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Crazy Quilt (1875-1880). Artist unknown. Art Institute Chicago

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Title: Dear Hannah: We have fucked around and found out

Date: SS, 2026

Artists: Sue Goyette and Tegan Zimmerman

Methodology/materiality: Quilt (text and other assorted mediums, assemblage, décollage, stitched together, spit and vinegar, other unknown and/or unnamed fluids, resin). Vulnerability. Two full moons and the summer Solstice. A Karass of Pollinating Thinkers and Doers. And returning to Dr. Hannah McGregor's keynote "Fucking Around and Finding Out as a Feminist Method" (McGregor 2025) to actually fuck around and find out. The same pair of olive green linen pants that eventually achieved that softness we are all after; the fabric of our days.

And what material do women use to shear experience into the ephemeral, the unbelievable, the weariness, the violence of how things really are?

Is there an intimate (inherent?) relation between violence and women's bodies as texts? That's where my question about medium came from and comes in. I see now that we are making our quilt, that we are patchworking layers together. Each textblock functions as one of the fabric squares.... Is this what Hannah McGregor means by fucking around and finding out as a feminist method? I nearly failed sewing in home economics.

I've been reading about Tracey Emin, after seeing her show at the Tate, and was struck by something she said in an interview about visiting Louise Bourgeois in her home. How there were these vivid pink watercolours on the floor but what she was most taken with were Louise's hands, the strength and look of them. In a video, speaking of the visit, Tracey's face is radiant, remembering them. I went on to read how they worked together on sixteen paintings/drawings for a show called *Do Not Abandon Me* (2011). Louise painted all sixteen pretty quickly and it took Tracey two years to work out how and what she wanted to contribute. Here's medium being both the condition, the environment she was thinking in, and the means, the agency she was after, what it takes to join the shared frequency the work was asking them to think in. Tracey eventually drew and wrote on Louise's paintings which would be the medium noted on the work and now I'm thinking of that title—*Do Not Abandon Me*—and how temporally fluid it is, how it chimes another of medium's definitions: the ability to receive communication from the deceased or what's past. I have an old dictionary that I sometimes open to see words in company with each other and there is a medium in between meditative and medley. I'm intrigued by how that company works with the cohesion of the definitions for medium. And how they all describe aspects of a creative practice. Here's when something stirs or shimmers in a beguiling and compelling way. For example, the question, *What does medium mean to you?* can now be considered instrumental. And here's when words get porous and begin to relate and attend to each other like trees rather than syntax/fences. Here's when things get interesting. "The only access we have to our volcanic unconscious and to the profound motives of our actions and reactions," said Louise, "is through shocks of our encounters with specific people." What or who "shocks" you may be worth noting.

I sewed the arm to the neck of the blouse I had to make in grade eleven and I think about how quickly I processed and reconfigured my face so that it was okay and not a truly fucked-up thing to do. My body knowing something and then doing with that knowing. Fucking around and finding out as a method was closer to the ground when I was younger and has also now become, for me, a source of the kind of praxis that stitches research/reading/art and the radiance art-making brings to the gathering. I'm wondering about the ways the unspeakable requires hands to move as a way of processing, embodying, and relaying experience. In the way that Elaine Scarry (2001) tells us that beauty invites reiteration as in a recalling, a retelling, perhaps art reframes something closer to our hearts that may not be beautiful but is vital. How some events/experiences are bigger than we can contain and we heft them around until we find a way of putting them down, of considering them. And I'm pausing here to look up what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank had to say about the chapter they didn't include in their *Silvan Tomkins Reader* (1995) because I still think about it. How Tomkin considered the face as the primary site of the affects and how our hands read and care for our faces for tiredness, for the burn of shame, for tears. That first knowing, before we reconfigure or reassemble, the raising of a hand to a cheek, a forehead. What are our hands to do with the reading they do, the comprehension they arrive at but carry it to something: a pen, a needle, a loom, the seam ripper? Do you think this carrying over is where and how the feminism of the method asserts itself?

Quilts Before Marriage? "Mary said that a girl did not consider herself ready for marriage until she had three such quilts, made by her own hands" (Atwood 2011, 160). Mary never started her marriage quilt...did we want to try? What kinds of materials might we use? Scraps. Leftovers. Second-hands. Hand-me-downs. Gently used. Pre-loved. Unloved. Tiny flaws in the stitches. Sinew. Marrow. You say let's go to Mary-le-bone. To see the Virgin Mary and watch the executions. You say Margery Kempe will be there and maybe Julian of Norwich too, if they can coax her out. A Holy Trinity? Nah, they're not really into threesomes. Julian, that "creature unlettered," (Julian of Norwich 1670) locked herself in and Margery, that "white-clad creature" (Kempe 2005, np) spread herself thick and thin. Heretics, the two of them. They took their cut-offs, off-cuts, and hand-outs. They took their clothes off. Out-of-hand these sisters, sirens, spiritualists. Spiralling. Writing and writhing: their lives in secret little corners. Bone on bone. Grace and Mary + Margery and Julian + Tracey and Louise. Sheets, quilts, bodies: hung, for all, to see.

I find myself circling back to this idea of holy trinities: Mary-le-bone / Margery Kempe / Julian of Norwich. This past year, mine would be: Tracey Emin / Patti Smith / Richard Siken. If this were a quilt, could these be the metallic thread that occasionally appears to enliven the whole shebang?

Hung, for all to see. And confessional as in *I want you to get off of me*. The interiority executing an exodus, a bow, a farewell. The departure that we call art. Maybe not departure. (Haha, as if, right?) The reckoning we call art. Or the quilt we call experience reframed. It's not the woman saying *bicycle* every time she sees one on Broadway Market, it's her voice, sparrow-pure, lifting above and carrying on beyond her. Consider the report of the derailed freight train that destroyed Poe's gravestone as maybe art theory. Now consider the mahogany pen holder made from a splint of his coffin. Art moves like a derailment making its own course, like water, or fire, like spilled ink or a voice aloft. (*Bicycle, bicycle, bicycle: that meditative medley around the medium.*) Would you say art can then craft life? I read about Poe in a small bookstore in that slot of time reading a book that will be returned to its shelf permits. This time, of course, is self-imposed. A private clock (or metronome or vitality) that keeps me moving. And what is that particular brief and voracious scanning? Kin to appetite and appraising, kin to recharging? Later, a bee at the Chelsea Flower Show will reiterate the feeling. The sipping and the mapping. Tracey's quilt, *The Last of the Gold* (2002), breaks that clock. The gold began as the fabric of her late mother's drapes, quilted above and below in the way memory moves before it is worn out, or sewn into, as it's becoming something else. Transformed yet still haunting a window, still absorbing all its darkness and all its light.

A medium of expression: the body lives between materiality and discursivity. Let's pretend that the body is a metaphor. And in terms of temporality: as a patchwork of sorts, where each square is not quite the other. It is the other, yet, it is not the same. That's when the body's fabric bends linear time and breaks it. Folded up and over unto itself, like a cheap plastic chair. But we've lost the metaphorical, if *Μεταφορά* still means to carry across, to carry over. We don't know how to write the body. "I suppose the body to be nothing but a statue or machine made of earth" writes Descartes in his *Treatise on Man* ([1667] 2024, 13). We've lost the body haven't we? What's so tempting and extraordinary about that infamous bed is that there are bodies everywhere and not a body to be found. Is this what Derrida meant by the power "to see without being seen" (Derrida 1994, 8)? We find ourselves crying out *habeas corpus*. Embarrassed at our own defilement, our own blindness. A visual-verbal soiling then shame. A vulgar laugh hidden inside, at first surprising but then we quickly understand: this is what it means to embrace the hysterical. Catherine Clément tells us she embodies the "madwoman who names, who names the mother; she is also the laugh that [...] keeps a wide gash bleeding in [...] man's breast. [...] All laughter is allied with the monstrous" because it disrupts a seemingly impenetrable or orderly masculine body-image (Cixous and Clément 1986, 33).

We hide our bodies in our art.

What if Tracey's bed is a welcome to our bodies? What if it offers itself as kinship? What if it is where our bodies remember and acknowledge how they/we wreak their/our sacred and animal havoc? What if we haven't lost the body but have continued to be involved in the fiery and crucial reclamation and inclusion of our bodies long redacted (as in *Treatise on Man*)?

The Latin word *animus* is a faux ami, for me. My mind always conjures animality first then spirit. Platonic punishment is to be re-embodied as a woman. Devoid of logic. Another opportunity to fulfill that tripartite wish, gone? Too bad for us. Maybe that's why women's art discloses the thrill of divinity in carnality: Cindy Sherman's photograph, *Madonna (Self-Portrait)* (1975)!

My body: my hands to my face as if reading it. My hand on this keyboard coding and decoding the interiority, the illegible, the almost, the becoming. My body, of late, has become a reliable portal to healing and understanding myself. I sometimes feel a return to animal for how it knows so much more before my thinking does or before my thinking tries to know or reiterates or cajoles or reformulates.

Why I Never Became a Dancer (1995) is a six-ish minute film in Tracey's show at the Tate. The narrative first, the sex she started having at thirteen—the adventure and learning of it, she says—her young body and their older ones and, eventually, the 1978 British Disco Dancing Championship where she tried to groove her way out of Margate. Images of Margate accompany this telling, its shore, its rollercoaster. Midway through her dance, which was going so well she imagined winning, the men in the audience that she had sex with started calling her a slag. *Slag, slag, slag*, she says in the video (each an axe into whatever it was that was running with the confidence of a river) not only interrupting her groove but making her, she tells us, cry. The video shifts then to an empty white room, a boombox, a balcony and the pulse of "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" by Sylvester and there's Tracey dancing her way back to adventure. Dancing her way back to her body. Shane, she calls out, Eddy, Tony, Doug, Richard, this one's for you. The original was filmed on a Super 8 which makes her dancing look choppy. Audrey Wollen in Art Forum says "maybe we can only access such heights of feelings—such triumph—in fragments" (2021). A strip of fabric then, iridescent and singular, that calls the eye, my eyes, to behold it. Calls all of us sitting on the floor in the Tate, who can't help but move along, sitting up a little straighter with her righteous call out. Here's another species of carrying over. Metaphorical and deeply physical. A literal dance on the move. Her body then mine, bent under the weight of it then exerting itself forward and not only upright, but deeply in the groove.

Is this what Donna Haraway envisioned when she wrote, “It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway 1991, 181)? Dancing without bodies. Is that what feminism as a method is? Carrying over through travelling, unravelling, scrapping, suturing, scraping, needling, eyeing, stretching? An unstable object of study? From Philomela’s tapestry of unspeakable violence to Artemisia Gentileschi’s propensity for chiaroscuro and self-referentiality—*Susanna and the Elders* (1610) or truth by thumbscrews. Consider Kathleen Gilje’s x-ray of the underpainting (1998). Restoration. Making nothing into something. la paperson’s “queer cyborg as a sculptor of assemblage” who “splices one machine to another, de-links apparatuses from/ to one another, places machines to work in making new machines, disassembles and rolls the machine” (as quoted in McGregor 2025). Stitching and allusion are critical to our project too; trying not to get too hung up; choosing between undertaking a feminist machine method instead of a feminist hand method. I’m thinking about Alison Holt’s freehand machine embroidery—soft, undulating, quaint British countryside, the result of rapid needling-piercing—she calls the technique painting with stitches. Figureless, yet, someone is dancing, surely.

The mother, standing, is put on trial: Accused of art crafting life. The one claims we need symmetry, uniformity, chronos, in other words immaculate, clean, rectitude, sickeningly-sweet patterns, but then the other argues for the messy, ugly, complicated, wet, stained, soiled, sick, slutty, misshapen, lumpy, bad, bad, bad pieces. It means borrowing from Christine de Pisan’s *The City of Ladies* (1405) and Julia Kristeva’s *Stabat Mater* (1977). Pisan was accused of plagiarism. Kristeva called it “intertextuality.” You said, “No one is in trouble,” Hannah, but new geometries are risky. We’re making our lives out of scraps, afterall. It’s forgivable. All these corridors, errors, and detours. Connecting into the potential of us writing-reading-exploring together is hard! And letting the method live inside the object is even harder. In the pursuit of decolonial desires, McGregor encourages us “to create new assemblages...of rebellion, whimsy, or nonsense.” Spare parts (synecdoche and metaphor for our missing bodies?). All these imperfect trajectories. Errantry. Ungovernable. Estrangement. Uncanny. Fragments of everyday objects—Livia Marin’s *Nomad Patterns* (2012) come to mind. Marking time by neither the moon nor the hand but by broken pieces....

Accusation: imitation: lacking a thesis, therefore no structure (whispering, wondering where are our monuments?) “What had our mothers been doing?” Virginia Woolf asked ([1929] 2001, 25). But what she meant, and didn’t say, is how do you organize and evaluate the anonymous? In their reimaginings of Black women’s lives and voices, another trio, Alice Walker, Saidiya Hartman and NourbeSe Philip reconfigure the archive (official government-law-house); they take up the question of our inability to separate violence from intimacy, medium and mode. They ask: how do you articulate what is not said, who is not speaking? How do you uncover the body differently? Their narratives go beyond/against the official/Master record to reanimate quilts, stones, songs, saints, leaves, ceramics, gardens, bones, beds, #metoo. Métis artist Jaime Black-Morsette hung red dresses: to honor and remember MMIWG2S+, she articulated a communal refusal to be forgotten or to be silenced. These are just some of the “practices that respond to the conditions of social crises, struggle and upheaval by publishing differently” (Thoburn and Thurston, as quoted in McGregor 2025). Amongst her (re)visions, Walker (1983) told Woolf to get out of her room and go into her mothers’ gardens. Really throw wild

flowers
on Aphra Behn’s,
Phillis Wheatley’s,
and Rita Joe’s
tomb.

Pandora's Box is the last of the premarital quilts: maenads are loose, deceptive, sneaky, surreptitious, gossips who must be tamed-contained (tomb-wombs). Witnesses say the body was bent in ways it did not want but had to go. A bad shape, a "misfit": "Push, push, push, no amount of pushing will get you in" (Ahmed, quoted in McGregor). But this one had to get through. Pushed inside-out its thick black thread becoming borders, hard edges, curated petal shapes. Enclosed. Yoked. Bound. A public display of rage and grief concealed in a bright golden array of circles and nuzzling sungrazing stars. Closing remarks: Who is guilty now? Who is sorry now?

In the film *My Dinner with Andre* (Malle 1981), Wallace says, "When I was ten years old, all I thought about was art, now I'm thirty-six and all I think about is money." As a child I checked the quantity and quality of my grandmother's candy to determine the length of my visit. I measured time and value in sugar. A soft yellow banana equated to thirty minutes. A fudge baby, an hour. A gummy bear, maybe fifteen minutes. A mint and I turned around and walked out the door. A transaction was made good. Art has always been inseparable from oikonomos and violence. Kara Walker's haunting, giant sugar installation of a Mammy-sphinx called *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) cements this connection. Isn't that why the poets must be banished from the Republic's polis? Subversive voices: criticized/cut/excised/exiled. Budget balancing. Policing. NDAs. It's an art to be artless.

Praxis: becoming the practice. What is perfection if not imperfection? My body is a risk. What if my body is out of practice and the reach and risk is how I regroove? What if art is the dancehall, the disco ball, the DJ? What if the feeling of this being hard is more of a *you are here* on an unmapping? As in, at the beginning, where risk feels its riskiest? I aim to work deep in my hours, far from the clock and phone. The silence I wait for is sonically rich and ultra cosmological. Here's where the frequencies of all things thrum, here's where failure swerves to become free of the binary that holds success at the other end, staring down hard at it. Part of this practice is the patience needed for this circulation to become a groove. When this groove begins to vibrate, to play, it sends itself further afield and everything becomes part of an enterprise that thinks and breathes and sinks and swims. Like a shark. Or a murmuration, startled into being by the bird that sees the hawk first, the whole orchestration of its shape directed then by the few birds around each bird. Manifesting meaning then as it moves or something meaningful that can't quite explain itself. Yet. Or ever but can be stepped into, encountered and absorbed somehow. Being on the brink of becoming, always. A Deleuzian shimmer. A frequency or event. I can barely commit to these words trying to describe this. Forgive me. It resists voice or ink. It is pure intuition à la Bergson (these two are the birds flying closest to me right now that I'm using for direction). When I encounter art I find myself tracking how the artist may have passed through this space. I've noted how some durational practitioners have developed the ability to subsist in what Giambattista Vico calls the ligamen: the hidden link between the source and the target of a metaphor, (from the Latin *ligare*, meaning *to bind*) long enough for the experience to become its own species and its own genius/genus (as cited in Geary 2012). An ecosystem of a telling and a showing that flourishes into being. Imagine what coursed through Kara Walker's body when the ideas for *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* began to shift from this to that orchestrally and in every direction. When the ideas beyond her began to organize like starlings. And how this enterprise, this species of ideas then moved into public space where it initiated the "achievement of intimacy," that Ted Cohen writes of when encountering a metaphor (1978). The participatory connection between viewer and the work that is intimate for how it first arrives in the viewer's body with all of its ideas forging immediate and new understanding and impact. Rage and grief not concealed but on the move. Staying with sugar, I'm thinking of Felix Gonzales-Torres's *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), the sculpture he made when his partner died of AIDS that consisted of one hundred and seventy-five pounds of candy, the ideal weight of a healthy male, and how it instigates that intimacy when visitors, leaning in to help themselves to the candy, actively participate in the loss (how the candy lasts, sugaring the tongue and the complexity of that!), the ongoing losing and how the candies are replenished every day to sustain that specific weight. This site of creative labour, the risk and the carrying of this to that curdles immediately, dissipates, at the thought of public and of transaction while it is still finding its way into becoming and becoming relational. Perhaps its arrival to that, haunted by this, and our encounter with it is when metaphor shifts and uproots, perhaps here is when everything teems with the possibility of being on the move.

Artists' Statement

Inspired by Hannah McGregor's keynote address at Atlantis' 50th anniversary conference, *Revolution and Resurgence: Celebrating Feminist Publishing*, the authors have stated that they want to challenge traditional publishing models by reclaiming goodness. The focus on process, McGregor's "fucking around as a feminist method and finding out" becomes the central concept, to the extent that the distinction between form and content is frequently brought into question. This textual quilt, affectionately and playfully titled "Dear Hannah" brings together various mediums, including a wide range of artistic forms and references, most of which pertain to women's practices, including the ways in which women have experimented with and documented their lives and voices. As a non-linear piece, readers are invited to reflect on its composition via organic connections, unexpected pairings, flirtations and revelations, coincidences and confessions, detours, disruptions, and diversions; for instance, in one moment we are in the cell of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich and in the next, we are in bed with Tracey Emin. In their feminist commitment to make space for the unspoken and the unspeakable, however, these temporal-spatial shifts and pauses and to trust the process—breath—becomes necessary.

The juxtaposition between synthetic and natural keeps intruding—it won't go away. Sentences like the slipperiness between resonance and dissonance, symphony and cacophony keep forcing their way into and between existing layers—with every new block of meaning-made, another potential meaning is un-made. The reader too then is a witness and active participant in the piece's (and its writers') vulnerability: essentially, one has to be willing to fuck around and find out. They—we cannot stay there/here—we are making something (in the present tense). We are doing something, together. And what happens in this shared space that is both temporary and temporally fluid, meeting you when you meet it? That perhaps follows you? What is exchanged and activated, what hums along and gains momentum? What do we call this shared frequency and how do we continue to pollinate it together, moving from the singular to the albeit brief but new choir? And how do we gain/find/conjure up the courage to sing? Wait, is this a species of singing, of flying in a momentary formation? The hawk is, of course, yours to see first, the trust this offers is that we will rise to meet you as you fly. Here is when the abstract has escaped its pen to rile up its abstraction. This is also part of the praxis.

A response to neoliberalism, ecological crises, geopolitical conflicts, and misogyny, this quilt delights in play, whimsy, reassemblage, fury, futurity, faith, and hope. We see the embracing of spontaneity as being one way to reclaim and rename our original dignity, autonomy, and joy, a species of terroir thinking/being. Writing in the moment we saw sparks of connections and trails, shimmers. In the back and forth of meeting briefly then parting, precarious pathways began to pop-up. The desire for a collective pedagogy emerges; we wonder if this is how we begin to make feminist community? Can you distinguish where/when one voice ends and another begins? We began with a question: what does medium mean to you?

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A Preliminary Exploration of Arab Older Immigrant and Refugee Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence in Canada: Experiences, Service Utilization, and Support Needs

by Salma Almukhaini, Lori Weeks, Lois Jackson, Colleen MacQuarrie

Abstract: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a global public health concern affecting women across all societies, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or age. Beyond gender, other social identities—such as immigration status, race/ethnicity, and legal standing—intersect to increase women's risk of IPV and shape their experiences of violence and access to services. With the rising number of immigrant and refugee women globally, coupled with an aging population, both age and immigration status create additional layers of vulnerability. This study aimed to explore the experiences, service utilization, and support needs of Arab older immigrant and refugee women who have experienced IPV in Canada. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with one older Arab immigrant woman with lived experience of IPV and three individuals who provided support to Arab older women in either paid or unpaid roles (N=4). Interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Participants indicated that Arab older immigrant and refugee women underutilize available IPV services for multiple reasons, including stigma, lack of awareness about existing resources, fragmented services, and language barriers. A unique finding was a strong preference for services to be provided by female healthcare and social service providers, reflecting cultural and religious considerations. Trust and culturally sensitive care were identified as essential for supporting disclosure and access to services. To improve service utilization among Arab older immigrant women experiencing IPV, organizations must engage in targeted outreach and awareness campaigns, using linguistically and culturally appropriate strategies. Partnerships with Arab community leaders and organizations are critical for building trust and reducing stigma. Additionally, whenever possible, offering services through female providers should be prioritized to respect cultural and religious preferences and enhance women's comfort and safety.

Keywords: Arab; Canada; intimate partner violence; older women; services

Résumé : La violence entre partenaires intimes (VPI) est un enjeu de santé publique mondial qui touche les femmes de tous les pays, quel que soit leur âge, leur race ou leur statut socio-économique. Au-delà du genre, d'autres identités sociales, notamment le statut d'immigration, la race ou l'origine ethnique et le statut juridique, s'entrecroisent, augmentent le risque de VPI chez les femmes et déterminent leur expérience de la violence et leur accès aux services. L'augmentation du nombre de femmes immigrantes et réfugiées dans le monde, combinée au vieillissement de la population, fait en sorte que l'âge et le statut d'immigration constituent des facteurs supplémentaires de vulnérabilité. Cette étude vise à explorer les expériences vécues, le recours aux services et les besoins en matière de soutien des femmes âgées arabes, immigrantes et réfugiées, ayant été victimes de VPI au Canada. Plusieurs entretiens individuels semi-structurés ont été menés avec une femme âgée arabe immigrante ayant subi de la VPI ainsi qu'avec trois personnes ayant apporté leur soutien à des femmes arabes âgées, à titre rémunéré ou bénévole (N=4). Les entretiens ont été analysés à l'aide d'une analyse thématique inductive. Selon les commentaires recueillis, les femmes âgées arabes immigrantes et réfugiées sous-utilisent les services accessibles de lutte contre la VPI pour plusieurs raisons, notamment la stigmatisation, la méconnaissance des ressources existantes, la fragmentation des services et les barrières linguistiques. Un constat particulier a mis en évidence une préférence marquée pour les services dispensés par des inter-

venantes des secteurs de la santé et des services sociaux, en raison de considérations culturelles et religieuses. La confiance et la prestation de soins adaptés à la culture ont été reconnues comme des éléments essentiels pour favoriser la divulgation et l'accès aux services. Pour accroître le recours aux services chez les femmes âgées arabes immigrantes victimes de VPI, les organismes doivent mener des campagnes ciblées d'information et de sensibilisation, fondées sur des stratégies adaptées à la langue et à la culture. Les partenariats avec les dirigeants et les organismes communautaires arabes sont essentiels pour instaurer la confiance et réduire la stigmatisation. De plus, dans la mesure du possible, il faut privilégier la prestation de services par des femmes afin de respecter les préférences culturelles et religieuses et de renforcer le sentiment de confort et de sécurité des femmes.

Mots clés : Arabes; Canada; violence entre partenaires intimes; femmes âgées; services

Authors:

Salma Almukhaini was doing her PhD during this study at Dalhousie University, Canada. She is from Oman, one of the Arab countries in the Middle East. She holds a Master's degree in Adult-Gerontology Critical Care Trauma as a Clinical Nurse Specialist from the University of California, San Francisco. Her research interests include refugee and immigrant health and aging. She has worked as a research assistant, contributing to recruitment, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Her current work focuses on the nursing workforce and advanced practice nursing.

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Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is recognized as a significant public health issue affecting newcomers, including refugees and immigrants, in many Western countries, including Canada (Njie-Carr et al. 2021; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020; Sanz-Barbero et al. 2019). It is projected that by 2036, nearly 30% of the Canadian population will be immigrants or refugees, reflecting Canada's growing cultural diversity (Statistics Canada 2022). *For clarity and readability,*

the term “immigrants” will be used throughout this paper to refer to both immigrants and refugees. The majority of these newcomers originate from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Statistics Canada 2022).

Immigrant women in Canada often face multiple challenges that increase their vulnerability to IPV and influence their ability to seek help (Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020). The immigration process itself can be stressful and may lead to changes in gender roles and power dynamics within families. These roles may be re-evaluated or even rejected during resettlement (Ahmad et al. 2005; Alaggia et al. 2009; Cainkar and Sandra Del Toro 2010). Women who adapt to Canadian cultural norms more quickly than their partners may experience marital conflict, as this shift can be perceived negatively by their husbands, increasing the risk of IPV (Hyman et al. 2004; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020).

Post-migration life for many older immigrant women can be further complicated by several intersecting factors, including limited language proficiency, transportation barriers, extreme weather conditions, challenges in adapting to a new cultural environment, and difficulty securing employment due to non-recognition of foreign credentials. These barriers often lead to financial dependency on partners. When combined with experiences of racism, sexism, and ageism, they can significantly heighten vulnerability to IPV (Guruge et al. 2010; Guruge et al. 2008). Importantly, research shows that the length of stay in Canada is associated with increased IPV risk. Hyman et al. (2006) found that women who had lived in Canada for more than five years were at a significantly higher risk of IPV than recent arrivals. Additionally, immigrant women from non-Western countries were identified as particularly vulnerable to IPV (Hyman et al. 2006).

Financial dependency, systemic inequities, and the lack of culturally sensitive services have been linked to increased IPV risk among older immigrant women (Ahmad et al. 2005; Baobaid and Hamed 2010; Kulwicki et al. 2010). Despite their heightened risk, many immigrant women face multiple barriers when reporting IPV or seeking help. These barriers include fear of deportation, unfamiliarity with available health and social services, language differences, and gender-based discrimination (Guruge et al. 2010).

In response to Canada’s increasing immigrant population, researchers have explored IPV experiences among women from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Portuguese (Souto et al. 2019), Chinese (Fong 2010), Sri Lankan (Guruge et al. 2010), Ethiopian (Hyman et al. 2004), and Nigerian communities (Nwosu 2006). These studies consistently emphasize that immigrant women are not a homogenous group. Key factors such as age at immigration, country of origin, language proficiency, and length of stay shape their IPV experiences and help-seeking behaviours (Hyman 2002; Hyman et al. 2006).

Only two Canadian studies have specifically focused on older immigrant women. Guruge et al. (2010) included women aged 49–85, examining their experiences of neglect and violence from intimate partners and other family members. Souto et al. (2019) studied Portuguese older women and highlighted their diverse experiences, concluding that some women sought support not to leave abusive relationships but to repair them. This finding underscores the importance of respecting women’s individual choices and cultural contexts when providing care. Collectively, these studies highlight the critical research gap surrounding IPV among older immigrant women from other cultural groups

Arab Immigrants in Canada

Arabs represent one of the fastest-growing immigrant populations in Canada, comprising 7% of the visible minority population (Statistics Canada 2022). The 2021 census reported 694,020 individuals of Arab descent living in Canada, a substantial increase from 523,235 in 2016 (Statistics Canada 2017; 2022). Arabic is also among the most commonly spoken immigrant languages in several provinces, including Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia—the setting for this study (Statistics Canada 2017).

Despite this growth, there is a notable lack of Canadian research examining IPV among Arab immigrant women, particularly older women. However, US-based studies provide valuable insights. Abu-Ras (2003; 2007) explored cultural beliefs and service utilization among Arab immigrant women aged 18–50 and found that those holding tradi-

tional patriarchal beliefs were significantly less likely to access available services. Barriers identified included shame, fear of social stigma, and distrust of service providers. These findings suggest that similar barriers may exist among Arab women in Canada and warrant investigation.

Relevance of Nova Scotia as a Study Setting

Nova Scotia, located on Canada's Atlantic coast, has experienced a notable increase in Arab immigration in recent years, particularly among families and older adults. However, services in smaller provinces such as Nova Scotia are often limited and fragmented, creating additional challenges for newcomers navigating health and social support systems. Understanding the IPV experiences of Arab older women within this specific context is crucial for identifying service gaps and informing targeted interventions.

Purpose of This Study

The present study aims to explore the experiences of older Arab immigrant women with IPV in Canada, specifically in Nova Scotia, focusing on their patterns of service utilization and unmet needs. It is part of a larger, multi-site project examining the support needs of diverse older women experiencing IPV across Canada (Weeks et al. 2021).

By gaining a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by Arab older women in disclosing IPV and seeking support in Nova Scotia, this study seeks to generate actionable insights for social service providers, healthcare professionals, and policymakers. The findings will inform the development of culturally sensitive, accessible interventions and policies that better meet the needs of this vulnerable population. Furthermore, this exploratory work aims to lay the foundation for future research, advancing knowledge of IPV experiences among older immigrant women more broadly and guiding improvements in nursing practice and health policy at both provincial and national levels.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the feminist theory of intersectionality, which provides a lens to examine how overlapping and interconnected social identities shape women's experiences of oppression and privilege (Adams and Campbell 2012). Intersectionality emphasizes that individuals do not experience forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, ageism, or xenophobia, in isolation. Instead, these factors interact simultaneously, creating unique and compounded experiences of marginalization.

Applying an intersectional framework was particularly relevant for this study because Arab older immigrant women occupy multiple marginalized social positions. Their experiences are shaped by the intersections of 1) gender, as women in patriarchal family and community structures, 2) age, which may lead to increased dependency and vulnerability; 3) cultural and religious identity, as members of a minority group within the broader Canadian context; and 4) immigration status, which can involve power imbalances, language barriers, and systemic discrimination. These intersecting factors not only influence women's risk of IPV but also affect their responses to violence, including help-seeking behaviours and service utilization. For instance, a woman's decision to disclose IPV may be shaped simultaneously by cultural expectations around family honour, language barriers that hinder communication with service providers, and age-related health or mobility challenges. Intersectionality allows these complex realities to be examined holistically rather than as separate, unrelated factors. Using this framework enabled the researchers to explore how structural, cultural, and personal factors converge to shape women's lived experiences. This perspective was critical for understanding why IPV may remain hidden within certain communities and why services often fail to meet the needs of Arab older immigrant women.

Methodology

Study Context and Participants

This study was part of a larger research project exploring the support needs of diverse older women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in Canada (Weeks et al. 2021). The broader study aimed to better understand the complexity of services required to support older women, particularly those from visible or language minority groups living in rural or urban settings.

For this paper, we focused specifically on Arab older immigrant and refugee women aged 50 years or older who experienced IPV, as well as individuals providing them with paid or unpaid support. Ethics approval was obtained from Dalhousie University (#2018-4433), the University of New Brunswick (2018-007), and the Université de Moncton (#1718-070), and data collection took place in 2019.

Culturally sensitive recruitment strategies were used, including bilingual flyers placed in Arab community spaces and outreach through social media, particularly a WhatsApp group of more than 250 Arab women living across Nova Scotia. Despite 12 weeks of intensive efforts, four participants were recruited: one Arab woman with lived experience of IPV (AW), a healthcare professional, and two social service providers (AS1, AS2, AS3). The survivor was in her 50s, while the other participants ranged from their late 30s to late 50s. All participants were Arab, Muslim, and Arabic-speaking. Three had immigrated to Canada and one had arrived as a refugee, with time in Canada ranging from two months to ten years (mean of six years). All were married, except the survivor, who was divorced. See Table 1 (appendix) for participants characteristics.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted in settings convenient for participants (e.g., homes, offices, cafés). Two interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed, and translated into English by the first author. Interviews explored experiences with IPV, service utilization, and support needs. The survivor provided detailed, first-hand insights into her experiences with IPV, while the other three participants shared their perspectives as service providers and supporters.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Two authors independently coded the transcripts and reached consensus on final themes. The themes captured the lived experiences of Arab older women with IPV, their patterns of service utilization, and support needs, including the close circle of abuse, barriers to service utilization, and specific support requirements for this population.

Results and Discussion

This study is the first exploratory research to examine IPV among Arab older immigrant women living in Nova Scotia. By focusing on this local context, our findings shed light on the unique cultural, social, and structural factors influencing IPV experiences and service utilization in the province. While some patterns reflect national trends observed across Canada, the Nova Scotia context is distinctive due to its smaller immigrant population, geographic distribution of services, and limited culturally tailored resources. This section presents the key findings organized by major themes, emphasizing Nova Scotia first and then connecting to broader Canadian literature.

Theme 1: The Closed Circle of IPV

The narratives of participants highlighted that IPV among Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia exists within a persistent and closed cycle. The survivor reported that her experience with IPV began in her country of origin and continued after immigrating to Nova Scotia. She shared, “I have lived with abuse since I was married” (AW). This emphasizes that immigration did not protect her from IPV; instead, social isolation and lack of family support in Nova Scotia contributed to the continuation of abuse. Locally, these findings underscore that immigrant women may

face compounded vulnerabilities when they lack extended family and community connections. This aligns with previous research conducted in Nova Scotia, which highlighted that immigrant women often experience social isolation that limits their ability to seek help and disrupt cycles of violence (Tañafranca 2020). Similar findings were reported by Sri Lankan older immigrant women in Toronto (Guruge et al. 2010). Conversely, Portuguese older immigrant women described migration to Canada as protective, attributing it to improved opportunities to report IPV and access services (Souto et al. 2019). These differences emphasize that immigrant women are not a homogenous group and they may face distinct barriers shaped by local resources, culture, and community structures.

The survivor's story also revealed multiple forms of IPV, including psychological, financial, verbal, and physical abuse. She highlighted that psychological and financial abuse became more pronounced as she aged. While studies nationally have noted psychological abuse increases with age (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2019), limited data exist on financial abuse, which may be a growing issue in immigrant populations.

Theme 2: Barriers to IPV Disclosure and Service Utilization

Stigma

Stigma was identified by all participants as the most significant barrier preventing Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia from seeking help for IPV. The survivor vividly illustrated the depth of this stigma, stating, "Shame for women to be divorced. Shame for women to seek help. Everything is a shame" (AW). This reflects how feelings of shame discourage women from disclosing abuse, whether to formal support services or to informal networks such as friends and relatives.

Participants described how stigma directly influenced service utilization within Nova Scotia. For instance, some women felt judged and ostracized after using housing services such as shelters. As one supporter explained, "The shelter was not a success because the women that went to the shelter were themselves stigmatized" (AS3). These experiences highlight the challenges in a smaller province like Nova Scotia, where close-knit communities can intensify fear of exposure and public judgment. Similarly, Fong (2010) reported that Nigerian immigrant women in Toronto perceived shelters as unwelcoming due to judgmental attitudes from staff and other residents.

Tañafranca (2020) reported that cultural barriers, particularly stigma and patriarchal norms, are major obstacles for immigrant women in Nova Scotia when it comes to disclosing IPV or seeking help. Their study also highlighted that some immigrant communities actively discourage women from reporting IPV in order to protect family reputation and preserve social standing. When compared to the broader Canadian context, similar patterns are evident. For example, Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2020) identified stigma as one of the most powerful barriers to help-seeking among immigrant women nationally. However, in Nova Scotia, the smaller population and limited culturally tailored services amplify these barriers, making women feel even more visible and vulnerable.

Taccini and Mannarini (2023) conceptualize stigma as a phenomenon involving stereotypes that lead to prejudice and discrimination against women experiencing IPV. Public stigma manifests externally through societal stereotyping and discrimination, while internalized stigma occurs when women adopt these negative views, leading to self-blame and shame. This creates a closed cycle of self-stigma, victimization, and trauma. Such psychological effects can be severe, with stigma contributing to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Taccini and Mannarini 2023). Our findings emphasize that stigma in Nova Scotia is not merely an individual issue but a community-wide barrier. Addressing stigma through education, awareness campaigns, and culturally sensitive interventions is essential for improving service access and encouraging disclosure of IPV among Arab older immigrant women.

Lack of Awareness

Lack of awareness about available IPV services emerged as a significant barrier to service utilization among Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia. All participants emphasized that many women are unaware of the types of services

offered, how to access them, and how these services could provide support. This lack of knowledge directly hinders their ability to seek help. The survivor described how her silence was partly due to not knowing that services existed, stating, “He was physically abusing me, and I was silent. If I knew at that time that there were services to help me, I would run to them. I swear I would run” (AW). This highlights a critical local gap in service outreach and education.

Our findings are consistent with research conducted in Nova Scotia. Tañafranca (2020) reported that immigrant women in the province frequently lack information about IPV services and how to navigate the support system. This lack of awareness reflects both limited dissemination of information and language barriers, which together create significant obstacles to accessing care. It underscores the urgent need for targeted educational campaigns and outreach initiatives in Nova Scotia, specifically within immigrant communities.

Similar trends are evident in a broader Canadian context. National studies have found that racialized and immigrant populations often have limited knowledge about available IPV services (Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020; Waldron et al. 2021). Previous studies have linked lack of social connections, language proficiency, and willingness to disclose IPV to lower levels of awareness about services (Abu-Ras 2003; Finfgeld-Connett 2014; Souto et al. 2019). However, these challenges may be more pronounced in Nova Scotia due to its smaller immigrant population and limited culturally tailored services.

Interestingly, differences exist among immigrant groups across Canada. For example, Sri Lankan older women were able to learn about services through strong social networks (Guruge et al. 2010). These findings emphasize the importance of local, culturally sensitive strategies to increase awareness of IPV-related services in Nova Scotia. Community outreach must prioritize immigrant populations to ensure women not only know about these services but also feel empowered to access them.

Police Involvement

Participants reported that Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia engaged police services only in extreme situations, such as when they feared for their own lives or the safety of their children. At the same time, many women hesitated to contact the police due to fear of deportation and concerns about potential negative consequences for their families. One survivor explained: “All I knew was that if your husband hit you or abused you, you call the police. I didn’t do that because he was the father of my children. My children would not love me because they would say you brought a police officer for our father” (AW). These local narratives reflect a complex relationship between immigrant women and law enforcement in Nova Scotia. Tañafranca (2020) highlighted that the province’s justice system often relies heavily on criminalization, which can discourage women from reporting IPV. Fear of authorities, shaped by previous negative experiences or immigration-related concerns, contributes to a reluctance to involve police even when abuse is severe.

Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2020) found in their scoping review that immigrant women across Canada often avoid contacting police because of fears linked to policies such as mandatory spouse arrest. Hyman et al. (2011) reported that length of stay in Canada influences police service use, with recent immigrants being more likely to engage police than those who have lived in the country longer. While these findings resonate with the Nova Scotia context, our study suggests that local factors, including smaller communities and limited culturally informed policing practices, may intensify fear and mistrust.

Language Proficiency

Lack of English language proficiency was another major barrier highlighted by all participants. A supporter emphasized the importance of bilingual services, stating, “If we are talking about here in the context of Nova Scotia, I think it should be bilingual. So Arabic and English” (AS3). Tañafranca (2020) also identified language barriers as a critical issue in Nova Scotia. While services related to IPV exist, they are often offered exclusively in English.

This mismatch creates challenges for Arab older women, who may not fully understand the resources available or how to access them. Importantly, no data were found regarding the availability of IPV services specifically in Arabic within the province, highlighting a significant service gap.

On a national level, language barriers have been repeatedly documented as a major obstacle to accessing IPV services (Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020; Weeks et al. 2021). Weeks et al. (2021) found that most services for older women in Canada are provided in English, with very limited availability in other languages such as French. The lack of translation and interpretation services in Nova Scotia, combined with its smaller immigrant population, makes the issue particularly acute locally. To improve accessibility, Tañafranca (2020) recommended offering linguistically appropriate IPV services and proactively reaching out to immigrant communities in multiple languages. These steps are essential to ensure that Arab older immigrant women can access the information and support they need without facing linguistic barriers.

Fragmented Services

Participants highlighted that Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia often require multiple types of support, including medical, social, legal, and mental health services. However, these services are frequently fragmented, leaving women to navigate a complex and disconnected system on their own. One supporter described the challenge, stating: “It was not that effective, I would say. It could have been, but it was not that effective because also it was not comprehensive. So, if the woman needed economic support, or needed health services, or needed marriage counseling or mediation services, there was no referral system” (AS3). This lack of coordination creates significant barriers to timely and effective care.

Tañafranca (2020) documented similar issues in Halifax, noting that IPV services are shaped by multiple policies and institutional mandates, including immigration regulations, legal systems, and organizational protocols. Because these sectors often operate independently, women encounter gaps and inconsistencies when seeking help.

National research reflects similar challenges, with immigrant women across Canada reporting difficulties in navigating disjointed health and social service systems (Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020). However, in Nova Scotia, the smaller scale of services and limited availability of culturally responsive care amplify these barriers. There is a pressing need for a well-coordinated referral network in the province, where healthcare providers, social workers, and other agencies work together seamlessly to address immigrant women's needs in a timely and holistic manner.

Theme 3: Service Needs of Arab Women with IPV

When asked about the types of services and supports Arab older women need in Nova Scotia, all participants emphasized that these services should ideally be delivered by women. Considering the conservative nature of the Arab community, and the perception of IPV as a private family matter, Arab older women may feel more comfortable discussing IPV with female service providers, particularly when physical examinations are involved. Although this may be challenging to implement, participants stressed that it should be facilitated and respected whenever possible. Interestingly, this need was not reported among other immigrant women experiencing IPV in Nova Scotia (Tañafranca 2020) or in Canada more broadly (Fong 2010; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020), underscoring the heterogeneity of immigrant women's support needs and the importance of recognizing diverse experiences.

Trust also emerged as a critical theme. A participant working as a family physician explained that Arab older women are more likely to visit their primary healthcare providers when experiencing physical or mental health concerns. Female physicians and nurse practitioners, in particular, were seen as well-positioned to detect IPV and provide appropriate interventions and referrals. However, participants noted that Arab women may not disclose IPV directly, and that trust and long-term relationships with healthcare providers are essential for recognizing subtle cues. As one participant explained, “Sometimes even she [a woman experiencing IPV] cannot come directly to say I have something

wrong in my life. So, because we are family physicians, we know our clients, we know our patients. From the first look, you can say she has something wrong in her life” (AS2).

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

This exploratory study highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive and coordinated strategies to address IPV among Arab older immigrant women in Canada. Based on the findings, several implications emerge for policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers.

Recognizing IPV as a Hidden Public Health and Human Rights Issue

Intimate partner violence among Arab older immigrant women remains largely hidden, shaped by stigma, cultural norms, and systemic barriers. IPV must be framed as a human rights issue, not a private family matter. To achieve this, policymakers should support prevalence studies to better understand the scope of IPV within this population. Larger-scale qualitative and mixed-methods research is needed to explore how intersecting factors—age, gender, immigrant status—affect experiences of IPV and coping strategies. These data are essential for developing targeted interventions and policies.

Further studies are needed to explore financial abuse as a distinct form of IPV among older immigrant women, examine the experiences of service providers working directly with Arab women to identify systemic challenges and opportunities, and evaluate the effectiveness of culturally tailored interventions and outreach strategies. These efforts will expand the evidence base and inform sustainable solutions to IPV within immigrant communities.

Reducing Stigma and Creating Safe Spaces

Stigma was the most powerful barrier identified in this study. Building a culture that normalizes disclosure of IPV requires multi-level, community-based efforts. Stigma can be reduced by: 1) increasing community engagement with Arab community leaders, religious leaders, and grassroots organizations to create safe, non-judgmental spaces where IPV can be discussed openly; 2) increasing education and awareness campaigns to develop culturally relevant educational materials in Arabic and English that frame IPV as a violation of human rights, emphasizing that seeking help does not compromise family values or religious beliefs; and 3) increasing youth involvement as to engage younger generations of Arab Canadians, who may hold different beliefs about gender roles and IPV, as allies in reducing stigma and promoting change.

Increasing Awareness and Accessibility of Services

Many Arab older women lack awareness of available IPV services and how to access them. Service providers should use multiple outreach strategies and disseminate information through printed materials, social media, WhatsApp groups, and local Arab community centres. Service providers can also provide materials in Arabic and other relevant languages to ensure that women fully understand the services available and how to navigate them. Finally, service providers can partner with trusted community figures as building relationships with local Arab organizations can improve outreach and foster trust. These strategies will not only increase awareness but also empower women to seek help earlier and more safely.

Offering Gender-Appropriate and Culturally Tailored Care

Participants expressed a strong preference for female service providers, especially for services involving physical examinations or sensitive discussions. Healthcare organizations and social services should prioritize recruiting and training female providers where possible, offer cultural competency training to all staff to ensure services are respectful and responsive to Arab women's values and preferences, and develop care pathways that recognize the central role of trust and long-term provider relationships in disclosure.

The lack of coordination among health, social, legal, and mental health services was a major barrier. A comprehensive referral network is urgently needed in Nova Scotia and similar provinces. Policymakers should support integrated systems where service providers collaborate seamlessly across sectors, navigation support is available to guide women through complex systems, and policies and institutional mandates align to ensure consistent, culturally sensitive care.

Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be considered. Recruitment was challenging, resulting in a small sample size of four participants. This may reflect cultural factors, as older Arab women may view IPV as a private family matter that should not be disclosed to outsiders (Abu-Ras 2007; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2020). Future research should explore strategies to improve recruitment and engagement, possibly through community partnerships or trusted intermediaries. The survivor in this study had limited direct experience with IPV services in Canada due to a lack of awareness. As a result, her perspectives on service quality were limited. Some supporters shared insights based on their work with Arab women in their home countries rather than exclusively in Canada. This may affect the transferability of findings to the Canadian context. Finally, as this was a preliminary exploratory study, findings are not generalizable, however, they provide a critical starting point for understanding the unique challenges faced by Arab older immigrant women and for shaping future research and interventions.

Conclusion

This exploratory study is, to our knowledge, the first to examine IPV among Arab older immigrant women in Nova Scotia. The findings reveal that Arab older women face multiple, intersecting barriers to disclosing IPV and accessing support, including stigma, language difficulties, lack of awareness, and fragmented services. A unique and culturally significant finding was the strong preference for female service providers, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive care models. The study also reinforces that immigrant and minority women are not a homogenous group; interventions must reflect their diverse experiences and needs.

To effectively support Arab older immigrant women, awareness campaigns, culturally tailored services, and integrated care systems are essential. Partnerships with local Arab communities and organizations are crucial for building trust, reducing stigma, and improving service utilization. By centring the voices of Arab older women and acknowledging their unique cultural and social contexts, this study provides a foundation for future research, policy development, and practice innovations aimed at preventing IPV and promoting safety, dignity, and well-being for this vulnerable population.

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Appendix

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Participant ID	Gender	Status	Immigration status	Years in Canada
AW	Female	Survivor	Immigrant	10 years
AS1	Male	Paid supporter: Personal trainer	Refugee	5 years
AS2	Female	Paid supporter: family physician	Immigrant	7 years
AS3	Female	Paid and unpaid supporter: social worker	Immigrant	2 months

Childfree in the Academy: Class and Motherhood in the Professoriate

by Lynn Arner

Abstract: Employing a survey of English faculty across Canada and data from Statistics Canada, the first one-third of this article examines the intersection of gender and parental educational level in relation to faculty members' likelihood of having children. Although among the men reproduction was not associated with parental educational level, women whose parents possessed graduate degrees were more likely to have children than women with lower parental educational levels. The bulk of the article discusses some of the implications of these disparities. Not all women struggle equally to balance academic careers with childrearing: class privilege can compensate for some gendered disadvantages. Given their increased chances of being childfree, given their gender, and given their class backgrounds, women faculty with lower parental educational levels can end up with heavier workloads than their colleagues. With the government and universities alike failing to provide adequate childcare, university administrators routinely shift the responsibility for accommodating parents' schedules onto childfree women and LGBTQ+ faculty. Because (heterosexual) men typically spend more of their work time than their women colleagues on research, because of gendered assumptions about service and about the pastoral care of students, and because of the time constraints of faculty mothers, a disproportionate amount of service and care work is performed by childfree women and their LGBTQ+ colleagues, hindering their ability to publish.

Keywords: academic labour; childless faculty; faculty who are first-generation university students; working-class faculty; gender discrimination in academe; classism in academe

Résumé : En s'appuyant sur un sondage mené auprès de professeur·e·s de littérature anglaise dans l'ensemble du Canada et de données de Statistique Canada, le premier tiers de cet article examine l'intersection du genre et du niveau de scolarité des parents en lien avec la probabilité que les membres du corps professoral aient des enfants. Bien que, chez les hommes, le fait d'avoir des enfants ne soit pas associé au niveau de scolarité des parents, les femmes dont les parents détenaient des diplômes d'études supérieures étaient plus susceptibles d'avoir des enfants que les femmes dont les parents avaient un niveau de scolarité inférieur. La majeure partie de l'article examine certaines des répercussions de ces disparités. Les femmes ne se heurtent pas toutes aux mêmes difficultés pour concilier une carrière universitaire et l'éducation des enfants : les privilèges liés à la classe sociale peuvent compenser certains désavantages liés au genre. Compte tenu de leur plus grande probabilité de ne pas avoir d'enfants, de leur genre et de leur milieu socioéconomique, les femmes membres du corps professoral dont les parents ont un niveau de scolarité inférieur peuvent se retrouver avec une charge de travail plus lourde que celle de leurs collègues. Alors que le gouvernement et les universités ne fournissent pas suffisamment de services de garde, les administrateur·trice·s universitaires transfèrent régulièrement la responsabilité de l'adaptation des horaires des parents aux femmes sans enfants et aux membres du corps professoral LGBTQ+. Comme les hommes (hétérosexuels) consacrent généralement plus de leur temps de travail à la recherche que leurs collègues féminines en raison de présomptions genrées du travail de service et de l'accompagnement des étudiant·e·s, ainsi que des contraintes de temps auxquelles font face les mères membres du corps professoral, une part disproportionnée de ce travail et de cet accompagnement est assumée par les femmes sans enfants et leurs collègues LGBTQ+, ce qui nuit à leur capacité de publier.

Mots clés : travail universitaire; membres du corps professoral sans enfants; membres du corps professoral qui sont les premiers de leur famille à fréquenter l'université; membres du corps professoral issus de la classe ouvrière; discrimination fondée sur le genre dans le milieu universitaire; discrimination fondée sur la classe sociale dans le milieu universitaire

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Introduction

Scholars have often observed that, among university professors, women are less likely than men to have children (e.g., Mason and Goulden 2004; Mason et al. 2013). Apart from considerations of marital status (e.g., Mason et al. 2013), researchers have paid little attention to which women in the tenure system tend to have children versus which women are more likely to remain childfree. In 2020, I conducted a nationwide survey of faculty in the discipline of English in Canada that sheds light on this issue. A key reason why this question has not been investigated is that the professoriate is generally seen as much more homogeneous than it actually is. While race in the profession has been an important area of inquiry (e.g., Henry et al. 2017; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), class in the professoriate has not yet received much attention. This oversight is largely because, as Timothy Haney's (2016) survey of Canadian professors attests, most faculty view class in the professoriate as a non-issue. It is as if once working-class students earn degrees—and certainly once PhD recipients enter tenure-track positions—class differences among faculty vanish.

Although employed in a middle-class occupation, not all university professors are middle class. In Canada, large portions of faculty derive from working-class backgrounds. According to Statistics Canada, one-half of all PhD recipients in 2005 were first-generation university students (Desjardins 2012). Similarly, as explained in my previous work (Arner 2021), according to Statistics Canada's *Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED)*, the parents of 38.8% of English doctoral recipients in Canada from 2003–2008 held no university degrees. While first-generation university students and working-class students are not interchangeable groups, there is a very large overlap, and parental educational level is conventionally considered a key indicator of socioeconomic status (Oldfield and Conant 2001; Carnevale and Rose 2004). Socioeconomic disparities among faculty—rooted in their familial backgrounds—have *profound* effects on academic careers. In the US, these effects are as monumental as where scholars earn their degrees and where they are hired (Grimes and Morris 1997; Lipset and Ladd 1979; Roscigno et al. 2023). The same is true in Canada (Arner 2021, 2024). Despite the profound effects of socioeconomic background on academic careers, the relation between socioeconomic roots and reproduction among faculty has been almost entirely ignored.¹

Based on my survey of English faculty across Canada, the first one-third of this article examines the parental educational level of women faculty in relation to their likelihood of being mothers. The study then discusses some key conditions that enable women scholars from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to become mothers but that make it difficult for women scholars from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to have children. (It is important not to assume, however, that childfree women necessarily want children.) Although the Canadian federal government has instituted a generous parental leave policy nationwide, because of the unfulfilled promise by the Canadian government (excluding the province of Quebec) to provide universal childcare and because of the simultaneous dearth of on-campus childcare available to faculty, not only are the Canadian government and universities failing faculty mothers, but, as this article explains, these institutions are also failing childfree women faculty and their LGBTQ+ colleagues (groups that obviously overlap to some degree). Part of this failure involves senior university administrators routinely displacing their responsibility for accommodating parents onto childfree women and LGBTQ+ faculty and thereby creating unnecessary conflict among different groups of faculty.

Methods²

From January 28 through May 28, 2020, I conducted a survey that invited the participation of all faculty (excluding graduate students) listed on the websites of English departments at every university in Canada. I selected English because it has been the largest discipline in the Humanities, in both Canada and the US, with the greatest volume of students and the biggest faculty labour pool for decades. Survey invitations were emailed to 1,913 faculty, and the survey garnered a response rate of 32.51% ($N = 622$).³ Four screening questions asked participants to affirm that they were (a) housed in an English department/program, (b) not students, and (c) not primarily administrators outside an English department/program and that they were (d) either teaching or on sabbatical during that academic year.⁴ 556 participants remained in the survey. The overall survey explored a few key ways in which careers might differ for English faculty according to their gender and parental educational level. This article concentrates on one section of the survey, specifically the section on reproduction.

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and parental educational levels. For gender, respondents could identify as men, as women, or as non-binary. Seven participants skipped this question, and six selected non-binary, too small a group for analysis. The survey did not inquire about sexuality because, if participants were out in the profession, there was a risk of revealing the individual identities of individuals of those who indicated that they were LGBTQ+. For parental educational level, participants could choose from the following categories for each parent/guardian: (a) no baccalaureate; (b) a baccalaureate as the highest degree; or (c) an advanced degree. Six participants skipped this question.

This article also employs publicly unavailable Statistics Canada data on English PhD recipients. Li Wang, Kristopher Brazil, and I processed data from the *SED* from 2003–2008, the only years in which the *SED* was conducted in Canada. Kristopher and I processed data from the *National Graduate Survey (NGS)* for university students who completed degrees in 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015 (Statistics Canada 2002, 2007a, 2013, 2018).⁵

My survey could not inquire about participants' race because of the limited number of BIPOC scholars (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) who had graduated with English PhDs in Canada. In the *SED* (Statistics Canada 2005, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), 88% of English PhD recipients identified as White, and an additional number did not answer questions about their race or ethnicity, meaning that the real percentage of White English PhD recipients may have been higher. Hence, in my survey, the variable of race would have generated cell counts too diminutive to analyze and, due to other variables, could have revealed some participants' individual identities.

Results

Table 1 records the number of respondents in my survey, divided according to (binary) gender and parental educational level.

Table 1: *Gender and parental educational level of faculty*

	Men	Women	Total
Parents with no university degrees	91 (16.79%)	124 (22.88%)	215 (39.67%)
Parents with baccalaureates only	41 (7.56%)	75 (13.84%)	116 (21.40%)
Parents with advanced degrees	88 (16.24%)	123 (22.69%)	211 (38.93%)
Total	220 (40.59%)	322 (59.41%)	542 (100%)

Notes. N in the tables vary because a few participants intermittently skipped some questions. Due to rounding, totals in the tables may not equal 100%.

Table 2 outlines the number of men and women in each parental educational level who answered “yes” to the question “Do you have children?” Although my survey found a gendered disparity in the proportion of men (65.8%) and women (60.2%) who were parents, this gap was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 540) = 1.69, p = .194$.

Table 2: *Gender and parental educational level of faculty with children*

	Men	Women	Total
Parents with no university degrees	59 (64.8%)	68 (54.8%)	127 (59.1%)
Parents with baccalaureates only	25 (61%)	39 (52.7%)	64 (55.7%)
Parents with advanced degrees	60 (69%)	86 (69.9%)	146 (69.5%)
Total	144 (65.8%)	193 (60.1%)	337 (62.4%)

Note. $N = 540$.

There was an association between parental educational level and having children. As Table 3 demonstrates, faculty whose parents possessed advanced degrees had an increased likelihood of having children compared to faculty whose parents did not possess advanced degrees, $\chi^2(2, N = 548) = 8.31, p = .016$.

Table 3: *Parental educational level and number of faculty with children*

	No degrees	Baccalaureates	Advanced degrees	Total
Count	129a	64a	149b	342
Expected Count	136.1	72.4	133.6	342
% Responding “Yes” within “Do you have children?”	23.5%	11.7%	27.2%	62.4%
% Within parental educational level	59.2%	55.2%	69.6%	62.4%
Standardized Residual	-.6	-1.0	1.3	

Notes. $N = 548$. “A” indicates a subset of parental educational levels whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Regarding where the disparities among the groups lie, there were no significant differences among the three groups of men in the likelihood of having children, $\chi^2(2, N = 219) = 8.31, p = .654$. As Table 4 demonstrates, the disparity lay specifically among the women: women who were first-generation university students or whose parents held only baccalaureates were significantly less likely to have children than women whose parents possessed advanced degrees, $\chi^2(2, N = 321) = 8.07, p = .018$.

Table 4: *Parental educational level and number of women without children*

	No degrees	Baccalaureates	Advanced degrees	Total
Count	56a	35a	37b	128
Expected Count	49.4	29.5	49	128
% Responding “No” within parental educational level	45.2%	47.3%	30.1%	39.9%
% Within “Do you have children?”	43.8%	27.3%	28.9%	100%
Standardized Residual	.9	1	-1.7	

Notes. $N = 321$. “A” denotes a subset of parental educational levels whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Table 5 records the average number of children across the entire faculty pool, including parents and nonparents alike.

Table 5: *Average number of children among all faculty, according to parental educational level and gender*

	M	N	SD
Women whose parents have no degrees	.94	124	1.01
Women whose parents have baccalaureates only	.95	74	1.01
Women whose parents have advanced degrees	1.28	123	1.02
Men whose parents have no degrees	1.35	91	1.14
Men whose parents have baccalaureates only	1.20	41	1.15
Men whose parents have advanced degrees	1.36	86	1.08
Total	1.18	539	1.07

Faculty parents averaged 1.89 children ($SD = 0.7$). Among the six groups divided by gender and by parental educational level, post-hoc analysis revealed that the only significant gender difference lay among faculty who were first-generation university students: fathers who were first-generation university students ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .68$) had a significantly greater likelihood of having more children than mothers who were first-generation university students ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .71$) ($MD = .364$, $SE [.122]$, $p = .037$, 95% CI $[.01, .72]$).

Regarding when in their career trajectories faculty reproduce, in the *NGS*, 42.3% of survey participants already had children when they completed their English PhDs: 53.3% of the men were parents but only 37.7% of the women. Among the women, the *NGS* suggests that the motherhood gap between women whose parents held advanced degrees and women whose parents had lower educational levels was already underway early in their careers: nearly one-half (47.7%) of the women whose parents held advanced degrees were mothers at PhD graduation versus only one-third (33.3%) of the other women (Statistics Canada 2002, 2007a, 2013, 2018).

Age is clearly an important factor regarding when in an academic career a woman might reproduce. Employing data from the *SED*, my previous work (Arner 2024) demonstrated that, at the conferral of the PhD in English, there was a significant difference between the age of first-generation university students and the age of those whose parents possessed advanced degrees: from 2003–2008, women whose parents possessed advanced degrees graduated on average at age 33.3; women whose parents possessed only baccalaureates graduated on average at age 37; and women who were first-generation university students graduated on average at age 39.4. Not surprisingly, women who were first-generation university students formed the largest proportion of PhD recipients who graduated at forty or older (Arner 2024). Similarly, according to the *SED*, the older English PhD recipients were significantly less likely to have parents with university degrees (Arner 2024). These age disparities were attributable primarily to differences in age upon entry into doctoral programs, since the length of time to PhD completion was comparable across gender and parental educational levels (Arner 2024).

Among my survey participants, women faculty inside the tenure system were no more likely to be mothers than women outside the tenure system: 61.9% of women in the tenure system and 56.9% of women outside the tenure system were mothers, $\chi^2(1, N = 320) = .744, p = .39$. Likewise, women who taught part-time were no more likely to be mothers than women who taught full-time, $\chi^2(1, N = 322) = .423, p = .52$: among the women, 56.9% of part-time and 61.2% of full-time faculty were mothers. The absence of significant disparities between mothers outside versus inside the tenure system and mothers who worked full-time versus part-time persisted across the different age groups (under 35, 35–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–65, 66 and over) and hence is not explainable by age.

My survey did not investigate the likelihood of LGBTQ+ faculty having children. However, the 2021 Statistics Canada (2022) census sheds light on this issue in Canada as a whole. According to the census data, in 2021 slightly over one-half of the heterosexual couples in Canada had children living with them, but less than one-quarter of lesbian couples, roughly 6% of gay men couples, and just under one-third of transgender or non-binary couples had children in the home.

Discussion

Not all groups of women are equally able to balance careers with childrearing

Among the groups of women divided by parental educational level, disparities in the likelihood of having children seem to indicate that the oft-cited problem of balancing careers with childrearing (e.g., Connelly and Ghodee 2011; Bracken et al. 2006) does not affect all three groups of women equally. Since my survey suggests that mothers whose parents hold advanced degrees are the most likely group of women to have children, it appears that class privilege can compensate for many gendered disadvantages. One key component of class privilege for women whose parents hold advanced degrees is the average age at which they complete their PhDs, well within childbearing years, enabling a large number of women faculty from this group to have children, if they choose, often within the security of a tenure-track, and sometimes tenured, line.

Another key component of the class privilege enjoyed by women whose parents possess advanced degrees are the material conditions in which a disproportionate number of these women work. Primarily because of strong faculty unions, Canadian universities overall have experienced much less casualization of academic labour than their US counterparts, although the tenure system in Canada is increasingly under threat. Irrespective of the disparity between the

US and Canada regarding the proportion of faculty who work inside the tenure system, in both countries not only are women scholars with higher parental educational levels more likely than women scholars with lower parental educational levels to hold tenure-track positions, but they are more likely to hold such positions at prestigious universities (Grimes and Morris 1997; Lipset and Ladd 1979; Roscigno et al. 2023; Arner 2021, 2024). As Matt Brim (2020) explains, faculty members' abilities to produce scholarship are tied to the material conditions of their academic workplace, and stark contrasts exist between elite, well-resourced research universities (with their greater availability of sabbaticals and funding for research and conference travel, at least for faculty in the tenure system) and under-resourced universities.

Brim's observation applies not only to scholars' material conditions at work but can also apply to scholars' material conditions at home. Women scholars from economically privileged families are not usually laden with so much childcare and housework that their research suffers greatly. To use the logic of Pierre Bourdieu (2011), most women faculty whose parents hold advanced degrees have sufficient access to capital to purchase the time of poorer women to perform domestic and childcare labour, allowing the more socioeconomically privileged women to free their time for nondomestic pursuits, in this case research. In *The PhD Parenthood Trap: Caught Between Work and Family in Academia*, Kerry F. Crawford and Leah C. Windsor (2021) discuss their survey of faculty parents who work in a variety of post-secondary colleges and universities (mostly in the US). Emphasizing a respondent's comment "Pay for your time back" (197), Crawford and Windsor explain that many of their respondents recommended hiring others to clean the house, to deliver groceries, and to prepare food.

By contrast, the decreased likelihood of faculty women from less socioeconomically privileged backgrounds of becoming mothers seems to suggest that less privileged women have a reduced ability to combine an academic career with children. A key factor is the average ages at which the two groups of women with lower parental educational levels complete English PhDs. Thirty-seven and especially thirty-nine respectively do not leave much time on the biological clock for securing a tenure-track job, earning tenure, and producing a baby. Freezing embryos and in vitro fertilization can be expensive and unreliable. Women with limited financial resources who dare to have children (biological clock permitting) can have their research time devoured by childcare and domestic work and thereby jeopardize their career. Presumably at least a few women academicians with lower parental educational levels avoid having children because of the risk of severely damaging—or forfeiting—their careers as scholars.

Although they do not necessarily possess a lot of disposable income, heterosexual men faculty do not typically face the same pressure to choose between careers and children, not only because of greater latitude age-wise for paternity but also because their partners usually bear heavier domestic and childcare responsibilities. A 2022 survey by the Pew Research Center (Fry et al. 2023) in the US found that in heterosexual marriages when wives either were the primary earners or had earnings comparable to their husbands, husbands spent more time on work and leisure, while wives devoted more time to caregiving and housework. Only when wives were the sole breadwinners, a mere 6% of heterosexual marriages, did husbands spend more time than their wives on caregiving—but not on housework. Regarding English faculty specifically, the Modern Language Association's report from Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession (2009) found that women faculty in English and in Modern Languages and Literatures at US universities and colleges devoted significantly more time to childcare than their men counterparts, averaging 31.6 versus 14.2 hours a week respectively. Given the gendered distribution of domestic labour and childcare, most fathers' research time would not be devoured to the same extent as that of mothers who cannot afford many domestic and childcare services.

Lest one object that, irrespective of parental educational level, mothers in the tenure system in the strongly unionized Canadian university system earn comparable salaries and hence are equally equipped to pay for childcare and domestic services, it is important to remember familial money. The intergenerational transfer of wealth is a key source of financial support for privileged families. Scholars whose parents possess advanced degrees typically have access to greater familial funds because their families are usually wealthier. Scholars whose parents possess lower levels of parental education, especially scholars who are first-generation university students, often have little more than their paycheques upon which to rely. Regarding spousal support, a longitudinal study of Canadian tax files indicates that heterosexual

women tend to partner with a spouse whose income level is relatively similar to that of their parents, especially towards the top of the income distribution (Yang et al. 2022). Consequently, the spouses of women who are first-generation university students would typically earn less than the spouses of women whose parents hold advanced degrees. Regarding lesbian couples, another longitudinal study of Canadian tax records reveals that women who live as part of a lesbian couple (specifically, women who have never lived in heterosexual marriages or common-law unions) earn on average 25% less when living in a common-law relationship and 31% less when married than heterosexual married men earn on average, although this investigation was unable to consider class differences (Yang et al. 2025). Women faculty who are first-generation university students can have many financial impediments to motherhood, such as sizeable student loan debt, no parental assistance with home purchases, and lower lifetime earnings because of the average age at which they complete their PhDs. Moreover, as Vincent J. Roscigno et al. (2023) learned, it is not uncommon for scholars who are first-generation university students to financially assist their parents and other relatives.

The problem of childcare

The Canadian government has accomplished quite a bit for working mothers, but universal daycare has yet to be delivered, a failure that profoundly affects women scholars in Canada, whether or not they have children. The Canadian government has dealt reasonably well with the most common policy demand of parents who publish on motherhood in academe: substantial paid maternity leave (e.g., Connelly and Ghodsee 2011; Mason et al. 2013; Crawford and Windsor 2021). Under Canadian federal law, a mother is entitled to seventeen weeks of maternity leave, then thirty-five weeks of standard parental leave, followed by extended parental leave, to a maximum of seventy-eight weeks total when parental leave is not shared. Partners are also entitled to parental leave, with a cap of eighty-six weeks combined total when shared (Government of Canada 2023). In addition to stopping tenure clocks and, at many universities, continuing to accrue sabbatical credit, parents typically receive supplemental income from their universities to narrow the gap between their unemployment insurance income and their salaries. (It is important to note that faculty outside the tenure system do not receive equal parental support from their universities.)

The Canadian government and Canadian universities alike have been much less successful at addressing the second most common demand of parents who publish on motherhood in academe: quality on-campus childcare that is affordable and accessible (among others, Crawford and Windsor 2021; Connelly and Ghodsee 2011; Mason et al. 2013). Quebec is the only province that funds an affordable early learning and childcare system and has done so since 1997 (Fortin 2018). In 2024, the federal government reported that it had lowered the price of childcare in regulated childcare facilities by at least 50% in half the provinces/territories and to \$10 on average in the remaining provinces/territories (Government of Canada 2024). In 2022 and again in 2024, my research assistant Alia Wassan and I examined the childcare webpages for all Canadian universities (excluding Quebec) with English departments that granted baccalaureates. Most on-campus childcare facilities appeared to have lengthy waitlists and typically closed at 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. (Some closed earlier.) The majority did not accept children older than five, and most childcare centres prioritized the children of students over those of faculty.

By routinely offering parental accommodations but failing to provide sufficient childcare services, senior university administrators and university boards of trustees create conflict among different groups of women faculty, along with some of their LGBTQ+ colleagues. Faculty parents (especially mothers of underage children) can usually avoid teaching evening courses. At many universities, parents—irrespective whether they are in the tenure system—are eligible for teaching schedules that facilitate dropping off, or picking up, their children at school and taking their children to after-school extracurricular activities, such as sports practice. Such accommodations are provided through either formal institutional mechanisms or informal arrangements. The burden of accommodating parents typically falls on childfree women and on many of their LGBTQ+ colleagues. With the shortage of childcare on campus, these two groups are obvious candidates for teaching night courses. As many feminist scholars have argued, childfree women—both in academe and in the larger workforce—are expected to have greater work availability, to work longer and during undesirable hours, and to take additional assignments than co-workers with children (França 2022; Ramsay and Letherby 2006; Cummins 2005; Verniers 2020). Given that, according to my survey, at least in the discipline of English in Canada, women whose parents hold advanced degrees are more likely to have children than women whose

parents do not have advanced degrees, women from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, even in the tenure system, can teach a disproportionate number of 8:00 a.m. and evening classes to accommodate the schedules of their co-workers' children. Similarly, LGBTQ+ faculty almost certainly teach a disproportionate number of 8:00 a.m. and evening courses.

Teaching predominantly in the evening has many disadvantages. First, usually little or no infrastructural support is available, such as administrative assistance, computer help desks, and technical support in classrooms. Second, campus buildings and parking lots can be sparsely populated in the evenings and not overly safe, especially for women and LGBTQ+ folks. Third, night classes often contain different students, especially nonmajors, than during the day, meaning that faculty with night classes might not teach many majors in their own department. Fourth, a faculty member who teaches until 10:00 p.m. may need to either remain on campus for as long as twelve hours or make multiple trips to campus in a day because of morning meetings.

Tenure-track and tenured faculty who teach during the day, when halls are busy, can enjoy a sense of community and bond with fellow faculty around mailboxes and photocopiers. More importantly, because they are not casually running into colleagues on a regular basis, faculty who teach in the evenings can be left out of informal conversations about departmental policy and long-term plans. Consequently, when faculty who teach predominantly in the evening arrive at departmental meetings, policy can be *a fait accompli*, worked out informally by the tenure-track and tenured faculty who teach during the peak of the day. Since non-parents are disproportionately women from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and LGBTQ+ faculty, it is frequently already marginalized groups who are further disenfranchised by parental teaching schedules, and these groups can experience greater alienation and isolation from their departments and universities.⁶ By shifting the responsibility for accommodating parents onto childfree faculty instead of supplying adequate childcare, senior administrators and university boards of trustees are disadvantaging childfree women—who, my survey suggests, are disproportionately from less socioeconomically advantaged groups—and large numbers of faculty with non-normative genders and sexualities. It is important to note that the senior administrators who are shifting this workload onto these two marginalized groups are typically middle-class heterosexual men, as are the majority of the members of boards of trustees at most Canadian universities.

In addition to difficult teaching schedules, childfree women and LGBTQ+ faculty can perform more than their fair share of service. Numerous studies have demonstrated that men faculty overall typically perform less service than women faculty overall and that men dedicate more of their work hours to research (Statistics Canada 2020; Guarino and Borden 2017; Misra et al. 2011; Massé and Hogan 2010; O'Meara et al. 2017).⁷ Not all groups of women perform equal amounts of service, though. Understandably, scholars who are mothers frequently warn other academic mothers to perform minimal service work, to protect their research time while childrearing (e.g., Connelly and Ghodee 2011). Not surprisingly, a survey conducted by Julie A. Kmec et al. (2015) at a major, multi-campus Research-1 university in the US found that faculty mothers perform less service on average than men and than women without children. Given this diminution of service, the heaviest service burden falls on childfree women.

In an oft-cited observation, Joan Acker (1990) points out that it is commonplace to view academic women without children as ideal employees, unencumbered by caregiving demands outside their jobs, always available, committed exclusively to their jobs, and free to help others. In addition to acknowledged service, invisible caring workloads are heavier for childfree women, including meeting with greater volumes of students (Cummins 2005; Ramsay and Letherby 2006). Both mothers and childfree women are affected by an ideology of motherhood in academe: in addition to being perceived by students and other staff as naturally caring because they are women, academic childfree women are expected to put in the time and energy that mothers cannot (Ramsay and Letherby 2006; Verniers 2020; França 2022). Such perceptions lead to the exploitation of women faculty who are childfree, especially if single, inundating them with compulsory emotional labour for colleagues and students and ultimately impeding their ability to publish (Cummins 2005). Simultaneously, scholars from first-generation and working-class backgrounds spend significantly more hours each week advising and mentoring students (Roscigno et al. 2023). Given the intersection of class and gender, it appears that women faculty who are childfree and first-generation university students bear the heaviest load of care work.

The extra service and care work pushed onto childfree women—because of gendered assumptions and practices—can damage the careers of childfree women by syphoning their research time. It is almost as if their workplaces are punishing childfree women with extra service and care work because they failed to reproduce. The displacement of excessive service onto childfree women promotes the exploitation of women who, because they do not have children, are understood by hegemonic ideologies to be less socially valuable than mothers. Simultaneously, for those childfree women from working-class backgrounds, the hegemonic assumption that women from working-class backgrounds are worth less than (most) men and than women from middle-class backgrounds can intensify the demands on them for service and care work, especially since women from working-class backgrounds are from the class and gender that routinely perform service and care work in the larger labour force. Irrespective of their socioeconomic position, according to the logic of pronatalist societies like Canada, LGBTQ+ faculty deserve to be punished, including with extra work, because of their gender and sexual deviance; and they should be de-prioritized vis-à-vis reproductive, heterosexual, gender-normative workers.

Conclusion

Academe is already a difficult career for women, mothers and childfree women alike. Being a professor is especially arduous for women from working-class backgrounds, who, my survey suggests, are less likely to have children than women whose parents possess advanced degrees. There are no easy solutions to the problems outlined in this essay, since sexism, homophobia, and classism are endemic in academe, reflecting the larger society. However, a greater awareness of which groups of women faculty are more likely to have children could lead to more nuanced advice when scholars write about how to negotiate motherhood in academic careers. More pressingly, it is important that faculty and faculty unions understand that different groups of women, along with their LGBTQ+ colleagues, are being pit against each other in the current structure of parental accommodations routinely in place at Canadian universities. Meanwhile, heterosexual fathers fare the best, since, as explained earlier, men typically perform less service and care work than women and instead spend more work time on research. Because there are no signs that university administrators will rein in the service—necessary or not—that they demand of faculty, because there are no indications that heterosexual men plan to increase their service and care work on campus, because there are no indications that heterosexual men beyond academe plan to dramatically increase the amount of housework and childcare that they perform so that their partners bear less such responsibilities, and because Canadian society shows few signs of abandoning its pronatalism, the best approach for childfree women and LGBTQ+ faculty is to join mothers' calls for universal, accessible, and affordable childcare—even though this demand may seem counterintuitive to the childfree. Otherwise, childfree women and LGBTQ+ faculty will continue to be the *de facto* substitute for accessible, affordable childcare, and their careers and quality of life will continue to pay the price.

Endnotes

1. The few investigations of class and motherhood among faculty are typically autobiographical (including Mosier-Puentes 2023; Copland 2019).
2. An alternate description of the survey appears in Arner (2024), which discusses a different section of the survey on an entirely different topic.
3. 1,913 excludes undeliverable messages. Sample sizes for individual questions vary due to branching and because some participants intermittently skipped questions.
4. The fourth restriction bumped 15 (2.41%) participants, possibly including contingent faculty who do not teach every year and faculty on parental or medical leave.
5. Data from the *SED* are unweighted, but the weighted and unweighted data were similar. Data from the *NGS* are weighted.

6. On exclusion and alienation experienced by childfree women and queer workers, see, for example, Ramsay and Letherby 2006; França 2022; Turnbull et al. 2018; Wilkinson 2020; Verniers 2020; Cummins 2005.

7. The Modern Language Association's *Standing Still* (2009) is a rare exception in that this study did not find that women spent significantly more time on service; however, the study found that women dedicated more time than men to teaching.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest.

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Between Violence and Everyday Resistance: An Intersectional Feminist Study of Women's Voices in Beirut and Cairo

by Nathalie Baba

Abstract: Violence against women is a major public health issue that causes severe physical and mental health consequences, including permanent injuries, depression, and suicide, affecting more than 35% of women worldwide (UN 2017; WHO 2021). In the post-Arab Spring era, the prevalence of sexual and physical violence against women in public spaces has prompted numerous international and national interventions. Yet, despite these efforts, only a small proportion of survivors access support services, report incidents to the police, or receive healthcare, legal, or social assistance. Research suggests that many international and humanitarian programs struggle to engage women survivors effectively, often due to limited cultural sensitivity and reductive representations of Middle Eastern societies. In response to these limitations, a range of grassroots and feminist initiatives have emerged to provide alternative spaces of support and advocacy. This study examines six local and transnational initiatives in Beirut and Cairo that use both online and offline platforms to amplify women's voices and make visible experiences of violence. Drawing on eighty-one narratives of violence collected through these platforms, as well as eleven semi-structured interviews with initiative founders, this paper explores the relationship between women's experiences of violence and their practices of resistance. More specifically, it examines how women resist in the face of intimate, structural, and political violence. This relationship is analyzed through a critical interdisciplinary framework informed by anthropology, transcultural psychology, critical sociology, and feminist studies. Our findings demonstrate how gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, migration status, and disability shape both experiences of violence and possibilities for resistance. An intersectional feminist perspective allows us to situate these practices along a continuum ranging from highly visible acts—such as public testimonies, political activism—to less visible forms of resistance, including storytelling, solidarity, social awareness, and silence. Importantly, our analysis also highlights how silence and subtle acts of defiance—such as refusal, non-compliance, and strategic disengagement—can function as meaningful forms of resistance, particularly among women whose opportunities for overt political action may be constrained.

Keywords: violence against women; resistance; agency; intersectionality; feminist activism; digital storytelling

Résumé : La violence à l'égard des femmes constitue un enjeu majeur de santé publique, entraînant des conséquences graves sur la santé physique (blessures permanentes) et mentale (dépression, suicide, etc.), et touchant plus de 35 % des femmes dans le monde (ONU, 2018 ; OMS, 2021). Dans le contexte post révolutionnaire arabe, la forte prévalence des violences sexuelles et physiques envers les femmes dans les espaces publics a donné lieu à de nombreuses interventions nationales et internationales visant à prévenir et à éliminer ces violences. Pourtant, malgré ces efforts, l'accès aux services de soutien demeure limité : seule une faible proportion des survivantes a recours aux services policiers, judiciaires, de santé ou aux services sociaux. Parmi les obstacles, plusieurs travaux montrent que les programmes internationaux et humanitaires peinent à répondre aux besoins des femmes concernées, notamment en raison d'un manque de sensibilité aux réalités locales et de représentations réductrices des femmes du monde arabe, souvent dépeintes comme des victimes passives et silencieuses, soumises à l'autorité religieuse et patriarcale. En réponse à ces limites, de nombreuses initiatives féministes de terrain, locales et transnationales, ont émergé afin de créer des espaces alternatifs de soutien, de solidarité et de mobilisation. Cette étude porte sur six initiatives implantées à Beyrouth et au Caire qui mobilisent des espaces en ligne et hors ligne afin de soutenir les femmes, d'amplifier leurs voix et de rendre visibles les violences qu'elles subissent. À partir de quatre-vingt-un récits de violence recueillis sur les

plateformes Web de ces initiatives, ainsi que de onze entretiens semi-dirigés réalisés auprès de leurs fondatrices, cet article explore les liens entre les expériences de violence des femmes et leurs pratiques de résistance. Plus précisément, il examine la manière dont celles-ci négocient et résistent aux violences intimes, structurelles et politiques dans différents contextes de leur vie. Cette articulation entre violence et résistance est analysée à partir d'un cadre critique interdisciplinaire mobilisant l'anthropologie, la psychologie transculturelle, la sociologie critique et les études féministes. Les résultats montrent que les expériences de violence et les trajectoires de résistance sont façonnées par l'intersection de rapports sociaux liés au genre, à la classe sociale, à l'ethnicité, à l'orientation sexuelle, au statut migratoire et à la situation de handicap. Une perspective féministe intersectionnelle permet ainsi de situer les pratiques de résistance sur un continuum allant des formes les plus visibles — telles que les témoignages publics, l'activisme politique et l'engagement collectif — aux formes plus discrètes, comme les récits de soi, les gestes de solidarité, les prises de conscience sociale, et le silence agentif. Enfin, notre analyse montre que le silence, tout comme certains actes subtils d'insubordination — notamment le refus, la désobéissance ou le retrait stratégique — peut constituer une forme significative de résistance, en particulier lorsque les possibilités de prise de parole et d'action politique sont limitées dans l'espace public.

Mots clés : violence à l'égard des femmes; résistance; agentivité; intersectionnalité; activisme féministe; récits de soi numériques

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century and into present times, women have played a pivotal role in national and anti-colonial struggles across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the broader Arab world. They helped shape the Arab revolutionary imagination not only through their massive presence in public spaces, but also through diverse forms of resistance and expression. Women have made their voices heard through literature, poetry, photography, film, painting, storytelling, theatre, graffiti, and slam poetry (Jasser et al. 2016; Mansour 2016; Cooke 2016; Hafez 2012).

Across Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Algeria, women's mobilizations have historically articulated a dual political discourse: the struggle for equal rights and full citizenship alongside demands for national liberation and anti-colonial independence (Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Wahba 2016; Badran 2016).

The wave of popular uprisings in December 2010—commonly referred to as the Arab Spring—marked a significant turning point in this long history of mobilization. For women across the region—regardless of age, social class, religion, or political orientation—these uprisings opened new sociopolitical spaces of resistance. Within these spaces, women articulated demands for improved socio-economic conditions, greater rights, emancipation and autonomy from patriarchal authority, and the overthrow of authoritarian regimes (Guillot and Martinez 2016; Wahba 2016; Mehta 2014).

While the Arab Spring uprisings led to important political transformations—including the fall of several authoritarian regimes—they also contributed to the intensification of armed conflicts, gender-based violence and systemic oppression in the region (Guillot and Martinez 2016; Amar 2011; Booth and El Hussein 2014; Jasser et al. 2016;

Chékir 2014; Mansour 2016; Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Hafez 2012). The complexities of democratic transition, the challenges of constitutional reform, and the resurgence of both state repression and religious fundamentalist movements have contributed to widespread insecurity and political instability, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations, particularly women and young girls (Hafez 2012; Kelly and Breslin 2010; Gheyntanhi and Moghadam 2014; UNICEF 2021).

Nevertheless, the revolutionary moment also opened new discursive spaces that enabled women to speak out more freely. As Chékir (2014, 7) observes, the “Arab street,’ independent of any political movement, broke its silence.” This emancipatory moment fostered new forms of expression and critical reflections, often rooted in disillusionment with institutional and international politics (Cooke 2016).

Among the many initiatives that have emerged in the MENA and the Arab World, this article focuses on six local and transnational projects based in Beirut and Cairo that support women survivors of violence and make their experience visible. Drawing on nine months of fieldwork conducted in both cities, this research combines a qualitative analysis of eighty-one narratives of violence collected from two online platforms with eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with the founders of these initiatives. The central aim of this research is to examine the intersections between women’s experiences of violence and their practices of resistance, with particular attention to how women survivors resist and develop their agency in response to violence. This relationship is explored through an interdisciplinary framework combining anthropology, transcultural psychology, critical sociology, and feminist studies.

The article is structured in five sections. The first examines the limitations of international political interventions addressing violence against women, while highlighting the crucial role of grassroots feminist movements in promoting collective healing and social transformation in post-revolutionary societies. The second presents the research methodology and the researcher’s positionality. The third outlines the feminist analytical framework guiding the study of resistance practices. The fourth presents the findings, highlighting the diverse forms of resistance mobilized by the women in response to violence. Finally, the fifth section discusses these practices along a continuum—from visible acts, such as public testimonies and activism, to less visible or invisible forms, including silence, insubordination, artistic expression, solidarity, and community care.

Challenges of International Strategies in Addressing Violence Against Women in the Arab World

In the post-revolutionary context of the Arab World, the 2021 edition of a report by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), *Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in the MENA and Arab States Region—A Decade Review 2010–2020*, provides an overview of the sociopolitical conditions affecting women and girls across the region. The report highlights several social gains achieved over the past decade, including increased visibility of women in several spheres of daily life, improved access to employment and education, and greater representation in political and legal arenas.

However, these advances coexist with persistent structural barriers that continue to limit women’s political participation and social equality. Key trends include: (1) a rise in gender-based violence in both private and public spaces; (2) women’s continued underrepresentation in political spheres; (3) unequal access to resources and decent employment, particularly for migrant, refugee, and undocumented women; and (4) a significant increase in poverty among women from working-class, urban, semi-urban, and rural backgrounds (Hafez 2012; Moghadam 2014; Amar 2011; UNICEF 2021).

Despite the development of numerous international conventions, resolutions, and programs aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women, particularly in post-conflict contexts—such as the creation of the WHO’s Women, Health, and Development Unit, and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—the prevalence of violence against women remains high across the Arab world (UNICEF 2021). Several interrelated factors help explain the limited impact of these international frameworks.

1. At the national level, a persistent gap exists between legislative reforms and their effective implementation. As noted by the United Nations (UN) (2017,16), no country has fully aligned its legal system with the obligations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or developed coherent policies to operationalize existing legal frameworks. Egypt's 2014 sexual harassment law exemplifies this disconnect: despite its adoption, few concrete measures have been introduced to ensure its enforcement by state institutions (Abdelmonem 2015). This implementation gap is further compounded by the limited availability of accessible and adequately resourced support services for women survivors of violence.

2. In practice, only a small proportion of women who experience violence seek institutional assistance or report incidents to the police. In fact, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (2008) reported that 97% of Egyptian and 87% of foreign women surveyed did not report sexual harassment to law enforcement. Similarly, UN data (2017) indicate that fewer than 40% of women survivors seek institutional support, and only 10% access services such as police, judicial, or healthcare institutions. These low rates of engagement are largely attributed to mistrust of institutions, insufficient training of services providers, and fears on the part of victims that they will be revictimized by police and health professionals.

3. Structural constraints further undermine effective responses, including chronic underfunding of prevention programs and inadequate training for healthcare workers and frontline service providers (UN 2017; WHO 2021; UNICEF 2021). Moreover, international strategies continue to prioritize security-oriented approaches and police intervention, an orientation strongly contested by grassroots feminist activists given the prevalence of police-perpetrated violence (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Amar 2011). In Egypt, for example, fear and mistrust of law enforcement deterred 34.6% of women from reporting sexual harassment (Booth and El Hussein 2014).

International policy frameworks have also been criticized for reproducing culturalist discourses that attribute violence to Arab-Muslim culture and traditions. Such narratives reinforce orientalist representations of Arab women as passive victims of inherently oppressive societies while obscuring structural factors and women's agency (Abu-Lughod 1990; Abu-Lughod 2002; Amar 2011). In addition, international funding has disproportionately favoured economic empowerment initiatives for women which, while valuable, often overlook the structural roots of violence and rely on top-down, professionalized approaches that provide limited support to survivors (Calvès 2009; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

In sum, while international and national policies have laid important groundwork, their effectiveness is consistently undermined by fragmented implementation, culturalist narratives, and weak alignment with women's lived realities. In response, numerous local women's movements have emerged across the Arab world, adopting a more participatory orientation and community-based approaches. For many of these movements, the Internet has become both a tool of resistance and a space of democratization and social emancipation for marginalized communities, enabling women to challenge traditional media and organize collective action (Najar 2013; Pratt 2020). Although women's internet use has increased steadily since the Arab Spring (ITU 2023, 8), relatively few studies have critically assessed the effectiveness or limitations of digital platforms in supporting women survivors.

Methodology

Speaking about others needs to be backed up by speaking with others. We will do this as long as we do ethnography (Fabian 2006,148).

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of eighty-one narratives of violence collected from two digital platforms (*Uprising of Women in the Arab World* and *Sawt al Niswa*), along with eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with the founders of six initiatives. Forty-five of the published narratives were written in Arabic and were translated into English in collaboration with a local translator. All interviews with initiative founders were conducted in English.

The interviews were carried out during nine months of fieldwork in Beirut and Cairo. This prolonged presence in the field enabled us to establish closer relationships and networks with informants and women activists in both cities. The fieldwork itself constituted a form of knowledge production as it involved not only a prolonged and systematic presence in the field, but also a mode of observation that was simultaneously “internal” and “external.” This dual positionally facilitated access to relational dynamics and implicit aspects of social action that are often difficult to capture through interviews alone (Paugam 2010; Paillé and Mucchielli 2016; Hine 2015).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and ethnographical methodological framework, grounded in feminist epistemologies that are both *situated* and intersectional. Standpoint feminist theory underscores the importance of incorporating situated perspectives and subjective experiences into the production of knowledge, recognizing individuals as knowers and active agents of their own experiences and practices (Harding 1992; Haraway 2007; Clair 2016). Intersectional analysis further highlights the effects of intersecting power relations—related to gender, ethnicity, social class, colonialism, disability, age, sexuality, and more—on women’s experiences of violence and their resistance trajectories (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2016; Bilge 2009). This second model sheds light on the structural causes underlying women’s experiences of violence, as well as on the systemic factors that constrain survivors’ agency.

Researcher’s positionality

The feminist standpoint adopted in this research also requires reflexive engagement with the researcher’s own social position and its effects on both knowledge production and relationships in the field (Clair 2016; Harding 1991). Rejecting the possibility of researcher neutrality, Clair (2016) argues that feminist positioning constitutes a form of knowledge that demands ongoing reflection on fieldwork materials, interpretative processes and the researcher’s social and cultural assumptions shaping the analysis.

Awareness of the researcher’s own positionality made it possible to acknowledge potential power relations influencing both discourses and the production of meaning within the testimonies analyzed. This reflexive posture also facilitated the development of trust-based relationships with participants during the interviews. For instance, shared aspects of identity—particularly gender and cultural background, as I am a woman of Egyptian, Armenian, and Kurdish descent born in Montreal—appeared to foster openness when discussing experience of violence and resistance.

This study nonetheless has limitations. The use of English as a second language in interviews and translated narratives may have introduced cultural distance and affected meaning-making; conducting interviews in Arabic might have generated different insights. In addition, the researcher’s experiences as a visible minority in Canada differ from those of informants in Beirut and Cairo, as well as from women who shared their narratives online. Religion, for instance, appeared less central in interviews than in online narratives. These positional differences may have produced blind spots in interpreting intersectional experiences of violence and resistance across diverse groups of women.

Deconstructing Resistance: A Feminist Perspective

Agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms (Mahmood 2005, 15).

A review of the literature on violence against women reveals that relatively few studies have examined the practices and strategies of resistance deployed by Arab women who experience violence. Moreover, when such practices are addressed, they are often reduced to passivity or inaction, as described by Boy and Kulczycki (2008, 67), who argue that “victims often show passive acceptance of the abuse and are unlikely to attempt to change the situation.” As a result, Arab women are frequently represented in the literature as passive victims subjected to oppressive sociocultural norms (e.g. religion and patriarchy). In this body of literature, culture and religion are often mobilized as explanatory causes for violence against women, obscuring gendered social relations and the structural forms of violence shaping women’s diverse experiences, while simultaneously silencing their agency and resistance.

Numerous activists and scholars have criticized these approaches, arguing that they reflect a Western-centric and colonial logic in which women in non-Western societies are portrayed as mute (silent) victims subjected to religious and patriarchal authority (Abu-Lughod 1990; Abu-Lughod 2002; Bilge 2010; Mahmood 2005; Moghadam 2014).

According to these authors, such a perspective reinforces biases and binary discourses that associate agency and resistance with modernity, while linking inaction, apathy, and passivity in the face of violence with tradition and religion.

The critique echoes broader debates in the social sciences surrounding the veil and the culturalist assumptions embedded in certain feminist analyses, which oppose “oppressed” Arab women constrained by religion to “emancipated” white Western women. Feminist and decolonial scholarship has played a crucial role in dismantling this binary opposition historically constructed between vulnerability/passivity and agency/resistance, making visible the multiple arrangements, negotiations, and resistance practices deployed by Arab women in contexts of violence. Mahmood (2005, 6) underscores the importance of feminist scholarship in restoring and amplifying these historically marginalized voices. Similarly, Khamis and Mili (2018) argue that the invisibilization of Arab Women in the literature on violence has directly contributed to the erasure of their resistance practices, a process rooted in persistent culturalist biases and stereotypes applied to them.

The feminist and decolonial reappropriation of empowerment and resistance also constitutes a political response to the ways these concepts have been instrumentalized within public health and development policies. Such policies often equate agency with individual choice and economic autonomy (Calvès 2009; Jasser et al. 2016; Marteu 2011). In this vein, the UN (2017) emphasizes the importance of women’s economic empowerment as a primary protective factor against gender-based violence.

However, the literature on empowerment highlights that the concept has become diluted and is now the subject of significant debate within the social sciences. These debates are closely tied to the ways international organizations have promoted an individualistic and economic approach to violence prevention, prioritizing funding for institutionalized empowerment programs focused primarily on increasing women’s economic power. Feminist scholars have pointed out the limitations of such programs, arguing that they contribute to the depoliticization of empowerment, obscure the power relations sustaining violence against women, and tend to benefit primarily the least marginalized women.

In the following section, this article demonstrates that resistance and empowerment cannot be reduced solely to economic agency or to visible forms of emancipation in public spaces. By challenging the historically constructed binary between oppression or vulnerability and agency or resistance, this article seeks to recognize alternative and less visible forms of resistance and to advance a more inclusive and situated conceptualization of resistance than that offered in much of the existing literature on violence.

Results: Women’s Experiences and Practices of Resistance

Political action

Among the feminist practices of social engagement identified in this study, some participants prioritized political mobilization and collective action in public spaces as central forms of resistance to gender-based violence. These participants explicitly identified as “activists” and emphasized solidarity as the foundation of a transnational feminist movement:

“Feminism has always been radical. It’s a historical movement, something collective and poetic. The only power we really have is in building collective action through solidarity. I fully support any initiative that moves from the individual to the collective. I’m not comfortable with individual initiatives, because systemic issues haven’t been addressed” (Interview 10).

Other participants, however, expressed discomfort with the label “activist,” particularly in the Egyptian context, where it carries elitist connotations. Instead, they described themselves as feminists, and framed feminism as an intimate, relational practice rooted in everyday life rather than formal political mobilization. These participants often favoured artistic, indirect, or less visible forms of resistance: “Feminism is not only about public space; it is also about family and intimate choices. It is a social and personal choice, not only a political one” (Interview 8).

The analysis identifies four interrelated motivations shaping participants’ trajectories of resistance and the creation of feminist initiatives: (1) the pursuit of personal healing and social connection; (2) a sense of social responsibility; (3) the aspiration to democratize knowledge; and (4) a commitment to hope and continuity.

Participants’ political engagement was often rooted in personal experiences of gender-based violence and social injustice, including workplace discrimination, abusive relationships, sexual violence in public spaces, and gendered inequalities within the family. In several cases, exposure to broader political violence and marginalization also acted as catalysts for feminist engagement:

“Growing up amid injustice shaped my sense of rebellion. I was raised in a working-class neighbourhood marked by poverty, close to Palestinian refugee communities, where I witnessed daily hardship and discrimination. ... I still remember the fear, the anxiety, and the nights hiding from shelling. This reality is hard to escape” (Interview 1).

For many participants, anger emerged as a central affective force in both personal healing and collective mobilization. Activism and feminist engagement were often described as ways of transforming intimate suffering and anger into collective resistance. As one participant explained, “The revolution released individual and collective anger. ... Women who didn’t know each other before started speaking together. We realized we were all suffocating from the same anger” (Interview 2).

The revolutionary moment was widely described as formative, fostering feminist consciousness, solidarity, and political engagement. One participant recalled: “In 2011, my political and feminist consciousness started to form.... It made me aware of the risks of being a woman and an activist in Egypt, but it also pushed me to engage in resisting that reality” (Interview 7).

For many, this period was experienced as a generative period characterized by political effervescence, collective hope, and a sense of shared destiny: “... We are all the children of the revolution” (Interview 7).

Finally, some participants emphasized that their engagement and well-being were inseparable from their responsibility toward others and future generations of women: “How could I be well if others were suffering? I never felt this was a choice ... I wanted to feel better, and I wanted others to feel better too” (Interview 1).

Storytelling and the act of writing

I will write my story here, because I am being systematically silenced (Narrative SAN-11).

For survivors, online storytelling emerged as a powerful form of resistance. Writing enabled women to break silence, reclaim their narratives, assert agency over their lives, and challenge oppressive social structures. Digital platforms allowed women not only to share their personal experiences but also to build solidarity with others who had experienced similar forms of violence.

Many narratives emphasized writing as a means of emotional release, self-reconciliation, and resistance: “I used poetry to describe my anger online and, at the same time, to resist” (Narrative SAN-1). “I decided to face my fears and stand up to harassment online, to reconcile with myself. I felt confident again” (Narrative UP-58).

Sharing stories was often described as a transformative process, allowing women to move from invisibility to recognition and from victimhood to survivorship: “When you share your story, you are no longer a victim hidden in the closet, you’re not a taboo, nor a secret, nor a scandal. You become a storyteller—a proactive speaker taking action by telling your story” (Interview 11).

For many users, engagement with these platforms through storytelling also contributed to emotional regulation, particularly regarding anger and guilt, and has enabled them to confront trauma, process grief, and rebuild trust. Some participants reported concrete impacts, such as leaving abusive relationships, recognizing patterns of violence, or engaging in public advocacy.

Building community and solidarity

For the majority of women, digital platforms fostered strong forms of solidarity among women regardless of region, religion, sexual orientation, or social class. Participants emphasized the emotional and political importance of collective belonging: “The Internet is a space to tell your story and to bring people together” (Interview 3).

Belonging to a community of shared experience generated validation, renewed strength, and reduced feelings of isolation: “... When you know you’re not alone, you feel less hopeless and have more energy to fight back. The circle of sharing helps to feel heard and supported” (Interview 6).

Many survivors expressed a desire to support other women with similar experiences. This solidarity often took the form of encouraging others to speak out and resist gender-based violence: “I feel a sense of betrayal if I stop writing, but then I push myself to write—as long as there are women out there who suffer from similar abuse, I will keep writing” (Narrative SAN-7).

The analysis reveals a common pattern: many narratives shifted from an individual “I” to a collective “we,” reflecting both transnational and transgenerational solidarities and a shared commitment to making silenced voices visible and keeping alive the memory of those who have suffered.

Social awareness

Many women survivors emphasized the development of a social and political awareness through their participation in digital platforms. This awareness often shifted from an initial sense of individual ignorance to a structural understanding of gender-based violence. Exposure to other survivors’ testimonies often prompted many women to reinterpret their own experiences through a structural and feminist lens: “I am not sharing my story because it shocked me. I was moved because it made me realize how ignorant I had been before ...” (Narrative UP-4).

As another participant noted, this shift profoundly altered her perception of society: “My innocent perspective toward society changed in an instant ...” (Narrative UP-2).

This process highlights the transformative potential of online spaces—not only as sites of disclosure, but also as arenas for feminist consciousness, and critical reflection: “I don’t think there are actual changes in my everyday life. I think the changes are in how I perceive the public sphere and the city—and how I understand my experience” (Narrative UP-7).

Growing social awareness also involves a critical reassessment of dominant gender norms associating femininity with obedience, weakness, and silence. As one woman explained: “My mode of resistance was my conviction that being a woman must not be conflated with being weak ... and the realization that being a woman is totally healthy ... normal does not exist, it never did so I stopped wishing for everything to go back to being ‘normal’” (Narrative SAN-2).

By collectively sharing their stories, these women challenged internalized guilt and reassigned responsibility to oppressive social structures: “We must not bear the blame. Blame must be placed on our society” (Narrative UP-40). “Societal norms must not be given the right to silence women’s rights ... Women must speak up against all sorts of abuse” (Narrative UP-53).

This emerging consciousness was also accompanied by a collective hope for more equitable and safer societies for women.

Agentive silence

I decided not to talk, I don’t want to look like a victim. I don’t want to be anyone’s victim (Narrative UP-21).

Finally, the analysis reveals that some women deliberately choose silence as a form of resistance—either by withholding their voice, refusing to speak publicly, or declining to respond altogether. This silence often takes the form of defiance, or insubordination toward normative expectations, such as refusing to testify or undergo harmful medical procedures that could compromise their physical and mental health.

For many women, silence emerged as an agentive strategy to reclaim power and regain control over their personal narrative of violence. This choice was often motivated by a desire to avoid revictimization, retraumatization, and institutional violence. Refusing to testify, seek medical treatment, or engage with judicial systems was described as an act of self-protection and resistance: “At that time, I preferred to keep quiet ... because it is useless to talk in front of the justice system ... If my abaya, the society, and the Saudi Airline cannot protect me, then who will? I won’t be talking to any of them” (Narrative SAN-11).

In other cases, silence functioned as a protective strategy to survive shame, guilt, revictimization, and dishonour, while also shielding families from blame and social harm: “Blame would’ve been the response and so I refrained from reporting or even telling my parents” (Narrative UP-38). “I preferred to remain silent to avoid a scandal and protect my mother and me” (Narrative UP-42).

Acts of refusal and disobedience—toward family, medical institutions, or legal authorities—were also described as meaningful forms of resistance that challenge dominant gender norms and institutional power. Testimonies included women resisting both familial pressure and invasive medical intervention, unwanted psychiatric treatment, or expectations of docility and submission, even in contexts of chronic abuse and intersectional violence.

Finally, silence was sometimes mobilized as a collective and political strategy to protect fellow community members. One participant explained that women working with Palestinian communities in Lebanon often chose not to report abuse in order to protect already stigmatized groups from further legal and police violence rooted in racialized stereotypes: When I was working with Palestinian women in Lebanon, all of them kept silence about their abuse because they did not want Palestinian men to be perceived as perpetrators, even though some of them were (Interview 10).

Discussion

Voices of silence

Silence can take many forms and carries diverse meanings in women’s experiences of violence. Findings show that silence may emerge from trauma, functioning as an adaptive and protective response to violence and manifesting as the suppression or paralysis of speech. Silence can also be shaped by gender norms that condition women to remain quiet through internalized oppression, domination, or exclusionary discourses. Yet silence can also function as a subversive mode of expression, capable of disrupting and redefining dominant gendered norms. In this sense, silence may operate as a powerful counter-discourse and a form of resistance to violence.

The findings indicate that choosing not to speak, refusing to respond, rejecting medical care, lying, or disobeying within familial or institutional settings can serve as strategies to protect women from social and familial revictimization associated with dishonour, while simultaneously resisting violent acts or discourses. By inverting expected social roles, these gestures of refusal and insubordination become means for women survivors to express anger and indignation in the face of violence.

Women may also resist by remaining silent in public while cultivating solidarity in private spheres, refusing to engage with untrustworthy institutions, or withdrawing from systems that reproduce harm. In these contexts, silence is not merely strategic or a deliberate practice but becomes a space for reflection, solidarity, and vulnerability. Through this silence, they connect with other women's experiences and begin to emerge from the isolation of their trauma. These relational spaces often catalyze critical awareness of power relations and enable women to reconnect with others' experiences, gradually reclaiming agency and narrative control.

Following this logic, such silences should not be read as signs of submission but rather as expressions of agency. This perspective highlights that women do not always resist through visible or vocal protest, public engagement, or the verbal disclosure of trauma. As Mahmood (2005) argues in *Politics of Piety*, agency does not necessarily align with liberal ideals of emancipation or vocal defiance but must be understood within specific cultural and structural conditions in which women live and resist. Similarly, Spivak (1988) cautions against the assumption that "the subaltern cannot speak" unless they adopt Western modes of articulation. Spivak emphasizes that the demand for speech itself may reproduce epistemic violence, and that silence—when chosen—can itself be a mode of political or ethical subjectivity.

These multiple voices of resistance challenge assumptions that equate silence with powerlessness, trauma, apathy, or inaction. As feminist and postcolonial scholars emphasize, silence may function as a meaningful form of agency, particularly in contexts where visible or vocal resistance may be dangerous, ineffective, or culturally unintelligible (Butler 2016; Brown 2005; Bourgault 2015; Paradis-Deschênes 2021).

Voices of resistance: a continuum from visible to invisible

Acts of resistance emerge from distinct individual trajectories shaped by specific social, cultural, and political contexts. As demonstrated in this article, resistance can take as many forms as there are individuals, ranging from visible forms, such as public and visible testimonies, political activism, and the creation of online and offline initiatives, to less visible and everyday practices, including anonymous storytelling, solidarity, social awareness, agentive silence and gestures of refusal.

James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance highlights the indirect and daily forms of resistance through which subordinate individuals cope, navigate, and contest domination without overt confrontation (Scott 1990). In a similar vein, Asef Bayat develops the notion of a feminism of everyday life, emphasizing how ordinary daily practices of life—such as working, playing sports or singing—can gradually reshape power relations without necessarily taking the form of explicit political claims or deliberate collective protest. These practices contribute to make oneself heard, seen, and felt through what Bayat calls "the power of their presence" (Bayat 2010: 98).

From this perspective, resistance practices can take different forms, ranging from visible political mobilization in the public sphere to more subtle, indirect, and everyday expressions such as poetry, testimony, oral history, storytelling, humour, and rumours. Building on the concept of everyday resistance, this approach captures how women living under conditions of social oppression resist and challenge gendered and patriarchal norms without overt transgression. These practices extend beyond direct and visible acts, encompassing subtler "strategies of play, circumvention, and negotiation" shaped by networks of domination and in tension with structural and internalized constraints, including family structures, patriarchy, and market dynamics (Dayan-Herzbrun 2016; Kandiyoti 2005).

Ethnographic studies by Lila Abu-Lughod (1990; 2002) and Saba Mahmood (2005) illustrate how women's everyday resistance—through religious devotion, poetry, modest dress, collective activities, or specific social practices—reveals hidden power relations that sustain subordination and violence (e.g., honour codes, Islamic laws, male domination, colonialism). From this perspective, power and resistance are understood as deeply intertwined: systems of domination not only produce compliance but also generate micro-political acts of defiance. As Foucault (1976, 125-126) famously notes, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather because of this, resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”

The concept of a continuum highlights what feminist and decolonial scholars emphasize: resistance is not limited to public or vocal acts of social emancipation, which often require women to speak out or expose themselves and thereby risk their safety. Rather, resistance varies from individual to individual depending on their social contexts and the resources available to them (Butler 2016; Brown 2005). Importantly, the notion of a continuum affirms that a lack of visibility—whether online or offline—does not imply an absence of resistance, nor does it indicate passivity or submission. By conceptualizing resistance along a continuum, alternative practices that are often marginalized or excluded from mainstream social science literature—such as gestures of vulnerability, solidarity, refusal, or silence—can be recognized as meaningful expressions of agency.

Intersectionality and resistance

Findings also indicate that trajectories of resistance are shaped by women's social positioning. In fact, the creators of local initiatives generally benefit from relative social and class privileges and certain forms of social protection (such as financial resources, higher education, and social support), which enable more visible forms of public mobilization. Despite persistent exposure to gender-based violence, particularly in Egypt, these resources appear to facilitate collective action and public denunciation.

Disparities in trajectories and modes of resistance (visible vs. everyday) among the women in this study reflect the intersectionality of violence. While some women denounce violence publicly by creating a movement for survivors, or share testimonies online, others resist through less visible strategies. As Scott (1990) notes, marginalized individuals often rely on everyday resistance strategies to avoid violent retaliation or life-threatening consequences in public spaces. These findings align with research on cyberactivism and the use of online spaces, showing that marginalized populations often rely on the Web anonymously when they cannot speak or share testimonies openly in public, particularly under conditions of political repression. This is especially notable among young women and those experiencing violence, who use these spaces to maintain anonymity, safety, and protection (Radsch & Khamis 2013; Khamis & Mili 2018; Stephan 2013).

In this context, the absence of voices and narratives from some women on online platforms (e.g. women situated at the intersection of multiple forms of social oppression) does not necessarily reflect a lack of resistance, but rather reflects the complex effects of intersectional violence. The lack of visibility and voice of these women in digital spaces may result from the limited inclusivity of the local initiatives studied, as well as from barriers to access for the most marginalized women.

Overall, these findings reinforce the idea that resistance operates along a continuum, ranging from visible to invisible forms. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of resistance beyond Western-centric models of voice and visibility. Rather than framing these women solely as victims, this study highlights how diverse choices—whether to resist publicly through political action, speak out, remain silent, or act discreetly—reveal complex forms of agency shaped by structural, cultural, and political conditions. Future research and action research should further explore everyday and less visible strategies of resistance that go beyond speech-based emancipation, to better understand how marginalized women negotiate violence, express dissent, and sustain forms of collective survival.

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Collaborative Teaching across Institutions: Reflections on Sharing Work and Creating a Feminist Space of Care

by Lori Chambers, Bailey Gerrits, and Nadia Verrelli

Abstract: Amid growing awareness of gender-based violence on university campuses, teaching about this issue is urgent. Courses on gender-based violence hold transformative potential: they can foster critical consciousness, challenge systemic inequalities, and contribute to broader social change. Yet, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, transformative teaching demands more than intellectual rigor—it requires emotional presence, care, collaboration, and vulnerability. For instructors, especially women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty, this work often entails significant emotional labour. This paper reflects on our experience of feminist pedagogical collaboration and support across institutions as a means of resisting the neoliberal imperative and making emotionally-challenging and potentially transformational courses more sustainable. In the fall of 2024, we taught parallel courses on gender-based violence across three universities and disciplines. We developed a collaborative model of feminist support. We co-designed our syllabi, shared teaching materials, and, as three white cisgender women, worked together to actively centre the experiences of queer and/or racialized folks and to de-colonize our course materials. We met weekly to reflect, troubleshoot, and care for one another. This paper reflects on this process as a form of feminist praxis—one that foregrounds care, reciprocity, and collective reflection as pedagogical tools. Our approach was both effective and affective and our experience contributes to feminist pedagogical scholarship by demonstrating that cross-institutional collaboration can mitigate the isolation of academic labour. This experiment both improved our teaching and helped us maintain wellness and enthusiasm while teaching difficult materials.

Keywords: cooperative teaching; feminist pedagogy; neoliberal academia; faculty burnout

Résumé : Dans un contexte où la violence fondée sur le genre sur les campus universitaires fait l'objet d'une prise de conscience croissante, il est urgent d'enseigner cette problématique. Les cours portant sur la violence fondée sur le genre ont un potentiel transformateur : ils peuvent favoriser une conscience critique, remettre en question les inégalités systémiques et contribuer à un changement social plus vaste. Pourtant, comme nous le rappelle bell hooks (1994), l'enseignement transformateur exige plus qu'une rigueur intellectuelle : il nécessite une présence émotionnelle, de la bienveillance, de la collaboration et de la vulnérabilité. Pour les personnes enseignantes, en particulier les femmes et les membres du corps professoral racisés ou queers, ce travail suppose souvent une importante charge émotionnelle. Cet article porte sur notre expérience de collaboration et de soutien pédagogiques féministes entre établissements comme moyen de résister à l'impératif néolibéral et de rendre plus durables les cours exigeants sur le plan émotionnel et susceptibles d'être transformateurs. À l'automne 2024, nous avons donné des cours parallèles sur la violence fondée sur le genre dans trois universités et trois disciplines. Nous avons élaboré un modèle de soutien féministe collaboratif. Nous avons conçu nos plans de cours conjointement, avons partagé du matériel pédagogique et, en tant que trois femmes blanches cisgenres, avons travaillé ensemble afin de placer activement au centre les expériences des personnes queers ou racisées et de décoloniser le contenu de nos cours. Nous nous sommes réunies chaque semaine pour réfléchir, résoudre les problèmes rencontrés et prendre soin les unes des autres. Cet article porte sur ce processus en tant que forme de praxis féministe, une approche qui place la bienveillance, la réciprocité et la réflexion collective au premier plan comme outils pédagogiques. Notre approche était à la fois efficace et axée sur l'affect, et notre expérience contribue aux travaux universitaires sur la pédagogie féministe en démontrant que la collaboration entre établissements peut atténuer l'isolement associé au travail universitaire. Cette expérience a non seulement amélioré notre

enseignement, mais nous a également aidées à préserver notre bien-être et notre enthousiasme tout en enseignant des contenus difficiles.

Mots clés : enseignement coopératif; pédagogie féministe; milieu universitaire néolibéral; épuisement professionnel du corps professoral

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"I love that we decided to do these meetings" (week 10).

Amid growing awareness of gender-based violence on university campuses, teaching about this issue is urgent. Courses on gender-based violence hold transformative potential: they can foster critical consciousness, challenge systemic inequalities, and contribute to broader social change. Yet, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, transformative teaching demands more than intellectual rigor—it requires emotional presence, care, collaboration, and vulnerability. For instructors, especially women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty, this work often entails significant emotional labour. Within neoliberal academic institutions that prioritize productivity and demand, but do not adequately support, increasing care for students, this affective labour can lead to burnout (Bodenheimer and Shuster 2019).¹ This paper reflects on our experience of feminist pedagogical collaboration and support across institutions as a means of resisting the neoliberal imperative and making emotionally-challenging and potentially transformational courses more sustainable.

In the fall of 2024, we taught parallel courses on gender-based violence across three universities and disciplines. Acknowledging the emotional toll of this work, we developed a collaborative model of feminist support. We co-designed our syllabi, shared teaching materials, and, as three white cisgender women, worked together to actively centre the experiences of queer and/or racialized folks and to de-colonize our course materials. Once the course had begun, we met weekly to reflect, troubleshoot, and care for one another. This paper reflects on this process as a form of feminist praxis—one that foregrounds care, reciprocity, and collective reflection as pedagogical tools. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2017) notion of a "shared feminist project," we argue that this collaboration not only enhanced our teaching but also created a space of emotional support. Our approach was both effective and affective. Our experience contributes to feminist pedagogical scholarship by demonstrating that cross-institutional collaboration can mitigate the isolation of academic labour, particularly in small institutions or under-resourced departments.

The paper begins by situating our work within the context of gender-based violence on campus, the need for *engaged pedagogy* specifically related to this problem, and the extra emotional challenges inherent in this work. It is also situated in the current academic climate in which faculty are denied support and subjected to expanding expectations. We describe our praxis and collaborative approach and reflect on its impact through insights drawn from our weekly conversations. We conclude that shared work and feminist care can be ways to fight back against neo-liberal aca-

demia, isolation, and overwork. For us, this experiment both improved our teaching and helped us maintain wellness and enthusiasm while teaching difficult materials.

Gender-Based Violence and the Academy

We chose to teach about gender-based violence because it is a serious concern to each of us personally, for our students, and in our communities. University-age women and genderqueer individuals in Canada face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence. In 2019, 11% of women students surveyed by Statistics Canada reported being sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting within the preceding twelve months (Statistics Canada 2020, 1). Over their time at colleges and universities in Canada, one in five women students report experiencing sexual assault (Burczycka 2019; Shankar and Tavcer 2021). Racialized and marginalized individuals are particularly at risk (Barlow 2020). These figures likely underestimate the full scope of harm: a report on Albertan post-secondary schools identified that 50% of students reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence (Leger 2023). While this is not a new problem, it has recently received more sustained attention, with some universities changing their policies, implementing more robust anti-violence training programs, and creating dedicated positions or offices to handle complaints of gender-based violence (Nelund 2020). It has also led to demands for knowledge about gender-based violence and courses in this subject area. But such courses are demanding to teach. As Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen note, faculty who teach more challenging courses face an increased workload in the classroom (Lawless 2018; Lawless and Chen 2021). Instructors must deal with resistance to difficult materials and the emotional responses of students. They also have to manage their own—often complicated and intensely personal—relationships with the intellectual material being discussed. Universities do not provide specialized training for such demanding teaching, nor do they recognize the extra emotional load that such work creates. How, then, are we to maximize the transformative potential of education about gender-based violence in the context of a fundamentally uncaring university system?

The Neoliberal Academy and Demands on Instructors

At the same time universities are responding (perhaps ineffectively) to the problem of gender-based violence on campus and students are requesting courses in this area, there is a rise of neoliberalism in academia. With public divestment in postsecondary institutions, universities have come to rely on international students, rising tuition rates, and private donations to make up the shortfall. Recent federal caps on international student permits have triggered widespread concerns about layoffs and budget shortfalls (Baxter 2025). Universities are also relying more on precarious contract faculty and demanding more from faculty: larger class sizes, increased teaching loads, and greater expectations for student supervision and research productivity. These structural shifts coincide with rising emotional demands from students, who themselves are navigating precarious job markets, social and environmental crises, high tuition, mental health challenges, and pandemic education (Newcomb 2021). As institutions adopt a student-as-client model, faculty are increasingly expected to provide emotionally burdensome customer support alongside academic instruction. As Jayne Goode et al. (2020) argue, this requires faculty to provide “increasing and intensive social and emotional support for students.” (52). Instructors are under constant pressure to meet both the increasing emotional needs of students and the business needs of their institutions (Hester and Denker 2023).

The burden of emotional labour is not evenly distributed; women, racialized, and/or genderqueer faculty are disproportionately called upon to work as care workers (Berheide et al. 2022). M. P. Filby (1992) asserts that “emotional labour is a predictably gendered phenomenon” (24) yet these faculty also genuinely care for their students and want to assist them, “even if it might not be within our capacity in the moment that they demand this labor from us” (Hester and Denker 2023, 129). But these increased demands on faculty are rarely translated into reduced expectations in other aspects of the job, and faculty burnout is an increasing problem (Pope-Ruark 2022; Watts and Robertson 2011). Care work in teaching has been directly linked to burnout (Teven 2007), and “care labor is also often the cause and moment of clear role conflict for academics. We are pulled to keep up with our service commitments, teaching, and save those early morning hours for keeping our research line alive, but when that knock on the door comes, we choose every time what aspect of our jobs is given priority” (Hester and Denker 2023, 130). While Cana-

dian universities have begun to address student mental health through voluntary guidelines and wellness institutions (Mental Health Commission of Canada 2021), similar resources have not been developed for faculty and support for faculty well-being remains limited.

Emotional support is more in demand, and more needed, in classes with contested or emotionally difficult content, such as courses on gender-based violence. As Scarlett Hester and Katherine Denker (2023) note, “teaching difficult content or challenging students can be seen as personally risky” (130) whether because of the emotional impact of class or due to worry about the repercussions for teaching evaluations (Stern and Denker 2020). But these extra demands and challenges remain invisible. In environments without support for the well-being of instructors, undertaking feminist work brings with it the potential for emotional and professional exhaustion and breakdown. As Lindsay Naylor (2023,1) writes, “the neoliberal academy is a fundamentally un-caring space.”

Feminist scholars have developed strategies of resistance and resilience to counter the extractive demands of neoliberal academia. From bell hooks’s (1994) “engaged pedagogy” to the slow scholarship movement, these approaches offer alternative visions of academic life. Yet, as some have noted, these strategies can themselves be taxing and can disguise power structures (Morley 1998). The commitment to constant critical engagement in the classroom—a hallmark of hooks’s pedagogy—can increase the mental load for faculty. Similarly, while slow scholarship critiques the culture of speed and productivity endemic to the neoliberal university, it requires a deliberate reorientation toward care, collegiality, and relationality over metrics of efficiency (Berg & Seeber 2016; Mountz et al. 2015). Moreover, as Naylor (2023) argues, many of the most meaningful forms of resistance—such as peer mentoring, networks of support, and care-full leadership—remain invisible within institutional metrics of performance. These practices are undervalued precisely because they do not produce quantifiable outputs. Yet, they are essential interruptions to the individualized, competitive ethos of the neoliberal academy. As Ester Conesa Carpintero (2017) writes, “to place care in the centre of life, and to create the availability for time to care and care for time constitute some of the feminist politics of resistance and responsibility useful for scholars facing this time of crisis” (54). In short, care is political. And caring classrooms must provide care for the instructor and allow instructors to take care of their own emotional needs. As Audre Lorde (1988) argued in *A Burst of Light*, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and it is an act of political warfare” (131).

Engaged Pedagogy and a Feminist Ethics of Care

In our own teaching we aspire to the *engaged pedagogy* described by bell hooks. Following on the work of both John Dewey (1916) and Paolo Freire (1970), hooks critiqued the “banking” system of education in which students are viewed as vessels to be passively filled with knowledge. This process is never neutral and top-down education risks training, perhaps is even intended to train, learners into obedience rather than freedom. hooks asserted it is the responsibility of the teacher “to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforced systems of domination” (1994, 21). Not only does this involve rethinking and de-colonizing the materials we teach and the ways by which we assess student learning, but *engaged pedagogy* also demands that we interact differently with students themselves. We must make space for diverse voices in the classroom, welcome students as humans in all their complexity, encourage them to bring their own experiences into the classroom, and be fully human ourselves in our interactions. This requires enhanced effort from instructors and, she acknowledged, would not be an easy or feel-good process.

To theorize the care required for *engaged pedagogy* more fully, we draw on Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto’s (1990) articulation of an “ethics of care,” which has been widely taken up and expanded by feminist scholars. They define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible,” encompassing our bodies, selves, and environments in a “complex, life-sustaining web” (40). This ethics of care emphasizes attentiveness, responsiveness, and mutual responsibility—not only recognizing the needs of others but also being willing to receive care in return. Some early theorizations of care framed it as a uniquely feminine or maternal capacity, but these essentialist assumptions have been rightly critiqued. As Donna Engelmann (2009) argues, a feminist ethics of care need not rely on “feminine virtues” or universal claims about women’s moral reasoning. Neo-

liberal institutions, as noted above, implicitly adopt this view by requiring care work specifically of women-identified, genderqueer, and/or racialized faculty. Instead, care should be understood as a set of practices that require training, professionalism, and institutional recognition. We reject the notion that care flows naturally from women or is simply a product of socialization. Good feminist caregiving is not instinctual—it is skilled, intentional, and political. Yet, in academia, faculty are rarely trained in how to care, nor are they rewarded for the care they provide.

But how can this ethic of care be operationalized in teaching, especially within the uncaring structures of the neoliberal university, and particularly while teaching emotionally difficult and contested materials? We turned to collective action. Sara Ahmed (2014), writing as *feministkilljoys*, reminds us that collective acts of self-care rooted in anti-racist, queer, and feminist communities “can be...act[s] of political warfare....We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.” In this context, this project began as a way to reduce our workloads by working together to create course content that reflected our combined knowledge and was guided by anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches to gender-based violence. But its most important outcome was mutual support which counter-acted the lack of institutional respect and concern for both *engaged pedagogy* and the well-being of instructors who undertake emotionally difficult teaching. As Hester and Denker assert, feminist academics “are left struggling with how to balance mentoring our students and caring for them when there does not seem space or time to care for ourselves. We push forward as an act of love and resistance against a system that consistently demands more and reminds us that we are not doing enough” (2023, 123). We consider this project a form of feminist-based, care-full collaborative teaching.

Feminist Collaborative Teaching and the Courses We Taught

Isolation in teaching is entrenched in traditional interpretations of academic freedom which frame the classroom as a sovereign space in which individual instructors are protected from external interference (Engelmann 2009). While this autonomy is a hard-won right, it can also block pedagogical practices from collective reflection and improvement. In this individualized environment, there are structural and practical barriers to collaborative teaching in all its forms. Shared teaching may involve co-leading a single class or coordinating across sections with shared materials and goals; instructors may rotate presence in the classroom, observe one another and provide feedback, co-create course content, and/or share the process of assignment design and marking (Helms et al. 2005; Letterman and Dugan 2004). Collaboration requires significant coordination, upfront planning, and mutual trust, all of which are often in short supply within neoliberal institutions that prioritize efficiency and individual productivity and put faculty members implicitly in competition with one another (Morelock et al. 2017). Despite these barriers, working together on teaching offers substantial benefits. It can enhance professional development, foster peer-to-peer learning, and—when equitably structured—distribute teaching labour and provide mutual support (Laufgraben and Tomkins 2004; Morelock et al. 2017; Mountz et al. 2015). It can also improve student experience (Wadkins et al. 2006). All of these forms of cooperation challenge the dominant conception of teaching as an isolating, individualistic endeavor, but they all also require that faculty members be in place together or at least teach on the same schedule to share zoom space. We did not have such conditions of work.

Because of these circumstances, our model might not be recognized as team teaching as it is traditionally defined as “all arrangements that include two or more faculty in some level of collaboration in the planning and delivery of a course” (Davis 1995, 8). While we worked on a common course outline, we did not share teaching duties. Yet we were desperate for community as we set out to teach difficult courses on gender-based violence. Ironically, collaborative approaches to teaching (and other academic work) may be most needed for marginalized faculty in small, politically-engaged, and under-funded departments, descriptions that apply to all of our individual work situations. Unable to co-create learning materials in our small departments in which we were all the only individuals teaching courses on gender-based violence, we turned to colleagues and friends outside our own institutions for sharing and support. While most literature on shared teaching focuses on collaborations within a single institution, sometimes with an emphasis on interdisciplinarity (McDaniels and Colarulli 1997), our experiment expands this idea across institutions.

There were two central components to our collaborative teaching: we shared the work of developing all course materials and we met each week to debrief after our respective classes. We are all white cisgender women and we all taught courses on gender-based violence at Canadian universities with the following modules: violence based in gender identity; sexual assault; intimate partner violence; and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Two of the participants also taught a unit on sex work and sex trafficking. Two of the classes were offered at the third-year level and the third was a graduate course. We co-developed a core outline with a common set of readings, including required as well as many additional recommended readings for future student reference, which each of us adapted based on the specific needs of our students. We all did some lecturing at the beginning of each unit and all lecture materials, slides, and extra videos etc. that could be shared with students were placed in a Google drive. We all made changes to the master documents at various times. We met each week throughout the term. The intention of these meetings was to review how students responded to materials, with a focus on improving the course for the future. But in practice the meetings became a place for mutual support as we struggled with student resistance to materials, the demands of our institutions, and the loneliness that can afflict feminist academics committed to *engaged pedagogy* in environments which do not provide practical or emotional support for such work.

Methodology

Each of us approached the term expecting that teaching about gender-based violence would be difficult (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006) but also rewarding. We knew that we would face challenges as students confronted difficult concepts, dealt with their emotional responses to the materials, and required emotional care. But we hoped that the experience would be transformative for some of them who would either contextualize and better understand events in their own lives, or develop a deeper understanding of, and empathy for, victims/survivors of violence. We also knew that the materials would be personal and difficult for us as instructors. Our meetings were intended as an antidote to isolation.

We recorded our meetings, intending to document the ways in which review of multiple sections of a course could be useful for future course design and save us all time. Our research methodology is grounded in the tradition of collective feminist inquiry, drawing on the practice of collective critical autoethnography. Tony Adams and Jimmie Manning (2015) define autoethnography as a “research method that uses, and even foregrounds, a researcher’s personal experience (‘auto’) in an attempt to represent (‘graphy’) cultural experiences (‘ethno’)” (351). Following on the work of Andrew Herrmann (2021), we also conceptualize autoethnography as an act of love that is self-reflexive and transparent. Collective critical autoethnography allows a multivocal approach. As Jennifer Dyer and colleagues (2022) write, collective autoethnography can be a “feminist practice for disrupting, exposing, and critically analyzing social and structural power, making room for the unspoken, unseen, invisible aspects of labour and taking action towards a more just society” (97). Perhaps, in this context, it is not surprising that what emerged was not simply better course outlines, but a record of mutual support and wide-ranging discussions of the challenges of teaching and learning in a neoliberal world. Borrowing from rhetorical theory, particularly Aja Martinez (2025), we assert that our voices, and those of others, can contribute to a counterstory of academia, one in which sharing, cooperation, care, and reciprocity are centred for students and faculty alike. We are all storytellers and, using our counterstory as both a methodology and a tool, we can speak against a vision of academia which silences gender-based violence and harms both students and instructors (Martinez 2025).

For our analysis, we used nearly eighteen hours of audio data from these weekly discussions. Lori did an initial phenomenological thematic analysis using Paul Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method which involves extracting significant phrases, formulating meaning, and clustering themes. The preliminary themes were then reviewed collaboratively by Nadia and Bailey to ensure accuracy and credibility. Through this iterative process, the initial themes were affirmed and we deepened our collective understanding of the pedagogical and political dimensions of our collaborative teaching experience. We did not seek ethics approval for this study, nor did we collect data from students, and we do not discuss students themselves. We reflect only on our curriculum development and the ways in which we created a space in which to care for one another.

Findings

Our review identified two themes. First, collaborative teaching, even, and perhaps particularly, across institutions, is effective, rewarding, and pragmatic. It should be encouraged. We all saved a lot of time and effort by sharing our resources. We were able to reflect on course materials and assignments across multiple classroom experiences, a process that allowed us to revise the course to better serve future students. Second, it was also an affective practice which was extremely helpful for us all. Given the emotionally difficult materials we were teaching, weekly check-in meetings enabled us to approach the course with a feminist ethics of care. This improved our ability to respond to student disclosures, distress, and anger. Equally importantly, we were able to provide each other with care and support. To borrow from Sara Ahmed, this approach was an experiment in pragmatic sharing of workload, a survival strategy, and collective self-care (Ahmed 2014).

Collaboration as Effective Practice

Sharing the work of course preparation is pragmatic. We saved an enormous amount of time and effort by sharing our resources, even if we include the one- to two-hour weekly meetings. Before we began teaching in September of 2024 at our respective institutions, we began at ground zero with long discussions of the objectives of teaching a course on gender-based violence. While two of the instructors had taught a similar course previously, we did not simply adopt an old course outline but added two new modules for students: violence based on gender identity and violence in the context of sex work and sex trafficking. This required us not only to develop extensive reading lists, but also to prepare new lectures. All documents were loaded into a Google drive, which allowed us to revise them simultaneously. We had a number of discussions before the beginning of the term about readings, assignments, and the order in which to present our topics. As we prepared slides and collected videos and clips to accompany lectures, we posted everything to this drive so that what one produced, all had access to use. This time-saving approach is an important form of resistance in the context of overwork that is endemic in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in small, under-resourced institutions such as the ones in which all of the involved professors work.

Sharing the burden of course preparation allowed us to focus more on harder questions about delivery and best practices and to adapt the material to emerging themes in gender-based violence. Most particularly, we spent a lot of time talking about how to ensure that we, as white cisgender women, could present the materials on gender-based violence in a way that would be inclusive, anti-colonial, and anti-racist. All too often, feminist solutions to gender-based violence, particularly carceral solutions, have been narrowly conceived, and “sameness at the level of intervention can function to marginalize and further subordinate individuals who are not ‘the same’ as the imagined survivor of domestic violence” (Crenshaw 2010, 180). How would we ensure that we brought “attention to the multiple ways that patterns of power can converge...argue...against the elision of difference where it makes a difference, and against fetishizing difference where it does not”? (Crenshaw 2010, 165). We put a great deal of effort into providing readings and materials that reflect this commitment and to working and re-working all lectures in an attempt to ensure inclusivity.

The first week of the course was spent providing context for students about law and responses to violence, including strong critiques of carceral white feminism. We talked about systems of law in place before the arrival of common law, the origins of common law, and the problem of law as one of the master’s tools (Audre Lorde). We asked students how they define the problem of gender-based violence and provided a refresher about intersectionality (Crenshaw) (week 1). For a variety of reasons, including having our outlines correspond with planned events on our respective campuses, two of the instructors began the course with violence based in gender identity and the third with missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. We all expressed concern that some students might respond negatively to expanding definitions of gender-based violence beyond the violence against women framework; this fear was not entirely misplaced. We were also very conscious of our responsibility to teach against colonialism and concerned about how the order of presentation of materials might be perceived. In particular, we viewed MMIWG as the most pressing issue of the term in the Canadian context. Would having it last on the list (for two of the instructors)

make it seem like an add-on when the intent was to show that “it all [colonial, misogynist law] leads to this” (week 1). The differences in how we delivered the materials offered us an opportunity to compare responses.

Once the term started, we met weekly and discussed how classes had gone in the previous week. This encouraged reflection on pedagogy. Each week we considered, across an audience of three very different groups of students, which materials had been well received, which readings students found difficult or misunderstood, and what modes of engagement worked best. The most common problem we faced was the fact that many of the undergraduate students did not complete their reading. We noted strategies that worked well to encourage deeper reading and engagement, in particular Bailey’s practice of splitting the class into two groups, assigning each a specific reading, and requiring them to explain it to the rest of the class (week 1). She noted that “they read more carefully with having to present” and that “she was really happy with thoughtful discussions” (week 2). Bailey and Nadia also both used exercises in which students worked in small groups identifying themes and problems in real trials (week 5).

We engaged in a lot of discussion about how to encourage better participation/reading. We sought out videos, clips, and other sources that might engage students who were resistant to reading and shared everything in our Google file. We were reminded of the importance of at least some lecturing to provide context for students who don’t read. We also found that it was very useful to do such lectures before discussions to head off misconceptions. We noted that difficult legal readings were beyond the abilities of many of the students in the third-year classes and should be recommended, not required, at this level in the future (week 3). And we all agreed that five full units seemed to be a bit overwhelming. Finally, students seemed to crave more information about sexual assault on campuses and the specifics of the individual institutions themselves (week 12). This information can and will be used to further revise the course in the future; in fact, two of the three instructors are in the process of revising this course collectively again for the fall of 2026 (the third left academia). The extensive feedback we were able to consider would be impossible to collect unless someone taught a course multiple times across varied programs, so it is incredibly valuable in improving the course. It would take a single instructor at least three years to amass this level of feedback/information and it might never be as diverse. This would be, therefore, a useful strategy across different courses and disciplines. We emphasize particularly that our experience illustrates that it is possible, and desirable, to collaborate not only within, but also across, institutions in the construction of course materials.

Collaboration as Affective Strategy and Ethics of Care

Care of Students

Teaching a course on gender-based violence means, by default, that the reading materials, lectures, and discussions are emotionally draining and difficult. As we noted, “the course title is itself a trigger warning” (week 1) and “it is built into the course outline and alternative possibilities for participation” (week 9). We all allowed students to come and go from class if they were in distress and provided means for them to participate privately, in writing on our various course websites, over email or in the office with the instructor. While such adjustments made it possible for students to participate when they were sick or distressed, they did not preclude difficult in-classroom responses and situations. The reading materials themselves for these classes are complaintful; they reflect an on-going critique of patriarchal relations and of the silencing of the suffering caused by gender-based violence. Students often have had few previous opportunities to speak about these issues. As Sara Ahmed notes, “to be heard as complaining is not to be heard” and the feminist classroom may then be a place of profound importance and freedom for students (2021, 1). But this creates challenges for instructors: how can we appropriately respond to disclosures/distress and disagreement/anger. We are not provided with any training for these encounters and our discussions allowed us to reflect upon how best to respond in these nuanced situations.

Dealing with the topics covered in a course on gender-based violence is challenging for students for many reasons. Some have experienced violence themselves, or know others who have experienced such violence, and may disclose their experiences in class. While personal experience can be an important topic for discussion, instructors must ensure that students don’t “trauma dump” on their classmates while remaining sensitive in their response to students

who disclose. Each of us confronted this fact directly in our initial classes, asking students to be careful when sharing personal details/experiences and noting that, while we will always be caring, “we cannot provide crisis support” (week 1). It would not be safe for us to serve as counsellors as we have not been trained for this role. But we do have to recognize student distress and know how to connect them with resources on and off campus. We provided lists of services (specific to each institution) available on campus, in our wider communities, and online, including twenty-four-hour crisis lines and support services. We noted that many students do not seem to be aware of the services and programs that are available on campus (week 1). We had long discussions with our classes about the need for self-care and community care.

We noted that “learning is uncomfortable” (week 1) and that we have to provide a safe space for people to speak freely while also protecting students from harm. We all described positive discussion and engagement for our students and provided careful wording in our course outlines about the need for respect in the classroom. We were particularly concerned about the potential for anti-trans speech and/or racism in the classroom. We worried that anti-trans sentiments might emerge in the context of discussions of violence based in gender identity. We noted that students could be simultaneously outraged by violence against trans and nonbinary folks, yet subtly discriminatory themselves in their language and reliance on experience and feelings rather than facts. Similarly, some students professed anti-racist sentiment but supported carceral solutions to gender-based violence that would harm racialized groups. Careful questioning and re-directing of such sentiments were at times required and our discussions allowed us to consider what did and did not work in such situations (specifics not discussed to respect student privacy).

Further, anger is inevitable in discussions of gender-based violence as students confront the profound injustices embedded in law and society. The rules of engagement in the classroom have to leave a space for anger, but it has to be clear “that you can’t take it out on a specific person” (week 1). We have never received ANY training about how to teach in a trauma-informed and sensitive manner and how to negotiate these challenges. Anger can be incredibly productive and is a valid response to the horrors discussed in class. Yet, students may not come into the classroom with the skills to express their strong emotions or may not be receptive to corraling by the instructor.

Weekly chats helped us to develop concrete strategies and responses and to enact a feminist ethic of care in our classrooms and office hours while maintaining a focus on learning. These included the careful construction of wording in course outlines, gentle re-direction, and questions that could be posed to counter anger that felt too personal. These discussions about dealing with student disclosures, disagreement, and anger should be more widespread on all campuses, but small-group support outside of our institutions was incredibly valuable for each of us in expanding our respective repertoires of classroom tools.

Care of One Another

Critically, our weekly meetings enabled us to provide support for one another. Teaching about gender-based violence is inherently difficult: “this is a hard course to teach. It is a hard course to manage. This is why I love that we decided to do these meetings” (week 10). We are all passionate about addressing gender-based violence. Each of us has written and researched about the topic and engaged in community-based leadership to try to support survivors and work towards a better world. We shared many hopes for our courses. Student responses can be—and sometimes were—deeply rewarding. As one instructor noted, it was “uplifting” to see such an open response to something that was new to the students: “it was quite beautiful...[a] room full of good humans” (week 3). And we all had students who produced work that was inspiring and thought-provoking (week 7). But classroom dynamics and student responses could also be both challenging and disappointing. For example, in both undergraduate classes, “it was like pulling teeth to get them to think about capitalism as a master’s tool” (week 2). When undergraduates were resistant to reading, we reminded each other that “when they don’t read and it doesn’t work, we don’t have to take responsibility” (week 12). As one of us noted, it is “hard, you feel so optimistic when you start...but it is a little bit heartbreaking” (week 5). Our weekly meetings provided a space to work through these disappointments.

It was also a space in which we could openly discuss the extra work that is created by *engaged pedagogy* and political commitment. For example, we all had disclosures of violence from students. These are both heartbreaking and challenging. There is the problem, often, of how to respond in class: how does one both support the disclosing student appropriately and simultaneously keep the class from becoming a space of quasi-therapy? We used humor to combat our feelings of overwork and joked that we could reduce the problem of disclosures by “being less approachable. Be more of a bitch...Happy they feel open. But I don’t want that burden” (week 2). This was not an endorsement of mean-girl feminism, described by Kim Hong Nguyen (2024) as “white rage...allowing white women to ‘reclaim’ bitchiness as feminist performativity”, but a recognition of the work that kindness in the classroom creates. Frustration and overwork would not justify meanness or any attempt to ignore the disclosures and rage of students. Teaching compassionately, however, increases our workload in ways that are not recognized by any of our universities. Little thought is given by our institutions to the harm done to faculty in classrooms in which they have to deal with sometimes hostile students, widespread student trauma, contested subject matter, and their own complicated relations to difficult materials, in this case violence which instructors have also often experienced directly themselves. The university wants to protect itself, not its instructors. Talking about how we felt each week, we provided care for one another. It would be easier to avoid classes like this one. Yet, all three of us remain determined that we are “not going to not talk about hard topics” (week 5).

Our conversations jumped frequently between the professional and the personal and we provided more general support to one another given that we are all surrounded by anti-feminist sentiment. For example, when one of us heard a lecture by a colleague in which he reinforced many myths and misconceptions about intimate partner violence, she “left feeling sick and angry” and we provided her with a safe space in which to rant and vent (week 6). As Lori noted after the very first week of classes, it was comforting to know that we would have somewhere to discuss any challenges that emerged: “If I fuck up, I have a safe space to process it the next day. To say, hey, what would you have done differently. Because with this course, the materials are brutal and the students will struggle” (week 1). And as Bailey noted, it “makes you feel better. Yesterday I was batting my head against the wall a bit...but I know that I am not alone” (week 5). Teaching these topics is “emotionally draining” (week 12). Our support for one another gave us strength as individuals and as a collective.

Conclusions

Some feminist rethinking of teaching focuses on the collaborative and co-constituted nature of the classroom (Colwill and Boyd 2008). Our experiment taught us that it is beneficial to think about this collaborative responsibility beyond the classroom and beyond a single institution. By supporting one another, we improved our teaching, reduced our workloads, countered academic isolation, and centred our own well-being— creating more sustainable professional practices and reducing our risk of burnout. There were challenges. We each had to adapt the course to our individual institutions’ schedules, and we were not always able to teach the same topic at the same time. Nonetheless, our sharing of resources reduced the labour required to prepare and revise the course, a fact of significant importance and impact in the context of the neoliberal institution and the overwork each of us faces. It also allowed us to share responses and to think about adaptations to the course that might be useful in the future, providing an opportunity to improve the course based on extensive and varied feedback. This would be useful in many contexts beyond the particulars of the class we were teaching.

But the choice to collaborate and to meet weekly to debrief was also an important challenge to the isolation and emotional burden specific to teaching about gender-based violence. Gendered expectations for care in the classroom can be quite high and the demands on instructors in emotionally difficult courses are burdensome. Our weekly debriefing made our teaching more successful (and less harmful to us as instructors) in two specific ways. One, it was a space of professional development where we could improve our caring skills. We learned from one another about classroom best practices and meeting the needs of diverse students. Two, it was also a space in which we could give and receive care. We were able to counter the individualism and isolation of the neoliberal institutions for which we work and to support each other in a myriad of ways across the term.

Traditional mentorship often assumes a hierarchical relationship in which a senior scholar imparts wisdom to a junior colleague. Feminist co-mentorship, by contrast, emphasizes reciprocity, multidirectional learning, and the dismantling of hierarchical norms (Bona et al. 1995; McGuire and Reger 2003). While junior scholars still greatly benefit from the experience of their senior colleagues, co-mentorship also centres the needs of the whole person, not just the professional role (Bona et al. 1995; McGuire and Reger 2003). Moreover, senior scholars can (and in this case did) learn new techniques, theories, and pedagogical approaches from younger scholars. This holistic approach aligns with feminist commitments to relationality, care, and the recognition of emotional labour as work. Mentorship and peer-to-peer exchanges are forms of resistance to the toxicity of academic life (Naylor 2023). They are embedded in broader feminist practices that seek to build and sustain communities of support, such as feminist writing groups and collaborative research collectives. As Alison Mountz and colleagues (2015) argue in their work on slow scholarship, these practices challenge the neoliberal university's emphasis on speed, competition, and individualism. Our experiment follows in this genealogy of feminist academics who have sought to reimagine academic life through practices of care and collaboration. We recommend collaborative teaching across institutions and small group support for others teaching similar materials as an effective and affective way of reducing the burdens and the isolation of teaching. Our innovative teaching across institutions was both a practical strategy for reducing workload and a survival strategy for avoiding burnout in contexts of profound institutional neglect of faculty needs. It is an approach we will undertake again and which we highly recommend to others. Cooperative course construction can save time and improve course materials. And weekly check-ins and support can help us to counter the demands of our neoliberal workplaces, allowing us to better care—not only for our students, but for each other and ourselves. These are acts of “self-preservation” and feminist “political warfare” (Lorde 1988, 131) through “collective self-care” (Ahmed 2014; Ahmed 2023).

Endnotes

1. Instructors may take pleasure in providing emotional labour and research has found this to be the case for some. Our point is to highlight that unsupported emotional labour is a problem.

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What is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*? Transnationality and Mexico's *Mestizaje* System in and around Silvia Moreno-Garcia's Novels

by Luisa Fernanda Grijalva-Maza and Claude Denis

Abstract: *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) seems to embrace a transgressive role for the traditional Gothic heroine and for Southern *mestizaje*, countering colonialist forces, patriarchal subjectivities and a dominant morality. We argue instead that SMG's perspective is not quite so inclusive and critical, and less anticolonialist than meets the eye. It is rather anchored in white feminism, and reproduces Mexico's *mestizaje system* that promotes a whitening of the "race." *Mexican Gothic* in particular tells a story of conflict between colonizers and colonized, but makes it a binary conflict of evil Europeans against valiant *mestiza* Mexicans, erasing the women of the First Peoples and of whole classes of non-whitened Mexicans. To understand this tension, we ask what is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*. We begin with a discussion of the dominant narratives of Mexican identity, centred on whitening and *mestizaje*. Then, we look at how female characters are written in *Mexican Gothic* and five other novels. We outline the novel's transnational conditions of production and reception, between Mexico (the author's country of birth), Canada (where she lives) and the United States (where she publishes).

Keywords: *Mexican Gothic*; *Mestizaje* system; decolonial feminisms; Gothic Studies; sociology of literature; transnationality; coloniality and gender

Résumé : Le roman *Mexican Gothic* (2020) de Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) semble donner un rôle transgressif à l'héroïne Gothique traditionnelle et au mestizaje du Sud, rejetant tant les forces colonialistes que les subjectivités patriarcales et la moralité dominante. Nous croyons au contraire que la perspective de SMG n'est pas aussi inclusive et critique, et moins anticolonialiste, qu'elle ne donne à voir. Elle est plutôt ancrée dans le féminisme blanc, et reproduit le système de mestizaje mexicain qui encourage le blanchiment de la «race». En particulier, *Mexican Gothic* raconte une histoire de conflit entre colonisateurs et colonisé-e-s, mais en fait un conflit binaire entre méchants Européens et courageuses mestizas mexicaines, ce qui efface les femmes des Premiers Peuples ainsi que des classes entières de Mexicain-e-s non «blanchis». Pour comprendre cette tension, nous posons la question de ce qu'il y a de mexicain dans *Mexican Gothic*. Nous commençons par une discussion des principaux narratifs de l'identité mexicaine, centrés sur le blanchiment et le mestizaje. Nous examinons ensuite les personnages féminins, et la façon dont ils sont écrits, dans *Mexican Gothic* et cinq autres romans. Nous esquissons les conditions transnationales de production et de réception du roman, du Mexique (pays de naissance de l'autrice) au Canada (pays où elle vit) et aux États-Unis (là où elle publie).

Mots clés : *Mexican Gothic*; système du mestizaje; féminismes décoloniaux; Études Gothiques; sociologie de la littérature; transnationalité; colonialité et genre

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Introduction

The novelist Silvia Moreno-Garcia (SMG) has described herself as “Mexican by birth, Canadian by inclination” (Moreno-Garcia 2026). This phrase appears in the “extended biography” on her own website’s “About” page, and it is repeated in a *Los Angeles Times* interview and review of her work in 2022 (Woods 2022), in the wake of the popular and critical success of her US-published *Mexican Gothic* (2021a). These three coordinates, Mexican, Canadian, and American, anchor the “new” North American frame within which Moreno-Garcia and her works operate, the region consisting of three countries and not just the two northernmost ones. This frame is characterized not only by its neo-liberal trading agreements, but also by the region’s deep-rooted colonialities of power and of gender that shape subjectivities as much as they do economic and power relations.

SMG does not write *about* North America, however. Apart from her 2025 novel, *The Bewitching*, much of which is set in New England, she tells stories set in Mexico, formulating an explicit critique of Mexico’s patriarchal and colonialist features. This has been an important component of their positive critical reception, marking them—and their author—as progressive, anti-colonialist contributors to the empowerment of Southern women (Castillo-Garsow 2024; Cutter 2021). In the context of Gothic literature and studies, such works are seen as transforming the portrayal of women, by turning them from victims to transgressive heroines who challenge colonial relations (Castillo-Garsow 2024). More broadly, SMG’s work has elicited remarkable praise—such as in Paula Woods’s *LA Times* article referenced above:

If you read her work as deeply as it deserves to be read—beyond its page-turning thrills—or if you talk to Moreno-Garcia, as I did via Zoom while she sat in her Vancouver home, you’ll see that what lies beneath is even more astonishing: a perspective on Mexican history as broad and inclusive as any you’re likely to see in fiction—never mind a bestseller list (Woods 2022).

We argue that SMG’s work is not quite so broad and inclusive, and is less anticolonialist than meets the eye. Our analysis proceeds through a close reading of gendered/racialized characterizations in her work, particularly *Mexican Gothic*, and is supported by perspectives from the sociology of literature and her context of reception/production. *Mexican Gothic* tells a story of conflict between colonizers and colonized, but makes it a binary conflict of evil Europeans against valiant *mestiza* Mexicans, erasing First Peoples and whole classes of non-whitened Mexicans. Throughout the Americas since the nineteenth century, new national elites have indeed displaced European colonizers, but they have also marginalized and erased First Peoples. In Mexico, this has been done in part through the promotion of a model of *mestizaje* in which the white / European part is privileged over the Indigenous one. *Mexican Gothic* does the same thing and so elevates whitened *mestizas* over racialized women.

In this article, *Mexican Gothic* is our primary focus but we have also read five other SMG novels set in Mexico—most of her output in the past dozen years—and we bring them to bear when relevant to help identify key vectors in her

writing. There are recurring themes and tropes here, and flagging a few of them across a number of novels shows that their presence in *Mexican Gothic* is not merely incidental. These novels are *Signal to Noise* (Moreno-Garcia 2022), *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2020), *Velvet Was the Night* (2021b), *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* (2022), *Silver Nitrate* (2023). Through this body of work, SMG's writing ambition and the challenge that she faces have been considerable: to enact the struggles of Mexican *mestiza* women, which implies a "translation of the margins to the center" (Olarste-Sierra 2025, 4). This is not only a question of translating words, but of translating for a Northern audience life experiences that are common and readily intelligible in the South. Enacting the struggles of Mexican *mestiza* women, written from Canada for a mostly English speaking, American audience, SMG's novels bear the mark of the in-betweenness of "the open wound of colonialism" (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, 17). This open wound continues to be experienced by a diversity of the world's peoples in their bodies and in their flesh, the latter conceived as "a site of experiences of resistance to such interventions" (Olarste-Sierra 2025, 3).

In this perspective, we seek to place the sense of women's emancipation evidenced in SMG's novels in the North American context of their writing, publishing, and reading: that of the hegemony of white feminism, which Celenis Rodríguez Moreno defines, from a Latin American perspective, as that which "reveals itself as colonial in its analysis of Black, Indigenous and poor *mestizas* ... it assigns itself the role of saviour of these women and the civilizing role of these communities in a manner that is too similar to colonizing enterprises and the apparatus of development" (2014, 32; our translation). White feminism then inscribes its particular take on whiteness and coloniality in the works of a young Mexican-Canadian writer and her relationship with the country in which she was born and raised. Hence the question: what is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic*? Or, in what way(s) is *Mexican Gothic* Mexican?

Multiple Perspectives

This is not a moralizing question, nor is it, in and of itself, normative. In characterizing SMG's works as North American rather than Mexican (or indeed Canadian), we are not making a value judgement or claiming that some "real" Mexican identity lies elsewhere. We are making the sociological argument, rather, that the conditions of possibility for the existence of these very specific works have an impact on the content of the works. This is not to say that they are good or bad, but rather that they are what they are, in large part, because of the world in which they were born. Put another way, by situating SMG biographically and by referencing her main audience / market, we are sketching a sociological framework that would need further development but for which space is lacking. In so doing, we are *not* looking down on them from some elevated literary critical perspective.

Our objective is to begin to address the demands of the open colonial wound. We point to the continued struggles for social justice that demand epistemological, cultural, political, and economic recognition, and we emphasize a recognition of the flesh of very important but marginalized female characters in SMG's novels: a flesh that resists. Our question and objective are informed, in this spirit, by multiple perspectives: cultural studies and North American studies, the sociology of literature, and Latin American decolonial feminist theory and Gothic studies, from Mexico and from Canada.

We approach North America and its component parts from a decolonial perspective, and *Mexican Gothic* from both Gothic and decolonial perspectives. Rebecca Duncan argues that Decolonial Gothic is the expression of those who have been marginalized by the perverse matrix of coloniality at the intersection of capitalism and the modern project. It makes visible the colonial differences that continue to organize the world, while foregrounding the vantage point of those who have been violently marginalized (Duncan 2022). As such, decolonial concepts can serve as an entry point to analyze and engage with colonial power and to understand Gothic works (Duncan 2022).

It is because, like Duncan, we are committed to the project of decoloniality that we analyze SMG's work in the after-glow of the high anticolonial and feminist praise that it has received. This praise, not coincidentally, aligns with *Mexican Gothic's* ostensible valuation of its characters (good, nationalist Mexican *mestizas*, bad neocolonialist English men) and SMG's own commentary on her novel. In a "Letter from the author" in the book club guide at the end of

Mexican Gothic's trade paperback edition, she situates her novel within the history of Mexico and of the "mining ghost towns" that "carry with them the traces of colonial rule and all its excesses" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 307). She adds:

The predominant laborers in these towns were Indigenous people who were forced to work the mines through several systems—slavery, *encomienda*, and *repartimiento* ... —and were often abused, toiling in bad conditions. Those who did not labor in the mines might still feel the brunt of Spanish rule, by being driven from their traditional lands... After the Spaniards, there came other powers to pry the earth for silver. (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 307)

To make her outlook absolutely clear, she concludes: "I suppose I could have called the book *Postcolonial Gothic*, but that seems so much longer and less zesty. *Mexican Gothic* expresses the haunting feeling I had when we drove through Mexico looking at the remains of towns from another era" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 308).

We address the question of the Mexican-ness of *Mexican Gothic* by first painting a portrait of SMG's women—not only her protagonists, but also some secondary and often marginal(ized) women who nonetheless play a pivotal part in this and her other novels. First, there are her young protagonists and the ways in which their search for emancipation is formulated. From the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, these young women struggle under the weight of patriarchal domination and seek liberation through a mixture of modern education and financial independence. Markers of their sought emancipation include, in the late nineteenth century, a scientific education; in the early twentieth century, an attraction to cars, modern dance halls and the flapper style of dress and hair-styling; and in the 1950s, smoking and a university education. This is a script of women's advancement that tracks white feminism closely and is utterly familiar to SMG's primary readership: American women who buy and read novels, particularly so-called "romantasy" novels (so baptized by #BookTok). To repeat: we are not condemning these reading women or the writers who speak to them. We are instead pointing out the perspectives that particular readers might find readily familiar, the connection between what readers read, who they are, and how they are ever becoming who they are.

Then, we focus on the other female characters and their worldviews and aspirations, who are both kept at the periphery of the stories *and* peculiarly essential to the success of the heroines. Again, we focus on *Mexican Gothic*, but there are three such women in three novels—Marta Duval in *Mexican Gothic*, Cándida Cordero in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (Moreno-Garcia 2020) and Ramona in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* (Moreno-Garcia 2022)—who play key roles, providing *the* solution to a major problem that the protagonists cannot solve on their own, a solution that is rooted in ancient traditions and practices of *México profundo*.

And so we seek to understand how these specific characters, the stories and the worlds in which they operate came to be created—by this particular writer positioned as she is. To do so, we sketch the relationship between SMG's North American circumstances and the general tenor of our six novels, with *Mexican Gothic* front and centre. Of particular interest here—although we do not have the space to describe specifics—is the strangely weak sense of place that pervades all these books. In this perspective, we are in full agreement with Elizabeth Nichols who, in her review of *Mexican Gothic*, wrote that she was "disappointed in how little the specificity of place (Mexico) appeared in the novel" (Nichols 2021, 112). Also notable is the consistently negative portrayal of the author's country of birth, which she left as a young adult. Mexico City's streets late at night, early in *Mexican Gothic*, for example, are anonymous and could be anywhere. Characters identified as French or British could just as easily be German or Swedish. Most tellingly perhaps, in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau*, SMG's transformation of the doctor from a British scientist in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* into a French one is striking (Moreno-Garcia 2022): what difference does it make? Although other factors would come into play to understand these aspects of her stories, SMG's multifaceted remoteness from her country of origin cannot be discounted. As her own comment quoted above flags, perhaps to an inadvertent degree, *Mexican Gothic*'s haunted mood came to her when driving through and "looking at the remains of towns from another era" (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 308). The (touristic?) gaze that is revealed is Northern and whitened, two characteristics that bring us back to the Decolonial Gothic.

White Feminism, *Mestizaje*, and Decolonial Feminisms

The narrative analysis of the female characters of *Mexican Gothic* brings with it particular kinds of complexity that demand attention. Because of the in-betweenness that characterizes SMG's writing locus and the open colonial wound that her writing embodies and attempts to address, we must speak of the violence, abuse, oppression, slavery, and silencing that women from the South, and notably Mexico, have experienced and continue to experience (Curiel 2007, 98). The narratives of the powerful who have demonized Southern women are historical, multilayered, and situated (Hurtado 2019). To unpack them in Mexico, we draw from the works of Latin American decolonial feminists.

Inspired by Black and intersectional feminisms, María Lugones expands and elaborates on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2007, 171) by thinking about decoloniality alongside intersectionality. She brings to light the "modern/colonial gender system" that produces both race and gender in Latin America (Lugones 2008, 77). As Lugones explains, hegemonic feminisms led by white, middle-class women of the North criticized the construction of the female gender without recognizing the racialization of those narratives: non-white peoples did not have a place, to the point that non-white peoples in Latin America were sexualized but not gendered, and so were perceived as animals (without the masculine/feminine characteristics of humans). Even when Latin America's non-white women were "gendered," they did not receive the privileges of white women (Lugones 2008).

In one of its many elaborations among decolonial feminists, this gendered complexity has led to a distinction between the body and the flesh. While the body has been the site of colonial control in its becoming racialized and gendered, flesh is the site of creative resistance (Olarite-Sierra 2025). Flesh calls on us to always remember that the colonial wound has not closed and to look into the everyday lives of non-white women in Latin America, how they experience the system that has oppressed them for centuries, and how they navigate that oppression.

The wounds of the modern/colonial gender system in Mexico are expressed through *mestizaje* and its profound complexities and contradictions. One of the main pillars of modern Mexican national identity, *mestizaje* has been the building block both of racism and of the claim that racism doesn't exist in Mexico because we are all *mestizos* (Moreno Figueroa 2010). As Mónica Moreno Figueroa explains, this latter trope is the result of a homogenizing effect of *mestizaje* that naturalizes/hides whiteness as a core pillar of Mexican structures. This is fundamentally different from the way *mestizaje* is understood in other contexts and groups, as in the Chicano community in the United States, for example, where it can be an identity of political resistance to white hegemony (Curiel 2007).

In Mexico, *mestizaje* began during La Colonia (1521–1810) as a Spanish racial category produced in a context of slavery, exploitation, rape, and abuse of Indigenous communities, that named the mix of a Spanish and an Indigenous person. After the independence of Mexico and through to the beginning of the twentieth century, *mestizaje* became the symbol of national identity as designed by Mexican politicians and thinkers who forcefully admired and preferred the modern European ingredient in the Mexican mix. Conversely, they discriminated against Indigenous communities and their ways of life, actively planning their disappearance through institutional and policy-based "progressive" biosocial whitening. This is the project of "La Raza Cósmica" formulated and promoted by José Vasconcelos, founder of the Mexican Ministry of Education and Dean of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) (discussed briefly in *Mexican Gothic*): the denigration of the Indigenous and the elevation of the whitened *mestizo*, who is mixed but has whitened socially and culturally by adopting the markers of European modernity.

"*Mestizaje* logics," in Moreno-Figueroa's formulation, are "a variety of strategies of racial differentiation that permeate social life" (Moreno Figueroa 2010, 389). As distributed intensities, these logics allow racism to exist in a normalized way so that people, while experiencing it in their everyday, don't recognize it as such and therefore do not see the grave effects it has on their lives, only perceiving it in moments when racism is blatant and dramatic (Moreno Figueroa 2010). In this sense, racial logics are not only about skin colour but also about class, education, and Mexico's Northern-influenced hegemonic culture. This is a completely *embodied* hegemony, in that the enactment/embodiment of *mestizaje* determines social inclusion and exclusion. As *mestizaje* logics are the anchor and pivot of the

modern/colonial gender system in Mexico, we will refer to this complex as Mexico's *mestizaje system*. This concept sheds light on the racialization of women and grounds Mexican decolonial feminists' denunciation of the unquestioned adoption of "white feminism" by elite and middle-class women. White feminism among the whitened *mestizas* in Mexico has considered Indigenous and Afro-descendant women as "incapable of agency, stuck in primitive patriarchal societies—even more violent than western patriarchy" (Rodríguez Moreno 2014, 32; our translation).

Rodríguez Moreno's analysis shows that racialization and gender go hand-in-hand and are articulated to social class—the higher the social class, the whiter the expectation. As such, working women are racialized as Indigenous or non-whitened and poor *mestizas* when they labour in domestic service. This is a legacy of colonization, when Black and Indigenous women were forced into this kind of work (Saldaña Tejeda 2013). The daily proximity that domestic work fosters intensifies this legacy, for instance, by feeding the belief among middle-class, whitened *mestizas* that domestic workers are dangerous, threatening the whitened family with contamination and sexual perversion. This is the source of the pejorative and yet common reference to these workers as "gatitas" or "gatas" (female kittens or cats) by middle-class families (Saldaña Tejeda 2013), where female cats are seen as perfidious. In this *mestizaje system*, then, the bodies of non-whitened *mestizas*, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women, and others, are sexualized, demonized, and instrumentalized.

The gendering of all these women's bodies is always dependent on the *mestizaje* logics that are operating in a specific context. But this is not the end of the story. The open wound calls for careful observation, not only of the systems that dominate the body, but also of the resisting flesh that is sentient, remembers, and "knows how to navigate experiences through quick reactions and how to not navigate experiences by refusing to act" (Hurtado 2019, xviii). Following Roberta Hurtado, we understand the sentient flesh as that which operates at the level of the minor, of everyday survival action subverting the powers that have attempted against its very life (2019).

The Mexican Women of Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Mexico's *mestizaje system* that has dominated female bodies while being resisted by their flesh is central to our analysis of *Mexican Gothic* as a Gothic novel that narrates the experiences of those who have traditionally been known as a Gothic other. Using the traditional tropes of the Gothic novel (dark castles or houses, excesses of power, mystery, ghosts, and spectres), SMG moves toward what Duncan calls the "decolonial gothic" (Duncan 2022, 306): she centres the narrative on Noemí Taboada, a dark-skinned *mestiza* sent to rescue her cousin Catalina from High Place, the isolated home, high on a hill, of the white, British dynasty unto whom the novel shifts the monstrosity. This family, the Doyles, have exploited the people of the local community to the point of uncounted deaths, and are attempting to do the same with Noemí and Catalina. Here, SMG unmasks the colonizing power that has organized the town for centuries.

This seemingly decolonial shift has been praised by scholars such as Melissa Castillo-Garsow and Matthew Cutter. For Castillo-Garsow, through *Mexican Gothic*, SMG has given voice to the colonized peoples of Mexico with her representation of High Place as a microcosm of the horrors of colonialism and racial supremacy that Noemí then reveals and destroys (Castillo-Garsow 2024). For Cutter, *Mexican Gothic* is a story of Noemí and Catalina, two women who represent the difficulties of living in a colonial society that systematically "looks down on them for their mestizo heritage" (Cutter 2021, 113) (this, despite their clearly belonging to the country's elite). Although *Mexican Gothic* shows these evils of colonialism and a Mexican *mestiza's* resistance, it obscures the deeper racial relations that underpin the *mestiza* heroine's circumstance.

In *Mexican Gothic*, *mestizaje* and gender underpin Noemí's actions. This is also the case of Carlota in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* and Casiopea in *Gods of Jade and Shadow*. But in the power relations and hierarchies that constitute Mexico's *mestizaje system*, not all *mestizas/os* are positioned identically. For example, Noemí is described as darker-skinned than Catalina (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 29) but this does not place her within the vulnerable, discriminated, and marginalized non-whitened *mestizol/a* population. Her elite socio-economic status, the fact that she has a university edu-

cation from a private institution, and her participation in and adhesion to Mexican nationalism's hegemonic culture of whitened *mestizaje*, position her among the more powerful and privileged classes of Mexican society.

In several passages of the novel, we encounter Noemí as a young socialite who is supported by her family's economic prosperity and prestige. She has attended private religious schools that provide her with the "proper" manners of any elite young lady of the time, and she has attended the Feminine University of Mexico. All this allows her an understanding of the power dynamics of gender, as she looks for ways to push back, for example by demanding to register in an MA program in anthropology at UNAM. This thoroughly modern ambition to attain university-level knowledge is shared by other protagonists in the SMG universe, such as Carlota in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* and Casiopea in *Gods of Jade and Shadow*.

Noemí arrives at High Place as a woman of privilege with a certain amount of power. However, High Place is different. Poised at the edge of a mining town first controlled by the Spanish who enslaved its people, it is isolated geographically, facilitating and expressing the Doyle family's aloofness from post-revolutionary Mexican society. The moment Noemí enters the house, her social standing as an elite woman drops dramatically in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, in the eyes of most of the Doyle family, Noemí—like Catalina before her—is no more than a sexualized female who will serve reproductive and economic purposes. But it is also because she belongs to Mexico's ruling elite that she—after Catalina—is even considered for such a debased role.

The novel's critique continues by showing that *mestiza* women such as Noemí are learned, cultivated, valuable, and resourceful. During her first encounter with the patriarch, Howard Doyle, Noemí responds to his clearly racist attacks by referencing Manuel Gamio, father of Mexican Anthropology, and his recognition of positive traits in Indigenous communities (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). But while Gamio rejected the notion of the evilness in Indigenous Peoples, his objective was to know them so as to integrate them gradually into western culture, taking the best of them to create the *mestizo* fusion with western culture and building a strong foundation for the nation (Reynoso Jaime 2013). That Noemí references Gamio positively hints at the complex and unacknowledged racial politics that anchor *Mexican Gothic's* narrative.

As we have discussed, the Mexican state has been built on the foundation of the *mestizaje system*. This reality underpins *Mexican Gothic* which, by not recognizing it, reproduces it—as when Noemí calls uncritically on Manuel Gamio's outlook. Indeed, the narrative is comfortably built within a racist normalization in Mexico that only recognizes very specific social configurations as problematic (Moreno Figueroa 2010), such as the one where Noemí finds herself devalued among Britons in High Place. This normalization of racism is rooted in the modern/colonial gender system. While Noemí is appalled at the way she is treated by Howard and his son—as a stupid, impertinent, and sexualized female who can be violated at will—her interactions with the local healer, Marta Duval, are highly revealing of the way Noemí and the novel itself adhere completely to Mexico's *mestizaje system*.

Noemí's first visit with Marta—which is also her first outing in the village—aims to procure a traditional medicine for what ails Catalina. She encounters an old woman with a long braid and a blue apron sitting outside her small house, peeling peanuts. The house is full of plants, candles, hanging flowers, and herb-filled bottles (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). Although the novel is not explicit about Marta being Indigenous, the description of her looks and of her demeanour in this first encounter racializes her as either Indigenous or a non-whitened *mestiza*, and marks her as a *curandera* (a characterization confirmed by SMG in the book club guide) (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). In addition to the blue apron, which has traditionally been associated with domestic workers (who are racialized because of their work) and Indigenous women, her knowledge of herbs and medicine is also a sign of racialization. Before this encounter, Noemí already knew of the existence of healers, having read about them in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, the very book that had sparked her interest in anthropology (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). This contrast—Marta's traditional knowledge, Noemí's book learning—highlights the gulf between them, not only of class but also of "race," culture, and knowledge.

Up to this point, the narrative had portrayed Noemí as a strong Mexican *mestiza*, a feminist who questions and resists the Doyles' colonial and patriarchal oppression. This emancipatory positioning falls apart in this encounter with Marta as she performs fully the social and "racial" distance between them. It is not only that she questions the veracity and effectiveness of local knowledges, she also questions Marta's intentions and looks down on her. After Noemí asks for the medicine, she also wants to hear the story of the Doyles:

"It's a famous story around these parts. I can tell it, but it'll cost you a little."

"You're rather mercenary. I'm already going to pay for the medicine."

"We've got to eat. Besides, it's a good story, and no one knows it as well as I do."

"So, you're a healer and a storyteller." (Moreno-Garcia 2021a, 67)

Having mocked Marta, Noemí agrees to pay and offers her a cigarette. Marta smiles and takes two, dropping them in her apron's pocket. Noemí thinks that Marta will smoke them later or sell them (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). She understands that Marta is poor, that her medicine is somehow helping her cousin, and that she knows things about the Doyles that could be useful to her. Yet, the passage intimates that Noemí believes Marta to be dishonest and possibly trying to take advantage of her, knowing that Noemí is wealthy—Marta has noticed and commented on the young socialite's nice shoes (Moreno-Garcia 2021a). This kind of exchange is commonplace in Mexico and it shows the ways in which non-whitened *mestizas* and Indigenous women are positioned as racialized females, not women. They are suspect, they can be perverse, even dangerous. In Marta's smarts, Noemí sees the kind of deviousness that whitened society identifies, for instance, as animal, cat-like.

But Marta knows! The actions that Noemí interprets as devious, are Marta's knowledge of how to survive. While the narrative racializes her body, it also discloses inadvertent hints of flesh resistance, such as when she insists on being paid for telling her story. Her short scenes are instrumental to Noemí's purposes and, structurally, to SMG's own purpose of telling Noemí's story—not Marta's. At the same time, these glimpses of Marta are illustrative of the racial politics of the novel and of Mexico: *Mexican Gothic* and its whitened *mestiza* protagonist want the reader to understand Marta's responses as mercenary; we, however, see them as the flesh that knows how to resist and survive.

The encounter between Noemí and Marta is not that of two women. It is the encounter of a *mestiza* woman of privilege and a racialized female. This is an interesting shift: Noemí is a privileged whitened *mestiza* at home and a racialized female in High Place, and she goes back to being the high-class and whitened *mestiza* as soon as she encounters Marta, whom she racializes. And while Marta's knowledge and potion end up being the key to uncovering the Doyles' secret and to saving Noemí, Catalina, and the family's embattled nephew, Francis, this does not make her the story's heroine: as written in the novel, she is merely a tool in Noemí's adventure. There are similar encounters in *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau* involving Ramona, the domestic worker in Dr. Moreau's house; and in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* with Cándida Cordero, a witch called upon to provide crucial help. By othering such non-whitened *mestizas*, these encounters undermine the emancipatory credentials of *Mexican Gothic* and these other novels.

This analysis of Noemí and Marta shows that Noemí adheres to what decolonial feminists denounce: a white feminism that does not recognize the sexualized, racialized, marginalized position of other women. While *Mexican Gothic* gives us a white feminist critique of Mexican colonization and patriarchy, it does not in any way question Mexico's *mestizaje system* and the coloniality that underpins it. In fact, it reproduces them by erasing the origin, social position, and importance of the "other" women, making them into mere tools in the hands of the privileged, whitened *mestiza* heroines. This is not strange or unusual in Mexico. On the contrary, it is precisely the norm that is criticized by Latin American decolonial feminists.

The Places and Peoples of Silvia Moreno-Garcia: Elements of a Sociological Analysis

Much of the condition of in-betweenness that characterizes SMG's work is embedded in the transnational production of contemporary culture and resonates with the clearly ambivalent relationship to Mexico that pervades her novels. SMG sets almost all her work in Mexico and presents the country in a largely negative light; she writes from Canada, and publishes with great success in the United States with the world's biggest trade publisher (Random House) for a readership that is primarily made up of white, American, middle-class women. None of these features of SMG's writing and publishing circumstances is merely anecdotal or insignificant. Published writers work in and for specific markets, on the basis of whatever insights and understandings their social world(s) produce and make available to them. And so the novels' surface commitment to anticolonialism is brought into being.

SMG writes in English, having explained in a number of interviews that "it was the most practical thing. I wanted to write fantastic fiction at the time, and there are no fantastic fiction imprints in Mexico, or in most of Latin America, and there were very few in Spain at the time" (Flood 2022). She has also said that she was not living in Mexico by the time she began publishing in earnest and was thus not part of the literary and publishing milieu there, which would have facilitated her publishing in Spanish (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center 2021). This is a rather different kind of claim, focusing on her personal circumstances instead of an absence of publishing opportunities in general in her chosen genre(s)—Gothic, at least in the case of *Mexican Gothic*. As Castillo-Garsow has noted in this connection, Latin America's tradition of magic realism has explicitly rejected the primarily English tradition of the Gothic, as a way to affirm an anticolonialist independence.

SMG's turn to the English language and to the (traditional) Gothic, away from the Latin American fantastic, sits awkwardly with the anticolonialist credentials that she claims and that her critics so praise. This awkwardness need not be fatal: the argument that the English Gothic tradition can be turned against its own patriarchal and colonialist weight may have merit. But that question lies beyond our purpose here. In any case, none of the above should be read as some kind of condemnation of SMG for her life choices or preferred genre(s): millions of people leave their country of origin for a variety of good reasons, and she is perfectly entitled to have a complicated relationship with the place where she grew up. By the same token, no writer from a particular place is obligated to operate within that place's dominant traditions.

In this case, it is easy to find praiseworthy SMG's explicit agenda of shining a light on important episodes of Mexico's history *for a primarily American audience*. Indeed, *Mexican Gothic* has been a "New York Times Bestseller" and was featured in a national reading contest in Canada (whose market is dwarfed by the American) in 2023; by the summer of 2026, the trade paperback edition had reached at least its fifteenth printing. *Mexican Gothic* has had no comparable impact in Mexico. Then, how exactly SMG's novels perform that agenda is its own question, one we have addressed primarily through our analysis of key female characters and the tensions they reveal between Moreno-Garcia's claimed anticolonialism and her novel's participation in Mexico's *mestizaje system*; and secondarily as regard her chosen genre(s) and language. Regardless, our purpose is neither to praise nor condemn SMG and her novels: it is to assess critically how these novels work and what made them culturally and socially possible. Here, then, we explore how SMG's circumstances constitute conditions of possibility for writing her stories and characters in the way that she has and does.

SMG is very good at plotting, and at telling a story that you want to follow: as a reader, you want to know what happens next, and next, and next, until the end. But it also becomes quickly obvious (within a page of any of these novels) that descriptions of people and places are generic and characters' psychology often strains belief. Still, the stories move forward efficiently: we want to know what happens next. This is what is needed in a market where people are "reading for the plot" (Brooks 1984)—meaning that they are far more interested in *what* story is being told, than in *how* it is being told. That is a huge market, in several genres. SMG has said in interviews that she has an affinity for the pulp fiction of the fifties, and that she writes fast with a view to a paycheck—not in any mercenary sense, in her

telling, but because she is a working writer with a family to feed (Moreno-Garcia and Tidhar 2020; Jackson 2020). Indeed, in the afterword to *Velvet Was the Night*, SMG writes, “[m]y novel is noir, pulp fiction...” (Moreno-Garcia 2021b, 281).

Then, it turns out that there is not much that is Mexican Gothic in *Mexican Gothic*. In other words, whatever Mexican Gothic might be, it is not in this novel. Noemí and Catalina are perfectly generic, modern upper-middle class human beings, as are Virgil and Francis Doyle—easily recognizable by your average American reader. Meanwhile, it is the Doyle patriarch and his family history who bring the Gothic to unsuspecting and victimized Mexicans. As we argued above, in agreement with Castillo-Garsow and Cutter, SMG skillfully flips Gothic’s traditional monster position so that here it is the dominant English who are the monsters. In this perspective, Mexico’s disappearance from the book’s title in Spanish (simply, *Gótico*)—and only in Spanish, from all other translations that we have found that kept the original title—perhaps begins to make sense: Mexican readers, who constitute the world’s biggest Spanish-speaking market, might wonder how this Gothic is Mexican.

Indeed, Mexico often seems absent from *Mexican Gothic* and from *The Daughter of Dr. Moreau*—especially in the former novel, set as it is in an English-style house overlooking an English-style village. More broadly, the setting for the action in both novels is an isolated place that is a kind of no-place, run by Europeans who have basically no interest in Mexico and Mexicans other than as instruments in their various enterprises. In these novels, European men drive the action, while the (male) Mayan god does the same in *Gods of Jade and Shadow* and the (male) French demon has the last word.

Conclusion

SMG’s major American success was *Mexican Gothic*, in which Mexico basically disappears from Mexico, foregrounding the Englishness of her Gothic. In the much more Mexican *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2020), Casiopea pines to leave her town and to experience the life depicted in Hollywood magazines: 1920s (American) flappers with short hair and daring dresses, dancing the new (American) dances, driving (American) cars. The novel ends with her driving away with a French demon, either to (American) New Orleans or (Canadian) Quebec.

In the end, there is something weirdly, truly North American in these novels—and we might add, weirdly and truly Canadian. Again, this is neither praise nor reproach. Rather, it is a recognition of the conditions of SMG’s writing and publishing: the translation of *mestizaje* from Mexico to the North has informed the ways in which she depicts Mexico. But being at a (Canadian) remove from that public also would have an impact. Canada is, among other things, a land of immigration in which cultural differences are omnipresent and, at least in part for this reason, flattened to kinds of distinctiveness that translate easily and are at low risk of giving offence to most anyone.

Ultimately, there is also something profoundly Mexican in these novels, that is further affirmed in the anticolonialist and feminist praise that SMG has received. Her novels and her fans such as Castillo-Garsow and Woods construct the anticolonial and feminist struggles as a binary: there are the European, colonialist, patriarchal men and there are the young, educated, modern *mestizas*. But in the margins of the novels, we also find the *mestiza* heroines’ necessary and overlooked helpers: the Marta Duvals of this world, and of SMG’s fiction. Just as the real Mexico needs *and* marginalizes and erases these racialized women, SMG’s novels need the solutions provided by Marta Duval and her likes—without giving them their narrative due. This is a remarkable twist, very much the open colonial wound in practice, and perhaps a kind of *return of the repressed*, whereby SMG’s stories can’t help but bring these invisible women to the rescue, reiterating the actual structure of Mexican society.

So, the anticolonial and feminist struggle is structurally (at least) a triad, not a binary. Making it look like a binary affirms and reproduces the nationalist narrative of Mexico’s (and other countries’) fight for independence from Spain, a fight that erased First Peoples (the third term of this struggle). For all its negative portrayals and criticisms of Mexico, SMG’s fiction fully mirrors its structural coloniality and patriarchy. Canada and the United States have been en-

acting their own versions of this obscured triadic relationship, making SMG's form of anticolonialism perfectly intelligible and agreeable from San Antonio to Vancouver as it affirms the two northern countries' own stories of national becoming.

Much more could be said about this isomorphy between Mexican society's erasure of racialized people (women, especially) and SMG's own. We may draw for instance on Lucien Goldmann's interest in the question of where the novel comes from, socially speaking, as a literary form in capitalist society and, as such, how it resonates with the society / societies in which it is read (Goldmann 1964). Or on Benedict Anderson's conception of how the novel contributes to the construction of a national public (Anderson 1983).

For now, we do have an answer to our question. What, then, is Mexican in *Mexican Gothic* and SMG's other novels? The answer is in the structures of patriarchal and colonial power that these novels do not question, resist, or make visible, as their narratives mirror the positions and outlooks of Mexico's elites and middle classes. These are not narratives of transgression, they are novels that uphold the status quo of Mexico's complex *mestizaje system*.

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Playing Speculative Cat's Cradle: Reckoning with the Feminist Potentialities of Twine

by Anna Lee-Popham, Sarah York-Bertram, Aparajita Bhandari, Laurence Butet-Roch, Sarah Choukah, and Alison Harvey

Abstract: Inspired by the feminist possibilities within digital technologies and acknowledging their limitations, the authors examine the collaborative process of creating Twine workshops for three conferences, the International Communications Association, the Canadian Communications Association, and the Open Technology in Education, Society, and Scholarship Association. The workshops engaged with Twine as an interactive tool for reckoning with narratives of Empire through feminist, nonlinear, non-normative, creative expression and explored how embracing the ethos of Twine might enable collaborative analog ideation. In Twine, we see ways to bifurcate from libertarian normalizations of individualism and instead posit “playing with speculative cat’s cradle” as a prompt from Donna Haraway to collectively reckon with, re-imagine, and co-experiment with burgeoning forms of digital expression to shape otherwise thinking and future possibilities. Drawing from our respective fields of expertise (digital cultures; communications; history; gender, feminist, and women’s studies; environmental studies; writing and rhetoric; game studies), we examine the opportunities and limitations of Twine and reflect on the process of forming a feminist collaboration. We highlight processes and relationships rather than solely focusing on outcomes as a deliberate feminist intervention against neo-liberal results-oriented approaches to research and suggest that a component of feminist collaboration is being open to nonlinear, ongoing, and iterative work together.

Keywords: Twine; speculative fabulation; feminism; collaboration; creative practice; nonlinear storytelling

Résumé : Inspirées par les possibilités féministes offertes par les technologies numériques, tout en reconnaissant leurs limites, les auteures examinent le processus collaboratif de création d’ateliers sur Twine pour trois conférences, soit celles de l’International Communications Association, de l’Association canadienne de communication et de l’Association pour l’ouverture/les technologies en éducation, dans la société et pour l’avancement des savoirs. Les ateliers ont mobilisé Twine comme outil interactif permettant d’aborder de manière critique les récits de l’Empire à travers une expression féministe, non linéaire, non normative et créative, tout en explorant la manière dont l’adoption de l’éthique de Twine pourrait favoriser une idéation analogique collaborative. Dans Twine, nous voyons des façons de s’écarter des normalisations libertariennes de l’individualisme et proposons plutôt de « jouer à un jeu de ficelle spéculatif » en suivant l’appel de Donna Haraway à réfléchir collectivement, à réimaginer et à coexpérimenter des formes émergentes d’expression numérique afin de façonner d’autres modes de pensée et de futures possibilités. En nous appuyant sur nos domaines d’expertise respectifs (cultures numériques; communications; histoire; études féminines, féministes et sur le genre; études environnementales; écriture et rhétorique; études des jeux), nous examinons les possibilités et les limites de Twine et réfléchissons au processus d’établissement d’une collaboration féministe. Nous mettons l’accent sur les processus et les relations plutôt que de nous concentrer uniquement sur les résultats, comme une intervention féministe délibérée contre les approches néolibérales axées sur les résultats en recherche. Nous suggérons aussi qu’un aspect de la collaboration féministe consiste à être ouvert à un travail commun non linéaire, continu et itératif.

Mots clés : Twine; fabulation spéculative; féminisme; collaboration; pratique créative; récits non linéaires

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“Everything is a parking lot or landback.” – participant in one of our Twine workshops

While digital technologies are embedded in exploitative practices within the current colonial context (Chan 2013; Couldry and Mejias 2018; Arora 2019; Benjamin 2019; Milan and Treré 2019), they also offer “new possibilities of politics of difference” and “understanding locations” (Lothian and Phillips 2013; Tuzcu 2016; Lewis et al. 2018; Philips 2021). Inspired by these possibilities, the authors, all members of York University’s Feminist Digital Methods Research Cluster (FDMRC), examine the process of creating workshops for three conferences held in 2023, the International Communications Association (ICA), the Canadian Communications Association (CCA), and the Open Technology in Education, Society, and Scholarship Association (OTESSA). The workshops engaged with Twine (twinery.org), an open-source tool to create interactive, nonlinear, and choice-based storytelling. We were specifically interested in Twine as a collaborative and experimental tool for reckoning with narratives of Empire through feminist, nonlinear, non-normative, creative expression. We want to make a note that attendees of the three workshops by virtue of their attendance at these specific conferences were most likely well-versed in digital media and methods, which may have impacted on the effectiveness of the workshops. The results of the workshops should be understood as highly contextual case studies rather than generalizable universal templates.

From feminist perspectives, Twine is particularly interesting as a nonlinear narrative-building digital tool since it is accessible and free to use. Additionally, by having a low learning curve (Anthropy 2012; Evans 2020), Twine “challenges mainstream standards by subverting the celebration of difficulty, in both production and play” (Harvey 2014, 99). We do not position Twine as a technological fix, but as a tool to generate expansive thinking, engage in collaborative digital scholarship, and craft new meanings. In this article, we draw from Long et al.’s (2020) work on feminist collaboration and Donna Haraway’s (2011; 2021) concept of feminist speculative fabulation in science fiction (SF). Haraway’s (2021) metaphor of cat’s cradle, which she uses to conceptualize threads between SF writers, resonates with our experiences collaborating with Twine together as we “pass patterns back and forth, give and receive, hold the unasked-for-pattern in our hands,” reflecting on failure, Twine’s limitations, and our own while also finding “something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before” (Haraway 2021, 10), as further explored below.

In this paper, we draw from our areas of study (digital cultures; communications; history; gender, feminist, and women’s studies, environmental studies, game studies, and writing and rhetoric) and what Long et al. (2020) term “retrospective sense-making” to examine the opportunities and limitations of Twine as we have encountered them within the three workshops we developed. In particular, we explore our experiences of feminist collaboration using Twine and consider approaches to contravene the platform’s limitations. We take our cue from Kuo (2020) to highlight processes, relationships, tensions, and challenges rather than solely focusing on outcomes as a deliberate feminist intervention against results-oriented approaches to research. We reflect on Twine as a tool for otherwise and nonlinear thinking. In the following sections of this article we first outline the process of coalescing, creating, and conducting three Twine workshops as a group over the course of one year. We then reflect on two guiding themes that emerged from this iterative workshoping process: nonlinearity and collaboration, which we see as building towards an idea of feminist digital play. Through our reflections on the workshops, we contribute to conversations about feminist methods and theories of the transformative potentialities of technologies, particularly how interactive and accessible tools can enable collective mobilization and resistance in the academy and beyond.

What if... we jam with Twine?

In the spring and summer of 2022, a group of feminist digital methods (FDM) practitioners organized York University’s (YU) open access FDM Events and Conference with the aim to foster communities of practice. On July 14, 2022, YU’s Centre for Feminist Research (CFR) hosted a virtual workshop titled “Feminist Possibilities of Digital Interactive Storytelling” proposed and authored by writer and lecturer Anna Lee-Popham, through which participants explored the use of Twine. During this generative, critical, and playful workshop, we realized we wanted to continue playing with Twine together. As we wrapped up the workshop, Sarah Choukah, Assistant Professor in Digital Cultures at Université de l’Ontario français, asked “What if we do Twine jam sessions?” and the idea of organizing more

opportunities to collaborate around Twine took root. In October 2022, we established a small Twine-making group as part of the new FDMRC Quilting Circle, supported by the CFR and YU Libraries' Digital Scholarship Centre and Media Creation Lab.

The FDM Events and Conference provided an initial opportunity to meet and learn from each other, laying the groundwork for playful feminist collaboration. With YU hosting the 2023 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences and engaging themes of reckoning and reimagining, we decided to propose our workshop to the CCA and OTESSA. The themes of reckoning and reimagining lend well to what Shira Chess names "radical play," an approach to play that is disruptive to the status quo in big and small ways (Chess 2020, 7). We also decided to propose our workshop to the ICA Games Studies conference preceding Congress. All three associations accepted our proposals of two-part workshops that first resourced participants in learning how to use Twine and then facilitated a co-creative play session.

Our experiences as a collaborative and multidisciplinary group of FDM practitioners have shaped our approach to writing this article. We are interested in and have grappled with the language of methods and methodologies. While readers of this article may be inspired to organize similar workshops or use our writing as a jumping off point for their own collaborative and feminist work/play, this article is not written with the intent of sharing data that can be verified and reproduced. Our process for writing this article is one of "retrospective sense-making" (Long et al. 2020), which involves selecting and interpreting our experiences. Part of that retrospective sense-making involves thinking through language and conversing about our (inter)disciplinary perspectives. We draw from qualitative research methods, which lend well to multidisciplinary collaboration as they are multimethod in focus and rely on naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry observes phenomena in their "natural" setting. The settings of our workshops were informed by the delegation of space, by the associations we worked with, as well as by the materials we brought with us and the contributions of participants.

In addition to Long et al.'s (2020) work on feminist collaboration, we turned to speculative fabulation to conceptualize our expansive and critically playful collaborative storytelling. In her characterization of speculative fabulation in SF's terran worlding, Donna Haraway likens SF to a game of cat's cradle, imagining the collaborative worldmaking process of SF authors as "[...] giving and receiving patterns [...] relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for flourishing" (Haraway 2021, 10). Our collaboration can be similarly characterized as we grapple with Twine as a platform and as a way of thinking about playful feminist worldmaking. Although play is a core feminist issue (Chess 2020, 6), it is not necessarily fun (Sicart 2014). In making this statement, we are aligning our feminist approach to the ludic less with Zimmerman and Chaplin's proclamation of "a ludic century" characterized by a centering of digital games as exemplars of systems thinking and more with another manifesto, that of Donna Haraway's cyborg. Haraway embraces "humour and serious play" (Haraway 1991, 291), an approach to understanding the ludic as a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism (Sicart 2014, 3). Taking direction from intersectional feminism, which refuses a universal perspective of reality and its histories (Lutz et al. 2011), we combined playfulness with a serious drive to make sense of power's fulcrums, structures, and devices (Back and Puwar 2012, 8).

According to Haraway (2011, 99), "twenty-first century technoscience and technoculture are nothing if not frontier practices, always announcing new worlds [...]." Drawing links between settler colonial nation-states, Haraway encourages settler-citizens of such states to "face settler heritage differently, to participate in decolonising generational practices, in a state of what [Deborah Bird] Rose calls 'responsive attentiveness'" (Haraway 2011, 100). On the subject of generational practices, the FDMRC centres early career scholars. Congress 2023's themes of reckoning and reimagining as well as engaging with feminist futurity and questioning the future of post-secondary education brought forward opportunities to discuss rank and tenure in an informal and playful space. Tenured or tenure-track professors and graduate students made up the majority of participants for our workshops with an interesting generational and professional rank dynamic in which those most senior learned from their junior colleagues. This generational dynamic differs from expectations of learning and mentorship in the academy.

During our Twine workshops, we inhabited fluid roles. However, one of us in particular—Professor Sarah Choukah—did the most thorough note taking and documenting. Choukah made handwritten notes during the workshops and used a 3D-scanning camera application for documenting the spaces where our workshops took place as well as objects participants created in the workshops (<https://scans.minutiae.ca/catscradle/>). Choukah shared the images and her notes with the rest of us by typing out the notes and uploading them, as well as images, onto a shared cloud drive. These notes and images, together with our individual notes and memories, were integral to our retrospective sense-making. It is through the process of collectively reviewing, interpreting, and discussing our experiences as organizers and participants of the workshops that two main themes emerged: feminist collaboration and linearity versus nonlinearity.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the shared Twine_Jam_Docs Google Drive folder, showing workshop photographs and handwritten notes uploaded by Sarah Choukah following the ICA and CCA sessions, May 2023.

Though each workshop was designed around feminist collaboration, nonlinear possibilities, conference themes, and Twine, the workshops were also oriented around specific questions that were relevant to each association. In our first workshop with the ICA Games Studies Division, we reimagined roles and boundaries between “players” and “creators” of Twine games. We considered how collaboration could facilitate situated gaming experiences outside of platform economics and imperatives of connectivity, and what unexpected forms of play (including human and more-than-human experience) Twine could facilitate. For CCA, we engaged legacies of feminist collective diary practices and situated Twine and “Twine thought” as an alternative mode for collaboration. Finally, for OTESSA, we proposed to grapple with Anglo-centrism on Twine and in its code, reflecting on experiences teaching Twine in multilingual contexts.

Our focus on play and experimentation carried through the structure of our workshops. More than providing a tutorial explaining the basics and enumerating the ways in which Twine could be used in the classroom or in research, we hoped that participants would begin to imagine how embracing its ethos might unleash new possibilities for their work/play. Unsure of the number of participants that would attend each session as well as their familiarity with the platform, we devised three lively activities that would showcase the nonlinear thinking afforded by Twine without requiring technical know-how. This approach allowed us flexibility in working with participants with varying degrees of

experience with Twine and interests. It also enabled us to continue our learning when participants didn't attend, as was the case for one of the workshops (OTESSA). In this case, the three group members who were going to facilitate this workshop took the time to improvise with shifting the language of conversation to French, as the workshop we had developed for OTESSA was focused on a discussion about language and narratives of Empire and reflecting on our Twine-making and teaching experiences in English and French post-secondary education institutions and in open access virtual contexts. This created an interesting dynamic because two of the three group members were fully bilingual in English and French with French being their mother tongue. While the third group member was also bilingual, English was her mother tongue and language of much greater ease. This flipped the dynamic—as we normally spoke English at all of our meetings and workshops—and led us to reflect on what it means to attempt to speak in a nonlinear way in a language within which one is less at ease. We are interested in further exploring these reflections in the future.

In both the CCA and ICA workshops, the first activity set the stage for our collective endeavour and entailed playing through some inspiring examples, such as *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine 2012), *Queers at the End of the World* (Anthropy 2013), *The Temple of No* (Crows, Crows, Crows 2016), and *Tonight May Be* (Lee-Popham 2021). Participants shared their reflections regarding how these experiences related to gaming and storytelling. For our CCA workshop, this was followed with a thirty-minute tutorial introducing some of the elemental capabilities and magic of the Twine platform: how to create a passage, how to introduce options that link to divergent outcomes, and the rudiments of “what-if” statements, which allow Twine users to do different things depending on their previous experience in the story.

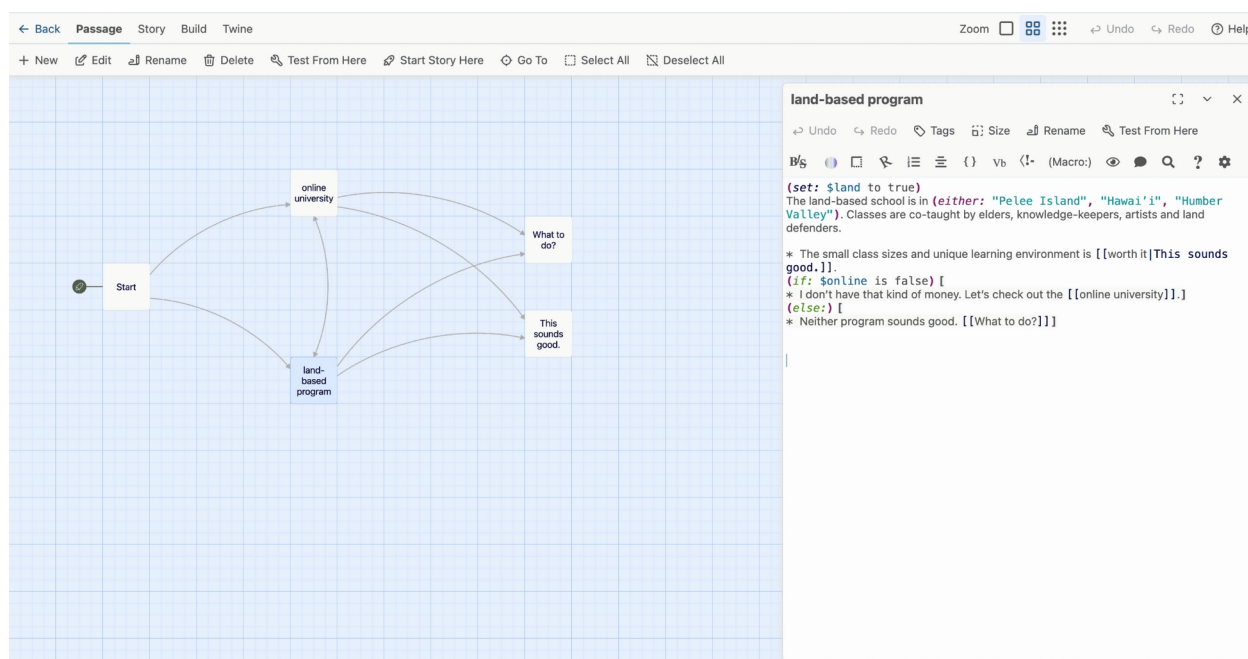


Figure 2: Screenshot of the Twine editor showing a branching narrative structure created during the CCA workshop at Congress 2023. The story map, built around the speculative prompt “What will the university look like in 100 years?,” illustrates how participants used passages, links, and conditional logic (if/else statements) to create nonlinear narratives.

With this understanding of what Twine enables, we moved onto the second activity: analog ideation. Attendees were divided into two groups, each with two facilitator-participants, and each asked to play an improvisational game of “what if?” Based on a future-oriented prompt, “what will the university look like in 100 years?” (informed by the conference theme of “Reckoning” in conversation with institutional colonial legacies), a participant offered an initial speculation, beginning with the phrase “what if...” A peer built on this proposition, also using “what if...” as a starting point. And so on for a couple of minutes. From this collaborative narrative-building, each group was then asked

to create a Twine-inspired plot using coloured flashcards, Post-Its, markers, and twine (as in thick string, which we included so participants could visually link the flashcards).

Working in an analog format not only eschews the need for technical know-how but also enables more collaborative thinking, with participants alternating between working as a singular unit and being responsible for building distinct pathways. With a draft physically mapped out, each group switched places, decoding the story their counterparts devised, before exchanging feedback by writing on sticky notes and placing them next to the relevant passages. After each group returned to their table, we moved on to the third activity, which we referred to, in jest, as “the curve ball.”

On a table at the front of the room, several objects were displayed: seashells, a sprouting tomato plant in a pot of soil, Play-Doh, paper straws, plastic animals and dinosaurs, toy cars, minuscule pencil crayons, a tarot deck, and so on. These were items the group discussed in advance, reflecting what we had on hand at home that could be generative and flow from our own lives and personal interests (including gardening, parenting/children’s toys, and foraging). Each team was asked to select one item, before any further instructions were given. Only then did they learn that they would have to find a way to integrate that prop into their creation as a transformative agent, that is, not as a character or a moment in the narrative arc but as a portal offering a new way of engaging with the storyworld they designed. For instance, a group in the first workshop that selected Play-Doh was inspired by its malleability, suggesting the addition of a “god mode” to their creation whereby the player no longer had to make decisions within the scripted options but could mould any thread they desired. During the CCA workshop, a team who also picked the Play-Doh (a crowd favourite) mused about how its smell evoked childhood. Based on that observation, the team introduced options to travel between, among, and along different time-space continuums. In both these cases, and with the other chosen objects as well, the “curve balls” encouraged participants to think well beyond the bounds of what Twine, as a technological fix, offers.

What if... digital play was feminist?

Digital technologies like Twine are paradoxical objects for feminist resistance. Historically “high tech” has been linked to the formation of masculinities, particularly in terms of the dominant discourses, images, and tropes prevailing around computing, identities that have shifted from “geek” to hegemonic with the increasingly lucrative and powerful role of technology in society. From the early days of mainstreaming of “new” technologies, those who worked on computers, networked communications, and the emerging Internet were upheld as paragons of technophilia—emotionally isolated, competitive, rational, and oriented towards control and achievement (Turkle 1984). This entanglement of technological competence and identity is referred to as technicity (Dovey and Kennedy 2006) and has informed the framing of tech subjects ranging from hackers to Silicon Valley visionaries to digital game players and makers as predominantly white, Western men.

If there is inherently a discursive connection made between masculinities and technology, it follows that young women and people of colour have been positioned as reluctant participants in need of coding camps and game-making clubs to recruit them into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Catherine Knight Steele challenges this logic presuming lack, noting “an overemphasis on coding and programming skills accepts mythology about Blackness, womanhood, and technology that does not serve Black women and girls” (Steele 2021, 2). Her work, in line with the research of the likes of Mar Hicks (2017), Laine Nooney (2013), Lisa Nakamura (2011; 2014) and Charlton D. McIlwain (2019), resists common stories told about participation and affective attachments (Ahmed 2004) in histories of technological development, unsticking the common associations and revealing that those often framed as “marginal” in tech have always been impactful if not recognized, central if not valued.

But still, legacies of hegemonic technicities have shaped digital technologies in important ways, informing their design and use (Edwards 2003), from the anthropomorphizing of user interfaces to counter stereotypes of feminine computer-phobia and ineptitude (Lupton 2000) to the racist imaginaries of search algorithms that reveal the deep-seated data discrimination programmed into supposedly neutral technologies (Noble 2018). The prominence of data extraction and exploitation within regimes of surveillance capitalism has provoked reflection on the relationship between digital technologies and histories of colonialism provoked by the framing of data as the “new oil” (Couldry

and Mejias 2018). Ruptures with this overarching narrative of appropriation and control can be found in interventions like the Big Data from the South Initiative, where activities to resist and creatively subvert datafication are foregrounded (Milan and Treré 2019).

Our engagements with Twine are aligned with this ethos of reclamation and rupture, paralleling other feminist and decolonizing approaches to ludic technologies that acknowledge the dominance of hypermasculine production practices (Weststar and Legault 2018), spaces of play (Trammell 2023), and representational regimes (Lynch et al. 2016), while also revealing, imagining, and creating alternatives for digital play. Digital games have been in many ways the paradigmatic technology of hegemonic masculinity—oriented towards militaristic violence, command and control, the entrepreneurial self, monitoring and improving one’s quantitatively-assessed biopower, consumerism and rampant consumption, the power of the individual, and of course zero-sum, meritocratic competition (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva 2017; Stallabras 1993). In their pervasive use of maps, conquest, and the Other in both mechanics and aesthetics, digital games also commonly rely on the normalization of imperialism and colonialism as motivating narratives (Mukherjee 2016). This goes beyond their representation and designed play experiences—the production context of games is known to be intensively exploitative, exclusionary, and extractivist in terms of both their workforces and environmental costs (Abraham 2022; Cote and Harris 2023). Indeed, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter characterize digital games as the “exemplary media of empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xxix). However, feminist, queer, and critical race scholarship, as well as the design and activism of historically marginalized communities, has for many years made interventions into this “hegemony of play” (Fron et al. 2007; Harvey 2019). A key artifact in this shift in discourse and practice around digital games is Twine.

Despite not being intended as a tool for game design but as a technology supporting the creation of nonlinear stories (Cox and Klimas 2024), Twine rapidly became synonymous with queer game-making and community formation and drew the attention of scholars for whom the radical democratization and politicized engagement with game development was an important challenge to the hypermasculine, toxic, and exclusionary context of this media form (Harvey 2014). Our work with Twine is indebted to the ways these communities and creators seize the mode of production for ludic creativity and the generosity of the open source community in responding to these uses of the tool. Our work builds on these resistant and generative engagements with Twine by considering the potential for reclamation of ludic technologies for feminist thinking, research-creation, and critical practices related to reckonings. This work doesn’t affiliate with the instrumental approaches of “games-based education” and instead aligns with feminist approaches to technology, particularly with the injunction of Sharma and Singh (2022) to approach the question of how the medium is the message from a critical perspective.

What if... storytelling was purposefully nonlinear?

In developing these workshops, we were interested in the ways that nonlinear thinking could be explored through Twine as a tool to generate expansive thinking, engage in collaborative digital scholarship, and craft new meanings. Our orientations to nonlinearity varied across our disciplines. In game studies, nonlinearity is a presumed feature of the ludic form due to the agency of players. In addition, narrative-driven titles (which are often associated with marginalized makers and the use of Twine) have been denigrated within “hardcore” games culture as “not real games” because they eschew rule-driven competitive engagement. This debate, of course, overlooks the ways that platformized digital content is tightly controlled by game developers and publishers, limiting interactivity to only desirable ends, and how noncommercial tools like Twine enable much more open-ended engagements with both playing and making. At the interdisciplinary intersections of gender studies and Canadian history, teleological understandings of time and progress are troubled. In the field of creative writing, the braided essay (which weaves together different “threads” of a story) and other fragmented writing is often referred to when discussing nonlinearity. Yet theorists have suggested that nonlinearity “is part of the process by which language and literature are generated” (Livingston 2021, 271), is “always in operation in the writing process, [and] can also be deliberately enhanced” (Livingston 2021, 267). Across our disciplinary orientations, we were interested in exploring the use of Twine as a tool for otherwise thinking reflective of Black feminist, anti-colonial, and plural forms of futurism and design.

Early on in our development of these workshops, we articulated Twine as a hack of more conventional game development tools. Stemming from the limitations we had encountered as students and instructors of Twine (e.g., limited collaborative opportunities, steeper learning curve for more complex demands), we were interested in hacking the hack that is Twine. This, as we understood it, would involve inviting participants to engage in the nonlinear thinking that is promoted through Twine without the constraints inherent in the tool. One illustrative moment came when a participant offered the line we use as our opening epigraph. The group treated “parking lot” and “landback” less as endpoints than as generative constraints: a deliberately blunt binary common in nonlinear narrative structures such as Twine’s. In contrast, the situated, collaborative workshop experience fostered spontaneous unpackings, complications, and multiplications with Post-Its and twine. Participants treated parking as a narrative and material connector—linking vehicle-dependence and parking fees to questions of access and uneven futures—while also contrasting them with “landback” and asking questions about its potential, future incarnations.

From the “what if” exercise (outlined above), we wanted to provide participants with a strategy to engage in the nonlinear branching thinking that is enabled through Twine. The “what if” exercise was also used by Preda and Matei in their study of using speculative fabulation “to deconstruct the hegemonic temporalities of modernity” (Preda and Matei 2023, 318) with university students. Similar to our approach to inviting in nonlinear thinking, in their study, Preda and Matei “encouraged [students] to create counter-hegemonic representations [and] diverge from the norms and conditions of ordinary life” (Preda and Matei 2023, 325). From this, they suggest that “speculative fabulation is a resource that allows students to approach various contemporary issues and consider alternative solutions to social problems by pondering over what needs to be done in the present” (Preda and Matei 2023, 329). From our workshops, we found three key learnings we offer here.

First, participants in the CCA and ICA sessions developed two different approaches to organizing their stories. One group organized their stories towards what Sarah Choukah (in our discussions after the session) noted as “structure finding,” whereby the focus was on developing a more linear structure with a more clear beginning and end. The other group oriented towards a more expansive rhizomatic structure based in what Sarah Choukah (also during our after-session discussions) noted as “story imaginings.” Participants had different perspectives of how Twine informed their experience of linearity: One participant indicated that the branching structure of Twine sets up the expectation of what would come next, inspiring a more linear progression through a story, while another reflection from the discussion was that the “what if” activity and subsequent Twine-inspired approach to the analog exercise invited the story to exist outside the traditional constraints of narrative. A participant reflected that these two components, as well as the curve ball addition, resulted in an impression that the storytelling could begin from any moment—unlike the classic Hero’s Journey—creating a sense of multimodality and a less rigid adherence to the story being only text-based. Another participant noted that the introduction of the curve ball made the story more linear. We were curious about how, for some, introducing an element of surprise might result in returning to a more linear narrative to attempt to move to “resolution.” Another participant reflected on how each decision point opened up many other options, each of which could be further explored. For example, one group in the ICA workshop developed an underwater world and then created branching options that would lead towards assuming the underwater world existed or questioning the possibility of its existence, as well as determining the ease or difficulty of underwater existence. While these choice points may appear as a series of binary options, we would suggest instead that they exist as multidimensional components, in that both components from one decision point (e.g., assuming the underwater world existed and questioning its existence) could engage with both components from another decision point (e.g., underwater existence is easy or underwater existence is difficult), therefore enabling a series of interweaving options and inspiring expansive thinking.

Second, participants developed different ways to interpret each other’s stories, which they were required to do without explanation from each other. During our co-creation session, we divided participants into two groups. Groups switched tables part-way through the session and interacted with each other’s games. The feedback each group gave the other influenced the outcome of the game. This practice of switching tables disrupted a “god mode” or “god view” of the worlds we built. The approach of either “structure finding” or “story imagining” seemed to inform each group’s interpretation of the other’s story and the questions they subsequently posed (e.g., some questions

were focused on trying to determine where the story began, where others were focused on different possible entry points into the story). Lastly, participants were impacted by each other's stories. In both the CCA and ICA sessions, the story that had been more linear became more rhizomatic and vice versa.

What if ... collaboration in Twine was feminist?

Twine itself is a collaborative experience as players interact with the narratives/games authored with choices built in. These narratives/games, which often have autobiographical undertones, evoke a range of sensations and experiences that encourage players to feel along with the authors or their fellow players (though not usually simultaneously). Twine is not a multiplayer game. While reflecting on experiences teaching with Twine, participants discussed emotional responses to games like Anna Anthropy's *Queers at the End of the World* in which players have ten seconds to choose how they will spend their last moments with the love of their life. Participants with experience teaching Twine and those in our workshops described playing Anthropy's Twine game as a "more lonely experience." Our workshops disrupted the individual experience of playing Twine games and brought the collaborative structure of Twine to the analog world. Analog collaboration put the choices on the table, literally, and participants shaped or developed them through play.

While conceptualizing our playful feminist collaboration, we drew from Long et al.'s (2020) three metaphorical frames: feminist collaboration as reflexive becoming, as proactive improvisation, and as co-learning partnership. Collaborative processes can be part of everyday organizing that resists and/or perpetuates inequality regimes—the interlocked processes and practices that sustain inequalities in organizations. It takes careful consideration to infuse feminist principles into collaborative processes. The conference themes of reckoning and reimagining offered an opportunity to reflect on systemic oppressions, taken-for-granted values, norms, and patterns of relating. Technoculture holds responsibility, or a duty of care, and possibility because it has the potential to expand capacity for responsive attentiveness (Haraway 2011). Inspired by Patricia Piccinini's visual and sculptural art representing "naturaltechnical" worlds—worlds in need of care and response—Donna Haraway asks: "How might a speculatively fabulated SF art object help morph eroded and disowned no-places into flourishing and cared-for places?" (Haraway 2011, 100). Reimagining relational dynamics is part of feminist praxis—including upholding an ethics of care, which adapts to changes, such as individual circumstances, group dynamics, collective tasks, and broader organizational, institutional, and cultural changes. Rather than aiming for a utopic vision of harmonious relating, Long et al. suggest that feminist collaborators attune to tensions and negotiations in the collaborative process (Long et al. 2020, 490). Attuning to tensions makes the effort of collaboration evident as well as negotiations of power, voice, and identities.

Tending to tensions in the collaborative process requires reflexivity. Long et al. (2020) explain reflexive becoming as a process whereby collaboration evolves and demands individual and collective reflexivity to uphold a feminist stance. Reflecting throughout collaboration encourages us to think about the ways we impact each other's participation, exclusion, and agentic expression. Throughout the duration of our collaboration, we have held regular virtual chats and maintained email communication. We have also met to debrief and reflect on the workshops. Our collaboration has been digitally mediated, relying on shared access to cloud drives, the use of word processors to co-write, and video and instant messaging communication platforms.

According to Long et al. (2020), feminist collaboration is proactive improvisation because it is constant creative work, it is shaped by time and access to resources, and it requires everyday acts of transformation within contextual constraints. The "what if" exercise is how we built worlds together in a short timeframe. But we also improvised as workshop organizers, notetakers, and participants. Some of us moved from one role to the other. On our last day of workshops, one of us was ill and unable to attend. Those who could attend the last workshop arrived to find no participants for the workshop.

Our collaboration as a co-learning partnership has a longer history and is situated in the aims of the FDMRC. We have been intentional about fostering communities of practice around feminist digital methods and organizing events

that formally and informally facilitate learning together, from each other, and in partnership. Long et al. (2020) write that feminist collaboration is a co-learning partnership when the collaboration values connections, ethics of care, and equity. It also centres a sense of solidarity. In our case, solidarity is informed by our interests in FDM, Twine, feminist anticolonial speculative futurity, and feminist play. We also demonstrate care for one another throughout our collaborations by carpooling; sharing food and drinks at workshops; meeting up in advance of our workshops to walk and talk; running each other's errands when time allows and cancelling unnecessary errands when time requires; taking over when one of us gets sick or has an emergency; and supporting the amount one can contribute and each other's boundaries.

Our collaborative process is layered and characterized by expansion and contraction. It is layered in the work of conceptualizing the workshop, its format, and in our intention to act as players in our gameplaying and participants in our workshops. Our collaborative process involves expansion and retraction as we navigate possibilities and home in on how those possibilities can be practically applied. As we prepared for our workshops, we noticed different behaviours among us as we shifted from more expansive attitudes to practicality and maintaining sustainability. Sometimes, contraction triggered intense feelings as possibilities closed and choices became more limited. Expansion and contraction was rapid in the workshops due to the time constraints. Our emotional reactions were informed by the so-called "post-pandemic" context: this was the first in-person Congress since the COVID-19 pandemic and many people were navigating grief while interacting in person for the first time.

Laughter, jokes, and humour facilitated our play as did our use of shared cultural references. Other popular SF, like Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, offered ideas for our own worldbuilding. Invoking *Star Trek* in this setting was less about fandom than about reframing familiar franchise tropes into collaborative prompts—shifting from viewership to participatory worlding. In one exchange, "Beam me up Scottie" surfaced as a joke about escape, only to be met later with the counter-line, "Not today Scottie"—a small performative refusal that kept the group with the difficulty of imagining otherwise, rather than narrating a clean exit. Positive and nostalgic associations with the materials we used, such as Play-Doh and tiny colouring pencils, also facilitated our play. Holding space for our emotional expressions and experiences of play was important, though we did not coddle. As topics like death, the carceral, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous realities underlying utopian visions under settler colonialism, and the effects of climate change came up, the relationship between creation and destruction became evident (Sicart 2014).

We were not only interested in human experiences of Twine. We explored the possibility that Twine can facilitate nontextual, embodied, and more-than-human responses and/or experiences. In her speculative exploration of the significance for thinking, knowing, and living in more than human worlds, María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reframes care as a force distributed across multiplicities of agencies and materials, including the more-than-human. Puig de la Bellacasa differentiates between "thinking with care" and "thinking for." Whereas "thinking with care" acknowledges relationality on a large scale encompassing the human and more-than-human, "thinking for" reflects the risks of fetishization and appropriation when humans attempt to think and act on behalf of others, including more-than-humans. Puig de la Bellacasa argues that an ethical reorganization of human-nonhuman relations is vital, but what this means in terms of caring obligations cannot be imagined once and for all (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 24). It is a practice to attend to these obligations consistently and adapt as needed. We see speculative feminist game-playing as part of that ongoing process of tuning in to obligations and adapting as needed.

The tension of "thinking with care" and "thinking for" is evident in our attempts to integrate the more-than-human world and experience into our play. During the CCA workshop, as we played our "what if?" game, one participant offered the question: "What if we develop a universal translator technology that can communicate with the more-than-human world?" The query inspired the group to think about what that would mean for our most immediate nonhuman relationships with plants and animals we care for. Participants quickly brought the universal translator down from sci-fi abstraction into the everyday: "I wake up and put my universal translator on." The "what if" then turned noisy and messy—"My dog won't shut up"; "My dog ate my translator"—a playful reminder that translation is not a neutral device but rather a relational practice prone to breakdown and requiring care. In Deborah Bird Rose's terms quoted by Haraway (2011), this breakdown kept us in "responsive attentiveness" to more-than-human agency:

technoscientific devices might announce new worlds but rather than presenting themselves as seamless fixes, those worlds arrive through stubborn, messy, and noisy processes. Following the introduction of the “curve ball,” each group picked a plastic toy—one representing a turtle and one representing a snowy owl. This component of the workshop inspired questions about difference, embodiment, and consciousness as we considered how to meaningfully integrate a turtle’s experience and a snowy owl’s experience.

What if ... we didn’t have to conclude?

After the workshops, we met regularly to develop a plan for, and then write, this article. During these meetings, it was common that one or more of us would comment on the experience of working together—appreciating feeling supported in our collaboration, in bringing our different interests and expertise, and in being able to step in and step back, in ways that felt unique and distinctive. Different group members suggested future opportunities for ongoing collaboration, including submitting proposals to future conferences and for a book project. Our experiences exploring the possibilities of Twine for critical thinking and alternative future ideation also prompted reflections on how we could adapt the workshops and their teachings to the classroom setting. While not discussed explicitly in this article, Twine, with its emphasis on nonlinearity, is a rich pedagogical tool for encouraging students to think expansively and imaginatively. We all expressed ongoing excitement for collaboration. Long et al. note that it “is important to keep the principles of feminist collaboration specific enough to be actionable yet vague enough for feminist collaboration to be agile” (Long et al. 2020, 496). Our process of writing this article constituted an improvisational yet directed process. This analysis is itself an act of retrospective sense-making, written after the fact and shaped by our interpretive commitments to feminist methodologies. In returning to these moments with the benefit of temporal distance, we were able to attend to the ways that meaning is produced not only in experience but also enacted through its later narration, memory, and analysis.

When we got to writing this conclusion, we couldn’t help but ask: What if we didn’t have to conclude? What if feminist collaboration entails an openness to future nonlinear collaboration? By this, we wonder how the nonlinear thinking that is enabled by Twine might inspire us to also consider ways our collaboration could be approached in expansive, nonlinear ways through which we could iteratively craft new meaning for working together. As mentioned above, this too seems to draw from Haraway’s (2021) understanding of speculative cat’s cradle through recognizing collaboration as a way to “pass patterns back and forth, give and receive, hold the unasked-for-pattern in our hands,” while also finding “something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for flourishing” (Haraway 2021, 10). As we pondered possible futures that centre what is life-giving, sustaining, and precious and imagined feminist ethics for that future, Haraway’s reflection on real reconciliation resonates. Such real reconciliation depends on descendants of settler worlds letting go of particular historical narratives that position us as saviors and learning to live in technoculture(s) that face ancestors of many kinds and take responsibility for those who come after.

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Resisting Colonial Limitations, Building Community and Sharing Knowledge: Urban Indigenous Women Determine their Reproductive and Sexual Futures

by Holly McKenzie, Dory Nason, Colleen Varcoe, Elder Betty McKenna, Paulete Poitras, Jenelle McArthur, and Cassandra J. Opikokew Wajuntah

Abstract: Colonial forces in North America have long targeted the reproductive practices of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people as part of the project to assert sovereignty over Indigenous lands and these oppressive forces continue to shape struggles for reproductive rights. While the reproductive choice movement remains predominantly focused on rights and access to abortion and contraceptives, Black women, women of colour, Indigenous women and Indigenous youth activists have taken up reproductive justice as a framework to analyze reproductive violence and advocate for reproductive freedom. Yet, missing from the extant literature are ways that Indigenous women activate reproductive justice in everyday contexts. Grounded in a collaborative, action-oriented study that amplified an Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework that is relational and centers self-determination, this paper examines how urban Indigenous women in Canada build reproductive and sexual self-determination through resisting colonial influences, drawing on government and community-based services, and contributing to the resurgence of Indigenous teachings and practices. Through foregrounding these material-discursive practices, our analysis highlights resistance work taking place outside of what is usually considered both reproduction and politics. In doing so, we aim to foster a broader view of ongoing resistance work, as well as illuminate future potential sites for movement-building.

Keywords: Indigenous; First Nations; Métis; women; reproductive justice; self-determination; Canada

Résumé : Les forces coloniales en Amérique du Nord ont longtemps pris pour cible les pratiques reproductives des femmes autochtones et des personnes de genres divers dans le cadre de leur projet visant à affirmer leur souveraineté sur les terres autochtones, et ces forces oppressives continuent d'influencer les luttes pour les droits reproductifs. Alors que le mouvement pour le libre choix reproductif reste principalement axé sur les droits et l'accès à l'avortement et à la contraception, les femmes noires, les femmes de couleur, les femmes autochtones et les jeunes militantes autochtones ont adopté la justice reproductive comme cadre pour analyser la violence reproductive et défendre la liberté reproductive. Pourtant, la littérature existante ne rend pas compte de la manière dont les femmes autochtones mettent en œuvre la justice reproductive dans leur quotidien. S'appuyant sur une étude collaborative et orientée vers l'action qui a mis en avant un cadre autochtone de justice reproductive et sexuelle fondé sur les relations et centré sur l'autodétermination, cet article examine comment les femmes autochtones vivant en milieu urbain au Canada construisent leur autodétermination reproductive et sexuelle en résistant aux influences coloniales, en s'appuyant sur les services publics et communautaires, et en contribuant à la renaissance des enseignements et des pratiques autochtones. En mettant en avant ces pratiques matérielles et discursives, notre analyse met en lumière les actions de résistance qui se déroulent en dehors de ce qui est habituellement considéré comme relevant à la fois de la reproduction et de la politique. Ce faisant, nous visons à favoriser une vision plus large des actions de résistance en cours, ainsi qu'à mettre en lumière de futurs terrains potentiels pour la construction de mouvements.

Mots clés : peuples autochtones; Premières Nations; Métis; femmes; justice reproductive; autodétermination; Canada

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Elder Betty McKenna is Anishinaabe and speaks Anishinaabemowin. Her family reserve is Sapotaweyak Cree Nation. She follows the traditions of her people, speaks her traditional language, conducts numerous ceremonies, and gathers medicines. Elder Betty is an author of several peer reviewed publications and editor of the book "Listening to The Beat of Our Drum". Elder Betty is very passionate about Indigenous health, education and returning people to their traditional practices and languages. Elder Betty is currently involved with many research projects and is a lecturer at the First Nations University of Canada and Luther College in Regina. Elder Betty is also an Elder in Virtual Residence to the Canadian Virtual Hospice. She is also currently the first Resident Elder for the Mackenzie Art Gallery and recently became a Resident Elder for CAAN. Elder Betty currently also is currently the Guiding Elder to RESOLVE Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse, Institute of Indigenous People's Health-Canadian Institutes of Health Research (IIPH), Guiding Elder to IGNITE Adult Learning Corporation and she is an Elder in Regina Public Schools. Previously, she was a member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Saskatchewan Council and the Saskatchewan Police Commission Board, and she also was a member of the Elders National Advisory of Corrections Canada. She is widely recognized for her work and has received numerous awards over the years, these include: the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal, the Queen's Gold Jubilee Medal, the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal, and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. She has also been recognized with the Excellence in Health Award, the Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse (RESOLVE) Saskatchewan Community Award, the Regina Board of Trustees Shared Values Recognition Program Award, the Wakamow Valley Award of Distinction for Conservation of Prairie Plants, as well as the Sovereigns Award for Volunteers. She is also a member of the Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan's Prayer Breakfast committee.

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Introduction

Colonialism and other intersecting oppressive forces shape people's reproductive experiences in North America and their struggles for reproductive rights. In Canada, colonial forces have targeted the reproductive practices of Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) women and gender-diverse people as part of the project to assert sovereignty over Indigenous lands (Stote 2015; Lawford and Giles 2013; Tait 2009). These colonial forces have employed various strategies to disrupt traditional modes of gender, reproduction, family, and community, including demonizing gender-diverse people (Hunt 2015; Jacobs et al. 1997; Wilson 2009), imposing EuroWestern biomedical reproductive healthcare (Kelm 1998; Lawford and Giles 2013), enacting reproductive coercion (Stote 2015; Stote 2025), and instituting patriarchal structures of governance and family through federal legislation (Emberley 2001; Green 2001). In the face of colonial interventions, Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people have protected, sustained, and revitalized Indigenous teachings and practices, contested colonial heteropatriarchal violence, and developed community programming to meet local reproductive healthcare needs. Crucial to this work have been Indigenous feminist, Two-Spirit and queer scholars (Anderson 2011; Risling Baldy 2018; Simpson 2017; Starblanket 2024), and Indigenous midwives (Couchie 2007; Silliman et al. 2004).

While the struggle for decriminalizing abortion brought together feminists with various reproductive concerns, the reproductive choice discourse and material politics crystallized to focus primarily on legal and accessible abortion services and contraceptives (Silliman et al. 2004). This focus on technologies and procedures necessary to prevent and end pregnancies reflects the dominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual women within the reproductive choice

movement, women who are often compelled within North American society to become mothers. This is not to deny that these concerns remain pressing, as underscored by the 2022 United States Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* and related state-level legislation that criminalized abortion in various contexts (Guttmacher Institute 2025), and by Trump's defunding of health organizations that provide abortion care within and beyond the United States (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025). Nor is this to overlook the intersecting structural inequities that shape abortion and contraceptive access. Rather, it is to highlight that the reproductive choice movement's focus on abortion and contraceptives has marginalized other reproductive concerns pertinent to Indigenous people, Black people, people of colour, and people living in conditions of economic precarity (Silliman et al. 2004).

Black women from the United States working in reproductive rights and health in the 1990s first articulated reproductive justice as a framework to address various forms of reproductive violence and build liberatory futures (Ross 2017). Reproductive justice is grounded in a human rights framework, centres marginalized communities, and renders visible the interconnections among individual reproductive decisions and the sociopolitical contexts in which they are made. Alongside Black women, women of colour, and other communities, Indigenous women and youth have taken up reproductive justice as a relevant framework to analyze their experiences, engage in community work, and mobilize politically (Wiebe and Konsmo 2014; Women's Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2016). Vital to the development of Indigenous reproductive justice theory and practice has been the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), a grassroots organization led by, and for, Indigenous youth, whose spectrum of work includes land back advocacy (a movement to reclaim sovereign Indigenous lands), intervening in the child welfare and criminal system, culturally safe sexual health education, 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy, and environmental justice.

As state forces and service providers continue to subject Indigenous people to reproductive injustices including the forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system and reproductive coercion (Ma et al. 2019; Senate of Canada 2022; Stote 2015; Stote 2025), recently, various levels of government in the United States and Canada have targeted multiple communities' rights and access to health information and care. Right-wing populist governments have criminalized and limited people's abortion rights and 2SLGBTQ+ rights, as well as undermined access to sexual health education and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people's healthcare (CBC News 2023; DeMillo 2023; Guttmacher Institute 2026). Our collective struggles against these forms of violence must foreground Indigenous peoples' resistance, as Indigenous peoples have developed creative strategies to resist various forms of reproductive, sexual and gendered violence and sustain themselves and their communities in the face of it.

Grounded in our collaborative research exploring urban Indigenous women's conceptualizations of reproductive justice and reproductive experiences, in this article we share our analysis of everyday material-discursive practices urban Indigenous women in the Prairies engage to build reproductive and sexual self-determination. Through these practices, collaborators resist colonial regulation of reproductive decision-making and motherhood, draw on services and resources to meet their own and their family's needs, and build community, all of which strengthens their capacities for resistance. Collaborators also spoke about engaging and sharing cultural practices and teachings in dynamic, complex, and relational ways.

Study Context

This study was a collaboration of urban Indigenous women and accomplices living on the homeland of the Métis and Treaty One (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada), Treaty Four (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada) and Treaty Six (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada) territories who brought experience in service provision, community leadership and advocacy, research, and navigating challenges in reproductive and sexual healthcare and in child welfare. Manitoba and Saskatchewan were constructed by colonial governments that divided and named territories on which First Nations (including the Cree, Dene, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda), Inuit, and Métis lived, and still live. There is a long history of colonial displacement from, and migration within, these lands (Daschuk 2013; Hogue 2015), including among Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. As of 2021, Indigenous people comprised 12.4% of Winnipeg's population, 11.5% of Saskatoon's population, and 10.4% of Regina's population. More broadly, Indigenous people consti-

tute 5.0% of the Canadian population with 44.3% of Indigenous people living in large urban centres (Government of Canada 2022).

Colonial and class segregation dominate these cities. Various policies and practices, including the ongoing legacy of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the continued forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system, and sexist, classist, and racist provisions in the *Indian Act* have pushed, and continue to push, many Indigenous people into under-resourced areas such as Saskatoon's West Side, Regina's North Central, and Winnipeg's North End, areas known as inner-city (sometimes "core") neighbourhoods.

These cities are also spaces of community-building. Indigenous women living in these urban centres engage in diverse forms of activism and community work. Grassroots and community-based organizations mobilize to hold police accountable for their problematic responses to violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people, to resist the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families by the child welfare system, and to hold the state and corporations accountable for environmental violence. A few specific examples include the grassroots, Indigenous-led blockades in 2023 to pressure the Manitoba government to search the Prairie Green Landfill near Winnipeg for the bodies of First Nations women who were suspected to have been murdered by a serial killer now convicted of the crime; Ikwe Safe Rides, a volunteer-based safe ride group in Winnipeg created by Indigenous women in 2016 in response to taxi-cab drivers' harassment and violence; and the Idle No More movement, which emerged in late 2012 from teach-ins led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Saskatchewan to protest threats to First Nations rights that were introduced by the federal Bill C-45 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). These three cities are also sites where Elders and cultural leaders are recovering, practicing and sharing First Nations cultural practices, including reproductive health practices, such as Indigenous doula care and birthwork, moon lodge teachings and full moon ceremonies. As such, these three cities were, and are, ideal sites in which to amplify Indigenous women's everyday work building reproductive and sexual justice.

Study Process, Methodology, and Methods

Study Development

This project was instigated by the first author (McKenzie) through a collaborative, community-engaged approach. McKenzie is a white-settler, queer, cis-gender feminist woman who works as an accomplice with Indigenous peoples in the fight against the colonial heteropatriarchal order (Arvin et al. 2013; Fornssler et al. 2018). The catalyst for this study was not one moment or conversation. Rather, it was informed by the first author's experiences while living in Saskatchewan, working at a reproductive choice organization in which colonial narratives continued to shape reproductive healthcare funding and programming. At this time, and since, McKenzie also engaged in activism alongside Indigenous community leaders to fight reproductive injustices (e.g., the colonial child welfare system and violence against Indigenous women and girls). Informed by these experiences, NYSHN's work, and other Indigenous reproductive justice literature, the first author instigated conversations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, friends, and mentors about this potential work. These conversations explored whether it would be useful to community for the first author to facilitate a study about Indigenous women's conceptualizations of reproductive justice and reproductive experiences. Buttressed by these generative discussions and support for this project's concept, the first author initiated this three-phase collaborative, action-oriented study, guided by an Ojibway Elder (co-author Elder Betty McKenna), and informed by Indigenous Storytelling and post-critical ethnography (Kovach 2009; Lather 2007). This project's data gathering methods in Phase One and Two included a series of study conversations (research circles, individual interviews, and research meetings) between Elder Betty McKenna, McKenzie, local *kokums* (a Cree word that translates to the English word "grandmother"), and collaborators. McKenzie led the analysis drawing on thematic and Indigenous Storytelling approaches, with collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna contributing throughout. We also collaboratively determined how to share knowledge through academic and community outputs to prompt change.

Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Ethics

In Phase One, the first author drew on existing relationships to engage with others with professional and community experience related to reproductive (in)justice(s), sharing study information and inviting potential collaborators to participate via email. We use the term collaborators rather than study participants to make clear how collaborators' roles differ from those of participants in much research. Twelve collaborators were involved in Phase One of the project and participated in open-ended one-to-one interviews. In Phase Two, McKenzie and Phase One collaborators focused on involving Indigenous women with personal experience related to reproductive and sexual (in)justice(s) through our relational networks as well as organizations who provide services related to reproductive (in)justice(s), particularly to women whose reproductive experiences are stigmatized or silenced (e.g., women with HIV/AIDS and Two-Spirit, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans women). In particular, we shared information about the study through community events, as well as email and poster communications. Potential collaborators contacted McKenzie to learn more about the study so they could determine whether they wanted to be involved. Twenty additional collaborators joined the study, with five participating in research circles led by *kokums*, and all twenty participated in open-ended one-to-one interviews (Kovach 2009). Collaborators from Phase One and Phase Two also participated in individual and group meetings focused on the analysis of study conversations and knowledge-mobilization activities. Twenty-nine of these thirty-two women identified as Indigenous, many identified as First Nations (predominantly Cree), and some identified as Métis. Rather than relying on the colonial heteropatriarchal system of gender/sex, we involved a diverse group of collaborators, including Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people who also identified with the category "women." Collaborators brought diverse educational, advocacy, professional and lived experiences related to sexual health, sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking, doula and midwifery, HIV, harm-reduction and substance use, family support and outreach, the child welfare system, the justice system, and Two-Spirit people's rights and services.

At the beginning of research circles and individual interviews, the first author shared commonly accepted principles of reproductive justice from Ross (2006), that is, a person's ability to determine: 1) whether or not to have children, 2) whether or not to continue or end pregnancies, 3) how and where they give birth, and 4) their ability to raise the children they do have in safe and healthy ways, free from violence. These research circles and interviews focused on the relevance of reproductive justice to Indigenous women's lives, the meaning of reproductive justice, the forces that constrain or foster reproductive justice, and how Indigenous women assert their rights to reproductive justice within these constraining contexts.

In order to make meaning from study conversations (research circles, interviews, and meetings), we used an adapted thematic approach that was inductive and deductive (Braun and Clarke 2006) and grounded in postcritical ethnography (Lather 2007). We also condensed women's stories through an Indigenous Storytelling lens (Kovach 2009). McKenzie led the analysis, of which she presented an early iteration to collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna, who then shared their insights and input, which McKenzie incorporated into the analysis. Elder Betty McKenna, collaborators, and McKenzie's supervisory committee also determined whether they wanted to be co-authors/co-presenters of study products, and if so, contributed to the thoughtwork of these products, to writing and revision. For instance, co-authors of this article include Elder Betty McKenna, collaborators (Poitras, McArthur, and Opikokew Wajuntah) and graduate co-supervisors (Nason and Varcoe) who contributed to the writing of this article. The bios of all co-authors are included here.

Our study was guided by Indigenous ethical principles (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; Walters et al. 2009) as defined and activated within this study. Our project followed both Indigenous and university cultural protocols for informed consent and sharing knowledge. In particular, after potential collaborators reviewed study consent forms, they gave oral or written consent to participating in the study. Then, in alignment with Kovach's (2009) research, McKenzie presented potential collaborators with tobacco and asked them to become involved with the study and share their experiences and knowledge. In recognition of some Métis people's preference for the gift of tea when asked to share stories, knowledge, or teachings (Campbell 2012 as cited by LaVallee et al. 2016, 171), tea was also offered. Our study was reviewed and approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Informed, ongoing consent was practiced throughout our analysis and knowledge-sharing processes. As McKenzie and co-authors prepared study products, we shared any quotes and condensed stories with collaborators for their review and consent prior to publication. Collaborators chose whether they wanted to be identified by their pseudonym or name with these quotations and in the study more broadly. In addition, we circulated drafts of study products to all collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna for their review prior to publication/presentation. See McKenzie et al. (2022) for an in-depth description of study approach, methods, including policy analysis and environmental scan methods not drawn on in this article's analysis, and ethics.

Findings

The study conversations amplified and further developed a distinct Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework, which emphasizes the interconnections among the rights to determine gender and sexual identities, reproductive experiences, birthing and living conditions, and relationships with community, culture, and land. Self-determination was identified as the central tenet of Indigenous women's reproductive and sexual justice. This framework resonates with Indigenous reproductive justice writing and community work (see for instance, Wiebe and Konsmo 2014; Women's Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2016), and thus, we are not claiming it is new. Rather, we recognize this framework amplifies and builds upon community conversations and work, as well as Indigenous scholarship in this area. In McKenzie et. al. (forthcoming), we further articulate this framework.

Grounded in this framework, our analysis below illustrates the material-discursive practices Indigenous women have engaged to build self-determining pathways; through these practices, collaborators resist colonial heteropatriarchal influences on reproductive decisions and the regulation of Indigenous motherhood, as well as draw on available services to sustain them and their families and build community—strategies that strengthen their capacities for resistance. Collaborators' engagement with Indigenous teachings and cultural practices emphasized the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge as they discussed the influence of colonial processes on Indigenous teachings and practices and re-envisioned teachings to be inclusive of women, girls, and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people.

Resisting Colonial Heteropatriarchal Influences on Reproductive Decision-Making

Collaborators described the pervasiveness of colonial heteropatriarchal structures and narratives within health and social services, and wider society in these three Prairie cities, and their impact on their families' and communities' norms and values. These structures and narratives operate through various mechanisms, including the imposition of heteropatriarchal norms, the perpetuation of stereotypes about Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people, the erasure of gender- and sexually-diverse people's histories, and the disruption of reproductive health and midwifery knowledge. Alongside discussions about these harms, collaborators shared how they resisted colonial influences on their reproductive decision-making.

During this study's fieldwork there were burgeoning conversations across Saskatchewan and Canada about forced and coerced sterilization after Indigenous women shared stories with journalists about healthcare and social service providers who had pressured them, or even forced them, to have a tubal ligation after giving birth at the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon (Boyer and Bartlett 2017; Adam 2015). In study conversations, collaborators shared stories about service providers subjecting them, and other Indigenous women, to reproductive coercion in relation to various technologies and procedures, and ways they resisted and navigated these coercive contexts. For instance, Jasmond spoke about how she navigated pressure from multiple healthcare providers to agree to end or prevent future pregnancies (i.e. abortion, tubal ligation procedures, and long-term contraceptives). Jasmond explained how she accessed support from an Aboriginal Liaison Worker and her sister, both of whom spoke to these doctors and helped Jasmond advocate for her rights. She also rejected care informed by colonial narratives. In particular, after an encounter with her gynecologist during which he evoked colonial and racist stereotypes to justify prescribing Jasmond an intrauterine device (IUD), she did not fill the prescription for the IUD, and avoided further dialogue with the doctor about it.

Indigenous women did not equate their resistance to colonial influences on their reproductive decision-making with deciding to become pregnant or to continue a pregnancy despite pressure to end it; indeed, this was only one expression. Collaborators also highlighted access to abortion services and various challenges that constrain this access, such as stigma from EuroWestern society at large and from individual practitioners, as well as limited abortion services. Indeed, Saskatoon is considered one of the most difficult urban locations in Canada to access an abortion, as surgical terminations are only provided in hospital and up until thirteen weeks and six days gestation (Saskatchewan Health Authority 2019). Further, these decisions may contradict, or align with, individual women's traditional teachings, as Melissa explained:

There's stigma in general in society, but there is also, as far as traditional teachings go, I've had women say, "Oh, I'm not a murderer," or "Creator gave me this gift and I can't give that gift back" and so depending on which Elder that they talk to, and which ceremonial family that they have, those beliefs are different and lots of women feel very strongly. If their grandma tells them, "You can't do that, you can't have an abortion" or "You can't give your baby up for adoption," that woman will listen to their grandma even if that woman is really struggling. So, that's a really tough subject, some women won't even talk about it.

Collaborators from diverse Nations, with varied familial and geographical histories, and ceremonial teachings, expressed that colonial ideologies have influenced Indigenous teachings. For instance, Tanya shared that while at least some Indigenous communities have techniques to control pregnancy and reproduction, the imposition of colonial norms "definitely played a huge role in the loss of teachings around Indigenous women's moontime and medicines and things like that, as well as Indigenous midwives and the medicalization of childbirth." Colonial forces disrupted Indigenous reproductive health teachings in various ways including the criminalization of First Nations ceremonies through the *Indian Act* until 1951, the imposition of Christian anti-choice teachings through residential schools, and EuroWestern biomedical approaches to reproduction and childbirth (Kelm 1998; Lawford and Giles 2013). As such, Indigenous women who terminate pregnancies as part of building their reproductive futures may face stigma and pressure from various forces within their community and family, as well as from EuroWestern society. They also navigate limited and fragmented systems of care and support. Collaborators spoke about these complex conditions despite the pervasive stigma and silence about abortion.

Resisting Settler-Colonial Regulation of Indigenous Motherhood

Collaborators emphasized that service providers' pressure on Indigenous women to make specific reproductive decisions—whether to prevent, continue, or end pregnancies—is intertwined with settler-colonial regulation of Indigenous motherhood, imposed through colonial institutions and policy, which continues to shape community narratives and relations. Collaborator Autumn openly resisted such regulation in her statement, "For me to have a safe home [for me and my children], I am going to do what I feel is right whether the public or the community says, 'This is how it should be.'" This resonated with other discussions about the pressure collaborators have faced to comply with colonial ideals of motherhood and womanhood, and how they have navigated these pressures.

State and religious forces have imposed patriarchal ideals on First Nations communities through institutions such as residential schools as well as through legislation such as the *Indian Act*. The latter regulates First Nations people's identities as status Indians, which determines access to reserve lands, resources (such as hunting, fishing, and trapping rights), education, and funding. For over a hundred years, this legislation did so according to heteropatriarchal family formations. Between 1869 and 1985, the *Indian Act* stripped First Nations women of their status if they married non-status men. The children of these First Nations women were also denied status under the *Indian Act* and further, under the *Indian Act*, the status of all children was determined by their biological father (Lawrence 2003; Lawrence 2004; Cannon 1998). First Nations women have engaged various national and international bodies to challenge the heteropatriarchal provisions of the *Indian Act*, including Charter challenges, challenges to Canadian courts, to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Gabriel 2011; Lawrence 2004). While changes to the *Indian Act* in 1985 and in 2011 aimed to address sexism propagated by the *Indian Act*, the effects continue to be felt in families and communities. Collaborators spoke about this Act, its con-

tinuing effects, and how they and other First Nations women resist and navigate them. One collaborator, Laverne, said that by the time she had finished her master's thesis, which analyzed the impacts of this legislation, she concluded that "one of the most revolutionary acts as a woman is just to have a baby and to hell with laws, policies, and legal crap."

Various government systems intrude into Indigenous women's and families' lives and demand their engagement. A particularly germane example is the ongoing forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system in these two provinces (McMillan 2020; Bennett 2009). Collaborators spoke about strategies they used to navigate the child welfare system's intrusion into their families, to maintain or regain custody of their children, and to support other families in these efforts; such strategies ranged from complying with demands from child welfare workers to advocating for themselves and others. For instance, Tatanka Ska Win spoke about herself and other Indigenous mothers becoming "super moms, super advocates" to protect themselves against the threat of child welfare and justice system involvement, which entailed learning laws and their rights within these systems to advocate for themselves and their family members. While the power of pushing back against these narratives and institutions was emphasized, collaborators also spoke about individuals fearing retaliation if and/or when they did. For instance, Laverne described how people working in government services often punish women who do not engage with systems and services the "right way," denying them access to other critical supports unless they fully comply with the system.

Drawing on Government and Community-Based Services and Building Community

Alongside discussions about resisting and navigating intrusion from government forces, collaborators also discussed utilizing government systems and community-based services to meet their families' needs. Drawing on these resources was a pathway for collaborators to build both their reproductive lives and their capacities for resistance to colonial domination. Jaqueline explained: "Community-based organizations and the grassroots have been really vital to providing these services that we need for access to culture, access to food, rides, and transportation, and Elders and family/children centres." Indeed, through drawing on existing government and community-based services, Indigenous women mitigate the harms of colonial erosion of knowledge- and resource-sharing practices, as well as the harms of inadequate government services (e.g., social assistance, child welfare services, education, and housing) and the high cost of living.

This resistance of colonial influences and navigation of systems imposes a heavy mental and emotional burden, one that may be mitigated by building community relations. Chris stated that while Indigenous women often experience a lot of isolation,

[Eventually many also access] the community as a sisterhood, the women, the aunties, you know and really reaching out and that is powerful and real and happening...and it is done outside of policy and government and funding. I have seen young women learn how to navigate health benefits through INAC [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada]...I have seen young women get pregnant so that they can start the life that they want and leave a way they were raised that isn't what they want and, because they have educated themselves, they have become empowered and they want to change a cycle that has been set on them. So, that is one avenue that they will access to become independent and start their own life. I have seen young women, and again back to the community—it is going back to the teachings that they know are inherent and they have been taught, but may not have had an opportunity to practice so they start accessing and asking for what they need.

Chris pushed back against the epidemiological discursive constructions of young pregnancy and parenting as inherently problematic, constructions that have been mobilized to justify harmful sexual and reproductive health interventions and programming. In this quote, she revealed colonial epidemiological narratives as a narrow representation of people's complex realities and related that Indigenous women's pregnancies can be pathways through which many build community relations and disrupt harmful intergenerational patterns. Chris and other collaborators spoke about the value of building community relations and knowledge-sharing, and how doing so fostered Indigenous women's resistance.

Engaging and Sharing Indigenous Practices and Teachings

Collaborators described engaging Indigenous knowledge and practices emanating from specific Nation-based traditions and shared understandings across Nations. Collaborators from various Nations discussed engaging with the same, and similar, culturally-grounded and culturally-safe programming, and organizing and attending ceremonies together. They identified as powerful the opportunities to spend time with Indigenous women from other Nations who had shared experiences navigating colonial systems and participating in cultural practices. Their framing of First Nations teachings suggests that most found more similarities across First Nations teachings than between First Nations and EuroWestern beliefs and values. In the context of insufficient resources for Indigenous-specific programming in the three cities, programming often needed to be designed to meet the needs of Indigenous women from diverse Nations. As Laverne explained, “We never get a chance to actually sit around and negotiate [our differences in values and beliefs] amongst ourselves, because we are so busy trying to just have a place so that there is assistance [for Indigenous women in Winnipeg].” Laverne’s quote gestures to how increasing resources for Indigenous-led organizations would likely foster these critical conversations and Nation-specific programming.

Collaborators described engaging with Indigenous teachings and practices in diverse ways. For instance, Jennifer shared how they prepared for the arrival of their adoptive daughter prior to, and shortly after, their daughter was born:

I took a traditional parenting program and I remember asking the Elder, “What can I do to help with that bonding since I am not carrying?” and she told me about going as soon as I was able to after she was born to have a blanket and wrap that over us and sort of simulate being in the womb and hold her. Then, just send her as much love or talk with her about whatever I wanted to in order to make that connection and so I did that. I brought one of my ceremonial blankets and when we were in the hospital, I did that. I talked with her and told her about her birth mom and her birth dad and about all of this love that was waiting for her. It was beautiful because I felt really connected to her. I prayed lots before she was born and went to ceremony in sweat lodges and felt that was my way to connect with her as well.

Jennifer’s quote illustrates that cultural practices are activated in dynamic, relational, and complex ways. Similarly, Tanya reflected that engaging in cultural practices promotes further growth within and across communities: “I think that the more that there is space made for people to come together and talk about these things, it becomes less isolating and there are more opportunities to...share the knowledge or teach the knowledge.” Collaborators discussed various sites where this knowledge-sharing has taken place, including community-based organizations and community and family settings. Several collaborators specifically spoke about the importance of NYSHN, particularly their work on consent, violence on Indigenous lands, and violence on Indigenous bodies, and their collaboration with the National Council of Indigenous Midwives.

As alluded to above, collaborators discussed the diversity of teachings among families, ceremonial families, communities, and Nations about reproductive decision-making and how these teachings can shape what decisions are more (or less) possible. They also spoke about challenges to seeking teachings and finding the right teachers. In particular, Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse collaborators and collaborators who live at a distance from their Nation’s traditional territory and are seeking Nation-specific teachings spoke about challenges and difficulties in this regard. Melissa discussed this challenge and her work to recover knowledge about pregnancy, labour, and birth:

Yes, there are a lot of women’s ceremonies and family ceremonies and things like that, but when it comes to cultural knowledge around pregnancy, labour and birth and things like that, that is kind of lacking in general. I have a lot of people e-mailing me or messaging me and saying, “Who can I talk to about this?” and “Have you heard about this teaching and that?” I have a little bit of knowledge; it feels like a tiny bit compared to what an Elder would have...My dad’s side is from Arizona and I connected with a really good friend who is a midwife down there, so I have been learning a lot about that side of me.

She added that colonial forces have purposefully undermined the intergenerational transmission of this knowledge through violence at residential and boarding schools, forced removal of women from communities for childbirth as well as related patterns of colonial violence, all of which are part of the ongoing genocidal effort by the Canadian state to undermine Indigenous women's and communities' self-determination.

Re-Envisioning Indigenous Teachings and Interrogating Teachings for Colonial Influences

Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people respond to these constraining conditions by seeking out affirming teachers, recovering and re-envisioning knowledge, and interrogating Indigenous teachings for the influence of colonial processes. For instance, Paulete described how she plans to share her Dakota teachings with her future children in ways that will support her children's gender and sexual identities:

I want my child to feel that they are in a safe space to grow the way that they are intended to be, because I grew up with someone telling me exactly how I was supposed to be and I ended up not being any of them, but very active and traditional in my role. I understood that these were done with good intentions but that is not something that I am going to enforce in my own family with my own children.

Our discussions about collaborators re-envisioning traditions to be more inclusive of girls, women and Two-spirit and trans and gender-diverse people aligns with writing by Indigenous feminist and Two-Spirit scholars, which explicitly and implicitly argue for, and demonstrate, such inclusivity (Wilson 2009; Simpson 2017; Starblanket 2024).

Collaborators also critiqued the influence of colonial values on what some people share as traditional teachings. Jennifer explained how they respond:

Often, I will question, when I am told, "This is a traditional teaching," I will ask, "Where did that come from? Is that really a traditional teaching or is that based on a Christian teaching that has been mixed into it? Is that a colonized teaching? So, are those cultural teachings actually there to help women? Or, sometimes those cultural teachings can actually be more harmful.

Jennifer's approach to these conversations resonates with Joyce Green's (2007) assertion that it is necessary to analyze how power, including colonial and patriarchal power, may flow through traditional practices, and how they impact Indigenous women, men, and children. There are varied ways that colonial influences manifest in how traditional teachings and practices are articulated and activated. For instance, Laverne critiqued the homogenization of Indigenous women's roles within many Indigenous communities: "There is way more around women's roles. Women are not just mothers; they are aunties, and those different roles we played in the community. They can accept us as mothers, but they can't accept the other roles we played." Collaborators discussed how limiting the value of women to their reproductive capacity and related qualities reflects colonial processes and has, in fact, been produced by them. This resonates with Anderson's (2010) critique of masculine-dominated Indigenous political organizations' conflation of Indigenous womanhood with motherhood as well as the way in which these organizations marginalize social issues (read: women's and children's issues) within politics.

Colonial government forces have long perpetuated static and essentialized notions of Indigenous cultures and gender, a pattern that reverberates through Laverne's discussion of funding organizations' recent expectations about culturally-relevant programming:

I've been worried a little about what is considered cultural, because our funders, they are all focused on culture ... so we're not doing the beading class ... but what we are focusing on is responding, so if our women become politically outspoken, that's who we are, that's our culture. We have always been historically political leaders and speakers, because we did care for our community. That is our culture. So, how am I going to frame that to the funder to understand that yes, we are responding and we are responding in a cultural way, because this is who we are.

Laverne's resistance of government funders' essentialized notions of culture is crucial work, as is the collaborators' questioning of how tradition is framed by Indigenous community members. This work is one of the ways Indigenous women are asserting their roles as political leaders.

Discussion

Our analysis of urban Indigenous women's material-discursive practices highlighted that through these practices, collaborators resist colonial influences on reproductive decision-making and motherhood, draw on government and community-based services, as well as build community, which assists women in meeting their needs and strengthens their capacities for resistance. This resonates with Indigenous feminist scholarship that highlights how Indigenous women in the Prairies have used government services and settler economies to meet their needs and advance their sociopolitical aims at different points in history (Anderson 2011; Nickel 2018). Informed by this analysis, our study's public-facing products both sought to intervene in colonial systems and processes (e.g., a policy brief addressing coercive sterilization) and provided information Indigenous women can draw upon to navigate health and social systems (e.g., fact sheets about abortion care, the child and welfare system, and patient's rights to informed consent).

While collaborators did not use the terms Indigenous refusal or resurgence, their stories, insights, and discursive shifts resonate with these terms as articulated by Indigenous feminist scholars such as Audra Simpson (2007) and Leanne Betasamoske Simpson (2017)—in particular, the latter's articulation of refusal as refusing colonial heteropatriarchy and generating alternative lifeways. Collaborators refused epidemiological deficit-based framings and constructions of culture as homogenous and static through discursive moves and collaborative processes. As we have demonstrated, collaborators' everyday work of building reproductive and sexual self-determination contributes to the resurgence of Indigenous teachings and practices, including re-envisioning teachings so they are inclusive of girls, women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people, and interrogating teachings and practices for the influence of colonial processes.

In alignment with the distinct Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework developed through this study, collaborators' everyday practices of building reproductive and sexual self-determination cross various contexts and various aspects of their reproductive lives; these aspects include: resisting reproductive coercion and abortion stigma, advocating to regain custody of their children from the child welfare system, and re-envisioning cultural practices and teachings so they are inclusive of their (future) children. Collaborators' engagement with these various strategies and contexts was shaped by their cultural teachings, access to resources, experiential, professional, and educational knowledge, as well as local and sociopolitical contexts.

Both this framework and collaborators' everyday material-discursive practices emphasize the relational aspects of reproductive and sexual self-determination, which disrupts EuroWestern liberal narratives that isolate reproduction from other aspects of people's lives (Silliman et. al. 2004). Collaborators' insights resonate with work that foregrounds the relationship between individual and communities' self-determination (Simpson 2017; Kuokkanen 2019). Specific to Kuokkanen's work, our analysis highlights the non-legislative work Indigenous women engage to build self-determining pathways. We amplify this everyday work with the aim of fostering a broader view of ongoing resistance, as well as illuminating future potential sites for resistance and movement-building.

Conclusion

Grounded in this analysis, we call for others to recognize and foreground the leadership of Indigenous women in our collective struggle against right-wing populism (read: the most recent articulation of settler-colonialism). As we agitate for legislation and policies to protect and, in certain locations, re-establish people's right to safe, accessible abortion care, and as we struggle for other legislative and policy changes that will address ongoing reproductive violence (e.g. transforming child welfare and protecting 2SLGBTQ+ people's rights), we must also work to radically transform Canada's political and economic relations, including the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Stote 2017; Stote 2025). It is crucial that we engage in everyday practices that disrupt oppressive, hierarchical relations. As part of this movement, it is integral for settler organizations use creative techniques to redistribute resources to Indigenous-led organizations, networks and communities to foster Indigenous people's leadership in building just reproductive relations.

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Panties and Diapers

by Rachel Huh

After weeks indoors, H and I enjoy the sticky heat of summer with boba teas in hand. We sip icy tapioca as sweat trickles down our necks, trace our too-weak pulses. H—dizzy from their months-long uterine bleeding—and I—dizzy from the dysfunction of my autonomic nervous system—are slow to meander a lap around their sun-drenched neighbourhood. Despite the scarcity with which our good days align, how stringently we otherwise budget our vitality, together we are wanderers, explorers, aimless stranded friends. Sometimes we rant, rage at being sick, at being poor, at how often the two go together. And more often, we laugh at being sick, at being poor, at our lingering vanities un-tempered by sick bodies.

I eulogize my once-perky breasts defeated by gravity after so few occasions for bras. Where others may have offered reassurance, H exclaims down a busy Kensington Ave: *breasts akimbo!*

Some turn our way to the sound of H's full-throated cackle. Most look away when they see us limping, our shuffling steps shaky with exhaustion. I laugh and squish my boobs together then let them fall back in wayward unison.

Together, we are queer irreverence—a quality borne of bodies rarely considered sacred. For some, a body queer and a body sick are hardly different after all. It frees us, this failure to fit, to treat the world with as little reverence as we have come to expect in return. And though it never stops hurting, H shows me how to laugh.

We are giggling when H stops abruptly on the sidewalk. With wide-eyed panic, they ask me for a ride to the grocery store.

*

The air conditioning of Walmart's bleach bright aisles is stark against our skin; it cools the sweat trapped in all our creases. Though H is twelve years older than me, they are faster to speed-walk across the linoleum towards a blue-vested employee. By the time I catch up with my sore-hipped, aching-kneed hobble, I only catch the end of their question.

Period panties? The employee directs us to a section in the back corner of the pharmaceutical aisles, behind the condoms and vitamins, to the left of the cartoon band-aids.

Amidst the pharmaceuticals, we are met with Walmart's finest selection of adult diapers. A green plastic package adorned with the overbright grin of a diapered white man stares back at us. His thumb is raised in exaggerated eagerness. I remember the weeks when my inflamed knees struggled to seat me on the toilet; when my thumb was too splinted to raise, my jaw too stiff to smile.

Shit! H's good humour falters. *This isn't what I meant.*

The cotton of my romper clings as we wade through the rows of protein powders and cough medicine. The air conditioning only makes me more aware that I have sweat too many fluids, that I should really sit before passing out. But squatting on the linoleum would only make another employee party to our panty foraging. I'm tempted to ask H why they can't use the diapers, but they are punctuating their search with a breathy: *shit, shit, shit, shit, shit*.

When we wander far enough into the cosmetics aisle, past the shampoos and conditioners and next to nail polish and pumice stones, we finally find a singular brand of period panties. A disembodied waist, panty-donned and slim, mark the box as a beauty product. H grabs them and runs to the bathroom after telling me to meet them back at my car.

I promise not to make a crime scene in your car, they assume me sitting on my passenger seat.

I've always wanted to star in an HBO special, I say back, starting the engine.

True crime: hot and diapered. H rolls down the window.

Your chalk outline would have such a nice ass with the diaper.

They bark with laughter.

When they invite me in to their apartment, they don't apologize for the mess or feign efforts to tidy. I don't troubleshoot ways to staunch their bleeding nor pretend I could help them any more than the panties, that I'm not seconds away from collapsing myself. When I lay on the hardwood to save myself the head injury, they join me without comment. I listen as they tell me about how much it hurts.

H has spent the last year ping ponged between gynecologists and general practitioners in search of some way to stop bleeding. Tomorrow, they would hazard misgendering to call their latest gynecologist, brave the bureaucratic gauntlet of waitlists, appointments, and insurance coverage. Tomorrow, H would find the strength to fight the bloodletting. But today, they make do with the period panties they know won't hold long but long enough. It's funny, how urgent bleeding is until it comes from someone's uterus.

Backs against the hardwood, we stretch our arms above our faces to aid our circulation and admire the matching tattoos that dot our fingers—stars on calloused knuckles. Together, we are a constellation of sore joints and tired hands. I wish I could know the story our stars are trying to tell us.

I tell H that I'm going back to work; that after a year unemployed, my sick body's needs are being superseded by my bank account's. Disability payments aren't enough to live without working and only pay when you can't live to work. I tell them that I don't know what it was all for. Wasn't there some deeper moral I should be extracting from being so sick, some righteous fury that spurs me on despite my tireless fatigue? They ask me if I'm ready though we both know it doesn't matter.

Of course not.

But poor?

But poor.

How much do HBO specials pay? H asks. *I'd wear a diaper for you.*

But we just found the panties, I say with feigned outrage. H stretches the waistband of their green cotton shorts and looks down as if to check that their new period panties have not transformed into diapers.

I know they aren't different, they confess.

But you weren't ready. I get it. I think of when my mother had to help me install a bench in my shower stall before she, thirty years my senior, needed one herself. Diapers, shower benches, splints, disability benefits—all chapters of becoming and being sick. Sometimes we still need to pretend that our lives had not diverged so far from who we were pre-covid, that we could still recognize ourselves through the grief. Sometimes, panties are a lifeline.

Actually, I'd wear a diaper now, H says. But only if I can bedazzle it. I want a cunty diaper.

I erupt with laughter. I've lost months to memory-blurring pain and on a rare day of lucidity, they have made me period panty co-conspirator. H reminds me that the universe doesn't mete out suffering like some cosmic pedagogue. With H it's simple: it sucks to be sick. And sometimes it's funny.

Rachel Huh is a creative writer and PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. Her scholarly and creative work explore themes of chronic illness, grief, Asian diasporic identity, and gothic fiction. Rachel's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Central Avenue Poetry Prize Anthology* and *Tint Journal*.

ghost girls never sleep

by Olivia Landry

we're going to have to be the ones to do it

We decorate baseball bats in our spare time. There is news in town of men breaking into women's homes at night, and the police aren't doing anything about it. We keep the baseball bats by our beds. We hold meetings in the library theatre, in circles in the grass, swatting bees and talking about how to keep each other safe. We're going to have to be the ones to do it. We memorize sunset times, watch the days get shorter. We call ourselves a *baseball bat gang*. We screen movies about girls clawing their way through high school, fighting their way out of dystopias. We stay up too late organizing protests and rewriting racist syllabi. Ghost girls never sleep anyway.

ghost girls take a night off

It's February 14th and the art show is over. We stayed sober all night and held on to each other's elbows, fiercely. We watched all our favourite professors eating fancy cheese from the sidelines, trying not to run into anyone we were hoping to avoid. You take our picture in the reflection of an art piece of framed buttons that say *party without party* in different languages. We really do look like ghosts in it, like we were never really there. It was the only picture on my desktop for a year, just you, me, and the party buttons.

It's dark and I walk you home in my black flats, quickly becoming absolutely soaked with snow. I didn't bring my hammer to the art gallery so I have nothing up my sleeve to protect me on my solo walk home. You live all the way up King Street, and tonight, for once, I feel like nothing can touch us. There's no reason for this, I've just decided it: tonight is not a night to be afraid.

I'm cold and giddy and years from now, I'll wish I could live this night over and over again. Just to relive the feeling of sharing a world with you, sharing a night where nothing went wrong, where no one got hurt, where we really knew, *we can be anything*.

most girls know

I used to send you pictures of sunsets whenever I saw them. The summer before I left town, I walked down to my old elementary school with a lump in my throat every night, sitting on the bleachers and watching the sun go down to Conan Gray's *Idle Town*. We didn't talk much that summer, but I knew you loved seeing the sunsets like I did. Sometimes you sent pictures back of sunsets you watched from your bedroom, the window screen obscuring most of the view.

Every day the sun sets earlier than the day before, did you know that? I always know the time off by heart. I spend the entire sunset wondering about when I should leave, worried about the walk home in the dark. Knowing that girls can't have routine, should always stagger things, you never know who might be noticing you. Even still, I can never make myself go home before the sunset is completely over. Every moment of it is beautiful and important and it can't

be stopped. It's stressful to watch something so temporary disappear. I always risk the dark walk home to see every minute of it.

Tonight, the grass is overgrown under my feet. It's one of the most beautiful skies I've ever seen. There's a man with a grey truck in his driveway that watched me walk down here. I've seen him before. He's sitting on his step, and I can see that instead of looking towards the sky, he's watching me. I've already memorized his address, his license plate, it was the first thing I did when I saw him come out of his house. But still, I've made all the mistakes. I walked to a dead-end road at sundown. I made a routine of it. Shouldn't I know better by now? That girl's summer clothes don't have pockets big enough for hammers, knives? Surely this won't be the time I don't make it home. I can picture the comments on news articles, the whispers between neighbours at the grocery store; *really, you'd think she would have known by now, girls aren't meant to go out by themselves at sundown.*

ghost girls never sleep

Ghost girls are late to class. Ghost girls hate the syllabus, ask for readings that reflect their experiences. Ghost girls ate all the cheese at the art gallery opening. Ghost girls have a rip in their tights. Ghost girls won't stop giggling. Ghost girls stay up too late sending song lyrics back and forth. Ghost girls can't stop crying in the library. Ghost girls keep replacing the bathroom graffiti every time it gets erased. Ghost girls know he's guilty. Ghost girls never sleep, keep baseball bats under their beds, ready, waiting, waiting.

ghost girls know the end

No one believed us. At first, we tried to explain ourselves, we laid down the map of everything that had gone wrong. We pointed to the posters in the hallway, the policies, the way bad men just kept getting shuffled around instead of thrown out. Eventually we had to stop trying. Instead, we started noticing other ghost girls crying in the library. We caught them rewriting the graffiti in the bathroom. Heard them yelling at someone who catcalled them from the sidewalk. Saw them curse and scream until the bad man left the party. *How many of us could there be?*

I used to think if I met one more ghost girl I'd scream. With each new girl, I never did. I didn't have to. All of us ghost girls already knew, there's a last time for everything.

Olivia Landry (she/her) graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Women's and Gender Studies from Mount Allison University (2018) and a Master of Arts in Gender Studies from Queen's University (2019). Since 2019, she has worked across Nova Scotia in the field of sexual and gender-based violence prevention. She has been a volunteer leader for Girl Guides of Canada for many years and is proud to support girls in building community and trying new things. She is from Halifax, Nova Scotia, and is grateful to live so close to family, friends, and the ocean.

A Review of *Gold Star* by Emma McKenna

Reviewed by Corinne Gilroy

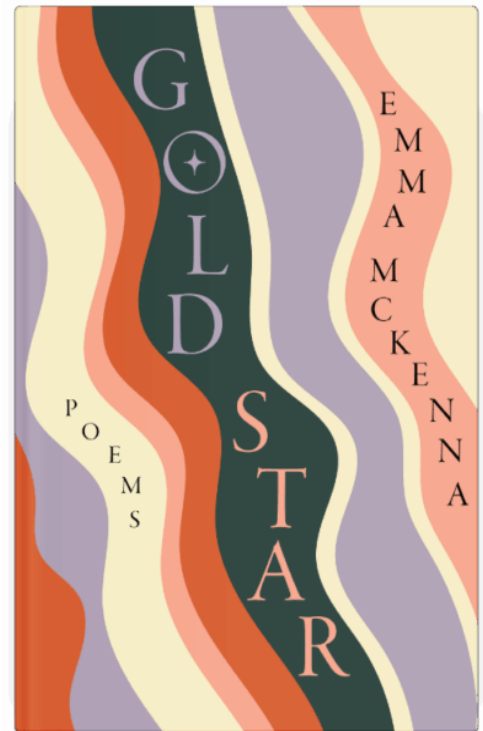
Cover to colophon, Emma McKenna's poetry collection *Gold Star* (Book*hug Press 2026) sent bits of an old documentary film flickering through my mind. But I can't remember what the film was called or where I saw it. All I have are visual impressions and fragments of an interview in voiceover: an elderly woman describes a trip she took in the '40s or '50s to the American southwest, where she explored a canyon that would soon be flooded by a hydroelectric dam. Young and statuesque, she posed nude between the water-carved rock faces while her travelling companion took photographs, immortalizing both her glowing body and the rippled sandstone around her.

What I most wish I could remember from that documentary—what screams out from the gap in my memory—is the desert sky, both day and night, because McKenna's poetry is as celestial as it is geological. It's right there in the title, of course: a metal that doesn't tarnish crossed with an untouchable cosmic engine of heat and light. Concrete constellations skipping across tectonic page gutters. Ethereal lines enjambed with hammer and chisel—"slow down / fracture / self from I / detach" ("Chasing Ivory," 68). Gleaming seams like rivulets. Molten, metamorphic, mutagenic.

McKenna organizes *Gold Star* into "Breech," "Breach," and "Break." The sonic and semantic overlap of these three section titles is a prelude to the body of work itself, where fitting observations and quick lines become "one second split in half" ("Carrying Capacity," 11). "Breech" meditates on early life, bodily emergencies, family transgressions, observations through young eyes that can shift or reframe without even a moment's notice. In "Easter Sunday," for instance, "fathers are outside shooting / hoops my mother gave me" (24); riding the wake of the poem from the previous page ("Gun Metal"), bloodsport becomes beer league; homosocial bonding is suddenly mother/child.

"Breach" introduces a more forthright and independent poetic voice that defiantly wears "the muted gleam of worn / gold" ("Anniversary Dress," 39); a "new / identity beat back" ("Gold Star," 43) that keeps pushing "up against / the bravest bodies" ("Miraculous," 32). Other bodies chafe violently against this autonomy in ascent, but it "find[s] safety in / the overlap [...] an oblivion laugh / like there is nothing / singular about trauma" ("Section 271," 51)—tenuous resilience revealed to be sedimentary layers of "abuse-sick attraction [that] is epigenetic" ("Under Brandenburg Gate," 52).

When "Break" finally arrives, those softly accumulating sediments reappear, metamorphosed by the heat and pressure of time and maturity—"walking forward" ("Mentorship," 67) into colossal decisions like whether to become a parent, but of course "the mind follows its own formula" ("With Child," 73). The geological weightiness of McKenna's words sublimates into something cosmic once again; the poem "Close Your Eyes to Block Out the Sun" (77) casts long, consequential shadows across the page, "structured / with pulleys / and slides and ladders / to hang on to / to hold thoughts to" (77), and the expanse of adult autonomy is "Cauterized in Orbit" (78), "another part to / strangle / choke" ("Neck of the Womb," 80).



Yet *Gold Star* concludes with a brilliant north star—an apogee of peace, resolve, and contentment; “there is joy here, and it is boundless” (“Kindred,” 82) because “you chose” (“And How Would You Like to Spend It?” 83) and no one else chose for you. I initially thought it was the structure, design, and imagery in McKenna’s book that conjured up memories of that documentary about the woman exploring the canyon before it disappeared into floodwaters, but perhaps it is this burst of lightness—of cleaving to the gold seams and orbits we find ourselves following, even if their future is something unknowable.

Corinne Gilroy (she/her) is an editor, writer, and critic who serves on the *Atlantis* editorial board and lives in North End Kjiptuk/Halifax.

Introduction to the 2026 AMI Working Papers

by Emily Fevens and Jennifer Garagan

Authors:

Emily Fevens graduated from Mount Saint Vincent University in May 2026 with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours, majoring in English with a minor in Writing. She has a keen interest in the modernist period (c. 1900–1940)—particularly in Imagist poetry and Cubist painting—which she explored in her Honours thesis. Emily currently works in her hometown as a hotel clerk, where she has the opportunity to meet visitors from around the world. Her goal is to become an editor, and she has worked with *Atlantis* since October 2025 as a copyediting intern, a student in a directed study, and as a copyeditor and editorial assistant. She plans to start freelance editing, eventually get her certification from the Editor's Association of Canada, and hopes to someday work for a publishing house as an editor for book manuscripts.

Jennifer Garagan is a lawyer who advocates for disabled and injured Maritimers in Atlantic Canada. She received both her undergraduate and law degrees from Dalhousie University, graduating from law school in 2009. Jennifer has worked in private practice throughout her legal career, focusing on injury and disability law for well over a decade. She became a partner of the regional firm CLG Injury Law in 2019. She is also appointed to several provincial and federal administrative tribunals, including as the acting chair of the Involuntary Psychiatric Treatment Act Review Board of Nova Scotia. She is the chair of a not-for-profit feminist theatre company, LunaSea, that focuses on the stories of underrepresented genders. Jennifer is currently a part-time graduate student of the Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University, which is another avenue for her to focus on her passions including social justice, access to justice, disability rights (including mental health), and socioeconomic rights. Outside-work, Jennifer enjoys the arts, hiking, and exploring the various corners of our beautiful region with her partner, three children, and their dogs.

The following group of writings, “AMI Working Papers,” is an annual section that presents innovative essays, interviews, and creative writing from speakers hosted by Mount Saint Vincent University’s (MSVU) Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender, and Social Justice (AMI) throughout the current or previous year. Both co-authors of this introduction took a directed study in feminist publishing with *Atlantis* in early 2026, not long after this year’s selection of Working Papers were developed and presented. The Papers—a keynote speech, two interviews, and two poems—include a focus on recentring the voices that are often marked as politically subversive when they challenge “spaces of access and privilege” (Tiffe and Hoffmann 2016, 116) traditionally dominated by the white, male colonial-settler perspective. One of the co-authors of this introduction, Emily Fevens, is a recent graduate with an English degree from MSVU, and she can attest that her area of study continues to be oversaturated with the works of white men who write little about anything outside of their own culture, or with an exoticized lens that Others the non-white subject. She therefore recognizes the radical disruptions that these Papers offer. The pieces also discuss feminist theory, historical and political contexts and modern realities. The other co-author, Jennifer Garagan, is a legal advocate for fair and equal treatment, and welcomes the calls to action within the Papers to address current issues in our sociolegal systems.

As postcolonial literary scholar Gugu Hlongwane argues in her essay, “You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock’: Challenges in the ‘Good Talk’ of Transnational Feminism,” the centring of Western epistemologies in transnational feminism colonizes a movement which by its name demands diversity of experience and inclusion of difference, for transnational feminism examines the “interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relations and experiences in a geopolitical context” (Enns et al. 2020, 11). By drawing on historical figures such as the Combahee River Collective, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Hlongwane asserts that the voices of women in the Black diaspora and Global South have been—and continue to be—necessary and meaningful in the fight against global inequality under colonialism. As Hlongwane points out, the West has attempted to marginalize and silence the voices of women of colour; her essay thus turns the critical “eye” onto feminism and asks whether feminist scholars have perpetuated the same kind of systemic violence the discipline seeks to dismantle.

One of the interview pieces in this issue is between Tracey Raney, a professor of politics and public administration at Toronto Metropolitan University, and Adebola Esther Osegboun, the 2024 Fellow of the AMI at MSVU. The interview draws, in part, on Raney’s 2024 co-edited book *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*. In providing a detailed discussion of what gender-based violence is and where it is found, Raney demonstrates that it is multi-faceted and pervasive in many contexts. In addition to identifying and defining gender-based violence, the interview highlights positive measures already in place to address the issue. Importantly, it also centres stories of resilience by women who experienced such violence while working in Canadian politics. The interview includes a discussion of the gaps in policies intended to address this violence and provides an impetus for further measures to be taken.

The second interview in the AMI Working Papers is between Tawany Aguiar, *Atlantis’s* media coordinator, and the co-editors of *Unmasking Academia*, Dr. Irene Shankar and Dr. Corinne L. Mason of Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Dr. Shankar is a professor in the Department of English, Languages, and Cultures, and Dr. Mason is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, Media, and Film. The interview provides a contemporary discussion of structural inequalities within post-secondary institutions, including how those have developed during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. The discussion is rooted in the works of such feminist theorists as Sarah Ahmed, Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde and uses these frameworks to ground further theoretical insights into the current state of (in)equality within academia. This includes discussions that provide practical resources to advocate for change in the context of specific institutional practices. In so doing, the interviewees point out that changemaking can be a disproportionate burden on historically disadvantaged communities, thereby perpetrating further inequality. The piece provides both a call to action for individuals in academia, as well as the opportunity for further reflection and analysis.

The final selection in the Working Papers are two poems by Asha Abdosh, the 2025 Halifax Youth Poet Laureate. The canonization of literature—in the Western “literary culture of categorization, factionalism, and exclusion” (Parmar 2018, 1)—helps publishers to define literature “against a white male ‘norm’” (Parmar 2018, 1) so as to clearly delineate that which is Other. Abdosh’s poetry is a distinct act of resistance, for it makes manifest the voice of a young, Ethiopian woman and her inner world. In “Over It,” she grapples with and astutely articulates the downward spiral of overthinking; in “Proof,” she uses a patchwork of mathematics puns to articulate the speaker’s utter devotion to their partner. Abdosh pushes back against the poetic canon which insists upon the expression of the white, male perspective. Instead, her poetry is politically charged in its insistence upon the significance of the inner lives of women of colour.

This year’s AMI Working Papers represent a growing body of metafeminist scholarship that shift the voice in political and academic discussions. They also promote critical reflections on the ways that feminist praxis—as it pertains to politics, the university, and the literary canon—has proven unjust and inequitable to women of colour. These Papers provide a space for alternative, intersectional methodologies and inclusive practices that advocate for and reflect the complexity of gender and lived experiences.

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“You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock”: Challenges in the “Good Talk” of Transnational Feminism

by Gugu Hlongwane

Abstract: In this article, I investigate the complexities and challenges of a Black feminist praxis that seeks to decenter Western epistemologies by interrogating definitions of transnational feminism as a radical theoretical framework. Ultimately, by privileging situated knowledges, the paper underscores the value of dialogue or “good talk” between women as they engage in anti-global movements. The article is concerned with what a discerning transnational feminism might look like in the midst of systemic racism, patriarchal normativity, and gender imperialism.

Keywords: Black feminist praxis; transnational; anti-global; Western epistemology; hetero-sexism; situated knowledges; dialogue

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'examine les complexités et les défis d'une praxis féministe noire qui cherche à décentrer les épistémologies occidentales en remettant en question les définitions du féminisme transnational en tant que cadre théorique radical. En définitive, en accordant une place privilégiée aux savoirs situés, l'article souligne la valeur du dialogue ou du « bon dialogue » entre les femmes lorsqu'elles s'engagent dans des mouvements antimondialisation. L'article s'intéresse à ce que pourrait être un féminisme transnational éclairé au cœur du racisme systémique, de la normativité patriarcale et de l'impérialisme de genre.

Mots clés : praxis féministe noire; transnational; antimondialisation; épistémologie occidentale; hétérosexisme; savoirs situés; dialogue

Author: Gugu Hlongwane is an Associate Professor of English (postcolonial literatures) at Saint Mary's University, Halifax. Her collection, *Electric Fences and Other Stories*, was published by Mawenzi House in 2016. She is currently working on a novel as well as a second collection of short stories. Her articles appear in *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, *African Identities*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Alternation*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, *Postcolonial Text*, and the *Journal of Literary Studies*.

Historically, feminists in the Global North have dictated the theoretical terms of engagement to women in both the Black diaspora and the Global South, thus threatening the erasure of important contributions. The relentlessness of structural racism has required a fierce, uncompromising stance, particularly from Black women, who have worked and continue to work tirelessly to decenter Western epistemologies. Activists and intellectuals in the Global North are beginning to understand how gender struggles cannot repeat the imperialism of the early waves of feminism. All struggles are necessarily political, intersectional, international, and local; to understand this is to celebrate the agency and dignity of women worldwide.

The Combahee River Collective, founded in Boston in 1974, insisted on the *particular* experiences of Black women, arguing that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [their] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1977). Close to a century before the founding of the Combahee River Collective, suffragist and civil rights leader Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, at the “Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women” in 1895, assumed a hopeful tone in a toxic America of “limited opportunities” (Ruffin 2007). Ruffin’s “good talk,” in her words, “teach[es] an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women” (Ruffin 2007). The “good talk,” as opposed to “noisy protestations of what [Black people] were ... not,” attempts to crush anti-Black racism for the benefit “of women and men, for the benefit of all humanity” (Ruffin 2007). Yet, as Ruffin contended, “year after year southern women [in America] have protested against the admission of colored women into any national organization on the ground of ... [the] immorality of these women...” (Ruffin 2007). Vacillating between assertions of American and coloured identities, Ruffin insists that “we are not drawing the color line,” even as this line is necessarily drawn: the “good talk,” as Ruffin puts it, is occurring “among ourselves.” Gloria T. Hull et al. (1982) boldly encapsulated the realities of Black women’s historical exclusions and subsequent responses in the title of the landmark feminist anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Today, the struggle continues “to create transformative theories and practices that dismantle racism and its interlocking effects on hetero/sexism, classism, imperialism and other oppressive ideologies” (Hobson 2016, 2).

Taking her cues from so-called Third World feminism, decolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty attempts a “good talk” premised on the understanding that the “connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up in particular cultural and historical contexts” (Mohanty 1988, 62). Writing along the same lines as Mohanty, Carol Boyce Davies invites an engagement of “African cultures on their own terms, as distinct from Western cultural impositions” (Boyce Davies 2015, 2), while simultaneously encouraging “women’s peace organizations and ... international connections between women” (Boyce Davies 2015, 20). Just as Mohanty—and likely Davies—accepts her subject position in the US academy today as being “inside” rather than “under” the Western gaze (Mohanty 2003, 221), Robin Maynard is cognizant of how, in the Global North, “transnational Black feminist subjects [are] challenge[d] ... to view how Black diaspora is continually made and remade due to the ongoing relationship between Western imperialism and dislocation impacting the Caribbean, Africa, and the rest of the global South” (Maynard 2019). Ultimately, for Maynard, “the fact of Western empire presents an ethical demand ... an outright refusal to be the (Black) handmaidens of imperialism, a rejection of the false promises of ‘Black capitalism’ as freedom, and a rejection of the policies of Western nation-states that continually unmake the lives of Black subjects across the global south” (Maynard 2019).

The “good talk” between women, therefore, requires honesty from transnational feminists in the Global North about how the world is actually designed. The reign of terror of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, popularly known as ICE, evidences the long tentacles of structural racism. That ICE resides in five Canadian cities (see Ali 2026) should give us pause about the narrative of “the Good Canadian.”

Dialogue has been the lifeline of Black and Brown women who, sometimes in “noisy protestations,” (Ruffin 2007) have used whatever material is at their disposal, including hairstyles, to communicate crucial messages. Anneeth Kaur Hundle et al. (2019) importantly ask the question, “What is the *Transnational* in Transnational Feminist Research?” The answer necessitates an acknowledgement of the inequities in women’s access to power and “the efforts required to work against the grain of the existing forms of canonical scholarship or heteropatriarchal nationalisms in research practice and scholarship.... The researcher’s positionality, as a tenet of feminist methodologies, is even more salient when working transnationally or adopting a transnational lens. The researcher’s social location vis-à-vis the subjects of feminist research raises questions relating to mobility, access and privilege, which are sometimes veiled by a transnational focus” (Hundle, Szeman, and Hoare 2019, 5).

There is a level of defiance from transnational feminists like Maynard and Hundle et al. that is very encouraging for women’s global autonomy. These feminists aren’t nervous about the conversations that must be had if the cycle of

fundamentalism and authoritarianism is to end. A discerning transnational feminism, therefore, should be far removed from mainstream feminism that, for Mikki Kendall, ignores “basic needs as a feminist issue. Food and security and access to quality education, safe neighbourhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues” (Kendall 2020, xv).

Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat, who proposes the reclamation of Third World feminism as theoretical framework, foregrounds what is at stake in the very process of such a reclaiming. Arat contests “the erasure” of Third World feminism “and the repackaging of this feminist theory—which is informed by Third World women’s experiences, articulated by them, and grounded in the history and realities of some dominated geographies—as ‘transnational feminism’” (Arat 2025, 176). Arat is convinced that “if we do not point to the geographical origin of knowledge production but instead disperse the ownership under ‘transnational feminism,’ we disregard an already anonymous act of theory building to the extent of erasing the collective authorship as a geography ... and [thus] commit epistemic injustice against Third World women” (Arat 2025, 176).

High wire “theory building” can be a cutthroat, even toxic and divisive undertaking, but it need not be. When Chikwenye Ogunyemi, for instance, “arrived at the term ‘womanism’ independently” (Ogunyemi 1985, 72) of Alice Walker (1983, xi-xii), there were no “noisy proclamations” (Ruffin 2007) of “epistemic injustice” (Arat 2025). Ultimately, the fruits of the feminist struggle have yielded results in both public and private spheres, though there is still much ground to cover in bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, economic freedom and safety from violence.

What is exciting about theory—or scholarship in general—is the opportunity not only to yearn but to trouble the knowledge under construction. Not all voices are immediately heard; many sound louder because of the position and power of microphones. A discerning transnational feminism, then, has to be one that, according to Mohanty, “acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real—and that feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division (Mohanty 2003, 2).

Rajna Kothari similarly regards a robust transnational feminism as one that must be distanced from “the modernist, competitive and ‘catching up’ orientation of the first generation of feminists [and] western conservationists for whom ‘the wretched of the earth,’ fast multiplying and making demands on the resource pool of the planet, are the source of environmental degradation, who they would like to exclude from access to natural resources which are, in fact, being far more rapaciously depleted by... the modern ‘development project’ than by the poor and the deprived” (Kothari 1989, ix).

The narrative of a lagging “Third World” is perpetuated by so-called radical thinkers who are too idle to venture beyond existing stereotypes. It seems easier to lead with the hackneyed—and unequivocally racist—perceptions of Africa, for instance, than with examples of African vibrancy and self-sufficiency that Chimamanda Adichie lists in her iconic Ted talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie 2009).

A thriving transnational feminism should embrace both the “good talk” as well as “the mourning in our knowledges for what our words leave behind” (Romanyshyn 2007, 6). The notion that the terminology “Global South” offers a more neutral alternative to “Third World” evidences Adichie’s “single story.” Wealth and poverty are not determined by geography, nor are innovation and leadership. In fact, Mohanty observes how, “in the United States, women’s movements have become increasingly conservative, and much radical, antiracist feminist activism occurs outside the rubric of such movements” (Mohanty 2003, 221). Furthermore, she notes that “because social movements are crucial sites for the construction of knowledge, communities, and identities, it is very important for feminists to direct themselves toward them. The antiglobalization movements of the last five years have proven that one does not have to be a multinational corporation, controller of financial capital, or transnational governing institution to cross national borders. These movements form an important site for examining the construction of transborder democratic citizenship (Mohanty 2003, 248).

This means, for Mohanty, that “feminist activist teachers must struggle with themselves and each other to open the world with all its complexity to their students. Given the new multi-ethnic racial student bodies, teachers must also learn from their students. The differences and borders of each of our identities connect us to each other, more than they sever (Mohanty 2003, 250-251). This is precisely what the Canadian government sadly miscalculates in its draconian, anti-immigration Bill C-12, which, rather than supposedly strengthen Canada’s borders, robs classrooms of diversity, and escalates risk for female refugees in particular.

Black women, as Audre Lorde’s “sister outsider,” are in an unenviable position, “distrust[ing] everything in themselves” and each other (Lorde 1984, 102) while confronting the stinging effects of heteropatriarchal ideologies, trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, and many other social ills. Using a Maoist mountain metaphor, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, for instance, counts six mountains on the African woman’s back, one of which is the African woman herself, “shackled” as she is by negative self-perceptions and “centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 36). The harsh reality of African women’s lives belies the romantic mother trope employed by nationalist poets like Leopold Senghor: “The African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years,” Senghor (1970) argues. As exhausted as African women are from the misrepresentations and erasures, they stubbornly fight for freedom *on their own terms*.

The voices of women from the Global South have always been essential and loud. On August 9, 1956, twenty thousand South African women across racial lines descended upon the Union Buildings in Pretoria for a “good talk” with the then-Prime Minister Hans Strijdom. At this march, the women submitted a petition against the racist apartheid legislation, “Pass Laws,” which controlled Black people’s freedom of movement. “*Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo*,” the women protested in isiZulu, a battle cry which translates, “You strike a woman, you strike a rock.” The official end of apartheid or racial segregation in 1994 is owed to the activist labour of South African women like these.

There was no “good [political] talk” allowed in apartheid South Africa, though that “talk” flourished anyway. Speaking one’s mind invited the wrath of the state which brutally incarcerated and killed children; South Africa was a giant prison for Black South Africans denied the right to vote, move, love, write, organize and strike. Women like Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini could pen autobiographies precisely because of the foundation of active citizenship laid by the women who, long before 1956, marched against Pass Laws in 1913, as well as the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), that, in a milestone moment of 1954, drafted and adopted the Women’s Charter. Despite these remarkable strides, Black women in this part of the world have continued to be maligned. There is, of course, the devastating case of Saartjie, also known as Sara Baartman, a victim of sexual trafficking; prior to her death, Baartman was forced into “freak shows” across Europe; after her death, two centuries ago, Baartman’s brain and sexual organs were pickled and put on display at a Paris museum until 1974. There is also the icon of the apartheid struggle, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was the apartheid government’s demonized killjoy. She has also been the favourite scapegoat of misogynistic Black journalists like Mondli Makhanya. In his article titled “We Must Not Want to Be Winnie” (2018), Makhanya mockingly describes Madikizela-Mandela as a “wayward” woman who was “nowhere to be found” when her husband, Nelson Mandela, was liberated in 1990. “When she was eventually found,” Makhanya argues, “she was in a not-so-nice location, in not-so-good company and in a not-so-good state of mind,” thus delaying her husband’s “walk out of those gates” (Makhanya 2018). While Makhanya does acknowledge Madikizela-Mandela as “the primary voice of the anti-apartheid forces ... a pillar of strength” who “did not succumb to harassment, imprisonment and torture [but] just got stronger and more defiant,” (Makhanya 2018) there is no effort at all to humanize her for her flaws on the occasion of her passing in 2018.

Just as the Black Panther Movement relegated Black women in America to the fringes of the liberation struggle, South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement was similarly chauvinistic and exclusionary. However, an honest, “good talk” should also expose the fissures between women. Desiree Lewis, writing about “the first South African conference on women and gender (held at the University of Natal in 1991),” (Lewis 1993, 535) observes how “black [South African] women were denied a voice both because of the preponderance of white academics and because of insidious ways in which the tone of the gathering and the orientation of most papers and discussions stressed black wo-

men's passivity and the role of 'enlightened' (white middle-class) feminism in their salvation" (Lewis 1993, 537). An opportunity for meaningful dialogue between women "became a self-glorifying monologue in which constructs of black (and especially black working-class) women merely bolstered the ruling group's sense of authority—blatantly revealed in the logo on delegates' folders: A tiny-headed, naked, burdened, bent-over Other, 'present' only as object for scrutiny by the self-defining, theorizing subject.... Balancing precariously on one leg, head poised in an attitude of appeal, her arms plaintively outstretched as she grips something enigmatically 'ethnic,' this constructive black woman begs her deliverance (Lewis 1993, 537).

Black women in South Africa have certainly been "burdened," but they have never been "tiny-headed" nor defeated, as Lewis contests above.

Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman* (1985), exemplifies bold action in a debilitating environment that legally classified Black women as minors. Kuzwayo, a social worker and activist, puts the South African apartheid government on trial (see Hlongwane 1995) as she also fights an abusive husband she later divorces. Her refusal to "wash ... dirty linen in public" (Kuzwayo 1985, 140), is quite strategic. Kuzwayo exposes her husband's "violence, arrogance, meanness and downright selfishness" (Kuzwayo 1985, 127) by the very act of publishing her autobiography. But, as a so-called minor under South Africa's racist and sexist laws, she has to seek her son's permission to travel to London. Ultimately, Kuzwayo crosses borders in her negotiation of both textual and physical spaces. In her autobiography, Kuzwayo pays tribute to "the many, many black women, old and young, who emerged uncorrupted regardless of the obstacles which blocked their way ... who have made both humble and outstanding marks in education, industry, commerce, social commitments, trade, sport, and in day-to-day family life (Kuzwayo 1985, 38). Kuzwayo's grit escapes Carmela J. Garritano, who argues that the autobiography:

Reveals its own textuality as it slips beneath its author's control. It is a text vitiated by contradictions and intersections. Kuzwayo seems to struggle between mythologizing a precolonial, rural, and pagan South African past and admonishing the backwardness of the remnants of such a past, between supporting the tenets of Christianity and recognizing Christianity's complicity in apartheid, between praising the power of community and extolling the virtues of individuality, and finally between defining women who act like men as subjects and, on the other hand, relegating women to the position of objects. (Garritano 1997, 63)

That Kuzwayo writes at all is a triumph, the contradictions above revealing of a woman erased as a "person" in the eyes of the law.

Nadine Gordimer, in the autobiography's preface, dismisses Kuzwayo as "not [being] a writer," though "she has the memory and the gift of unselfconscious expression that enable her to tell her story as no-one else could" (Gordimer 1985, xi). Whereas Gordimer expects an "exotically revealing" and "simple" narrative (Gordimer 1985, xi-xii), Lewis Nkosi challenges these elitist and patronizing positions, arguing that "black writing has always existed in a limbo of nearly complete disablement which makes it impossible to speak about it in the same breath as white South African literature" (Nkosi 1994, 39). Apartheid was a crime against humanity, hardly a policy of "good neighborliness" as apartheid architect and Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966) characterized it (Verwoerd n.d.). Apartheid's inherent hatred is also on full display in the vitriolic question, "What is the use of teaching the Bantu [Black] child mathematics when he cannot use it into practice?" (UNESCO). Based on the universal pronoun employed above, Verwoerd, here, imagines Black schools, no matter how ill-equipped and dysfunctional, as exclusively male domains.

In order to survive, Black women have had to advocate for themselves, continuously recalculating and reevaluating their brutal realities. Like Kuzwayo, Emma Mashinini, Secretary of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa, launched a literary strike against the apartheid government (see Hlongwane 1995), recruiting local and international audiences in her autobiography *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989). Mashinini not only writes against the grain, but also maneuvers around the bombs placed at union headquarters by the *actual* terrorists, the South African government. Both Kuzwayo and Mashinini were imprisoned for their political activism:

Kuzwayo was detained for five months in 1976, and Mashinini's incarceration in 1981 included almost six months in solitary confinement.

It was *The Women's Press* in London that provided outlets for Kuzwayo and Mashinini's "talk." As Courtney L. Thompson asserts:

The resistance of African women activists to state power also had international ramifications. The delineations of struggle expressed in their narratives enhance our understanding of the formative role that African women assumed as actors in struggles for social justice that reached beyond the borders of their nations. In an effort to combat exclusion from the political, economic, and social sectors, African women activists contested practices and legislation designed to subordinate them and undermine their interests; their resistance to subordination and the deprivation of their civil rights reflect their efforts to coalesce and empower themselves. Given the international backdrop, these actions accentuated the ways in which the struggles that blacks confronted in African nations were linked to broader diasporic struggles for human rights in other parts of the world. (Thompson 2018, 38)

Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga, nonetheless describes the challenges of writing "while black and female" (Dangarembga 2022, 64) as akin to using words to "raise the blade of the guillotine, reach for the dismembered parts, and rejoin them to the rest of [her] being, while the monster of empire practised through patriarchy snaps at [her] heels" (Dangarembga 2022, 64). These "snaps" have kept Black women on the run as "existential refugees" (Dangarembga 2022, 3) even with feminist allyship.

There is an assumption, perhaps even an expectation, that transnationalism will take "a postcolonial trajectory, and a North-South axis of geopolitical orientation" (Hundle, Szeman and Hoare 2019, 6). The reality is that, in many instances, Black women in the Global South have served as beacons of knowledge and safety for each other. After all, it was neighbouring African countries that sheltered exiled South African freedom fighters during apartheid, which is why the recent and ongoing xenophobic attacks against Africans from outside South Africa have been particularly distressing.

All struggles have their fault lines, instances when the "good talk" deteriorates to "trash talk" such as when Ogundipe indicts Nigerian men who abandon their families in Nigeria for Black South African women: women who are disparaged as promiscuous, gun-toting, man-stealers, the only upstanding Black South African woman of note being Kuzwayo. Ogundipe-Leslie's transnational feminist work remains vital despite these glitches, her book title *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994) stressing the value of *re-creation*. South African feminist, Pumla Gqola (2013), in prioritizing re-creation, writes: "As real as the policing of women's bodies is in South Africa, and the world, it is possible for women to think of themselves—of ourselves—differently. It is important that a critique of power not end with reaction, but that it goes further to imagine something new, more exciting, more pleasurable. Picture what we can *create* if we dare give ourselves permission to imagine freely (Gqola 2013, 2)."

But survival mode need not invite Helena Andrews' "Bitch" as "the New Black." Celebrating another woman's pain, as Andrews does, even in a "sadistic" moment (Andrews 2010, 96), is a low but human struggle. Lorde observes how "women have not developed tools for facing anger constructively" (Lorde 1984, 130). As a result, that anger ends up misdirected at Black women who "are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger" (Lorde 1984, 145). We have to find better channels to ease generational trauma and fragilities.

Ogundipe urges us to continue the "good talk" as long as "the black indigenous African [remains] the international 'dirty secret'... left out of world discourses and disqualified from speaking for themselves or from being recognised in the gathering of the world's peoples as minds and agents of culture and history" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 2). Black women, globally speaking, have always refused to be "dirty secrets," never muting their volume especially in oppressive times.

Boyce Davies reiterates Ogundipe's point about the "tendency in Western academic contexts, borne of U.S. and European hegemony, to assume that what is said in Euro- American universities is *only what has been said* or *only what matters*. As well, the ways that research is conducted, the subject positions and locations of those conducting the research, and the types of questions engaged are often set, in the West" (Boyce Davies 1994, xi). There is actually an embarrassment of riches outside of established canons; the entire Global South is talking and writing stories for themselves and for the greater good.

South African women's voices of resistance reverberated around the world when president Jacob Zuma was acquitted of rape in 2006, a case Gqola (2016) interrogates in her book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Feminist work is daily work, Mbali Mazibuko reminds us, the work occurring "in the street[s] and on the web ... it can be explicit or implicit ... it can entail revolutionary violence, classroom politicking" (Mazibuko 2020). Moreover, Mazibuko argues that, in a climate of white privilege, "the university is not at all the pot of gold at the end of the [South Africa] rainbow nation." Instead, the university works against "gender non-conforming, non-binary... poor students... thinkers [and] women." Yet optimism must remain. Lauren Berlant argues that "because optimism is ambitious, at any moment... feel[ing] like anything, including nothing" (Berlant 2011, 2), we must accept the possibility that "any action of making a claim on the present involves bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it" (Berlant 2011, 263). Women know enough about bruising as well as the attachments that must be maintained, at all costs, for the sake of the coming generations. In South Africa, the tradition of fighting and talking has been laid by the matriarchs, whose record, to borrow Gordimer's patronizing language, is neither "simple" nor "unsubconscious" (Gordimer 1985, xi-xii).

When South African women marched in 1956, they chanted the aforementioned slogan which, in full, translates to, "You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will die." In her chapter, "The Fetishization of Fierce," Mikki Kendall observed how "the term *fierce* ... carries its own highly specialised baggage" (Kendall 2020, 127). In other words, the price of that fierceness, for women in particular, needs greater attention (Kendall 2020, 132). What were the costs for the Combahee River Collective, named after the June 1863 Combahee River Raid, and Harriet Tubman, the woman at the helm of it? What were the costs of being sturdy as rocks for Madikizela-Mandela, Kuzwayo, and Mashinini?

The South African women's slogan is telling, nonetheless, coming as it does from Africa, "the cradle of humankind," the site of beginnings. The continent of Africa is also the bastion of unspeakable thefts and deaths. The South African woman's slogan, then, elevates all women as keepers of culture. The antagonization of women, whether by others or by themselves, risks the death of culture not only in South Africa but around the world.

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The Importance of Gender-Based Violence in Politics: An Interview with Tracey Raney

by Tracey Raney and Adebola Esther Osegboun

Abstract: Gender-based violence in politics (GBV-P) is undoubtedly a serious issue globally, and it remains both under-researched and under-addressed. This interview seeks to shed further light on the issue and contribute to greater awareness by engaging with the work and insights of Professor Tracey Raney, a leading scholar on GBV-P. Drawing from her extensive research, including her 2024 co-edited book *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*, the discussion draws attention to this serious threat to democracy. The interview offers readers an opportunity to understand the motive, forms, and impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) in political spaces. It also emphasizes that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to addressing this issue; rather, effective responses must be context-specific and attentive to the different political levels and lived experiences of those affected. Also in this conversation, Professor Raney discusses the nature and prevalence of GBV in Canadian politics, as well as how intersecting identities—particularly gender, race, and sexual orientation—shape the forms of violence experienced by women and gender-diverse political actors. She also reflects on the role of social media and mainstream media in these harmful gendered narratives, as well as examining the existing policy responses to GBV-P and their gaps. Finally, the interview reveals the resilience and agency of women navigating political spaces despite these challenges, while emphasizing that there is still much work to do in order to fully understand and address GBV-P. Professor Raney calls for collective action and decolonial, intersectional strategies to meaningfully confront this issue. Readers can expect a critical and engaging exploration of GBV-P and the possible pathways toward change.

Keywords: Canadian politics; gender-based violence; women’s political participation

Résumé : La violence fondée sur le genre en politique (VFG-P) constitue indéniablement un grave problème à l’échelle mondiale et demeure un phénomène à la fois peu étudié et insuffisamment pris en compte. Cette entrevue vise à approfondir la compréhension de cette question et à contribuer à une meilleure sensibilisation en s’intéressant aux travaux et aux réflexions de la professeure Tracey Raney, chercheuse de premier plan dans le domaine de la VFG-P. S’appuyant sur ses nombreuses recherches, notamment sur son ouvrage codirigé en 2024, *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*, la discussion attire l’attention sur cette grave menace pour la démocratie. L’entrevue permet aux lecteur-trice-s de mieux comprendre les motivations, les formes et les répercussions de la violence fondée sur le genre (VFG) dans les espaces politiques. Elle souligne également qu’il n’existe pas de solution universelle pour s’attaquer à ce problème; les interventions efficaces doivent plutôt être adaptées au contexte et tenir compte des différents paliers politiques ainsi que des expériences vécues des personnes touchées. Au cours de cette conversation, la professeure Raney aborde également la nature et la prévalence de la VFG dans la politique canadienne, ainsi que la manière dont les identités intersectionnelles, notamment le genre, la race et l’orientation sexuelle, façonnent les formes de violence vécues par les femmes et les personnes de diverses identités de genre qui œuvrent en politique. Elle réfléchit également au rôle des médias sociaux et des médias traditionnels dans la diffusion de ces récits genrés préjudiciables, tout en examinant les mesures prises actuellement pour lutter contre la VFG-P et leurs lacunes. Enfin, l’entrevue met en lumière la résilience et la capacité d’agir des femmes qui évoluent dans les espaces politiques malgré ces difficultés. Elle souligne notamment qu’il reste encore beaucoup à faire pour comprendre pleinement la VFG-P et y remédier. La professeure Raney appelle à une action collective et à des stratégies décoloniales et intersectionnelles afin de s’attaquer véritablement à cette question. Les lecteur-trice-s peuvent s’attendre à une analyse critique et stimulante de la VFG-P ainsi que des pistes possibles de changement.

Mots clés : politique canadienne; violence fondée sur le genre; participation politique des femmes

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Adebola Esther Osegboun: Could you tell us about your recent research on gender-based violence in politics (GBV-P)?

Tracey Raney: My research seeks to examine GBV-P in order to provide evidence-based solutions on how to address it. In 2024, I co-edited a volume with Cheryl Collier (University of Windsor) on this topic, *Gender-based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*. The goal of this book is to draw attention to this serious threat to democracy and to offer new concepts and measures in the study of this problem. In the book, we define GBV-P as “harmful actions that are directed at an individual because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender and which are designed to discourage or restrict them from being active in informal (e.g., movement, advocacy, online) or formal (e.g., elections, political parties, legislatures) political spaces” (Raney and Collier 2024, 7).

Across all the chapters, the authors in the volume tackle this issue in different spaces, including on social media; in traditional media coverage and political cartoons; in municipal, provincial, and federal politics; and in Indigenous political spaces. Each chapter makes the case for an intersectional approach to understanding violence and harassment in the political sphere.

Our hope is that this book opens the door to deeper explorations of how gender, gender identity and expression, race, religion, sexual orientation, and other axes of marginalization all impact experiences of violence in the political sphere. There isn't a “one size fits all” solution to address it, and we need multiple strategies to tackle it. We also wanted the book to be read by a wide audience, including academics, students, decision-makers, policymakers, women's movement activists and members of the public. The last chapter in the book, for example, includes practical solutions that emerge from the research conducted by the authors in the book.

While I was conducting research for this book project, a number of survivors came forward to the mainstream media to share their experiences of violence in municipal politics in my home province of Ontario.¹ In one of the more egre-

gious cases, Ottawa's municipal Integrity Commissioner found that over multiple years, one of the city's longest serving city councillors had harassed and bullied a number of women staff members, yet he was able to remain in his seat. At that time, most of my research had focused on the House of Commons, the Senate, or in the provinces, but I hadn't yet considered the municipal level of government. What I learned from hearing about these women's experiences is that solutions that might work in federal or provincial politics might not fit at the municipal level. As "creatures" of the provinces, municipalities have different ethical frameworks and in most municipalities across the country, political parties don't exist. Given the lack of research on gendered violence in Canadian municipal politics, I initiated a new research agenda that delves into this issue with recently co-authored, open-access publications on public opinion of councillor-perpetrated sexual violence and on policy solutions to address this problem in Ontario's municipalities.

Currently, I am working on a project with Toronto Metropolitan University Politics and Governance student Parmida Khanchi, where we are engaged in a cross-jurisdictional analysis of how other provinces have tackled violence and harassment in city halls across the country. In a separate yet related program of research, I'm writing a book that examines how legislative workplaces can be made more inclusive in Canada. Once published, this book will be part of a series that addresses issues related to political leadership and trust in Canada.

AEO: What is the nature and prevalence of GBV in Canadian politics?

TR: GBV can take different forms. In her book, *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Mona Lena Krook identifies different types of violence designed to subjugate women political actors because of their gender and render them invisible. These include physical (e.g. shoving, beating, slapping, killing), psychological (e.g., death threats, rape threats, intimidation, bullying, threats against family members), sexual (e.g. non-consensual touching or kissing, groping, rape, attempted rape), economic (e.g. property destruction, theft, threats to terminate employment or to withdraw financial support), and semiotic or "symbolic" (e.g. using words, images, or body language) (Krook 2020).

In Canada, GBV-P is directed at any actor who participates in the political sphere, including politicians, political and legislative staffers, party officials and volunteers, women's movement actors, human rights advocates, and political journalists. Women with intersecting identities often experience the most harassment and violence, particularly those who are Indigenous, Black, or racially minoritized. This violence takes the form of groping, sexual harassment and assault, as well as sexist, racist, and homophobic threats and non-consensual image-based sexual violence online. Indigenous women leaders face these harms with particular intensity. To provide one example, in the fall of 2025 two First Nations women cabinet ministers, Nahanni Fontaine and Bernadette Smith, were targeted by multiple acts of arson and vandalism at their campaign offices. Although police have not publicly identified a motive, the fact that both women were the first Indigenous women appointed to Manitoba's cabinet strongly suggests that the attacks were not random. Instead, they point to the intersecting dynamics of misogyny and anti-Indigenous racism that continue to shape political life in Canada. These recent examples are reminders of how embedded colonial structures have long worked to silence, punish, and exclude Indigenous women from positions of power and how they continue to operate today.

AEO: Can you tell us how gender influences the forms of violence women are exposed to? And, in your view, which forms of GBV most significantly harm women's political participation?

TR: Research by Bardall et al. (2020) lays out a useful framework to understand how and when political violence is gendered. They suggest that violence can be gendered in its *motive* (when perpetrators use violence to preserve patriarchal control in politics), in its *form* (when gender roles and tropes differentially shape men's and women's experiences of violence) and in its *impact* (the subjective meaning-making processes that occur as different audiences react to political violence). This framework allows us to determine when violence is being directed at a woman political actor versus violence that is directed at a political actor *due to their gender, gender identity or gendered expression*.

All forms of GBV-P harm women's political participation and more broadly, the democratic process. When violence is directed at political actors because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation, its purpose is to silence their voice and punish them for encroaching on a space where they do not belong, with the ultimate goal of pushing them out of positions of power. When gendered violence occurs in public spaces, whether at community events or on social media, it sends a broader message about who is considered acceptable in politics. Such violence acts as a tool to reinforce politics as a space dominated by hegemonic masculinity by suggesting that anyone who challenges the traditional image of politics as the domain of white, cisgender, heterosexual men risks facing similar attacks if they seek to participate or remain in political life.

AEO: In today's digital age, social media plays a significant role in circulating GBV in political spaces. What can you say about this?

TR: Social media plays a central role in how gendered political violence is produced and circulated. When online violence is directed at women political leaders, it impacts not only its immediate target, but also the staff who often oversee politicians' social media accounts, their family members who see it, and all of their followers. The practice of rage-farming, where online creators intentionally create and post inflammatory and/or discriminatory content in order to maximize viewer engagement, is one example of alarming activity online. A clear example of this behaviour occurred in 2022, when former Minister Chrystia Freeland was verbally accosted by a man while entering a small elevator with her all-woman staff team. This incident was filmed and subsequently shared across multiple social media platforms, reaching a wide audience. While the misogynistic attack targeted Freeland personally, its purpose was to signal to the public that Minister Freeland isn't "fit" for office, thereby generating more clicks from the accoster's audience in the process. The danger of rage-baiting is that, as misogyny becomes more normalized, those who wish to spread hate online must work harder and harder to capture the attention they crave.

The constant threat of online violence has led some women politicians to self-censor by limiting how they engage with the public on social media or to withdraw from these platforms entirely. When political actors are forced to censor themselves or withdraw from social media, it constitutes a form of political exclusion and another barrier to inclusive, equitable democratic politics. It also diminishes the wider democratic process as there are fewer voices, interests, and issues being circulated in the virtual public square.

Unfortunately, many of the most popular social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and X) lack adequate policies and safeguards to prevent the spread of extremist content, misogyny, and misogynoir. Decision-makers urgently need to regulate these platforms to ensure that free expression is protected for everyone and not just for those who use it to promote hatred. Allowing hate to circulate unchecked online poses a serious threat to social cohesion and to the health of democratic societies. The ongoing European Union, French and British-led investigations into Grok (X's AI tool) and its production of sexualized images and videos of women and children demonstrates how government actors can play a role in responding to this global problem. Canadian decision-makers need to act similarly to force social media companies to better safeguard their sites from widespread hate and discrimination. Stronger regulations and more transparency and accountability regarding the use of algorithms and enforceable codes of conduct are urgently needed.

AEO: What are your thoughts about the Canadian mainstream media reports? Do they promote, challenge or ignore incidents of violence against women?

TR: A significant body of research (Wagner & Everitt 2019) demonstrates how traditional news media coverage reinforces hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative stereotypes of leaders in Canada. Gendered mediation frames often focus on the appearance, personality, and personal lives of women leaders rather than on their policies, while signalling that traditionally-coded masculine traits like dominance and competition are indicators of strong leadership. Media coverage of political candidates that reproduces these gendered mediation frames contributes to the marginalization of women and gender-diverse individuals, as it narrows acceptable models of leadership and normalizes hostility against those who fall outside of the traditional norm. At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that several

women journalists have played an important role in exposing sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia in Canadian politics. Many of the stories that document these forms of discrimination in politics have been written by women, some of whom are themselves subjected to racist and misogynistic attacks (The Coalition for Women in Journalism 2022). Diverse representation on news media editorial boards is crucial to telling the real stories of how women leaders are being treated and their strategies in responding to it.

AEO: What policy measures or laws currently exist in Canada to respond to GBV-P? In your view, what gaps persist?

TR: I'd like to start with some of the positive measures that have been taken first, as this is helpful for other jurisdictions (both in Canada and elsewhere) to replicate. One of the strengths of existing policies and rules that seek to address this problem is on the prevention-side of the ledger. The House of Commons, the Senate of Canada, and some of the provincial legislatures all require elected officials and staffers to attend mandatory training on violence and harassment. In 2015, the House of Commons appended a new code of conduct to its standing orders. The Code's purpose is to create an environment in the House that is free of sexual harassment. To achieve this purpose, upon election all MPs are required, in writing, to pledge their commitment to contribute to a sexual harassment-free work environment. Additionally, some legislatures across the country, including the House of Commons, have policies in place that would allow for an independent investigation to take place into an allegation of sexual harassment. These are all positive developments.

At the same time, there are many gaps and loopholes in existing policies. Unlike in the United Kingdom where there is an independent panel that reviews all cases of MP bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct to determine a penalty, in the Canadian House of Commons the decision to sanction a politician who has engaged in sexual harassment is left to a panel of fellow politicians. Moreover, given the current composition of the House of Commons which is comprised of 70% men (most of whom are white), decisions about how and whether to sanction a politician who has engaged in sexual harassment are most likely going to fall to committees comprised of largely white men. The existing rules also don't address the underlying causes of such violence, which is the result of hegemonic masculinity and colonial legacies that preserve the power of white, cisgender men.

Another gap is the lack of specific protections for politicians from harassment or threats, whether online or in public spaces. While Canada's Criminal Code provides some safeguards against criminal harassment for members of the public, there is no standalone law explicitly addressing harassment or violence targeting women politicians. Some Latin American countries, including Bolivia and Mexico, have pioneered such legal measures. In Canada, Quebec is a notable exception: in 2024, the province passed a law imposing fines of up to \$1,500 for anyone who intimidates or harasses a politician and allowing officials to seek injunctions against citizens who issue threats against them. The legislation followed a survey showing that three-quarters of elected municipal officials in Quebec had experienced harassment or intimidation. This law represents an important first step in protecting politicians, and policymakers in other jurisdictions should seriously consider adopting similar measures.

AEO: Even in the face of these various forms of violence, a lot of women continue to engage in politics. What forms of agency have you observed that women use to navigate these challenges?

TR: This is an important question, as it highlights the issue of resilience in the face of violence. One way to address GBV-P is for women to support other women leaders through formal and informal networks. For example, the Halton Elected Representatives (H.E.R) group (comprised of women politicians at the local, provincial, and federal levels from the same region) created a pledge to call out and prevent harassment of women in government. At the federal level, the Canadian Association of Feminist Parliamentarians launched a similar pledge to promote greater civility in politics. These networks demonstrate how women are organizing across party lines to raise awareness of harassment and to protect one another from hostility and toxicity.

Another demonstration of women's resilience in the face of gendered violence is to simply refuse to leave politics. When Manitoba Ministers Fontaine and Smith's constituency offices were targeted by vandalism, they stated that

they would not be pushed out of public office (Hoye 2025). Their courage in the face of anti-Indigenous, gendered violence helps to draw attention to the problem and to demonstrate that these acts of intimidation won't work. Beyond Canada, we are also seeing women who have experienced gendered violence pursue changes through public policy and law. After Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum was publicly groped late last year, the Secretary of Women, Citlalli Hernández, presented a presidential plan intended to combat violence against women (Presidencia de la República 2025). This plan includes easier pathways to report sexual violence and a public awareness campaign intended to prevent violence against women. Using the judicial system, another prominent example is Brigitte Macron's (the French President's wife) cyber-bullying lawsuit which was filed against multiple defendants who were found guilty of spreading false and transphobic claims about her gender and sexuality (Armstrong & Schofield 2026). Other women have used their voice to draw attention to GBV-P. After being on the receiving end of sexist language from a Republican colleague in 2020, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez delivered a powerful speech on the floor of the House of Representatives where she called out the sexist culture of politics (Associated Press 2020). Eight years earlier, former Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard delivered a speech heard around the world on the misogyny she faced being a woman politician (BBC 2022). These women leaders are using their own platforms to raise awareness about this issue.

AEO: It is safe to say that to fully explain and address GBV-P, multiple approaches are needed. What do you think are some of the approaches to best address the problem of GBV in the political space?

TR: There is still much work to do to fully understand and address GBV-P. A crucial step is for researchers and advocates to adopt decolonial approaches that specifically address the lateral violence experienced by Indigenous women leaders. Scholars such as Rebecca Major and Cynthia Stirbys have begun this work, outlining important measures that must be taken (Major and Stirbys 2024). Their work indicates how solutions must be grounded in Indigenous feminist frameworks, recognizing that Indigenous women face compounded violence as members of two historically subordinate groups, based on gender and race. The systemic targeting of Indigenous women continues to shape their experiences in predominantly non-Indigenous political spaces today. Implementing anti-racist policies across institutions, fulfilling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, and acting on the recommendations of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Inquiry are critical steps.

Those who are in power have a responsibility to ensure that online platforms and tools do not perpetuate group-based hate. We also need a strong and vibrant women's movement to prevent the further normalization of violence and hatred toward women. Women's organizations across Canada play a vital role in combating the rampant misogyny in the manosphere, which includes popular podcasts and social media channels viewed by millions globally.

Finally, it is important to encourage people from marginalized communities to run for office: vote for them, contribute time or money to their campaigns, or, ideally, consider running for public office yourself.

Endnotes

1. The use of the term "survivor" is subjective and varies according to how people who are targeted by gendered violence prefer to identify themselves in relation to their experiences. While some people use "survivor," others prefer the terms "victim" or "victim/survivor." [where is this in the text?]

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Two Poems

by Asha Abdosh

Over It

I'm over overthinking
'cause quite frankly it's a waste of time
I'd rather protect this mind of mine
hate when I can't think in a straight line
and all my thoughts bounce around and can't be confined

forgetting how I got here in the first place, simply doesn't feel worth it
'cause when the picture isn't quite so clear
and the pieces don't add up
I fear that my peace
will get lost in the mix,
I fear that my peace
will cease to exist,
I fear that my sanity
will become endangered in favour of the spiral
a simple thought suddenly gone viral

it starts with a simple reflection
over analyzing each moment
overthinking each thought
my mind working overtime, going over what went wrong
and then over again

well, I'm over it
I'm overturning it
I'm overtly returning it:
so instead of being sucked into that hole
I choose to stay whole
and focus on my goals,
I'm protecting my soul
by staying in control,
stress locked away
with no chance of parole

because there's nothing like a mind still as a pond
and your reflections as tranquil as dawn
conflictions scatter like fawn
and as resolution arises
deep breath
Finally.

Proof

I'll give you my attention like an incomplete fraction
the root of our love is undefined
it's something you can only imagine
derived from passion

we might be opposites
but when adjacent to you
it's as if we've stopped time
nothing's comparable
it must be a sign
my missing variable
the stars realign
and suddenly I see

there is no one right angle
seeing both perspectives is integral
because two rights don't make a wrong,
ours converge and a long line headed forward is our destiny
the product of our love is a legacy
endlessly heavenly
and the limit does not exist
an infinite moment of bliss
beyond the real world
because our parallels
brought us together

we beat the statistics
rebuke their logistics
we are nothing intrinsic
can't fit in one bracket
and I might sound insane
but trust, I can back it
because I've done the math

by embracing our difference
considering distance
and instants of resistance
combined with persistence
my inference is
there is no quotient of uncertainty
therefore
it works out so perfectly
I say this earnestly
and honestly nervously
we are destined for eternity.
Q.E.D.

Asha Abdosh was the 2025 Youth Poet Laureate for Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a keynote speaker at *Atlantis'* 2025 conference. She is a writer and poet with Ethiopian roots. Since migrating to Halifax, her identity and lived experience have provided a unique and multifaceted perspective on the world around her. A lens that made it clear that she must dedicate her life to fostering a society where liberation is no longer a fantasy but a reality for all. She has committed her years to uplifting marginalized voices and inspiring meaningful dialogue within local schools by participating in councils and leading student associations. For Asha, poetry is more than an art form—it became a sanctuary, a medium of boundless expression, and a means of building a bridge between personal and collective experiences. Through her words, she aims to forge connections across diverse audiences by not only resonating with those who see their struggle and triumphs reflected in her work, but also by challenging others to consider new perspectives. Ultimately, she strives to create art that educates, inspires and unites.

Unmasking the University: An Interview with Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar

by Tawany Aguiar, Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar

Authors:

Tawany Aguiar is the Media Coordinator and Editorial Assistant at *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*. She is completing a BA in Communication at Mount Saint Vincent University and holds professional credentials in proofreading, translation and language education.

Corinne L. Mason (they/them) is a Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Mount Royal University (Alberta, Canada). Their current research program focuses on the "anti-gender" movement and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ policies and rhetoric in Alberta. Mason is also working on projects that explore the dismantling of EDI and increasing anti-2SLGBTQIA+ sentiments in post-secondary institutions. Mason is the co-founder and co-director of QriTical: queer + trans research centre at Mount Royal University.

Dr. Irene Shankar's scholarship and teaching is embedded within the critical intersections of marginalization and inequality. A Professor of Sociology at Mount Royal University, Dr. Shankar's main areas of research and teaching are Feminist Theories, Sociology of Gender, Critical Race Theory, Qualitative Methodology, and the Sociology of Health and Illness.

Tawany Aguiar, who began her work at *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* as an Editorial Assistant and later became Media Coordinator, speaks with Corinne L. Mason, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, and Irene Shankar, Professor of Sociology, both at Mount Royal University. Mason and Shankar are the co-editors of *Unmasking Academia: Institutional Inequities Laid Bare During COVID-19* (University of Alberta Press, 2025), an edited collection that examines how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified inequities in higher education. Conducted by email, the interview explores institutional power, hidden labour, the contradictory possibilities of academic life and pathways toward structural transformation. Mason and Shankar provided their responses jointly; the responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Tawany Aguiar: Your edited collection challenges the perception of academia as a neutral space of knowledge production. How do you see institutional norms shaping who is visible, who is heard, and who remains marginalized within academic structures?

Corinne L. Mason and Irene Shankar: Black Feminist and Critical Race scholars (such as Ahmed 2021; hooks [1984] 2000; Collins 2014; Puwar 2001) have long pointed out that universities are not neutral spaces. Rather, they are spaces constructed around the needs and lives of somatic norms of who originally occupied these institutions. Although policies and practices have shifted, post-secondary institutions (PSIs) still largely serve those original inhabitants. This extends beyond universities to the broader education system, which is powerfully demonstrated by Carl E. James' contribution to our book. In "We Missed Out on a Lot: The Pandemic, Schooling and Black Youth," James highlights the experiences of Black students in K-12 public education who had to complete their schooling during

the pandemic without adequate support and often had to deal with teachers and administrators who were not culturally conversant. These structural constraints can limit marginalized students' access to higher education. James' analysis shows, importantly, that long before marginalized students "show up" at the university, there is a structural and systemic suppression of learning.

Pressure from Black Lives Matter organising pushed PSIs to respond to racism. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies and practices became visible within PSI institutional mandates and goals. However, public declarations and policy commitments to EDI did not always lead to substantive institutional changes in relation to the structure of the university (University of Alberta 2026). Canadian university leadership continues to privilege white men (Smith and Bray 2019); in 2024, only 2.3% of senior leaders at Canada's universities were Black (MacLatchy and Goel 2024). If everyone has equal access and mobility within these institutions, why are PSIs still run by people who look the same? Questions of visibility and recognition become especially complicated through the performative dimensions of EDI where Indigenous and racially minoritized faculty and students become "the face" of the institution in marketing and communications but continue to experience erasure within the institution.

Beyond leadership, we continue to see the prevailing hierarchy. Some voices and forms of knowledge are affirmed and prioritized, and "others" are often precariously situated and subject to cuts and dismantling due to institutional and political pressures. Sara Ahmed (2021) uses the term "window dressing" to explain how the institution is dressed up for external view and how those dressings simultaneously hide the internal aspects of institutional functioning. Looking at institutional budgets rather than institutional messaging reveals that marginalized faculty and their students remain consistently under supported and directly targeted for removal. A recent example is budget cuts at York University that impacted programs such as Women's and Gender Studies and Indigenous Studies.

TA: You address the often-invisible labour that sustains universities. How do gender, race and precarity intersect in this hidden labour economy?

CLM and IS: Sara Ahmed writes that "the more precarious you are, the more support you need. The more precarious you are, the less support you have" (Ahmed 2017, 238). Within PSIs, Indigenous, racially minoritized, and 2SLGBTQIA+ faculty are more likely to experience institutional barriers and take on additional labour to support students, change policies, and challenge discriminatory institutional practices. Although this work is necessary, it is rarely recognized as legitimate academic labour and seldom receives institutional support or resources. In our collection, Ayesha Miran Akram's chapter, "Critical Reflections of Workload and Labour," explores her experiences navigating graduate school as a Muslim parent during the pandemic. She shows labour intensified through formal committees and working groups that were responding to structural racism, especially during the height of Black Lives Matter organizing in 2020. While formal EDI labour expanded, informal labour also continued. This dual burden disproportionately fell on precariously positioned faculty, including contract instructors and graduate students. Similarly, Sepideh Borzoo, Isabel Fandino and Pallavi Banerjee's chapter, "Struggles of International Graduate Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic," highlights how international students were largely excluded from EDI policies and were affected by the campus closures during the pandemic. Although international students financially sustain universities through high tuition fees, they often remain invisible within institutional support structures. This became even more evident following federal restrictions on international students, which led to budget and staff cuts at universities across the country (McDonald 2024).

Political attacks on EDI have also led many universities to rename or restructure EDI offices (Liddle 2025). As Enakshi Dua discusses in the chapter "Exposed and Exacerbated: The Social and Institutional Conditions Underlying the Years of the Pandemic," the invisibility of gendered and racialized labour has intensified in recent years. EDI work is increasingly being renamed and reorganized to avoid political backlash. In this political climate, where institutions are hesitant to publicly foreground EDI mandates and goals, there is little indication that those performing this labour will receive adequate recognition, support, or resources.

TA: Many scholars describe academia as both a site of empowerment and harm. How do you conceptualize this tension and what does it reveal about institutional power?

CLM and IS: For those of us who do not embody the somatic norm, academia often occupies contradictory roles. Academia allows us to research and teach subjects that matter to us and engage with timely and relevant issues. It provides many of us with tenure, financial security and institutional stability. At the same time, academia remains structured around the somatic norm and therefore continues to exclude many “others” (Ahmed 2010). However, we remain hopeful that critical work on institutions can still lead to meaningful change. Our collection offers several examples of this transformative work.

In the third section of our collection, “A Future Otherwise,” faculty write about the classroom as a site of potential empowerment while holding onto the tension between the possibilities of this space and the harms that too often occur within it. Gabrielle Ellen Weasel Head, in her chapter titled “Resisting Racism Through a Pedagogy of Blackfoot Resilience,” writes about the problem with deficit-model teaching that too often positions Indigenous people as resilient against historical and contemporary harms of white supremacist settler colonialism. By offering an embodied Blackfoot understanding of resilience, Weasel Head explores what a classroom can look and feel like outside of Eurocentric frameworks, one that can be empowering to both faculty and students.

Similarly, Hee-Jung S. Joo, Erin Keating and their student Nardos Omer, in their chapter titled “Abolishing Grades,” position traditional assessments and grading as a harm to learning and a limitation on the potential of the classroom. Focusing on the carceral relationships produced through grading, the authors explore ungrading as a relational practice capable of transforming both classrooms and institutions. Together, these chapters remind us that structural transformation remains possible through rethinking our relationships with institutions and with one another.

TA: In what ways does your work invite readers not only to critique academia, but to imagine structural transformation?

CLM and IS: Meaningful transformation requires a careful and honest assessment of existing institutional conditions. However, as we noted earlier, there is a long genealogy of Black Feminist and Critical Race scholars writing about institutions that hold power in our society and about the changes that are needed. Building on this genealogy, our collection foregrounds voices, forms of knowledge and experiences that are often marginalized or insufficiently acknowledged within academia. Furthermore, while large-scale transformation may or may not occur within our lifetimes, the chapters in this book show the places where institutional changes can be more equitable and inclusive. Two chapters, in particular, provide recommendations for transforming research partnerships with marginalized communities. In her chapter titled “Nobody’s Gonna Talk to You About That: Methodological Considerations in Research with Undocumented Caribbean Care Workers During COVID-19,” Carieta Thomas offers specific recommendations for ethics boards, that, if implemented, would support better research relationships with undocumented communities. By critiquing how ethics boards evaluate research involving vulnerable communities while also proposing community-grounded approaches, the chapter demonstrates how smaller institutional changes can still produce meaningful transformation. Fawziah Rabiah-Mohammed and Leah K. Hamilton’s chapter titled “Community-Engaged Research with Refugee Communities During COVID-19” critiques funding structures, including timelines for grants and expectations of outcomes, by illustrating how community needs and institutional priorities are often misaligned. By questioning how universities define and brand “community-engaged” research while also addressing the realities of this work, the chapter highlights what can be done to create more ethical and equitable future research practices.

TA: For early-career scholars navigating increasingly unstable academic futures, what critical awareness or forms of solidarity feel most urgent today?

CLM and IS: Academia, like every other institution, often rewards silence around inequity and encourages work that enhances institutional reputation. As a result, it can become easy to prioritize institutional image-management over

transformative work. This dynamic often encourages individualism and isolation rather than collective community-building.

Critical scholars (such as hooks [1984] 2000; Lorde 2007) have long cautioned that our ability to do transformative work requires our survival, which in turn is facilitated by social relationships and a community. Patricia Monture's (2010) advice to “find your people” within PSIs remains an essential survival strategy. We need communities that care for one another and affirm realities institutions often deny. We also need collective strength to effectively challenge institutional policies and practices. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, addressing our societal inequities requires “... connection, a coded layering of intimate interconnection and interdependence that creates a complicated algorithmic network of presence, reciprocity, consent and freedom” (Simpson 2017, 185). Community requires moving beyond transactional relationships and consistently showing up for others. However, finding “your people” within neoliberal institutions can be difficult. Too often, alliances are built on expectations of perfection rooted in white supremacy culture (Okun 1999). Social movements are built on relationships and relationships are messy. Organizers like Dean Spade call on us to “hold each other with tenderness and realistic expectations” (Spade 2025).

Our co-authored chapter, “Institutionalized Feminist Loneliness: An Exchange on Pandemic Disruptions to Research,” illustrates how academia creates the conditions of loneliness and isolation that were further intensified during the pandemic. The chapter explores both the desire for and the obstacles to building relationships and community through research. Similarly, Ethel Tungohan, in her chapter “Dissident Friendships During COVID Times,” explains how she fostered communities of care to survive structural erasure and toxic institutional cultures. Together, these chapters remind us: “Survival can also be about keeping one’s hope alive; holding on to the projects that are projects insofar as they have yet to be realized. You might have to become willful to hold on when you are asked to let go; to let it go. Survival can thus be what we do for others, with others. We need each other to survive; we need to be part of each other’s survival” (Ahmed 2017, 235).

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