

# Introduction: (Re)Building the City

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When the topic for this issue was announced, in the Spring of 2021, the world was contending with change. In the midst of the ‘Zoom era’, stringent regulations, and calls for the reevaluation and restructuring of public health institutions, the question of (re)building city space and place was urgent. A year later, the mask mandate has been lifted throughout the Netherlands, universities are urging employees to come back to work on location, and yet the notion of ‘the city’ remains unstable and amorphous. Institutionally-perpetuated narratives that frame the pandemic as a thing of the past highlight the power these institutions have in deciding which bodies and beings are permitted to exist in public. The lifting of the mask mandate, for instance, carries with it the implication that safety means safety for the able-bodied; the steady decrease in the availability of hybrid work conditions implies that their necessity for immunocompromised and otherwise disabled individuals is irrelevant. The question of access, too, has taken on new and multifaceted forms beyond the spatial inaccessibility of architecture, monuments, and buildings: existing patterns of exclusion and denial of access have evolved and adapted into the virtual space. Amid an urging to ‘return to normal’, the call to question what ‘normal’ is, who it protects, and who it fails to protect, is slowly gaining more traction. What we are witnessing is a site of potential change: an opportunity, perhaps, to really begin the process of rebuilding.

Discussions of safety and the city have always been pertinent. Safety, depending on which group it pertains to, takes on different meanings when we think of public space. In the last year, there were multiple high-profile cases of women murdered on their way home, sparking questions about how to facilitate safe commutes for women and igniting initiatives such as the *Strut Safe* hotline for women who have to walk home alone and feel unsafe.<sup>1</sup> Another consideration discussed in our initial call was that of hostile architecture, installed to ‘clear’ cities of unhoused populations. Rather than enacting solutions that address gentrification and the housing crisis, architectural changes are made that render homelessness no longer physically visible in public spaces, thereby pushing the narrative that the issue is ‘solved’. Many of these projects additionally inadvertently remove seating and rest areas for disabled individuals in spaces such as bus stops and subway stations in the name of safety and security—but whose safety, whose security?

Indeed, the city is far from a ‘neutral’, inanimate, objective space. This is highlighted in Françoise Vergès exploration of the Capitalocene in 2019, where she investigated questions of race, gender, and waste in relation to public infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Vergès asked these questions pre-COVID-19, but they hold relevance here and now: why are waste and sanitation workers denied the categorization of ‘essential workers’, despite being required to continue performing labor—labor that was crucial for maintaining public health and safety standards—throughout the pandemic? Who is the city (made) liveable for? By whom?

This relates in large part to the question of remembrance, both in relation to death and its reduction to body counts and statistics, and in relation to whose illness, whose recovery, whose existence is and was deemed worthy of remembering, of broadcasting and calling attention to. Not only is the city remembered—the city *remembers*. Public awareness of governmental ‘pandemic responses’ and who was left behind in their wake will continue to have repercussions and consequences for whether notions of health and safety will be left in the hands of ‘the city’, or instead entrusted to more localized practices of mutual aid and community care; indeed, whether the meaning of ‘the city’ itself will come to mean those communities and safe spaces borne out of weathering the last few years and being determined not to repeat them.

This issue of *Junctions* seeks to explore these questions, both material and symbolic, about the relation between space and power. We hope that engaging with four theoretical conceptions of the city—the physical, the imagined, the radical, and the remembered—allows us to contemplate current and future understandings of city space and place, and the actors, networks, and dynamics of power therein. This holds special relevance in light of what is being presented as the ‘aftermath’ of the pandemic, and the importance of considering the ways in which we are able, if not obligated, to rethink, reframe, and, of course, rebuild.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

In ‘Ineffable Poetics’, Sophie Fernier reflects on Wittgenstein’s metaphor of language as an imagined city, where meaning and understanding rest on houses and neighborhoods of familiarity and shared experience, and Maurice Blanchot’s notion of ‘disaster’, where chaos coincides with reality to produce societal horrors deemed ineffable, beyond words. Reading Dunya Mikhail’s ‘The Iraqi Nights’ through this framework, Fernier presents poetic modes of expression as a way to negotiate the chasm between the holes left by these cultural traumas and the need to convey these experiences through language; between city and disaster.

In ‘Reimagining Public Safety’, Adrianna Elizabeth Rosario envisions the city through the public institutions it upholds, examining the role of punitivism and carceral discourses in shaping societal responses to gender-based violence in Spain and the United States. Using traveling concepts to connect anti-carceral scholarship from various geopolitical sites, Rosario pushes against perpetuating the dominant, globalized and neoliberal-oriented rhetoric of punishment as accountability. Instead, Rosario highlights the value of transnational anti-carceral solutions in protecting survivors of gender-based violence.

In ‘The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project’, Elaine O’Donnell discusses the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in India and reflects on its neocolonial implications for both the indigenous peoples and their infrastructure. By focusing on this case study, O’Donnell explores the more damaging aspects of (re)building—the potential for conflict, loss, and further marginalization—and the colonial power structures that enable their enforcement.

In addition to these articles, we also present a book review of Olivier Vallerand’s *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space* by Martin van Wijk. In their view, the book presents a long-overdue consideration of architecture through the lens of contemporary feminist and queer scholarship. In applying queer theory as a form of critical enquiry into built environment, van Wijk argues, Vallerand positions queerness in relation to domestic space as both relational and performative, highlighting the fluidity inherent to such a consideration.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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<sup>1</sup> McDermott, Sarah. "Hi, thanks for calling. Are you OK? How far away are you?". *BBC* 22/01/2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-60055916>

<sup>2</sup> Verges, Françoise. 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender.' *e-flux* 100 (May 2019). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>

# Ineffable Poetics

## Negotiating Exile and Literary Self-Expression via Wittgenstein's City Metaphor

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### ABSTRACT

Amidst the collected aphorisms in 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953), Wittgenstein famously offers a metaphor comparing language to an imaginary city in which meaning is created against a background of shared experiences between speakers, forming the manifold 'houses' and 'neighborhoods' of familiarity and understanding at the level of ordinary communication. Within such an imaginary city, inhabitants are said to share a certain 'form of life' which enables them to understand each other. This paper reflects upon the limits of this metaphor in the context of exile. The immediate environment that people then relocate into 'co-exists' with a lingering past form of life, which may have involved hardships and traumas that diverge from the lived-experiences of residents in their new community. When the discrepancy is too great, beyond merely fostering a sense of alienation, the very condition upon which 'ordinary communication' is predicated in Wittgenstein's metaphor is lost. The 'ineffable feeling' that presents itself in such contexts can be illuminated by referring to what literary theorist Maurice Blanchot calls 'the disaster': a superlative notion of chaos penetrating the fabric of experience, as exemplified by wars or concentration camps. Characterized by the absolute dissolution of one's subjective experience of space-time as a coherent sequence and continuum, the disaster invokes nothing but silence. This paper argues that in such contexts, poetic modes of expression can shed light on how to negotiate the tension between traumas of catastrophic magnitudes and the longing to communicate such experiences in words. Taking Dunya Mikhail's poetry anthology 'The Iraqi Nights' (2014) as its case-study, this paper suggests that in the context of geographical displacement, poetry can be re-imagined as a metaphorical 'sanctuary' between Wittgenstein's metaphorical city and the ineffable realm of 'disaster.'

### KEYWORDS

Ineffability, Poetics, Wittgenstein, Blanchot, Exile

### INTRODUCTION

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

The above metaphor stands out amidst Wittgenstein's collected aphorisms because it captures a radical shift in his thinking from that which we find in his former work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). Unlike the *Tractatus*, there is no longer precisely *one way* for linguistic expressions to be meaningful. Meaning is understood to be a pluralistic phenomenon, derived

from the lives of language-users rather than abstract models. The metaphor of ‘language as a city’ is used as a means of conveying this radically different insight; language is conceived as a metaphorical city space because, for the later Wittgenstein, linguistic competence is embedded within what he calls a ‘language-game’, i.e., speakers understand each other on the basis of flexible and localized contexts, just like the changing environments of a real city. In other words, meaning is ‘part of an activity, or of a form of life’ ([1953] 2010, §23). Urban spaces display varied settings and residents, and remain in flux: in the same sense, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ houses Wittgenstein describes represent theoretical emerging ‘hubs’ within which new linguistic uses and language games gradually arise. The notion that linguistic meaning is embedded within a site of shared experiences between people carries two implications. First, it involves the concept of a set geographical space in which individuals partake in similar activities and lifestyles across a prolonged period of time. Second, such a ‘city’ also carries the abstract meaning of representing a ‘microcosm’, in which residents form a sense of being a members of a community. Both ideas are related on the basis of having a similar form of life, i.e. being able to relate to each other on the basis of a shared history and collective identity.

This paper problematizes Wittgenstein’s metaphor in the case of displaced persons forced to abandon their previous ‘form of life’ in order to survive, and the implications that this carries for language. The past of displaced individuals is often colored by great suffering and instability. Merely relocating to a safer place is not sufficient to ‘exchange’ one form of life for another: pre-existing hardship and traumas can continue to exert an influence, even when people are physically removed from their previous environment. Within one and the same displaced person, two forms of life can be said to ‘co-exist’: one that is informed by their immediate surroundings and community, the other an inner ‘whirlwind’ of experiences produced by their previous space. Individuals in exile do not simply ‘exchange’ one ‘form of life’ for another, and adopt that of their new community. The linguistic corollary to Wittgenstein’s metaphor represents a challenge in such a context. If successful communication is predicated upon peoples’ ability to relate to each other’s background of experiences, an ‘outsider’ is severely disadvantaged. Beyond the personal sense of deracination involved in relocation, people who have escaped the threat of death or grievous harm may find that communication can only be partially effective at best; they may struggle to share, or make their experience understood. There might be a sense that ‘something is left unsaid’ in relation to one’s own history, which fosters a sense of alienation.

The notion that something is ‘ineffable’ or ‘beyond words’ is not uncommon in emotionally-charged contexts of trauma. This can be illuminated by appealing to Maurice Blanchot’s concept of ‘the disaster’, which connects ideas of trauma, language and spatiality that can help understand

the magnitude of what people experience under extreme circumstances. For Blanchot, the ‘disaster’ is of such intensity that it involves the subjective fragmentation of time and space, which in turn erodes a coherent sense of ‘self’ that would allow for linguistic communication.

Despite involving unspeakable atrocity, the desire to articulate experience remains, if only for the hope of interpersonal connection that it could provide. The second part of this paper focuses upon how the limits of ‘ordinary language’ can be circumvented by looking at the special ‘expressive power’ of poetry (that allows us to touch on or express/convey this space of ‘disaster’ or ‘ineffability’). Using Dunya Mikhail’s recent poetry collection *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) as a case-study, it provides an analysis of how to navigate certain ‘ineffable’ experiences of trauma by turning to creative language. As a refugee who has left Iraq, Mikhail’s writing touches upon the kinds of experiences that affect displaced persons. Building upon her work, this paper suggests that looking at notions of poetic license and periphrasis can ‘expand the horizons of the possible’ when the shared past or background of experience required for mutual understanding is lacking. Poetic expression, by encouraging a renewed sense of linguistic ‘agency’ through a creative departure from conventions of ‘ordinary’ speech, might allow for at least partial explorations of ineffable subjects via an individual’s freedom to use indirect locution as their preferred form of expression. Both aspects contribute to re-imagining poetry as a metaphorical ‘sanctuary’ in-between Wittgenstein’s metaphorical city as a site of meaning, and the disasters that force individuals into exile.

## DISASTER: THE RUINS OF MEANING

When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (*the fragmentary*).

– Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*

If for Wittgenstein meaning is pluralistic, represented by familiar spaces in his imagined city, Blanchot’s notion of ‘disaster’ is the complete opposite. Blanchot is concerned with everything that meaning is *not*: notions of ultimate destruction, ruin and fragmentation—the complete and absolute dissolution of language. Disaster is never explicitly defined, as Blanchot chooses instead to advance by allusions, hinting toward a superlative notion of absolute horror. Whilst synonyms can be used, such as ‘tragedy’, ‘catastrophe’, or ‘devastation’, none can adequately convey the disaster’s magnitude. The concept of disaster stands for a kind of haunting experience falling at an extreme beyond thought and expression. Given the depth of imagery and intertextuality in this book, it is not surprising that a wide range of interpretations can be offered, with different areas of focus.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the discussion focuses upon the sense in which disaster

places a being ‘outside’ of any possible coherence. The disaster involves the dissolution of all notion of space and time, which represent the two axes upon which we can make sense of experience, and intelligibly articulate it in words. It is in that sense that it can be paradoxically said that ‘there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment’ (13).

### **Atemporality and limitless space**

Time is generally experienced as having a ‘direction’: with each sunrise starts a new day, before progressing into nighttime. To speak of ‘day and night’ in such a way is the most commonplace sequence we are accustomed to, the one which separates states of wakefulness from sleep. The range of the disaster, however, removes us from any sense of temporality or historical situatedness: ‘such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light’ (13) explains Blanchot. Instead, it involves a sun which ‘would attest not to the day, but to the night delivered of stars, multiple night’ (15). This antithetical reversal is profound: the passage of time ceases to hold any meaning, and anyone attempting to write about the disaster is described by Blanchot as being ‘the daytime insomniac’ (103), which suggests that in disaster, there is no meaningful rhythm to life. In a somewhat playful manner, not unlike Epicurus, Blanchot describes the disaster as follows: ‘when the disaster comes upon us, it does not come’ (13). This chiasmic description is reminiscent of *Letter to Menoeceus*, in which death is conceived as an event occurring outside of all events: ‘death means nothing to us’, as Epicurus explains, ‘because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are non-existent’ (Epicurus and Strodach 2013, §124). In the Epicurean materialistic worldview, death marks the cessation of all sensation, the necessary condition for anything to affect us. Likewise, for Blanchot, the disaster marks the end of a meaningful chronology which would allow us to understand the disaster’s magnitude. Disaster involves a ‘time that is deranged and off its hinges’ (Blanchot, 17), lacking any integrity in relation to the past or future, simultaneously a looming ‘threat’ of futurity and a deep, ‘immemorial past’ (pp. 13, 29, 60 and 64).

In a phenomenological sense, this aspect of disaster could be related to the disappearance of coherent time-perception, as well as of external contexts against which time can be measured. Primo Levi, for instance, suggests that the experience of time becomes unstable in Auschwitz. In moments of complete despair, Levi writes, ‘it did not seem possible that there could really exist any other world or time other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time’ (Levi [1947] 1988, 136). In removing individuals from their way of life, disaster disrupts the very fabric of experience: thus, if for ‘living men, the units of time always have a value’, for those who are incarcerated, ‘hours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past.’ Upon

return or rescue into a place of safety, the disturbance remains so profound that it becomes difficult to exhaustively convey to others what exactly such a fundamental cognitive deviation feels like, unless they have shared the experience. Regarding the kinds of torture and humiliation in concentration camps, Levi remarked that ‘our language lacks words to express this offence, the demotion of a man’ (21).

Blanchot himself mentions Auschwitz to explore the corollary notion that the disaster involves the loss of spatial intelligibility. It represents the way in which the disaster is a kind of ‘limitless space’ (13), in which reigns a unique kind of horror and ‘where extermination in every form is the immediate horizon’ (72). The oxymoronic notion of ‘space without limits’ runs contrary to our most basic sensory experience in which everything has some form of physical boundary. Yet, the disaster blurs everything. In the case of warfare, for instance, it becomes unclear who count as combatant or non-combatant forces, especially when weapons of mass destruction are involved. Likewise, the damage caused by military attacks is not limited to man-made structures such as cities or villages, but also implicates the biosphere of which they are a part. Some weapons can jeopardize surrounding flora and fauna, nearby bodies of water, or involve the bio-accumulation of poisonous substances in non-human animals. With the dissolution of such boundaries, any coherent notion of ‘self’ vanishes in disaster: we encounter the ‘absence of the world [...] withdrawn from all self-presence’ (50). Spatial understanding is required to make sense of an ‘I’: it forms the very basis of seeing oneself as being an individual, recognized by others as an entity with a particular body and shape. In such a context, it becomes unclear where one’s body ends or begins, or the distinct location it occupies. The simultaneous dissolution of time and external structures involve something akin to an ego death, threatening ‘an other than I who passively become[s] other’ (30).

Blanchot’s work is useful in providing an extension to Wittgenstein’s metaphor, which does not account for the challenge represented by radical discrepancies in lived-experiences. A notion of ‘disaster’ can clarify the sense of confusion and alienation carried over into peoples’ lives, regardless of their immediate situations. In the context of traumatic displacement, the circumstances that force people out of their homes might never be ‘fully’ understood by others, given their radical nature. However, how to interpret what it means exactly for something be ‘beyond words’ is naturally an open question. The rupture implicated in Blanchot’s disaster, and the kind of incommensurability it involves, could very well be interpreted as posing a ‘metaphysical’ challenge to linguistic expression. A few scholars have explored related ideas when conceptualizing what ineffability involves;<sup>2</sup> however, for the purposes of this discussion, the term is understood independently of any specific ontology, and of whether things are

‘metaphysically’ inexpressible or only ‘relatively’ so. Instead, it focuses upon the kind of psychological or emotional dimension involved in feeling ‘speechless’ in response to trauma. Philosopher Ben-Ami Scharfstein suggests that the more highly we prize a certain kind of experience, the more inclined we feel to call it ineffable, insofar as the concept allows us to ‘protect certain cherished experiences from being explained or, rather, *explained away*’ (Scharfstein 1993, 188). If *we do* attempt to use language in relation to prized experience, it often becomes ‘poetic and sometimes paradoxical, meant less to explain than to point, less to solicit logical analysis than to indicate the undesirability of logic’ (206). This point suggests that what might be ‘ineffable’ in one manner of using language could be at least obliquely ‘touched upon’ or ‘gestured at’ linguistically through another. In this case, we will pay attention to how poetry operates as a mode of expression distinct from ‘ordinary’ speech, and hence why it is so often used as means to help navigate the realities of exile. Whilst Scharfstein does not take on this project himself, as it falls beyond the scope of his work, I will now question what such a notion of ‘indirect’ poetic telling is.

Since displacement problematizes the notion that one’s ‘form of life’ is solely produced by one’s immediate surroundings and, as Blanchot showed, the magnitude of some disasters can be so profound that it becomes inexpressible under the notion of a ‘shared’ meaning, it is worth exploring poetic modalities and what makes them so seemingly suitable for expressing such experiences/why they are so often appealed to in conveying such ideas. Thus, the next section focuses on the overlap between poetic language and the lived-experiences of displacement, with the broader aim of reflecting upon what kind of different ‘expressive resources’ poetry allocates us to touch upon a range of feelings and memories otherwise described as ‘ineffable’.

## ‘INEFFABLE’ POETRY

We cross borders lightly  
 like clouds.  
 Nothing carries us,  
 but as we move on  
 we carry rain,  
 and an accent,  
 and a memory  
 of another place  
 – Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

Born in the city of Baghdad in 1965, Dunya Mikhail worked as a journalist and translator until she was forced to leave her homeland due to safety concerns from Iraqi authorities. Amidst threats of censorship for what was considered to be ‘subversive’ writing by the Iraqi government, she first fled to Jordan, before settling in the United States in 1996. *The Iraqi Nights* is her third poetry collection and takes on the theme of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. Following her own experience of war, her work addresses the topic of displacement through the figure of Scheherazade, who saves her own life through storytelling. Mikhail’s poetry highlights the kind of duality involved in geographical displacement: in a 2015 interview with Dr. Sobia Khan in *World Literature Today*, Mikhail states, ‘my poetry has two lives, like any exile’ (Khan 2015, 11). Her work relates to the notion discussed by this paper that some forms of life are said to ‘co-exist’: having moved somewhere else, the impact of her past experiences remains. Although now an American citizen, Mikhail’s poetry continues to reflect the anxieties and hopes of an Iraqi: ‘trying to have one life for the exile is like a word in dictionary: it occupies one space but has other meanings and connotations. The here is an occasion that reminds us of there.’ To physically leave a city, in this case, Baghdad, does not in itself create a rupture from the fears, concerns, or memories associated with it. On a fundamental level, Mikhail suggests that ‘something deeper’ lingers after crossing borders, shaped by the accumulation of experiences.

Her book represents the very spirit of what it means to write ‘the remains of the disaster’ in Blanchot’s sense of the term: the sort that might only be alluded to via a ‘slippage of sense’, or the latent undertone of one’s writing. Comparatively speaking, there is an interesting mirroring range of diction in both of their works. Echoing the ‘ruins’ of Blanchot’s disaster, the imagery of physical destruction appears across various scenes in multiple poems, from ‘wrecked cities’ (Mikhail 2014, 1.8), ‘rubble’ (1.6) or imagining a world away from the ‘shelling of cities’ (1.28), setting an atmosphere of chaos which reminds us that in times of absolute terror, neither life nor ‘overt’ linguistic communication can occur. Like Blanchot, Mikhail juxtaposes various temporalities: the kind of disaster she hints toward blurs the boundaries between ‘contemporary’ Iraq and its mythical or prehistoric past. Both ‘human’ time and a time ‘outside’ of time are interwoven via references to mythical figures from both the Middle East, such as Scheherazade, Gilgamesh, or Aladdin, but also Greek mythology, via Orpheus, Pandora, Rapunzel or as recent as Perrault’s Cinderella. The very same heterogeneity is applied to geographical locations, which are often lumped together to form a single horizon. The reader experiences a progression of poetic sequences which form a surreal space, with titles such as *The Old Olive Tree*, suggestive of a biblical setting, alongside *Footprints on the Moon*, a place beyond earth itself. Unlike the common usage of the imaginary, which seeks to impart a sense of extraordinariness to daily life, Mikhail’s poetry operates in the reverse fashion, aiming to foster the hope that ‘every moment / something

ordinary / will happen / under the sun' (1.29–32). Against the hostile reality of war, Mikhail's poetry re-negotiates lived experience to envision the opposite of the disaster, such that the sun might someday again 'attest to the day', to return to Blanchot's symbolism that the disaster is akin to a 'night without darkness' (Blanchot 1986, 50).

The exact manner in which two 'forms of life' co-existing can create the sense that something is left 'unsaid' in ordinary interactions is captured by Mikhail's poem, *Choices*. The speaker, presumed to be in a grocery store, is asked if they would prefer a paper or plastic bag. The mere question alone suffices, by way of association, to trigger the speaker's memory and induce a momentary return to a place of limited freedoms, whereupon their inward wish is that 'I'd had such a choice / in more pressing matters / long ago' in a different country that 'cared less / about our choices / or what kind of bags we used' (1.3–9). By showing how memory can project one's awareness into a different time and place beyond the immediacy of one's immediate surroundings, Mikhail 'displays' the manner in which disaster hinders communication after exile. The question 'what kind of bag would you like?' is closed, in that it only has two available answers in such a setting. Yet to a person who experiences mental fragmentation following geographical displacement, it acquires a different connotation in relation to their past. To provide an answer which would capture the appropriate depth of one's inner emotional response would be met with confusion by an interlocutor. Insofar as previous 'forms of life' can always resurface through memory, and in so doing eclipse the presence of another, such moments display how the 'inner landscape' of trauma co-exists with one's immediate situatedness, and perhaps why speakers may not understand each other fully. In the metaphor of language as a city, meaning is the byproduct of a shared geographical space: Mikhail's poetry relates how two horizons intersect within one and the same speaker, and impede linguistic expression in as 'ordinary' settings as going to the supermarket. Although it would be impossible to capture all of the reasons why people are inclined to use poetic modes of expression over other kinds of creative mediums, Mikhail's work provides the stepping ground to initiate a discussion regarding the 'special' difference between 'poetic' and 'ordinary' ways of speaking. The next section suggests that a distinction can be drawn on the basis of certain freedoms afforded by 'poetic license', in particular that allowed by the use of periphrasis.

*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* defines poetic license as originally referring to 'the freedom allowed the poet to depart in diction, grammar, or subject matter from the norms of prose discourse or, later, from poetic 'rules' (Greene et al. 2012, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1057). The notion of how such a license is applicable can be conceived in terms of different 'scopes'. The first concerns the kind of freedoms taken by individuals to depart from commonplace diction and functions of 'ordinary

language' in their writing. The second is embedded within the kind of 'social configuration' of poetry as a genre, which involve certain trends, movements, and ideas regarding what constitutes 'the lyric'. From the perspective of being a historically-situated practice, we can speak of the 'license' to critically reflect upon and depart from what constitutes poetic 'canonicity', or re-evaluate what certain poets and their respective 'movements' have come to mean from an academic or social perspective (see e.g. Perloff (1990), for a collection of essays questioning ideas surrounding what constitutes 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' lyric). It is the first 'scope' that is relevant to this paper, in the sense of an individual's autonomy from the expectations found in 'ordinary language'. In Wittgenstein's city metaphor, speakers seek interdependent 'meaning validation' in shared spaces, which involves several implicit rules. Freedoms taken by an individual poet to 'transcend the limits of the language to explore and communicate new areas of experience' (Leech 1969, 36) depart from some expectations, either in relation to the syntax or semantics of a text, or to certain 'conceptual holds': for example, notions of dialect, register or historical period. Such departures can create ambiguity, in the sense that a multiplicity of meanings can exist in simultaneity, beyond the denotative power of words. While in ordinary contexts this very ambiguity is generally considered a distraction from a message or a stylistic defect, 'both ambiguity and the wider concept of multiple significance are manifestations of the many valued character of poetic language' (205). Insofar as exiled individuals face a dualistic 'form of life', poetic language both mirrors and celebrates the very same linguistic multiplicity.

One basic rule of interaction which regulates ordinary communication is the principle of economy of expression: to say only what needs to be said in the specific context, to eliminate the need for excessive information or speech. In other words, our directness of locution is an integral part of what makes speech 'successful'. In the case of traumatic exile and disaster, however, the memories and emotions of a displaced person may resurface in contexts where they cannot be adequately expressed without appearing disconnected from the demands of a situation, as Mikhail's poem *Choices* highlighted. Likewise, the lived experience of Auschwitz can be so profoundly life-altering that it feels impossible to 'say enough' and successfully capture just how radically different something like time-perception becomes, as discussed by Primo Levi. However, poetic language is free to depart from such a rule of 'adequacy' of context: a poet can instead choose to use circumlocutions meant to animate the imagination rather than abiding by implicit conversational maxims. The term for such manner of expression is 'periphrasis', which denotes the roundabout way of referring to things, objects or states by means of several and different words. It involves, in a sense, a superfluity of expression in which semantic meaning is conveyed via unnecessary length where a simpler expression would work: e.g. 'the writer of this sentence' instead of 'I'. In its figurative modality, periphrasis might *also* include elaborate

metonymical descriptions where closely related attributes stand in lieu of the name for what is meant, or synecdoche, where a part is made to represent the whole of an object or concept. To write in such a way can in a sense be described as ‘oblique’ reference: while bringing attention to an idea, it does so by highlighting something in relation to it, or a part of it, rather than the thing in itself. Periphrasis, beyond providing a heightened imaginative appreciation of what is being described, can thus be conceived as kind of ‘mediation’ between speaking and remaining silent: a poet communicating by way of circumlocutions invokes ideas by ‘hinting’ at them, rather than through direct naming.

Mikhail navigates her own experience in Iraq by using periphrastic language in this way. In *Song From Another Time*, instead of overtly denoting the feeling of grief, the speaker’s pain is displaced into a ‘small piece of paper’ (l.6) upon which a song is written. At first, the speaker desperately attempts to crumble it up and throw it away, symbolically representing the desire to repress a difficult memory. Yet the speaker will inevitably ‘peel the paper open / [...] whenever I remember / one of my dead friends’ (l.8–11). Neither specific feeling nor song lyrics are ever made explicit in the poem, but the roundabout manner in which one’s sense of infinite grief can be ‘transposed’ into an object exemplifies how poetry allows for the *suggestion* of a great depth of feeling while simultaneously leaving itself unspoken, in the sense of remaining ‘beyond’ denotation. Another example can be found in Mikhail’s *The Story*, the first installment of the section of poems entitled *Personal History*. The poem begins with the speaker’s wish to ‘whisper’ (l.1) their experience of certain significant events that make up the totality of a ‘life story’, but finding it impossible, this life story is symbolically ‘displaced’ onto other objects. These then serve as synecdochical imagery to ‘display’ traumatic fragmentation, and the impossibility of complete self-expression. The story is thus in turn ‘condensed in the cup / on the table / as I waited for flight 65’ (l.2–4), then ‘coiled in the gate’ (l.5), before being ‘curled up / in the stamp / in the passport’ (l.10–12). The poem eventually reaches a climax when the story is personified with ‘the key’ used to enter an apartment, ‘alone’ (l.22), suggestive of the alienating nature of abandoning one’s home for a new one. This circumlocutory structure serves the purpose of metaphorically ‘by-passing’ the demands of ordinary communication, in which certain experiences are difficult to articulate given their intensity, and due to falling ‘outside’ of certain norms relative to one’s community. For someone who has lived in warzones, where the death of friends has become a common event, writing poetry can help indirectly communicate what such a form of life can look like to someone whose range of experience differs. Such departures from habitual means of ‘saying’ or ‘showing’ ideas, while still being located *within* language itself, nevertheless involve an exploration that goes beyond ways of speaking that characterize ordinary communication. In that sense, poetry can be said to ‘expand the horizons of the possible’ when it comes to the things we already do

with words. Furthermore, the ‘omitted parts’ in the narrative whole and discursive content in Mikhail’s poetry can offer further reflection regarding how poetry can be conceived of as a metaphorical ‘haven’ between the public, ‘ordinary’ function of language and traumatic experiences that otherwise feel impossible to share.

### **Rethinking poetry as sanctuary**

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.

– Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

The disaster is in a sense, ubiquitous, in that it cannot be eradicated. At the time of writing, Blanchot’s work was primarily concerned with concentration camps, and the mass-scale industrialization of death that they entailed. Mikhail’s work discusses the realities of war or censorship in Iraq, both past and current. Both atrocious circumstances, they are produced by political dynamics that can plunge the world into chaos for human beings at any moment. They remind us that anybody could be forced into a life of displacement, and become a refugee. Yet even if one imagines a world in which wars, armed conflict and systemic oppression would come to an end, ‘disaster’ and ‘exile’ will not cease. To speak of disaster is not only limited to chaos between people(s): in colloquial language, we also speak in terms of ‘natural’ disasters. The threat of ecological or environmental exile looms ahead, and it is not difficult to imagine a future where environmentally-driven displacement will be magnified. For example, rising temperatures involve global sea-level rises; each day, more people become at risk of being displaced from coastal cities, the lands that were once ‘homes’ and ‘forms of life’ of their own submerged by water. In the case of nuclear disaster, a once inhabited area only becomes safe once radiation breaks down—such timelines are counted in years that far exceed life-spans of individual humans. The kind of ‘familiarity’ implied in Wittgenstein’s metaphor can come to a brutal end, at times without forewarning. Individuals who survive must negotiate new forms of life in exile, with the heavy burden of traumas that can be ‘outside the norm’ in their places of relocation. Language that itself ‘departs’ from expectations can help at least partially reflect the significance of what being exposed to certain radical experiences entails. In the same manner that a lighthouse stands between land and water, poetry can thus be re-imagined as a kind of linguistic ‘sanctuary’ between the disaster, which silences and victimizes, and the expectations of shared experiences within a linguistic community.

The term ‘sanctuary’ implies a notion of ‘safe space’: paradoxically, poetries of exile and violence are often the very opposite, arousing painful feelings via deliberate re-exposure to traumatic

circumstances. There does exist, however, a sense in which poetry can be conceived as holding a ‘healing’ dimension. In relation to experiencing oneself as being ‘atrophied’, per Blanchot’s notion that disaster is ‘withdrawn from all self-presence’, a certain agency can be retrieved, albeit only linguistically. Philosopher Simon Critchley for instance, holds that poetry ‘illuminates the surface of things with imagination’s beam’, such that ‘in poetry, the makings of things are makings of the self’ (2008, 10). It does not mean that poetry becomes a passively inward state in which one can shut their eyes to the to ‘the dark and bloody violence of the world, trying to imagine another world’ (88)—rather, it involves an imaginative transfiguration meant to ‘increase our feeling for reality’ (89) by highlighting that which is otherwise ignored in everyday activity. Furthermore, from the standpoint of a reader, expanding one’s vision to include a range of experiences that might otherwise be inaccessible carries a humanistic import, particularly in a pedagogical setting. Although the disaster is, in one way or another, inevitable, at least some of the types of tragedies discussed in this paper could be remedied by encouraging such exposures.

## CONCLUSION

This purpose of this paper has been to offer a critical reflection upon Wittgenstein’s metaphor connecting the notion of a ‘city’ to that of human language. The idea that meaning is predicated upon a certain similarity of experience presents a challenge in the context of exile. In such cases, what counts as ‘familiar’ is not solely based upon one’s immediate surroundings, but coexists with a previous ‘way of life’ from which a displaced person becomes divorced via relocation. In a climate of displacement, there exists a wide range of discrepancies in lived-experiences between speakers occupying one and the same geographical city, some of which include profoundly traumatic past experiences. The intrinsic intensity of such experiences can be explored via Blanchot’s notion that the ‘disaster’ in such contexts involves a kind of ‘dissolution’ of space and time, and it is this rupture from the coherence of one’s outer reality which creates the sense that some radical experiences cannot be adequately conveyed in language. However, as we have seen, the tension of what can be described as ‘beyond words’ and our desire to communicate may be negotiated by looking into how poetic modes of expression operate. Taking Dunya Mikhail’s work *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) as a case analysis, this paper reflected upon the ways in which poetry helps preserve the integrity of ‘ineffable’ disasters while ‘hinting at sense’, so to speak, aided by the freedom of a poet’s license to depart from ordinary language through the use of periphrasis or circumlocutory expression. In terms of Wittgenstein’s metaphor, where the city represents the center of shared experience, and the ever-present threat of disaster, which destabilizes all possibility of familiarity, poetry can be conceived as a metaphorical sanctuary. Such a ‘linguistic refuge’ allows for the formation of new and creative modes of self-expression

that can generate newer perspectives that might otherwise not exist between speakers. As Rimbaud describes in *A Season in Hell* (1873), through poetry may lie an inkling of sense in our desperate attempt to understand the ‘incomprehensible’: ‘what was unutterable, I wrote down. I made the whirling world stand still’ (1976, 232).

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<sup>1</sup> See Hart (2007) for a comparative analysis between Blanchot’s motif of the star with Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (1921) and Schuster’s review (2014) through the lens of contemporary ecology.

<sup>2</sup> See Kukla (2005) regarding the conceptual coherence of ineffability or mysticism, Bennett-Hunter (2014) working within contemporary philosophy of religion, and Jonas (2016), who has developed a metaphysical framework for ineffability in terms of non-propositional knowledge.

# Reimagining Public Safety, Rebuilding Anti-Carceral Alternatives

## Traveling Between US and Spanish Gender Violence Theories and Practices

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### ABSTRACT

Ruth Wilson Gilmore said, ‘Abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life. It’s about making things’ (2018). Fred Moten and Stefano Harney echoed Gilmore when they wrote, ‘not abolition as the elimination of anything but the founding of a new society’ (2013, 101). Many people view abolition as a reckless ideal that tears down tired social infrastructure without offering tangible alternatives to rebuilding public safety. However, prison abolitionist activists have long proposed defunding the criminal justice system as a means to reinvesting in social supports that assess, respond and prevent gender violence. At its core, abolition involves reckoning with widespread disparities and embracing long-term structural policy and slow transformation. This article embraces an anti-carceral stance to trouble the hegemonic notion that punishment is the de-facto solution to resolving social issues and, particularly, gender violence. It examines how carceral discourses and logics have traveled with the globalization of neoliberal ideology and sparked resistances since the late 1970s. Punitivism has increasingly taken center stage in feminist gender violence agendas in the US and Spain, despite early feminist skepticism of the criminal justice system and numerous studies that indicate that criminalization does not make marginalized survivors safer or make perpetrators less likely to abuse again (Gruber 2020, 90). While punitivism manifests distinctly according to localized US and Spanish gendered and racialized subjectivities, its gender violence approaches share many similar characteristics and punishment technologies. Methodologically, the article uses traveling concepts to ethically weave transnational anti-carceral scholars and activists together from different geopolitical locations. The goal of this article is to counter the dominant claim that punishment equals accountability and highlight transnational anti-carceral alternatives that radically rebuild public institutions to better serve trans survivors and survivors of color.

### KEYWORDS

abolition, (anti-)carceral feminism, gender violence, neoliberalism

### INTRODUCTION

Many people experience a knee-jerk reaction when they hear the word prison abolition in the United States. They imagine total anarchy. A world where criminals run free, and there is no one to call when you are in trouble. Trump cultivated this imagination during the November election when many people saw nightly television advertisements of a masked robber assaulting an elderly, white woman in her own home. Black Lives Matter protesters became known as rioters who destroyed businesses and monuments, burned down police precincts and jeopardized public

safety infrastructure. 1980s war on crime nostalgia ran rampant throughout the right's talking points which promised to restore law and order and protect [white] women from monstrous criminals who often assumed images of men of color. Many Black Lives Matters activists fired back at this assumption of police as protectors: 'I think white people talked more as if the courts belonged to us and therefore should work for us, where we always saw it as belonging to someone else and talked more about how to keep it from hurting us' (Gruber 2020, 62-63). Simply calling the police for help while having a mental health crisis (Water Wallace Jr.; George Floyd), carrying a replica toy gun (Tamir Rice) or sleeping in one's own bed (Breonna Taylor) can be a death sentence. The prison abolition movement gained a lot of political traction thanks to the sweeping summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protests that drew attention to historical patterns of police brutality and overreach. However, fervor for prison abolition typically comes to a screeching halt at the mention of gender violence. Even the most leftist politicians like Bernie Sanders harshly criticize the criminal justice system but do not dare to challenge gender violence bills that contribute to mass incarceration.

In her book, *Feminist War on Crime*, Aya Gruber suggests that the main task of millennial feminism is to balance its disdain for both punishment and gender violence. This contradiction haunts many activists, including myself, working at the intersections of racial justice and gender violence in the United States. As I marched masked up in the blistering heat and amidst a pandemic during a BLM protest, I pleaded with the criminal justice system for help: 'Lock up the cops who killed Breonna Taylor!' Then the next minute, I rallied for its destruction: '2-4-6-8 Smash the police state!' I understood that prison abolition meant divesting from the criminal justice system in order to invest in education, healthcare, housing and food programs. It made sense to me that sending a few bad cops to prison would not solve policing's systemic issues nor heal communities' wounds. However, I still harbored doubts about how we would hold 'the real bad guys'—such as the Harvey Weinstens—accountable without a criminal justice system. In other words, I wanted to abolish prisons *and* lock up the cops who killed Breonna Taylor. I believed I could simultaneously toughen the criminal justice system against the 'worst of the worst' and rehabilitate it for those it fails, namely, women, people of color and queer/trans people. Otherwise, how would we show people that racist, transphobic and patriarchal violence is not acceptable?

My punitive impulse was, and sometimes is, still intact. Many people suffer from a deeply ingrained carceral logic that tells us punishment equates to accountability, safety and healing. My professional domestic violence training taught me that the police and courts failed survivors, and our goal was to make those institutions safer for them. Only a year prior to BLM summer protests,

I worked in the City of Philadelphia's Office of Domestic Violence Strategies and helped coordinate trainings to better educate the police on how to best respond to domestic violence emergencies. I left every training feeling defeated as my colleagues and I tried to teach years of social work training in a two-hour annual session. I felt uneasy about the role of the police in gender violence but assumed it was an inevitable reality that could just be 'tamed'.

I first really engaged with anti-carceral thought through the US prison abolition lens in the summer of 2020. I was drawn to the hope it instilled in me during the politically tumultuous time. I learned how women of color and trans feminists have long reimagined viable alternatives to reconciling violence that do not expand the criminal justice system and perpetuate harm. Their front-line work opened up an urgent line of critique and activism that I wanted to continue connecting with in my new home in Granada, Spain. I quickly found many of the same US punitive strategies re-purposed in a very distinct socio-political context in Spain. Feminists in Spain, Argentina, and Italy were re-iterating the same clear case as US prison abolitionists: locking up and isolating perpetrators, without educating them and helping them amend the harm they created, does not keep survivors or communities safer. This inspired a larger thesis project that traces carceral discourses between feminist political mobilizations and gender violence legislation in Spain.

The article centers around the idea that carceral responses to gender violence are not solely unique to Spain or the US but, rather, are part of a globalizing phenomenon driven by neoliberalism since the late 1970s. Neoliberalism, as a global-capitalist political project, has introduced similar racializing and gendering logics of narrowly conceptualizing and punitively responding to social inequalities. Various transnational scholars discuss the characteristics and effects of carceral feminist constructions of victimhood and justice and underline their curious alliance with right-wing crime-control policies. Meanwhile, marginalized anti-carceral gender violence proposals offer a hopeful, rehabilitative and distributional path forward. The article blurs the lines between theory and activism because anti-carceral theory grew out of concrete organizing against the post-slavery, racist state violence in the US and post-Franco fascist repression in Spain. Demonstrating how theories and practices interact in a 'reciprocal process where one enables the other' (hooks 1991) disentangles the rhetoric that prison abolition is dangerous or a lofty ideal and exemplifies how anti-carceral theory has always been tied to life-saving praxis. Methodologically, the article does not merge US and Spanish carceral geographies, but illustrates, through my own personal border crossing, how carceral discourses and anti-carceral feminisms are globalizing symptoms and reactions to (distinct) oppressive histories and the rise of neoliberalism. As a methodological tool, traveling concepts allows for the exploration of the politics of location embedded in the

terminologies and the difficulties and advantages of linking transnational authors and movements together.

## METHODOLOGY

My everyday experiences meeting, clashing and grappling with the terms abolition and gender violence, between the US and Spain, inspired traveling concepts to act as the central methodology for weaving together transnational anti-carceral feminists from varying socio-political contexts. The encounters speak to not only the dilemmas but also the advantages of connecting transnational theories and practices. Cautiously bringing concepts together highlights how carceral logics globalize and resistances emerge from similar (but not identical) motivations to topple hegemonic systems. Learning from and re-purposing one another's terminology and knowledges presents an opportunity to link movements, attend to analytical gaps and generate more creative solutions to resolve gender violence. Above all, reflecting on language allows a researcher to practice self-reflexivity and entangle both theory and political commitments.

Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (2002) describe traveling concepts as a 'meta-theoretical framework for developing a self-reflexive approach to the study of culture' (3). As a cultural heuristic, traveling concepts draw attention to the 'epistemological, cultural and political implications of the theories and concepts we endorse' (3). Research focused on culture within a globalizing world, often conducted by privileged researchers in the US, too often wholesale applies concepts without considering how their meanings and operational values shift between academic disciplines, socio-political contexts and historical time periods (3). Neumann and Nünning recommend traveling elsewhere as a method for placing different approaches to concepts against one another to lay bare 'selective appropriations, productive misunderstandings and discontinuous translations according to historical and local circumstances' (5). Traveling elsewhere requires explicitly naming differences, tensions and antagonisms to bring together transnational cultural phenomena under the umbrella of a singular concept (7).

*Abolition or anti-carceralism?* In the US, I am comfortable evoking the term abolition and trusting that those around me understand I am referring to abolishing prisons and police. Yet beyond the US, abolition is often a prickly term because it is an 'irrelevant' political goal, or it can signify allegiance to radical feminist and conservative religious abolitionists. This became glaringly clear when I initially framed my project around abolition which often triggered discomfort and confusion in Spain because: one, racist policing and mass incarceration is overwhelmingly viewed as a 'US problem' and, two, abolition is exclusively associated with

criminalizing sex work. It frustrated me that the former comment elides Spain's own histories of colonialism and contemporary anti-migrant projects. While it is true that the US holds the highest world incarceration rate and quintuples that of Spain, Spain's rate still beats out the rest of Western Europe (World Population Review 2021). The United Nations has also accused Spain of more human rights violations against people of afro-descent than any other nation apart from the US (Rights International Spain 2020).

Perhaps another important element is the Spanish left's relationship with the law. Many feminist reformists were skeptical of the criminal justice system, but they prioritized the law as a vehicle for social change—an ethic that has persisted today because of institutional feminists' rise to power. Even the most prominent Spanish academic critics of criminalization (Larrauri, Laurenzo-Copello, Maqueda-Abreu, Juliano, Bodelón González) do not call for total abolition of the criminal justice system, as is sometimes seen in the US, but instead call for a severe divestment from its role in social policy. The law is viewed as patriarchal but not as an appendage of white supremacy and slavery as it is viewed in the US, and the latter framing engenders abolishment rather than divestment.

This article primarily adopts anti-carceralism to avoid confusion about ties to anti-sex work abolitionism. However, at times it draws on the term abolition to reference *prison* abolition feminisms that offer important insights from anti-racist feminists on how prisons and policing function as historic racializing and colonial technologies (an analysis that is largely missing from Spanish feminist critiques of criminalization). Overall, anti-carceralism represents a political commitment to dismantling carceral responses to social issues and that treats criminalization as a tool for enforcing the gender binary and whiteness.

*Gender violence, domestic violence, or violence against women:* The United Nations first institutionalized the term violence against women and girls at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights. At first glance, the wide international recognition of violence against women and girls may insinuate a certain stability and agreement of meaning. Yet scholars, activists and institutions have long contested the terminologies violence against women, gender violence and domestic violence on world, national and local stages. Gender violence does not assume the same meaning nor receive the same response across its border trips.

In my previous job working at a local domestic violence governmental office in Philadelphia, I witnessed many activists reject the term gender violence because it is often default for violence against cis women and “does not create a welcoming space” for male, queer and trans survivors. I distinctly remember using the term gender violence in a meeting with another non-profit

professional when she quickly responded, ‘Are we still using that term? Don't we all agree that violence happens to *all* genders?’ I did not necessarily disagree, but there was a certain neoliberalness to how gender-neutral language, in this case, was employed to obscure how different gendered, racialized and other intersecting identities shape one’s proximity to violence.

In other places like Spain, feminists have widely rejected the term domestic violence since the 1990s. Feminists in Spain tend to argue that domestic violence does not recognize the inequality between men and women that drives gender-specific violence nor the violence that occurs outside of the nuclear family home (Larrauri 2007, 92). For that reason, feminists largely opt for the term gender violence to highlight the structural inequalities between men and women. Still, some Spanish feminists have critiqued gender violence for obscuring the fact that victims are disproportionately women (47). Mainstream feminists recognize that this diagnosis enforces a binary victim-victimizer equation, which excludes queer relationships and trans identities. However, (cis) women-specific language is often treated as unfortunate but ‘acceptable’ collateral damage given the absolute necessity to underline violence against women exercised by men (92).

Between these two examples in the U.S. and Spain, there are two zero-sum language arguments. On one side, there is gender-neutral language, which, in the spirit of inclusivity, flattens inequalities around who is more likely to experience violence. On the other side, is cis woman-specific language that recognizes gender inequality in a narrow, cis-heteronormative vacuum. Both narratives blur how gendered structures of power, derived from enforcing and transgressing gender norms and the gender binary, and other intersecting identities such as race, immigration status, ability, and class, inform higher rates of violence. My conversations traveling from terminologies and discontentment with their scopes made me ruminate about what term I would center in this project and how I would define it.

In the end, the article views gender violence as encompassing the violence, harassment, discrimination, or bullying driven by gender inequality and the norm-enforcing gender binary. Many queer people face more adverse health, employment, poverty, and homelessness outcomes due to social exclusion. These oppressions carry unique structural traumas that create the conditions for abuse (Waters et al. 2015). Queer and trans people disproportionately suffer from intimate partner violence, sexual violence and murder.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the article does not treat gender as the sole cause of gender violence given that plural identities shape one’s specific experience with violence. Gender violence exists in a dialectical relationship with the individual and structural where governmental policy and societal norms interact to position racialized and trans people's vulnerability to harm and overall life chances.

Overall, traveling concepts exhibit how anti-carceralism and gender violence are flux categories that vary in meaning from place to place. As a method, it amends for the complications of translating terminologies and considers how my positionality and political goals affect the language employed to define the globalization of punitive discourses and co-existing resistances. Shifting between US and Spanish contexts requires a situated approach to explaining gender violence phenomena and to proposing viable anti-carceral alternatives.

## **GLOBALIZING CARCERAL LOGICS**

Neoliberalism has been the primary global driver of the expansion and hardening of punitive social policies in the US, Western Europe and Latin America. Loïc Wacquant (2009) locates the rise of neoliberalism in the US to the mid-1970s and its spread to Western Europe to the early 2000s (3). He argues that the US has been the ‘theoretical and practical motor for the elaboration and planetary dissemination’ of neoliberalism as a political project (20). Wacquant contends that it is fruitful to trace the emergence of neoliberalism in the US to ‘discover the possible, nay probable, contours of the future landscape of police, justice and prisons in European and Latin American countries’ (20). His positioning of the US as a global exporter of neoliberal ‘theories, slogans and measures’ further endorses the use of the US as an entry point and the shift between US and Spanish theories and practices.

Wacquant’s astute observations on the contextual differences between how neoliberalism diffuses into US and Western European countries further undergirds the necessity for attending to ‘specific national history, social configurations and political traditions’ (23). He notes how the deep roots of the social welfare state, the lack of persuasive influence of individualism, and the absence of severe ethno-racial divides make it less likely that Europe will rapidly adopt punitive strategies (23). Of course, Wacquant hypothesized this before the increase in migration to the European continent from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa and the rise of right-wing electoral prominence. In any case, his theorizations that neoliberal logics and tactics learn from one another, even if not homogeneously, establish a critical framework for how I approach globalizing neoliberal logics.

What comprises the neoliberal political project that surmounted political divides between the left and right and enraptured much of the world between the mid-1970s and early 2000s? David Harvey (2007) discusses how neoliberalism’s central claim is that the capitalist free market is a legitimate ethic for governing both economic and social issues. Neoliberalism posits that the world is post-equality and identity-based politics will only divide populations, hence it relies on color-blind arguments that flatten inequalities and endorse individualist discourses. Neoliberalism

manifests differently according to specific state structures and histories, but it often shares several key features: it thrives against the backdrop of job precarity and mass unemployment; it strives to unravel social welfare structures; and it works to harden the punitive system (Wacquant 2009, 3). This self-perpetuating triad driving neoliberal governance privatizes social welfare and liberates itself from the responsibility to care for the needs of the population. It replaces rehabilitative social policy with a ‘managerialist approach centered on cost-driven administration of carceral stocks and flows’ that provide the foundation for the privatization of ‘correctional services’ (Wacquant 2009, 2-3). It also suggests that all individuals can access well-being and prosperity if they work hard enough. This political shift displaces social welfare into the private sphere and compartmentalizes social issues. It forces social justice movements to “professionalize” in order to survive and upends intersectional grassroots and direct-action projects (Stanley and Smith 2011, 25).

Neoliberalism embraces a distinctly punitive logic that supposes it can attend to the ‘errors’ of the free market through law and punishment. It individualizes social ills to the moral character of a few bad actors, rather than the effects of social inequalities. Such narratives are tailor-made to villainize ‘the (dark-skinned) figure of the street delinquent, the welfare queens, the homeless, the unemployed, the drug addicts, the street sex workers and (postcolonial) immigrants’ (Wacquant 2009, 2). Marginalized populations become natural vectors of a pandemic of minor offenses that poison daily life and the progenitors of ‘urban violence’ bordering on collective chaos’ (Wacquant 2009, 2). Dolores Juliano (2020) notes how policing symptoms rather than attending to the roots of social inequalities does not decrease crime. In fact, policing only aggravates the very state of emergency that it claims to ameliorate (1). Neoliberal politicians often rely on a state of emergency to cultivate a sense of moral panic that evades the need for evidence and caters to short-term ‘whatever means necessary policy’ (Ávila-Cantos and García-García 2013, 78). Wacquant (2009) suggests that the ‘blurring of crime, poverty and immigration in the media as well as by the constant confusion of insecurity and the “feeling of insecurity”’ have led to unprecedented political consensus and public support across class lines (3). Emergencies prey on bigoted fears by constructing criminals as monstrous and evil, making crime seem inevitable to human nature rather than orchestrated and dependent on government policy (Ávila-Cantos and García-García 2013, 73). By reducing violence and suffering to the fault of a few bad actors, neoliberal governments avoid responding to questions about their own role in perpetrating structural violence. As such, neoliberalism rejects structural influences on behavior, opting for individual culpability rather than collective culpability, and insists that the state can extract ‘bad individuals’ from society like a cancer (Gruber 2020, 66).

The proliferation of punitive responses to social issues reaches beyond the singular institution of prison. As Foucault (1975) theorizes that prisons are just one aspect of a vast network of carceral technologies, including schools, hospitals, military institutions and factories, that discipline the body. Neoliberal carceralism most explicitly reveals itself in the form of harsher sentences, expedition of carceral procedures and expansion of judicial powers. Yet in an even more troubling and pernicious arena, punitivism creeps into the cracks of social ‘welfare’ systems through policies that monitor and punish the poor who interface with child welfare services, schools, hospitals, and borders, forming what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls ‘carceral geography’ (Kushner 2019). Carceral geography ‘examines the complex interrelationships among landscape, natural resources, political economy, infrastructure and the policing, jailing, caging and controlling of populations’ (Kushner, 2019). Carceral geographies map the failure of punishment to resolve problems related to the environment, child welfare, native lands, immigration, economic equity and gender violence (Kushner 2019). The following sections discuss the punitive footprint of neoliberalism in the mainstream framings of and interventions into gender violence.

## **CARCERAL FEMINISMS**

In 2007, feminist sociologist, Elizabeth Bernstein coined carceral feminism to explain the growing belief that toughening prison sentences and criminal justice procedures improves gender equality outcomes. In the early 2000s, scholars in Spain began to note the punitive turn in social interventions (Ávila-Cantos and Malo de Molina-Bodelón 2010; García-García 2013). Around the same time, scholars from the US (Bumiller 2008; Coker 2001; Gottschalk 2006; Halley 2008) began to theorize about carceral feminism. However, US and Spanish scholars responded to distinct socio-historical contexts: one, the US adopted neoliberalism a quarter-century sooner and, two, the early faces of carceral activism were different. In the US, the trailblazers of carceral feminism were primarily white legal and prosecutor feminists who first started advocating for harsher penalties and more police involvement in the early 1960s and late 1970s (Gruber 2020, 45). In Spain, the solidification of carceral demands in the mainstream feminist agenda grew from the rise of institutional feminism and neoliberal governance in the 1990s (Uría-Ríos 2009, 122). In any case, both movements shifted from margins to the center thanks to the ability of ‘war on *gender violence* crime’ to unite both leftist and right-wing parties.

Carceral feminism, derived from neoliberal carceral logics, relies on a narrow version of victimhood and justice that panders to racist and patriarchal norms. In crime-control discourse, the ideal victim is an innocent, hysterical and brutalized middle-class, cis, white woman who desires swift paternal rescue by the state and punishment of the monstrous offender (Gruber 2020,

96). The ‘monstruous’ perpetrators, often portrayed as men of color and poor immigrant men, are supposedly more violent and sexist towards women than white men.. The idea of protecting women, especially women of color from men of color, has been used historically to justify US and European carceral and colonial projects (Spade 2013, 1038).

Sara Farris (2017) describes how since the arrival of greater numbers of migrants from the Middle East to the US and Europe right-wing nationalists and neoliberal feminist groups have joined forces to advocate for anti-immigration policy in the name of ‘women’s rights.’ These discourses often involve saving ‘passive’ and ‘oppressed’ Muslim women from ‘backwards’ and ‘perverted’ Muslim men. Farris proposes the term ‘femonationalism’ to describe this contemporary wave of nationalist, xenophobic and paternalistic rhetoric that supposes criminalizing migration will resolve gender violence. Femonationalism represents a distinct brand of carceral feminism used to stigmatize Islamic populations in the US and Europe. Saez Valcarcel (2007) expands on this idea by arguing that criminalizing immigrant men allows white people from the Global North to feel more civilized than the poor people from ‘undeveloped cultures’ who are more ‘chauvinist, violent and brutish,’ all while masking the unequal economic and social conditions that inform behaviors that provoke more violence in marginalized communities (as cited in Laurenzo-Copello, Maqueda-Abreu and Rubio-Castro 2008, 354–355).

Carceral feminism often utilizes ‘every woman’ narratives that proclaim violence happens to all women equally, and hence, ignores evidence that indicates privilege shapes one’s proximity to violence. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) warned three decades ago that essentialized depictions of identity only make visible the most powerful within that respective group. In the case of gender violence, ‘every woman’ narratives center a white, middle class cis woman experience. This gendered and racialized portrait of victimhood makes people of color and trans people non-legible as survivors of gender violence. Essentializing victims according to a limited definition of womanhood obscures lifelong structural and intersectional violences experienced by people who deviate from assigned gender norms and cannot access whiteness.

Carceral feminists bolster their visions of victimhood and justice through several practices. First, carceral feminists advocate for prosecution rules that restrict the agency of survivors and, sometimes even, criminalize them for non-compliance. In both the US and Spain, carceral feminists have secured many of the same legal changes that restrict a survivor’s agency and increase their own ability to be criminalized. For example, laws such as mandatory arrest, automatic no-contact order, no-drop prosecution, convictions with or without victim participation, deny survivors from independently filing or dropping charges or contacting the offender. In Spain,

a survivor may even face a legal penalty for dropping charges for ‘lack of cooperation’ or ‘falsified testimony’ (Laurenzo-Copello, Maqueda-Abreu and Rubio-Castro 2008, 342). The authors note how this paternalistic and rigid attitude, that reduces women’s legal rights to those of minors or incapacitated, does not align with feminist discourse that demands equality (243). Laws that do not let survivors make decisions for themselves and insist on the need for ‘state protection’ reinforce a victimization narrative characterized by helplessness and passivity (397). As such, these laws act as mechanisms of social control that reproduce gender norms and stereotypes, rather than a means of empowerment and self-realization (376).

Second, carceral feminists urge for harsher sentences. In both Spain and the US sentences for gender violence crimes, across the board, have steadily increased (Larrauri 2007, 60 and Gruber 2020, 44). In some states in the US and the United Kingdom, carceral feminists have also established mandatory minimum sentences that shift non-consensual, non-forcible behaviors from serious misdemeanors to high-degree felonies worthy of substantial jail time (Gruber 2020, 196). This curiously mandates the same sentence for non-consensual experiences, from condom removal during sex to gang rape, equating their gravity and hiding the complexities of sex and consent. Carceral feminists often justify higher sentences by arguing that higher penalties will teach men that they cannot get away with abuse and violation. Despite widespread feminists’ claims that all male perpetrators do not pay for their crimes, there is not any evidence that suggests that Black men in the U.S. (Gruber 2020, 166) nor immigrant men in Spain have the same privilege (Laurenzo-Copello, Maqueda-Abreu and Rubio-Castro 2008, 355). Even though there is an ingrained impulse to punish the worst of the worst, reactive penal policy will always fall most harshly and widely on poor people of color because the penal system is beholden to larger social biases. White and privileged men have the power to evade tougher sentencing laws ‘placing the burden of increased criminalization on the poor minorities who form the policed segment of the population’ (Laurenzo-Copello, Maqueda-Abreu and Rubio-Castro 2008, 207).

Next, carceral feminists aim to strengthen their relationship with police and courts by integrating their responses. This typically looks like policies that require survivors to interface with the criminal justice system in order to gain access to state resources, such as paid time off, medical compensation, and temporary and long-term housing. For example, the Andalusian regional government in Spain passed a law in 2009 which mandated that intimate partner violence survivors must file a criminal complaint in order to enter a long-term shelter. In other words, survivors must register with the criminal justice system in order to receive recognition and support from the state (Valenzuela-Vela and Alcázar-Campos 2019, 7). The integration of the criminal justice system and social services pose many obstacles to queer/trans, people of color, migrants

and the poor who may be reluctant to involve the police in fear of retaliation from their partner or communities, police violence or overlook, child custody battles or deportation. These obstacles discourage marginalized people—who often face disproportionately cruel punishment—from seeking resources and finding safety from violence. Studies (Sherman et al. 1992; McCloskey and Sitaker 2009) also show that police more often identify gender nonconforming people and Black women as primary aggressors rather than victims (as cited in Gruber 2020, 87–89).

Finally, carceral feminisms collaborate with police to share and blend tactics. Ávila-Cantos and García-García (2013) note how police in Spain have embraced activist language common in social interventions such as ‘multidisciplinary response, empathy, companionship’ and tactics such as resource brochures, meetings with schools and associations and talks in community centers (63). This smoke and mirrors tactic assumes that police aim to support and to rehabilitate people in the community. However, neoliberal police ethics practice criminalization rather than rehabilitation to minimize the threat of violence. Social workers in Spain have dually embraced policing tactics. The authors signal how social workers, who are more present in more poor and racially segregated areas, often act as surveillance agents detecting ‘risk’ of those who may potentially disrupt the ‘productivity’ of the population (66). Social workers systematically document whether a child is more likely to commit a crime based on certain demographic characteristics and observed behaviors. The documentation serves less to connect youth with more social support and more to put a magnifying glass over their behavior. Instead of intervening with youth at any early age to prevent abuse, surveillance and criminalization only reinforces inequalities that produce violence.

While they do not excuse violence, anti-carceral feminists are skeptical of attempting to change cultural norms or resolve inequalities through legal means. ‘Message sending’ or ‘symbolic’ laws, like emergency-oriented policy, bestow policymakers with the unchecked ability to create any criminal law regardless of how counterproductive it is to serve survivors and deter abuse (Gruber 2020, 106). In fact, criminal justice intervention often exacerbates the psychological, economic and social conditions that correlate to higher rates of gender violence. For example, in cases of intimate partner violence, survivors may share more economic, familial and emotional dependencies with their partner. Thus, punishing perpetrators can also directly jeopardize the stability of survivors, especially for poor people of color. Studies reveal that criminalizing abusive partners puts survivors at disproportionate risk of losing their home, child support, and citizenship (Gruber 2020, 87). Criminal records can cause a chain-reaction of events that make it difficult to find employment or receive certain benefits. Imprisoned people also suffer physical traumas from attack dogs, strip and cavity searches, sexual assault, inedible food and overcrowding (Goodmark

2021, 91). These measures further destabilize relationships and increase chances perpetrators will harm again.

## **ANTI-CARCERAL INTERVENTIONS**

While femicides have seen steady long-term decreases in both Spain and the US, statistics show that a striking number of women do not report to the police and that immigrant women and women of color are disproportionately affected (Consejo General del Poder Judicial; Cooper and Smith 2011). Those in favor of criminalization have traditionally used these high numbers to insinuate fewer women would have died were there more police involvement. However, anti-carceral feminists insist that we must critically analyze whether victims, especially those on the margins of society, trust the criminal justice system to properly assist them. For instance, Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore firmly believe we will not incarcerate our way to non-violence. In the words of Gilmore, ‘the criminal justice system does not have just moral faults but practical ones’ (Kushner 2019). Since the 1960s, Black feminist prison abolitionists have called not just for an abolition of carceral systems but also an investment in public health, housing, education, employment and food programs (Kushner 2019).

Dean Spade (2013) echoes Black feminist prison abolitionists in his calls for tackling intersectional violence throughout population-level legal and administrative systems. The use of criminalization to combat gender violence suggests we can amend harm by teaching race or gender consciousness on an individual, progressive-temporal basis (Spade 2013, 1034). Instead, population control, as a vector of analysis, moves the focus from ‘discrete incidents or individuals’ towards ‘multiple systems that operate simultaneously to produce harms directed not at individuals but at entire populations’ (1035). Dean Spade’s intervention suggests that the criminal justice system cannot be saved with reforms because removing bad laws and bad cops one by one does not attend to the racist, transphobic, patriarchal, ableist and anti-poor structure the prison system is built on and reproduces.

Mimi Kim has been a long-time activist who translates transformative justice theories into tangible practices. Co-founder of the US-based organization INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (now known as INCITE! Women, Trans and Gender Non-Conforming People of Color Against Violence), Kim advocates for interventions that address the structural conditions that create more violence in marginalized communities of color. To reach such a goal, INCITE! believes in transformative justice gender violence models, rooted in indigenous practices<sup>2</sup> and abolitionist social movements driven by people of color, that decrease stigma, shift community

norms and center collective, community-based responses rather than state authorities. This may consist of using language like ‘person who caused harm’ rather than ‘perpetrator’, ‘abuser’ or ‘offender’, or ‘supporting accountability’ rather than ‘holding someone accountable.’<sup>3</sup> Community-based strategies involve networks of friends, family and community members rather than police, child welfare, immigration control, civil courts or anti-violence organizations that work in collaboration with the latter institutions (Kim 2020, 168).

Leigh Goodmark (2021) makes concrete suggestions for what a non-punitive accountability process may look like. According to Goodmark, the survivor should lead and initiate the process ‘allowing survivors to determine whether, when and how such processes should proceed’ (95). Both parties should also be linked to resources before, during and after the processes. This model stresses accountability by involving mediators, family and community members. Involving the community and treating violence as a broad social issue rather than individual and idiosyncratic can lead to greater changes in cultural norms and provide both parties with support networks to heal (Goodmark 2021, 95). Returning to Kim (2020a), non-punitive accountability models should be wary of restorative justice models<sup>4</sup> that maintain strong ties with law enforcement: ‘Compared to strongly anti-carceral or prison abolitionist transformative justice, restorative justice has been confined, to a large extent, to its role as an alternative to the criminal legal system that also leaves that system intact’ (169-170). Transformative justice organizations, like INCITE!, question the embeddedness of state-run public and nonprofit organizations, supposedly subscribing to restorative justice, with carceral architecture (Kim 2020b, 314).

Leigh Goodmark (2020) states that distributional and restorative policy<sup>5</sup> rather than criminalization is the best method to change patriarchal cultures around sex and relationships. Goodmark (2020) identifies various effective pre-, during and post-violence interventions. Increasing the minimum wage, affordable housing, health care access, and free education all reduce stressors on relationships. Education programs around sex, sexuality, relationships and media literacy for teens and youth improve cultural logics around consent and healthy relationships. More regulation around coerced debt and unfair tax liability can hinder opportunities for economic abuse. Emergency funding for rental housing, food and transportation can provide a path to safety without involving the police. A mobile response unit with gender violence advocates can also de-escalate violence by meeting with victims and helping them to safety plan. Post-abuse strategies such as expanding employment opportunities, work readiness training, education grants and therapy can help prevent future violence for survivors and perpetrators (93). The latter material supports can help survivors find safety and healing without

involving the police, which historically have escalated violence (72) and increased survivors' chances of economic ruin (87).

Through the practices suggested above, transformative justice practitioners have operated with barely any financial support or credibility and yet survived thanks to strong political will and networks of care (Kim 2020, 169). In a world where many people face a severe crisis of imagination and long-term visions, Mimi Kim (2020) illuminates an anti-carceral path forward:

Transformative justice offers a liberatory and emergent vision of justice that asks the everyday person to participate as a likely survivor of violence, a potential perpetrator of violence, and someone invested in a world liberated from violence in all of its forms. It renders the intervention of violence and its prevention as an everyday democratic act, one not reserved for authorities of the state but offering a meaningful role for anyone part of a family, a neighborhood, or a community (170).

Kim's inspiring words remind us of the relevance of anti-carceral feminist interventions and provide the motivations and tools for debunking the myth of punishment as justice.

## **FINAL REMARKS**

This article discusses how carceral feminisms have globalized under the guise of neoliberal 'war on crime' policies in both the US and Spain. It explains how crime control discourse shapes how political actors articulate gender violence as a problem and approach its solutions. Using my personal border crossing between US and Spanish academic and activist spaces, the article draws on the work of transnational scholars to explain the characteristics of global carceral feminisms and their adverse effects on marginalized populations. By highlighting the alternative visions of anti-carceral scholars and activists to invest in structural preventative solutions and community-led accountability processes, the article troubles the commonly held claim that the criminal justice system is effective at resolving gender violence and desired by all survivors. Its goal is to provide a broad foundation for the theoretical relevance of anti-carceral feminist debates and the political urgency of debunking the myth of punishment as justice transnationally.

This article makes several key methodological and theoretical interventions unique to existing anti-carceral feminist research. Notably, it entangles activism and theory to honor how carceral feminism is not an objective, self-evident category but rather an observed and constructed phenomena thanks to the political and intellectual work done by queer, trans and racialized activists and scholars. For that reason, I recommend other researchers working with anti-carceral

feminisms to not let theory escape the practical roots of activism. On a similar note, I particularly encourage researchers who explore cross-Atlantic and global dimensions of anti-carceral feminism to pay close attention to the politics of location. Traveling concepts served as a highly illuminative tool to question the limits of US anti-carceral feminisms as a basis for resistance in other geographical spaces and to encourage the use of local ideas and actions.

Neither these findings, nor the theories that sustain them, are meant to be tidy, perfect, new, or complete. This project is an amalgam of ongoing critique and conversations that is designed to push the needle forward for an anti-carceral feminist politics in a manner that speaks to my feminist desire to transform how we think about victimhood and justice. Transformative justice theories and practices, despite their limitations, fill a necessary gap in reimagining long-term, structural policies amongst an ever-present storm of neoliberal individualization, punitivism and paternalism. Through my travels to Spain, I encountered many scholars and activists who have dreams like I do. Their critiques of neoliberal feminism's alliance with patriarchal justice systems resonated with my own doubts about mainstream feminist visions of public safety in the US. By weaving together anti-carceral knowledges and practices, I explored the possibilities for an even bigger dream: a global anti-carceral feminist resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Data shows that intimate partner violence in lesbian and gay couples is comparable to (Turrell 2000) or higher than that among heterosexual couples (Messinger 2011; Kelley et.al. 2012). The few statistics available about trans violence indicate that trans-murder is a global health crisis. According to a data gathered by Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide (TvT), a research entity of Transgender Europe, more than 350 transgender and gender non-conforming people were murdered between the beginning of October 2019 and the end of September 2020 (Clifton 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Kim (2020b) explains that indigenous practices of addressing harm and establishing justice have been 'left unwritten, unrecognized, and largely erased by colonial and neocolonial histories' and 'long precede the recent "discoveries" of *transformative justice* or *restorative justice*' (314).

<sup>3</sup> This first-person language is typically used in therapeutic settings and accountability-processes. For the purposes of this paper, I use language from legal and professional settings (perpetrator, abusive partner, survivor, victim) given that it is the area I critique.

<sup>4</sup> Kim (2020b) explains that restorative justice has a complicated history, but a review of nationwide restorative justice programs shows that they are 'white dominated and law enforcement friendly' (316). Whereas, transformative justice has more roots in indigenous practices and people of color abolitionist movements (314).

<sup>5</sup> Distributional policy refers to structural investments in social welfare such as health care, education, employment, housing, food programs, etc.

# The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project

## Subaltern Erasure and Neocolonial Advancement in Urban Development Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

Spanning across the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary society, the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project in India has been a site of highly contested legal, social, and economic controversies. The project was initially praised for the benefits it would bring to the communities clustered around the Narmada River, the site of the dam, through its innovative water irrigation and hydroelectric properties. However, the project soon tumbled into chaos as the social activist group Narmada Bachao Andolan 'Save the Narmada Movement' (NBA) protested and petitioned the Indian government to halt construction of the dam. Comprised of Indigenous peoples, climate protesters, and human rights activists, the NBA argued that the native people who lived alongside the Narmada River were being forcefully displaced from their ancestral homes, causing harm to their communities, and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. In this paper, I seek to understand how the discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project functions as a societal representative mechanism, and how this effects the way the adivasi and their struggles were understood by mainstream society. Applying an explicitly feminist and decolonial approach to my analysis of the discourse, I examine a legal document from the Supreme Court of India and the construction of wider economic narratives relating to the dam to explore the extent to which the discourse serves to erase subaltern identities and advance neocolonial ideologies.

### KEYWORDS

Adivasi, development, discourse, displacement, decolonization, Sardar Sarovar Dam

## INTRODUCING THE SARDAR SAROVAR DAM PROJECT

The deep and cascading waters of the Narmada River flow through the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, forming a boundary between North and South India before spilling out into the Arabian Sea. Beloved in Hindu culture for its peaceful and prosperous spiritual significance (Apnisanskriti n.d.), the river became the site of a decades-long controversy regarding the construction and impact of more than 3,200 developmental dam projects in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (BBC 2000). Initially conceptualized in the 1940s as the Narmada Valley Project, a hydroelectric and irrigation development scheme, opposition to the dam halted the onset of the project until 1979 (Sahoo, Prakash and Sahoo 2014, 888). The construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the biggest dam of the Narmada Valley Project, was controlled by the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal, who oversaw the usage and sharing of the water between the four states of Gujarat,

Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. In the same year the project began, the UN Development Program also joined the planning team. However, despite the original implementation of the Sardar Sarovar Dam going smoothly and the partnerships between different stakeholders appearing amicable, the dam was to become embroiled in heated and aggressive contest in the coming years (Sahoo, Prakash and Sahoo 2014).

Conceived as a forward-thinking project that embodied ‘modern’ engineering to provide power for the four states (Sahoo, Prakash and Sahoo 2014, 889; quotations added), the vast scale of the dam’s construction forcefully displaced some of the state’s most vulnerable adivasi (Hindi for ‘original dwellers’) and Indigenous people who live along the river. This displacement fostered anger and catalyzed rising protests from social and environmental activists who were concerned for the safety and livelihood of the Narmada River adivasi. Nonetheless, the dam also provided irrigation for 17,920 km<sup>2</sup> of land over 12 districts and 3,393 villages, and afforded flood protection for areas surrounding the river (Sahoo, Prakash and Sahoo 2014, 889). Why, then, was the project considered so controversial if it had so many tangible benefits to the wider community around the dam? Are there threads of colonial ideology or capitalist influence to be found in the decision to prioritize urban development over the welfare of the local adivasi? And how does discourse present an advantageous lens through which to ask these questions? To consider these questions, this paper seeks to examine to what extent the discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project functions to advance colonial ideologies and erase the identities of the native adivasi living along the river.

British sociologist Stuart Hall examines how language and representation within society function to construct common codes of meaning. According to Hall, the concept of representation itself can be described as ‘larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority’ (1997, 27). Following Hall’s definition, discourse can thus be termed the linguistic and representative practice through which social meaning is constructed. These various mediums through which discourse can present itself highlight its prevalence across social life and the power it has in maintaining social meaning. Therefore, by electing to research the discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, I hope to uncover how the representation of the project in normative legal and economic frameworks may be influenced by colonial ideologies, serve to uphold harmful Western jurisdiction, and subsequently marginalize certain groups. I hope to demonstrate the need for a decolonial, feminist critique of urban developmental discourse and the importance of implementing a more critically reflexive urban development praxis. As Laurie Flood says, ‘exploring [neocolonial] patterns helps [to] shed light

on why development, which is supposed to be a beneficial process for all, often in actual fact causes both [...] victimization and displacement' (Flood 1997, 16).

## **A SHIFTING MECHANISM: COLONIALISM TO NEOCOLONIALISM**

There has been much debate in recent years surrounding the language used to describe the South of the globe and the implications that terms such as 'third world' and 'developing' have for inhabitants of these countries (Silver 2021). Arturo Escobar discusses the thematic infantilization and salvation praxis of Occidental development discourse, which framed the South as lesser in its 'discovery of mass poverty in Asia, Africa and Latin America' (1995, 21). To maintain control over these countries, where there was increasing instability due to decolonizing struggles and the fight for nationalism, the 'developed world' created the narrative of the South as a problem that needed fixing (Escobar 1995). Not only did this bolster their economic, social, and political control, it also served to maintain Eurocentric ideologies as the hegemonic norm.

These colonial, capitalist, and ethnocentric views of what constituted a 'developed' country have been long contested by feminist theorists, with feminist urbanists calling for a decolonial approach to urban development (Beebeejaun 2017; Roy 2014). Every year, around 15 million people are displaced from their homes to make way for massive urban development projects such as dams, highways, and mining (Terminski 2015; cited in Aboda et. al. 2019, 100). Consequently, communities that are displaced often face increased risk to their social and economic capital, with women, the elderly, and children experiencing the worst impact due to their larger social vulnerabilities (Stanley 2004; Mehta 2009; Terminski 2011; cited in Aboda et. al., 2019, 100). To begin to understand why this is the case, I insist upon a feminist critique of urban development praxis, focusing through a decolonial lens which I contextualize further in this section.

As established, there is a pressing need for theories and praxis which actively address the prevalence of inequalities in the canon of global urbanism. One theory that seeks to understand the inequalities present in societies once ruled by colonizers is postcolonialism. Postcolonial studies grew in the late 1970s after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Rao 2013, 2) and in essence explores the cultural, economic, political, and historical impact of colonial rule on the world with the aim to destabilize ethnocentric perspectives. To condense its complexity into a singular postcolonial theory is not feasible, but a key tenet of the studies is that it is impossible to understand contemporary global structures and societies without also considering their relationship to colonialism (Elam 2019). However, theorists have also debated the legitimacy of the term 'postcolonial', asserting that 'post' signifies a moving past and that the prefixes 'anti-'

or ‘de-’ colonial better demonstrate the tight hold colonial ideologies still have over areas of the world (Rao 2013; Shohat 1992).

Akin to postcolonial theory, decolonization as a praxis is also concerned with dismantling harmful Eurocentric ideals and liberating historically oppressed groups. With no singular definition of what ‘decolonial work’ is, a common aim among the field is the dismantling of all colonial systems and structures present in society. In their seminal work ‘On Decoloniality’, Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh iterate the necessity for decolonial work to remain relational, citing the importance of ‘different local histories and embodied conceptions’ (2018, 1). Furthermore, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s (2012) equally explosive work ‘Decolonization is not a Metaphor’ calls for decolonization as an active, reparative practice that gives stolen land back to Indigenous communities. In the past few years, there has been an increase in cultural awareness of these spatial legacies and a recognition of the importance these lands had and still have for Indigenous communities (Champagne 2008). For the purposes of this critical case study of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, I utilize the term ‘decolonial’ as a reference to the praxis of dismantling colonial hegemony in all its forms, particularly the contemporary formations of such ideologies.

The work of cultural sociologist Paul Gilroy examines the shift from earlier technological and social formations to contemporary frameworks, and how this has ushered in new forms of colonial control across society (2016). He terms this shift neocolonialism. Writing within a European context, Gilroy examines how contemporary forms of colonial control, such as increased surveillance, new forms of warfare, and corporate governance, rely on ‘a deficit of historical information about Europe’s colonial and imperial past’ (2016, xiv). Furthermore, he states that contemporary society is seeing a stark increase in binary oppositional groups, particularly within politics. Echoing Hall (1997), Gilroy establishes that these groups interact with themselves and one another through increasingly separatist language which is coerced at an institutional level through re-enacting these representations within common discourse (Gilroy 2016). Through these globalized, technological, and polarizing practices, neocolonialism establishes itself by assuming ‘complex and novel configurations [through which the] “neo” secreted inside the postcolonial will have to be ruthlessly and repeatedly uncovered and interrogated’ (Gilroy 2016, xvi). Therefore, I rely on Gilroy’s formation of the concept of neocoloniality to inform my analysis of the discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project.

I see an example of the neocolonial shift in the work of Franz Fanon. In *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), Fanon wrote a visceral critique of the poisonous legacy that colonialism has left in many

of its former colonies, manipulating their legal liberation with continuing social and cultural bondage to their colonizers. His work focuses on the Algerian War of 1954-62, but I believe his commentary of the insidious clutches that colonialism still held over national elites in Algeria is applicable to the shifting relationship with colonialism and 'liberation' that India also underwent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He describes the 'empty shell' of national consciousness that colonialism left in Algeria and the neoliberal emulation of the 'bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hope[d] to replace' (1961, 148) by upper members of society. The initial lack of economic mobility of newly liberated colonies, combined with the inability to build on the small amount of power they were afforded by the colonizers leaving, forsook the national elite with the inability to connect with and subsequently help the masses (Fanon 1961, 148). This stark disconnect between the national elite and lower members of society is something I wish to examine further in my analysis of the legal discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project.

The social rupture left by colonizers in recently 'freed' societies extends wider than just the relationship between the national elite and the masses. In her highly influential work, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Spivak questions how 'the third-world subject is represented within Western discourse' (1988, 271). She recounts the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman in India who committed suicide in 1926. The motivations for her death were misconstrued by her community, so the narratives of her life and her death were altered against her consent. Thus, her voice, even in her death, was lost. Using Bhaduri's story to solidify the damage that misrepresentation can create, Spivak conceptualizes the subaltern as a figure for whom decisions are made insofar as their truth and voice are spoken for and over; a figure who is forced into the hegemonic narrative of civilization without being able to represent themselves truly or authentically. Unable to contest this violence with their own narrative voice, they exist outside of normative society, whilst being framed within it by their oppressors (Spivak, 1988). Subsequently, they are denied access to autonomy and they cannot speak for themselves. In my analysis, I seek to understand how the adivasi of the Narmada River may have been subject to the same representative extinguishment by the discourse surrounding the project, and thread a connection between this and the discursive subjection of Spivak's figure of the subaltern. I hope that conducting a feminist, decolonial reading of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project discourse will help illuminate the ways in which discourse shapes social frameworks and maintains potentially harmful ideologies over suppressed groups.

## **FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

As established in my introduction of the work of Stuart Hall, I am attentive to the importance that discourse and language have in shaping cultural norms and ideologies. To generate a feminist connection between the importance of discourse and the discursive context of this article, I turn to Michelle Lazar's (2007) methodology of *explicitly feminist* discourse analysis to conduct my research into the discourse surrounding the dam. Lazar first introduces explicitly feminist discourse analysis as a 'perspective that is implicitly [...] attentive to the discursive aspects of [...] forms of oppression' (2007, 149). Although I do not highlight intersectionality as central to my theoretical framework, it would be remiss to exclude any mention of it in a feminist excavation of the discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. Subsequently, Lazar's focus on embedding intersectionality within the methodology of explicitly feminist discourse analysis must be attended to.

Lazar highlights an explicitly feminist approach to discourse analysis as one that is 'motivated by goals of social emancipation and transformation' (2007, 141). I connect this methodological aim to the transformative theoretical considerations of post- and decolonial theories contextualized in my framework. Therefore, I believe that conducting a discourse analysis that is aware of the intersections of oppression will provide a more cohesive understanding of the way the discourse functions to suppress the adivasi and advance neocolonial ideologies. Theorists have noted that feminist approaches to discourse and the politics of discourse are varied and multidisciplinary (Baxter 2003; Speer 2005). Lazar's method encapsulates this interdisciplinary focus, as another of its main features are its wide-ranging foci of subject matter with an emphasis on the interrelatedness between different discursive texts in society. I focus on this interrelatedness between the representations of the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project as I seek to understand how different legal and economic discursive actors function together in a network of neocolonial advancement and subaltern erasure. By applying an explicitly feminist critical lens to my discourse analysis, I focus on transformative and emancipatory analytical mechanisms for change.

## **LEGAL DISCOURSE AS SUBALTERN ERASURE: THE ADIVASI AND THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA**

As aforementioned, while construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam progressed, social activist groups began to fight back against the development project (Sahoo, Prakash, and Sahoo 2014, 890). The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) was formed in 1989 in the state of Maharashtra to protest the displacement of the various adivasi communities from their land on the Narmada River. In 1994, the NBA sued the Supreme Court of India on the grounds of harmful treatment of

the adivasi and concerns for the environment surrounding the dam which further delayed the project (Culletf, 2008). One year later, the court restricted construction of the dam with a stay order that postponed the original lawsuit. This was not enough compensation for the NBA, who continued to protest. Eventually, in October of 2000, the Supreme Court of India reacted to petitioning from the NBA by ruling in favor of the continued construction of the dam, arguing that 'the displacements of persons need not 'per se result in the violation of their fundamental or other rights' (*The Union of India and Others v. Narmada Bachao Andolan*; cited in Culletf 2008, 975).

Central to my analysis is the fact that this verdict, which ruled in favor of the Union of India and Others who encompassed the upper echelons of Indian society, relied on Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Article 21 outlines the right to life and personal liberty for those recognized by the law across India (Culletf 2008, 975). Therefore, any person who was not recognized legally, i.e. many of the adivasi who have lived in rural or small communities for many years, were left out of this ruling and were vulnerable to legal and wider social discrimination. This pattern of negating to recognize Indigenous communities as autonomous and legitimate was inherent in the first waves of historical colonial invasion and are evident in the decision the Supreme Court of India made. Subsequently, I argue that the decision is simply a neocolonial mechanism to marginalize the adivasi and reject them from normative social narratives and constructs, erasing their legal representation.

When writing his verdict in *The Union of India and Others v. Narmada Bachao Andolan* (2000) SC 3751 at 21, Justice Bhupinder Nath Kirpal stated that 'though these villages comprise a significant population of tribals and people of weaker sections [the] majority of them will not be a victim of displacement.' Justice Kirpal's choice to align the adivasi with those of purported 'weaker sections' in society speaks to the strong presence of hierarchy that has been part of Indian society for many years. Although the caste system can be traced back to ancient India, modern formations of social hierarchies have their roots in constructions from previous rulers such as the British Raj (Bayly 2001). The influence that colonial rule had over the shifting formations of the caste system thus highlight the neocolonial nature of Justice Kirpal's phrasing. I would also like to consider how, writing from his position as a Justice in the Supreme Court, he wields immense power over the legal proceedings. Therefore, there is a clear power imbalance in the hierarchy between himself and the group of adivasi he ruled against. This disconnect to the plight of 'lower' echelons of society, echoing Fanon's critique of the postcolonial national elite, is solidified when he insists that displacement 'will not' adversely affect the adivasi and that there is no place for victimhood in his decision.

Justice Kirpal continues to write that the adivasi will instead ‘gain from shifting [into] the gradual assimilation in the mainstream of the society [which] will lead to betterment and progress’ (2000, 21). I consider this statement to encapsulate the central goal that neocolonial discourse sets out to achieve; by removing the culture and history of the oppressed through the enforcement of the dominant culture upon them, they simultaneously equate their histories and communities to something ‘lesser’ than the betterment which the dominant culture can offer. In the legal context that Justice Kirpal speaks from, the verdict functions discursively to centralize the position of those enforcing the displacement and marginalize the identities of the adivasi. This prioritization of those in power in society and the suppression of the other is a key mechanism of neocolonial control (Gilroy 2016). Furthermore, Kirpal’s specific wording of how the adivasi will ‘gain’ from their displacement imposes upon them the idea that those in power are more knowledgeable, and that their perspective as a marginalized group does not have any merit. This perspective fails to consider the cultural and historical significance that the land and the river have for the communities that lived there, instead giving precedent to the neocolonial drive for progress and the infantilization of occidental development discourse as outlined by Escobar.

### **ECONOMIC DISCOURSE AS NEOCOLONIAL ADVANCEMENT: MODERNISATION AT ANY COST**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is often referred to as the ‘urban millennium’, or the ‘Asian urban century’ (Roy 2014). More than half of the world’s urban population now lives in Asia, a development that has sought to ‘disrupt the canon of global urbanism by foregrounding the cities of the Global South’ (Roy 2014, 14). The shift of attention and resources to these emerging mega-cities in the South has led to a change in economic hegemony. New economic models of capital accumulation are rising against a backdrop of the crumbling neoliberal economies in the North, visible through divisive actions like Brexit and increasing wealth gaps in ‘developed’ countries (Roy 2014).

As these ‘mega’ urban landscapes grow, the inequalities faced by women and marginalized groups become more visible as ‘women are increasingly forming the majority of urban populations across the global south’ (Chant and McIlwaine 2013, 1). At a micro level, women face increased risks to their wellbeing and safety, with a lack of practical infrastructure like lighting and segregated toilets, reproductive and labor divisions with domestic spaces, and mental and physical health problems when working with harmful cooking fuels. At a meso urban development level, they lack access to property rights with male-lineated inheritance and customary law, and a lack of representation in political and urban power (Chant and McIlwaine

2013). These risks are exacerbated as the Global South grows, calling for an intersectional urban development shift.

The growing economic power of societies in the Global South presents an interesting connection with Gilroy's concept of neocolonialism. The economic benefits the Sardar Sarovar Dam would bring to the Narmada River area were central to its initial conception and construction (Sahoo, Prakash and Sahoo 2014, 888), and can be traced through the discourse to contemporary times. To examine how the discourse functions to represent economic growth and neocolonial modernization as the hegemonic narrative surrounding the dam, I return to Justice Kirpal's verdict. Rife with textual reference to the positive economic impact the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project exhibits for Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and their surrounding states, he repeatedly references Article 12 of the International Labor Organization Convention<sup>1</sup> (No. 107). This article states that (tribal) populations shall 'not be removed [...] from their habitual territories except [...] in the interest of national economic development' (Kirpal 2000, 19). However, theorists have established that despite the viable economic benefits of the dam, the energy produced was used 'primarily by urban consumers, for business and agricultural pumping, all at subsidized rates' and that 'poor [did] not benefit from this subsidy' (Baviskar 1995, 28; Savur 1995, 161-2; cited in Flood 1997, 14). It is clear that the wider economic benefits vastly outweighed the rupturing displacement of the adivasi in the eyes of the Indian national elite, as they would be afforded subsidized rates for energy production. This utilitarian approach of focusing on the economic benefits the dam would bring, alongside excluding those most in need of financial assistance such as the displaced communities, and the desire for progress served to oppress the adivasi of the Narmada River (Flood 1997, 13).

As explored earlier, Escobar focuses on the important role that economic power had in the creation of developmental discourse, and this is something that can clearly be seen in the neocolonial discursive shaping of the economic benefits of the dam project. With the World Bank's 1948 definition of 'poor' as any country with a lower per capita income than \$100, the 'essential trait of the Third World was its poverty, and the solution was economic growth' (Escobar 1995, 24). In her 1995 essay '*Let us Not Dam Development*', Indian academic Manorama Savur highlights how dams were 'integral to India's development vision [...] ideal since they are amenable to top-down planning, provide tangible benefits to industrialization needs, and to modernized agriculture' (Savur 1995, 156; cited in Flood 1997, 12). Inclusion of 'integral', 'ideal,' and 'tangible' all speak to the highly positive representation the dam had within an economic framework. Savur's statement highlights the wider discursive aims of those who

championed the dam's economic legitimacy and echoes the reasoning that Justice Kirpal gives above for the continuation of the project.

This idealization of dams as instrumental in the industrialization and modernization of India connects to the ideology of economic advancement evidenced in critiques of occidental development discourse (Escobar 1995). The utilitarian push for economic and industrial progression at the expense of the poor demonstrates the neocolonial influence on the development project, with the drive for modernization and capitalist gain central to the motivations for the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. Escobar's analysis of the economic representation within development discourse comments on how colonial developmental discourse created the binary relationship between developing countries and economic advancement, so therefore newly liberated colonies were still influenced by the idea they had to generate high economic wealth to keep up with wealthy Western countries who set the economic norm for the rest of the world. I consider this a potential explanation as to why India was so determined to reap the economic benefits of the dam over the welfare of the adivasi, as it would align them with the neocolonial ideology of economic progression.

## **THE FUTURE OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT PRAXIS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNTER-DISOURSE: CONCLUDING REMARKS**

I set out to examine to what extent the legal and economic discourse surrounding the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project acted as subaltern erasure and neocolonial advancement. By relying on legal texts from the Supreme Court of India as well as a wider examination of the beneficial economic narrative presented of the dam, I demonstrated how the discourse functioned to negate the adivasi from social recognition and legal protection, furthering their position as subalterns on the periphery of society. I also demonstrated how the wider economic discourse of the dam was represented as highly beneficial to wider Indian society through a neocolonial prioritization of the benefits it would bring to businesses and the national elite. It was only through the immense strength of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and their efforts to alter the way the project was represented in normative society that attention was brought to the suffering of the native communities. Their efforts successfully generated enough awareness about the damaging effects of the dam on the adivasi that the World Bank withdrew their funding, and the project faced numerous disruptions to its construction.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project is unique in relation to other large dam constructions due to its charged history and changing representation within the public eye. Although the project is continuing, the NBA managed to massively shift normative and mainstream perceptions of the

project and brought more careful consideration of its consequences to the wider public, despite the huge socioeconomic and legal forces it was up against. They rejected the normative narrative of the beneficial nature of the dam, conjecturing the neocolonial influence against the effect on the adivasi. It is in the power of alternative narratives such as the one the NBA put forward that I see a feminist and decolonial avenue for future research. I suggest the praxis of counter-discourse - focusing on situated narratives from those in marginalized and oppressed social groups - as one way that neocolonial and harmful representative practices could be prevented in future urban development projects. As explored in my theory section, decolonization is about the reparative theoretical and material aim to help uplift those who have been systemically oppressed by a system that prioritizes Eurocentric, universalist ideals. Turning to counter-discourse and narratives presented by marginalized people offers a reparative chance to challenge ideas that have historically upheld normative, Eurocentric social frameworks.

There has been little effort to retroactively analyze the effects that large dam projects have had economically, socially, and environmentally, hence 'the validity for and against dams by governmental institutions and NGOs cannot be resolved one way or another because of the lack of past and present post-project evaluations' (Jagadeesan and Kumar 2015, iii). Although I agree with this statement insofar that there is validity for dam projects, as they offer great resources for irrigation and hydroelectricity, I argue that it is imperative for such future urban development projects to be implemented with a decolonial, feminist perspective in mind to prevent other native communities from being marginalized by potential displacement. Instead, I insist upon an urban development praxis which includes all members of society and is attuned towards specific cultural and social needs that different communities would benefit from.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam Project was conceptualized with the aims of progressive irrigation, modernized farming, and economic advancement. During the project, the native people of the Narmada River were excluded from legal and cultural systems and left with no legal or social framework to help ease the trauma of displacement from their ancestral land. I have analyzed several discursive texts which demonstrate the neocolonial tendencies of the dam discourse and how this presented itself in the Indian elite through their lack of national consciousness, choosing to prioritize the project over the welfare of the adivasi. From the court's denial of the legal rights of the adivasi, to the continuing controversy of the resettlement plans, this project failed to implement an intersectional and egalitarian urban development praxis at the expense of the adivasi and their cultural heritage. I believe the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project provides an important example of the dangers of a neocolonial urban development praxis, but also of how fighting for the rights of those adversely affected by such systems can shift perceptions and bring justice to

the oppressed and a more reflexive attitude towards urban development in general. Thus, the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project serves as a warning for the perils of neocolonial urban praxis and urges a more reflexive, feminist, and decolonial disciplinary approach to developmental discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Labor Organization is a tripartite U.N. agency that has been in operation since 1919. The ILO brings together governmental bodies, employers, and workers to organize labor standards, policies, and programs that promote acceptable working conditions.

# **Review: *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space***

By Olivier Vallerand. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780228001850. 246 pp.

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Architecture has been slow to take up the epistemological developments taking place in feminist and queer scholarship of the past decades. Apart from a few noteworthy publications and exhibitions in the 1990s and early 2000s, queer architectural practice has remained marginal, until a recent resurgence of interest in the topic. Among the publications brought forth by this renewed interest, Olivier Vallerand's *Unplanned Visitors: Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space* (2020) stands out through its theoretical rigour and original subject matter. The book compiles a short and selective history of how architects, artists, theorists, and historians have critically considered the relations between gender, sex, and the built environment in the past thirty years. To unearth their queer critiques of architecture, Vallerand turns his gaze to representations of domesticity in exhibitions, photography and film, art installations, and temporary architectural interventions. He first considers how queer critiques of space are represented in these artworks and installations and then evaluates how they have impacted the architectural design practice. As such, the book is loosely arranged around two threads: the first a chronological one, generally moving forward in time as the chapters progress, and the second relating to the nature of the representations of domesticity in the different case studies, moving from more theoretical and speculative critiques towards those integrated in the design of lived spaces.

Vallerand's extensive research bears its fruit already in the first chapter, which is reserved for laying out his theoretical framework. One of the issues the author addresses is the different understandings of 'queer' in architectural discourse. Vallerand rejects mainstream understandings of the word as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual people, criticising early explorations of queer space which are aligned with such non-problematized identity-based understandings as Aaron Betsky's well-known *Queer Space* (1997). Instead, the author's conception of queerness is strongly grounded in academic queer theory for which Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Sara

Ahmed, among others, have laid down the groundwork. ‘Less a discourse around an identity than a critique of conventional identity politics’ (2020, 18), Vallerand’s understanding of queerness is both political in challenging hetero- and homonormativity and non-essentializing in its focus on exposing and critiquing the constructedness of identity categories.

Up to here, this may sound like old wine in new bottles to anyone who is familiar with queer studies. The merit of Vallerand’s study, however, lies in how he applies queer theory as a mode of critical enquiry to questions of the built environment. Without a doubt, others before him have employed the term ‘queer space theory’ to demarcate a field of study where queer theory, architecture and social geography overlap/intersect; however, I have not come across an earlier work which fleshes out the principles of this domain so clearly and rigorously. Queer space, he writes, is ‘continually in the process of being constructed in opposition not only to heteronormativity but also to broader prescriptive norms’ (2020, 20). According to Vallerand, queer space must not be understood as the materialization of essential identity characteristics but as *relational*, meaning it only exists by virtue of its opposition to the norm, and *performative*, because it is constantly in the process of taking place. As such, queer space theory allows for a better understanding of the exclusionary and oppressive effects of architecture, which result from the way that certain building typologies and conventions uphold and reiterate normative codes of gender and sexuality.

Because the theoretical foundations of *Unplanned Visitors* are strongly laid out and consistently applied throughout the text, Vallerand’s application of queer theory to questions of architecture and the built environment is close to watertight. One way in which the book delivers on its promises is in its successful deconstruction of public and private, notions that are omnipresent in architectural debates. Building on feminist challenges to the gendering of domestic life, Vallerand demonstrates that the opposition of private and public is a historically constructed binary which has sustained the design of oppressive and unsafe spaces. His analysis of a series of exhibitions from the 1990s, in particular, problematizes the conflation of the domestic with the private by showing that domestic spaces are always already exposed to the public gaze, while at the same time public spaces such as bars and parks are constantly queered through acts of intimacy which according to normative views belong to the ‘private’ realm of the bedroom. His book convincingly demonstrates that binary understandings such as public/private do not reflect the fluid complexity of actual spaces nor the people who inhabit them.

Furthermore, the book advocates for a much-needed shift in architectural discourse from high design aesthetics towards a focus on banal everyday spaces such as the house, where oppression

is experienced by many on a daily basis. With projects like the *House Rules* exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Washington (1994), the second chapter of the book presents strong challenges to the idea of the home as safe haven, while also showing how queer living constellations have navigated the constricting setup of the traditional American suburban home. As such, the work underscores the need for architecture to reconcile its aesthetic dimension, reflected in formalist approaches dominant in both its historiography and practice, with the ethics of designing the built environment.

Another commendable contribution of *Unplanned Visitors* to the architectural discourse is that it expands the notion of what is considered as ‘architecture’ by blurring the boundaries between art and architecture. Vallerand rests his queer critique of domesticity on an analysis of artworks, exhibitions, installations, and temporary architectural interventions from outside the narrow confines of architecture. The third and fourth chapters of the book contain some very interesting explorations of the way that domesticity is put on display in the photography of architect Mark Robbins (chapter 3) and in the large-scale installations of Scandinavian artists Elmgreen and Dragset (chapter 4). Through these examinations, the author recovers an important and valuable strand of queer thinking in architecture from the margins of architectural history.

Vallerand shows that art installations and exhibitions can be powerful rhetorical devices with the capacity to challenge institutions and normative understandings of space and architecture in a way that built architecture cannot. While *Unplanned Visitors* certainly affirms the power of speculative design, herein lies one of its limitations at the same time: when these critiques are applied to actual projects much of their critical value is lost. The BOOM retirement communities for LGBT+ elderly discussed by Vallerand forms a case in point. The author observes that, despite good intentions of inclusivity, the design is geared primarily towards privileged white gay male couples. The project thus demonstrates the difficulties of translating critiques that are easily presented through installations into actual architecture projects, which are constrained by building regulations, budget, clients’ wishes and so on.

Finally, although the scope of Vallerand’s queer theoretical lens in *Unplanned Visitors* reaches beyond gender and sexuality to consider intersections with other markers of difference, his selection of the projects he discusses is not free from its own limitations. The author sets out to correct the tendency of early explorations of queer space to investigate spaces designed by and for (mostly) affluent white gay men. Throughout his book he consistently points out when ‘queer’ is conflated with ‘gay’ whenever his objects of analysis ‘fall into the largely masculinist inclination of much “queer” work’ (2020, 72), as is the case in, for example, the publications of

Aaron Betsky and Henry Urbach, or the photographic work of Mark Robbins. However, a closer look at the selection of works discussed in the book shows that the author is not able to completely escape this masculinist inclination himself either: it includes only one explicitly non-male case study, namely Swedish queer feminist collective MYCKET. Moreover, although he highlights how gender and sexuality are closely intertwined with class and race throughout his analysis, lower-class and racialized subjects remain underrepresented, if not entirely absent from his selected projects, making his study at best a partial history of queer critiques of the built environment.

One last aspect that I have found valuable is the fact that the extensive bibliography of the book, compiled over a period of ten years of research, reads like a compendium of sources that are relevant to the field of queer space theory. For one, it shows how much intellectual labour has been done already. Sadly, I share Vallerand's conclusion that these queer critiques of space and architecture have not led to a discernible transformation of the design profession. The author ends on the somewhat positive note that early North-American queer space theorists, who played an important role in architecture education, have managed to create an opening towards diversity in architecture. From my own (limited) experience with Dutch architectural education, a structural inclusion of feminist and queer thought in architectural pedagogies has yet to materialize, although queer feminist theory has entered some European architecture schools, such as Manchester, Zürich, Stockholm, and the Bartlett London. Nonetheless, *Unplanned Visitors* is an excellent contribution to the fields of both architecture and queer theory. I am hopeful that reading the book will convince architects, designers, theorists and historians alike of the necessity to consider the exclusionary and oppressive ways in which social norms shape architectural space.

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