart-driver refuses to drive the cart which carries Dalit children. Caste here becomes an "experiential category" (Dhareshwar, 1993) for which spatial segregation and a socio-spatial watertight hierarchization become the conducive backdrop for exercising untouchability. It is pertinent to note that the documentation of Babasaheb's journey towards an organised Dalit resistance, where thousands of people join

him, maintains the focus on mobility and space as everyone is shown marching and Babasaheb leads them to transcend boundaries – cultural and spatial – and claim their rightful "place" in society as they kneel and drink water from the public tank in Mahad (Figure 7). It is the "everydayness" of how caste permeates and informs children's lives – the children who are immured at the bottom of the social ladder and those who remain oblivious to caste because of their social capital – and reproduces rigid and exclusionary social networks in children's spaces that makes it invisible and, to the urban "secular" (Dhareshwar, 1993) self, also defunct. Erasure from and reclamation to space as a fundamental right and the focus on the spatiality of caste-based marginalisation and resistance embeds caste in questions of space and access.

Figure 5
A Spatial Imagination of the Caste-Society as a Ladder with No Possibility of Mobility Across the Socio-Spatial Hierarchy
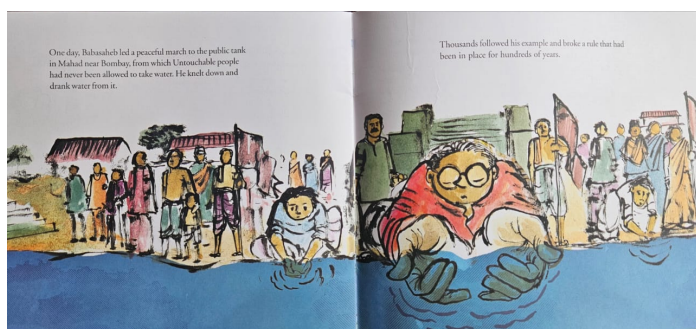

Figure 6
The Spatial Ostracisation Experienced by Dalit Children is Visually Emphasised by Placing Them on the Margins, Colourless and "Othered"

Figure 7

A Reclamation of Their Right to Occupy Space – Shown as an Integral Part of the Collective Dalit Resistance Led by Babasaheb

Sagar Kolwankar's *My Name is Gulab* (2021) also represents the inherently political nature of children's spaces and experiences, as Gulab, who is teased by the name "stinky gulab" because of her father's occupation, learns how caste renders any social mobility impossible to the likes of herself. One realises that cleaning gutters has been the "only work [they] have been allowed to do" across generations (*Gulab*, p. *9*), implying that the violent curtailment of Gulab's family in a space that symbolises "impurity", filth and the waste ejected from society is not only cruel but also ironic. As noted by V. Geetha (2009), "the dirt that becomes untouchable and renders [a Dalit] unworthy of touch is not his" (p. 4), so the likes of Gulab remain endlessly trapped at the margins and bear the weight of caste-society's unscrupulous notions of purity and pride. This is displayed in the piercing visual of Gulab's father looking up, covered in filth, at the municipal officers who employ him to clean the filth which isn't his but wouldn't even touch him to give the money (Figure 8). Socio-cultural ostracization, thus, implicitly takes on spatial meanings for the marginalised. Gulab suffers this ostracization and the stigma of being an "untouchable" at the hands of her peers and eventually hopes to release herself and her father of this stigma by making a machine that would clean gutters itself. Naming her machine "Gulab", she wonders if a machine could also clean "the filth of people's minds", implying that caste is not limited to professional hierarchies. It is also a systematic encapsulation of people on the various steps of the social ladder (as recognized by Bhim in *The Boy Who Asked Why*). Her innocent yet determined attempt to destabilise the "place-identity" that has rendered her cruelly marginalised reasserts the deep connections between identity and space, and the necessity of an equitable and affirmative relationship between a child and the spaces they inhabit, traverse and co-occupy with others.

Figure 8

The Spatiality of Untouchability Represented Visually, With Gulab's Father at the Bottom and Spatially Segregated from the Municipal Officer at the Top
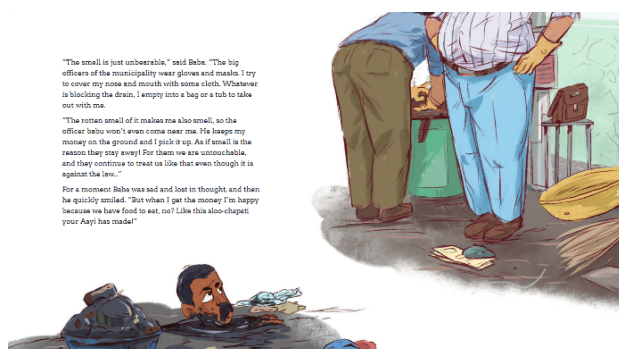
Lavanya Karthik's *The Girl Who Was a Forest* (2021) introduces another layer into the discourse of caste by bringing in the experientiality of gender within Brahmanical patriarchy. Young Janaki's physical confinement (Figure 9) on account of her caste and gender position fills her with a yearning to be free like a bird and break out of the world in which she neither belongs nor fits in. Ultimately, as she discovers the vast seaside flora of Kerala and realises that the dense Mangrove forest that fascinates her has grown from a single seed, she learns that she too is a "forest…of dreams, ideas and possibilities" (Figure 10). By virtue of being vast, unbridled and self-sustaining, the forest becomes a symbolic extension of Janaki's desire for an existence unfettered by the impositions of her caste and gender identities. While her home becomes a space of curtailment, the limitless forest embodies a promise of freedom and empowerment for her, becoming an extension of herself.

Figure 9

Janaki's Physical Curtailment: A Similar Portrayal of the Spatiality of Gender as Seen in Figure 4, With the Window Symbolising the Contrast Between the Domestic and the Public

Figure 10

Janaki Literally Becomes One with the Forest, Symbolising a Conflation of the Emancipated Female Body With Uninhibited Wilderness

Another powerful exploration of the relationship of gender with space is found in Ilaiah's *Mother* (2009), an autobiographical creation that locates his (and his mother's) story within his community and delineates his mother's world through her close cultural linkages and the nexus of power operating between diverse communities like Baindlas, Mandichulas and Garadis, and the upper caste Patels and Patwaris. He characterises his mother's world in her negotiations with the Brahmanical patriarchal order – in the casteist division of labour, spatial segregation, denial of education to the marginalised, and her exclusion from the Bonalu festival – and as she struggles to make a "place" for herself and her son in the society, her transgressions involve crossing boundaries (marching with the Bonum pot across the maize fields) and claiming her right to spaces – physical and cultural – which are denied to her kind. Her resistance to her exclusion from the Bonalu festival and her subsequent victory as she carries the *bonam* (offering to the Mother Goddess), and the first vermillion *bottu* (dot) touches her forehead while the first sacred thread is tied on his father's wrist, embed her struggle for inclusion in a determination to register her presence. Registering one's physical presence in spaces denied to them becomes a protest against their ostracization, and Ilaiah's mother's fight to claim her rightful place in the Bonaly festival embodies that sense of protest.

Space and Indigenous Identity

The question of space and identity acquires a more complex dimension – historically and politically – for indigenous communities, for whom space, especially their land, is an extension of themselves. Picturebooks like *The Why-Why Girl* (2003)*, I Will Save My Land* (2017) and *The Girl Who Loved to Sing* (2021) introduce the reader to the spatiality of the indigenous identity for Adivasi women, complicating the questions of agency, access and ownership through an intersectional approach of indigeneity and gender. Lavanya Karthik's *The Girl Who Loved to Sing* (2021) situates the life story of Teejan Bai in her cultural, tribal and gendered experience as a young girl, for which space and mobility become central questions. Teejan

Bai's resistance against the Brahmanical patriarchal social order exposes the close link between patriarchal control and women's curtailment within the domestic space as well as the transgressions (especially spatial) necessary for the realisation of her dream, and her story underlines the emphatic spatiality of patriarchal subordination. Teejan is repeatedly directed to stay silent and within the domestic bounds as her *Ma* (mother) rages, "girls do not step outdoors after dark". Her marriage at the age of twelve is aimed to control her *pagalpana* (madness) for singing and domesticating her, but not only does she sing, she also transgresses the physical peripheries of her village to break free (Figure 11). Physical mobility and transgression of domestic peripheries, thus, empower Teejan and become integral to her resistance against her intersectional marginalisation.

Figure 11
As Opposed to Initial Visuals of Curtailment, the Final Portrayal of Teejan's Emancipation Depicts Her as Running Away and Rejecting Spatial Boundaries of Home

Teejan runs away.

Mahasweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) also explores the intersectionality of indigenous and gender identities and the spatiality of a Shabar girl's negotiations with both of these markers of identity. Moyna, known for her incessant "whys", is characterised as a young girl who refuses to abide by the socio-cultural and gender expectations made of her by her community without the conviction of reason. In her pursuit of answers – to why she should have to walk so far to the river to fetch water, why she should eat leftovers, why she has to graze the Babu's goats, why she shouldn't study too – Moyna also questions the inequitable access to spaces and her curtailed freedom to occupy and claim space as a Shabar woman. Devi's verbal descriptions of the issues that indigenous women commonly face are supplemented by Kanyika Kini's illustrations that situate Moyna in her tribal landscape, sitting beside a woman weaving a basket and imagining the vast spaces, flora and fauna of her natural habitat (Figure 12), thereby contrasting curtailment to the boundless vision of freedom. The patriarchal fetters that underline her persistent questions, contrasted with the expansive natural world which is her community's home, and the grandeur of her imaginations and visions for freedom from her cultural – and evidently spatial – boundaries (Figure 13), delineate the

political nature of the relationship between an individual, a community and the spaces they occupy.

Figure 12
Visual Contrast Between Moyna's Physical Curtailment with Her Imagination Which Transcends Sanctioned Boundaries
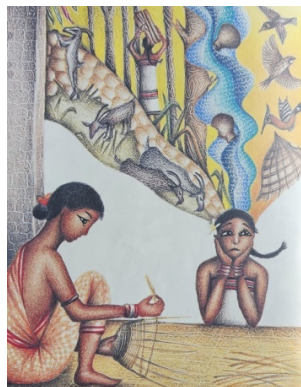
Figure 13
Moyna's Eventual Emancipation Is Visually Symbolised Through an Expansion of Her Physical Surroundings Similar to Her Imagination of That Freedom in Figure 12

Rinchin's *I Will Save My Land* (2017) takes the question of gender and space – especially land – further as it explores land as integral to indigenous identity and how patriarchal norms, divisions of labour and control over women manifests in regulating their claim on land. While as a representative of the Adivasis of Chhattisgarh, Mati delineates their "cumulative anxieties over losing their lands" (Dandapat & Tripathi, 2020, p. 45) to a coal mine, her story also embodies the ways in which gender complicates the already endangered relationship of indigenous people with their ecosystem. As Mati, whose name itself means "soil", asserts, "mor doli heh—it's my field" and is met with her father saying, "girls don't have fields", her *Ajji* (grandmother) repudiates him and recalls her struggle against the entire community to own her parents' land, being their only child. From *Ajji* to Mati, the Brahmanical patriarchal denial of land to women and their persistent fight for access and ownership complicates the struggles of indigenous peoples against invasive "developmental" machineries. Mati embodies the spirit of

eco-feminist resilience as she learns about the "big monster machine" that would convert her land into a coal mine and sneaks out to sleep on her *doli* – her land – as she clutches her phaawda (spade), to save her land (Figure 14). *Her* land here means more than just an Adivasi reclamation of space against skewed modernity; it also becomes an assertion of her *right* to occupy space, own land and legitimise her social identity as an Adivasi woman.

Figure 14
A Symbolic Conflation of the Tribal (Female) Body and Land, Depicted Through Mati Becoming One with Her Land for its Protection

As the picturebooks discussed above delineate how spaces are fundamental for the construction of indigenous identities, Rinchin's *The Trickster Bird* (2016) exposes what the loss of such spaces begets for communities inhabiting them. Renchu's conversation with her grandmother reveals that their displacement from the jungles – which were their original home – to the city has also meant that from being the indigenous inhabitants of the natural world, living in a harmonious relationship with nature, they have been displaced to the margins of the city, left to fend for themselves as ragpickers. The loss of their home as a space has also fractured their collective sense of identity, as portrayed in the contrasting visuals of Renchu's grandfather in the lush green forest and the little Renchu carrying a sack of rag in the grey, urban landscape. Cooper Marcus's (1992) theorization of place's link to self and group-identity includes a sense of continuity with the past, and asserts that as spaces become physical reminders of the past, they nurture a sense of continuity in the community and affirm its identity. Therefore, as happens with Renchu's family, displacement from their "home" ruptures this necessary link of the indigenous identity from the place that affirmed it, leaving the individual (and the community) "placeless" – not just physically but also culturally. Therefore, space acquires a deeply collective and political meaning in the vocabulary of indigenous reclamation, and the picturebooks analysed in this section reiterate the spatiality of indigenous identity as well as the cultural and political meanings acquired by such spaces, thereby connoting the synthesis of space and identity in the indigenous context.

A critical engagement with the fourteen picturebooks selected for this study reveals that children's negotiations with their identities is rooted in their spatial experiences of the world. At the same time, as opposed to being a universal monolith of idealised innocence, the category of childhood, especially in multicultural societies like South Asia, is fraught with social inequalities of gender, caste and indigeneity, among others, and therefore experienced heterogeneously. Given this fact, it becomes imperative to examine the links between the

inherent spatiality of children's experiences and the multiple marginalities that puncture a unidimensional understanding of childhood. For this, a theoretical engagement with questions of place-making and identity, especially within the domain of childhood, and then the exploration of these issues within the multimodal format of picturebooks becomes important. Construction of identities, individual as well as shared, can never be "spaceless", for without a locale, social and cultural connections can neither be formed nor asserted. Hence, a study of the relationship of people with space further opens up two domains of enquiry – the ways in which identity is spatialized and consistently in negotiation with its physical surrounding, and the meanings that spaces are imbued with as they are inhabited, occupied, claimed and contested for by people. Scholars of Human Geography have attempted to contextualise social identity in space and theorise "place-identity" and its ramifications for individuals, communities and the spaces they exist in. As spaces become imbued with meanings, they become places – of belonging, security and continuity – and "place-identity" then, as conceptualised by environmental psychologists like Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983), becomes a substructure of the self-identity. A critical engagement with the relationships between identity and space also punctures the apparent "illusion of opaqueness" (Soja, 1989, p. 7) which renders space as undialectical, fixed and concretized. Soja (1989) describes this as "the cartesian cartography of spatial science" (p. 7) and argues that human geographies entail an inscription of power into the "apparent innocent spatiality of social life" (p. 6), making spaces political and ideological. Similarly, Lefebvre (1991) argues,

> "If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be 'purely' formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has always been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape." (p. 31)

Therefore, as spaces become the soil for the construction and renegotiation of social identities, they take on semantic notions themselves which may remain invisible but underlie individual self-identification, belonging, social relations and collective cultures.

This intertwining of identity and space becomes crucial for decoding children's self-identification and the ways in which physical settings affirm their sense of belonging and channel their socialisation. Place-identity forms an essential component of the child's identity through their "accumulated cognitions about the physical world" (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987, p. 23), thereby making the home, the playground, the school and other spaces more than just physical surroundings. Questions of belonging or being out of "place", feeling secure or endangered, accepted or alienated, then, also occupy spatial dimensions for the child. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues that space implies a certain abstraction and freedom, while places, being definitive, offer security (p. 3). In common representations of childhood, home becomes a place for belonging and safety, school becomes a place for learning and forming friendships, and the playground becomes a place for controlled transgression and liberty. On the other hand, something unrestricted like the wilderness that child protagonists of adventure tales often traverse becomes a free space, unencumbered by parental control and authority and, therefore, also dangerous. Children's spaces, thus,

especially in the western canon, have been conventionally characterised as embodying universal bourgeois notions of the experiences of childhood and children's relations with spaces.

A conscious decolonization of this discursive space of childhood and its representations uncovers not just the multiplicity in the experiences of childhoods which exist outside the pigeonhole of the western bourgeois childhood, but also the vastly different affiliations between children and their physical surroundings which are fraught with structural inequalities. The picturebooks analysed for this study reveal that as issues of gender, caste, class and indigeneity make childhood a plural category, children's affiliations with spaces likewise become nuanced and heterogeneous. For instance, the home as a domestic space reveals gendered demarcations, while public places become territories that include some and exclude others on the grounds of caste and class hierarchies. At the same time, a shift in the gaze also turns the fetishized exotic wilderness into indigenous communities' habitat. Questions of historical marginalisation and the complex networks of exercising power in socio-cultural macrostructures may exceed the scope of pedagogy for children, however, the spaces that children inhabit certainly carry the implications of these structural inequalities along the lines of caste, gender, class and religion, among others, as they trickle down through their family and community socialisation into their experience of the physical world. The picturebooks discussed above expose these crevices and problematise the notion of the home and the world as universally experienced spaces within the domain of childhood.

Home as a physical space embodies a sense of belonging and occupies a central position in a child's "place-identity" as they use its "environmental meaning to symbolise or situate [their] identity" (Cuba & Hummon, 1993, p. 112). The portrayal of the home in *Dotted Lines* as an anchor for Bhuri Bai Bhil's self-identification as a Bhil woman, and the absence of this anchor in *A Home of Their Own,* rendering the children utterly "placeless" and vulnerable in the world – both attest to the significance of the physical security of a home for an individual's self-identification. However, home is also not a monolith but a space with layers of meanings – most evidently gendered, as seen in *Dotted Lines*. An exploration of space as gendered as well as the spatial underpinnings of gender roles and portrayals reveals the "discursive 'constructedness' of both gender and space" (Ranade, 2007, p. 1519). Gender differences in patterns of exploration and the extent of mobility reveal how spaces are also inhabited and accessed differently by men and women. Picturebooks like *Ma! Hurry Up!!* and *Goal* delineate this "discursive constructedness" of both space and gender as the domestic domain is rendered feminine and subsequently women's gender-appropriate conduct is foregrounded in their domesticity. Similarly, *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* characterises the spatiality of the cultural masculine notions in the Bakarwals, demarcating the outdoors as masculine. Transgressing these spatial boundaries ultimately becomes inevitable if the characters desire to transgress their sanctioned gender-roles. A picturebook like *Abba's Day*, then, though fairly simple in its plot, embodies a transformative message as the father shares the domestic responsibilities with everyone else at home. As the margins separating the home from the outside world become equally permeable for all and the home itself is reconfigured beyond gendered domains, the disparities in the gendered experiences of home begin to dissolve as well.

Just as home as a place is experienced differently by different individuals, their spatial experience of the outside world is also deeply fraught with structural inequalities and systemic marginalities. The experientiality of caste, for instance, continues to be rigorously and violently spatial in a caste-society like India. The nature of the spaces "allocated" and "allowed" to the marginalised, like Bhim (*The Boy Who Asked Why)* and Gulab's family (*My Name is Gulab*), reveals the quotidian manifestations of caste hierarchies as access to spaces and amenities becomes regulated, thereby deepening the gap between the caste elites and the oppressed. This "everydayness of caste and untouchability [that] is essential for the caste system to reproduce itself" (Kumar, 2015, p. 65) is delineated in the seemingly "innocent" space of childhood. The ostracisation faced by Bhim and Gulab, along with their communities, implies that cultural notions of purity seep into social spaces and the Dalit body becomes a site for the violent performance of the artifice of untouchability, abhorred for its association with the dirt of the savarnas and simultaneously encapsulated in that sociospatial prison. As embodied in Gulab's father's experience of untouchability, the *bahiskrit* (ostracised) labouring Dalit body is both inside and outside (Kumar, 2015, p. 55), filthy but socially necessary, and thus trapped in a vicious cycle of slavery and repudiation. This paradoxical suspension of the Dalit body right at the margins, both inside and outside, makes it a spatial mockery of the Dalit existence in caste-society. Therefore, caste, which is often understood as an antiquity which has no place in the modern-secular vocabulary, in reality continues to be a persistent marker of one's socio-cultural and spatial location.

At the same time, the question of space and identity as correlationally entwined becomes all the more crucial for the indigenous communities for whom identity and agency cannot be separated from the "land" they inhabit. The Adivasi identity is innately constructed in spatial terms, as delineated in the picturebooks discussed above. Using an eco-feminist approach, *I Will Save My Land, The Why-Why Girl* and *The Girl Who Loved to Sing* characterise Adivasi women like Mati, Moyna and Teejan Bai who derive their indigenous as well as gender identities from their spatial affiliations with their natural habitats. The overlapping themes of endangered natural ecosystems and the Adivasi women struggling to transgress patriarchal boundations coalesce the question of land with a feminist assertion of women's agency and right to ownership, mobility and empowerment. Mati's fight for her *doli* – her land, Moyna's critical questioning of her sociospatial position as a Shabar girl, and Teejan Bai's spatial transgression for emancipation – all the stories locate the feminist assertion of Adivasi women's agency within the questions of preserving indigenous spaces and reclaiming their roots. In these picturebooks, the visual narratorial space also becomes exceedingly important as it also renders visible the landscapes that are often absent from mainstream media for children. The questions of land, ecological cultures, sovereignty and sustenance associated with indigenous communities across cultures and nations rupture the dominant discourse on indigenous cultures which is one of an "imputed pastness … [which is] a mere pastness of anachronism" (Banerjee, 2016, p. 17). By recovering their claim to history, one also faces the enduring questions of land, ecology and sovereignty that have shaped the Adivasi politics, for which the issues of a suspended temporality and an intrinsic spatiality of their cultural existence become crucial.

Whether it is a mass mobilisation of the Dalits for a reclamation of their right to occupy space, as shown in *The Boy Who Asked Why*, or the sense of collective action against the reckless "developmental" and technological interventions incongruent with the indigenous ecosystems – one learns that not just individuals, but communities also derive their sense of belonging and identity from their spatial roots. Lewicka's (2005) exploration of a consistent link between civic participation and neighbourhood identification, foregrounding that stronger sense of community and neighbourhood ties leads to action, including participation in grass-roots organisations (Perkins et al., 1998), can prove useful for assessing shared belonging and collective action as seen in indigenous politics of protest and reclamation. In picturebooks on indigenous life-worlds, collective action for the preservation of their land and resources is underlined by the indigenous people's deep association with their land. As land becomes an intrinsic part of their identity, any threat to their sovereignty and access to their land propels active resistance – place and identity are so entwined that a threat to one is automatically a threat to the other. Therefore, as embodied in the collective resistance of the indigenous people to the violent encroachment of the machineries of development into their habitat in *I Will Save My Land*, indigenous place-identity does not only coalesce the community's self-identification with their spatial environment but also consolidates their group consciousness that underlies their struggle for saving their homeland.

The relationship between the individual and space, therefore, is of paramount significance in postcolonial narratives and perspectives in literature (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 9). As noted by Superle (2011), place itself plays a central position in children's writing as it becomes crucial in creating and consolidating a sense of national, regional, or cultural identity (p. 86). Superle also refers to Canadian children's literature expert Judith Saltman's remark on the importance of setting in children's books when she states that "British Columbia is almost a character as well as setting" (p. 110). Therefore, in multicultural explorations of differences in the experience of childhood, especially in a region as diverse as South-Asia, space becomes an essential narratorial, visual and cultural component. Whether it is the inscription of the Bhil rituals and culture onto the indigenous spaces (*Dotted Lines*) or Janaki Ammal's deep resonance with the coastal forests of Kerala as a young girl resisting Brahmanical patriarchy, multicultural identities are constantly informed by, renegotiated in and founded in space. Indigeneity, then, as suggested by Doughty and Thompson (2011), is "logically the place to begin an exploration of the relation of children to space and place" (p. 3).

Conclusion

Given the aforesaid and without taking away from bright illustrations and engaging storylines for children, picturebooks can help destabilise an artificial sense of homogeneity and deceptive simplicity with which childhoods are often regarded. This paper has attempted to rigorously locate representations of intersectional marginalities in children's experiences within the questions of space and place-making. However, the employed methodology, while useful for deconstructing the complex heterogeneity of childhood in the Indian context, might not be applicable to other settings. At the same time, though, critical content analysis is a potent approach for decoding the underpinning politics of literature, including picturebooks, for a

more comprehensive examination of the impacts of picturebooks on children, aspects of readers' response and pedagogy also need sincere attention. These approaches have been relatively more prominent in the western critical literacy scholarship, but just like the nascent body of picturebooks engaging with spatial marginalities in India, critical Indian scholarship that coalesces content analysis with pedagogical research on diverse picturebooks with an increased focus on their multimodal contribution to the visual literacy of children is yet to bloom. If children can *construct* new understandings of diversity through extra-curricular experiences and social discourse outside of their classrooms, integrating new information with what they already know through socialization, then we need a more serious critical engagement with children's responses to diverse picturebooks in India. Therefore, for future research in this domain, the incorporation of reflections from readers or educators, as well as the responses to such stories from communities who are represented in them, would enrich the discourse and add more grounded perspectives.

As the structural disparities of caste, class, gender and indigeneity add a note of dissonance to a universal notion of childhood, thereby dissolving the neat separations between work/play and childhood innocence/adult struggles, the spaces that children negotiate with – macroscopic-like the city or microscopic like home – become political. "Each place, each crossroads, each building, releases, upon meditation, a past which floats up vertically as if exorcised" (Ganim, 1998, p. 89); therefore, for a child whose intersectional identity mediates their experience of such places, every locale occupies a unique significance. Thus, the literature that children are exposed to cannot be honestly reflective of themselves; that is, become a mirror (Bishop, 1990), or introduce them to the various ways (like a window, in Bishop's terms) in which people associate differently with the same spaces if it continues to be essentialist and simplistically universal. Place attachment is a significant part of a child's perception of themselves within a nexus of social relations. Picturebooks can help bring the subliminal spatial negotiations of children to the surface that, owing to the apparent abstractions of spaces, otherwise remain critically invisible.

Edward T. Hall (1959) has addressed space as "the silent language" shaping human action. Reading the semantics of space, therefore, becomes crucial for understanding identity and culture. The picturebooks assessed for this study locates the protagonists in their socio-spatial environments and explore the subtle quotidian negotiations with spaces that inform and are informed by their identities. Not only do people derive meaning from places, but places also derive meaning from people, thereby constantly evolving and acquiring new meanings. Through the gendered division of labour and areas within the home, the home itself becomes a gendered space. The enforcement of cultural notions of caste-based purity into public spaces not only encapsulates certain people within fixed peripheries and segregates them from others, but it also alters the nature of neighbourhoods that are culturally and physically deemed "impure". This is why physical spaces that enable diverse people to co-exist become fundamentally democratic and transformative. For affirming children's identity and fostering an environment of ethical recognition of diversity, critically engaging with spaces, transgressing sociospatial impediments and actively democratising children's spaces is indispensable. At the same time, envisioning such transformative possibilities in the literature

for children, especially visual and multimodal media like picturebooks, is of paramount significance.

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Placemaking Through Sensory Engagement: Assessing Cultural Essence of Assi Ghat, Varanasi for Virtual Environments

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Abstract

Assi Ghat, one of the most prominent places in India, and incorporating the steps leading down to the sacred river Ganges in Varanasi, is a microcosm of the city's spiritual, cultural, and social life. This paper explores the sensory experiences at the cultural landscape site Assi Ghat, focusing on how these experiences shape the identity of the space and contribute to the overall experience of visitors and pilgrims. The built fabric of the ghat (from Sanskrit Ghatta, steps leading to a river), along the sacred river Ganges, is not merely a geographical location but a multisensory environment where the sights, sounds, smells, and textures all play a crucial role in creating a deep, immersive experience and spiritual connection with the sacred environment. Various activities at the ghat, such as the morning prayers (Aarti), yoga sessions, and cultural performances become integral to this sensory landscape, influencing how both locals and visitors perceive and interact with the space. The study discusses the importance of sensory experiences in public spaces, particularly in the context of placemaking at cultural landscapes, where these elements contribute to the creation of meaningful and engaging environments. Additionally, the paper explores the concept of digital placemaking, suggesting that the sensory richness of Assi Ghat could be preserved and replicated in a digital environment. The study emphasizes the need to integrate sensory experiences into both physical and digital placemaking efforts to maintain the cultural and spiritual essence of Assi Ghat, ensuring that its unique atmosphere is preserved for future generations.

Keywords: Assi Ghat, digital placemaking, placemaking, sacred geographies, sensory experiences, Varanasi, virtual engagement

Varanasi, often referred to as the "City of Ghats", is known for its numerous riverfront steps (ghats) that line the western bank of the Ganges River. Among these, Assi Ghat holds a prominent place due to its historical, cultural, architectural, associational and spiritual value (Eck, 2012). This ghat, where the Assi River, at the extremities of the imaginary sacred boundary of Varanasi, as per the ancient scriptures meets the Ganges, serves as an important confluence of spiritual practices, cultural performances, and social interactions, making it a microcosm of Varanasi's broader cultural landscape (Singh, 2018a). Assi Ghat is one of the busiest Ghats of Varanasi and is marked as the first and most significant ghat amongst various pilgrimage routes of Kashi, Varanasi. Historically, pilgrimages or sacred journeys are linked with the sacred spatial systems that is actively observed by the pilgrims and reflects a certain symbolism within a spatial frame. Assi Ghat is a part of a large cosmic layout of a 'climax community', an elaborate social and cultural frame characteristic of Varanasi (Rana, 2016). Within this system it is usually symbolised in the form of a circle, connected to various shrines and sacred sites, and is called a "pilgrimage mandala" (Rana, 2016). In the sacred pilgrimage mandala of Varanasi, Assi Ghat is one of the important ghats of the following pilgrimage routes within the city of Varanasi: Panchkroshi Pilgrimage, Varanasi Nagara Pradakshina, Varanasi Avimukta Yatra Circuit, Vishveshvara Antargrha Yatra and the Varanasi: Three Khandas and Avimukta. To understand in detail, the Panchkroshi Pilgrimage, within the limits of sacred Kashi, is a route of 88.5 kms (25 krosha) divided into five parts and with a total of 108 sacred sites along it; Varanasi Nagara Pradakshina, within city circuit territory, is considered sacred and its route is 25 kms long and has a total of 72 sacred shrines along its route. Varanasi Avimukta Yatra Circuit is one of the most important ones as per ancient texts, Vishveshvara Antargrha Yatra is the route that moves seven times around its core Vishveshvara Temple, and lastly, Three Khandas and Avimukta symbolise the sacred landscape of Varanasi, with three sacred segments each consisting of an inner circuit route, delineated with circumambulatory paths and linked with many temples along the route (Rana, 2016).

In the context of cultural landscapes like Assi Ghat, sensory experiences play an important role in shaping the identity and character of the place. These sensory elements – encompassing sight, sound, smell, touch, and even taste – are not merely passive stimuli but active agents that contribute to the creation of a "sense of place." The sights of the flowing Ganges and the morning sun, the sounds of temple bells and chanting, the smells of incense and flowers, and the tactile experience of the cool water and stone steps are all integral to how Assi Ghat is perceived and experienced by locals, pilgrims, and tourists alike. These sensory experiences are deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual practices at the ghat, contributing to the creation of a space that is both physically and emotionally engaging.

However, the significance of Assi Ghat extends beyond its physical boundaries. As the world becomes increasingly digitized, there is a growing interest in how the sensory richness of such culturally significant sites can be preserved and replicated in digital environments (Dudley et al., 2023). This has led to the emergence of the concept of "digital placemaking", which involves using digital technologies to enhance or recreate the sense of place in virtual spaces (Maciej, 2024). Digital placemaking offers a unique opportunity to preserve the sensory and

cultural essence of any cultural heritage sites, making it accessible to a global audience and ensuring its legacy for future generations (Allen & Queen, 2018).

The potential for digital placemaking to replicate the sensory experiences of a cultural heritage site is particularly significant in the context of preservation. While the physical experience of visiting cultural heritage site is irreplaceable, digital technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and 3D modelling offer the possibility of creating immersive virtual environments that capture the multisensory landscape (Pescarin et al., 2023). These digital representations can serve as educational tools, virtual cultural heritage sites, and a means of preserving the intangible aspects of heritage that are often difficult to capture through traditional preservation methods (Konstantakis & Caridakis, 2020).

The concept of placemaking, which focuses on creating spaces that promote people's overall health, happiness, and well-being, is deeply relevant in the context of Assi Ghat. Placemaking involves the collaborative process of designing and managing public spaces to create environments that are meaningful and engaging for the people who use them (Sepe, 2017). It is through this lens of placemaking, taking culture as a driving force, that Assi Ghat's unique sensory landscape is explored in this paper. In this paper, there is an exploration of the multifaceted sensory experiences that define Assi Ghat and their role in placemaking. With the examination of how these sensory elements contribute to the identity of the ghat, shaping the experiences of those who visit it. Additionally, by delving into the concept of digital placemaking, discussing how the sensory richness of Assi Ghat, if replicated in virtual environments must ensure its cultural and spiritual essence and preserved for future generations. By integrating sensory experiences into both physical and digital placemaking efforts, this study aims to highlight the importance of maintaining the unique atmosphere of Assi Ghat, both in the real world and in the digital realm.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on placemaking, sensory engagement, and heritage preservation by providing a comprehensive analysis of Assi Ghat's sensory landscape and exploring innovative approaches to digital placemaking. Through this exploration, it is attempted to provide insights into how culturally significant sites like Assi Ghat can be preserved and experienced in new and meaningful ways, both physically and virtually.

Literature Review

The literature on placemaking, sensory experiences, and digital heritage is rich and varied, reflecting the growing interest in understanding how people interact with and perceive spaces, both physical and virtual. This section will review key theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that inform the present research on Assi Ghat, with a focus on three main areas: the concept of sacred symbolism, placemaking, the role of sensory experiences in shaping cultural landscapes, and the emerging field of digital placemaking.

Sacred Symbolism: Spatial Reflection of belief Systems at Assi Ghat

Ghats of the sacred river Ganges are associated with innovative narratives about complex histories, creating the image of a city, placemaking, and the formation of identity (Singh & Rana, n.d.). The river Ganges is a reflection of faith amongst the Hindu community and holds a special place as compared to other mighty rivers, viz. Mandakini River as the Ganges of North, the Godaveri of the East, the Kaveri of the South and the Narmada of the West (Singh & Rana, n.d.). There is a total of 96 waterfront sacred spots along the banks of river Ganges in Varanasi, out of which Assi is first called Assisangameha Tirtha. The temple of Asi Sangameshvara is already mentioned in the 14th century ancient text Kashi Khanda (Singh, 2018b). As mentioned in this ancient text, the architectural style of temple is Nagara Style and the ghat was in its natural shape until 19th century; later it was renovated with stone steps under the Ganga Directorate Project. Since 2014 there exists a fully developed stage cum pavilion built for spiritual performances at the extended part of Assi Ghat with an all-year-round affair of Subah-e-Banaras to celebrate the cultural glory of Assi Ghat. Here, pilgrims/visitors witness the events at the ghat of morning prayers offered to the river Ganges, Vedic "mangalcharan" initiation music, yoga sessions, classical music sessions performed by different groups of the city. This early morning event represents a busy life of pilgrims in the city and their engagement as a community.

Placemaking: Theoretical Foundations and Practices

Placemaking as a concept has its roots in urban planning and community development, where it has been used to describe the process of creating meaningful public spaces that foster social interaction, community engagement, and a sense of belonging (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2024). The seminal works of theorists such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and William H. Whyte (1980) laid the groundwork for understanding the social dynamics of urban spaces, emphasizing the importance of human-centred design in creating vibrant, liveable environments. Their ideas have been further developed by scholars like Kevin Lynch (1960) and Jan Gehl (2010), who have explored the visual and experiential aspects of urban spaces, highlighting the role of sensory perceptions in placemaking.

Lynch's concept of "imageability," which refers to the quality of a place that makes it memorable and easily navigable, is particularly relevant to the study of Assi Ghat. The ghat's unique spatial configuration, with its steps leading down to the Ganges, its proximity to temples, and its bustling activity, contributes to a strong mental image that resonates with both locals and visitors. Gehl's emphasis on the importance of human scale, walkability, and the sensory richness of public spaces also aligns with the sensory experiences at Assi Ghat, where the sights, sounds, and smells of the ghat create a deep, immersive environment.

More recent approaches to placemaking have expanded the concept to include not only the physical aspects of space but also the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions. Scholars like Setha Low and Neil Smith (2006) have introduced the idea of "social placemaking," which focuses on how places are constructed and maintained through social practices, rituals, and

collective memory. This perspective is crucial for understanding Assi Ghat, where the daily rituals, cultural performances, and communal activities are integral to the ghat's identity and function as a place of cultural significance.

Sensory Experiences and Cultural Landscapes

The role of sensory experiences in shaping cultural landscapes has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly within the fields of anthropology, cultural geography, and heritage studies. Sensory anthropology, as developed by scholars like Howes (2006), explores how different cultures perceive and interpret their environments through the senses. This approach challenges the dominance of vision in Western epistemology, arguing for a more holistic understanding of sensory experiences that includes sound, smell, touch, and taste.

In the context of cultural landscapes, sensory experiences are not just passive perceptions but active engagements that shape the meaning and significance of a place. The concept of "taskscapes" by Tim Ingold, latest explored by (Gruppuso & Whitehouse, 2020) emphasizes the temporal and performative aspects of sensory engagement, suggesting that places are continuously created and re-created through the activities and practices of those who inhabit them. This idea is particularly relevant to Assi Ghat, where the daily rituals, such as the morning Aarti, meditation sessions, pilgrim daily activities, boat rides and yoga sessions, are performative acts that produce and reinforce the sensory landscape of the ghat.

Scholars like Rodaway (2002) and Classen, (1997) have further explored the sensory dimensions of cultural landscapes, examining how different sensory modalities contribute to the experience and understanding of place. Rodaway's concept of "sensuous geographies" highlights the ways in which sensory experiences are spatially and culturally situated, while Classen's work on the anthropology of the senses explores the cultural significance of smell, touch, and other non-visual senses. These perspectives provide valuable insights into the multisensory environment of Assi Ghat, where the interplay of sight, sound, smell, and touch creates a deeply immersive experience for visitors and locals alike.

Digital Placemaking and Heritage Preservation

The digital revolution has introduced new possibilities and challenges for placemaking, particularly in the context of heritage preservation. Digital placemaking, as an emerging field, explores how digital technologies can be used to create, enhance, and sustain a sense of place in both physical and virtual environments (Basaraba, 2023). This approach is informed by broader trends in digital humanities, virtual heritage, and smart cities, where technology is increasingly seen as a tool for cultural engagement and preservation.

Scholars like Jeffrey Schnapp, at the Stanford Humanities Lab, and Kenderdine (2015) have been at the forefront of exploring the potential of digital technologies for heritage preservation. Schnapp's work on digital humanities emphasizes the importance of integrating digital tools with traditional humanities research to create new forms of cultural expression and

engagement. Kenderdine's research on virtual heritage explores how immersive technologies, such as VR and AR, can be used to create digital replicas of cultural heritage sites, allowing for their preservation and broader dissemination.

In the context of digital placemaking, the work of theorists like Lange & de Waal (2018) is particularly relevant. They propose a framework for understanding how digital media can be used to enhance the sense of place, focusing on the intersection of digital and physical spaces. Their concept of "hybrid space" highlights the ways in which digital technologies can augment the physical environment, creating new forms of interaction and engagement. This idea is central to the study of Assi Ghat, where digital placemaking efforts may aim to replicate and preserve the sensory experiences of the ghat in a virtual environment.

Empirical studies on digital placemaking and virtual heritage have demonstrated the potential of these technologies to enhance cultural engagement and preservation. For example, the work of Kenderdine and colleagues on the "Pure Land" project (Kenderdine et al., 2014) showcases how digital technologies can be used to recreate the sensory experiences of historic sites, allowing users to explore and interact with virtual environments in meaningful ways. Similarly, the "Dancing with Drones" project (Eriksson et al., 2019) illustrates how digital tools can be used to create new forms of cultural expression and engagement.

These studies provide valuable insights into the potential of digital placemaking for Assi Ghat, where the goal is not only to preserve the sensory and cultural essence of the ghat but also to make it accessible to a global audience. By leveraging digital technologies, we can create immersive virtual environments that replicate the multisensory experiences of Assi Ghat, ensuring that its unique atmosphere and cultural significance are preserved for future generations (Erek & Krasznahorkai, 2024).

Gaps and Future Directions

While the literature on placemaking, sensory experiences, and digital heritage is extensive, there are still gaps that this study aims to address. One gap is the lack of research on the cultural and spiritual dimensions of digital placemaking, particularly in the context of sacred sites. While there is growing interest in the use of digital technologies for heritage preservation, there is still limited understanding of how these technologies can be used to preserve the spiritual and emotional resonance of cultural heritage sites. This study addresses this gap by examining how digital placemaking can be used to maintain the cultural and spiritual essence of Assi Ghat, ensuring that its unique atmosphere is preserved in both physical and virtual environments.

The literature on placemaking, sensory experiences, and digital heritage provides a rich foundation for understanding the complexities of cultural landscapes like Assi Ghat. By integrating these perspectives, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on heritage preservation and placemaking, offering new insights into how the sensory and cultural essence of Assi Ghat can be preserved and enhanced through both physical and digital placemaking efforts.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is rooted in sensory ethnography, a qualitative research approach that focuses on the sensory experiences of people in a particular environment. Sensory ethnography involves the use of participant observation, sensory mapping, and interviews to explore how people experience and interact with their surroundings.

Participant observation was conducted over three months, from August 2023 to October 2023 at Assi Ghat, during which time the author spent extended periods of time observing the activities and interactions that take place at the ghat. This involved attending the early morning public activities along the ghat starting from morning prayers offered to holy river Ganges called as Aarti, participating in yoga sessions, and observing cultural performances, as well as spending time simply sitting on the steps and observing the daily rhythms of life at the ghat. This ethnographic research informs a better understanding to author by actively participating in the activities at the ghat. The goal of this observation was to gain a deep understanding of the sensory environment at the Ghat and how it shapes the experiences of people who visit the space.

Sensory mapping was also employed as part of the methodology, involving the creation of detailed maps that document the sensory elements of Assi Ghat. These maps include information about the visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile elements of the space, as well as how these elements change throughout the day.

Questionnaires were distributed and Open-Ended Interviews were conducted with a sample size of 21 individuals, both locals and pilgrims/ tourists who visited Assi Ghat as a part of their visit to Varanasi, with a focus on understanding how they perceive and experience the sensory environment. Both the questionnaire and interviews were divided into six sections:

1. Personal Information of the pilgrims/tourists, about the name, age group, education level, occupation, gender, state and country
2. Visit frequency and purpose of visiting Varanasi, purpose of visit, significance of visiting ghats, selection of ghats for the visit
3. Virtual Experience Preferences of the ghat they visit frequently
4. Enhancement of Cultural Values in Virtual Environments,
5. Built and Intangible Heritage along Pilgrimage routes
6. Feedback and suggestions

These questionnaires and interviews provided valuable insights into the ways in which sensory experiences shape the identity of Assi Ghat and influence the spiritual and cultural significance of the space. The interviews also helped to identify the key sensory elements that contribute to the unique atmosphere of the Ghat, as well as the challenges and opportunities for preserving these elements in a virtual built environment.

The data collected through participant observation, sensory mapping, questionnaires and interviews were then analysed to identify the key sensory elements that define the experience at ghat. This analysis was used to develop a sensory profile which forms the basis for the subsequent discussion of placemaking and the potential for creating a virtual built environment.

The following section will provide a detailed analysis of the sensory experiences at Assi Ghat, focusing on how these sensory elements contribute to the overall experience of the space.

Sensory Experience at Assi Ghat, Varanasi

The sensory experience at Assi Ghat is an intricate and vibrant tapestry, intricately woven from a diverse array of sights, sounds, smells, textures, and activities that collectively define this sacred and historic space. This section of the research delves deeply into the multisensory environment of Assi Ghat, exploring how these varied sensory stimuli coalesce to create a unique and immersive experience that is integral to the identity of the ghat. Each sensory element, from the aroma of incense to the sound of temple bells, contributes to a rich sensory landscape that resonates with both spiritual significance and cultural heritage.

The sensory and activity mapping provided in this section offers a detailed visual representation of how these sensory elements are distributed across the ghat. This mapping highlights the crucial role these sensory experiences play in the process of placemaking, showing how they shape the perceptions and interactions of visitors. By examining these sensory dynamics, the research underscores how Assi Ghat's sensory environment not only reflects its cultural and spiritual essence but also actively participates in the continuous process of defining and re-defining its identity as a living heritage site. This multisensory approach emphasizes the importance of sensory engagement in understanding the holistic experience of those who visit and interact with this revered space.

Figure 1

Map of Assi Ghat along the sacred river Ganges

Source: Author

Visual Experience

The visual experience at Assi Ghat is a carefully orchestrated interplay of natural and human-made elements. The Ganges River itself is a visual anchor, providing a constant point of reference amidst the ever-changing activities on the ghat. The river's surface, reflecting the sky, acts as a canvas that transforms with the time of day and the changing seasons. During the monsoon, for instance, the river swells, altering the ghat's appearance and the activities it supports, while in the dry season, the receding waters reveal more of the ghat's steps, creating new spaces for gathering and ritual.

The architecture around Assi Ghat also plays a crucial role in shaping the visual experience. The temples and shrines, many of which are centuries old, stand as testaments to the enduring religious traditions of the area. Their intricate carvings and vibrant colours are not just decorative but serve to convey spiritual narratives and cultural values. The juxtaposition of these historic structures with the more recent additions such as the murals and public art projects that have emerged in recent years creates a layered visual narrative that speaks to the ghat's evolving identity.

Figure 2

View of Assi Ghat, Varanasi after Sunrise

Source: meunierd, Shutterstock

The visual experience is further enriched by the presence of diverse groups of people who visit the ghat. The attire of the visitors, from the traditional dhotis and sarees of the locals to the casual wear of tourists – adds to the visual diversity. The interplay of light and shadow, particularly during the early morning and late afternoon, accentuates the textures and forms of the ghat, creating a dynamic visual environment that is both meditative and vibrant.

Moreover, the visual experience at Assi Ghat is not limited to the immediate surroundings but extends to the broader context of Varanasi. The sight of distant ghats, the iconic spires of temples, and the horizon where the river meets the sky all contribute to a sense of place that is deeply connected to the larger spiritual landscape of the city. This connection between the local and the universal is a key aspect of the visual experience at Assi Ghat, reinforcing its significance as a spiritual and cultural hub. The visual experience at Assi Ghat is dominated by the majestic view of the Ganges River, which stretches out into the horizon, reflecting the changing hues of the sky. The steps of the ghat, lined with temples, shrines, and historic buildings, create a visually complex environment where the sacred and the everyday coexist. The vibrant colours of the boats, the saffron robes of the priests, and the array of offerings create a dynamic and colourful landscape. At dawn, the ghat is bathed in the soft light of the rising sun, creating a serene and almost ethereal atmosphere. This is a time when pilgrims and locals alike gather for the morning Aarti, a ritual that is as much a visual spectacle as it is a spiritual one. The flickering flames of the lamps, the flowers floating on the river, and the rhythmic movements of the priests contribute to a visual narrative that speaks of devotion, continuity, and reverence.

As the day progresses, the ghat becomes a hive of activity. The visual experience shifts as vendors set up stalls selling religious paraphernalia, tourists take photographs, and children play along the steps. The constant flow of people, each engaged in their own rituals or routines, adds to the visual complexity of the ghat. The contrast of the sacred and the secular, the ancient and the modern, creates a visual landscape that is both timeless and ever-changing.

Auditory Experience

The auditory experience at Assi Ghat is equally rich and multifaceted, with the soundscape serving as a key component of the sensory environment. The constant presence of the river, with its gentle lapping against the ghat's steps, provides a soothing auditory backdrop that anchors the space. This natural sound is often contrasted with the more dynamic human activities that take place throughout the day.

In the early morning, the soundscape is dominated by the sounds of devotional practices. The chanting of mantras, often amplified by loudspeakers, can be heard from a distance, creating an auditory beacon that draws people to the ghat. The rhythmic ringing of temple bells, the sound of conch shells being blown, and the collective singing of hymns all contribute to a powerful auditory experience that is both spiritual and communal. These sounds are not just heard; they are felt, resonating through the body and creating a sense of connection with the divine.

As the day progresses, the soundscape becomes more varied. The calls of vendors selling flowers, incense, and religious paraphernalia add a lively, rhythmic quality to the environment. The occasional sound of a priest reciting prayers or conducting rituals at one of the smaller shrines adds to the auditory richness, while the laughter of children playing and the conversations of locals and tourists alike create a lively, bustling atmosphere.

The evening *Aarti* at Assi Ghat is another key auditory event. The synchronized chanting, the ringing of bells, and the clapping of hands create an intense auditory experience that envelops participants and spectators alike. The sound of the *Aarti* carries across the river, mingling with the sounds from other ghats, creating a layered auditory landscape that is unique to Varanasi.

Olfactory Experience

The connection between the mind and the sense of smell is deeply rooted in human physiology. This direct connection explains why certain smells can evoke strong emotional responses or bring back vivid memories. The olfactory experience at Assi Ghat is deeply intertwined with the spiritual and everyday activities that take place there. The scent of the Ganges River, while subtle, is a constant presence. It is a scent that carries with it the weight of history and spirituality, evoking the river's role as both a life-giving force and a sacred entity in Hindu tradition.

Incense plays a central role in this olfactory landscape of Assi Ghat. The burning of incense is a common practice at the temples and shrines, as well as during the daily Aarti ceremonies. The scent of incense, often a blend of sandalwood, jasmine, and other aromatic woods, permeates the air, creating an atmosphere that is both calming and uplifting. The scent of sandalwood, for instance, is known for its calming properties, helping to quiet the mind and prepare it for meditation or prayer. Jasmine, on the other hand, is often associated with purity and the divine, further enhancing the spiritual atmosphere at the ghat. For those who regularly visit the ghat, the smell of incense becomes intertwined with their personal spiritual journeys, creating a lasting connection between the place and the emotions it evokes. Even for first-time visitors, the scent of incense can leave a lasting impression, embedding itself in their memory as a symbol of their spiritual experience at Assi Ghat.

The fragrance of flowers also enriches the olfactory experience at Assi Ghat is, which plays a central role in the spiritual rituals conducted along the river. Marigolds, roses, and other vibrant flowers are integral to the religious offerings made at the ghat. Their natural, sweet fragrance permeates the air, particularly during the morning and evening rituals, creating a sensory environment that is both serene and spiritually uplifting.

During these rituals, the scent of fresh flowers mingles with the aroma of incense, enhancing the sacred atmosphere of the ghat. As devotees offer these flowers at the shrines or gently place them on the river's surface, the air becomes imbued with their delicate fragrance. This floral scent not only adds to the sensory richness of the space but also serves as a symbolic offering to the divine, representing purity, devotion, and the ephemeral nature of life. The olfactory presence of these flowers, combined with their vibrant colours, contributes to a multisensory experience that deepens the connection between the devotees and the spiritual essence of Assi Ghat, reinforcing the ghat's role as a place of worship and reflection.

The olfactory experience is further enriched by the scents of food being prepared and consumed at the ghat. Street food vendors offer a variety of snacks and sweets, each with its distinct aroma. The smell of frying samosas/snacks, brewing chai/tea, and roasting peanuts adds a savoury dimension to the olfactory landscape, blending seamlessly with the sacred scents of incense and flowers.

The interplay of these scents creates a complex olfactory environment that is reflective of the ghat's dual role as both a sacred space and a social hub. The olfactory experience at Assi Ghat is not just a passive one; it actively engages visitors, drawing them into the sensory world of the ghat and connecting them to the broader spiritual and cultural traditions of Varanasi.

Tactile Experience

The tactile experience at Assi Ghat is a profound aspect of the sensory engagement that visitors encounter, deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual fabric of the space. The textures of the environment and the physical interactions of visitors with the ghat contribute

significantly to its unique sensory landscape, offering a direct and intimate connection to the history, heritage, and spirituality of this sacred site.

The steps of Assi Ghat, smoothened by centuries of use, are perhaps the most immediate tactile element that visitors encounter. These steps, made of stone, bear the marks of time, reflecting the countless feet that have trodden them over the years. In the early morning, the coolness of these stones underfoot offers a refreshing contrast to the warmth they retain later in the day when bathed in sunlight. This shift in temperature throughout the day creates a dynamic tactile experience, allowing visitors to physically feel the passage of time and the changing rhythms of the day. The worn texture of the steps serves as a tangible reminder of the ghat's long history, connecting visitors to the generations of pilgrims and locals who have come before them.

One of the most significant tactile experiences at Assi Ghat is the act of touching the water of the Ganges. For many visitors, this is not merely a physical sensation but a deeply symbolic act. The cool, flowing water of the river is believed to purify and renew the soul, making the act of submerging in the Ganges or simply sprinkling its water over oneself a central ritual for pilgrims. This tactile interaction with the river is imbued with spiritual significance, as the water is considered sacred, capable of cleansing both physical impurities and spiritual burdens. The sensation of the water, cool and invigorating, is a moment of connection with the divine, an experience that transcends the physical and touches the spiritual core of the individual.

Beyond the steps and the river, the tactile interactions at Assi Ghat extend to various other objects that visitors encounter. The soft petals of flowers offered at the shrines, for instance, provide a gentle contrast to the rough texture of the ropes used in the boats that line the riverbank. These flowers, often marigolds or roses, are integral to the religious rituals performed at the ghat, and their soft texture adds a layer of sensory engagement that enhances the act of offering. Similarly, the smooth surface of prayer beads, often held in hand during meditation or prayer, offers a tactile rhythm that aids in focus and contemplation.

These tactile experiences, while they may seem subtle, are crucial in connecting visitors to the material and spiritual essence of Assi Ghat. They provide a direct, physical link to the space, allowing individuals to engage with the ghat not just visually or aurally, but through touch, creating a multisensory experience that is both immersive and deeply personal. In this way, the tactile elements of Assi Ghat play a vital role in the process of placemaking, helping to anchor visitors in the present moment while also connecting them to the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of the ghat.

Gustatory Experience

The gustatory experience at Assi Ghat, though not as immediately noticeable as the visual or auditory elements, contributes subtly yet meaningfully to the sensory landscape of this sacred space. The ghat is surrounded by a variety of stalls and vendors offering traditional foods and sweets that are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Varanasi. These offerings, such as lassi, laddoos (a spherical sweet made from flour, sugar, and ghee), jalebis (deep-fried batter soaked

in sugar syrup), and fresh fruits, are not merely consumables but are imbued with cultural and spiritual significance. The act of consuming these foods, whether as a part of religious rituals or as a casual snack during a visit, enhances the overall sensory experience by engaging the sense of taste in a context that is both familiar and spiritually resonant.

For many visitors and pilgrims, the consumption of food at Assi Ghat is closely tied to their spiritual practices. One of the most significant aspects of this is the consumption of prasadfood that has been offered to the deity and is then distributed to devotees. Prasad is often simple, such as a piece of fruit or a sweet like laddoo, but its simplicity belies its profound spiritual importance. The act of eating prasad is seen as a form of divine communion; it is believed to carry the blessings of the deity, and consuming it is a way for devotees to internalize these blessings. In this way, the taste of prasad becomes a sensory experience that is deeply intertwined with faith and devotion.

This connection between taste and spirituality adds a unique dimension to the sensory landscape of Assi Ghat. The act of tasting food in this context is not just about nourishment or pleasure; it is about participating in a ritual that has been carried out for generations, linking the individual to the broader spiritual and cultural traditions of Varanasi. Whether it is the sweet richness of a laddoo or the refreshing coolness of lassi, these gustatory experiences reinforce the sacred atmosphere of Assi Ghat, making the sense of taste an integral part of the spiritual journey undertaken by those who visit this revered site.

Activity Mapping

The sensory experience at Assi Ghat is closely tied to the various activities that take place at the ghat throughout the day. Activity mapping helps to visualize how different sensory experiences are distributed across the ghat and how they interact with each other to create a cohesive sensory environment.

- **Morning Aarti and Yoga Sessions:** The early morning hours are dominated by the spiritual and physical activities of the Aarti and yoga sessions. These activities are concentrated in specific areas of the ghat, creating zones of intense sensory engagement where the visual, auditory, and olfactory elements are most pronounced.

Figure 3

Morning Aarti (Prayers) at Assi Ghat, before Sunrise

Source: Author

- **Pilgrims Bathing:** The riverbank is a key site for tactile and olfactory experiences, where pilgrims engage in ritual bathing. The act of submerging in the Ganges and the associated sensory rituals form a central part of the sensory landscape.

Figure 4

Pilgrims taking a bathe in river Ganges at Assi Ghat

Source: Author

- **Cultural Performances and Gatherings**: In the early morning, Assi Ghat transforms into a cultural stage, with cultural performances and gatherings that heighten the auditory and visual experiences. These activities attract large crowds, further amplifying the sensory intensity of the ghat.

Figure 5
A Group of Young Girls Performing Group Chanting of Mantras

Source: Author

- **Daily Chores and Social Interactions**: Throughout the day, the ghat is a site of continuous social interaction and daily chores, such as washing clothes, preparing food, and conducting business. These activities contribute to the sensory diversity of the ghat, making it a living, breathing space where everyday life and spirituality coexist.

Figure 6
A Boatman Repairing His Boat at the Ghat in a Busy Afternoon

Source: Author

- **Recreational Activities**: The presence of tourists adds another layer to the sensory experience, with activities such as photography, boat rides, and guided tours contributing to the visual and auditory landscape.

Figure 7
A Group of Tourists/Pilgrims/Visitors Sitting on Boat, Enjoying Views of Ghats

Source: Author

The sensory and activity mapping of Assi Ghat reveals the intricate ways in which sensory experiences are interwoven with the social, cultural, and spiritual activities that define the ghat. The mapping at Assi Ghat reveals a dynamic and layered environment where spiritual, cultural, and everyday life converge to create a rich, multisensory experience. Each activity at the ghat from the serene morning *Aarti* and yoga sessions to the ritualistic bathing of pilgrims, contributes to the distinct sensory landscape that defines Assi Ghat. These activities are not just isolated events but are deeply interconnected, forming a cohesive tapestry of sensory engagement that reflects the ghat's identity as a living heritage site.

The morning *Aarti* and yoga sessions, for instance, mark the beginning of the day with a powerful combination of visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli. The sight of devotees, the sound of chants, and the aroma of incense and flowers create a concentrated zone of sensory intensity that sets the spiritual tone for the rest of the day. Similarly, the ritualistic bathing along the riverbank is a tactile and olfactory experience that holds deep spiritual significance for pilgrims, further enriching the sensory environment of the ghat.

Cultural performances and gatherings add another layer to the sensory experience, transforming the ghat into a vibrant cultural stage that amplifies both visual and auditory stimuli. These events, often drawing large crowds, create a shared sensory experience that fosters a sense of community and collective participation in the cultural life of the ghat. The sensory richness of Assi Ghat is further enhanced by the everyday activities of the local population, such as washing clothes, preparing food, and conducting business, which infuse the space with the sounds, sights, and smells of daily life.

Tourist activities, including photography, boat rides, and guided tours, introduce yet another dimension to the sensory landscape. The presence of tourists adds a global perspective to the local culture, and their interactions with the environment contribute to the visual and auditory diversity of the ghat. The sensory mapping thus illustrates how Assi Ghat is not just a static

historical site but a living, breathing space where spirituality, culture, and daily life seamlessly intersect. This dynamic interplay of activities and sensory experiences is what makes Assi Ghat a unique and vibrant heritage site, continuously evolving while retaining its deep spiritual essence.

Digital Placemaking and the Sacred Virtual Environment

In an increasingly digital world, the concept of placemaking has evolved beyond the confines of physical spaces (Maciej, 2024). Digital placemaking, an emerging field within urban design and cultural studies, explores how digital technologies can be leveraged to create, enhance, and preserve a "sense of place" in virtual environments. This concept is particularly relevant for culturally significant sites like Assi Ghat, where the sensory and spiritual experiences are deeply embedded in the physical environment. The challenge and opportunity of digital placemaking lie in replicating these experiences in a virtual setting, ensuring that the cultural essence and emotional impact of the place are preserved for a global audience.

The Concept of Digital Placemaking

Digital placemaking refers to the use of digital tools and platforms to create, sustain, and enrich the sense of place in both physical and virtual spaces. Unlike traditional placemaking, which focuses on the tangible aspects of urban design, digital placemaking encompasses a broader spectrum, including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), digital mapping, and social media platforms. These technologies allow for the creation of immersive experiences that can replicate, augment, or even entirely create new spaces that resonate with users in a meaningful way.

In the context of heritage sites like Assi Ghat, digital placemaking serves multiple purposes. It can be a tool for preservation, allowing the replication of the site's sensory landscape in a digital format. It also facilitates access, enabling people who may never visit the physical site to experience its cultural and spiritual significance. Additionally, digital placemaking can act as an educational platform, providing interactive and immersive learning experiences about the history, rituals, and cultural practices associated with the site.

Replicating Sensory Experiences in the Virtual Environment

One of the most challenging aspects of digital placemaking is the replication of sensory experiences (De La Fuente Suárez, 2024). At Assi Ghat, the sensory landscape encompassing visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile elements plays a crucial role in creating a deep, immersive experience for visitors. The sights of the Ganges at sunrise, the sounds of the morning Aarti, the smell of incense, and the feel of the cool stone steps are all integral to the experience of the ghat. Translating these elements into a digital environment requires innovative approaches that go beyond mere visual representation (Sparkes, 2009).

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies offer promising solutions for replicating these sensory experiences (Hill-Smith, 2011). VR is capable to create fully immersive environments that simulate the physical space of Assi Ghat, complete with detailed visual and auditory cues. Users can "walk" through the ghat, hear the sounds of the river and the chanting of prayers, and even interact with virtual representations of the people and activities that define the space. AR, on the other hand, can overlay digital elements onto the physical world, allowing users to experience Assi Ghat's sensory landscape in real-time, wherever they are.

For instance, a virtual representation of the morning *Aarti* could include not only the visual and auditory elements but also olfactory cues, such as the scent of incense, which could be simulated using scent-dispensing devices. Tactile feedback, such as the sensation of touching the stone steps or feeling the cool water of the Ganges, could be replicated through haptic technologies. These multisensory simulations can create a rich, immersive experience that closely mirrors the physical reality of Assi Ghat.

Preserving the Sacredness of Rituals in the Digital Space

One of the challenges of digital placemaking in sacred environments is ensuring that the sacredness of rituals and practices is preserved in the transition to the virtual space. Rituals like the *Aarti*, yoga sessions, and ritual bathing at Assi Ghat are not merely performative acts; they are imbued with deep spiritual significance and are central to the identity of the ghat. In translating these rituals into the digital realm, it is crucial to maintain their sacredness and authenticity.

To achieve this, digital placemaking must go beyond mere replication of the physical environment. It must incorporate the symbolic meanings and cultural significance of these rituals into the design of the virtual space. For example, a virtual *Aarti* ceremony could include not only the visual and auditory elements of the ritual but also provide contextual information about the significance of each component, the history of the ritual, and its role in the spiritual life of the ghat. Interactive elements could allow users to participate in the ritual in a meaningful way, such as lighting a virtual lamp or offering virtual flowers, thereby creating a sense of involvement and reverence.

Cultural Preservation and Global Accessibility

Digital placemaking at Assi Ghat has significant implications for cultural preservation. As urbanization and environmental changes continue to impact historic sites, the ability to preserve these locations in a digital format becomes increasingly important (Calcatinge, 2020). Digital archives of Assi Ghat, including 3D models, VR experiences, and digital recordings of rituals and performances, can serve as a long-term record of the site's cultural and spiritual significance. These digital resources can be accessed by future generations, ensuring that the essence of Assi Ghat is preserved even if the physical site undergoes changes or degradation.

Furthermore, digital placemaking democratizes access to Assi Ghat, making it possible for people around the world to experience its cultural and spiritual richness. Virtual environments can be designed to be accessible from anywhere, breaking down geographical barriers and allowing a global audience to engage with the site (da Silva et al., 2019). This has particular relevance for diasporic communities and those with limited mobility, who may otherwise never have the opportunity to visit Varanasi.

By offering virtual experiences that are immersive and emotionally resonant, digital placemaking can also foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Assi Ghat's cultural significance among people who may not be familiar with the site. This global accessibility can contribute to the preservation and dissemination of Varanasi's cultural heritage, ensuring that the stories, rituals, and traditions associated with Assi Ghat continue to be shared and celebrated worldwide.

Integrating Physical and Digital Placemaking Efforts

While digital placemaking offers exciting possibilities, it is most effective when integrated with physical placemaking efforts (Basaraba, 2023). The relationship between the physical and virtual environments should be symbiotic, with each enhancing the other. For example, digital tools can be used to enrich the experience of visiting Assi Ghat by providing visitors with AR-enhanced guides or virtual tours that offer deeper insights into the site's history and significance. Conversely, virtual representations of Assi Ghat can be informed by the sensory and cultural richness of the physical site, ensuring that the digital experience is as authentic and immersive as possible.

The integration of physical and digital placemaking efforts also opens up new avenues for community engagement and participation (Machidon et al., 2018). Digital platforms can facilitate collaborative placemaking, where local communities, cultural practitioners, and visitors contribute to the creation and curation of digital content related to Assi Ghat. This participatory approach ensures that the digital representations of the site remain dynamic and reflective of the living culture associated with the ghat.

Challenges and Considerations in Creating a Sacred Virtual Environment

Despite its potential, digital placemaking faces several challenges, particularly in the context of replicating the sensory and spiritual experiences of a place like Assi Ghat. One of the primary challenges is the technological limitations in fully capturing and simulating the multisensory environment of the ghat. One of the key challenges is maintaining the sacredness and authenticity of the rituals, practices, and cultural activities that define Assi Ghat. Digital representations of these elements must be carefully designed to respect their spiritual significance and cultural context. This requires collaboration with local communities, spiritual leaders, and cultural experts to ensure that the virtual environment accurately reflects the values and traditions of Assi Ghat.

Another consideration is the need to balance accessibility with exclusivity. While digital placemaking can make sacred spaces like Assi Ghat accessible to a global audience, it is important to recognize that some aspects of the ghat's spiritual and cultural life may be intended for a specific community or group of practitioners. In creating a virtual environment, it may be necessary to consider how to protect the integrity and privacy of certain rituals and practices, while still making the overall experience accessible to a wider audience.

Furthermore, the technical aspects of creating a virtual environment must be carefully managed to ensure a seamless and immersive experience. This includes the use of advanced technologies such as VR, AR, and immersive audio, as well as considerations related to user interface design, interactivity, and accessibility. The goal is to create a virtual environment that is not only visually and aurally engaging but also easy to navigate and interact with, ensuring that users can fully immerse themselves in the experience.

Additionally, there are ethical considerations related to the digitization of cultural heritage (Hespanhol, 2023). The creation of digital replicas must be done with sensitivity to the cultural and spiritual significance of the site, ensuring that the process respects the beliefs and practices of the local community (Tipnis, 2018). There is also a need to address issues of access and digital equity, ensuring that digital placemaking efforts do not exclude those who may lack the technological resources to engage with virtual environments (Chong et al., 2021).

Looking forward, the future of digital placemaking at Assi Ghat lies in the continued development of immersive technologies and the exploration of new ways to integrate physical and virtual experiences. As these technologies evolve, there will be greater opportunities to create digital environments that are not only visually accurate but also emotionally and spiritually resonant. Collaborative efforts between technologists, cultural practitioners, and local communities will be key to ensuring that digital placemaking at Assi Ghat and similar sacred sites remains authentic, inclusive, and deeply connected to the site's cultural essence.

Conclusion

The study has highlighted the essential role of sensory engagement in shaping the cultural, spiritual and communal identity of Assi Ghat, Varanasi. There is an exploration of ghat's unique multisensory environment based on its visuals, sounds, smells, textures and tastes that creates a deeply immersive environment for both locals and visitors. However, while the study proposes the potential of digital placemaking to preserve and replicate these sensory experiences, it acknowledges the current absence of a dedicated VR project for Assi Ghat. Unlike global benchmarks such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, which has been entirely digitized to enable immersive virtual exploration of its rich history and architecture. Varanasi's heritage including Assi Ghat, remains unexplored in the digital realm.

There are initiatives for creating solutions incorporating technology under the umbrella of Smart City Initiative for Varanasi which includes an interactive smart map (https://map.varanasismartcity.gov.in/varanasismartcity/index.html) providing relevant

information such as administrative boundaries, public services, religious places, education services, surveillance, health services, tourism services, recreation, transportation, water bodies, water line services, sewage services and drainage but lacks an sensitive approach to integrate the symbolism and intangible heritage of Varanasi. This gap may be attributed to several challenges, such as the complexity of replicating spiritual and cultural essence in a virtual medium. Another significant project Virtual Experience Museum, at Man Mandir Ghat in Varanasi, showcases different cultural aspects of the historic city through digital medium that integrates laser light show about the mythology and history of the sacred river Ganges; ambience of street flows of Varanasi; replicas of staple culinary experiences, such as Banarasi Paan (shops serving betel leaves/ mouth fresheners); classical music etc. This project is an advanced effort in the direction of integrating digital tools for user engagement in the museum. However, the project caters to users present on site and doesn't involve the features of a virtual museum providing a global accessibility.

These limitations highlight a gap in approach to integrate technology with living heritage sites, Unlike static monuments, the dynamic, ritualistic nature of spaces like Assi Ghat demands a more nuanced and collaborative digital strategy.

From a critical perspective, this study acknowledges the spiritual and philosophical challenges of digitalizing sacred sites. While VR and digital platforms can democratize access, making these sites available to those who cannot visit physically, there is a risk of oversimplification, commodification, and decontextualization of the spiritual experience. The challenge lies in preserving the authenticity and integrity of Assi Ghat's rituals, activities, and cultural narratives without reducing them to digital artifacts stripped of their sacred essence.

However, the potential benefits of a well-executed digital replication cannot be overlooked. An immersive digital version of Assi Ghat can expand global accessibility, foster cross-cultural understanding, and provide a tool for education and heritage preservation. This study advocates for a balanced and ethical approach to digital placemaking. The digitization of sites like Assi Ghat must involve local communities, heritage professionals and technologists. It should prioritize authenticity and sensitivity to ensure that the spiritual and cultural essence of the ghat remains intact.

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Online News, Public Health and Misinformation: Their Impact on Foreign News Consumers Living in China

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Abstract

This article explores online news consumption patterns among foreign news consumers living in China, with a particular focus on the correlation between public health and misinformation. During a public health emergency, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for accurate and timely health information has become more urgent, especially as the increasing amount of misinformation on digital platforms (e.g. WeChat, Weibo, websites) has complicated the situation and continues to create cultural barriers for its audience. By examining how foreigners in China develop and live their news consumption habits, this study aims to investigate the impact of misinformation on their perceptions and actions regarding public health. The findings are expected to serve as references for organizations and policymakers with the purpose of improving communication strategies to better support foreign communities in China during public health crises.

Keywords: China, media consumption, foreigners, misinformation, public health

Research on the consumption of online news and the spread of misinformation has seen a significant surge over the past decade (Zhang et al., 2024). This surge is largely due to the global shift towards digital media and the increasing concerns about the reliability and credibility of news outlets (Bhattacherjee, 2022; Fletcher & Park, 2017). This dynamic is not merely a technological shift, but also a cultural transformation that is deeply intertwined with audience's national identities and social paradigms of the place where they live (Abrar et al., 2023; Borkovich & Breese-Vitelli, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reshaped news consumption habits of expatriates living in China. They increasingly relied on digital platforms for timely and accurate information. One expatriate highlighted the urgency and anxiety surrounding access to medication: "A lot of people are posting on social media right now, asking, 'How do I get medication?' How do I get fever medication? It's not available in the pharmacies. That makes it much scarier for them" (Inskeep, 2022, para. 16). Another expatriate expressed the psychological toll of constant exposure to distressing news: "The greatest challenge to me this time was that I feel a lot of psychological pressure because whenever I turn on the computer and look on the Internet or sometimes watch TV, all the news is heartbreaking" (Nam et al., 2022, p. 6). These experiences underscore the double-edged nature of digital news consumption during a public health emergency, where access to information was vital for survival but also anxiety-provoking.

People living in China grapple with this shift, expressing an ambivalent relationship with news digestion. On the one hand, they rely on digital media for timely and relevant information, but on the other hand, they express concerns about misinformation and media censorship (Lu et al., 2020; Wu, 2021). This ambivalence is shaped by various factors such as language barriers, cultural norms, and attitudes towards information sources (Lai, 2021; Sun, 2014; Xue & Xu, 2021). Also, concerns have been raised about the role of algorithmic curation in shaping narratives, reinforcing the "status quo" of a controlled media environment, and perpetuating the spread of misinformation (Lee & Wei, 2022; Raza & Aslam, 2024; Shin, 2024). These concerns underscore the power dynamics inherent in the digital media landscape and the cultural implications of these dynamics.

Many foreign news consumers in China, however, possess the technical know-how to navigate this complex media landscape, which is not merely a matter of individual choice, but is also shaped by cultural identities, societal structures, and power relations (Geers, 2020). One strategy is to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and other technologies to access international news sources, bypassing the constraints erected by existing media censorship (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This strategy, while technologically driven, also reflects cultural and social motivations, such as the desire for cultural connection, the need for multidimensional narratives, and a general resistance against content censorship (Andi, 2021; Martin & Nightingale, 2019)

To date, however, comprehensive data on how foreign news consumers in China develop online news habits, especially during public health crises, is limited. Therefore, this research seeks to

address these knowledge gaps by exploring how foreign news consumers in China interact with online news during public health crises. By conducting in-depth interviews with participants from 13 countries, this study examines the extent to which they (1) trust or distrust online news sources, (2) adopt strategies to access the information they need, and finally, (3) show an association between the use of these strategies and their perceptions of health-related misinformation.

Literature Review

Digital innovation has reshaped global news consumption, creating a challenging atmosphere for audiences from different cultural backgrounds (Liu & Yang, 2022; Lu et al., 2020). This review discusses how online news platforms (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, websites) and public health events impact the news consumption habits of expatriates in China. Factors such as digital platforms, trust in media, and misinformation can significantly influence this engagement, especially during public health crises (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020; Park, 2024).

The reliance of foreign news consumers in China upon news platforms highlights their indispensable role in bridging the information gap (Ang & Martin, 2024). Given the dynamic media environment in China, a deep understanding of the relationships between migrant information needs and news accessibility in China becomes increasingly vital. To achieve this, research of this specific population is thus necessary.

Media Environment and Online News Consumption

Before the advent of the Internet, mainstream media dominated the media landscape, disseminating information and shaping public opinion (Deacon et al., 2024). Media ownership and business decisions aligned with the trend of journalism convergence, leading to the concentration of media cartels in the market (Yuan, 2011). Some media outlets served as mouthpieces for powerful economic interests (Coyer et al., 2007), often neglecting the voices of minority groups. One of the most evident phenomena here is that biased media coverage during the pandemic in the US exacerbated race discrimination against Asian Americans, leading to a significant rise in anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes at the time (Gover et al., 2020). This kind of neglect partly led to the rise of internet-based media (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010), and platforms such as forums, blogs, and social media continued to gain credibility as they integrate user-generated content into news publishing and dissemination (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014).

In today's era of constant connectivity, social media have become integral to online news circulation, with media organizations promoting content diffusion on these platforms and enabling user redistribution (Singer, 2014). About 93% of U.S. adults consume news online, with 67% via social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), a proportion even higher in Southern Europe and Latin America (Newman et al., 2017). The convenience and immediacy of digital platforms make them popular among news consumers (Mu, 2024), serving as conduits for news and curating information through algorithms.

However, as consumers juggle information from various outlets, AI-driven personalization by news platforms has raised renewed concerns regarding "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001), which neglect diversity, fragment public debate (Tewksbury et al., 2008) and confront users with stereotypes and biases related to gender, politics, religion, nationality, and social class (Saran, 2023). Algorithm-driven news feeds, while increasing usable information, can contribute to information overload and decision-making impairment, leading some to limit or cease social media use, a phenomenon known as *digital disconnection* or digitox (Aldoory & Van Dyke, 2006; Bucher, 2020; Foot, 2014; Hampton, 2010; Syvertsen, 2020; Woodstock, 2014; Wilcockson et al., 2019). Disconnection, coupled with misinformation exposure, polarizes public debate and impacts political understanding and social consciousness (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001). Despite declining trust in news, journalists and audiences navigate these platforms, relying on various factors to evaluate news trustworthiness (Arguedas et al., 2023), fundamentally reshaping information access strategies.

In China, media is governed by strict regulation, with rigorous controls over the spread of information, which limits the diversity of viewpoints (Ditlhokwa et al., 2023; Tai, 2014; Tang & Iyengar, 2011). Particularly, mainstream media are under tight control by the Chinese government, with the party-state imposing authority over official information (Zeng et al., 2017). More recently, this control also extends to social media like WeChat and Weibo, which often serve as alternative sources of information and a less regulated zone for discourse (Zeng et al., 2017). The government heavily censors social media through intermediary liability, relying on private companies to implement content controls (Ruan et al., 2020). Algorithmic platforms like Jinri Toutiao, a news application developed by ByteDance, are forced to manage a complex relationship with the regulatory body and public expectations (Kuai et al., 2022). Also, WeChat's news-sharing functionality demonstrates how platform affordances enable and constrain user participation in news distribution, reflecting the interplay between commercial interests and state regulations (Xu, 2022). This regulatory framework heavily impacts the availability and credibility of news sources and creates an environment where state-sanctioned narratives dominate, often weakening the credibility of news outlets that do not align with government perspectives (Yin et al., 2023). Also, China's censorship practices often impact upon foreign websites without official notice, making it challenging to access them through legal means (Chu, 2017). Consequently, foreigners in China often resort to VPNs to access news they need, which can be inconsistent and unreliable due to censorship fluctuations (Xu et al., 2011). Officially, the use of VPNs is prohibited, but this prohibition is rarely enforced.

For foreigners in China, finding reliable news is therefore challenging, mostly due to language barriers and censorship. Language proficiency is crucial for comprehending and evaluating local news sources, and many expatriates grapple with the nuances of the Chinese language, leading to potential misinterpretations or limited access to critical information (Liu et al., 2023). Moreover, the Chinese government's censorship policies restrict the availability of foreign news outlets, often distorting or suppressing information widely accessible outside of China (Chen, 2023). These barriers often restrict audiences from relying on local platforms for news (Hilbig & Riaz, 2023; Ling et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, empirical studies indicate that many users often use VPNs to access international news, thus staying informed about

global events using a broader base of news bouquets (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). The limited availability of international news in China can worsen this reliance, making consumers feel disconnected (Lissitsa et al., 2024). There is also a fear that reliance on local platforms can limit exposure to more diverse perspectives, leading to a narrower understanding of global issues (Geniets, 2010).

Furthermore, the clash between China's actions regarding Internet control and its goal of opening up to foreign investment and trade creates a paradox that also influences the foreign diaspora in China (Endeshaw, 2004). As stakeholders in both their resident countries and homeland, they find themselves at the intersection of these conflicting points. (Tan et al., 2021). As a result, this has repercussions for their decisions regarding study, employment, business, and even personal ties with China.

Trust in Media, Misinformation and Public Health

Trust in media plays a pivotal role in shaping public health narratives and the spread of misinformation, particularly in the context of online news consumption. A significant body of research has explored the relationship between media trust and news consumption, suggesting that trust can influence the acceptance and spread of information, including misinformation (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Historically, trust in news media in the US exhibited a steady decline following a period of high confidence from the 1950s to the 1970s (Ladd, 2012). While global trust in news remains relatively stable at 40% (Newman, 2024), the factors influencing media trust have become increasingly complex.

Research also indicates that demographic characteristics, media consumption habits, and perceived credibility of news sources significantly impact trust levels (Coninck et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2022). Younger audiences tend to favor non-mainstream news outlets, while those with lower levels of news interest are also more likely to consume alternative news sources (Fletcher & Park, 2017). The proliferation of digital media has further complicated the trust landscape. Consumers are more inclined to use non-mainstream news sources than ever before (Newman et al., 2017). Social media, while offering increased access to information, are often associated with lower levels of trust compared to traditional media due to the rapid dissemination of oftentimes unverified content (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Fletcher & Park, 2017 ;Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Consequently, individuals who primarily rely on social media for news tend to exhibit lower trust in news overall (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

The relationship between trust and news consumption is bidirectional. While trust influences media choices, news consumption patterns also shape trust levels. Fletcher and Park (2017) found that individuals with low trust in traditional media are more likely to turn to non-mainstream sources and engage in online news participation. Conversely, continued consumption of trusted news outlets can reinforce trust over time (Lee, 2010). However, the perceived increasing prevalence of misinformation has eroded public trust in factual

information. In the "post-truth" era, personal biases, anecdotes, and popular opinions often outweigh evidence-based arguments (Cooke, 2017). Developing critical thinking skills and media literacy is crucial for discerning credible information from misinformation (Rosenbaum et al., 2008; Stanovich et al., 2013).

The Chinese media environment presents unique challenges and opportunities for trust-building, as well as an exclusive context for studying media trust. State control and censorship can lead to both high levels of trust in official media sources, due to their perceived authority, and skepticism due to perceived propaganda (Shirk, 2011). While research on trust in media among foreign consumers in China is limited, studies on Chinese citizens' trust in media suggest that credibility, transparency, and perceived neutrality are key factors influencing trust (Lee, 2010). These factors may also be relevant for foreign consumers, although their effect may be moderated by other factors such as cultural background, language proficiency, and political attitudes.

During the H1N1 pandemic, information used to improve protection and prevention was difficult to find on the Internet (Gesualdo et al., 2010). Almost a decade later, polarization in politics and media can facilitate the diffusion of misinformation, and one of the countries where such a situation occurred was the US during COVID-19 (Allcott et al., 2020; Motta et al., 2020).

China's controlled media environment has significant implications for the flow of information, including health-related news. Studies have shown that cultural norms and values shape individuals' trust in news sources and their susceptibility to misinformation (Baqir et al., 2024). In this context, foreign audiences in China may exhibit unique patterns of trust and vulnerability to misinformation compared to other populations. While domestic media outlets adhere to official narratives, foreign news consumers often rely on international sources for information (Lu et al., 2022; Wei, 2013). This reliance, however, can lead to exposure to both accurate and misleading information, complicating public health communication efforts (Wang et al., 2023).

The production of health news is often influenced by information subsidy, in which external sources provide pre-packaged information by professional individuals or organizations to journalists (Len-Ríos et al., 2009). This practice is particularly prevalent in science and health reporting due to the specialized nature of its topics (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990). The reliance on information subsidy can expedite news production but can also increase the potential for misinformation to enter the news cycle. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the devastating consequences of misinformation on public health. Literature indicates that media have responded to it in various manners. While some media have focused on disseminating evidence-based facts about COVID-19, others minimized the severity of the virus, spreading rumors and misinformation, and accusing China of the outbreak (e.g., Chiu, 2020).

These contrasting messages not only caused deep divisions within the public but also led to dangerous behaviors such as non-compliance with reasonable COVID-19 prevention policies (Mervosh et al., 2020), violence against those attempting to implement such practices

(MacFarquhar, 2020), and discrimination against Asians who were accused of being the source of COVID-19 (Ruiz et al., 2020). Conversely, in China, the US was accused of introducing the virus to China (Brito, 2020). Thus, the spread of misinformation contributed to public confusion, mistrust in health authorities, and harmful behaviors (Acemoglu et al., 2023; Rocha et al., 2021).

From a technical standpoint, the role of digital platforms has been significantly influenced by the spread of misinformation, which was accelerated by AI-driven algorithms prioritizing engagement over accuracy (Ferrara et al., 2020). The dissemination of viral content, which can inadvertently prioritize misinformation, can result in widespread public health risks (Pathak et al., 2023). The role of technology in public health misinformation is evident in the spread of fake news during health crises. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about vaccines and treatments proliferated on social media, undermining public health efforts (Dhanani & Franz, 2020; Nutbeam & Lloyd, 2021). The persistence of misinformation can make it difficult to debunk, as it shows that such opposition can undermine one's worldview (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). For foreign news consumers in China, the use of VPNs increased their exposure to international social media platforms and such content, but it also heightens the risk of encountering misinformation on health prevalent on such platforms (Xu et al., 2011).

Moreover, news consumers may also suffer a psychological impact from health misinformation which can lead to anxiety, fear, and mistrust in health authorities, hindering effective public health responses (Rocha et al., 2021). These negative effects are intensified by the social distancing and quarantine foreigners experienced, making them even more susceptible to outside misinformation (Stewart et al., 2024).

Research indicates that repeated exposure to misinformation can create false beliefs and resistance to corrective information (Baqir et al., 2024). For foreign news consumers in China, the psychological toll of navigating a complex information landscape can be significant. Therefore, public health strategies must address the psychological dimensions of misinformation by providing clear, consistent, and trustworthy information to mitigate its impact. Bridgman and colleagues (2020) argue that if efforts to minimize the spread of misinformation on social media are not successful, this could potentially compromise the large-scale social efforts needed to combat public health emergencies. Similarly, Donovan (2020) suggests that the spread of misinformation on social media poses significant threats to public health and calls on social media platforms to focus more on reducing the flow of misinformation.

In response to the research gap, this research explores how expatriates in China deal with health-related information amid public health emergencies, thereby contributing to the existing knowledge on news consumption in the Chinese context. The following research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: How does the media environment in China influence foreigners' online news consumption during a public health emergency?

RQ2: How does cultural background affect foreigners' trust in media and interpretation of online news during a public health emergency in China?

RQ3: How does cultural background impact foreigners' responses to misinformation related to public health in China?

Methodology

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the online news consumption habits of foreigners living in China. A total of 13 interviews were conducted, with nationalities of the interviewees being Filipino, Singaporean, Malaysian, Indonesian, Indian, American, Italian, French, and Irish. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 17 to 56, and their education levels went from high school to PhD.

Research Design

This research project employs an in-depth interview approach, targeting foreigners who lived in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative method is particularly suitable for generating new perspectives and evidence on emerging, complex, and relatively under-researched phenomena, as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994). This aligns well with the current study's focus. Additionally, the project adopts an inductive approach to understanding news consumers' preferences, anticipating common patterns from participants' responses.

Compared to quantitative methods, in-depth interviews foster closer connections with participants, capturing the emotions intertwined with their speech. This qualitative edge is crucial for research related to COVID-19, human emotions, and behaviors. Antunovic and colleagues (2018) highlight those quantitative methods "lack the depth that can be gained from qualitative approaches" (p. 6). In-depth interviews enable a deeper conceptual understanding of participants, especially in natural settings relevant to this project's public health context. Finally, rather than collecting static data through quantitative methods (Bryman, 2016), this research aims to explore the dynamic communication processes with fewer participants, but with more in-depth investigations.

Sampling Strategy

A snowball sampling strategy was employed due to the sensitivity of the research topic. The trust established through acquaintances and interconnectedness helped alleviate participants' concerns, encouraging them to share their thoughts during interviews. This approach did not aim for representativeness. Additionally, a cross-sectional study design was used to examine how public health influences participants' news consumption habits.

Data Collection

Participants were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately one hour, conducted either in-person or online, considering their schedules and health concerns during COVID-19. Participation was voluntary, and participants signed an Information Sheet and Consent Form to fully protect their rights. Additionally, before the interviews, a Concept Explanation Sheet was provided to help participants understand certain concepts and better prepare for the interview questions.

Based on the research questions, the interview was divided into six sections:

- *Personal Information*: Interviewees were asked to provide basic personal information, such as nationality, age, highest level of education, and occupation.
- *Background Mapping*: A generic question was used to map the background: "Could you please describe how COVID-19 has affected your life?"
- *Pre-COVID-19 News Consumption*: Interviewees discussed their news consumption habits before COVID-19, including their daily news consumption routine, preferred news media, news elements and categories, trust in various media, interaction with news, corresponding feelings, and how they interacted with others regarding the news they consumed.
- *During COVID-19 News Consumption*: Similar to the third section, interviewees were asked about their news consumption habits during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- *Post-COVID-19 News Consumption*: Interviewees were asked about their news consumption habits after the COVID-19 outbreak, mirroring the questions from the third section.
- *Comparative Analysis*: Two questions were used to compare the news consumption habits as COVID-19 developed.

Data Analysis

Specifically, coding was used to examine news consumption habits through several key dimensions:

- *Preferred Media Channels and Frequency*: This includes the types of media consumers favor (e.g., mainstream media, social media) and their typical usage patterns (e.g., morning, night).
- *Valued News Elements*: The aspects of news that consumers find most important (e.g., immediacy, proximity, prominence, oddity, conflict, suspense, emotion, and consequence).
- *Preferred News Categories*: The genres of news that attract readers (e.g., health, science, politics, China, world, fashion, food).
- *Media Interaction*: How consumers engage with news content (e.g., forward, share, ignore, skim).
- *Attitudes and Feelings*: The emotional responses elicited by news consumption (e.g.,

sad, worried, anxious, fear, fine, happy, joy, frightened).

Results

To explore how the pandemic has impacted foreigners living in China regarding access to news, we first asked interviewees a background-mapping question: "Could you please describe how COVID-19 has affected your life?" This question aimed to uncover changes in their daily lives, work, study, and communication, and how these changes influenced their news consumption habits. The responses were categorized into several aspects:

Travel

The COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent government policies, such as home quarantine and social distancing, severely restricted expatriates' travel. Border control policies and quarantine concerns prevented them from flying home, while domestic travel was hindered by the need to register multiple health codes, often without clear guidance. Early in the pandemic, severe outbreaks in parts of China and government lockdowns further discouraged travel. Additionally, the lack of procedures for foreigners to register health codes limited access to malls and restaurants. Public transportation restrictions led many to rely more on taxis, e-bikes, and bicycles.

Work and Study

While few interviewees changed jobs, many transitioned to working from home. Initially, they struggled with the blurred boundaries between work and life but eventually adapted. Due to the shrinking job market, many became more cautious and serious about their work, often working extra hours without overtime pay. Some focused more on COVID-19 due to professional sensitivities, seeking opportunities to contribute to combating the pandemic. The shift to online activities also posed challenges for teachers and students. Teachers reported decreased interaction with students and spent more time adapting to online teaching tools. Students faced visa uncertainties and discomfort with online education, preferring face-to-face learning and struggling with group work across time zones.

Social Life

Distancing policies and travel restrictions moved social interactions online. Families separated by the pandemic had to adjust to long periods apart, often relying on digital communication, which sometimes increased misinformation. Those who socialized in person took precautions like wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. Over time, many interviewees reported maturing in their relationships with family and friends.

Discrimination

Interviewees reported increased incidents of discrimination during COVID-19, often related to

race. The China Foreign Affairs Bureau was frequently mentioned as a resource for help, indicating the government's recognition of the need to protect foreigners' rights. However, there is still much to be done to raise awareness of openness and tolerance and reduce discrimination against foreign communities.

From Mainstream to Social: Consume to Survive

The media environment significantly influences news consumers' online habits, as examined through two distinct periods: before and during COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, most interviewees reported accessing media primarily through the Internet, spending considerable time on mainstream media and social media, with the latter being more frequently used. This shift to digital news consumption is a result of the rapidly evolving media landscape driven by the Internet. Popular platforms mentioned by interviewees included websites, news apps, social media, streaming platforms, and blogs.

The devices used for accessing news have also transitioned from print newspapers and magazines to digital devices such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and desktops. Mobile devices, in particular, have enabled news consumption anywhere and anytime, although some interviewees preferred consuming news at night when they had more free time. Despite the digital shift, many interviewees continued to follow recognized mainstream media through the Internet, such as BBC, CNN, and the *South China Morning Post* newspaper. This reflects mainstream media's efforts to expand distribution channels in the era of convergent journalism. However, some legacy media, like the *South China Morning Post*, have implemented paywalls on their websites. While some interviewees, particularly media professionals, subscribed to these services, others viewed them as overly commercial and not focused on improving reporting quality. Attracting news consumers' attention continues to remain a challenge for legacy media.

Generally, interviewees reported positive experiences with social media algorithms, enjoying a continuous stream of news tailored to their interests, especially younger users. Social media was also used for receiving and sharing news with online friends. However, issues such as misinformation and digital disconnection were also noted. Some interviewees preferred to consume news through multiple channels simultaneously, combining social media with traditional media like TV. Interviewee #4 (Indian) said,

> "While using social media, like WeChat, I also watched traditional media, like TV, to watch BBC, CNN, or just let it run in the background."

Also, interviewees favored news elements such as proximity, conflict, and immediacy, indicating that dramatic, self-interest-related, and timely news is more likely to capture their attention. However, these elements also make misinformation more likely to spread. There was no clear trend in preferred news categories before COVID-19, though interviewees living in China showed more interest in Chinese news due to proximity. Interaction with media was higher for news seen on social media, especially if it related to their home countries or interests.

Most interviewees felt neutral about the news they consumed, but proximity and conflict-related news were more likely to evoke emotions and trigger further engagement, such as sharing and commenting.

During COVID-19, most interviewees engaged more on social media due to the need for social interaction. Media outlets set agendas for reporting COVID-19 cases, preventative measures, government actions, and related outcomes. Interviewees emphasized the urgent need for immediate and accurate COVID-19 statistics for decision-making. Although their media consumption habits did not change significantly, they spent more time on COVID-19-related news to make essential survival decisions. Increased time on social media also led to more frequent commenting and sharing of news, partly due to the need to verify sources amidst rampant misinformation (Diddi & La Rose, 2006; Katz et al.,1973; Rubin, 1983).

> Also, interviewees expanded their local news sources, such as China Central Television and China News Agency, to understand the situation in China, given the potential bias in Western media reports. News categories that gained more attention during the pandemic included health, China, science, and politics, reflecting a prioritization of survival. Initially, interviewees read news stories carefully, driven by survival instincts. However, information overload led some to skim news to avoid fatigue.
>
> Interviewee #6 (Italian) stated, "Sometimes skimmed it, just got tired."

Interactions with media reached a high level during the pandemic. Interviewees frequently refreshed news apps and social media, spending significant time and energy identifying misinformation due to its impact on their lives. The need for social interaction drove social media usage and engagement much higher.

Consequently, all interviewees indicated that news consumption during COVID-19 caused their emotions to fluctuate, with attitudes toward news being closely related to its content due to the media's COVID-19 agenda. More than half of the interviewees experienced negative emotions such as arrogance, cynicism, hostility, distrust, depression, and suspicion during COVID-19 news consumption. This underscores the significant influence of the media environment on news consumers' perceptions of events.

Dilemmata Arising from the Variety of Cultural Backgrounds

Trust in media significantly impacts news consumption habits, influencing how people perceive, digest, and interact with news. This section examines this influence across two time periods: before and during COVID-19.

Prior to COVID-19, all interviewees expressed a preference for mainstream and social media, despite varying levels of trust in these sources. They typically consumed news online during their spare time, such as evenings and weekends. Notably, no interviewee claimed total trust in a single media outlet, indicating a degree of media suspicion. Overall, trust in mainstream

media was higher than in internet-based media (e.g., social media, blogs, forums, streaming platforms). Interviewee #1 said,

> "Anyone can post anything (on social media)."

Interviewees with higher education levels preferred to consume news in their own ways, regardless of the media channel, and tended to trust news circulated within their small social groups (e.g., small WeChat groups). Interviewee #3 stated,

> "I always doubt everything first."

More than half of the interviewees indicated they would verify news if genuinely interested or relying on it for decision-making, employing critical thinking skills. They typically used search engines (e.g., Google) or social media search functions (e.g., Meta, Twitter) to investigate key terms related to certain incidents or writers. Interviewee #11 explained,

> "If someone shares a story with me, and I'm thinking I've never heard of this organization before, then I would look it up."

However, especially those few interviewees who preferred consuming news through word of mouth (e.g., friends, colleagues) rather than print or digital media, might not bother to verify news, feeling they had more important tasks and thus avoiding spending too much time on news digestion. Most interviewees paid attention to proximity, conflict, and immediacy, with no clear preference for news categories due to their diversity. This indicates that news consumption habits are relatively fixed and not easily changed. Interestingly, low trust in news could lead to negative attitudes and high-frequency news participation. For example, some interviewees shared or commented on fake news to warn friends or family about its authenticity, often with anger. This finding aligns with Fletcher and Park's (2017) observation that negative feelings of low media trust can trigger higher news participation.

During COVID-19, interviewees continued to prefer mainstream and social media, consistent with responses to RQ1. However, they consumed news more frequently and preferred sources with higher trust levels. Since the outbreak, almost all interviewees reported a decline in media trust, especially in social media. They performed more cross-checks on news sources to uncover the truth behind various incidents, challenging their media literacy and critical thinking abilities. Trust in legacy media remained higher than in internet-based media, particularly social media:

> Interviewee #7: (I) partly trust them (media), (I want to) not to stay neutral … (legacy media are) more reliable than social media, (I) want to hear more different voices.

> Interviewee #1: Social media got lots of different or extreme opinions regarding COVID-19. People got affected a lot by biased news, so (I decided) not to trust a lot of social media websites.

Most interviewees used social media primarily for the latest news, emphasizing immediacy and proximity. However, this also exposed them to a higher likelihood of encountering fake news. They admitted encountering misinformation on almost all aspects of the pandemic, including the virus's origin, the true number of cases, and politically polarized news coverage. These issues impeded the flow of correct information, intensified echo chambers and filter bubbles, and sharply declined media trust.

Regarding biased news, some interviewees shared their perspectives on Chinese and Western media's COVID-19 coverage:

> Interviewee #1 (Indonesian): Outside of WeChat, there was much news in China, but seems to be Americanized/biased, a lot of Western news at that time was very biased, anti-China, which very frustrated me... (The) Western media underreported events a lot in the East, and other countries that within the atmosphere.

> Interviewee #4 (Indian): Dad's in India ... We are already here in China, where the situation was not so bad, but he was still very anxious which made us very crazy ... Dad sent me news articles which both drives me and my mom crazy, because the news articles could be very disappointing. So we had to told him to stop sending news articles. As a result, I received less. Felt better and happier.

More than half of the interviewees focused more on health, science, and China news during COVID-19. Despite decreased media trust, there was a tendency to pay more attention to political news. Interviewee #9 (Malaysian) explained:

> Sometimes politics can play as a rule in making this event better or worse, as you know that some governments would take some measures to prevent it (COVID-19), so we have to look at the politics' system or environment in the country.

Additionally, continuing changes in media trust also influenced news consumers' attitudes and feelings about news stories, altering their behavior accordingly. Two interviewees expressed negative feelings regarding COVID-19 news:

> Interviewee #9 (Malaysian): When reading news, (I) felt disappointed, because some countries could not tackle this problem efficiently, and affect every aspect of our lives, making our activities restrained, not as free as ever.

> Interviewee #10 (French): Sad about what's happened in my country.

> As a result, some interviewees reported changes in their attitudes influenced by these emotions. A young interviewee #1 (Indonesian) noted that,"(I) became more sceptical, because of news quality varies."

Another interviewee #2 (American) who had family in her home country stated,

> "(I felt) uncertain, I could not literally trust the news, my worry was brought up by kids and family."

Meanwhile, some interviewees tried to control their news consumption or lost interest in following current events:

> Interviewee #9: (I) don't feel anxious, because I am mature enough, as an adult I know what to know.

> Interviewee #2: (I feel) less stressed, but still a little bit worried about family in the US.

An interviewee said she would look for more positive news from reliable news sources, such as the development of the COVID-19 vaccine:

> Interviewee #1: (I felt) relief about the vaccine.

These two statements clearly show that when it came to reassurance, more traditional (home) media were preferred.

Evolving Dynamics on Responses to Misinformation Related to Public Health

The COVID-19 pandemic was defined by the World Health Organization (2020) as "a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)" (para. 1). It affected people's news consumption habits over different time periods.

During the early COVID-19 outbreak, heightened health awareness led most interviewees to consume more news on social media, particularly about COVID-19. This increased both their interaction with news and their communication with others. Also, they indicated a preference for news categories related to the development of COVID-19 and their survival, such as health, science, China, and the world. These categories are commonly constructed by news elements such as immediacy, proximity, emotion, consequence, and conflict. They consumed such news with increased intensity and duration, making them more likely to encounter misinformation related to COVID-19. Interviewee #11 (American) said:

> And then another group of people who were maybe sharing other information that I didn't agree with, like articles from news organizations, like do trust about how maybe wearing a mask is not so helpful or not even good for you or the coronavirus is a hoax, you know.

In the context of COVID-19, more than half of the interviewees said they consumed news in a more comprehensive, lengthier, and engaging way. They actively searched and digested information for specific purposes such as personal communication, self-protection, safety of family members, and travel arrangements:

> Interviewee #10 (French): Tell friends about my situations and city that I stay…China is well-organized. Show them that I am well off.

> Interviewee #11 (American): Um, I was hoping to influence their behaviour in terms of wearing masks. That was a thing they would wear masks and do all the things that we know that are helpful to control the coronavirus, because I was worried about them.

However, some interviewees preferred to stay calm and avoid contributing to the chaotic flood of information. When asked about the action of disseminating news, interviewee #3 (Irish) said that he "not really" shared news, because "I didn't want to transmit any false information." Having consumed a substantial amount of news, every interviewee reported learning how to take preventative measures, such as wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. This finding aligns with Lo and Wei's (2002) research that higher exposure to news is likely correlated with higher consumption effects on oneself and others. Later, as the COVID-19 situation evolved in China, most interviewees reported reading more news on mainstream media instead of social media due to their previous experiences. Compared to the early COVID-19 outbreak, their frequency of news consumption dropped dramatically. Several interviewees reported suffering from information overload, a condition that began to surface approximately one year after the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, their news-reading performance decreased in both intensity and duration, and their interaction with news content was notably reduced:

> Interviewee #4: (I) initially read it a lot and got scared, but after getting more and more, (I) just ignored it because way too many, or skimmed through it, contents were very repetitive, because already seen or read it on WeChat or TV.

> Interviewee #3: In the early months I followed the spread of COVID-19 but after a few months I stopped.

Later on, during the crisis, at least some interviewees returned to their original news consumption habits, considering they no longer needed to search for survival information and gradually resumed their original rhythm of life:

> Interviewee #11: I would say I've kind of gone back to my previous habits of looking at articles that others recommended on social media and occasionally looking things for myself … I've kind of reverted away from just being glued to the statistics of what's happening, especially with COVID all the time.

> Interviewee #3: I don't really check the news. I hear from friends or social media.

However, news consumers who cared about their friends and family still shared COVID-19 news to warn of potential threats. Consequently, some interviewees focused more on their own countries rather than China:

> Interviewee #11 (American): Because the situation has improved there, I guess. I think

my practice for sharing on Facebook has not changed because I still have so much concern for my friends and family and others who live in my homestay.

Interviewee #10 (French): Two months ago (October, 2020), I became more interested in my countries' situations. I care about my family and friends, and want to find relevant topics to talk with.

Another striking scenario in the interviews was that the categories of news consumed by the interviewees changed. While they still kept a close eye on health news for future preparation, they paid more attention to political and world news as the situation of COVID-19 outside of China worsened. As one interviewee explained,

"Since July (2020), (I) mainly focused on the rest of the world."

News elements such as conflict and emotion caught the eyes of most interviewees. Countries, notably the United States, were perceived to have failed to respond effectively to the dramatic spread of the coronavirus due to various factors such as political polarization (Jacobs, 2021). The U.S. also experienced one of the most turbulent presidential elections in history:

Interviewee #1 (Indonesian): American politics, because a lot of riots at that moment, thus (was) reading a lot on American politics during that time.

Interviewee #11 (American): A lot of politics, a lot of US politics, especially with the election and this last period, there was a lot of politics. Um, and then also health news because of COVID.

Meanwhile, a few interviewees in China had been continuously monitoring China's political environment, believing it would involve many policy changes that concerned them, such as visa policy and border control policies:

Interviewee #6 (Italian): China's conflict with other countries in terms of politics, races, vaccine, border policies… Trying to be aware of what is going on in China and the rest of the world, because as foreigners I don't belong to this country, keep an eye on the possibility of staying in or out of China, because I am here on a visa, worried about the visa procedure.

Nearly every interviewee began seeking news regarding the efficacy of the vaccine, the timing of vaccination, and the vaccination procedure. This shift meant they consumed similar news messages with more positive emotions like relief, gratitude, and hope. Interviewee #2 said:

Now (I) have a good understanding of this virus, and instead of finding how to stay safe, (I) check more on what's going happen next, when do we get vaccine, which vaccine is good, do I want to get a vaccine.

As the pandemic progressed, information overload led to decreased news engagement and a shift towards mainstream media. However, the evolving global situation has rejuvenated interviewees' interest in news, particularly regarding developments in their home countries and medical progress against COVID-19.

Discussion

This research investigated how foreigners in China consumed news before and during COVID-19, focusing on three factors: media environment, trust in media, and the public health emergency.

Results indicated that the Internet had significantly shaped the media landscape, with over 90% of interviewees consuming COVID-19 news on digital devices. This aligns with Johnson and Harihara's (2017) findings the general public's knowledge and attitudes towards health risks during pandemics are influenced by the accessibility and dissemination of information through digital media platforms. Despite this digital shift, legacy media remained influential through digital distribution. However, more than half of the interviewees faced issues like information overload, echo chambers, and filter bubbles. Consequently, many shifted their focus to specific news categories to mitigate these drawbacks.

Also, Casero-Ripolles (2020) noted that increased news consumption during COVID-19 did not boost media trust. This research found a significant decline in media trust due to misinformation. Some interviewees abandoned previously favored media outlets for more reliable sources. Despite relying heavily on social media for news, trust in these platforms was notably low. Interviewees with higher education levels showed lower trust in media and were more proactive in seeking news and taking preventive measures. Younger interviewees with only high school diplomas were more confused about finding trustworthy media. This aligns with Rosenbaum et al.'s (2008) findings on the role of media literacy and critical thinking, that individuals with higher media literacy are better equipped to critically evaluate information sources, discern misinformation, and make informed decisions about the media they consume.

Similarly, COVID-19, the most severe global health crisis since the 1918 Spanish Flu, altered news consumption patterns. Interviewees shifted their news focus based on survival instincts. They consumed more health, science, China, world, and political news as the pandemic evolved. Older age group showed a higher consumption of COVID-19-related news, similar to Casero-Ripolles' (2020) findings that in the group of 65+ US adults, COVID-19-related news consumption increased by 16%. Considering this, news consumers' various concerns, such as health awareness, the safety of their friends and family members, and communication with others, can be seen as the driving factors behind their consumption behaviors.

Regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, Dhanani and Franz (2020) highlighted the link between news consumption habits and misinformation. As the situation in China improved, interviewees focused more on developments in their home countries, interacting with overseas friends and family to share timely and accurate news. This behavior is consistent with a report showing

that 30% of Americans believed COVID-19 was lab-developed, and many felt news reports exaggerated the risks (Mitchell & Oliphant, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic reconnected even the least engaged individuals with public health news, reducing inequality in news consumption and fostering informed communities.

The research also revealed that public awareness of and strategies for COVID-19 prevention was high in the sample, but that it was limited in size and its retrospective nature, potentially introducing bias. Qualitative research captures dynamic attitudes, but it always begs for further studies to generalize findings. Future research should explore more dynamic aspects of news behavior, such as forwarding and selection, to help news organizations attract niche audiences. Thus, before the pandemic fades from our collective consciousness, further analysis is needed to understand changing news behaviors and misinformation impacts in detail.

Despite reporting that the pandemic significantly impacted their daily lives, affecting travel, work, social interactions, and mental health, some interviewees exhibited unexpected resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity, highlighting their capacity to overcome challenges in a completely different cultural background.

Interviewees from diverse cultural backgrounds revealed distinct patterns in how they perceived and interacted with health-related information. Interviewees from a more individualistic culture (e.g. US American) were proactive in seeking out news, often relying on personal subscriptions and social media. Thus, US American interviewee #11 was critical of media sources, preferring established, reputable outlets, and actively verified information to form independent opinions. During the interview, she expressed strong emotions, including frustration and concern, particularly regarding the political climate in the US.

In contrast, collectivist interviewees, primarily from Confucianism-influenced cultural backgrounds (e.g., Indonesian, Singaporean, Malaysian), relied more on social networks and word-of-mouth for news. They shared news within their social groups, influenced by community opinions and concerns, and trusted familiar sources like family, friends, and local media. This group was more susceptible to groupthink and social pressure, sharing news to maintain social harmony and support their community. Conversely, their behavior thereby demonstrated obedience to authority, adhering to China's anti-COVID policies by staying home, wearing masks, and maintaining social distancing.

Additionally, it was surprising to find out that foreign news consumers in China who have experienced COVID-19, especially those from non-Western countries (Indonesia, India, etc.), sometimes perceive China's COVID-related news covered by Western media as biased. They have taken actions to resist this perceived bias, such as reducing the time spent reading and sharing Western media news feeds, and actively sharing their experiences in China with friends and family in their home countries to provide a more accurate picture and reassure them.

In the later stages of the COVID-19 development, political news was at the forefront of interviewees' minds. Interviewees expressed concern about President Trump's labeling of

COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus" and his speeches in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which fueled virus-related discrimination and violence against Asians, exacerbating existing systemic biases (Riechmann & Tang, 2020). In response, when interviewed, many Asians conveyed strong negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and sadness.

Conversely, Western interviewees expressed concerns about a potential backlash, including rising Chinese nationalism, which could result in discriminatory treatment against foreigners in China. They described examples of such discrimination happened to them or their friends or families, and urged the Chinese government to intervene to prevent further escalation. Particularly, interviewees focused on the statements and policies of the newly elected U.S. president and his administration, as these would impact U.S.-China relations, local pandemic control measures, visa policies in host countries, and the attitudes of their local communities towards them. All these unpredictable changes may bring new shocks to their diaspora life, so they need to keep an eye on it and prepare in advance.

In the face of similar situations encountered by expatriates, solutions have been proposed and implemented by multiple stakeholders like organizations, private sectors and policymakers from previous experience (Aïmeur et al., 2023). These solutions, supported by academic research and practical participation, can help create a systematic framework to counter misinformation and empower individuals to make informed decisions.

One effective solution is the implementation of AI-powered instantaneous translation software, which helps bridge language barriers and ensures accurate information dissemination (Siu, 2023). Baidu and ByteDance, two of the leading Chinese Internet companies, have integrated AI-powered translation into their instant message services and smart devices. These tools can automatically translate documents and news articles, helping users quickly access and understand important information (Donnelly, 2024).

Additionally, fact-checking mechanisms and AI-driven content moderation tools are other two critical components for debunking fake information (Salma et al., 2024). By collaborating with news agencies, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube utilize generative AI, to scan and flag potentially false information, providing users with verified facts and debunking myths in real-time (Kamboj, 2024; Manish, 2024; Washington, 2023). These tools not only prevent the spread of false information but also provide users with context and corrections, ensuring a safer and more reliable online environment.

Although technology can mitigate the sudden impact of public health crises, long-term preparedness and prevention are essential for strategic and sustainable approaches. To effectively combat misinformation, it is crucial to hold platforms and individuals accountable for spreading false information by developing and enforcing legal policies. Governments can collaborate with tech companies to create policy frameworks that promote transparency and accountability, ensuring the swift addressing of misinformation (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024)

The lesson to be learned from this is that digital literacy programs are essential in educating

people on identifying credible sources and debunking misinformation. Considering that designing and implementing such programs require substantial resources and time to see results, these initiatives are typically launched by governments, educational departments, or schools (Digital Literacy Accelerator, 2022). They often target school-aged children to ensure they acquire good digital literacy before entering society (Digital Literacy and Technological Skills, 2023). One specific example is an evidence-based digital literacy program developed by the Canadian Ministry of Education. This program includes topics selected from seminal work in digital literacy education, aiming to enhance digital skills among vulnerable groups (Buchan et al., 2024). Likewise, similar programs can be delivered through workshops, online courses, and community outreach, targeting vulnerable or minority groups such as the elderly or those from different cultural backgrounds (Wedlake & Bugre, 2023).

Furthermore, the Internet has become a crucial source of health information, emphasizing the need for local health organizations to provide preventive advice online. Tailored online health communication campaigns, which utilize a mix of traditional media, social media, and community engagement are vital in disseminating accurate health information. This is particularly evident in China, where there is a tendency to favor a collectivist approach to propaganda and a policy preference for majority rule (Gao & Zhang, 2021; Perry, 2024).

Since the mid-1980s, the evolution and practices of health communication in China have prominently featured the use of mass media and community engagement in public health campaigns (Dang et al., 2021). During COVID-19, social media is the most powerful tool for mobilization (Ban, 2020). A health campaign on Sina Weibo, initiated by a celebrity, promoted mask-wearing. The hashtag "#national mask campaign#" became highly popular, with millions of users participating. For foreigners in China, understanding their news habits during the pandemic can help provide timely, accurate information, minimizing information gaps during health crises, which still remain relevant post-pandemic. This campaign effectively used social media to promote health behaviors and build trust within communities, which is a good way for foreigners settling in China to learn how to access local healthcare resources effectively (Jiang et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic not only challenged the daily lives of expatriates in China but also prompted a reevaluation of China's media establishment and operations. Interviewees noted changes in their news consumption to counter rising prejudice and discrimination from polarized media. The study highlights how diverse media have stigmatized foreigners, prompting social judgments and discriminatory behaviors. This affects China's international image and suggests a need for media authorities to curb discriminatory news.

The data from the interviews also revealed that most participants utilized social media as a common source of news, although trust in it varied. They heavily relied on foreign media for information, even if it required using VPNs, while local news was primarily obtained through social media or word-of-mouth. They rarely consulted Chinese media for two main reasons: the inherent distrust of state-owned media in China and the difficulty in finding timely and comprehensive English-language news from Chinese media, which predominantly

disseminates information in Chinese.

Recent events, such as the three-month lockdown in Shanghai in 2022, have contributed to a continued decline in the number of foreigners in China (Bickenbach & Liu, 2022). Despite the Chinese leadership's emphasis on stabilizing foreign trade and investment policies (Chu & Ferenczy, 2023), the diverse challenges brought about by the pandemic highlight the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to media. Given the stringent regulation of media in China, this situation may prompt the Chinese government to reassess its external policies to better accommodate the needs of foreign residents and improve their confidence and convenience in living and working in China.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to review the manuscript. The use was limited to the Literature Review of the manuscript.

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David Lynch's Los Angeles: Control and Liberation through the Cinematic Image

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Abstract

Arguably, one of America's greatest cinematic surrealists, David Lynch, boasts a filmography concerned with iconography, the nature of kitsch, and what dark underbellies such images veil. In Lynch's famous TV series *Twin Peaks (*1990-2017*)*, the kitsch aspect of a local small-town murder mystery is connected to a surreal and ungraspable larger world of primordial darkness and incomprehensible nightmares, where consciousness and unconsciousness constantly inform upon one another, one cannot exist without the other. Lynch's cinematic outings, such as the neo-noir *Lost Highway (*1997*)*, the acclaimed Hollywood fantasy *Mulholland Drive (*2001*)*, and the experimental nightmare *Inland Empire (*2006*)*, are all set in the heart of the film industry, in Los Angeles, and reveal his most ambitious vision yet: to examine the hierarchies of images in American pop-culture, providing a space in which dreams and nightmares routinely, yet subtly, intersect. In my article, I will analyze how these films take stock of American West Coast lives of the late 20th and early 21st century, on the one hand providing a psychodrama of dreams gone bust, while on the other exploring the potential for a new iconography.

Keywords: aesthetic, culture, Hollywood, medium, Star System

Part I: Medium, Dividuals, and *Lost Highway*

The opening piece of the trilogy, *Lost Highway*, which Lynch co-wrote with Barry Gifford, is rather loosely connected to the main body of Lynch's grandiose cinematic thesis on the nature of the city of angels. At first, the setting of Los Angeles here feels rather arbitrary. It takes over one hour until we are presented with a long reaching aerial landscape shot of the city's typical hills during sunset. But even then, we don't see any of the typical markers of L.A., no Hollywood sign or other sightseeing attractions. Furthermore, in contrast to the preceding *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, our protagonists, saxophone player Fred Madison and his wife Renee, do not seem to be involved in the film industry. Their social position within the city's landscape is hard to pinpoint: Their house is very much the center of the film's opening section, and they appear to live in suburbia, although Lynch shies away from another deconstruction of said environment, as he did previously in *Blue Velvet*. Although they seem to live a wealthy lifestyle, there is nothing idyllic about Fred and Renee. Slavoj Žižek identified their existence as "aseptic, grey, 'alienated', suburban-megalopolis married life" (Zizek, 2000, p. 13). The earlier obscenity of *Blue Velvet*, in which white picket fences, waving firemen and the smiling girl next door mask the subconscious horror lying underneath, is exchanged for the analysis of the relationship between conscious and unconscious in which the geographic hierarchy marks a stand in for a seemingly temporal one, a structure that sometimes (mostly through the usage of a technological medium), overlaps and collides but never merges or concludes. One recurring motif of Lynch's L.A. trilogy is how the opening minutes of each movie relate to their respective overarching themes. In *Lost Highway*, after we have traversed the opening credits, the never-ending, primordial highway in the dark, we are treated to a sequence in which Fred Madison hears an anonymous voice through the intercom at his door, telling him that "Dick Laurent is Dead" before disappearing. From this point on, the film both spirals into emotive excesses of jealousy, guilt and transgression while constantly recontextualizing itself, that is, making recursions to individual scenes, until it arrives precisely back at this moment when we are shown the other side of the door. Through this impossible temporal loop, we are made to realize, that it was Fred himself who spoke the message into the intercom, existing both inside and outside of the house. This opening and concluding image is very much informed by Barry Gifford's vision of the film, who described the film as a "*moving portrait*" which tells the story of a man "(who) has a very difficult time dealing with the consequences of his actions, and this fractures him in some way" (Rodley, 2005, p. 125). His description implies how Fred, who, in the process of the narrative, is accused of murdering Renee before metamorphosing into the young car engineer Pete Dayton, is both pictured as a fractured, fluent being ("moving"), who is subjected to the tension between sexual obligation and jealousy in his marriage and shifting from one identity to the next. The characteristic "moving" becomes quite literal in how Fred always seems to be on the run, a motif that the film will also end on. However, there is also the "portrait"-aspect, the fact that there is no escape from the frame. Julia Meier, who observed and compared the iconography of Lynch's movies with portraits by Francis Bacon and their subsequent analysis by Gilles Deleuze, interprets the guiding motif as the "idea, that we are no longer in a Euclidean notion of time and space, but in a time that, despite the sequential mode of the film, can be understood as simultaneity" (Meier, 2013, p.75). There are several moments in the film in which people and

events reappear, as if their appearance temporally coincides with their "original": The best example for this is the conversation Fred has at a party with the ominous Mystery Man, which later, after the transformation into the Pete Dayton character, reappears while retaining almost the exact same word structure (Starting with "*We have met before…*"), as if he is having two conversations at the same time. The ironic aspect here is that the content of the Mystery Man's speech involves just that: Him being present both at the party in front of Fred, as well as a welcome intruder in his house. The second aspect that the opening scene with the intercom foreshadows, besides the outside/inside-tension of the human psyche, is how the natural time flow doesn't apply to the logic of the film. This, however, is not to say that there is no logic present in *Lost Highway*, as many of Lynch's critics, like Roger Ebert who accused the film of pointlessness and being a "director's idea book" (Ebert, 1997, para. 7) as well as devotees would assume. Rather, there appears to be an underlying logic which informs the film and is unconnected to illnesses of the human psyche, one that is also already established in the opening scene: the importance of the medium, be it Fred's intercom in the opening scene or the devices that the Mystery Man uses, prominently, his mobile phone during the party scene. It is thus the technical media that communicate between the inside and the outside, between original and *dividual*, or at least, appears to do so. According to Deleuze (1992), the term "dividual," characterizes the society of control: "we no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become '*dividuals*', and masses, data, market and banks," (p. 5) meaning that in the society of control, "people are inherently multiplied around distinct areas of society" (p. 5).

The opening premise of *Lost Highway* involves Fred and Renee being tormented by anonymously placed video tapes first of the outside of their home, then of its inside and finally, as the depiction of Renee's murder. We observe the medium transforming from intruder to the verifier of truth, the truth that Fred is a murderer, a fact he tries to escape from until the very end. But Fred's uttered discontent with the medium ("I like to remember things my own way") is not just an escape from his supposed "true self" but rather, when viewed ideologically, a questioning of the truth-value that the aesthetic of the medium, in this case, of the blurry, VHS-tape, automatically attempts to assign to its "reality"-recording function. After all, the person who "produces" this footage, appears to be the Mystery Man who, through his Mephisto-like appearance, is clearly framed as a trickster. Furthermore, unlike everyone else in the film, he is not a "dividual" but rather retains his status as an "individual", seemingly being unaffected by the duplicating structure of the film in which all characters appear at least twice. The horror within the reproduction of the image through media is not just Fred's horror, it is the horror of the film itself and people like the Mystery Man are the only ones who can still obtain their positions as individuals, a term reserved for those who record images, or rather create them, another substitute for creating reality and for Lynch akin to the function of the director. Here, the most profound metaphorical line, which stretches through Lynch's L.A.-trilogy, becomes apparent: Los Angeles marks a place of social, metaphorical, and metaphysical hierarchies.

His exploration of the star system in *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, both being set directly in the Hollywood industry, make this a bit more concrete, but the ideological underbelly of *Lost Highway* already sets the stage for how, in Lynch's own Los Angeles,

images are a substitute for reality as it can be manipulated by people like the Mystery Man, who are granted a higher, metaphysical power. To return one last time to the intercom-scene, it is also of significance what is communicated here: *Dick Laurent is dead*. Dick Laurent, as we later learn, is the obscene father-figure who, in the typical Lacanian cinematic interpretation, exudes unfulfillable desire. This character is also what connects the film to and at the same time disconnects it from the movie industry: Rather than being a reputable Hollywood producer, Laurent produces pornography, in whose films Renee occasionally acts, an industry representing the underworld of Los Angeles. Here, rather than presenting a possible solution via the father figure as he did in *Blue Velvet*, Lynch goes a step further. Laurent is stripped of his power, humiliated by a portable screen, and is finally violently murdered in the desert not by Fred but by the Mystery Man. What Lynch, in these closing moments, communicates is that the psychoanalytic solution has become nothing but a joke. It's clear from the get-go: Laurent is already dead and has always been, but the viewer only understands much later the significance of his death. The Mystery Man represents the first of three key figures in hierarchical positions, each appearing respectively in the three films. What his final message is to Fred (and us), appears to be the following: The father figure, i.e. the psychological system of explanations, which we assign authority over the subject, is a lie. Said authority is nothing but an illusion compared to the power of the image, for it is only in the image that reality can be constructed. Those are the rules under which Lynch's Hollywood operates and which we should take with us when discussing the next film.

Part II: Hollywood, Icons, and *Mulholland Drive*

Mulholland Drive seems to be a maximized version of *Lost Highway*. Whereas the earlier film found its medial horror in the miniature VHS-tape, *Mulholland Drive* is first and foremost concerned with the sheer size and expanse of the cinema screen. Unlike Lost Highway, its setting is deep in the heart of Hollywood, centering on two (or four?) women, both with seemingly opposite personality splits: Over the course of the film's divided structure, we observe Betty, a young, dreamy blonde and blue-eyed actress, who arrives in Hollywood, transforming into Diane, a washed-up, depressed failure, while her raven-haired, vulnerable love-interest, who has forgotten her original identity, takes on the name Rita (inspired by the iconographic image of Rita Hayworth from the poster of the film "*Gilda*" (1946)), and later transforms into Camilla, a femme fatale-esque seductress who ends up on top of the Hollywood food chain. A few minutes before this fatal, ambiguous switch occurs, after the two women had sex for the first time and decide to head for the Club "Silencio," we see them waiting for a cab on a highway. Within the same take, a sticker is distantly, but visibly, placed at a lighting poll, saying "Hollywood is Hell". What would appear as a foreboding omen from the perspective of the two lovers is, to the active viewer, not much more than a shrugging confirmation of what they already knew. As idyllic and beautiful as Betty and Rita's love story (both of whom are figuratively and literally oblivious to their environment) appears, Lynch's film, which borrows it's disjointed and, at times, episodic narrative style from the fact that it was conceived as a mini-series (a fact that could serve as a metacommentary to the follow-up *Inland Empire*), treats us with numerous side plots to better exemplify the depravity of this place. The most coherent one involves film director Adam Kesher losing his job, house, wife

and fortune due to his refusal to cast an actress named Camilla Rhodes (presumably the same Camilla Rhodes that Rita will transform into in the film's second half) in his new film. Only after Adam bows to his producer's demands and casts Camilla, his position in Hollywood is reinstated. Here, Lynch lays bare the insidious dynamics that permeate the film industry, how everything is structured and ordered according to the plan of a shadowy network. This network, at whose center the Castigliane brothers reside, is introduced in an early scene through a montage of phone calls, where we never get to see who exactly picks up the phone and who talks to whom. We only discover its two ends: On the one hand, we see the headquarter of the Hollywood elite, a man resting in a chair, surrounded by glass doors and walls, a place so abject and removed it recalls the black lodge from *Twin Peaks*. On the other hand, where the phone call is left unanswered, we see a phone ringing next to a red nightlamp, the same nightlamp we will later identify as belonging to Diane's apartment, in which she will commit suicide later.

Similar to *Lost Highway,* the first part of the film already appears informed by the second part and once again a reality level is being seemingly influenced by outside forces from a greater diegetic hierarchy, this time embodying the Hollywood elite. This more tangible social backdrop of *Mulholland Drive*, which directly attacks Hollywood's star system, might be an explanation for the film's popular and critical acclaim. Whereas *Lost Highway* received mostly negative reviews during its release and *Inland Empire* is still being regarded as one of the most controversial films even among Hardcore-Lynch fans, *Mulholland Drive* was immediately met with critical acclaim, topping the BFI's List of the Best Films of the Decade, winning Lynch the Director's Prize at the Cannes Film Festival and even an Academy Award nomination for Best Director.

However, it might not only be the familiar narrative of a young actress being exploited by the purgatory that is Hollywood that made the film more celebrated, despite the fact that it was not any more conventional than *Lost Highway.* What makes *Mulholland Drive* seem more accessible might be how there appears to be a stable and agreed-upon interpretation of its narrative. Lynch himself proposed ten clues that the audience should look out for[1], which soon promoted said "stereotypical interpretation," which almost all scholars follow and agree upon when discussing the film: That the first half of the film, the Betty/Rita-storyline, is a dream by Diane, who was rejected by Camilla in favor of Adam Kesher and more job opportunities in Hollywood. Diane subsequently plotted to murder Camilla, a scenario we see played out in the dream, which only puts Camilla into an amnesiac state, transforming her into Rita and Betty/Diane's love-interest. The first part is commonly read as a dream, because the opening minutes of the film feature a short scene of a POV-shot of someone falling asleep on Diane's bed (most likely Diane herself) and one of Lynch's clues was to especially pay attention to the beginning of the film. As playful as this scavenger-hunt for an explanation is, it should not detract from the fact that *Mulholland Drive* is ambiguous and does not allow for one final interpretation. For example, this interpretation does not clarify why Betty/Diane's perspective

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[1]Anon. (2020). Lynch's 10 Clues To Unlock the Thriller. MulhollandDrive.net. https://www.mulholland-drive.net/studies/10clues.htm. Last accessed on December 10th 2024.

is absent in some of the dream-sequence scenes. One of the many interpretations on the fan website *Lost on Mulholland Drive* (*mulhollanddrive.net*) sees the first part as a movie Diane and Camilla starred in and the subsequent party scene at Adam Kesher's house as a wrap-up party. While in film the distinction between dream and movie can appear frequently blurred, it is an interpretation that gives ideological patterns further traction. Regarding the direction, Todd McGowan (2007) obverses that, within the first part "the mise-en-scéne conforms on the whole to the conventions of the typical Hollywood film: scenes are well-lit, conversations between characters flow without awkwardness, and even the plainest décor seems to sparkle" (p. 195).

Following the reading of the first part as indeed a film and the second part as an extended behind-the-scenes drama, we learn two things: First, *Mulholland Drive* is also a film about a reality that is controlled by outside forces. McGowan (2007) describes the film as an "advance on *Lost Highway*" (p. 196) for emphasizing "not only that fantasy offers a solution to the deadlock of desire but also that fantasy provides a way of staging an encounter with trauma" (p. 196), even going so far and calling the film a *"feminist version of Lost Highway*" (p. 196). What the film shares with its predecessor is that it envisions Deleuze's society of control through divided personalities, this time within the context of the cinema and actors reproducing characters but also themselves, that is, the part of themselves they can't escape on screen. Second, *Mulholland Drive* appears to be an inversion of *Lost Highway*. Whereas Fred Madison hated the camera as a surveillance method and as the verifier of reality, Diane (as her role as Betty) loves the screen and the illusion the camera can produce. Her inner turmoil is just caused by the disillusion on the incompatibility between dream and reality, that her love for Camilla/Rita was merely something that existed on screen, not in reality. Of course, it is every film's job to fool its viewers, to create illusions, and sometimes even disillusion. In *Mulholland Drive* both are true, as McGowan (2007) elaborates, "though classical Hollywood films also rely on the power of fantasy to construct a sense of temporality, they take pains not to reveal this in the way *Mulholland Drive* does. The classical Hollywood film hides fantasy's role in producing temporality by not depicting any moments bereft of fantasy–no moments of desire as such, in which neither fantasy nor temporality operate." (p. 202). Here, McGowan (2007) describes very well how both parts of the film function: Part 1, the Hollywood-love story between Betty and Rita as the world of fantasy, and part 2, Diane murdering Camilla out of jealousy, as the world of desire. What Lynch achieves with *Mulholland Drive* extends to revealing the ideological structure of the Hollywood film, as well as the disillusionment with the corruption of its underlying industry. Lynch's film adds two specific elements to this interpretation: First, it asks the question of whether the first part, the dream (or the movie, whatever one may call it), exists to absolve Diane/Betty of her desire for Camilla/Rita by staging an encounter with it as fantasy. This is further ensured through the extended Club Silencio scene, in which we (and Betty for that matter) are directly told that "There is no band, and yet, we hear a band," prompting the collapse of the dream. This love won't last and can only exist in the realm of fantasy. What is also a possibility, however, is that it is precisely the dream that triggers said desire in the first place. The inversion to *Lost Highway* is precisely its difference in narrative structure: Whereas *Lost Highway* first depicts Fred's unfulfilled desire only for him to retreat into the world created by the media as a means of control, the fantasy,

said means of media control, first creates the fantasy of Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla in *Mulholland Drive* to nurture the inciting desire.

Second, Lynch observes this desire once again in the form of a metaphysical hierarchy that is not just directed at its protagonist, but this time also meta-textually to us. Instead of having only the Mystery Man as the locus of control, here we have two: First, there is the ominous Cowboy that Adam Kesher meets at the outer edge of Los Angeles. As an embodiment of the Western film genre icon, he represents the greatest authority, and it is therefore he that Adam needs to encounter to finally oblige the demands of his producers. The cowboy tells him: "If you did it right, you will see me one more time. If you did it wrong, you will see me twice." Adam never ends up seeing the Cowboy again in the film and yet, we do, twice, to be exact: First when telling Diane to "wake up," connecting the first to the second part of the film, controlling the narrative further, and for a second time at Adam's party when he walks among the guests in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it-moment. What this communicates to us is that by simply looking, we're doing it wrong. This second locus of control in the film renders the act of looking even more futile. The exact opposite of the monumental icon of Hollywood is the character of the homeless man living on the streets. While the first manifestation represents the immortal iconography of Hollywood, the second represents the unwelcome by-product of it, the image of failure. We encounter the homeless character during the scene in which a man and his therapist are sitting in Winkys, a restaurant, and discuss the man's dream, in which he encounters a monster behind the restaurant. Similar to the Cowboy, the man is afraid of seeing the monster a second time ("If I ever see his face outside the dream…"). Both men walk to the back of the restaurant to check and, indeed, the monster appears, and the man dies on the spot. At the end of the film, the monster is revealed to be a homeless man, living behind the restaurant, holding the blue box that contains the secret to the film, the end of the fantasy. He also functions as the authority negotiating between the two poles of fantasy and desire, success and failure, both of which make the existence of Hollywood possible in the first place. Diane, who, after being haunted by her guilt, shoots herself, is reunited as Betty with Rita in a transcendent sequence of heaven. For it is only in the final, ultimate fantasy of the afterlife in which desire will forever be eradicated. As bittersweet as this ending appears, there is something bleak to it, as it was the control of the dream factory that drove Diane to her heinous acts. So, is it better not to look, thereby avoiding desire? Such a statement would be far too moralistic for an artist like Lynch, and it appears as if the final part of his L.A.-trilogy addresses precisely that question.

Part III: Escape, Remainder, and *Inland Empire*

Whereas the film title *Mulholland Drive* already evokes the iconic road circumferencing Los Angeles and providing for the inciting event of the film, the name *Inland Empire* might feel more arbitrary. The title points squarely at the setting: The name is a term for a predominantly impoverished area in Southern California. The film is not set in this area, yet it is evoked in one pivotal scene in which a homeless woman refers to the place in a seemingly throwaway dialogue. Yet, the contrast this title has to *Mulholland Drive* is crucial in understanding this, even for Lynch standards, enigmatic film. The topic of poverty and social failure is a crucial

theme in Lynch's filmography. Themes of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking play an important role in the psychoanalytical dimension of his films, especially so in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, since, according to Joshua D. Gonslaves (2013) "the socio-historical real of sex-trafficking (…) functions as the great American repressed" (p. 119). *Lost Highway* contrasted the exploitation of women both consciously and unconsciously, marital hegemony and the pornography business. *Mulholland Drive* thematized how close failure and success can be for upcoming actresses in the film business. *Inland Empire* has the subtitle *A Woman In Trouble*, but it is both questionable and ambiguous who that woman is, as the film features multiple women, who imagine one another, act as one another, fantasize one another and ultimately are one another, mirroring the Matryoshka-structure of the film, which is, tracing it to its narrative core, if that is possible, a fantasy within the making of a movie, within an actual movie, within a daydream, and finally in a program on a television screen. The outer layer of the film features a woman who is described in the credits as the "lost girl," who, in one of the earliest scenes, is seen having sex with an unseen man. During the scene, both of their faces are blurred into obscurity, evoking the blurring of faces during true crime broadcasts for identity protection.

Julia Meier and her elaboration of what she calls the thematic chain Bacon-Deleuze-Lynch connects the directing style of Lynch in this scene and in the overall film as strongly evoking the "Body without organs" concept, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari Meier interprets this concept as a "large and intricated system, which can be comprehended as an abstract body without specific personality" (Meier, 2013, p. 140–141) In the opening scene "the blurred zone represents precisely the fact of this film image, since it clarifies at this point that there is nothing to represent: "the blurred or elapsed parties are neutralized parts of the organism that are reduced to their state as a zone or plane: The human face has not yet found its appearance" (Meier, 2013, p. 146–147). The eventual discovery of one's appearance seems to be the most coherent framework one can use to make sense of whatever *Inland Empire* is. Minutes later, we see the lost girl crying in front of a television screen, watching the film we are about to watch as well. Thus begins the core narrative about actress Nikki Grace who stars in the film *On High in Blue Tomorrows* based on a cursed screenplay that apparently killed the two lead actors from a previous attempt to adapt it into the film "4-7". However, *Inland Empire* only pretends to be interested in this plotline within the first third of its extended 3-hour runtime. All over sudden, Nikki "vanishes" behind the props of the set and wanders throughout the rest of the runtime through, what can only be described as, a hallucinatory, fragmented dream space, which defies all temporal logic in which her life, the diegesis of the film, and dream sequences bizarrely merge with one another. At the end of this long nightmare, Nikki becomes a prostitute, working on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and is violently stabbed to death by a jealous wife, only for the camera to pan out and reveal another camera, filming the scene, the entire sequence being exposed as the still ongoing shooting of "On High in Blue Tomorrows." Interlaced with this fragmented narrative are numerous other plotlines, one taking place in Poland, another one featuring segments from Lynch's web series *Rabbits* (2002), in which we perceive humanoid giant rabbits living in a sitcom-like environment. One could go on and on and still not come close to recounting the entire sequence of events, which is more loosely strung together in Lynch's perhaps most massive and confusing film. When following the numerous mirror-metaphors of the L.A. trilogy (arguably loosely inspired by Lacan's

conceptions of the mirror stage and ego-formations), one sees first in *Lost Highway*, that Fred is gazing at himself before Renee's murder; then in *Mulholland Drive*, Camilla is remodeling herself as Rita, a metaphor that perceives the film screen as a distorted mirror image that projects the controlled and compartmentalized conception of the self back to the subject; and, lastly, *Inland Empire* marks the point in which this structure finally breaks up and the mirror shatters. Therefore, one cannot speak any more of a hierarchy of power that controls the images. Said hierarchy appears present, but the narrative structure of the film refuses to compel it anymore. While *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* appear as self-referencing and constantly allude to and recontextualize themself, *Inland Empire* is so fragmented that such a reference is hardly possible anymore.

Instead of Fred and Diane/Betty, subjects who fell victim to the control through the media image, Nikki becomes so disengaged from it that she can see its other side, the film structure, instead of being influenced simply by the unconscious, becomes a long path through the unconscious. Coming back to Meier's conception of the body without organs, the film itself appears as said body as the individual scenes seem to refuse to form a coherent whole, not serving a greater narrative anymore but staying distinct, a testament to Lynch's decision to shoot *Inland Empire* without a screenplay and instead improvising the individual scenes. This is not to say that *Inland Empire* as a film has no personality, no cohesion, as there certainly exists a discomforting, confusing and highly disturbing one. After all, the body without organs does not entail that it has no theme. Meier (2013) recognizes that within the body of *Inland Empire* "levels of experiences and of narrative (figurative) nature intersect more intensely than in all other Lynch films. In terms of content or pictorial forms, the film deals with breakouts ("Durchbrüche" in German)" (p. 145). Said breakouts are not just metaphorical but rather appear, according to Meier on the physical layer of the human body, featured several times in the film and forming the most essential outer layer of *Inland Empire*: "Other breakthroughs or access points in the film are directly physical: a screwdriver is thrust into Nikki's abdomen, and a man's murder causes his intestines to leak out. A homeless woman tells us that her friend has a perforated inner vaginal wall."[2] Another moment, not featuring the human body but rather, metaphorical perception includes Nikki burning a hole into a scarf, looking through said hole and discovering another universe within it. The elements within *Inland Empire* rebel against their commodification, the images rage against their control, against their purpose. A breakthrough must occur to finally make an escape possible. Whereas the failure, the abject, was symbolized by the monster behind Winkys restaurant in *Mulholland Drive* and still served as a contrast to the success-icons and thereby was integrated into the hierarchy of the film's images, *Inland Empire* provides the abject a space where it can leak out and thus finally make the underbelly of the controlling structure apparent.

The visually biggest contrast that *Inland Empire* has in comparison to *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, to Lynch's entire filmography, is that it is his first digital film. Lynch, who

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[2] Anon. (2020). Lynch's 10 Clues To Unlock the Thriller. MulhollandDrive.net. https://www.mulholland-drive.net/studies/10clues.htm. Last accessed on December 10th 2024.
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for the first time served as his own cinematographer (as well as his own editor and score composer, controlling almost every aspect of the film), did not opt for state-of-the-art high-quality technique and instead used the DSR-PD150 Sony camera, commonly used for private home video rather than Hollywood productions. The result speaks for itself: As much as *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* critique and raise the audience's awareness of the control mechanisms behind the image, they cannot help but succumb to it by being visually stunning works of art. *Inland Empire*, on the other hand, is a notoriously hideous film, in which entire backgrounds are sloppily blurred, faces appear overly lit and overfocused, and whole sequences are ridiculously overexposed. The film's visual style could best be summarized as home video aesthetic. Lynch thereby makes *Inland Empire* a film of the abject, of what cannot be accompanied by the structure explored by the previous films.

There is another concept one could apply for Nikki's journey from controlled actress to self-aware dream wanderer, and that is Jean Baudrillard's *The Remainder*. In the most ambiguous chapter of his "Simulacra and Simulation," Baudrillard alludes to this concept as follows: "*When everything is taken away, nothing is left.* This is false. The equation of everything and nothing, the subtraction of the remainder, is totally false. It is not that there is no remainder. But this remainder never has an autonomous reality." (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 143). The point here is that every society is supposedly formed on the basis of opposites ("the right/ the left, the same/ the other, the majority/ the minority, the crazy/ the normal, etc. – but the remainder----- ? Nothing on the other side of the slash."), including Deleuze's control society where we deal with dividuals rather than individuals. In Hollywood, this control apparatus is portrayed as a hierarchy that is founded on opposites like real/ imaginary and success/ failure. Lynch's film can be seen as an attempt to grant this remainder of such a system, that which cannot be included, an autonomous reality. In *Inland Empire*, shortly after Nikki's stabbing on the sidewalk, as the camera appears again, she is on the brink of becoming reintegrated into this hierarchy, to once again become absorbed as the image of failure. But Lynch's film does not end here. In the last scene, Nikki is able to localize "The Phantom" (the counterpart to the Mystery Man and the Cowboy from the previous films), who can be seen as the hidden locus of this hierarchy, being portrayed as a pimp to a group of prostitutes. As Nikki shoots the Phantom, it's face morphs into a horrifying version of Nikki's face, before ultimately exploding in a gush of blood, its face disintegrating. In the end, the final layer of the film is unveiled as we exit the television, to bring Nikki back to what she always was: an image on a screen, a remainder that has seemingly no autonomous reality. What seems to be Lynch's vision of his trilogy on/of the city of angels, is how, once the hierarchy of control is broken that veils it, its magic can finally flourish. In its final, heavenly minutes, light pours into the film. Nikki delivers the lost girl from evil, from the hierarchy that was enforced on her. For the last time, she exits the television to gently kiss her, before vanishing. It is now that the lost girl can go home. The conclusion Lynch's trilogy as his, so far, final cinema project finds with his last, idealistic film is that the autonomous reality of the remainder is whatever it affects within the spectator. If everything is absorbed by the system, the remainder still exists. If everything is controlled and corrupted, it is the very surface of the screen, the very character, that will rebel.

Conclusion

David Lynch's (so far) last great cinematic endeavor, represented by the Los Angeles-trilogy, can be described as perhaps his most socio-economically conscious work. Whereas *Lost Highway* serves as a theoretical introduction to the topic of how the medium structures control enacted on the individual, thus becoming a dividual, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* serve as the film's statement: Both films draw a cohesive line between poverty and fame, while retaining their metaphorical underbelly. In *Mulholland Drive*, the locus of control in the system of images is both represented by the "cowboy" as the mythological image of the Western/US-American cultural landscape, as well as the "monster," a homeless person hidden behind the walls of a restaurant. The divided narrative of the film places its dividual subject Betty/Diane at the crossroad between both worlds, that of fame and success and that of failure and poverty. Both ends inform the dividual nature of the works and emphasize an obscured metaphorical statement on the homeless crises of Los Angeles and how rich and poor live literally side by side. In *Inland Empire*, this abject element manifests itself on the narrative and directorial level, in Lynch's refusal to further aestheticize his film, paving the way for an uncontrolled, digital ether of images. Through the utilization of the abject, Baudrillards "remainder" seemingly becomes present and the system collapses. Lynch's final trilogy can thus be seen as the logical endpoint in an artist career-long wrestling with the manifestation of the subconscious in American iconography. The trilogy guides a journey from darkness into the light, from the primordial highway, through the alleys of Sunset Boulevard, culminating in the room of the spectator, granting them a relief from its role as a dividual, from the image.

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