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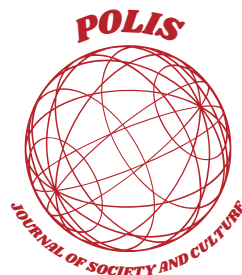
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# Letters from the Team

As I was nearing the completion of my academic journal in late 2023, I found myself feeling out of balance within the academic community. Around that time, a few conversations about academic publishing with Professor Bascom Guffin and one of our earliest editors Nat helped me realize that my dissatisfaction with academia could actually be a powerful motivation. I realized that instead of stepping away, I could create spaces for others who felt the same way; spaces of care, collaboration, and belonging. This realization was the beginning of a long and rewarding journey that I shared with our incredible former SASU president, Hannah in creating this journal. I am so happy and grateful for this experience. It has not only given me a stronger sense of self, but also a beautiful community that I will cherish forever. I'm deeply thankful for the support we've received from faculty and staff (Esther, Terrance, Kate and Brian) and most of all, I am immensely proud of and grateful for the extraordinary POLIS team. It has been an honour to work alongside such wonderful people that I call my friends: Nat, Xander, Erin, Ariana, Citlalli, Sofia, Elijah, Colin, Kamran, Allyson, Gudrun, Jacqueline, and Hannah. The bonds of community we've built through this journal remind me every day that academia can be a beautiful, supportive, and encouraging space if we choose to make it so. —*Anum, Editor-in-Chief*



Sociology and Anthropology help us understand the fabric of reality we move through. Our research papers allow us to investigate subjects we are passionate about and guide our own education. However, knowledge only holds value when it is accessible and shared. There is no reason the knowledge we accrue as undergraduate students cannot hold this value. The work all of you do to make sense of the world is, if anything, more special because it is being done during the period of so many of our lives as we discover who we are. I am grateful to have helped create a space for the knowledge we've attained to have greater value. I hope this journal can be a place for us all to share ourselves and the research that shapes us. And maybe, we can help shape each other. —*Xander, Editor + Reviewer*

POLIS has been an extremely rewarding and positive experience for my academic development. Sociology and anthropology are often arcane disciplines, so the ability to present knowledge with peers is a real delight. Being able to work alongside people who are as passionate as the rest of the team has been a great privilege, and I'd not trade it for the world. —*Kamran, Editor + Reviewer*

Joining the POLIS team in Fall 2024 has been an incredible experience. My first involvement in POLIS was as an author in our first issue and it is due to the incredible support I received then (and the "join us!" encouragement I received from Anum, our editor-in-chief, of which would have admittedly taken very little but came in droves nonetheless) that I am now proud to consider myself a part of this wonderful team. It has been an honour to contribute to that same environment of encouragement, support, and genuine care I was lucky to benefit from. —*Elijah, Editor + Reviewer*

I am grateful to work with POLIS again and have the chance to learn from my peers. It has been another wonderful semester with this team! —*Sofia, Reviewer*

Joining the small but vibrant community of POLIS, led by the wonderful Anum, has been a pleasure. It feels quite daunting to be a newcomer, but it's infectious to see such passionate, thoughtful, and caring individuals run POLIS to provide students with a platform to tackle crucial issues of our time. —*Allyson, Reviewer*

Spending the past two semesters as a part of POLIS has been an incredibly rewarding experience. Reviewing papers has allowed me to see the fresh, exciting sociological perspectives from peers, and also given me a valuable opportunity to truly apply what I've learned throughout my degree. As I approach the end of my undergraduate experience and reflect on the legacy of my involvement on campus, I'm most proud and thankful for the time I've spent in POLIS and all the brilliant people I've met through the journal. If I have a single regret, it's that I didn't get involved sooner! So excited to see how POLIS will continue to grow and build with each new Issue. —*Colin, Reviewer*

Participating in POLIS has given me the confidence to write better and in turn, to be a better peer reviewer. I am continually inspired by the thoughtful and creative ways that undergrads weigh in on some of the most pressing issues that we are faced with. I am fortunate to be a part of a team that is thoughtful, kind, and compassionate. I see these as the bulk of our strengths which tether us to our work. I hope you enjoy our first volume! —*Citlalli, Reviewer*



Being here to get POLIS off the ground and having the opportunity to help students further develop their scholarship has been a wonderful experience that will be a defining memory of my time at SFU. The POLIS team are not only a talented and creative group of people but formed a tight-knit and warm circle who have been a joy to work with. Also, I'm sure our Editor-in-Chief Anum is far too gracious to mention it, but the handmade, custom bookmarks she ordered for every single team member was touching beyond belief. I will treasure mine for as many decades as it holds together. —*Nat, Editor*

Being a part of building POLIS from the ground up was such a special experience, and will remain the most memorable part of my undergraduate career. Engaging more deeply with sociology in this way undoubtedly enriched my worldview and left me deeply inspired. But most importantly, I feel so lucky to have worked collaboratively with this passionate and inspiring group of people whom I get to call my friends.

—*Erin, Designer + Editor*

I feel so lucky to have been part of this amazing team and get to work on such an inspiring student initiative like this. We have cultivated such a hardworking and encouraging environment and I am so proud of the work we have put out. Getting to meet like-minded people through this format has been the highlight of my undergraduate experience. I love our little team and I can't wait to see how we evolve and adapt in the future. —*Ariana, Designer*

Since becoming a sociology student at SFU it has been at the back of my mind to one day write for a journal. Hearing about POLIS' formation in the last year has been really exciting! From having my research published for the first time to joining the review team, it's been a fantastic experience working with a wonderful team of fellow students passionate about social research. I hope to see this journal continue to thrive for future students to come. —*Gudrun, Reviewer*

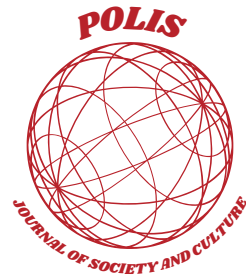


Watching POLIS blossom and grow from a concept to a reality has been so awesome! It has been such a privilege to be a sounding board for our exceptional Editor-in-Chief, Anum, whose passion permeates every aspect of this journal. Bearing witness to the magic of the POLIS team working together to make this first volume a space for an array of researchers and creative minds has also been a privilege. I cannot wait to see how POLIS grows in the coming years! —*Hannah, Reviewer*

Reviewing submissions to the journal highlighted how bright the future of academia is. The authors in this first volume presented fresh and vibrant topics, ideas, and perspectives. They sparked excitement not only for the final copy of POLIS' first edition but for what's to come in the future of the journal.

—*Jacqueline, Reviewer*

*Photos by Xander Elstone, Ariana Clements, & Gudrun Wai-Gunnarsson*



*Summer 2024 Issue*



# Towards an Understanding of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Through Queer Assimilationism

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## **Abstract**

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) policy marks an important moment in the history of queer rights in the United States of America—while outwardly ending the military’s ban on Queer servicemembers, the protections this policy offers hinges on any given servicemember’s willingness to conceal their queer identity. Historical research on the American queer rights movement contextualizes this era of policy within a broader move away from the radicalism of its past and towards demands of queer into inclusion into previously exclusive facets of American life. This presents space for analysis into how and why this rhetorical shift occurs, and consequently with what effectiveness this shift presents to the demands expressed by the American queer rights movement. Utilizing Michel Foucault’s conception of *interest*, this paper argues for an understanding of DADT through the *interest* generating potential of this rhetorical shift that makes possible the aims of DADT. Through widespread adoption of strategies aimed at aligning queer identities with heteronormative ideals, the American queer rights movement defines ‘the right to fight’ as an addressable issue and thus makes possible a policy which acts upon this issue. This stresses the importance of interest theory in the analysis of the American queer rights movement and thus contributes to an understanding of how social movements affect change.

**Keywords:** DADT, Assimilationism, Interest Theory

**O**N DECEMBER 21, 1993, The United States Department of Defense issued a new directive on the subject of “Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction.” A major consequence of this directive was the introduction of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT). DADT, as a policy which guided military legislation until the policy’s dissolution in 2011, stipulated that “[armed forces] applicants ... shall not be asked or required to reveal their sexual orientation” however, “homosexual conduct may be grounds for barring entry into the armed forces” (DOD 1993, 1–5). The dissolution of DADT followed a decline in the actual use of this policy for the purposes of discharging openly gay service members. This fact provides a point of departure for elucidating a split in belief amongst the Queer rights movement who find themselves at the whim of such policy. Undoubtedly, decreased persecution of queer peoples in any respect is progress for American queer rights. To the antimilitarist, however, this fact mirrors an expansion of the U.S. military in potential personnel and thus contributes to furthering problematic American overseas incentives (Rimmerman 2014). The American Queer rights movement found a broad base of support amongst the political unrest of late 1960s American life—particularly anti-Vietnam war organizing (Suran 2001). How is it, then, that this movement found itself just 30 years later arguing for the right to participate in such military action?

‘The right to fight’ is an ongoing point of contention within the American Queer rights movement: it seeks to define what the goals of the movement should be, and thus what Queer rights should ideally look like. Should Queerness conform to the heterosexual standard in all but sexual identity, or should it reject this standard and seek to embody more radical critique of American life? If we know that disparate perspectives on military participation exist within the American Queer rights movement, how is it that we can understand DADT as a response to a seemingly unified call for ‘the right to fight’? To answer this, I suggest that we can understand this moment in American Queer rights with respect to the networks of knowledge production that inform it. I posit that we can understand this through employing Michel Foucault’s conception of interest. My analysis will argue for an understanding of DADT policy informed, and thus made possible, by a specific rhetoric of Queer rights advocacy; the aforementioned ‘right to fight.’ I will term this the ‘DADT era of activism.’ This is done with the intention of showing that the Queer rights movement is not determined by any one legislative policy or act, but rather the broader social movements to which these policies or acts respond to. It is in this sense that both the enacting of DADT and its dissolution can both be viewed as acting in the same direction of progress, in that the ‘right to fight’ becomes the dominant definition

of progress within the American Queer rights movement. I will be using an article by American activist Barbara Smith titled “Where’s the Revolution?” as a discursive artifact, as well as several histories of the American Queer rights movement during this era, to inform an understanding of the adoption of the ‘right to fight’ amongst a changing landscape of advocacy preceding and following DADT. The adoption of the ‘right to fight’ rhetoric, and the interest generating potential it represents, thus makes DADT possible as an attempt to address this end. This, ultimately, will stress the importance of interest generation as a key concept for analysis of the DADT era of the American Queer rights movement.

## **Terminology**

In this paper I use the term Queer when referring to sexual or gender identities that do not conform to heteronormative ideas; in my practice this is a catchall term. When applicable I will use more pointed terms to convey the relevance of specific identities as might be present in the texts discussed. When speaking of DADT, for example, I will use the term LGB<sup>1</sup> as it portrays the limited scope of identities under the regulation of such policy. In analysis of the article by Smith, ‘lesbian and gay’ is used, thus when discussing this text I will use the same phraseology.

## **Applying Interest Theory to American Queer Rights**

To understand DADT policy as it relates to the discourse of Queer-rights activism, I will be using Foucault’s conception of interest as a theoretical framework. Interest is a power constituted by “that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals” (Foucault 2008, 45). In other words, interest is a social power whose effectiveness to act toward a given end operates with the population’s desire to see that end met. Interest is a concept taken from Foucault’s series of lectures at the Collège de France, particularly in the volumes adapted from his lecture series of 1977 through 1979. Generally, Foucault’s work centers around understanding *how* power operates and not *who* possesses power. Among many things, these lectures concern themselves with understanding the development of the ‘technologies of power’ underpinning a contemporary conception of governance. So, what is a technology of power, how does it relate to interest, and what does this concept make possible for analyses of social movements?

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Exclusive of nonconforming and Trans peoples.

The idea of technologies of power is born from an analytic methodology that seeks to avoid reductions of power to those dynamics originating within the institution, the state notwithstanding. Indeed, "...the state, doubtless no more today than in the past, does not have this unity, individuality, and rigorous functionality, nor, I would go so far as to say, this importance" (Foucault 2008, 109). For Foucault, an analysis of the state, or any institution for that matter, as the progenitor of power leads to a reduction in the complexity of how power operates. It thus becomes necessary to "move outside the institution [so as to] replace it with the overall view of the technology of power" (Foucault 2007, 109). To demonstrate this methodology, Foucault (2007) gives the example of military discipline:

"We may say that the disciplinarization [referring to the process by which the military is constituted as a unified force through the process of disciplinary action] of the army is due to its control by the state. However, when disciplinarization is connected, not with a concentration of state control, but with the problem of floating populations, the importance of commercial networks, technical inventions, ... community management, a whole network of alliance, support, and communication constitutes the 'genealogy' of military discipline." (2007, 119)

This is to say that the disciplinarization of the military is not imposed by 'the state,' but is rather constituted by several intersecting actors. Returning this example to interest, we might say that these intersecting factors each act as an interest-generator: they affect a continuation of military disciplinarization based on the aspirations that are met through this exertion of power.

Interest, then, is a technology of power open to utilization by social actors on the pretense that there is potential in existing collective aspirations *or* potential to shape said aspirations. An example of interest as it relates to Queer rights might yield through historical analysis a history of medicine, organized religion, or military rhetoric negatively affecting interest in Queer rights. However, interest as a technology of power is not built upon any one institution involved in the proliferation of negative interest. Certainly, such institutions will act through interest generation to incite against Queer rights, but so too can Queer rights advocates positively affect the same interest in Queer rights to pursue their own goals. Thus, interest is a technology of power that can be utilized by any number of actors or institutions to affect social change. Understanding rhetorical shifts in

American Queer rights activism will allow for a history of the interest-generation projects within the Queer rights movement that can contextualize the history of DADT as a policy.

## **A History of Discourse within the American Queer Rights Movement**

Aaron Belkin (2003), an advocate for the repeal of DADT, states that DADT differs as a policy from its other discriminatory predecessors in that, on paper, it protects LGB applicants from questions regarding sexuality (109). In practice however, this was oftentimes disregarded, and these practices of questioning continued off-record (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network as cited in Lehring 2003, 138; Werner 2014). The official justification for this continued ban of ‘outness’ cites ‘unit cohesion’ as a priority that is fundamentally threatened by the presence of openly LGB servicemembers, despite evidence to the contrary (Belkin 2003, 109, 110–16; Estes 2005; National Defense Research Institute 2010, 157). Indeed, what served to ‘maintain camaraderie’ was often detrimental to that end in that it required secrecy on the part of LGB servicemembers (Trivette 2010). Belkin (2003) notes a commonality amongst rhetorical justification of this policy. Often, there is a reliance upon anecdotal evidence supporting a vision of ‘out’ LGB peoples as overtly solicitous and disruptive of the heteronormative environment central to unit cohesion (2003, 116-117). These rhetorical justifications are part of a much broader history of homophobic sentiment; formally beginning with the criminalization of sodomy in World War I’s ‘Articles of War’ sentiment and state regulation which thereafter saw expansion of its narrative beyond the homosexual act. This negative sentiment and regulation act to form the homosexual identity, or what Gary Lehring (2003) in his work on gay military identity terms the “official gay” (2003, 15–17). The transition from public conception of homosexuality as an act in isolation to an essentialized character flaw had a drastic impact on the lives of servicemembers discharged for homosexuality. The ‘GI Bill,’<sup>2</sup> for instance, was one of the most consequential welfare acts of the postwar period pertaining to military veterans and servicemembers. This legislation, however, contained clauses that exempted those discharged for homosexuality, denying them benefits such as guaranteed tuition, unemployment pay, and low-interest housing and business loans based on the immutable character of this officially gay identity (Altschuler and Blumin 2009; Canaday 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘GI Bill’ is a colloquial name for various pieces of legislation, all serving the end of servicemember reintegration into civilian life. See Editor’s Note in Altschuler & Blumin (2009).

## **The Assimilationist Turn**

Belkin's (2003) work represents a perspective that seeks to normalize Queer identities within the status quo by arguing for inclusion of Queer identities into facets of American life such as military service or marriage law. In much of the literature concerning itself with understanding this shift in the broader American Queer rights movement, this is called 'homonormativity' (Montegary 2015). 'Homonormativity' is a concept authored by Lisa Duggan (2004) in their work on racial and gender inequalities during the neoliberal politics of the 1990s and is used to describe the creation of a Queer identity that is palatable to the rightward shift of that era (Duggan 2004; Werner 2014). Homonormativity embraces the immutable 'official gay,' opting to replace this identity's segregated status with 'a seat at the table.' This perspective is what Queer American historian Craig A. Rimmerman (2014) refers to as 'assimilationism'. This perspective generally seeks to "work within the system" to "let us in," or attempts to affect inclusion of Queer identities previously excluded from existing structures due to historical discrimination (Rimmerman 2014, 5). Activists who maintain critique of these structures beyond their exclusivity of Queer peoples, opting instead to 'live outside of' as protest of broader issues associated with these structures, identify as 'liberationists.' This split in belief is readily apparent in the issue of Queer military participation.

## **The Liberationist Perspective**

In her July 1993 article "Where's the Revolution?" Barbara Smith reflects on the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation of April 25th, 1993, eight months before the enactment of DADT. This march was organized around several demands, among them (and the most notable in the context of DADT) the passage of a "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender civil rights bill and an end to discrimination by state and federal governments including the military..." (March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation 1993). Smith's article centers this demand as a major point of contention, and thus elucidates the split in belief structure between those subscribing to the assimilationist tendency and those, like Smith, who argue for a liberationist approach:

Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system—white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalist and homophobic—that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted something entirely new. Our movement was called lesbian

and gay *liberation*, and more than a few of us, especially women and people of color, were working for a *revolution*. (Smith 1993)

The liberationist perspective rejects inclusion into structures which are themselves responsible for the entrenchment and reproduction of white, hetero-patriarchal dominance. Liberationists see assimilationism as turning away from revolutionary action as a core goal of the American Queer rights movement. To Smith (1993), liberationism necessarily includes antimilitarism: “we need a nuanced and principled politics that fights discrimination and at the same time criticizes U.S. militarism and its negative effect on social justice and world peace.” The ‘right to fight,’ contrasts with the liberationist vision Smith is advocating. In adopting beliefs at odds with a liberationist perspective, the March on Washington cedes points that existed previously within these circles of broader, revolution-oriented critique. Smith (1993) states:

In fact, it’s gay white men’s racial, gender and class privileges, as well as the vast numbers of them who identify with the system rather than distrust it, that have made the politics of the current gay movement so different from those of other identity-based movements for social and political change.

Liberationism, then, seeks not to work within the field of the homonormative identity as does an assimilationist tendency, but instead problematizes this identity as fraught with the otherizations native to a broader American milieu.

### **Assimilationism as the Prevailing Strategy**

This assimilationist tendency, and the current gay movement to which Smith states it is attributed to, is otherwise well documented in literature pertaining to activism under neoliberalism. Duggan’s (2004) work on the ‘equality politics’ of the 1990s and early 2000s, we can further elucidate the motives for such an adoption of assimilationist tendencies in Queer rights advocacy. A rhetorical shift towards a “‘multiculturalism’ compatible with the global aspirations of U.S. business interests” is incentivized via the greater efficacy of interest generation such rhetoric enables (Duggan 2004, 44). Duggan (2004) uses the example of the Human Rights Campaign’s<sup>3</sup> (HRC) ‘Millennium March on Washington,’ an event drawing on the marches discussed by Smith, in that it acted seemingly more as

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<sup>3</sup> “The richest national gay and lesbian civil rights lobby in Washington, D.C.” (Duggan 2004, 45).

a public relations media campaign, relying on corporate sponsorships and top-down organizing rather than grassroots organizing previously common to the American Queer rights movement (2004, 45-46). Liz Montegary (2015) further documents the HRC's promotion of 'right to fight' rhetoric in the appointment of Eric Alva as the spokesperson for their DADT repeal efforts. As a gay marine who has suffered injury during his time in the military, Alva's experience works to "align gay American identity with a militarized form of self-reliant masculinity and sacrificial nationalism" (Montegary 2015, 906). This promotion of a hero figure became a common rhetorical strategy, and thus provides an effective rhetorical strategy for homonormative actors. Following the September 11th attacks, Maggie Werner (2014) states that America found widespread cultural support for renewed military action that oftentimes coalesced around masculinized 'heroes' that signified "American values of justice, fairness, and equality". Thus, the hero mythos is a site of potential interest-generation that dominant actors within the assimilationist movement were able to make effective use of to promote homonormativity through deploying certain cultural myths.

This promotion of the homonormative vision as the goal of Queer rights movements does not seek to address intersecting structural oppressions that some within the broader Queer movement contest as necessary for substantial change. Rather, it shifts the ends in such a way that they are more attainable through interest. This critique of homonormativity is at the very center of Smith's (1993) writing: assimilationism entering the mainstream as "the new gay political equation" has created an environment in which the official gay becomes a severely limited identity. It is similarly true that this vision of identity is that which becomes the most visible. Thus, we can understand the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy preceding DADT as the stirrings of a movement which seeks to become a more palatable interest-generating actor through embracing and promoting the homonormative identity. This rhetorical shift lends itself to demystifying the inception of 'the right to fight'. This end, and the policy that attempted to address it, is an artifact of the interest generation associated with the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy.

## **Limitations & Directions for Future Study**

Rights movements such as that discussed in this paper are complex social actors. It is beneficial to recognize that rhetoric is never adopted with perfect unity, nor is it clear what outcomes particular rhetoric can lead to—we cannot be aware of all the intimate details involved in technologies of power that we might unwittingly be beholden to. What I have argued is not that the assimilationist turn in

Queer rights advocacy is to be faulted for DADT policy or for the continuing discrimination of the officially gay identity. Technologies of power are not constituted by any single social movement or institution. Despite the effort I make to contextualize Smith's work via contemporary Queer theories and social movement histories, Smith's article offers analysis of only one social movement involved in the era preceding the drafting of DADT policy—and thus only one facet of the interest surrounding American Queer rights. To this end, scholars concerned with this policy and the discursive context surrounding it make note of intense lobbying on the part of the 'evangelical right' as influential in the drafting of this policy and responsible for the compromised policy that lacked improvement for the lives of Queer servicemembers (Lehring 2003, 137; Werner 2014). If more work were to be done to understand the interest behind DADT policy, examining this site of interest generation would prove insightful and contribute to a more robust understanding of this policy as well as the future of queer advocacy.

## **Conclusion**

My argumentation shows that this policy could not be formed without something informing it—without something pushing for the ends that this policy found itself trying to reach. This 'something,' in my scope of analysis, is the popularization of assimilationist 'right to fight' rhetoric within the American Queer rights movement. In this way, the rhetorical strategies of these advocates contributed greatly to a discourse that legitimized the legalization of LGB participation in the military, to which DADT policy *and* its eventual repeal had set as its aims.

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# The Paranoid Style of Internet Politics: Gamer Backlashes and ‘Politics’ as Imposition

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## **Abstract**

The 2014 Gamergate movement has since become a model for backlashes and attacks against the inclusion of marginalized identities within the gaming industry. In the decade since the Gamergate movement, a number of similar backlashes have continued to occur, finding new reasons and rationales to attack the inclusion of marginalized people in the narrative of games as well as in the industry more broadly. In early 2024, one of these Gamergate-esque backlashes emerged around the company Sweet Baby Inc., first noticed by anti-woke movements in late 2023. This article examines two Reddit threads discussing Sweet Baby Inc. and analyzes the discourses produced around the company and how this reflects on the ways that anti-woke: gaming backlashes conceptualize notions of ‘politics’ and ‘diversity’.

**Keywords:** Gamergate, Anti-woke, Sweet Baby Inc., ESG

**A**SPECTER IS HAUNTING VIDEO GAMES, the specter of *politics*. Much digital ink has been spilled in bemoaning this scourge, hundreds of thousands of forum threads, angry articles, posts, and videos that denounce the ways that politics have infiltrated and indeed *infested* video games. Gamers remain vigilant against this ever-present threat. But what does this really mean? What are ‘politics’ in video games, for the anti-woke gamer, and what does this tell us about the broader conception of ‘politics’ in the world?

In 2014, the world was suddenly and violently introduced to the gaming community through Gamergate, a complex and decentralized backlash and harassment campaign nominally centered around “ethics in games journalism,” but realistically functioning as a way to police and punish the presence of women in games (Mortensen 2018). This followed years of anti-feminist undercurrents in the gaming culture, and Gamergate itself was in part mobilized against the critical feminist analysis of both games and game culture (Mortensen 2018). Specific women within the games industry and surrounding ecosystem, such as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, were targeted for the perceived threat they posed to gaming as a hobby and institution (Mortensen 2018). Despite almost a decade of time, and the continued (if messy) integration of marginalized peoples into games through both depiction and industry, the shadow of Gamergate lingers as a force in the minds of gaming’s alt-fanbases. The afterlife of Gamergate has been a general anti-feminist and anti-woke milieu that lurks underneath the surface of online gaming cultures.

This undercurrent breaches the surface of gaming culture with semi-regular outbursts of Gamergate-esque sentiments, often manifesting around higher-profile games such as *The Last of Us Part II* (Letizi and Norman 2024). In the last few years, as the ‘culture war’ and anti-woke discourses have come to dominate the conversation around media and popular politics, gamer backlashes have become clothed in the same language. The terms they use have come to occupy their own meanings, within this ecosystem, ideas like ‘wokeness’ divorced from their original contexts and instead understood by the anti-woke as social justice gone mad, inherently hollow, performative, and corrosively inauthentic (Davies and MacRae 2023).

In late February and early March of 2024, the latest echo of Gamergate arrived on the scene. Following the disappointing release of *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, gamers searched for a reason that the game was bad. For some, the blame was placed squarely at the feet of ‘Sweet Baby Incorporated’ (henceforward SBI), a Canadian narrative consultancy firm who worked on the game. The way that gamers responded to SBI presents a case study of how right-wing anti-woke movements

conceptualize ‘political’ content in media, and how their conceptions of politics are used to bolster and reinforce right-wing opinions. Through analysis of two Reddit threads, we can see how the narrative about SBI evolves and how gamers conceptualize the way that ‘political’ themes and representation are manifested within video games. For anti-woke gamers, games are not inherently political, and thus they are *made* political. I argue that anti-woke gamers conceptualize politics as an imposition, something that undermines quality *inherently*. Thus, it must be tied to outside, malicious conspiracy against the presumed white male gamer.

## **Methodology**

The main texts I am analyzing in this paper are two Reddit threads. The first is titled: “Have you felt as though that games have been written by the same exact people for the past few years? That’s because they have been, meet ‘Sweet Baby Inc.’, an ESG focused company in Canada.” (MrCalac123 2023) and was posted on Gamergate subreddit r/KotakuInAction. The second, “What's going on with the Sweet Baby Inc Controversy?” (Finnikk 2024) was posted on the general user subreddit r/OutOfTheLoop. Reddit has historically been an organizing space for a number of right-wing backlashes, including Gamergate. The platform’s construction and decentralized moderation structure enabled and shaped Gamergate, with that style of online campaign remaining entwined with the website (Massanari 2017). I have also examined the Steam Curator page ‘Sweet Baby Inc. Detected’ and used two media articles on the topic: “Sweet Baby Inc. Doesn’t Do What Some Gamers Think It Does” by Alyssa Mercante at Kotaku (Mercante 2024) and “How A Small Video Game Narrative Studio Wound Up At The Heart Of A Massive, Anti-Woke Conspiracy Theory” by Nathan Grayson at Aftermath (Grayson 2024). These additional sources provide further context and commentary on the wider movement outside of Reddit, as well as the motivating factors for those posting about the conspiracy on Reddit.

## **Ideological Gestation**

The r/KotakuInAction post dates to October 26 of 2023, predating the wider backlash to SBI by about four months. The text of the post read “Every triple-A American game studio has been outsourcing their game writing to this shitty ESG obsessed company, who sanitizes and ‘diversifies’ games to be more “progressive”. This explains soooooo much...” referring to SBI (MrCalac123 2023). The title and text both reference ‘ESG,’ an initialism for Equality, Sustainability, and

Governance<sup>1</sup> (Grayson 2024). The post was accompanied by a screenshot of a 4chan thread that examined the company and its presence in the credits of other video games. r/KotakuInAction offers a useful case study for the culture of anti-woke gamers, as it was founded during Gamergate and was an organizing space for the harassment campaigns (Mortensen 2018). Its culture has developed directly from that period and is a sort of living fossil for Gamergate-era mentalities and politics. So, what do the ideological heirs of the most impactful gaming backlash in history think about SBI?

Immediately notable is the theorization on what role SBI played in specific projects, especially *Alan Wake 2*. In fact, there was a *specific* action users imagined SBI took: “Wouldn’t be suprised[*sic*] if they were the ones who encouraged Remedy to recast Saga Anderson as a black woman and make half of Alan Wake 2 about her arc” (dandrixxx, October 26, 2023, 8:49 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023). Another user imagines the conversation that SBI had with the writers of the game:

ok, y'all didn't give us much to work with to enhance this game, but after working with your writers for eight months, we finally came up with a perfect update to the story. We replace this gruff, complex and nuanced FBI agent character with... A BLACK WOMAN!!! (KnikTheNife, October 26, 2023, 8:06 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

A common tactic of anti-woke movements is to make social justice positions inherently abnormal and alien to society, something from *outside* (Cammaerts 2022). However, the comments demonstrates that on r/KotakuInAction this kind of rhetoric has escalated to the presence of non- white women in general. The presence of a Black woman in the game, for r/KotakuInAction, is inherently foreign and imposed. This specific element would become a main talking point when the SBI scandal breached into the mainstream gamer consciousness, with the CEO of Remedy Entertainment, the developers of the game, having to state that this was not the case (Grayson 2024). The ‘gruff, complex and nuanced’ character that is imagined never existed, was never something that could be replaced. Despite this, SBI conspiracists felt that this was something *taken*, that the white (presumably male) version of the character *would* have been better and was made worse because of ‘forced diversity’. Other

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<sup>1</sup> A management style adopted by certain corporations and encouraged by some financial investment firms. The style focuses on obtaining certain goals often related to social and environmental justice, such as equal opportunity employment (Grayson, 2024).

commenters look at the people behind SBI, trying to tie the identities and histories of its leadership to the conspiracy they identify as driving the inclusion of content they oppose.

The CEO of said company is a racist+sexist leftist POC that somehow landed a writing gig at Ubisoft [...] She was promoted during the first great DEI wave following the Baltimore/BLM protests of 2015. She wrote for less than 3 years before leaving and becoming a "narrative" consultant that somehow gets contracted to shape the narrative of some of the biggest AAA<sup>2</sup> titles... She doesn't like games and she's unqualified for the job [...] she got rich by being given the chance to destroy your hobby with her deranged world view. (Dismal-Range1678, October 26, 2023, 7:31 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

Anti-woke crusaders often work to disconnect the work of people they consider “woke” from legitimate claims of oppression and discrimination (Davies & MacRae 2023). This approach can readily be seen here, where the anti-racist cultural moment of BLM is used to find the motivating factor for an ‘unqualified’ figure to enter the industry. The focus on how gaming is under threat, that this figure ‘hates games’ and is trying to ‘destroy the hobby’ also speaks to how gamers imagine the hobby as threatened by outside forces. Scholarship on Incels, another Reddit-entwined movement, has examined how its adherents conceptualize anti-feminism as emancipatory, perceiving feminist movements as already hegemonic and oppressive (Price 2024). Part of this is the phenomena of incels struggling to perceive women as human, seeing them only as agents of their imagined feminist hegemony. We can see this same kind of thinking in this comment, where a woman of colour is only understood in terms of “diversity hire”. The logic flows from the pre-established conclusion that these inclusions are corrosive: SBI must hate games because they are ruining games by adding content that makes games worse.

Overall, the thread is full of comments that invoke a myriad of anti-woke tropes and grievances: DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion), ESG, Social Justice Warriors, and citing Anita Sarkeesian as a sinister figure a decade after Gamergate. Even conspiracies that are outside of the general anti-woke

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<sup>2</sup> AAA is a term used in the games industry and fandom to denote games made by mainstream studios with large budgets. There are no universally accepted criteria for what qualifies as AAA, with the label denoting more of an intangible but present quality associated with these studios and games.

content sphere, like Pizzagate, are discussed in the thread, demonstrating the ties of this movement to wider far right conspiracism (Bleakley 2023). It's easy to understand and dismiss this thread and the r/KotakuInAction subreddit as a whole as simply the impulse of hateful ideology, fundamentally opposed to diversity on principle. However, this view obfuscates the mechanisms that motivate posters against SBI. Hatred as a model for understanding the right-wing often reduces into nebulous, undefined conceptions that struggle to identify where movements and ideologies originate (Tetrault 2021). While hate undeniably plays a part in these kinds of backlashes, the adherents do not understand themselves as being motivated by hate. We can see from the examples that, instead of deriding the content on the merits of its content, the commenters are focused more on the motivations of SBI, how its acts as a mechanism to undermine their vision of games and what games culture should be.

## Breaching the Surface

It is useful, before going into the next thread, to briefly look at the way that the SBI scandal played out. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, *Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League* released, to widespread disappointment due to its flawed live-service design, monetization, and narrative choices that it made, especially regarding characters in the much-beloved *Arkham* game series. Shortly thereafter, a Steam Curator<sup>3</sup> emerged that began cataloging games that were worked on by SBI, tagging them as 'not recommended'. This spiraled into a wider backlash when employees of SBI tried to get the Steam Curator removed out of fears of harassment, causing the anti-woke cadre to claim persecution and verification of the censorious nature of SBI (Mercante 2024). It is in this moment where SBI moved from a niche conspiracy theory for anti-woke gamers, into something that was being argued in more public spheres and by more high-profile creators such as popular Youtubers SomeOrdinaryGamers and Asmongold (Grayson 2024; Mercante 2024). It was into this context r/OutOfTheLoop thread was posted on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, posted by a user seeking to try and understand the sudden outburst in discourse and conflict around the company:

I'm not really into the AAA gaming sphere. The most I play are Indie games, but I've been hearing a lot of drama about Sweet Baby Inc, and even saw some people calling

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<sup>3</sup> Steam is a popular online storefront and social service for PC games, and allows users to create Curator profiles to evaluate and highlight games for a public audience

it GamerGate2.0. I'm just so confused about what it's about, though, it's probably obvious and I'm just stupid. (Finnikk 2024)

Posted at the height of the scandal, the thread thus acts as a strong example of how these narratives were crystallized. Here, instead of theorizing as to the evils of SBI, users who are proponents of the SBI conspiracy theory are trying to argue for its validity in the mainstream. Unlike the *r/KotakuInAction* thread, there are many people who are trying to resist the narratives of post-Gamergate gamers. Here, we can witness those who subscribe to the conspiracy theories about SBI try and present their ideas in forms that seem reasonable to audiences that are not already within the sphere. One of the big parts of these arguments was arguing that the reaction SBI had to the “SBI Detected” Steam Curator was unwarranted. One argument, repeated by multiple people, was that the curator was simply pointing out what games were worked on by SBI so that gamers could make informed choices about the media they were consuming. The fact that the Steam Curator was explicitly marking games with ‘Not Recommended’ was something pointed out by opponents to the conspiracy, and swiftly dismissed by its proponents (Steam has an ‘informational’ category for curators to provide commentary without rating). Instead, anti-woke commenters pivoted to arguing that ‘curators are allowed to have opinions’. The argument that the identification of games that were worked on by SBI is not harmful is core to the mentality of anti-woke gamers: they have a *right* to know and that right cannot itself be harmful. Transparency is often depicted as something politically neutral, or even always beneficial, being in the interests of the nebulous “public” (Willmott 2020). However, as noted, this argument of transparency and consumer rights was swiftly contested when it was argued in a more hostile space, seeing anti-woke proponents need to pivot. Another recurring theme in the anti-SBI comments are attempts to divert from the idea that bigotry is the driver of the backlash. This can be seen in the following comment:

People aren't against this because they are all bigots. That's just an easy cop out. People are against it because they've spent years now seeing a direct correlation between the unsubtle, in your face diversity politics in media, and its general low quality, and they are tired of it. (Zaando, March 15, 2024, 7:26 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

The comment focuses on the low quality of games, and several comments follow a similar trend. Often, anti-SBI posters and posters sympathetic to the anti-SBI position would cite a number of high-

profile flop releases and poor products being tied to SBI, casting the negative reaction to the company as motivated by a pattern. This, however, is false. As we saw with the responses to the r/KotakuInAction thread, games that SBI worked on were targeted. The manifestation of the SBI backlash within a wider sphere of gaming discourse resulted directly from a *specific* low-quality release, that of *Suicide Squad*. Many of the other games that SBI worked on, such as *Alan Wake 2*, were great critical and commercial successes, and despite attempts to build controversies out of those games, such narratives did not catch on (Mercante 2024). It was necessary for a game that did not meet general quality standards among gamers to emerge as a wedge issue, but once that game emerged it was possible for anti-woke gamers to recontextualize the entire catalog of games SBI worked on as inherently tainted and poor quality. These are placed into conversation with games like *Palworld* and *Helldivers 2*, recent releases that are from studios that do not fit into the traditional AAA style (despite these releases still being funded and published by massive companies like Sony). The core of the anti-woke gamer argument's core grievances and deflections is summed up in the following comment (responding to the top of the thread):

Answer: Because people are waking up to what SBI is. They force agenda and diversity into games. I mean they have people who defend them and say things like You can't be racist against White people. (Powerful\_Ad\_4233 2024, March 10, 2024, 2:35 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

Much of the anti-woke movement finds its thrust by constructing working class identity as fundamentally white and thus fundamentally threatened by measures that challenge white supremacy (Davies and MacRae 2023). We see a similar phenomenon here, where instead of the working-class identity being fundamentally white, it is *gamers* who are fundamentally white and men. Games are already serving their primary audience, cisgender heterosexual white men, and there is no need to expand gaming's appeal into different groups and experiences. Because of this, the diversity witnessed in games cannot be natural. It must be the result of an agenda, a scheme that is subsequently entwined with a wider culture war. This leads to the development of an identity that is under attack for being gamers and for being white. Antisemitic 'Cultural Marxist' and anti-woke conspiracies often dovetail, with a fundamental 'Them' being the party to institute things like anti-white racism and the fall of Western civilization (Black et al. 2024). These discourses can be seen here with the commenter

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bringing up the “forcing” of diversity in one breath and linking it to racism against white people with the next.

## **Conclusion**

Politics are always entwined with culture, and as the culture of the internet is the culture of video games, the politics of the internet is the politics of video gamers. Gamergate was a site of innovation for how right-wing discourses could resist progressive themes and the presence of diverse peoples in media as a whole. Gaming-focused backlashes often mirror or foreshadow wider culture-war issues, such as the broader anti-woke movement. Looking at the SBI backlash, we can understand that any politics that cannot understand the *reasons* inherently collapses into conspiracy. It is not only a hate-fueled attack against nor a revanchist backlash against a changing culture, though those elements absolutely play a role. Instead, it speaks to a fundamental incomprehension of why social justice policies should exist and an alternative epistemology as to why the landscape of gaming is changing. It *must* be conspiracy, because why else would one insert policies that make games “worse”? Things were *good* so why do they need to change? What SBI actually does is immaterial to the role they must play in the ecosystem.

As of mid-2024, this backlash has reduced in scale but continues to simmer underneath the public gamer consciousness. Conspiracies often carry long afterlives and become canonical points for broader narratives even after they fade from the limelight (Bleakley 2023). It seems likely that SBI will be incorporated into the canon of woke institutions ruining gaming, cited over and over alongside the names of people like Anita Sarkeesian or Kotaku. Nothing that has occurred with SBI is new, and the discourses that fuelled the backlash against the company are reflections of wider culture war issues and age-old tactics. These all lead to a particular conception of politics, where anything that can be construed as “diverse” is “political,” and the ways that politics are played out in the world, one where it is *imposed* into culture by insincere actors. When an incident such as the SBI backlash occurs again, exploiting another bout of grievances (in gaming or any related culture sphere) it is important to recognise this playbook, and how it can be used in concert with other ideas to shut certain people and perspectives out of culture. We should not allow the paranoid impulses of the anti-woke to impose their vision of gaming onto us.

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# Algorithms of Mass Destruction

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## **Abstract**

The genocide in Gaza has been widely witnessed on social media, where the rapid dissemination of news and the rise of social activism have left many unsure of where to turn for accurate information. This paper critically examines the role of propaganda and dataism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on how social media platforms contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinian civilians. Drawing on autoethnographic insights from Instagram, the paper explores symbolic violence and the construction of narratives that essentialize and marginalize Palestinian identities, leading to compassion fatigue among global audiences. The analysis underscores the dual role of social media as both a tool for resistance and a mechanism of oppression within a broader techno-capitalist framework, highlighting the complexities of digital activism in the context of colonial violence.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, dataism, compassion fatigue, techno-capitalism

**A**S OF EARLY AUGUST OF 2024, Al Jazeera reports that the Israeli government has murdered at least 40,000 Palestinian civilians, the majority of whom (16,500) are children (AJLabs 2024), and has displaced 1.9 million civilians (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Many of the uncounted Palestinian civilians remain under the rubble, with even more missing and taken as hostages by the IDF. These attacks on Palestinian civilians are part of a long and excruciating history of settler colonialism that has displaced millions of Palestinians from their homes for nearly a century. Most media sources, however, remain mainly concerned with the aftermath of the Hamas-led October 7th attack against Israeli citizens. This analysis will proceed with the recognition that the Israeli government has been forcing Jewish settlements on Palestinian lands, enacted an apartheid state, limited access to humanitarian aid in Gaza and the West Bank, set up multiple checkpoints to surveil and manage the Palestinian population, and led numerous military operations resulting in the deaths of countless Palestinian lives, all of which has been reduced to the metaphor of ‘mowing the lawn’ in Israeli discourses over the past 75 years (Chomsky and Pappe 2015).

After the October 7th attack on Israeli civilians, the Israeli government retaliated with a wave of airstrikes and by opening fire on innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza, justifying this as an effort to exterminate Hamas. Since October 7th, social media platforms have been employed by both sides as tools for resistance as well as instruments of dehumanization. This paper explores how propaganda is used to essentialize and dehumanize Palestinian civilians. I explore the role of dataism in reducing individuals to faceless statistics, and the resulting compassion fatigue that diminishes social media users’ empathy. Additionally, I aim to critically examine the positionality of social media within the broader framework of techno-capitalism, highlighting the biases of and limitations within these platforms.

### **Symbolic Violence and Propaganda:**

In a lecture at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver on November 15, 2023, Safiya Noble discussed the emergence of “propaganda wars” through the mediation of the internet and social media platforms. In this context, propaganda refers to the essentializing, authenticating, and othering narratives deployed by the Israeli government against Palestinian civilians (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis

2021). These propaganda wars use seemingly innocuous language and imagery to dehumanize and mislead the online public, creating a divisive 'us versus them' mentality.

Following October 7th, various news organizations and world leaders framed the conflict in terms of ' Hamas/Israel.' This language, originating from the IDF's official website, has been adopted by 'neutral' Western news sources. For example, The New York Times posted a seemingly 'neutral' article titled *"Israel-Gaza Fighting Flares for a Second Day"* in which the media outlet used language like 'Islamic militants', 'jihad' and 'misfired rockets' to narrativize 'Israel's right to defend itself' (Baroud 2024). This is a strategic form of propaganda that shifts the narrative away from the loss of innocent lives in Palestine and instead justifies the Israeli government's actions as necessary anti-terrorist measures. Such language not only embodies symbolic violence but also represents a mobilization of political language against Palestinians (Bourdieu 1984). It works to "reinforce the deep distrust—not incompatible with an equally deep form of recognition—which the dominated feel towards political language," fostering a sense of helplessness and apathy among the public (Bourdieu 1984, 464–65). This 'neutral' political language, broadcasted by news organizations, echoed by politicians, and amplified on social media, serves to essentialize all Palestinians as Hamas, rendering Palestinian civilians as a homogenous, dangerous group and thereby justifying the inhumane acts committed against them. These descriptions of Palestinians as illustrated below aim to strip away their individuality by associating their identity with violence and weapons, thereby reinforcing a sense of facelessness.



Figure 1. Propaganda images posted by the Israeli Defence Force X account (@IDF, December 1, 2023).

The IDF's use of propaganda on their X (formerly Twitter) page further illustrates this manipulation. For example, fig. 1 above contrasts an Israeli child with an adult Palestinian woman. The deliberate association of the Palestinian woman with weapons reinforces her facelessness, reduces her identity to a terrorist combatant and as someone who is violent towards Israelis, further preventing the audience from empathizing with her. This intentional dehumanization through visual rhetoric makes her, and by extension all Palestinians, easier to other and essentialize as threats. The stark color schemes and selected images (a bike vs. a bomb) are meticulously chosen to deepen the narratives of Palestinian culpability and Israeli victimhood. This image exemplifies how propaganda operates, creating and disseminating harmful, dehumanizing narratives (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis 2021).

While social media platforms like Instagram have facilitated the global spread of dehumanizing narratives such as the ones highlighted above, they have also played a significant role in shaping global reactions and mobilizing social movements in support of Palestine. These movements are often inspired by Palestinian journalists and activists who risk their lives daily to humanize Palestinians and remind the world of their names and faces. While Instagram did not create these movements, it provided the infrastructure that facilitated their organization and spread (Rodineliussen 2019, 240).

However, it is crucial to critically examine the positionality of social media within techno-capital. These platforms are not neutral; their algorithms are highly biased, often reflecting the interests of the corporations that control them. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that Meta's policies and practices have been censoring Palestinian voices. Content related to Palestine has been suppressed under flawed policies such as Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI), which unfairly categorize Palestinian context as violent (Brown and Younes 2023). Additionally, the IDF's AI system, 'Lavender,' has been used to identify airstrike targets through WhatsApp contacts (Middle East Monitor 2024). These examples highlight how tech giants like Meta are far from unbiased, and their platforms, influenced by these biases, can perpetuate the very injustices they claim to be neutral towards. While social media has undeniably facilitated activism, it is also embedded within a broader techno-capitalist framework that can undermine and censor the very movements it helps to amplify.

## **Counter-Narratives, Dataism, and Resistance**

Social media has played a significant role in mobilizing global protests for Palestine, with Palestinian journalists and activists using these platforms to bring attention to the realities on the

ground. Journalists like Motaz (@motaz\_azaiza) and Mutasem (@mutasem.mortaja) have used their Instagram platforms to share personal stories and document the violence against Palestinian civilians. Their work goes beyond mere reporting; it fosters a deep connection between the international community and the Palestinian people, cultivating compassion and reinforcing Palestinian identity on social media. Organizations like "We Are Not Numbers," a Palestine-based initiative, have further amplified these efforts by creating profiles of those lost in the conflict. They, along with media outlets like B'Tselem (2024), Al Jazeera (Haddad and Antonopoulos 2023), and The Washington Post (Mellen, Galocha, and Ledur 2023), work to share the stories behind the statistics, putting faces to the numbers seen on Instagram. These narratives challenge the dehumanization that occurs when individuals are reduced to mere figures.

However, it is essential to recognize that numbers and statistics are also tools used by the IDF and the Israeli government to generate propaganda within a colonial framework. Numbers are used to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless and desensitizing the public to their suffering. Numbers are employed to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless entities and desensitizing the public to their suffering. As Elia Zureik (2010) highlights, the collection of statistics within the Palestinian population reflects power imbalances, often with Palestinians not being the ones producing these figures. A striking example occurred on July 24, 2024, when Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, addressed Congress in Washington. He stated, "I asked the commander there [in Rafah], 'how many terrorists did you take out in Rafah?' He gave me an exact number: 1,203. I asked him, 'how many civilians were killed?' He said, 'Prime Minister, practically none.'" This quote illustrates how the Israeli government carefully selects and presents numbers to shape public perception. Netanyahu's emphasis on the number of "terrorists" killed, while falsely claiming no civilian casualties, highlights how statistics are manipulated to create specific narratives about Palestinians. As Zureik notes, "counting the Palestinians becomes a political act laden with controversy [...] depending on who does the counting" (Zureik 2019).

Following the October 7th attacks, numbers have taken on a life of their own on social media, with big, bolded statistics dominating the narrative. While it is crucial to remember the lives lost, constant exposure to quantitative data like death tolls can have a numbing effect. Numbers alone do not convey the lived experiences behind them; they reduce real people to statistics and only further dehumanize them. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of dataism, defined as "a widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human

behavior and sociality” (Fors et al. 2020, 25). Dataism strips numbers of context while smoothing over and erasing the stories behind them. When applied to human narratives, dataism reduces the complexity of the Palestinian experience to mere statistics, overlooking the fact that these numbers represent real people with families, culture, and identity. This quantification instills a sense of facelessness, embedding a false sense of objectivity into knowledge systems that render individuals commensurable and legible within settler colonial frameworks (Willmott 2023).

In this context, the practice of dataism, when discussing Palestinian casualties, produces what I term ‘conversation-stopping narratives.’ These narratives arise when users repost numbers without engaging with the human realities beneath them. Dataism functions as a conversation-stopping narrative because it often leads to “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999), where people become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data and stop discussing the underlying issues. Instead of focusing on the people who have died and their stories, the conversation shifts solely to the numbers, effectively silencing deeper discussions about the human cost of the conflict. Thus, while Palestinian activists and journalists work to humanize the numbers and tell the stories behind them, the pervasive influence of dataism inadvertently contributes to the very dehumanization they seek to resist.

Post-October 7th, my Instagram feed filled with images and reports from Gaza, many shared by journalists risking their lives to document the unfolding crisis. As the situation worsened and journalists were targeted or forced to evacuate, civilians took it upon themselves to capture and share what was happening. Amid waves of compassion fatigue and as people began to post and talk less about Gaza, these civilians urged the online community not to remain silent. Compassion Fatigue, a term coined by Susan D. Moeller (1999) in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, refers to the public's diminishing emotional response to humanitarian crises due to overexposure. I witnessed this firsthand on Instagram, where Palestinian civilians, including those in desperate situations, posted pleas for visibility and support, resisting the algorithms that sought to filter out their voices. For example:

- "I will not forgive anyone who watches this video without sharing it. I am Khamis from Gaza. You can help me and my family by donating. Donation link is in bio. Share this video. Like and comment." (@khames.\_mahmoud, July 28, 2024)

- "For 5 seconds, watch this video if you care about us in Gaza. If you can watch it till the end, I know you want to help us. Please press the buttons you see on the screen to save me and my family." (@musbah.family11, June 12, 2024)
- "Please don't skip this video. We are so tired. Please help my family survive this war. Watch this video and donate if you can. The link is in my bio." (@m0taz\_family, August 6, 2024)
- "Please stop. We know that you are tired of watching videos like this, asking you not to skip them. But what other option do we have? My father and sister are infected. We lost our house and now we have no income. Please help us by liking, sharing, commenting, and donating if possible." (@ziad.alhindawi.family, August 3, 2024)

After the attacks on October 7th, social media, particularly Instagram, was flooded with real-time coverage from Palestinian journalists and civilians. Initially, the online world seemed to engage actively, but as the crisis prolonged, interest waned, and posts became less frequent. This decline in engagement is something I observed on my own Instagram feed. The diminishing emotional response, exacerbated by the constant stream of brutal images and overwhelming casualty statistics, speaks to compassion fatigue. The repetitive exposure to these numbers and images can numb people and reduce their ability to empathize. Numbers alone, detached from the human experiences they represent, contribute to this desensitization and render real people as faceless statistics.

Compassion fatigue also results from the sheer volume of crises happening simultaneously, which overwhelms the public's capacity to engage with all of them. In the context of Palestine, the prolonged nature of the conflict, combined with explicit and gruesome images, pushes many to retreat to ignorance as a form of self-preservation. As Moeller (1999) notes, "Didactic images can overload the senses. A single child at risk commands our attention and prompts our action. But one child, and then another, and another, and on and on is too much. A crowd of people in danger is faceless. Numbers alone can numb."

Journalists in Palestine have observed this compassion fatigue within international audiences. For example, Yara Eid, a prominent Palestinian activist and journalist, recently posted, "It seems like the world got tired of us being murdered: we're seeing fewer social media posts, less coverage globally. Since day one, this has been Israel's goal. To make us all fatigued and used to their war crimes. But Palestinians are still being slaughtered every day... we need you to call for an end to this genocide; we

*Khalid*

still need you to fight for us!” (@eid\_yara, Nov 21, 2023). The world is gradually becoming desensitized to the Palestinian cause, bombarded with faceless numbers that make it easier to forget that real human beings are suffering on the ground. This dataism-caused facelessness reinforces the dehumanization of Palestinians, making it harder for the public to maintain empathy and engagement.

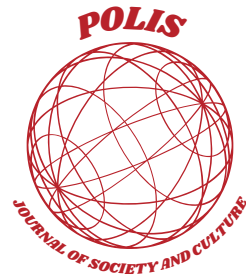
## **Conclusion**

The intersection of social media, propaganda, and dataism has profoundly influenced global perceptions of the Palestinian genocide. While platforms like Instagram enable the spread of counter-narratives and help humanize the victims, they are also embedded within a techno-capitalist framework that can undermine these efforts. The influence of biased algorithms and the dehumanization inherent in dataism contribute to compassion fatigue, making it easier for the global audience to become desensitized to the ongoing suffering in Palestine. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the power and limitations of social media in shaping public discourse. After 10 months, the genocide in Gaza continues, with Palestinians losing their lives, families, and homes while Instagram users watch from their phones. This reality underscores the importance of our digital footprints and serves as a reminder not to become desensitized or stop posting in the face of mass cruelty and compassion fatigue.

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Community and Belonging: Being a Trans Man in a Queer League.  
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# Community and Belonging: Being a Trans Man in a Queer Soccer League

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## **Abstract**

Sports are traditionally highly gender segregated, creating spaces of exclusion and discrimination for non-normative sexuality and gender identities. This has been countered with the creation and maintenance of lesbian and gay sports leagues that have, in more recent years, widened their scopes to include a wider array of ‘queer’ identities. This paper aims to understand and analyze a transgender man’s subjective experience of belonging and community in a queer Vancouver sports league through ethnographic research methods. While current scholarship relating to transgender people and sports largely investigates the ways in which transgender people experience unbelonging and exclusion in sports and ‘queer’ spaces, my research finds that my primary interlocutor experiences strong senses of community and belonging in a queer sports space. Through observation and interview, I examine the underlying phenomena that explain my interlocutor’s experience of positive trans selfhood in a space that is often problematic for trans individuals in Canada.

**Keywords:** sports, transgender, queer, community, belonging

**I**T WAS ANOTHER LOVELY, breezy early-July evening, long shadows from trees casting over the lush field where two Queer Van Soccer (QVS) teams were beginning their game. Friends and loved ones sat at the sidelines with picnic blankets and foldout chairs. I watched from my seat at the corner of the pitch as my dear friend Alex warmed up and made friendly small talk with his peers on Team 8.

Soon, the game began with Alex positioned as his team's striker. It was a relaxed start. As the shade moved to my seat on the sidelines, I overheard teammates on the sidelines chatting about brunch amidst supportive cheers. As the game picked up, there was boisterous encouragement from fellow Team 8 members: "Good shot, Lou!" When teammates subbed in, they high fived their replacement with smiles on their faces. Though it was a friendly atmosphere, there was a charge of real competitive energy. Both sides were engaged and taking the game seriously. There were calls of "Yes Maxine!" "Way to go!" "Good d!" "Watch middle! Watch middle!" "Yes Alex!"

About 15 minutes after the starting whistle, Alex scored the first goal of the match! The game got a little rough at points, someone exclaiming at one point, "Ouch, right in the ovaries!" after an unfortunate handling of the ball. Another came off the field complaining of a stomped-on foot. As the game progressed, a player was in awe of Alex's attempt at another goal: "Yes Alex! What a freaking run. Holy smokes. That was amazing. He's so fast."

During half-time, Jack, the captain, gave the team a pep talk, noting the evenness of the team they were up against. His team looked back at him with attentive eye contact, nods, and smiles. He concluded by asking for others' thoughts, at which point a teammate called Marshall chimed in with his advice.

Halfway through the second half Alex subbed back in. From my spot in the sidelines, I overheard queer gossip, and someone else congratulated a teammate for having just married her wife. A few minutes before the game's end, the other team scored. The score was now one-one, upping the pressure. The air was thick with palpable tension. Team 8 took several shots on the net, but unfortunately were not able to score.

The game ended in a tie, and Alex's team was content despite not winning: "We were very evenly matched, and we defended for a long time!" They cheered for each other, the goalie, and the referee before high-fiving the opposing team with repetitions of "Good game, good game, good

game...” I packed up as Alex made plans to go to a concert with a couple teammates the following week. “Good job. That was awesome!” said the captain to his happy team (Fieldnotes, 11 July 2024).

Over the course of July 2024, I got to spend several hours of quality time conducting research with Alex, a longtime friend and talented athlete who has, in the past year, realized that he is a transgender man. He is a 24-year-old, passionate elementary school teacher, with freckles, blue eyes, a big smile, and short cropped strawberry-blond hair. Though we chat about our lives often, I sought to learn more about the nuances of his relationships with gender and sports.

We first met through sports almost a decade ago, when a friend invited Alex to watch one of our softball games. From then on, we would see each other at various track and field events and the occasional party until Alex went to Calgary for university. Last year we reconnected and became close friends, now lucky to call each other neighbours. When he moved into our neighbourhood, he was quick to deck out his bedroom in Toronto Raptors merchandise and throw a sports-themed house party for his 24th birthday. Sometime during this period, he realized that he was not non-binary as he had identified for the last few years, but rather is a queer transgender man and has since begun steps in a physical transition.

My interest in exploring the topic of sports and gender is that, despite its extreme institutional gender segregation and consequent gender-based exclusion, in many ways sports spaces paradoxically provide positive experiences of belonging for queer and trans youth like myself and Alex. Sport in much of the world is “organized in terms of taken-for-granted assumptions of binary and hierarchical sex difference by virtue of sex segregated sporting spaces and grossly unequal cultural and economic spaces” (Anderson & Travers, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, riding on the coattails of the United States’ widespread anti-queer movement, Canada has recently seen a surge of anti-trans laws and policies (Khonina & Salway, 2024). Some target transgender people in sports: In early 2024 Alberta premier Danielle Smith announced a policy that would “ban trans girls and women athletes from participating in competitive women’s sports” (Mason, 2024). In light of the chilly contemporary climate for queer and transgender athletes in Canada, it is integral to explore how and why sports spaces often still allow for positive experiences of queer and trans selfhood, community, and belonging.

This phenomenon not exclusive to, but especially notable, in the present-day existence of multiple ‘queer sports leagues’ in Vancouver. In Spring 2024 Alex signed up for QVS after we’d spent the last season cheering on our friends’ matches together. Alex is one my closest friends who also happens to have complex relationships with both his gender and sports. For these reasons, he was the perfect interlocutor and QVS was the perfect field (both literally and figuratively) for my endeavor to learn more about the intricate combinations of these two bases of identity.

As seen in my account of Alex’s friendly but competitive July 11th game, “queer community sports are informed by feminist and social justice principles that prioritize shared decision-making [(exemplified when Team 8’s captain concluded his halftime pep talk by asking for others’ thoughts)], inclusion, and community-building”(Carter, 2021, p. 5). Not only do queer sports leagues aim to function as spaces of athletics and recreation, but they seek to foster social connections. Furthermore, queer sports leagues like QVS aspire to be inclusive of people of all genders, including trans identities, and all skill-levels. However, queer sports scholars note the novelty of trans and non-binary inclusivity, as many leagues, QVS included, have shifted from being explicitly “lesbian” or “women’s” leagues to what they are now (Carter, 2021, p. 9). The result is the inclusion of trans and non-binary members while cisgender queer women remain the leagues’ majority demographic. Thus, my research aims to address questions regarding Alex’s sense of belonging as a transgender man: What is my interlocutor’s experience in a queer sports league whose demographic is predominantly queer cisgender women? Do trans men benefit from the sought-after community of queer sports leagues that are implicitly dominated by cisgender sapphic\* identities, and how does this affect these men’s sense of self?

## **Methods**

I gathered data using a variety of qualitative methods; literature reviews of queer sports and community in Canada, two sessions of thorough participant observation, followed by an open-ended and transcribed interview with Alex, all while keeping a close eye on the QVS social media pages and downloading anything related to Alex, community, and social events.

Before and during observations and interview I ensured informed and ongoing consent from my interlocutor, and offered the option to use a pseudonym. Alex chose his own pseudonym, and I changed the names of his teammates to further obscure identities. As we socialize together almost

daily, I also ensured I clearly communicated to Alex when research sessions begun and ended. The first observation session consisted of attending a QVS non-game social event; a “summer beach barbeque,” and the second took place at one of Alex’s regular soccer games. I took thorough jottings which I then turned into field notes less than a day after the events, with the framework in mind “that all writing, even seemingly straightforward, descriptive writing, is a construction” (Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 45–46). A few days after observations ended, I conducted an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long interview with Alex in our home’s kitchen, asking open-ended questions first about identity and community, then gender and sexuality, then sports, and then the combination of the two. As we are close friends, I took a conversational approach, intending to build on our already comfortable rapport to encourage openness and personal storytelling. I gathered digital social media data for the entire month of July. Lastly, I coded the data, finding conceptual patterns while paying particular attention to information in actions and statements that pertained to members’ sense of belonging and inclusion, and behaviours that I read as indicative (or not) of community-building.

## **Findings**

Alex has discovered strong senses of belonging and community in a queer sports space, despite being a transgender man in a league whose members are mostly cisgender women. I found several contributing factors to Alex’s sense of belonging: the popular narrative that queer people are a “community,” his renegotiated identification with the sapphic community, the league’s inclusivity policies, the camaraderie provided by a sports environment, and Alex’s personal history with sports and positive selfhood.

*The Queer “Community.”* “Community” is “a sense of commonality: of a common identity, a common purpose, or a shared set of beliefs” (Sullivan, 2003, as cited in Carter and Baliko, 2017, p. 701). Popular narratives of queerness imagine queer people to be large community with shared identity tied to non-normative sexual identities. This view of community implies a sort of built-in commonality that may provide a basis for social connection among members of the “queer community.” QVS takes this stance, stating in their registration form for their 2024 season, “the league strives to be a positive, safe, and inclusive space for members of the *queer community*” (Queer Van Soccer, 2024) (emphasis added). The queer “community” is then both the imagined commonalities of queer-identifying folks, and something that can be actively sought out in spaces that are designated for members of this group.

Indeed, this imagination of queer “community” is reflected in Alex’s views. In our interview, he told me that he found “community within [...] the queer community too, [which] has been really important for [him], like just finding people that [...] understand some of [his] same experiences, like especially in terms of [...] sexuality,” and that he is now “kind of in the process of trying to find more people that understand [his] gender experience” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). He sees his participation in QVS as an entrance point for meeting people who are part of the queer “community” and might thus share a sense of commonality related not only to his experiences of sexuality, but also to being a transmasculine person. In the league’s frame of acting as an avenue for members of the queer “community” to socialize with other members of the queer “community,” it provides a groundwork for building senses of belonging and community based on a common queer identity for members like Alex.

*The sapphic community.* Alex is partially able to find senses of community and belonging through a renegotiated identification with the sapphic community. From the ages of 12 to 18, Alex identified as a lesbian. When he left the province to attend university right after secondary school, he felt that he had the freedom to come out as non-binary. Finally, at the age of 24 he realized that his masculine lesbian and non-binary identities were “stepping stones” in his “gender journey” to being a transgender man. However, in these life experiences, he developed an identification with the “sapphic community,” noting a developed sense of belonging among queer women and assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) non-binary people. This identification was complicated when he realized he is a man.

Initially identifying as a lesbian is a common experience for trans men, and for many “who first identified as lesbians and socialized in lesbian social and political spaces, transitioning rendered them differently legible in those spaces” (Nash, 2011, p. 201). In Alex’s initial process of coming to terms with his gender, he expressed a desire to “pass” to others as a cisgender man, and looked forward to a point in his physical transition where he would be able to do so more easily. Some trans men leave the lesbian community entirely. However, Alex’s viewpoint has since evolved:

“When I’m in public, and I don’t know people, I totally want to be like, seen as a cis man. But I think that’s where having a queer community is still really important for me. Because when I’m around that community, I do want to be seen as a trans man. [...] I don’t want to be [...] just lumped in with cis men, because it’s nice to feel seen

and understood, and have people around me that fully know who I am. Because being a trans man is a totally different experience” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024).

Although he is a man, Alex expresses that he “still like[s] that [he] can feel connected to [...] the sapphic community” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). This comes from an understanding that though he enjoys living and being seen by strangers as a man, his life experience and worldview is totally different than that of a cisgender man. Thus, in lesbian and wider queer community spaces, he finds commonality with those who have similar experiences of sexuality and gender. This personal renegotiation of identification with the sapphic community allows Alex to feel a sense of belonging in the majority-sapphic-women community space of QVS.

*“For gender expansive folks of all skill levels.”* While prior literature notes that QVS was originally a “lesbian” or “women’s” league, and cisgender queer women appear to still be the majority demographic, the QVS Instagram biography states that the league is “for women, gender expansive, non-binary, & trans folks of all skill levels” (Queer Van Soccer, n.d.). This is a wide category that seems to include every category of queer person but queer cisgender men, while placing an emphasis on it being open to everyone – not just those with sports skill and experience. As Alex is a transgender man, he is able play in the league: “it’s a safe space for also like non-binary, and like trans people too” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). At the soccer game I attended, I also noticed that when his team went around the circle introducing themselves, “of the seventeen players, about seven used he/him or he/they pronouns, including Alex” (Fieldnotes, 11 July 2024). This means that nearly half (41%) of his team that day were transmasculine-identifying. This shows that there is potential for Alex to find a sense of belonging at QVS amongst fellow transgender men and masculine non-binary people – people that might be able to “understand his gender experience.”

Furthermore, the emphasis on inclusion of “all skill levels” adds to the relaxed social atmosphere of the games, as much “as it’s [...] competitive, it’s also like, just meant to be fun, and everyone’s very supportive of each other. [The players are] a variety of different skill levels, like some people are playing soccer for the first time, whereas others have played for most of their life” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). League members understand the mixed skill levels and experience of their peer and so competitiveness is able to be kept light and friendly, as seen in my observations of Alex’s game. Thus, the leagues’ inclusivity policies about gender and skill levels contribute to Alex’s sense of belonging and community in QVS.

*Camaraderie in a sports space.* Expressions of camaraderie contribute to Alex's sense of belonging and community, too. By camaraderie, I mean instances of playful competitiveness and friendly 'sportsmanship' that serve as expressions of mutual respect and bonding over a shared interest and engagement in an athletic activity. These moments of camaraderie establish, build, and maintain social connections and thus, sense of community. This was seen in the friendly yet competitive atmosphere of Alex's game, the desire to win and teammate encouragement, but satisfaction in ending in a tie game.

QVS as a *sports space* facilitates this sort of peer support environment, seen in players' cheering, encouragement, and compliments on and off the field as people work together toward a common goal. This social dynamic is highly rewarding in terms of self-esteem, and helps in forming social connections between the members of QVS. I noted, too, that the camaraderie on the field translated to off-the-field banter between opponents and teammates: at the beach barbeque event, there was "an air of masculine, showy, competitive playfulness [...], a person with short-cropped hair in a muscle tee shoved their friend, challenging them to a volleyball match: "Let's go, loser!" (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). At the same event I also observed a former opponent say to Alex, "I'm happy to see you even though you kicked our asses last week – I'm only pulling your leg – it's a compliment; you're very fast!" (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). So, QVS as a *sports space* encourages camaraderie which works to facilitate social bonding and thus sense of community and belonging for members like Alex.

*Alex, sports, and selfhood.* Alex has a personal history with sports that is closely linked to positive experiences of selfhood, allowing him to approach his QVS experience with a positive attitude toward sports. He has nuanced feelings toward his personal history with sports as its high gender segregation meant he had to play in "girls" teams growing up: Being openly trans meant risking expulsion, as Alex witnessed when a teammate left their secondary school basketball team after coming out as a transgender boy. Despite this, Alex found that from a young age he "was [...] not always doing very well in school, [so instead he] found that [he] got a lot of confidence from doing well in sports." Having been raised by parents who place high value in athleticism, Alex engaged in sports from a young age, and performed well in them. Alex even says that sports have shaped his identity for the better: "Being a part of a team and a group, [has] made [him] a more confident person. [He] naturally would [...], within a lot of [his] teams, just kind of take on a

leadership role” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024). Thus, despite the complexities of sports’ gender segregation, Alex gained self-esteem and valuable leadership skills through sports.

Sports also provided Alex a way to cope with his anxiety related to his gender and sexuality. Coming from a Christian family, he noted that for a period of time he would pray daily to not be gay, and experienced homophobia and transphobia from family members, causing mental health issues like panic attacks. Engaging in a variety of sports like basketball, field hockey, and track and field helped him endure these experiences, because “even though like in a lot of other ways [he] was dealing with, you know, a lot of anxiety, or like dealing with [his] sexuality, [...] sports to [him] always made [him] a very, very confident person [...]” (Interview, Alex, 16 July 2024) who was self-assured and socially popular in school through sports friendships. Therefore, Alex’s personal history of positive selfhood discovered through sports created a basis for *continuing* to find community and sense of belonging in sports through QVS later in life.

## **Limitations**

While I was able to gain a thorough understanding of my interlocutor’s relationship with sports, gender, and sense of belonging and community within a queer sports league; my findings are not generalizable to all trans members of QVS, or other trans people engaged in queer community sports. As recognized by Carter, “studies identify numerous tensions and complexities that disrupt the dominant narrative of collegiality within queer leagues and teams.” (Carter, 2021, p. 65). My interlocutor is a White, able-bodied, athletically-skilled Canadian citizen. Thus, his sense of inclusion and community does not reflect the experiences of other members of the league, particularly those who are racialized, immigrants or refugees, disabled, fat-identifying, transfeminine, or differing in athletic skill-level. My study also does not take socioeconomic class dynamics into account.

In the uncommon instance that a teammate was not fully accepted by peers, this appeared to be for reasons relating to breaking social norms, for example the community sports league social norm of shared decision-making in perceived traits such as “bossiness.” However, my research was limited to one interlocutor, so I was not able to gather sufficient data regarding other potentially ostracized league members’ senses of belonging, and how their intersectional identities may or may not have played roles.

Furthermore, I noticed at the QVS barbeque event that “there were some Asian and Brown people, about three Black people, but it was a majority White crowd” (Fieldnotes, 1 July 2024). In a situation where the racialized members of the community space are visibly a minority group, how might these members’ senses of belonging and community be affected? If I had engaged a racialized member as my interlocutor, I may have gathered very different findings. As Alex is White, and living in Canada, an “imagined community” that sees Canadians as White (Creese, 2019, p. 1487), he does not have to reflect on how his racial identity does or does not affect his sense of inclusion and community, as he is a member of the racial group deemed socially normal.

## Conclusion

Despite the Queer Van Soccer league’s original establishment as a “lesbian” or “women’s” space that still has a majority of cisgender lesbian members, my transgender male interlocutor has discovered senses of belonging and community. I found Alex’s positive experience of a queer community sports league to have been shaped by several factors: QVS’ adoption of the popular narrative of queer people as a “community,” the league’s gender and skill level inclusivity policies, the camaraderie environment facilitated by a sports space, Alex’s personal history with sports as a means for confidence-building and positive sense of self, and his re-identification with the sapphic community. He joined QVS with the intention of having fun and making more queer friends, and that he did.

Though there already exists a broader scholarship of works relating to community and belonging in queer community sports, as well as of trans men’s experiences in lesbian spaces; my mini-ethnography about Alex’s QVS experience contributes a thorough account of one individual’s subjective experience in one of these spaces and takes a deeper look into his personal history, allowing me to break down what *specifically* makes queer sports work so well for this individual. My case study of Alex and QVS may also serve as a basis for a broader argument that sports can and do provide positive experiences of queer and trans selfhood, community, and belonging; despite the current contentious social relationships between sports and gender.

## Reflection

*Methodological reflection.* The qualitative research methods I used proved to be very effective in answering my research questions. By reviewing related scholarship prior to beginning my

observations, I was able to formulate a relevant and answerable question to focus on within the limitations of this research project. Field observations provided a good basis of understanding my interlocutor's dynamic within the social space, while the later in-depth interview allowed me to ask the questions that weren't answered by simply watching. The transcription process was tedious, but familiarized me with the data, making the coding process easier as I had already developed a good sense of the themes and categories of my findings through repeat listening. Digital data from the QVS social media pages were also helpful, as they provided textual evidence of the league's ethos and inclusivity policies. It was tough to narrow down the wealth of data I gathered over this process, as I had to choose to leave out a lot of interesting information and audiovisual data to focus on my core argument. Overall, I found these methods effective and enjoyable and will carry what I learned forward into future research.

*Notable findings.* I found it particularly interesting that Alex has been able to forge a new queer/trans identity within the sapphic community despite now identifying as a man. "Transmen's experiences [...] highlight how representations of self are flexible and unstable but come up against the limitations of what can be understood" (Nash, 2011, p. 205). Today, a multiplicity of queer identities is becoming visible in formerly "homonormative," more homogeneous spaces. Though Alex's unique relationships with sports and gender have rendered him able to find belonging in QVS, the landscape of queer spaces, much like that of gender and sexuality identities, is unstable and changing.

Additionally, it was interesting to see that in his youth, despite having to compromise aspects of his gender identity in order to participate in gender-segregated sports, these same activities provided ways of managing difficulties relating to discrimination and internalized homophobia. Thoughtful reflection over time has allowed Alex to forge a positive relationship between his love of sports and love for his queer community that is supported by his participation in QVS. As the expression goes, it is the best of both of worlds.

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\* Broadly, "sapphic" refers to women who sexually and/or romantically desire women. However, the term is fluid and heterogeneous and may be inclusive of other non-normative sexual and gender identities.



# Safety, Securitization and the Carceral Web: Who's Public?

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the implications and impacts of private security presence in the Vancouver Public Library. Historically situating local security culture demonstrates how punitive ideology creates populations predisposed to violence and exclusion, both physical and epistemic. Within the city of Vancouver Indigenous, Black and poor populations are the primary communities strategically pre-categorized as “bad” and pre-emptively subjected to increased surveillance and policing, entwining local communities within globalized practices of racial capitalism. The beliefs and practices of removal or violence as punishment form the backbone of the carceral web in Canada permeating settler colonial pedagogy. The securitization of the public library encroaches upon crucial access to pedagogy that reflects marginalized epistemologies. Methodologically, this paper aims to validate embodied knowledge and lived experience as resistance to the Western scientific research paradigm that tends to replicate pre-existing carceral and colonial norms.

**Keywords:** securitization, carceral web, trans studies, library studies, critical pedagogy

**T**HE SECURITIZATION OF MY LOCAL public library concerns me for a few reasons. Private security companies are not required to be explicit to the public in regards to their duties, ethics or values. While it is within the jurisdiction of private security personnel to “perform many police-like functions”, the primary roles assigned to the police are also not officially defined by the government of Canada. (Li, 2008; Public Safety Canada, 2016). An increase of private security presence within so-called universally accessible public space emerges as a modality through which the carceral web is expanded and thus reified. (Pitman, 2021; Axster et al., 2021; Schram, 2010; Kammersgaard, 2019).

Carcerality is the constellation of beliefs, practices, and systems rooted in *punitive ideology* which argues that harm happens within society because certain people are “bad” and that removal or violence as punishment will restore “justice” and prevent further harm (Raymond, 1979). Strategically pre-categorized as “bad”, Indigenous, Black and poor populations are the primary communities in Vancouver pre-emptively subjected to increased surveillance and policing; the globalized practices of racial capitalism connect communities across borders through tactics of control enacted on the local level (Pitman, 2021; Axster et al. 2021).

The history of policing in Canada can be traced right back to confederation where the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) — which later became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) — were established to enforce the new colonial borders and laws, and oversee the construction of the Canadian Pacific railway. Indigenous law and jurisdiction was explicitly ignored, and the treaties and colonial laws proposed by the Crown, broken. Indigenous resistance to this colonization, such as the Métis and Cree resistance of 1885, was so strong that the NWMP upped its militarization through help of the Canadian Army, doubling down on its violent tactics to remove Indigenous peoples, either from their lands, or from existence entirely (Gouldhawke, 2021). Epitomizing another manifestation of the white supremacist ideology and practices of violence endemic to Canadian law, Black people were legally subject to enslavement until 1834 (Public Service Alliance Canada, 2021). But the fundamentals of enslavement have not disappeared entirely: as of 2021 people in federal prisons earned a maximum of \$4.28 *a day* for their labour, after room and board deductions (Canada, 2021). Compounded with over-criminalization, institutional racism in the so-called criminal justice system is a continuation of colonial and racist practices. Racism in the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) manifests in the significant over-representation of both Black and Indigenous Peoples Vancouver statistics on arrests, chargeable incidences, mental-health related

incidences, and strip searches (Routley & Govender, 2021). Ongoing colonial processes of land dispossession by removal are revealed in the over-representation of Indigenous populations in federal prisons, making up 32% of the inmate population despite comprising between 3-5% of the population of Canada, or the states complicity in the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2Spirit (MMIWG2S) (Public Safety Canada, 2023).

The beliefs and practices of removal or violence as punishment which form the backbone of the carceral web in Canada permeate settler colonial pedagogy, epistemically excluding the knowledges of Indigenous, Black and people of colour, as well as queer/trans, poor and disabled people (Lynn, 2002; Galarte, 2014). This epistemic exclusion normalizes systems of violence and removal, teaching them instead as “justice” by silencing the voices of those who have been harmed, nurturing a carceral imagination for future generations. Access to the educational resources found in public libraries can provide self-understanding to members of marginalized groups whose lived/embodied experiences do not count as knowledge within settler colonial pedagogy. A *critical pedagogical perspective* is that which challenges “the production of social hierarchies, identities, and ideologies across local and national boundaries” empowering people to draw from the knowledge generated by their own embodied experiences (Galarte, 2014; Burkhart, 2003). Epistemic exclusion within educational institutions compounds the significance of the carceral practice of library security systems.

As a student researcher and in the world, I am simultaneously protected by my whiteness and made vulnerable by my transness. This vulnerability is because of the long history of criminalization and brutalization of queer and trans people in Canada (Spade, 2017). Through the eyes of colonial law, sexual and gender deviance was a crime punishable by death until 1869 and remained an imprisonable offence until 1969 (Levy, 2019). Given the patterns of treatment exemplified by the state, it follows that the legal status of trans people remains a constant political debate and campaign topic. In view of this history, the overlap and intersections of racism, classism, sanism and transphobia/heterosexism contribute to a broad gamut of risk for queer and trans people. Despite meaningful differences, minoritized communities in Vancouver are interconnected through common experiences of vulnerability.

Due to the carceral logic underlying predominant law and conceptions of justice, minoritized groups are excluded and removed from definitions of “public” through racist, classist, and cis-sexist

values implicit in policy and embodied through institutional actors — in this case, private security personnel (Axster, et. al, 2021; Kafer & Grinberg, 2019). The library can be a space providing folks low-barrier access to the tools to create their own critical pedagogies and ideally, as articulated by the Vancouver Public Library (VPL), exist as “[a] free place for everyone to discover, create and share ideas and information” (City of Vancouver, 2022). In creating such a space, I assert the necessity in centering Indigenous, Black and queer/trans perspectives on the question of what it means to be safe. I draw upon my lived experience as a white trans student, orienting myself to the social dynamics of racialization, class and normativity. Through the securitization of the public library, tensions within conflicting understandings of safety, “the public” and knowledge come to light. I seek to explore the implications and impacts of private security presence in the public institution of the library and observe how securitization manifests in the Vancouver Public Library, Central Branch.

## **Background information and literature review**

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* traces the history of the European carceral system and strategic social control in service of power within a capitalist system. Carcerality is diffused throughout society through what Foucault calls the carceral archipelago, consisting of mechanisms, technology and knowledge systems which are decentralized and permeate the micro-macro continuum of social life (Foucault, 1995). Many theorists and academics from a breadth of disciplines reference Foucault’s work to understand how power operates within society, while others critique aspects of his work for lacking the critical axes that are integral to the structure of the carceral system in the West. Of the latter, one such scholar is Angela Davis, who draws attention to the absence of the reservation system, slavery, mission system and internment camps as situated within global capitalism in Foucault’s genealogy of the carceral system (Davis, 1998). Bearing this in mind, Foucauldian concepts and terms are best applied in conjunction to contemporary intersectional critical analysis. *Colonial Lives of the Carceral Archipelago: Rethinking the Neoliberal Security State* by Sabrina Axster et al., explores mechanistic examples of Foucault’s carceral archipelago, naming mass incarceration, border control and police brutality as central elements of a catch-all carceral *web*, further substantiating that racial capitalism relies on the “punishments” of violence and removal of the carceral system. The authors ultimately argue that the neoliberal reliance on state violence is not a new phenomenon, and that the exclusion/suppressing of Black, Indigenous and

people of colour's experiences is a weaponization of the power that is to not know of something; a colonial unknowing (Axster et al., 2021).

There is a considerable body of sociological analyses relating to private security guards, with a wealth of studies conducted in North-Western Europe. In his 2021 qualitative publication *Private Security Guards Policing Public Space: Using Soft Power in Place of Legal Authority* Tobias Kammergaard observed private security guards policing a public square in Denmark and found that guards demonstrated illegitimate acts of authority and garnered general public mistrust especially in response to people who use drugs (Kammergaard, 2021). In a review of census Canada statistics, Geoffrey Li reports the overlap within the roles of private security and police officers, comparatively drawing attention to disparities in employment rates and salaries for private security personnel (Li, 2008). There is a wealth of relevant discourse as a basis for the study of library securitization, but the unique intersection of the topics remains overall understudied.

## **Methodology**

To research modes of neoliberal securitization I conducted 10 hours of observation at the Central Branch of the Vancouver Public Library, located between downtown and Yaletown in the city of Vancouver, and one 40-minute interview with a library patron who attends the Semiahmoo Public Library in White Rock.

To conduct my field observations, I used a polymorphous engagement approach which involved multiple modalities (Mannick & McGarry, 2017). I interacted with the library, its patrons and security guards through participant observation, review of library and city policy documents, private security company websites, online Google and Yelp ratings; I conducted walking ethnography through the use of headnotes, jottings, sketches and diagrams, as well as photography. At times I was taking a participatory approach, as a patron of the library and a resident of Vancouver city, and other times I took an active approach, trying to understand the role and methods of security guards without being a part of their social group (Mannick & McGarry, 2017). I focused on the postures and behavior of the security guards, as well as my own body-mind experiences in the library and recorded what I thought to be notable occurrences within the space, be it among patrons or staff. I noted signage and design elements within the space, and correspondingly, sensory

experiences such as light, smells, temperature and sounds. I ensured in my field notes that I was not recording any incriminating, identifying information from the library staff, patrons, or security.

My interview methods followed the same critical pedagogical approach, wherein the interview process communicates knowledge through collaborative constructivism. I interviewed my friend, asking semi-structured questions with a focus on the interviewee's experiences, feelings, and knowledge, and then anonymized our conversation.

As a white university student, the power which I hold is much more than I have been taught to recognize. My research processes are informed by my experience of education and enculturation through the white-settler state where I have been protected by white supremacy and middle-class social security. This means that I have internalized racist and classist approaches to life and learning, which I am working to unlearn as I sit with the understanding that I have the power to do harm.

In the process of crafting a methodological toolkit to study “up”, or to look at the systems of governance which exert power over myself and others, I have had the tendency to ‘collect’ critical sociological frameworks, which has resulted in biases against institutions and certain roles within this society. My positionality as a prison abolitionist complicates my relationship to security guards, which has been a topic of ethical concern for me throughout this process. Of relevance, there are significant distinctions between security guards and police officers, and in the case of the former I empathize with how individuals within this society must work to make money under the continual threat of homelessness and starvation. My observation hours helped to counter this reductive tendency, as I grew familiar with various security guards and was pushed to multiply the nuances of my analysis and worldview in general. During my observation I was also aware of how I held power as an observing researcher at the same time as feeling vulnerable in proximity to security guards. My ethical integrity is contingent on conducting research that is of benefit to those who are most negatively impacted first.

My methodological aim is to validate embodied knowledge and lived experience as resistance to the Western scientific research paradigm which tends to replicate pre-existing carceral and colonial norms (Bernal, 2002; Waters & Burkhart, 2003). With an awareness of the university's influential power and cultural authority within mainstream knowledge production, I lean into how theory informs research design. I take an active autoethnographic role in data collection as an

enactment of the critical pedagogical approach, situating my personal reflections of autoethnographic embodiment as a trans embodiment of securitization and surveillance (Stine, 1991 in Madison, 2005; Galarte, 2015).

## **Autoethnographic embodiment**

After I had concluded my fieldwork, there was a necessary part of analysis that came to the fore, which was my own investment in the questions of surveillance and exclusion. With an awareness of the multifaceted manifestations of carceral logic, I ventured inwards towards some of my own lived experiences that had come up in the form of feelings throughout my time researching the library; discomfort, anger and grief, as well as determination and connection all brimmed at the threshold of my observations. Following the threads of exclusion and its various justifications within my own life I noticed surveillance and punishment throughout many stages of my life and aspects of my socialization.

Reflection, March 14th, 2023:

“Within the Foucauldian vein, conceptions of power and powerlessness have pulsed alongside me throughout the past four months; naturalizing themselves in my body-mind, informing my research questions and methodologies. The public library was my ideal public space to explore power, perhaps due to hearing the phrase “knowledge is power” during my schooling more times than I can count. Through the Western education system, seeking domination of others and power over one another is normalized. This type of power takes on new modalities but reproduces its essence within individuals, who are the basis from which ideology, the state and institution all arise.

The circumstantial and institutional constraints that many people face in pursuit of learning frustrates me, especially considering the expanse of perspective which has resulted from my own access to certain texts and materials. The critical works of Audre Lorde, Eli Clare, Judith Butler, just to name a few, have not only given me the knowledge to understand my own circumstances, but also have showed me worldviews far more empathetic to my own positionality than the dominant Eurocentric paternalistic “traditional” epistemologies.

Even when considering the skewed cultural production of knowledge, I imagine the *library*; a non-transactional site for learning, and for some, community. At the Central Branch library, the

warm hues and grand colosseum architecture spanning an entire city block invoked a nostalgic idealization of society wherein knowledge, among other resources, is universally available. In reality, underdressed, underfed and unsheltered people, relying on the toonies and dimes of fellow city-dwellers, hold their ground on the streets surrounding the library's perimeter, resisting displacement against city mandated "street sweeps" deployed to make the sidewalk and alleyways unlivable. *Dispossession by removal.* Even the types of knowledge that make it into the library are skewed towards the interest of the state, and how it wants to be imagined. Obviously, my envisioned ideal of the library is a dream yet to come.

Co-creating a resistance against this exclusionary, power-hungry white-dominant, settler colonial power is collective work. My experience in queer community, learning and generating knowledge as one life connected to many, colours my positionality as a student. I have learned how my transhood is inextricable from my selfhood. Eurocentric epistemology feeds a narrative that as a trans person I do not know myself, that I am wrong in who I am, and that I should be corrected or punished for my difference. So too, in progressive spaces, narratives of 'valid' transsexuality permeate my being; despite my struggle and resistance against gender norms, I feel as though my thoughts and feelings of self are being watched. Since the first gendering mechanism of categorizing my genitalia at birth to prescribe a set of roles to my personhood, all the way to the psychological assessment required to access gender affirming health care, surveillance has never meant safety to me. The context of power swells through my own powerlessness in the face of gender surveillance.

My audacity to watch who is watching the people has bloomed from grounded, supported, resistance. Maybe knowledge of the agents through which dominating power is maintained and enforced will contribute to the redistribution of power. That is my hope, that is my reason for writing, and my role as an academic-in-training. To me, safety extends far beyond physical space. Safety of body-mind *is power to the people*; power to resist domination, both internally and externally."

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thus far I have explored the ideological and internal aspects of the carceral web, as well as aspects of its historical origins and legacy in Canada. These are strands in the web of carcerality, as is the privatization and outsourcing of surveilling social actors. While security guards lack the legal power of the police, they invoke an authoritative presence through their uniforms, and collaboration

with local branches of law enforcement. Through strong security presence, the Central Branch of the VPL becomes another strand in the web.

The first time I stepped into the central branch of the library I immediately noticed how peaceful it was; upon entering through the building's large double doors, "the sounds of the rain, cars, pedestrians and construction outside is quickly muted. [...] the quiet is soft and noticeable. [...] Outside I still hear the sirens through the walls of the library". The quiet let me notice my thoughts, buzzing. Patrons would frequently walk out without checking out a book, through the security-scanner doors and past the security guard. The library can provide refuge; from home, work, school, the overstimulating effects of downtown Vancouver, and the cold, to name a few. I had the chance to talk to my friend, a university student, about her experiences with public libraries. Overall, she expressed that it had been a welcoming a third space where she could enjoy the quiet and focus while feeling the presence of community:

"All types of people go there; young, old uh, let's see, I wouldn't necessarily know by looking at anybody, but I'm assuming LGBTQ since *I* go there. But it's a very inclusive and open space, I see families there every single day, I see children there learning to read, getting used to being around literature and all that" (personal communications, 2023).

While I too noticed that there was a wide range of people, my attention is pulled towards who is excluded from so many spaces that their absence has become normalized? The priority was a regulated orderliness. No alarms sounded the entire time I was in the library, but there were usually about six guards strolling the nine stories of bookshelves. The guards wear coordinated black or black and yellow uniforms, sometimes with a Canadian flag on the sleeve, always printed with the word "SECURITY". They carry walkie-talkies, pace, and watch everything. There were many times while observing the guards that I felt nervous, aware of the power they had over me in that space, but also aware of the ways in which I was resisting said power through my continued observation, in addition to my generally deviant being-in-the-world. The library's "expectations of behavior" printed on one paper sign, taped to the blacked-out window of the security office, reminded me that the security guards are following the directions of Securigaurd, the private security company which was hired to follow the directions of the library (Li, 2008). Sometimes the presence of security is not helpful for individuals to feel safer in the library. In our interview conversation, I asked my

interlocutor about times that she had felt unsafe in the library she frequents, and she told me about how there was a particular youth who would hang around her and her friends while they studied. She recalled two instances where this person began to make hateful, targeted, and racially motivated comments towards her. In these moments, she told me that she felt as if she had to “just deal with it” especially because those around her at the time were acting as passive bystanders. I asked her if the intervention of an authority such as a security guard would make her feel safe, to which she responded, “I think I would have been a little bit more embarrassed than anything else, ‘cause, you know, especially back then I wasn't good with conflict or anything like that [quietly]”. While she expressed that she did not mind the presence of the security, she also did not perceive them as helpful to improving her feelings of safety after experiencing interpersonal racism. Most significant in recovering from these moments was a person she knew and trusted:

“I told [...] another friend of mine at the time, who would stand up for me, [...] but like, they weren't there when this happened. So they couldn't do it then. But they were a little bit like, you know, a little bit more protective of me whenever I went to the library with them. And that was kind of helpful. I felt a lot safer, and a lot more comfortable in their presence.” (personal communication, 2023).

Through connection arises the power to find safety and solidarity. They stabilize each other. A theme that emerged from the above section of our interview conversations in conjunction with my own field observations and auto-ethnography, is that feelings of safety are not solely determined by authoritative actors of securitization, but by the people with whom individuals share community and space. On the other hand, even singular people can wield systemic power through their words/actions and embody carcerality through the reproduction of oppressive beliefs by deeming racialized difference as the “*bad*” within punitive logic. Within the context of colonial unknowing, racism has a vested interest in the epistemic exclusion of Indigenous, Black and people of colour within educational institutions (Davis, 1998). The state weaponizes law for the advancement of their interests, particularly against racialized groups; punitive logic is then revealed to function bidirectionally in practice, as opposed to the formal conception of ‘bad person gets punished’. The colonial state enacts violence or removal first, *then* defines the victimized groups or populations as legally ‘bad’ and within this logic said punishment is warranted. Because the carceral archipelago is diffused throughout society and also imperative to the entire existence of Canada, the public education system is a mechanism for its reproduction; an epiphenomenon of this carceral education

being isolation and hyper individualism. Stark contradiction between stories crafted versus experiences lived creates distance between realities, lessening shared realities, decreasing solidarity. Furthermore, carceral logic replaces the tangible, soft skills needed to empower people to resolve conflicts in community.

Isolation and hyper individualism sing the refrain that everyone is separate from one another. My interlocutor would frequently express nostalgia for the communal aspects of the town where her family lives in Uganda. One such remembrance was in reference to the contrast in cultural values in regards to community:

“Everything is really like, communal like, even like my grandpa and my grandma's house is just right up the street from my uncle's house. [...] And most houses have like two of my relatives in them like my aunt and my uncle, living there, and it's just so nice because there's always somebody there you don't really feel lonely, [question/upwards inflection] per se. But here you do. Here you really do. Really ridiculously individualistic.”

Her articulation of Vancouver as individualistic brought me back to the contrast between the idealistic institution of the public library and the concurrent “street sweeps”. Attitudes surrounding homelessness and poverty as a social problem differ and can further the distance between realities. In isolation our vulnerability is exacerbated ideologically, institutionally, physically and socially. This isolation once again disproportionately impacts minoritized communities under the threat of violence and removal, both physically and epistemically.

The contradictions within the carceral web and punitive logic are endless. Exemplified in my field work, I discovered that the VPL is accountable to the municipal government and the federal libraries act, as well as their corporate sponsors such as BMO Financial Group, which funds pipeline projects such as Trans Mountain Expansion Project (TMX) and Coastal Gaslink (CGL) which directly displace Indigenous peoples from their land (City of Vancouver, 2021; Yunker, 2019). The primary priority of both racial capitalism and settler colonialism is the easy participation of a powerful minority in a globalized economy, to the detriment of the global majority (Axster et al., 2021; Schram, 2010). The priority of protecting profit, capital and the colonial state, is consistent; However, it is in the claim that the priority of the state institutions is the safety and wellbeing of the

general public that contradicts itself. Security guards have far more in common with me and with the most excluded, minoritized, members in our communities than with the state; yet their presence enacts the very maintenance of hyper-inequality. As I would witness the guards sharing words, smiles and conversation with some members of the community, while employed to enforce the exclusion and removal of other(ed) members, I felt unsettled by how these exchanges represented the naturalization of the carceral web. Many of us partake in the systems of our own dehumanization as if there is no other way. Seeing fragmented displays of community gathered around disembodied ideas of safety serves as an insight into the type of ideological and epistemological learning/unlearning we may need to embark upon as a collective.

### **Research contribution/goals**

There is a gap in literature at the intersections of critical legal studies, sociology and library and information studies. Libraries are an excellent site to discuss alternatives to securitization, especially in regard to claims of being a space for “everyone”. I agree with those who say that the library is a pillar of society. In reimagining a social system transformed to better suit the needs of the people, the library as a model is promising. I scrutinize it for this reason: unless a pedagogy is informed by the knowledges of those who have been oppressed and excluded it is no more than a reshuffling of hierarchies which allows different identities to steer the machine of oppression and divide.

Black, Indigenous and queer definitions of safety; social tensions surrounding conflicting notions of safety; the isolating effects of neoliberalism; 2SLGBTQIA+ interactions with public space; and the axiologies implicit within the structural design of buildings are all research topics that I hope to explore further from this body of data.

### **Conclusion**

At the very time that this paper is being written, mayor Ken Sim is deploying armies of VPD officers to “decamp” East Hastings Street. Decamping is forcible removal, and decamping is the banishment of those in poverty who are experiencing the effects of colonial violence, systemic racism, and absolute abandonment by the state. I see the maldistribution of “punishment” as violence and removal every time that someone, in my community or elsewhere, dies of an overdose or police brutality; is arrested or silenced; experiences isolation in the face of a system that is their

aggressor (Butler, 2021). Surveillance and carceral actors are inextricable from this reality. Furthermore, through the carceral web, mechanisms of securitization and policing serve the exclusionary functions of the state within a social system that protects the fabrication of cis white colonizing men. Some people are worried about seeing something that makes them feel uncomfortable, while others are worried about how they are going to survive another day; there is endless variation in between, and each perspective is important. I recall my own initial judgements of character towards the security guards working at the library, having almost forgotten our shared global context. To position myself in opposition to my fellow working-class citizens was counterproductive for the discourse I would like to engage in. Without a social safety net, the exhaustion and alienation resulting from a 40+ hour work week is involuntarily adopted under the coercive, looming, threat of houselessness and social abandonment (Wacquant in Schram, 2010). My research findings have shown the many constraints against minoritized communities' physical and epistemological participation within the neoliberal settler colonial "public". Security guards are not the biggest threat to the population's development of critical pedagogical tools. However, securitization is a facet of the carceral web, which in its archipelago of forms, must also be addressed at the ideological, behavioral and structural scales. As it is a subjective concept, safety will not be straightforward to negotiate. Widespread access to critical pedagogy may ratify rather than remove embodied knowledge which spotlight the contradictions within mainstream neoliberal and settler colonial operative definitions of safety. Decreasing rather than further pluralizing the carceral web would be synonymous with the prioritization of previously and presently excluded perspectives within the academy and all spaces of education.

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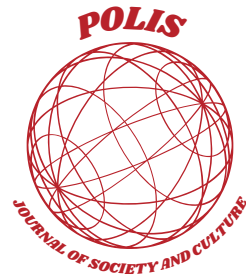
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# “Rights without Responsibilities”: Exploring the antithetical vernacularization of feminism in Korean anti-feminist forums

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## **Abstract**

In this political moment of post-truth anti-feminism, far-right populists have gained immense support amid a global shift in young men’s voting habits. This paper uses Valesco’s (2023) theoretical framework for the transnational backlash to liberal norms to analyze how anonymous online forums (a prevalent means of networking within the manosphere) can facilitate the *antithetical vernacularization* of liberal norms for illiberal diffusion as a result of cultural friction. I use a post from the South Korean online community Nate Pann to show how the process of *antithetical vernacularization* translates feminism from its liberal meaning to entail female supremacy, relying on iterative citationality to naturalize patriarchy, and how this contributes to the gendered political divide capitalized on by populist politicians such as South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, illiberalism, conservative, politics, feminism

**S**OUTH KOREA (HEREAFTER KOREA) is a rich site for political sociological research due to the country's prevailing traditional familism and subsequent friction with the institution of liberal norms (Jung, 2020; S Lee, 2024; Park & Jackson, 2022). "Gender equalism" (Kim, 2022, p. 116), Korea's localized version of equity feminism and men's rights activism, has become increasingly popular with young Korean men (Jung, 2020; Jung, 2024; S Lee, 2024). It proposes an alternative ideology reflective of liberal feminism—that gender inequality is no longer an issue, and policies institutionalized by women's rights activism are no longer legitimate (Kim, 2022; S Lee, 2024). Existing literature on contemporary Korean culture points to traditional roots in Confucianism and Christian Protestantism (Jung, 2020; S Lee, 2024; Park & Jackson, 2022). These ideologies collaborate to produce a cultural emphasis on filial piety and social hierarchy, in which heterosexual marriage and child-rearing are viewed as moral imperatives for the reproduction of a stable family, society, and collective good (Jung, 2020; S Lee, 2024). With the added dimension of Korean nationalism, particularly following liberation from colonial Japan in the mid-20th century, family is understood to be the core of social stability and Korea's strength as a nation (Jung, 2020; Park & Jackson, 2022).

However, gender roles enforced by a strong sense of patriarchal familism have become complicated by the influence of Western liberalism, which Korea sought to adopt in order to follow the progressive social development of the West (S-H Lee, 2019; T-H Kim, 2011). Park and Jackson (2022) note the lack of certainty surrounding the "effectiveness of implanting such foreign structures and programs on the nation's family-centred culture" (p. 295). From the 1980s to the 2000s, the Korean feminist movement prioritized "gender mainstreaming", a general policy implementation following the UN Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 which sought to increase women's representation in politics and the workplace (S-H Lee, 2019). Gender mainstreaming did not have significant cultural influence despite successes in institutionalization (Jung & Moon, 2024; A-R Lee & Chin, 2007). Policy changes such as equal inheritance rights, the socialization of childcare, and the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001 were viewed from the anti-feminist lens as the institutionalization of misandry (Baik, 2019; A-R Lee & Chin, 2007; S-H Lee, 2019).

Backlash to institutionalized feminist norms, which have successfully increased women's participation in the Korean labour market in past decades, has culminated in perceived crises in

masculinity surrounding cultural beliefs of men's roles as familial breadwinners (Jung, 2024; S Lee, 2024). Many young Korean men blame feminism for their difficulties in participating in the job market or fulfilling traditional familial roles by marrying and starting a family, which are supported by heightened unemployment among young men and decreasing marriage and fertility rates (S Lee, 2024). This anti-feminist rhetoric is also complicated by the country's compulsory military service for men. By temporarily removing men from their career paths, women's advancements in education and the job market are seen as an unfair advantage despite the abysmal gendered wage gap (S Lee, 2024). Resentment against feminists grows on the belief that women want rights without responsibilities, especially as they put off marriage and motherhood for the sake of independence (Jung & Moon, 2024).

Anonymous forums serve as the primary site for the dissemination of "fictitious factuality," which Kim (2022) describes as the "affective feedback loop" that generates confident confirmation bias within these spaces (p. 116). Anti-feminist backlash is not unique to Korea and has gained legitimacy transnationally with the emergence of the manosphere (Ging, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). According to Ging (2017), the Red Pill "philosophy" of the manosphere—which takes its name from the film *The Matrix*—has been rapidly propagated across platforms transnationally, arguing for the need for men to wake up to the reality of feminism's "misandry and brainwashing," (p. 640). Expanding on Ging's (2017) research, Van Valkenburgh (2018) conducted a systematic study of the original "Red Pill" forum and found that the philosophy integrates discourses of evolutionary psychology, rationality, and neoliberal market-value into existing cultural norms of sexual relationships. The ideology is described as an "extension" and "acceleration" of said norms, essentializing men as the only rational beings, dismissing women as opinionated and emotional, and denying the need for feminism at all (Van Valkenburgh, 2018).

Kim (2022) also discusses the "wikiality" of the manosphere, referring to "the notion that a thing can become true once a sufficient number of people agree with and repeat it on a wiki platform," (p. 99). This specifically refers to misinformation shared from a "reputable source", which complicates consumers' assumptions of truth. For example, the sudden entry of "gender equalism" to NamuWiki (Korea's "authoritative" right-wing online encyclopedia) in 2016 gave Korean anti-feminists a common cause to organize around: dismantling their country's institutionalized feminist policy (Kim, 2022). The entry fabricated the claim that gender equalism is replacing feminism in Western society due to feminism's inherent victimization of men, which was

then regarded as fact, and shared within anti-feminist circles to reinforce criticism before it was marked as falsified information (Kim, 2022). Kim (2022) also notes how the concept of gender equalism exploits “the language of feminism” by using terms such as “equality” and “equal opportunities” to reframe discourse about contemporary gender inequality (p. 105).

*Yi-dae-nam*, or men in their 20s, became the key demographic of right-wing populism in the 2022 presidential election of conservative anti-feminist Yoon Suk-yeol, the candidate who appealed to their dissatisfaction with the bleak labour market by promising to rid them of the disadvantages of feminism (Jung, 2024; S Lee, 2024). During his campaign, Yoon promised to "reorganize the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Affairs and recalibrate the [budget]" to shift its priority from women's rights to “gender equality” (K-W Lee, 2021, para. 3). He claimed that the ministry “failed to properly perform its gender equality function and has disappointed the public with its publicity that treats men as potential criminals” (K-W Lee, 2021, para. 4). As a generation formerly united on the centre-left, the 2022 election marked a dramatic political divide between young men and women—62.9% of men in their 20s voted conservative, compared to only 26.1% of women in the same age group (S Lee, 2024). Young Korean men have leaned toward right-wing conservative views of gender and social politics, culminating in a reactionary, politicized collective identity as victims of feminism (Jung, 2024).

Exploring the relationship between gender and populism, Banet-Weiser (2021) conceptualizes feminism's threat in a “post-truth” world (referring to the increasing influence of social science in public discourse) and states that “gender is rarely acknowledged as a key context for the very notion of post-truth,” (p. 211). Misogyny and misinformation as mechanisms of control have always been mutually constitutive as women have been, and continue to be, the bearers of non-truths (Banet-Weiser, 2021). This is enabled by scientific assertions that sexual difference is perfunctory and devoid of racial or cultural context (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Butler, 1993). Misogyny is the central ethos of far-right misinformation campaigns, which posit that liberal feminism has emasculated society and call for the need to “reset” gender balance to its “natural patriarchal relation,” (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 213). The need for gender equality itself is then considered misinformation, and affective feedback confirms and continues to naturalize heterosexist rhetoric through the process of iterative citationality (Butler, 1993).

## ***Antithetical Vernacularization, Transnational Backlash, and the Deinstitutionalization of Liberal Norms***

Much of the literature on the manosphere studies masculinity in the context of the deterioration of white male privilege in the West, with conservative Christians particularly vocal about feminism's threat in the global "culture war" (Ging, 2017). The character of Korean-specific anti-feminism can be explored through Valesco's (2023) findings that liberal ideology's success and prominence in instituting norms transnationally can produce both liberal and illiberal outcomes. In his analysis, Valesco (2023) argues for a culture-based understanding of cross-national events and shifts in the institutionalization of norms. He argues for a subversion of the characterization of the international community as an inherently liberal or progressive body which transmits uni-directional political influence from the global to local spheres (Valesco, 2023). Rather, it is deeply cultural and *reciprocal* global-local feedback loops that are "instrumental to the consolidation and institutionalization of norms" in the form of domestic policy (Valesco, 2023, p. 5). This theoretical framework is best suited for describing the shift in feminist norms in Korea as it not only recognizes, but centralizes the importance of cultural context in the reception (or rejection) of norms. Understood as a foreign imposition with little success in the public sphere, feminism is construed as inherently incompatible with values of family and faith. Abolition of feminist policy is then a rationalized response to compounded fears surrounding status and economic stability.

Through the study of 152 countries and their adoption of pro- or anti-LGBT+ policies between 1990–2018, Valesco (2023) details how gender and sexuality are focal points of the liberal/illiberal divide as categorizations that precede sexual reproduction. As a "dual strategy," illiberalism both undermines the logic of individualism while using its tools to antithetically promote "the supremacy of traditional corporate bodies," (Valesco, 2023, p. 12). The "sacralization of the individual" embedded in liberal discourse reconfigures bodies like the family or nation "away from a corporate whole greater than the sum of its parts to, instead, a collective built via the free association of individuals," (Valesco, 2023, p. 9). Individualism has shifted Western cultural beliefs surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality in regard to their conceived purpose for reproduction, however, it is crucial that sexual difference is still assumed to be essential in a way which presupposes race or cultural difference (Butler 1993; Valesco 2023). Despite its thoroughness in describing how backlash

is framed, this study does not identify essentialism as the normative logic (and constitutive flaw) of liberalism which enables illiberal backlash in the first place.

While Valesco's (2023) study analyzes LGBT+ norms, feminism follows a similar theme in that it also disrupts the hetero-patriarchal norm. *Antithetical vernacularization* is the framing for which illiberal actors or "norm brokers" pose their opposition to global liberal norms (like feminism) for local resonance (Valesco, 2023). By co-opting "the dominant language and structure of the liberal world society," illiberal networks such as the manosphere gain footing in mainstream political discourses (Valesco, 2023, p. 14). Anti-feminist men situate themselves as victims of gender equity policies that prioritize women, and affective feedback from other men (both globally and locally) increases the legitimacy of feminism as an existential, oppressive threat (Valesco, 2023).

Justification for the defense of heteropatriarchy is made possible by designating it as a natural hierarchy in which men have the right to fulfill their position, upheld through performative appeals to normative patriarchal relations (Butler, 1993). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) "recasts" sex as a temporally-situated regulation of significant difference sustained and empowered through the citations it compels; I use this to explain how *antithetical vernacularization* relies on iterative citationality (that is, reference to and perpetuation of the self-reinforcing cycle of sex essentialism) to demarcate patriarchy as a natural social hierarchy. Iterative citationality is integral to the construction of *antithetical vernacularization*: it first demands legitimacy of the symbols referenced in order to convey the argument, and that its use, in turn, reattributes symbolic legitimacy. This critical discourse analysis aims to present how anonymous online forums, a prevalent platform for transnational anti-feminist networking, host the *antithetical vernacularization* of liberal norms for illiberal diffusion and rely on the performative citationality of heteropatriarchy to reinforce how Korean men conceptualize sex, gender, and socioeconomic relations.

## **Critical Discourse Analysis**

The anonymous online bulletin website *Nate Pann* is described by NamuWiki as "an ordinary South Korean bulletin-board based community" with a user demographic that skews toward teenagers and adolescents (NamuWiki, 2025, para. 8). The board is discussed as having a "low entry barrier and a strong ripple effect," as well as a disproportionate amount of female users who engage in gossip and are "generally very angry at misogyny," (NamuWiki, 2025, paras. 15, 24). Additionally,

*Nate Pann* “has no separate political inclination,” which is explained to mean that there are no overarching restrictions on what is posted or appears to be trending (NamuWiki, 2025, para. 26). Users are able to “recommend” posts, a positive marker akin to a “like” which boosts the posts visibility according to the site’s algorithms, and a post’s view count also contributes to its popularity and increased circulation (NamuWiki, 2025).

With nearly 80,000 views, 322 recommendations, and 149 oppositional downvotes, the following post on the *Nate Pann* forum claims to explain the “universally valid social phenomenon” of how feminism has complicated traditional notions of the family and can be blamed for modern Korean women’s reluctance to marry (anonymous expert, 2012). The text was chosen for 1) its popularity among forum users as indicated by views and recommendations, taking into account that these have accumulated since its initial publishing in 2012; 2) the date on which it was posted, as it pre-dates the 2022 presidential election by ten years and provides a snapshot of growing anti-feminist sentiment in younger Korean men; 3) the notable absence of an identifier for the post’s author (such as a name, username, tag, etc.) other than “expert” speaks directly to the role of affective feedback in legitimizing illiberal discourse. Using Valesco’s (2023) framework for understanding transnational illiberal backlash, I will analyze excerpts to explain how this post utilizes *antithetical vernacularization* to rearticulate feminism as a threat to “natural” heteronormativity.

The post begins by addressing:

*Those who are too tired of Korean women...*

*First, basic common sense about patriarchy.*

*The two pillars of patriarchy are*

*1. Men are responsible for the household economy.*

=====> *Disadvantageous to men. Advantageous to women.*

*2. Men have full authority and make decisions on all household matters. =====>*

*Advantageous to men, disadvantageous to women. (anonymous expert, 2012)*

The author’s explanation of patriarchy sets the parameters for which it functions and designates itself within the frame of illiberal, antithetical discourse. It is not a denial of patriarchy, but an

assertion that (Korean) women's understanding of patriarchy as an unequal construction is misinformed. It is an explicitly citational statement in that the notion of patriarchal relations as "basic common sense" is used to delegitimize any opposition as that which stands to oppose *sense itself*; it is the reification of the assumed objectivity imagined by masculinist knowledge production which characterizes Other perspectives as inherently misinformed (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Butler, 1993; Kim, 2022).

Aside from the original poster's claim to "basic common sense" being indicative of the manosphere's reception of fictitious factuality, the "two pillars of patriarchy" are strategically presented as the cooperation between men and women to produce a stable household—and by extension, a stable society. Emphasis on the corporate body of the household/family in direct association with patriarchy again points to the performative citationality of heterosexual hegemony in constituting the bodies which it governs (Butler, 1993). This vernacularization constructs the family as the subject as opposed to the individual, antithetically promoting the notion of equal individual responsibilities necessary for its maintenance (Valesco, 2023). The advantages and disadvantages of patriarchy are acknowledged and framed so that they are understood to be different but equal for both men and women. The author engages in iterative citationality by defining patriarchal characterizations of labour, private property, and the very notion of "the public" as male by nature, and through *antithetical vernacularization*, translates individual privileges to instinctive responsibilities for the benefit of a greater whole.

Often looking internationally and to their parents' generation for social context, it becomes clear to young Korean men that the institutionalization of liberal feminist policy was what interrupted the possibility for them to afford a future (S Lee, 2024).

*The United States was the first and most intense place where feminism spread... [Those] men fall into great despair. Why should I get married? In an era where divorce is common (after all, the rise of women's equality and feminism... the divorce rate has skyrocketed along with the improvement of women's economic status) [ . . . ] why should I get married? They fall into doubt. In the end, men are left with only a sense of duty to support and take responsibility for their families, and their rights as patriarchs have virtually disappeared. There is no need to get married anymore. As I explained earlier, "the advantages of patriarchy have disappeared, and only disadvantages remain." (anonymous expert, 2012)*

The crux of the poster's argument is that in the West, but also anywhere that feminism has been institutionalized, "the advantages of patriarchy have disappeared, and only disadvantages remain," (anonymous expert, 2012). Both cultural norms and affective feedback are crucial here; young men view becoming the breadwinners of their families as a duty they must fulfill, and share the growing fear that marriage and economic security are not possible given the current job market (Jung, 2020; S Lee, 2024). Advocating for their individual "rights as patriarchs", illiberal anti-feminists once again appropriate the framework of liberal activism to promote the rights of a corporate body through *antithetical vernacularization* (Valesco, 2023). In discussing patriarchy as a natural hierarchy rather than structural, anti-feminists can use the language of liberal activism (for example, the position that there are innate individual "rights") to disseminate illiberal ideology by defending their right to patriarchal dominance. Not only does affective feedback in the manosphere's transnational community bolster the strength of their beliefs, but success in the local political realm also weakens the legitimacy of previously instituted feminist norms (Jung & Moon 2024; Valesco 2023).

*I know that feminism and gender equality are the main culprits that 'destroyed' the fact that women could secure their old age and live a stable life once they got married. What they received from gender equality was not a new world, but a life of having to work hard, being a single mother, and the anxiety of not knowing when they would be kicked out of their homes. That's why women who still talk about gender equality and feminism are ostracized and treated like ignorant fools.*

*This is largely the same in Europe. In Italy and other countries, there are still macho men, but in France, men who freely date, live together, break up, and live together are already the norm. Likewise, feminists and women's equality advocates are ostracized among French women. As a result, the lives of French women have become very unstable. And there is **fierce competition** among women to marry a good man and find a stable life. They also want to be loved. They don't want a great man, and they think that even if [the men] are a bit macho or patriarchal, they just want to be domestic without divorce. However, most men are gentle and modern, but they don't want to get married. They want to be free from responsibility. I realized that it's okay.*

*Japan is the same. Japanese men also have no sense of responsibility and don't bother dating women. They realized that women are a burden, a bondage, and a responsibility. Even if we treat women equally, [men] realized that it is unreasonable to have to take responsibility for their entire lives because of a love that won't last a few years, so the number of herbivore men who are not interested in women has increased dramatically, and even if they do date, they are not as detailed and romantic as*

*Korean men. They go Dutch, are blunt, and don't contact each other often. That's why Japanese women really prefer Korean men. (Korean women are the only ones busy looking down on Korean men.)*

*And what about Korea?*

*In Korea, the sex ratio of marriageable-age men and women has been normalizing since 2015. Japan is following the West, and Korea is following Japan. (anonymous expert, 2012, emphasis mine)*

The manosphere's transnational connectivity enables affective feedback on a scale never before seen. With (notably unsupported) claims of anecdotal evidence from several international communities, the post derives legitimacy solely through affective resonance and confirmation bias. Coupled with the disadvantages of feminism for men are what the author claims to be the natural disadvantages of feminism for women; "*I know that feminism and gender equality are the main culprits that 'destroyed' the fact that women could secure their old age and live a stable life once they got married,*" (anonymous expert, 2012). The post discusses the ostracization of feminists as a result of creating an environment of instability where women must balance precarity and partnership now that the two no longer appear to be mutually exclusive. Gender and subsequent cultural performativity are understood on a basic level, but varying economic and socio-cultural contexts both uncritically support the claims that living in a way differential to traditional gender roles is the real source of societal instability. Once more, this is made possible by *antithetical vernacularization* and the performative citationality of sex as a constitutive category.

The terms "macho" and "patriarchal" are used interchangeably to refer to a man who assumes hegemonic masculinity and fulfills his responsibilities, which then denotes greatness. Due to Korean men's understanding of marriage as a social responsibility, committal men are regarded with higher value (and rarity) than those who do not want the financial responsibility of a family: "*In Italy and other countries, there are still macho men, but in France, men who freely date, live together, break up, and live together are already the norm*"; "*However, most men are gentle and modern, but they don't want to get married*". The author goes on to say that women "*don't want a great man*", a significant argument made within the manosphere based on a misappropriation of evolutionary psychology which denies women agency in forming romantic or sexual relationships by claiming that marriage and sex are solely for reproductive purposes (Ging, 2017). This argument significantly resonates with Korean Confucian-Christianity's proposition of marriage and childbearing as moral acts, confirming through affective feedback a sense of epistemological reason (Jung, 2020). As an illegitimate concept, feminism

wrongfully allows women to reject traditional gender roles conducive to the formation and maintenance of a corporate body; feminists and their advocates are foolish, especially when turning down romantic advances that preempt responsibility.

The author makes a curious statement regarding gender and the responsibility of upholding traditional gender roles, however. Speaking about men in France, Italy, the US, and Japan, it's stated "they want to be free from responsibility" and that the author "realized that it's okay," (anonymous expert, 2012). When the author says that "it's okay", they do not mean a lack of responsibility is necessarily beneficial—this is evident by the post's overall message arguing for responsibility to the family as a fundamental human concept. Rather, the remainder of the post indicates that Korean feminism will resolve itself as a temporary subversion of the natural order, for "the time will definitely come when women will be obsessed with marriage and men," (anonymous expert, 2012). By refusing the responsibility of marriage, Korean women will inevitably arrive at the culturally unsustainable social position of "the individual":

*In any case, it seems that the Korean flag will also follow the West. [...] Men had to endure humiliating relationships while listening to women's ridiculous arguments and demands because of the **fierce competition** among men, but after about 10 years, the situation completely changed. There is no country in the world where women have more economic power than men. There may be differences in degree, but in Korea, men will still have more economic power in 10 years. (Currently, the average income of all women is half of the average income of all men.) In other words, the economic power of single women who live alone without marrying a man will be very low. The time will definitely come when women will be obsessed with marriage and men. Although men are currently disappointed by the **fierce competition...***

*And one more thing.*

*Social problem of single women.*

*Of course, single women are not in good financial shape because they live alone. Since the West has tried such a social experiment, the number of women who say they will be single has decreased significantly compared to the past. They have no illusions about being single. They have a strong perception that they will only be poor and lonely in their later years.*

*Those who act like single women in Korea now will end up like that in 20 years. Furthermore, the economic power of men and women in Korea is much different from that of the West, and the social*

*safety net is weak. There is only one way out. (A rich married man?)* (anonymous expert, 2012, emphasis mine)

As observers of the effects of the institutionalization of feminism, young Korean men rationalize their own anti-feminist positions by framing the gendered wage gap as evidence of patriarchy's natural supremacy. Discussed in the first excerpt is the author's observations that feminism has not guaranteed women financial independence, and this is explained further when comparing economic (labour) power. The post recognizes the gendered gap in economic power not as an effect of socially constructed inequality but a natural consequence of patriarchal defiance. Enabled by iterative citationality, capitalism's patriarchal structure is assumed to be natural in conceptualizing labour and economy as inherently male; feminized labour is not *undervalued* but merely valued, and unpaid care labour is an innate condition of womanhood. On average, women make less than men, therefore they are empirically worth less in the labour market. In referring to feminism as a "social experiment", the author further communicates its invalidity by mere association with that which is social instead of scientific or objectively rational.

"Fierce competition" is referenced three separate times in the context of romantic relationships, another instance of iterative citationality which connotes the heterosexist norm. In characterizing courtship as a neoliberal "sexual marketplace", the manosphere appropriates evolutionary psychology to make the claim that heterosexuality is not only normative but compulsory, and ideology which denies this is ignorant of objective truth (Ging, 2017). The use of *antithetical vernacularization* to problematize single women relies on essentialist assumptions of sex, and the phrasing also indicates the same underlying assumptions of patriarchy—those who "*act like single women*" are not perceived as independent despite individual rejection of such norms. The final sentiment that "*there is only one way out*" for women under feminism is reflective of Korean anti-feminists' naturalized patriarchal view, which essentializes sex and gender as categorizations necessary for the reproduction of a corporate whole.

## **Conclusion**

The manosphere's emergence as a transnational anti-feminist network can be attributed to several factors including economic insecurity and the success of misogyny-based misinformation, relying on fear and uncertainty to accumulate support (Banet-Weiser, 2021). As a global network, anonymous online forums serve an important function as incredibly accessible spaces for

unregulated discourse within the manosphere. Ease of access and anonymity both enable the overload of misinformation and strength of belief in the content's validity.

Valesco's (2023) theoretical framework for backlash to the institutionalization of liberal norms calls for culture-focused analyses of norm adoption to conceptualize multi-directional feedback. With increasing transnational support for far-right populist campaigns, there is a pressing need for the analysis of illiberal backlash and its functional mechanisms as illiberal actors coordinate deinstitutionalization. The election of Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022 *because of* his disavowment of feminism shows the ability of populist strategies to use sexual difference as a tool for the deinstitutionalization of liberal norms.

In studying Korean anti-feminism, I was able to explore the rationality of *antithetical vernacularization* as it pertains to the articulation of norms which contradict cultural heritage. Illiberal *antithetical vernacularization* is the process by which liberal norms are rearticulated; in the case of the Nate Pann post, feminism is framed as a threat to the traditional and natural laws of the hetero-patriarchal family, and further, to men as individuals trying to fulfill responsibility. It is the antithetical promotion of the family as a corporate body through advocacy of the individuals' responsibility to it. This critical discourse analysis illustrates how *antithetical vernacularization* relies on iterative citationality as the discursive function of sex in order to naturalize patriarchy for the promotion of illiberal politics.

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# Inverting the Medium, Severing the Oppressive Hand

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## **Abstract**

Media use has played a key role in the fight against colonialism. Different mediums from film to radio have become an integral strategy for groups resisting colonial forces. Frantz Fanon's account of the Algerian revolution in *A Dying Colonialism* shows how Algerians subverted colonialist media, the radio. What was once a tool for dispersing colonial ideology soon became a way for Algerians to mobilize their revolution against French rule. This paper explores the historical and contemporary use of media as a tool for resistance and self-representation. Expanding on the blueprint provided by Fanon, the paper draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Barry Barclay's *Fourth Cinema* to discuss the importance of self-representation in media and the dangers of colonial distortion, which often infects and overrules the narratives of those facing oppression. To expand on the concept, this paper also looks at the state of the current resistance movements. From Palestinian social media activism to Indigenous filmmaking, the way media is subverted to remove oppressive forces from gaining authority over the narratives of oppressed groups demonstrates the importance of the practice in the fight against colonialism.

**Keywords:** Self-Representation, Media Subversion, Colonial Resistance, Activism, Oppressive Narratives

**MEDIA IS A POWERFUL TOOL** when it comes to the fight against oppression. Media circulation plays a key role in shaping culture as new means of communication spread across regions and blended into the background of everyday life. The transformative nature of media has been a useful tool for colonial forces. Colonizers can use different forms of media to aid in the erasure and reshaping of the culture and ideology of the groups they target. Media has been used throughout different points in history by oppressive powers to control, erase, and distort marginalized identities. However, the transformative power of media also enables its use by oppressed groups as a form of rebellion, decolonization, mobilization, and a way of storytelling without the influence of an oppressive presence. Marginalized groups have and continue to reverse the damaging impacts of the colonialist use of media by integrating these tools into their fight for liberation.

In Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *A Dying Colonialism* (1967), he outlines how Algerian society rejected and then adopted radio technology to sever the hands of their oppressors during its struggle for independence from French colonial rule. Fanon (1967) describes how mediums such as radio can be a method for colonial powers to ideologically destroy the Algerian identity, but also how Algerian revolutionaries used this medium by flipping colonial technology on the head of the colonizers. Fanon's work is key to understanding how oppressed groups use colonialist technologies and mediums against their colonizers. Most importantly, Fanon's work depicts its success through the lens of Algerian individuals active in the revolution for freedom against French colonial rule.

Stories of oppression, liberation, and identity should belong to marginalized groups. Outside forces looking to capitalize on the stories of marginalized people can distort these stories as they do not live the realities of marginalized groups. From the Algerian revolution to the ways Indigenous communities across the world redefine the colonialist implications of media, technology has become a key component in the fight against colonization.

### **The Potential of Media:**

Media is not just simply a way of communicating through subtext, but also an effective way of shaping public opinion. As defined in Salvin Paul and Maheema Rai's (2023) *Role of the Media*, "The media works as the tools that publicize information and entertainment to a large and vast number of populations" (Paul & Rai, p. 2). Electronic media was a "turning point" in

communications—it can have a farther reach than print, as it allows for the distribution of certain forms of communications to be expanded (Paul & Rai, 2023, pp. 2-3). In the chapter “The Medium is The Message” in *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan states that “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (Paul & Rai, 2023, pp. 2-3). The media extends well beyond just content or message—it is also the medium that matters. A message can be delivered and received through various methods, but what makes that message most significant is its technology: the medium it is being transmitted through. The power of the medium becomes clearer when examining the “Nixon versus Kennedy” debate which aired in 1960 (Hillier, 2015, p. 145). Those who tuned in on the radio were under the impression that Nixon won the debate, but that is because a major detail was omitted from the consumer’s perception: the image. The majority of the population that tuned in on their television claimed Kennedy won. Kennedy’s appearance and demeanour won over the American public more than his words. Nixon’s appearance on television made him seem “uncomfortable” and “sinister.” He was a difficult presence to trust, whereas Kennedy appeared charismatic and genuine. The message was the same, yet the medium played a huge role in determining who won and shaping public opinion.

While electronic media reinforced the power of the medium, social media reinforced the importance of distribution. Since the emergence of social media, an abundance of information has become decentralized. This meant that consumers did not need to rely on large media outlets like the New York Times or Washington Post to deliver the news. The news could be shared on social media outlets, but most importantly, every consumer could also create and upload media themselves. Social media allowed non-mainstream media to be dispersed and spread amongst massive populations, often bridging the gap between borders (Paul & Rai, 2023, p. 3). The intermediary roles of mainstream media outlets no longer dominate the way media shapes public opinion. Since the proliferation of social media, consumers can easily become producers by uploading their content without the need for mainstream outlets to distribute their work.

With electronic and social media, oppressed groups facing the brutalities of colonization have the ability to use the two forms of media to their advantage: to both document their first-hand experience and mobilize change. These forms of media present a high potential for marginalized groups to express agency within storytelling.

## **Fanon's Blueprint for Transformative Media:**

Franz Fanon's (1967) *A Dying Colonialism* examines the nature of the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962). It is a seminal text documenting Algerian society in their resistance against French colonization. Being Algerian himself, Fanon's (1967) work is an important example of self-representation. *A Dying Colonialism* examines how factors such as medicine, clothing, radio, and family fit into the crux of revolution. Fanon elaborates how radio was first rejected by Algerian society, then embraced for its transformative power. To fully grasp the extent of what radio meant to Algerian society during French colonial rule, it should be noted that radio wasn't the only form of media used in colonial pursuits. Fanon also discusses how mundane aspects of society can be colonized by examining the veils that Algerian women wore and how oppressive forces reduced the Algerian woman as a subject of a "backwards" society. A tangible way in which colonizers labelled Algerian society as "backwards" was through clothing: Algerian women wore veils that covered their faces (Fanon, 1967, p. 35). To the oppressor, this was a sign of restrictiveness. The veil represented a symbol of patriarchy to the Western gaze. This was, as Fanon states, an "attempt to confine the Algerian in a circle of guilt" (Fanon, 1967, p. 37). Algerian society was labelled with terms that seemed threatening, such as "medieval", "barbaric", and "vampirish" (Fanon, 1967, p. 37). The use of these terms are vital when it comes to labelling a society. Radio had the power to reinforce the notion that a backward society needs to be fixed, as it allowed this ideology to be transmitted across many regions. To those who were non-Arabs living in Algeria, the Arab identity became distorted such that the view of Arabs was rendered negative and dangerous, establishing the grounds for colonization.

Next comes a form of colonial technology that must be used to communicate the importance of French-Colonial rule in Algerian society. Radio was a pervasive colonial technology because it was something that blended into the background of everyday life. A small object with the potential to transmit colonial ideology and news shaped by the oppressor, radio was the French colonialist tool for subtle colonization (Fanon, 1967). But for radio to have its full effect, Algerian society needed to be labelled first. To the French, radio was a form of displaying a lavish lifestyle filled with culture and festivities. The absence of radio in colonized parts of Algeria was symbolic of a lack of French control. Algerian society initially rejected the radio, seeing it as a colonialist form of technology. For the French, the radio was a connection to French civilization. It was a preventive

measure to ensure that the colonizing power “did not go native” in a land where the society repudiated their ideals (Fanon, 1967, p. 71). The radio was initially a sign of French presence as a way to not only spread news from the French perspective but to hide certain news as well. The presence of radio became daunting to Algerians, not because of its ability to just spread information, but because of its ability to disappear into the background. The radio can blend into the background, and without even knowing its entire presence, influence consumers’ thinking.

However, after 1954, the power of radio as a way to fight back became clear. Radio transformed from a rejected technology to a participant in the revolution. It went from being an “evil object,” a form of anxiety, to a “protective organ” for this anxiety (Fanon, 1967, p. 89).

Algerians, before radio, were already experts in large-scale communication. Colonialists called this the “Arab Telephone”, referring to how news spread through word of mouth (Fanon, 1967, p. 78). This communication technique was also a signifier, as the French were constantly under the impression that Algerian society was connected in the efforts for revolution and in touch with a chain of command. Once the “Arab Telephone” had reached the radio, the revolution mobilized even further. Algerian resistance rejected, analyzed, dismantled, and reassembled colonial technology in their fight for independence. Through this, they became the authors of their identities, stories, and history. The French Colonial rule could not infest Algerian society *because* they recognized the power of the mediums that were initially used against them.

Even when the French targeted Algerian society for the enforcement of veils, Algerian society began to use this colonialist tactic against the French. The veil, which was part of Muslim tradition in Algeria, had been abandoned as women went undercover into colonialist society and carried out missions for the revolution. The French had racialized Algerian women and learned to identify them through their apparel and therefore had little idea these women had joined the revolution. In turn, Algerian women had chosen not to wear it to subvert the enemy’s expectations (Fanon, 1967, p. 58). The French had underestimated how much the Algerians valued their identities and their ability to use colonialist perceptions of themselves against the colonizers. As Fanon puts it, “The colonizers were incapable of grasping the motivations of the colonized” (Fanon, 1967, p. 59).

## **Agency in Storytelling:**

Algerian society, as described by Fanon, is where “the Algerian found himself having to oppose the enemy news, with his news” (Fanon, 1967, p. 76). The news had to be in the hands of the Algerian. The news in the hands of colonial forces was news that omitted details as a form of defence; the oppressor’s lie was constructed to combat the actual truth of Algerian identity. When a group of people are not given the agency to tell their stories authentically, oppressors grow fearful that their sense of identity could falter once the oppressed group gains authorship of their truths. The radio plays a large role in storytelling, but it is not just this form that tells stories—paintings, photographs, and the combination of media outlets variously referred to as “social media.”

*Orientalism* by Edward Said (1979) highlights how colonizers legitimize colonial pursuits by depicting the Orient as a place of backwardness through the creation of harmful myths and stereotypes. In paintings like *General Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa* (Gros, 1804) the colonial hand paints a different culture. Said’s work criticizes this notion of storytelling which places the paintbrush, camera, pen, or microphone in the hands of those outside of the culture they intend to portray. This is done intentionally for the fear that the dominant culture may be threatened by others with differential values. In this, the problem of stereotyping arises, which can convince those part of an oppressive society that their way of life is superior. The oppressed cultures begin to take the form of those that need saving in the eyes of the oppressive society. Said states “The modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero recusing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he had properly distinguished” (Said, 1979, p. 121). To oppose the oppressive hand, oppressed groups find ways to self-represent. As Barry Barclay (2003) explains in his paper “Celebrating fourth cinema”, movies about a social group do not qualify compared to movies that are produced by creators of that social group. It is imperative to acknowledge that traditional media content does not accurately present these groups, and misrepresentation can result in the formation of problematic views of these social groups for the general audience. Allowing room for self-representation is vital as it allows for specific and nuanced portrayals of communities’ experiences within a culture oppressed by colonialism.

To understand what authentic self-representation looks like, Barclay (2003) lays out the difference between each degree of cinema. The distinctions are: First Cinema as traditional Hollywood films, Second Cinema as “arthouse” films, and Third Cinema as films produced in third-

world countries (Barclays, 2003). These films often expose the harsh realities of those who reside in the area. These first three forms of cinema are the ones present in mainstream story-telling but do not acknowledge the importance of having the guide of a marginalized voice behind the camera. Barclay (a Māori filmmaker) categorizes Fourth Cinema as a form of self-representation for Indigenous people as it allows Indigenous filmmakers to tell their own stories—stories situated in their own communities (Barclay, 2003, pp. 6-7). This allows for a thorough approach to storytelling which does not group all indigeneities into one, instead focusing on a distinct community (Barclay, 2003, p. 4). This becomes vital in breaking the colonial gaze, as it shows the diversity of Indigenous communities while also allowing Indigenous people to break the deficit narrative placed upon them by the oppressive hand. Many Indigenous communities have seen a lack of representation in Hollywood films, and those that are represented are often done through a colonial lens. Such films tend to label them as “separatists,” “guerillas,” and “rebels” who are found in the setting of civil wars.

The need for self-representation is important in the context where oppressors perpetuate propaganda through the use of social media, especially considering the power of the Israeli propaganda machine. Propaganda pages on social media sites like Facebook such as “Israel Speaks Arabic” or Ofajaa Adraei’s account (an Israeli military spokesperson) distort the perception of the brutal treatment of Palestinians by specifically humanizing Israeli soldiers (Mualla, 2017). Adraei’s account captures the Israeli military as a defence force upholding the nation’s safety. The soldiers are portrayed as compassionate individuals—the media is “selective” as it only shows military personnel practicing their standard procedures instead of any actual footage of *how* these procedures are exercised in the context of violence towards Palestinians. The image of “a state that tries to maintain its own security, with a strong army that fights terrorism” (Mualla, 2017, p. 66) is curated through Adraei’s account. The terrorists in this scenario are Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, who unlike those living in the West Bank (currently controlled by Israel), are seen as a group not willing to negotiate peace (Mualla, 2017, p. 53). Adraei’s account attempts to paint his community as victims of coercion by terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, allowing the Israeli military to play the role of saviour. Israeli propaganda doesn’t just aim to paint the Israeli military in a positive light for domestic support but also focuses on distorting the views of those *not* affected by the genocide. While the Israeli occupation is often painted by the Israeli propaganda machine as a defence procedure, Palestinians have used social media to tell their truths. They have found ways to

document the oppressive Israeli apartheid and occupation that is taking place in the West Bank. Many of these voices have been heard, and their struggle has been mobilized through the use of mass media technology. The Palestinians, similarly to the Algerians, understand the importance of subverting the colonial perspective through the use of media. Instead of radio, however, the Palestinians utilize social media. In 2010, an activist named Hasan in the village of Al Ma'sara, used Facebook to post the realities his community was subjected to (Wulf et al., 2013, p. 1985-1986). By 2012, many more Palestinians began using Facebook to mobilize support and advocate for the Palestinian cause. The need for Palestinian voices to advocate for their statehood was most efficiently filled through the strategic use of social media. By depicting the harrowingly inhumane ways the Palestinian people were treated, as well as the Palestinian protest rallies against the Israeli occupation, many across the globe were able to see the struggle but were also able to find ways to join the revolution (Wulf et al., 2013, pp. 1985-1986).

The documentary *No Other Land* is another example of Palestinian self-representation as well as an exposure to a horrifying truth. The film depicts the violent occupation of Masafar Yata by the Israeli Military. The purpose of the military was to seize the land of native Palestinians to turn it into a training ground, displacing all inhabitants in the process. The film is captured through the lens of a Palestinian journalist, Basel Arda who is joined by Yuval Abraham, an Israeli journalist (Abraham et al., 2024). The documentary is a reminder of how the media can play such a pivotal role in self-advocacy. The footage in *No Other Land* does not just serve the purpose of story-telling but tells a truth which has been distorted by colonial media. The devastating reality that *No Other Land* presents to the audience directly juxtaposes the aforementioned propaganda perpetrated by the colonial forces. The audience no longer views the perspective of the military, who supposedly enacts “commendable heroism”. Instead, the brutalization and horrific nature of military commandeering is on full display. The critical success of the documentary in the West also highlights the potential of self-representation within media for fighting colonial projects such as the ongoing genocide in Palestine. This self-representation is an inescapable truth for all to see.

## **Conclusion:**

The medium matters just as much as the content. Fanon's deconstruction of the radio, which was once seen as a colonial tool used to infest Algerian society, shows how the Algerians strategically flipped it into a revolutionary medium. Fanon's work outlines a pattern in which

oppressed communities fight back by subverting colonial technology into a means of resistance, representation, and mobilization. Fanon's account of the Algerian revolution in his book is an example of how using media to reclaim one's story can be a focal point within a revolution and the fight against oppression.

The use of Fourth Cinema, as stated by Barry Barclay has been a tool for Indigenous storytelling in North America. Fourth Cinema dismantled stereotypes that legitimized the grounds for colonialism, subverting the content and medium. Alternatively, while Hollywood (as First Cinema) racialized Indigenous communities, stripping their stories of important contextual diversity, and producing harmful stereotypes. Fourth Cinema, then, became a way for Indigenous communities to gain control of their narratives and assert agency. These communities have used the technologies of colonial forces to capture *their* truths instead of ones distorted by the colonial gaze. From the use of radio in Algeria to the way cameras are utilized by Palestinians, the oppressed have redefined the technologies used against them and instead of rejecting the medium, have incorporated it into their fight for self-determination.

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