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Ruptures, Resistance, Reclamation: Global Feminisms in a Digital Age

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Special Issue: Ruptures, Resistance, Reclamation: Global Feminisms in a Digital Age
Introduction

Ruptures, Resistance, Reclamation: Transnational Feminism in a Digital Age

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Cover art: *between the algorithm and the glass ceiling*, by Iqra Shagufta Cheema

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In 2008, *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice* published a special issue titled *Digital Feminisms*. At that time, Instagram was non-existent, the newly launched Twitter had just introduced hashtags,[1] and Facebook had hit 100 million users and launched Facebook Chat and Facebook app for iPhones (Van Grove 2014). Since that special issue, the digital sphere has changed in unprecedented ways. One event that is emblematic of these shifts is the Me Too movement, which was founded in 2006 and went viral in 2017 under the hashtag #MeToo, turning into a transnational feminist movement that highlighted the scale of gendered and sexual violence across the globe. Since 2023, for fifteen months, we witnessed Israel committing a live-streamed genocide against Palestinians. Seventy percent of those killed in this genocide—which was partly justified by instrumentalizing accusations of rape (Goldenberg and Frankel 2024; Sanders 2024) and that heavily used technology to wage unprecedented levels of violence—were women and children (Al Jazeera 2024). These two instances invite feminist reflection on the limits and possibilities of transnational feminism—which acknowledges the systemic nature of inequities while attending to the global and local realities of gendered lives—in a digital age. This special issue, *Ruptures, Resistance, Reclamation: Transnational Feminisms in a Digital Age*, therefore, interrogates the intersecting inequities in gendered and sexed relations that the digital sphere engenders and exacerbates. We are invested in how feminist inquiry can make space for resistance and reclamation against the backdrop of a seemingly inevitable wave of tech domination and advancing global capitalism.

Today, 4.88 billion people or 60.42% of the global population own a smartphone, with the most users in China, followed by India and the United States of America (Gill 2025). However, predictably, access to digital tools is not horizontal even though they seemingly flow readily through borders and sites. The digital divide reinforces disparities of class, language, gender, age, ableness/ability, sexual orientation, knowledge, and urban and rural locality across the globe, particularly in the Global South (Cheema 2023; Fellows and Smith 2022). Most recently, the trojan horse of Artificial Intelligence (AI)—despite tech developers' utopian promises of eliminating social inequities, improving laborious working conditions, and democratizing access to knowledge and its production—has aggravated systemic disparities. The much-coveted Large Language Models (LLMs) like Google's Gemini, Microsoft's CoPilot, or OpenAI's ChatGPT rely on "scraped data" and largely unquestioned exploitation of intellectual labour to distill information for users (Bender et al. 2021). They deincentivize creativity, discourage critical thinking, impair human ability to produce knowledge, and, thereby, clear the way for mostly unchallenged techno-imperialism in the long term (Bender et al. 2021). The new tech reality disproportionately affects the global majority that lives in the Global South, who are exploited for cheap labour and who bear the catastrophic material and environmental costs of AI (Bender et al. 2021; Perrigo 2023). This accelerated process of "recolonization of peoples" (Mohanty 2003) reduces the global majority—poor, marginalised, gendered, racialized—to replaceable consumers and disposable workers.[2] Feminist inquiry must think in ways that concomitantly attend to the local, national, and transnational implications of these techno-imperialist mutations.

The tech companies that build these digital tools rely on the exploitation of labour, cultural, and material resources in ways that reinscribe and further colonialism and sexism in digital space (Perrigo 2023; Shahid and Vishistha 2023). These new technologies often reinforce hegemonic ideologies and biases, leading to data harms and discrimination as well as increased polarization (Bender et al. 2021; Fournier-Tombs 2023). For example, algorithms are, at their core, a set of explicit rules designed to collect user data to better suggest content that maximises the time a user spends on any given platform (Daston 2022; Noble 2018). Implicitly, they work as mediators between the user and data, creating a choice loop, where information is sourced for the user based on their previous choices. However, the digital sphere and its algorithms disfavour some ideas or populations over others (as evidenced by shadow bans and content suppression) and relegate some information to the margins of the digital sphere (Fellows and Smith 2022).

The algorithmic, labour, and ecological costs of technological advances are overwhelmingly paid by the Global South —especially poor women and children—in the form of surplus, underpaid, or exploitative work like data annotation or online content moderation, or raw minerals mining (like cobalt and copper in Congo and Rwanda) (Canelas 2024; Dzieza 2023; Hao and Hernandez 2022; Jensen 2024; Vij 2023). Importantly, powerful actors on the world stage seem willing to embrace the illusory and misleading promises that these tools will resolve the most urgent crises, from solving climate change to ushering in a new utopia of worker leisure to even solving global conflicts (Crary 2023; Gebru and Torres 2024). This is evident in the United Nations's decision in 2023 to use the AI tool PIVOT (the Palestine-Israel Virtual Outlook Tool) to simulate potential interventions to resolve the decades old Israel/Palestine crisis (Black 2023).[3] However, against this potential use of AI is the Israeli Defence Force's real use of AI in the Israeli genocide against Palestinians and its attendant effects.[4]

Though generative AI tools and the scale of their use as mechanisms of war may be new, AI as a tool of control, conflict, and even genocide are not. In 2016, the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that Facebook had influenced several political decisions in the US and the UK (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). Facebook is also a tool used in Myanmar to fuel the oppression and genocide of the Rohingya people spurring them to sue Facebook for its role in their suffering in 2021 (Milmo 2021). The racialized impact of AI is visible in the data annotation gig economies in Kenya, India, Philippines, and Nigeria (Canelas 2024; Jensen 2024; Jones 2021; Roberts 2019; Vij 2023) and in the Israeli Defence Force's use of AI to target gendered targets. Digital technologies mediate, embed, co-produce, and reproduce the normative racial, ethnic, sexual, and gendered structures both locally and globally (Akbari 2019; Baer 2016; Benjamin 2019a; Benjamin 2019b; Cockayne and Richardson 2017; Gieseking 2017; Mullaney et al. 2021; Noble 2018). Whether it is through generative AI, social media algorithms, access to medical technologies and tools, or other forms of racialized gendered violence facilitated by digital technologies, there is much to provoke feminist concern and reflection.

As a response and amidst ongoing reflection, feminists and marginalized groups have employed digital tools and the border-crossing possibilities of social apps to organize transnational feminist movements like #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, #IdleNoMore, and Women, Life, Freedom to raise feminist consciousness, create solidarity, and stage resistance. In these instances, digital technologies also offer "new possibilities of politics of difference" and "understanding locations" (Cheema 2023; Philips 2021; Tuzcu 2016). However, inequitable access to digital tools—both within national boundaries and beyond—determines and controls who can participate in these online communities. The digital divide manifests locally and globally, as a lack of access to high-speed or reliable internet, poor availability of digital sources in local languages, and gendered access to devices in financially disadvantaged families (West et al. 2019). This digital divide is also used by states as a means of suppression in the form of online content moderation, limitations on the permitted language and terms, and bans on online platforms and apps.[5] These uses and abuses of technology and technological advances shift in the current tech ecology and, therefore, invite consistent feminist attention, intervention, and collaboration. This is the attention and collaboration that is at the heart of this special issue.

In the opening article of the special issue, Sara Naderi examines the Iranian "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Observing how the movement was framed online, Naderi argues that it began as liberatory, but was co-opted. Students of Iranian history will, perhaps, not be surprised, as Naderi notes that Iranian Women have long served as symbols, standing in for the nation itself. Just as the mandatory unveiling laws of the 1930s centred Iranian women as symbols of progress, and the mandatory veiling laws of the 1990s centred Iranian women as symbols of resistance to the West, so too did the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement where Iranian women became a collective symbol of the nation in online spaces. In effect, Naderi argues, as the movement gained momentum online, it became detached from reality, becoming a simulacrum of its former self, no longer serving the women who had started the movement in the first place (Baudrillard 1994). This raises a potential concern about online activist movements in general. Do they serve a liberatory end, or do they distract the public from the real lived experiences of real people? Are all online movements at risk of becoming simulacra?

This reflection on the self and alienation in digital spaces is picked up in the second article by Christoffer Koch Andersen. Using the lens of necropolitics, Andersen conducted qualitative interviews with three trans persons to examine how social media algorithms render trans bodies and trans lives as unliveable and ungrievable. Due to the algorithmic promotion of anti-trans content, the exclusion of nonbinary and trans identities in gender choice options, the surveillance of trans people, and the shadow banning of trans content, trans people online experience a necropolitical force. This force erases the possibility of their lives as intelligible and worthy of empathy or grief. Eventually, Andersen invites interviewees to imagine the possibility of a truly trans-liberatory social media landscape.

Advancing this conversation on algorithms and data management, in the third article, Nicole Ramsoomair argues that LLMs create and exacerbate epistemic injustice through the ways they replicate (or do not replicate) and homogenize content, as they are more likely to represent dominant or majoritarian views. Furthermore, as LLMs are merely knowledge-claim generators, not knowers, they are unable to identify any gaps in their knowledge-claims, or erasure of marginalized views, thereby furthering ignorance. LLMs generate a "wikipedia-esque" voice that appears authoritative and that may encourage users to adopt the same style. This implicitly coerces users to adopt an empty style, potentially leading to a flattening of Englishes. Since LLMs are prompt-responders, a prejudicial prompt will often generate a prejudicial response, thereby leading the user deeper into an echo chamber wherein their biases are merely fed back to them. Therefore, LLMs spread epistemic injustice quickly and conveniently, which obscures truth and erodes trust. As epistemic injustice tends to support the privileged and further oppress the marginalized, the widespread adoption of LLMs will further entrench existing inequalities, unless we act to change this.

Finally, in the fourth article, Anat Schwartz examines how feminist activists in South Korea view and interact with digital tools and social media such as Telegram through the study of the Nth Room case. The Nth Room was a case of sexual violence perpetrated against South Korean women and girls in digital space, illustrating that rape culture is all too normalized online. South Korean lawmakers and politicians initially dismissed or excused the acts of perpetrators in this case, but amidst public outrage they were forced to take stronger measures, which included more aggressive surveillance, stricter censorship, and harsher penalties. These measures created a placebo effect, without any actual

positive impact. Instead, these "solutions" further stigmatized survivours of digital sex crimes, while also extending government surveillance and control over citizens. Through interviews with South Korean feminist activists, Schwartz illustrates how these government measures served to maintain a digital world that is increasingly hostile to women and girls, despite the efforts of feminist activists. Finally, she argues that this case illustrates how anti-feminist and far-right actors may co-opt the language of feminist activism to justify passing anti-feminist regulation.

In addition to these four research articles, we also include two shorter commentaries and a literary piece. The first, by Elizabeth Cameron, reminds us that one of the places where people face technological injustice is in medicine. Cameron examines endometrial diagnostic technologies and discusses the possibilities of bias and discrimination resulting from white, cis gender, heterosexual, and colonial assumptions on the part of people designing and using these technological tools. Cameron notes that, just like digital technologies, these medical technologies reinforce and exacerbate existing inequities. Women, especially those with endometriosis, suffer as they may wait years for a proper diagnosis while their symptoms are dismissed for sexist reasons.

In their transcribed conversation, Iqra Shagufta Cheema and Jennifer Jill Fellows discuss Cheema's edited volume *The Other #MeToos* (Oxford University Press 2023). This volume includes sixteen chapters that trace the impact of the MeToo movement in the Global South. Employing a transnational feminist framework, Cheema discusses why the inherent malleability and flatness of the *#MeToo* movement was both a strength and a weakness: different feminisms were able to translate it to their specific context, but it also invoked mistrust because of its white, Western, feminist attachments. This interview leaves us with an unsettling paradox that harkens back to algorithmic biases: the Me Too movement could not have been sustained online for as long as it was/is without millions of women who shared their personal experiences in hopes of a political change via #MeToo.[6] And yet, globally, the movement tended to gain momentum in the regions where high profile celebrities or public figures used the hashtag. This prompts us to ask: who is best represented by #MeToo? Is this a movement of solidarity or of privilege? How does a political movement ensure that it honours its participants? #MeToo, as the biggest feminist movement online to date, visibilizes the radical potential of online activism, while also inviting our attention to its white supremacist, cissexist, heteronormative, and colonial limitations.

Lastly, we include a poem by Kate Miller. "'It's Time '92' Telethon" looks at technology, disability, celebrity and the Other.

Taken together, contributions to this special issue highlight that the digital sphere—the internet, algorithms, and online content production and consumption—is not neutral. Digital space rarely serves the marginalized well, if it serves them at all. A transnational feminist ethos necessitates attention to the fact that algorithms normalize and privilege the biases of the most privileged. These contributions in this volume conclude that interventions can be made to render digital space more feminist, inclusive, and just. Contributors to this volume have not only shared their critiques of the current digital landscape, but the vision of what a more equitable digital future would require. We thank the contributors to this issue for sharing their work with us. We also thank the reviewers of these articles for their time and attention, and *Atlantis* staff for their guidance through this process. We hope this issue will spur an interest in further digital feminist research among readers. Thinking collaboratively with our contributors, we invite the reader—you—to envision what a truly liberatory digital world would look like and do the work to make that vision a reality.

Endnotes

1. Formerly known as Twitter and rebranded as X after Elon Musk bought it in 2023.

2. In her 2003 article "Under Western Eyes: Revisited," Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that "feminist scholars and teachers [...] must respond to the phenomenon of globalization as an urgent site for the recolonization of peoples (515).

3. The UN decided to contract Slovakia-based AI startup "CulturePulse." The idea behind PIVOT was to test potential interventions in a digital simulation before implementing them in the real world (Black 2023).

4. IDF use their own AI tools—Habsora, # Lavender, and Where is Daddy?—in Gaza to identify potential targets (Abraham 2024). Lavender is reported to have "clocked as many as 37,000 Palestinians as suspected militants" (Abraham 2024). The Gospel, AI target-creaton platform, has helped determine "schools, aid organization offices, places of worship and medical facilities" as targets so far (Gedeon and Miller 2024). In September 2024, Israel orchestrated an attack in Lebanon wherein batteries of thousands of pagers blew up, killing or injuring 5500 Lebanese (Bassam and Mackenzie 2024; Christou 2024). While human rights organizations expressed concern about this horrific use of batteries as bombs, many people, from regular citizens to tech-enthusiasts, were impressed with this technological feat. Despite these reports, the connection between civilian targets and the IDF's use of AI (though IDF is not the only military using AI) remains blurry and under investigated (Gedon and Miller 2024). Besides the immediate deaths and destruction, widescale use of weapons has long term effects on ecology, environment, and food security.

5. This is visible in the much-debated TikTok ban in the United States and Twitter ban in Pakistan.

6. Tarana Burke's 2006 movement is titled Me Too. However, in 2017, it took the shape of #MeToo via Alyssa Milano's tweet. Our use of Me Too here refers to the broader movement and its work in the offline spaces, while we use #MeToo to point to the ways it gathers women in online spaces.

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Research

The Banality of a Medium: Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement in the Social Media Mirror

by Sara Naderi

Abstract: The tragic death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022 sparked the largest national movement in Iran since 2009. Iranian Women became the symbolic center and main actors of this movement, with the Kurdish slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" emerging as its defining motto.. This paper presents a theoretical and exploratory reflection on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" (WLF) movement, focusing on how social media, as a medium, shaped its mainstream representations and trajectory. After a brief genealogical analysis of discourses that place women's veiling at the core of Iranian national politics, the paper examines how the hyperreal nature of modern reality influences social movements. It argues that social media amplifies the visibility of "hyperreal political subjects," making them dominant actors in the movement. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political actions. Finally, the paper explores how social media facilitates revolutionary and polarized political strategies, enabling the dismantling of dominant hegemonies while simultaneously discouraging radical and progressive political imagination in building counter-hegemonic discourses.

Keywords: counter-hegemony; hegemony; hyperreality; Iranian women; social media; veiling discourses; Woman, Life, Freedom Movement

Résumé : La mort tragique de Zhina (Mahsa) Amini survenue en septembre 2022 a déclenché le plus grand mouvement national en Iran depuis 2009. Les Iraniennes sont devenues les leaders symboliques et pratiques de ce mouvement, dont le slogan kurde qui signifie « Femme, Vie, Liberté » est devenu la devise. Cet article présente une réflexion théorique et exploratoire sur le mouvement « Femme, Vie, Liberté », centrée sur la façon dont les médias sociaux, comme média, ont façonné ses représentations dominantes et sa trajectoire. Après une brève analyse généalogique des discours qui mettent le voile des femmes au cœur de la politique nationale iranienne, l'article détermine comment la nature hyperréaliste de la réalité moderne influe sur les mouvements sociaux. Il soutient que les médias sociaux amplifient la visibilité des « sujets politiques hyperréels », faisant d'eux des acteurs dominants du mouvement. Cette transformation de la subjectivité politique s'est traduite par une limitation structurelle des médias sociaux, qui touche non seulement à la représentation, mais aussi à la « présence » des actions politiques. Enfin, l'article montre comment les médias sociaux contribuent à des stratégies politiques révolutionnaires et polarisées, et permettent le démantèlement des hégémonies dominantes tout en décourageant l'imagination politique radicale et progressiste dans l'élaboration de discours contre-hégémoniques.

Mots clés : contre-hégémonie; hégémonie; hyperréalité; femmes iraniennes; médias sociaux; discours sur le port du voile; Mouvement Femme, Vie, Liberté

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Introduction

Zhina! You will not die! Your name shall become a symbol.[1]

This potent sentence was inscribed on the grave of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini by her family. Yet, at that moment, perhaps not even Zhina's family envisioned how swiftly this visionary sentence would come true. The "woman, life, freedom" (WLF) movement became the realization of this promise, transforming Zhina's name into a symbolic echo of subaltern voices in Iran's modern history (Mahdavi 2023).

Zhina was a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who died in the custody of Iran's morality police for wearing an "improper hijab" on December 16, 2022 (Bayat 2023, 19). The "woman, life, freedom" slogan—miraculously resurrected like a whisper of revelation from Zhina's grave, in the Kurdistan Province of Iran and spread in the hearts and voices of Iranians like an untold messianic promise—initiated the "most severe and sustained political upheaval ever faced by the Islamist regime in Iran" (Bayat 2023, 19).

The movement began with a collective resistance of women against the Islamic regime's mandatory veiling laws and swiftly expanded across the country and transformed into a comprehensive uprising for regime change, drawing participants from diverse genders, classes, and "nations"[2] (see Vahabzadeh 2022) inside Iran. Notably, it marked the first national resistance movement initiated by women in the history of the Islamic Republic. This positioning of both women and marginalized nations at the forefront of a national liberatory movement has been unprecedented in Iran's modern history. The accumulation of progressive and promising features heralded new social and political possibilities in the Iranian political sphere, the possibility of collective life that has not been imagined or experienced in the past, and the possibility of more diverse, democratic, and inclusive national identity that is less suppressive toward visible (national, cultural, and gendered) minorities.

Similar to other contemporary social movements, social media played a pivotal role in igniting the WLF movement and became the primary medium for its global representation. However, the movement's representation on social media also paved the way for the rise of centralist androcentric and conservative voices, including the extreme right-wing populist and monarchist[3] groups mostly based outside Iran (Tohidi 2023, 5; Sadeghi 2023). These self-proclaimed leaders overshadowed the voices of women and marginalized groups inside the Islamic regime's opposition, citing the need for "national unity" in overthrowing the regime. Ironically, the most conservative forces in Iran's political sphere have gained popularity amid the most progressive movement in Iran's post-revolutionary history.

I acknowledge that I do not have any firsthand experience of the WLF movement, as I was not in Iran during that time. However, like many diasporic Iranians, I was able to follow the movement from a distance through its social media representation, which evoked a mixture of contradictory feelings. I also relied on the accounts of friends who actively engaged with the movement's reality inside Iran. Exploring the "virtual reality" of the movement from afar presents both risks and opportunities for a researcher. On one hand, there is a danger of reducing the movement to its online "representations," treating them as the movement sole dimension and possibility. On the other hand, this perspective offers a valuable opportunity for profound "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) reflection, providing a unique and critical lens through which to examine the movement. Throughout this research, I strive to avoid the former while exploring the possibilities of the latter.

As a researcher interested in both social media and social movements, what particularly captured my attention was the central role of social media representations in shaping the trajectory of actions within the movement's actual reality. Built on all above-mentioned observations and experiences, this paper aims to illuminate how social media as a "medium" or "scale" (McLuhan 2006,108) influenced the mainstream representations and trajectory of the WLF movement in Iran. The paper also draws on Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyperreality to illuminate how the social

media representations turned this movement into "pure simulacra," which extend the limitation of the medium (representation) to the social event's (WLF movement) presence.

In what follows, I will begin with a brief genealogical review of the discourses positioning women's veiling at the center of Iranian national politics. Then, reflecting on my observation of the movement in the social media mirror, I will demonstrate the discrepancy between the major representations of the movement in social media and the emancipatory political potential contained in the "woman, life, freedom" slogan as an iconic motto of the movement. Building on a literature review, I will highlight some structural limitations of social media as the main medium of the movement. The hyperreal character of modern reality affects social movements by turning the "hyperreal political subject" into the most seen and, consequently, the leading actors of the movement. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political actions. Finally, I hope to shed some light on how social media, as the "medium" of the WLF movement can facilitate revolutionary and polarized political strategies (in both form and intensity) in breaking the dominant hegemony, while simultaneously discouraging radical and progressive political imagination in building counter-hegemonic discourses.

This paper is a theoretical (based on literature review) and exploratory reflection on the WLF movement that draws on my personal experiences of observing the representations of the movement on social media[4] and engaging in friendly dialogues with a few people who participated in the actual movements inside Iran. Media literature provides me with theoretical lenses that enhance these observations and offer a more nuanced understanding of some paradoxical features of the movement that may not be easily observable by theoretically naked eyes.

A Brief History of Women and the Veiling Question in Modern Iran

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini's death was a tragic result of one of the most controversial discriminatory laws of the Iranian Islamic regime, a law which passed a few months after the 1979 revolution and mandated veiling [*hijab*] for all women in the Iranian public sphere. During the 1979 revolution, hijab or veiling was considered by Islamists as one of the central features of resistance against westernization and seen as moving toward the Islamization of Iranian culture (Ahmed 1992; Sadeghi 2008; Zahedi 2007). However, despite what is represented by mainstream mass media, the importance of veiling in representing the orientation of Iranian political culture first appeared through "mandatory unveiling act" about 40 years before the 1979 revolution. In 1936, King Reza Pahlavi [*Reza Shah*], the father of modern Iran in the monarchists' narrative and the founder of Iran's first modern nation-state, legislated the mandatory unveiling act, in which the presence of veiled women in the public sphere was prohibited (Naghibi 1999, 555). After announcing the unveiling legislation, the police were instructed to deal harshly with any woman wearing anything other than a European-style hat and dress (Ahmed 1992, 164).

Delving more into the history, the birth of discourse around women's veiling in Iranian politics dates back to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It emerged alongside the constitutional scholars' attempts to find a convincing response to Iranian modernity's conventional question: Why did we remain backward? (see Najmabadi 1991; Ahmed 1992; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Zahedi 2007; Hirschman 1998; Naghibi 2007) "In the earliest formulations, in the mid-nineteenth century, 'the traditional woman' became the most visible symbol of backwardness. Correspondingly, the journey into modernity was signified by educating and unveiling this backward subject" (Najmabadi 1991, 51).

Both Leila Ahmed (1992) and Mayda Yegenoglu (1998) consider this spotlighting of Muslim women's bodies and their unveiling as a sign of the nation's development, an initial face of an Orientalist reading of Islamic culture. In fact, during the nineteenth century, Westerners travelling to Iran observed differences in women's dress as one of the most obvious visual differences between Western and Eastern public spaces (Ahmed 1992; Paidar 1995; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Naghibi 2007). As more and more educational, economic, and political encounters between Iranian intellectuals and the West occurred, Orientalist views of women and culture gradually echoed in Iranian modernists' portrayals of their homeland. Interestingly, despite their political antagonism, both Islamist and modernist discourses

share this Orientalist logic about veiling and unveiling, which materialized in mandatory veiling (1979) and mandatory unveiling (1936) acts.

Based on such reading of women's veiling/unveiling and cultural orientations, both the Pahlavi and Islamic Republic regimes exercised strategic manipulation and control of women's bodies and sexuality to represent their political ideologies. In both readings, the woman's body is idealized and even theologized to the extent that it symbolizes the "nation" [*vatan*], and the biopolitical governing of that body symbolizes the ideal way of governing the nation (Najmabadi 1991; Tavakoli Targhi 2002; Naghibi 2007; Zahedi 2007). Consequently, the same biopolitical strategy that expands the female body to symbolize the nation simultaneously diminishes women's subjectivity so that women even lose control over their bodily territory, let's aside anything beyond it!

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement: Echo of the Past or Harbinger of Epistemological Emancipation?

From this viewpoint, the 2022-2023 WLF movement, particularly its virtual and media portrayals, appears to be another chapter in the ongoing narrative of Orientalist and androcentric identification of Iran's culture and Iranian women's body. The narrative equates the liberation of the nation from the oppressive Islamic despotic regime with the liberation of Iranian women from Islamic veiling. Unsurprisingly, this narrative aligns with prevalent Western academic and media representations of women in post-revolutionary Iran, where women's bodies and their covering signify their political stance toward the Islamic Republic (see Moaveni 2005; Mahdavi 2008; Khosravi 2008; Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012).

A brief glance at posters and pictures circulating in social media (See Figures 1, 2, and 3 as examples) supports an Orientalist identification of women and the nation's body as the legitimate interpretation of the WLF movement's message. In these images, women's unveiled hair and bodies represent Iran by either being represented as the country's map or flag.

Figure 1: Map of Iran (symbol of nationality) portrayed in the shape of a woman with unveiled long hair (unveiled woman equals national liberation)

Figure 2: Iranian flag in the form of an unveiled woman with long hair. The slogan "woman, life, freedom" [zan, zendegi, Azadi] is written at the center of the flag

Figure 3: Women at the center of the map of Iran, brushing clerics (Islamic regime leaders) free from her hair

Social media representations confirm the movement as a continuation of the dominant trend in modern Iranian national politics. Here, as in the past, women's body politics serves as a tool to signify the domination of a particular androcentric political discourse over the Iranian public sphere. Thus, the liberation of women from the Islamic Republic regime seems to mean little more than the replacement of one androcentric discourse with another in governing women, as seen in other moments of Iranian national history such as mandatory unveiling act in the 1930s. Viewing the movement from this perspective, it is not surprising that Orientalist and androcentric narratives find a strong voice in social media representations, contributing to the marginalization of women's voices.

I propose that what distinguishes the WLF movement as the harbinger of a new era is embedded in its symbolic motto "woman, life, freedom." To elucidate my interpretation of the slogan within the current intersection of women's issues and national dynamics in Iran, I must briefly situate the slogan within Kurdish Jineolojî. Jineolojî is rooted in the Kurdish words "jin" (woman) and "jîn" (life), as well as the Greek "logos" (reason or word) (Jineolojî Committee Europe 2018, as cited in Al-Ali and Kasar 2020, 213). Jineolojî developed epistemologically and politic-

ally as a result of Kurdish women's struggle against gender injustice (Düzgün 2016; Al-Ali and Käser 2022). It positions women at the forefront of the battle against patriarchy, capitalism, and the state in the Middle East (Schäfers and Neven 217, 2). Jineolojî's epistemology transcends mainstream Western (white) feminism's identity politics, yet it is politically aligned with feminist struggles to deconstruct the misogynistic and androcentric political domain (Al-Ali and Kasar 2022, 214; Schäfers and Neven 2017, 2). Within Jineolojî, women's life experiences are intended to form a foundation for a new anti-positivist, anti-hierarchical, and non-institutional knowledge production system rooted in Kurdish women's experiences (Al-Ali and Käser 2022). Mythology, spirituality, science, and various knowledge sources contribute to Jineolojî, provided they pass the life experiences filter.

Noteworthy for our current argument is that in Jineolojî, "woman" (jin) denotes actual women, not symbolic representations of liberating masculine geopolitical or biopolitical property. Men are encouraged to "[kill] their masculinity." That is, men need to overcome their tendency to dominate and oppress while women are urged to rediscover their femininity, distorted in misogynistic readings throughout the history of patriarchy (Öcalan 2013, 51, as cited in Al-Ali and Käser 2022, 220). However, due to the entanglement of gender, state, and capitalist oppression, the liberation of women extends beyond gender constraints. In Jineolojî, the history of women's oppression mirrors the history of all forms of oppression of life in the Middle East, epitomized in "woman, life, freedom." Therefore, Jineolojî seeks the emancipation of women as "subalterns," positioned at the intersection of devalued forms of life, subjected to the interconnection of patriarchal, capitalist, nationalist, and colonial domination. This conceptualization of women's emancipation as the "emancipation of the subaltern" extends beyond the gender identity politics of Western feminism, challenging its colonial and Orientalist implications on non-Western societies (see Najmabadi 2006; Lugones 2016).

With the Kurdish roots of the slogan in mind, the full significance of the slogan can be better understood. It begins with "woman" in simultaneous connection and disconnection to "life." Life, in turn, is defined by simultaneous connection and disconnection to freedom. Each word is treated as a separate yet connected noun, not serving as an adjective for the others.

The innovation in the current "woman, life, freedom" slogan, indicative of an epistemic revolution in Iranian context, is found in the emphasis on pure life without any additional qualifiers. In essence, altering it to an adjective clause like "freedom of women" or "free life" would fail to bring anything new to Iranian politics. In terms of life, modern politics in Iran has historically aimed to enhance life through utopian promises, whether in the pursuit of freedom, equality, independence, or salvation. In a secular context, the objective is to elevate life to a developed and dignified status akin to the West; while in an Islamic ideological framework, it is to empower life for the conquest and dismantling of the West. Following these promises, the contemporary history of the region is marked by bloody wars involving postcolonial modern nation-states imposing their meaning of bios (dignified, developed or simply good political life) (Agamben 1995) in various religious, ethnic, and cultural forms, on irreducibly diverse collective lives. The history of violence, massacres, and suppressions in Iran against women and national and religious minorities is indicative of the extremist definition of *bios* and demeaning of the rest as *zoe* (Agamben1995)—or as a politically killable life. Dignifying life, stripped of adjectives, at the heart of politics—captured in the WLF slogan—transgresses the rigid binary of bios versus zoe, of the good life versus the killable life, and ushers in a new political imagination. It whispers that, even if the enemy is seen as the embodiment of a "bad life," they still possess a life worthy of living. In dignifying the pure essence of life, it shatters all definitions of a good political life (bios), those definitions that have long nourished patriarchal hierarchies.

As discussed above, the word "woman" in the WLF slogan represents nothing beyond its literal meaning—the human who happens to be (become) a woman. This significance is noteworthy, especially when considering that in modern Iran's political discourse, the term "woman" has traditionally been used and abused as a symbol of the nation. However, beyond the patriarchal portrayal of women's bodies as the symbol of a nation or national flag, the actual lives of Iranian women, including their feelings, lived histories, and political agency have seldom mattered to various political ideologies, whether Islamic, leftist, or liberal. What we see here is a great example of Baudrillard's pure simulacra: the symbolic representation which becomes almost divorced from its actual reference. This over-politicization of women's

bodies also gives a fetishized (à la Marx 2004) quality to the notion of the "Iranian woman" in Iranian political discourse, juxtaposing it against the lived experiences of Iranian women. So, the more robust the "symbolic presence of Iranian women" may be, the less significant the lives and voices of actual women become. Thus, it is not surprising that Iranian utopian politics have always ended up degrading women's and all people's lives in the name of the nation and freedom. Hence, placing life without an adjective in between the two most abused words in Iran's modern history, "woman" and "freedom," manifests a capacity to deconstruct both Orientalist and androcentric frames of freedom and woman in Iranian political discourse. It heralds the emergence of an indigenous "standpoint" (Harding 1991; Smith 2005) of feminism, which first and foremost seeks emancipation inside the life of real people and not by imposing pre-prepared Orientalist, essentialized androcentric definitions of liberation upon those lives. My interpretation shares a family resemblance with Fatemeh Sadeghi's definition of the term "jiyanism" as the potential for indigenous feminism, embedded in the WLF movement, which is both "feminist and life-affirming" (Sadeghi 2023, 462). Given this, the key question is: Which structural mechanisms within the Iranian political sphere overlook the epistemological novelty embedded in the "WLF" motto and movement, causing it to be interpreted as a continuation of androcentric and Orientalist identifications of governing women's bodies and the homeland?

Indeed, addressing this question requires an in-depth investigation of many sociopolitical and historical forces inside Iran's political sphere. However, the focus here is on the role of social media as a medium of the movement in foregrounding the banal, neutral, and conservative reading of "woman, life, freedom" over its radical, and progressive spirit.

Social Media as the Medium of the Resistance

The social media age, emerging in the late 1990s and solidifying by the late 2000s has revolutionized the communication dynamics in the public and private sphere. Among many other features, internet-based communications allow individuals to possess a personal voice and to express themselves in various ways. Unlike the passive audiences of mass media, social media seems to have paved the way for the emergence of active and engaged audiences (Fisher 2015, 187) and consequently shakes up the hierarchical boundaries of the sender and receiver of information in the mass media age.

Social media platforms in Iran's political sphere facilitate the connection among activists, minorities, and marginalized individuals, offering them a platform beyond official institutional politics. These platforms enable the movement constituents to voice their perspectives beyond mass media channels that face censorship within Iran or biases in news networks outside Iran. Iran's Green Movement[6] (2009), the Arab Spring (2011), Black Lives Matter (2013, 2020), and #MeToo (2017) are examples of the many movements that were launched or expanded through social media (Manoukian 2011; Akhavan 2013; Fisher 2015; Nagle 2017; Alimardani and Milan 2018). However, some studies indicate that while social media successfully connects activists, mobilizes online movements (hashtag activism), and challenges mass media hegemony on social and political issues, it may not necessarily facilitate and disseminate radical epistemology and new collective political imagination (Manoukian 2011, Fisher 2015). Morozov (2012) coins the term "slacktivism" to describe the gap between social media performers' online and real-world impacts. Similarly, critically reflecting on "citizen photojournalism," Mortensen (2011) and Manoukian (2011) caution against reducing political activism to mere reporting. They argue that citizen photojournalism can lead to an overreliance on the dominant discourse of social media, thereby diminishing the subjective agency and authenticity of the actors and "witnesses" involved in the moment.

Other researchers highlight how social media can fuel false and violent polarization in society during moments of socio-political crisis (Gladwell 2010; Nagle 2017; Ghaffari 2022; Corey 2022). Given the tendency of social media to fail to disseminate radical epistemology, and to instead drive polarization, it is perhaps not surprising that the message of WLF movement was impacted by its representation on social media. In the following sections, I consider how the limitations of social media contributed to concealing the WLF movement's progressive critical spirits and its promising political imaginations.

Social Media Echo Chamber and Extreme Representation of Self/Other

Van Dijck and Poell (2013) coined the term "programmability" as a crucial feature of social media platforms, illustrating how specific algorithms in each platform contribute to the creation of echo chambers. This structural condition shields users from encountering opposing viewpoints and ideas, and successfully surrounds and secures them with an "echo chamber" of like-minded friends, pages, and news which resonates with their current value system (also see Sunstein 1991; Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015: Yardi and Boyd 2018). Put differently, while the virtual space provides a wealth of information, it simultaneously manipulates the discourse of knowledge production in a sophisticated and concealed manner.

In the world of local communication, we communicate with unshielded everyday reality, which is smaller in scale and provides a less comprehensive view of the world, but simultaneously keeps us more vulnerable to interacting with and facing people or events that do not follow some of our taken-for-granted perspectives. Exposure to individuals with undesirable characteristics fosters tolerance, discourages the demonization of others, and compels us to refresh and open our political imagination according to realities outside our comfort zone.

However, in the globalized virtual world, despite being bombarded with information, the discourse of the information that we receive is designed based on our intellectual/political/ lifestyle taste so that it rarely questions our major political values. This trend creates a cycle of consuming knowledge that reinforces existing beliefs and results in the creation of rigid, uncritical echo chambers in virtual reality. As Barberá explains, "the outcome of this process is a society that is increasingly segregated along partisan lines" (2020, 34), each of which resonates only within themselves. This condition, in moments of political crisis and unrest when compromises become impossible, positions people on two polarized sides of the ideological spectrum. Amplified by a lack of tolerance, during moments of political crisis this echo chamber structure intensifies "hate speech" (Siegel 2020) and exacerbates a "discursive spiral of hate" (Ghaffari 2022). This discourse easily boxes people with even slight deviations from one's perspective into the "demonized other" category (political, cultural, racial, etc.). In this nontolerant political sphere, particularly during moments of crisis, those who gain popularity in social media are often individuals capable of using aggressive language, employing hateful rhetoric, and demonizing their adversaries to an extreme. The WLF movement has not been immune from this political epidemic. At the movement's zenith, precisely when the need was most urgent to introduce new, alternative political imaginings and make historically significant decisions, numerous intellectuals and activists, particularly women, were condemned to silence as their analytical voices were marginalized and left unheard, overshadowed by the prevalence of irrational, sexist, aggressive, and violent language (Ganji 2022; Vahdati 2022) dominating social media discourse.

I remember that in one discursive trend, some monarchists, by enforcing the hashtag (I give my representative [to Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran's last king]) forged a dichotomy of "pro-1979 revolution" versus "anti-1979 revolution," categorizing individuals who do not denounce or demonize the 1979 revolution—which ousted the monarchical regime—as being automatically against the WLF movement and pro Islamic regime. This so-called "pro-1979 revolution" [*Panjah-o Hafti*] category entailed the majority of secular leftist and liberal activists and intellectuals who had a history of struggling against both despotic regimes during pre- and post-revolution and were tortured, suppressed, killed, or banished by both the monarchy and the Islamic Republic. In another disturbing case, even the mourning mother of Hadis Najafi[7], a young woman killed during the movement by the Islamic regime, became a target of cyber assault for not sharing an unveiled picture of her daughter at her funeral. Sharing a veiled (with Hijab) picture of an individual—an individual who lost her life protesting mandatory veiling—during her funeral was enough for numerous angry social media users to unjustly demonize the mourning family. Despite being victims of the Islamic regime's brutality, the family was unfairly labelled as pro Islamic regime, a series of events that highlights the harsh judgments prevalent on social media. The extreme polarization forced the mourning mother to record an unveiled video, pleading with people to stop harassing her family and affirming, basically confessing, her opposition to the regime and mandatory veiling. That a mourning mother of a martyr must prove loyalty to the movement in which her daughter has become a victim and symbol, that a mourning mother has to beg to be excluded from the "otherness" (or the pro-regime category), highlights the fragility of expressing thoughts freely in such a polarized environment.

Political Celebrity and Performativity

At first glance, it appears that social media provides individuals with more space to question hegemonic discourses. This observation carries a partial truth. In this and the next sections, I will show how social media structures can pave the way for the emergence of a political subject that, despite being radical in questioning the hegemonic discourse, is accustomed to appreciating and generating less critical and radical counter-hegemonic voices.

Despite being a less hierarchical and more democratic form of communication compared to mass media, social media users do not enjoy an equal voice in the virtual public sphere. Metrics such as shares, likes, reposts, and retweets, which are indicative of "popularity" as articulated by Van Dijck and Poell (2013), determine the reach of ideas deemed noteworthy in the virtual public sphere. The overdetermination of popularity shaping online identity is partially due to the distinct nature of "being" in virtual versus actual reality. In actual reality, one exists as long as one is alive. The actual self may be damaged as a result of unpopularity but it will not die because of it. In contrast, in virtual reality, one exists as much as one is seen by others (also see Utz, Tanis and Vermeulen 2012; Greenwood 2013). Utilizing Baudrillard's (1994) theory of representation (image) as simulacra[8], one can say that the virtual self is nothing but representation; it is solely a representation without any necessary reference to presence beyond that representation. It relies on others' gaze for its existence. This dependency on others' gazes for virtual survival intensifies the role of dominant discourses in constructing the virtual self. For instance, in the case of WLF pictures on social media, we have already seen how, unlike its Jineological roots, the term "woman" was divorced from actual women's blood and flesh, fetishized, and transformed into pure simulacra, read under the androcentric and Orientalist gaze (woman as the symbol of the culture/land) that dominated the Iranian virtual political sphere.

Moreover, social media platforms do not archive the history of knowledge in the same manner as print media libraries or mass media archives. In other words, unlike when writing a book, where unpopularity at the moment may still hold hope for future readership, a social media post that lacks popularity at the moment is less likely to gain attention in the future. Hence, not conforming to followers' tastes would lead to the virtual self's gradual disappearance.

Therefore, the goal for every social media user is to become the permanent celebrity of their echo chamber, requiring them to take extra caution not to offend their fans (followers). The quest for immediate and permanent popularity imposes an invisible self-censorship on users, even among the most radical activists and intellectuals. This tendency toward self-censorship or conformity to trends for the sake of popularity was noticeable in a recent movement in Iran. I remember in one trend, social media users blocked friends not for lack of political actions or opposing the movement but for not posting "enough statements" or echoing trendy hashtags in support of the movement. Returning to the WLF images in social media posts (see figures 1, 2 and 3) , one can easily see how the most androcentric and Orientalist reading of the slogan was praised and went viral. The wise reader knows that conformity of some representations usually goes hand in hand with the silent dismissal of other interpretations/representations.

Consequently, political actors are often judged not by their tangible actions but by the representation of these actions. These representations, often lacking authenticity, can involve simple acts like reposting or retweeting pre-prepared content. I concur with Pradhana and Tania (2021) in contending that "hashtag activism" has shifted the focus of political engagement away from social justice's liberatory goals, transforming it into a tool for "gaining more digital presence on social media" (Pradhana and Tania 2021, 288). This shift signifies the emergence of a hyperreal political subject, where performative acts consistently overshadow real actions, reducing meaningful engagement to mere representations.

Politics of Speed and Banality

Unlike the print media age, which, according to Habermas (1991), preserved citizens' private space, offering the necessary peace and quiet for reflections on personal and public affairs, the realm of social media is marked by speed and hastiness. Facebook and other platforms incessantly prompt users to share opinions. A pause in keeping up with

the news flow means falling behind on events. Constantly updating profiles and taking stances on events is crucial for visibility. In a sphere where one is always bombarded with news toward which one is urged to *take a standpoint*, one has no time to process, let alone critically reflect. As highlighted by Eran Fischer (2015), social media platforms "encourage users to think about themselves and express their thoughts and feelings about a wide range of issues in particular terms, identifying themselves according to preconceived and pre-packaged categories, thus rationalizing self-disclosure" (Fisher 2015,190). The role of hashtags is paramount, serving to locate posts within pre-prepared categories or knowledge commodities.

Analogous to the actual self, the construction of the modern virtual self is intertwined with questions of identity and distinction (Bourdieu 1984). However, while the distinction is the key to success in social media, a radical (and epistemological) distinction is not. Simply, one should be distinguished from others in an easily digestible way. Due to the bombardment of standpoints and discourses, and the "skim and scan" habits of users, less sophisticated, more easily digested discourses have a better chance of going viral in the virtual public sphere. The key to going viral on social media lies in being distinct and easily digestible. Consequently, the virtual public sphere is not a conducive space for radical or profound deviations from current hegemonic discourses. Instead, it promotes less radical and more banal voices in emerging counter-hegemonic discourses. This feature is vividly evident in the case of WLF slogan.We already discussed how, in the mirror of social media, the WLF slogan was read interpreted through the lens of already existing androcentric and Orientalist discourse often more than through its original Jineological foundations.One reason for this misreading is that Jineolojî initiates a radical epistemological shift in both Iranian national and feminist discourses. Any radical epistemological divorce from the dominant hegemonic discourse is difficult to digest and inevitably needs profound reflection, which is beyond the patience of the majority of social media readers. Hence, the urge to become "political celebrity," hand in hand with the "politics of speed," deprives many social media actors of the possibility of generating or engaging with new epistemologically radical counter-hegemonic voices.

The Hyperreal Political Subject

Some may argue that even by accepting all of these limitations of the medium in the (mis)representation of a political movement, it is still a "representation" and could not hinder the emergence of a new political imagination in actual reality. I argue that such claims do not take the hyperreal character of social media as a medium seriously. Reflecting on structural limitations of social media and expanding on Both McLuhan's (2006) and Baudrillard's (1994) theories, I would claim that "hyperreality" is the "scale" of life in the social media age.

The virtual space is basically a reality of images as simulacra; one exists there as an image (or representation) of oneself and one always communicates with images (representation) of the world and other humans. Of course, this is not a peculiarity of social media. Guy Debord (2002) defined "the spectacle" as a main feature of the mass media age. The spectacle is "not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (8). The difference between representation in social media and representation in mass media is the possibility of constantly living inside social media (our cellphones are on even when we are off!) and, more importantly, the more possibility of living in comfort zone in virtual compared to actual physical reality (as discussed above in the section titled *Social media Echo Chamber and Extreme Representation of Self/Other*). It is easier for us to remove books (print media) and TV (mass media) from our lives for months or years than it is to live even one day without a smartphone. Thus, living more in the virtual space has led to an increased tendency to live as images and interact more with images of others than with actual people. The more time humans live inside a world (a particular configuration of social relations with oneself and others), the more that world becomes their true reality. This new configuration of reality is best envisioned in Baudrillard's (1994) concept of "hyperreality." For Baudrillard (1994), in hyperreality the representation no longer even claims to imitate (or duplicate) the real; it is substituting itself for the real (4). The distinguishing feature of images as pure simulacra is that they go beyond the mere representation of reality—they become reality in the hyperreal world, where all boundaries between real and virtual are blurred and liquified. Thus, for the hyperreal political subject, the original reality, the original political action/thought, the original community, and even the original self(s) have been overshadowed by and become the virtual one.

Hence*, the banality of knowledge production and political imagination in social media is not just the banality of "representation" or "medium" but rather it directly banalizes social movements in actual reality*. To illustrate, Campbell (2021) employs Baudrillard's simulation theory to show how all antagonistic discursive political oppositions can melt into each other in hyperreality and rebuild new "false oppositions," which exhaust and deplete real political oppositions from their emancipatory political spirit. Campbell illustrates this false opposition through the Democrat/Republican opposition in the United States, in which both parties essentially serve the same capitalist neoliberal political imagination (Campbell 2021, 18). The false oppositions, amplified by the extreme polarization of self and other, create a fertile ground for "anti-establishment insider" (Ehteshami 2017, 58) leaders who claim or seize leadership of movements against the systems of which they are the privileged offspring (e.g. Donald Trump in 2016 election). In doing so, they dispossess the marginalized, suppressed voices (the subalterns) that initiated the radical movements and banish them to the periphery of the movement's counter-hegemonic discourse, exactly the place that they started from in the dominant regime's hegemonic discourse. In the case of Iran, the WLF movement and its motto embody subalterns (à la Gramci 1992) whose lives were demeaned and degraded by all national, gendered, cultural, and geographical hierarchies. Nevertheless, in social media debates, the potential emancipatory opposition between all subalterns and the oppressive modern nation-state turned into a series of "false oppositions" between the pro- and anti-1979 revolution standpoints, the opposition between national and ethnic identities, and between national and women's liberation.

Last Words

I concur with Mojtaba Mahdavi (2023) that Zhina (Mahsa) Amini is symbolically an embodiment of the "matrix of subjugation," her death represented the "matrix of domination," and the WLF movement represents the "matrix of emancipation" of subalterns. However, while being highlighted in the motto, the radical political imaginary of subalterns has been marginalized in major representations and the trajectory of the movement and its counter-hegemonic voices. In this paper, I tried to shed more light on the radical political imagination embedded in the WLF slogan and also reveal the structural role of social media in marginalizing and overshadowing this radical political imagination in the movement's trajectory and representations. In doing so, I discussed the *"social media echo chamber and extreme representation of the self/other,"* the *"politics of speed and banality,"* and *"political celebrity and performativity"* as the main structural implications of social media in representing the political reality. Spurred on by Baudrillard's theory, I also discussed how the hyperreal character of modern reality affects the social movement by substituting the "hyperreal political subject," for whom the virtual reality (being and action) always transcends the actual one, instead of the real political subject. This transformation of political subjectivity imposed the structural limitation of social media not only on representation but also on the "presence" of political action. That condition can explain my initial observation about the unprecedented role of social media, not only as a medium for representing the WLF movement but also in orienting and constructing the reality of the movement. *Hence, in the hyperreal world, the banality of the medium's effects is no longer limited to the movement's representations, rather, it also directly banalizes social movements' actual reality.* The condition perpetuates the domination of the least epistemologically radical and least politically progressive reading of a movement as its main and perhaps sole reading.

Indeed, remaining unread by both dominant hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses does not erase the silent, persistent presence of life without adjectives—the subaltern narratives of life that breathe through the 2022 movement. The "message" stands before us, sharp, clear, and vivid, yet our hyperreal "medium" enchants us, luring us into the creation and perpetuation of "false oppositions" and prescribed "performative actions" to navigate these oppositions. The banality of the movement's "medium" has locked its "hyperreal political subjects" within rigid, ossified political imaginations, clouding their vision and dulling their capacity to recognize the arrival of new possibilities on the horizon.

Endnotes

1. Translated from Kurdish sentence which was inscribed on Zhina's grave: ژینا گیان تۆ نامری، ناوت ئەبێتە ڕەمز [Jina gian,to namri, nawt ihbeth rrimz]

2. Based on a critical examination of the Eurocentric and colonial origins of the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity," Vahabzadeh (2022) argues that using "ethnic" to describe non-Persian Iranian groups (such as Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Azeris, etc.) results from the imposition of a colonial framework of modern state-building onto Iranian culture. This framework requires the hegemonic domination of one group (e.g., "White" in Europe or "Fars" in Iran) over other groups that have historically shared the same land. To challenge this Orientalist construct, Vahabzadeh (2022) asserts that Iran has historically been a multi-national region and proposes using the term "nation" or "people" to describe the various cultural and linguistic groups within Iran.

3. Monarchists in post-revolutionary Iran advocate for the return of power to the Pahlavi royal family, who were ousted after the 1979 revolution. A very brief historical glance shows that the monarchy has not had any brighter history regarding the violation of human rights or oppression of opposition and marginalized voices than the Islamic Republic (see Dabashi 2007; Abrahamian 2008; Dabashi 2016). This regime marked the inception of the modern Iranian nation-state, characterized by the oppression of ethnic minorities and the systematic Persianization of Iranian culture (see Ansari 2008; Abrahamian 2008; Dabashi 2016; Matin_Asghari 2018; Matin 2022). Although outlining the discrimination against and colonization of non-Persian people in the process of nation-state building is beyond the scope of this paper, the partial history of the monarchy and its role in continuing violations of women's rights is discussed in this paper.

4. It should be noted that this paper does not rely on systematic content analysis of social media posts related to the WLF movement. Neither do I aim to generalize to other movements or to the entire reality of the WLF movement.

5. The three figures are a few examples of artistic posters created by artists and activists inspired by the movement. Due to security concerns and the risk of arrest by the Islamic Republic, these artists often remain anonymous. As a result, these posters are anonymous and widely shared on social media.

6. The Green movement was the national movement that occurred in protest against the alleged fraud in the 2009 presidential election.

7. To learn more about Hadis Najafi please read her Wikipedia page (2024) and her mother's YouTube video (YouTube 2024).

8. For Baudrillard, simulacra, is the phase of image (representation) that neither has any relation nor make any reference to reality. Thus, Simulacra are "not unreal, but simulacrum that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (1994, 6).

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Wrapped Up in the Cis-Tem: Trans Liveability in the Age of Algorithmic Violence

by Christoffer Koch Andersen

Abstract: Algorithms pervade our reality and promise to universally enhance our lives, but what happens when this promise is reserved for cisgender people while subjecting trans people to legacies of anti-trans violence that implicate trans liveability? Despite this key question, existing critiques engage only sparingly with the violent legacies perpetuated by algorithms that trans people encounter, rarely go beyond notions of bias, and therefore fail to centre trans experiences. In this article, I extend scholarship on critical algorithm studies, trans studies, and necropolitics through three accounts of lived trans experiences to show the vicious algorithmic operations on trans lives. Centrally, this article argues that algorithms are not neutral, distinct, or progressive. Rather, as a vicious "cis-tem" (playing on the word *system*), algorithms enact forms of violence towards the possibility of transness, violence that is rooted in legacies of capitalist, colonial, and cisheteronormative power that violate trans lives and radicalise transphobia. Contrasting trans voices against the algorithmic machines, this article offers a novel perspective on the entanglement between algorithms and trans liveability through the lens of algorithmic violence. I demonstrate how algorithms embody racialised and gendered ideals of the human that target trans people through engineered transphobic feedback-loops, cisnormative default, and capitalist profit based on fear. I conclude by reimagining liberatory digital futures.

Keywords: algorithmic violence; cisheteronormativity; colonialism; digital trans studies; necropolitics; trans liveability

Résumé : Les algorithmes sont omniprésents dans notre réalité et sont censés améliorer universellement nos vies, mais qu'en est-il lorsque cette promesse se limite aux personnes cisgenres et expose les personnes transgenres à des séquelles de la violence anti-trans qui compromettent leur qualité de vie? Malgré cette importante question, à l'heure actuelle, on ne s'intéresse que très peu aux séquelles de la violence perpétuée par les algorithmes auxquels les personnes trans font face. On va rarement au-delà des notions de biais et l'on ne parvient donc pas à mettre l'accent sur les expériences des personnes trans. Dans cet article, j'élargis les recherches sur les études algorithmiques critiques, les études sur les personnes trans et la nécropolitique en présentant trois récits d'expériences vécues par des personnes trans, afin de montrer les opérations algorithmiques malveillantes qui touchent les vies des personnes trans. Essentiellement, cet article soutient que les algorithmes ne sont ni neutres, ni distincts, ni progressifs. Au contraire, les algorithmes, qui sont un vicieux système qui privilégie les personnes cisgenres, infligent des formes de violence à la transidentité, une violence ancrée dans le legs du pouvoir capitaliste, colonial et cishétéronormatif qui portent atteinte à la vie des personnes trans et radicalisent la transphobie. En opposant les voix des personnes trans aux machines algorithmiques, cet article offre un regard nouveau sur l'enchevêtrement entre les algorithmes et la qualité de vie des personnes trans, en ce qui a trait à la violence algorithmique. Je démontre comment les algorithmes incarnent des idéaux racialisés et genrés de l'humain qui ciblent les personnes trans par le biais de boucles de rétroaction transphobes, de la cisnormativité par défaut et du profit capitaliste fondé sur la peur. Je conclus en imaginant un nouvel avenir numérique libérateur.

Mots clés : violence algorithmique; qualité de vie des personnes trans; études numériques sur les personnes trans; nécropolitique; cishétéronormativité; colonialisme

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1. Introduction: Contesting the Algorithmic Incomprehensibility of Transness

Algorithms have morphed into a global promise to improve the conditions of our lives—from government systems, border control, medical diagnostics, to communication technologies and capitalist transactions—but whose lives benefit from this promise and who is coded to die? This article calls attention to how algorithms by default serve cisgender people while harming trans people. Algorithms are sociotechnical systems relying on binary logics that establish epistemological histories of exclusion and distinction through legacies of colonialism and cisheteronormativity (Amaro 2022; Benjamin 2019; Duffy and Acierto 2024; Ricaurte 2019; Wilcox 2023). Specifically, algorithms can be defined as sets of technical instructions coded by humans and utilised by states, corporations, and organisations with the aim of automating, calculating, generating predictions, and solving presented issues based on binary classification principles (Richardson 2024; Wilcox 2017). Within this binary format of coded instructions, algorithms are not coded or able to "comprehend" nuance beyond colonial gender binarity. This classificatory threat posed by algorithms is troublesome not purely due to their potential of accelerating social prejudices "but because [they have] the power to cloak and amplify existing ones" (Onuoha 2018, n.p.) based on the cisheteronormative and colonial prejudices of humans that subsequently become embedded in these technologies. Algorithmic systems coproduce the reality in which they are developed, in which they operate through humans and the wider sociopolitical colonial assemblages that created them, enabling them to perpetuate existing oppression in ways that have become invisible under the contemporary technooptimism, which entrenches forms of violence towards trans lives in the algorithmic world.

This article argues that we are wrapped up in a "cis-tem" of cisheteronormative power further manifested and radicalised by algorithms increasingly indispensable to our everyday lives. Within this algorithmic cis-tem, cisness—as always already racialised as white—is a product of coloniality that limits liveability and recognition of humanness beyond the white cisgendered subject. As Bey (2022) argues, "cisgender" is a hegemonic regime that expulses gender variance and mutability to sustain itself: cisgender presents itself as natural, which overlays the pureness of algorithms, forming a cis-tem of trans impossibility. By not fitting into this cis-tem, trans lives are violated, but they also provide a way of refusing this "cis-tem" order as a "radical abolition of the violent tethers of the world" (Bey 2022, 27). Centrally, this article elaborates on the idea of the "human"' as a technology of legitimacy that originated to enable the Western colonialist and gendered violence that now determines who is algorithmically possible and, as such, who is dispossessed as unliveable entities. Through the colonial and cisnormative embodiment of the "human," algorithms are coded to determine which lives are made intelligible and liveable, a process that "reinscribes the imaginative geography of the deviant, atypical, abnormal 'other'" (Amoore 2009, 56). This algorithmic "othering" of transness implies that trans people are neither assumed *to be possible* or *made to live*, but systematically (re)produced as unliveable subjects. Ultimately, these algorithmic operations constitute the cis-tem: an interlocking system constituted by the racialised cisgendered idea of the "human" that construct trans lives as uncountable, unliveable, and impossible.

Scholars have taken a broad interest in how algorithms inhabit social power that governs political decision-making (Beer 2017), extend exploitative capitalist and extractive surveillance matters over subjects (Couldry and Mejias

2019), affect racialised and gendered embodiment of security and warfare (Wilcox 2017), valorise lives in accordance with racialised assemblages (Benjamin 2019), glitch out on subjects that do not fit white cisnormative criteria (Broussard 2023), ratify insidious reproductions of racial stereotypes (Noble 2018), revitalise statistical historicities that reproduce colonial violence (Valdivia and Tazzioli 2023), reinforce gendered inequalities and censorship of queer identities (Leufer 2021; Shah 2023), and facilitate spaces for far right radicalisation (Daniels 2018). These critiques suggest that algorithms consist of more than coded scripts, but rather encode procedures of expediting oppression. To counter these injustices, scholars suggest reparative and process-oriented approaches to algorithms based on intersectional, decolonial feminist principles (Costanza-Chock 2020; Davis et al. 2021; Hampton 2023; Klein and D'Ignazio 2024) that reimagine algorithmic futures.

However, while some scholarship concentrates on queer subjects, a majority asserts the gendered implications of algorithms, where "gender" equals cisgender (DeCook 2021). This scholarship fails to focus on the material conditions and lived experiences of trans people and thus showcase the cisgender privilege in algorithmic critiques. While attention to all gendered violence is crucial, anti-trans violence demands more urgent research as it is yet underexplored and unveil aggravated, often opaque traces of colonial violence that disproportionately impact trans lives. Exploring the material realities and lived experiences of trans people in relation to algorithmic violence will encourage further critical studies of algorithms towards advancing intersectional, ethical, and liberatory algorithmic analyses.

Digital trans studies disrupt the idea that algorithms are inherently progressive, examine algorithmic implications for trans lives and how technologies are repurposed by trans people for counterpublics. Engaging with digital trans studies, as I do here, extends algorithmic analyses to focus on the fleshy, digital, and epistemological investments of how algorithms regulate and (re)form trans lives from their binary conceptualisation of life. As Hicks (2019) notes, "The computer system was explicitly designed to reinstate and strengthen not only the idea of static, permanent, immutable gender, but also to continue to uphold strictly binary gender. […] The problems of gender essentialism and gender binarism in technological systems continue to exist today, and are repeatedly built into ever more complex computing systems" (29). This suggests that algorithmic systems are hardcoded and designed to uphold the liveability of some subjects while letting others die, which, in turn, modulates transness as uncodeable and solidifies the cis-tem over time.

Within this cis-tem, trans people are subjected to algorithmic systems that regulate and control trans lives through colonial expectations of binary gender. This categorising control originated in and spread across bureaucratic realms: administrative violence in passport gender indicators (Quinan and Bresser 2020); birth certificates (Armstrong 2017) and health care registries and have now become embedded into and stretches over augmented forms of regulation through biometric security; algorithmic airport scanners (Clarkson 2019); cisnormative social media content moderation (Haimson et al. 2021; Mayworm et al. 2024); hostile algorithmic feedback loops (Shin 2024); automatic gender recognition technologies (Keyes 2018); AI-based health care systems (Chudy 2023); surveillance of gender normativity (Beauchamp 2019); and digital welfare services (Hicks 2019). Further scholarship points to the amplification of transphobia on social media, for example in Facebook's inability to decode gender normativity (Bivens 2017); TikTok's promotion of transphobic content and radicalisation of transphobia through feedback loops (Keith 2023) or by shadowbanning trans creators (Rauchberg 2022); Instagram's promotion of far right anti-trans media and censorship of trans bodies in favour of cis bodies (Parsons 2021); and Twitter's transformation into a transphobic echo chamber (Bauer 2023).

As accentuated by these scholars, algorithms infringe on trans lives in various ways by installing trans bodies as deceptive at the border; flagging trans bodies in airport scanners; removing trans content to favour cis content and entrenching transphobic views; misgendering trans identities and operationalising gender as trans-exclusive; providing trans people with wrong or life-threatening medical care from gendered logics; surveilling trans identities to cisnormative standards; and erasing trans access to welfare services. Trans scholars have thus unveiled some of the operations on which this cis-tem functions through flagging by security technologies, facial recognition that cements gender binarity, and limited gender options that leave us with strictly binary "male/female"-representation or "prefer not to say"-

erasure, all of which force trans people to conform to cisnormative infrastructures of life (Edinger 2021; Keyes 2018; Pennisi 2024; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012).

Such lines of trans algorithmic thought establish inquiries into the digital beyond technooptimism, recognise the differential violent logics of the "human" entangled within algorithms, and refuse being reduced to these limitations. In illustrating the confinements of current systems, these inquiries assemble embodied strategies to recode alternative forms of liveability beyond the webs of algorithmic deathworlds and towards liberatory means from the (im)possibility of trans existence. Importantly, as a trans scholar myself, this article is inherently grounded in and situated by my own experiences with algorithms while simultaneously accentuating and representing my fellow trans folks and their lived experiences of algorithmic violence. By opposing this cis-tem, this article follows similar lines of trans scholarship that investigates digital trans practices, resistances, and countermoves against algorithmic operations (cárdenas 2017; Haimson et al. 2020; Pow 2021).

Based on these notions, this article intervenes in and enriches scholarship on the crucial intersection between transness and algorithms and argues that trans people are situated in a "necropolitical moment" of death reverberating through digital spaces (cárdenas, 2017) and curating a networked algorithmic 'cis-tem', where the algorithmic gaze renders transness "unreadable" from this binary operational logic. As a result, transness is constructed as an unliveable life. Through trans algorithmic scholarship and the trans lived experiences in this article, algorithmic systems have shown to disproportionately (re)produce forms of racialised and gendered oppression based on colonial logics of binary essentialism (Danielsson et al. 2023; Lugones 2007; Tacheva and Ramasubramanian 2023) that implicate trans people in multiple facets of daily life. Algorithms classify subjects into gendered and racial categories that fail to recognise transness as a human legitimacy and lived possibility. As Conrad (2009) notes, "Surveillance techniques, themselves so intimately tied to information systems, put normative pressure on non-normative bodies and practices" (380). In other words, algorithms work on a coded default of the white cis man to which everything else is compared. This default creates senses of incomprehensibility which latch onto subjects that fall outside of this default. These affordances of the default cis white man not only equate to manual violence with ties to normative control over bodies, they also automate compliance with colonial cisheteronormativity (Ibrahim 2023; Scheuerman et al. 2021) to produce an undeniable "othering" of transness.

Since algorithms viciously trouble transness, the question arises: What are the implications of these violent and transphobic algorithms that are incapable of recognising, or even valuing, trans lives? In asking this question, this article is premised on the fact that algorithms are not distinct, neutral, or inherently progressive, but always already embodied with colonial and gendered power about who counts as "human" and, consequently, who matters and, by contrast, who becomes disposable. As such, algorithms not only neglect trans lives, but actively threaten trans liveability in an increasingly digital realm. Building on critical scholarship on algorithms, transness, and necropolitics, I examine the entanglement of transness and algorithms to show how trans-antagonistic algorithmic violence, grounded in ongoing colonial legacies, viciously affects trans lives and renders them unliveable. As such, I ask: How do algorithms perpetuate legacies of capitalist, colonial, and cisheteronormative anti-trans violence and radicalise transphobia?

Accordingly, this article takes into consideration embodied, affective, and material trans experiences, lives, and knowledges of algorithmic systems and how algorithms (1) reinforce transphobic feedback loops, (2) operate on a cisnormative default, and (3) generate capitalist profit from fear to (4) conclude by envisioning alternate algorithmic realities beyond the limitations of the current systems.

2. Situating the Cis-tem: Necropolitical Entanglements of Algorithms and Transness

2.1. Necropolitics: Algorithmic Trans Deathworlds

Necropolitics establishes a crucial link between critical scholarship on algorithms and digital trans liveability. This

link seeks to conceptualise the lethal logics through which the algorithmic gaze reads, rejects, and ratifies violence to make sense of the deathly, vicious, and opaque algorithmic operations on trans liveability.

So, how can we understand the underlying logics of algorithms as necropolitical incentives against trans liveability? Achille Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics describes "the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003, 39). While biopolitics concerns the sovereign politics of "life optimisation" with the intention of *making live*, necropolitics concerns the political mechanisms of death through *making die*. The "power to death" is central to the fabrication of transness as an enemy to state normativity, where this power to death triggers a state of exception that "refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy" (Mbembe 2003, 16). As Mbembe explains, this allows the juridical order to become suspended from the construction of threats and securitised worries around the normative population, which legitimises the state necessity to destruct the threat of non-normative bodies failing to conform to cisheteronormative temporalities of life.

Necropolitics generates "death worlds" as types of social existence where certain subjects are exiled from conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead* (a state of non-living, where certain lives are stuck under normative regulations of what counts as a liveable life). Ultimately, necropolitics exercises the power of defining who is disposable and who is not (Mbembe 2003, 27) based on the colonial instrumentalisation of the human as a deathly technology that claims the legitimacy of binary life and destructs deviating subjects. Linking necropolitics to algorithmic technologies, this article along strains of scholarship on algorithmic necropolitics (McQuillan 2022; Lewis 2023; Pele and Mulholland 2023; Pugliese 2016; Ricaurte 2022; Silva 2023; Wilcox 2017) further extends the notion of necropolitics to the algorithmic entanglement with trans bodies and argues that algorithms—through their coded inability to conceptualise life beyond binary notions of value—infringe a mode of necropolitical violence on trans liveability, render transness impossible and programme digital death worlds. Within these algorithmic codes of life and deaths, trans lives are forcibly situated based on binary algorithmic control and ingrained ideas of trans as unvalued. These algorithmic operations of "the automation of life and death generate two types of societies: those that concentrate the power of wealth, political-military control and knowledge and those that are subdued by that power." (Ricaurte 2022, 736). Algorithms structure a necropolitical cis-tem of coded value for lives, where cis lives are worthy of life investments and trans lives are structured by conditions of intelligibility, devaluation, and inscrutability. This speaks to how the "consequences of this logic efface the way power and life are maintained and reproduced through the deaths of certain others" (Snorton and Haritaworn 2019, 69), which predetermines trans lives as lives not to be grieved, but as an impossibility and as already dead.

Algorithms can thus be understood as a "new paradigmatic tool of necropolitics" (cárdenas 2017, 163), hence I argue that algorithms extend the necropolitical incentive directed at trans lives. Based on their inability to comprehend transness, algorithms reject trans liveability, encode transphobia, and act as "weapons deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds" (Mbembe 2003, 40). With their infinite connections, algorithms expand the territory of cisnormativity by eliminating non-normative bodies through the creation of these deathworlds, which inscribes deathworlds with potentials to intimately destroy the possibility of transness. Trans lives are—in comparison to cis lives—not sought as lives to sustain; rather, they are lives to make die and not considered as true possible lives to begin with. These algorithmic efforts to eradicate trans liveability are further catalysed as algorithms are widely believed to be unmistakeably correct, which enacts an algorithmic extension of the necropolitical legitimacy to programme trans unliveability as sensible and transness as killable without objections.

2.2. Gendered Violence, Algorithmic Violence

Finally, it becomes critical to name the reality of the perversive algorithmic implementation and articulate it for what it is: algorithmic violence. Onuoha (2018) describes algorithmic violence as "the violence that an algorithm or automated decision-making system inflicts by preventing people from meeting their basic needs" (2018, n.p). Algorithms are not decoding inequality, rather, the algorithmic reality "has the power to cloak and amplify existing [inequalities]" (Onuoha 2018, n.p) and make them unrecognisable: hidden, regimented, and camouflaged within the codes. Elements of transness, through falling through the binary cracks of the system, become statured as "[i]ndiscernible ele-

ments—in the sense that they are impossible to parse and hence understand—[that] compose a localized image that can be exposed in plain sight, but rests illegible" (Mollicchi 2017, 81). Trans bodies are exposed and the violence inflicted on trans bodies is allowed to hide in plain sight. The constant focus on "technical error," "systemic bias," or "human accidents" excuses the violence and ignores the ramifications for trans subjects and other minorities. An error that disproportionately falls on one part of the population is not a bias or a mistake: it is intentional and a radicalisation of violence.

I further Onuoha's definition of algorithmic violence as a conceptual framework for analysing the violence inflicted on trans, queer, Black, and other non-normative lives that captures the nuances of lived experiences with algorithms to criticise and unveil the harmful properties of algorithms. Indicating the non-accidental incentives of algorithms beyond bias and towards the coded exertion inscribed into the flesh of minority subjects, algorithms encrypt the white cisgender human as the artificial measuring technology, which imposes an even further aggravated coded impossibility for racialised trans people within the algorithmic cis-tem. These algorithmic assemblages (re)produce an interlocking mechanism of racialisation that intersects with transness as a form of unliveable life and thus reifies binary gendered and racialised notions against humanness; the possible "human" is not a neutral being, but an embodied figuration that includes and excludes certain subjects (Hall and Clapton 2021; Silva 2021) which is "corporealizing in terms of the racialized and gendered bodies it produces as either killable or manageable" (Wilcox 2017, 14). This automates the definition, determination, and violent decision not only of who becomes algorithmically possible, but also able to be considered and rendered as human. By furthering the notion of algorithmic violence, I attend to how algorithms are coded to embody, augment, and perpetuate legacies of colonial, capitalist, and cisnormative forms of oppression that infringe on and destroy minority rights, autonomy, personhood, and liveability. By interweaving critical algorithm studies, materiality of digital trans studies, and deathly notions of necropolitics, my work therefore extends trans analyses of algorithms as sociopolitically situated and sophisticated forms of violence that continue legacies of anti-trans hostility in a way that seeks to unveil the harms, amplify trans voices, and articulate visions for trans liberatory digital futures.

3. Methodology: Centring Trans Voices in Algorithmic Analyses

To further demonstrate the relationship between trans lives and algorithms, I draw on digital storytelling as a methodology to encapsulate trans algorithmic experiences and to centre trans voices. This methodological choice of digital storytelling serves a twofold goal: (1) centre trans voices in algorithmic analyses to suggest modes of unveiling and speaking back at algorithmic violence to (2) repurpose technology in anti-oppressive, creative, and trans-affirming ways that encourage trans autonomy over how the digital is embedded with their bodies, voices, and selves.

Digital storytelling dissolves the dichotomy of the human/non-human that rests at the core of Western colonial knowledge production and does not subscribe to trans erasure in digital technologies. Digital storytelling values trans-digital embodiments that span "the cinematic cuts and sutures between the visual and the spoken, between frames, and between genres are delinking and relinking practices of transfiguration" (Steinbock 2019, 2) towards liberatory accounts of algorithmic lives. A methodology that fails to centre the lived experiences of the oppressed will be in danger of reproducing the same violence, and it is through the voices of the marginalised subjects that "midwifery of liberating pedagogy" (Freire 1968, 33) is created, not *based on* but *from* the subjects themselves to counter cultures of erasure and control "both the story creation process and the manner in which identity and experience is articulated" (Vivienne 2011, 44).

In recruiting participants for my research, I circulated a call for participants through my social media platforms, on global digital forums, and as physical posters around Cambridge, England, to reach as many people as possible. In the call, trans people were invited to share their experiences related to living under algorithmic systems. The three participants are August (he/they) who is nonbinary genderfluid, white British and born in England; Thaiil (he/him) who is a trans man, Black Somali and born in England; and Wendy (she/her) who is white British and born in England. Given this Eurocentric context, it is crucial to state that despite algorithms reaching across state boundaries, the trans experiences presented in this article, while not uniform, are shaped and interpreted through political regulations

and cultural frames located in England, which inform the participants' narratives.

In confronting the academic dilemma between anonymity and agency, I asked: How do I ensure the safety of participants—under intensified global violence—without undermining agency? In a world that deliberately tries to erase transness, I asked each participant to choose how (in)visible they want to appear. All three participants chose not to be anonymous due to their commitment to activism and empowerment, hence their identities are made visible and appear as non-anonymous in this article.

The consent form and video guide were based on prompts such as: How do you feel living as a trans person within the algorithmic reality that (re)produces gender binarity as a form of control? How do you experience and embody your gender identity through the digital? Have you encountered cisheteronormative, capitalist, and colonialist structures in the digital? How can trans subjects take ownership and secure the digital as our own space? Based on the participants' responses, I employed a thematic coding, cross-referenced the most frequent topics, and sorted those topics into the following categories: (1) transphobic feedback loops, (2) default cisnormativity, (3) capitalism and exploitation and (4) future desires and digital joy.

Due to the precarity of visibility in times of global anti-trans sentiments, some potential participants opted out of this research prior to sharing their experiences due to the intensified political climate against trans lives, fears for their safety, or to protect their mental health, hence only three participants are included in this article. Nonetheless, the aim of this article is not to paint a universal picture of trans experiences or to acquire a fixed quantitative number of participants from which to generalise. Rather, the purpose is to centre trans voices, value the qualitative insights of lived experiences, and pave the way for future analyses that foreground trans experiences.

4. Algorithms Meet Transness: Trans (Un)Liveability & Algorithmic Violence

4.1. "Algorithms that reinforce transphobic ideas are a very real problem": Algorithmic spaces as engineered loops of transphobia

Algorithmic systems function on principles of violent legacies that worsen modes of oppression. So what happens when digital spaces, crucial to trans identity exploration, community, and activism, turn out to be networked loops of engineered transphobia? As Wendy states:

> Algorithms that reinforce transphobic ideas are a very real problem pretty much on every social media that I can think of because these social medias are built around keeping you engaged by feeding you content that you remain interested in. I have seen that very easily transphobic videos can quickly fill someone's feed with content and it would create a continuous cycle if they were continuing to engage with that [transphobic] content […] pushing someone further towards transphobic ideologies.

Wendy shares her experience with the insidious issue of algorithms that reinforce transphobic ideologies. Algorithmic drivers pose a threat across platforms because they are engineered to spread through feedback loops that prey on, latch onto, and haunt bodies on social media. The overarching neoliberal technohype centres the myth of the neutral algorithm, but if algorithms were neutral, they would not fill up feeds with transphobic content by automating the selection, ranking, and presentation of this content. Instead, as I have argued throughout this article, algorithms are infused by traces of violence that devalue transness and valorise transphobia.

Algorithms are not merely intensifying cycles of and spaces for transphobic views to flourish, but they are also built to forward transphobic content by default and valuate this as a priority to the system; hence creating the power of the "cis-tem." Algorithms are—through the colonial and cisnormative logics of human (de)valuation—coded to push anti-trans content and valuate transphobia as a legitimate computational priority for users. According to Media Matters (2021), even one like on a slightly anti-trans leaning video floods your feed with transphobic content on TikTok. Media Matters found that "it began with repetitive 'jokes' berating transgender and LGBTQ people [... but as] we

watched and interacted with more videos, the content fed to our FYP [For You Page] became increasingly violent" (2021, n.p.). In this study, the feedback loop also forwarded coded homophobic, misogynistic, racist, white supremacist, far right, and minority violence-endorsing videos. For example, looking at one anti-trans videos and exploring the first 400 recommended videos on the FYP, fostered 103 videos that contained anti-trans content along with many others that contained violent, far-right content and accompanying systems of violence and disinformation (Media Matters 2021).

The Media Matters report illustrates how algorithmic systems are not programmed to value transness but engineered to support patterns of violence, extend disinformation, and automate transphobic content. As virtual bodies navigate these spaces, they are subjected to coded calls to violence through transphobic content that becomes exponentially more hostile and aggressive. These coded calls also enable a form of algorithmic control over transphobia in digital spaces. Herein, "lives are supported and maintained differently [….] Certain lives will be highly protected [while] Other lives will not […] even qualify as 'grieveable' (Butler 2004, 32). This quotation gestures to how algorithms function on logics of grieveability and perpetuate historical rationales that mark transness as lives acceptable to violate because they are not grieveable. The violent legacies of trans hostility are coded into the history of data from our views, clicks, likes, comments, and shares, which legitimises continuous transphobia and the devaluation of trans lives. This, in turn, creates a global algorithmic anti-trans network that emphasises the verity of algorithmic violence engineered into these platforms. Since algorithms do not filter anti-transness out, the feedback mechanisms create virtual motions of trans violence that reverberate infinitely—trapping trans lives in an incessant necropolitical digital deathworlds.

Algorithms go beyond initiating feedback loops of violence. Algorithms are not simply forwarding predictive content based on user behaviour, but this "personalised content" is calculated based on entrenched historical affiliations between queerness and violence which stem from societal norms that legitimise initiating harm and subjecting trans people to violence. August, one of my study's participants, explains:

> When you're interacting with a lot of queer content, you get shown people responding to anti queer content. And then it just stacks up. It stacks up over time [….] I then have to see it. I then have to see the bad thing the person says.

In addition to furthering anti-trans violence through transphobic content, algorithms actively trap trans bodies in digital confinements where, as August states, *facing* violence becomes a requisite of access to and existence on these platforms. In this way, trans existence on social media platforms is impossible without violence because anti-trans violence always already lurks in the coded background through feedback mechanisms. This resembles historical mechanisms of control, discrimination, and violence in the physical world that trans people have had to endure to exist in society. Even when interacting solely with trans- and queer-positive content, the violence remains bound to trans bodies as existential temporalities subjected to the endless reverberating necropolitical domination. The requisite, gradual stacking-up of anti-trans violence forced onto trans bodies creates toxic breeding grounds for this algorithmic devaluation "sticking" to transness and further entrenches transphobia into the fabrics of algorithmic systems

4.2. "A cis white man […] would possibly get a wider reach just for the same amount of work that I'm doing": The algorithmic cisnormative default

Algorithmic systems do more than facilitate spaces for transphobia. Rather, algorithms—through the embodied colonial and cisnormative logics of human (de)valuation—invoke a compulsory cisnormative default, which trans people are valued against and cannot be valued within because in the binary, they are erased from legitimate existence. Within this algorithmic valuation complex, the normative power relations of heterosexuality, whiteness, and cisness form a matrix of domination and constitute an interlocking privileged default, where the content forwarded not only caters to this default, but the bodies valued are compared to the coded white cis man. If we consider this default as an "algorithmic cisheteronormativity," what happens to those who do not conform to this algorithmic body politics of cisheteronormative legitimacy? Examining the legacies of algorithmic violence and underlying cisnormativity, August highlights their experience of the encoded "cisnormative default," where trans people are forced to perform a cis-

normative body politics for the algorithms in order to be valued appropriately:

> I imagine that […] a cis white man […] would possibly get a wider reach just for the same amount of work that I'm doing. […] I'm not stepping that far outside of what the algorithms and such would consider to be troublesome.

August gestures to the ominous reality of how algorithms function on a default of the white cis man against which everyone else is valued and how this is a constant form of surveillance. In addition to transphobic loops and cisheteronormative default, trans lives are subjected to predatory algorithmic surveillance. Trans people experience explicit targeting and outing of their identities. They are pushed to isolated margins of the platforms. Their content is impelled to hypervisibility or invisibility (DeVito 2021; Rauchberg 2022). They have their accounts cancelled or they need extra backup accounts. August further explains these implications:

> I know that a lot of them [my friends] have had issues with predatory algorithms singling them out, alienating them, being shadowbanned, having their accounts removed, needing to make backup accounts, things like that. I know that it is definitely something that is affecting people near to me. I have no idea if my own reach is being hindered by my queer and, otherwise marginalised identities as a neurodivergent disabled trans person.

These algorithmic implications not only inflict intensified logics of devaluation and intimate targeting and ostracism of trans lives, but infuse senses of algorithmic anxiety as a form of emotional labour. Trans people are required to rely on extra precautions, to continuously worry about whether they are being hindered by cisnormativity, binarism, ableism, and other trans antagonisms in the digital realm. For August, this catalyses a constant ghostly worry around *if* or *when* they are stepping outside the normative coded barriers of the cis-tem.

Since algorithms are not coded to valorise trans bodies or labour, but rather assign more value to white cis men's work, who is imagined as the default subject? Underlying the system's default and valuation, algorithms embody the cisnormative ideal of the "human" as a sophisticated technology. This technology operates to measure, rank, and determine who is algorithmically possible and valorised as "human" based on whether they conform to the white cisnormative body politics (Wilcox 2017). August's suspicion that their transness is not valorised and frustrated doubts as to whether their content does not have the same reach as the content of cis white men is borne out by existing scholarship that demonstrates how queer content is subjected to higher degrees of censorship, suspicion, surveillance, and erasure of content, particularly when queer people express their marginalised identities (Mayworm et al. 2024). The reproduction of existing power becomes integral to continuing the infrastructures of power that sustain white cisheteronormativity as an invisible default against which all else is "othered" (Rosinski 2021).

By encapsulating algorithmic cisheteronormativity, there exists a coded boundary I refer to as the "normativity border." This boundary points to the regulatory barriers of human normativity within algorithmic systems. Gendered subjects must stay within bounds to be evaluated as acceptable forms of life. Moving outside of this normativity border equals aberrating from normativity and into a territory of perceived deviance. It entails drifting into the necropolitical zone of permissible killing where trans bodies are considered dangers to the system, thereby continuing the binary colonial classification of bodies. As this valorisation draws on the historical violence of white cisheteronormativity as hegemonic default, both the physical and computational reality of the white cisgender male masquerades as the data that is ubiquitously loaded as the default "human." In this valorisation of humanness, trans people challenge the gendered assumptions of algorithms in two ways: "categorically (through the rejection of binary gender) and conceptually (through resistance to singular, fixed meanings)" (Hoffmann 2017, 9). This double refusal of the default leads to an automatic algorithmic necropolitical marking of transness as illegitimate and eliminable from the challenges presented to the systems.

The necropolitical marking of trans bodies as devalued threats to let cisheteronormative bodies live is energised by algorithmic power to expand the ruling over transness to sustain the valorisation of cisness. This means the sociopolitical valuation underlying the "reach" is infused with a capitalist, cisheteronormative matrix of value or death, where trans bodies do not reach as far as white, cisgender bodies. By existing against these norms, trans bodies diverge out-

side of the border and into the necropolitical zone, where they are made to die. In the algorithmic realm, forces of cisheteronormativity administer and gatekeep the acceptability of bodies. As Thaiil explains:

> It feels like any attempt to include me in media is met with fierce opposition to it as though the inclusion of trans people in the discussion is somehow exclusive. […] We are also excluded when companies ask for our data and they really want to know what gender we are.

Thaiil mentions the fierce opposition to the inclusion of trans people, visible through the ciscoded algorithmic gaze, which renders transness incomprehensible. Consequently, trans people are forcefully excluded from participating in digital spaces that relate to their own conditions. Other than the aforementioned algorithmic anxiety and targeting of trans accounts, algorithmic violence also enacts a predatory surveillance, which reinforces compulsory cisnormativity in bodies, where data disclosure of gender must fall inside the binary. This ultimately exposes trans people to violent visibility traps, where the status of visibility acts as a trap for further anti-trans violence and where the very exposure to violence entraps trans lives within the constructed inevitability of violence. These virtual bounds on trans bodies are intended to ensure that visibility is only utilised by normative identities that fit into the legitimate assemblages of power, and where gendered digital traces are snatched up by algorithms to sell.

Conrad (2009) calls the "informatization of the body," the process by which bodies are coded as bodies-of-information for the purpose of data production. This process inevitably puts disproportionate pressure on nonnormative bodies to become available, visible, and traceable without being rendered as legitimate subjects. Rather, nonnormative bodies are made vulnerable to the necropolitical facilitation of death because they do not conform to the immutable encoded gender binary. As a result, we are invisibilised, penalised, or erased from digital spaces and denied access to the very spaces affecting our states of (un)liveability. Effectively, the automated yet invisible routinised nature of these discriminatory defaults make algorithms more insidious and poisonous to trans lives. Simultaneously, the cisnormative racialised logics of humanness coded into algorithmic systems become cloaked as they are repeated. These logics entrench transness within a self-referencing system that becomes nearly impossible to prove or reject.

4.3. "It is a system that benefits from my fear": Algorithmic capitalism, fear, and transphobia

Connected to the engineered loops of transphobia and the cisnormative default, participants expressed how algorithms exacerbate transphobia through capitalist logics, which—by catalysing cycles of transphobic content and devaluing trans lives to only valorise bodies that fit the cisnormative default—function as a strategised form of digitalised emotional appropriation that installs fear, anxiety, and exhaustion in trans people to generate profit. August notably expresses:

> Social media at the moment, it's profiting off of making marginalized people feel scared, or angry, or hurt. It profits off harming us. […] The people in power benefit from me being afraid, and from making me afraid, and from setting up these systems to scare me, to frighten me.

Essentially, August describes the exploitative system of algorithmic capitalism. As a modern form of political control, digital artefacts take a novel approach in appropriating digitised lives for economic gain. This hegemonic system of algorithmic capitalism operates and thrives on a penetrating gaze to harvest our intimate data (Zuboff 2019). This process infects the inner emotions of trans lives and triggers fear, anger, hurt, and anxiety as digital cogs ensure capital accumulation for companies such as Meta, X Corp, and ByteDance.

Human emotions constitute the foundation of our social reality and interactions and constitute core attributes of our intimate lives and are therefore key components in acquiring economic power through technological dominance. As algorithms function on historical legacies of capitalism, this commodification has become central to the digital economy, where emotions are exploited as *techno-emodities* (Llamas and Belk 2022). These commodified emotions are entangled between the trans subject and algorithms, where they appropriate emotional affects, but also feed these feelings—fear, anxiety, and hurt—back into the system (Llamas and Belk 2022, 231). Engaging with algorithms means engaging with an affective technologisation of trans feelings that elicits emotional responses and simultaneously logs them for capitalist surveillance. Consequently, as Thaiil expresses, capitalism inflicts feelings of involun-

tary alienation from one's own trans body:

> Being trans digitally is the definition of floating beyond your flesh. You are alienated from your working cogs, your parts, which work to keep you alive […] as they are picked apart and discussed by everybody, all with different faces and in letters and images and writings.

Trans lived experiences of algorithms are marked by segregation from one's own flesh, where transness is dissected and exhibited. This dissection sustains the algorithmic capitalist system through the circulation of trans suffering, alienation, and fear as affective states to be turned into profit. To be datafied and commodified is to generate profit by upholding cisnormative bodies as the "mode of population disaggregation between those incited to life and those consigned to death" (Puar 2007, xxxiv). In other words, trans oppression is bound up with death under the production of cisnormative value within capitalism, where trans bodies become digitalised objects of exploitation. As August notes, this exploitation is achieved by inflicting emotional harm on trans subjects by "setting up scare systems" that point to how algorithms extend necropolitical incentives to subjugate trans existence to capitalist goals.

The notion of algorithmic capitalism can be understood as an intimate surveillance technology based on emotional exploitation and commodification. August shares that being subjected to invasive surveillance practices and possessing awareness of weightier scrutiny and control over trans bodies leads to a "gradual build-up of fear":

> Even if I don't immediately recognise that I am being frightened, over time there is a gradual build-up of fear.

Algorithmic surveillance not only succeeds by functioning as an immediate, visible control of bodies but also from the hovering uncertain yet "expected" potential of infusing pervasive, unpredictable fear in trans bodies *sooner or later*. The effectiveness of algorithmic capitalist exploitation of trans bodies comes from inflicting fear-related feelings and logging these feelings. Importantly, this fear is produced *in advance* of the expected harm, such that this gradual build-up of fear is not immediately recognised, where the build-up of fear allows the algorithmic oppression of trans bodies to go unnoticed for longer. It enables the algorithm to operate more invasively on trans bodies. In effect, algorithmic violence operates as microdose of violence, which over time inflicts more distress. The ultimate power of this pervasive algorithmic surveillance system lies in its ability to inflict a slower and more painful necropolitical death that profits the cisheteronormative capitalist economy.

The capitalist logic works to sustain the cisnormative and racialised assemblages embodying digital technologies and the overarching pursuit for profit by the big tech companies responsible for these platforms. Capitalist suppression of transness is intended to sustain cisnormativity and profit from the same system: make trans people feel hurt, scared, and alienated by being "picked apart" through trans-antagonistic algorithms, and turn the emotional responses into commodified data. As a result, this process constructs an interlocking affective necropolitical data economy through ensembles of trans suffering systematically circulated in the system.

4.4. Trans Radical Futures: Algorithmic Desires and Liberatory Digital Futures

To reject the encoded necropolitical deaths situated in the algorithmic systems, it is crucial to discuss, carve out, and ground affirming alternatives in trans desires that transcend the current state of algorithmic violence. All three participants mentioned how they—despite the overarching issues of algorithmic violence and transphobia—feel desire for and have hope for the future design and development of technologies catered to trans identities, trans joy, and community care. Wendy articulates:

> I think an important thing to come at this is that social media should be held accountable. They should make sure that hateful content does not get picked up by the algorithm in the same way most content would. Despite this though, I do have a lot of hope for the digital future for the transgender community. I think it is a very helpful place that can have a lot of people together. It is a very good source of information for transgender people that I think in real life they wouldn't have access to.

One way of addressing this violence, Wendy mentions, concerns algorithmic accountability. Algorithms must be pro-

grammed to filter out hateful content and restrict the masses of automated harm directed at trans lives to embrace transness as an impossible and legitimate form of life. Moving beyond the technooptimist belief in simple auditing and neoliberal forms of accountability, a trans-centred accountability within algorithmic systems demands a recoding of algorithms to not "stick" to transphobic content, where the coded infrastructure of algorithms do not pick up on, endlessly loop or valorise transphobic assemblages to move beyond how mundane moderation "reproduce the very same [violent colonial legacies and racialised] gendered tropes on which more explicit anti-trans rhetoric and violence are predicated" (Jereza 2022, n.p.). This need for algorithmic efforts to counter the aggravation of coded transphobia become especially poignant following the removal of anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech content moderation by Meta (GLAAD 2025) that only further embeds algorithmically encouraged forms of violence and harm towards trans people digitally.

Instead, trans thought suggests inhabiting the (im)possibility of the deathworlds in which trans bodies have otherwise been forced exist in order to refuse, resist and reimagine the inevitable digital world. This form of accountability requires conscious and continuous ethical algorithmic commitments for trans lives stretching from the tech companies coding our technologies, the nation states implementing the algorithmic infrastructures and the individual coders producing and embedding their binary language. Through these forms of justice-based commitments, and examining of the enmeshment of legacies, histories, and infrastructures that actively unveil and criticise the global expansion of algorithmic systems that encode and strengthen the coloniality of gender binarity as the epistemic mechanism of control over life and death.

Wendy also notes the joyfulness of digital trans spaces, where trans people are united across borders, spatial differences, and temporalities. These spaces are central to fostering community care and knowledge sharing, otherwise not as easily accessible in the physical world. In these digital spaces, trans people can access resources and seek information, which highlights digital spaces as trans spaces of unity. As affirming spaces, algorithmic systems must be transcoded to produce "adaptive and flexible processes that underscore the political potential of dismantling binary systems" (Duffy and Acierto 2024, 77). By decoding the binary assumptions, colonial erasure, and normalised punishment of trans people for not fitting into the normative boundaries, algorithmic technologies must embody and assemble as digital spaces that make trans existence possible. Here, the otherwise encoded necropolitical valorisation does not rule or even exist. Instead, the value and possibility of lives become pluralistic, fluid, and mutable to liberate all digital temporalities.

August expresses their wishes for the digital future to be:

> ...somewhere that you have control of what your output is [where] there's no overarching capitalist system that is taking your work and [the] ability to forge your identity in a space that is outside of your own physical body.

August shares that they wish for the digital to turn into spheres where trans people are in *control* instead of functioning as spaces *controlled* by algorithms. They wish the outputs were not governed by engineered logics or predetermined from historical residues of capitalist exploitation, colonialist essentialism, i.e. the strict colonial essentialist imposition of binary gender, and cisnormative ideal of the body. This notion of *control* encompasses the power of reasserting ownership and entitles the trans-embodied right to their own work without being subjected to exploitation and the devalorising of trans labour. Thereby, the digital is envisioned as spaces to experience oneself outside of the physical restrains of the body that is neither tied to a fleshy form, cisnormative restrictions, or capitalist commodification. Instead, in the digital, the trans body is free.

As a desire for trans algorithmic futures, Thaiil offers concluding comments:

> My hope for the future is that we'll […] make our safety global. We aid each other, house each other, feed and love each other. […] This will be free of capitalism. The financial exploit of our bodies. And we'd not be trans anything, or cis anything. We'd be normal.

Thaiil articulates the queer desire for the algorithms to foster spaces for global safety, mutual aid, and love as constant,

non-negotiable conditions for trans liveability. In this desire, mutual aid is the "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (Spade 2020, 7). Powerfully, Thaiil speaks to how the "productive approach is not to fix harmful algorithms, but to 'un-invent' them […] to the point where a harmful algorithm is not just deployed, but never made; to the point where the idea of making an algorithm harmful in a particular way is simply unintelligible" (Keyes and Austin 2022, 10). In this context, oppressive algorithmic practices are unlearnt, abolished, and imagined into liberatory futures. Importantly, the violence—and not the transness—become unintelligible to the algorithms. These liberatory systems do not rely on exploitation of bodies and dispossession of lives. They dismantle the relations of capitalist power, colonial extraction, and cisnormative control. Crucially, this liberatory figuration dissolves the ruling dichotomy between normative and non-normative bodies. Thereby, trans lives are not devalued by necropolitical forces, but the differentiation between bodies that are valuable and bodies that are disposable is eradicated. By forming digital and physical reality where multiplicity is the default, trans lives are freed of confinement, objectification, and expectations. Within this novel digital reality, trans lives are liberated and thoroughly humanised.

5. Conclusion: Algorithmic Transphobia and Trans Futures

Algorithmic violence matters, as do trans experiences of it. This article analyses the intersections between algorithms and transness by tracing the colonial and cisnormative legacies perpetuated by algorithms. Extending this beyond technooptimist ideas of bias and centring trans experiences, this article advances critical insights on algorithms, digital trans scholarship, and necropolitics. Using the lens of algorithmic violence, the article unveils the vicious algorithmic operations on transness and (re)production of trans lives as unliveable to highlight trans-affirming desires for algorithmic futures.

First, algorithmic violence is enacted through feedback loops of transphobia and initiates gradually radicalised cycles of transphobic content. Trans people experience how algorithms advance harmful disinformation and perpetuate violent transphobic ideas. Algorithms are—through the colonial and cisnormative logics of human (de)valuation—coded to value anti-trans content as a computational priority. Since algorithms do not erase anti-transness, the feedback mechanisms create motions of violence that reverberate infinitely and trap trans lives in necropolitical deathworlds. As a result, trans people experience increased algorithmic surveillance, censorship, content suppression, shadowbanning and blockings. This inflicts an affective sense of devaluation of transness, but also ignites algorithmic anxiety about unsafety for trans lives in comparison to cisheteronormative lives. These algorithms mandate exposure to violence if one wants access to and exist in digital spaces in an inescapably algorithmic world. This shows that algorithms mark trans lives as ungrieveable which further legitimises the continuous devaluation of trans lives in global anti-trans networks.

Second, algorithmic violence and transphobia result from the cisheteronormative default. Algorithms operate through the embodied colonial and cisnormative logics of human (de)valuation, where the algorithmic valuation operates on a matrix of whiteness and cisness that constitute an invisible and compulsory privileged default—cisgender man— against which other content and bodies are valued. As trans bodies do not conform to the algorithmic body politics of white cisheteronormativity, they are pushed outside of the normativity border that constitutes "human" and legitimate lives. This means that the digital "reach" is situated within a matrix of death, where transness does not reach as far as white cis lives. By existing against this default, trans bodies diverge into the necropolitical zone and are made to die, catalysing a ghostly worry of *when* they outstep these barriers.

Third, algorithmic violence is accentuated through capitalism and fear, since existing as trans entitles an alienation from one's own flesh as transness is dissected to sustain algorithmic capitalism and trans suffering is circulated to generate profit. Participants express how the capitalist logic inflicts feelings of fear, hurt, and anxiety in trans bodies that are turned into digital drivers to ensure capital accumulation. The algorithmic surveillance catalyses emotional responses, but particularly operates on the expected potential of infusing fear *at some point,* which haunts trans bodies as an unpredictability that gradually builds up over time. This allows the algorithmic violence to stay unrecognised

for longer, grants invasive access to trans lives, and instantiates slower necropolitical deaths to sustain the cisheteronormative capitalist economy.

Fourth, trans people express excitement about potential algorithmic futures and emphasise need for greater algorithmic accountability and a core responsibility to filter out transphobic content. Such a lens on accountability must address the asymmetrical architectures of power and infrastructures of epistemic violence in relation to historic roots of state control, surveillance practices, and normative regulations of trans bodies embedded in and accentuated through algorithms. Further, participants remain hopeful about the potential for algorithmic technologies to enable community care and knowledge-sharing together with desires of hardwiring trans control over algorithms to diffuse transphobia and capitalist exploitation of bodily autonomy and liberation. Lastly, they express desires to expand algorithmic possibilities beyond bodily restraints to, rather, serve as vehicles for global safety, mutual aid, and dissolution of the violent dichotomy of normative/non-normative bodies.

Algorithms radicalise traces of colonial cisnormativity. They entrench an automatised continuation of violence against trans liveability by enforcing transphobic ideas of the algorithmically possible human that assemble a cis-tem of oppression. Despite this interlocking system of violence, trans communities encode resistance, dismantle and reimagine this cis-tem, and remain excited about the algorithmic potential of curating autonomous and liberatory trans digital futures.

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Pressing Matters: How AI Irons Out Epistemic Friction and Smooths Over Diversity

by Nicole Ramsoomair

Abstract: This paper explores how Large Language Models (LLMs) foster the homogenization of both style and content and how this contributes to the epistemic marginalization of underrepresented groups. Utilizing standpoint theory, the paper examines how biased datasets in LLMs perpetuate testimonial and hermeneutical injustices and restrict diverse perspectives. The core argument is that LLMs diminish what Jose Medina calls "epistemic friction," which is essential for challenging prevailing worldviews and identifying gaps within standard perspectives, as further articulated by Miranda Fricker (Medina 2013, 25). This reduction fosters echo chambers, diminishes critical engagement, and enhances communicative complacency. AI smooths over communicative disagreements, thereby reducing opportunities for clarification and knowledge generation. The paper emphasizes the need for enhanced critical literacy and human mediation in AI communication to preserve diverse voices. By advocating for critical engagement with AI outputs, this analysis aims to address potential biases and injustices and ensures a more inclusive technological landscape. It underscores the importance of maintaining distinct voices amid rapid technological advancements and calls for greater efforts to preserve the epistemic richness that diverse perspectives bring to society.

Keywords: algorithmic bias; artificial intelligence; echo chambers; epistemic friction; epistemic injustice; standpoint theory

Résumé : Cet article examine la façon dont les grands modèles de langage (GML) favorisent l'homogénéisation du style et du contenu et dont ils contribuent à la marginalisation épistémique des groupes sous-représentés. En s'appuyant sur la théorie du point de vue, l'article explique comment les ensembles de données biaisés des GML perpétuent les injustices testimoniales et herméneutiques et limitent les différents points de vue. L'argument principal est que les GML atténuent ce que Jose Medina appelle la « friction épistémique », qui est essentielle pour remettre en question les visions du monde qui sont prédominantes et déceler les lacunes dans les points de vue courants, comme l'explique Miranda Fricker (Medina 2013, 25). Cette réduction favorise les chambres d'écho, diminue l'engagement critique et renforce la complaisance dans la communication. L'IA concilie les désaccords de communication, réduisant ainsi les possibilités de clarification et de création du savoir. L'article souligne la nécessité d'améliorer la littératie critique et la médiation humaine dans la communication par l'IA afin de préserver la diversité des voix. En préconisant un engagement critique à l'égard des résultats de l'IA, cette analyse vise à lutter contre les préjugés et les injustices potentiels et à garantir un environnement technologique plus inclusif. Elle souligne l'importance de maintenir des voix distinctes dans un contexte où la technologie évolue rapidement et appelle à redoubler d'efforts pour préserver la richesse épistémique que les différents points de vue apportent à la société.

Mots clés : biais algorithmique; intelligence artificielle; chambres d'écho; friction épistémique; injustice épistémique; théorie du point de vue

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1. Introduction

Often described as "auto-complete on steroids," Large Language Models (LLMs) are sophisticated computational algorithms designed to analyze, interpret, and synthesize text with human-like comprehension (qtd. in Meuse 2023). LLMs can recognize and replicate syntactic structures and connections in sentences and paragraphs which allows them to efficiently generate organized content, thereby reducing the need for extensive manual edits and facilitating accessible content creation. However, this proficiency may inadvertently dilute the distinctiveness of a user's "voice" and flatten the intricacies of communication. This article argues that the trend toward content homogenization, accelerated by the capabilities of LLMs, exacerbates the epistemic marginalization of underrepresented social identity groups. The limited datasets used for training these systems may normalize expression in ways that undermine individuality and hinder knowledge generation.

This article contributes to the evolving discourse on AI by demonstrating the relevance of standpoint theory in epistemology and by drawing on works such as those by Miranda Fricker (2007), Charles Mills (1997), and José Medina (2013). Fricker's analysis of epistemic injustice highlights the communal nature of knowledge creation, enriched by diverse experiences. Conceptual negotiation, involving the exchange and reconciliation of perspectives through dialogue, fosters broader viewpoints and critical reflection. However, the smoothing of communicative edges reduces what Medina identifies as "epistemic friction," understood as the productive tension arising from the interaction of differing, often conflicting, epistemic viewpoints (Medina 2013, 75). However, with the increasing insularity and exclusivity of knowledge generation, AI replicates biases that favour dominant perspectives. AI-mediated communication exacerbates real-world asymmetries, thereby amplifying the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of marginalized experiences and narrowing the diversity of perspectives represented through these platforms.

Section 2 begins by examining how knowledge generation can reflect power dynamics that marginalize groups through epistemic injustices and biased AI systems, which in turn perpetuate systemic inequalities and restrict access to and participation in collective epistemic resources. Sections three, four, and five of this paper illustrate these effects by showing how AI encourages complacency in communication. The ease of communication offered by LLMs may reduce disagreements and necessary communicative impasses, enhancing echo chambers and reducing opportunities for critical engagement. Despite these potential drawbacks, however, the article concludes by advocating for enhanced critical literacy to address the limitations of LLMs (Tanksley 2024). Such literacy can increase awareness and protect against these diminishing effects, emphasizing the essential role of human mediation. Overall, this analysis aims to stimulate discussion of the epistemic effects of AI innovations and underscore the importance of preserving distinct voices and perspectives amid rapid technological advancements.

2. The Generation of Knowledge

Communal epistemic resources are central to societal progress, yet the processes of knowledge acquisition and distribution often reflect underlying power dynamics, resulting in an uneven allocation of benefits and burdens. Interests shape cognition at all levels, which influences perception, interpretation, classification, and the selection of facts and frameworks. Miranda Fricker (2007) outlines two intertwined processes through which knowledge production accentuates structural inequalities and power imbalances: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (9, 147).

Testimonial injustice occurs when biases undermine a speaker's credibility, which results in the dismissal of their testimony and the opportunity to contribute to shared knowledge (Fricker 2007, 6). This exclusion precipitates hermeneutical injustice, which manifests when individuals or groups lack the conceptual tools necessary to interpret and articulate their personal experiences, particularly those associated with social harm (Fricker 2007, 147). This injustice stems from gaps in a society's collective interpretative resources, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

These groups experience "hermeneutical marginalization," characterized by their exclusion and subordination from participating in the creation and interpretation of collective social meanings (Fricker 2007, 152). Consequently, these groups are disadvantaged in making sense of their own social experiences. This issue is both morally and politically significant; it represents a form of powerlessness, wherein the affected group lacks the necessary interpretive tools to fully understand and communicate their experiences. The lack of language and conceptual tools that accurately reflect the experiences of marginalized individuals within the available hermeneutical resources impedes their ability to articulate their experiences. This gap also hinders others from understanding these experiences, which can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. The dominant epistemic framework lacks the resources to adequately capture these experiences, thus perpetuating a cycle of marginalization. This situation reinforces existing power structures by privileging the dominant group's interpretive frameworks and dismissing or altering the experiences of marginalized individuals to fit these frameworks. As a result, the misrepresentations further entrench marginalization and diminish the epistemic agency of those affected, as their authentic voices and insights are neither acknowledged nor valued within the dominant discourse.

Further, despite widespread recognition of counter-epistemologies, hermeneutical gaps often persist. Linda Martín Alcoff (2007) contends that this ignorance is not simply an accidental oversight that can be corrected by providing additional information; rather, it is structural and resistant to counterclaims and further evidence. Dominant groups, according to Alcoff, "have less interest" in challenging the status quo and "have a positive interest in 'seeing the world wrongly'" (Alcoff 2007, 47). The prevailing social understandings within the hermeneutical resource allow individuals to rationalize their interpretive choices, justifying omissions and emphases that maintain power. This enables individuals to avoid confronting their own ignorance by perceiving the world as complete, even though it represents only one framework among many. Consequently, the exclusionary hermeneutical resource exemplifies how "epistemologies of ignorance" are sustained (Mills 1997, 18).

Charles Mills (1997) describes epistemologies of ignorance as involving a "particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will, in general, be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (18). This ignorance is not merely a lack of knowledge but an active production of misunderstanding that serves to uphold existing power structures. By dismissing or invalidating the lived experiences of marginalized groups, the dominant framework perpetuates epistemic injustice. The result is a cyclical reinforcement of ignorance, where the dominant group remains unaware of or indifferent to the systemic inequalities and biases that shape their understanding of the world. Worse, this dominant framework often positions the voices of marginalized individuals to be disregarded or deflected, thereby ensuring that even when these individuals speak out, their perspectives are often ignored or silenced. This dynamic maintains the asymmetry in hermeneutical resources, as the dominant group's interpretive frameworks are privileged and further testimonial and hermeneutical injustice is perpetuated. The epistemic marginalization thus created prevents marginalized groups from contributing meaningfully to the collective understanding of society, which reinforces the power dynamics that keep them in a subordinate position. Consequently, the dominant group's worldview remains unchallenged and unchanged, further entrenching the systemic inequalities that epistemologies of ignorance help sustain.

Marginalized groups face significant challenges to having their experiences acknowledged within broader societal discourse due to epistemic injustices and epistemologies of ignorance. Despite the detrimental effects, feminist standpoint theory suggests that this frustration may also offer epistemological advantages. Standpoint theory exposes the limitations of dominant frameworks that fail to include the experiences of marginalized groups and reveals the artificial and contingent nature of these frameworks. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) describes this as the "outsider within" perspective, which highlights the unique vantage point of those who are both part of and separate from dominant ideologies (514).

By occupying diverse perspectives, marginalized individuals can identify the inherent flaws and biases in dominant epistemic structures due to the generation of "epistemic friction" (Medina 2013, 207). The conflicts between their lived experiences and prevailing frameworks create a "double vision" or "multiplicitous" consciousness. This diverse perspective allows marginalized individuals to see the world from multiple angles and generate a conceptual disson-

ance that results in epistemic friction between perspectives. Epistemic friction is a critical source of comparative insights that emerges from the interaction of diverse cognitive perspectives and social experiences that challenge and resist one another. The diverse perspective of marginalized groups can illuminate how dominant frameworks obscure or distort reality and can foster critical awareness and drive potential epistemic and social transformation. Therefore, while systemic marginalization perpetuates epistemic injustice, it also equips marginalized individuals with a diverse perspective that can challenge and contest the inadequacies of the prevailing epistemic order, thereby promoting a more inclusive and equitable discourse.

It is important to note that the diverse perspective does not inherently produce truth but rather provides marginalized individuals with heightened awareness of the artificiality in dominant interpretive frameworks which provides an epistemic advantage. Alison Wylie (2012) suggests that "differential access to evidence is rarely an advantage on its own" (347). The epistemic advantage is not automatically accrued by residing in a particular social location; instead, "standpoint theorists often point to a special inferential acuity, a skill at discerning patterns and connections in the available evidence that goes along with sub-dominant status" (Wylie 2012, 347). That is, navigating various cultural contexts results in a diverse perspective that equips marginalized groups—such as people of colour, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals—with a deeper understanding and the ability to identify incongruities between perspectives.

The perspectives of marginalized groups are diverse, shaped by the Intersections of various oppressions, which leads to unique experiences. What these groups share is that their experiences are situated at the periphery of social discourse, creating a dissonance between dominant understandings and their actual lived realities. Privileged individuals, immersed in epistemologies of ignorance, avoid confronting knowledge gaps and overlook the daily realities faced by marginalized groups. Medina (2013) refers to this as "meta-blindness," where individuals inhabit a flattened social reality that prioritizes their own experiences and renders them ignorant of their ignorance (78). For clarity and to contrast this position with those produced by epistemic friction, I will refer to this sort of ignorance as a singular, rather than diverse, perspective.

Homogenization of Content

Standpoint theory posits that knowledge is influenced by individual social positions and emphasizes that marginalized groups can offer unique insights into social structures. It challenges the notion of an objective "view from nowhere," and advocates instead for a "view from everywhere" to fill in hermeneutical gaps where they occur. This approach aims to synthesize multiple viewpoints for a more holistic understanding of reality. However, technological advancements often fail to achieve this epistemic ideal. For instance, while the internet and social media were initially celebrated for democratizing information and enabling grassroots organization, these platforms have been compromised by corporate interests, echo chambers, and polarization. Algorithms that prioritize engagement over truth undermine genuine knowledge democratization. Despite increased access to information, it remains debatable whether this information accurately reflects lived experiences of persons in general. Programs like ChatGPT also fall short in this regard.

Developed using publicly available content from the internet, such as news articles, online forums, books, and digital encyclopedias, the diverse corpus used to train ChatGPT does not necessarily champion varied perspectives; instead, it mirrors and streamlines biases present in the original data. As AI integrates these biases, dominant perspectives—even if biased—may be recognized by the algorithm as statistically significant. Despite efforts to incorporate "guardrails" to prevent content that violates community standards or propagates racism or sexism, and despite techniques such as bias mitigation and continuous oversight, the effectiveness of these measures remains debatable. For instance, research shows that when AI adopts specific personas such as Muhammad Ali, it significantly heightens the risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes, quickly leading to biased dialogue and offensive viewpoints (Deshpande et al. 2023).

As an "automation of the status quo," it is questionable whether AI can detect these hermeneutical gaps (Fountain 2022, 3). Hermeneutical gaps occur when marginalized groups lack the conceptual tools to interpret and articulate

their experiences. These gaps signify more than just data absences; they reflect a deficiency in shared concepts and language essential for making certain experiences intelligible and for generating epistemic friction. AI systems, which learn from existing data and patterns, struggle to represent experiences not yet included in collective knowledge, making comprehensive data representation challenging. Consequently, AI is confined to what is explicit in its training data because it lacks the lived experience to notice gaps, which are unlikely to be represented without explicit prompting. These gaps are often perpetuated in the output of AI models trained on biased data, thereby reinforcing epistemologies of ignorance and representing dominant interests.

Hermeneutical inequality is particularly difficult to identify because interpretive efforts are influenced by interests. This generates "hermeneutical hotspots" in areas where those with power either lack interest in or actively oppose accurate interpretations (Fricker 2007, 152). This disinterest results in, at best, a peripheral recognition of marginalized experiences by those in power, which leads to a lack of necessary context and depth in the articulation of their experiences. Consequently, the perspectives and lived realities of marginalized groups are frequently misrepresented or overlooked in data creation, collection, and interpretation. The data tends to centre on and perhaps exclusively include the experiences of those with social power. These skewed interpretations are then used to frame the experiences of marginalized groups, leading to unrepresentative depictions that justify marginalizing these experiences as outliers, rather than recognizing them as central to the dominant understanding.

The overrepresentation of dominant interests results in representational harms, which involves the unjust distribution of resources and the perpetuation of stereotypes or exclusions (Crawford 2017). Representational harms occur when systems perpetuate the subordination of certain groups based on their identity and lack substantive representation. This bias is readily observed in AI applications that associate "man" with "computer programmer" and "woman" with "homemaker." For example, sentences like ""He is a doctor" are more likely to be generated than "She is a doctor," and sentiment analysis systems often rank sentences containing female noun phrases as indicative of anger more frequently than those with male noun phrases (Sun et al. 2019, 1631). These harms also stem from data collection choices that may reflect traditional classifications. Classification systems, while useful for organizing and understanding complex information, inherently exclude data that does not conform to predefined categories. These systems rely on specific criteria to sort information, which marginalizes data that is ambiguous, overlaps multiple categories, or falls outside the established framework.

These known representational harms raises questions about the training data used in generative AI and which perspectives are prominently represented and which are made invisible. For instance, data from activities like driving in the city or using social media may not represent those using public transit or lacking smartphone access (Fountain 2022). Similarly, digitization often prioritizes collections from well-funded institutions in the Global North, which affects data under-representation (Milligan 2022). The centralization of technological power in a few global locations contributes to data collection tools that can systematically discriminate against marginalized groups, whether intentionally or incidentally.

Representational harm is particularly dangerous because it shapes our perception of reality and upholds pernicious epistemologies of ignorance. These harmful representations limit hermeneutical resources and conceptual vocabulary, creating further asymmetric burdens that lead to continued marginalization and reinforce bias. The result is a "runaway feedback loop," wherein biases embedded in large datasets used for training AI algorithms perpetuate and amplify historical and societal prejudices. This, in turns, makes the biased representation appear as an accurate reflection of reality (Gebru 2020, 256). In the tech industry, marginalized individuals often face hostile environments, diminished recognition, and limited advancement opportunities. These conditions foster false beliefs that these individuals lack the necessary skills or aptitude for their positions. Such misconceptions are then reinforced in the data used by hiring algorithms, thereby further excluding underrepresented groups.

For instance, if an AI system is trained on biased hiring data that underrepresents women in certain roles, it may continue to recommend fewer women for those roles and thus perpetuate the cycle of exclusion. Automated hiring tools, such as those used by Amazon, have exhibited negative biases against women; resumés that reference gender-specific

activities or institutions are penalized (Sun et al., 2019). These representational harms replicated in the data reinforce systemic disadvantages for marginalized groups by maintaining existing power structures and inequalities. Hermeneutical gaps prevent these groups from effectively communicating their experiences and advocating for changes in AI systems. These gaps significantly impact AI and are impacted by AI by limiting the interpretive resources available to marginalized groups and entrenching the dominant discourse.

3. Flattened Voice

Standpoint diversity is crucial for AI to foster meaningful and inclusive public discourse, rather than reinforce existing biases and exclude minority perspectives. AI struggles to comprehend nuanced and less statistically prevalent contexts essential for generative epistemic friction. Without diverse contexts to interpret words and phrases, conversations risk misrepresentation or defaulting to the status quo. This homogenization results not only in content reflecting the status quo but also in dialogues and word choices replicating prevailing norms and biases, potentially sidelining minority standpoints and eliminating chance miscommunications. LLMs may not capture the unique idioms, dialects, and styles of various standpoints. This leads to a homogenized voice that fails to represent the richness of diverse experiences and results in flattened communication as the technology becomes more ubiquitous.

AI systems are typically designed to produce consistent and standardized outputs that can suppress diverse standpoints as the AI aims to generate broadly acceptable and non-controversial responses. Writing for Vox, Signal Samuel observes that "they have a tendency to talk in a bland, conformist, Wikipedia-esque way" (Samuel 2023, para. 17). The voice reflected in the output is crucial. Unlike previous language processing models built on expert-created rules or trained on constrained datasets specific to grammar and spelling tasks, current generations of LLMs utilize advanced analytical techniques. The transformer architecture, with multiple layers of self-attention mechanisms, enables the model to understand patterns, context, and relationships between words across extensive text sequences. For example, when predicting a missing word in a sentence, the model considers the relationships and dependencies between all the words in that sentence. This capability allows for a profound transformation in the output. In consequence, using a transformer model as an editing tool might lead to significant but subtle changes in salience, tone, meaning, and connotations, thereby altering the user's original voice to conform to patterns derived from broad, statistically dominant internet sources.

The non-literal and idiosyncratic aspects of communication present significant challenges for technologically mediated exchanges, often marked by representational biases. If the training data primarily includes content created by and for a specific demographic, the AI's voice and style will mirror those biases, regardless of user diversity. The ability of AI to maintain the depth and complexity of human interaction is compromised by its reliance on statistical patterns. This results in the loss of the rich, diverse tapestry of human dialogue, reducing it to a uniform, flattened exchange. Critical engagement arising from miscommunication, where participants navigate and negotiate meaning, is essential for robust and dynamic conversations. When AI fails to replicate this, it diminishes the potential for genuine understanding and the exchange of innovative ideas. The epistemic friction that often arises in human interactions, fiction that pushes individuals to engage critically with differing perspectives, is lost in AI-mediated exchanges.

Much of communication relies on shared frameworks to understand the flow of ideas beyond the literal meaning of words. According to H. P. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature, conversations have implicit goals guiding their flow and content. Grice posits that speakers often imply additional meanings beyond the literal content of their utterances. In everyday conversations, speakers contribute cooperatively through maxims that ensure smooth communication. Implicatures occur when these maxims are flouted. However, with the assumed cooperation, listeners may still infer indirect meanings from context rather than explicit statements. For instance, if John asks Mary if she will attend Paul's birthday party and Mary replies, "I have a lot of work to catch up on," the implication is that Mary cannot attend, even though she did not state this directly. This understanding relies on shared knowledge between conversational participants to fill in the conversational gaps. These implicatures provide an example of communication barriers that result in epistemic friction and impede the smooth exchange of knowledge and information. Points of miscommunication prompt active interpretation and negotiation, motivating interlocutors to generate addi-

tional meanings. This encourages them to critically engage with each other's implicit assumptions and the underlying norms guiding their communication, which ultimately improves mutual understanding. When confronted with uncertain or novel situations, humans often intuitively respond with "I don't know" and seek clarification. AI systems, however, might gloss over these subtle points of miscommunication and defer to data trained on dominant interpretations and understandings. These systems may miss subtle miscommunications and fail to seek clarification or ask follow-up questions. Instead, users are often provided with plausible-sounding and confident answers that can be deeply factually incorrect or under-representative.

Further, as interpersonal communication becomes more ubiquitous, we can foresee scenarios where email exchanges consist solely of one-click responses that strip away nuances. Such interactions may proceed without substantive idea exchange, with friction interpreted purely through statistical probability. This shift toward brevity can expedite decision-making but may lead to communicative complacency, where individuals are less likely to clarify ambiguities or correct misinterpretations. Without miscommunications leading to clarifications, responses become mere products of statistical patterns rather than meaningful dialogue. Through disagreement, errors, and moments of unintelligibility, individuals are prompted to step back and resolve communication issues. In contrast, AI-generated texts and translations inherently lack sensitivity to hermeneutical gaps or an awareness that intelligibility may reach its limits in each context. AI-mediated answers tend to "hallucinate" and present falsities under the guise of an authoritative tone (Metz 2023). Consequently, epistemic friction gives way to seamless communication.

Some have already experienced this homogenization and loss of voice as a result. According to Halcyon M. Lawrence, representational biases that favour English within these datasets echo historical linguistic imperialism. She observes, "For millennia, civilizations have effectively leveraged language to subjugate, even erase, the culture of other civilizations" (Lawrence 2021, 474). Lawrence underscores that English continues to predominate online informational spaces, comprising fifty-one percent of web pages as of November 2017. This dominance leads to the vast underrepresentation of other languages, thereby suppressing diverse voices. While LLMs have often performed well in translation tasks, the voice of the output tends to be heavily influenced by Western English-language use. Content related to economically disadvantaged countries is underrepresented in the training data, leading to less accurate predictions and occasionally resulting in the omission or neglect of these regions and their nuanced dialects in the models' outcomes.

Gebru further illustrates these biases with a recent incident wherein a Palestinian's Arabic post saying "good morning" was erroneously translated by Facebook Translate as "hurt them" in English and "attack them" in Hebrew (Gebru 2020, 264). Platforms created by major technology firms like Google and Facebook are frequently geared towards translations between English and other Western languages. This orientation reflects the linguistic preferences of researchers and the concentration of funding, particularly in places like Silicon Valley. Consequently, there is a distinct bias towards resolving translation issues between languages like English and French, while languages like Arabic are neglected. Had the field of language translation been more inclusive of Arabic-speaking populations and other underrepresented languages, it is conceivable that such an error might not have occurred.

It is also important to recognize that the predominance of Western English in the voice of the output diminishes the diversity of linguistic styles to which users are exposed. Lawrence emphasizes the overrepresentation of this voice, arguing that it negates specific benefits associated with hearing linguistic diversity, such as foreign-accented speech. These advantages include not only enhanced comprehension of various styles but also transformed attitudes towards speakers with accents, owing to increased familiarization. With a growing exposure to outputs generated by such models, a subtle normalization of the dominant dialect occurs, reinforcing the perception of foreignness among accented speakers. This lack of representation in linguistic diversity confirms "the prevailing misconception that accents are not only undesirable but unintelligible for use in speech technologies" (Lawrence 2021, 491). Connected to the absence of diversity in the output is the system's capacity to establish a standard that may implicitly marginalize various linguistic expressions. This can perpetuate stereotypes against such expressions, which further exacerbates the exclusion of those whose dialects do not neatly conform. The dominance of Western English in AI and LLM outputs

perpetuates historical patterns of linguistic imperialism, marginalizes non-Western languages, and reduces exposure to linguistic diversity.

4. Communicative Complacency and Echo Chambers

It might be argued that failures, such as mistranslations, are productive as they highlight blind spots in the data, can prompt greater attention to standpoint diversity, and can potentially motivate efforts to address these deficiencies. While AI technology is still in its infancy, its ability to capture unique voices shows promise. With sufficient time and input, AI may overcome its tendency to default to dominant language patterns through more deliberate example-level instruction engineering. This approach trains AI using specific, context-rich examples designed to teach it how to interpret and generate language with greater nuance. By clarifying contextual meanings, enhancing pattern recognition, and fostering pragmatic understanding, example-level engineering helps AI better grasp subtleties such as tone, intent, and cultural diversity. By incorporating diverse perspectives into its training, this method enables conversational agents to more accurately reflect often-overlooked viewpoints. The current "flattened" voice of AI may be less a limitation of its potential and more a symptom of its developmental immaturity.

An example of AI's evolving capability in mimicking human communication is "grief tech," which allows individuals to capture their essence in a chatbot that interacts with loved ones after their death (Fitzhugh-Craig 2023). “Grief bots,” or “ghostbots,” simulate conversations with deceased individuals using extensive data from their digital footprints. For instance, Michael Bommer, facing terminal colon cancer, created an interactive AI version of himself to support his loved ones after his passing (Kelly 2024). He recorded 300 sentences to capture his voice nuances and 150 stories detailing his life experiences and principles. These provided the AI with content to construct personalized responses that reflect Bommer's knowledge and personality. This ensures his digital avatar offers guidance and reassurance aligned with his approach to life.

However, despite the potential for replicating a unique voice and idiosyncratic contexts, significant concerns remain. While AI may eventually master maintaining an individual's conversational style and perspective, its increasing prevalence reduces opportunities for meaningful unmediated communication. There are immediate concerns that this emerging technology, driven by for-profit interests, may prioritize increasing engagement over fostering genuine communication, which is particularly troubling in the context of grief tech. Additionally, as AI-generated suggestions and communication become more integrated into daily activities, there are concerns that increased and more personal interaction with AI could significantly alter how we communicate, potentially reducing the depth and complexity of our interactions. Notably, misunderstandings and mistranslations do not prompt the system to halt and investigate its errors; the system simply produces another text that irons out these communicative wrinkles, thereby ensuring epistemic friction is avoided without being addressed. The experience of dissonance between one's conception of the world and the way it is being framed is significant. Such dissonance is crucial because moments of miscommunication reveal failures in shared understanding, underscoring that shared meaning cannot always be assumed or dismissed.

Employing LLMs, even for creative writing or brainstorming, can guide users toward specific responses that conform to pre-existing norms. Consequently, certain avenues of thought may become underrepresented or neglected altogether, an outcome that would direct thought and normalize particular viewpoints. Should AI-generated content become normalized, it might enter its own data training and perpetuate a closed feedback loop where it draws upon itself, continually feeding and enlarging its own biases like an informational ouroboros.

The self-perpetuating characteristics of LLMs can inadvertently reinforce what Thi Nguyen terms "epistemic bubbles" (Nguyen 2020, 141). Nguyen defines an epistemic bubble as an informational context where certain perspectives are consistently underrepresented or disregarded. These bubbles often emerge from the natural dynamics of social alignment and community formation. Social networks, acting as channels for disseminating information, further amplify these shared beliefs and create an epistemic filter that resists differing opinions, reinforces confidence in confirmatory

information, and perpetuates homogeneity within discourse. This can inadvertently lend credibility to potentially harmful content by maintaining and exacerbating existing biases and a notable lack of opportunities for friction.

A similar reduction in opportunities for friction occurs when current AI technologies are employed for informational searches. The subtleties and context essential to research are frequently overlooked or stripped away, often presented without counter-information unless specifically requested. The resulting responses are typically tailored, influenced by algorithms and corporate interests, and delivered without adequate context, nuance, or source attribution. This lack of critical elements facilitates their unchallenged acceptance. For example, the landing page of conventional search engines like Google is often inundated with content created for advertising purposes, the company's primary commercial interests. Cory Doctorow (2023) likens the function of search results to a “payola” system where top visibility is granted to the highest bidder. The organization of websites within search results constructs a perceived hierarchy, wherein higher-ranked sites may be regarded as more credible and relevant. This preferential positioning drives user engagement, further enhancing a website’s statistical relevance and reinforcing its prioritization by the algorithm. Currently, platforms such as Google have assigned this top position to their AI-generated overviews, further centralizing user engagement and consolidating information access within algorithmically curated content.

The complexity of this issue is amplified by the algorithms' opaque nature which leaves users with little information about content selection and prioritization. This lack of transparency exacerbates the difficulty in understanding the mechanisms that govern information production and can lead to confusion about how content is selected and prioritized. Users may not be unaware of how much the information has already been mediated by the time ChatGPT answers them with an authoritative voice. Acting more as content curators than providers of a comprehensive overview, informational searches create an illusion of exhaustive research. The outcomes, prompted by a user's selection of terms, foster a belief that these results are unbiased answers to their queries rather than products significantly influenced by corporate agendas and algorithmic biases.

Information obtained through search engines often becomes detached from its original context and the underlying biases of the medium. This constructs an appearance of neutrality and objectivity, further reinforced by the “Wikipedia-esque” tone (Samuel 2023, para. 17). This guided navigation contributes to what Eli Pariser (2012) describes as a "filter bubble" that stems from personalized technology's filtering function. Algorithms process vast amounts of user data to furnish hyper-targeted content, aligning selections with user habits and analogous profiles. By doing so, they guide decisions, often sideline personal evaluations, and create a decision consensus through repeated analogous choices. These selections are then logged and prioritized in future recommendations to establish a self-sustaining feedback loop that buttresses pre-existing beliefs. Informational searches rely on queries supplied by the user, and fine-tuning these inquiries can result in highly skewed results, just as it can generate accepted facts. Likewise, LLMs further enable targeted searches that conceal and minimize encounters with counterevidence that might otherwise create dissonance or friction with one's held beliefs.

These systems often present information with markers of credibility, especially when the output aligns with a user’s existing beliefs and is curated through chosen prompts or when a specific perspective is normalized within the user's informational ecosystem. This reinforces the acceptance of potentially biased or uncited information. With the help of LLMs, users may not simply ignore websites containing countervailing information—these sites may not appear at all, thus lending further credibility to the skewed belief.

Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) highlights the potential harm in disseminating misinformation through limited search engine results. Noble underscores the critical role of online platforms in fostering harmful ideologies, as illustrated by the case of Dylann Roof. In 2015, Roof, a self-identified white supremacist and neo-Nazi, executed a tragic shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. His online manifesto disclosed that his motivations were shaped by internet searches centered on “black on white crime” that lead him towards a restricted, aggressive, and racially prejudiced perspective. These search outcomes glaringly lacked counterarguments, anti-racist resources, or comprehensive understandings of groups such as the Council of Conservative Citizens, notorious for their anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-Muslim positions.

Additionally, the search term “black on white crime” often failed to provide links to authoritative discussions on race or credible sources that outline the historical dynamics of racial relations in the US. This limitation in search results can result in "credibility excess," where certain sources are disproportionately credited with reliability and authority (Fricker 2007, 17). As users often do not explore beyond the first few results, these initial sources can unduly influence their understanding and opinions, even when the information is biased, incomplete, or misleading. Consequently, the perceived credibility of these sources is artificially inflated by their prominence in search results, which can contribute to the spread of potentially harmful ideologies and misinformation.

The decontextualized information offered by ChatGPT operates similarly to a targeted keyword search. Ian Milligan likens the use of keyword searches to gleaning information with almost “surgical” precision (Milligan 2022, 27). While this technological advancement facilitates knowledge acquisition and enables users to efficiently sift through vast amounts of data, it forfeits the valuable skill of skimming. As Milligan observes, “If a user simply relies on keyword searches within historical collections, they would be unaware of what they are missing. The absence of search results might be interpreted as a complete lack of relevant information, when in fact it could be an inaccurate representation of reality” (Milligan 2022, 24). ChatGPT functions analogously, as the answers provided are restricted to those explicitly requested, and notably with less contextual information than might be obtained from a keyword search that at least directs to citations and further research opportunities. The monological responses supplied by ChatGPT, particularly without source information, diminish the likelihood of encountering opposing views and areas of contention.

Users receive data congruent with their accepted social understanding, often finding endorsement within online communities. In today's pervasive social media usage, once private or selectively shared views are now widely distributed. Such dissemination often garners endorsement from familiar community peers whose views might otherwise have been overlooked. This familiarity enhances and normalizes these opinions, integrating them into individual worldviews. Pervasive social media usage exposes users to increased consensus, unjustifiably boosts confidence, and facilitates widespread acceptance of platform-shared opinions. This broad reinforcement of prevailing worldviews fosters a cycle of credibility and familiarity that subtly directs individuals to adhere to specific narrative frameworks, particularly when contrasting views are lacking or must be explicitly sought. Social media algorithms that mold content based on previous user choices build an online filter surrounding digital interactions. This content prioritization for engagement might conflict with users' actual interests, but interacting with this content causes it to permeate feeds and cement an epistemic bubble. For those with biases, the algorithm's effect is magnified, exaggerating even slight initial differences, overshadowing contrary views, and trapping users in a self-reinforcing loop. This process narrows opportunities for engaging with diverse perspectives, reinforces existing beliefs, and deepens epistemic bubbles through what Nguyen calls “bootstrapped corroboration,” where epistemic bubbles exclude key information thereby creating an inflated sense of epistemic self-confidence (Nguyen 2020, 144).

Unique to LLMs is the all-encompassing nature of the information they provide. The consolidation of such large data sets can inadvertently overlook varied perspectives and voices, leading to a loss of the richness and objectivity that diversity brings to the data. Users are no longer required to navigate multiple sites to obtain the desired information; they can simply query systems like ChatGPT, now accessible on phone apps. This approach creates a singular information source that not only reinforces prevailing societal narratives but also serves as a comprehensive platform for information retrieval. Information—or more often, misinformation—gains credibility by resonating with pre-existing narratives that originate from a source that appears authoritative, and conveniently excluding counterarguments due to the monological nature of the responses. Such narratives may be perceived as having augmented authority that surpasses traditional markers of academic credibility inherent in the text generated. Consequently, the chance discovery of evidence that contradicts these dominant narratives becomes progressively uncommon. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in online communities, where echo chambers foster environments that normalize and strengthen prevailing viewpoints and promote a singular, rather than diverse, perspective.

Even when individuals within an echo chamber encounter opposing views or evidence, these interactions are unlikely to challenge or alter their established beliefs. This is due to the phenomenon of “epistemic inoculation”, where mem-

bers of an echo chamber are conditioned to distrust and pre-emptively discredit any external information or perspectives (Nguyen 2020, 147). As a result, when these members do encounter opposing views, they interpret them as anticipated and consistent with the warnings they have been conditioned to expect. This process serves to validate the information and theories previously endorsed by the echo chamber, thereby neutralizing any potential impact that contrary views might have had. This pre-emptive discrediting not only shields their existing beliefs from scrutiny but also reinforces their trust in the echo chamber's perspective.

The overconfidence that comes with persistent confirmation and validation cements existing misconceptions and renders users incapable of recognizing the need for change, let alone the need to initiate such change independently. This situation is further complicated by the "coverage-reliance ignorance" that social media echo chambers often cultivate (Bayruns García 2020, 414). Eric Bayruns García defines this type of ignorance as occurring when individuals form beliefs—false or unjustifiably true—based on the mistaken presumption that their informational sources are reliable within a specific domain. However, these sources, compromised by inherent injustices, fail to consistently provide dependable information. Users thus become inadequately attuned to the reliability of their sources to unveil and broadcast pertinent information in these spheres. This insensitivity is partly due to the epistemic friction that is conspicuously absent in pervasive echo chambers and leads to uncritical consumption of information and the perpetuation of biased datasets.

5. Reintroducing Wrinkles

As I have argued thus far, identifying gaps within the discourse necessitates standpoint diversity—knowledge derived from diverse lived experiences relative to dominant social systems. However, AI systems struggle with implied meanings and cultural nuances; they typically default to the status quo when uncertain, thereby undermining standpoint diversity. Efforts to mitigate this bias include pretraining on large datasets, fine-tuning, dissociating stereotypical associations within models, and conducting regular bias audits using techniques such as reweighting data and disparate impact testing to promote fairness (Bolukbasi et al. 2016). Mitchel et al. advocate for increased transparency in datasets and suggests detailed information about usage, potential pitfalls, and inherent biases, akin to a nutrition label on food products (Mitchell et al. 2019, 221). Others propose using synthetic data to counter real-world biases and avoid issues with copyrighted data (Reed 2024).

Such proposed solutions, however, do not necessarily eliminate the need for human mediation within the system. Synthetic data, for example, can create diverse and representative datasets by oversampling underrepresented groups, balancing class distributions, and controlling confounding variables that introduce bias. This approach aims to improve representation and model performance without compromising data integrity (Lee 2024, 22). However, the effectiveness of synthetic data in eliminating bias depends on careful design and continuous monitoring to ensure alignment with real-world data. Human AI trainers play a crucial role by providing demonstrations and comparative evaluations to guide the model's responses and ensure context-sensitive judgments. Nevertheless, even with rigorous monitoring, achieving such diversity is uncertain. Furthermore, reliance on human oversight can exacerbate inequitable worker treatment. Gray and Suri (2019) use the term "ghost work" to refer to labour that is costly, error-prone, and often involves poor working conditions. They highlight a global underclass engaged in tasks like content moderation and transcription. Without sufficient diversity in both data and the "human-in-the-loop" approach—where human judgment is integrated into the process of developing or refining algorithms— this process may replicate and widen hermeneutical gaps while further entrenching global disparities.

It is more effective to address hermeneutical gaps through human intervention more generally rather than rely solely on diversity within AI systems. Human mediation in AI is crucial for providing the context-sensitive judgments that AI systems inherently lack. As Fricker (2007) posits, promoting hermeneutical justice requires sensitivity to the speaker's interpretive resources, identification of areas of struggle, and awareness of "hotspots" for misinterpretations (Fricker 2007, 152). This necessitates context-sensitive judgment, active listening, and corroborating evidence from similar social experiences. Enhancing general critical literacy can better address hermeneutical gaps by promoting fric-

tion from a diversity of standpoints and avoiding the exploitation currently used in AI training. By ensuring that users deeply understand the data they are using, the charge of complacency might be better mitigated.

For example, Tiera Tanksley (2024) examines Critical Race Algorithmic Literacies (CRAL) and emphasizes its historical role in literacy as a tool for emancipation. Historically, literacy has served to subvert oppressive systems, with contemporary bans on critical race theory viewed as efforts to suppress critical literacies that challenge systemic racism. The digital mediation of critical literacy enables users to assess data sources, methodologies, and implications, fostering a nuanced approach to data usage. Tanksley highlights the significant impact of CRAL in empowering Black students to navigate and challenge algorithmic racism in educational contexts. Through CRAL, students acquire the skills to scrutinize AI technologies by identifying racially biased tools such as Google, ChatGPT, and Grammarly as ineffective for fostering inclusive educational experiences. This literacy enabled students to link negative experiences from traditional educational practices, such as low teacher expectations and zero-tolerance policies, to AI-mediated inequities.

Furthermore, CRAL facilitated students in exposing and critiquing racial biases within AI systems and educational policies, and in reimagining AI applications that prioritize equity and well-being. Additionally, students challenged the uncritical adoption of AI by educational institutions and advocated for thorough bias audits and rejection of simplistic colourblind approaches. Through CRAL, students redefined effective AI usage and promoted the critical use of technologies to advance educational equity and disrupt systemic racism, thus preparing them to thrive within settings using educational AI technology. This approach works to ensure the necessary diversity for epistemic friction because it equips users with the cognitive tools necessary to navigate and interpret complex information and potentially addresses hermeneutical gaps more effectively than merely ensuring diversity in the data itself. By focusing on human intervention and critical literacy, we can better prepare users to engage with AI systems and digital platforms in a manner that promotes justice and understanding across diverse perspectives.

6. Conclusion

Promoting standpoint diversity requires more than diversifying datasets; it necessitates empowering users to actively engage with and critique AI outputs. Expanding critical literacies among all technology users is essential to prevent echo chambers by reintroducing epistemic friction in interactions with AI. Through critical engagement with AI, and by recognizing its limitations, users transition from passive consumers to active contributors in the process of knowledge creation. This critical awareness encourages users to consistently question AI outputs and thereby reduces the risk of hermeneutical gaps and the kind of complacency that fuels echo chambers. As users become more attuned to dissonance, they are better equipped to identify inconsistencies and contradictions, which prompts recognition of instances where diversity in perspective is lacking. Ultimately, this approach ensures that diverse viewpoints are not only represented but fully engaged with and can thereby lead to more dynamic and epistemically textured interactions with technology.

Overall, it may not be possible to "program away" biases, as dissonance relies on experience—something the system fundamentally and perhaps perpetually lacks. Therefore, human mediation remains crucial. Standpoint diversity is achieved by empowering users to critically engage with AI, thus ensuring a more inclusive and just technological landscape.

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Cloud Backlash: Digital Sex Crimes and Anti-Feminism in South Korea

by Anat Schwartz

Abstract: This article explores the ongoing issue of bodily security, surveillance, and safety in and around South Korean digital spaces. By focusing on the Nth Room in March 2020, I argue that the rapid growth of digital and cloud-based technologies exacerbates social and political issues in Korea. I use an interdisciplinary methodological approach to critical gender and sexuality studies, data feminism, and Korean feminist scholarship to interrogate the relationship between transnational digital technologies, the deep-seated roots of patriarchy, and the contemporary anti-feminist backlash and conservative political landscape in South Korea. I argue that the cloud-based servers of instant messaging group chats pose a particular case that illustrates the challenges feminist activists face around digital sex crimes and surveillance in South Korea and transnationally.

Keywords: digital sexual violence; digital technologies; feminism; South Korea; surveillance and security; technology-facilitated sexual violence

Résumé : Cet article explore la question de la sécurité corporelle, de la surveillance et de la sécurité à l'intérieur et à proximité des espaces numériques sud-coréens. En m'intéressant au cas de la Nth Room de mars 2020, je soutiens que la croissance rapide des technologies numériques et infonuagiques exacerbe les problèmes sociaux et politiques en Corée. J'utilise une approche méthodologique interdisciplinaire par rapport aux études critiques sur le genre et la sexualité, au féminisme des données et aux études féministes coréennes dans le but de remettre en question la relation entre les technologies numériques transnationales, l'enracinement profond du patriarcat, la réaction antiféministe contemporaine et le paysage politique conservateur de la Corée du Sud. Je suis d'avis que les serveurs infonuagiques de clavardage en groupe instantané constituent un cas particulier qui illustre les difficultés auxquelles les activistes féministes font face à l'égard des crimes sexuels numériques et de la surveillance en Corée du Sud et à l'échelle transnationale.

Mots clés : violence sexuelle numérique; technologies numériques; féminisme; Corée du Sud; surveillance et sécurité; violence sexuelle facilitée par la technologie

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, the "Nth Room" made international headlines as a criminal operation in which women and girls were blackmailed and coerced into sexual slavery. Young women and girls using social media platforms to search for

part-time work or to share personal pictures were targeted by perpetrators. These perpetrators ran phishing scams to attract young girls for part-time work that, at first, seemed harmless but would turn to blackmail or into conditional meetings with a "sponsor." The "sponsor" would send them money in exchange for sharing photos or videos of themselves beginning with modeling poses or miscellaneous tasks. These interactions migrated to Telegram, an encrypted messaging application, where perpetrators would ask or harvest for personal information such as the victims' legal names, bank account numbers, and home addresses under the guise of depositing money for their part-time work. They would use this information to stalk, harass, blackmail, and physically abuse girls and women to extort violent sexual content. These exploitative videos were distributed in Telegram chatrooms where viewers paid through cryptocurrency per-view. The case became publicly known as "Nth Room," (*Npŏn-pang*[1]) as the Telegram channel included eight groups using ordinal numbers (e.g., First Room, Second Room, etc.).

As of March 2020, the number of individuals involved in criminal activities related to the possession and distribution of illegal videos is estimated to be at least 60,000, with over 260,000 consumers (Jun 2022). This includes both those holding illicit materials and those engaged in unlawful distribution. The production and dissemination of sexually exploitative content through modern information and communication technologies, notably on the dark web, have exhibited a concerning trend of increasing sophistication and expansion. The resulting harm is severe, semi-permanent, and scalable, underscoring the imperative for targeted and decisive measures to address this issue.

The sexual violence and violation experienced by victims of the Nth Room case went viral domestically and in international media, which led to public outrage at some politicians excusing viewers' participation as personal enjoyment and teens fooling around on the computer (Kong 2021). The general public was outraged not only at the perpetrators but at the politicians' dismissive and victim-blaming reactions. In response, a public petition drew over 2.7 million signatures on a Blue House Presidential Petition requesting that the government reveal the identities of the traffickers and viewers. This petition platform was a national system that allowed the public to voice concerns directly to the Blue House, formally referred to as Cheong Wa Dae.[2] The signatories on this petition demanded that Korean lawmakers propose stricter censorship and surveillance measures as well as more punitive laws, measures which were met with both acceptance and suspicion by Korean feminists.

The Nth Room, and the subsequent partial revisions to the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes and the Telecommunications Business Act, came at the tail-end of the height of #MeToo activism in South Korea. Feminist organizing against digital sex crimes in South Korea has been further complicated by local and global far-right politics and anti-feminist backlash. By situating the Nth Room incident within the broader context of feminist movements in South Korea (henceforth, Korea), this article reconsiders the role of chatrooms (Kim 2020; Yun 2020) as they are used and viewed by Korean feminist activists, particularly on popular instant messaging applications such as Telegram, to argue that increased censorship and surveillance measures on cloud-based messaging platforms present a unique challenge for both local and transnational feminists. In the conclusion, I examine how feminist activism against digital sex crimes became entangled with the complexities of anti-feminist backlash and the global rise of far-right ideologies.

2. Prior Scholarship and Methods

In this article, I use a transnational feminist approach by building on interdisciplinary Korean feminist scholarship to address issues relating to global feminism in the digital age. Korean-language monographs have addressed feminist concerns regarding digital technologies of surveillance from a wide range of perspective, including the Nth Room and growth of digital sex crimes (Fire Press Corps 2020), feminist narratives (KwonKim et al. 2017), intersectional feminism (Jeon et al. 2018; Han et al. 2018), and the Break the Corset movement, a youth-based protest movement which sought to break away from stereotypical femininity by breaking and disposing of feminized products such as heels, makeup, and dresses (Lee 2019). Recent English-language publications on digital sex crimes in Korea address issues of censorship and pornography (Lee 2020; Y. Lee 2022), feminists' varied reactions to digital sex crimes (Lee and Jeong 2018; Jeong 2020; E. Lee 2022), digital sex crimes as a human rights issue (Jun 2022), and legal concerns (Women's Human Rights Institute of Korea 2020, 2021; Amnesty International 2023).

South Korean feminist scholars have documented the intimate connection between pervasive sexual violence and its evolution into digital spaces since the late 1990s (Jeon 2021). Korean scholars and activists use terms like *saibŏsŏngbŏmjoe* (cyber sexual violence) and *tijit'ŏl sŏngp'ongnyŏk* (digital sex crime), or a mixture of both, to discuss these issues. Similarly, this article uses "digital sexual violence" and "digital sex crimes."

Korean research has linked the rapid expansion of misogyny and the illegal distribution of explicit images, referred to as "pornography," to the proliferation of sexual violence on digital platforms (Jeon 2021; Park 2021; Lee and Lee 2021). According to Jeon (2021), the Korean government, National Assembly, and judiciary system have only recently acknowledged the severity of this issue and have started addressing it by establishing relevant laws and systems. However, these measures provide only a foundational shift in society's perception of digital sex crimes and have yet to prove effective in deterring offenses.

In the late 1990s, digital sexual violence emerged through actions such as filming personal sexual acts without consent using hidden cameras, and distributing and consuming these materials online (Kim 2018; Jeon 2021). The widespread use of smartphones and Korea's hyper-connected mobile internet networks exacerbated this issue in the late 2000s, leading to the proliferation of *mollaek'amera* (hidden or spy camera, colloquially known as *molka*) in both public and private spaces. Women's organizations, scholars, and feminist activists argue that the prevalence of digital surveillance and violence has blurred the lines between the production, distribution, and consumption of sexual content, contributing to the "pornification" of the everyday lives of young girls and women (Kim 2018; Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center 2020). In other words, digital sexual violence is an extension of gender-based sexual violence, amplified by systemic and cultural misogyny.

Korean scholars and activists refer to "digital sexual violence" and "digital sex crimes," while Western scholars often use the term "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (TFSV) to describe sexual harm and violence perpetrated via digital platforms. Prominent scholars in the field include Suzie Dunn and Jane Bailey from Canada, Clare McGlynn from the UK, and Nicola Henry, Anastasia Powell, Bridget Harris, and Molly Dragiewicz from Australia. Dunn and Bailey have highlighted the legal and social challenges of addressing TFSV within current frameworks, discussing issues like cyberstalking, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and online harassment (Bailey et al. 2021; Dunn 2021; Bailey et al. 2022; Dunn 2022). McGlynn advocates for comprehensive legal reforms to keep pace with technological advancements and better support survivors (McGlynn et al. 2017; McGlynn 2022). Powell and Henry examine TFSV as a persistent form of gender inequality through technofeminist and criminological lenses (2017), and image-based sexual abuse from interdisciplinary perspectives (Henry et al. 2021). Additionally, other scholars explore topics like intimate partner violence and victimization (Harris and Woodlock 2023), survivor narratives (Dragiewicz et al. 2023), surveillance and control (Woodlock et al. 2023), and digital spatiality (Harris and Vitis 2020).

Despite overlapping language between Western and Korean scholars and activists, it is important to recognize the distinct ways Korean scholars frame the discourse on digital sexual violence. This article aims to bridge Western discussions on technology-facilitated sexual violence and Korean discussions on digital sex crimes.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted from 2018 to 2022, I analyze South Korean feminist activism, transcending the online/offline binary. The primary sources include fieldwork conducted in South Korea between 2018 and 2019, comprising fifty semi-structured interviews with feminist activists and individuals from various affiliations and regions.[3] Additionally, I utilize textual analysis of Korean feminist legal scholarship on digital sex crimes and legislation, legal documents from the Korea Legislation Research Institute, and digital technologies and instant messaging applications such as Telegram and KakaoTalk, the most popular messaging platforms in Korea. I include follow-up correspondences with feminist activists originally interviewed in 2018-2019. As my research interlocutors and Korean scholarship favour the terms "digital sexual violence" and "digital sex crimes," I have adopted this terminology here. This article expands on prior research findings related to digital sexual violence, cloud-based technologies, and anti-feminist backlash.

3. Digital Sex Crimes: The Nth Room Case

While not all forms of digital sexual violence are encompassed as sex crimes, sex crimes are a dangerous and serious category of violence primarily experienced by women, marginalized individuals, and minors (Powell and Henry 2017). Sex crimes include non-consensual sex acts and diverse forms of violence, such as sexual assault, rape, minor sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sex trafficking. Digital sexual violence broadly refers to gender-based violence that occurs online and/or offline through digital devices and information and communication technology. Referred to in Western discourse as technology-facilitated sexual violence, these forms of violence traverse non-physical spaces such as social media to use non-physical force to assault and intimidate victims. Digital sexual violence includes non-consensual distribution of intimate images (often described as revenge pornography) and the creation, distribution, or consumption of sexually explicit materials obtained without proper consent. Digital sexual violence materials are frequently obtained through online harassment, cyberstalking, blackmail, and engagement in illegal online spaces dedicated to sharing explicit sexual content.

In my fieldwork research in Korea, the feminists I interviewed who were in their 20s-30s frequently referenced the prevalence of misogynistic culture and sexual violence online as a catalyst for their own awareness and engagement in feminist activism. Whether they were involved in grassroots feminist groups, non-governmental organizations, feminist and queer book clubs or university student clubs, online feminist communities, or elsewhere, my interlocutors referenced their own or their female friends' experiences with digital sexual violence as an urgent social and legal issue. At a feminist discussion meeting held in October 2018 at the Feminist Book Cafe 'Doing' in Gangnam, Seoul, participants discussed the need for proper legislation to address the widespread issue of misogyny and digital sexual violence. So-young,[4] a participant at the meeting, argued that the issue of digital sex crimes was a "basic problem" (*kibonjŏgin munjejŏm*). Later that month, So-young and I met at a café and continued discussing the issue of digital sexual violence:

So-young: "The [Korean] government can use technology to prosecute women when they distribute obscene materials (*ŭmnanmul yup'ojoe*) of men online, but they don't use technology in cases of violence against women."

Me: "Are you referring to the Womad case[5]?"

So-young: "Yes, but that is just one example of the lack of laws addressing digital sexual violence."

Me: "How would you like to see the government address digital sexual violence?"

So-young: "They could begin with revising existing laws to include requests to delete *molka* [hidden spy camera] images online, address the social stigma of survivors, societal misogyny […] the biggest issue for victims is the risk of secondary victimization when reporting.[6] These images [*molka* and digital sex crime materials] are everywhere online."

Interview with the author (October 2018).

As this vignette from my interview with So-young demonstrates, at the center of young women's concerns is the ubiquity of digital sex crimes and the lack of a comprehensive legal framework to address the impact of digital technologies on women's everyday lives. While So-young was discussing a case involving an operator of the online radical feminist community, Womad, facing a warrant for distributing nude photos of a male model in an act of misogynistic "mirroring" activism, it is important to note that the laws and policies classified digital sex crime photos and videos as *ŭmnanmul*, which can be translated as "obscene materials" or "pornography." This view of materials produced through technology-facilitated sexual violence focused on penalizing the suppliers and created a societal perception that victims had consented to the filming and/or the acts involved, which led to lenient punishments (Kim 2023). The perception of women and girls surviving acts of digital sexual violence as engaging in pornography or "obscenity" is a central issue related to the social and legal environment that still perceives such materials as consumables (Ko and

Park 2023). "Obscene" materials obtained using spy cameras and distributed online had become a widespread issue by 2018. Jiwon, another interlocutor in her 20s, reflected on young women's anxiety surrounding hidden spy cameras.

Jiwon: "The issue of *molka* needs to be addressed socially. *Molka* culture is so pervasive."

Me: "What do you mean by pervasive?"

Jiwon: "Victims [of illegal spy cameras] are viewed as engaging in vulgarity. We need to confront victim blaming."

Me: "Where do you see victim blaming happen?"

Jiwon: "Everywhere […] I feel that not much has changed yet, but especially when reading comments on news articles. Change is not something you can just receive."

Interview with the author (May 2019).

Speaking from a place of anxiety regarding young women's experiences with digital sexual violence, the above vignettes from my interviews with Jiwon and So-young demonstrate the pervasiveness of digital sex crimes in Korea. While women of all ages have had to contend with the continuous threat of digital sex crimes in public spaces (Human Rights Watch 2021), such as spy cameras hidden in subway station bathrooms, my interviews with young women in their 20s and early 30s frequently discussed feeling anxious about becoming a victim of digital sexual violence. As Jiwon argued, victim-blaming culture is particularly pervasive around the distribution of so-called "obscene materials" produced through technology-facilitated sexual violence. Many of my interlocutors echoed this anxiety and a distrust in the government's approach to digital sex crimes. In my interviews with So-young and Jiwon, as well as other young feminists in various regions, digital sex crimes were regarded as a manifestation of legal and social misogyny that required comprehensive legislation and structural societal change. The feminist activists I interviewed in 2018-2019 had accurately foreseen the evolving nature of technology-facilitated sexual violence, which continues to advance swiftly as information and communication technologies outpace legislation. Their insights also highlighted the deep-rooted nature of misogyny in society.

The Nth Room consisted of a network of chat rooms operating on instant messaging applications, particularly on Telegram, and functioned as an online sex-abuse ring from mid 2017 to March 2020. Perpetrators used the chat rooms to disseminate sexually exploitative material for pay and to further antagonize and blackmail victims. Ringleaders created different online chat rooms to circulate explicit materials in a pay-per-view system. Many of the victims of Nth Room were minors. A total of 1154 victims were confirmed at the end of a formal government investigation in December 2020 with a total of 60.7% in their 20s or younger (Jun 2022). Although only 103 victims moved forward with legal prosecution, 26 were minors (Simons 2022).

The investigation of the Nth Rooms led to the arrests of ringleaders Cho Ju-bin[7] (nicknamed "Doctor") and Moon Hyung-wook (nicknamed "god god"). Cho's chatrooms had at least 10,000 people paying up to $1,200 USD to access materials, with Moon's chatrooms seeing approximately 260,000 users. Cho's arrest included 38 accomplices operating from 2017 through March 2020. Cho was sentenced to 42 years (reduced from 45) and Moon was sentenced to 34 years in prison for coercing 20 women and girls into sharing 3,800 videos and images (Simons 2022; Kim 2023). The Korean government arrested an additional 3,757 people connected with the Nth Room and imprisoned 245 of them (Kim 2022). *Hankyoreh* news staff reporter Oh Yeon-seo was one of the first journalists to uncover sexual abuse of Korean women and minors on Telegram. Oh (2020) detailed the newspaper's work to create an archive chronicling the battle with digital sex crimes but stated that survivors had little time or energy to spend on the larger issue of systemic disregard for digital gendered crimes.

A subsequent investigation by *Hankyoreh* reporter Ch'oe Minyŏng (2022) revealed that among the 378 "general participants" involved in the Nth Rooms, individuals received an average fine of approximately $4,713 USD and an average prison sentence of 13.2 months, although 61.9% of these sentences were suspended. The primary charges included: downloading or purchasing "sexual exploitation material" (*sŏngch'akch'wimul*) on Telegram (277 individuals, 73.3%), aiding and abetting (33 individuals, 8.7%), selling photos and videos (35 individuals, 9.2%), creating sexual exploitation material (20 individuals, 5.3%), redistributing downloaded material (9 individuals, 2.4%), and operating chatrooms (4 individuals, 1.1%). Additionally, 64 individuals (16.9%) received fines, 47 (12.4%) received imprisonment, 4 (1.1%) had their sentences deferred, and 2 (0.5%) were acquitted. Although the findings suggest increased judicial awareness and harsher sentences, 7 out of 10 individuals charged with possession received suspended sentences.

In the aftermath of the Nth Room case, perpetrators and users leaked victims' personal information, including full names, addresses, phone numbers, and citizen identification numbers (Oh 2020). In the following section, I detail the Korean government's response to public demand for legal solutions to digital sex crimes. This legal response is one of two major systemic changes resulting from the Nth Room investigation. The second notable change was the prosecution's release of four names associated with Nth Room crimes, a rare move under Korean criminal law, which typically protects suspects' anonymity from the media and public.

4. Cloud Backlash to the Nth Room Prevention Act, "Obscene" Images, and the Limit of Legislation

Dubbed the "The Nth Room Prevention Act," a Partial Amendment Enforcement Decree of the Telecommunications Business Act was announced in 2020, partially applied in 2011, and officially enforced as Presidential Decree No. 33038 by the Korea Communications Commission on December 9, 2022. This partial amendment has three components:

i. Designate the Korea Women's Rights Promotion Agency, Sexual Violence Victims Counseling Center, as well as other institutions subsidized by the government, as the organizations that can request the deletion of illegally filmed and/or distributed images.

ii. Require businesses to implement new technical and operational protocols when offering digital storage services or running platforms where users freely share and upload information. These protocols include: the establishment of a systematic mechanism for regular reporting of activities; the integration of measures restricting search results associated with keywords commonly linked to illicitly recorded content; the assessment of uploaded materials against the Korea Communication Standards Commission's (KCSC) list of censored materials; and notification to users that uploading unlawfully recorded content will result in penalties as per established laws. Additionally, in cases where business operators are uncertain about the legality of specific content, they are permitted to request prompt review by the KCSC.

iii. The final clause of the Decree originally permitted business operators to temporarily restrict access to the offending content while awaiting the outcome of the KCSC's deliberation. However, in response to public pushback over concerns that this authority might be misused to arbitrarily suppress and censor political speech, the clause was subsequently amended. As per the revision, business operators are no longer granted the authority to temporarily block the content in question prior to the completion of KCSC's examination (Korea Communications Commission 2022).

Ko and Park (2023) analyzed the Korea Communications Commission's "2021 Transparency Report" from 87 operators, finding that nearly three years after the enactment of the Nth Room Prevention Law, the issue of digital sexual violence remains without clear solutions. While the Korea Communication Commission found that a total of 87 business operators claimed to have deleted 27,575 posts flagged for illicit videos in 2021, including Korean business

giants Kakao and Naver and multinational companies such as Google, Twitter, and Meta (Yoon 2022), this report did not include Telegram, the instant messaging application used by perpetrators and consumers in the Nth Room case. The report failed to include other responsibilities outlined in the amendment, such as the outcome of the Korea Communications Commission's preventative measures. While some platform operators have turned to artificial intelligence to experiment with algorithms to filter illegal sexual content, the results have been unreliable to date, accidentally censoring models wearing bikinis or unrelated content featuring female content creators on YouTube (Yoon 2022). Other post-2020 legislative amendments include the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (Act No. 19517), which added language specific to the protection of minors ages 19 and under.

The reach of local legislation on the landscape of transnational digital media is limited in its current scope. The instantaneous nature of digital platforms—including livestreaming and instant messaging applications—encompasses a vast and complex world. Digital platforms hold promise for feminist and anti-sexual violence activism yet are precarious as these platforms can be used to perpetuate violence against women and girls. The Nth Room was a complex web that spanned multiple social media and messaging platforms. By operating on member-to-member admittance or by completing simple verification tasks assigned by chatroom moderators, Nth Room grew rapidly. The Nth Room included an expansive library of extorted videos and deepfakes in the First to Eighth Rooms. The most infamous component of Nth Room's operation was its tiered subscription model, wherein members paid incremental fees to witness and even participate in physical violence inflicted on enslaved women and girls during livestreams (E. Lee 2022).

The digital landscape in Korea was particularly conducive to the rise of the Nth Room. The widespread availability of high-speed Internet and the common use of online forums (or "cafes") for anonymous communication had shaped the country's digital landscape into both a space for social mobilization and a platform for exploiting vulnerable communities. The Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center (KCSVRC; *Han'guk Saibŏ Sŏngp'ongnyŏk Taeŭngsent'ŏ*, colloquially known as *Hansasŏng*) was established in May 2017 to support victims of cyber sexual violence through counselling, monitoring portals and mobile applications distributing digital sex crimes, issuing reports on the status of digital sexual violence in Korea transnationally and at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and pushing for harsher laws and prosecuting digital sexual violence, among many others.

On their website,[8] the KCSVRC declares, "The change has already begun." This refers to the significant gains the anti-digital sexual violence movement has made since 2017, namely:

i. Taking photos without consent and distributing or viewing them are now sex crimes.

ii. The government established a support system for the deletion of sex crime materials and opened a specialized counselling center for survivors of digital sex crimes.

iii. The passing of the Webhard Cartel Prevention Act and the arrest of Yang Jin-ho strengthened the responsibilities of online service providers, such as cloud-storage hardware.

iv. An online grooming punishment law was enacted.

v. The Nth Room Prevention Act was passed.

vi. Cho Ju-bin was sentenced to 40 years in prison.

vii. The Act on Punishment of Crimes of Stalking was enacted.

As discussed above, a core aim of the Nth Room Prevention Act was to force cloud storage providers and large value-added service providers to actively prevent and remove the distribution of digital sex crime content (Lee 2021). While not directly connected to the Nth Room case, the Webhard cartel mentioned by the KCSVRC as their third gain is an important example of how certain technologies have been used to facilitate the illegal distribution of sexually explicit material in South Korea. In 2019, Yang Jin-ho, the chairman of Korea Future Technology Corporation, was charged with distributing pornography through an organized system known as the Webhard cartel. This system involved multiple levels of collaboration: large-scale uploaders, website operators, companies that filtered content, and digital eraser services, all working together to maximize the illegal circulation of pornographic material (Hong 2019).

Although new laws have been introduced to combat digital sex crimes, including those involving hidden cameras, the rise of cloud storage services—especially those hosted overseas in countries with no extradition agreements with South Korea—continues to make it difficult to curb the distribution of such content. Additionally, the legal language used in these laws often frames materials from digital sex crimes, such as images taken without consent, as mere pornography, which can be problematic in terms of how the severity of these crimes is understood and addressed.

The KCSVRC points out that despite a long history of amendments made to address sex crimes, recent digital sex crime cases highlight that the current legal protections lag in technological developments to address the widespread reach of sex crimes. Attempts to establish, amend, and enact local laws to punish and mitigate violence against women span from the late 1990s to the 2010s (Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center 2020). The final versions of Article 13 (Obscene Acts by Using Means of Communication) and Article 14 (Taking Photographs or Videos by Using Cameras) in the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes still lack legal recourse.[9]

Digital sex crimes and the distribution of sexual exploitation materials are difficult to punish under current law. This provides victims with limited recourse. Law enforcement is not adequately equipped to handle complaints of online harassment or digital sex crimes. Consequently, the responsibility for reporting these crimes falls on the victims. Survivors of illegal spy cameras and digital sex crimes often face social backlash and secondary victimization through victim-blaming discourse. Despite recent legal advances, significant loopholes persist. These include the continued use of spy cameras, societal and legal perceptions of digital sex crime footage as "obscene" or "pornographic," inadequate legal language addressing online grooming, and ambiguous definitions of consent regarding sexual violence and digital sex crimes.

The problematic framing of materials filmed, distributed, and consumed through digital sex crimes is rooted in negative social attitudes toward pornography and stringent laws against the production, distribution, and possession of pornographic materials. These laws lack clear definitions of what constitutes "obscene" content and the standards used to determine it.

The focus on misogynistic violence and discrimination against victims of digital sex crimes is complicated by outdated legislative language and the rapidly evolving landscape of digital technologies.

These complications are not unique to Korea. As Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein demonstrate in *Data Feminism* (2020), thinking about how data—or digital spaces, here—impact marginalized and oppressed groups requires contextualization of the intersecting systems of power and privilege. Clare McGlynn in the UK and Jane Bailey and Suzie Dunn in Canada have similarly argued that existing laws do not adequately address technology-facilitated sexual violence. McGlynn argues that traditional legal frameworks are often outdated and ill prepared to handle digital sexual crimes, such as revenge pornography and cyberstalking (McGlynn et al. 2019). Bailey and Dunn likewise criticize Canadian laws for failing to provide sufficient protections against technology-facilitated sexual violence and call for for more comprehensive legislation to better reflect the specific complexities and reach of digital sex crimes as a response to survivors' needs (Bailey and Mathen 2019; Dunn 2020). Hester Baer has argued (2015) that digital feminisms reflect the oppressive nature of neoliberalism and its possibilities for new subjectivities and social formations. Legislative amendments transnationally as well as in Korea have yet to curtail the widespread use of digital spaces and offshore cloud storage. As of the writing of this article, there is no unified transnational cooperative re-

sponse to the complex issue of individual criminals and crime rings using digital technologies such as cloud-based hardware and encrypted software to exploit women and young girls.

5. Feminist Critiques of the Nth Room Prevention Act

The Nth Room Prevention Act and other legislation have begun to address the broader issues surround sex crimes. In particular, the resulting legislation addressed some of the concerns So-young spoke to in our interview vignette (Section III of this article) pertaining to language requesting the deletion of spy camera or *molka* images and including procedures for reporting digital sex crimes. However, the issues of social stigmas for survivors, potential doxing and secondary victimization, and societal misogyny persist.

Moreover, not all responses to the Nth Room Prevention amendment were favourable. In Korea, engaging in both the posting of explicit images of oneself and soliciting customers for paid sexual services are not only criminal offenses, subject to legal repercussions, but are also culturally stigmatized. Exploiting this social stigma and the fear of legal consequences, the Nth Room perpetrators were able to manipulate and coerce victims into becoming targets of digital sex crimes. Feminist critiques further the argument that current laws conflate images and videos produced through digital sex crimes with pornography (*ŭmnanmul*), which further stigmatizes survivors and fixates on establishing "voluntary" or "involuntary" consent. In other words, under the current law and cultural perceptions, the government still considers photos and videos resulting from digital sex crimes as pornography.

Some feminist critics view the Nth Room Prevention Act as extending government reach, invading privacy, and censoring citizens online (Ko 2021). This form of nationalistic paternalism places itself as the moral and ethical protector of women's sexuality and bodily autonomy. As Cho (2009) argues, the transformation of women into subjects of neoliberal governmentality belies a fundamental requirement for the paternalistic nation-state through a focus on sexuality for reproduction for the nation.

6. Anonymity and Surveillance

In addition to the limited success of legislation in curtailing the filming and distribution of digital sexual violence, public demand to name and shame the perpetrators and buyers of such materials has also been limited. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea argued in 2001 that breaking anonymity before a guilty verdict is a violation of human rights (Seo 2023). Since the early 2000s, the disclosure of high-profile criminal suspects has been left to the authorities' discretion. The public demand to reveal the names behind the Nth Room resulted in authorities releasing the names of four perpetrators: Cho Ju-bin, Moon Hyung-wook, Nam Kyung-eup, and Ahn Seung Jin. In addition to their names, authorities subsequently released current photographs of the four, as opposed to the more common practice of releasing high school yearbook photos of perpetrators.

Digital surveillance presents a significant concern for feminist activists, especially young feminists in their teens to early 30s. While younger feminists rely on anonymity to share their experiences with sexual violence (e.g., #MeToo and the Uncomfortable Courage protests) and to oppose gender-based violence, the same technologies are also exploited by perpetrators of digital sex crimes. Moreover, both the government and anti-feminist activists use these technologies to monitor feminist activist spaces.

Maintaining anonymity is a vital component of feminist activism, particularly around sexual violence. News of the Nth Room first broke through the meticulous investigate journalism of two university students under the joint pseudonym of Team Flame on Twitter and YouTube (Yoon 2020). Anonymity has become an important tool for young radical feminist activism in Korea and is used to organize rallies protesting digital sex crimes, troll misogynists online, and protect feminists' identities in a landscape hostile to feminist ideals and ideologies. In 2018, during the height of #MeToo activism in Korea, a mass protest series against digital sex crimes using the hashtag #Uncomfortable_Courage erupted. Also known as the "Hyehwa subway station protests," these protests were organized online by

anonymous young radical female feminists. Although referred to by most feminists simply as "the illegal spycam protests" (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng shiwi*), the previous Minister of Gender Equality and Family, Chung Hyun-Back, framed the protests as fighting for an unbiased investigation of voyeuristic hidden camera crimes (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng p'yŏnp'asusa kyut'anshiwi*) in June 2018. The importance of anonymity is especially significant for young feminists in Korea, as anonymity is a tool primarily used by young radical feminists online as it allows them to express their dissent without fear of backlash or harassment. While this is not exclusive to younger feminists, the feminist activists I interviewed—regardless of age or affiliation—noted that perpetrators of digital sexual violence primarily target young women and girls. This is reflected in the slogan of the Hyehwa protests, Uncomfortable Courage (*Pulp'yŏnhan Yonggi)*, which highlighted the courage to protest and to publicly confront issues like spy cameras crimes, despite the potential social and economic risks and discomfort of speaking out in a society hostile toward women's voices and feminism.

Feminist transgressive spaces, both physical and digital, are often subjected to surveillance. Jeong (2018) contends that the rapid spread of radical feminism in Korea is closely linked to young women's anxieties about illegal photography (*pulbŏpch'waryŏng)*, spy cameras, and surveillance in both private and public spaces. The widespread presence of spy cameras, especially in public bathrooms, exemplifies how neoliberal surveillance technologies and digital sex crimes affect the daily lives of young Korean women. Donna Haraway (1991) argues that the new economy has dissolved previous distinctions between public and private domains, leading to a blurred boundary for women through surveillance technologies. Haraway's perspective underscores how women's experiences are profoundly reshaped by the social relations of science and technology.

The anxieties of young women and feminists over surveillance have become a significant aspect of the Korean feminist activist landscape. The dual use of anonymity by perpetrators of digital sexual violence and feminist activists presents a complex issue that demands further feminist research.

7. Anti-feminist Backlash, Censorship, and Cloud Technologies

Wang: "Online and offline activism are both important. My friends use both. I don't believe in 'keyboard warriors' (*ipp'emi*). After [activist meetings, rallies, or protests], we cool off together, drink together, and talk freely together."

Interview with the author (September 2018).

The above excerpt from an interview I held with Wang, a radical Korean feminist in her 20s, illustrates the porousness of activism in digital and physical spaces. The research included in this article demonstrates that there is no single feminist approach to digital sex crimes or activism, but rather feminists find solidarity and friendship in all formats of activist spaces.

The surge of anti-feminism in Korea is not a unique response to feminist social and/or political advancements (or their scale). Writing about sexual violence at Ontario universities, Colpitts argues that misogyny and resistance to feminism are persistent components to social movements, but that backlash corresponds to specific feminist efforts that endanger a patriarchal status quo (2020). The transition from former President Moon Jae-in's liberal government to Yoon Suk Yeol's conservative government in 2022 was a blow to the feminist movement's momentum. Yoon's successful bid was due to a persistent rise in anti-feminist backlash and pro-natalist rhetoric that placed the burden of low birthrates on women being "picky" about their partners and pressuring them to give birth (Moon 2021). Yoon Suk Yeol ran on a platform that stirred up anti-feminist sentiment by calling for the abolishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, whose officials they accused of treating men like sex criminals. Yoon's platform also blamed feminism for low birthrates and denied the gender wage gap and systemic discrimination (Gunja 2022). It is evident that the gains won by the feminist movement in recent years have been countered with anti-feminist backlash.

Yoon's administration has worked to undo efforts by the prior progressive administration to publicly address citizen

concerns. In addition to President Yoon relocating the South Korean presidential office from Chung Wa Dae (Blue House) to a Defense Ministry Complex in Yongsan in 2022, Yoon shut down the popular public petition platform on Cheong Wa Dae's website which was introduced by former president Moon Jae-in on August 19, 2017. Under former-president Moon's "National Petition" platform, when a petition reached more than 200,000 citizen signatures, the petition required a response by government officials, including ministers and chief secretaries, within 30 days. On June 23, 2022, President Yoon established the "National e-People" website (https://www.epeople.go.kr/) for petitions and complaints from overseas Korean nationals and foreigners residing in Korea and the "People's Proposal" (kungminjean) website (https://withpeople.president.go.kr/) for Korean citizens. Under Yoon's system, petitions no longer require a response if they reach over 200,000 signatures by citizens, but are sent to the National Assembly for legislative matters and to the relevant government agency for administrative matters.

According to an analysis by the Korean Women's Development Institute in June 2019, 4 out of 10 petitions that received more than 200,000 signatures and warranted a response from the Blue House were gender-related issues, and the platform had brought many gendered issues into public discourse, particularly 23 cases of sex crimes and 19 cases of digital sex crimes, which includes the Nth Room case on Telegram (Mun and Yu 2024). The Yoon administration's changes to the online petition systems had greatly reduced citizens' use of petitions as a public forum to give voice to otherwise marginalized issues. Ultimately, these changes in administrative reception and responses to democratic public discourse is intimately tied with backlash against progressive social policies. As demonstrated, online citizen petitions were an important avenue for raising gender-based issues publicly in a way that could maintain anonymity. The removal of the National Petition platform functions as a form of governmental censorship of citizen concerns and directly impacts the visibility of issues relating to gender-based violence and digital sex crimes.

It is not only anti-feminist politicians and skewed understanding of gender discrimination that further complicate meaningful change. The anti-feminist stance by Yoon's administration has influenced government policies and curtailed progress in gender equality initiatives. For example, the implementation of stricter penalties for false accusations in sexual harassment cases has been criticized as potentially deterring victims from coming forward. The impact of intensifying anti-feminist backlash was felt by my prior interview participants as well.

In a follow-up chat on KakaoTalk, a popular messaging application in Korea, So-young and I discuss her dating life as a heterosexual cisgendered woman and feminist. So-young remarked: "I don't always reveal that I'm a feminist. [...] I think the reason feminists seek out people with similar values is not just because it brings them joy, but because there is a strong desire for safety. However, having similar values doesn't necessarily mean that person is safe. Safety can also be compromised outside of political and ideological alignment" (exchange in a chatroom on KakaoTalk with the author, March 2022).

With a growing rise in anti-feminist politics, feminists continue to find ways to resist backlash and misogyny, and continue to work towards political and social change. This brief exchange with So-young is a reminder that feminist ideology and values require a delicate navigation of public action and personal relationships.

8. Conclusion

Yeo: "The country is really a mess…."

So-young: "It's really infuriating."

Sue: "Ridiculous."

Yeo: "Even with that revealed, it's still confirmed. [...] I can see how they view women."

Exchange in a chatroom on KakaoTalk with the author (November 2022).

The above exchange between feminist activists I had met during my fieldwork occurred after a troubling news report was shared in a group chat. In November 2022, an incident dubbed "the Second Nth Room Case" was reported when a suspect was apprehended with over 1,200 videos of sexual exploitative materials involving minors (Ko and Park 2023). This "Second Nth Room" is a troubling recurrence that highlights the weakness of post-Nth Room legislative measures. Additionally, in late 2024, several incidents involving nonconsensual deepfake porn of videos and images of women and girls highlight my argument that, without addressing misogynistic culture and politics, digital sex crimes will continue to occur via new and emerging technological forms.

As discussed, digital technologies exacerbate existing misogynistic cultures, which can result in ineffective legislation. This is evident in the classification of digital sex crime materials as obscene pornography. Although the Nth Room Prevention Law rephrased this to "illegal filming" (*pulbŏpch'waryŏngmul*), there remains no clear legal distinction between pornography and illegal footage obtained and distributed through digital sex crimes. However, effective transparency and enforcement of laws to prevent and deter digital sexual violence require some form of digital surveillance. Feminist activists recognize the need for surveillance but also depend on anonymity for safety in an increasingly hostile, anti-feminist and right-wing political and social landscape. The same anonymity used for anti-sexual violence activism is exploited by perpetrators of digital sexual violence. Further critical research on transnational digital sex crimes, surveillance technologies, and the global rise of extreme right-wing politics and anti-feminist backlash is essential to understand the impact of local legislation and feminist activism in a transnational context. By examining cases like the Nth Room and the use of digital chatrooms on platforms like Telegram, I argue that heightened censorship and surveillance of cloud-based messaging platforms pose new challenges for both local and transnational feminists.

Endnotes

1. All Korean-English translations follow the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system primarily used by Korean studies scholars in North America, with the exception of instances where authors, public figures, and institutions have an established English spelling of their name or institution, such as President Yoon Suk Yeok (Yun Sŏkyŏl in McCune-Reischauer) or feminist film scholar Sohn, Hee-jeong (Son Hŭichŏng).

2. As one of the key promises made by Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-) during his presidential campaign, Yoon relocated the South Korean presidential office from Chung Wa Dae (Blue House) to a Defense Ministry Complex in Yongsan in 2022. In the same year, President Yoon shut down the popular public petition platform on Cheong Wa Dae's website which was introduced by former president Moon Jae-in on August 19, 2017. I discuss this change in section six of this article.

3. The ethnographic research included in this article was supported by a grant from the Academy of Korean Studies in 2018 and a Fulbright grant in 2019. All interviews were conducted in Korean and translated by the author. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Korean to English are by the author.

4. Interview subjects' names have been anonymized either by the author or using a nickname chosen by the interview subject, unless otherwise noted.

5. The case mentioned in my interview with So-young refers to the South Korean authorities issuing a warrant for arrest of the operator of an anonymous online radical feminist community, Womad, in August 2018. For more on this case see Haas 2018.

6. Secondary victimization refers to the additional trauma or victimization that individuals may experience as a result of their interactions with institutions, systems, or individuals after the initial victimization. This can occur through insensitive or dismissive treatment by the legal system or law enforcement, victim blaming, or other forms of inadequate or harmful responses from law enforcement, medical professionals, social services, or even friends and family in-person or online.

7. Korean names are written last name, first name.

8. "About." The Korea Cyber Sexual Violence Response Center." https://www.cyber-lion.com/about.

9. The Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes (Act number 19743) was enforced on January 25, 2024. The English translation of the Act is available through the Korean Law Information Center: https://www.law.go.kr/eng/engMain.do?menuId=0

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Commentary

Imag(in)ing the Invisible

by Elizabeth S. Cameron

Abstract: This commentary politicizes the relational-technical economy of biomedicine and the future it forecasts for feminized bodies with chronic illnesses. As digital medical imaging technologies develop, visualizations of disease are becoming more sophisticated. I begin by critically considering the implications this has for feminized bodies with chronic illnesses through the example of endometriosis, a common chronic pain disease that is not well understood within the biomedical paradigm. Enhanced imaging technologies promise to illuminate previously-unknowable aspects of disease pathophysiology, but what future is such technological progress enabling, and for whom? Through a critical intersectional lens, it becomes evident that the biomedical-technological future imag(in)es particular bodies, in particular places, and towards particular, but not unfamiliar ends. Enhancing abilities to visualize disease through digital technologies within a biomedical paradigm does not require us to look differently, which may be precisely what is needed. Thus, drawing theoretically on the work of bell hooks as well as critical feminist disability studies scholarship, I kindle the fire of a critical intersectional politic that transforms biomedical-technological ways of seeing the feminized body with chronic illness. Such a politic not only offers the possibility to imagine alternate futurities, but also contributes to their tangible realization.

Keywords: biomedicine; chronic illness; digital diagnosis; endometriosis; futurity; medical imaging technologies

Résumé : Ce commentaire politise l'économie relationnelle et technique de la biomédecine ainsi que l'avenir qu'elle réserve aux corps féminisés atteints de maladies chroniques. À mesure que les technologies d'imagerie médicale numérique évoluent, la visualisation des maladies devient de plus en plus sophistiquée. Tout d'abord, je pose un regard critique sur les conséquences de cette évolution pour les corps féminisés atteints de maladies chroniques, en prenant l'exemple de l'endométriose, une maladie douloureuse chronique courante qui n'est pas bien comprise dans le paradigme biomédical. Les technologies d'imagerie améliorées promettent d'éclairer des aspects auparavant inconnus de la physiopathologie des maladies, mais quel avenir ces progrès technologiques permettent-ils d'envisager, et pour qui? D'un point de vue critique et intersectionnel, il est clair que l'avenir biomédical et technologique imagine des corps particuliers, dans des lieux particuliers, et à des fins particulières, mais pas étrangères. L'amélioration des capacités à visualiser la maladie grâce aux technologies numériques dans un paradigme biomédical ne nous oblige pas à voir les choses différemment, alors que c'est peut-être précisément ce dont nous avons besoin. Ainsi, en m'appuyant théoriquement sur les travaux de bell hooks ainsi que sur des études féministes critiques sur le handicap, je jette les bases d'une politique intersectionnelle essentielle qui transforme les façons biomédicales et technologiques de voir le corps féminisé atteint d'une maladie chronique. Une telle politique permet non seulement d'imaginer un autre avenir, mais aussi de contribuer à ce qu'il se réalise concrètement.

Mots clés : technologies d'imagerie médicale; diagnostic numérique; biomédecine; endométriose; maladies chroniques; avenir

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within which she created the website suspectedendo.com to translate and disseminate her research directly to public audiences, particularly people with suspected endometriosis and those involved in their care. During the final year of her undergraduate Sociology degree at the University of Calgary (where she graduated with Distinction), Elizabeth co-produced and edited the film *Dorothy Smith: Discovering a Sociology for People*, which has been shared widely through conference presentations as well as university course syllabi. She also has a diploma in Journalism (Photo-journalism concentration, Honours) from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), and previously worked as a multimedia journalist.

The future promises great things for feminized bodies with chronic illnesses. As digital medical technologies develop, visualizations of disease are becoming more sophisticated. The previously invisible is becoming knowable. Take endometriosis as an example. This chronic inflammatory pain disease is not well understood but affects "at least 11% of women (and people assigned female at birth) worldwide" (Ellis, Munro, and Clarke 2022, 1) and unknown numbers of gender diverse people (Allaire, Bedaiwy, and Yong 2023). Endometriosis is best described as a condition where tissue similar to that of the uterine lining (the endometrium) progressively grows on organs and soft tissues within the body. This tissue responds to hormone fluctuations, particularly that of estrogen, and results in a variety of painful and disruptive symptoms (see Allaire et al. 2023).

Since the nineteenth century, endometriosis has been definitively diagnosed through surgery which enables histopathological interpretation of diseased tissue. Histopathology is the medical practice of looking at tissue through various techniques (under a microscope, for example) to determine which particular pathology (disease) is present (Brown n.d.). The introduction of video-assisted laparoscopic surgery[1] in the late twentieth century replaced its more invasive predecessor, abdominal laparotomy (making a surgical incision in the abdomen as a way to see inside the body) (Nezhat, Nezhat, and Nezhat 2012). Videolaparoscopic technology invited "a completely new understanding of the anatomy" because tissue that appeared normal to the surgeon's eye could be magnified to "visualize atypical lesions" that would have otherwise been missed (Nezhat, Nezhat and Nezhat 2012, 53).

Despite these technological advances, presently, getting diagnosed with endometriosis usually takes several years. As will be further discussed below, depending on who you are and where you seek treatment, it can sometimes take more than a decade (if it ever happens at all). This delay arises for a number of reasons, including a limited number of practitioners with surgical expertise to perform diagnostic procedures (which are often accompanied by excision, or removal, of the problematic tissue) (Ellis, Munro and Clarke 2022; also see Seabrook and Cattapan 2023 for further explanation of the diagnostic delay associated with endometriosis).

Because diagnostic delays result in immense consequence for people with endometriosis as well as health care systems (see Levy et al. 2011), non-surgical interventions are quickly replacing surgical extraction as the preferred method for diagnosing and treating endometriosis. This clinical turn[2] has been supported by the development of more sophisticated medical imaging technologies. Transvaginal ultrasonography and pelvic magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are recommended for use in clinically diagnosing endometriosis (Allaire et al. 2023; Becker et al. 2022), with other options rapidly transforming the future possibilities for diagnosis. For example, recent developments in electron microscopy are deepening understandings of "both anatomical and pathological conditions at ever smaller, constitutive levels, in turn providing more terms of reference for precise targeting and functional imaging" (Burfoot n.d., citing Nahirney and Tremblay 2021). Neural interactivity has been mapped in humans since 2010 through MRI technology, and an entire neural network was mapped in tissue extracted from a fruit fly for the first time in 2023 (see Elam et al. 2021; Naddaf 2023). As Annette Burfoot (n.d.) has also described, photoacoustic tomography is increasingly used with ultrasound to produce a three-dimensional moving image that visualizes "in real time the uptake of pharmaceutical treatment … or how a body reacts to pharmaceuticals, including nano technologies, *during* exposure" [emphasis in original]. This technology "promises to enhance early cancer assessment especially in deep and dense tissue like the breast and to monitor activity in the heart" (Burfoot n.d., citing Zhang et al. 2022).

These developments suggest how more sophisticated imaging technologies may help illuminate previously-unknowable aspects of endometriosis pathophysiology (referring to the physiological disorder caused by and/or resulting in disease, see Witthöft 2013). For example, photoacoustic tomography could be explored as a means to visualize endometriosis more precisely through non-surgical methods. If cancer, "as a distinctive cellular material, can be identified and located at the initial stage of molecular change as can heart dysfunction" through "this way of looking" (Burfoot n.d.)—and surgery can be guided in real time—what might be the implications for endometriosis?

Additionally, in the drive to confer more accurate diagnosis and treatment, and do this faster than ever before, artificial intelligence-assisted diagnosis has already become part of the endometriosis treatment paradigm (Dungate, Tucker, Goodwin, and Yong 2024). Soon, clinical diagnoses may not be determined by a human. As Burfoot (n.d.) has argued,

> we have been marching steadily towards [the application of artificial intelligence software within medical imaging and diagnostic processes] by reducing what is being scanned to its constitutive parts and creating ways of distinguishing such from surrounding "noise." What appears to be ever more realistic to the human eye, and a more informative non-destructive gaze inside a living being, is the result of layers of digitization and computer manipulation.… What is to stop more sophisticated automated scan/read systems from making diagnoses based on the raw digital data gathered more accurately and far more quickly than the human eye/brain, which requires considerable enhancement to make the data readable?

Without a doubt, "the internal human body and its functions has [sic] never been so illuminated, and the images never so widely disseminated" (Burfoot n.d.). But Burfoot (n.d.) raises a critical question: If, with the enhanced ability to "visualize the body in ever more minute and easily digitizable forms, and … compute increasing arrays of function all through mediations that do not require eyeballs, do we trust things without them to read on our behalf?" Indeed, social discrimination is "baked-in" to these technologies and, without addressing this, discrimination will be digitized (Burfoot n.d.; also see Tuzcu 2021). What is to stop the promised diagnostic future from reproducing inequities already existing within medicine? Why would digital white supremacy/patriarchy/cisheteronormativity/ableism be any different from their analog analogues?

We might ask ourselves, then, what future such technological progress is enabling, and for whom. Machines produce a mechanical reading of the molecular structures of endometriosis tissue, unlike a human, who, for example, might interpret results variably based on their mood, education, and biases towards racial, gender, and sexual identity categories ascribed to the body being visualized. But which bodies are even funnelled towards diagnosis? Who gets to have their disease visualized and diagnosed at all? This is also of concern. Further, machines are taught, programmed, and designed with the knowledge possessed by their human creators; (diagnostic) algorithms and technologies are not created in a social vacuum (see Tuzcu 2021). These matters become even more pressing as endometriosis diagnosis and treatment rapidly shifts towards new methods that do not require technologically-assisted surgical incisions which follow a suspected diagnosis but, rather, rely on biomedical-technological interventions that capture layers of corporeal material without breaking skin to direct diagnosis and subsequent treatment.

In her book *Killing Rage*, bell hooks (1995) describes "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ways of seeing black womanhood" (85). I want to briefly consider how such a regime sees the feminized body with chronic illness. Critical menstruation and critical feminist disabilities scholarship has argued the feminized body is rendered through compulsory systems of able-bodiedness and cisheteronormativity within white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture (Przybylo and Fahs 2018; Jones 2021; also see hooks 1995). Using this critical intersectional perspective, biomedicine can be understood as a system which organizes the body, including its fertility and disease, in line with white supremacist cisheteronormative and ableist social structures. This means that bodies are compelled to fit within a very particular acceptable form. The biomedical paradigm of endometriosis care works to control the body with this feminized, gendered disability (Jones 2021) as a substitution for a cure. For example, clinical treatment for endometriosis, projected to be a $3+ billion pharmaceutical market by 2030 (see Lindeman 2023, 187), is an increasingly encouraged practice as this may reduce painful symptoms – but it does not cure the disease or prevent its progression (see Allaire et al. 2023).

Further, a racialized cisheteronormative ableist economy confers endometriosis diagnosis and treatment for some while excluding others. The biomedical-technological future imag(in)es very particular bodies: those who are white, cisheterosexual, of reproductive age, with economic resources, living in a city in the global North and with access to the best diagnostic technologies (see Jones 2021). For instance, advanced transvaginal ultrasonography, as performed by sonographers, radiologists, or gynecologists with special interest and training, "has been shown to reliably detect deep endometriosis in systematic reviews" (Allaire et al. 2023, 367). But in practice, as with surgical endometriosis interventions, this advanced imaging is not routinely available to most Canadians, which may contribute to less-than-timely referral to specialized surgeons or centres of expertise (Allaire et al. 2023, 369; see Wahl, Yong, Bridge-Cook, and Allaire 2021). Ways of seeing also produce ways of not-seeing: in knowing who is imag(in)ed, we should ask, who is not imag(in)ed?

Pinar Tuzcu (2021) has theorized how knowledge in the digital age is produced[3] through *cybercolonial* dynamics. As with postcolonial[4] hierarchies in non-cyber realms, such dynamics concentrate epistemic power in the hands of "Western companies, usually owned by wealthy white men, that are increasingly monopolizing their control over the information sector" while silencing the *cybaltern*, or those "whose voices are muted and rendered unheard, paradoxically despite and because of the digital tools available" (Tuzcu 2021, 516, 520). This works to deepen "geopolitical hierarchies between the Global North and South" (Tuzcu 2021, 515). It is "not only the technology per se" which produces this dynamic, but the elite's "discursive and methodological power over the technology" (Tuzcu 2021, 515). In this way, "tools that theoretically should make [cybaltern] voices heard become the very means for suppressing their voices" (Tuzcu 2021, 520). Imaging technologies, then, which can make the previously unknowable visible, become tools of domination and subordination when wielded within a cybercolonial present: a mode of digital medical knowledge production that gazes through a predictably narrow scope, towards predictably narrow ends.

The surveillance of the body made possible through medical imaging technologies can be further seen as a form of data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019). This suggests that the "abstract quantification methods of computing" assist the extending of "predatory extractive practices of historical capitalism" to new dimensions of social life (Couldry and Mejias 2019, 337). Who benefits from the ability to visualize the body like never before? If the emergence of Big Data provides any indication of what happens to a sea of digital information generated about human activity, we might assume the primary benefactors of increasingly agile imaging technologies are probably not the bodies being visualized.

This highlights the tensions inherent in the process of becoming knowable, particularly given the primacy afforded to visualizing pathology within medicine (Burfoot n.d.). As technology makes the previously unknowable, and uncontrollable, legible, bodies with feminized chronic illnesses such as endometriosis risk being brought further under biomedical-technological regimes of control. Enhancing our ability to visualize disease through digital technologies within this paradigm does not require us to look differently, which may be precisely what is needed. What if we consider what we fail to see because of what Burfoot (n.d.) describes as a culture of the visualized body? How might the image of endometriosis change if knowledge was no longer premised on what is possible to visually observe? It's a familiar question among critical feminist disability scholarship: What can be gained in the absence of perceived "ability" and what do we learn from our impairment (Jones 2021)? What becomes possible by redirecting our gaze?

You might be expecting me to call for a rejection of medicine's visual culture and declare my refusal to engage with it outside written critique. And while this is certainly a valid refusal for any person to make—very much in alignment with feminist refusals to engage with oppressive structures which promise to amplify harm—doing so here would risk negating the also-valid desires of people with invisible chronic illnesses to be relieved, even cured, of their impairments, including pain (Kafer 2013; Jones 2016; Wendell 2014). These are desires I share. If there is a digital technology that can visualize the disease inside me and, say, guide more accurate or targeted treatment, or a non-invasive test to confirm without a doubt that yes, it *is* endometriosis and not "something else" (Whelan 2007) that might necessitate different treatment, sign me up. Hence, the need for a critical intersectional politic in assessing the medical endometriosis paradigm, including diagnostic imaging. A critical, feminist, queer, and crip politic names white supremacist capitalist patriarchy as the primary organizing logic of biomedicine, separates impairment from disability, and

refuses biomedical/individual models which position the disabled body as something that needs to be cured. Rather, a political-relational model of disability (Kafer 2013) is adopted. This positions impairment as something medicine may be a helpful in reducing and positions disability as an embodied location that is disadvantaged by a social world, including biomedical-technological relational structures, which constantly demand performances that comply with able-bodied and cisheteronormative imagined ideals (Kafer 2013).

It is necessary to politicize the relational-technical economy of biomedicine and disidentify (Muñoz, in Jones 2021) feminized chronically ill bodies with the projected biomedical-technological future. Disidentification implies "neither completely identifying with nor completely rejecting dominant culture – but rather transforming it" (Jones 2021, 204). The imagined biomedical-technological future is not a future that these bodies necessarily desire, accept, or endeavour to be made visible to. Instead, it is important to recognize our digitally colonized selves and the ongoing practices of dispossession from our bodies and the images (and other digital data) made of them. This is a readily available means to resist this projected future that allows queered and cripped possibilities to emerge in place of present hegemony. For example, a critical intersectional politic takes seriously questions such as: What happens when uncertainty and the unknowable are embraced? What does inability to visualize the chronically ill body make possible? More concretely, how might endometriosis be understood through other ways of seeing bodies with feminized chronic illnesses, beyond the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal microscope? What would we learn from examining the disease's relation to what isn't so easy to see, such as the immune, endocrine, and nervous systems? Instead of being put on medical ice while biding our time for surgery, are other possibilities possible?

To conclude, I begin to articulate, without claiming definition, an alternative future that people with feminized chronic illnesses might desire. What do we accept and what do we resist? What do we reclaim? To what and to whom do we endeavour to be made visible?

First, we desire a queer, cripped futurity that disidentifies with the compulsory white supremacist capitalist patriarchal regime of biomedicine and, in particular, disidentifies with the technological future this regime compels us towards. Many of us desire cures for impairments alongside our desire to rupture white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, and this doesn't make us traitorous to our shared cause (Kafer 2013; Wendell 2014). Second, we accept the limits of biomedical authority over the body. In doing so, we invite solidarities with an expectation of difference. This politic has been well articulated by Audre Lorde (1984) and Sins Invalid (2015).

Bodies with feminized chronic illnesses also resist certainty and control – both tenets of biomedical authority, which demands agency be ceded for legibility. The creation of critical intersectional discourse undermines biomedical-technological knowledge production processes and challenges the authority being claimed over our bodies. And finally, we endeavour to be made visible to ourselves and each other. Through this work, we begin to reclaim power. We reclaim agency of our bodies and embodied knowledge through recognizing and naming the colonizer and reinhabiting our bodies as embodied agents rather than biomedical discursive constructions. We are already coming to know ourselves as bodies with desires, agency, and capacities that resist the imagined biomedical-technological future. Through such effort, we are not only imagining something else in its place but actually building an alternative feminist/queer/crip futurity (see Kafer 2013). This is an invitation for others to take up a critical intersectional politic to transform the biomedical-technological regime and white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ways of seeing (hooks 1995) the feminized body with chronic illness.

Endnotes

1. Video-assisted laparoscopy refers to a surgical procedure where a magnifying lens on the end of a scope displays an image of the tissues in real time. This technique has resulted in "lower morbidity, better visualization of areas difficult to access … [and allowed] for more precise dissection" as well as allowed faster recovery time compared to abdominal laparotomies (Nezhat, Nezhat and Nezhat 2012, 53).

2. The European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology and the Canadian Medical Association Journal have recently encouraged the clinical diagnosis of endometriosis to reduce delays in starting treatment (Becker et al. 2022; Allaire, Bedaiwy, and Yong 2023). This means that if someone has a symptom history consistent with endometriosis, responds positively to clinical treatment (currently, this involves taking hormonal medication to suppress menstruation as a way to reduce pain, see Allaire et al. 2023), and medical imaging does not rule out endometriosis or suggest other diagnoses, the person can be clinically diagnosed with endometriosis by a medical practitioner (see Becker et al. 2022).

3. Knowledge production is not only accelerated but also takes new forms; for example, artificially intelligent computers can not only store and display information but actually generate it (Tuzcu 2021, 515).

4. Indicating an absence of ongoing imperialist colonization of land but the remaining presence of power hierarchies that continue to produce colonial relations of domination; see Tuzcu (2021) and Couldry and Meijas (2019) for more discussion.

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Interview

#MeToo in the Global South: Reflections on a Viral Movement

by Iqra Shagufta Cheema and Jennifer Jill Fellows

This is a revised version of an interview with Dr. Iqra Shagufta Cheema that aired on the podcast *Cyborg Goddess* on June 7, 2024.[1] Iqra Shagufta Cheema is an assistant professor of humanities at Graceland University in Iowa. She is a scholar and teacher of twentieth- and twenty-first- century literary and media studies of the global majority, feminist film studies, and transnational feminisms. In this interview, Dr. Cheema discusses her book, *The Other #MeToos* (Oxford University Press 2023), with Dr. Jennifer Jill Fellows. *The Other #MeToos* is an edited volume that brings together sixteen scholars of media, linguistics, gender, law, literary studies, postcolonial studies, and Indigenous studies to examine how the Global South countries and communities engage with the #MeToo movement and how this translation of #MeToo changes the feminist politics and publics.

Jennifer Jill Fellows: Can you tell me what motivated you to take on this book project?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema: In 2017, when Alyssa Milano's tweet went viral,[2] I closely followed the #MeToo movement. While academic discussions about #MeToo occurred in the West afterwards, there was little critical attention to the movement's transnational impact or how feminists in the Global South experienced the transnational diffusion of the #MeToo and how it was shaping Global South feminist politics and publics. I also noticed that global attention to #MeToo and other related issues was often limited to certain days, like Women's Day. I specifically remember a *Washington Post* photo essay that featured Women's Marches from around the world. The photos in this essay, which had images from Women's Marches from countries such as Iran, France, India, and Pakistan, were striking to me considering the contestation around even a single issue like women's choice to cover their heads amid the rising Islamophobia.

The fact that Women's March had room for all these women, or that women whose feminisms *looked* so different yet was tied to same right of choice, was interesting. This prompted me to read scholarly works on the global #MeToo movement, such as *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* by Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes and *The Global #MeToo Movement* by Ann Noel and David Oppenheimer. More books such as *Reporting on Sexual Violence in the #MeToo Era* which was edited by Andrea Baker and Usha Rodrigues came out while I was putting together *The Other #MeToos*. While such works were informative, they underscored the need for a more comprehensive, expansive exploration of the movement's impact beyond the West. Following Toni Morrison's advice to write the book you want to read, I decided to start *The Other #MeToos*.

JJF: The book is expansive, covering the #MeToo movement across various locations and cultures globally. There are chapters on Indigenous communities and on the movement's presence in Morocco, Pakistan, India, South Korea, Egypt, and the Czech Republic, among others. While this interview can't fully capture the breadth of material in the book, I'd like to discuss some of the recurring themes and a few chapters. Before that, could you briefly explain what transnational feminism is for those unfamiliar with the concept?

ISC: To answer this, I will go back to the evolution of the term itself to define transnational feminism and its shifts

against and in comparison with other dominant feminist terms. The term goes back to initial contentions between white feminism and feminisms of color as articulated in the scholarship by Ranjoo Herr, Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Jacqui Alexander. Recognizing the implicit racism and homogenization of women's lived experiences, some white feminists started using the term global feminism and international feminism as these terms could be more inclusive and expansive.

However, unlike international feminism, global feminism advocated for transcending national borders, which is a thorny subject given the geopolitical histories of the Global North and Global South. It's irresponsible and inaccurate to ignore the formation of national borders and role of border regimes when thinking in the shadow of imperial global histories. Compared to global feminism, international feminism presupposed nation states as "discrete and sovereign entities," which is also a thorny position to take as we see in Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal's work.

To account for the geopolitical situatedness of women's experiences, feminists like Kumari Jayawardena and Chandra Mohanty, among others, argue for Third World feminism to geopolitically historicize the Third World women's experiences to examine their agency and diverse forms of their activism. However, transnational feminism then replaced or subsumed Third World feminism and is now the more familiar and more widely used term, as laid out in Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar's work, *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, along with Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, and Jacqui Alexander's work. Overall, transnational feminism challenges the assumption of homogeneity, both of women and their experiences, and the also challenges conception of global sisterhood to emphasize the heterogeneity of women's experiences and activism, as did Third World feminism. But it focuses more on the cross-national rather than national feminist organizing and networks.

This is not to say that all transnational feminists articulate these ideas similarly. Their methodologies do differ. For example, Grewal and Kaplan focus more on a culturist transnationalism where nations as analytical frames are less relevant. Mohanty and Alexander, on the other hand, emphasize geopolitical and national histories. However, it's important here to note that Mohanty in her 1984 seminal essay, 'Under Western Eyes" wrote about third world women as a third world feminist. However, in her 2003 "Under Western Eyes Revisited," she revisits her previous position as a third world feminist to reposition herself as an "anticapitalist transnational feminist." She believes a "transnational, anticapitalist feminist critique" is a more suitable methodology to focus on the interplay of globalization and capitalism as it "historical materialism and centralizes racialized gender." Overall, transnational feminism examines gendered epistemic privilege, intersectionality, deleterious effects of global capitalism, and the politics of international feminist solidarity. In doing so, it aspires to historicize, situate, and examine gendered relations and their formation in cross-border global, racial, colonial, and imperial contexts with less attention to the nation-states.

JJF: Now that we have outlined the conceptual tool of transnational feminism, can you tell us about the origins of the #MeToo movement and how the movement became a viral online feminist phenomenon?

ISC: Most people witnessed the #MeToo movement going viral in 2017 with Alyssa Milano's tweet. But after Milano's tweet, it emerged that this was not a new movement. The "Me Too" movement, with the same goals, had been started by Tanara Burke in 2006 on MySpace. Milano's tweet helped to make the movement international and viral, both because of her celebrity status and because social media and its access has changed considerably since 2006. Upon learning of Burke's Me Too movement, Milano acknowledged Burke's contribution. Burke also accepted Milano's role in leading the #MeToo movement.

Despite their recognition of each other's work, questions about the politics of solidarity come into play here: Milano's tweet received responses from celebrities like Lady Gaga and Jennifer Lawrence; Burke only got credit for her work after Black feminists and other allies advocated for her and amplified the work she had been doing since 2006.

We can credit different sociopolitical shifts like broader cultural acceptance of feminist politics, increased international recognition for the need for feminist justice, awareness about intersectional feminism, and availability of feminist vocabularies for the virality of 2017 campaign. But at the same time, we can also think about the politics of

white feminism at play in instances like this. Burke, in her interview with *Ebony*, commented that discrediting her work was perhaps unintentional but somehow sisters of color manage to "get diminished or erased in these situations."[3]

Burke's Me Too imagines an international sisterhood of Black, Indigenous, and people-of-colour survivors under the assumption that all of these survivors are equal and equally deserving of justice, which is something that often gets erased when it comes to white feminisms. But despite these issues, #MeToo continues to be a massively successful feminist movement in our times. Between October and November 2017, the hashtags #MeToo and #WomensMarch were tweeted more than 2.3 million and 11.5 million times respectively, in multiple Indigenous and national languages worldwide. It is this grassroots appeal of the movement that made it successful. It is the participation of the masses in the movement that made it into what it is. But, in times of crises, solidarity is extended conditionally and selectively to women of color, as we witness in the feminist responses and feminist engagement with Palestine. This points to the limits of transnational feminist movements like #MeToo.

JJF: That points to a tension that we'll draw out more in this conversation. A lot of people, myself included, did not know about the #MeToo movement until 2017. Part of that might have been because I was never on MySpace. But part of it is probably also because of my social location as a white feminist living in Canada which definitely shapes what I have regular access to and see, and what I don't. So it's really important to think about the way in which technologies and social media platforms like Twitter and MySpace work—and also whose voices are being amplified on which platforms.

ISC: Right. With the American tech hegemony, it's critical to pay attention to whose voices are amplified, silenced, restricted, or shadow banned in many ways that we sometimes witness—and most of the time don't witness or only learn about retrospectively. But overall, at least #MeToo became the integrative site where both Burke and Milano could come together because they had one shared goal. This shows us that solidarity is possible, when one is willing to acknowledge and work through the challenges and contradictions of the process.

JJF: A recurring theme in the book is that the #MeToo movement is often viewed as a white, Western brand of feminism, extending colonial or Western influence, especially in different contexts. This perception leads to the movement being seen as dangerous and supporters of it as threatening. Can you discuss how this manifests?

ISC: This aligns with general synonymity of feminism with white feminism, particularly in post-colonial contexts, where many nationalists view feminism with suspicion, equate it with imperialism, or misperceive it as Western agenda. The term carries colonial and imperial baggage. It has been instrumentalized and offered for imperialist and settler designs. We see in feminists like Gloria Steinem, Eve Ensler, Meryl Streep, and Susan Sarandon's active support for War on Terror,[4] which Rafia Zakaria describes as America's first feminist war.

Unsurprisingly, these histories of white feminists or Western feminists undermine feminist praxis and complicate feminist theory. Rafia Zakaria's book, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, explains this discomfiture by examining the long histories of feminist development work as well as the relationship between white feminists and Third World feminists. White feminism, as soon as it touches borders with feminisms of colour, especially in or from the global majority countries and communities, tends to become relatively apolitical or politically myopic. Many liberal feminists remain unaware of these tendencies in their own work. The #MeToo movement, despite its limitations, has broadened the potential for more transnational models of solidarity through a hashtag, which supplements the traditional on-ground activism by offering wider accessibility and safety. This is not to prioritize one mode of political activism over the other but to say that they work best when mobilized simultaneously on the ground and online. People have been able to modify the hashtag #MeToo, adapt it, translate it in different ways, so it could be localized, while sustaining its transnational underpinnings. But feminist goals and objectives are heterogenous everywhere, across a variety of contexts. In the Global South, public visibility remains deeply political, as we see in movements like "Girl at Dhabas" in Pakistan and "Why Loiter?" in India. In contrast, in the West, visibility often aligns with neoliberal, capitalist aspirations rather than feminist politics. This divergence creates a more complex, sometimes re-

luctant, engagement with feminism in different parts of the world. #MeToo became the one central place or hashtag or referent for conversations about gendered and sexual violence, but it remains malleable enough to allow heterogeneity and difference.

JJF: Throughout the book, there are chapters highlighting the ways communities have engaged with the global #MeToo movement to amplify voices and raise awareness about specific issues. Could you discuss the advantages some communities found in participating?

ISC: Absolutely. I received many remarkable essays for this collection, which also served as powerful teaching tools for me while I was planning the book. Several essays examine how local movements emerged from this global phenomenon. For instance, the #MosqueMeToo movement discusses how the sub-hashtag enabled Muslim women to share their experiences of sexual violence during Hajj. This created a transnational movement centered around a religious identity beyond national borders.

Zoe Eddy's chapter discusses Indigenous feminisms, highlighting how the #MeToo movement opened space for Indigenous survivors of gendered violence in North America. Eddy critiques the white-dominated narrative of #MeToo, while acknowledging how it provided a platform for Indigenous approaches to addressing sexual violence. In contrast, movements like #MosqueMeToo do not rely on Western engagement; instead, they focus on community issues, such as policy changes for Hajj. Here is an excerpt from the chapter, "Deer Women Dancing":

> To an Indigenous survivor among a community of Indigenous survivors, #MeToo sometimes feels as though a bleeding wound has opened further. After all, Indigenous activists have long been seeking redress for the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people. A conversation with a friend epitomized my own sentiments. #MeToo is no secret in Indian country. It's literally a statistic. If you are looking at me and I am Native, then it's literally probable that, you know, #MeToo. Nevertheless, the popularization of Burke's movement among white feminists and their adjacent circles has created a re-entry point for Indigenous survivors.

These examples show how #MeToo has expanded to include diverse, localized movements—an alternative politics—that reflect the experiences and politics of the various communities.

JJF: These two examples are really helpful. When we think about Indigenous movements, like #MMIW or #NoMoreStolenSisters, they existed independently of the 2017 #MeToo viral movement. In some of the chapters, one can read the frustration that the #MeToo movement has gone viral and many other online and offline activist movements have existed yet haven't gone viral in the West. But that this was both a frustration but also an opportunity, or a re-entry point. In contrast, #Mosque MeToo does not attempt to engage with mainstream Western audiences and media. While Indigenous movements use the #MeToo movement to leverage visibility, #MosqueMeToo uses #MeToo movement to build solidarity among Muslim women and does not try to get Western media to respond, to be involved at all. I think the malleability of the #MeToo movement is interesting.

ISC: Definitely. It takes us back to the question that you were asking earlier about the ways in which people engage with feminism. I would also clarify that Western feminism or white feminism is about a certain kind of imperialist politics and its methods, not about the skin color or geographical location.

It is critical for Indigenous movements to get engagement and attention from the Western mainstream media for any redressal, but that is not as necessary in the case of the #MosqueMeToo movement or #MeinBhi in Pakistan. Broader media coverage helps build pressure for resolution or policy changes, but redressal in the later cases can only come from within the community or the respective state.

There is another chapter in the book (the only one written by a man, Nicolás Juárez) called "Native Men Too: Settler Sexual Violence, Native Genocide, and a Dream of Fire." Juárez invites the readers' attention to "Native" men saying #MeToo, not to undermine women's experiences but to complicate the discourse on sexual violence and agency, spe-

cifically as they relate to gender and race. This is critical because, frequently, when people think of gender or sexual violence, the automatic victim that many people imagine is women, which is not always the case. Violence against men remains understudied and doesn't get the feminist or media attention that it should receive.

JJF: We've talked about the ways in which this movement, because of its malleability and its ability to adapt to local contexts, can be really powerful. But chapters in your book also look at the ways in which the #MeToo movement was not that helpful depending on what was going on locally? Can we talk about regions where the #MeToo movement just didn't seem to gain ground?

ISC: One chapter in the book talks about the #MeToo movement and its impact in Nepal. One chapter talks about Sri Lanka; another chapter talks about the #MeToo movement in Czech Republic. As you said, the impact of the #MeToo was different depending upon the local contexts and the different ways in which feminism has been vilified or valorized in different cultural and political contexts. One idea that recurs across the chapters is the discomfort with the term *feminism* itself and with its Western origins, which we discussed earlier.

JJF: Some chapters show that in some contexts online feminist movements were gaining ground and making a difference, possibly changing public policy or gaining solidarity and sisterhood. And as #MeToo swept around the globe, these movements were sometimes negatively affected by the perception that they were connected to #MeToo, perhaps because people had tweeted #MeToo along with the local hashtag. This led to the suspicion that this was a colonial, imperialist force rather than a local feminist movement. You mentioned the Czech Republic. I was fascinated by this chapter which describes how #MeToo movement was often viewed with suspicion as something akin to communism, which the Czech Republic has a history with. The #MeToo movement was therefore viewed with suspicion, as a trial of public opinion, moving away from law and order and fair trials, and also viewed as having Communist influences. In that way, the movement also gained suspicion and didn't gain ground. This came up in a few different chapters, though in different contexts, in different ways.

ISC: Right. Feminists have been mulling over this relationship between the local, national, and the international for a long time. Even thinking about the origin of the term transnational feminism or the move from Third World to transnational feminism is intriguing as we think about the geopolitical categorization of the world and its impact on political, social, and material conditions of life. This is a complexity that is impossible to flatten.

JJF: It is interesting that many activists felt the pressure to engage with this movement even though engaging with it was sometimes unhelpful. On the one hand, it is messy. On the other hand, it's the rich complexity of transnational feminism, right? We can't reduce it to something simple. And that's kind of the point. Reducing is erasing. We discussed this tension in the #MeToo movement where you feel like you have to engage in this international viral movement and also acknowledge the movement's American origins, which carries certain risks given the histories of white feminism and colonialism. I wonder if some of this tension in the #MeToo movement stems directly from the way the movement went viral.

In the preface of your book, you write: "Burke's #MeToo supports an international sisterhood of BIPOC survivors under the assumption that all survivors are equal. But famous #MeToo cases that went viral after Milano's tweet suggest that some survivors are more equal than others." It is also a theme in several chapters in your book that the movement gained a boost in certain contexts, often because of high profile, powerful, privileged people's involvement. The movement is very flexible but also risks silencing the very voices that are keeping it alive. Can we talk about this tension between finding international solidarity and amplifying voices versus the way the #MeToo movement went viral, which is a prioritizing of very privileged white Western feminist voices, and how that might complicate #MeToo?

ISC: Because so many of the #MeToo cases, inside and outside the United States, have been the celebrity cases. These high-profile cases, often involving celebrities, may share some experiences with the public but remain unique due to the power and positionality of those involved. This is despite the fact that the movement owes its success to everyone

who participated in it, tweeted it, and chose to share their personal experiences of #MeToo. This points to multiple concerns. For example, who can hope for justice in cases of sexual or gendered violence? How relatable or constructive are these discussions around celebrity cases, especially in culturally specific contexts? It also invites our attention to the contemporary "economy of attention": who gets noticed and whose voices matter. A part of this dynamic might be the human desire to make heroes out of people or idolize them. One example is the way certain celebrities are made into feminist icons due to their work, even though their work remains apolitical as it merely employs the tropes and aesthetics of feminism without actualizing feminist politics. This often furthers structural violence and serves as a Band-Aid to hide the pervasiveness and urgency of a problem. However, this question is increasingly more critical for movements like #MeToo.

Endnotes

1. Permission to reprint this transcript was granted by the producer and host of *Cyborg Goddess*, Dr. Jennifer Jill Fellows, and by the podcast guest, Dr. Iqra Shagufta Cheema.

2. On Oct. 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano shared that one of her friends had suggested that "if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'MeToo' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.' Milano urged people to write 'me too' as a reply to her tweet. This came in the wake of accusations against Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein. Milano's tweet quickly went viral, gaining millions of tweets. Read more: Anderson, Monica and Skye Toor. (2018). "How Social Media Users Have Discussed Sexual Harassment Since #MeToo Went Viral." Pew Research Center, Oct. 11. www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/11/how-social-media-users-have-discussed-sexual-harassment-since-metoo-went-viral/

3. Zahara Hill. (2018). "A Black Woman Created the 'Me Too' Campaign against Sexual Assault 10 Years Ago." *Ebony*. October 18. www.ebony.com/ news/ black-woman- me- too- movem ent- tar ana- burke- alyss amil ano/#.

4. George W. Bush, "Rights and Aspirations of the People of Afghanistan." White House Archives of President George W. Bush. georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/afghanistan/text/20040708.html.

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Literary Work

‘It’s Time ’92!’ Telethon

by Kate Miller

Repeat and repeat the tragedy of not fitting,
A horror to many.
It happened to a relative of The Celebrity.

The Celebrity says “I know first-hand the
Difficulties my family has faced because of
My brother’s condition.”

The Parent says to the camera
“I know first-hand how much my daughter
Has struggled every single day.”

The Subject Object asks If their hands are
The first hands, then which are mine?
When will my body be returned to me?

Live from a shopping mall in Calgary, Alberta
Where Hopeful Citizens have gathered
In support of the cause.

The Parent whispers “Ok, it’s time” and
The Subject Object responds “I’m too
Tired I don’t want to this place sucks.”

The Doctor takes the microphone to rouse
Donations, “...and I have seen first-hand the
Financial sacrifices these families must make.”

A children's dance troupe performs.
One sequin is always flipped up or out.
A girl who had an early growth spurt
Pulls at the waistband
Of her white tights,
And the tights slip back down
Her mom gestures at her to stop.
The horror of not fitting.

Back to The Celebrity:
"It is our belief that with enough funding,
In twenty years technology will be so advanced
That the physically disabled will just live among us."

Kate Miller is a hard of hearing writer, Child and Youth Worker, and audio/video artist in Toronto. She is focused on writing a collaborative book about Cape Breton, whales, work, disability, and loss with her brother Geordie Miller, as well as creating and sharing audiovisual works about parenting. You can find her audiovisual poems on instagram @katemildew