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BRITISH COLUMBIA

# The Ethnograph

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Dear Reader,

This, the 8th edition of *The Ethnograph*, is a true labour of love. This year's team and authours have concocted a careful reflection of undergraduate anthropology on the North West Coast of Turtle Island. This edition is marked by hours of contemplation, conversation, reading, reflecting, and passion. *The Ethnograph* is an annual, student-run publication, sponsored by the UBC Anthropology Students' Association, publishing thoughtful, intersectional works that reflect the dynamic field of anthropology. We open a window for undergraduate authours, students, and readers to find one another on an accessible platform.

We would like to thank everyone involved in the creation of this edition, and the teams before ours for establishing this avenue of creativity. We would especially like to thank the students of UBC Anthropology and the support of the Anthropology Students Association. We would also like to thank the faculty of the Department who took special interest in our work and lended us their expertise in considering this year's submissions. Lastly, we would like to thank you, the reader, and the dedication of our anthropology community, without whom *The Ethnograph* would not exist.

Importantly, we would like to recognize and thank the unceded lands of the x̱w̱məθḵw̱əy̱əm (Musqueam) on which we gathered to create this edition. The University of British Columbia as an institution maintains and continues the legacy of colonialism on these lands, and elsewhere. We ask that you reflect on whose lands you are currently on, and the gift it is to be there.

We encourage all who are reading to become involved in the publication in the future. This student-led journal provides an avenue to be heard, and to lift the voices of our peers. Your involvement, be it through submissions or as a part of the editorial team, will help this publication flourish. We are privileged to have this platform of conversation. We look forward to the future editions of this journal, and hope you do as well.

From the River to the Sea, From Turtle Island to Palestine.

“The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free.” - Maya Angelou

High kicks,

**Laura Derby** (They/She) & **Julia Robertson** (She/Her)  
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# Artist's Statement

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*Nurse Log of a Moss Forest*. 2023. [Photograph taken on Pentax SP 1000, 35 mm film].  
Harrison Lake, BC, Canada.

Captured on a venture into the forest for a reprieve from the heat, this photograph was taken on a warm day in July just off the lakefront. The trees scatter the afternoon light as it illuminates the moss hanging from the many levels of branches. The effervescent glow of the forest will only last a moment as the sun continues to shift lower in the sky. The narrow depth of field isolates a moss-covered fallen log. On it, a patch of sunlight highlights a small fern frond—the first of many plants that the log will nurture. Just as this photograph has captured an ever-changing environment, so too will this collection of anthropological studies capture a living moment of culture within a written account. And just as this photograph forecasts growth based on the remnants of the past, so too will the anthropologists of today grow on the work before them.

Best Paper Award**Two-Spirits, Four Medicines: Two Spirit Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation Day and Embracing Community**

Nenaa'ikiizhikok Kinew Erdrich (She/They)

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**ABSTRACT**

In this essay I reflect on my experience of Truth and Reconciliation Day as a Two-Spirit person. I illustrate how Queer, Trans, and Two Spirit (or 2S) Indigenous individuals have been affected by the legacy of Canadian Residential Schools. I also engage with the history of the term Two-Spirit and the politics surrounding this identity.

Aaniin nindinawemaganidok, Nenaa'ikiizhikok indizhinikaaz. Gokomisinan indizhinikaaz gaye. Pizhew indoodem. Onigaming gaye Mikinaak Wajiwin indoonjibaa. x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm akiing indaa noongom. English translation: Hello, 'Healing Sky Woman' is my name. 'Our Grandmother' is my second name. I belong to the Lynx clan. I'm Anishinaabe from Onigaming and Turtle Mountain. I currently live on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm land. Because of the cultural and spiritual content of this essay it is only appropriate to introduce myself, my kinship, and the land I'm on using my Indigenous language, Anishinaabemowin. Miigwech.

I was secretly relieved when my partner, Tru, and my best friend, Waxase, discussed going on a hike rather than attending a Truth and Reconciliation Day gathering. As the cousin, niece, daughter, grandchild, and great grandchild of Residential School survivors, it's imperative to embody the actions which my ancestors are owed. Yet, I've never joined a gathering on Truth and Reconciliation Day as the thought of attending has always been too overwhelming. This hike was the first time I hadn't shut myself away and retreated to bed for the duration of the national 'holiday.' That morning I packed my backpack with tobacco, sage and smudging materials, and we all drove to the bottom of Cypress.

For Plains Indigenous people there are four major medicines: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. The joining of these medicines represents the power in a unified community. The Canadian Residential School system specifically sought to destroy community and cultural bonds through the abduction, forced assimilation, and systemic abuse of Indigenous children. Residential Schools enforced colonial structures such as heteropatriarchy, gender binary, and white supremacy onto Indigenous communities, all of which continue to plague Indigenous communities today. This opposes the historical fluidity of gender and sexuality which many Indigenous nations held prior to the introduction of settler colonialism. Today, the legacy of Residential Schools can be witnessed within the continued existence of heteronormativity, misogyny, and cisnormativity. Distressingly, these systems have suffused themselves within our community gatherings and traditional ceremonies.

The imposition of heteropatriarchal and cisnormative systems onto Indigenous populations was a direct strategy to promote assimilation into settler society. In Marie Laing's Zine *Two-Spirit: Conversations with Young Two-Spirit, Trans, and Queer Indigenous People in Toronto*, she interviews various Two-Spirit people in Toronto on how they understand and experience their identity. As Laing notes, there are multitudinous interpretations of Two-Spirit identity and it is imperative to acknowledge that any way which a Two-Spirit individual identifies is fundamentally authentic (Laing 2017, 14). The only illegitimate definition of Two-Spirit would be if a non-Indigenous person identifies with or polices the term. The historical context of the term Two-Spirit is also crucial to this furthered understanding. When first introduced in the 1990s, the term Two-Spirit came from the Anishinaabe word

“Niizhoowadizi,” roughly translated to “Two Spirits.” This word was never intended to refer to a specific identity but rather was supposed to be an umbrella term for marginalized individuals who exist at the intersection of Indigenous and Queer. Two-Spirit as an identifier was created in reaction to the exclusion of Queer relatives from Indigenous communities and the centering of whiteness within Queer communities. At its conception, the term Two-Spirit (2S) was intended to be generative and fluid so as to encompass any and all experiences of Indigeneity and Queerness, and thus for 2S, Queer, and Trans individuals to find community. Returning to etymology, because of its roots in Anishinaabemowin, Two-Spirit was also intended to only be a substitute word until individual Indigenous nations could connect, retrace, and embody their historical understandings of gender and sexuality. This context is often ignored and misunderstood outside of Queer Indigenous communities but is extremely important to acknowledge for those hoping to provide solidarity with 2S, Queer, and Trans Indigenous peoples.

The common definition of Two-Spirit posed by non-Indigenous and cis/straight Indigenous people, is to embody both the masculine and feminine spirits however this definition lacks cultural nuance. In Anishinaabemowin, there is little emphasis placed on the construction of a gender binary, rather the major category is spiritually alive or not. So, for English speakers first hearing the term ‘Two Spirit,’ the assumption was that the ‘two’ referred to the duality of the gender binary as well as the embodiment of ‘masculine and feminine.’ However, (and as a beginner speaker I don’t want to overstep in my summarization) the term ‘Niizhoowadizi’” could also refer to embodying other Anishinaabe dichotomies beyond gender such as animacy or spirituality. In assuming an overly simplified and rigid understanding of Two-Spirit, the colonial centrality of the female; male gender binary is replicated in a context where it is at the very least unwelcome if not directly harmful.

As someone who grew up in the Midwest, where the only thing resembling a ‘mountain’ is a short uphill walk, my body was not ready for hiking anything more than a slight tilt. After sweating and gasping my way up, we reached the first stop of our hike, a lake watched over by moss, cedar trees, and Whiskey Jacks. I suggested we investigate the small, flat trails weaving around the lake, mostly due to growing soreness in my calves but partially to admire the area. Soon we landed at a sunny spot where we sat and watched the water striders propel themselves over the water. The rocks we had stopped at had strips of dark lichen growing on them which for any Anishinaabe will bring to mind the story of Nanaboozhoo and why lichen grows in stripes. The story involves the Nanaboozhoo, commonly called the Trickster, their butt cheeks, and a bear. After reciting the story to my captive, two person audience, we began to discuss Nanaboozhoo as a Queer figure in Anishinaabe oral tradition. Nanaboozhoo, the half man, half spirit who in some stories, helped create the world, is a shapeshifter always getting caught in compromising situations. In these stories, Nanaboozhoo frequently transforms between man, woman, gender queer person, and other than human beings. When transforming, Nanaboozhoo has romantic, sexual, and intimate relationships with people of various identities. Recently, some have begun to recognize Nanaboozhoo as representative of the fluidity between gender and sexuality which many Indigenous nations had prior to colonialism. For 2S, Queer, and Trans Indigenous people, Nanaboozhoo’s antics and ever changing identity reflects a personal story of discovering our identities in relation to our Indigeneity.

While the Trickster is a major character in Anishinaabe oral tradition, their queer and gender-fluid nature goes relatively ignored. This reflects a move within some Indigenous communities to fundamentally ignore the existence of 2S, Trans, and Queer Indigenous identities. As discussed, this is a remnant from Residential Schools and the settler colonial system at large. In Marie Laing’s zine, an interlocutor named Fenris discusses the historical context of homophobia and transphobia.



[the gender binary] is a piece that is really deliberately from genocide, thinking back to Residential Schools and the really rigid gender norms that were enforced there. So I think that that is a piece where that colonial trauma, it manifests within us as two-spirit people working through that, but it also manifests in our community members re-enacting that violence (2017, 28)

For Indigenous peoples today, historical colonial violence manifests through the perpetuation of settler structures which were not traditionally part of Indigenous cultures, such as the colonial gender binary, heteropatriarchy, and cisnormativity. The cyclical nature of intergenerational trauma converts violence which one generation faced and reproduces it onto the next, in this case through the validation of transphobia and homophobia as being “traditional.” This rhetoric of Queerness not being “traditional” echoes mainstream homophobic rhetoric that Queerness is somehow “new” or “more prevalent” though it's more likely that it's just more accepted to be Queer now than in the past. To refrain from understanding all Indigenous cultures as a monolith, it is also important to note that some Indigenous cultures were not traditionally welcoming to Queerness. Yet, that fact does not make 2S, Queer, and Trans people of those Indigenous cultures any less valid in their identity. Furthermore, rather than focusing on validating Queerness or homophobia as traditional through specific historical examples, it might be more beneficial to focus on Indigenousizing the future through providing safe, community-focused spaces, events, and services for all Indigenous people including our 2S, Queer, and Trans relatives.

Truth and Reconciliation Day is a national day created in acknowledgment of the discovery of unmarked graves, the historical legacy of Residential Schools, and the atrocities committed at Residential Schools. This day of national mourning brings to mind the immense loss of the children found in graves, as well as the grief of our languages, stolen generations, ceremonies, cultural knowledge, oral tradition, and our oral histories. In addition, for many Two Spirit, Queer, and Trans Indigenous people who come from nations which historically had broad understandings of gender and sexuality, there is grief over the loss of inclusion, acceptance, and community.

Tru, Waxase, and I, each identify with the term Two Spirit in some way. Apart from being two of my closest friends they also deeply relate to my experience as a Queer Indigenous person in Canada. This is why I chose to spend Truth and Reconciliation Day hiking through the woods, shielded by cedar trees, sharing jokes and stories. Tru, Waxase, and I, all come from different nations and have had varied experiences in what it means to be both Indigenous and Queer. However, we have all experienced transphobia, cisnormativity, and homophobia within our own Indigenous communities. Many elders say that community is medicine but when we're pushed away from our communities for our identities, it creates a barrier in accessing that communal healing. For Trans, Queer, and Two Spirit Indigenous people, it is integral to nurture relationships and solidarity within our community so that we can one day be the Trans, Queer, and Two Spirit elders we wish we could have had.

After hiking for a few hours we reached the goal of our hike, Eagle Bluffs. We sat high over Vancouver as the sun started to lower. While gazing over our home, now shifting to gold in the mid afternoon sun, my partner and I brought out our tobacco. Holding a small pinch in each of our hands we prayed. I began with a prayer for the healing, health, and happiness of those that I love who were forced into Residential Schools. I said a prayer for all Residential School survivors, their families, and their children, who live in Vancouver. Once done, I looked over the edge of the cliff and let the tobacco scatter from my hand, as it fell it looked like it was floating over Vancouver. Eventually, Waxase brought out their sweetgrass letting thin smoke float around all of us. Tru and I unwrapped the Buffalo Sage which our friend gathered

for us and we began to smudge. Guiding the smoke with our hands and bringing it close to our hearts then washing it over our bodies. Listening to the Whiskey Jacks sing over Vancouver, we each asked for healing, acceptance, and love to re-enter our communities and thanked the spirits for guiding us here. After arriving home and reflecting on my first time leaving the house on Truth and Reconciliation Day, I realized we had accidentally brought the four medicines throughout our hike: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, and the cedar trees which we walked under. The potential for community healing is always there, it requires effort similar to my breathless journey up to Eagle Bluffs, however medicine always finds you. Miigwech, Mi'iw.

### References

Laing, Marie. 2017. *Two-Spirit: Conversations with Young Two-Spirit, Trans, and Queer Indigenous People in Toronto*. Toronto.

## Secrecy Unveiled: How Palantir Technologies Steals Your Right to A Secret

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### ABSTRACT

Secrecy and the maintenance of secrets have long been important sites of study for anthropology and other cognate disciplines, but few papers reflect on how the social power of secrets are supplanted when corporations are involved in taking secrets away from the individual. This paper reflects on the death of old notions of secrecy and the birth of modern notions of secrecy under a corporate capitalist system, and how previous anthropological thought on secrecy and power relations may be applicable to secrets. To do so, I examine how a data-mining company called Palantir displaces secrecy from the individual and their social sphere by constructing secrets as a piece of data to be bought and sold. Through examining previous anthropological thought and drawing on a case study of Palantir's operating system, Gotham; I intend to show that Palantir positions itself as a 'secret extractor' and how his reputation grants the corporation social power. However, this social power is not taken at no cost to social well-being; the extractive and unethical practices that Palantir uses to gather secrets are not being properly addressed

### 1. Palantir and Secrets

Many corporations engage in some sort of secrecy, be that through patented knowledge unavailable to competitors or information that is obscured from the public eye, organizations regularly conceal information from the public, shareholders, and competitors (Federenko et al. 2023). While it is worth examining the implications of routine corporate secrecy, of particular interest to me are corporations that sell secrecy by extracting (often unwittingly to the subject) the secrets of others and construct themselves as "secret" corporate organizations. Palantir Technologies is a multi-billion dollar data-mining and analysis software company founded in 2004 using CIA seed money (Greenberg 2013; Johnson 2016).

Data-mining and analytics, at the broadest level, is a multistep process that involves taking large, often disparate, sets of data—this could be a structured database such as names and birthdates or streaming data like the live feed from a video—and integrating them on one platform and allowing users to interpret the data (Han et al. 2012). A major aspect of data analytics at Palantir is called link analysis, which involves looking for relationships between different entities in a data set (Types of Analysis). One of Palantir's flagship technologies, Gotham, relies heavily on link analysis to find people's names, car license plate information, or address. (Gotham). As of 2015, the last time a Palantir client list was leaked, Gotham was utilized by a large number of United States government departments, including the CIA, FBI, NSA, military, and municipal police departments (Burns 2015). Gotham, as an operating system, has broad applications and Palantir generally does not disclose how contractors may utilize the system (Gotham).

However, reporting has revealed that Gotham has been used to integrate previously siloed datasets between the FBI, to build a controversial license plate registry in California, and to create a vast and searchable network of data gathered from immigrants at the Mexico/United States Border (Burns 2015). In 2019, Palantir took over Project Maven from Google and is applying Gotham to AI drones used for bombing (Peterson 2019). The public rarely has access to information about the technologies that may be used to gather data about their lives, and fewer opportunities to decide if they want to allow this surveillance in their lives. It is important to consider how these corporate intrusions on the lives and secrets of individuals affect the person, their community, and our perception of such corporations.

Prior to examining how Palintir and its leadership uses secrets and the performance of secrecy as a tool for social domination, it is worth understanding what exactly secrets are- a challenge in and of itself. Secrets as an anthropological concept are particularly formidable to describe, as the obfuscation of knowledge exists in myriad forms to serve nearly endless sociocultural functions (Simmel 1906; Depenport 2019). “Knowledge” is of central concern to many anthropological research. I will extract a working definition of secrets from a historical understanding of knowledge studies in anthropology.

While there are many anthropological works that examine the impacts of contemporary surveillance on social relations, there are few articles that examine how Palintir’s extractive practices have repeatedly negatively impacted communal well being. Through understanding how secrecy and power have previously been considered, we can come to new conclusions about the influence of surveillance on our lives.

## 2. Social Importance of Secrets

Explicit engagement with limited fields of knowledge (logic, rationality, and cognition in particular) was one of the key disciplinary developments of anthropology in the 20th century (Boyer 2005). Contemporary anthropological research often aims to more adequately recognize and categorize so-called alternative forms of knowledge- indigenous knowledge and “local” knowledge (Hobart 1993). In these conversations, **non**knowledge has often been relegated to being the same as ignorance or a lack of knowledge. While studies of ignorance often debate the analytical or sociological interest of a lack of knowledge, they view nonknowledge as merely the negative inverse to the positive “true knowledge.” (Geisler 2013). This dichotomous understanding has the potential to prevent anthropologists from examining “not knowing” as a creative social form in its own right and a powerful discursive tool used in subjugation.

Within the field of not knowing, there is the more acute “secret”- whereas non-knowledge may be understood as the lack of something, secrecy contains an innate element of social performance. This distinction between not telling and telling is where philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that secrets exist- “here is a secret of denial [*dénégation*] and a denial [*dénégation*] of the secret. The secret *as such*, as secret, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself” (Budick & Iser 1996). By performing the telling or explaining of a secret or even by performing the not telling of a secret, the secret (knowledge) is simultaneously obfuscated yet reproduced. More powerful still at shaping the secret in a social and cultural setting is the performance of **obfuscation** of a secret. When one reports to another that something is “secret”, they simultaneously position themselves as a knower of secret knowledge (or at the very least, aware that such knowledge is secret) and the “secret” takes life as a social form. As Dave Boothroyd (2011) argues, “If no one knows it, it is not really a secret at all, and for this thing to be regarded as a secret in the first place, I must have already shared it with someone, or be able to share it—at the very least with myself” (47). The secret as a social form both grants knowledge of social life and affects the public perception of the secret holder.

From this, we can begin to understand that the social position of being known as a ‘secret holder’ will have some effect on the individual. Corporations, and their public-facing aspects, are also aware of this relationship. Palintir, and its co-founder Peter Theil, are intimately aware of the lurid appeal and social power that secrets have, he is quoted in an interview “very great business is built around a secret that’s hidden from the outside. A great company is a conspiracy to change the world; when you share your secret, the recipient becomes a fellow conspirator..” (Perell 2021). Yet, Palinitir does not adequately recognize or engage with the ethical and social implications of selling another person's secrets.

In conversations of secrecy and contemporary surveillance technologies, there is an unfortunate near-exclusive focus of the psychic harm caused by the blatant yet unavoidable surveillance of secrets that most people are subject to in their daily lives. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* distills this attitude succinctly, "If we fail to take notice [of surveillance] now, how long before we are numb to this incursion and to all the incursions? How long until we notice nothing at all?" (2019, 327). What Zuboff and readers fail to grasp from this understanding is that having one's secrets observed does not merely create some higher-order, spiritual harm- rather these intrusions have devastating material effects on the lives of the observed. Through examining previous thought on secrecy, rather than 'not knowing', we can come to a clearer understanding of the power imbued in social relationships by secrecy.

Beyond an explicit political power, secrets are a deeply powerful social phenomena that exist in myriad ways across cultures. From Lurhman's (1989) work on secrecy in contemporary witchcraft practitioners in the United Kingdom in which she asserts that secrecy "creates value" and purveyors of secret knowledge have a way to safely enjoy a sense of control to Niko Besnier's (2009) ethnography on Nukulaelae atoll that explicated the social importance that gossip and secrecy has- secret gossip is simultaneously a tool that builds social bonds and reveals intricate social relations. Secrecy, as a discursive phenomenon, "can be used to characterize, categorize and organize virtually any kind of social fact" (Kirsh 2015, 102). In these ways, anthropologists can understand that secrets are far greater than the knowledge they conceal- secrets can be used to understand social power and relations.

If secrecy can be used to categorize and understand power, how does it affect the person when these secrets become points of data that can be bought rather than an interrogative and discursive tool that serve key social functions? What happens to the way we understand and relate to these corporations?

### 3. Gotham Sans Bat

One of the companies most utilized products in Palantir Gotham, is surveillance technology. Palantir publicly markets these services as protecting American interests at home or abroad A featured quote on the Palantir website from General James N Mattis, former United States Secretary of Defence, of for Gotham states that "[Palantir] came up with groundbreaking technologies that help us make better decisions in combat zones. You are giving us advantages right now that we need." (Palintir). Palintir's business model is predicated on the extraction and selling of others' secrets. In fact, it is this reputation for being able to extract even the most closely held secrets that allows Palintir to have such a large market value and why their services are contracted to assist government agencies.

Palnitirs' ICM (Investigative Case Management) software, based on the Gotham platform, was used to facilitate ICE's (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention and deportation of the families of migrant children in 2017. ICM collects utilities data, housing data, DMV records, healthcare provider information, live cell phone recordings, and license plate images to build a profile on someone (Mijente 2017). This information is usually "secret" (ie, obfuscated from the general public) and typically requires a warrant to access if ICE is using traditional methods (Mijente 2018). However, when accessing this previously secret information through Palintir's technology, officers did require a warrant because this information was collected and aggregated by an outside contractor, rather than law enforcement.

According to an ICE (2017) handbook, ICE officers were instructed to use ICM to document any interaction they had with migrant children at the border. After a profile was created on the child and their family, Palintir's FALCON search engine,

also a part of the GOTHAM platform, was used to find links between ICM data sets to produce webs of relationships between individuals (Mijente 2017). This information was used to arrest and deport 433 individuals related to migrant children who themselves never came in contact with law enforcement (ICE 2017). It is essential to understand that these individuals would typically have not been deported, as those who are undocumented but do not come into contact with law enforcement are not. Individuals who requested to see reports on themselves or their children were denied, citing security concerns (ICE 2017). Immigration status *could* be viewed as a point of data, but this does not capture the “secret” that is one's illegal immigration status.

This view of immigration status as data not as “secret” does not capture that the public revelation of an undocumented immigration status and the consequences that follow is an extraordinarily destructive event to the lives and communities (Mckinnon 2018). Throughout the weaponization of ICM against migrants, Palintir's co-founder Alex Karp described Palintir's work with ICE as “very limited”, despite their contract with ICE in 2017 being the second-largest they had held (CNBC Television 2020). This is a purposeful obfuscation of the relationship that Palintir has with law enforcement. When it was revealed that Palintir's contributions were key to deportations, they faced no legal consequences or legislation limiting the use of their technologies.

To understand how this stealing of secrets creates power, we can use Michael Taussig's understanding of secrecy. Inspired by Elias Canetti's dictum, “secrecy lies at the very core of power” (1962, 90), Michael Taussig emphasizes the political importance of a secret. Taussig (1999) understands secrecy at the state level through the concept of a public secret, which he defines as “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated.” These public secrets are indicative of hierarchical social orders, making domination unspoken. For Taussig, the ground of social power rests when one party is able to instruct another, “Even when X is generally known, you are enjoined to act and think as if X cannot be known.” It was known that Palintir was surveilling the public in this highly intrusive manner while simultaneously obfuscating this fact from the public, this is the definition of power.

It is the power to obfuscate knowledge, to be the one who dictates that which can be socially known and unknown that is most revealing of social power. Those who may have secrets are those in power, while those who are observed are subjugated (Taussig 1999). While Taussig found his site of understanding in fascist governments and other anthropologists have applied similar understandings of secrecy as the apoptosis of power to cults (see Pitt-Rivers 1997); this knowledge has rarely been applied to the modern, slick, corporate entities that functionally dominate contemporary North American society. Clearly, Palintir entrenched itself in the extraction of secrets and in doing so has positioned itself as a social entity of great power. In fact, it is this reputation that allows Palintir to be a highly profitable corporation.

By examining how Palintir, both the corporation and its employees, have the right to secrets but the subjects of their technologies do not, we can facilitate a new understanding of power relations that rests on the right to secrecy. Secrecy becomes an expression of power and commodity in its own right, those who have the privilege to remain opaque (such as tech billionaires) in an increasingly observed world are those who have power (Nuttal and Mbembe 2015).

We must aim to understand that these data-mining entities such as Palintir do not just extract non-socially charged pieces of data, they are taking secrets and creating a market value out of them. This is different from the state surveillance of the past, wherein secrets were extracted or created in pursuit of a larger political goal but did not have an explicit economic value (Manderson 2015). When it

becomes the right of a corporation to reveal secrets, this reinforces the existing power dynamics in which individual rights are subjugated under corporate interests. The dynamics of who can claim a secret and who exercises the right to tell that secret create new norms pertaining to the power of a secret, and are centrally linked to practices in today's capitalist society. If secrecy is central in creating and maintaining social relations of all forms, then we must understand how old notions of secrecy are displaced by "big data."

#### 4. The Price of Secrets

The monetization of secrecy is shaping a new power structure, one beyond previous understandings of secret knowledge and government interest. In this new age of secret extraction, corporations are not just acting to fill the needs of government surveillance, they are gathering secrets and billing themselves as knowers of secret knowledge for the express purpose of gathering social power which can be transformed into market value. When Palintir is viewed as a corporation that has the ability to gather lots of information, they undertake larger contracts and gain market value. However, these practices have not adequately been addressed in the legal sphere because this secret agething is existing beyond the government. Palintir's knowledge practices and personnel move across corporate-state boundaries and into the legal gray zones that emerge with the privatization of war and the outsourcing of intelligence functions (Welker et al. 2019).

I would be remiss to not mention that Palinitr agreed on January 14th, 2024 to assist the Israeli military in their ongoing genocide against the people of Gaza at the 2024 inaugural board meeting in Tel Aviv. (Newman 2024). Joe Lonsdail, a founding member of Palantir, said "Israel is now doing what it has to do to eliminate the bad guys...We are trying to make sure the U.S. stays more advanced to their enemies and keep them scared...So we were trying to keep the good guys armed and ahead" (Yadev 2023). This will likely involve integrating the data from Israeli surveillance technology with Palnitir's analytics tools, including Palantir Gotham. Palestinian people are unable to access the surveillance data that is produced about them, this knowledge becomes secret. (Abu Jabal 2020). This invasion into the private lives of Palistinians to gather data which will be used in a genocide against them is despicable. Israel has previously used unnamed algorithms on data gathered by the NSA. Hundreds of hours of phone calls between Palestinian Americans and their relatives in the West Bank were secretly exchanged to Israel in 2014, this information was used to arrest Palistians who committed no actual crime (Abrahms 2014). This unmitigated surveillance has never been addressed as unethical or illegal by Israel's international partners, and is allowed to continue. As the genocide continues, we must consdier the profit and power that corporate entities can access by being part of the killing machine.

It is of the utmost importance, beyond the academic exercise of exploring corporate secrets, that we recognize and understand who has the right to have secrets and thus, who has the right to live. As we enter a new age of surveillance and AI, corporations and their governing bodies must be forced to reckon with the fact that they are selling explicit social power- not mere points of data. Previous understandings of secrecy allow us to deeply understand how central and powerful secrets are to human livelihood, we must use his knowledge to hold corporations accountable and demand they cease opaque surveillance of us.

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## Arts organizing as urban commoning: A case study of community-based artistic practice, participation, and governance

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores dynamics and outcomes of community-based arts organizing in the urban context of Vancouver, Canada. Through a case study of a community-based Vancouver arts collective, it explores the social, spatial, and material resources, as well as the practices, strategies and repertoires that are used by this collective to enact community-based arts initiatives. Ethnographic methodology, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observation methods, were used to explore the practices, strategies, and experiences of the collective. Various theories of commoning, including the works of Ostrom, Fournier, and Federici, are employed to dissect how the ‘commoning’ of social, cultural, spatial, and economic resources is enacted by the collective, becoming a potent strategy to enable collective artistic practice. The ethnography reveals that this habitus of commoning, as it is enacted through community-based arts practice, enables powerful forms of grassroots community governance and self-determination.

### 1. Introduction

*I arrive at the neighbourhood house on a Saturday afternoon in January and pass into the main community gathering space - a room filled with tables in a long U-shaped formation at the center and a small kitchen at the back. Today, the tables are covered in buckets of miscellaneous craft supplies, pencils, and tools. The walls temporarily serve as a gallery for the event, hung with photos of art installations that have taken place throughout the neighbourhood, quotes from appreciated artists and community organizers, and guidelines and inspirations for the day's activities. I've been invited to participate in this community arts workshop by Arthur (all names of groups, individuals, and identifying places are pseudonymized). Arthur is a member and organizer of the Elso and 108th collective and an active member of many of the other arts- and community-oriented initiatives in his community. He spots me entering, and immediately starts introducing me to other participants who — just like me as a participant observer and researcher — are here with their own diverse motivations, curiosities, areas of knowledge, and interests for participating. I meet a retired architect, an organizer of a local woodcraft collective, an urbanist with a long white beard, a retired teacher, a painter who works as a barista at a coffee shop across the street, and many others. As the room fills and folks settle into their spots around the table, Arthur calls attention to the wall of quotes, photos, and guidelines, and begins to discuss the afternoon's purpose, activities, and guiding philosophy. We are gathered for a charets workshop: a community gathering and collective design session where we will collaboratively imagine and make initial plans for arts installations, events, and interventions to take place in public spaces throughout the neighbourhood. I partner with a retired architect and a performance artist, both of whom have worked on initiatives with the collective in the past. The architect discusses her ideas for a group art piece: an archway-like installment for the entrance to a nearby public plaza, referencing the importance of creating collective symbols and demarcations of space for community gathering places. The performance*

*artist probes the architect about her ideas on these traditions and meanings and discusses how we might meld this project with his ongoing initiatives to facilitate participatory performance art in the plaza. The workshop goes on with such collaborative imaginings and plannings for another hour, until the neighbourhood house gathering space is needed for another community group. We wrap up the workshop, gather the materials and sketches into buckets and folders, and leave the room, gathering on the sidewalk outside to talk, and finally going our separate ways.*

I open with this vignette as it presents many components of community-based artistic practice that I seek to explore in this article. It encapsulates the role and use of spatial and other material resources in enabling collective, community-engaged artistic practice. It shows the practices, strategies, and repertoires of participation and collaboration that facilitate collective engagement with and contribution to this collective practice. The vignette also encapsulates the dynamics of membership and participation in the collective's artistic initiatives; the ideologies and constructions of community-engaged art that are created and reproduced through their activities and practices. In my exploration of the collective's work, I am interested in this nexus of resources, repertoires, collaborations, and ideologies of art that inform and enable the collective's community-engaged artistic practice. Through this exploration, I argue that these practices, as they are enacted by the collective and collaborating community members, constitute a potent form of localized community-led governance, specifically enacted through various collective artistic acts.

In the vignette, as participants collectively plan for artistic installations in their neighbourhood, they enact a form of collective decision-making about how space and resources in their community are to be mobilized, distributed, used, and adapted. Throughout this article, I come to understand this collective decision-making as a form of community governance, enacted by the collective's members and collaborators through collective artistic practice and through the tangible and aesthetic alterations to space that they produce. To dissect the dynamics and impacts of this community governance, I engage with the concept of "commoning". Commoning, as it has been conceptualized by Ostrom, Fournier, Federici, and others, describes the form of community-led collaboration and governance that determines and guides how these resources are mobilized, as is the purpose and consequence of the event described in the vignette (Ostrom 1990; Fournier 2013; Federici, 2019). In the context of community-engaged artistic practice, commoning is particularly present in the process of making resources collectively available and accessible. As such, this form of commoning functions to actively contradict and resist the privatization, exclusivity, and barriers to accessing artistic resources, and to facilitate collective determination of the use of resources for artistic activity and intervention (Ostrom 1990). Commoning also describes the collection of repertoires and practices through which collective creation and community governance occur. In the vignette, this can be seen in the use of the neighbourhood house, the use of the charets collaboration model, or the gathering in small groups to bring together diverse artistic backgrounds and ideas. These practices and repertoires themselves constitute important resources in the community arts commons, as actions such as the gathering of people in the neighbourhood house becomes a resource in and of itself that facilitates community governance through artistic practice (Fournier 2013). To understand this dynamic, I draw upon Fournier's essential contribution to commoning theory: that commoning exists in both the social organization *of* the commons and the social organization *for* the commons. In Fournier's conceptualization, the social organization *of* the commons refers to the governance of commons resources, as it is conceptualized by Ostrom, such as the use of space, funds, and materials to enact the event in the vignette above. In contrast, the social organization *for* the commons refers to the activities, repertoires, collaborations, connections, etc. through which this collective

governance happens. In the vignette, this can be seen in the existing and developing relationships between community members, the act of bringing together diverse artistic skills, or the use of the charets model itself to develop and institute artistic planning.

By investigating the collective's community-engaged artistic practice, and its role in their local community, this study contributes to an understanding of the social organization and social construction of artistic practice as a form of community-engaged governance. It does so by analyzing the mobilization of resources, systems of collaboration, and guiding conceptualizations and construction of art that are most relevant in the specific context and practice of community-oriented, grassroots arts. In tandem, it contributes to sociological understanding of the commons and social practices of commoning, by dissecting how community-based arts practice enacts the social organization of the commons. This contributes to a growing area of literature examining the relationship between community-engaged artistic practice and civic engagement and grassroots governance (see Eynaud et al.'s examination of artistic collaboration within the context of civil society organizations [2018]; Zilberstein's examination of grassroots community organizations as forms of resistance to displacement [2019]). Such research has found participatory arts practice to have strong potential for fostering civic engagement, civic identity, community agency and resiliency, community governance, and to provide community groups with tools and collective power to resist urban processes of gentrification, displacement, top-down development, and privatization. This study contributes to this growing body of literature by lending support to studies that find community-oriented artistic activity to be a potent tool in community engagement, the assertion of community agency, and bottom-up governance. Further, it expands upon this research by dissecting the dynamics of resource use and interpersonal and inter-organizational networks and strategies that are mobilized to foster practices of commoning through and for the community-based arts. Ultimately, this study adds to a growing and diversifying body of literature on the functions, impacts, and potential of community-based arts, and on the role and potentials of artistic practice in fostering civic engagement and community governance.

## **2. Case Study and Methodology**

These areas of inquiry are explored through a case study with a local art collective, whose members generously shared their time, skills, insights, and expertise, and welcomed me as a guest to their activities, events, and spaces for the purposes of this study. The 108<sup>th</sup> and Elso collective is a group of multidisciplinary artists, community organizers, and individuals with other vocations and ways of describing themselves, who collaborate to create place-based community-engaged arts initiatives in their local area. These initiatives range from workshops, such as the one described in the vignette, to open mics, installations, performance interventions, and beyond. They work in collaboration with other artists, community groups, and organizations to bring these initiatives to life, to the street, and to the community they are part of. Their work occurs in a variety of spaces throughout their neighbourhood, which is diversely used for gatherings, events, work sessions, installations, and interventions. These spaces, which are essential to both the production and sharing of their work, include, the collective's "art house" which serves as a residency and creation space; public spaces, such as parks, plazas, sidewalks, community gardens, etc.; and semi-public community spaces such as neighbourhood houses, fieldhouses, and community centers. Of these spaces, the local plaza is a place of particular relevance. A blocked-off section of road that connects the neighbourhood's main commercial street to a residential area, neighbored by two cafés and populated by picnic tables, benches, and planters, this space is heavily used by the collective and wider community for gathering, intervention, and engagement. Reflecting the importance and abundance with

which it was discussed and used by participants in interviews, focus groups, and observed activities, this space is abundantly discussed and considered in this study.

This case study methodology included focus groups, collective mapping activities, observation, and participant observation. Ethics approval for behavioural research with participants was obtained with the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board in 2022 (ID: H22-03122). These were done to investigate the resources, spaces, places, relationships, networks, practices, and strategies employed by members of the arts collective in their collective and community-based artistic practices and initiatives. Participants were gathered by contacting organizers and directors of several local, small-scale arts groups or societies. I invited organizers and directors to reach out to active members of their groups and communities who might be interested in participating in the study. Potential participant groups were identified through local knowledge of arts organizations, through personal connections and networks, and through online profiles of arts organizations or societies. The group that ended up participating and constituting the case study subject was recruited by contacting a member and organizer of the collective who I had met at an art event and had maintained contact with. This organizer then connected me with other members of the collective and supported in coordinating focus groups and inviting me to opportunities for participant observation as discussed below.

Focus groups were conducted over a two-month data collection period in January and February of 2023. Focus groups took place at the collective's "art house," which serves as a studio and residency space for several members of the collective, as well as a site for community arts gatherings, workshops, performances, and other events. The focus groups were made up of different groupings of members of the collective. The intention of this grouping approach was to have different voices and experiences centered and amplified throughout the data and to provide opportunities for the ideas and perspectives of different members to inform, inspire, contrast, and resonate with each other in different ways. Focus groups were selected as a methodology for data collection for their propensity to enable the creation and development of data and analysis amongst participants, a strength which was observed and beneficial in this investigation of collective artistic practice (Morgan 1997). Focus group questions sought to explore characteristics and trends in participants' individual and collective artistic practices, including the resources that are necessary and most heavily and frequently drawn upon in these practices. Focus groups took place in the shared living spaces of the art house at the invitation of participating collective members and residents. Integrated with these discussion-based focus groups were collective mapping activities, which were employed to elicit and collect visual and spatial data on trends in the use of public and private urban space for collective arts activities. They were also employed as a tool to engage visual thinking and expression, and to trigger responses and conversations related to and expanding upon the research questions. A large paper map of the city and markers were available, placed at the center of the discussion circle throughout the focus groups, and participants were asked to mark locations, events, and other spatial information related to their individual and collective artistic practice and the wider artistic community they were part and aware of. Collective mapping activities have the capacity to capture intersecting embodied, material, spatial, geographic, and economic experiences of social and physical space. As such, this method presented a powerful way to explore participant's interaction with and experiences of the social material and spatial dynamics and resources in their neighbourhood and how they pursue the activities central to their collective artistic practice within this context. Collective mapping methodologies were informed and adapted from the *Iconoclastas Manual* (2016).

In concert with focus groups and collective mapping activities, data was collected through observation of portions of the art house where the collective works, installs, and holds artistic shows and gatherings, and where some participants reside. This

included observation of the nearby local plaza and other outdoor spaces that are used by the arts collective and collaborators for installations, shows, gatherings, interventions, etc. This also included observation of the shared living spaces, some study/studio spaces, shared outdoor spaces, and the public sidewalk space that extends from the art house property and is used for installations. As I learned about the centrality of community-engagement initiatives and art workshops to the community-based artistic practice of the collective, it became evident that it would be valuable to attend these events and gatherings as a participant. Thus, the final method used for this case study was participant observation of several events including a “design charet” workshop at a local neighbourhood house and an installation opening at a local community center. The process for collecting data from these observation and participant observations sessions were informed by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw’s guidance for writing ethnographic fieldnotes (1995).

Focus group transcripts, field notes from observation and participant observation, and memos on the data collection process were coded using qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Coding was initially inductive, with attention to resources, spaces, practices, relationships, strategies, etc. employed in the collective’s artistic practice, arts initiatives, and relationships with the wider community and partner institutions. After several rounds of inductive coding, findings were organized into thematic categories of resources, relationships, and organizational practices. Throughout the coding process, once initial inductive coding and thematization had been established, deductive coding and thematic coding was applied. This phase of the coding sought to systematically identify connections between the data and the relevant literature and to systematically investigate the data using relevant theoretical frameworks and concepts. This resulted in strong presence and reliance upon the theoretical frameworks of art as collective action, resource mobilization, and the social organization of the commons (Bečević & Dahlstedt 2022).

This combination of qualitative methods sought to draw upon the voices, expertise, skills, and knowledge of members of the collective. It enabled me to learn both from their own descriptions of their perspectives and experiences, as well as directly from their enactment of commoning and community governance through practice, collaboration, and intervention within their own community.

### **3. Findings**

The practices and strategies employed by the collective show that community-based arts practice constitutes a form of social organizing *of* and *for* the commons. That is to say, it makes resources more collectively available and amenable to community-engaged artistic activity, it enables community governance of these resources, and it fosters a system of community organizing through the arts, a system which constitutes a commons in and of itself. This is present in a wide range of activities, practices, and strategies employed by the collective, ranging from the resources drawn upon for artistic practice, to the philosophies of participatory art that inform and guide the organization and execution of different installations and initiatives. I begin by discussing the collective’s location and use of resources to enable their community-based art practice. I find that the use of publicly-accessible and community-oriented resources is an essential practice in the social organization of and for the commons. I then discuss the dynamics through which the use of such publicly accessible and community-oriented resources, in concert with the collective’s philosophies of art and artistic practice, influence and inform the installations, interventions, workshops, etc. they create. Finally, I discuss the dynamics of participation and membership in the collective and their activities.

#### ***Mobilization of community-oriented resources***

The collective draws upon a wide range of publicly accessible and community-oriented resources to support their place-based, community-engaged

artistic practice. This web of resources includes those that are specifically designed and facilitated to support community engagement initiatives, as well as those that the collective adopts, co-opts, and reshapes for this purpose. This range of resources includes more tangible resources, such as funding, artistic materials, and spaces for creating and installing art. It also includes less tangible resources, like relationships, collaborations, and partnerships with other artists, arts groups, neighbours, local community organizations, municipal governmental actors, and other actors.

To support the material needs of their artistic activities, the collective relies heavily upon Neighbourhood Small Grants (NSG), a funding stream provided by the locally based charitable organization, The Vancouver Foundation (Neighbourhood Small Grant, 2023). The collective relies upon successive NSG's for diverse community arts projects. For instance, the material costs of the workshop described in the vignette — including many of the artistic materials, food and beverage, etc. — were covered largely by NSG funds. Here, this community-oriented grant stream enables access to materials that are essential in the collective planning of future arts installations. It in turn enables the connectivity and collaboration that happens between community members through this planning process, as well as the final artistic productions themselves. Noting the value, centrality, and agility of NSG funding to their collective arts practice, one participant commented,

You know Neighbourhood Small Grants, NSG? [...] They're wonderful. I've done like 10 or 12. [...] Because they're very grassroots, right? So, you kind of work that way. So, we did like one was a mobile library. We built this kind of like for the plaza. Another one was a poetry reading. Another one was the [...] with music... so we got a grant for buying speakers and kind of better-quality mics. So, that was happening as summer like once a month we would have open mic, you know.

Here, community-oriented grant funding not only supports the collective's core arts activities, but also supports agility and diversity in their initiatives, and supports their grassroots, community-based approach. This allows arts initiatives to be responsive and adaptable to the interests and ideas of the collective, as well as to the wider community of artists and community members that engage with these initiatives. As seen in the quote, the collective predominantly allocates funds to activities and installations that aim for public community engagement. They take a role in governance by distributing these funds in such a way that the community can engage in artistic activities in public space. What is relevant to our understanding of commoning through community-based arts is not only that materials are needed for such activities, but that the use of these resources is effectively governed by the interests and objectives of the community by members of the community themselves. This governance is supported by the structure of the grant stream itself, revealing the impact and necessity of public funds for small-scale, community-directed artistic activities, with funding structures that allow for agile, collective, adaptive decision-making in how funds will be used. These financial material resources are commoned not simply because they are transferred to the hands of the collective, but because the collective mobilizes them for projects and installations that the public can engage with. They in turn become parts of the public, collective, space of the neighbourhood. The usage of these funds for such collective public activities and space is determined through collective decision-making processes, and thus exemplifies commoning in action (Harvey 2012).

We can also see the dynamics of commoning in how the collective organizes their activities in relation and collaboration with other community groups. While grants are received by a particular actor or group, the practices and initiatives of the collective act to distribute these resources through artistic creation and installation. Both the resources purchased by the grant, and the impacts and benefits of engaging with community-oriented arts initiatives, is spread, expanded, and multiplied

through this process of collaboration and community engagement. Describing their use of funds from the Vancouver Foundation for the production of a community arts event, one participant commented:

“We did a great big banner. This big [gestures to animate idea of banner] for the music night. We were, we were involved with the Chestnut Park community garden and we were trying to raise money for that. So, we had - it was like it was like an open mic kind of thing.”

Here, funds are not only used for the creation of an arts initiative, but to spread resources (NSG funding, public space, artistic skills, etc.) and to build collective capacity for other community initiatives. Through this use, the NSG funds become part of a much wider, diverse pool of resources that is commoned amongst community groups and local residents. There is a reciprocal process of commoning: commoning of the collective’s artistic activities, public space, and funding avenues, which together are mobilized to raise funds for the community garden, and commoning of the fieldhouse’s spatial resource for the collective’s artistic practices, which is used by the collective for other installations and initiatives. Thus, commoning is a habitus carried and formed within the collective itself, as well as within the network of community actors it is embedded in.

### ***Mobilizing Interpersonal and interorganizational networks***

The creation of art, as potently theorized by Howard Becker, is a fundamentally collective process, embedded in social networks of collaboration and the divisions of labour that are necessary in the production of any product. The production, distribution, and presentation, as well as the social construction and valuation of art within particular socio-cultural contexts, is not practiced in isolation, is not assessed and displayed neutrally or objectively, but happens through social systems of collective action and collective meaning-making (1982). This is the major contribution of Becker and other sociologists of the arts: that art is created and distributed by interlinked and interdependent networks of actors - through the division of their labour, specialization, and expertise. This foundational sociological understanding of the arts is both exemplified and expanded upon in the diverse artistic and community engagement work of the collective. Essentially, the collective draws upon a vast network of interpersonal and interorganizational networks to support their community-engaged arts practices. This includes a diverse array of actors and relationships, including connections and collaborations with other artists, groups, community service organizations, and local businesses, as well as larger non-profit and municipal institutions. These relationships and networks, and how they are mobilized for community-engaged arts initiatives, are instrumental in the collective’s social organization of the arts commons. In the opening vignette, we see relationships between different members of the collective, relationships between the collective and the neighbourhood house who invites them to use and adapt the space for their purposes, and relationships between the collective and other community members who join and contribute. These relationships are the fabric that enable the workshop to come together and to produce ideas and plans for future installations. These relationships and networks, and the practice of drawing upon them to create community-based artwork, are an essential example of organizing *for* the commons. They represent the practice and repertoires of organizing to share artistic ideas, to discuss the philosophy and goals of participatory art, to design installations in public space - to collectively govern community resources for the purposes of community-based art.

We can explore the dynamics and importance of these interpersonal and interorganizational collaborations by further dissecting the public plaza that was being imagined and planned for in the vignette. The plaza is an important resource and community gathering space where the collective collaborates with other



community members and groups to create installations, interventions, performances, and other publicly accessible, community-engaged arts initiatives. As such, it is an important spatial commons, mobilized through collective artistic action for diverse purposes that foster community engagement and collaboration. Describing the actors and processes involved in this use of the plaza for community arts initiatives, one participant describes the stewardship of the plaza as a collaboration between:

3 groups. Little mountain neighbourhood house; our collective. [Marks onto map]. and then Coco [local business directly neighbouring the plaza]. So the city has given [permission]. This [indicating the Neighbourhood House on the collective map] is like sort of like a neighbourhood [organization] as semi-private. This [indicating the storefront of a local business on the collective map] is a private, I guess commercial. So, it's kind of an ideal thing. So, when there's meetings with the guy [city planner who coordinates the stewardship of local plazas] - Erwin is the coordinator. And of course, there's the overarching: there's the city, the big thing is Erwin and the city. [...] Not to be kind of, like, arrogant but they love what we're doing. I think Erwin was... they thought ours was quite unique because it was more participatory.

Here, a variety of organizations, actors, municipal policies and systems, and interpersonal and interorganizational networks and relationships, intersect and collaborate to enable the use of the plaza for place-based arts initiatives. These practices and repertoires of collaboration that are created to collectively steward the plaza become essential in the commoning of the plaza. It is a potent example of what Fournier describes as organizing *for* the commons - creating and fostering the relationships, community connections, and repertoires of collaboration that themselves become part of the commons (2013/4). To Fournier, these repertoires and interactions are part of the material and substance that constitutes the commons, as they are the repertoires and practices that people draw upon to be able to collectively organize the commons (Fournier 2013). The intention here is to think of the commons not only as the resources themselves, but as the nexus of resources, practices, and systems through which these resources are held, governed, nurtured, and used by the collective. As such, the commons includes the interpersonal collaborations, discussions, relationships, and community that are involved in the collective organization of common resources. Ultimately, the commons is a set of tangible resources as well as actions, relationships, strategies, practices, and ways of thinking and collaborating (Fournier 2013/4). In the quote above, the network described includes an array of individuals, groups and organizations that make up the social landscape of their local community, and the landscape of governance that informs public engagement with the arts. Social organization *for* the commons is enacted when this network of relationships and governance is drawn upon to plan and facilitate collective artistic engagement with the public space of the plaza. This is coupled with the social organization *of* the spatial commons of the plaza, which I dissect further in the following subsection.

To dissect this case of organizing *of* and *for* the spatial commons, it is relevant to consider the diverse positionalities, strengths, contributions, and resources, as well as the distinct but somewhat overlapping and compatible values, purposes, mandates, and interests, that are brought by each group to carry out community-engaged arts activities in the public space these groups collectively steward. For example, in the case of the interaction with Erwin, coordinator and representative of the municipal government, the collective draws upon the interacting social and institutional resources of a) permits to use public space, b) policies that enable the collective stewardship of the plaza space, and c) support from a designated government employee, and d) the city's stated and enacted interest in supporting community-based, "participatory" initiatives — those that

engage and involve a diversity of citizens and organizations. This nexus of social and institutional resources allows them to use the plaza for community-engaged arts, and to collaborate and share support with other community actors and organizations. In each partnership that the collective draws upon for the collaborative creation of community-oriented arts initiatives, a similar nexus of bureaucratic or institutional factors, the specialized resources and capacities uniquely held by that actor or group, interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships, and value for participatory community involvement coalesce and are mobilized to support community-oriented art initiatives.

Together, these actors that the collective collaborates and interacts with, and the diverse resources, interests, capacities, etc. they each contribute, inform and influence the community-engaged arts initiatives that take place at the public plaza. At the root of this network of actors and collaborators, is an interest in contributing resources, skills, expertise, and connections in ways that foster publicly accessible, community-oriented arts activities. As one participant reflecting on a previous installation project at the plaza remarked, “It’s really wonderful to bring people together, you know, with an art event and to have a little bit of money from the Vancouver Foundation to make it happen.” Here, with the support of community-oriented funding discussed above, the collective’s community-engagement activities fosters the forms of community organizing which themselves constitute the social structure of commoning. As Fournier emphasizes, the value of the commons is not only its provision and distribution of resources, but its potential to foster the strengthening and construction of community bonds and systems of organizing for the commons (2013/4). These connections and collaborations themselves constitute the commons.

As is so often true, these interpersonal and interorganizational relationships and collaborations represent the social organization both *of* and *for* the commons. The strengths, capacities, and resources that are held by the municipal government actors are mobilized to enable community-based artistic practice. This represents the organization *of* the commons in that it converts resources such as permits, governance of public space, and municipal bureaucratic discretionary roles into resources that are accessible to and supportive of community-based art initiatives. Simultaneously, it represents the organization *for* the commons through the creation of relationships, practices, collective mobilization of values, which themselves become the commons - the repertoire of social organization which constitutes a pillar of the commons.

### ***Spatial resources and practices***

The use, design, and governance of the plaza ties into another resource that is essential in the creation and growth of community-engaged arts. Spatial resources that are publicly accessible and community-oriented provide essential opportunities for gatherings, workshops, collaborations, installations, interventions, performances, and other community-engaged artistic initiatives. Public spaces, such as parks, plazas, sidewalks, community gardens, etc., as well as semi-public community spaces such as neighbourhood houses, fieldhouses, and community centers, act as essential resources and tools for the practice of community-engaged arts. The collective draws upon a wide variety of such spatial resources as sites for their artistic initiatives in ways that represent the social organization both *of* and *for* the commons.

Through the actions of the collective (their community-engaged design of the plaza, their use of the space for installations and events that involve community members, etc.) the plaza becomes an important component of the commons. That is, it becomes a resource that is organized, mobilized, and governed by and for the artistic initiatives and interests of the local community. It is particularly relevant

that through the practices of the collective, this municipally owned, governed, and controlled street space is functionally turned into a collectively held and managed community asset. While this space is inherently open to the public, regardless of the actions of the collective, the use of the space for community-engaged arts initiatives actively involve community members in the creation, care, aesthetic design, and stewardship of the space— roles that would otherwise be performed by municipal government. In other words, the artistic practices and initiatives of the collective shift the stewardship, agency, governance, and creation of the plaza space from the regulatory and institutional hands of the municipal government, to those of the local community that participates in these initiatives – either as active creators or as engaged audiences. Here we see a powerful example of the social organization of the commons in that the collective and wider community organize and collaborate to imagine, guide, and govern how this spatial resource is used for community-based artistic activity. As David Harvey articulates, “while public spaces and public goods contribute mightily to the quality of the commons, it takes political action on the part of citizens and the people to appropriate them or to make them [commons]” (2012). In the case of the plaza, space that is initially publicly accessible is converted to a commons through the governance of the collective, through their adoption of stewardship responsibility from the municipal governments into their collective hands.

Simultaneously, as the collective practices this governance and establishes these repertoires of collaborating and negotiating with municipal actors, they enact the organization *for* the commons, which is inseparable from their organization *of* the commons. The practice, systems, and strategies of adopting of responsibility, governance, and agency from the domain of the municipal government into their collective, community-led domain, is an important and potent practice within their habitus of organizing *for* the commons.

This social organization of the spatial commons is also observable in the events described in the vignette. In the community arts workshop facilitated by the collective, where community members gathered to collaboratively imagine and plan for future installations at the neighbourhood’s public spaces we see the community-led organization and governance of this spatial resource of the plaza. As the artistic ideas and objectives of the retired architect and the performance artists come together to inform how this spatial resource will be designed and used, these community members enact the social organization of the urban spatial commons. Furthermore, this is not only an organization of the spatial commons, but of the other resources that support this collaborative community-based governance process. Here, the coalescence of community-oriented funding, use of public space for community-based arts, collaboration with other artists and organizations, and mutual support between these actors enables commoning through collective, community-led governance of this space and resources.

### ***Relationships between resources, repertoires, participation, and artwork***

These norms and practices of locating, using, valuing, and commoning community resources and networks are not divorced from, but rather deeply tied and mutually informative with the character, forms, and underlying philosophies of the artistic initiatives and creations themselves. The installations, interventions, performances, etc. produced by the collective are informed and influenced by the resources, spaces, places, materials, and social networks that are drawn upon for their creation. This means that the character and form of the artworks is highly influenced and characterized by the vulnerability and exposure that comes with exhibition in public space and by the adaptation and creation of art to engage public interaction. In other words, the use and governance of the commons for the creation of community-based artistic work informs the form and character of the art itself.

This was revealed frequently as members of the collective discussed the philosophies underlying and informing their participatory artistic initiatives. As one participant emphasized, “we're very much about guerilla, spontaneous thing, because the way our philosophy is kind of like, it's temporal.” Reiterating this theme and value of temporality, another participant reflected, “we tried with [the initiatives at the] plaza to, [...] we've been talking about even that art is not sacred, we can do temporary installations.” In these resonant reflections, the participants reveal that the temporality of the art both emerges from, and supports, the exposure and vulnerability of the art to the influence of public spaces, public resources, public audiences, and public contribution and adaptation. As such, the mobilization of the commons for artistic purposes informs the art that is created and installed. By centering and relying upon the spatial commons for their collective artistic practice, the art is consequentially rendered more exposed, malleable, and temporal.

This character and form of exposure, malleability, and temporality was also influenced and informed by the diversity of styles, approaches, opinions, and intentions of the combined contributions of many actors from many artistic and non-artistic backgrounds. This results from the practices and processes of community-engaged artistic creation and practice – in the collective's understanding, value, and philosophy of public involvement in the creation of the art. Embedded in and guiding their practice is a push for public participation in the creation of the art. As one participant emphasized, “we just want people to share and evolve. We don't want to kind of impose you know, like, you got to do this and if it gets wrecked, you know, it's bad or something.” Here, the creativity, agency, and involvement of community members is valued and prioritized over any permanence, aesthetic, or form that they seek to achieve in their art. This is exemplary of social organization *for* the commons, in that the priority of the social organization is the construction and bolstering of community ties and collaborations, rather than the use of resources for any particular artistic material production. As Fournier emphasizes, much of the function and impact of commoning is its capacity to be reproductive of community bonds. By prioritizing the involvement of community members in the creation, installation, and experience of art, over the artistic product's permanence, preservation, and exclusivity – and thus adapting artistic creations and practice to facilitate popular involvement – the collective fosters this reproduction of community and organizes *for* the commons through their artistic practice.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The guiding intention of this study has been to explore the dynamics and impacts of resource mobilization and organizational practices in community-based artistic initiatives through a case study of a place-based, community-oriented, grassroots arts collective. Through this investigation of the 108<sup>th</sup> and Elso collective's practices and repertoires of mobilizing community-oriented resources, interpersonal and interorganizational networks, and community participation in the creation of place-based arts, I find that community-based arts initiatives can enact powerful forms of commoning - of community organizing *of* and *for* the commons. These findings expand sociological understanding of modes and practices of commoning, as well as sociological understanding of artistic creation as a set of practices, repertoires, and social construction of art that can be deeply tied to community governance.

Through various community-based arts initiatives, the collective and participating community members enact community-led governance of the various material, spatial, and social resources that exist in their community and are amenable to community-engaged artistic practice. This finding of commoning at the grassroots level lends support to related studies that have examined the potentialities and impacts of participatory art as a tool of commoning and community governance. As such, this research is in dialogue with an expansive body of literature that explores

the role of artistic expression and organizing in claiming and asserting civic and community rights and agency, particularly within urban contexts. It is amenable to recent invigorations and mobilizations of the Right to the City discourse, which argues that the design, creation, development, and governance of urban space and its social functions should align and be informed by the needs, desires, and leadership of urban citizens, rather than dominated by market forces in favour of accumulation (Lefebvre 1968; Harvey 2019; Eynaud et al. 2018). The Right to the City has proliferated as a framework and discourse, informing and bolstering activist and academic practices and strategies, to articulate and enact the collective right of urban citizens to use and recreate urban spaces and urban social worlds in alignment with their needs, desires, and capacities. Or, as David Harvey summarizes, “to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way” (2012). This study adds the particular context and strengths of place-based grassroots organizing to the array of practices and repertoires of community engagement and governance through which the Right to the City can be claimed and asserted.

The practices of the collective also showed that the use of community-oriented resources and social networks foster an alternative construction of art as that which is accessible, exposed, and malleable to access, interventions, and contribution of the local community. In their community-engaged artistic practice and initiatives, the collective prioritized accessibility, exposure in public space, and involvement of community members in the creation. Through the organization *of* the commons for artistic creation - that is, the reliance on public and community-oriented resources - the collective proposes a social construction of art as that which is temporal, malleable, and exposed to public access and participation. Through the organization *for* the commons through artistic creation - that is the creation of community bonds and collaborations through artistic initiatives - art is constructed as that which is accessible, exposed, and contributed to by the community. By being involved in the creation of community arts initiatives - be it through workshops, events, performances, etc. - individuals with artistic and non-artistic backgrounds and identifications are involved in the social organization of the arts commons, and thus hold position and influence as members of the arts community. From this position, they are involved in the governance of the commons, of the resources, spaces, networks, etc. that are mobilized in the creation and practice of community-based arts.

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## **Critiquing the Institutionalization of the Red Dress Exhibit in the Canadian Museum For Human Rights**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the complexities of institutionalizing The Red Dress Project, a symbol addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s), within museums, particularly the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Specifically highlighting strained historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and museums, this critique emphasizes the risk of portraying an ongoing issue as a historical event, hindering public awareness and action. I will expand on my critique by utilizing my personal experience at the museum, not only as a museum patron, but as a Coast Salish, Two-Spirit person myself.

### **1. Introduction**

I vividly remember my mother gifting me a pair of beaded earrings for my nineteenth birthday. Deep red cylinders joined with string to form tiny red dresses that would dangle from my ears. Despite their allure and intricacy, these red dresses have come to represent the violence that Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people endure.

The REDress movement began in 2010 by a Métis artist, Jaime Black, from Thunder Bay, Ontario (First Nation Indigenous Studies 2009). The Red Dress Project invokes the use of red dresses hanging in typically empty spaces to generate remembrance and advance action on the national issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s). Black mentions that her work began mainly in Winnipeg, and through the grassroots work of Indigenous people and combined allyship, the Red Dress has become a widely recognized symbol for MMIWG2s throughout North America (First Nation Indigenous Studies 2009).

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, located alongside the Red River, demonstrates the Red Dress movement in one of its many exhibitions centered on human rights violations. I traveled to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) this October to observe the Indigenous experience depicted in the museum as a Coast Salish individual. Indigenous issues and experiences were highlighted throughout many spaces in the museum, invoking times of reflection. However, one particular space that situated itself in my memory was the Canadian Stories Gallery, where I was confronted with six dresses hanging from the ceiling against a photographed background of white birch trees. This exhibition is in the Level One Gallery entitled Canadian Journeys, which focuses on surveillance and language rights. The Red Dress exhibit at the CMHR provoked me to consider some potential issues that may be circulated when placing such a sensitive, ongoing issue into an institution of this kind. Therefore, I will be using my personal experience and relying on scholars' inferences to critique the institutionalization of The Red Dress Project. I will consider the strained relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums and highlight some contentions that may arise when memorializing current issues.

### **2. Indigenous Peoples and Museums: A Contentious Space**

Museums are contentious spaces for Indigenous peoples due to past and present colonial relations that exist within these institutions. Amy Lonetree acknowledged this in their work that surrounds decolonizing museum practices, emphasizing that "museums are already extremely painful sites for Indigenous peoples due to their history with colonial practices" (2012, 1). Lonetree understands this through the lens of early anthropological ideals, which stressed that Indigenous peoples and

communities were a fleeting race (2012, 8), leading to exhibitions that misrepresented and demonstrated cultural insensitivity to the communities they were portraying (Phillips 2012, 185). Indigenous communities were depicted as an image of the past rather than the everpresent hubs of vibrant, living culture they have always existed as (Harrison 2009, 10).

According to Phillips, when museums were becoming prominent institutions, it was common for them to acquire sacred material culture and even human remains during colonization and exploitation (Phillips 2012, 190). This created a relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums characterized by theft, forced trade, or removal without proper consent or understanding of the cultural significance. Lonetree (2012) also considers that museums were not spaces that offered open collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for some time, creating an even more tumultuous relationship. Through recent years, contemporary museum practices seem to attempt to lean toward incorporating Indigenous presence into their work (Lonetree 2012). This has been done through a myriad of collaborative practices, which all focus on healing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums. For example, The Canadian Museum for Human Rights held an event for Red Dress Day in May 2023 in which community members who have been affected by MMIWG2s brought artistic expressions of their grief to the museum for a two-day period in which guests were welcomed free of charge to view the materials. It was held as a demonstration of honor and remembrance of Indigenous kin who have been afflicted by the historical and ongoing crisis on MMIWG2s. However, this aspect of community engagement is not congruent with their permanent Red Dress Exhibition as it was only a two-day exhibition, and greater efforts must be made to facilitate collaboration and cultural recognition (Canadian Museum for Human Rights 2023).

Despite reconciliation efforts that have been made to decolonize museums, there are still issues at bay within Indigenous exhibitions, especially when they pertain to current atrocities that affect the communities surrounding the institution. There will likely always be a degree of separation between Indigenous ways of knowing and being from the curatorial approaches of museums due to colonial influences, both past and present.

### **3. MMIWG2s as a Crisis**

The fundamental question being addressed is why the Red Dress exhibition at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is concerning, and why institutionalizing the Red Dress project within museum walls is potentially dangerous. It is important to understand the imminent crisis of MMIWG2s and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' relation to it to further my critique against the institutionalization of this exhibition.

Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people disappear and are killed at an alarming rate. Homicides of Indigenous Women are six times higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Additionally, Indigenous Women constitute between 5% and 7% of homicide victims in Canada while making up only 2% to 3% of the total population (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2014). These are merely the cases included in the RCMP data; most go unreported or illicitly under-investigated (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2014). Many scholars understand this victimization from a pipeline of gendered colonization, where legislation such as the Indian Act or instances like the Sixties Scoop decentralized the matriarchs that Indigenous societies once sustained from. In turn, these acts devalued women, wives, and mothers in an effort to reflect patriarchal norms (Parsole & Campbell 2021, 198). The Native Women's Association of Canada estimated that in 2010 alone, there were approximately 1,181 cases of "[Indigenous] female homicides and cases of unresolved missing [Indigenous] females" (Dean 2015, 198). These numbers are not generous, and there are likely to be more, especially in



communities that struggle with mental health issues and substance abuse.

Approximately one month before the Canadian Museum for Human Rights opened, on August 17, 2014, the body of a young Indigenous girl, Tina Fontaine, was found in the Red River—only a few kilometers from the museum grounds. Though her murder did not strike uproar in the media, 2,000 Indigenous kin and others in allyship gathered along the shore of the river for a vigil for Tina's short life. She was only fifteen. The museum, which was in the process of opening, stayed entirely silent in regards to the young girls' murder, regardless of its mission statement that stressed the "public's understanding of human rights" (Dean 2015, 148). The museum did not comment on Tina or the vigil held for her and instead tweeted about the progress on their gift shop, indicating it was 'coming along nicely.' This non-response from the CMHR in 2014 indicates the general attitude towards MMIWG2s, where dismissiveness continually proves dangerous and fosters room for more Indigenous kin to go missing and return home. Simultaneously stressing that cases such as Tina's call for active attention to the crisis of MMIWG2s, rather than simply memorializing them further down the road.

Furthermore, this kind of response affirms the need for movements such as the Red Dress Project that placed pressure on the public to look, and having red dresses hanging in spaces devoid of embodiment (i.e., in forests, in windows) demonstrates the need to have some form of public engagement.

#### **4. Institutionalization of the Red Dress Project**

Institutionalizing The Red Dress Project, specifically in a museum space, is an area of contention. As mentioned previously, museums have historically portrayed Indigenous peoples, cultures, and communities as "frozen in time" (Lonetree 2012). The biggest fear surrounding a current crisis being played in a museum, especially in a section that highlights historic movements across history, is that public interaction will ascertain MMIWG2s to be a resolved issue or one that needs reconciliation. Rather than acknowledging it as a crisis that is being lived every moment for the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Typically, we engage with museums as sites of memory (Shelton 2006, 500) to reflect on and learn about instances of the past. An example of a museum as a site of memory could be the Canadian War Museum, where military history is the focal point, and their exhibitions are presented with the intention of "honouring and remembrance" where "each gallery highlights defining moments in Canada's military history and the ways in which past events have shaped the nation" (Canadian War Museum 2005). It is less common to approach museums as direct spaces to interact with action. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights museum statement stresses the goal to "explore the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, to enhance the public's understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others, and to encourage reflection and dialogue" (Canadian Museum of Human Rights 2024). Though it encourages dialogue about human rights, public interpretation of this exhibit may be skewed without clearly explaining how MMIWG2s is an ongoing issue. Additionally, it is evident that this issue needs more attention than reflective dialogue, and it is unclear if the CMHR has taken part in this or encouraged public action. Viewing something as fixed in time rings true with many instances of memorials. Rowlands and Tilly (2006) write about memorials and their implications, highlighting that they are "designed to fix history and are associated with a degree of remembering, usually associated with a given moment in time," posing a risk of separatism from the present moment (Rowlands & Tilly 2006, 510). In comparison, The Red Dress Project embodies both a memorial for the MMIWG2s and a simultaneous call to the public to take action by raising awareness for the issue.

One particular moment in my visit to the museum where I felt a particular pull towards public action, and away from the institutionalization of this project, was

when I was looking out onto the city streets of central Winnipeg, and the Red River, where Tina Fontaine's body was discovered eight years ago. Looking through the windows, we see more Red Dresses, but not in the same format of photographed trees with plaques as inside the museum. Looking outwards from the museum, Red Dresses can be seen hanging from trees, swaying in the wind. Red Dresses were also hanging around small tents, where houseless people built community. Upon a closer view, there was a large banner that read "Camp Mercedes," hanging upon one of the tents. Red Dresses wrapped this encampment, indicating that this community specifically had direct ties to MMIWG2s. Red ribbons were tied, and handprints were painted on the bridge that crossed over the Red River, leading away from the museum. #NoMoreStolenSisters was painted alongside a medicine wheel mural that was also visible from my viewpoint inside the museum. Seeing the community engage in tangible action serves as a reminder that this is an active issue many Indigenous communities are facing today. Not only is this seen in Winnipeg, but rather, there are community based initiatives spreading awareness for this ongoing issue across Canada. In Vancouver, every year on February 14th, The Women's Memorial March crosses the Downtown Eastside. Victims, families, women's rights organizations, allies, and other community members rally together in a call for action, while also remembering and honoring those who were murdered, or have gone missing (Lewis 2024).

This example of community engagement was powerful and functioned as a protest to the current social climate that victimizes Indigenous women and as a public art piece that allows the public visiting the museum to visualize the lived reality of MMIWG2s. It is not a peaceful display against a photographed background. It is an active experience, filled with trauma, and is not in a space in which it can solely be memorialized.

## 5. Conclusion

The Red Dress Project serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s). The project has become a symbol of remembrance and a call to action. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums has historically been fraught with colonial practices, misrepresentation, and cultural insensitivity. While efforts have been made to decolonize museums and engage in collaborative practices, challenges persist within these institutions. The Red Dress Project, a contemporary issue addressing the abhorrent uptick in disappearances and homicides of Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people, faces the risk of being perceived as a historical event tied to issues of colonial past rather than an ongoing crisis. Museums, often seen as a site of memory, allow the inherent memorialization of current issues such as MMIWG2s to persist, and may inadvertently contribute to a perception of separation from the present moment, hindering the necessary public action and awareness needed to address the ongoing crisis. We can look to cases such as Tina Fontaine to understand how a dismissive attitude also highlights the importance of movements such as the Red Dress Project, which places pressure on the public to confront the harsh realities of MMIWG2s. The concluding challenge lies in finding a balance between memorialization and active engagement, which is where the critique of The Red Dress Exhibit in the CMHR stems from. While fixed memorials risk separating the issue from the present moment, The Red Dress Movement must be understood as an active exhibit, an example of art functioning as a protest, and a stark representation of the traumatic reality. In essence, the institutionalization of the Red Dress Project within museums prompts a necessary conversation about the portrayal of contemporary Indigenous issues, urging institutions to actively engage with communities, prioritize public awareness, and address the ongoing crisis of MMIWG2s with the sensitivity and urgency it demands.

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## Contemporary Fairy Lore and The Tooth Fairy: Structures to See Girlhood and Growing-Up in Parent-Child Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

The use of supernatural narratives and folk beliefs reflect societal beliefs, desires, and fears. In Canada and the United States of America, one of the largest folk beliefs is the Tooth Fairy. This paper explores three phases of fairy representations: The folkloric fairy, the Victorian-era literary fairy, and the contemporary fairy. The contemporary fairy is grounded in auto-ethnographic reflections of familial folk fairy beliefs and early 2000s fairy representations. This paper describes fairy folk traditions like the Tooth Fairy as structures to help process fears of growing up too quickly for both the child and adults. Additionally, this paper views the shift of fairies in early 2000s media and literature as part of a broader capitalist and patriarchal narrative. Supernatural narratives of fairies currently act as a structured rite of passage and a model to young girls for their desired attitudes and roles as they grow up.

### 1. Introduction

Fairies have, and continue to be, socialized reflections of the culture they are embedded within. In contemporary Canada and the United States of America, many beliefs around fairies are received and popularized within media representations. In this essay, I will discuss literature on the folklore of fairies in comparison with completed auto-ethnographic research on my personal family fairy folklore. I will discuss three phases of fairies: 1) the folkloric fairies, including fairies as symbols of fear and femininity; 2) the shift in the Victorian era to create the domesticated and cute 'literary fairy'; before exploring 3) contemporary fairies including Disney Fairies and the Tooth Fairy as informed through my auto-ethnography. I argue that fairy beliefs, especially Tooth Fairy rituals, function as a structure to assist adults and children handling fears of growing up. Additionally, by critically analyzing the early 2000s North American representations of fairies I argue that fairies act as a role model to shape children—particularly young girls—to be subjects in a capitalist and patriarchal society.

### 2. Who Have Fairies Been

#### 2.1 Folkloric Fairies

Much of this essay focuses on the contemporary monetized fairies, however, the intersection of girlhood and fairies invokes a discussion of folkloric femininity which is known for its darker, fear-based roots. The qualities associated with fairy folklore have significantly shifted over time, discussed in books and essays by Purkiss (2000), Silver (1999), and Magliocco (2019). These authors acknowledge the longstanding folkloric fairy, whose qualities imitated cultural fears as they changed over time. The roots of fairies originally reflect “our fear of what we do not know” (Purkiss 2019, 11). Reflection of societal fears is very common for folkloric supernatural creatures, and the original folkloric fairies are no exception. In *Strange and Secret Peoples* (1999) Carole Silver explores femininity in folk legends. She discusses that supernatural figures who were primarily portrayed as female were described as self-assertive and out of the control of men, disconnected from patriarchal society (Silver 1999, 175, 176). This was portrayed as a negative thing, often linked with Satanism. Silver (1999) evidences this by looking at legends of fairies, alongside witches, as two distinct creatures that were coded similarly as “the greatest threat to society” (176) and showed fears of “weakening of the patriarchal and hierarchical underpinnings of the church” (9). While this associated threat to society disappeared over time, the association between fairies and children grew. Originating in the belief that folkloric fairies stole children, fairies developed into a

beloved supernatural creature associated with promoting childhood and innocence.

## ***2.2 The Victorian Shift to Literary Fairies***

The literary descriptions of fairies, particularly seen in Victorian times, are sites of a major transform of fairies to create the contemporary 'literary fairy'. The transition towards a cute and harmless fairy—as it can be recognized in contemporary literature— can be traced back to the original folkloric projections of female supernatural beings. In contrast to the folkloric fairy, the literary fairy is a version of women that is “confined and domesticated” in order to subdue the qualities of women they fear (Silver 1999, 100). There is a process of “sweetening and simplifying fairies” at the same time as rendering them not simply small, but tiny (Purkiss 2000, 182). The miniature scale of fairies originally made them “manageable” and “laughable” which allowed the fairies of the literary lore to lose much of the malevolence, fear, and violence that was seen in the folkloric versions (Purkiss 2000, 182). The creation of tiny fairies is a product of literary representations compared to being a construct of folkloric practices (Silver 2000, 187). This process of domestication that fairies faced is a projection of how to deal with fears about women. Women can be turned cute and tiny—confined and domesticated—just as representations of fairies have been. Fairies have seemingly progressed away from this fearsome monster typical to folkloric representations and into gentle, tiny, winged playmates for children. In the Victorian era, the concept of childhood became a defined and recognized period of life; connecting children to fairies helps characterize the innocence, imagination, and playfulness associated with childhood. It was demanded for children to demonstrate this new necessary feature of childhood—imagination—by showing a belief in fairies (Purkiss 2000, 254). Fairies became a popular motif in children’s toys, books, and theatre plays in the Victorian era rather than a manifestation of fears associated with femininity.

## **3. Fairies and Innocence as a Marker of Childhood**

By correlating childhood with fairies, outgrowing a belief in the supernatural is a marker of outgrowing childhood itself and the subsequent loss of innocence. The Victorian “child as perfect innocent” (Purkiss 2000, 220) was further promoted in the rising “child-centred view of the family” popularized in post Second World War America (Purkiss 2000, 220; Tuleja 2012, 17). The period marked as childhood exists in a boundary between adulthood and infancy, an example of liminal space which the supernatural, including fairies, occupy. A child’s innocence helps them enter this liminal space of supernatural fairy belief through their flexible, or weak, “boundaries between let’s pretend and reality” (Purkiss 2000, 290). This innocence that fairies became strongly linked to then turns fairies into playmates that are “outgrown as children mature” and leave this innocence behind in maturation (Silver 1999, 118). As a specific example of this, discovering that the Tooth Fairy (or Santa Claus) isn’t real is a rite of passage as much as participating in the belief and practices. The division of children and adults is reinforced in folkloric beliefs as “people lose the ability to see fairies as they become adults” (Magliocco 2019 paraphrasing J.M. Barrie, 117). In my family fairy folklore, children were the ones who believed in the fairies while guardian engagement fostered the belief and curiosity. The type of play my sister and I engaged in was ultimately inaccessible to adults because our innocence allowed for full immersion into the fantasy. Even without first-hand proof, it did not inhibit our faith that we were inhabiting the same landscape as fairies. The keepsakes that came out of participating in our belief system are artefacts that reflect a bygone childhood, one which can only be explored by adults vicariously through children.

## **4. Contemporary Fairies**

### ***4.1 The Tooth Fairy***

The Tooth Fairy is one of the most widespread modern ‘American’ folk beliefs only second to Santa Claus (Tuleja 1991). Childhood is rapidly fleeting equally for those who are afraid to grow up and those excited to leave it behind. The Tooth Fairy as part of this period of growing up “marks a boundary between one stage of childhood and another” signified by the loss of baby teeth (Purkiss 2000, 315). The modern tooth fairy likely originates in European folk practices of giving lost teeth to animals including “crows, birds in general, and rodents” (Tuleja 1991, 16). Tuleja claims that the rise of accessible media sources including newspaper, television, and radio in the mid 1900s in America was critical for the Tooth Fairy to shift “from a relatively obscure folk belief into a national custom” (1991, 17). The role of the Tooth Fairy is to prioritize excitement in a potentially fearful experience where you have no control over the progression of change; you can not stop a tooth from falling out. The roles children and parents play in the ritual facilitated by the Tooth Fairy belief becomes a way to ease the period of transition.

#### ***4.2 My Family Fairy Folklore***

As a child, my older sister and I had extensive folklore traditions in relation to fairies, especially present in relation to The Tooth Fairy. To set the scene, we were both incredibly creative, avid readers, and constructed complex systems in our play with toys. We had a particular affinity for fantasy which fuelled our attachment to fairy lore. The Tooth Fairy traditions that my sister and I engaged in included (1) putting a lost tooth in a small glass of water beside our bed so the fairy would have to go in the water to retrieve the tooth and leave a coin, therefore leaving the colour of their fairy dust (glitter) in the water; (2) creating a small rest area out of doll toys for the fairy where they could dry off their wings after going in the water; (3) writing letters to the tooth fairies to inquire about the magical system and society they were from. Questions in these letters could include personal information about each fairy who visited—as it was not a singular tooth fairy but any fairy whose job was to collect teeth—and what purpose our tooth would serve for them. Our family’s reciprocal traditions to encourage this behaviour were formed through creating an illusion of these fairies visits by methods including (1) taking the tooth, colouring the water, and leaving a coin; (2) creating intricate, colourful letters from the fairies; (3) responding to the questions from my sister and I in said letters and by leaving notes with answers regarding the functionality of the magic system, information on the society and culture, and each individual fairy’s personal identity.

Outside of these active tooth fairy traditions, fairies remained featured in the ways we interacted with the world. They were integrated into the books we read, adventures exploring our paternal grandmother’s flower beds for ‘garden fairies’, and our maternal great-grandmother creating two paintings gifted for each of our rooms based on the imagery in the fairy books. The multi-generational involvement in our fairy beliefs is what shows the multiple actors—besides children—in this folklore; these were actions required from my family to uphold my sister and I’s engagement with these supernatural beings. The creation of my great-grandmother’s paintings shows how involved the family, specifically the female family members, were in encouraging these childhood folk beliefs. The paintings (Figure 1 and 2) are based off the illustrations by David Christiana (Figure 3 and 4) found in Disney fairy books written by Gail Carson Levine (2005). In another example, my maternal grandmother told me of a time I had lost a tooth when I was staying with her. She frantically got help from her friends nearby—women who were Aunties to me—to get all the supplies needed to perform her part to keep my youthful belief alive. My ritual of the tooth fairy is unique because it required such involvement from my family. Although it was a childhood belief, it was a family practice. I was inspired by the media I consumed, but my faith was encouraged by the ‘actions’ of the tooth fairies and the continued opportunities for fairy involvement like in the garden or seen in paintings. Fairy beliefs were an immersive experience of my childhood that required external contributions which transformed it into a family folklore practice.

### **4.3 Parental Involvement**

Imagination, innocence, and cuteness became markers of childhood modeled through fairies. Material for this imagination is not solely isolated to peers and play but is “invariably well stocked with materials placed there by adults” (Purkiss 2000, 254). Purkiss’ belief that parental involvement influences imagination and fairy belief is supported by Tucker who says that “adults sometimes take significant roles in children’s folklore” (2012, 405). Additionally, in a study of modern North American folk beliefs, the Tooth Fairy demonstrated high levels of parental participation which is directly linked to a child’s level of involvement and belief in the myth (Prentice et al. 1978, 626). Within the myth-related activities of the Tooth Fairy, the adults must take a significant role in order to foster belief. We can see this reflected in the auto-ethnographic family fairy folklore of this essay. Parental involvement was a defining feature in the extensive knowledge and practices that contributed to my experience of tooth fairies. Multi-generational encouragement was key to the development of imagination in my sister and I as young girls.

However, parental involvement is more than just facilitating a child’s belief. Purkiss pushes it one step further by discussing the adults indulging in these “cute” fairies. Although it may be portrayed as adults entering the children’s world, in fact, Purkiss claims it is flipped: “the Cute World [of fairies] exists just for the adult, and the child must play along” (200, 256). This view contends with previously discussed ideas of the fairy world existing solely for children, however, it is important to acknowledge that when children grow up and forgo their fairy beliefs it is a loss for adults as they no longer can access interacting with fairies through their children.

Adult indulgence in the fairy world is supported by my auto-ethnography’s final card from the tooth fairies seen in Figure 5. Even when we children vocalized that we had outgrown believing in this myth, our mother still indulges in creating one last card from the Chief Tooth Fairy to wish us farewell from our belief and fairy tradition. It reads: “I was sad to hear that you do not believe in the tooth fairy anymore! Luckily your mom does, and she left 6! of your very old teeth for me to collect.” This evidence supports Purkiss’ theory of inversion of who the fairies’ world belongs to. The parental figure still holds the ability and desire to engage with this “cute” world, it is just the children who stop playing along. By engaging with the folklore, it allows parents to embody the myth themselves; they become part of the innocence again and immersed in their children’s worldview which is seen as precious while it lasts.

### **4.4 Providing Structure to Face Fear**

The original roots of fairies reflected fears, and this modernized fairy, particularly tooth fairies, reflects that the period of growing up can include a fear of change. Even with their helpful and kind-hearted appearance now, fairies reflect fears of innocence and imagination being lost. Although inspired by the literature in this essay, this theory of fairies providing structure to process fears of growing up is a synthesis of personal family fairy folklore and the claim that fairies can still reflect societal fears in contemporary society even after becoming tiny and cute. Fairies are associated with innocence, childhood, and imagination; as mentioned previously, learning the ‘truth’ of The Tooth Fairy is a metaphor for receding innocence and gullibility (Tuleja 1991, 13). The Tooth Fairy is a rite of passage that occurs multiple times throughout the ages at which children lose their teeth.

Although only children can ‘interact’ with the fairies, necessary parental involvement to foster these beliefs indicates a purpose of engaging with this belief for adults. The belief practices of the Tooth Fairy offers an outlet to soothe fears and give excitement to this change marked by children losing their teeth. Losing teeth is potentially a fearful experience because of the foreign sensations, but also because it is evidence of growing older. Tooth Fairy rituals have predetermined actions and

roles that distract both children and adults; it turns fear of the foreign to excitement for the child and soothes a parental fear of their children growing up too quickly. The Tooth Fairy folklore offers structure to navigating an element of the parent-child relationship. The ritual fosters pride and excitement rather than fear as children grow up and lose teeth. Ultimately, the transition out of childhood's innocence is marked by the interactions or lack thereof with fairies.

#### **4.5 Literary Inspiration of Family Fairy Folklore**

As discussed with literary fairies, media can play an important role in forming the public perception of fairies. Magliocco's (2019) work with modern Pagans recognized that, in the ongoing influence from many sources to collective fairy lore knowledge, literary and media fairy description including "Grimm tales and their Disney adaptations" (115) have played a bigger role in the perception of fairies to modern Pagans than the older folkloric traditions do (112). There is an ongoing dialogue between sources influencing how folklore is conducted (Magliocco 2019, 108). These 'newer' forms of fairies include characteristics of protectors of children and being helpful towards humans (Magliocco 2019, 112). Similarly to pagan folklore practices, my family folklore practices are also heavily influenced by literature, film, art, and digital platforms of the time.

One of the most significant sources influencing fairy functions and attitudes in my family folklore came from early 2000s children's literature and books. Prominent in our collection of books were "Rainbow Magic" fairy books collectively written under the pseudonym Daisy Meadows and "Disney Fairies" books including *The Hidden World of Fairies* (2008) written by Redbank and Picksey (cover seen in Figure 6), and *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg* (2005) written by Gail Carson Levine and illustrated by David Christiana (cover seen in Figure 7). The worldbuilding in our family practices shared the fundamentals of the literature in which fairies encouraged embracing roles based on natural talents. For example, the Pixie Hollow Disney Fairies are all "talent fairies" with specific gifts informing workload responsibilities of their community, and the Magic Rainbow fairies have a unique role, responsibility, or talent attached to each individual. This concept of 'roles' contextualized tooth fairies for my family as a classification rather than being one individual Tooth Fairy. In the figures depicting letters from tooth fairies to myself, there were multiple fairies who acted as The Tooth Fairy who all had unique names and identities including Penny (Figure 8), Swanfeather (Figure 9), or Orangezest (Figure 10). One fairy even mentions a dragonfly pet named Shimmerfly (Figure 11) which aligns with the type of literature where each fairy had unique identities.

However, the narrative supplying Disney Fairy qualities expanded beyond children's books to include a multitude of media sources and fairy experiences across the Disney Fairy canonical universe. Magliocco's idea of multiple sources to create fairy folklore can be applied to Disney's multiple forms of entertainment all portraying the uniform qualities of this 'Disney Fairy' that perpetuates my family fairy folklore. The fairyland of 'Pixie Hollow' is a Disney creation that has been commodified into books, movies, toys, electronic games, and at one point a dedicated 'Pixie Hollow' attraction at Disneyland. Fairy qualities popularized by media directly correlate to the same qualities seen from the fairies within the auto-ethnographic family folklore because media representations, primarily children's books, were one of the primary sources of exposure to fairies.

#### **4.6 Who Do These Role Models Want Me to Be?**

The image presented by fairies becomes an archetype of femininity for girls to imitate in play first, and life later. Young girls are fascinated by fairies, myself included in that statement. This fascination is encouraged by adults and informed by the implicit messages in the media representations. Just as literary fairies were



symbols and role models for Victorian children representing a proper child who was “diligent, or good at grammar, or willing at tidying up” now, modern fairies are associated with a prettiness likened to flowers, talent for hard work, and a domesticated nature to make “a logo for the ‘good’ middle-class girl” (Purkiss 2000, 311). The change from the Victorian literary fairy to the contemporary Disney Fairy can be identified in the feminist coding of subliminal messages sent to young girls.

Under the growing popularity of feminism coming up to the early 2000s, core elements of folkloric fairies like their independence and critique of patriarchy were no longer something to be deeply feared in the same way. Depictions of fairies could portray *some* of these qualities so long as they remained cute and helpful. The core elements of fairies in original folklore—primarily female, living in isolated communities, and assertive—were not entirely erased from the contemporary representations, like Disney’s ‘Pixie Hollow.’ But the re-inclusion of folkloric fairy traits only applied to jobs and productivity; all other personality traits still encouraged the friendly, cooperative, and innocent nature of literary fairies. These ‘cute’ fairies of Disney and Rainbow Magic books all had their part to play in their communities through their responsibilities. Purkiss says that although “cute fairies might appear to be all about leisure, they also make the child work” (2000, 258). Early 2000s fairy representations in literature targeted towards young girls reflects the transition towards the societal needs that women must fulfill—working. This is not a true ‘return’ of the folkloric fairy, as completely embracing those qualities would still be a threat to the same systems of power; it is imperative that fairies—and women—remain cooperative, kind, helpful, and fond of children. Modern fairies encourage a work ethic, but still emphasize that “cuteness is a guide to conduct” (Purkiss 2000, 255). The early 2000s fairy representations follow in the steps of other literary fairy representations which subvert the power that traditional folkloric feminine fairies held by making them cute and laughable. The domestication and ‘cuteification’ of fairies have turned them into role models reflecting desirable qualities for little girls rather than a reflection of societal fear. The economic and political environment around the turn of the 21st century desired increased workforce and productivity, and the fairy representations prime youth, particularly girls, to step into those roles. In fact, the “feminist” messages of early 2000s fairies target values in girls that will benefit the continuation and expansion of capitalism.

## 5. Final Remarks

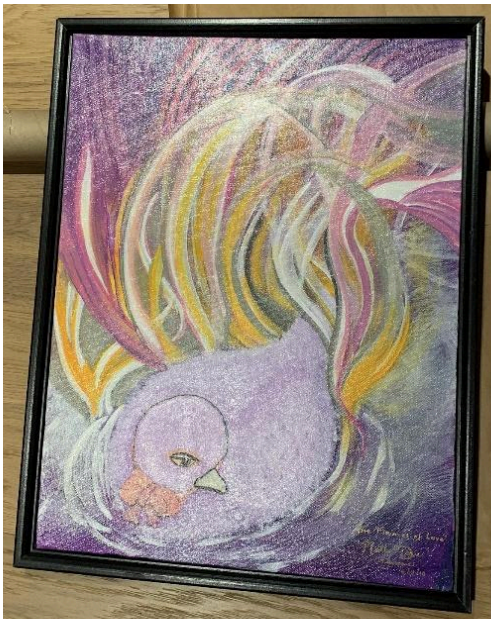
With a similar interpretation, the Tooth Fairy is another example of capitalist values being embedded within fairy representations and rituals. In the beginning, the popularity of the Tooth Fairy took off because of post Second World War affluence (Tuleja 1991, 17). Tuleja says that the Tooth Fairy’s message is a product of capitalist society by teaching that “Anything—even your own body—can, if you work it right, be turned to gold” (1991, 20). In my beliefs of the fairy world, the teeth were a physical material that fairies wanted to build with. They would pay the most for a strong, well-brushed molar. A Tooth Fairy ritual teaches young children about exchanging a desired product for monetary value. At its core, the Tooth Fairy is a business lesson preparing children for engagement with the capitalist world awaiting them out of childhood.

This paper finds that fairy representations have gone through three significant stages of development in which they serve unique purposes. As represented in the folkloric fairy, fairies are seen as something to fear. In the Victorian literary fairy, the autonomy and fear associated with fairies is strongly revoked through the miniature, cute, and innocent fairy associated with children. The contemporary fairy serves two purposes that have re-fashioned elements of both the folkloric fairy and the literary fairy. First, the contemporary Tooth Fairy provides a structure to manage fears for both children and parental involvement. In having a clear ritual marking the process of growing up, fairies can help soothe the fear of growing up

too quickly and mark change through childhood. Second, the contemporary fairy qualities and values act as a role model for children. Young girls are a particular target for these role models through the “feminist” branding, yet the values encouraged in girls at heart is to create an agreeable, working mother. Both the characteristics of fairies and the ritual of the Tooth Fairy ultimately work to prepare young children for their socialized duty within their culture—in the context of this paper a capitalist and patriarchal society.

### Appendix 1: Figures

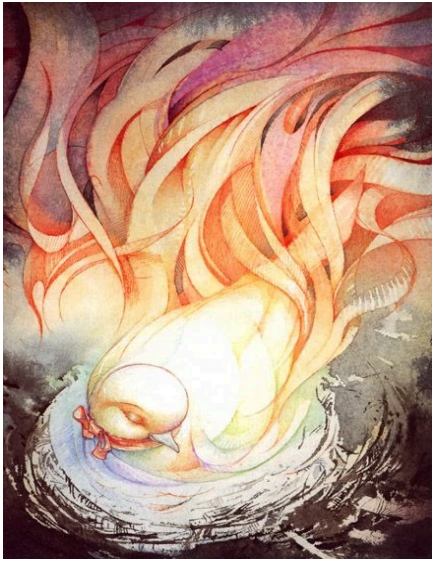
**Figure 1:** Painting by author’s great-grandmother of Mother Dove. Wade, Uldeane (Deannie), “The Flames of Love: Mother Dove” 06/04/2010. Photo by: Teagan Dale-Johnson



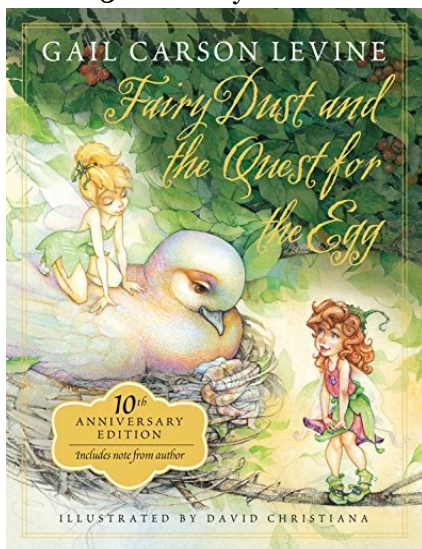
**Figure 2:** Painting by the author's great-grandmother of fairies. Wade, Uldeane (Deannie), 01/19/2010. Photo by: Teagan Dale-Johnson



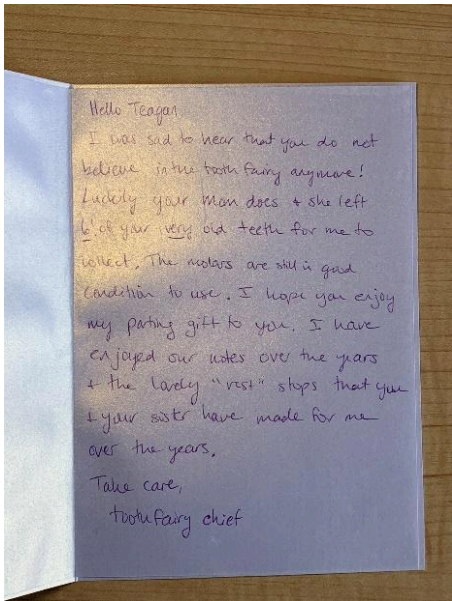
**Figure 3:** Inspiration for Figure 1. Illustration by David Christiana. Photo from user Fleur123 on disneyfairies.fandom.com



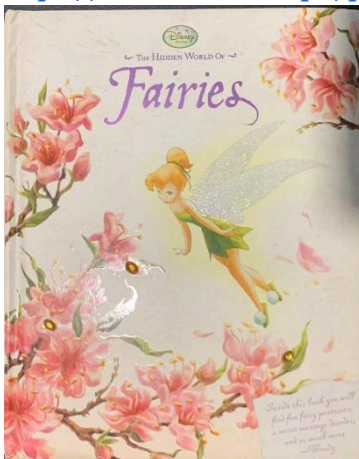
**Figure 4:** Inspiration for Figure 2. Illustration by David Christiana. Photo from user Fleur123 on disneyfairies.fandom.com



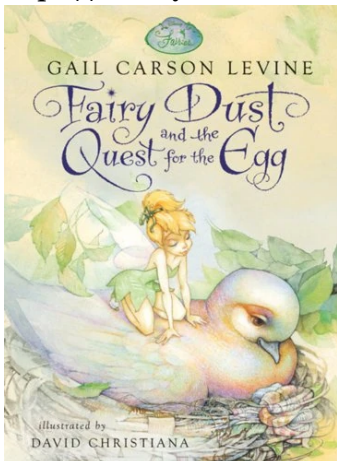
**Figure 5:** Letter from the Tooth Fairy Chief (Final Letter from Fairies). Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



**Figure 6:** “The Hidden World of Fairies cover photo” from user JR Reyes; Carousell; <https://www.carousell.ph/p/the-hidden-world-of-fairies-1193671506/>



**Figure 7:** “Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg Cover photo” Illustration by David Christina. Photo from user Fleur123 on [disneyfairies.fandom.com](https://disneyfairies.fandom.com/); [https://disneyfairies.fandom.com/wiki/Fairy\\_Dust\\_and\\_the\\_Quest\\_for\\_the\\_Egg](https://disneyfairies.fandom.com/wiki/Fairy_Dust_and_the_Quest_for_the_Egg)



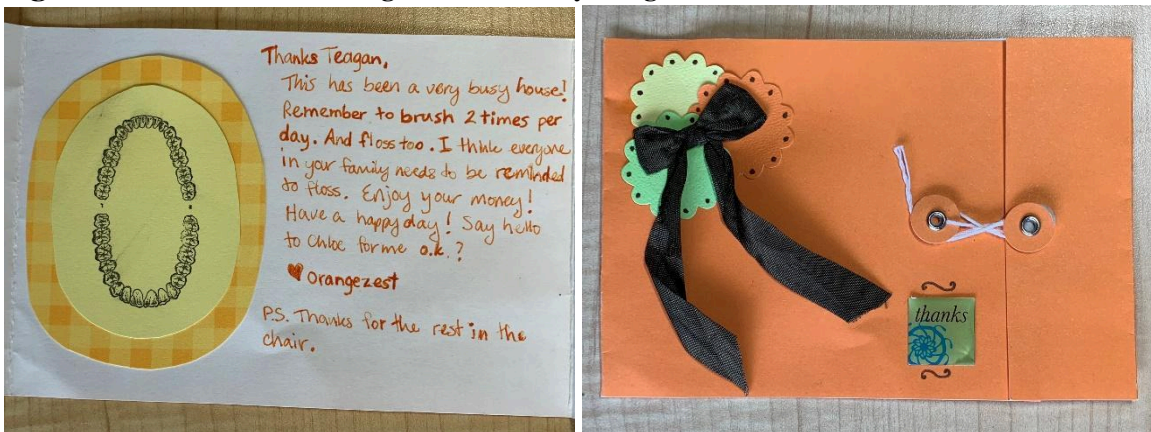
**Figure 8:** Letter from Penny. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



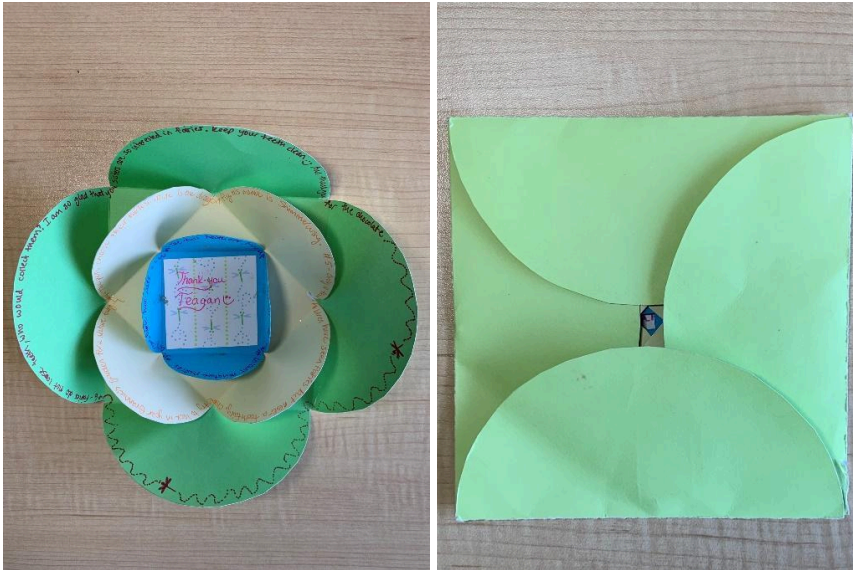
**Figure 9:** Letter from Swanfeather. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



**Figure 10:** Letter from Orangezest. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



**Figure 11:** Letter from fairy with dragonfly pet “Shimmerfly”. Photo by Teagan Dale-Johnson.



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## Truth as Spectacle, and Spectacle as the Inversion of Life Suffering Women, Prisoners to the Dream of Romance and Reconciliation

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### ABSTRACT

Blurring the boundaries between ethnography, fiction, and literature, this essay explores the crisis of representation through literary works of post-Apartheid South Africa: Antjie Krog's (1998) 'Country Of My Skull', and Njabulo S. Ndebele's (2006) 'The Cry Of Winnie Mandela'. Each text aims to provide a platform for testimony, record experiences of oppression, suffering, and injustice, and destabilize power imbalances; tasks which are frequently relevant to ethnographies. The authorial voice and form of their delivery, however, risks instantiating other power hierarchies and the rhetorical mechanisms that continually cast the symbolic image of suffering women as victims absent of agency. This analysis strives to highlight important hazards and power dynamics inherent to the representation of suffering and violence to offer critical insights for anthropological accounts.

### 1. Introduction

The simultaneous need for truth and reconciliation, and the impossibility of adequately recording suffering, presents a fundamental tension in representation. Invariably falling short of equivalence, representations consist of "a complex set of relations between the visible and invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid" (Rancier 2008, 92). Trauma itself is instantiated by silence, so any rendition of it involves translation, interpretation, and invention; imposing the 'crisis of representation' (Marcus & Fischer 1986) that shadows anthropology, philosophy, and literature alike. Still, paradoxically, "The force of the silence that translates the unrepresentability of the event exists only through its representation" (Rancier 2008, 92) posing the need to record the impossible. This essay draws on literary accounts of the trauma following South Africa's Apartheid, from Antjie Krog's (1998) 'Country Of My Skull', and Njabulo S. Ndebele's (2006) 'The Cry Of Winnie Mandela', to inform a critique of anthropological methods, and attend to the problem of representing suffering in ethnography, following in the historical trend of anthropology learning from literature.

The issues raised are 'incitements': intended to disrupt the "rhetoric, and politics of established representational forms" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, 25) to pursue their further exploration. Krog and Ndebele's narratives provide worthwhile points for investigation, considering each of their efforts at leveraging the restorative power of narrative to recover truths, destabilize power, and advance reconciliation: undertakings which are commendable and frequently aspired to in ethnographies. The representation of women in both texts exhibits some risks of ethnographic authority by freezing character types and providing interpretations that may be unfaithful to the subjects' lived realities. The divisions of genres between literature, fiction, and ethnography are thereby productively eroded, revealing fundamental similarities in invention, interpretation, and narration. These authors employ techniques of multivocality, experimental writing, inter-textual narratives, and auto-ethnographic reflections which offer critical insights to anthropological accounts. In this essay I turn to literary accounts in an attempt to expose gaps in ethnographic practice, with the hope that valuable contemplations on *truth*, *reconciliation*, *representation*, and *power* can be recovered.

The tenuous balance inherent to representing the suffering of others submits the storyteller, reader, and subject to many dangers: there is no neutral or objective representation, any reiteration involves mediation, emphasis, and erasure. This demands a reckoning of how identities and power are implicated through

compositions. Both Krog and Ndebele set out with the admirable task of elevating the voices of victims and presenting the grievances of those most oppressed by Apartheid, in particular Black women, to shift *dispositifs* (Foucault, 1977) —the constitutive structures of knowledge, institutions, and legal apparatuses that uphold systems of power. Ironically, they use their own notoriety and positions, as a White woman and a Black man, for this effort; oscillating uneasily between the inside and outside of the perspectives that they are representing. Knowledge production consists of and constitutes power, so the elevation and representation of certain perspectives to address a power imbalance also runs the risk of reinforcing hierarchies. And yet, as Philippe Bourgois has warned, “radical deconstructionism makes it impossible to categorize or prioritize experiences of injustices and oppression” (Bourgois, 2002, 80), an effort which is particularly crucial in moments of profound injustice and attempted erasure.

In moments of systemic oppression, state brutality trickles down and accumulates, disproportionately affecting those in already subaltern positions —Black women in the case of South Africa’s Apartheid. Women are often used symbolically to express national identities, honor, measure the extent of oppression, freedom, or resistance of a country, and inspire a sense of loyalty and protection. Stories of women are therefore convenient to inspiring national integrity: a relevant and urgent task in post-Apartheid South Africa as the country tries to clarify historical narratives, and reimagine and refashion a collective identity. The faithful Penelope, waiting for the return of Odysseus for 20 years, inspires stories of patience, loyalty, and forbearance. Those who wield symbolic control over women risk substantiating the power discrepancies that continually recast them as victims, disregarding their individualities, struggles, and agencies.

Krog and Ndebele each attempt to recover historical dimensions through the voices of women victims with the aim of redefining a national identity and imagining, articulating, and designing a future for the country that they want. Ndebele describes this as a ‘dialectical’ approach to writing history, expressing the dynamic nature of past events and their effects on the present political moment. He advocates for the reclamation of past narratives through a ‘fluid’ realism that he calls ‘ordinariness’ (Ndebele, 1991): a kind of fictional realism that attempts to unearth the society that *should be* out of the society that *is*. This spirit resembles the ‘striving as becoming’ that Naveeda Khan describes in its constructive tendency towards experimenting with “temporal registers of possible pasts and futures” (2012, 1). Ndebele positions this genre of historical fiction striving as a “living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative” that rises to the challenge of resisting the “epistemological structures” of Apartheid, ‘freeing’ and ‘invigorating’ the social imagination (Medalie, 2006, 52). To this end, Ndebele aims at a kind of ‘Radical hope’: crafting something that can not yet be articulated within current epistemological or linguistic configurations (Lear, 2006). This exercise involves reshaping, envisioning, and preparing for the desired social state. This subtle act of agency through fiction refuses to entirely compose itself to current social, cultural, or political constraints and instead invites a leap in imagination (Medalie, 2006, 54).

But ‘The Cry of Winnie Mandela’, falls short of unearthing this new order; while Ndebele illustrates the womens’ solidarity and gestures at its potential force, he remains more focused on the victimhood that unites them. He stages the stories of ‘Penelope’s descendants’: four women who have been left by their husbands during Apartheid, and Winnie Madikezela Mandela. Their stories are ultimately structured to foreground the painful absence of their husbands, and the end address by Mandela reiterates the significance of their shared loneliness, framing it as part of their sacrifice to fighting Apartheid. This ultimately infantilizes and diminishes Mandela’s other political, intellectual, and cultural struggles in dismantling Apartheid. Ndebele’s narrative exhibits the risk of ethnographic authority that interprets and represents the perspectives of subjects in ways that are unfaithful to



their lived realities. Although he makes a valuable attempt at highlighting the so often invisible domestic and emotional labour that make political struggles possible, in his misappropriation of it, he does a disservice to both men and women. These narratives infantilize women and exclude them from the other struggles against apartheid, and leave men to bear risks alone. As Khan cautions, this experimentation “means also attending to the risks courted by such becoming, notably the risk of alienation from one’s world or the estrangement of others within it” (2012, 7). Indeed, both authors maintain an alienating distance that deprives an important intersubjectivity, and in their preoccupation with historical and future registers neglect certain obligations to their present subjects. While the orientation of their texts make it clear that they feel committed to rectifying the injustices that they detail, they fall short of opening avenues for true emancipation.

In Ndebele’s writing, the details of the womens’ narratives seem at times realistic, but the use of an omnipresent intertextual narrative removes the novel from the conventions of realism; it is at once realistic and clearly fictionalized. He uses the stories to highlight the womens’ disparate responses to similar states of loneliness and frustration after being left, abandoned, or betrayed by their husbands. This range of characters reads as an effort to complicate a homogenous or stereotypical notion of victimhood. By privileging the women’s perspectives, Ndebele compels his audience to sympathize with them and attend to their side of the story. He features their internal lives, dialogues with one another, and descriptions of their conditions in a valuable effort to be sensitive and empathetic. This mode of address offers insights on the internal reasoning and lives of the subjects, and displays an irony at the heart of ethnography, of attempting to render the unfamiliar, familiar. This inversion simultaneously offers the most moral potential and most liability (Appadurai, 1988). At times, Ndebele’s attempt to familiarize the women and draw on the readers’ empathy assumes an unchecked license over their supposed internal states.

Krog, by contrast, inserts self-reflective accounts in her journalistic account. She positions herself in the narrative observing, recording, and reiterating the testimonies at the Truth Commission, punctuating the report with reflections on her own fraught, contentious position as an Afrikaner, a poet, and a reporter, and the morally loaded implications that each of those identities entail. She writes, “I look at the leader in front of me, an Afrikaner leader. And suddenly I know: I have more in common with the Vlakplaas five than with this man”; We are so utterly sorry. We are deeply ashamed and gripped with remorse. But hear us, we are from here. We will live it right -here - with you, for you” (125). In reading these reflections from a settler colonial state that continues to prosper off the erasure and oppression of its Indigenous inhabitants, I feel suspended with Krog in these moments of culpability and moral weight. She declines to offer comfort or conclusions, instead leaving the reader to ‘sit’ in moments of ‘confused moralities’ (295) with her. The implication here is that continual revision and engagement with these questions is vital, and that these grievances will not be reconciled or rectified in a way that is satisfying for the settlers’ moral identity. And yet that “[f]or all its failures, [South Africa] carries a flame of hope that makes me proud to be from here, of here” (364). Krog calls on us to not cower from the discomforts that these engagements demand, but to work continuously for imperfect improvements. These techniques of autoethnography are one of the biggest strengths of the text. Krog is critically self-reflexive and conflicted in a moving and intimate prose. They also, however, present new hazards. At times these techniques undermine the profundity of suffering that she is trying to convey. Her discomfort is brought to the fore, while the testimonies are aggregated to the background (see Laura Moss 2006). Throughout the text, she slips uneasily between a reporters’ authoritative voice, poetry, national allegory, and personal reflection, and is often ambivalent as to how her readers should be interpreting the text: as a memoir, political journalism, historical documentation, or a fictionalized interpretation.

In a journalistic tone, Krog provides a more explicit platform for the voices of victims, delivering them in uninterrupted sequence and often, presumably, verbatim. In chapter sixteen, 'Truth is A Woman', Krog hosts a series of testimonies delivered by women from Mdantsane as they detail intensely brutal personal accounts of violence, sexual violence, and rape. In this section, she foregrounds voices that have been neglected or marginalized for so long and systematically denied—through various, violent personal and political mechanisms—the capacity to speak for themselves. By privileging the victims' accounts in the first person, Krog again puts the reader momentarily in a position of complicity, as though they are being addressed directly by the victims. This is an evocative, unsettling technique which elicits discomfort in a clear demand that readers confront, and be affected by, the testimonies. It also, however, momentarily removes Krog's 'interpretation' and seems to offer verisimilitude, uncontaminated and unhampered by her mediation. This form of direct anecdotal evidence to support claims to capture other places, stories, perspectives, and voices is characteristic of what Arjun Appadurai describes as Anthropology's special brand of "double ventriloquism" (1988, 16) which, as he insists, "needs constant examination" (1988, 20). To be clear, the truth of these women's stories is not what requires scrutiny, but rather Krog's political leveraging of them, which gets eclipsed by the format in which they're delivered. Similar to any ethnography, Krog's account is necessarily an interpretation, and it is her responsibility as an author to maintain clarity over that fact.

The testimonies she chooses to frame and the length she lends them are necessarily, directed by her account and agenda. She attempts to provide a transparent medium for these narratives, but eventually invokes the same "analytical inventiveness of [anthropologists]" (Appadurai, 1988) and grasps at an objective voice that abstracts and generalizes over its subjects in an aim to partially free itself from the confines of its present. Thus the 'dilemmas of place' that Appadurai describes play out in spatiotemporal compression, beyond 'talking and listening' to 'reading and writing' as Krog's dialogue is precariously positioned between her accountability to subjects and readers across time and space, and impossibly tries to fulfill dues to each simultaneously. Although she is clear-eyed and genuine about her own position, these obligations at times require her to be more transparent in her interpretive strategy in order to avoid "the illusion of the panopticon" (Appadurai, 1988, 20).

While the perspectives of victims are temporarily elevated they remain ultimately sidelined to Krog's personal account and her psychological development of the perpetrators. There is very little information revealed about any of the women, effectively categorizing and essentializing their identities. The flattening of victims' stories throughout the text is eventually disconcerting. It dismisses them as subjects, continuing to deprive them of the agency they were denied in the initial encounter, and thereby extinguishing potentials for emancipation. Krog's elaboration on their lives and backgrounds is sparse, and when evident, it generally serves to illustrate them as victims. The exception of Rita Mazibuko proves the rule: "The picture of Rita Mazibuko in her brown dress, beige cardigan, and neatly knotted kopek is in stark contrast with her story of rape, torture, and rejection" (Krog, 1998, 240). The 'stark contrast' that Krog observes in Rita's inconsistency here proves that Krog is receiving the testimonies expectantly: presupposing the individuals' victimhood, as well as relying on a typology of rape victims. Krog, unlike Ndebele, offers little speculation to the victims' psychological state, in effect rounding them out considerably less than she does the characters of the perpetrators.

Her conjecture over the perpetrators' psychology punctuates the book. She speculates on their states of trauma, the accuracy of their memories, and (dis)honesty, pleading at one point "[h]elp me make sense of the five cops" (125). As she reveals, the doubt over their psychological states presents concerns for the committee since it is unclear whether perpetrators are 'genuinely traumatized' or

‘deliberately hiding information’ (125). Officer Benzien for instance, gets described as “a victim of his inhumane working conditions” who “suffers from a severe form of self-loathing” (98). The schizophrenic state of another perpetrator, Eliot, is also a source of debate as it seemed to have been ‘under control’ but ‘erupted’ following his arrest, making him less fit for testimony (277). Krog limits any similar analysis on the internal lives and psychology of the victims, seemingly out of respect and ethical diligence. I appreciate this reluctance and recognize that internal speculation and psychoanalysis is unwelcome and unfit here. However, at times this does result in the stories of victims having very little individual shape.

The successive summaries of victims’ stories abandon the reader with the challenge of picking up the pieces, making sense of them, and refining the characters in their own imaginations. In representing the perpetrators and victims through unequal psychological development, she makes a disquieting implication: there is less at stake to be understood and developed; the victims’ stories are ultimately of less interest and less complexity than that of their perpetrators; and their psychological state is damned, universal, and interchangeable. As Laura Moss contends (2006), this effectively, silently, works to maintain the inequality of the traumatic events to which they have just testified.

I do not consider this intentional on Krog’s part. In fact, I suspect that she was attuned to this potential implication but considered the hazards of unsolicited psychological analysis greater, and saw the need for an analysis of the perpetrators that could be fulfilled by someone in her position. From an ethnographic perspective, I think what is missing in Krog’s account is a more explicit acknowledgment of this imbalance, and the ethical reasoning that undergirds it.

Krog presents many of the atrocities voiced in the context of the commission, sometimes choosing to close them in quotation marks, and other times leaving them up to the reader to frame. In her imitation of the structure-less, fragmented, abrupt nature of the commission, she also allows the testimonies to be ‘derailed’ by external discussions. This gives the impression that Krog, along with the commission and present psychologists, are in the practice of intellectualizing over these accounts. Dwelling on seemingly simple questions like :“What is rape?”, reflecting on men’s unwillingness to use the word when they testify, or exploring the “ambiguity surrounding sexual torture” (1998, 239-240). While these subjects are indeed of interest and deserving of public discourse, they are in this case, perhaps ill-timed. They read to me in this form—as someone who did not live through Apartheid nor attend through the seven years of the Truth Commissions—as preemptively distanced and dispassionate considering the vulnerability being demanded by those testifying. These interruptions invite the reader to undertake the same exercise: applying misplaced semantic musings, meticulous analytics, distanced discourse, and generalizations as they overhear the testimonies.

The repetitive, sequential reiteration of the stories in both texts also threatens to amalgamate the voices into a one-dimensional character, and reduce individual testimonies into a pattern. Krog assimilates testimonies into a repertoire of trauma rhetoric, which she uses to her literary advantage in order to make a moral and political statement. The overall, final effect of each text is to ratify the embodied symbol of a suffering woman: in Krog’s case a woman victim, and in Ndebele’s case the revival of Homer’s Ulysses’ ideal of a lonely woman in waiting. In the nature of their delivery, both texts invite their readers to draw parallels and similarities in the women’s accounts, categorize, and theorize over them. In this sense, the representations of the women are problematic as they reinforce the women as objects to be examined, studied, and fit into larger trends, perpetuating a degree of symbolic violence, subjugation, and erasure of identity that produced and naturalized some of the atrocities in the first place. Ethnographies conducted from institutionalized settings need to be particularly vigilant against the risks of maintaining power asymmetries in research. We can not be justice oriented and

continue to leave the exploitative means of knowledge production intact. This is a call then, to interrogate the scaffolding of knowledge production that is rooted in systemic injustices.

In this light I would like to raise a similar objection to each of their narrative techniques which risk employing testimonies as timeless metaphors for humanity. In Krog's aim to reflect on the larger political context she illustrates an archetype of women's suffering, and in Ndebele's aim to complicate a stereotype he inadvertently relies on other parables, both of which support a more general theme of victimhood. The value of this endeavor is debatable. The legitimacy of the women's status as victims is not in question or under scrutiny; the extent of their suffering is indubitably valid. To be sure, uncovering these narratives and making a space for them to be revealed was an important effort of the Truth Commission, but is arguably less so in literature that sets out to reimagine a different national identity and status for women. Ethnography often alleges to address the daunting double task of providing historical record and an emancipatory analysis. The effort at this point should be directed to empowering them as survivors and creating places for them to regain agency and respect, rather than to dwell on their victimhood. In fact, dwelling on their victimhood, in both cases, is inconvenient to this now more pressing and relevant objective. Medalie draws on Ndebele's (1991) text, 'Rediscovery of the ordinary', to offer that:

Some of the keenest expressions of the suffering produced by apartheid, he [Ndebele] suggests, may for all their sincerity and good intentions, lead to an obfuscation of the conditions that produce that suffering, even as they are it is impossible to envisage (and thus work towards) a viable alternative:

The oppressed need only cast their eyes around to see a universal confirmation of their status. ... The mere pointing of a finger provides proof. In this situation, the rhetorical identification of a social and political evil may easily become coincident with political and intellectual insight. (Rediscovery 61-62)

(Medalie, 2006, 52, on Ndebele, 1991, 61)

Krog's personal political imperatives ultimately mediate and frame the testimonies, so her retelling of them is crafted by a specific agenda. What is missing in this account is awareness and transparency over her interpretation, and clarity and sincerity to her reader audience. She stages stories that are deeply private and arguably not desired to be public, as Mthintso reveals: "While writing this speech, I realized how unready I am to talk about my experience in South African jails and ANC camps abroad. Even now, despite the general terms in which I have chosen to speak, I feel exposed and distraught" (Krog, 1998, 236). This form of incidental coercion of the exploitation of information not intended to be public, amounts to a kind of 'symbolic violence' which Paul Rabinow writes "is inherent in the structure of the situation" of 'field experience' (1977, 130). Krog's decision to include these accounts anyways raises significant concerns over the issue of consent. She assumes no small amount of authority and power in staging these accounts, risking a troublesome breach of privacy. I think there is a sound criticism to be made of Krog for using these narratives to formulate a national allegory that is convenient to the dramatization and foregrounding of her own misgivings and guilt. And at times this personal imperative and agnostic process ultimately, ironically, relies on preserving the status of these women as victims.

Notwithstanding his aim to complicate the stereotype of a woman victim, Ndebele also conditions a 'type' of woman and woman experience among his characters. He may add nuance to aspects of their victimhood, but nevertheless perpetuates other assumptions of womanhood, sexuality, desire, and notions of a *woman in waiting*. Given that this is a work of fiction, Ndebele wields full control

over the representation, development, and impressions of each character. This incidentally highlights some risks of ethnographic authority that objectify in the attempt to excavate patterns. By drawing out their differences he accentuates the similarities that string all of their narratives together. He maintains the focus on their separation, “their unending spells of anxiety, loneliness, longing, wishing, desiring, hoping, doubting” wherein “day to day life becomes an effort of continuance: endurance without consolation” (Ndebele, 2004, 7). Ndebele presents Winnie announcing that “Departure. Waitings. Returns.” are the “three pillars of a South African woman’s life” (Ndebele, 2004, 104) declaring with undue conviction that these features define and structure their lives. He proceeds to group them into the congregation offering that “Yes, there’s something generic about them” (Ndebele, 2004, 39) and draws out their commonalities as if they represent the experience of a contained, coherent demographic. Although there is surely an element of truth to this generalization, reenactments and representations of it only serve to entrench its effects, demonstrating the liability of ethnography to exert demographic typologies and historical suspension. This form wields the performative power of language described by John Austin (1950), to create tangible effects through *affective utterances*, in effect crafting the conditions and subjects it describes. Ndebele is not merely describing the women’s circumstances, but reenacting and reconstructing them: puppeteering their performances and formations.

Ndebele describes the women, first and foremost, in terms of men in their lives. The first, second, and fourth descendants’ stories start explicitly with their relations to men: “A woman lives with her husband” (Ndebele, 2004, 36); “A man of thirty five obtains a scholarship to go overseas to study to become a doctor. He leaves behind his beautiful young wife” (Ndebele, 2004, 17); and “Lejone Mofolo finally yields to strong pressures to leave his family” (Ndebele, 2004, 10). Through each representation Ndebele naturalizes the state of the domestic sphere: every scenario involves the woman staying and waiting at home, looking after children, and keeping the house. While he describes each of their husbands leaving for political, economic, or educational reasons, he effectively denies women access to any of those realms. By contrast, he promotes associations with an aloof, homey comfort: “she remembers only the floating feeling, the medium of forgetfulness and shelter”; “she has skills that enable her to make extra money: catering at weddings and parties, sewing, knitting. It keeps her going.” (Ndebele, 2004, 16-17). Even in his representation of Winnie, he accentuates the domestic aspects of her life and her relationship with Nelson. He doesn’t hesitate to depict Winnie’s internal state as she reflects on Nelson’s influence: “I’m truly reminded of the power of things unseen: like my husband, in his absence. Not seen, but there. Making me do things. Working inside of me. Taking control” (Ndebele, 2004, 102). In the delivery of each story, he represents the woman’s husbands as a centrifugal force in their lives; bequeathing them with meaning and fulfillment, or a solidarity in their founded and common lack thereof.

Ndebele also conjures up the women for the most part as being pathological and miserable. He articulates a consistently unflattering state in his subjects, which Medalie describes as a “morbid and claustrophobic subjectivity”; “they seem condemned to return obsessively to it in ways which suggest a disabling sensitivity, a form of subjectivity grown pathological” (Medalie, 2006, 57). This overwrought, self reflective, self-loathing subject is evident in the expression of fourth descendant, Mara, being “disgusted with herself” after her husband dies, reconciling with the fact that “he had become a rag towards which she no longer felt any emotion. But dare she articulate this truth? In time, she couldn’t even say it to herself.” (Ndebele, 2004, 37-38). Her self-deprecation, shame, and denial emerge from an intense, but irrational loyalty and longing that Ndebele bestows in all the women characters: ‘driven’ by a common “blind but determined hope” (2004, 14). Similarly, the third descendant Mamello Molete, concludes “perhaps I’m just

jealous. Another feature of my insanity”; “I’m fine, but insane” (Ndebele, 2004, 34-35). These representations of psychiatric subjects wield what Foucault described as the ‘microphysics’ of power that illustrate insane subjects: this works to simultaneously relay Ndebele’s power and undermines the women’s’. In this rendition they do not have clear access on their own psychiatric states, as Foucault describes, the constitution of madness “bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue” so psychiatric language invariably involves “a monologue by reason about madness” (Foucault, 1961: xxvii) fixing Ndebele as the *reasonable* and the women as the *mad*.

Ndebele speculates freely on all of their internal states, lending a transparency to each of their characters. He doesn’t hesitate to depict them as tortured by compulsion and desire, irretrievably miserable. He only privileges Mamello and Winnie’s narrative in the first person. On one hand this lends them an increased internal complexity and subjectivity, and on the other it is exploitative in an ultimately invasive narrative authority. Ndebele uses the first person for each of these women to convey his own interpretation of their internal afflictions and distress under a more credible prose. He writes Marara arguing to her fellow descendants that: “our conversations are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to us” (Ndebele, 2004, 43). This reinforces the otherwise miserable state that he has subjected them to and solidifies the idea that the only possible sense of fulfillment and purpose in their lives is contingent on men, or the lamentation and solidarity over their absence. This statement also implies that things happen *to* them which again, serves to deny them agency even within their own stories. The omnipresent delivery of the texts also works to subject the women to a kind of narrative determinism: stifling their resistance as “they strain at the writer’s leash, wanting to assume individuality of character” (Ndebele, 2004, 40). The representation of women as psychologically, financially, and emotionally dependent on the men in their lives and pathological, self-contradictory, and self-deprecating themselves, through the use of a deterministic meta-narrative, ultimately serves to undermine their characters and deny them any agency as subjects. Ndebele fails to offer any ways in which power discrepancies between genders might be addressed or rectified. His representation eventually serves to fix his subjects in an alternative status of victimhood. Similarly, his literary aim to create a malleable, provisional, imaginative space for reclamation is undermined by his perpetuation of other patriarchal tropes. Krog similarly casts a permanent and immobilizing state of victimhood over her subjects through her cursory and successive representation.

Throughout each of the authors’ representations of suffering, and attempts to disrupt and shift power, they neglect to interrogate their own positions or agendas or leave room for their subjects to reclaim any agency. This complacency calls for a close critique of representations that arise from a fundamentally unequal power encounter and inadvertently work to maintain it. In their endeavours for justice and emancipatory literature, Krog and Ndebele are subject to many of the same hazards of ethnography - from historical suspension, demographic typologies, complacency to the asymmetries of knowledge production, and exertion of ethnographic authority - and provide valuable lessons for Anthropology accordingly. This rehearsal of critical theory to literary works is intended to clarify potential risks of representation and anticipate how they might be circumvented. This follows the important recognition that each of these authors had ethical and historical motivations that should continue to be aspired to in ethnographies, but which require constant revision. The questions and cautions I raise throughout this essay are necessarily partial and ongoing, but nonetheless indicate a commitment to continue crafting more emancipatory methods of representation for anthropology.

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## Queerness in Japan: The Bishōnen Revival in Boys' Love Manga

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### ABSTRACT

Following the introduction of Western-Christian ideas in the Meiji era (1868-1912) that sought to regulate expressions of gender and sexuality, and the consequent institutionalisation of these ideas in Japanese society, contemporary Japanese queer communities have since faced difficulties. From discrimination to social retaliation, the hostility towards gender identities and sexualities seen as transgressive to heteronormativity have resulted in the hesitation of queer individuals to out themselves or to create a visible community. Instead, they have turned towards other means to privately explore their sexuality and gender and engage with other queer-identifying people. This has been most notable through the manga genre known as BL (boys' love) and its use of the historic bishōnen aesthetic (an androgynous beauty defying a classically Western male-female gender binary). This paper focuses on the revival of the bishōnen aesthetic in manga, examining how BL manga magazines have created an underground queer community, as well as how readers have utilised bishōnen characters as self-inserts to understand their sexualities and genders.

### 1. Introduction

Despite its well-documented history of male homosexuality, contemporary Japan has remained rather closed off towards identities seen as transgressive to heteronormativity. In no small part, this has been largely due to the Westernisation process in the Meiji era (1868-1912) during which Western-Christian ideas of 'proper' (heteronormative) expressions of gender and sexuality were introduced to the country. While some progress towards acceptance has certainly been made since then, on a whole Japanese society continues to operate under a restrictive framework when it comes to expressions of queerness. For instance, although same-sex activity is not illegal, same-sex marriages remain unrecognised across Japan with the validity of civil unions varying between cities (Human Rights Watch 2016, 16). Furthermore, the Japanese constitution provides no legal recourse for discrimination against one's sexual orientation or gender identity in matters of securing, or retaining, employment, housing, or care access (Human Rights Watch 2016, 16). Social hostility is also quite prevalent. In middle and high school for example, queer-identifying youth often fall victim to *ijime*, an intense form of bullying involving verbal abuse, psychological and physical harassment, and extreme social isolation (Human Rights Watch 2016, 38-44). Because of these factors, contemporary Japanese queer communities have largely remained 'hidden' from the public. However, this is not to say they are absent: rather, their presence has been highly embedded in specific popular cultural movements. In particular, as anime and manga (graphic novels) flourished in the 1970s, so did the underground queer community as anime and manga embraced the *bishōnen* (beautiful youth) aesthetic. A concept rooted in the pre-Western feudal periods, the *bishōnen* figure embodies a specific sort of queer androgynous beauty that has made them popular for consumers and creators alike. As such, this paper will focus on the revival of the historically queer *bishōnen* figure in manga, examining how this revival has facilitated both the creation of a 'hidden' queer community accessible through BL manga magazines, as well as the private exploration of its consumers' sexual and gender identities otherwise seen as transgressive to Japanese heteronormativity.

### 2. Usage of Terms

Throughout this paper the term *bishōnen* will be used often. Although in its written form [美少年] *bishōnen* means beautiful youth and is not inherently gendered, contemporary anime and manga have used it to describe androgynous

*male* characters drawn with male genitalia, and, to varying degrees, other ‘classically’ male features (i.e. a completely flat chest). As such, this paper uses *bishōnen* to describe androgynous presenting characters who are considered biologically male by their creators, as well as the overall aesthetic of androgynous beauty they represent.

Additionally, some clarification is required on the terms of sex and gender. When sex is used in this paper, it is either in reference to the biological attributes, such as the reproductive organs that determine one as ‘male’ or ‘female’ at birth, or the act of engaging in intercourse. When gender is used, it is in reference to the socially constructed roles, expressions, and behaviours associated with one’s gender and how they identify in relation to these. Furthermore, to be inclusive of gender performances, terms like women-identifying and male-identifying will be used during the discussion of the differences between these two groups’ interaction with BL manga.

### 3. History of the *Bishōnen*

Before addressing how the fictional *bishōnen* has been revived in manga, it is prudent to contextualise their historical role and the shifts that led to their wider cultural erasure. To do so, it is best to turn to the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) as this era gives the best example of what queerness historically looked like and how it was received. For the most part, male homosexuality was viewed as an “elite social practice with a style, etiquette and aesthetic of its own” (McLelland 2000, 20). Primarily practiced between status groups, such as a master with his servant/apprentice or between samurai, it operated similarly to Greek pederasty wherein these relationships consisted of a *chigo* or *wakushū* (a passive younger man) and a *nenja* (a dominant older man) (McLelland 2000, 19-20). This dynamic influenced male relationships to a great extent and was widely viewed as acceptable in society.

The Tokugawa period also saw a fixation on young men who embodied an androgynous beauty that was neither fully masculine nor fully feminine. In particular, these men, who became known as *bishōnen*, were venerated for this androgyny that enabled them to cross-dress as women in classic Japanese theatre, like *kabuki* or *nōh*, and for their versatility during *kagama* (prostitution) (MacDuff 1996, 248; McLelland 2000, 21). With regards to prostitution specifically, the *bishōnen* were sought after for their fluid gender presentation that could be tailored to their partner’s preferences. For instance, depending on these preferences, *bishōnen* individuals could present themselves as more feminine (by wearing a women’s *kimono* or hairstyle) or more masculine (by wearing a man’s *hakama*).

Even prior to the Tokugawa period though, it should be noted that homosexuality was still framed as an elite practice and that the *bishōnen* aesthetic was highly desirable. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Muromachi aristocracy were well-known for having beautiful androgynous male lovers, and the medieval term *yūgen* (an elegant and mysterious beauty) was often used to describe these men before the popularisation of the term *bishōnen* (MacDuff 1996, 248-9). What this shows then is that both male homosexuality and an appreciation of gender expression outside of the male-female binary were long-standing traditions in Japanese history. Rather than being the aesthetics of a specific time period or moment, it was an ingrained part of Japanese culture that was not only tolerated, but also seen favourably. The *bishōnen* especially played into this, particularly in the Tokugawa period as they were idolised for their queer gender presentations and seen as objects of sexual desire.

However, with the beginnings of the Meiji era in the 1800s and the increasing presence of the West and Christianity in Japan, foreign discourses around sexuality changed the stance on homosexuality: instead of being an accepted practice, it was

now seen as a “deviant and dangerous passion” (McLelland 2000, 22). From 1867 to 1881, sodomy was consequently criminalised in the Meiji legal codes, and this criminalization fed into the public framing of homosexual acts, sodomy or otherwise, as a “horrible depravity” (McLelland 2000, 23). Additionally, under these imported Western discourses, the focus on ‘reproductive’ sex that would result in the creation of a family unit (i.e. a husband, a wife, and their children) was intensified. This was particularly evident in the differences between how the Tokugawa and Meiji periods culturally understood sex. Although there was still an expectation of producing heirs through a reproductive (heterosexual) relationship in the Tokugawa period, overall there was more flexibility and acceptance of non-reproductive relationships as sex was viewed equally as a necessity and a pleasure in life (McLelland 2000, 35; Fu 2011, 904-5). Yet in the Meiji era, attitudes became more conservative. Sex was reframed as not for pleasure, but rather as a method to strictly fulfill one’s cultural responsibility of reproduction (Fu 2011, 906). As such, sex for non-reproductive purposes, like pleasure, was highly discouraged: this extended to both hetero- and homo- sexual acts (Fu 2011, 907). Ultimately, both the intensified focus on reproductive sex and the idea of homosexuality as deviant had notable consequences, especially for the *bishōnen*. As biologically male individuals who primarily engaged in non-reproductive sex via homosexual relationships, the *bishōnen* were consequently considered transgressive to ‘proper’(heteronormative) society.

As a result of these shifting attitudes towards non-reproductive sexual relationships, homosexuality became noticeably less visible during and after the Meiji period. Disappearing from public art and popular literature, it was instead expressed privately and in only specific places, such as underground gay bars, or in “closed public spaces” where anonymity could be retained, like park restrooms (McLelland 2000, 25-7). Queer gender expressions likewise became less visible. With the emphasis on heterosexual reproductive relationships, a male-female binary was delineated in which expressions outside of it, like the *bishōnen* whose fluid gender presentation was neither fully ‘male’ or ‘female’, were not accepted.

Overall, it was not until the 1970s sexual revolution as it trickled into Japan from Europe and America that new-wave efforts, via fiction and film, sought to bring homosexuality and non-heteronormative gender expression back into the Japanese public (McLelland 2000, 28). It was in the 1970s as well that manga saw a rise in popularity, and, with it, the revival of the *bishōnen* figure (Welker 2006, 841).

#### 4. The Contemporary *Bishōnen* Revival

Originally, the revival of the *bishōnen* aesthetic began in the wider genre of *shōjo* manga (girl’s manga). Though *shōjo* manga included an array of tropes and subgenres, it was ultimately its off-shoot, BL, that was pivotal for the queer community. Emerging in the 1970s, BL became highly popular on the manga market, attracting a readership of all ages and genders, and was well-known for its characters who embodied the similar aesthetic of androgynous beauty prized in the feudal periods. Recognisable by their “lithe, androgynous, and sexually ambiguous [figures]” (Welker 2008, 46) and associated with overtly feminine motifs, such as rose petals framing the panels whenever they were ‘on screen’ (Welker 2006, 859), the boys in BL contradicted the masculinity of the Meiji era. Instead of short cropped hair, they tended to have longer and kempt styles, and rather than angular faces and stern expressions, their features were softer with expressive “twinkling eyes” (Welker 2008, 46). But most notably, rather than engaging in heterosexual relationships, the *bishōnen* were the lovers of other male characters. Despite being fictional, the *bishōnen* in manga embodied many of the same characteristics as the historical *bishōnen*. From their aesthetics to their relationships, many have argued that these similarities have allowed the fictional *bishōnen* to continue Japan’s longstanding tradition of queer gender performance and sexuality in a more modern way (Welker 2008, 48).

As BL and their *bishōnen* characters grew in popularity, BL manga magazines emerged to provide coverage on the genre, detailing chapter releases, upcoming titles, and interviews with artists. However, these magazines did more than just promote a surface-level engagement for casual fans: they also facilitated the creation of an underground queer community accessible through a controlled channel. This controlled access is important given the climate towards queerness and non-heteronormative sexualities in Japan. With the prevalence of bullying and discrimination, it is understandable why many queer individuals do not feel comfortable with outing themselves. Yet through these magazines, they were able to create a community and engage with other queer-identifying people privately and safely without the risks of social retaliation. To understand how this worked, it is best to turn to the example of *Allan*.

*Allan* was initially published in 1980 as one of the first manga magazines dedicated to the BL genre (Welker 2008, 47) and was instrumental in the early creation of the underground queer community. Primarily, it accomplished this through coded language and references. For example, a special issue on Shinjuku claimed the area was “crowded with beautiful boys [read as *bishōnen*] like those in the world of *shōjo* manga” (Welker 2008, 49). By positioning the ‘boys’ in Shinjuku as the ‘real life’ *bishōnen* from manga, characters of which were colloquially understood to be queer, the magazine subtly signaled to its readers where like-minded (i.e. queer) people could also be found. It should be noted that today, Shinjuku is pretty known for being one of Tokyo’s more queer-friendly areas (Welker 2008, 49), and that this association was already being made in the 1980s through *Allan*’s ‘beautiful boys’ references.

Furthermore, *Allan* also provided a column for personal ads in which queer people could communicate from a distance under pseudonyms. Though these ads covered a range of topics, they were primarily used to search for romantic or sexual partners. Generally, posters either relied on popular *bishōnen* characters, such as Gilbert Cocteau (the passive *bishōnen* lead from *Kaze to ki no uta*), or the overall aesthetic to frame their gender identities and preferences. Through utilising specific *bishōnen* characters, posters could situate themselves on a spectrum of masculinity-femininity by presenting themselves as more “boy” (masculine) or more “beautiful boy” (feminine) and similarly apply the same spectrum to their preferences in a partner (Welker 2008, 55-56). Notably, this description of one’s *bishōnen* aesthetic was not limited to male-identifying posters; women-identifying posters also used the same criteria to describe themselves and their partners. Between both groups though, most wrote under gender-neutral pseudonyms (i.e. like Kaoru) to indicate that their biological sex, or even that of their partners, mattered less than their adherence to the aesthetic gender performance of being more masculine or more androgynous (*bishōnen*) (Welker 2008, 56).

Ultimately, whether it was through signaling queer-friendly spaces to its readers or by encouraging communication and connection through ads, these interactions were largely sanctioned by, and confined to, the safety of BL magazines. Though anyone could obviously purchase a copy if they wished, the employment of pseudonyms greatly reduced the risks of queer people being accidentally discovered by their real-life associates during their search for romantic or sexual partners. Likewise, by using specific terminology as it applied to certain contexts, such as popular *bishōnen* characters and their gender presentations, there was an added fail-safe in that only community members would fully understand what was being discussed. All of this created an underground queer community which, for the most part, was being facilitated through BL magazines and the *bishōnen* aesthetic.

## 5. Woman-identifying readers and BL

As mentioned earlier, the revival of the *bishōnen* aesthetic arose out of a subgenre of *shōjo* manga known as BL. Yet, despite BL’s exclusive focus on

male-male relationships, its greatest consumers and creators were, and still are, women (Welker 2006, 841). Although there is some debate over what women-identifying readers get out of consuming male homosexual content, I argue that BL and its *bishōnen* characters provide an outlet to privately explore sexuality and gender identities in a space free from the gendered expectations of their day-to-day realities. In Japan's context specifically, these expectations can be quite exacting on women-identifying readers as double standards. For example, although relaxed in recent years, women are still generally expected to marry young (sometimes through *omiai* (arranged marriage)) and their sexual life remains largely socially sanctioned through marriage (McLelland 2010, 90; Fu 2011, 906). This mentality is exemplified in how women's contraceptives continue to be strictly regulated (McLelland 2010, 78). Comparatively speaking, the sexual life for men is not as regulated nor contained to marriage, as is illustrated by Japan's thriving sex industry and the relative ease of access to condoms (McLelland 2010, 78-9). Of course, it should be noted that this is not a contemporary double standard. Historically, it has always been, more or less, acceptable for men to engage in non-marital sex as the 'phallic myth' dictates men require an outlet for their sexual desires to avoid their build up and alternative expression through violence (Fu 2011, 906). Additionally, in the case of queer sexuality, women's experiences have been often discounted. For example, lesbianism in Japan is less tolerated in the media than male homosexuality as it is framed as a 'passing phase' rather than something to consider seriously (Welker 2006, 842; McLellan 2010, 83).

In a large part, these double standards for women have derived from the aforementioned emphasis on reproductive relationships. With the conservative understanding of sex's purpose being for reproduction in the Meiji era, a new slogan was introduced by the state: *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) (Fu 2011, 905). This slogan was aimed at policing women's behaviour and consequently restructured gender relations in Japanese society. Under this idea of 'good wife, wise mother', women who wished to be seen as socially respectable were not allowed to pursue their sexual desires outside of the "sanitised realm of marriage" (Fu 2011, 906). Although men were likewise discouraged from engaging in non-reproductive, non-marital sex, it was culturally seen as sometimes necessary for the functioning of society (i.e. by limiting crime and violence) because of the persisting phallic myth. Prostitution, therefore, became a sanctioned way for men to work through these desires. However, while there were no repercussions for men hiring prostitutes, women employed as such were considered immoral and failing to embody the 'good wife, wise mother' ideal. So while this slogan did not eliminate non-reproductive or non-marital sex, it did create highly gendered beliefs of what women and their role in Japanese society is (Fu 2011, 906). Furthermore, the repression of sexual desire outside of marriage, as well the cultural framing of women's 'respectability' being tied into wife- and mother- hood, has continued to persist today.

Within the context of manga and fiction, women have not fared any better. For instance, the *shōnen* (men's manga) genre is openly hostile towards women through its hyper-masculine and violent characters, degrading and inequitable sex scenes, and lack of healthy or romantic relationships between its male and female characters (McLelland 2010, 79-81). Meanwhile, the commercial and widely distributed *shōjo* manga (that is manga geared towards women but not necessarily BL) typically features heterosexual pairings wherein the focus is on the 'reproductiveness' of the relationship. In fact, the typical end goal for such couples in the heterosexual *shōjo* genre is their marriage or the birth of their child. So for some, especially queer women who do not necessarily envision themselves in these conventionally heterosexual relationships, this can be too close to the realities and gendered expectations dictating their everyday lives.

On the contrary, BL is removed from these realities. It does not embody the male-female aggression that *shōnen* manga does, nor does it centre on the heterosexual relationships hallmark of the general *shōjo* genre. Rather, it is a realm

of its own that, for women-identifying readers, is pure fantasy. This fantasy is further enforced by the fact that BL plots are often set elsewhere (i.e. in far-off Europe) and are consequently removed from Japan's societal pressures. Additionally, the focus in BL manga is not on the reproductive, but rather the emotional development of a relationship. Reading along, women-identifying readers can live vicariously through these relationships as they watch the male leads fall in love, grow in closeness, and overcome trials and tribulations until they become a couple. In certain cases, this reading experience can even translate into a self-insert facilitated by the androgynous appearance of the *bishōnen* characters. Despite being biologically male in their stories, it is actually common practice for artists to not focus on the *bishōnen*'s penis, especially when they (the *bishōnen*) take on the 'passive' (bottom) role during sex. Usually, this is done by portraying their genitalia ambiguously (i.e. as an outline), whitening it out, or omitting it entirely (Nagaike 2015, 197). In doing so, more attention is drawn to the feminine features of the *bishōnen* character, such as their softer faces and bodies, allowing women-identifying readers to interject themselves into the story and experience the fictional relationship through the eyes of the *bishōnen*. This can also work in reverse for readers who do not necessarily see themselves as the passive *bishōnen*, but rather as a fantasy stand-in for their preferred partner. In this case, the previously mentioned physical ambiguity works in favour for women-identifying readers to manipulate the story to include their preferred partner's gender, such as another woman.

This aforementioned point of the *bishōnen* being a potential stand-in for another woman in its consumer's queer fantasy plays into how lesbianism has been understood and received in Japan. With their attraction being discounted, lesbian and queer women have come to co-opt BL and its more accepted male homosexuality in order to find pseudo-representation. In one interview for example, Mizoguchi Akiko, a lesbian activist, claimed she "became" a lesbian via reception, in [her] adolescence, of the 'beautiful boy' comics of the 1970s." (Welker 2008, 47). Hers is not the only story like this. Women-identifying posters appeared with frequency in the personal ads columns in BL magazines, like *Allan*, to seek out sexual or romantic relationships, sometimes with other women, that could replicate what they were reading in manga.

As the greatest consumers and creators of BL content, it is clear that women-identifying readers have found enjoyment and purpose in the genre. I argue then that BL provides something the heterosexual *shōjo* genre does not: a removal from their realities and the gendered expectations dictating their relationships and sexual desires. There is an evident sense of emotional fulfilment women-identifying readers derive from consuming male homosexual relationships, and this has to do with the fact that there is no pressure for the couples in BL to marry, have children, and settle into their parental roles. Rather, they (the *bishōnen* characters) are free to engage in just the emotional aspect of their relationships and experience a love uninfluenced by these pressures. Ultimately then, BL grants women-identifying readers the ability to participate in a queer expression of love outside of heteronormativity, enabling them to privately explore their sexualities and desires that otherwise would be seen as transgressive for their non-reproductive nature. Additionally, through this exploration as facilitated by self-inserting and through their use of BL magazines' ad columns, they have been able to keep their preferences hidden and their involvement in the queer community out of public view.

## 6. Man-identifying Readers and BL

Although women-identifying readers are BL's main consumers, it would be remiss to say they are the only ones who partake. Despite being a bit rarer, there are male-identifying creators and readers who use BL in a similar manner: to facilitate a private engagement with their sexuality and gender independent from heteronormative expectations. This mostly refers to the expectations around masculinity. Generally speaking, Japanese boys are taught, both formally (i.e. in

school) and informally, that they should embody a specific kind of masculinity: assertive, dominant, aggressive, and opposed to romanticism (Nagaike 2015, 192-5). Historically, this type of masculinity emerged in the Meiji era, but it was most noticeable in the militarism that defined the first decade of the Shōwa period (1926-1936) (Fu 2011, 905). During this time, the phallic myth became a culturally embedded narrative wherein male virility was framed as both a “powerful and dangerous force” either beneficial or detrimental to society (Fu 2011, 906). As previously discussed, this narrative impacted gender relations in Japan, particularly for how men and women related to one another.

This sort of masculinity is also the kind heavily reflected in fiction as well, like in the *shōnen* genre. Male characters in *shōnen* manga are usually drawn as hyper-masculine with harsh features and overly-exaggerated muscles and exhibit sexually aggressive behaviours towards the women in their stories (McLelland 2010, 80). Furthermore, healthy or romantic relationships are rarely depicted in *shōnen* stories as interactions between the male leads and the supporting female characters are typically confined to violent and inequitable sex scenes (McLelland 2010, 81). Despite these issues, the *shōnen* genre remains highly popular among young boys. More importantly though, these stories reproduce a specific narrative of masculinity and heterosexuality in which its consumers are encouraged to replicate by embodying the same aesthetics and attitudes of popular *shōnen* characters.

Existing on the opposite end of the spectrum, BL and its *bishōnen* aesthetic are removed from the *shōnen* world. Embodying a different kind of masculinity, the queer characters depicted in BL are highly attuned to their emotions, accepting their feelings as they derive from love and romanticism (Nagaike 2015, 195). In the Japanese context specifically, this attunement of *bishōnen* characters is read as less classically ‘masculine’ and more ‘feminine’. Additionally, although some BL stories do feature explicit sex scenes, usually the plot’s primary focus is not on the sexual. On a whole, it does not adopt the *shōnen* stance of there being an ingrained, aggressive sexual drive in men that mindlessly dictates all of their actions and relationships; rather, the attention is on the development of the romantic and emotional side of their characters first and foremost (Nagaike 2015, 195). Therefore when reading BL, much like how it is for women-identifying readers, male-identifying readers can vicariously experience a different kind of relationship (i.e. romantic and non-toxic) excluded in the *shōnen* genre and engage with a masculinity otherwise transgressive to the ‘ideal’ gendered behaviour in Japanese society. For example, one online reader explains “I somehow feel myself freed from [established] gender consciousness [through reading BL]. I’m not at all skilled at expressing masculinity in a particularly appropriate way.” (Nagaike 2015, 193). Appropriate here is defined as hyper-masculine, aggressive and sexually dominant towards women. Overall, this quote is quite telling in BL’s function. For those who are queer in their gender performance (in that they find themselves unable to perform society’s expected gendered roles), BL can provide catharsis. Such catharsis is achieved not only through experiencing these *bishōnen* characters’ relationships and alternative gender performances, but also through engagement, via online forums and BL magazines, with a community of queer individuals in a similar position.

In terms of the *bishōnen* aesthetic, it should also be considered how this assists in the self-inserting practice. As discussed earlier, women-identifying readers primarily relied on the more androgynous traits of *bishōnen* characters, like their slender bodies or omitted genitalia, to insert themselves into the narrative. I argue that this works in a similar manner for male-identifying readers, especially when considered alongside the unrealistic standards set by the *shōnen* genre. In *shōnen* manga, male characters are typically defined by their bulging muscles and large frames, making them look like pro-wrestlers. This is contrasted to the *bishōnen* who lack this extreme muscle definition. For the majority of male-identifying readers, the slender bodies of the *bishōnen* protagonists would look more realistic and

relatable. Additionally, although there is a tendency for artists to forgo drawing the genitalia, this can actually further the self-inserting process. While for women-identifying readers the lack of a penis makes the *bishōnen* body more recognizable (i.e. more feminine), for male-identifying readers, it can work to create a blank space wherein their own genitalia can fictionally occupy. However, compared to women-identifying readers, there is a varying degree in how male-identifying readers accomplish this self-inserting, or how they sexually relate to the characters in BL manga. In an online survey, 111 male-identifying readers were asked, if placed into a BL manga, would they prefer to be the *seme* (the penetrator, or dominant top), or the *uke* (the *bishōnen*, or bottom recipient) (Nagaike 2015, 196). In the survey, 41% responded *uke*, 19% *seme*, and 40% as switches, meaning they had no preference when it came to being the dominant top or bottom recipient (Nagaike 2015, 196). In this survey as well, 21 male-identifying readers identified as heterosexual in real life; yet within this heterosexual category, only 5 said they would exclusively be a *seme* (the dominant top) (Nagaike 2015, 196). What is interesting to note from this survey is that real-life sexuality does not always translate over to the reading experience of BL. Furthermore, the prevalence in the answers for being the *uke* recipient or a switch suggests a queerness being explored through these BL self-insert sexual preferences. By placing themselves in either the recipient or dominant top role, male-identifying readers are given the space to fictionally explore homosexual or bisexual desires where it may not be safe to do so in real-life and where it is seen as transgressive for its non-reproductive nature. Or, for a different matter, they can rely on these terms to better articulate their sexual identity and preferences within the wider BL community, particularly in the search for partners, when conventional labels (like homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual) can feel too restrictive.

## 7. Conclusion

Given Japan's contemporary climate towards queerness, it may be tempting to think that intolerance of non-heteronormative gender identities and sexualities has always been part of Japanese society. However, considering the feudal periods' acceptance of homosexuality and their idolisation of queer figures, like the androgynous *bishōnen*, it is highly remissive to approach this intolerance as ingrained in Japanese culture. Rather, it is more accurate to understand it as a repercussion of the Westernisation process occurring in the Meiji era. In the wake of the importation of Western discourses pertaining to sexuality and gender ideals, there was a noticeable shift in how queerness was socially framed. With a newfound focus on the reproductivity of heterosexual relationships, and the subsequent gendered expectations around 'proper' behaviour and expressions, long-standing traditions of homosexuality and queer gender performances were discouraged, censured, and erased. This was particularly evident in the case of the *bishōnen*. Once venerated for their androgynous gender presentation, they had all but disappeared from the public until they returned in the most unexpected manner: manga.

Revived through the BL genre, the fictional *bishōnen* and the queerness they embodied quickly gained popularity among creators and consumers alike. As a product of the global 1970s sexual revolution, BL became a staple on the manga market with magazines (i.e. *Allan*) legitimising it as a new category independent from the already established *shōnen* and *shōjo* genres. In the end, it cannot be understated how important these magazines were. More than just legitimising the genre and furthering its popularity, these magazines facilitated the creation of underground queer communities. In a context where expressions of queerness are still generally met with a degree of hostility, and where queer individuals feel uncomfortable outing themselves, this underground community as accessed through BL magazines has become an invaluable tool for queer individuals to communicate and interact without drawing unwanted attention. This understanding of BL as a tool is likewise important to note for how it operates on an individual



level as well. Through its characters and its employment of the *bishōnen* aesthetic, BL has provided the means, through self-inserting, for the private exploration of the sexual and gender identities of its readers, ultimately providing both emotional fulfillment and catharsis.

Overall, although queerness remains less visible in Japan now than compared to the past, it nonetheless persists, albeit subtly. United by a love of fictional *bishōnen*, it is clear that queer individuals have carved out a space for themselves and have continued to resist heteronormative expectations in a rather unique and unprecedented way.

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## The Domovoy: Benevolent House Spirit or Overbearing Grandpa?

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary belief in the Slavic house spirit, the Domovoy (or Domovoi), among Russians stems from a long history of Slavic pagan belief. Ethnographic data reveals that the Domovoy is regarded as a benevolent ancestor and spirit to a given family. He is responsible for all domestic aspects of his dwelling. He punishes amoral behaviour like a messy home and aids his family through favours when they please him. The Domovoy's characteristics and behaviours reflect larger social and cultural values of Russian peasants before their Christianization in the 10th century. Values of communal and cooperative behaviour, sharing, modesty, and domestic harmony are evident in the 'rules' the Domovoy sets for his family. This paper investigates how the belief in the Domovoy strengthens these values of community and tradition. The persistence of the Domovoy in the religious beliefs of contemporary rural Russians exemplifies how studying folk and pagan aspects of larger religious institutions can aid in understanding the cultural intricacies of rural populations.

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary belief in the Domovoy (or Domovoi) among Russians stems from a long history of Slavic pagan belief (Ivanits 1989). The survival of this belief and the practices surrounding it reflect the cultural values of contemporary Russian villagers. Using ethnographic data compiled in the late 1900s and early 2000s (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016; Adonyeva and Olson 2011), I explore how this belief solidifies community, cements tradition, and reflects the ideals of the rural Russian village.

The Domovoy is a benevolent Slavic house spirit that is believed to live in the homes of Slavic people ranging from modern day Serbia, Kazakhstan, and northern Russia (Ivanits 1989). Other very similar house spirits exist in cultures around the world, such as the Scottish brownie (Henderson and Cowan 2001). The Domovoy's genesis can be traced to Slavic paganism, which was practiced in Eastern Europe since before the Christianisation of the Slavic regions in Europe (Tikhomirov 1959). Although there is minimal native documentation of the region during the pre-Christian era due to illiteracy, scholars believe settlements were arranged in small villages with fortified centres surrounded by fences or a similar barrier for protection (Andreyev 1962). The inhabitants of the villages lived in farmsteads and were primarily farmers and agricultural workers who relied on difficult manual labor to sustain their livelihoods (Andreyev 1962). Russia during this time was predominantly pagan; there was no overarching structure to their beliefs and practices. Villagers believed in multiple deities, including the supreme god, Rod, and performed rituals to appease them. They also believed in "lower" entities that were tied to nature, rivers, and the home (Hazard Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor ~1113 AD).

The introduction of Christianity to the rural villagers of Russia influenced their pagan belief system. These influences occurred in several waves from the 8th century to the 13th century, but Christianity was officially adopted in 989 C.E. (Tikhomirov 1959, 200). The initial "baptism" of Russia was primarily concentrated to the nobles who resided in urban areas. Thus, years of Christian influence only superficially altered the beliefs of the Russian villagers likely due to their geographical and cultural isolation (Tikhomirov 1959). Although villagers accepted Christianity with little resistance, it is clear through ethnographic research in the mid and late 1900s that rural Russians still held onto some of their pagan ways

(Adonyeva and Olson 2011; Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). The veneer of Christianity was placed upon pagan practices and beliefs, allowing villagers to continue their traditional ways of living with slight modifications.

Due to limited agricultural technology in the villages, farming was small-scale and only done for sustenance. As a result, many families were poor and the social structure of the villages were heavily communal and collective (Andreyev 1962). Collaboration and compromise were essential to the survival of the village and its inhabitants; neighbours and kin helped each other with cooking, caring for children, and farmwork (Clements 1982). Although the Russian Revolution in 1917 liberated the villagers from their landlords, their new “freedom” was not much different from their labour-intensive lives before. Years of Christian influence seeped into the pagan tradition and the syncretism of these two belief systems formed double-faith or *dvoeverie*. Despite the mixture of these two belief systems, rural Russians do not consider themselves to be practicing a mixture of religions, rather, most consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians (Chulos 1995).

Rural inhabitants still make up a large part of the Russian population. In the mid 1900’s the rural population was at a staggering 46% (“Rural Population (% of Total Population) - Russian Federation | Data” n.d.). In the early 2000s, rural inhabitants made up 26% of the total Russian populace (“Rural Population (% of Total Population) - Russian Federation | Data” n.d.). Research done with villagers in rural areas of Russia from the late 1900s and early 2000s has documented the enduring existence of pagan beliefs. From this research, it is clear that the Domovoy is one of the most prevalent supernatural spirits. In the following pages I will describe the Domovoy, his appearance, and his role in rural Russian society. I will then provide an analysis of his characteristics and behaviours and link them to cultural values. Exploring the function of the Domovoy and his role in the home and in the community can provide insight into why he has persisted in the beliefs of villagers for centuries.

## **2.The Domovoy**

### ***2.1 The Domovoy’s Abode***

The Domovoy is believed to reside in the homes of Slavic villagers. His typical place of rest is behind or under the stove, in the hearth, in the chimney, or in the basement or attic (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). A villager from the Omsk Region of Russia says that, “He lives with [them] behind the stove; he would jump out of there. Small, shaggy, [they] could not really see him well” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016).

### ***2.2 The Domovoy’s Appearance***

The Domovoy is invisible most of the time; villagers believe he prefers not to be seen and even punishes those who are particularly intent on spotting him (Ivanits 1989). When he does appear, he is often anthropomorphized and represented as a small, masculine, humanoid creature with a long beard or covered in hair from head to toe (Adonyeva and Olson 2011). Sometimes he is described as bearing a resemblance—not just in appearance, but also in attitude and voice—to a deceased male ancestor of his lineage or the master of the house (Adonyeva and Olson 2011). This description is very common among villagers in numerous regions and many even consider him to be the reborn soul of an ancestor. Additionally, he is said to be able to manifest into the form of an animal, often the family dog or cat (Adonyeva and Olson 2011).

### ***2.3 The Domovoy’s Role***

*The Domovoy serves as the guardian of his designated family, often ensuring their health and a bountiful harvest. He is deeply invested in their well-being,*

*actively contributing to domestic duties, and bringing good luck.* During harvest season when the family is working the land, he looks after the livestock, and when parents are busy with chores or other tasks, he looks after the children (MacCulloch and Jan 1918). The Domovoy also supervises the people of the household and enforces “proper” domestic behaviour. He expects the home to be clean and orderly and keeps a watchful eye over the behaviour of his family, ensuring that they are all adhering to social rules (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). For example, one account from the *Khar'kov Province* illustrates the Domovoy's punishment for broken social rules:

The woman went out onto the porch and, forgetting that she did not have her head covered, she stood and admired the starry sky. Suddenly she recollected herself and quickly headed back to the passageway, but there the domovoi was waiting for her. He seized her by the braid and pulled her up to the attic” (Ivanits 1989, 170).

In return for his service, the Domovoy asks to be honoured and fed. If a family neglects their Domovoy, fails to tend to him adequately, or mismanages the household, he may become vengeful. The Domovoy may “cause the walls of the house to creak, bang pots, tangle needlework, spread manure on the door, and turn everything upside down in the yard” (Ivanits 1989, 53). However, owing to his inherently kind nature, he may simply vacate the dwelling, which perhaps is the worst fate of all for the family, as domestic harmony was believed to be impossible without the presence of the Domovoy. (Ivanits 1989).

#### **2.4 Pleasing the Domovoy**

Due to the Domovoy's mercurial personality, measures are taken to please him. In many households he is given a portion of supper, milk, bread, sugar, tobacco, or bread and salt as an offering (Ivanits 1989). In many stories, it is often emphasized that the Domovoy is invited to the new home when a family moves dwellings. One villager from the Novgorod Region warns, “You should surely invite him to a new house, otherwise he will not go, but will remain [where he was].” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). One such ritual to invite the Domovoy is to “take a new broom and sweep all the corners, saying, ‘Our keeper, father, come with us to live in the new house.’ In the new house, you need to put the broom behind the stove with its head up, and this broom should be no longer used for sweeping” (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). The broom was a common implement to transport the Domovoy to a new home, along with a boot, a slipper, or a bag (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016).

Along with these implements, there are other various traditions and rituals, which vary between villages, to invite the Domovoy into a new home (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). If the Domovoy was *not* properly invited into the new home, he would howl and wail and eventually become a nuisance for the new homeowners (Ivanits 1989). Further measures taken to please the Domovoy included keeping horses, cats, and other animals of his favourite colour (Ivanits 1989). If the Domovoy did not like an animal, “he scattered its feed, tied its tail to the manger, caused it to stomp all night, and sometimes rode it to exhaustion” (Ivanits 1989, 55). The master of the house would spend the night in the shed with the new animal to watch the activities of the Domovoy to determine if the colour of the new animal was the Domovoy's preference (Ivanits 1989).

#### **2.5 The Domovoy as Kin**

The Domovoy, much like a member of the family, shares in the happiness and sadness of the household to which he is connected. He mourns when a family member dies and may be heard crying in the night. He may even foresee the death of a family member and begin his mourning prematurely by “knock[ing] on the

windowing or clink[ing] dishes on the eve of the death of relatives" (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). The Domovoy has the special ability to predict the fate of his family. To see the Domovoy in physical form is interpreted as an omen (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016). Furthermore, villagers describe the Domovoy as most active at night. He visits people, gently dragging his hairy hands over the faces of sleepers. A soft and warm hand is seen as a sign of good luck, while a cold and dry hand is a sign of the opposite (Ivanits 1989). One woman tells the story of her family Domovoy on the eve of her wedding, "At night, a shaggy bear fell on me and started to suffocate me. This was a Domovoy who was driving me out of the house. I soon got married" (Ansimova and Golubkova 2016, 132). Stories of the Domovoy 'suffocating' or 'choking' members of his household are particularly common in many regions.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1 *The Domovoy's Brethren***

Many of the Domovoy's characteristics allow him to fall into different categories of supernatural beings. His small stature, connection to ancestors, and devotion to his community are shared by house deities and spirits from cultures around the world (Briggs 1976). He can be classified as a fairy due to his small size, humanoid form, supernatural abilities, ability to vanish and reappear at will, and the inherent risk associated with encountering him (Briggs 1976). Alternatively, his deep connection to a specific family and his ability to control objects telekinetically are reminiscent of a poltergeist (Briggs 1976). Folklorist Eugeny Karagov also posits that the Domovoy's omnipresence, enabling him to "watch" over his family at all times, and his often benevolent nature, may derive from his association with a certain manifestation of the supreme Slavic god, Rod (Ivanits 1989).

A characteristic of the Domovoy akin to many creatures in other cultures and religions is his connection to the ancestors of his given family, for example, the Veli in Fiji, as documented by Tomlinson (2016). Clark and Coe (2021) theorize that ancestor worship functions to preserve social norms and traditional behaviour. "A failure to treat kin altruistically, in many societies, is said to ignite the scorn of dead ancestors and/or other supernatural beings" as well as living elders who heavily discourage breaking of tradition (Clark and Coe 2021, 288). "The threat of supernatural punishment should then be largely interpreted as synonymous with the threat of social, public punishment, meaning that the vague threat of supernatural punishment (e.g., illness; crop failure) can be paired with immediate, direct punishment (e.g., isolation from larger social groups)" (Clark and Coe 2021, 288).

The Domovoy's role in rural Russian society fits perfectly into this theory; his tendency to punish those who do not adopt proper behaviour encourages conformity. The Domovoy makes it very difficult for a home to run in a non-traditional way and thus ensures the continuity of tradition. For example, the woman who went outside without her scarf was punished by the Domovoy because her behaviour broke the social norm. Ignoring the Domovoy's rules means ignoring the social rules that govern the village. There are unwritten guidelines that dictate how a home should be run, and if a family decides to ignore these guidelines, they face retribution from the Domovoy as well as the village. This case also illuminates the lasting gendered roles that have persisted into the modern era. Women, who participated in outdoor manual farm work alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers, were not met with the same help in the domestic sphere (Clements 1982). It is evident in the ethnographic interviews that women are commonly the protagonists in stories concerning the Domovoy. His 'rules' of maintaining social control within the home allude that the home was a place of social control for women. Their roles were clearly defined and any transgression resulted in punishment—from both the Domovoy and the community. Thus, the Domovoy can

reveal sexist double standards that arguably serve no functional purpose in contemporary rural Russia. However, these standards persist, perhaps in part due to their association with the Domovoy and other essential social values that he promotes.

The community aspect of belief in the Domovoy is similar to the Indonesian water spirit Sikameinan. Manir, Kaptchuk, and Henrich (2021) find in their study of this spirit that belief in small gods and deities encourages cooperation and behaviour that benefits the community. Through ethnographic interviews, they find that the belief in the Sikameinan instills fear to prevent people from stealing and encourages people to share their food (Singh, Kaptchuk, and Henrich 2021). The moral wrongness of these two deviances, stealing and failing to share, are reified by the Sikameinan—which in turn—cements the cultural value of sharing. The importance placed upon sharing can be interpreted as a key ingredient to the survival of this community (Singh, Kaptchuk, and Henrich 2021).

Manir, Kaptchuk, and Henrich (2021) further theorize that the rituals performed for the Sikameinan are not merely for the sake of worship; they also serve the purpose of gaining the trust of peers. Through showing a belief and fear in the Sikameinan, the ritual performers are relaying that they can be trusted. This theory can be applied to the Domovoy; when people put their trust and respect in the Domovoy, they are simultaneously putting their trust and respect in the community. What the Domovoy deems proper behaviour is often based on the village, and therefore those who behave in ways to appease the Domovoy are behaving in ways that benefit the village. The ritual of inviting the Domovoy to a new home also contributes to this; it instills and reifies the belief in the Domovoy. It establishes the continuity of the belief because it is a demonstration of a family's devotion. It also conveys the importance of the belief to children who are essential in carrying the tradition forward. This shared belief acts as a social contract between the villagers, allowing for stability, solidarity, and harmony—not only within the home, —but throughout the community. Although the Domovoy is different from the Sikameinan, in that he is inherently benevolent, belief in the Domovoy also functions to ensure community solidarity and conservatism.

### **3.2 The Local Domovoy**

The place in the home where the Domovoy is said to reside can give insight into his origins and significance. The hearth and the stove are both places of warmth and heat. The hearth is traditionally built in the centre of the home, and the Domovoy's residence there symbolizes his importance to the Slavic family. Like the hearth, he is essential to the home, serving as its lifeforce, providing warmth and comfort. A proper home can simply not function without him. Still, the Domovoy's other places of residence—the attic and the basement—continue to symbolize his 'otherness.' These two locations, either directly above or directly below the main area of the home, represent the parallel 'otherworld' where spirits reside. The Slavic home, therefore, mirrors the world, with the spirit realm positioned either above or below the human realm.

Additionally, visits from the Domovoy in the middle of the night could be an explanation for the cross-cultural experience of sleep paralysis. Many cultures have folktales and beliefs to explain the symptoms of sleep paralysis. The Domovoy suffocating or sitting atop an individual in their sleep would produce the same sensations as sleep paralysis. The cause of these visits from the Domovoy are usually significant events, like a wedding, which often produce stress in an individual. Stress is associated with sleep paralysis and fragmented sleeping (Wróbel-Knybel et al. 2022). How a culture understands and explains sleep paralysis can significantly influence how an individual experiences it (De Jong 2005). This could be an explanation for why some individuals only feel light touches during the night rather than the typical heavy weight on their chest. Sleep paralysis is often a frightening

experience, but not all of the stories of visits from the Domovoy during sleep portray the same aura of fright. This can be due to how the culture influences the experience of sleep paralysis. Many other individuals report feeling soft touches from the Domovoy.

In his analysis of common Russian peasant sayings, Chulos (1995) finds that “many sayings did not indicate superstition as much as an acknowledgment of the transient nature of fortune or misfortune, the lack of control over human activity [and] other sayings commented on the fear of the natural world and uncertainties of peasant life” (208). Expanding on this quote from Chulos (1995), these sayings can indicate a causal relationship between villagers and the spiritual world. Villagers use the supernatural to cope with the uncertainty in their lives. The turbulence of village life, which includes unexpected deaths, illnesses that affect livestock, and sub-optimal crops, are softened by this relationship with the supernatural. This is primarily because the unfortunate circumstances can be attributed to them. The Domovoy himself is a connection to the untameable natural world and allows the villagers to manufacture some control over the uncontrollable.

Another interpretation of the Domovoy’s genesis and continued existence can be made using a phenomenological approach. This approach theorizes that experience leads to belief. Seeing apparitions of recently deceased relatives is a cross-cultural experience. Family members of the deceased may hear sounds or even see their relatives during the mourning process. In the case of the Domovoy, these experiences may have led to a cultural belief in spirits. More significantly, the death of an important family member—like the dominating figure that governed the home—can cause a distinct sense of loss and disorientation. These feelings could lead to the manifestation of the Domovoy as a leader and protector, in order to quell the anxiety that surrounds mortality and loss. Using the belief source hypothesis, one can theorize that individuals who grew up in this culture may be more likely to perceive apparitions and attribute them to the Domovoy. This is largely due to their prior exposure to this ideology, thus reinforcing their belief in him.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Domovoy, a Slavic house spirit, embodies long-standing Slavic pagan traditions, persisting even after the Christianization of rural Russian regions. This house spirit takes on the role of the household’s guardian. He ensures domestic harmony and enforces social norms by imposing rules and punishing those who transgress them. The Domovoy is also deeply intertwined with Russian peasant culture. He is a physical manifestation of the values: communality, cooperation, and domestic order. This spirit is seen as an ancestral protector, participating both in his family’s joys and sorrows. The Domovoy also upholds moral conduct within the household by punishing improper behaviors and rewarding good practices. This action sheds light on gender roles and arguably outdated traditions.

Despite the official adoption of Christianity, the rural villagers maintained their pagan beliefs, integrating Christian practices with their existing traditions in a syncretic manner. This allowed them to preserve their cultural identity and continue their traditional way of life. Ongoing beliefs in the Domovoy among contemporary rural Russians offer insights into the enduring nature of these cultural practices. The spirit’s role extends beyond mere folklore, functioning as a belief mechanism that reinforces community values and social norms. The Domovoy shares characteristics with other supernatural entities across cultures, indicating a broader human tendency to use folklore to manage social behavior and maintain communal harmony.

The Domovoy serves as a cultural bridge between the past and present in rural Russian communities, encapsulating the enduring values and social norms of these societies. By examining beliefs in the Domovoy, we gain valuable insights into how

supernatural folklore can reflect, but also actively stabilize, community life. This ensures the continuity of cultural traditions amid changing social landscapes. This study not only highlights the importance of the Domovoy in maintaining domestic and communal order, but also illustrates the broader role of folklore in shaping and reflecting the cultural identities of communities. In studying the Domovoy, we gain knowledge of the cultural heritage of rural Russia, and also glean valuable perspectives on the persistence of folk beliefs and their role in shaping contemporary societies. These beliefs serve as a bridge between the past and the present, shedding light on the values that continue to influence life in these regions. Indeed, to understand the present fully, we must explore the depths of the past.

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## Examining Illness Narratives of Hikikomori

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### ABSTRACT

Hikikomori, often described as "social withdrawal," emerged as a sociomedical condition among Japanese youth at the end of the twentieth century (Rubinstein 2016). In this paper, I aim to examine the Japanese cultural model utilized by individuals experiencing Hikikomori to articulate their circumstances. Specifically, the study will delve into the narratives employed by Hikikomori individuals to elucidate the factors leading to their entry into the Hikikomori state and the reasons behind their subsequent reintegration into society. An essential aspect of this inquiry involves examining whether these narratives reveal any indications of social suffering. Additionally, the research explores external influences on Hikikomori individuals, focusing on the directives provided by others regarding their actions. I believe that analyzing these accounts within the conceptual framework of "illness narrative" (Hunt 2000) would allow me to investigate how individuals narrate their Hikikomori experience.

### 1. Introduction

Hikikomori, often described as "social withdrawal," emerged as a sociomedical condition among Japanese youth at the end of the twentieth century (Rubinstein 2016). In this paper, I aim to examine the Japanese cultural model utilized by individuals experiencing Hikikomori to articulate their circumstances. Specifically, the study will delve into the narratives employed by Hikikomori individuals to elucidate the factors leading to their entry into the Hikikomori state and the reasons behind their subsequent reintegration into society. An essential aspect of this inquiry involves examining whether these narratives reveal any indications of social suffering. Additionally, the research explores external influences on Hikikomori individuals, focusing on the directives provided by others regarding their actions. I believe that analyzing these accounts within the conceptual framework of "illness narrative" (Hunt 2000) would allow me to investigate how individuals narrate their Hikikomori experience.

### 2. Conceptual Framework

#### 2.1 Illness Narratives

I perceive similarities between the personal illness narratives outlined by Londa Hunt (2000) and the phenomenon of Hikikomori, especially in the experiences of individuals coping with chronic illnesses like cancer, as discussed in her article "*Strategic Suffering*." Analogous to chronic illnesses, Hikikomori subjects undergo disruptions to everyday life. This is evident in the most salient features of Hikikomori subjects' affective distress, which include "feeling depressed, anxious, and abandoned. They may also experience being bullied, attention problems, communication problems, issues with friends, and risk factors such as a 'freeter' (part-timer) lifestyle preference, a lack of self-competence, and unclear ambitions about the future" (Tajan 2021, 191). The recovery process from the Hikikomori state can span days, months or even years, with the possibility of temporary recovery followed by a return to the Hikikomori state.

Hunt (2000, 88), in her article, defines illness as "often characterized as an existential loss, a break in the usual rhythm of life." These characteristics can also be attributed to Hikikomori, where the emotional depth and experience can be described by the individual as their own personal narrative or explanatory model to cope with the question, "Why did this happen to me?" This framing will guide my analysis when investigating how individuals' personal Hikikomori narratives and views are influenced by their accounts of overarching cultural models. If we define

Hikikomori as a disruption or break from daily functioning (an illness), another aspect to consider is how the tension between this "disruption" and cultural expectations or roles as functioning members of society is resolved. Illness narratives, as outlined by Hunt (2000, 89), serve as a means to integrate personal suffering "within the larger context of life." These narratives are produced between people who are suffering and others in society, acting as an explanatory mechanism that communicates and allows the suffering individual to be "understood and sanctioned" (Miles 2010, 128).

## **2.2 Social Suffering, Explanatory Model**

Kleinman (2000) defines social suffering as a "social experience" resulting from the impact of political, economic, and institutional power on individuals and reciprocally, how these forms of power influence responses to social problems. In the context of Hikikomori, social suffering can manifest in various ways, including social pressures and expectations, the educational system, family dynamics, and economic pressures (Tajan 1997, ix).

## **3. Methods**

I gathered firsthand accounts through informal interviews with two Japanese individuals known to me. The interviewed students, denoted as M and F, were both young adults of the same age. M is male, and F is female, both born in Japan. M has spent his entire life in Japan. M experienced episodes of Hikikomori intermittently between grades eight and 12. On the other hand, F lived in Japan until grade 10, then moved to Canada, completed high school in Toronto, and returned to Japan for university. F went through a Hikikomori phase for three months during grade 10 in Japan.

The questions I posed during the interviews were general in nature, with the overarching goal of framing specific aspects of the cultural models of Hikikomori. I aimed to explore the manner in which my interviewees narrate their Hikikomori experiences. Recognizing the sensitivity of the subject matter surrounding Hikikomori, I made it clear to all interviewees that they had the option to refrain from answering any questions that made them uncomfortable. The inquiries focused on (1) the Hikikomori narratives of the interviewees, (2) the Japanese structures influencing the causes of Hikikomori, (3) the ways in which individuals support or interact with one another when experiencing Hikikomori, and (4) the primary factors contributing to the recovery from Hikikomori.

## **4. Examining the Narratives and Discussion**

### **4.1 My Relationship with M and F**

I met M through a mutual acquaintance in Japan. He enrolled at a university in Tokyo for a year, but when we met in the summer of 2023, he had taken a hiatus from his studies to work and accumulate funds for his tuition. Being self-financed, he found it challenging to sustain his education after the initial year.

I encountered F in the summer of 2017 at the boarding high school we both attended in Toronto, Canada, from grades 10 to 12. With just three Japanese students in the school, our daily interactions forged a strong bond, owing to our shared experience of being away from our families in Japan and being the only Japanese-speaking individuals as we navigated English-speaking environments. Since then, our friendship has remained steadfast.

### **4.2 M's Brief Hikikomori History**

When M was in grade six, his parents divorced, and he was raised by his father alone. He had been experiencing domestic violence from his father since a young

age. M struggled with school refusal and Hikikomori from time to time from the end of junior high school until his first year of university. He had experienced bullying several times from elementary school to high school. It was during his university years that he visited a psychiatric clinic for the first time and was diagnosed with ADHD and depression. The cause of the bullying was due to the circumstances of his parents, leading to three school transfers since childhood, which resulted in difficulties forming relationships at each new school. Looking back on that time, M acknowledges that he was perceived as insolent and socially awkward. Despite having high communication skills, he found it challenging to engage in group activities.

### ***4.3 F's Brief Hikikomori History***

F was raised in a small town in Hokkaido, attending a similarly small middle school where everyone knew each other. During her third year of junior high, she held the position of student council president and was a warmly trusted student relied upon by both classmates and teachers. With a recommendation from a school teacher, she secured admission to one of Hokkaido's most prestigious high schools. As this high school was situated in a larger town adjacent to her hometown, F moved to her grandparents' house in that larger town and commuted to school from there. Despite her promising start, F's social relationships took a downturn at this new school. Starting in the latter half of September during her freshman year, she became socially withdrawn, refrained from attending school and Hikikomori until December, eventually dropping out. The trigger for her school refusal was the bullying she had endured from her classmates. F attributes the bullying to her different behaviour, which made it challenging for her to integrate into the social circle.

### ***4.4 Uniformity in Japan's Education System***

Both M and F pointed out that Japan, being an island nation with a long history of homogeneity, had limited entry of people from other racial backgrounds. Due to this history of homogeneity, Japan is believed to prioritize uniformity as opposed to multicultural countries like Canada. The emphasis on uniformity in Japan stands out as a defining feature of its educational approach.

M and F draw attention to the specialization of Japan's education system in executing prescribed tasks, a notable contrast to the more opinion-based and discussion-oriented assignments common in Canada. Particularly in Japanese high schools, the focus is on memorization, with few assignments encouraging creativity or individual opinions. Assignments prioritize finding the correct answer through memorization, aligning with the goal of preparing students for university entrance exams, where conformity to established methods is paramount. The emphasis on conformity in the Japanese education system leads to proficiency in completing assigned tasks but may hinder the development of independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

M underscores the societal pressure in Japan to prioritize cooperation and uniformity. During his elementary school years, M struggled with conforming to the expectations of sitting still for two hours during morning assemblies, choosing to run around the schoolyard instead. This deviation from the norm resulted in a caution from a teacher regarding his inability to participate in group activities.

F highlighted how the demand for uniformity made it challenging to return to the status quo once one had deviated from it. For example, when she was in grade 10, there was a need to prepare for the cultural festival performance in her class. Since nobody was enthusiastic about it and the progress was slow, F took on a leadership role, organizing roles for everyone. However, she became disliked when some accused her of seeking attention and trying to please the teacher by taking a

leadership position. This deviation from the majority of classmates who were not enthusiastic about the preparation for the festival resulted in bullying, emphasizing the difficulty of returning to the expected conformity once strayed. Annual class changes further reinforce uniformity, as students spend an entire year with the same classmates, attending classes and participating in school events as a cohesive unit. She stated, "Spending the majority of the day in class with the same classmates every day makes class connections strong, but if you do not fit in well with that class, you feel like you have no place anywhere in the world."

#### ***4.5 Neurodivergence and School Support for Students with Special Needs in Japan***

The cultural emphasis on uniformity prevailing in Japan has led to a dearth of support provided by educational institutions for neurodiverse individuals. This environment often fails to adequately address the diverse needs of students with learning differences, thereby hindering their academic and social integration. Consequently, neurodiverse individuals may encounter feelings of isolation, frustration, and inadequacy within the educational framework, exacerbating their tendency towards social withdrawal and detachment from society. This lack of institutional support and recognition may ultimately contribute to the emergence of Hikikomori, a phenomenon characterized by profound social withdrawal and isolation, as affected individuals seek solace from societal pressures and expectations that do not accommodate their unique requirements.

M was later diagnosed with ADHD, a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that can significantly impact daily functioning and development ("Attention-Deficit"). He discovered that the reason he easily lost his attention was due to his ADHD. However, because ADHD was not widely discussed among those around him, and no one suggested that he seek medical attention for diagnosis, he remained unaware of his condition until the age of 18.

In contrast to Western countries where some students might skip or redo a grade level as needed, Japan's rigid grade placement is solely determined by one's birthdate until high school. The flexible accommodations seen in Western schools are nearly absent in the Japanese education system. When she was in grade 10, despite her diligent efforts, she repeatedly struggled with her math exams. Students who failed the exams were required to take makeup lessons before being allowed to retake the tests. F's classmates witnessed her frequent participation in makeup math lessons and began ridiculing and bullying her, perceiving her as different and inferior. F went to the hospital in grade 10 to seek help. There she was diagnosed with dyscalculia, a specific learning disability that affects her ability to understand and work with numbers. She shared this diagnosis with her Japanese high school, hoping for support. However, due to the inflexibility of Japanese school rules for students with special needs, teachers informed her that special accommodations could not be made just because of her diagnosis as it would not be fair to others. This response left F and her family deeply disappointed. In contrast, upon transferring to a school in Toronto, Canada, F found a much more supportive environment for her dyscalculia. Her school in Toronto acknowledged her need for special care, providing accommodations such as extra exam time, permission to bring dictionaries or calculators to exams when others could not, assistance with studying during tutorials, and additional private time for school-related activities. Unlike the Japanese system, the Canadian high school was accommodating to students with diagnoses and ensured they received special support.

The examples above emphasize the critical need for schools to possess resources aimed at fostering awareness about neurodivergent conditions and mental health concerns. Such awareness initiatives can play a pivotal role in the early identification of special needs among students, enabling timely intervention and

support. These efforts may potentially mitigate the risk of individuals developing Hikikomori tendencies, as early intervention can address underlying challenges and promote social inclusion and well-being.

#### ***4.6 Academic Stress and Societal Pressures on Japanese Students***

Both F and M have observed that a significant number of Japanese students grapple with the demands of entrance exams spanning junior high, high school, and college, resulting in profound fatigue from an excessively high level of academic stress. In an effort to secure recognition of their worth from parents and peers, these students aspire to attend elite schools. Furthermore, during the job-hunting process, Japanese companies employ a system referred to as the academic background filter, wherein the educational institution a person graduated from becomes a pivotal criterion for recruitment. A prevailing stereotype suggests that graduating from a renowned university is necessary to enter a prestigious company. As a consequence, parents, friends, and society exert immense pressure on individuals to excel in exams and secure admission to reputable universities, leading to social suffering.

M first started not to go to school and became Hikikomori in the second year of junior high school. In order to gain recognition and love from those around him, including his parents, he believed he had to excel in both school and sports. The means to gain approval from others and avoid bullying was to be the best in sports and academics. At that time, M, who had no outlet for expressing his frustrations, clung to the idea of being highly capable. M was reportedly adherent to ability-based and perfectionist ideologies at that time. As a result of his tremendous efforts, he was able to achieve first place in both school and soccer club activities in grade 8. However, during a soccer game in grade 8, he suddenly could not run. When taken to the hospital, it was revealed that he had a stress fracture from excessive soccer playing. Although he had been feeling pain for a year, due to the family's financial situation, he believed he should not go to the hospital and could not discuss it with his family. The doctor informed him that he could no longer play soccer, and he had to give up the sport he had worked hard at for so long. This was a considerable shock, and as a result, he quickly lost motivation for both sports and academics and began to skip school and became Hikikomori. M said that the reason why he had been striving to be the best in both academics and sports was that in Japanese society, excelling even slightly more than others in sports or academics is considered a positive attribute to gain recognition and acceptance from those around him.

When students opt to evade school, they inevitably lag behind in their studies, intensifying concerns for both parents and the students themselves and thereby amplifying the prevailing pressure. In an attempt to escape this pressure, some individuals resort to becoming Hikikomori. This phenomenon can be characterized as a form of social suffering, given that Japan's societal structure instills significant pressure on students to excel academically, attend prestigious universities and go to famous companies, which is perceived as a key measure of success in their lives. Parents particularly emphasize the importance of their children graduating from prestigious schools and securing positions in well-known companies as markers of success within Japanese culture.

#### ***4.7 Impact of Familial Understanding on Individuals Experiencing Hikikomori***

The individuals with whom I spoke emphasized the profound importance of having understanding and supportive family or friends for individuals experiencing Hikikomori. This support network plays a crucial role in providing emotional stability and acceptance, which are essential for individuals grappling with the challenges of Hikikomori.

In the case of M, his family showed a lack of understanding regarding his Hikikomori situation. He faced derogatory remarks from his father, was told to attend school, and felt a lack of belonging both at home and at school. Moreover, he felt that no one understood him. However, a turning point came in grade 9, when he met a former girlfriend. Experiencing love from someone who accepted his vulnerability made him feel accepted, and he regained the ability to attend school. During his first year of high school, he faced Hikikomori tendencies after breaking up with his girlfriend. However, thanks to two friends he met in grade 10, who understood and supported him, he increased the frequency of attending school to meet these two friends at school.

In F's case, her family had a profound understanding of her Hikikomori. Her family was aware of the bullying she experienced at school, given her physical scars and unstable mental state, and reportedly told her that it was okay not to go to school if it did not suit her. She said that having a supportive presence that accepted her Hikikomori state was immensely valuable. Due to the support from her family, F did not feel anxiety about the future or self-blame during her Hikikomori. Living without self-loathing, she only felt anger towards the children who had bullied her. It was because of the understanding from her family that, three months after becoming a Hikikomori, her family made the decision for her to go to Canada, and by changing her environment, she was able to overcome Hikikomori. In Canada, her study-abroad destination, she was blessed with friends, and without falling into Hikikomori, she could attend school in a new environment.

As illustrated by the examples above, the ability to overcome Hikikomori can be significantly influenced by the presence of individuals who understand and offer support during the Hikikomori period.

#### ***4.8 Financial Support as a Crucial Factor in Overcoming Hikikomori***

The individuals I interviewed underscored the importance of receiving financial support from their families during Hikikomori to have the flexibility to change their environments. Both of them successfully emerged from Hikikomori when they altered their surroundings and discovered supportive communities.

In the case of M, the eldest among four siblings, his father covered the tuition fees for his three younger siblings. However, due to experiencing domestic violence from his father and his father's financial responsibility of supporting his younger siblings, M was deprived of emotional and financial support from his father. The family's economic instability and strained relations with his father prevented M from discussing a visit to the doctor after sustaining a stress fracture. Consequently, the stress fracture worsened, impeding his ability to play soccer. Additionally, the lack of financial flexibility at home left him with no option to easily change his environment.

In contrast, F's family had financial stability. A month after F became a Hikikomori, the decision was made for her to study abroad in Canada, and two months later, she was in Canada. The financial support from her supportive parents enabled F to change her environment, facilitating her recovery from Hikikomori.

Both F and M stressed the significance of parental financial support in providing children with the option to move to a new environment as one of the solutions to overcome Hikikomori.

#### ***4.9 Understanding Hikikomori Through a Global Lens: Prevalence, Contributing Factors, and Interventions***

The phenomenon of Hikikomori, initially identified in Japan during the 1970s, has

since been recognized as a global issue, with reports of similar cases emerging from various countries and territories around the world (Cai et al. 2023, 547). The prevalence rates reported: 1.9% in young individuals in Hong Kong, 20.9% in university students in Nigeria, 9.5% in university students in Singapore, 2.7% in university students in the United States, and 8.1% among youths in China (Cai et al. 2023, 541). These numbers underscore the transcultural nature of this phenomenon, challenging the notion that it is unique to Japanese society. This global occurrence of Hikikomori suggests that the underlying causes and contributing factors extend beyond cultural and national boundaries, pointing towards more universal issues associated with modernization, globalization, and the shift towards virtual communication (Cai et al. 2023, 541). Various interventions for Hikikomori are available both within and outside of Japan.

The emergence of Hikikomori on a global scale can be attributed to several interconnected factors. The widespread use of the Internet and the transition from face-to-face to virtual communication have been identified as significant contributors to the rise of Hikikomori, affecting individuals who experience high levels of loneliness and low levels of social support, particularly from family members and friends (Cai et al. 2023, 541). Furthermore, Hikikomori is often found to coexist with various other mental health problems, including post-traumatic disorders, autism spectrum disorders, depression, and schizophrenia (Cai et al. 2023, 541). This suggests a complex interplay between social isolation and psychiatric conditions.

In Japan, where Hikikomori was first reported and has been extensively studied, the increase in its prevalence has been linked to several societal changes. These include the breakdown of the traditional labour market, economic shifts in households leading to a devaluation of work, and changes in child-rearing practices that may encourage avoidance of face-to-face communication (Cai et al. 2023, 547). Additionally, attributes such as shyness, social anxiety, and avoidant personality disorder, which are relatively common in Japanese society, have been associated with Hikikomori, indicating a cultural dimension to its prevalence in Japan (Cai et al. 2023, 547).

Despite the global recognition of Hikikomori, Japan has been at the forefront of developing support and treatment options for those affected. Mental health and community facilities in Japan offer various means of support, including consultation and job placement services tailored to the needs of individuals suffering from Hikikomori (Cai et al. 2023, 547). This comprehensive approach to treatment and support reflects a recognition of the multifaceted nature of Hikikomori, encompassing both the need for mental health intervention and the provision of social support to address the underlying causes of social withdrawal.

In addition, home visits conducted by healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurses, psychologists, and social workers, serve as a critical initial support mechanism for individuals experiencing Hikikomori (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 435). Although these visits, often initiated after consultations with parents, remain infrequent in Japan, they play a significant role in the intervention process (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). In contrast, South Korea has identified a similar condition among its youth, known as Oiettolie, and has implemented a social worker-led home visit program (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). This program has proven effective in facilitating accurate psychological assessments and streamlining access to subsequent treatment phases, such as direct psychotherapy (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). Despite the reluctance towards home visits in Japan, the success observed in South Korea suggests that developing a robust home visit strategy could be crucial for assisting Hikikomori individuals in Japan and potentially in other nations (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436).



Hong Kong has also made significant strides in addressing the challenges posed by Hikikomori. In Hong Kong, it has been identified that approximately 1.9% of the population exhibits Hikikomori characteristics, marking social withdrawal as a growing societal concern (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). In response, a range of support initiatives for Hikikomori individuals have been developed, and spearheaded by social workers and occupational therapists (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). Among these initiatives, animal therapy programs have been introduced, predicated on the notion that individuals suffering from Hikikomori may exhibit aversion to direct human contact (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). A pilot study suggests that engaging with animals, including dogs and cats, has been proposed and tested as an initial step in encouraging individuals to venture outside their homes (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436).

Additionally, the advent of pet-like robots, exemplified by Sony's Aibo, showcases the application of advanced technology in fostering emotional communication between humans and machines (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). These robots have been deployed in various contexts to address social challenges associated with psychiatric conditions, notably autism and dementia (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). It is posited that such robots could mitigate feelings of loneliness to some extent, particularly in single-person households affected by Hikikomori (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436). The rapid development of these emotionally communicative robots offers promise for their role in easing loneliness and facilitating the first steps toward enhanced social engagement and sociability among Hikikomori individuals (Kato, Shigenobu, and Teo 2019, 436).

The phenomenon of Hikikomori, once perceived as a culturally specific syndrome in Japan, has now been recognized as a pervasive global issue that reflects broader societal and psychological challenges. The international prevalence of Hikikomori underscores the necessity for a multidimensional approach to understanding and addressing this form of social withdrawal, one that considers the intricate interplay between cultural, economic, technological, and psychological factors. The world is becoming increasingly interconnected, yet paradoxically more isolating for some. The lessons learned from Japan's extensive experience with Hikikomori, alongside innovative interventions from around the globe, offer valuable insights into patient care, mental health, etc. These insights not only pave the way for more effective support and treatment strategies but also highlight the importance of fostering resilient communities capable of supporting individuals through times of social disconnection and mental health challenges. The collaborative efforts between healthcare professionals, technological advancements, and community-based support systems are essential in addressing the multifaceted needs of those affected by Hikikomori, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and supportive global society.

## **5. Conclusion**

Examining conceptual frameworks, including social suffering, reveals their contributions to shaping the illness narratives of Hikikomori individuals, as evident in the cases of both M and F. In both interviews, when discussing potential actions to address the issues surrounding Hikikomori, both M and F emphasized the importance of raising awareness about Hikikomori, neurodivergence, and mental health issues within schools. They noted that, unlike Western schools, Japanese schools lack sufficient resources, and there is a cultural stigma preventing individuals from openly discussing their special needs due to the desire to conform to Japan's cultural emphasis on uniformity. Nevertheless, both M and F expressed a wish that they had been aware of their special needs earlier, enabling them to seek help promptly. Schools having resources available to increase awareness about neurodivergence and mental health issues can offer crucial support to students with special needs at an early stage.

Furthermore, it is essential for schools to provide resources to inform Hikikomori individuals and their families about alternatives to traditional schooling. Various options can be made known to them, such as homeschooling or attending online school at home. Acknowledging these alternatives and avoiding pressure to conform them to traditional schooling are crucial.

For families of Hikikomori individuals experiencing financial difficulties, accessible resources that are free of charge are crucial. Non-governmental organizations exist where students with special needs or those struggling in traditional school settings can find support at no cost. Additionally, both interviewees emphasized the importance of having someone who understands their Hikikomori situation. Knowing that someone cares about them can make a significant difference in the Hikikomori state.

Finally, the transition of Hikikomori from a perceived culture-specific syndrome to Japan to a globally recognized condition underscores the impact of modernization, globalization, and the digital revolution on social behaviours and mental health. The shift towards indirect communication, facilitated by technological advancements, has contributed to increased instances of social withdrawal and related mental health issues worldwide. Innovative interventions, such as home visits and animal and robot therapy, represent promising steps towards addressing the complexities of Hikikomori, suggesting the need for continued multidisciplinary research and culturally adaptable solutions.

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## Hand in Fin: Exploring Reciprocity Between Humans and Fishes Through Music

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between fish and humans in the sonic realm is one that has yet to be explored in an anthropological context. Exploring this relationship provides us with an important new understanding: there is a reciprocal sonic relationship between humans and fish which must be considered in both biological conservation efforts and when understanding the lives of fish-adjacent peoples and communities. I provide a brief overview into the complex and diverse systems that fish use to hear and how noise influences their lives, and examine findings from biological studies that describe how fish react to human-generated noise. Then, I delve into a select few cases that describe how fish and fishing appear in human music and the meanings that these songs communicate. This research reveals that just as humans have the potential to have deep, yet poorly understood, impacts on the aquatic realm of fishes through our sound and music, changes in fish and fishing appear in our sound and music.

### 1. Introduction

*Well, I love her, but I love to fish.*  
-Brad Paisley's "I'm Gonna Miss Her"

Most people can conceive of a reciprocal relationship between fish and people, usually based on us eating them and trying to be considerate of their habitat to preserve our food source in the process. As we transition into an unprecedented time of threat to marine and freshwater fish, we must consider our relationship with fish beyond the physical nutrition they provide. Fish play important roles in the aquatic realm, they are key participants in underwater ecosystems and have long held important spiritual and cultural meanings for humans. Often left behind in discussions of fishes' environments is their sonic realm, yet research in this field increasingly demonstrates that fish exploit and contribute to a complex underwater acoustic environment. One must recognize the impact of anthropogenic noise and music in understanding the auditory world of fishes.

Just as humans influence fishes through noise and music, fish and fishing appear in human music across time and space; these songs reveal the interlinked relationship between humans and the marine world. Using music, one can understand that humans are inextricably linked to fish and vice versa. We sing songs about fish, and our songs and noise can profoundly impact fish: a sonic reciprocal relationship. Western conceptions of music strictly delegate singing and music-making to the human realm, but other cultures suggest that the fish may be singing back should we listen carefully enough.

### 2. The Fish are Listening

Auditory reception is critical in providing fishes' non-visual information, often from great distances. Sound is used for communication between fishes, detecting predators and prey, mating behavior, and migration and habitat selection (Fay 1988; Popper 2019). Fishes generally are restricted to low frequencies (800–1000 Hz) compared to marine or terrestrial mammals, although this is highly dependent on species (Sand 2008). Fishes generally have a greater ability to discriminate between sounds of different amplitude and frequency, as well as calls that differ in timing characteristics (Popper 2019) compared to other hearing animals. As sound plays a significant role in the lives of most fishes, it is crucial to understand how fish detect and process sound.

Fishes exist in an aqueous medium, which means they cannot detect sound using the vibrations of a tympanum as tetrapods do. None of the fishes, including teleost

fish that have a developed bony skulls, have developed a tympanum (ear drum) on the outside of the body or in the middle ear because no net movement exists between the medium (water) and the animal's body (Fritzsche 1992). However, this certainly does not mean that fishes cannot hear. Almost all fish have some auditory reception capability, and some groups have further specialized their ability to hear using accessory structures. All bony fishes have otoliths, a calcium carbonate structure that sits in the auditory capsule, and are thus capable of some noise detection. To do so, the fish's brain analyzes the otoliths movement striking delicate cilia, small hairs attached to the auditory capsule, in the capsule relative to body movement to provide information about the auditory environment (Popper 2019). In these cases, fishes are not detecting pressure changes striking a membrane (like tetrapod auditory reception), instead they are detecting particle motion<sup>1</sup> (Schuif & Hawkins 1976). This method of auditory reception is more akin to standing next to a loudspeaker and feeling the sound as it vibrates your skin rather than hearing the loudspeaker. Sensing particle motion limits the frequency of sound that can be detected and the range at which sound can be detected, but likely increases the ability to detect minute changes in directionality of sound (Nedelec 2019).

At least a third of all teleost (boney) fish have developed a far more sensitive auditory detection apparatus that functions similarly to the tympanum in tetrapods, relying on compressing air rather than compressing water, as air is more compressible than liquids. There is much diversity and variation of the type of air-filled chamber and its position in the fish. Sometimes this chamber is the swim bladder, like in cichlids or squirrelfish, or it may be another gas-filled chamber, like in labyrinth fish (Ladich & Schluz-Mirbach 2016). Regardless of position, these air-filled chambers are compressed and moved by vibrations in the water, and the movement of these walls is transmitted to the inner ear (Schuif and Hawkins 1976). Some fish have associated accessory structures that improve sound transmission, such as the Weberian apparatus; these fish are typically termed "hearing specialists". Additionally, around 800 species of fish can create sound by rubbing specialized groups of muscles called sonic muscles against the gas bladder; the muscles recruited to generate sound differ between taxa but have convergent functions (Bass et al. 2008). Just as some fish are hearing specialists, some are noise-making specialists. Similarly to the diversity in hearing structures, fish produce noise in myriad ways.

### 3. Do Fish Bay at the Moon?

While we typically associate nature's intricate auditory environments with choruses of birdsong in the forest or perhaps the ultrasonic screech of bats, many fishes are also just as capable of creating complex noise. Often, fishes generate noise during mating season. Those who have spent time on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast may be familiar with the low grunting, growling, and humming noises that can be heard above the water in late spring and early summer, a sound that has been likened to an "an orchestra full of mournful, rasping oboes." (Pearlman 2014). These are the vocalizations of the planefin midshipmen (*Porichthys notatus*), and are the fish equivalent of putting a Barry Manilow record on. Midshipmen produce these noises using sonic muscles attached to their swim bladder (Forbes et al. 2016). During the breeding season, the females undergo a modification of an accessory sensory organ in the inner ear called the saccule that likely helps them hear the males' vocalizations more clearly, encouraging them to rise off the benthos and mate (Sisneros 2007). Enticing your mate with sound is particularly important to avoid predation while trying to fertilize eggs.

Cusk-eels (*Ophidiidae*), a pelagic marine fish, also produce sound by rubbing sonic muscles against their swim bladder and have specialized forked bones that

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<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough discussion of particle motion detection in fish, see Nedelec (2019).

wrap around the swim bladder, forming a connecting bridge to the inner ear (Picciulin et al. 2019). In Cape Cod, the male cusk-eel times its song with the setting sun. Noise production begins just before sunset and peaks about an hour after sunset. The calls are the loudest when there is no moon (Roundtree 2002). This is likely because the female cusk-eels lay their eggs in open water, and the eggs float in the water column in a mucilaginous conglomeration for a week before dispersal. The eggs are at significant risk of predation during this period, so males must balance enticing females to lay eggs with the threat of alerting predators to the presence of a newly available snack (Mooney et al. 2016) By singing in the dark, the male cusk-eels can encourage egg laying without letting predators know eggs are on the menu. Here, we can see a prime example of fish exploiting the sonic realm to communicate with other members of their species to increase the chances of their young survival. Just as fish use sound to communicate within their species, fishes also likely analyze their sonic environment to understand the other species in their habitat more closely.

The impact of fish song on other animals is poorly understood, as there are many challenges to measuring environmental noise. However, one recent study suggests that fish "music" may contribute to a healthy reef environment. As the oceans face unprecedented levels of reef degradation, much effort has been put into restoring reefs by replacing the coral or spreading larval coral (de la Cruz et al. 2017). While restored reefs may have coral cover, they often are missing other invertebrates and fish that contribute to the overall health of the reef. Mooney (2016) suggests that diverse organisms do not flock to restored reefs because of the lack of sonic familiarity.

A healthy reef has a rich sonic environment, with diverse noise generated by fishes and invertebrates. Recent research has suggested that these "reef orchestras" are vital in guiding the recruitment and settling of reef organisms, particularly larval stages with limited sight (Montgomery 2006). Recall that most fish cannot sense noise from great distances as they detect particle motion rather than sound waves, so noise may be more impactful when selecting an ideal spot on a reef rather than finding the reef in the first place. For example, some damselfish (*Stegastes*) species live their entire lives in a single square meter of reef. Damselfish produce a distinctive "pulse" sound and a small "jump." Studies of closely related species (*Stegastes* spp.) have shown that each species produces a unique sound and can discriminate conspecifics from heterospecifics (Mann 2006). This distinctive pulse noise may encourage the pelagic larvae to settle in the area of their species rather than competing species or predators. Further research using equipment sensitive to particle motion is needed to understand the mechanism these larvae exploit to understand the directionality of sound.

By playing the songs of healthy reefs at loud volumes, humans can encourage recruitment of species to reefs that are being restored. A small project in Maui that used speakers demonstrated that the reef that plays "reef music" had greater biodiversity than the reef without music. Additionally, researchers used sonic diversity to measure biodiversity on the reef, which proved particularly useful for detecting the presence of cryptic and nocturnal organisms (Temesco 2020). Through human manipulation, we can understand that fish-generated noise impacts the health and lives of fish.

Fishes contribute to and interpret an underwater acoustic environment, but how can human noise impact fish? Because sound is so essential to fish, it is of the utmost importance that we understand the impacts of anthropogenic (human-generated) noise on fish and, thus, behaviour in health. By acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between human noise and fish livelihoods, humans can regulate and attempt to mitigate negative impacts of anthropogenic noise.

#### **4. Sonic Stress: Impacts of Anthropogenic Noise**

While there has been some recognition in the past several decades of the impact of anthropogenic noise on marine life, most research has focused on marine mammals, particularly whales (National Research Council 2006; Peng et al. 2016). Unlike whales, the impacts of anthropogenic noise on fishes are best understood on the scale of populations and local environments rather than individuals.

Existing studies suggest that noise impacts depend on the type of noise and the species of fish. The sounds added by humans into aquatic environments (both marine and freshwater), include those from shipping, dredging, sonars, seismic airguns used for oil and gas exploration, underwater explosions and construction, including pile driving, and many other activities. Some of these sounds contribute to “chronic” noise (such as the low hum of a ships engine), and some acute, such as the sharp pulse noise generated by underwater pile driving. As seen above, fishes use sound to engage in various life-sustaining activities, it follows that anything interrupting the auditory environment generated by fishes may have deleterious effects on their communication and health.

While it is generally assumed that anthropogenic noise will be more impactful on “hearing specialist” fishes, this may not always be the case. Comparisons of laboratory responses of Zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) and Lake Victoria cichlids (*Haplochromis piceatus*), the former having more sensitive hearing, demonstrated that both showed similar and immediate reductions in swim speed when exposed to a continuous loud noise (Shafiei et al., 2016). This indicates that anthropogenic noise may concern more fish species than initially thought, but also confounds our current understanding of how fish sense noise. More research is needed to explore the relationship between hearing specialists and “regular” fishes concerning anthropogenic noise and possible harms.

Many fish produce a short single pulse rather than sustained call (Wilson et al. 2004.) Of particular concern to fish health are “pulse noises”, which have a high amplitude and low frequency, like those produced by oceanic pile driving. Pile driving produces many of these noises and has been shown to have acute near-field effects on hearing specialist and non-specialist species. Fishes generally avoid areas with active pile driving and will rapidly leave once the “noisy” portion begins (Bruintjes 2014).

Additionally, some fishes subjected to close-range noises similar to pile driving in laboratory settings showed short-term damage to the cilia in the inner ear that affected hearing ability for several days following noise exposure (Enger 1963). Taken together, this likely means pile driving noises can sonically injure fish at very close ranges and mask fish communication at longer ranges. Deckling (2016) points out that while we can make assumptions about anthropogenic noise in the range that fishes can hear and possible adverse health impact, there are large gaps in our knowledge of auditory reception via particle motion and underwater anthropogenic noise that make it challenging to understand the impacts of human noise on fishes fully.

## **5. Do Fishes Enjoy a Human Tune?**

Very few studies have been conducted on how human music affects fish (as opposed to non-musical noise), but those that have concluded that music can either calm or harm fishes, depending on the volume, type of music, and the species of fish examined. A study examined the impact of the Ultra Music Festival® in Miami, FL, USA on Gulf toadfish (*Opsanus beta*) cortisol levels. The Gulf toadfish is in the same family as the plainfin midshipman, and is another “hearing specialist”. The researchers demonstrated that in both laboratory and natural settings toadfish experienced an increase in noise levels between 7-9 decibels under water and a significant increase in the stress hormone cortisol during the festival (Cartolono et al. 2020). The relative elevation in cortisol (a 4-5-fold increase) that fish

experienced during the Ultra Music Festival was comparable to what toadfish experience in response to another acoustic stressor, the playback of dolphin foraging vocalizations (Remage-Healey et al. 2006). While the effects of fish stress hormones are poorly understood across different species, repeated elevation of cortisol has been shown to negatively affect mitochondrial activity and the gut microbiomes in salmonid species and likely has similar effects in other species (Uren Webster et al. 2020). More research needs to be conducted to understand the effects of human music, particularly music festivals, on fish health. This type of research is essential in understanding sonic impacts on fish health in the Pacific Northwest, as many music festivals occur near freshwater fish habitats and spawning grounds.

Just as our music can harm fishes, there is some indication that some human music may reduce stress in aquarium fish species. Many recordings of music purport to calm one's aquarium fishes—and they may actually work. Auditory enrichment is regularly provided to captive mammals to limit stress, but this care has yet to be extended to fish. A study demonstrated that when laboratory zebrafish were exposed to 2 h of Vivaldi's music (65–75 dB) twice daily, for 15 days they showed a significant decrease in inflammatory markers and displayed less anxiety behavior in both light and dark tanks (Barcellos et al. 2018). This reduction in stress by merely introducing music is particularly valuable because zebra fish are often used for neurological research, and keeping them calm with low-cost methods is important to ensure that the zebrafish behave "as normal" during experimentation.

The idea that human music may be calming to certain fish species, particularly species performing well in aquarium settings, opens up exciting avenues in understanding how fishes perceive human music. Just as our music may impact fishes, fishes appear in human music across different cultures and for myriad reasons. Our reciprocal relationship with fishes is best exemplified in the music of cultures and individuals who interact with fishes near-daily.

## **6. Fish Impacts on Human Music**

Fish (and fishing) represent important concepts in human music. Those who interact with and rely on the ocean for sustenance or a livelihood are deeply aware of changes to their environment, this reliance on fish is often exemplified in music. Fishes are physical beings, but they also exist beyond the physical form in important symbolical and cultural meanings. Additionally, the act of fishing carries differing meanings across cultures. When fishing, the "catch" is not the only focus, one enters into a series of relationships with the fish, the environment, and other people to try and get a fish. Every angler is familiar with the exclamations uttered, the bonds strengthened, and the excitement about nature that is conferred in the act of fishing. These relationships between humans, fish, and the environment can be understood through song. By deeply examining how humans interact with fish and fishing, we are able to reveal truths about human/non-human interactions in the aquatic realm. Further, by examining the influence of fishes in music, we can understand the sociological impacts of fishes on humans.

## **7. Exploring Changing Fisheries Economies Through Music**

David Taylor (1990) uses fishing songs from 19th century Maine to examine how the industrialization of the fishing industry affected fishermen, fishing culture, and the environment. At the time, a small Swedish community migrated from coastal Sweden to coastal Maine (Kanes 2008). Songs such as "Ny Fiskar Vals" (New Fisherman's Waltz) and "Lutefisk" (dried cod) served to connect recent Swedish immigrants to their old country through songs about fish and fishing. Here, we see the motif of fish as a means to remind people of a former home, evidence that fish play no small part in conceptions of nationality and identity.

Beyond expressing one's culture, fishing songs also reveal the struggles of dealing with a changing and collapsing marine life, although who is to blame depends on the song. "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" by R. Venes cautions fellow fishermen against overfishing, with the lyrics "Once there was a dollar in the lobster game<sup>2</sup>, you'll find along the coast it's not quite the same; there's ten traps to every lobster- they're going fast from our shore; if fisherman don't mend their ways, they'll be gone forever more." (Taylor 1990). Meanwhile, "Columbia River Blues" by J.J. Jones blames politicians and infrastructure: "The statesmen count their dams and all their new creations and wonder why the valiant salmon die" (Taylor 1990). A key message that goes unspoken in these songs is that the fishermen—those who have regular contact with the marine environment and thus have a large stake in its conservation—are deeply sensitive to marine ecosystems and their changes.

Songs in the 20th century from the same region in Maine do not discuss fishing to the same degree as they did in the previous decade (Taylor 1990). This is a subtle expression of the beyond-physical nature of fishes in American culture. The fishes in songs in the 19th century represented not only a changing marine ecosystem, but also a changing economic system for those who rely on fishes.

### **8. Fish and politics: a brief foray into 1980s Indonesian pop**

Fishing music can be used to understand how groups and individuals felt about large-scale socioeconomic transformations, and it can also be used to examine acute political issues. During the 1980s in Indonesia, maritime events were at the forefront of political discourse (Sammy 2020). Presidential Decree number 39 of 1980 banned "tiger trawling", a fishing practice that uses very long, wide nets with weights on the bottom (Namin 1980). This method efficiently captures fishes but results in minor habitat destruction in addition to catching and killing small and inedible fishes, leading to large-scale ecological collapse (Baum, 1978). As a result of the ban on trawling, fishermen switched to the far more destructive method of bomb fishing (Namin 1980), which caused extensive damage to reefs and biodiversity in the Indonesian archipelago. Concurrently, the explosion of the Indonesian naval ship *Tampomas II* in 1982 resulted in the loss of 146 lives and extensive pollution to surrounding Naya (an Indigenous group) fishing grounds (Sammy 2020). Among these events, critical voices arose in the musical scene to decry the lack of government intervention in preventing environmental destruction.

In the 1980s, there were 11 number one singles that featured songs that explicitly discussed fish or fishing. Of those, six reference the ancestral connection that Indonesian people share with fishes, their environment, and fishing (Sammy 2020). Again, we see that fish and fishing are used as symbols to explore changing marine environments and humans' negative impacts on the marine world. Just as we impact fishes, fishes are hugely impactful on human lives. It is often the anthropogenic impacts on fishes that are explored in music. By using music to understand human-fish relations, we broaden our conception of what and who produces valuable knowledge regarding marine conservation. By seeing fish not just as the subject of knowledge but knowledge producers themselves, we can center our research, work, and conservation efforts from the perspective of the fish.

### **9. Fish Music Beyond the Western Conception**

While in many cultures, fishes exist as a motif in music, a symbolic representation of identity or ideals, fishes also exist more explicitly as spirit singers and deliver information in some Indigenous Brazilian cultures. While it may be easy for even the uninitiated to understand that the song of a bird or a frog may literally "tell" the listener something about the location or number of animals in an environment, many (including anthropologists) have neglected to understand the Indigenous

<sup>2</sup> I know lobsters are not fish, but it is very difficult to find fishing songs from Maine that do not mention lobsters in some capacity.



sonic relationship with creatures customarily perceived as "silent"— like fishes

Just as in Indonesia and Maine, those who spend time with the water and fishes are most sensitive to fish/human relations. The Kamayurá (Aùap) live on the Xingu River, a region extraordinarily rich in fish near the base of the Amazon. Bastos (2013) recounts an experience with Ewaka (a Kamayurá fisherman) where Ewaka stopped and put his ear to the water when paddling in a canoe. Calling for Bastos to do the same, Bastos was confused as he heard nothing. Ewaka said, "Can't you hear them? Can't you hear the fish singing?" While Bastos could not hear the fish, he argues that this exchange exemplifies how the Kamayurá understand themselves in relation to fish and nature at a larger scale. He argues that the Kamayurá do not envision the world as one divided between human and non-human, that music creation is not a strictly human activity. (Bastos 2019). Kamayurá healers learn these songs from animals to guide wayward spirits (human and animal alike) back to where they belong to maintain balance in the natural world (Tânia Stolze 1996). Here, we see a different way that fishes and humans have a reciprocal sonic relationship; the fishes quite literally sing songs, and humans listen to learn truths about our world. This diverges from commonly held Western cultural beliefs, but broadening our understanding of how fishes communicate with each other and humans lets us imagine futures where humans understand the auditory environment of fishes and are more aware of our sonic impact on the marine world.

### 10. In Cod-clusion

The underwater acoustic environment has been woefully understudied, as have fish-human relations beyond conservation concerns. There is too little funding and too few studies on fish audio reception and the positive or negative impacts of anthropogenic noise on fishes and marine conservation. This perhaps means there is some systemic misunderstanding in ichthyology and marine conservation that the impacts of noise on fish are not meaningful because they hear differently than we do. This conception that human ways of being are the most important ways of being is rooted in a Western scientific understanding that there is a division between human and environment. Paradoxically, the studies that do exist highlight that there is growing concern about the possible impacts of noise on fish. There must be a renewed focus on understanding how and what fishes hear.

Fishes are deeply important to human civilization, this is reflected in our music, culture, and spiritual. Humans have the power to impact fish with our noise and music; recognizing this reciprocal relationship is integral for preserving the health of our waters. As fishes continue to face challenges in changing oceans, we must create legislation that respects and understands the ancestral, reciprocal relationship that many peoples around the globe continue to have with fishes.

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