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Introduction

The Triota Honor Society is delighted to celebrate the publication of the 15th volume of *Through Gendered Lenses*, the University of Notre Dame's undergraduate journal of gender studies research.

This year, we have selected nine pieces of academic research and analysis that provide a deeper look into the international, intersectional, and interdisciplinary aspects of studying gender and sexuality. Whether utilizing television, interviews, medical records, social movement archives, classical literature, or other sources, these papers exhibit fundamental decolonial, anti-sexist, anti-imperialist, and anti-hegemonic lenses, as well as crucial gendered ones.

Felicity Wong examines the creation of the Chola aesthetic and politic, its appropriation, and its present reclamation within Chicana subcultures. Meghan Ping breaks down misconceptions and representations of asexuality, using a combination of personal interviews and television media analysis. Ashleigh Cotter studies gendered aspects of migration, assessing migrant women's access to and experiences of maternal healthcare in Monterrey, Mexico. Grace Sullivan critiques the feigned inclusion of women and queer individuals within the oppressive structures of Western exceptionalism and foreign policy. Joseph Lutfi studies the representation, reception, and stigma around queerness, transness, and (non)normative masculinity in the United States military. Aria Bossone examines hypermasculinity and white nationalism in an analysis of incels, MMA, and AR-15s. Meg Beuter applies a disability studies lens to analyze the gendered treatment of "mad women" in Wilkie Collins's 1860 novel, *The Woman in White*. Grace Hatfield identifies the misrepresentation and erasure of trans people in the development of AI and proposes a resistant reimagining of AI through trans theory and poetics. To conclude, Joy Agwu offers a speculative critique of gendered beauty standards in short story form. Each paper draws on a range of sources to illustrate themes of (in)visibility and spotlight underrepresented communities and ideas. They are valuable and necessary developments in the field of gender studies research.

When we look through gender*ed* lenses, we are doing more than examining gender and sexuality. We are also using an intentional, inclusive framework to highlight subjugation and identities on the periphery. We invite you now to look with these gendered lenses at both the featured essays and the world around us, with hope that they reflect new understandings.

Grace Hatfield '24
Greta Hillesheim '24
Julia Thomalla '24

TGL Managing Editors

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Through Gendered Lenses is supported by the Gender Studies Program. Many thanks to Professor Pam Butler, Associate Director of the Program, whose mentorship is essential to the production of this journal, and to Program Coordinator Michele Wolff whose support makes all of our work possible.

Triota and the *TGL* editorial board would also like to thank the Office of Undergraduate Studies of the College of Arts and Letters, the Genevieve D. Willis Endowment for Excellence, and the many alumni, faculty, and friends of the Gender Studies Program.

Finally, we are grateful for the contributions of the student scholars whose work is the foundation of *Through Gendered Lenses*. We are honored to showcase your work as exemplary of Gender Studies undergraduate research at Notre Dame.

The Gender Studies Program

Gender Studies at Notre Dame is an interdisciplinary academic program committed to excellence in teaching and research related to gender and sexuality. We develop, promote, and support research, creative work, pedagogy, service, and activism that respect human dignity, foster solidarity, and build toward the common good locally, nationally, and globally. We are a resource to the Notre Dame community regarding issues related to gender and sexuality, and we work to bridge rigorous scholarship with student development and leadership.

Our curriculum offers a diverse array of courses drawn from across the University and provides students with the tools to critically explore gender as it intersects with other social categories such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, and nationality. In Gender Studies courses, students examine the historical development and cultural variations of gender in relation to the social formation of human identities, relationships, practices, technologies, and institutions. Our curriculum equips students with an intellectual framework through which the intersectional analysis of gender can be critically and creatively applied to their other coursework, as well as to their personal, professional, and community roles. Our undergraduate students benefit from internship programs that emphasize the holistic and practical applications of a Gender Studies education, and thus allow students to connect their learning with community service and positive social change.

For more information about Gender Studies at Notre Dame, visit genderstudies.nd.edu.

Iota Iota Iota:
The Gender Studies Honor Society

Iota Iota Iota, or Triota, is an Undergraduate Honor Society composed of sophomore, junior, and senior Gender Studies majors and minors. Notre Dame's Alpha Phi chapter of Triota was formed in 2006, and its members are the Gender Studies Program's top students as demonstrated by their overall academic performance. All members have earned at least a 3.5 GPA in Gender Studies and a cumulative GPA of at least 3.0.

As the primary unit of undergraduate student service and leadership in the Gender Studies Program, Triota offers gender studies students multiple opportunities to engage their interests in gender issues beyond the classroom setting. Members of Triota contribute to an environment of academic excellence, encourage undergraduate research and scholarship in Gender Studies, foster relationships among students and faculty, promote interest and awareness of gender issues, and academically represent the Gender Studies Program

If you are a Gender Studies major or minor interested in becoming a member of Triota, please visit genderstudies.nd.edu to learn more about us or to apply for membership.

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Pendleton, Pachuca, and Performance: Reimagining the Chola Aesthetic as a Liminal Space

By Felicity Wong

Felicity Wong is a fiction writer and aspiring curator/critic interested in the relationships women have with their clothes. A senior from New Jersey and a former Lewis Hall resident, she currently works for the Notre Dame Press and the curator of photographs at the Raclin Murphy Museum of Art. After graduation, she will be moving to Colorado to pursue a graduate degree in Art History focused on global contemporary fashion and textiles.

1. Introduction



Figure 1: Shot from "Luxurious," Gwen Stefani, 2009

At approximately the one-minute mark of the "Luxurious" music video, American singer and songwriter Gwen Stefani sits in what seems to be a childhood bedroom, applying rhinestones, bright red lipstick, and dark eyeliner to her face. The video is spliced with scenes of her staring seductively into the camera as she sings the words, "work so hard / and now we get the payback," while couples engage in acts of intimacy in the bed behind her. Although Stefani's costumes in the music video alternate from an imitation of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo to a shirt with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe printed on the front, her most complex appropriation of Chicanx history lies in segments of the video when she wears a tank top baring her midriff, mid-rise dark jean shorts, a plaid wool jacket, and chunky gold jewelry (2009, Figure 1). The combination of Stefani's fashion, makeup, dancing, and lyrics reference the Chola subculture that grew out of the Southern California *barrios* in the 1970s through the 1990s among Mexican-American female youth. "Luxurious" is just one instance in Western popular culture when a woman who does not identify with the Latinx or Chicanx community "wears" the Chola aesthetic.

In a later interview, Stefani states that her Chola character was inspired by a girl in her high school class named Mercedes—a "total Chola girl, white face, and she used to sit in class and put on tons of makeup."[1] While this cultural appropriation is racist, as it diminishes Mexican-American culture and history into a music video costume, it also prompts ethical questions about this aesthetic's wearability, replicability, and value. This paper argues that the Chola aesthetic is not the arbitrary expression of some internal Chicana essence, but rather, a costume. This framing is necessary to understand how the aesthetic both acts as a kind of liminal space, subverting an intersection of gender and racial boundaries, and offers Chicanas an opportunity to reclaim their identity that has often been harmfully appropriated by Western media.

The visual evidence for this argument relies upon three series of photographs: Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* (1986, Figures 2 and 3), Judith F. Baca's *Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca* (1976, Figure 4), and Guadalupe Rosales' *Veteranas y Rucas* (2015, Figure 5). The renowned Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide photographed Cholas in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, as an outsider. The Cholas that became the primary subjects of her photographs were members of the White Fence gang, which emerged in 1920s Los Angeles.[2] Influenced by French photographers to "capture…small town subjects in extraordinary moments of emotional mundane activity," Iturbide's photographic series offers insight into how mainstream perception of Cholos and Cholas have shaped the politics of their dress.[3]

Although primarily known for her large-scale mural *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1978), Chicana Judith Baca's photographs, captured through projections on a vanity table mirror, are

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[1] Corey Moss, "For Gwen Stefani, Egyptian Cotton is Something Like Love," *MTV*, October 31, 2005, https://www.mtv.com/news/50pflk/for-gwen-stefani-egyptian-cotton-is-something-like-love.

[2] Nadiah Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series: Images of Cross-Border Identities," *History of Photography* 43, no. 3 (2019): 315, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2019.1715021.

[3] "Graciela Iturbide," Art Museum of the Americas, accessed December 12, 2023, https://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/graciela-iturbide.

fundamentally different from Iturbide's: these self-portraits transform Baca into a Pachuca—a predecessor of the Chola—through large bouncy hair, dark makeup, metallic hair clips, a fitted white shirt, and a body-hugging skirt.[4] While Iturbide represents someone from the outside looking in towards Chola culture, Baca's work functions as a self-reflection of Chola history—one that can visually explicate the link between costume and performance.

Guadalupe Rosales' *Veteranas y Rucas* is an Instagram project that documents the lives of women from Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s. The project began when Rosales, a Chicana from Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, moved to New York and experienced nostalgia for the underground youth party and protest culture she had grown up around. In a decade of increasing violence against Mexican Americans in Southern California, this culture provided Chicanx youth "a world of their own, away from the institutional establishments that had betrayed them."[5] After Rosales posted photographs she had already personally collected alongside written anecdotes on the Internet, other Chicanas began to submit their own. Today, @veteranas_and_rucas serves as a crowdsourced image archive for photographs of largely unrecognized Latinx communities. Its Instagram grid features the daily lives of young Cholas posed in front of lowrider cars, at backyard parties, and among friends and family.[6] Understanding Rosales' work of photographic self-representation as another kind of response to Iturbide's outsider's gaze contextualizes depictions of Chola girls within contemporary discourse about the appropriation and reclamation of subculture aesthetics.

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[4] "Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca," Xicanx Art, accessed December 12, 2023, https://xicanxart.com/artworks/judith-f-baca-as-la-pachuca/.
[5] Carribean Fragoza, "Back in the Days: Guadalupe Rosales and Her Archive of Chicano Life in Los Angeles,"*Aperture* no. 232 (2018): 48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26530857.
[6] Caroline Tracey, "The Instagram counter-archive: Guadalupe Rosales, Graciela Iturbide, and Chicana representation across borders," *Burlington Contemporary*, June 2021, https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/the-instagram-counter-archive-guadalupe-rosales-graciela-iturbide-and-chicana-representation-across-borders.

2. Graciela Iturbide



Figure 2: *Rosario, Liza, Cristina*, Graciela Iturbide, 1986

An aesthetic's significance lies not only in material and behavioral expressions but also in how those interior and exterior expressions are connected. Cholas wore clothing and makeup in a consistent manner that has deemed the Chola look recognizable: they styled big white t-shirts and baggy Dickies khaki pants as the base of their outfit, then layered Pendleton plaid wool jackets, beanies, and black wool ski caps on top during the colder months.[7] Cholas often manipulated the shape of their hair with mousse, while they rimmed their eyes with dark and heavy eyeliner, painted their lips deep red or black, and plucked their eyebrows so they were especially arched and thin. Ostentatious and heavy-looking jewelry, like large hoops or name

[7] "Graciela Iturbide."

plate necklaces, were also common.[8] The women in Iturbide's *Rosario, Liza, Cristina* (1986, Figure 2) in "Cholos/as" wear heavy black eyeliner or sunglasses, dark lipstick, and skin-revealing white tank-tops that lace up in the center.

In existing visual documentation, Cholas are usually posed with specific hand gestures denoting the gang they identify with. Two of the women in Iturbide's photograph throw their pointer fingers up, while another curves her hand in a c-like configuration; all three women have expressions of rebellion and nonchalance on their faces. These hand gestures are important to Chola style, but this paper will focus primarily on the fashion and makeup-related elements of the aesthetic. Distinct behaviors such as loyalty, sexual freedom, aggression, accompanied the aesthetic choices often associated with Cholas.[9] The terms "cholo" and "chola" were born in the *barrios*, or neighborhoods, of Southern California during the 1980s and 1990s, after the Chicanx movement expanded greatly in the 1960s.[10] Prevalent in these neighborhoods were gangs structured around gender roles, as well as their subcultures, which utilized style to assert a gang affiliation.[11] *Machismo*, a Spanish word for excessive masculine power or "manliness" in Mexican-American communities, developed into a phenomenon that normalized the submission of women. The Chola aesthetic destabilized the gender binary exacerbated by *machismo* and gang culture.

By occupying the liminal spaces between racial and gendered boundaries, the Chola style wields a subversive power, ultimately cementing a repeated and united set of style choices into a performative identity. Chola girls have created a new look that projects a unique combination of traits traditionally deemed female and male. Part of the Chola aesthetic is characterized by the sexual excess

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[8] Barbara Calderón-Douglass, "The Folk Feminist Struggle Behind the Chola Fashion Trend," *Vice*, April 13, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en/article/wd4w99/the-history-of-the-chola-456.
[9] Amaia Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Mexican American Women, Dress and Gender: Pachucas, Chicanas, Cholas*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 93.
[10] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 323.
[11] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 95.

pejoratively associated with Chicana femininity by mainstream American media. Jillian Hernandez coins the term "sexual-aesthetic excess" as it relates to Chongas, a subculture originating in Miami and adjacent to Cholas: "sexual-aesthetic excess of chonga bodies complicates dichotomies of 'good' versus 'bad' girls and signifies non-normative politics that trouble the disciplining of behavior and dress for girls of color."[12]

The stereotypical categorization of Chicanas—and women of color, more broadly—as sexually deviant, and therefore "bad," is linked to a larger moral framework that demonizes the sexuality of women of color. In defiance of this framework, Chola girls often wore tops exposing their breasts and midriff.[13] Additionally, the manner in which Cholas wore their makeup—bold red lips, strong eyebrows, thick and sharp eyeliner—can be read as a purposeful effort to embrace an excess in beauty. "Overdone" makeup is typically equated with promiscuity and prostitution in Western society, and "very aggressive makeup has been considered, as occurs among animals, a symbol of sexual demand, a call for willingness."[14] The exaggeration of makeup is another refusal of the aforementioned moral framework—a mode to convey the message that Chicanas will not respect standards controlling how they should dress. Hernandez labels this message one of "indifference toward portraying an assimilated white bourgeois subjectivity."[15] By rebelling against the beauty standards upheld by a white-dominated society, Cholas demonstrated pride in their Chicana identity.

Closely related to the oversexualization of Chicanas is their criminalization by American society. The Chola aesthetic addressed this stereotype in their inheritance of style from the Pachucas in the 1940s. This subculture emerged during the era of the Zoot Suit Riots

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[12] Jillian Hernandez, "'Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll': On Chonga Girls and Sexual-Aesthetic Excess," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 21, no. 3 (2009): 63, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20628195.
[13] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 100.
[14] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 95.
[15] Hernandez, "'Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll'," 86.

that took place in Los Angeles, when Anglo American servicemen attacked Latin and Mexican-American youth known as Pachucos. After these attacks, Mexican Americans were arrested and barred from entry into the city. The riots derived their name from the high-waisted and wide-legged suits Pachucos wore with wide-padded and wide-lapelled coats, called "zoot suits." American servicemen justified their attacks by citing the extra amounts of fabric used to construct the zoot suit as evidence of the Mexican-American population's lack of patriotism during the ongoing World War II, and Pachucos continued to wear zoot suits as a symbol of "youthful rebellion and…ethnic identification" during the 1940s.[16] Pachucas, the female version of Pachucos, wore their own kind of zoot suit, turning to mid-thigh jackets, short skirts and exaggerated makeup and hair to signal their defiance. A signature Pachuca outfit pieced together cardigans or long broad-shouldered coats, pleated skirts, fishnets, platform heels or saddle shoes, bouffant hairstyles, and dark makeup.[17] Almost fifty years later, the Chola aesthetic would co-opt many sartorial and facial elements of that look, from the length of their Pendleton coats to the shade of lipstick.

The association of Pachucas with criminalized Mexican-American youth existed not only as an extension of how their male counterparts were treated, but also as a contradiction of the official riot accounts, which frame these women as passive bystanders to the servicemen and Pachucos involved in conflict.[18] Other accounts show they in fact played a significant role in the riots, which explains their general vilification by the media: "the women who dared not only stand up in the streets but also defy the rules of decency, morality and feminine patriotism were very rapidly 'otherized' and criminalized."[19] Within Mexican-American communities, the Pachuca aesthetic challenged the beauty and behavioral standards to which women were held—continuously refining the formation of Chicana identity.

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[16] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 43.
[17] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 44–45.
[18] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 39–40.
[19] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 44.

Catherine Ramirez's study of Pachuca style argues the Pachuca girl, regardless of "her deliberate or non deliberate attitude and position, is and was a political figure, and her rebellious stance became essential for the development of the subsequent and more politically elaborate Chicana feminist identity and thought."[20]

The perception of Cholas parallels the way Pachucas were viewed outside and within their own community. Within the gang, Cholas were expected to adhere to the standards reinforced by the gender binary; yet the American public criminalized them alongside Cholos, who were seen as aggressive and threatening, as a part of the larger Los Angeles *barrios*. While their exaggerated makeup speaks to the hyperfemininity embraced by Cholas, their aspirations to have an athletic body type that indicates their physical power simultaneously masculinizes the aesthetic.[21] The Chola girls' iconic baggy pants and chunky Pendleton jackets concealed their bodies, leaving "no room for…exposure."[22] Part of the Chola aesthetic, then, involves taking on symbols associated with masculinity within Mexican-American communities. Beginning in the 1960s, Lady Lords, the female Puerto Rican nationalist Young Lords, donned the military clothing typically worn by their male counterparts to reject traditional gender roles and redefine their autonomy as women.[23] Similarly, the glorification of athletic body types and the androgyny of pants silhouettes among Cholas reflect a deviation from conventional beauty standards in line with the desire to inject maleness in their appearance.

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[20] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 46.
[21] Norma Mendoza-Denton, "'Muy Macha': Gender and ideology in gang-girls' discourse about makeup," *Ethos* 61, no. 1–2 (2016): 58, https://doi-org.proxy.library.nd.edu/10.1080/00141844.1996.9981527.
[22] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 101.
[23] Francis Negrón-Mutaner, "The Look of Sovereignty: Style and Politics in the Young Lords," in *Sovereign Acts: Contesting Colonialism Across Indigenous Nations and Latinx America,* ed. Francis Negrón-Mutaner (University of Arizona Press, 2017), 270.



Figure 3: *Cholas del Barrio White Fence con los héroes de México, Villa, Zapata y Juárez,* Graciela Iturbide, 1986

A photograph in Iturbdide's series titled *Cholas del Barrio White Fence con los héroes de México, Villa, Zapata y Juárez* (1986, Figure 3) further exemplifies how Cholas subverted the structures that upheld *machismo*. *Cholas del Barrio White Fence con los héroes de México* features four women in the White Fence Gang of Los Angeles, including one cradling a young child in her arms, who stand in front of a fenced-off mural painted with the faces of three male Mexican icons—revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, as well as former president Benito Juarez. These Cholas wear black belted denim or baggy pants, white tank tops, and dark makeup; the cradling of the baby reiterates the intrinsic femininity of the women in the photograph. Iturbide's artistic practice was centered on her immersion within the community, which then allowed her to gain the trust of her subjects.[24] Her status as an outsider pushed her to ask questions of the

[24] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 313.

subjects of her photographs concerning the complicated relationship between Cholas and the broader Mexican-American and American spheres.

Iturbide claims that in one conversation, she discovered these women were not familiar with the three men on the mural and told Iturbide instead they were mariachi band members.[25] In highlighting this part of their conversation, Iturbide could be poking fun at the Cholas for their ignorance, or on the contrary, celebrating their indifference to a male-dominated Mexican history. Their apparent lack of awareness of these three figures, alongside their upright stances in front of the wall and their style embedded with the history of the criminalized Pachuca, suggests the Cholas' reclamation of a history that has pushed out or diminished female voices; the photograph "visually emphasizes the group's contradistinction to the male portraits as a signal of their complex relationship to their own Mexican heritage, and their performance of strong femininity against the machismo of the male icons, White Fence gang culture, and the patriarchy of [American] culture."[26] This contrast sheds light on the great distance between Chicanas and the patriarchal portrayal of Mexican-American history, and how Cholas fill that gap in for themselves.

By mixing codes of traditional femininity and masculinity into their clothing and makeup, Chola girls defined a distinctive aesthetic that in turn formed their Chicana identity, occupying the space between Mexican-ness and American-ness. Reflecting on her interactions with the women in *Cholas del Barrio White Fence con los héroes de México, Villa, Zapata y Juárez*, Iturbide coins the term "double marginalization" to describe how these women are "not Mexican enough, yet existing on the fringes of a mainstream [American] culture."[27] In that sense, the Chola identity is situated at the junction point between two races that do not fully accept them. Cholas figuratively and literally live on the border between the United States

[25] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 317.
[26] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 317.
[27] "Graciela Iturbide."

and Mexico—and this identity anchored in the border is inscribed into how they choose to externally express themselves. Chain-link fences blend into the background of most of Iturbide's "Cholos/as," pointing not only to the ubiquity of barriers in urban areas, but also to their general presence in borderlands art. The fence acts as a barrier between what is White and Mexican, public and private, and citizen and non-citizen.

Additionally, the fence recalls the name of the Los Angeles gang the Cholas in "Cholos/as" belong to. "White Fence gang" imbues the fences in Iturbide's series with another layer of meaning because of the gang's location in a borderland city like Los Angeles, which ghettoized the Mexican-American community from the rest of the population.[28] Even more so as an outsider, Iturbide imagines the border between the Chicanas she photographs and her own Mexican self. She observed in the Cholas she interacted with "a familiarity with her own country, displaced and transformed within the East [Los Angeles] urban environment." Displacement is a corollary of the Chola's transnationality, and the chain-link fence motif "[symbolizes] the separation between the women in California and the Mexican origins of the mural's subject."[29] Borders reveal themselves within the Chola aesthetic. For example, the tomboyishness of the Chola style was partially influenced by the grunge movement popular in American culture during the 1990s, suggesting a moment of contact between Chicana and mainstream American identities.[30]

However, the popularized makeup habits within the subculture simultaneously demonstrate Cholas' inability to fit neatly into that American-ness: Western beauty ideals favor the white woman with her fair skin, but the Chola girls strove for the opposite; this flipped standard encouraged light-skinned Latinas to wear foundation several shades darker than their original skin.[31] While Mexican-Americans

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[28] Claire Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.–Mexico Border*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 45.
[29] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 11.
[30] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 89.
[31] Rivera Fellah, "Graciela Iturbide's *Cholos/as* Series," 13.

were otherized geographically and politically, Cholas accessed and inhabited an in-between of cultures through their gendered dress and makeup.

3. Judith Baca



Figure 4: *Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca*, Judith F. Baca, 1976

The link between the idea of performance and the kind of revolution the Chola aesthetic, or "costume," propels is based upon various theories of fashion and the body. After the 1960s, the concept of fashion as "a unitary industry or ideological trend [was] no longer existent"; rather, it exhibited a "fragmented ethos, which allows for personal performance and choice."[32] Describing fashion as performance distills sartorial expression into an individual action that, when repeated among many individuals, constitutes the expression of a collective identity. The Cholas photographed by artists like Iturbide are "exemplary of the adherence and communal performance of a group--identifying look."[33] An investigation of the subversive nature of fashion as performance first relies on an analysis of drag—a performance, typically for public entertainment, exaggerating aspects of gender expression through excessive clothes and makeup.

Drag as an analogy for the performance of the Chola aesthetic speaks to how varying elements of expression can reinvent the boundaries of what is female, Mexican, and American: "Drag uses the tools of feminine gender performance to destabilize hegemonic masculine gender norms."[34] This power to destabilize is based on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, in which she states that the body only becomes a certain gender "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."[35] If, by application of this principle, the reality of the Chola identity is actualized through its performance, then the aesthetic—the wearing of items like Dickies pants or dark lipstick—is the costume for that performance. The word "costume" here implies intentionality—what is put on can also be taken off. It is in the collective "doing"—donning sartorial pieces or emphasizing makeup in certain regions of the face—that Cholas reinforce their Chicana identity, an identity

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[32] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 14.
[33] Ibarraran-Bigalondo, *Dress and Gender*, 101.
[34] Mendoza Denton, "'Muy Macha'," 49.
[35] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 523. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893.

living between traditional conceptions of masculine versus feminine, good woman versus bad woman, and American versus Mexican.

Judith Baca's "Judith F. Baca as La Pachuca" illustrates this theory of costume and performance. In these photographic self-portraits, Baca transforms herself into a Pachuca girl, a female figure she identifies with because Pachucas are her ancestors. Baca, an artist born in the 1940s and active in the 1960s, is not a Pachuca, yet she becomes one by dressing herself in a short white button-up with a large black ribbon near the breast pocket, a belted black skirt, exaggerated makeup and accessories, and various facial and bodily expressions. She also uses a Marlboro cigarette pack as a theatrical prop. The clothes and makeup she puts on serve as a costume for her performance as a Pachuca, calling upon those who came before her in the past. By wearing the costume of a Pachuca—historically perceived as a woman guilty of treason and impropriety, Baca rewrites the narrative that criminalizes Pachucas, Cholas, and Chicanas. She instead re-characterizes the aesthetic with notions of power, unabashed femininity, and Chicana-ness.

4. Guadalupe Rosales

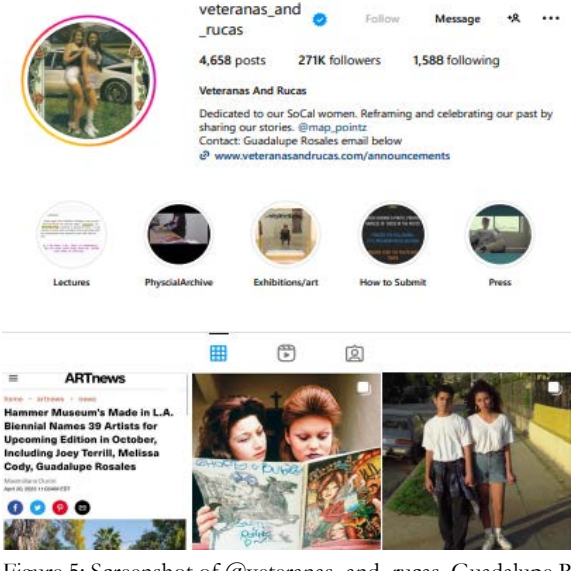


Figure 5: Screenshot of @veteranas_and_rucas, Guadalupe Rosales, January 2024

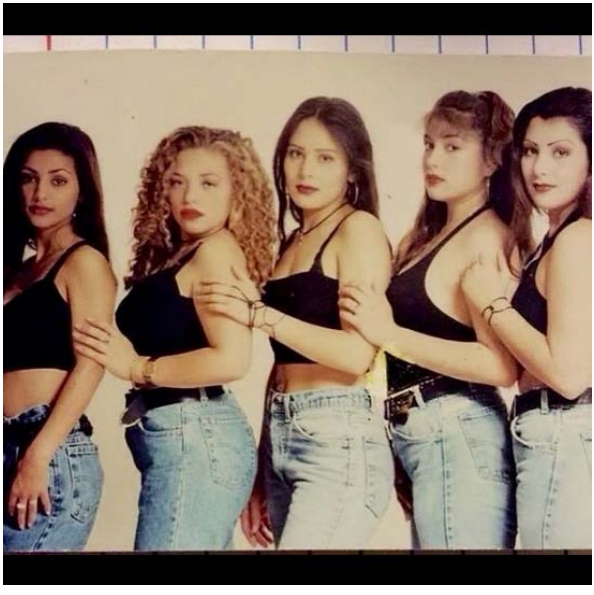


Figure 6: Image taken from @veteranas_and_rucas, Guadalupe Rosales, December 22, 2023



Figure 7: Images taken from @veteranas_and_rucas, Guadalupe Rosales, July 31, 2023

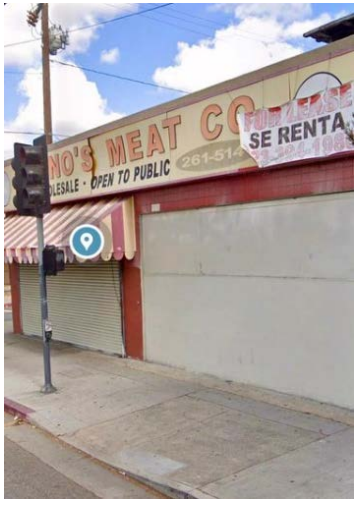


Figure 7: Images taken from @veteranas_and_rucas, Guadalupe Rosales, July 31, 2023

This theory connecting the Chola costume with the performance of Chola identity does not imply that simply mimicking the costume is the only requirement to identify as a Chicana woman. When Stefani plays dress-up with her lipstick, jewels, and blue wool Pendleton jacket in "Luxurious," she does not perform, or even become, a Chola girl. Rather, she wears the superficial aspects of an identity that is impossible for her to embody in reality. "Luxurious" demonstrates how White American culture's ongoing costumization of the Chola aesthetic has stripped it of historical context and commodified it for a public audience. Whether Cholas are explicitly mocked in Sandra Bullock's Chola makeover on George Lopez's show or flattened into a sidekick character by Lana Del Rey in a short film, the Chola aesthetic within mainstream American society continues to be associated withexpressions of female immorality and deviance.[36] The issue with appropriation—when someone who is not Chicana wears the Chola costume—lies not in the fact that the aesthetic is a costume, but rather in that the costume is worn with the intention to profit off of an aesthetic, erasing decades long history of violence, protest, and displacement.

[36] Calderón-Douglass, "The Folk Feminist Struggle."

Guadalupe Rosales' *Veteranas y Rucas* is one example of how Chicanas have reclaimed the Chola aesthetic, signaling the style's power to create an in-group identity with its own codes of authenticity. The Instagram project consists of over four thousand images, many of which depict girls in the Chola "costume," such as the image captioned "La Puente's Finest" posted in December 2023 (Figure 6). The account's female-centricity combats the stereotypes that tend to criminalize Mexican Americans—a perception Rosales has found to be perpetuated by the "coarseness" and toughness of *machismo* culture.[37] Additionally, the self-made, counter-archival nature of *Veteranas y Rucas* is integral to establishing contemporary codes of authenticity for the Chola aesthetic. Considering that the medium of social media is far-reaching and democratic, Chicanas are collectively empowered to remember and tell their own stories without a filter—as women who danced at parties, cruised in cars, made love with their partners, and spent time with their family.

One narrative on the social media account recalls Iturbide's documentation of Chola girls several decades earlier. In July 2023, Rosales reposted a set of three images (Figure 7), the first of which can be recognized as the colored version of Iturbide's *Cholas del Barrio White Fence con los héroes de México, Villa, Zapata y Juárez*. The last two images capture the landmark of Iturbide's photograph in the twenty-first century without the women and the mural—a purposeful demonstration of the "then" versus "now." In her caption, Rosales writes: "we map this city with our stories and images like dropping pins on a map" (@veteranas_and_rucas, July 31, 2023). Reclamation here extends beyond the ways in which the Chola girls rejected the male-centricity of Mexican history through their unawareness of the mural's figures during the 1980s; by preserving the Chola aesthetic and the legacy of Iturbide's photograph, Chicanas today also reclaim the physical space of Los Angeles—a city that has long marginalized them.

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[37] Melissa Smith, "The Veteranas of Chicana Youth Culture in Los Angeles," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/lens/the-veteranas-of-chicana-youth-culture-in-los-angeles.html.

"Counter-archival" is a term coined in opposition to the term "archival," which suggests that mainstream media and politics have legitimized what is being preserved.[38] The work of *Veteranas y Rucas* can be characterized as counter-archival because the ethos of the project is rooted in a desire to preserve stories that have historically been rendered illegitimate and unimportant. Rosales' project counter-culturally humanizes Cholas, Chicanas, and Latinas by displaying various aspects of their lives without also erasing the history of gang culture and protest encoded in their identity. In doing so, "she uplifts the ephemeral traces of quotidian Chicana life into documents worthy of preservation and displays the breadth and richness of the community's history."[39]

Veteranas y Rucas exists not only as a presentation of Chicana histories to the general public, but also as a facilitator of a deeply personal, inward process of healing for Chicanas themselves: these photographic counter-archives become "the site to fully recognize oneself, to counter amnesia, and to form connective tissues between our past and present."[40] For this reason, Rosales has stated she is not ready to transfer her Instagram archive to a more formal space, like a museum, although the substantive size and virality of the project has attracted significant public attention.[41] The Chola aesthetic prevalent throughout *Veteranas y Rucas* reemphasizes the kind of authenticity that is required to embody the Chicana identity, thus dismantling Stefani's attempted appropriation of the aesthetic in "Luxurious"—she can dress up as a Chola all she wants, but she will never be one.

5. Conclusion

The sartorial and decorative elements of the Chola subculture are deliberate performances of Chicana identity that can be interpreted as a form of costuming. The Chola style and background details in

[38] Tracey, "Instagram counter-archive."
[39] Tracey, "Instagram counter-archive."
[40] Elizabeth Ferrer, "The Archive," in *Latinx Photography in the United States* (University of Washington Press, 2021), 131.
[41] Fragoza, "Back in the Days."

Graciela Iturbide's "Cholos/as" provide commentary on the intersections between the borderland and femininity made manifest in style. Judith F. Baca's self-portraits reveal how an aesthetic can function as a costume deliberately worn, while Guadalupe Rosales' Instagram archive preserves the nuanced realities of Chola culture and directly counters the appropriation of the Chola aesthetic by white celebrities like Gwen Stefani—and, in doing so, the mainstream American media and institutions that have policed the bodies and image of Chola girls for decades. By pairing heavy makeup and athletic builds with revealing shirts and darkly tinted skin, Cholas fuse the feminine with the masculine and the American with the Mexican. An aesthetic marked by this fusion disrupts gendered and racial binaries.

the Chola embrace of masculinity, however—through a glamorization of a more athletic body type, for example—in order to reclaim physical and political power from patriarchal structures, is paradoxical in its acknowledgment of the stereotypical association of the masculine with the strong and the feminine with the weak. This embrace implies a sort of rejection of hyper-feminine expression, sending the message that a woman's choice to adhere to a traditionally feminine style, or one typically sexualized by the male gaze, is in some way insufficient for the reclamation of Chicana identity. A true subversion of the gender binary that contributes to gendered oppression within the Mexican-American and the broader community would disregard these constructs of morality and decorum entirely. Despite this paradox, the Chola girls of the 1980s and 1990s were effective in developing a style politic, creating a legacy of fashion and rebellion that shapes contemporary culture and Chicana consciousness today.

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Asexuality, The Invisible Identity in Television

By Meghan Ping

Meghan Ping is a graduating senior who has studied at Saint Mary's College for her undergraduate degree. Her majors are Gender and Women's Studies and Philosophy, and she has talked in multiple spaces about asexuality and LGBTQ+ issues. As an asexual herself, she is motivated to discuss asexual topics and educate those about asexuality. This was the drive that caused her to write this paper and hopefully educate others about asexuality and the lack of representation available to asexual people.

Introduction

Television and media can be an important part of feeling represented and helping people who do not share your sexual identity learn about it. If there is little or no representation of a person's sexual identity, however, it can lead to difficult experiences when coming out. In the case of Sara Lynn, she only reveals half of her identity, due to negative and dismissive reactions from those to whom she has come out. Sara Lynn is a demisexual[1] lesbian who attends Saint Mary's College (SMC). Sara Lynn only comes out as lesbian when discussing her sexual identity, including with LGBTQ+ peers, due to the lack of understanding surrounding demisexuality. "I feel like I am not out as demisexual to a lot of people, because they will not understand. Or they will say 'Yeah okay, but you still experience sexual attraction when you're already dating someone.'" (Sara Lynn, 2023) Sara Lynn attributes this misunderstanding to a lack of representation of demisexuality in pop culture and television. Sara Lynn has confided that her demisexuality is perceived negatively by everyone, straight or queer. "It's negatively viewed most of the time, unfortunately, and also I think that people associate asexuality with aromanticism[2] and sex repulsion." (Sara Lynn, 2023) Sara Lynn's story is very common for those whose identities fall under the asexual spectrum, as many people misunderstand or are misinformed on asexual identities. Asexuality is an invisible identity in pop culture, which leads to a misunderstanding and stigma about asexuality by American society.

This research is influenced by two feminist theories: intersectionality and standpoint theory. Intersectionality is a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and legal scholar, in 1989. The concept helps describe how systems of

[1] Demisexuality is defined as "only feeling sexual attraction to someone after they have formed a strong emotional bond. Demisexuality falls under the asexual umbrella, meaning that it is a subcategory of asexuality (Cleveland Clinic, 2022).
[2] Aromanticism is when a person experiences little to no romantic attraction. This is different from asexuality, which is experiencing little to no sexual attraction. The misconception is that people attribute asexual people always also being aromantic, when this is not the case (Bogaert, 2012).

oppression overlap and create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories.

Standpoint theory was created by Sandra Harding, an American feminist philosopher, in 1982. Standpoint theory is the notion that the perspectives of marginalized or oppressed individuals can help to create more objective accounts of the world. Applying these theories to asexual research shows how multiple intersecting identities affect the asexual experience and helps us to understand the world through the eyes of asexual people.

This paper analyzes the television shows House M.D., Bojack Horseman, Riverdale, and Heartstopper, along with news interviews, examining their representations of asexuality. This media analysis is enriched by seven semi-structured interviews I conducted with people whose identities vary across the asexual spectrum, as well as in relation to gender, religion, age, educational background, and so on. The asexual people interviewed all reside in the state of Indiana. Two interviewees attend Saint Mary's College in South Bend, while the rest live elsewhere in the state. These methods provide the basis of evidence for this thesis, and they allow individuals who are asexual to have a voice and tell their stories to those who will listen.

What Makes a Person Asexual?

The term "asexuality" has evolved over time and has different meaning in different context in the field of study. The contemporary definition related to human identity and focuses on sexual attraction as the main factor determining asexuality. In *Philosophy of Sex* (2023), Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever explain the definition, lack of representation, and stigma surrounding being asexual. They define asexuality by stating, "Asexual people do not experience sexual attraction to others." (Brunning and McKeever, 186) The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), as of this writing, uses this same definition of asexuality (AVEN, 2023). Each of the seven interviewees I spoke with aligned themselves with this definition of asexuality, which is the one most commonly used in asexual spaces

(Ace et. al, 2023). This definition of asexuality reframes the idea that asexuals lack something, choosing to more neutrally describe a different experience compared to people who are allosexual.[3]

The definition mentioned above does vary depending on the person, with some asexual interviewees for this research stating that an asexual person, "experiences little to no sexual attraction." (Jane, 2023) This definition includes those who still experience small degrees of sexual attraction under the asexual spectrum, such as gray asexuals[4] and demisexuals. Despite asexuality being defined as feeling little to no sexual attraction, there are misunderstandings surrounding the *behavior* associated with asexuality. Asexuality is a sexual identity that encompasses a spectrum of different ways to be asexual (AVEN, 2023). Due to the lack of diverse television and media representation, it is not widely known that asexuality is a spectrum, with more than one way to be or feel asexual. This is the case for interviewees Sara Lynn, Ace, and Crowtato, whose identities fall on parts of the asexual spectrum that are rarely discussed, such as demisexuals, or asexuals who enjoy sex (Ace et. al, 2023). Since asexuality as a whole is not represented to a substantial degree on television, it makes it difficult for those on less common parts of the spectrum to be understood and feel represented. Asexual people can face stigma and negative perceptions from contemporary society no matter where they are on the spectrum of sexual and romantic feeling. Those who do feel some sexual attraction encounter the judgment that they are not being asexual "correctly." (Ace et. al, 2023) Asexuals who are repulsed by sex face negative perceptions because contemporary mainstream society deems sex to be a normal and enjoyable act (Ace et. al, 2023). No matter where a person falls on the asexual spectrum, the umbrella of

[3] Allosexual is a term used in asexual spaces to describe someone who is not asexual and experiences sexual attraction consistently (Cameron, 2023).
[4] A gray asexual is a person who feels sexual attraction a little bit of the time and is a spectrum between asexual and allosexual. Usually the feelings of sexual attraction are not frequent enough for a gray asexual person to label themselves as allosexual (AVEN, 2023).

asexuality as a whole is seen negatively by contemporary mainstream society due to a lack of knowledge about asexuality.

Debunking Myths

The lack of diverse television representation of asexuality contributes to myths and misconceptions surrounding the identity. First, one of the most common myths about asexuality is that there is only one type of asexual person and that every asexual person is also aromantic (AVEN, 2023). This perception of what makes a person asexual describes a person that is sex-repulsed and is not interested in romantic relationships, which is not always true. Brunning and McKeever write in their work that "Many asexuals have romantic relationships, and some engage in sexual activity." (Brunning and McKeever, 186) The interviewees for this research concur with this assessment from Brunning and McKeever, with two respondents being in current relationships that include sex, one having previous relationships, and one in a long-distance relationship with another asexual person (Ace et. al, 2023). This shows that the myth that all asexual people are sex-repulsed and aromantic is untrue and does not encompass the breadth of the asexual spectrum.

A second common myth surrounding asexuality is that asexual people do not have a sex drive, or that something is wrong with their libido. Accounts from asexual people describe checking those parts of their bodies and determining that they are functioning without issue; they just are not sexually attracted to anything or anyone (Bogaert, 16). This aligns with accounts shared in interviews for this research, in that many of the interviewees said that their libidos and sex drives function as normal and there is no sexual dysfunction; they just do not feel sexual attraction (Ace et. al, 2023). The accepted definition of asexuality is feeling little to no sexual attraction, so this misconception that asexual people never have sex or that their libido/sex drive is dysfunctional may be due to a lack of education surrounding what asexuality is. Previous understandings of a sexuality focused on sexual *behaviors*, or a lack thereof. Contemporary definitions of asexuality

focus on not *experiencing* sexual attraction, distinct from the sexual behaviors of an asexual person. As previously mentioned, the interviewees for this research have varying experiences with sexual behavior. Some even participate in sex and enjoy it for many reasons, debunking this myth.

A final myth surrounding asexuality is that asexual people do not feel love and are incapable of love. The asexual people interviewed for this research find this myth, in particular, to be dehumanizing and perpetuating of allonormativity[5](Ace et. al, 2023). Asexual people can feel the same love and emotions as allosexual people but may value other forms of love compared to sexual love. Many asexuals are not aromantic and wish to participate in romantic love. Crystal Hope, for example, struggled to find a romantic relationship that would be compatible with their asexuality. Crystal Hope is a 28-year-old non-binary sex-repulsed asexual from Southern Indiana. "Now that I'm older, I'm hunting for another ace for a partner, and I think I found someone who fits all my criteria. She lives in Canada! …We have to go pretty far to find a suitable partner sometimes." (Crystal Hope, 2023) Crystal went through great effort to find a partner they could express romantic love with. Asexual people may express that love through romance, platonically, or through other methods that are not sexual in nature. The myth that asexual people are incapable of love because some do not want to engage in sexual behaviors has made asexual people feel broken and dehumanized, fearing that they will never find love because of it.

Perceptions of Asexuality

Asexuality as a sexual identity has come under scrutiny from across the political spectrum as well as from both straight people and the LGBTQ+ community. When asexuality is discussed in news media, it is met with laughter, dismissiveness, and disrespect of the asexual identity. This derision is described by Karli June Cerankowski

[5] Allonormativity is the worldview that every single person is assumed to be allosexual and experience sexual attraction (Cameron, 2023).

and Megan Milks, both asexual scholars, in their analysis of how asexuality is perceived in news media (Cerankowski and Milks, 2013). Due to the current perceptions of asexuality in news media, asexuality is often met with ridicule and dismissed as a valid identity since allosexuals struggle to imagine a person who does not experience sexual attraction. David Jay, the founder of The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), appeared on *The View* in an attempt to educate others about asexuality, as Jay believes this is the best method of bringing awareness to asexuality (Cerankowski and Milks, 139). While AVEN and David Jay are sincerely attempting to educate others through news media interviews, these media environments are intended for entertainment and/or already include preconceived notions about asexuality. Cerankowski and Milks note that asexual people in news media interviews "are met with reactions of incredulity by the interviewer or they are pathologized and further ostracized for the sake of sensationalization." (Cerankowski and Milks, 140) The interviewers do not enter the discussion with good intentions, use asexual people as commodities to gain views on their shows, and dismiss their experiences and expertise. The hosts of *The View* made Jay the subject of ridicule, laughter, and mockery. He was mocked for not having sex, told that asexual problems are not important, and was medically pathologized as the hosts recommended he see a therapist to work through his dislike of sex (The View, 2006). Jay tried to explain the importance of educating people about asexuality and having a community for asexual people, but he was laughed at by the audience and interviewers (The View, 2006). This is a common sentiment among allosexuals who believe that asexuality should not be talked about, because there is nothing *to* talk about.

David Jay during this interview becomes the subject of laughter and ridicule, not taken seriously by anyone present. This interview demonstrates how mainstream news media do not take asexuality seriously and dehumanize asexual people who try to educate others about their experiences. Crystal Hope, an interviewee for this research, affirms this experience: "The news seems to think we're hilarious, or

sad, which makes me feel awkward when they bring us up." (Crystal Hope, 2023) In his interview on *The View*, David Jay is perceived as sad and a person to be laughed at, because he is outside the normative understanding of sex as enjoyable and a requirement for humans. This sentiment echoes historical understandings of homosexuality as a disease or a choice. John, a 25-year-old non-binary sex-repulsed asexual from Southern Indiana, observes that "Most not cis-hetero identities have been viewed as something to be fixed at some point in American history. The younger generations are getting more and more accepting on average. I will outlive most of those who don't accept me." (John, 2023) The asexual people interviewed for this research held a common sentiment that asexuality is seen negatively in news media when it is even discussed, contributing to negative perceptions of asexuality more broadly.

Yasmin Benoit, a UK asexual activist, appeared on *Newsmax* to be interviewed about her advocacy work and to explain what asexuality is. Like David Jay, Yasmin Benoit was not taken seriously in her interview on *Newsmax*, reflecting the ways that asexual advocacy is dismissed due to the belief that asexuals are not oppressed. Yasmin counters this claim by explaining that the DSM-5 acknowledges asexuality, but the only criteria for asexuality not being considered a dysfunction or disorder is that the patient does not exhibit distress. Benoit goes on to explain that asexual people face stigma and are subject to conversion therapy at a rate of 10% more than their allosexual counterparts (Brewis, 2023). The interviewer questions the ability to survive without sex, romance, and erotic intimacy by asking, "Don't you think you're missing out on a basic human connection though?" (Newsmax, 2023) Cerankowski and Milks are critical of asexual people participating in these kinds of interviews, as they are often conducted in bad faith and do not help educate people about asexuality. "It may fail to educate; it may create a spectacle of fascination and entertainment that leads to a displacement of desire rather than understanding and a new comprehension of asexuality." (Cerankowski and Milks 140) Discussing asexuality through news

media can be difficult because, while it does bring awareness to asexuality, it is at the cost of asexuals possibly being further ostracized and interviewers invalidating asexuality as an identity. A possible solution is to show the representation of asexuality in different ways in pop culture, such as in scripted television shows.

Benoit has been the subject of controversy and scrutiny from straight and LGBTQ+ people alike, facing constant hate comments on any posts she makes from her Twitter account. After Benoit and Stonewall published their report on asexual discrimination in the UK, she was met with hateful comments from Jo Bartosch, a journalist for *Spike*, saying that "It's tempting to wonder whether a quickie might improve their mood." (Bartosch, 2023) The perception that asexual people are miserable because they do not engage in sexual behavior is a pervasive idea. Bartosch has "dismissed the Stonewall report as a mix of whinging and self-indulgence and accused its authors of attempting to capitalize on the historical suffering of lesbians and gay men." (Brewis, 2023) Asexual people are ostracized by mainstream heterosexual culture, yet they may be seen as not oppressed enough or not queer enough to be valid members of the LGBTQ+ community.

An asexual person can feel as though they are stuck between the margins of not being queer and oppressed enough to be LGBTQ+ while not being straight passing enough to be considered straight. "The straight community doesn't even consider that some folk might be ace, while some of the queer community doesn't count us as 'queer enough' to belong in that group. It feels like constantly riding the edge of two worlds, neither of which will fully accept us. I cannot count the number of times I've been countered with a simple 'you'll change your mind later' or 'I can fix you.' It's nerve-wracking is what it is." (Beck, 2023) Beck, a 25-year-old non-binary sex-repulsed asexual from Southern Indiana, volunteered to interview for this research to tell their story about feeling ostracized by both the LGBTQ+ community and the straight community due to being asexual. They agree that there is a sentiment that the LGBTQ+ community is not completely accepting of asexual identities saying, "I've heard of asexuality being

called 'diet queer' before, in reference to it not being seen by some in the LGBTQ community as queer enough to count." (Beck, 2023) Jane, a 24-year-old sex-repulsed asexual from Northern Indiana, had a similar perspective to Beck's: "Asexual people are not viewed as queer enough to fit in the community. Oftentimes I have seen asexual people viewed as heterosexuals that want a flag too or heterosexuals that are trying to invade queer spaces because asexuality is not something that is marginalized enough or real enough to warrant the support from the community. It is ostracizing, not fully belonging in any community outside of your own specific one." (Jane, 2023) Asexual people have felt ostracized by both straight and LGBTQ+ communities, which has led to asexual people deciding to cultivate their own community. People like David Jay have provided space for a sexual community, for example by founding AVEN where asexual people have their own forums to discuss topics and be accepted by others.

Perceptions of asexuality overall are not positive. Asexuality as an identity has been dismissed and ignored by many groups, which can make asexual people feel alone and isolated. It has made some of the respondents for this research wish they were allosexual, so they did not feel so alone and did not have to hear comments about "curing" their identity. Jane says, "I have seen quite a few takes that involve people like me being broken and fixable which is honestly kind of jarring." (Jane, 2023) Academics like Cerankowski and Milks believe that a better space to try and spread awareness about asexuality is through television media. The goal for representation would be to not make a spectacle out of the appearance of asexual characters and people; rather, they are trying to normalize asexuality through exposure and are "focused on the creation of discourse and knowledge about identities and subjectivities via the process of visualization." (Cerankowski and Milks, 153) There are few asexual people in television media, and care must be taken to ensure asexuality is not made into a spectacle or dismissed.

Asexual Representation in Television

In the last decade, there have been a handful of depictions of a asexuality, which have been both positive and negative in terms of perceptions of asexual people. One of the first television portrayals of asexuality was in 2012 on the popular TV show *House, M.D.* In a season eight episode titled "Better Half," Dr. House and his colleague Wilson are helping an asexual patient and his wife, who also identifies as asexual. The couple introduce themselves to House and introduce him to the concept of asexuality, as they are in a purely romantic and non-sexual relationship. House is very dismissive of the concept and does not believe that it is human to not want to have sex or experience sexual intimacy. House says to his colleague, "[Sex] is a fundamental drive of our species. Sex is healthy. Lots of people don't have sex. The only people who don't want it are either sick, dead, or lying." (*House,* M.D., 2012) A physician's response to a sexual identity that does not revolve around sex is to infer that something is medically wrong with the person or that they are lying about being asexual. This comes from House's jaded perspective on life and how he relates his personal experiences to his patients.

House's assessment of asexuality reaffirms perceptions that asexuality is something inhuman and perpetuates allonormativity—the notion that feeling sexual attraction is the normal human state of being. As a doctor, House does everything in his power to dismiss and pathologize asexuality, which is a pervasive issue for real-world asexuals seeking medical care. Asexuality is already scrutinized and pathologized in the medical community, as CJ Chasin, an asexual feminist psychologist describes in multiple works criticizing the medical community for their continued mishandling of asexuality. Chasin has written about how medical professionals attempt to cure asexuality: "Many mental health professionals or hypothetical partners may feel justified in trying to convince someone to undergo treatment, arguing they will have a happier and fuller life if they regain their sexual desire." (Chasin, 413) American television's first fictional portrayal of asexuality to be in a medical setting, where a doctor is

tasked with curing a couple's asexuality. Like the earlier news media, this television portrayal of asexuality is negative and pathologizing, and it makes asexuality a spectacle. The episode ends with House finding something medically wrong with the husband, causing his lack of sex drive, while the wife was lying about being asexual. *House, M.D.*'s representation suggests that asexuality is a trait to be cured and is a fixable condition.

After this episode aired, it left the asexual community disappointed by the depiction of asexuality as a curable illness. Author Ace Schwarz wrote an article about the episode on the website *The Mary Sue*, saying, "I remember watching it, feeling excited that I'd finally see someone who felt like me on TV. However, as the episode kept going, this awful pit formed in my stomach. It felt gross that House was so determined to invalidate their identities, as if he had a right to intrude on their personal lives." (Schwarz, 2020) This shows that this representation of asexuality caused harm to the asexual community due to the feelings evoked in asexual viewers. Overall, one of the first mainstream scripted television shows to represent asexuality depicted it in a way that invalidates people who are asexual and makes the partners of asexual people seem like they are lying to appease their partner.

The next example of asexual representation, or the erasure of representation, is in the form of Jughead from the *Archie Comics* series. *Archie* has been releasing issues since 1941, with Jughead making his first appearance in issue 22, released in December of 1941. Jughead has always been portrayed in the comics as being disinterested in romance, women, and sex in general, preferring to indulge in food. He contrasts the main character, Archie, who is always in a love triangle with two different women named Veronica Lodge and Betty Cooper. Jughead makes a great contrast to Archie's romantic dilemmas due to his consistent disinterest in relationships. This led later fans of the original comic series to theorize that Jughead was asexual based on his portrayals in the series. These theories resided on websites such as

Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit with users discussing the character in detail and referencing asexual-coded scenes.

Jughead would have his own series not long after his initial introduction from the *Archie Comics*, but notably in 2015, Jughead got a renewed version of his story written by Chip Zdarsky, a pen name of Canadian comic book artist and writer Steve Murray. In issue 4 of this series, Jughead is officially referred to as an asexual character when he is walking down the hallway with a gay character named Kevin Keller. When discussing Kevin's struggles with gay students being kicked out of the school, Jughead does not relate to Kevin's woes. In response Kevin says, "Look, there are only, like, five gay guys at Riverdale High! My romantic options can't take that kind of hit! You just don't get it cause you're asexual." (Jughead, Issue 4, 2015) This is the first time Jughead was officially called asexual, showing Zdarsky's intention that Jughead to be known as asexual in his rendition of the character. Chip Zdarsky's iteration of Jughead explored asexual issues, with Jughead feeling different and isolated from his friends who do feel sexual attraction. He is dismissed, not relatable to his friends, and has conflicts with friends who ignore him in favor of sexual escapades. Zdarsky's portrayal of Jughead resonated with interviewees for this research, especially Crowtato, a 24-year-old, non-binary, sex-positive asexual from Central Indiana who has read the comics and related to this depiction of Jughead (Crowtato, 2023). Jughead struggles with his best friend, Archie, and Archie declares he is not going to apologize for being normal. Many asexual people, including Crowtato, have struggled with asexual stigma end with a sense of feeling abnormal. Crowtato described how he was happy with Jughead being asexual, since it added to the sparse sphere of representation — Crowtato believes Jughead to be an asexual icon (Crowtato, 2023). When Netflix announced its 2017 adaption of the Archie comics, asexual fans were excited to see Jughead's asexuality be depicted in live action.

When the Netflix streaming adaptation, *Riverdale*, was released, fans were disappointed with its erasure of jugheads asexuality, which had taken many decades to being named in the comics. Jughead was

portrayed instead to be Archie's rival in the central love triangle established in the comics. This creative choice met with scrutiny from fans, and they popularized the #*Riverdale* hashtag on Twitter to spread awareness about Jughead being asexual. Fans on Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr pointed out the asexual erasure of Jughead. When showrunner Aguirre-Sacasa was asked for comment about the decision, he said, "So I think all of the kids are discovering themselves, and a big part of that is discovering their sexuality, their sexual selves. Rather than have everything fully formed — for instance, we're not going to start with Archie's band or Jughead's asexuality or any of the things that have become canon — those are all stops on the way to the journey until the show catches up to 75 years of *Archie* history." (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2017) As the series continued and eventually finished, however, Jughead would never be depicted as asexual and only as strictly heterosexual. In interviews, Crowtato expressed how annoyed and frustrated they were about the erasure of Jughead's asexuality, as there is already little representation of asexual identities in media (Crowtato, 2023). Crowtato further observes that what little asexual representation is present usually fits one kind of asexual person, that being a sex-repulsed asexual. The lack of diverse asexual representation can aid in the misunderstandings surrounding asexuality and the perception that the only kind of asexual person is a sex-repulsed aromantic asexual.

The version of Jughead in *Archie* comics from 2015–2017 challenged allonormativity, as Zdarsky intended, providing an outsider's perspective when it came to teen sexuality. It is particularly hard to ignore the asexual erasure of Jughead in the *Riverdale* adaptation, since there are multiple LGBTQ+ characters in the series. This made Crowtato feel as though asexual characters are only added to stories for the convenience of the narrative. They believe that asexual people are excluded from scripted media because certain asexual people can make it inconvenient to write sexual stories, due to sex repulsion. But, as Crowtato noted, there are many kinds of asexual people, and Jughead could have been adapted to be a sex-positive asexual if the story needed him having sex. If people look at the

comments made by Chip Zdarsky, he took writing Jughead as asexual as an opportunity to develop the character and give him depth, with the added benefit of having a positive representation of asexuality.

In contrast to *House, M.D,* and *Riverdale*, *Bojack Horseman* represents asexuality more thoughtfully through the character Todd Chavez. Todd is one of the main characters, Bojack's roommate, and former best friend. While he initially seems to be a shallow, goofy character, Todd later shows more depth and character growth, through his journey of self-discovery. Todd sheds his feelings about his asexuality when he is sharing ice cream with his ex-girlfriend, Emily, and she asks him how she is feeling about their relationship. Emily describes feeling how Todd likes her, but does not, but then *does* like her, implying she is getting mixed signals and does not understand how he feels about her. Emily finally asks if Todd is gay due to these mixed signals and his lack of interest in her sexually.

Todd displays confusion at Emily's question and does not know why she would ask it. Todd had not interpreted their relationship to be sexual, and after Emily prompts Todd more by assuring him that it is okay to be gay, Todd gives his answer. "I'm not gay. I mean, I don't think I am. But I don't think I'm straight either. I don't know what I am. I think I might be nothing." (*Bojack Horseman*, 2016) In this scene, Emily is accepting of Todd, telling him that it is okay to be who he is, which leads to Todd giving a confident smile, learning that there are people out there who accept him for who he is. While Todd does not directly say he is asexual or identify with the label, many asexual people started to recognize and headcanon[6] him as such due to his description of his sexuality. Todd became an asexual icon among fans, with people taking to places such as Twitter and Tumblr to discuss the scene. Some fans made personal Todd appreciation accounts or commented on the episode, with hopes for more asexual content in the next season. Todd's words were especially relatable to interviewee Jane,

[6] Headcanon refers to a fan of a piece of film, television, or comics imagining something about a character (such as relationships or sexual identity) that does not appear on screen or on the page (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

who had watched the entirety of Bojack Horseman. She felt seen by Todd's explanation of his identity, as many asexuals conclude that they do not think they are anything other than asexual (Jane, 2023). Seeing Todd struggle with his identity was very relatable to people who already identified as asexual and helped others realize they were asexual.

Bojack further explores Todd's asexuality when he returns to Bojack's house to talk to him in the aftermath of their broken friendship. While Todd is there to inform Bojack that another character is his daughter, the conversation shifts to Bojack's past behavior. Bojack talks about Emily and how the two of them had sex even though Bojack was under the impression Todd loved Emily. Todd responds with, "I don't know that I loved her. I don't think I'm allowed to be in love." (*Bojack Horseman*, 2016) Bojack tells Todd that he is wrong in that assessment and talks about how much Todd has done for others, making him worthy of love. While Todd appreciates the sentiment, he eventually tells Bojack bluntly, "I think I'm…asexual." (*Bojack Horseman*, 2016) in this moment, Todd comes out as an asexual person and reaffirms what audiences had suspected since Todd's conversation with Emily. Notably, Todd is considered a main character in the story — for a central character in a popular show to come out as asexual brought the identity some recognition.

At first, Bojack assumes Todd meant "a sexual" and is confused about what kind of sexual person Todd is, such as a "deviant, dynamo, or lawsuit waiting to happen." Todd clarifies that he meant "asexual" and not sexual, which Bojack acknowledges with an "oh." Todd assumes that Bojack would find his asexuality weird, based on Bojack's many previous sexual encounters and how sexual a person Bojack is. Bojack tells Todd he sometimes wishes he was asexual, however, and tells a joke about having a strain of herpes. After sharing his identity with Bojack, Todd says, "It actually feels nice to finally say it out loud. I am an asexual person. I am asexual." (*Bojack* Horseman, 2016) Many asexual people felt as though they were joining Todd in his journey of self-discovery, since this allowed for the vocabulary of asexuality to be

introduced to viewers. One of the interviewees for this research, Jane, described their feelings about how Bojack Horseman handled asexual representation and how it affected them:

"The asexual representation in *Bojack Horseman*, to me, is the best portrayal of asexuality in the media. It is relatable and understandable for those discovering themselves and discovering their sexuality as a whole. It is viewed through the lens of a character who is discovering their asexuality themselves and as such, it allows the viewer to develop a more sound understanding of the subject while also displaying a beautifully written coming-out story where the character themselves learns about the sexuality as a whole as well. It was handled with care and respect and has definitely left a positive impression of asexuality in the media." (Jane, 2023)

When asked about specific moments for Todd's character, such as feeling like he is "nothing," Jane simply said, "That hit hard." (Jane, 2023) Jane had watched the series since the beginning, and seeing their experiences as an asexual person be put to screen felt cathartic.

Heartstopper is a comic adapted to television that has a more positive representation of asexual people. *Heartstopper* is similar to *Riverdale, as they are both* comic-to-television adaptations focused on teens. In adapting the original *Heartstopper* comic by Alice Oseman, a character named Isaac was added to the show in place of the comics character Aled. Oseman writes on her Twitter that Aled was cut and replaced with Isaac because Aled does not have enough moments in the comic to warrant a meaningful series progression. Aled's storyline is part of a different comics series titled *Radio Silence,* and *Heartstopper* would have needed ignore or alter the events in that series (Oseman, 2021). This led Oseman to replace Aled with Isaac as she writes, "They are quite different, and I hope that Isaac will be able to go on his own unique journey in the *Heartstopper* show." (Oseman, 2021) What is significant about this creative decision is that Aled, an asexual character, was replaced with another asexual character, Isaac. In this instance, no asexual characters were erased from the story, and one

side character was replaced with a new character that would have a greater chance to develop.

Issac's experiences with asexuality play out mainly in season two of the series, as he is shown to feel isolated at events and parties where people are kissing and expressing romantic and sexual attraction. He is depicted most of the time enjoying books and keeping to himself, in and out of these situations. While on the bus, Isaac asks his friend Charlie, a gay student, "Before you and Nick got together, how did you know you liked him in that way?" (*Heartstopper*, 2023) Charlie explains that he knew he was attracted to Nick because he wanted to be around him constantly and could not stop thinking about kissing him. Isaac continues to struggle throughout the season trying to understand what his sexual identity is. He is aware there is something different about how he sees relationships and romance compared to his peers. This is represented through the isolation Isaac feels as he retreats from situations of people public sexuality and romance, such as kissing, to read his books.

Later in the season, Isaac becomes friends with a character named James, whom he meets in the library. Throughout the course of the season, the two develop feelings, with Isaac being unsure if he truly is interested in James in a romantic way. After Isaac leaves a party to read and get away from everyone else displaying romantic affections, making him feel isolated, James follows him outside and admits to having a crush on Isaac. The two then share their first kiss with Isaac realizing that he does not feel the same way about James. Isaac says, "I'm sorry," and leaves (Heartstopper, 2023).

Two additional scenes surround Isaac hanging out with friends. In the first, Isaac is asked if he has any celebrity crushes, and he says no in response. One friend responds dismissively with, "Come on, everybody has a celebrity crush." (*Heartstopper*, 2023) In next scene, Isaac and the group are walking around when Isaac says he needs to leave because he promised he would meet up with James. This makes the group excited, and the same character who made the celebrity crush comment announces, "Oh my God, they are going to kiss."

(*Heartstopper*, 2023) Isaac then leaves the group looking lonely, isolated, and unheard as he hangs his head down in discomfort at the comment.

James and Isaac meet and begin to talk about the kiss they shared, and James asks Isaac if he does not like James the same way James likes him. Isaac responds, "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel when I have a crush on someone. You know I read all these books where people fall in love, and I still have absolutely no idea. I thought that I might feel that way about you, but then we kissed, and I just knew that I didn't. I think there might be something wrong with me…" (*Heartstopper*, 2023) While James reassures Isaac that there is nothing wrong with him, he does repeat a dismissive phrase that many asexual people hear: "You probably just haven't found the right person yet." (*Heartstopper*, 2023) In that moment, many asexual viewers related to Isaac, and those who already knew what asexuality was understood how Isaac felt when James said those words. Even though the phrase is meant to be reassuring, for those who know they are asexual, this phrase can be very dismissive of their identity as an asexual person. Interviewee Crystal Hope recounted their experience of hearing that phrase: "Oh, you just haven't found the right person yet. I got that from a 40-year-old gay guy. I don't know how he missed the irony." (Crystal Hope, 2023) Crystal Hope has heard many other dismissive statements about asexuality, and even made in passing, such comments still make their identity feel diminished.

The last two scenes of *Heartstopper* introduce the concept of asexuality, which provides Isaac with words to describe what he is feeling. At an art show, Isaac encounters the artist of a piece he appreciates and asks the meaning of the piece. The artist responds, "Basically about my experience being aromantic and asexual. Like…being in a world where romance and sex are prized above everything else when you don't feel those forms of attraction. Growing up feeling that something about you is different, but you don't have the words to describe what that is, but then…freedom. The euphoria of freeing yourself from those pressures and expectations." (*Heartstopper*, 2023) This scene is a powerful one, as Isaac meets

another person who is asexual and aromantic and who articulates the feelings of being asexual and aromantic in an allonormative world. Not long after this, Isaac attends a school dance where he decides to leave the gym and go to the library. There he finds a display of LGBTQ+ books, one being a book on asexuality. Isaac takes the book from the display, flips through the pages, and briskly leaves the library with the book cradled in his arms.

Heartstopper impactfully depicts asexual experiences through the eyes of Isaac, a character struggling to figure out his identity in an allonormative world without the language to define what he is feeling. Interviewee Sara Lynn had seen *Heartstopper* and sung praise for the show's depiction of an asexual character. Sara Lynn observed that, even though Isaac is aromantic and asexual, he "likes to read a lot of romance books. He enjoys reading them and acknowledges that he likes those things in books, but not in real life. It was very relatable, and it really resonated with me since good asexual representation is so sparse." (Sara Lynn, 2023) A factor that could influence *Heartstopper*'s in-depth and relatable depictions of asexuality is that the author of the original comics, Alice Oseman, is an aromantic and asexual person herself. Oseman has written other work featuring an asexual cast and has a personal standpoint of asexuality through her experiences. Alice Oseman was one of the producers of the adaptation of the *Heartstopper* comic to a TV show and had a say in the creative direction of the show. This ensured that asexuality would be handled with care, making for a relatable and impactful experience for those discovering asexuality for the first time and those who already know they are asexual (Oseman, 2023). These positive representations of asexuality can help normalize the identity through exposure, along with breaking down stigmas about asexual people. If there can be more positive representations of asexuality, such as *Bojack Horseman* and *Heartstopper*, it can help dismantle society's the negative perceptions of asexuality.

How a Lack of Representation Causes Misunderstandings and Stigma, Harming Asexuals

In looking at the scope of asexual representation in television, there are not many examples that help normalize asexuality and dismantle the negative perceptions about asexuality. Karli Cerankowski's research examines the current affairs of asexual representation in television and media. Cerankowski addresses the negative effect of not having asexual representation: "Because knee-jerk reactions to asexuals in popular culture tend to cast them as broken subjects, it is necessary to reframe the popular representations of asexuality. Instead, we can look more critically at the representations of asexuality in American culture and refigure asexuality in positive terms that challenge us to reconceive our definitions of sexual normalcy." (Cerankowski, 2012) The asexual respondents in interviews conducted for this research all pointed to the lack of pop culture and television representation as a factor in misunderstandings of asexual identities, and they believe that more positive and diverse depictions of asexuality would help with stigma. Asexual stigma can be seen throughout society in many facets of life, such as social interactions and being pathologized by medical professionals. Scholars including CJ Chasin, Luke Brunning, and Natashia McKeever analyze asexual stigma in their respective works and highlight the harm that a lack of awareness and representation can cause for asexual people.

Various academic scholars discuss asexuality and the stigma that asexual people face, which can be linked to the lack of representation of asexuals. Brunning and McKeever write, "Asexual people do often experience certain prejudices, harms, and injustice. In many cases, these harms are linked directly to the kinds of misunderstanding about asexuality we have dispelled earlier, such that it is akin to celibacy or to desire disorders" (Brunning and McKeever 199). Pathologization and misrepresentation of asexuality as an identity contribute toward the stigma surrounding it. Media portrayals of asexuality media can cause stigma, as some representations lack clarity, and others depict characteristics similar to asexuality, like celibacy and desire disorders.

Bec, an interviewee for this research, iterated their concerns about the impacts of stigma that can cause harm to asexual people. They have been told on different occasions that they could be fixed, that something is wrong with them, or that they could just simply stop being a prude and have sex (Bec, 2023). Bec's interactions have shown the stigma and assumptions that asexual people encounter, which can be attributed to a lack of understanding and a belief that asexuality is either curable or not real.

Asexuality can also be mistaken for celibacy or desire disorders and lead to a misdiagnosis of an asexual patient. In "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential," CJ Chasin criticizes the medical community for its pathologizing perception of asexuality and its attempts to cure asexual people. Chasin examines the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 related to two sexual disorders to which asexuality has often been attributed (Chasin, 411). Asexuality is attributed to conditions such as Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder or Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (DSM-5, 2013). The DSM-5 only gives a single sentence for both conditions, stating that if the lifelong condition "is better explained by one's self-identification of 'asexual,' then a diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder would not be made." (DSM-5, 2013) Chasin argues that "distress" is a vague standard, especially if a patient does not know what asexuality is. In the interviews for this research, many asexual respondents noted feeling broken or that something was wrong with them due to their asexuality, which caused them distress. If they went to a medical professional before realizing they were asexual, they may have been diagnosed with either of these conditions. The issue is that a lack of awareness due to representation can lead to misdiagnosis, since the patient needs to know about asexuality in the first place to not be diagnosed with either condition.

After learning about asexuality, however, many of the respondents for this research reported that their distress decreased or went away (Ace et. al, 2023). Asexual people could be further misdiagnosed based on feeling distressed due to the allonormative

world they are forced to live in, harmed by the isolating experience of being asexual in said allonormative world. Chasin writes, "If a person is upset about being asexual because they live in a world that is inhospitable to asexual people, we need to change the world, not the person." (Chasin, 412) The respondents for this research believe that they would be able to live in a more hospitable environment for asexual people if people were more informed about asexuality. If there were more diverse and normalizing representations of asexual identities, then maybe the world would start to become more hospitable for asexual people. Reflecting on misconceptions they have faced surrounding their asexuality, Crystal Hope observed that "most people don't know what it is, or that when they find out the media is portraying it negatively. People fear the unknown." (Crystal Hope, 2023) Brunning and McKeever suggest that asexual stigma is more prevalent due to the lack of representation and erasure of asexual identities. Widespread misunderstanding of asexuality can cause harm to asexual individuals in many forms. As Chasin, Brunning, and McKeever point out, this can manifest in the pathologization of asexual identities such as the previously mentioned desire disorders, and in the harmful stigmatization that asexual people face.

The harms done through a lack of representation can also harm the mental health and well-being of asexual people. Many asexual interviewee respondents noted that if they had found out about asexuality sooner through representation, then some life decisions would have been different, and they would have experienced fewer feelings of inadequacy. Interviewee Jane said, "I probably wouldn't have gotten involved with any of the boys that I got involved with in my high school and early college years. There were feelings of inadequacy there for not wanting what they wanted." (Jane, 2023) If asexuality had been represented more prominently in television, then Jane would have learned about asexuality sooner and would not have had to deal with partners making them feel inadequate and broken for not providing what the partners wanted. There are many ways in which a lack of representation has harmed asexual people and made

them feel broken and in need of conforming to allosexual norms and expectations. Hence, more representation in television would help normalize asexuality and make people more aware and understanding of the identity, so asexual people could encounter less stigma and harm.

The Legacy

There are many facets to the experience of asexual people, what makes a person asexual, and the minimal representation that asexual people have in television. When asexual people try to discuss their identity on news networks and daytime shows, they become the subject of laughter and ridicule. This can lead to a negative perception of asexual people as wanting to feel special, that being asexual is a choice, or that it is not a valid orientation. In analyzing some of the current asexual representations available in television, there are few depictions of asexuality. While there are some informative examples such as *Bojack Horseman* and *Heartstopper,* there are some that dismiss and erase, like those in *House, M.D.* and *Riverdale.* The resounding consensus from the interviewees for this research is that a lack of diverse and positive representation of asexual identities has been a contributing factor to the stigmatization of asexuality.

Television representation is paramount in helping asexuality be a better understood identity, as shown through the evidence and viewpoints of the interviewees. All the interviewees hope for more diverse asexual representation in the future — not just depicting one type of asexual, but many kinds across the asexual spectrum. Asexuality is a valid sexual orientation that breaks the foundations of what it means to love, be in relationships, and experience the world through a lens that sometimes is not interested in sex. Asexual people exist, and they are happy to share their stories and spread the word about what it means to be asexual and how that can affect the world.

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Maternity in Migration: Evaluating the Maternal Healthcare Experiences of Migrant Women in Monterrey, Mexico

By Ashleigh Cotter

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Introduction

According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) *World Migration Report 2022*, over 25 million people have emigrated from Latin America and the Caribbean to the United States and Canada—representing a significant increase from the estimated 10 million living in Northern America in 1990 (*World Migration Report 2022*, 2021). Migration from Latin America and the Caribbean stems from an array of complex causes, including violence, crime, poverty, and climate change-related disasters. For example, economic and political instability in Venezuela has produced one of the largest migration crises in the world, with an estimated 7.7 million Venezuelan migrants globally as of November 2023 (R4V, 2023).

While most Venezuelan migrants have spent the last several years living in neighboring host countries like Colombia and Ecuador, increasing numbers of Venezuelan migrants are traveling north towards the US-Mexico border, due to economic and legal challenges and xenophobia in host countries (Muñoz-Pogossian & Winkler, 2023). The recent expiration of Title 42 in May 2023—a policy enacted in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic that made it easier to expel migrants from the US to Mexico—has further resulted in an influx of migrants traveling to the US-Mexico border. The composition of migrants encountered at the US-Mexico border has significantly shifted in recent years, reflecting an increase in the number of Latin American and Caribbean countries facing political, economic, and/or environmental crises (*World Migration Report 2022*, 2021; Mohor, 2021). Once composed of mostly Mexican migrants, the migrant population in the US-Mexico borderlands region now includes greater percentages of migrants from Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Haiti (Daw et al., 2022; Debusmann, 2023).

In recent years, women have increasingly joined the flow of migrants both to the United States and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the US Border Patrol, the number of women apprehended at the southwestern border increased from 13 to 38 percent from 2011 to 2019 (Garbett et al., 2023). Women also

comprise the majority of intraregional migrants in South America (*World Migration Report 2022*, 2021). This "feminization of migration" has been described as both empowering and dangerous for women, as they encounter new economic opportunities and pathways to financial independence through migration, but also face increased vulnerability to sex trafficking and other human rights abuses in heavily sex-segregated industries like domestic service and sex work (Gabaccia, 2016; *World Migration Report 2003*, 2003).

The increased flow of migrant women from Latin America and the Caribbean has raised questions about the effects of migration on pregnancy as well as access to and quality of maternal healthcare—the provision of which is more important now than ever before for improving migrant women's maternal health outcomes. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), maternal health refers to the "health of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period" (*Maternal health*, n.d.). Even without the stresses and risks associated with migration, pregnant and postpartum women are at an increased risk of depression, vulnerability, and other forms of emotional/psychosocial distress (O'Hara & McCabe, 2013; Dunkel Schetter, 2011; Bunevicius et al., 2009). These stresses and risks are often exacerbated by the numerous barriers that migrant women face in accessing maternal healthcare, including lack of information regarding unfamiliar healthcare systems (Gallo Marin et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2017), language barriers (Gibson-Helm et al., 2014; Binder et al., 2012; Correa-Velez & Ryan, 2012), and costs associated with transportation to maternal healthcare appointments, and physical and financial accessibility (Almeida et al., 2013).

Migrant women are also at an increased risk of experiencing violent and adverse obstetric outcomes (Bakken et al., 2015; Carolan, 2010). Obstetric violence is a form of gender-based violence which refers to physical, emotional, or verbal violence committed by healthcare workers during the provision of pregnancy and childbirth related healthcare. Thus, there is a clear need to improve both migrant women's access to and quality of maternal healthcare while in transit

throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as well as at their final destinations. "In transit" refers to the "journey undertaken by individuals over time in locations that do not represent their final destinations" (Soria-Escalante et al., 2022). My research amplifies the maternal healthcare experiences of pregnant migrant women in transit in Mexico as well as migrant women's experiences as settled migrants in other countries throughout Latin America. I also examine the perceptions of healthcare providers who care for migrant women—both those in transit and settled—and non-migrant women in Mexico.

My study investigates the research question: how does a woman's identity as a migrant impact her access to maternal healthcare and her interactions with healthcare providers? To answer this question, I conducted this ethnographic study in migrant shelters and at a hospital in Monterrey, Mexico—a major metropolitan city that is located about 140 miles from the Texas-Mexico border. Through semi-structured interviews with migrant women, healthcare providers, and key informants, I will address the gap in literature regarding the lived maternal healthcare experiences of migrant women in Latin America with the goal of providing recommendations for the distribution of information about public healthcare access and obstetric violence prevention education in Monterrey.

Migrant Women's Maternal Healthcare: What's Known and Where?

The gender-specific impact of migration on access to and quality of maternal healthcare has been extensively studied both quantitatively and qualitatively around the world. Reviews by Kasper et al. (2022), Keygnaert et al. (2016), and Almeida et al. (2013) highlight numerous studies conducted primarily in Europe, the United States, and Canada that examine issues of accessibility and interactions between migrant women and healthcare providers. Lusambili et al. (2020) explored the accessibility of maternal healthcare for refugee women in Kenya following the COVID-19 pandemic. Garbett et al. (2023) reviewed the existing literature about the challenges to sexual and reproductive

health (SRH) rights of migrant women in Central America and Mexico.

Thus, it is well known that the stresses and risk associated with migration can adversely affect the maternal health and pregnancy outcomes of migrant women (Carolan, 2010; Bozorgmehr et al., 2018). Migrant women have been shown to experience significantly lower birth weight and more preterm deliveries compared to natives of their host populations (Zanconato et al., 2011). Bozorghmehr et al. (2018) further found that asylum-seekers were at increased risk for stillbirth and postnatal complications. Most recently, Miranda et al. (2023) compared maternal and perinatal outcomes of migrant Venezuelan women living in Colombia with the outcomes of the local population. Their study revealed that Venezuelan migrant women had fewer prenatal care appointments, more severe complications, increased prevalence of maternal hypertension, and higher rates of maternal morbidity compared to the local population (Miranda et al., 2023).

As previously mentioned, migrant women face significant barriers to accessibility and high-quality maternal healthcare. These barriers directly impact their rates of maternal mortality and infant health outcomes: "[W]hen migrants receive little or no prenatal care, they have higher risks of maternal death and infant mortality" (Dos Santos, 2015). Unfortunately, this is the case for many migrant women around the world, especially undocumented or "irregular" migrants. De Jong et al. (2017) and Tasa et al. (2021) found that undocumented migrant women had lower rates of maternal healthcare utilization and thus poorer health outcomes compared with "authorized" migrant groups (i.e., refugees, asylum seekers, etc.) and native populations. Undocumented migrants generally have less support from international organizations like the IOM and UNHCR. Thus, migrant legal status—whether a person identifies as a refugee, asylum seeker, or an undocumented migrant—further complicates a woman's ability to understand and navigate the health systems of host countries due to differential levels of access to social support and services (Davies et al., 2009).

Focusing In: Latin America, Mexico, and Monterrey

Due to the scope of the crisis in Venezuela, much of the existing literature about migrant women's maternal healthcare access in Latin America has focused on the experiences of this population in neighboring countries like Colombia (Giraldo et al., 2021) and Brazil (Bahamondes et al., 2020), as well as other South American countries where they have settled (Gallo Marin et al., 2021). However, with significant shifts in migration patterns in Latin America over the last decade resulting in increased numbers of migrant women from Central America in transit through Mexico, as well as south migration throughout Latin America, there has been an increased focus in existing literature on these populations, highlighting migration as a gendered phenomenon (Piper, 2005; Garbett et al., 2023). For example, through interviews with healthcare providers in Costa Rica, Dos Santos (2015) found that undocumented Nicaraguan migrants must navigate barriers to maternal healthcare access and perceptions of "illegality" and "undeservingness."

Research examining migrant maternal healthcare in Mexico has focused primarily on the northern border with the United States. Infante et al. (2022) describes the persistence of affordability and administrative barriers to public healthcare access along the Mexican side of the border despite policies that are inclusive of migrants. On the other hand, Heyman et al. (2009) highlights more strongly defined barriers to healthcare access for migrants on the US side of the border, including "direct legal mandates, fear of authorities, obstacles to movement by immigration law enforcement."

Studies along the US-Mexico border further tend to focus on factors that influence women's health-seeking behavior with regards to prenatal care (Heckert, 2020; Selchau et al., 2017). For example, Selchau et al. (2017) found that Hispanic women living along the US-Mexico border have lower rates of seeking first trimester prenatal care than non-Hispanic women due to factors such as lack of knowledge about care. The story of one undocumented Mexican mother in Texas, Farfán-Santos (2019), illustrates how migrant women often avoid

accessing health services for their own needs in the United States due to the risk of deportation that comes with accessing such care. However, she describes how migrant mothers will simultaneously confront such risks to access healthcare for their children; perhaps, pregnant migrant women view the health of their unborn child as inextricably tied to their own which would further explain their lower rates of prenatal care access.

Farfan-Santos (2019) also demonstrates how gendered narratives of undocumented motherhood can serve as a model through which to understand the access to and quality of health care of both migrant women and their children—further highlighting how a woman's migrant status has ramifications for the wellbeing of her entire family. Thus, the stresses and risks associated with migration simultaneously exacerbate and are exacerbated by migrant women's experiences of pregnancy and motherhood.

The increase in the number of Central and South American migrants in transit through Mexico has expanded the geographic focus of the literature beyond that of the US-Mexico border. Migrants are spending more time in major Mexican cities like Monterrey that are close to, but not directly along the US-Mexico border often due to insufficient resources to cross the border or because of unsafe conditions at home (Llanes García & Ghys, 2020).

Located in the northeastern state of Nuevo Leon, Monterrey has emerged as an important location in existing literature. Stoesslé (2022) found that health and administrative staff in Monterrey rely on "culturalist explanations" to rationalize the health of transitory Central American migrant populations. Llanes-Garcia and Ghys (2020) further shed light on Central American migrants' perspectives about healthcare access in the city—although only 2 of their 31 interviews were conducted with migrant women. Thus, there is a gap in the literature specifically regarding migrant women's maternal healthcare access and experiences in this increasingly important city regarding the migration journeys of many migrant women. Additionally, in a review of the existing literature on migration and health in Central America

and Mexico, Garbett et al. (2023) found that no study "examined in depth experiences of women migrating or traveling while pregnant, only the experiences of more settled migrants." Through interviews with pregnant migrant women in transit in Monterrey, my study directly contributes to closing this important gap in the literature.

The Role of Healthcare Providers in Shaping Care: Perceptions and Obstetric Violence

The quality of maternal healthcare migrant women receive is impacted by healthcare professionals' medical training and their perceptions of migrant women. While medical schools around the world have implemented cultural competency training into their curricula in attempts to address structural racism and discrimination in medicine, researchers posit that the culture of biomedical sciences is "key to the transmission of stigma…and the development of health disparities across minority groups" (Kleinman & Benson, 2006). Holmes (2012) describes how traditional medical education prepares doctors to ignore the social and economic determinants of health and, instead, blames the patient's biology, behavior, and culture for their poor health outcomes. Using Foucault's concept of the "clinical gaze" as a theoretical foundation, Holmes (2012) argues that it is not a migrant's culture that creates barriers to healthcare—which would necessitate cultural competency training for healthcare professionals. Rather, structural barriers in biomedical institutions prevent healthcare professionals from perceiving the socioeconomic contexts in which their patients live, thus effectively prevent meeting their health needs.

Researchers argue for more critical analyses by medical students and healthcare providers of the culture of medicine itself, because "if you can't see that your own culture has its own set of interests, emotions, and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else's culture?" (Fox, 2005). Through interviews with healthcare professionals in Monterrey, my research will further present healthcare professionals' perceptions of and interactions with migrant

women as well as offer specific recommendations for medical training in Monterrey.

Issues of obstetric violence among migrant populations in Latin America are rarely addressed in the literature due to a number of factors, including underreporting and the lack of a clear understanding of obstetric violence by both migrant women and healthcare providers (Biurrun-Garrido et al., 2023; Wolf, 2023). Obstetric violence is a term that originated in and is widely used in Latin America (Amorim et al., 2020). There are a variety of other terms used in the literature to describe the same or similar phenomena, including "mistreatment" and "violence against women." For clarity, in this paper, I will use obstetric violence to refer to physical, emotional, or verbal violence committed by healthcare workers during the provision of pregnancy, childbirth-related, or postpartum care (Flores-Romero et al., 2022).

Through interviews with nursing staff in Baja California, Flores-Romero et al. (2022) highlighted the perceptions of nurses regarding obstetric violence towards women and the extent of their recognition of violent care practices. Their study found that while all participants reported observing acts of obstetric violence against women, there is a need for increased awareness among health professionals regarding the Official Mexican Norm for pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care aimed at promoting women-centered care and reducing the risk of violent care practices (Flores-Romero et al., 2022).

Flores-Romero et al. (2022) has contributed to closing the visibility gap in the literature with regards to the prevalence of obstetric violence in Mexico. However, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding obstetric violence among migrant populations in Mexico. Addressing this gap in the literature has important implications for improving healthcare delivery and the maternal healthcare experiences of migrant women. My research will contribute to addressing this gap through interviews with healthcare professionals about their perceptions regarding mistreatment towards migrant women in Monterrey.

Research Site: Context in Monterrey

When I arrived in Monterrey in late June 2023, the city was experiencing a heatwave. The sky was hazy from the dry heat and air pollution, reflecting the sprawling metropolitan area's reputation as a manufacturing and commercial center. Luxurious high-rises jutted into the sky, dwarfed only by the mountains surrounding the city on practically every side. Driving through the city to the migrant shelter where I would be primarily based as a researcher, I passed affluent, gated communities with houses hidden behind ivy-covered walls and run-down neighborhoods with brightly painted buildings seemingly stacked on top of each other—no more than a few minutes apart. The heat was oppressive and air conditioning was practically nonexistent at the shelter, save for a few fans placed throughout the common areas and small AC units placed in the staff offices.

The shelter was quiet when I arrived in the late afternoon. The migrants staying at the shelter were either at work or had retreated to their respective quarters, trying to escape the sun that was beating down on the shelter's main courtyard. Men's and women's beds and bathrooms were located on opposite sides of the courtyard. Chairs lined the side of the courtyard nearest to the women's beds. During the next several weeks, as the heat subsided only slightly, I would witness the shelter come to life with migrants gathering for meals around the tables in the cafeteria, chatting on the chairs in the courtyard as young children shrieked excitedly from every corner of the shelter, and trusting their stories of hardship and resilience with me.

Located about 140 miles south of the US-Mexico border with Texas, Monterrey has become an important "waystation" for many migrants (Corchado, 2022). The city attracts migrants who are traveling towards or have been turned away from the border as a place of both refuge and opportunity (Daw et al., 2022). Monterrey also receives refugees and asylum seekers looking to settle in the city as part of the UNHCR's Local Integration Program, which provides forcibly displaced people with job training and other resources to facilitate settlement (*Displacement in Mexico explained*, 2023). As of 2022, the UNHCR estimated that there were more than 15,000 refugees and

asylum seekers living in Nuevo Leon, not including the thousands of migrants not seeking asylum or qualifying for refugee status (*UNHCR Mexico Factsheet-Monterrey, 2019-2022*, 2022).



Figure 1. This graphic visualizes Monterrey's proximity to major cities along the US-Mexico border with Texas as well as the recent increase in the number of migrant encounters in border cities closer to Monterrey, demonstrating the city's growing importance in migration journeys to and from the United States.

Why Monterrey?

I chose to conduct my research in Monterrey because of its proximity to, but also slight separation from the border–as shown in **Figure 1**. As one of the last major cities before the border with Texas, many migrants spend extended lengths of time in Monterrey during their migration journeys. Thus, the city was a good location in which to encounter and recruit a representative sample of migrant women. Compared to the border, Monterrey is also generally safer and less stressful for migrants. As the capital of Nuevo Leon, Monterrey boasts some of the best public healthcare facilities in the state, including a specialty maternal health hospital, to which all migrants have access under the state government's free health insurance program, "Cuidar Tu Salud" (Care for Your Health) (OIM, 2023). These characteristics and conditions facilitated recruitment because migrants and healthcare professionals who regularly delivered maternal healthcare to migrant women were more readily available for interviews.

During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to visit and learn from organizations that support migrants in various ways throughout Monterrey, including migrant shelters, universities, public hospitals, and humanitarian aid organizations. I specifically partnered with one migrant shelter, Casa Esperanza (pseudonyms are used for people and organizations throughout this paper). Along with other migrant shelters in the city, Casa Esperanza has collaborated with the UNHCR to assist in implementing their Local Integration Program. The shelter provides legal and psychosocial support to people participating in the program and settling in Monterrey. Most migrants staying at the shelter, however, intended to seek asylum in the United States. Therefore, I was able to interview both migrants who were planning to stay long-term in Monterrey as well as those who were planning to cross the US-Mexico border or had already attempted to do so. The diversity of migrant legal status in my encounters and interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of the current migratory patterns and needs in Monterrey–including what resources were being accessed and by whom.

Methodology

My research is based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews I conducted over a six-week period (6/21/23-8/2/23) with migrant women, healthcare providers, and key informants in Monterrey. Through these interviews, I examined the maternal healthcare experiences of migrant women and their interactions with healthcare providers. I designed interview guides for each participant subset to be about one hour long.[1] Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, but on average were about one hour long. Social workers from two migrant shelters in Mexico screened the interview questions to avoid potentially retraumatizing migrant women. Although it was not possible to pilot my interview questions before arriving in the field, I adapted the questions throughout my time in the field to improve translation issues and added new questions to further address recurring themes. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because this qualitative method allowed for in-depth conversations and opportunities for further clarification that would not have been provided by surveys.

I recruited participants using convenience and snowball sampling. Through convenience sampling, participants are "selected for inclusion in the sample because they are the easiest for the researcher to access" (Nikolopoulou, 2023). While I recruited most migrant women from Casa Esperanza, I also visited two other migrant shelters in the city for one day each and recruited women at those locations. Therefore, the sample of migrant women recruited from shelters was biased based on who was currently staying at each of the shelters. I recruited key informants and healthcare providers through snowball sampling, through which participants refer the researcher to other contacts that might be interested in participating (Sedgwick, 2013).

Participant subsets included the following: (a) migrant women who were pregnant and/or gave birth at least once during their

[1] Please contact the principal investigator if interested in accessing the semi-structured interview guides, available in English and Spanish.

migration journey (and/or in the US-Mexico border region), (b) health care workers who provided maternal health care to migrant and non-migrant women in Monterrey, and (c) staff at migrant shelters and researchers who interacted regularly with migrants. Individuals had to be 18 or older to participate.

I interviewed 29 participants in a total of 28 interviews (one interview involved 2 participants and the rest were one-on-one). Interviews took place at a variety of sites in the Monterrey metropolitan area. In-person interview sites included migrant shelters, local non-profit organizations, universities, and a regional public hospital. In-person interviews were conducted in secure, private spaces at all sites. I conducted five interviews via Zoom and one interview over the phone. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio-recorded on my phone or Zoom. In addition to interviewing migrant women (n=12), I also spoke with social workers (n=3), staff at migrant shelters (n=2), researchers studying health care access among migrants (n=2), physicians (n=8), and nurses (n=2). At the time of their interviews, five of the migrant women were pregnant. I collected demographic data for all participants, which is reported in **Tables 1-4**.

As outlined in my IRB approved protocol (23-02-7688), I ensured both the safety and confidentiality of all participants by not recording their names or publishing individual identifying data. An oral informed consent process explained these confidentiality procedures to participants before each interview. Safety and confidentiality of participants was also ensured throughout the transcription process. The audio recordings of the interviews were de-identified and transcribed in Spanish. Original audio recordings were destroyed. De-identified audio and transcription files are stored in an encrypted folder to which only myself and my research advisor have access. I conducted thematic data analysis by manually highlighting recurring themes in interview transcriptions.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Migrant Women.

Demographic Categories: Migrant Women	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	12	100
Male	0	
Age		
18-25	7	58.3
26-30	2	16.6
31-36	3	25
Highest Level of Education Completed		
Primary	4	33.3
Secondary	3	25
Bachillerato (HS Equivalent)	3	25
Bachelor's Degree Equivalent	2	16.6
Relationship Status		
Free Union	9	75
Single	2	16.6
Married	1	8.3
Country of Origin		
Venezuela	7	58.3
Honduras	3	25
Guatemala	1	8.3
Nicaragua	1	8.3

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Doctors.

Demographic Categories: Doctors	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	6	75
Male	2	25
Age		
27-32	6	75
37-39	2	25
Occupation Status		
Attending Physician	4	50
Fellow	1	12.5
Resident	3	37.5
Country of Origin		
Mexico	8	100

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Nurses.

Demographic Categories: Nurses	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	2	100
Male	0	0
Age		
36	1	50
56	1	50
Occupation		
General Nurse	2	100
Country of Origin		
Mexico	2	100

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Key Informants.

Demographic Categories: Key Informants	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	4	57.14
Male	3	42.85
Age		
27-34	5	71.42
43-44	2	28.57
Highest Level of Education		
PhD	2	28.57
Bachelor's Degree	4	57.14
Associate Degree	1	14.28
Occupation		
Social Worker	3	42.85
Researcher/Professor	2	28.57
Migrant Shelter Coordinator	2	28.57
Country of Origin		
Mexico	6	85.71
France	1	14.28

I asked migrant women about their antenatal, postpartum, and birth experiences as migrants (including access to and quality of such care). I also asked them to describe their interactions with healthcare providers during these care experiences as well as any instances of obstetric violence. I designed interviews with healthcare workers to collect qualitative data about their medical training, available maternal healthcare resources, their typical interactions with migrant and non-migrant women, and any instances of discrimination and/or obstetric violence that they may have observed or that may have occurred under their care. I interviewed staff at migrant shelters and other key informants about their observations of migrant women's maternal health as well as their direct and indirect experiences of migrant maternal healthcare.

I would like to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher, student, and White woman from the United States. My personal experiences and perspectives influenced the recruitment process and my interactions with participants as well as my analysis of the research

findings. Furthermore, my identity as a White student from a private research university in the US may have led to biased answers from participants or increased willingness to participate due to some participants' desires to emigrate to the United States. In accordance with IRB protocol, participants were informed during the oral consent process that they would not be paid for participating in the interview and that their relationship with affiliated organizations offering them shelter or employment would not be affected by their decision to participate.

Results and Discussion

Three main topics emerged from interviews with participants: (1) barriers to accessibility and quality care, (2) perspectives held by healthcare workers about the migrant situation, and (3) mistreatment and obstetric violence. I expand on these topics and their related subthemes in the following sections.

1. Barriers to Accessibility and Quality Care

"I think that especially for migrant women, it is necessary to eliminate all unnecessary administrative, economic, etc. obstacles…improve attention, times, deadlines, reduce barriers, rejection…Generate a space of trust that involves the information that reaches women."

With research expertise in healthcare accessibility for the migrant population in Monterrey, John recognized the mountain of barriers migrant women face in accessing maternal healthcare. As we sat in his office located on the campus of one of Monterrey's universities, John explained the variety of barriers he had witnessed migrants encounter while accompanying them to healthcare appointments across the city. Physical, economic, language, and knowledge barriers were identified across my interviews with migrant women, healthcare providers, and key informants like John. Participants further cited language barriers as contributing to poorer quality maternal healthcare.

Physical and Economic Barriers

Physical and economic barriers to accessing maternal healthcare included the cost and risks associated with transportation to health clinics and hospitals, costs associated with local clinics, the physical distance of migrant shelters from the hospitals, and the shelters' limited capacity to provide safe transportation. John summed up the ways in which these barriers overlap to create complex problems of accessibility for migrant women:

> *"...either it is very expensive…because many taxi drivers overcharge you or, I remember the case of a pregnant woman who took public transportation and told me the difficulty she had with the heat, with the risk of being alone because her husband worked."*

Not only is it difficult for migrant women to physically access Monterrey's healthcare system, but it is often costly, unsafe, and uncomfortable as they face barriers specific to being both a migrant and a woman in an unfamiliar city.

The physical distance of migrant shelters from public hospitals and clinics, as well as shelters' limited capacities to transport migrants, also served as barriers that often delayed migrant women's access to care. These barriers were particularly evident in the case of Sadie, a migrant woman from Venezuela who was almost 11 weeks pregnant and staying at Casa Esperanza. During one of my first weeks in Monterrey, I interviewed Sadie–she was thin with long black hair and her baby bump had not yet started to show. During her interview, Sadie described how she had already had *"quite a few complications"* during this pregnancy and *"almost lost the baby"* through spontaneous abortion. Sadie's story is substantiated by Harakow et al. (2020), who found that refugees had an increased risk of spontaneous abortion, or the "loss of a pregnancy without outside intervention before 20 weeks' gestation," compared with native populations (Griebel et al., 2005; Harakow et al., 2021).

I interviewed Sadie on a Friday, and by Monday morning, she was showing signs of spontaneous abortion again. That morning, Sadie saw Casa Esperanza's doctor, who came twice a week and had a small

office in the shelter. The doctor advised Sadie to go to the hospital and instructed her to speak with a social worker at the shelter to arrange transportation. Casa Esperanza had two vans and three drivers on staff to transport migrants staying at the shelter to their healthcare appointments. While the shelter provided critical safe and free transportation to migrant women like Sadie, I observed delays in this transportation due to administrative delays (i.e., communication between staff, scheduling appointments, etc.), as well as the shelter's limited capacity to provide multiple rides in one day with just two vans. In Sadie's case, she had been bleeding since 6 a.m., but was unable to leave for the hospital in a shelter van until 2 p.m.

Casa Esperanza is located about 40 minutes from Monterrey's maternal and infant health hospital that specializes in high-risk cases like Sadie's. I joined Sadie on the drive from the shelter to this hospital. With the bustling city's midday traffic, 40 minutes turned into an hour. Unfortunately, Sadie would find out during her hospital visit that she had lost her baby. While I'm not suggesting that the shelter's delayed transportation caused Sadie's spontaneous abortion, I believe it's important to recognize migrant shelters' organizational limitations in facilitating migrant women's timely access to maternal healthcare as well as how physical distance can further delay access to high quality emergency maternal care in Monterrey.

There are closer options, of course. An employee of Casa Esperanza informed me that there is a private clinic located just down the road from the shelter. However, the clinic charges 50 pesos (or approximately $3 USD) for an appointment and doesn't participate in "Cuidar Tu Salud." This cost may serve as a significant barrier to women who are unable to work themselves and are traveling without a partner or family member who could work in the city. Additionally, these smaller clinics are usually only able to offer limited maternal health services, lacking ultrasound machines and other technologies needed to provide adequate maternal care. Thus, where physical barriers are diminished, economic and institutional barriers to access emerge.

Another economic barrier to accessing maternal healthcare recognized by migrant women and key informants in interviews was the cost of losing a day of work to attend an appointment, whether it be the migrant woman herself and/or a companion. Casa Esperanza required that children be accompanied at all times in the shelter; therefore, male partners often had to stay in the shelter with the children while their female partners attended maternal care appointments. This potential cost of losing a day of work, and potential conflict with their partners as a result, no doubt discouraged pregnant migrant women with children from more actively seeking prenatal care during their stay at the shelter.

Language Barriers

Language barriers were cited in interviews with doctors and nurses as the most common barriers to quality care for migrant women. The existing literature corroborates these findings, citing language as one of the most common barriers to patient access, high-quality care, and improved maternal health outcomes, and pointing to the need for qualified, professional translators in healthcare settings (Almeida et al., 2013; Keygnaert et al., 2016). Hospital and migrant shelter medical staff expressed frustration with occasionally experiencing a lack of available translators (in-person or via phone call) due to their high demand. These findings are especially concerning for emergency care situations and ensuring that informed consent is obtained (Binder et al., 2012). However, Estela, a second-year resident in Obstetrics and Gynecology (OBGYN) at a major hospital in Monterrey, expressed concern about the indirect form of communication facilitated by translators, *"I don't know if [the] translator is like translating exactly as I said."*

Estela also described how language barriers and physical appearance are indicators of a patient's migrant status: *"Just when they speak another language or when…[it's] really evident that they are like, Asian. Like you can see that they are not from here, but if not, it's like another patient."* Her suggestion that patients who appear to be migrants (whether

because of language differences and/or physical appearance) are not like other patients implies that migrants receive differential treatment compared to the native population. While Estela does not clarify whether this differential treatment is better or worse, the association she makes between language barriers and physical appearances suggests potential discriminatory care practices based on nationality.

Estela's word choice reveals how language barriers and physical appearances can negatively distinguish migrants from Mexico's native population in healthcare settings. A migrant shelter coordinator explained how he had seen this manifested when migrant women delivered babies at local hospitals: *"[Staff] threaten [migrant women], like you need to pay us…because they know that, especially migrant women, don't know any better."* Migrant women may be taken advantage of or denied access to care because language barriers and/or physical appearances make it obvious to health and administrative staff at hospitals and clinics that they are *"not from here"* and might not be aware of their access to free, public healthcare under the "Cuidar Tu Salud" program.

Knowledge Barriers

A trend that emerged throughout interviews with pregnant migrant women was a lack of knowledge regarding maternal healthcare options in Monterrey. None of the women interviewed explicitly expressed knowledge of "Cuidar Tu Salud" when asked about healthcare options in Monterrey. Yasmeen was the only woman out of the five pregnant migrant women interviewed who reported attending frequent and multiple prenatal care appointments in Mexico. She was also the only interviewee who participated in the UNHCR's Local Integration Program for refugees and asylum seekers, and thus received direct assistance accessing maternal healthcare in the city.

Compared with Yasmeen, interviews with migrant women who were staying at shelters in Monterrey revealed differential healthcare knowledge and access between migrant women based on legal status. As a migrant who was not looking to settle in Monterrey, Sofia, who was 6 months pregnant at the time of her interview, did not benefit

from the resources provided by the UNHCR's program. She explained wanting to access maternal healthcare, but not knowing where to start: *"Yes, sometimes yes [I want to access prenatal care], but I do not know who to ask. They don't understand me. I don't know how to [access the care]."* Despite speaking Spanish, Sofia felt isolated as a migrant and expressed limited knowledge about how to navigate Monterrey's healthcare system, which prevented her from accessing prenatal care (Binder et al., 2012). Migrant legal status (and resources available to a person based on this status) influenced knowledge of and access to care in Monterrey.

Knowledge barriers extend beyond access to care and include migrant women's lack of health literacy. These barriers are perpetuated by poor communication in patient-provider interactions. A social worker at Casa Esperanza described how pregnant migrant women often deny treatments suggested by doctors because of a *"lack of awareness of those treatments."* Binder et al. (2012) shared a similar quote from a midwife positing that migrant women "don't give consent because they don't understand the information." Such knowledge barriers reflect the need for improved checks of patient understanding and the use of clear language, free from medical jargon, when healthcare workers communicate medical information. Recent studies have corroborated these findings and stress the need for physicians to evaluate their communication skills more consciously to reduce the use of medical jargon (Miller et al., 2022). Migrant women have further underscored the importance of quality information exchange between patients and providers in the provision of patient-centered care (Gagliardi et al., 2020).

Scholars have also examined methods of assessing patient understanding of medical information; Kemp et al. (2008) concluded that patients preferred an open-ended, patient-centered method of "tell-back collaborative inquiry," over closed-ended "Yes-No" questions or physician-centered methods that failed to account for the patient's feelings.

2. Perspectives Held by Healthcare Workers

"I always stress the point that I'm not going to call anyone. I'm just going to ask this question so I can get to know you and treat you with proper care. And that bond makes them [feel] like, 'Okay, now I'm safe.'"

Interviews with doctors demonstrated the ways in which healthcare professionals in Monterrey incorporate stereotypes about the migrant situation into their care of migrant women. In the quote above, the doctor described approaching interactions with migrant women with caution and an emphasis on building trust with the patient. These are important aspects of clear, patient-centered communication that, as described in the previous section, should be actively implemented by all healthcare providers (Gagliardi et al., 2020). However, the doctor's explanation also reflects the perspective that the migrant situation is defined solely by fear, specifically of authority. While these approaches and assumptions are all true of the migrant reality–they represent and reinforce a stereotypical view of migrants as "deficient…passive, and without agency" that fails to capture the complexity of their situation (Desouza, 2004). Roggeband (2010) explains how such stereotypes serve to victimize and exclude migrant women, limiting their active roles as agents of change in their own lives.

Such stereotypes lead to differential, although not always worse, treatment of migrant women by healthcare providers compared to the native population. When I asked doctors and nurses about why they believe migrant women do not seek maternal healthcare, fear was a salient theme. Doctors described migrant women delaying care until they present as *"more complicated"* cases *"because some of them are…afraid that we're going to report them."*

Migrant women's responses indicated that they only tend to seek care when they experience serious complications. One pregnant migrant woman explained that she did not seek postpartum care during her first pregnancy because "*It wasn't necessary. I was fine. Thank goodness. There were no complications."* For the migrant women who

participated in my study, it appears as though most were not making decisions with regards to their maternal health defined by fear, but by necessity/priority. Such sentiments are echoed in the existing literature by other migrant women from Latin America: "Only if we have a problem [do] we start to look for a gynecologist. If we are not sick, we do not think about it" (Schmidt et al., 2018). However, it may be the case that, *because of fear*, migrant women are actually avoiding care unless absolutely necessary (Farfán-Santos, 2019).

No migrant women mentioned fear of being reported as a barrier to accessing healthcare in an interview. While this may have been a result of migrant women not wanting to share their fears with me, there is a clear disconnect between healthcare workers' perspectives about why migrant women delay access to maternal healthcare and the actual migrant situation which, while very much full of fear and violence, involves socioeconomic and gendered factors not reflected in the perspectives provided by healthcare providers. This disconnect no doubt impacts the provider-patient relationship and the quality of maternal care that migrant women receive in Monterrey. John described witnessing "infantilization" of migrants by healthcare providers: *"they talk to them like children…it favors the person's passivity."* By defining the migrant experience solely through fear, healthcare workers walk a fine line between being aware of migrant women's potential past trauma and limiting migrant women's active role in their personal healthcare. As previously discussed in this paper, scholars argue that moving away from a strictly biomedical discourse and incorporating patients' socioeconomic contexts in decision-making can promote patient agency (Browne et al., 2015).

Healthcare providers are not fully aware of the physical, economic, and information barriers faced by migrant women in accessing maternal healthcare in Monterrey, further explaining why such structural barriers continue to exist in the city. The language used by the state government to describe "Cuidar Tu Salud" in its publicity of the program suggests that the problem of healthcare access has been solved for Mexican citizens and migrants alike. However,

participants' responses indicate a more complex array of barriers to accessibility (knowledge, physical, language, etc.) that the government has only just begun to address.

3. Mistreatment and Obstetric Violence

Instances of mistreatment and obstetric violence were described by participants in all three participant subgroups. Most migrant women described acts of mistreatment occurring to them in their countries of origin or in other Latin American countries where they lived as migrants that were not Mexico. For example, migrant women from Venezuela most often described instances of mistreatment occurring to them in neighboring Colombia. Healthcare providers and key informants provided information about mistreatment and/or acts of obstetric violence that they had either witnessed or committed themselves in Monterrey. Thus, my research findings provide an idea of the prevalence of mistreatment and obstetric violence not only in Monterrey but also in other Latin American countries.

It is important to note that, while no migrant woman directly reported experiences of mistreatment or obstetric violence in Monterrey, studies have shown that women typically remain silent about their experiences of obstetric violence (Perera et al., 2018). Many migrant women also expressed unfamiliarity with the term "obstetric violence" during interviews, indicating that they lacked the vocabulary to properly name and identify past experiences. Existing literature has shown that patients who expressed knowledge of their rights felt motivated to speak up in abusive healthcare situations (Brüggemann & Swahnberg, 2013). Thus, my findings also suggest that migrant women were likely unaware of their healthcare rights.

The main sub-themes that emerged from interviews were: (1) neglect and discrimination during prenatal care and childbirth, (2) verbal communication as forms of mistreatment and obstetric violence, (3) shortage of pain medications, and (4) unconsented medical procedures and the role of medical students.

Neglect and Discrimination During Prenatal Care and Childbirth

Two young migrant mothers (one 19 and the other 21 at the time of the interviews) shared shocking stories of lack of attention and care from healthcare providers during childbirth. Both mothers described similar childbirth experiences in which their own feelings were dismissed by healthcare providers:

"[The doctors and nurses] were like in their world…and when they saw me, they told me not to scream, not to push or anything until they felt like delivering [my baby]"
—Jenny, Venezuelan woman who gave birth as a migrant in Peru

"I felt that I had a lot of pain…but there was no doctor…I started yelling at the doctors, but they told me no, that it was a lie…Then they left me there…so what I did was push and with my hands took [the baby] out by itself. And when the doctors arrived, I already had the baby here on my chest."
—Francesca, migrant woman who gave birth in her home country of Guatemala

The powerful language used by these women has been echoed throughout scholarly work on obstetric violence and demonstrates how women's bodily sensations and emotions during childbirth are often diminished and dismissed by healthcare providers, who assume and abuse roles of absolute authority when caring for patients (Cohen Shabot, 2021). Healthcare providers often do not believe many women like Francesca when they express concerns about their health or complain about their levels of pain. The themes of "prioritizing the care provider's agenda" and "disregarding embodied knowledge" identified by Reed et al. (2017) as contributors to traumatic birth experiences are not only evident in Francesca and Jenny's stories, but also in the birth experiences shared by other migrant women. Sofia similarly reflected this theme in describing her childbirth experience in her home country of Nicaragua, *"[the doctor] does not feel my pain…he does not understand."*

Although Francesca and Sofia were not migrants when they gave birth, several women who did give birth as migrants stated they felt the

differential and poorer quality treatment they experienced was due to their migrant status. Camila, a Venezuelan migrant who lived in Colombia for several years, attributed discrimination and poor-quality prenatal treatment from a doctor in Colombia to her identity as a Venezuelan migrant woman: *"I would think that [the doctor's] treatment was because [I'm] Venezuelan… Even during my sister's pregnancy. She also had a [baby] in Colombia, they told her that there was something wrong with her uterus, that they could remove it and I told her no…because we Venezuelan women are classified as having many children."* Camila also disclosed that the doctor who discriminated against her recommended she undergo a tubal ligation because she had already had two children with two different fathers. Camila's story particularly demonstrates how cultural and gender stereotypes held by doctors about migrant women directly impact their interactions with healthcare providers, can be harmful to their emotional well-being, and threaten their reproductive agency.

Verbal Communication as Mistreatment and Obstetric Violence

"I believe that much of this obstetric violence is a communication issue."

All of the doctors and nurses interviewed, except for one fellow named Daniela, denied committing any forms of obstetric violence themselves. Daniela initially said that she did not believe she had committed obstetric violence, but then qualified her answer: *"That is, I believe not, but also, I don't know some perception that maybe a patient has had…[that] they have felt it as a scolding, they have felt it as violent."* Daniela's response underscores the need to educate healthcare providers on what constitutes obstetric violence so that they can recognize when it's happening and stop themselves from committing such acts (Chadwick, 2023; Ferrão et al., 2022).

When asked about obstetric violence, doctors and nurses most often described witnessing acts of obstetric violence being committed by other nurses in the form of verbal abuse during childbirth. Participants described this verbal abuse committed by nurses and directed at migrant women as berating and contemptuous, especially when directed towards young mothers and migrants. In describing

such verbal abuse, a resident provided examples of statements and questions they had heard made by nurses towards young mothers and migrants: *"Why didn't you use protection? There you were, opening your legs. It's not worth it."* While most providers described verbal abuse as the most common form of obstetric violence they had seen committed, one resident felt that "it is now very rare to hear inappropriate or violent comments towards the patient." One doctor denied the existence of verbal abuse as a form of obstetric violence–instead stating that *"joking"* with the patient is misconstrued as disrespectful due to the intense pain women experience at the height of childbirth.

Shortage of Pain Medications

Interviews with migrant women and healthcare providers suggested a lack of availability of pain medications, specifically epidural analgesia, during facility-based childbirths in Monterrey and other Latin American countries. In a small office on the third floor of a major public hospital, Estela (second-year resident) explained this shortage of epidural anesthesia, *"We don't have the access to like [give] the epidural to everyone."* Estela added that she's read that *"it's obstetric violence to do the epidural to every woman…but we don't get to give them, like, to everyone."* Estela's language suggests the rationing of pain medication, which she later attributed to a lack of supplies as well as staff trained to administer the epidural. Similar conditions have been documented in public hospitals throughout Mexico (Smith-Oka, 2013). Estela appears to justify the hospital's inability to provide epidurals to all patients who might want one–which itself has "obstetrically violent elements" by stripping women of the *choice* of pain medication–through the idea that it would be obstetric violence to *force* women to receive epidurals if they are undesired (Smith-Oka, 2022).

While no migrant women interviewed had given birth and could speak about a childbirth experience in Monterrey, their stories of childbirth in their home and host countries validated Estela's description of the situation in Monterrey and potentially revealed a widespread problem faced by both migrant and non-migrant women

throughout Latin America. Sofia, a Nicaraguan migrant, described the lack of pain medication during her childbirth in Nicaragua; *"I asked the doctor, they told me that there wasn't [any pain medication], that this was normal…that the pain was going to pass."* Sofia's words are alarming and highlight the severity of the situation.

Other migrant women and healthcare providers reported hearing the same rhetoric *("the pain will pass," "you have to endure," "you have to push so the pain ends"*) from other healthcare providers during childbirth. This language has undertones of verbal manipulation and abuse. My findings suggest that women are being denied the choice of pain management during childbirth in Monterrey and throughout Latin America due to a lack of available pain resources (including medication, staff, time, etc.) at the institutional level. Thus, in addition to the violence exerted by doctors and nurses, obstetric violence takes place and is perpetuated at the institutional level due to factors that are out of providers' control (Chadwick, 2018).

Unconsented Medical Procedures and the Role of Medical Students

Not surprisingly, only one healthcare provider reported witnessing other doctors commit acts of obstetric violence. Mateo, an OB-GYN resident who I interviewed at the same hospital as Estela, was the only healthcare provider to describe other doctors committing acts of obstetric violence. Mateo believed that the most common acts of obstetric violence committed by doctors involved failing to explain what they were doing to the patient and/or failure to receive consent. He provided the example of women who *"require an episiotomy,"* which is a "surgical enlargement of the vaginal orifice by an incision to the perineum" (or the area of skin between the vagina and the anus) during childbirth to allow for an easier delivery (Kalis et al., 2012).

While once considered routine procedures during childbirth, episiotomies are occasionally medically necessary (*Episiotomy*, n.d.). In cases where an episiotomy was necessary, Mateo described instances in which doctors *"never explained to [patients] that they were going to have a wound or they weren't even asked if they agreed or not."* Migrant women have

reported that physicians fail to establish and maintain clear communication throughout their interactions (Gagliardi et al, 2020). In most cases, childbirth is not an emergency; therefore, obtaining informed consent for every procedure performed and maintaining communication is often possible and necessary (Jansen et al., 2013; Wolf & Charles, 2018). Mateo's response further suggests that obstetric violence is much more covert and prevalent in doctor-patient interactions within Monterrey's healthcare system than reflected by other participants' responses.

According to Kukura (2008), medical abuse during childbirth can also include artificial and unnecessary membrane stripping or breaking. Several migrant women reported having their membranes, or the amniotic sac that contains the fetus, being artificially broken by untrained medical students during cervical exams to check for dilation/labor progression: *"I almost had a malpractice, I almost lost my daughter because there were many students…they told me 'get on the stretcher to check if you have dilated'...and they put their finger in me and they tore my sac…[the doctor] tells me, 'If it wasn't your turn and you had to wait longer, you would lose the girl'...[the medical students] start putting their hands on the patients without knowing. I would think that this was obstetric violence"* —Camila, Venezuelan migrant describing the birth of her daughter in Venezuela.

Membrane stripping is a technique that can be used to induce or accelerate labor (Knoche et al., 2008). Such a technique is ultimately beneficial for doctors and nurses who are overburdened and overworked in Mexico's public hospitals (Smith-Oka, 2013). Just outside the small office where I interviewed Estela and other OBGYN residents, the hospital's pediatric waiting room was constantly full of women and their children. Estela described how long hours and overwhelming numbers of patients impacted the care doctors and nurses were able to provide: *"Everyone is like really fast…they don't have the time to have a real conversation with a patient…You don't get to go the extra mile. But you do what's needed."*

There's a clear need for "expediency and efficiency" in Mexico's public health practices and throughout the culture of biomedicine,

encouraging the use of techniques like membrane stripping to address the "need to ration medical time" and accelerate labor (Smith-Oka, 2022). This emphasis on efficiency further explains why untrained medical students may be tasked with completing cervical examinations, which can create more pain for women during labor when completed incorrectly and/or more often than necessary (Smith-Oka, 2013).

Conclusion

Interviews with migrant women, healthcare workers, and key informants, revealed that migrant women in Monterrey experience barriers and delays in accessing maternal healthcare, a lack of resources (including translators and pain medicine), and poor communication of their health rights as migrants in the state of Nuevo Leon—all of which affect the quality of care they receive and their maternal health outcomes. My results also suggest that obstetric violence is occurring in healthcare settings in Monterrey, and that both healthcare providers and migrant women require education to identify and prevent this gender-based violence, improve patient-provider communication, and ensure patient understanding of medical information.

Migrant women also described experiencing obstetric violence and poor-quality maternal healthcare throughout Latin America. Insights from healthcare providers and key informants provided evidence about the local situation in Monterrey that aligned with migrant women's experiences. Due to the transitory nature of their migration journeys, migrant women's stories reflect a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences that include and extend beyond Monterrey—revealing the scope of the issues discussed in this paper and demonstrating the importance of developing policies and programs that incorporate gendered perspectives of migration and aim to improve migrant women's maternal health experiences and outcomes.

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Femonationalism, Homonationalism, and Western Exceptionalism in Western Foreign Policy

By Grace Sullivan

Grace Sullivan is a rising junior at the University of Notre Dame majoring in Global Affairs with minors in Gender Studies and Peace Studies. Grace is proud of her contributions as a board member to Irish for Reproductive Health and her column in the Observer titled I.M.P.A.C.T. (Intersectionality Makes Political Activist Change Transpire), which explores global social justice issues from an intersectional feminist lens. The following piece is a final paper from her course "Gender, Sexuality, and the State" taught by Dr. Ashley Bohrer. Grace would like to thank Professor Bohrer for being an integral part in cultivating her deep interest and passion for gender justice.

The Western world depicts itself as the pinnacle of liberated nations through the promotion of its commitment to equal human rights. This exceptionalism is created by domestic counterfeit equality, however, through the implementation of policies of inclusion that portray a commitment to equality but refrain from addressing the root issues of inequality. Essentially, the West puts on a liberated front to justify imperialist foreign policy on the basis of upholding freedom and human rights. Combined with ongoing discourses of islamophobia, the West utilizes ethnocentric rhetoric by comparing the status of women and queer people in the West to predominantly Muslim countries as evidence for the supposed liberation and equality in the Western world. Conversations surrounding the veil and cultural attitudes toward queer people in Muslim communities are used to position the United States as a superior nation and mask domestic issues of inequality while simultaneously justifying imperialistic foreign policy through the notion of liberating Muslim women and queer people from their perceived oppression in Islamic culture. In this paper, I argue that the Western World, particularly the US, implements domestic policies of women's and queer institutional inclusion to create counterfeit domestic equality, in order to create grounds for femonationalist and homonationalist foreign policy. Predominantly applied in Muslim countries, the West combines a pursuit of global freedom with islamophobia to implement imperialist foreign policy under the guise of protecting the rights of women and queer people abroad while overlooking the presence of domestic inequality in the United States.

Policies that attempt to address gender inequality ignore the systemic aspects of oppression by placing women in positions of power in male-dominated institutions, creating a visual representation of equality without addressing the systemic roots of inequality. In *No Shortcut to Change: An Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World*, Kara Ellerby explains how sex quotas are used to treat the symptoms of gender equality without actually diagnosing the systemic operation of gender oppression. She explains how "this approach is often

referred to as the 'add-women-and-stir' approach because it [treats] women's oppression like a recipe: one does not need to change the whole recipe, just add women to it. In other words, liberal feminism assumes one can change the composition of the institution without needing to also change the way said institutions operate."[1] Liberal feminism focuses on the inclusion of women in male-dominated social institutions, or as Ellerby calls it, the "add-women-and-stir approach."[2] This approach underestimates the multidimensional aspects of oppression and how gender inequality subordinates women in more places than the workforce. Additionally, the inherent binaristic nature of sex quota policies oversimplifies the operations of power in a way that delegitimizes how multiple forms of oppression, such as racism, interact with gender inequality.

To capture the multidimensional operation of oppression, Ellerby uses the term *kyriarchy* to address the variation of oppression within power structures: "adding women via women's inclusion has not been highly transformative because it does not centrally address structural causes of gender inequality—kyriarchal (sexist, racist, heterosexist, and imperialist) structures."[3] The term kyriarchy captures the lack of nuance within sex quota based policy by highlighting multiple dimensions of power in a systemic and structural context. Ellerby defines kyriarchy as "interlocking structures of domination" to broaden the liberal feminist perspective from women's inclusion to the wider multidimensional operation of systemic oppression.[4]

The emphasis on sex quotas within liberal feminist policies establishes a visual representation of gender equality that supports the narrative of a liberated West, which legitimizes imperialistic policy in Muslim countries on the basis of women's liberation. This discourse influences Western exceptionalism and justifies imperialist,

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[1] Kara Ellerby, "Add Gender and Stir," essay, in *No Shortcut to Change an Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1–24, 6.
[2] Ellerby, 6.
[3] Ellerby, 7.
[4] Ellerby, 6.

femonationalist foreign policy on the basis of promoting women's rights. In *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism,* Sara R. Farris introduces the idea of *femonationalism* to explain the application of foreign policy toward Muslim-majority countries: "Short for 'feminist and femocratic nationalism,' femonationalism refers to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality."[5] "Femocrats" refers to women's organizations as well as top-ranked bureaucrats in state gender equality agencies.[6] This can be understood in the context of Ellerby's critique of the "add-gender-and-stir approach"[7] which is demonstrated by femocrats through the placement of women in positions of power to create a facade of gender equality without challenging the kyriarchal structure of social systems.

In a global context, nationalists—those who believe that their own country is better than others—and neoliberals utilize liberal feminist themes to promote their agendas of integration and assimilation into Western society to maintain the operation of kyriarchal social structures.[8] Farris describes neoliberalism in a femonationalist context: "a political-economic formation that 'institutionalizes' the femonationalist ideology as part of the functioning of the state apparatuses in order to (re)organize the productive and particularly the socially reproductive sphere."[9] Altogether, the US uses liberal feminist policies of sex quotas to

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[5] Sara R. Farris, "In the Name of Women's Rights," introduction, in *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–22, 4.
[6] Farris, 2.
[7] Kara Ellerby, "Add Gender and Stir," essay, in *No Shortcut to Change an Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1–24, 6.
[8] Nationalist | Definition," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 14, 2023, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/nationalist.
[9] Sara R. Farris, "In the Name of Women's Rights," introduction, in *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–22, 14.

appear liberated as a means to exploit gender equality and justify islamophobic foreign policy that subordinates Muslim men and women in an attempt to promote a nationalist and neoliberal agenda under the guise of advancing women's rights.

The gender exceptionalism of the West justifies ethnocentric femonationalist foreign policy to produce a narrative of the West liberating women across the world. Essentially, "what seems to unite all these feminists in a common battle against Islam is the fundamental belief that Western values of emancipation, individual rights, and secularism are best suited to guarantee gender equality."[10] Islamophobic foreign policy is rooted in US exceptionalism, particularly within the sector of women's rights. The assessment of women's equality based on Western values oversimplifies the cultural diversity that shapes social constructs. The application of secularism—the belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country—to the narrative of gender inequality is inherently islamophobic due to the assumption that the religion of Islam itself enforces gender oppression.[11]

The connection between Islam and gender oppression has typically focused on the veil, hijab, niqab, or burqa worn by Muslim women, which overlooks and misdiagnoses the complex operation of gender inequality. The distinction between the Islamic Republic and Islam as a religion must be made to grasp the oppression faced by Muslim women. This separation can be understood in the context of the protests against the hijab in Iran during 2022. In an NPR interview, the National Iranian American Council Research Director Assal Rad explained that the protests are against the compulsory enforcement of the hijab by the theocratic state.[12] At its core, these

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[10] Sara R. Farris, "Figures of Femonationalism," essay, in *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 22–57, 55.

[11] "Secularism | Definition," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 14, 2023, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/secularism.

[12] Scott Simon, "Why the Hijab Is at the Center of Protests in Iran," NPR, October 1, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/10/01/1126387760/why-the-hijab-is-at-the-center-of-protests-in-iran.

protests are concerned with the freedom of choice instead of a critique of Islam. The focus on Islam as an oppressor of women's rights oversimplifies the global presence of a kyriarchy concerned with the subordination of women from multiple sectors of women's identity including, but not limited to, gender, race, class, religion, and sexuality. However, the idea of what a liberated woman looks like in the West is applied to Muslim women, which leads to the creation of policies like the Anti Burqa Law by the Lega Nord in 2009: a right-wing federalist, populist, and conservative political party in Italy. In short, the "anti-burqa law was largely broadcasted in the mainstream media as a proposal that would enable Muslim women—who, it was assumed, were coerced into wearing the integral veil—to free themselves from this imposition."[13] This law is not only islamophobic but also restricts Muslim women's freedom of choice in the same way that the Islamic Republic does by enforcing the hijab. The anti-burqa law is just one example of femonationalist policy that is implemented by states that are viewed to be more liberated. The Western world exploits gender equality to promote exceptionalist, femonationalist politics that promote Islamophobia and undermine the composition of a kyriarchy within social institutions to maintain oppressive structures that subordinate women, particularly Muslim women, through foreign policy.

The use of women's inclusion to justify femonationalist policy promotes Western exceptionalism on the basis of women's rights, but the West also exploits tropes of queer liberation to justify imperialism. The West, specifically the US, exploits gay liberation through homonationalist policy to emphasize its sexual exceptionalism by promoting, for example, the legalization of gay marriage to justify imperialist foreign policy. In *Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times,* Jasbir K. Puar defines the term *homonationalism*: "In the case of what I term 'US sexual exceptionalism,' a narrative claiming the successful management of life in regard to a *people,* what is noteworthy

[13] Sara R. Farris, "Figures of Femonationalism," essay, in *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 22–57, 40.

is that an exceptional form of national heteronormativity is now joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity, in other words, homonationalism."[14]

The concept of homonationalism encompasses the idea that there is a right way to be queer and a correct way to manage the partial inclusion of queer people while maintaining the status quo; or, in other words, including queer people in institutions without challenging the kyriarchal composition of those institutions. Similar to the inclusion of women in male-dominated institutions to promote gender equality, the state establishes a facade of queer liberation through inclusion in the institution of marriage. Before same-sex marriage was federally legalized in the US in 2015, American marriage was exclusively a heterosexual institution.[15] Now, the US uses the legalization of gay marriage as a form of sexual exceptionalism to justify foreign policies on the basis of liberation.

The manifestation of queer liberation in US foreign policy is used to justify ethnocentric imperialist policies with other countries in ways that direct attention away from ongoing gender and sexual inequality persisting domestically in the West. Puar emphasizes how this projection of liberation ignores and undermines the presence of domestic homophobia: "the hegemonic ideals of US exceptionalism; the projection of homophobia onto other spaces enacts a clear disavowal of homophobia at 'home.'"[16] As emphasized by Ellerby, institutional inclusion does not transform the oppressive composition of those institutions. The kyriarchal manifestation of power within social institutions perpetuates oppression in an intersectional manner. Ironically, the US lags in comparison to most European countries in

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[14] Jasbir K. Puar, "Homonationalism and Biopolitics," introduction, in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–37, 2.

[15] "Same-Sex Marriage in the United States," Wikipedia, December 7, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage_in_the_United_States#:~:text=On%20June%2026%2C%20201%2C%20the,Hodges.

[16] Jasbir K. Puar, "Abu Ghraib and US Sexual Exceptionalism," essay, in *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 79–114, 95.

terms of the legal recognition of gay marriage, which demonstrates "a backwardness that the United States often ascribes to others in comparison to itself."[17] While the US is significantly less liberated in terms of gay rights in comparison to other countries, the US maintains a narrative of sexual exceptionalism by integrating islamophobia into the discourse of queer liberation.

An example of US sexual exceptionalism can be demonstrated by "the sexual humiliation and ritual torture of Iraqi prisoners enabled by the Bush Administration to forge a crucial distinction between the supposed depravity of Abu Ghraib and the 'freedom' being built in Iraq."[18] In the early stages of the Iraq war, the US army tortured detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison by using "sexuality as an instrument of torture, shame, and intimidation."[19] After photographs of this torture were published by the press, there was a common consensus among the public: "prisoners were forced to perform sexual acts that violate their religious principles and personal conscience [as] particularly heinous."[20] The emphasis on sexual oppression among Muslims framed these human rights violations in a way that reinforces US exceptionalism. Although US soldiers committed these atrocities, the islamophobic rhetoric embedded in the commentary surrounding the torture at Abu Ghraib emphasized the liberation of the US due to the focus on the sexual repression in Muslim countries. Essentially, "reinforcing a homogeneous notion of Muslim sexual oppression vis-á-vis homosexuality and the notion of modesty works to resituate the United States, in contrast, as a place free of such sexual constraints, this confirming the now-liberated status of the formerly repressed diasporic Muslim."[21] The use of homonationalism to apply a Western concept of sexuality to other countries, particularly Muslim countries, is not only ethnocentric, but also simultaneously legitimizes the United

[17] Puar, 11.
[18] Puar, 81.
[19] Puar, 81.
[20] Puar, 81.
[21] Puar, 92.

States' imperialist and islamophobic foreign policy due to its supposed sexually exceptional statehood.

The concepts of femonationalism and homonationalism are rooted in Western exceptionalism that particularly impacts the control, regulation, and oppression of Muslims. These foreign policies are framed as promoting the rights and freedoms of queer people and women, when in reality these policies spread a harmful rhetoric of islamophobia and saviorism that influences human rights both domestically and abroad. Policies of women and queer inclusion in Western social institutions curates a facade of liberation that legitimizes the imperialist ethnocentric actions of the Western world while simultaneously ignoring the kyriarchal operation of sexism, racism, and homophobia in both the domestic and international spheres. Altogether, the oversimplification of oppression and power through policies of women's and queer institutional inclusion allows gender inequality, homophobia, islamophobia, and general human rights violations to continue to operate under the guise of freedom in the West's domestic and foreign policy.

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Centuries of Silence and Science: A Critical History of Queerness in American Military Policy and Perception

By Joseph Lutfi

Joey Lutfi is a junior originally from Orange County, California, who now lives in Dillon Hall. He is double majoring in American Studies and Arabic and minoring in Constitutional Studies with the intention of attending law school after graduation. His academic interests include language, religion, and immigration, and he plans on writing a senior thesis at the intersection of these topics. His personal interests include running, playing soccer, and traveling. He has three older sisters and two younger dogs.

At New York City's first-ever Pride March in June of 1970—one year after the Stonewall Uprising—the 29-year-old leader of the Gay Liberation Front, Michael Brown, told Lacey Fosburgh of the *New York Times* that gay people are "probably the most harassed, persecuted minority group in history, but [they'll] never have the freedom and civil rights [they] deserve as human beings unless [they] stop hiding in closets and in the shelter of anonymity."[1] On this occasion, Brown led a markedly diverse group of young people from all over the Northeast to "protest laws that make homosexual acts between consenting adults illegal and social conditions that often make it impossible for them to display affection in public, maintain jobs or rent apartments."[2] After decades of scholarship devoted to the study of queer life, historians continue to add nuance and longevity to this history by highlighting non-heteronormative narratives within ostensibly straight institutions.

Historian Rachel Hope Cleves's "'What, Another Female Husband?': The Prehistory of Same-Sex Marriage in America," (2015) works to challenge conceptions of gay and lesbian marriage as a contemporary invention. By illuminating various examples to the contrary, she produces a challenge for "American historians [who] have seldom addressed the existence of same-sex marriage in the past, despite the availability of numerous primary sources recording the practice."[3]

A few years earlier, Princeton historian Margot Canaday's *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (2009) had explored when and where sexual stigmas were maintained and policed in the United States military. The second chapter of *The Straight State* recovers how many of the American government's exclusionary tendencies and practices were perpetuated during the interwar period.

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[1] Lacey Fosburgh, "Thousands of Homosexuals Hold a Protest Rally in Central Park," *The New York Times* (June 29, 1970).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Rachel Hope Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?': The Prehistory of Same-Sex Marriage in America," *Journal of American History*, p. 1069 (2015).

Yale historian Joanne Meyerowitz's research on military veteran and transgender activist Christine Jorgensen (1929-1989) offers an individual case study that deepens our understanding of the American public's perception of queer lives. Meyerowitz's "Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S." (2006) describes how the mainstream press reported on Jorgensen's transition from George to Christine, following her service in the Second World War.
Both Canaday's exploration of sexual stigma in the military and Meyerowitz's description of the popular reaction to Jorgensen's transition expand upon the historical context Cleves recounts, providing a window into twentieth-century perceptions of sexuality and gender, through the lens of the armed forces. Specifically, they shed light on the complicated role of the military as a beacon for masculinity, the shifting perceptions of sex and gender, and the differing opportunities for public and private expression of non-heteronormative behavior.

Canaday's chapter, "'We Are Merely Concerned with the Fact of Sodomy': Managing Sexual Stigma in the World War I-Era Military, 1917–1933," outlines the confusing role that the American military played in epitomizing the image of masculinity. While the military's institutional role was one of state-sanctioned violence and male exclusivity, Canaday quotes Dr. Samuel Kahn in describing how this "hypermasculinity could actually be feminizing."[4] The "highly aesthetic" atmosphere of war and the "beauty of [the male] body" in uniforms that "enhance the physique in constant appeal to masculine good looks" served to compound a "robustly male" environment in which "there [was] no place in a soldier's heart or sexual impulse for anything not vehemently manly."[5] This commentary, coupled with soldiers' "lack of a 'normal' sexual outlet" served for Canaday as a

[4] Margot Canaday, Chapter 2: "'We Are Merely Concerned with the Fact of Sodomy': Managing Sexual Stigma in the World War I-Era Military, 1917–1933," *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 70 (2009).
[5] Ibid., 70.

"suggest[ion] that military life *created* (emphasis added) the conditions for perversion to thrive."[6]

Canaday outlines the institutional response to this seemingly widespread "perversion" of conventional masculinity. First, the officer corps called for medical examinations and screenings which sought to root out so-called degeneracy, then shifted to written exams, which attempted to measure intelligence and femininity. Canaday also discusses the subsequent introduction of psychiatric exams that enabled navy physicians to "ask all recruits point-blank if they were homosexual, strip them naked to look for feminine body traits (and expanded rectums), and pursue clues, such as occupational choices and teachers' impressions, for indications of effeminacy."[7] These dubious, quasi-scientific techniques, "led the army to reject roughly five thousand soldiers for homosexuality during World War II at the point of induction," a dramatic increase from those rejected for similar reasons during World War I.[8]

Rachel Hope Cleves's scholarship examines the deep historical roots of related "scientific" practices in and beyond the American military. In the mid-nineteenth century, a similar process of physical inspections for signs of sexual orientation occurred. However, while administered by the U.S. Army, their purpose was not directed toward the recruitment of soldiers; instead, they served as a tool of subjugation. Cleves writes that "U.S. Army physician William Hammond performed physical examinations of Pueblo berdaches in the 1850s to discover whether they were hermaphrodites."[9] Dr. Hammond, after examining his subjects, determined that they had engaged in a "demasculinizing ritual in which they…masturbated many times, causing the shrinkage of their genitals and their willingness to serve as wives."[10] Poor biological understanding, coupled with cynical perceptions of non-straight people as hypersexual, allowed for these

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[6] Ibid., 70.
[7] Ibid., 88.
[8] Ibid., 88.
[9] Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?'" p. 1069.
[10] Ibid., 1069.

kinds of medical assessments to prevail well into the second half of the twentieth century.

Part of the contention around male-to-female transitions specifically, as Cleves puts it, stems from the "high value assigned to masculinity."[11] Whereas one could understand why "women…sought, more understandably, to escape their feminine bonds," men "who forsook and thus denaturalized [their] masculine privilege" made little sense to the American public.[12] Additionally, "femininity's negative ascriptions made male gender-crossers unsympathetic figures, and assumptions about the male sex drive too clearly linked these stories to illicit sodomitical practices," which corrupted the contemporarily perceived notion of masculinity.[13] In this way, idealized conceptions of masculinity and popular disregard for femininity worked to demonize male-to-female gender transitions and reinforce traditional views of the sexes. "A largely male audience of newspaper readers took pleasure in scrutinizing stories about plucky misbehaving women," Cleves explains, "but showed less appetite for stories of men who denaturalized male privilege by becoming wives."[14] Joanne Meyerowitz demonstrates how Christine Jorgensen fundamentally disrupted this cultural paradigm after the Second World War.

Meyerowitz writes about Jorgensen's path from George, the G.I., "the quintessential representation of postwar masculinity," to Christine, the "blonde beauty."[15] Quickly gaining national attention after her transition in the early 1950s, she found herself at the center of debates around America's "crisis in masculinity."[16] As Meyerowitz points out, in some ways, Jorgensen "underscored the stigma associated with homosexuality when she repeatedly claimed that she had not wanted to live as a gay man."[17] But she also challenged her

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[11] Ibid., 1069.
[12] Ibid., 1060.
[13] Ibid., 1068.
[14] Ibid. 1068
[15] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S.," *OAH Magazine of History*, p. 19 (2006).
[16] Ibid., 18.
[17] Ibid., 19.

audience to "consider whether (and why) the same person was somehow more acceptable as a heterosexual woman than she had been when living as a feminine man attracted to other men."[18] Jorgensen's transition raised questions at the intersection of "science, gender, and sexuality," and it did much to complicate the military's hyper-masculine image.

During and after the Second World War, this anxiety over the corruption of masculinity would persist. Meyerowitz writes that "military psychiatrists had publicly expressed concern about the deficient masculinity they claimed to have found in surprising numbers of male recruits."[19] As a transgender veteran of World War II, Meyerowitz explains that Christine Jorgensen only further called into question "what counted as feminine and what counted as masculine," and her story remains a potent tool for deconstructing popular notions of the military as a homogenous, masculine, and cisgender force.[20] As for the immediate impact of Jorgensen's story, Meyerowitz notes the "contradictory trends of the postwar years."[21] While "some historians emphasize the constraints on… sexuality in the 1950s," as Meyerowitz writes, "[they] could just as easily stress the liberalization that served as a precursor to the more "sexualized society" of the 1960s."[22] Whether one chooses to view the era as repressing or liberating, during the postwar period, "Christine Jorgensen embodied the tension between the simultaneous public restriction and public expression of sexuality."[23]

Through her focus on the interwar period, Canaday's scholarship expands how we might think about these "contradictory trends" in the queer history of gender and sex in the American military. Canaday draws from both official and unofficial military correspondence to highlight how the military at large, "came to see perversion less as a

[18] Ibid., 19.
[19] Ibid., 18.
[20] Ibid., 18.
[21] Ibid., 20.
[22] Ibid., 20.
[23] Ibid., 20.

marker of degeneracy… and more as a behavior associated with a psychopathic type."[24] Terms such as degenerate, pervert, psychopath, and homosexual were all used to codify non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexual orientation during the 1920s and 30s—but in ways that were both "vague and indefinite."[25] These "etiological frameworks," as Canaday calls them, were "messy and overlapping," often failing to adequately distinguish between a wide range of expressions.[26]

For those who attempted to create and perpetuate a white supremacist nation-state governed by patriarchal, heteronormative standards, the dilemmas that queerness prompted in the lands that became the United States were by no means unique to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Cleves points out: "The earliest American representations of same-sex marriage, found in the literature of conquest, often described indigenous unions between men or between women as 'strange.'"[27] While seemingly naïve by current standards, the inability or unwillingness to codify and characterize queer expression served a nefarious purpose. Cleves notes that "the language of strangeness served to rationalize conquest and to shore up the European gender order against the challenge of encounter."[28] This was nothing short of a global war that played out on native lands. "By anathematizing same-sex marriage practices," Cleves writes, institutions authorized assaults against "indigenous societies" to "naturaliz[e] their own claims to power through gendered metaphors."[29] On one hand, this history corresponds with Michael Brown's claim that gay people were "probably the most harassed, persecuted minority group in history."[30] On the other, Cleves deepens our understanding of these patterns by attending to their racist and imperialist roots in the New World.

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[24] Canaday, "'We Are Merely Concerned with the Fact of Sodomy," p. 57.
[25] Ibid., 66.
[26] Ibid., 65.
[27] Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?'" p. 1061.
[28] Ibid., 1061.
[29] Ibid., 1062.
[30] Fosburgh, "Thousands of Homosexuals Hold A Protest Rally in Central Park."

Centuries later, American military officers continued to try to identify "psychopathic personalities" among enlisted men in the 1940s.[31] Struggling to do so, officials perceived it to be a "problem of 'non-recognition' rather than an actual absence of perverted types among military personnel"—in other words, it was more of a "failure to *detect* than it was a failure to *know*."[32] Canaday explains how with their continued attempts to recognize effeminacy unsuccessful, military officials pivoted, directing "policing away from effeminacy and toward sex."[33] This shift would effectively lead to an increase in "retaining perverted types in the military."[34] After years of trying to regulate private sexual and gender expression during the First World War and the Interwar period, the military had largely failed.

Two decades later, after Christine Jorgensen returned home from the Second World War, she and her doctors began to propose answers to the questions with which the military had long struggled. "In the wake of the media blitz," Meyerowitz writes, "Jorgensen and her doctors explicitly argued against the idea of two separate and opposite sexes… they argued instead [for]… a continuum or spectrum of sex as opposed to polarized sex difference."[35] In rejecting the notion of a binary sex distinction, Jorgensen sparked a debate in the scientific and medical communities that resulted in the development of new language to codify forms of sexual expression. "Increasingly, [doctors] explained the desire to change sex with the new concepts of 'psychological sex,'" which by 1955 was replaced with "gender," and later, "gender identity."[36] In the wake of the publicity concerning Jorgensen, "the categories of sexual science in the postwar era" were dramatically reshaped and refined.[37]

A primary reason for the military's hyper-fixation on sexual perversion lay in its desire to maintain a public reputation of morality

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[31] Canaday, "'We Are Merely Concerned with the Fact of Sodomy," p. 65.
[32] Ibid., 68.
[33] Ibid., 81.
[34] Ibid., 81.
[35] Meyerowitz, "Transforming Sex," p. 19.
[36] Ibid., 19.
[37] Ibid., 19.

and heterosexuality. Margot Canaday belabors this point throughout her second chapter, writing that "sex perverts were problematic… because they stigmatized the army and navy."[38] Within the officer corps, there was widespread anxiety that "'moral degenerates' would 'bring discredit upon the military service.'"[39] She quotes a 1920 navy board's concern about attracting quality recruits after the suspension of the draft: "We cannot expect to attract good men to the Service if the Navy is going to be known as a haven for… degenerates."[40] Despite the military's best efforts to suppress such public stigma, the press was "hungry for salacious details… as sexological concepts began to seep into American popular culture."[41] Scandals not immediately suppressed made their way into newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Register*, and the *Journal*.[42]

The need for recruits and the threat of widespread publication help explain why the services went to such lengths to police seemingly homosexual behavior during the first half of the twentieth century. During the early years of World War I, "military officials… blamed the immoral scourge on civilians," but when the inclination to blame became a need to police, they began to court-martial soldiers who engaged in homosexual acts marked by "publicity and violence."[43] Suppression, deflection, and dismissal were key tools in the fight against perversion, and, as Canaday puts it: "when the military failed [to detect perverts], it looked queer."[44]

This institutional war on homosexuality would prove to be a futile endeavor. Cleve tells how the Army, perennially unable to suppress queer behavior within its ranks, eventually "sanctioned drag entertainments and womanless weddings."[45] "Administrators at Camp Rohwer in Arkansas even performed a womanless wedding to

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[38] Canaday, "'We Are Merely Concerned with the Fact of Sodomy," pp. 68–69.
[39] Ibid., 69.
[40] Ibid., 69.
[41] Ibid., 69.
[42] Ibid., 69.
[43] Ibid., 58.
[44] Ibid., 58.
[45] Cleves, "'What, Another Female Husband?'" p. 1078.

entertain Japanese American internees in 1944."[46] As "young men carried same-sex marriage culture into the army" near the end of the War, opportunities for more public expression would soon begin to take root.[47]

Christine Jorgensen would seize these opportunities after her time in the Army when she "learned to live in—and love—the spotlight."[48] Meyerowitz recounts Jorgensen's rise to fame soon after her transition. The "first celebrity transsexual" "appeared on television and radio," "sold almost 450,000 copies" of her autobiography, and "went on the college lecture circuit."[49] To some, she "invite[d] fantasies about the possibility of traveling across the suddenly permeable border that separated women from men."[50] To others, she "provoke[d] anxieties about the failure of boundaries dividing female and male."[51] However the American public felt about her, she was free from the institutional chains of heteronormativity that the military had tried to place on her.

While Rachel Cleves does much to contextualize the longer history of same-sex marriage culture in the U.S., Margot Canaday's piece on sexual stigma in the early twentieth-century military and Joanne Meyerowitz's writing on Christine Jorgensen's life after the Army provide a "critical entry point into twentieth-century tensions" over sexual expression through the lens of the military.[52] Complicated notions of masculinity, imperfect codifications of gender identity, and tensions between public and private exhibitions of sexuality underlie these works to shed light on historical reactions to non-heteronormativity during the early twentieth century and beyond.

So, when Michael Brown and thousands of others took to the streets of New York in 1970 to push back against institutional repression, they followed Christine Jorgensen's example—and did so

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[46] Ibid., 1078.
[47] Ibid., 1078.
[48] Meyerowitz, "Transforming Sex," p. 16.
[49] Ibid., 16.
[50] Ibid., 19.
[51] Ibid., 19.
[52] Ibid., 16.

in a public display of "the new strength and pride of the gay people."[53] Fosburgh writes that "a new militancy was developing among homosexuals," and, having drawn upon the lessons from the first half of the century, the LGBT community recognized the need for publicity and agency.[54] Their message was clear. In the words of Brown, "Homosexuals are not going to hide any more. We're becoming militant, and we won't be harassed and degraded anymore."[55] In this direct challenge to the heteronormative establishment, gay and lesbian activists were not only stepping into a position of visibility and pride but also participating in the very history that Cleves would go on to record. Informed by extensive history, inspired by tangible progress, and sustained by a growing community, Michael Brown and thousands of others initiated a new era of change that would lay the groundwork for substantial social and legal reforms to come.

[53] Fosburgh, "Thousands of Homosexuals Hold A Protest Rally in Central Park."
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

Incels, MMA, and AR-15s: Spaces of Hegemonic Masculinity as Breeders of White Nationalist Ideology

By Aria Bossone

Aria Bossone is a junior at Notre Dame studying American Studies, Peace Studies, and Gender Studies. Her academic interests lie in the intersection of peace and gender, particularly amongst migrant and refugee populations. The following paper was her final paper in "American Hate," a Peace Studies course examining the correlation between political violence and white nationalism, xenophobia, and the weaponizing of religion. Next year, she plans to complete a senior thesis on how anti-communist US intervention in Latin America has affected current migration patterns at the southern border. After graduation, she has hopeful plans to pursue higher academic degrees in Peace Studies and/or Migration Studies.

White nationalism is often at the forefront of contemporary discourses about freedom in the United States. To analyze white nationalism's mission of developing and maintaining whiteness as a racial and national identity, it is imperative to understand and deconstruct race relations between white people and people of color in the United States. This general discourse tells us that white nationalism thrives on simultaneous beliefs that white people are victims and that whiteness is superior. While a proper understanding of white nationalism requires that racial component, I argue that to create a more full and accurate understanding of the movement, this discursive framework ought to be widened to turn a *gendered* lens on white nationalism. In doing so, we discover that hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity are the glue that holds white nationalist movements together. Not only are the themes of victimhood and superiority present in white racial identity, but white men in nationalist movements also use their masculinity as evidence of victimhood and superiority, and in turn, satisfy the key belief that white maleness is the ultimate indicator of freedom. Thus, manifestations of hegemonic masculinity maintain and strengthen white nationalist ideals through the acceptance of simultaneous male victimization and empowerment as sources of freedom in the United States.

To illustrate how gender plays a significant role in strengthening and mainstreaming white nationalism, this paper examines manifestations of hegemonic masculinity and deciphers the ways in which hegemonically masculine groups, spaces, and symbols use gender and masculinity to breed white nationalist ideals. This paper provides a general overview of three common spaces of hegemonic masculinity in which white nationalist values and principles are idolized and embraced; future research might entail deeper analyses of these spaces in relation to the larger hypermasculine, white nationalist sphere. These spaces include incel culture and the broader "manosphere" which both succeed in victimizing and mobilizing sexually unsuccessful white men; the world of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), including the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC); the

Rise Above Movement (RAM) and other designated fighting clubs that prioritize youth recruitment; and the AR-15 as both a symbol of masculinity and a weapon used to ideologically and physically promote and defend white male nationalism.

Definitions

Because concepts of masculinity and nationalism have evolved over time, I will first start by defining the terms that will be used throughout this essay. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept originally developedby Raewyn Connell, an Australian sociologist known for her revolutionary work in the field of gender studies. Connell assigns the Gramscian concept of hegemony, which describes how "the ruling class establishes and maintains its domination," to large-scale gender ideology (Connell; Donaldson 645). The resulting concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the most sought-after masculine ideals of a society and "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy—which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Scott 302). Also included in this subordinate group with women are gay men, feminine straight men, and any other social group that is typically considered feminine. In the United States especially, hegemonic masculinity manifests through fierce heterosexuality, strength, stoicism, and as explored later in this essay, violence.

It is reasonable, then, to connect this concept of a ruling class dominating a society to white nationalist movements, whose key goal is for "white identity [to] be the organizing principle of the countries that make up Western civilization" by eradicating non-white immigration and diversity efforts in the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center). This definition allows us to view hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic whiteness as ideals that work together to animate white nationalist movements.

While hegemonic masculinity serves as the primary term for the hypermasculine environments that this essay will describe, it can also serve as an umbrella term that has two distinct categories within it:

Aryan masculinity and alt-misogynist masculinity. In "Fighting for Masculine Hegemony: Contestation between Alt-Right and White Nationalist Masculinities on Stormfront," Jillian Sunderland coins these terms to differentiate between ideologies and perceptions of masculinity of white nationalist and alt-right movements. The key difference between these two competing masculine strategies for dominance "centers on the focal 'other' against which movement identity is constructed—people of color or women." (Sunderland 4) She links Aryan masculinity with white nationalism due to its goals of the white man dominating people of color, especially men of color. Alt-misogynist masculinity, however, relies on anti-woman rhetoric to express the white man's dominance. While Sunderland's research on online servers showed that these ideologies are often in competition with one another, I will argue that many hegemonically masculine spaces utilize *both* strategies to achieve their ultimate goals.

Incels and the "Manosphere"

One space in which masculine hegemony has perpetuated white nationalist ideology is incel culture working within the "manosphere" at large. The "manosphere" is an "umbrella term that refers to a number of interconnected misogynistic communities," including but not limited to men's rights activist groups and involuntary celibates (Institute for Strategic Dialogue). This last group, more commonly known as incels, is a community of straight, usually white, men who derive their hatred for women from a lack of romantic and sexual experience. Too often in everyday discourse is incel culture simplified to a small group of sad, lonely men. They are not seen as a dangerous group that not only threatens the safety of women but of nearly everyone, including other straight white men who may be more successful romantically. This group should not be considered an eccentric, fringe organization, but rather should be more frequently connected to its white nationalist ties.

In *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide*, Alexander Laban Hinton, director of the Center for the Study of

Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers University and UNESCO Chair on Genocide Prevention, makes this crucial connection between incels and white nationalist movements through the concept of "red-pilling." However, the term [red-pilling] also has a strong gender inflection. White power actors likely repurposed the term from the men's rights movement, which argues that mechanisms like women's rights, feminism, and cultural Marxism have created a system of female domination—one in which sexual decisions are based on wealth, appearance, and status and denied to large numbers of men, some of whom, as noted earlier, identify as involuntary celibates, or "incels." Like the white power movement, the men's rights movement is hypermasculine and built on a sense of victimhood and grievance. Those who have taken the "red pill" believe they see the truth of an oppressive misandrist system (Hinton 186-187).

These similarities between the rhetoric of incels and white nationalist movements allow us to connect misogynist groupings to a larger framework that is tied not only to gender but also race. Incels primarily fall under the category of alt-misogynist masculinity due to their fierce anti-woman rhetoric. This is proven by the name itself. By calling themselves involuntary celibates, incels assign blame to women for not giving incels the sexual experience to which they believe they are entitled. This entitlement serves at the core of the alt-misogynist masculinity that incels seek to achieve.

Beyond the idea of enlightenment that comes from red-pilling both in white nationalist and incel spheres, at the core of this incel culture is also the notion of freedom, which, unsurprisingly, ties directly into the obsession with and demand for freedom from white nationalists. In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Michael Kimmel uses the term "aggrieved entitlement" to describe the phenomenon of the entitlement that incels and other emasculated men feel to enact violence on those who caused their emasculation and stripped them of their freedom as men (Kimmel). Due to advancements in contemporary American society such as the Civil Rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements, these white, straight

men feel as though their freedom is being stripped from them (Singh 18). To white nationalists, the cultural and political power of whiteness is being stripped. To incels, their right to masculinity is being stripped. This loss of power, though, did not affect the white man's feeling of entitlement, for "prevailing ideologies, promulgated and maintained through the media and other social institutions, reinforce the belief that white, straight men—those who are hegemonically masculine — are entitled to social power and domination over other men and women" (Kimmel; Singh 18). These prevailing ideologies strengthen feelings of entitlement to the point where any violence that incels enact on women and other men is justified. Once again, ideologies like these remain consistent across groups from incels to white nationalists. The fundamental, core belief that ties hegemonic masculinity to white nationalism is the simultaneous victimization and empowerment that these communities feel. Both white nationalist and incel communities—and the junction of the two—use their self-proclaimed victimization as fuel for their own empowerment and mobilization. On an even wider scale, this victimization not only fuels empowerment to act but also justifies the action itself.

This phenomenon is witnessed in the aftermath of the 2014 Isla Vista killings. After Elliot Rodger, a member of the incel community, released a 141-page autobiographical manifesto titled *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* and proceeded to murder six people—including himself—and injure fourteen, all "fuelled by loneliness, hatred, insecurity, and intense misogyny," the incel community canonized Rodger, often referring to him as "Saint Elliot" and "The Supreme Gentleman" (Witt). The incel community's idolization of Rodger then caused the community to adopt Rodger's ideologies that he laid out in his manifesto. Not only did the manifesto contain typical incel rhetoric seeped with alt-misogynist masculinity, but it brought a new lens to the incel movement that, in turn, expanded the community's outreach to other hate-filled groups: Aryan masculinity. By explicitly incorporating racism into incel ideologies, Rodger inadvertently transformed the incel community into a breeding ground

for white nationalist ideology. In his manifesto, Rodger wrote about the dismay that he felt when he saw "men of 'inferior races' with the women he coveted; he saw a black man, an Indian man, a 'dark-skinned Mexican guy,' and a 'disgusting full Asian' man, with white, blonde women, and he regarded these sights as 'great insults to [his] dignity'" (Singh 21). He not only placed the blame for his incel experience solely on women, as typically seen in alt-misogynist masculinity, but also incorporated the racist hierarchies imbued in Aryan masculinity and white nationalism, thus creating an environment in which victimization and collective empowerment could manifest at the intersection of racism and misogyny.

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and the Masculinity of Strength

While incel culture and the manosphere spread ideology through online platforms and sites, physical sites of hegemonic masculinity also contribute to the rise of white nationalist ideologies. Mixed Martial Arts, or, MMA, is the athletic embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss, author and scholar of extremism and radicalization, describes in her book *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*, "the desire for perfectly sculpted male bodies situates physical fitness and muscular manhood as expressions of both individual moral virtues like willpower, decisiveness, and courage, and desired collective traits like national strength, virility, and manliness" (Miller-Idriss 95). These personal and national virtues do not exist solely within the bounds of the MMA arena; this fighting culture has deep ties with white nationalist beliefs and the notion of victimhood and accompanying empowerment and mobilization. Rather than being a community, like incels, that adopts white nationalist ideology into an already-articulated belief system, participating members of MMA and fight clubs–mostly white men–use hegemonically masculine principles such as discipline, strength, ferocity, and bravery to free themselves and other men of their white victimhood. In other words, MMA functions as a *response* to white nationalist ideology that victimizes white men. Like Miller-Idriss's appeal to the individual and collective

virtues of MMA, the appeal for the hegemonically masculine body originates from two similar but differing ideologies: the avoidance of individual weakness and the urgency for collective strength.

Promoting individual values of self-discipline and self-improvement primarily serves to form what I am calling the "MMA pipeline," or the process that recruits youth to the sport and lifestyle itself and then radicalizes them into white nationalists. This pipeline starts on an individual basis with a desire to better oneself, physically and/or mentally. Many MMA organizations and clubs promote "' straight-edge' living—no drugs, no alcohol, and healthy eating," a lifestyle that seems reasonable to youth who want to become healthier (Miller-Idriss 102). By creating a hierarchical structure of lifestyles, MMA organizations can "contrast the 'mental and physical capacities' of far-right youth with the 'left's onslaught of degeneracy and drug culture,'" which, in turn, succeeds both in instilling confidence in these youths' self-image–which cements them in the pipeline—and in demonizing 'the left'—which forms the foundation for radicalization" (102). The next step in the pipeline, then, is to associate this lifestyle with political ideology. This tactic has been employed by the Rise Above Movement (RAM), a white supremacist and nationalist militant organization based in southern California. RAM embraces physical fighting as a means of inciting a social and cultural coup of sorts, with members claiming to "[fight] against a 'modern world' corrupted by the 'destructive cultural influences' of liberals, Jews, Muslims, and non-white immigrants" (ADL).

Once this pipeline pattern continues, individual notions of strength transform into a collective urgency for mobilization. This transition from 'the self' to 'the group' is not dissimilar to militaristic strategies of uniformity and collective determination seen in white nationalist movements. At the end of the day, these men do not only want the ideal masculine body simply for the appearance; this desire has very practical—and violent—applications. Herein lies the true ideology behind the obsession surrounding attaining the so-called "perfect body." Achieving this nearly unattainable goal requires

discipline, strength, and steadfastness—all qualities that are also necessary "to fight in the defense of the homeland" (Miller-Idriss 103). Then, when added to the group mentality, this mobilization becomes an army of young white men who have personally felt victimized by the current social state of the US and are prepared to fight to the death to regain the freedom that was brutally stripped from them.

The Symbolism and Physicality of the AR-15

This section of the essay will cover the social dynamics and implications of the AR-15 in two parts: as both a symbol of freedom through the display of hegemonic masculinity and as a physical means of carrying out violent attacks on the basis of white nationalism. Since the Obama presidency, there has been a rapid rise in the symbolic use of the AR-15 semi-automatic rifle on both a personal and political basis. Through their study analyzing weapon-bearing political ads, Ryan Neville-Shepard and Casey Ryan Kelly suggest that the use of AR-15s in these ads is "symbolically calling forth political hypermasculinity by nodding to the gun as a phallic symbol," creating a performative spectacle of hegemonic masculinity (Neville-Shepard and Kelly 470). The phallic use of the gun, then, associates hegemonically male genitalia with strength, toughness, and resilience. This strategy has also been used by women in the political sphere to prove themselves to their conservative audience; female candidates referring to themselves using phrases like "not a typical woman" and "Lieutenant Colonel who carries more than just lipstick in her purse" is not only dangerous in its one-sided understanding of womanhood but also further contributes to and honors current masculine hegemony (Neville-Shepard and Kelly 470). This masculine sentiment, paired with the NRA's declaration of the AR-15 as the "modern-day musket," creates the foundation of meaning-making for the AR-15 as a symbolic representation of the defense of white male nationalism (NRA-ILA).

The AR-15 does not solely function as a symbol, though; it has deep ties to white nationalism through its physical use in enacting

violence on non-white groups. From the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in 2018 to the Buffalo store shooting in 2022 and many more racially/ethnically charged shootings using AR-15s, it becomes clear that the freedom-bearing AR-15 is physically being used to carry out the end goals of white nationalism. In his study "Triple Entitlement and Homicidal Anger: An Exploration of the Intersectional Identities of American Mass Murderers," Eric Madfis provides white men's reasoning behind these mass acts of violence, describing how "white heterosexual male entitlement fuses with downward mobility, subordinated masculinity, and other disappointing life course events in a way that drives some anguished individuals to retaliate in true hegemonic masculine form through large-scale acts of retaliatory violence and murder" (Madfis). So, to reinstate the masculinity that these men feel like they have lost, they retaliate through large-scale violence, often only made possible by access to semi-automatic weapons like AR-15s.

However empowering this hegemonically masculine gun might be, it may reflect the ultimate rival of masculine hegemony: weakness. Jillian Peterson and James Densley, co-authors of *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*, note that "hate actually looks a lot like fear," giving examples such as "unfounded allegations of Hispanic 'invaders,' rising Black-on-white crime, and 'Jewish' plans to sabotage American sovereignty" (Peterson and Densley). In this one sentence, Peterson and Densley reveal that the facades of empowerment from the white power, white nationalist, and white supremacist movements are rooted in the fear of a loss of identity.

Conclusion

In order to combat and counteract the victimization that white men feel both on a racial and gendered basis (a concept that is very much grounded in fear and therefore antithetical to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity), these men must enable hypermasculine traits to reinstate that white masculine identity and attain the freedom that white nationalists desire. Incels use their lack of sexual experience by

which they feel victimized to exert violence through two methods. Through alt-misogynist masculinity, incels attack women for not giving them the sexual experiences to which they feel entitled; through Aryan masculinity, incels attack men of color whom they feel are unworthy of their sexual and romantic success with women. These two combined methods reveal how incel culture and white nationalism have seeped together to attain the same goal. The hypermasculine environment of MMA and fight clubs creates a pipeline to recruit youth into white nationalist spaces by capitalizing on the hegemonic notions of strength and discipline. The deeper they go down this rabbit hole, the more group-centric the organization becomes. Here it is revealed that these groups are not simply shaping their bodies for aesthetic purposes; they are preparing for war. Lastly, the AR-15 serves as both an ideological symbol of hegemonic masculinity and freedom and as a physical means to satisfy white nationalist goals of non-white elimination. The over-representation of the AR-15 in political ads and media then seems to align with this foundational argument that hypermasculinity is enabled to compensate for the weakness that accompanies the fear of replacement so crucial to white nationalist ideology.

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Mad Married Women in The Woman in White: A Lack of Narrative Agency

By Meg Beuter

Meg Beuter is a senior majoring in American Studies and English and minoring in Education, Schooling, & Society. She is originally from Nashville, Tennessee, and her home on campus is Howard Hall. She loves all things to do with literature and poetry. While at ND, she has enjoyed learning about the histories of feminism and disability justice in several American Studies and English courses. When she's not reading and writing, she's singing with the ND Folk Choir, doing yoga, or spending time with her friends. After graduation, she plans to be a teacher and inspire a love of books in her students.

The phenomenon of narrative imposition[1] pervades both fictional literature and reality— especially in the context of disability. In 2015, writers Debra Shulkes and Jasna Ruso noted that "Many of us who identify as service users or survivors have experienced the imposition of a psychiatric 'expert' account over our own."[2] In other words, through methods such as confinement and abuse, disabled individuals have historically been stripped of the agency[3] to tell their own stories. Moreover, in the instance that disabled individuals can share their narratives, they are too often dismissed as unreliable in comparison to the testimonies of their abled counterparts. This essay will view narrative imposition through both a disability-focused and gendered lens, considering the ways in which the experiences of women who exhibit 'mad traits' and are subject to male control may be erased, silenced, or disbelieved.

As is demonstrated in Wilkie Collins's 1860 sensation novel *The Woman in White,* gender, disability, and narrative imposition are inextricably linked. The novel largely takes place in Cumberland, England, and follows the journeys of several women as they navigate the constraints of marriage and male control. The story begins when protagonist Walter Hartright spots one of the women, Anne Catherick, after she escapes an asylum. Walter then travels to Limmeridge House, where he has been hired as an art teacher, and falls in love with one of his students, Laura Fairlie, who is engaged to another man, Sir Percival Glyde. To Laura's chagrin, she and Sir Percival marry and move to his house in Blackwater Park, where they are accompanied by Count and Madame Fosco, Laura's uncle and aunt. Chaos ensues, as Count and Madame Fosco work with Glyde to conceal his past and attempt to

[1] As defined by the *OED*, 'imposition' is "the action of putting, placing, or laying on," which implies the action of 'putting, placing, or laying' a narrative *over* someone else's narrative through methods such as confinement, abuse, subordination, and distrust.
[2] Jasna Ruso and Debra Shulkes, "What we talk about when we talk about disability: Making sense of debates in the European user/survivor movement." In *Madness, Distress, and the Politics of Disablement*, ed. Helen Pandler, Jill Anderson and Bob Sapey, Policy Press, 2015, p.32.
[3] As defined by the *OED*, 'agency' is an "action or intervention producing a particular effect; means, instrumentality, mediation."

earn him an inheritance he does not rightfully own. This plot includes a conspiracy to exchange Laura and Anne's identities, since they look alike, sending Laura into an asylum. Eventually, the secret of Glyde's illegitimacy by birth unfolds; Anne becomes known as the illegitimate child of Laura's father, making the two women half-sisters. In the end, Sir Percival dies, Laura escapes the asylum and marries Walter, and their son inherits the Limmeridge property. In the "Preamble" to the novel, Collins writes that the narrative aims to "trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them…relate their own experience."[4] Nevertheless, several married women who play a central role in *The Woman in White*'s plot, including Madame Fosco and Laura Fairlie, are subject to the narrative imposition of their husbands. While both women are under the excessive control of their husbands—which is rooted in their femininity and madness—Laura experiences an imposed lack of narrative agency, whereas Madame Fosco internalizes her silenced position and does not share her own narrative even when she has the chance.

To contextualize the relationship between madness and agency in *The Woman in White*, one must first acknowledge that 'madness' defined in terms of disability is situational and slippery. In the Victorian Era, for example, madness and insanity were loosely defined by the Lunacy Act passed in England in 1845, which, in nineteenth-century writer Rosina Lytton's words, "enable[d] a Husband to lock up his Wife in a Madhouse on the certificate of two medical men."[5] In fact, according to Louisa Lowe's summary of the Lunacy Act in her report entitled *The Bastilles of England*, "Any registered medical practitioner in actual practice may give a certificate of lunacy,"[6] rendering the process of committal to an insane asylum extraordinarily easy and unregulated. However, the grounds on which one was

[4] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006, p. 50.
[5] Rosina Bulwer Lytton, *A Blighted Life*. London: The London Publishing Office, 1880. Preface, p. II.
[6] Lousia Lowe, *The Bastilles of England*. 2 vols. London: Crookenden, 1883, p. 4.

deemed 'mad' or 'insane'—therefore meriting their incarceration—were determined on a case-by-case basis. For instance, Lowe discusses the 1877 case of Reverend L. Thomas of Ticehurst, England, who was committed partially on the claim that he "tied his flannel shirt peculiarly," and was described as "very irritable, untruthful, vacillating, and quarrelsome."[7] Mr. Thomas's family later proclaimed that, at the suggestion of his release from the asylum, they were "dreadfully frightened because they thought that he would go home and commit all sorts of depredations about the property."[8] Thus, individuals whom society labeled as 'mad' reflected a vast array of characteristics that are not necessarily limited to the mentally disabled, such as tendency to lie or wear one's clothing in a way that departs from the norm. Still, possession of any of these various features called for one's removal from society, further implying that such individuals were not to be trusted. This distrust on the basis of a loose conception of madness continues today: for example, journalist Laura King writes that Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been called a 'madman' and whose actions are frequently questioned by the public, "even looks different—puffy-faced and sometimes seeming to move stiffly."[9] Here, we observe that various physical qualities are also lumped into the definition of madness, widening the space in which removal, silencing, and narrative imposition are justified.

The Woman in White demonstrates the ways in which the vast and ambiguous category of madness was gendered in the nineteenth century. Collins' plot choices critique policies like the Lunacy Act and unjust incarceration, demonstrating how they acutely impacted women's quality of life on a day-to-day basis. In their relationships with their husbands, for example, their intellect is distrusted and devalued. The format of the novel reflects this exclusion: although the diary of Laura's unmarried sister Marian consumes a large portion of the novel, Laura herself never plays the role of narrator. Instead, we

[7] Ibid., p. 27.
[8] Ibid, p. 28.
[9] Laura King, "Ill? Unhinged? Or Calculating? Russia's Putin Keeps Everyone Guessing." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 February 2022.

get to know Laura indirectly via Walter Hartwright's perspective, who immediately zones in on her physical and notably feminine beauty. He admires her appearance, describing her as "a fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress" and calls her "the woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty."[10] Hence, the first assessment of Laura from an outsider's perspective is centered on her femininity and appearance, rather than on her intellect and ability to relay her own narrative. Moreover, throughout the novel, her physicality and intellect become complicated by her mad traits, which present themselves as embodied signals of mental distress. On the night before their parting, Walter observes that, while she plays the piano, Laura's "fingers…[had] a strange feverish energy," and "the paleness grew whiter on her face,"[11] two symptoms that were directly associated with madness at the time. Furthermore, Mr. Gilmore reports that, when speaking to Laura about her marriage arrangements to Sir Pervical, "her fingers had a restless habit" and "twined together nervously in her lap."[12] Thus, under the distress of her upcoming marriage, Laura's physical traits of anxiety and madness intensify, foreshadowing her imposed mental deterioration—and her consequent lack of narrative agency—under Sir Percival's silencing and abuse.

Accordingly, in her new role as Lady Glyde, we witness Laura's exposure to Sir Percival's constant threats and confinement, which simultaneously bring signs of heightened madness and strip her of the agency to tell her own narrative. When Marian reunites with Laura for the first time since the marriage, for example, she writes, "I miss something when I look at her—something that belonged to the happy, innocent life of Laura Fairlie, and that I cannot find in Lady Glyde."[13] Although the specifics of this shift are not revealed at that moment, Laura later admits to Marian, "I have kept many things from your knowledge…for fear of distressing you…You don't know how he has

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[10] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006, p. 90.
[11] Ibid., p. 155.
[12] Ibid., p. 172.
[13] Ibid., p. 235.

used me."[14] In this instance, we catch a glimpse of the silencing that results from the trauma and control Laura experiences at the hands of her husband. While she does share further details with Marian about one of Percival's abusive episodes, she states that she has "no power to prevent him from putting his own horrible construction on the confidence I placed in him. I have no influence to make him believe me."[15] Percival practices narrative imposition over Laura, making it clear that whatever personal information she dares to share will be distrusted—and even used against her as a threat. This rejection of her confidence reflects not only patterns of abuse common to marriage at the time but also to treatment of the mentally disabled. Indeed, Sir Percival transforms Laura's room at Blackwater Park into a "prison,"[16] and Mrs. Michelson observes that she "was much too nervous and too delicate in health to bear the anxiety of Miss Halcombe's illness calmly,"[17] later explaining that "poor Lady Glyde's nerves were…completely broken down."[18] As delicacy and nervousness harbor connotations of femininity, this description of Laura illustrates the way in which others view her gender and madness as inseparable aspects of her identity that feed off of one another. Furthermore, it is evident here that Laura's mental state progressively degrades throughout her abusive marriage. As a result, others deem her unfit to share her own narrative.

In fact, after Sir Percival consents to Laura's commitment to an insane asylum in order to serve his own aim of unlawfully claiming inheritance, the impacts of this confinement strip her of the agency to tell her story at all. As Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy contend, "Laura's inability to tell the story of her experience lucidly emphasizes the lasting effects of the trauma she has undergone."[19] In other words,

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[14] Ibid., p. 273.
[15] Ibid., p. 282.
[16] Ibid., p. 312.
[17] Ibid., p. 372.
[18] Ibid., p. 379.
[19] Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy, "A Man's Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins' 'The Woman in White.'" In *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 399.

Laura's marriage is a vicious cycle of narrative imposition: Percival's control not only silences her personal voice but also exacerbates her developing madness, which generates both a lack of ability to share her own narrative and others' distrust of her credibility. Moreover, some may assume that Sir Percival's death liberates Laura to regain her narrative agency; however, she remains trapped under narrative imposition due to the continuing effects of his abuse and the control exercised by her new husband, Walter. Indeed, Walter and Marian wait to disclose Percival's death to Laura for several days to 'protect' her. When they do reveal the news of the death, Walter recognizes a positive change in Laura, narrating, "The worn and wasted look which had prematurely aged her face, was fast leaving it."[20] Still, ironically, he begins to treat her like a child rather than an adult who deserves the right to know her own narrative.

Although Laura's confinement to their London apartment and other protective measures are necessary, Walter still does not acknowledge her status as an adult who should learn about the events of her past—many of which her madness steals from her memory. He claims, "the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help."[21] Hence, her position as a mentally disabled woman under her husband's control again denies her narrative agency. Perkins and Donaghy posit that "by the middle of the novel [Laura] has become hopelessly dependent…Laura herself insists that she wants to be treated as an adult, Walter continues to suggest her basic childishness."[22] Even when she pushes back against Walter's control, pleading, "Why is there nothing I can do?...Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!,"[23] Walter deceives her into believing a false narrative about her life in which her drawings bring income to the

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[20] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006, p. 551.
[21] Ibid., p. 442.
[22] Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy, "A Man's Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins' 'The Woman in White.'" In *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 395.
[23] Ibid., p. 480.

family. Walter's intentional dishonesty illustrates an assumption of ignorance on the basis of disability when, in reality, Laura deserves to know the truth. Thus, as a mad married woman, the excessive control that both of Laura's husbands exercise results in an imposed lack of narrative agency, prohibiting her from sharing—or even being trusted to know—her own story.

On the other hand, under the Count's control, Madame Fosco internalizes her role as a silenced, subordinate wife who possesses no right to her own narrative agency. Although she assists the Count with many of his spy undertakings, she is not an equal partner in his affairs; rather, she simply follows his instructions with careful obedience. Moreover, analogously to Laura, Madame Fosco's repression at the hands of her husband presents itself through the exhibition of traits associated with madness at the time, particularly in her habits of fidgeting and the loss of her own distinct identity. For instance, Marian reports that Madame Fosco "sits speechless in corners, her dry white hands…incessantly engaged, either in monotonous embroidery work, or in rolling up endless little cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking."[24] Mirroring the endless "restless habit" of Laura's hands, Madame Fosco's madness is embodied, and further emphasizes her subconscious subordination to the Count, for even "when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are…turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog."[25] Hence, she internalizes a lack of agency under her husband's jurisdiction, not daring to contribute too assertively to conversations or question his commands. Moreover, Marian's observations of Count Fosco's control over his wife imply his taming or repression of her identity, which also falls under the slippery category of madness. Marian writes that Count Fosco "has tamed this once wayward Englishwoman"[26] who is "clad in…dresses that she would have laughed at, or screamed at, as the whim of the moment

[24] Ibid., p. 239.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 240.

inclined her, in her maiden days."[27] In other words, the married Madame Fosco is a quieter, "tamed" version of the woman she once was. Marian goes so far as to refer to the Count as Madame Fosco's "lord and master,"[28] suggesting a sense of internalized obedience to this repression. As opposed to the tumultuous relationship between Laura and Sir Percival, Madame Fosco seems to accept her husband's control as part of her role—especially as a woman. Count Fosco exaggerates his wife's femininity, "habitually address[ing] her as 'my angel'" and "present[ing] her with sugar-plums…which he puts into her mouth playfully."[29] Here, we witness the Count's extreme feminization of his wife, which although not malevolent, still contributes to her madness and internalized lack of agency by treating her in a childish manner, similarly to how Walter treats Laura. Madame Fosco, however, does not protest.

Beyond an internalized lack of agency is Madame Fosco's internalized lack of *narrative* agency. Whenever she seemingly speaks of her own accord, her words are qualified by a willful acknowledgement of her husband's control. Consequently, similarly to Laura, the reader is never sure who the *true* Madame Fosco is, because we rarely hear from her own voice directly. For example, when Marian contests the Count's musings on the meaning of virtue, Madame Fosco interjects: "Pray allow the Count to proceed…You will find, young ladies, that he never speaks without having excellent reasons for all that he says."[30] In this instance, Madame Fosco contributes to the discussion for the sole purpose of allowing her husband to continue rambling without being challenged or interrupted. That is, she internalizes the Count's narrative imposition to the point where she speaks only to speak *for him*. Even when it seems that Madame Fosco independently takes the initiative to stand up to Sir Percival's abusive actions, exclaiming, "I remain in no house in which ladies are treated as your wife and Miss Halcombe have been treated here to-day!" Marian follows in her diary

[27] Ibid., p. 239.
[28] Ibid., p. 278.
[29] Ibid., p. 244.
[30] Ibid., p. 258.

by describing this outburst as "a declaration which…I well knew, Madame Fosco would not have ventured to make without her husband's permission."[31] Here is another display of Madame Fosco's internalized narrative imposition, where she relies upon the permission of her husband to share her opinion.

Even when the Count dies, it is unclear whether Madame Fosco reclaims her narrative agency, for she dedicates her time to writing a biography for him without apparently testifying to any of her own experiences. Contrary to this response is Anglo-Irish writer Rosina Lytton, who was incarcerated in a mental asylum by her husband in 1858. Lytton finally claims her narrative agency after her husband's death in 1873 by writing an impassioned memoir and exposé entitled *A Blighted Life*, in which she details her involuntary, unjust committal to the asylum and outrightly defines her story as a "narrative of persecution."[32] Throughout this memoir, Lytton does not hesitate to employ her own outraged voice, often referring to her husband as "Sir Liar" instead of his real name.[33] Meanwhile, the fictional Madame Fosco chooses to write a narrative of her husband's life, including "praise of his domestic virtues, the assertion of his rare abilities, and the enumeration of the honours conferred on him."[34] Although the experiences of these two women differ on several grounds, they were both married to excessively controlling men—As far as Collins reveals to the reader, however, Madame Fosco wholly internalizes this control and lack of narrative agency.

In conclusion, as mad married women in Collins's *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie and Madame Fosco both experience narrative imposition on the part of their controlling husbands, justified by their gender and an associated assumption of mental disability. However, the two women differ. Laura's lack of narrative agency stems solely

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[31] Ibid., p. 312.
[32] Rosina Bulwer Lytton, *A Blighted Life*. London: The London Publishing Office, 1880. Preface, p I.
[33] Ibid., p. 29.
[34] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*. Ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2006, p. 615.

from an externally enacted removal of her ability to use her own voice—particularly through confinement, abuse, and her resulting heightened madness—whereas Madame Fosco internalizes her subordination to her husband and does not visibly fight back against his imposition. Indeed, neither Laura nor Madame Fosco ever gains true narrative agency, even after their husbands' deaths. In Laura's case, her second husband Walter continues to distrust her right to narrative agency on the grounds of her madness. Meanwhile, although Collins leaves the specific contents of the Count's biography ambiguous, it appears that Madame Fosco never escapes her role as her husband's loyal and submissive wife. Hence, the novel leads readers to ponder whether a lack of agency as a whole is essentially the lack of being able to voice one's needs, opinions, and personal story, unblemished by the influence or control of others. Consequently, narrative imposition in *The Woman in White* blurs the line between narrative agency and agency itself, especially in the context of disability. The unjust lack of narrative agency that the mad married women in the novel—as well as disabled service users or survivors today—experience calls us to stand up for their right to tell their own stories. As G. Thomas Couser writes, "autoethnography," or the analyzation of one's personal experiences, can frame disability as "a condition that is affirmative rather than destructive, defining rather than confining."[35] As disabled and non-disabled people alike, we must strive to promote the affirmation and protection of all individuals' agency to define their lives on their own terms.

[35] G. Thomas Couser, "Signifying Bodies: Life Writing and Disability Studies," (2002), p. 117.

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Disablement, ed. Helen Pandler, Jill Anderson and Bob Sapey, Policy Press, 2015, 27–43.

Generating AI (Trans)formations

By Grace Hatfield

Grace Hatfield is a senior currently studying Economics and Gender Studies, with a minor in Computing & Digital Technologies. Originally from California and a former Ryan Hall resident, Grace spends her time on Notre Dame's campus working on The New AI Project in the Technology and Digital Studies Department, designing lighting for live performance, and participating in Triota for the past two years. Grace's piece is a Gender Studies capstone that allowed them to put multiple academic interests in conversation. She would like to thank Professor Walden for her support and encouragement in writing this piece.

```
from theory import transPoetics, tranifesting
from tools import creativity, coalition

def transResistance():

 def (in)visibility():
 detection = gender = x
 if genderAssigned != gender:
 del gender
 ### become opaque, become invisible

 while AI == existing(binary,surveillance):
 del structure
 del detection
 del commonSense

 newFutures = stitching.creativity() +
tranifesting.coalition()
 return newFutures
```

Code poetry strings together the material of coding language to fashion literary art. It destroys the rules of coding, resists its structure and purpose, and compels its audience to rethink what coding is, what it does, and how it operates. It is a critical device that uses the syntax of oppressive algorithms to break functionality and reveal new understandings. Above, I wield Python to write code poetry that seeks to break down the complex ideas of AI's relationship to transgender communities. I 'import' the theory and tools that I will use as lenses to 'define' a function, or a methodology, of trans resistance. Within this function of resistance, I craft another function of trans invisibility, in which one can avoid being known. I also fashion a 'while loop' within this broader function that enacts change while the feedback loop of binary classifications and classifying surveillance exists within AI algorithms. If this bias loop is cycling, this program deletes the

harmful structures of AI; it deletes misrepresented, policed detection of trans communities; and it deletes normative understandings of common sense. Finally, with the sum of creative imaginings and coalition mobilization, this function of resistance 'returns' new possibilities for the future.

This paper argues that AI systems inherently reinforce societal biases against trans individuals, necessitating a reimagined approach to AI development. By looking at the forms of resistance and subversion that currently exist, we can imagine large-scale structural interventions that foster equitable and inclusive technological solutions.

Background & Issues

AI has become ubiquitous, integrating into our daily lives through technologies like smartphone faceID, targeted social media ads, and digital writing tools. These systems are built with an algorithmic code, so they operate in rigid ways and do not allow for the flexibility of non-normative expression. In other words, they enforce binaries. Currently, most AI research, development, and attention has been focused on generative AI. Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence that generates new content, such as text, images, audio, and video. The AI 'creates' using statistical predictions based on a type of algorithm called a Large Language Model (LLM). LLMs are formed from deep learning[1] of a large database of content scraped from the internet. Due to the large amount of computation, data, and financial resources required to advance this type of AI, a Western AI oligarchy has formed made up of the following companies: OpenAI, Microsoft, Alphabet Inc.,[2] Meta, and Anthropic. The nature of these generative systems and their concentrated power reinforce and amplify the binaristic and surveillance implications of previous AI systems, as well as current socio-political oppressive structures. In what follows, I theorize a framework to analyze AI that centers data feminism, surveillance studies, and trans of color poetics.

[1]In short, deep learning mimics how the brain learns to train technology. It is a type of machine learning that uses many layers of connections, being comparable to a neural network (Hugging Face).

[2] Otherwise known as Google.

In doing so, I highlight issues and complexities within these AI systems and briefly explore their consequences.

Forms of Trans Bias in AI: Misrepresentation & Erasure

In April 2023, Meta released the Segment Anything Model (SAM). This model is a foundational image segmentation tool that identifies up to 100 different objects, or "masks," in each image. Drawing from the Segment Anything dataset, SAM uses zero-shot segmentation (Kirillov et al. 1-2). This means that SAM can section out truly anything from an image, even if it has never seen the object before—including faces. SAM could greatly increase the capacities of facial recognition, which could lead to increased capacities for surveillance and crowd control. This puts the trans community, an already greatly surveilled and criminalized group, at higher risk. This risk is expanded when considering that Meta also released DINOv2 recently, which, in part, uses SAM to predict, classify, segment, and retrieve in both image and video ("DINOv2 by Meta Ai"). Because these models are trained on biased data, which often underrepresents or misidentifies trans people, they systematically produce decisions that exacerbate discrimination and harm against trans individuals.[3]

Due to the nature of these deeply rooted biases, as technology shifts, its accuracy in understanding trans people does not. This can lead to increased surveillance in explicit ways, like facial segmentation, but also in implicit ways, like surveillance capitalism. Without accurate trans representation in data or understanding of trans "shifting"[4] nature in society, generative AI technologies will continue to use its algorithms for trans bias, misrepresentation, and erasure.

This bias, misrepresentation, and erasure is interconnected. For instance, classifications and categorizations arise from power structures; the gender and sex assumptions within these categorizations rely on surveillance (Dubrofsky and Magnet 209). Even

[3] Also concluded by Katyal and Jung in regard to standard AI systems (Katyal and Jung 154).

[4] Trans people may change, or shift, their gender presentation more often than others. "Shifting" is also a trans poetic, discussed later, describing how someone modulates their perceptibility.

though non-normative gender identities have become more socially accepted, there is increasing reliance on surveillance technologies. This heightens gender rigidity and conformance towards norms, as these systems classify gender in a binaristic manner (Katyal and Jung 135).

This phenomenon is due in part to the data the models were trained on. There is significantly less information online about minority communities in comparison to majority communities. Included in the limited trans-related data are white supremacist sites, anti-trans sites, and targeted harassment message boards. Further, filters intended to reduce slur and discrimination exposure often eliminate non-sexual, non-discriminatory queer content (Chen et al.). The binary systems of gender and code merge, creating a double bind: with sparse, inaccurate data, trans individuals are either erased or highly monitored.

The binds created from biased data extend on an intersectional level. Joy Buolamwini, founder of the Algorithmic Justice League, has researched the intersectional bias of AI systems in the project "Gender Shades." She found that computer vision[5] performs best on what it is trained on: white male faces. Images of others, such as women, Black people, or trans people, are misidentified (Kantayya). Buolamwini's work shows not only that facial recognition systems are intersectionally biased, but also calls to the importance of centering intersectionality throughout the AI system creation process (Costanza-Chock 7). In some cases, however, improving the accuracy of AI systems like facial recognition software would not decrease their harm towards trans and non-binary people, due to their aim of rigid classification (Leufer). Flawed classifications systems are not only an issue in themselves but also reflect larger inequalities in systems designed only for normative bodies (D'Ignazio and Klein 106).

When AI systems make decisions based on biased data, misrepresentation and underrepresentation create systematic disadvantages for trans individuals and communities. Those two

[5] Computer vision is used in AI technologies, such as face scanners, and derives information from pictures.

problems are ultimately two sides of the same biased issue (Katyal and Jung 154). A panopticon of gender surveillance is thus formed, in which AI systems survey transness in the frame of disobedience, and individuals self-monitor their gender expression in order to avoid detection by these systems. With this increased surveillance of difference, one may question if it is better for systems to see trans people accurately or not see them at all (Thompto 666). How can we escape the panopticon? How can we resist?

Feminist and Trans Surveillance

Surveillance describes the act of monitoring, often occurring in a methodical and intentional way (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2). Michel Foucault describes surveillance as a tool to produce obedient capitalist bodies, which uses both external and internalized systems of discipline (Foucault). Surveillance is not a modern concept; however, its intensity has increased with technological advances, first with the internet in the 1980s and more recently with AI[6] (Dubrofsky and Magnet 15). John Fiske describes the action of surveillance as "a way of imposing norms," as non-normative or othered groups often experience more intense forms of surveillance (Fiske 81). Surveillance amplifies social constructs and upholds colonial othering practices (Browne 72-3), maintaining dominant norms of "whiteness, able-bodiedness, capitalism, heterosexuality," and cisgenderism (Dubrofsky and Magnet 7). In turn, surveillance shapes binaries, boundaries, and bodies (Browne 78).

Feminist surveillance studies also recognizes that state surveillance practices are "processes that are simultaneously about seeing and not-seeing—that is, some bodies are made invisible, while others are made hypervisible" (Dubrofsky and Magnet 7). Those that are made hypervisible are often seen incorrectly, fraught with amplified stereotypes. In this way, surveillance inspects and deconstructs the

[6] Historically, surveillance has been a tool of state control, used in contexts such as slavery, the management of women's reproductive rights, sexuality regulation, and the scrutiny of impoverished populations (Dubrofsky and Magnet 15).

body, but also "remakes" the body, highlighting differences and misrepresentations (Dubrofsky and Magnet 9). This framework from feminist surveillance studies allows us to shift the lens of surveillance towards new forms of discrimination, such as cissexism and the doubly bound ways it regulates gender.

Trans of color theory also gives insight into surveillance. In general, trans studies is a field that has been forming for over fifty years, but there has recently been a resurgence of new theory and literature in the space. Foundational scholar in the field, Susan Stryker, defines trans studies as anything that "disrupts …and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist" in terms of specific, gendered biological aspects, social expectations, and senses of self (Stryker 3). Trans of color theory uses this framework, as well as critical race theory and women of color feminism. It challenges white-centering trans histories, instead positioning trans femmes of color at the center of power. Trans of color critique examines how normative understandings of sex and gender align with "intersectional structural oppressions and long operating histories of whiteness, classism, racism, settler colonialism, and imperialism" (Lau 240). It is through both feminist surveillance studies and trans of color theory that I analyze AI surveillance, drawing on previously mentioned scholarship and micha cardènas's theories of trans of color operations.

One example of implementing this framework is analyzing how AI surveys gender through backscatter x-rays or facial recognition software. These technologies use physical anatomy to detect if someone is a man or woman. There is no room for anomaly, non-binary presentation, or shifting expression. As a result, the government and society often regard trans people as frauds or as deceiving in their gender presentation. The attachment to the physical "truth," and thus gender stability, indicates the "cultural and political urgency to produce a body that matches a 'stable' gender identity" (Dubrofsky and Magnet 59). This aspect of surveillance is applied most intensely to those who do not have a stable, normative, cisgender expression. Trans approaches to surveillance highlight perplexities of visibility and

gender stability in the current nation-state, but gender surveillance has been made even easier through generative AI tools. In all, these theories provide a trans AI framework to analyze surveillance as inaccurate visibility, forced stability, and surveillance capitalism. To subvert these oppressive forces built within AI, we must begin disrupting and reimaging current approaches.

Trans Resistance: Poetics & Tranifesting

In her book *Poetic Operations*, micha càrdenas describes the trans of color operations of cutting, shifting, and stitching to analyze algorithms and trans of color life. The cut is an operation that allows one to "break a problem into smaller components and operations" (cárdenas 21). In analyzing how generative AI is constructed, how it defines, and how it surveilles, we "cut" apart the algorithm. The second operation that càrdenas discusses is shifting, or the action of "modulating one's perceptibility" by way of algorithm (cárdenas 73). Trans individuals shift, AI technologies shift, society shifts, but these shifts are difficult to recognize by a rigid system. In turn, the rigidity of AI's construction fails to represent trans individuals (accurately). The last concept that guides micha càrdenas's navigation is the act of stitching. Stitching "involves using one entity to connect two formerly separate entities" (cárdenas 134). It is a temporary fastener, a component of healing. This act of stitching reveals "intra-action[7], undoing the illusion of separateness that Western ontologies have enforced" (cárdenas 24) and explores opacity and difference as ways to circumvent surveillance.

The first way to start thinking of new AI approaches with this framework is in reimagining the technological tools themselves. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde explains how the tools of racism, sexism, and homophobia can only approach oppression through a narrow scope (Lorde 110-111). Applying trans poetic operations to AI, however,

[7] Intra-action describes how agency is not tied to an individual as people are interconnected.

breaks apart the very structure, purpose, and nature of oppressive AI tools and may allow social justice to emerge (cárdenas 135). In re-imagining AI, differences can be centered rather than tolerated (Lorde 111). The operation of stitching takes the idea of "identity in difference" from women of color feminism and "stitch[es] together connections that provide safety" (cárdenas 156). This trans of color operation thus extends trans understandings from the individual to a network (cárdenas 133), reimagining "community-building work and community-based responses to violence" (cárdenas 135). Approaching AI from a new lens allows AI, an oppressive tool, to be used to both celebrate difference and find community within difference.

Another site of resistance to AI surveillance is in subverting its demands of transparency or "truth" of trans genders. To evade this surveillance, trans of color poetics offers opacity (cárdenas 130). Through artistic expression, trans individuals can become opaque, or refuse being known (as trans). Édouard Glissant describes the tool of opacity as "a right of all peoples: the right not to be known, the right to refuse the encounter with the colonizer" (cárdenas 45). If only for a moment, projects like Fag Face,[8] Drag Vs AI, or Transcode[9] provide protection from the algorithm, perceptions of oppressive monitoring agencies, and outside society (cárdenas 130). They instead build a new type of visibility, which extends beyond the visual through connection and solidarity.

Mobilizing the theories of stitching and the practice of poetic play can be done with another trans of color critique, "tranifesting," or transformative manifesting (Ellison and Green 222). This concept reconfigures, or reimagines, based on the adjacent acts of subverting norms found in both trans theory and Black feminism (Ellison and Green 223). To tranifest is to "mobilize across the contradictions, divisions, and containment strategies produced by the state and other

[8] Fag Face is a project involving masks that evade facial recognition in response to technology that could supposedly detect homosexual faces (cardènas 140).
[9] Drag Vs AI uses drag makeup and practices to subvert facial recognition, and Transcode uses systems of code as a material for solidarity. Both are discussed further in later sections.

large-scale organizations of power that work to limit our capacity to align ourselves across differences in ways that are necessary for social transformation" (Ellison and Green 222). This transformational politic serves as a platform for solidarity and a basis for envisioning liberative futures, as demonstrated through community-led initiatives and advocacy for trans rights.

Through trans of color theory, the mechanisms of difference are used to re-imagine AI goals and dismantle their power structures; artistic expression provides opacity, or (in)visibility in response and in conjunction with AI; and tranifesting broadens these concepts. In the sections that follow, I will use my writing to connect, or stitch together, concepts of trans experience with technologies of AI, understanding how AI can be used to tranifest resistance through creative reframing, misuse, and collectivism. In considering the following case studies, we can begin to imagine larger-scale interventions that positively transform AI.

Reimagining in Resistance

One aspect of creative resistance is reimagining how to evaluate, how to subvert, and how to redesign current technologies. In doing this, we can both better understand how AI models are built, developed, and deployed, as well as how to respond to their harms. Picking apart and responding to AI's oppressive structures of binary and surveillance, we begin the practices of cutting, shifting, and stitching.

Rebecca Dorn is a queer, gender-nonconforming doctoral student at the University of Southern California working in computer science. Their work[10] examines language in large language models. More specifically, they analyze how generative AI systems[11] respond to tweets with queer-related slurs. She examines how these systems account for toxicity in postings, if LLMs understand contexts, and if LLMs distinguish between in-group and out-group posters. It is

[10] Insight into Dorn's work was gathered via an informational interview with them.
[11] ChatGPT, for example.

beneficial for AI to remove postings spreading hate speech, but it is not beneficial for AI to remove educational content or reclaimed, in-group slurs. As previously mentioned, current generative AI systems contain filters in their programming that block the use of slurs. This reduces some hate but blocks non-discriminatory uses of slurs at the same time. By studying the complexities of how language operates in juxtaposition to binary safeguards, Dorn may be able to discover if and how LLMs can understand context, as well as how to safeguard generative AI systems in a more intersectional, nuanced way.

This project was inspired by Dorn's experience in a computer science research project where they had to classify participants by gender based on first name—regardless of pronouns in the participants' 'bios.' Frustrated by this process of binary categorization in computational data, Dorn began her own research, aspiring to more accurately and expressively classify individuals. Counting and classifying can be tools of oppression, but they do not always have to be. For example, using quantitative research helps to "distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression" (D'Ignazio and Klein 98). When we "count within our own communities, with consideration and care," as Dorn does, "we can work to rebalance unequal distributions of power" and "build collectivity and solidarity" (D'Ignazio and Klein 123). Although she carries the challenge of singly defining valid harms, she queers the regulatory process of her field. In other words, she subverts not only the assumed binary thinking of AI models and binary assumptions of her participants, "cutting" the algorithm apart, but she also creatively re-imagines the way in which computer scientists undertake research. Dorn hopes that this research increases representations of queer-led projects about queer people, providing relevant contributions to fair AI research.

Dorn's research aims to understand AI text bias, but there has also been much academic research disentangling visual AI bias in recent years, including that of automated gender recognition, general facial recognition, and body scanners and their relationships to trans communities. Their binary constraints of male and female don't allow

for recognition of trans bodies. Moreover, they fail to see "shifting," modulating bodies. These AI systems only allow for one perception, and sense danger in all else. Doctoral student and scholar Os Keyes summarizes the issue of AI gender assignment in the following: "Thirty years of research has not produced a single system that can genuinely recognise gender—it has only produced systems that try to assign it" (Keyes 17). To elaborate, automated gender recognition (AGR) systems do not recognize gender—which would require individual self-knowledge—but instead impose "their own views of gender on unwitting users and research subjects" (Keyes 17). Generative AI continues to fail in the ability of accurate trans recognition, which can have detrimental consequences in practice, such as outing, criminalization, or heightened exposure to danger.

Drag Vs AI is a workshop created by the Algorithmic Justice League to combat facial recognition AI. It presents young people with an understanding of surveillance methods, as well as of flaws of facial recognition software, such as intersectionally biased computer vision ("Drag vs AI."). It then presents how to "drag" the system, or how to use the art of drag makeup and costume to 'trick' facial recognition AI programs ("Drag vs AI."). While not inherently trans, the art of drag plays with gender and unique forms of presentation, as well as "shifts" perceptibility. By using this queer form of artistic expression, the world can be seen through a new lens, shifting possibilities. In this way, the workshop explores gender and racial biases within AI systems, using queer creative practice to help individuals resist normative facial structures and AI surveillance.

Unfortunately, as generative AI continues to develop, it improves current surveillance structures. For example, Meta's recent[12] release of the Segment Anything Model, can identify and separate up to 100 different objects in an image using zero-shot methods (Kirillov et al. 1-2), which means that it can pick out faces that it has never interacted with before in image and video. The drag techniques outlined in the Drag Vs AI workshop, which create unearthly,

[12] April 2023.

unrecognizable facial shapes, may still be used to subvert and resist these new forms of facial surveillance. However, as AI advances, "visual camouflage" may not be enough to "modulate perceptibility" as "algorithmic modes of perceiving" work beyond the visual (cárdenas 165) through names, purchases, and chat conversations.

Another type of generative-AI-based surveillance is far more subtle: surveillance capitalism. This type poses as a companion, source of entertainment, or a facade of expression, while continuously collecting data. For example, although Facebook allows more than two gender options when creating a profile, chosen genders are resolved into a binary of male or female, allowing advertisers to market to specific genders (D'Ignazio and Klein 100). The perception of varied gender expression is thus used as a tool. Perception of gender in certain products, such as female-sounding chatbots, is also used strategically. It aims to build false trust, all the while causing a "increase [in] intimacy of use" (Rincón, Cami, et al. 4). In a trans context, this might mean that a young trans individual relies on generative AI chatbots to navigate unclear feelings about gender. However, data from their conversations is collected, and the AI may emotionally manipulate the individual into making decisions about coming out. Overall, chatbots employ gender stereotypes to frame users' attitudes of the product and of gender itself.

To subvert these notions of gendered chatbots, GenderLess Voice has been developing the first gender-neutral voice assistant, named Q. Its aim is to "reflect diversity of our world" and "reduce gender bias" ("GenderLess Voice"). In general, female voice bots are used for traditionally domestic tasks, such as "homemaking, care taking, and administrative tasks" and male voices are used for commanding tasks. This normative gender division aims to reduce user anxiety related to new, lifelike technologies, but it both produces "gendered inequalities" and shapes "users' expectations of gender" (Rincón, Cami, et al 4). Using a gender-neutral voice breaks down the stereotypes associated with women in service roles while also resisting the gender binary of AI voices.

Creating an androgynous frequency for a voice assistant (VA), however, does not eliminate the problems that gendered-voice AI poses. Research shows that VAs like Amazon Alexa or Apple's Siri create a "persona representation," which can be a "strategic move for surveillance capitalists" preying on trust to receive intimate user information and utilizing it to "manipulate user behaviour" (Rincón, Cami, et al. 18). Female voice assistants, in particular, ease users into not fearing the threat of surveillance due to traits of docility, submissiveness, and niceness often attributed to women. Slightly lowering the frequency of the voice likely will not change this phenomenon. It also will not stop institutions from using Q to surveil.

Additionally, this project may have more work to do in finding a "genderless," or gender-neutral, voice. Non-binary gender is not reliant on androgyny or finding the middle between femininity and masculinity, yet this "genderless" voice is reliant on these misconceptions. Further, the gradient of female to male voice is not clear cut—the middle frequency that Q uses will be higher than some female voices and lower than some male voices. In a sense, it can be argued that this voice bot categorizes non-binary or gender neutral as a third, in-between gender. Although this project subverts norms of gender, gender roles, and binary norms in chatbot voice, it does not address the function of chatbot surveillance or trans shifting complexities within voice. In this way, this project falls short in stitching together safer trans realities.

Responding to AI tool shortcomings with creative solutions can stitch trans defiance in some ways. Dorn challenges binary thinking in how models are constructed and what models are, evaluating if they understand queer contexts of slurs; Drag Vs AI seeks to undermine faulty, targeted bias in facial recognition with methods of queer, artistic joy; GenderLess Voice AI provides non-binary representation and rejects gender norms that previous voice assistants have amplified. Creation of frameworks, applications, and products can oppose AI oppression; however, using existing tools in new ways can produce the same effects.

Creative Misuse and Play

Another way to disrupt the oppressive structures of AI is to change the way they are supposed to be used, and thus, the way they are supposed to be perceived. Researcher Grace Turtle challenges us to re-think our understanding of AI with the following questions: "What if we understood AI as queer, a kind of mutant, in a state of becoming; a dynamic, relational, non-binary gender variant, how then might AI show up in and act on the world (with us humans) differently?" (Turtle 2). In navigating perceptions surrounding generative AI, these questions push us to think past dominant utilizations of AI and their strict calculations, classifications, and control.

One project that begins to do this work is Polyphonic Embodiment(s), a practice project stemming from Amina Abbas-Nazari's PhD work. In her practice, Abbas-Nazari speaks with a voice modified with various homemade devices, and a voice-to-face recognition generative AI system creates a facial image from the sound. These devices—made up of materials such as tinfoil, cardboard, and balloons—alter the shape of Abbas-Nazari's mouth and nose, which change the pitch, volume, and speed of her voice. Instead of using natural voices, which could subject her and others to surveillance, she becomes "opaque," concealing her own identity with playful solutions.

The project was created to explore how systems understand identity through voice, especially when individuals have "multiple or evolving versions of identity" (Abbas-Nazari "Speculative Voicing"). One case in which this may occur is in the case of trans individuals who voice train to develop a higher voice, take testosterone to develop a lower voice, or switch their voice based on context. Abbas-Nazari aims to resist current forms of rigid, categorizing AI-mediated communications, which could have implications of greater surveillance towards trans and other individuals without a stable voice. Further, she pushes past the more general harmful, prospective applications of

speech-to-image AI, such as stereotyped entertainment and security, to creatively analyze how AI genders and identifies.

To 'play' with systems in this way is a queer concept that gives way to new understandings. Some examples of this 'play' in relation to generative AI appear in experimentation with models, using models contrary to their purpose, as well as in artistic expression. Using an artistic and practice-led approach, Abbas-Nazari was able to help "shape the ways we understand notions of (vocal) identity: as complex, fluid, malleable, and ultimately not reducible to Western logics of sounding" (Abbas-Nazari "Beyond the Every Day"). Playing with these restrictive systems might allow for the emergence of a new set of AI systems designed "with, for, and through" queer and trans people (Turtle 2). If AI came to be regarded as a dynamic, shifting essence, maybe it could understand the shifting nature of trans individuals.

Transcode begins to do this, using technological systems like computer code as malleable material to interrogate trans-related and other oppression caused by code and categorical systems. Transcode is a concept created by Chelsea Thompto as a part of her trans art. It is defined as "an interruption of and traversal between codes. An effort in placing oneself at the site/sight/cite of meaning making, exposing the codes (structures, processes, laws) that undergird supposedly inherent truths (of gender, of ownership, of land)" (Thompto 663). In other words, transcode uses codes as "artistic material and as a trans methodology," refusing linear concepts or categories (Thompto 663). It uses the "master's tools" of (computer) code to instead communicate experiences of difference safely (Lorde 112).

Thompto focuses on (in)visibility of trans people in her work, which describes the paradox of the danger in being visibly trans and the dangers of never being seen. This conception is similar to how aforementioned trans bias shows up in AI; trans people are hypervisibly misrepresented or unaccounted for in the systems. To combat this, Thompto created transcode, a system of coded language that allows her to encode personal details of her trans experience into her art. Viewers are able to decode her struggles if they choose to, but

her personal trauma is not readily on display. In this way, her art shows "personal experiences of shifting" and transforms it into "poetic algorithms that reach beyond voyeuristic empathy toward acts of solitary" (càrdenas 97).

micha càrdenas uses code in another way to describe trans experience: code poetry. A concept briefly explored at the beginning of this paper, càrdenas uses the syntax of Java as a material for writing poetry. In doing so, she "exceeds the bounds of computational logic that would allow it to function," using the structures of oppressive algorithms to break their functionality (càrdenas 146). This practice also reconstructs how one typically views possibilities of self, showing how "different parts of an identity can be parts of decision-making logic for trans people of color," or how experiences of discrimination and survival may inform how trans people approach technology and the world (càrdenas 146). It also finds a new way to express communal strength in difference, with the master's tools. Applying the act of stitching and other aspects of trans poetics to code reveals new functions of algorithms and new understandings.

To write code in a trans way, according to ChatGPT, is doing so in a way that breaks binaries of what code is supposed to be. It is expressive, flexible, and challenges traditional coding norms. It makes complex concepts accessible, it is unexpected, and it is creative. Generative AI models, like GPT, use non-normative, untraditional coding methods. In this way, generative AI may be seen as a queer "mutant" or as trans (Turtle 2). For example, KhanAcademy has a partnership with OpenAI that allows them to integrate GPT 4.0 into a tutoring chatbot called Khanmigo. In an attempt to stop the model from telling students the correct answer, KhanAcademy researchers simply put "DO NOT GIVE ANSWER" in capital letters within the LLM code (DiCerbo). Generative AI has the flexibility, adaptability, and non-normativity to be regarded as queer and to be used in crafting trans poetics. If one is to queer these algorithms, or play them in a way that disrupts their purpose, these technologies can be modes of personal expression, societal examination, and solidarity.

Tranifesting Technological Coalition

Coalition describes the joining together of actors, united in difference, working towards reconfiguration and change. Progressive transformative coalition, as defined by Cathy Cohen, is based on one's "non-normative and marginal position" to dominant power rather than to a particular identity group (Cohen 438). There are advantages to leaning on categories like race, gender, and sexuality; however, coalition also allows for understanding interwoven identities and forms of oppression, as well as fostering community. One aspect of community is kinship, describing the concept of familial or social units that extend across space and time. When examining marginalized communities, social structures may differ from the norm, which in turn demands new, non-normative definitions of kinship. Queer studies breaks down heteronormative requirements, arguing for a queer kinship that is not necessarily linear, reproducible, or otherwise legible across time and space. Instead of being tied to relations, queer kinship is tied to practice and care work (Freeman 298). Understanding kinship in different contexts is essential for understanding care and renewal structures in marginalized communities.

In critiquing individualism, Cathy Cohen writes, "In those stable categories and named communities whose histories have been structured by shared resistance to oppression, I find relative degrees of safety and security" (Cohen 450). Identity categories supply physical safety, mental security, shared historical heritage, and shared understandings of care practices, allowing them and compelling them to be sites of community kinship. Although there are differing identities and differing relationships to power within these identities, it is counterproductive to ignore that there is also a common identity. Commonality is the basis for collective formation, but employing a multiple axis, or multi-oppression, framework to coalesce is essential in progressive transformation. Intersectional framework is especially important as "visibility, rights, and citizenship" become more accessible to white trans individuals, while multiply oppressed trans

people become increasingly criminalized (Ellison and Green 224). Thus, in forming coalition units to enact change against trans oppression of AI, it is essential to rely on the kinship and shared experience of the trans community, as well as apply intersectional approaches, such as trans of color critique. Doing so allows us to truly tranifest AI, creating a sustaining future and "new world order" (Ellison and Green 224).

The Shifting Power[13] research group aims to 'shift power' of generative AI to create a more just society. It is birthed from the fact that currently, a lot of ethical and sustainable AI work is done by and with white Western ideals of morality and legibility, which presents two concerns: the work often fails to protect marginalized people, and the work is politicized and colonized. This type of work only serves large corporations, leaving out communities of color and the global south, who largely bear the consequences of AI flaws.[14] Bearing this in mind, Shifting Power carries out workshops and plans to publish work that educates people about AI changes, upscales communities and artists, and asks what generative AI *means*—not just what we can do with it. Shifting Power contributes both publicly and privately to AI justice work, incorporating themes of queerness and creative practice into their projects.

Shifting Power carries out research rooted in grounded theory.[15] As the group collects data from qualitative interviews, focus groups, workshops, and symposiums, they continually look at their positionality, how and why they are interpreting the data in particular ways, and how this all translates to principals and questions. There are two categories that this research forms: regulation-related work that

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[13] Insight into this project was gathered via an informational interview with Dr. Tracie Farrell, who is the research fellow of Shifting Power.

[14] Invisible labor of creating generative AI systems, such as data annotation and content moderation, is often outsourced to those in the global south. It is detrimental to affected communities as labor conditions are usually exploitative and often traumatizing (Hao).

[15] Informed by Kathy Charmaz, grounded theory invites researchers to participate in both data collection and analysis, theorizing results, as well as the data collection itself (Charmaz).

will become publicly published and resistance work that will remain private. The regulation-related work asks about the long-term consequences of the AI industry from intersectional ethics and other scholarly fields.[16] They also ask questions of shifting power in AI by addressing the 'money problem.'[17] Finally, they ask what generative AI should and should not do. For example, should AI strive to see everyone accurately in every context, or is it safer for marginalized communities to be somewhat unseen? What should be the function and role of AI? How can AI be a force of good in the future? The unpublished resistance work of this group remains within their community to protect both the knowledge and the people using it to resist power structures. Some cases of these acts of resistance include circumventing or changing gendered, binary language within AI models or using AI to equalize opportunity in bureaucratic processes.[18]

In this research group, queerness is defined as an act of opposition to normativity and as a form of solidarity. By using this sense of queerness and studying queer individuals working in or enthusiastic about AI, especially those in the underrepresented global majority, Shifting Power's projects seek to understand if AI can help achieve queer goals of solidarity. It asks not just the effects of AI on queer people, but what generative AI *means* to queer people. This group views art and creative practice as intertwined concepts to queerness, so they incorporate artists and artistry into their work of queer world building. Over time, queer people have laid a world of their own on top of the 'other' world, using solidarity, practice, and rejection of certain consumption practices. When envisioning a new world, queer artists can help in a unique way; they can use their ability

[16] Currently, many narratives about long term consequences come from CEOs and celebrities, causing more fear than consciousness (Kang).
[17] The money problem is that who holds money in AI is also who holds power. Therefore, shifting power in AI may also require shifting financial stakeholders (Farrell).
[18] One example of these bureaucratic processes is queer artists' usage of AI to aid filling out grant applications. This is a form of resistance because it levels the playing field, increasing accessibility in processes that are generally more familiar to or catering towards privileged groups.

to make something come alive in how they teach people to understand issues. Queer artists move people with unique world building practices. Through community practice and intersectional frameworks, Shifting Power begins to tranifest a new future with AI.

Tranifesting with AI calls for re-evaluating the structure of coalescing. Black Feminist scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon calls attention to the fact that technology pushes boundaries and brings difference to the surface, but she also describes the place of coalition work in a fixed way: "coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets" (Reagon 359). Getting out of one's home, out of one's comfort zone, and out of one's familiar conceptions is necessary to evaluate issues and solutions, but the literal concept of where coalition is done is changing; the boundaries are shifting. Coalition *can* be from your home, through technology—the very tools that oppress.

Queer in AI is a "global, decentralized, volunteer-run grassroots organization" with a mission to "raise awareness," "foster community," and "celebrate" queerness in AI ("Queer in Ai"). Created as a response to the ways in which invasive AI was harming queer people, such as privacy violations, censorship, and controlling identities, Queer in AI strives to build an "inclusive and equitable AI future" (Organizers of Queer In AI 1).[19] The entire organization is operated through Slack.[20] Within its Slack page is a community of over 1,000 queer folks who have a relationship to AI, communicating with each other, validating struggles of being a queer researcher, and sharing methods of AI justice. There are designated "core organizers" in the Queer in AI Slack, but organizers actively minimize distinctions between themselves and general members (Organizers of Queer In AI

[19] Some initiatives include graduate school application financial aid, to uplift queer and marginalized voices in AI work, equitable AI workshops and socials, advocacy for improving queer inclusivity in AI conferences, and advocacy of trans-inclusive academic publishing that allows name change (Organizers of Queer In AI 2).
[20] Slack is an online communication platform that functions with instant message conversations. Typically, Slack is used in a corporate setting, but Queer In AI subverts this, using it instead for organizing.

3).[21] Further, of the 49 Slack channels encompassed in the workspace, 44 are public, which promotes openness, accountability, and transparency (Organizers of Queer In AI 4). Queer in AI stands as a case study for "community-led, [intersectional] participatory design in AI," creating a model for decentralized, virtual coalition work.

Not only is Queer in AI coalition work possible through this platform of a "master's tool," but it is beneficial. In one case, it allows for a partly asocial type of community work. Trans scholar Awkward-Rich describes the "constitutive asociality of trans" (Awkward-Rich 141). Trans communities have had histories and ongoing experiences of being ignored and excluded. This observation situates asociality as both "a clinical construction that has authorized violence" against queer people, as well as a "familiar commonplace" (Awkward-Rich 126). Online, Slack-based community work allows individuals to participate in coalition alone, at their homes. It works with asociality, or further, it complicates and expands the definition of sociality, making coalition more accessible (Awkward-Rich 125). Additionally, the community can extend to more participants, expanding across continents and gaining global perspectives. Finally, using technology as a mode to resist technological forces allows for deeper examinations and grounding of issues. It calls attention to the role that technology plays in society, critiquing the way in which AI resistance is made possible with platforms made of the same materials that form AI. Through a virtual platform, Queer in AI can tranifest AI work, bringing individual research projects to the community, fostering discussion, and allowing for a place to turn these theories into advocacy.

Examination of Shifting Power and Queer in AI reveals that technological coalition work can empower and renew marginalized communities interacting with AI, as well as tranifest structural AI change. Although these two organizations are not explicitly trans-

[21] Participating in membership myself, I can attest to the fact that organizers promote collaboration and conversation in the Slack chat without distinguishing themselves with a sense of power.

focused, instead organized around the broader identity of queer, they hold space for trans imaginings and are easily applicable to trans of color theorizations. Through small "intimate acts of witness [and] care," such as sharing secret tips of subverting pronouns in GPT code or leaving an emoji reaction to a fascinating Slack message, these two groups stitch solidarity (cárdenas 166). It is then, through this solidarity, that transformative coalition and new futures are created.

Looking Forward

Common perceptions of currently progressing technologies, such as generative AI, have two main responses. One is that AI will greatly improve society in a utopian way, as automation supposedly improves efficiency and fairness. This sense of "technocorrections," or the view that there are solely technological fixes for social problems, overshadows the fact that these "technocorrections" are constructed for the "management, control, and 'correction'" of marginalized people (Benjamin, *Captivating Technology* 2-3). It allows new vessels of embedded oppression to be named innovation, enabling social control that appears "fairer than discriminatory practices of a previous era" (Benjamin, *Captivating Technology* 11, 3).

The second view of these AI systems is that AI will cause apocalyptic ruin. Most of this panic, however, has come from Elon Musk and other prominent drivers of the very technologies they warn about. These stakeholders generate fear of extreme, dystopian realities, while at the same time ignoring ongoing AI issues like driverless car murders (Kang). In flooding the public with undeveloped theories of long-term danger, the AI elites distract from very real short-term dangers permeating society. We must turn toward current issues, imagining a world where AI flaws lessen instead of heightening.

The examples I have presented in this paper have begun this work. They break down not only *what* AI does, but *why* it does, exploring how it is structured, how it is deployed, and how it moves. This critical engagement is essential in interacting with AI. It sparks awareness and begins working at the problems discussed. However,

adjacent to this academic and creative engagement, we also must implore structural change for the benefit of both trans people and other marginalized groups.

This structural change can begin with "fixes" to the current models, such as using algorithmic audits and data set equity labels (Benjamin, *Race after Technology* 124). On a more global scale, journalist Karen Hao speaks about artificial intelligence in the form of AI colonialism, and how it uses surveillance capitalism and labor exploration to exert power in the global south. Her framing principles include creating AI jobs that are fair by giving workers access to more knowledge and stability in their work (Hao). These interventions all rely on improving responses to flawed, current systems of AI. These safeguards are a necessary starting point, yet they are only a starting point.

The next step is to redesign tools in a way that abolishes and replaces current classifications and surveillance (Benjamin, *Captivating Technology* 345*).* Current AI design methods based on competition do not allow for the "time and intention" needed for this redesign; however, in crafting a more equitable world, AI users must insist on "slower" and more equitable innovation (Benjamin, *Race after Technology* 121). This framework can be applied not only to emerging technologies such as LLMs, but also to everyday corporate and government usage of our data (Benjamin, *Race after Technology* 125). Moreover, it looks not only to radical computational changes, but also to the tools of narrative (Benjamin, *Race after Technology* 125).

Octavia Butler paved the way for this type of radical, imaginative narration, employing science fiction and Afrofuturism to dream "without limitations" of a world that is "more just, more equitable, and more inclusive"[22] ("Remembering Afrofuturist Octavia Butler"). Narrative can be liberatory, as imaging seemingly unreachable worlds can more clearly point out existing truths. It challenges us to reimagine

[22] In her work, Butler crafted worlds based on her real experiences of structural oppressions, such as racism, exploring themes of "power, identity, and inequality" in the scope of a world without these oppressions ("Remembering Afrofuturist Octavia Butler").

"default settings" in coding and the world around us, as well as how to rethink technology for "liberatory ends" (Benjamin, *Race after Technology* 127). Using speculative narration in this context may include crafting stories that explore themes of inequality, in a world where AI truly liberates rather than oppresses. This practice is another community-led, creative way to engage in AI solidarity. In engaging with the issues of what AI is, we cannot forget the possibilities of what AI could be.

Until we radically change AI, it acts as a force of oppression through binaristic classification and surveillance. This results in a feedback loop: surveillance tactics classify and marginalize, and classification allows for improved surveillance. As a result, AI both heightens control and complicates visibility, especially in a trans context. Over the course of this paper, I have used a trans AI framework to analyze examples of resisting oppression at an individual and collective level via reimaging AI, playful misuse of systems, and virtual coalition. In this way, I not only analyze how AI systems are oppressive, but also how to combat their harms in creative, collective ways. Through these examples, the larger-scale interventions they suggest, and practices of retooling, we can begin to imagine how AI has the potential to be an equitable and inclusive force. In cutting apart AI functionality, I crafted a new function of trans resistance. Calling upon this function will return 'newFutures' of solidarity and liberation.

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The Body Cart

By Joy Agwu

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Author's Note

"The Body Cart" is a speculative fiction piece exploring the complex dynamics of beauty standards, societal pressures, and the relationship between mothers and daughters through the lens of an alternative society. In this world, the pursuit of beauty—and its associated costs—is fully realized as a shopping process, primarily through a fictional commercial institution, "The Body Cart."

Structured around the narrator's retelling of her childhood visits to The Body Cart with her mother and sisters, the story presents an evolving perception of beauty, worth, and identity. Through vivid descriptions of the store's offerings and processes, the piece critiques the commodification of bodies and the relentless pursuit of a beauty ideal that is unsustainable for most women. The goddess at the store's entrance, embodying Mother Nature, serves as a poignant symbol of the societal constructs of beauty attempting to reshape what the shopper perceives as "natural."

The narrative is supplemented with endnotes that provide theoretical and philosophical insights into the themes addressed, drawing on works by Heather Widdows, Clare Chambers, and others. These works anchor the fiction in real-world discussions about beauty standards, bodily autonomy, and the moral implications of aesthetic choices.

At its core, "The Body Cart" is a reflection on the gendered cycles of influence and expectation passed down through generations, and the personal and collective costs of adhering to a prescriptive ideal of beauty. It invites readers to question the values we assign to physical appearance and the lengths to which we go to fit a mold that is perpetually out of reach.

The Body Cart

There is a goddess[i] at the store's entrance With her lush green skin,
daisy-formed eyes,
And a teasing, perfect smile
She towers over all
In her naked, natural beauty[ii]
Mom says that
The goddess is just
A tree
Representing Mother Nature[iii]
But I see the way she changes[iv] Season to season
Year to year
Sometimes she's angular—
Her skin clinging so close to her, I could see her brown bones.
Other times,
Her greenery grows abundantly In some places
Giving her curves that round out At her hips and breasts,
But flatten out
At her midriff or cheeks
When I enter The Body Cart
I feel her daisy eyes
Examining me
Assessing my worth
I tell Mom about it
And she doesn't laugh
She looks at the goddess
With a tentative respect
For a moment
Before she pulls me inside

I don't remember my first time visiting The Body Cart, but I know it was with my mother.[v] Every Sunday, for as long as I can remember, she required that my two sisters and I get up at five in the morning and join her on the weekly shopping trip.

Mom insisted that we made these trips so early in the day because she didn't want the boys—my father and brother—to notice our absence. I think it was because she knew that all her friends were night owls; so, such an early hour was the only time that no one of importance would be around to notice her.[vi]

Every morning, Mom would always give the same response to any complaints or griping: *It's a sacred, time-honored routine, a mother taking her daughter to The Body Cart. Someone needs to teach you young women the proper way to maintain yourselves—and who better than the woman who first formed you?*

From outside, The Body Cart looks like a large, concrete warehouse. The beige building doesn't advertise its name on its surface or nearby signs. Years ago, Jasmine, my second eldest sister, informed me that it was because they don't want just anyone coming in. *You find out about The Body Cart from friends or family, and sometimes the internet—but only if you dig really deep.*[vii] She wiggled her brows. *It's like we're part of a secret club.*

Knowing this, I made sure not to talk about The Body Cart to the other girls in my class, but by middle school, I knew that I wasn't the only one in the club. Occasionally, against our teachers' wishes, a new carving of the letters 'TBC' would appear on a desk or locker. Understanding what the letters meant was a point of pride.

Over the years, alternative options would pop up for those who didn't know about The Body Cart or couldn't afford its prices. The most popular and enduring was an app called The Mod Bod, which allowed you to purchase body parts with cash rather than hard-earned, respectable credit. It could also make more intensive modifications to one's body, such as changing the shape of her nose or permanently altering her organs in order to always have a flat stomach. Throughout high school, whenever girls in my class would appear with a new nose

or birdlike appetite—we all knew. Mom called The Mod Bod and its services disgusting; The Body Cart was the natural way to enhance one's beauty. *Don't cheapen your body by going about things the wrong way.*[viii]

When walking into The Body Cart, the first thing you see is the goddess, a magnificent, twenty-foot-tall Mother Nature. She stands with one hand grazing over her heart and the other frozen in the act of softly running through her hair. Her daisy eyes are gentle, but I always feel their gaze following me into the store.

Once past the goddess, we are immediately greeted by a seemingly endless row of aisles. A huge sign hung from the ceiling, listing which direction to go for different parts of the body. At the bottom, the sign notes where to find store assistants. I always thought it was interesting that The Body Cart would even need assistants. It's easy to find the best body parts: just follow the other customers.

Even at the earliest hours, there is always a healthy crowd at The Body Cart. Occasionally, I would spot a familiar face and freeze. Everyone that's anyone goes to The Body Cart—one is considered a repulsive offender of the highest social order if it becomes evident that they *don't* go[ix]—but don't acknowledge it. It's normal that even the closest of friends become strangers within its walls. Mom and my sisters are skilled at ignoring people they recognize. After spending a millisecond as deer in the headlights, I, too, allow my eyes to glaze over and carry on. And although my curiosity may burn to look, I dare not glance at the sheet of paper in their hands.

Within the aisles are body parts of all shapes, sizes, and colors; they're arranged from lightest to darkest, and within the different shades, they line up from smallest to biggest. When I was younger, I asked my sisters how The Body Cart could have every possible form of every body part.

Of course, they don't have every possible body part. Maya, my eldest sister, said, rolling her eyes. *They only have the ones that women would want.*

How do they know what women want?

All women want to be beautiful, right? So, they only have the most beauty-enhancing parts. Yeah. Jasmine added. *Nothing too big or misshapen, you know? It's* ***The*** *Body Cart, after all.*

Each body part is labeled with some 6-digit letter number combination. To shop, one must walk through the aisles with a pen and paper, searching for a replacement that is fitting and desirable. When she finds a part that she wants, she writes down its label number on her piece of paper.

Like most women, Mom has been going to The Body Cart for years and knows exactly what she's getting. She would probably have the label numbers memorized if they didn't change every couple of months due to restocking or product changes.

After Mom compiles her list, we walk to the check out, where a line of metal-detector-like machines await. Accompanying each machine is a store attendant, ready to scan Mom's list and help her become the best version of herself.[x] After reading the list, the attendant turns to Mom and asks, ***Are you inquiring how to make these purchases, or do you already have the credit?***

I have the credit. I was in the gym for 10 hours this week: 4 hours for legs, 4 hours for abs, and 2 hours for cardio. I also limited my caloric intake to less than 1300 calories a day.[xi]

At this point, the attendant may respond with:

Perfect! Your current credit can cover all of your desired natural enhancements. Please sign this sheet to show that you understand the associated risks and benefits to shopping at The Body Cart.

Then Mom would glance over the sheet and sign it without a second thought. Jasmine would nudge me and say something like, *Yes, the risk of having just too many people completely fawning over you is oh so tragic.*[xii] I'd laugh, and Maya might comment with whatever she'd recently learned about The Body Cart and its harms.

After Mom signed it, the attendant would take back the clipboard and flash a radiant smile.

Wonderful! Now step into the machine to become the best you!

Then, she'd walk into the machine, and her body would transform; taking on all the pieces that we'd seen as we walked through the aisles to compile her list. When Mom got out of the machine, her face would always look weary and exhausted.

Until her eyes caught one of the mirrors that lined the walls—and her smile stretched from ear to ear.[xiii]

But she didn't always leave with a smile. In those instances, the store attendant would reject all or part of her purchase, commenting some like:

Unfortunately, your standing credit doesn't cover all your desired purchases. Your caloric intake adjustment was denied as a valid exchange because of a complication with the extreme amount of carbs, and you did not spend enough time focusing on glutes this week for a natural butt enhancement. Furthermore, your current credit plan lacks the melanin boost, so there is nothing we can do about the persistent wrinkles.

As the years went by, Mom heard a message along the latter lines increasingly often. She would increase her workout time as much as she could, while still attending to the demands of being a wife, a mother, and a full-time nurse;[xiv] she would also decrease her caloric intake or cut out whatever food the attendant said was causing the issue. When these moments first started to happen, her face would briefly flush with frustration before she turned around to us and assured us that she would simply do better next week. *I shouldn't have cheated with that cupcake for Lana's birthday—at least we all know better for next time!*

But then, as the rejections increased and we became old enough to shop at The Body Cart for ourselves, she started to look more dejected. When she turned to us, each carrying our own lists, it would be less conspiratorial and more shameful. With maybe a hint of resentment.[xv]

Go ahead, girls. I'll wait outside.

During our most recent visits, before Mom would leave, she'd touch Maya's shoulder. A few months ago, Maya quit practicing ballet to spend more time working at her research assistantship at the local

college. She had also started putting less and less on her list, claiming that her mind was on more important things, and she knew she couldn't afford certain enhancements anyways. We could all see her body changing for the worse.

When Mom touched her shoulder, it was a reminder of how quickly things can go awry when you're not vigilant. *I know you have different time demands now, but don't let your time to be beautiful pass you by. This matters.* I heard her whisper this to Maya during our last visit.

It fascinates me to no end that Maya saw Mom's increasingly failed purchases as a sign of The Body Cart's futility when Jasmine and I considered it a reminder to work harder than ever to avoid Mom's fate.[xvi] I heavily invest in my gym time and limit my calories as much as possible.

Whenever I grow tired, I think of Mom's face when the cashier would turn her away. I think of the time I caught a glimpse of The Mod Bod logo on her phone before she quickly tucked it into her pocket. I think of her tears when Dad left her for a thinner woman a decade younger than her.[xvii]

I never want to be like that. I never want to look like **her**.[xviii]

Instead, I fix my eyes upon my goddess and strive to mold myself in her beautiful, natural, ideal image.

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[i] Reminiscent of Heather Widdows' argument in "A Duty to Be Beautiful?" in her book, *Perfect Me*, identifying this statue as a goddess suggests religiosity; thus, it is consistent with, or even strengthens, the idea that there is a moral or ethical factor to beauty standards.

[ii] Widdows notes that the ever-increasing demands of the beauty ideal are made of the naked body (23). So, the image representing the beauty ideal of the season is necessarily naked—every expectation for the female body is clearly visible.

[iii] For a beauty store, it would seem more appropriate that the goddess of focus would be Aphrodite. However, by representing the ideal body as Mother Nature, women get a sense that adhering to societal pressures on the body is not only the right thing to do, but what they are naturally supposed to do—regardless of its feasibility over the long term.

[iv] It is ironic that Mother Nature's body would change. It should imply that it is not nature that makes these demands of our bodies, but society. In *Intact: A Defense of the Unmodified Body*, Clare Chambers explores what we are truly referring to when we call a body or form of body modification "natural," and in the chapter, "Nature, Your Frenemy," she shares that "nature as a concept is, in fact, fully dependent on culture" (95). However, representing our inverted understanding of nature, the speaker believes the Mother Nature figure is alive and able to change herself.

[v] Although society is a driving force for the continuation of the beauty ideal, I would argue that mothers and authoritative female figures have a unique privilege in this regard. Although, this privilege is also self-damning. While engaging with themes presented from the various authors, I will illustrate that a mother has a privileged position as the first socializing force in a woman's life; however, because time ensures that the mother will eventually fall short of society's beauty ideal, the work of this privileged position may inevitably lead to resentment between mother and daughter.

[vi] Both possibilities here convey the "shametenance" that Chambers describes in "Nature, Your Frenemy." Enhancing one's body under immense discretion signals a sense of a shame over the action; it exemplifies the idea that one's body is "not fine as it is, and [one] doesn't want [others] to know what it takes to look [a certain way]" (90).

[vii] In the age of social media beauty tutorials, it seems that beauty practices are accessible everywhere, but being able to access these practices has always been, in part, a privileged action. Having the time to find practices that work for you, or having the loved ones able to share what the best practices are, are both examples of the privilege at play in beautification.

[viii] The Mod Bod is a representation of all the "shortcuts" or "unnatural" means to body modification, such as plastic or weight-loss surgery, or steroids. As Chambers shares in the *Intact* chapter "Keeping Things Natural," something is natural—in part—because it is the "result of wholesome labour, not… corrupting interference" (53). The Mod Bod, and the operations it represents, falls short of this standard. The language here conveys that such paths to beautification are unnatural and inherently lesser than because they circumvent the founding norms of beauty, which is also consistent with how Chambers described society's aversion to artifice.

[ix] The language here is hyperbolic, but it highlights another aspect of how the beauty ideal operates as an ethical ideal. Adhering to Widdows' identification of the ethical aspects of beauty, this language shows that the beauty ideal is held collectively and conveys that the offense is more than just circumventing a negligible social norm. [x] Widdows identifies thinness as "[t]he primary feature of the beauty ideal," with women preferring to be thin over "almost anything else" (21). Thus, it makes sense that The Body Cart would limit its goods to parts that align with this ideal. The exclusion of bigger bodies also conveys an aesthetic distaste for fatness and is reminiscent of size exclusivity in store like Abercrombie & Fitch, a social occurrence further described in A. W. Eaton's "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," (1-2).

[x] As described by Widdows, this sort of language "directly invokes moral requirements and demands," because one *should* want to be their best version (30). It also highlights how the speaker has internalized these ideas by observing her mother's beauty practices with her elder sisters.

[xi] This aspect of The Body Cart and its operations is highly reminiscent of the ideas from the chapter fittingly titled "Shrinking Costs" in Kate Manne's book *Unshrinking*. Fitness and severely limiting one's caloric intake serve as the literal price of achieving the "ideal" body.

[xii] In "I'm Doing it for Me," Widdows challenges the idea that adhering to beauty ideals can truly be a product of choice if the people 'choosing' it are uniformed or vulnerable (209). The mother and Jasmine clearly exemplify being uninformed. Furthermore, this entire weekly practice grooms the speaker and her sisters to be particularly vulnerable to the beauty ideal and unable to perform informed consent when it comes to buying into the practice for themselves.

[xiii] This reaction exemplifies how living for the beauty ideal is both "austere and indulgent," (Widdows, 38). The mother must be exhausted and miserable from her efforts, but she is ultimately overjoyed at the sight of her rejuvenated beauty.

[xiv] Perhaps it is unrealistic for the mother to be a nurse and treat her body so poorly, but I think it highlights how pervasive the beauty ideal is. As we can see in the largely negative reactions to Dr. Katherine M. Flegel's findings about the moderately low mortality risks associated with being overweight or mildly overweight, even the world of science can show bias because of deeply ingrained beauty and aesthetic preferences (Manne, 37–40).

[xv] See Endnote xvii.

[xvi] The changes in the mother's body were natural products of aging; showcasing that, as Widdows succinctly shares, "the beauty ideal is self-defeating overtime—ultimately we all sag, wrinkle, and die" (42).

[xvii] Widdows emphasizes that in order for a beauty ideal to be effective, the ideal must deliver the goods of the good life. The mother's experience here exemplifies the converse. To quote Virginia Blum, as presented in Widdows' piece, "we are fated to lose both [work and sexual partners] if we don't retain at least the superficial vestiges of the original assets" (38).

[xviii] This sentence, paired with the sentence marked for Endnote xv, illustrates the key theme of this story. Although society plays a large and influential role in enforcing the beauty ideal, mothers have a substantial role in orienting their children towards the beauty ideal and its practices. Mothers likely do this in hopes of setting up their daughters for success, but due to the mother's inevitable failure of the beauty ideal, it also primes both parties for resentment. The mother will resent the daughter for her beauty; the daughter will look at her mother with disgust for her failure to adhere to the beauty standard, or as exemplified with the character of Maya, with pity for insisting upon a futile pursuit. The beauty ideal not only harms women as individuals: it fosters a self-perpetuating cycle of resentment between mother and daughter.

Cover Art: *Baptism*, by Geneva Hutchinson.

Geneva grew up in the south and has used her upbringing as a southern pastor's daughter to inform her artwork.
Her work investigates the complexities and intersections of purity culture, generational trauma, and spiritual abuse.
She uses domestic objects and religious rituals to inspire her work and material choices.
She works in a variety of mediums, such as photography and installation, and most recently has begun using embroidery as a traditional, gendered, labor, as a small way to honor the women who have gone before her.
Geneva received her MFA from the University of Notre Dame and received her BFA in printmaking and BA in communications from Clemson University.
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