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[SPACE]

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Introduction: [SPACE]

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The Editorial Team 2026 would like to thank Tsolin Nalbantian and Mathijs Peters, for their excellent guidance throughout this process.

Thinking of space, a natural paradox unfolds—space as an ever-expanding, boundless plane of matter, yet also something we know can be exhausted, limited, enclosed. How can these meanings coexist within a single concept? We move through space, inhabit it, depend on it, and yet rarely pause to question it. It remains so constant, so omnipresent, that it escapes scrutiny. In this sixth issue of the *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical* (LEAP), we dwell within space more deliberately, to stretch its limits until its contradictions begin to speak. We follow its origins through territorial and other confining definitions, and inspect what emerges when those limits begin to loosen. We ask: Did we arrive within it, or did space precede us long before we tried to name and contain it? What does it mean to navigate space, and how does it influence us? How is it constructed and experienced with human senses? In this edition of LEAP, we explore these and many other spatial questions, playing with its conceptual elasticity.

If space resists a singular definition, this becomes especially visible across the disciplines represented in this issue. Fields such as linguistics, literary studies, disability studies, psychology, international relations, sound studies, digital media studies, philosophy, urban studies, and cultural analysis each approach space through different conceptual frameworks. In disability studies, for example, attention to bodily and cognitive variation shifts the focus towards the structures and infrastructures that act as barriers, rendering environments hostile for individuals with disabilities. In

linguistics, discourses surrounding language reveal how linguistic variation is tied to social and cultural evaluation, often shaping political dynamics. Sound studies inherently engage with space, as sound travels through different media that may alter its form. The connection between sound and space can shape how people perceive and relate to places, which play a crucial role in asserting space for diverse identities. Urbanism conceptualises space as a socially produced battleground shaped across time, and where actors, through an engagement with creation, can lean towards a re-appropriation of space from hegemonic structures. Similarly, in international relations, questions of space often involve acts of reclamation tied to identity. Whether through individual resistance to regimes that regulate intimate life or through transitional justice processes in which victims claim political space, these dynamics demonstrate how space can be actively reappropriated. While these perspectives sometimes overlap, they can also reveal tensions. Both guide us towards a better understanding of space, of its experience and of its representation. This journal is a project centred around the interdisciplinary conceptions of space and uses them to form a line of connection that links our work with one another. In exploring space, we are exploring possibilities and limits alike, delving into the omnipresence of a concept that affects each and every one of us.

This exploration of space is divided into three thematic blocks: "Navigating the World", "Between Reality and Representation", and "Territorial Contestations". "Navigating the World", with contributions by Roberto Ochoa, Patrīcija Bauze, and Simona Bizunovičiūtė, shows, through proprioception and through ideological and epistemological frameworks, that space is socially and historically constructed. In "Between Reality and Representation", Eline Balster, Stephanie Lones, and Zuzia Dzierzędzka demonstrate how media is an interactive and unfolding space that shapes and is shaped by its contents, creators, and consumers. These authors thus play an active role in this process with their work. Finally, in "Territorial Contestations", Matthijs Verzijden, Katharina Eder, Farah Pahlevan, and Daniëlle Baan and David Sary show that this spatial production is a political process shaping our identities and everyday lives. Similarly, the construction

of this edition of LEAP has been a shared process of personal and academic development.

Navigating the World

The contributions in this first thematic block approach the conceptualisation of space not as a unified problem but as a field of tensions unfolding across different levels of inquiry. Instead of treating space as given, they interrogate the conditions under which it is thought, perceived, and practiced. Taken together, these first three articles articulate a dialectical movement between epistemological critique, embodied experience and everyday spatial practice under a shared concern over the legacy of modernity's impact on understanding space and its claim to universality.

Roberto Ochoa opens this block with his article "Space Agnosticism as a Challenge to Modernity: A Comment on Jean Robert's Article 'Place in the Space Age'", which situates space within a broader historical and epistemological critique, interrogating its apparent universality. Ochoa follows Swiss architect and urban planner Jean Robert. Engaging with Robert's argument that space is not a universal *a priori* but a socio-historical construct, the article reveals how modernity abstracts and standardises spatial experience, producing environments that are epistemologically neat but experientially flattened. In this context, modernity appears not simply as a historical period, but as a regime in which space becomes central to the ordering of the world. By foregrounding the emergence of space as a dominant conceptual theory, Ochoa destabilises the assumption that space functions as an objective container of phenomena, arguing instead that the concept of space is produced within specific configurations of knowledge and power.

Patrīcija Bauze's article "Our Place in Space: An Experienced rather than a Positioned Reality" takes this problem up from the standpoint of lived experience, shifting the focus from epistemological construction to embodied perception. Drawing on French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as well as on empirical research in cognitive science, she examines the body as a primary site through which spatial relations are constituted. The systematic distortions observed in what is called *body image*, such as overestimation of length and underestimation

of volume, are approached in the article not as failures of measurement but as indications of a more fundamental mismatch between lived space and its "objective" representations. In this sense, the body is not simply located in space but operates as the very condition for spatial orientation. If Ochoa challenges the objectivity of space at a level of epistemic notion, Bauze demonstrates its instability at the level of subjective perception and cognition: space is not only conceptualised but also enacted through a body that ultimately resists being reduced to seemingly objective metric systems.

Simona Bizunovičiūtė's contribution "Species of Scriptures: An Infraordinary Methodology for Urban Observation" extends this tension into the domain of everyday spatial practice under conditions of contemporary digital mediation. If space is neither epistemologically neutral, according to Ochoa, nor perceptually stable, as Bauze notes, the question then becomes how it is navigated, reproduced, and contested in lived environments. Drawing on Perec's notion of the infraordinary, in dialogue with French theorists Henri Lefebvre's and Michel de Certeau's accounts of socially produced and practiced space, the article proposes a methodological response to this problem. Through ethnographic fieldwork centered around unauthorized inscriptions in The Hague, Bizunovičiūtė explores how attention ecologies, especially those shaped by digital infrastructures and algorithmic curation, constitute what becomes visible, valuable and meaningful in urban spaces. In this context, the infraordinary emerges as a counter-practice—a way of attending to the aspects of spatial experience that evade patterns of consumption enforced by algorithmic mediation of images.

Read together, these three contributions do not converge on a single definition of space. Rather, they discuss its ambiguities across three interconnected levels: the critique of conceptual foundations for understanding space, the instability of its embodied perception, and the methodological challenge of apprehending it in practice. What unfolds is not a rejection of spatial thinking but a reconfiguration of it. Space does not appear as a fixed object or a purely subjective experience; it emerges as a dynamic process constituted through the interplay of knowledge, perception, and everyday actions. Ultimately, space remains irreducible to any one

single mode of analysis and opens towards manifold possibilities of analytic interaction—not easily pinned down, nor exhaustible, space paradoxically reaches outward instead of closing in and delimiting its potentials.

Between Reality and Representation

The realm of media emerges as a key site in which these dynamics of spatiality can be observed. In this section, our writers critically engage with media in the form of a medieval autohagiography,[1] a 20th-century classic, and a digital documentary. Through their analyses of media, they explore a virtual space where the real and imagined meet each other.[2] Marshall McLuhan summarised media as "extensions of man,"[3] capturing this in-between-ness that makes it such a powerful tool, rooted in reality and at the same time departing from it. Media can discuss space, but more often than that, *provide* space for the expression and negotiation of humanity. The media space is constantly shaping and being shaped by its contents, creators, and consumers, and our authors become participants in these processes. Their analyses interact with the media space as new interpretations are drawn from and projected onto it. Yet space is not simply a canvas waiting to be projected upon. In fact, few media spaces illustrate the back-and-forth process of modification between the medium object, content, and participant as well as the internet.

Eline Balster's article "Grieving Without Soil: Digital spectrality and the necessity of physical space in _when _scrolling_becomes_scrying (2023)," demonstrates how far the interaction with the internet as contemporary media stretches into our lives. In her analysis of the desktop documentary made by visual artist Janilda Bartolomeu after the death of her father, Balster investigates how the digital space dominates the modern everyday, both allowing for and prohibiting a feeling of loss—and through that,

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[1] In her article, Stephanie Lones combines the concepts of hagiography, i.e. the story of a saint's life, and autobiography to describe the media object of her research.

[2] Shekh Moinuddin, *Media Space and Gender Construction*: *A Comparative Study of State Owned and Private Channels in the Post Liberalisation Period* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010).

[3] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* (Ark, 1964).

of grief. After all, how may we feel loss if the lost one can be found just a click away? Balster investigates this question in relation to space, looking at the mechanisms of grieving that are provided in the digital space but discovering the necessity of physical ground in order to find closure. Her analysis illustrates media as an in-between space—the ability to constantly find traces of lost ones, resulting in an imagined world in which they never left. With special consideration of the Dutch-Cape Verdean artist's family history, Balster brings together the notions of physical and digital space to paint a picture of how the modern-day grieving process is shaped by the unforgetting internet.

Stephanie Lones returns to a much earlier form of media, as the object of her study is what some consider the first English-language autobiography. It stands in purposely stark contrast to the digital medium analysed in the previous article, to show that modern perceptions cannot simply be applied to past media objects. In her work "Navigating Space as a Disabled Creature: Undergoing Medieval Womanhood, Disability, and Spiritualism in The Book of Margery Kempe," Lones analyses the writings of a 14th-century mystic and pilgrim through the lens of gendered medieval disability studies. By considering the medium object a product of its time, she argues that Margery Kempe should be considered a disabled woman, disabled both by her own body and by the society around her. Evidence for this lies in Kempe's engagement in the practice of *imitatio Christi* and her referral to herself as "creatur," as well as in embodied symptoms of disability. Most prominently, however, Lones argues that the *Book* itself is proof of Kempe's disability: written in response to her ableist and discriminatory environment, the *Book* provides a space for the mystic to express her disability. In her line of argumentation, Lones thus leaves behind anachronistic medicalised analyses of Kempe's disabilities but rather applies a more inclusive framework to accurately capture Kempe's multifaceted identity as expressed in the mystic's own space.

Remaining in the literary realm, Zuzia Dzierzędzka's "Sound of Subscendence: Navigating Soundscapes in George Orwell's 1984" turns towards a more modern work. Her article revolves around the power of sound in Orwell's literary classic, how it functions both as a mechanism of oppression but also carries the

potential for brief moments of freedom and even rebellion. Drawing on the philosophical concept of subscendence, developed by ecocritical scholar Timothy Morton, which refers to how parts may become bigger than the whole they make up, Dzierzędzka demonstrates how sound allows the individuals participating in the prison-like world of *1984* to supersede the oppression—through sound, the parts become bigger than the whole. In a close reading of five scenes, she illustrates how the oppressor utilises both loudness and silence as instruments of control. At the same time, however, she uncovers the paradoxical potential of this sounded environment, which—despite aiming to achieve total control—allows moments of reprieve and autonomy through subscendence. Dzierzędzka's article serves as a bridge leading to the third section: While no media is apolitical, her explicit discussion of the political implications of sound is taken up in the final section.

Territorial Contestations

The third and final block engages with the politics of space, examining how space is produced, navigated, and contested through political processes. These dynamics emerge from tensions between imposed structures of spatial control and lived practices of space. In line with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, these planes of reference in themselves can be understood as spaces where power and identity are contested, negotiated and exercised.[4] Space is subjected to processes that are dynamic and create tangible effects.[5] From migration flows to urban development to questions of justice and identity, space is never neutral but always shaped by competing forces and interests. In this sense, this last section focuses on space as being an arena in which different forms of agency interact, sometimes in the pursuit of hegemony, and sometimes simply to assert existence.

In "Sounding Hakka Spaces in Taiwan," Matthijs Verzijden explores how notions of space are crafted and contested through

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est ce que la philosophie ?* (Les Editions de Minuit, 2011), 39-62.

[5] Mustafa Dikeç, "Space as a Mode of Political Thinking," (Geoforum 43, no. 4, 2012): 669–76, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.01.008

singing and listening to Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan. Analysing five case studies, he shows how local initiatives craft space to sing mountain songs in reaction to national policies, how local space to sing mountain songs is contested by transnational developments, how audible differences between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs are used to distinguish between China and Taiwan as different spaces; and how Hakka people claim their space in Taiwanese history and contemporary society through singing and listening to mountain songs. He then discusses how his analysis contributes to the concept of the Sinophone, arguing that music and sonic culture in general is central in understanding what it means to be Chinese. The struggle of Hakka people for space in Taiwan is part of a larger effort to contest space for Taiwan in the world.

Relating the sonic space to the linguistic space, Katharina Eder's ""It is not German, it is replacing German": Why a multiethnic youth variety is perceived as a threat to the German nation" examines public and media discourse surrounding Kiezdeutsch between 2009 and 2012. She situates debates about language within broader discussions of immigration, identity, and social belonging in Berlin, by investigating the variety Kiezdeutsch, spoken by both multilingual and monolingual youth, reflects the diversity of urban neighbourhoods. Through a corpus-based approach, the article analyses how discourse about *Kiezdeutsch* reproduces ideologies linking linguistic variation to social and cultural decline. It focuses on the belief that the variety threatens "standard" German and that its speakers pose a risk to German society. Three interconnected layers of this ideology are identified, each contributing to processes of othering, exclusion, and in-group/out-group construction. The study highlights how terms such as "immigrant" and "migration background" are racialised in German discourse, which reinforces hierarchies of belonging and notions of deservingness. By analysing a period preceding a key political shift with the rise of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland*, Eder demonstrates how contemporary xenophobic and racist narratives around immigration and language were already taking shape between 2009 and 2012, offering critical insight into the foundations of current debates.

Turning from linguistic to affective dimensions, Farah Pahlevan's "Affective Territories of Resistance in Iran's Women-Life-Freedom Movement" explores how resistance persists under authoritarian rule when public protest is violently suppressed. While large mobilisation has been met with severe repression, resistance persists beyond tangible protest sites. Pahlevan argues that political agency is sustained through "affective territories", which are relational spaces constituted of shared emotions such as grief, care, and solidarity. Going beyond conventional spatial analyses focused on streets or institutions, she highlights the intimate and embodied aspects of resistance. She develops a specific framework showing how authoritarian regimes seek to regulate not only public space but also emotional and interpersonal life. She then demonstrates how everyday relational practices reproduce solidarity and participate in maintaining the collective movement. Applying this framework to the Women-Life-Freedom movement as it came about in Iran, Pahlevan shows how affective forms of resistance enable movements to survive repression and concludes by showing how resistance is continuously reconstituted through emotional bonds, ensuring that it persists even when violently restrained in public space.

Finally, Daniëlle Baan and David Sary examine transitional justice and the remembrance of the Cambodian Genocide by conceptualising space as both a metaphor for political participation and the physical arenas in which such participation can occur. Adopting an actor-focused approach, the article highlights how actors' experiences and practices shape transitional justice in practice. While formal transitional justice mechanisms such as the ECCC have contributed to legal accountability, they also risk monopolising transitional justice and remembrance, thereby constraining political space. Moreover, such mechanisms may narrow the discourses and standardised conceptions of transitional justice, as well as narratives aligned with the interests of the Cambodian government. However, institutions do not exercise absolute control over the political space of the Cambodian Genocide. Cambodian communities continue to assert and expand it through bottom-up practices rooted in local, cultural, and communal dynamics. By examining initiatives including *FRAGMENTS #KH50,* and the work of Vann Nath and Rithy

Panh, the article explores how survivors and further generations both engage with and challenge institutional frameworks. In doing so, Cambodians contest institutional dominance and actively reclaim political spaces, blurring the distinction between victims and perpetrators, extending the notions of responsibility beyond the senior cadres responsible for the genocide, and practicing remembrance through everyday acts.

Transcending Boundaries

Our edition of LEAP demonstrates the sheer variety of ways in which space can be conceptualised. One conceptualisation that must not be overlooked, however, is the journal itself. It is a space shaped by interaction between disciplines, by an overcoming of the boundaries put upon us by our individual fields. The hours spent working on the journal provided us with a space for intense discussion, a space for new ideas to grow and flourish. It was constituted by an outward-reaching, ever-expanding plane that allowed us to broaden our horizons beyond the spaces we were used to, beyond what made up our everyday reality. At the same time, it was delineated by our common interests and concerns, which transcend the three themes outlined above. While Bizunovičiūtė discusses the urban landscape and Balster explores grief, both investigate the hypermediatisation of contemporary life and how it affects the modern living experience. And although Pahlevan's and Bauze's articles might seem very different from each other at first glance, they engage with the embodied experience of space and the consequences it has for our view of ourselves and others. Both Verzijden's and Eder's analyses, furthermore, revolve around how people negotiate contested spaces inside their nations. Finally, Dzierzędzka's, Ochoa's and Baan and Sary's articles, despite engaging with entirely different topics, all ask the question: Does space simply exist, or can it be made? Like the book Lones analyses in her work, this edition of LEAP provided us with a space of our own. Through discussing space, we created it. With this thought in mind, we invite you to begin reading our individual contributions.

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PART ONE

NAVIGATING THE WORLD

Space Agnosticism as a Challenge to Modernity: A Comment on Jean Robert's Article "Place in the Space Age"

Roberto Ochoa

Abstract

We could better characterise the so-called crisis of the West as a crisis of Modernity. To be even more precise, it would be a crisis of the Cartesian picture of the world. Swiss-Mexican philosopher Jean Robert suggests a way out of this crisis. By questioning the supposed apodicticity and universality of Cartesian space, he opens new horizons for philosophical and scientific studies. This article explains Robert's space agnosticism: where it comes from, and where it leads. The main argument is that reconstructing a philosophical and scientific account based on the understanding of hyperbolic space, in substitution of Euclidean space, would give solid ground for true knowledge. In this way, we could recover the so-needed credibility and trust to live among each other and within nature.

Keywords: modernity, Euclidean space, hyperbolic space, Cuernavaca School, epistemological rupture.

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life" (2005)

We normally think of ourselves and everything around us as being in space. But is "space" really already a given, as water is for a fish? Since we cannot get out of space, we cannot know it for sure, but by simply asking about this we enter the domain of philosophy of science. We cannot think philosophically about the notion of space without considering the scientific implications of our wonderings. Space, together with time, is a central notion of our modern scientific understanding of the world. If we question the notion of space, we are doubting the very roots of our knowledge, and people would immediately —with very good reasons— be scared. How can we proceed with our wonderings on this topic without losing ground? The architect and philosopher Jean Robert (Moutier, Switzerland, 1937–Cuernavaca, Mexico, 2020) made an initial attempt that deserves study.

The invention of the notion of space is the origin of Modernity.[1] This is the main thesis proposed by Jean Robert in his article "Place in the Space Age."[2] Thinking as the architect he was, he opened a window for philosophical reflection. In fact, by thinking deeply about the idea of space, he himself became a philosopher of the city. When he states that if a hundred years before Newton no one knew space, and then Kant was wrong to consider it a universal a priori, he forces us to take his ideas seriously. The challenge that he poses opens the possibility for completely new questions about us and the world we live in. After reading him, one feels there is a wide-open room for philosophical and scientific creativity.

Robert's article should be read as part of a moment of rupture. When questioning space, he is calling for a completely new cycle of the scientific process. The enormous endeavour of reshaping science, however, is obviously not to be found in a short paper like the one we are commenting on. Science is progressive, but, as sustained by Gaston Bachelard, is also discontinuous,

[1] The word Modernity is capitalized in this article to indicate that it is used in a technical way that will gradually be made clear. It does not refer to modern culture, as a feature displayed by persons, institutions, or policies, but to a specific era in human history that could be very well labelled the *Space Age*.

[2] Jean Robert, "Place in the Space Age," *The International Journal of Illich Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 87-112. https://journals.psu.edu/illichstudies/article/view/60682.

successively ruptured and rebuilt. Bachelard is well known for introducing the term *epistemological rupture*, which denotes a radical shift in the structures of knowledge. In its own dynamics, scientific thought must firstly break with unthought or ingrained preconceptions, the epistemological obstacles that hinder knowledge. This is, at the end, the logic of scientific revolutions.

The new cycle of the scientific process for which Robert is calling must be considered only at the beginning, and where a deeper epistemological rupture is still needed.[3] It is in this context that the notion of space is questioned. "However surprising it might sound, space, strictly speaking, a perfectly homogeneous nothing, is a historical construction."[4]— Robert states. "It had a beginning and therefore might now approach its demise."[5] Modernity is reaching its end, but the process of building new scientific accounts must necessarily be undertaken in stages: first agnosticism, then scientific research, in the hope of reaching, at a final shore, a new notion of our environment, one that would provide us with grounds for a better coexistence between humans and with nature.

The purpose of this article is to comment on and, within my own limits, explain Robert's ideas. I will do this in three steps. In step number 1, I consider the cultural and, above all, intellectual environment of Jean Robert, which is of primary importance for understanding his method and main ideas. In step 2, I go deep into Robert's philosophical sources, especially in Patrick Heelan's *Space Perception and the Philosophy of Science*.[6] Finally, in step 3, I call for academic consideration of Jean Robert's space agnosticism and for more philosophical and scientific research, with new horizons in mind.

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[3] For this reason, this paper, as well as Robert´s article, is not trying to achieve academic precision, and may sometimes seem merely evocative. I will try, when the case demands it, to add some explanatory notes like this one.

[4] Robert, "Place," 92.

[5] Robert, "Place," 94.

[6] Patrick Heelan, *Space Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (University of California Press, 1983).

The intellectual context of Jean Robert and his method.

Jean Robert is part of what Humberto Beck has called the Cuernavaca School of critical studies.[7] He arrived in 1972 at the Mexican southern city of Cuernavaca, where he joined Ivan Illich (Vienna, 1926–Bremen, 2002) in the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC), where the latter hosted prominent thinkers, like Paul Goodman, Erich Fromm, Susan Sontag, André Gorz, Paulo Freire, Carl Mitcham, among many others. In the 1970s, the CIDOC became the headquarters from which Illich launched a profound critique of industrial society. Most of the thinkers came and went, but Robert permanently settled in Cuernavaca, where he lived walking the streets and winding roads of that city, crossed by 46 main ravines. After meeting Illich and writing his first book against the monopolistic tendency of motorised transport to shape cities, he made a personal choice to renounce having a car of his own, so he used to walk through the city's meanders. It is mainly for this reason, Illich's CIDOC and Robert's decision to put down roots in the city, that it has become feasible to begin speaking of the Cuernavaca School of Critical Thinking.

Technological asceticism

Jean Robert's ideas are so close to Illich's that it is impossible to comment on the former without reference to the latter. Robert used to present Illich as the inventor of a science that still does not exist. For Carl Mitcham, a prominent contemporary philosopher of technology, Ivan Illich should be considered one of the main critics of the "technogenic way of life."[8] Illich became widely known in the 1970s for a set of five critical books written in CIDOC that denounced the most prominent modern institutions as counterproductive: Celebration of Awareness. A call for institutional revolution (1971), *Deschooling Society* (1971), *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), *Energy and Equity* (1974), and *Medical*

[7] Humberto Beck, "Ivan Illich: A Philosophy of Limits," *Conspiratio*, Fall (2022): 54–66, https://thinkingwithivanillich.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Ivan-Illich-A-Philosophy-of-Limits-.pdf.

[8] Carl Mitcham, "The Challenges of This Collection," in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich: A Collective Reflection*, ed. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (State University of New York Press, 2002), 17.

Nemesis (1976). As Illich himself frequently told Jean Robert, he was then trying to set the intellectual framework of what, in his view, a post-industrial society must be. He thought it should be possible to imagine a society that could truly take advantage of what industrialisation brought, without falling into extreme dependence on technological devices, and becoming addicted to and enslaved by technology. The distinction between autonomous action and heteronomous satisfaction of needs, and the trends in industrial societies to privilege the latter, is central to understanding Illich's critique of the relationship between modern societies and their technologies. However, two decades later, Illich became strongly discouraged by the direction that historical events had taken regarding societal dependence on technology, so his method shifted from social criticism to a deeper historical archaeology of modern certainties.

In the preface to Ivan Illich's *Collected Works* in Spanish, Jean Robert speaks of a methodological break in Illich's work following the closure of CIDOC in 1976, after which he became an itinerant philosopher [9] and moved to what we could call the academic peripheries. This break corresponds to what Mitcham describes as the replacement of social criticism by, first, historical archaeology in the 1980s and then, historical elegy in the 1990s.[10] He was not alone. As Robert and Mitcham reported, the endeavour became a collective project of researchers from a wide range of disciplines who met several times a year to present their projects around Ivan Illich's table. It is in this context that "Place in the Space Age" was written and presented at the Oakland Table meeting, hosted by Ivan Illich and the city Mayor, Jerry Brown.

From the 1980s on, Ivan Illich's studies migrated from the material power of technology to its symbolic power. He stopped asking about what tools and machines "do" to society, but about what they "say." Illich identified one key characteristic of the

[9] Jean Robert and Valentina Borremans, "Prefacio," in *Iván Illich. Obras Reunidas*, vol. 1 (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 23.
[10] Mitcham, "The Challenges," 18–19.

"recasting of the ego" by technology: disembodiment.[11] To face it, his later work was rooted in a technological ascesis, which is "a critical distancing from the symbolic effects of mind-boggling (technology) that increasingly shape self-perception and subjectivity,"[12] an ascesis that starts in the body and mind, but that also becomes "an indispensable matrix for the recognition of tipping points" in the search for knowledge.[13] This change in Illich's method has two main implications. On the one hand, the depth and scope of his research proved, in my view, incomparably superior. On the other hand, it also—and this is something I will address later—distanced him from the broader scientific and academic debate of our time.[14]

Jean Robert's method

In line with Ivan Illich's technological asceticism and to delve deeper into the understanding of space as a modern certainty, Jean Robert had to practice a discipline he called space agnosticism. He defined it as "an ascetical effort to disentangle from the aggregate of notions and perceptions foisted by the enclosure of all realities into the homogeneous space of science and management."[15] To explain space agnosticism, he begins with his personal story. He describes himself as a once-upon-a-time believer in the endemic modern superstition that considers space as "the non-transcendent beyond of all reality,"[16] a believer "in a strange natural religion that doesn't worship Ge, Ra, Helios, Tonatiuh or Ouranos, the earth, the sun or the sky, or any of the elements, but space itself, as if it were the primordial element."[17] In that time, he recalls, he became an architect, and while working as a draftsman in Amsterdam during 1963 and 1964, he witnessed the threat posed to the city by a

[11] Silja Samerski, "Tools for degrowth? Ivan Illich's critique of technology revisited," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197, (2018): 1643, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.10.039.
[12] Samerski, "Tools for degrowth?" 1638.
[13] Samerski, "Tools for degrowth?" 1644.
[14] One of what we could call secondary objectives of this article is to try to bring him and his colleagues back to academic debates.
[15] Robert, "Place," 96.
[16] Robert, "Place," 96.
[17] Robert, "Place," 88.

political decision of the municipality to build roads and introduce vehicular traffic. His walks during the summer of 1964 left an imprint on him about the loss of something unique, the delight of the vibrant, smelly, and shadowy street life, and new questions assailed him: "What is there in architecture that destroys streets? What is there in space that destroys places?"[18]

Space agnosticism began as a personal experience, which later became a method. In more theoretical terms, Jean Robert describes this study method as a way of binding together again, as it was in the peripatetic axiom *Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu*,[19] the "concept" with the "percept", a method that, in his words, goes beyond modern phenomenology.

Here, again, it is important to foreground the method of technological ascesis as a path to space agnosticism. "From the 19th century onwards, the technique engendered, first, visual shows; then, other sensory simulacra of fleshless entities"[20] that Robert calls pseudo-percepts.[21] The entire industry that we today call the Media, in all its forms, runs by producing them. This is the main reason why, in his logic, technological asceticism has become so indispensable as a starting point for research. To do so, Jean Robert draws especially upon the ascetic of the gaze (custodia oculorum), a tradition widely commented on in some of Ivan Illich's last writings.[22] Illich's original ideas led Robert to amplify the research into the history of visual perception, in search of what he calls proto-ideas that gave rise to the modern invention of space. In this journey, he found the heuristically interesting idea that the invention of linear perspective in Renaissance painting, linked to the notion of the infinite, could be considered the true birth of space. He states:

> *According to (Albrecht) Koschorke, perspectivist space was engendered at the end of the fourteenth century by the introduction of the horizon into the womb of Renaissance*

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[18] Robert, "Place," 91.
[19] Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.
[20] Robert, "Prefacio," 30. Translation from Spanish is mine.
[21] Robert, "Prefacio," 26.
[22] See Ivan Illich, "Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 28 (1995): 47–61.

> *painting in Northern Italy. The pictorial "horizon" was no longer the crest of the mountains or the bottom of the heavenly vault but the abstract line of the points at which the viewer's eye would meet his feet, were he to reach them, an impossible feat. In other words, the horizon was now the mathematical construction of the infinite on a finite surface.*[23]

Without ascesis as a working method, it would have been impossible for Jean Robert to arrive at such heuristic insights. Before attempting to draw some arguments that could be philosophically and scientifically considered, it would be worthwhile, however, to delve a little deeper into the depths of the discoveries that underpin his agnosticism. I will do that following one of his main sources dealing with the philosophy of science.

Space-perception and the scientific revolution.

The idea of the horizon should be, without a doubt, of special interest for thinking about space. This is one of the main findings of Patrick Heelan, the first source mentioned by Jean Robert in his explanation of space agnosticism. Heelan states: "The perceptual object is never experienced as an isolated, unrelated entity: it always manifests itself within a horizon."[24] In his book *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Scienc*e, Heelan sets the terms for developing a new scientific account of the world.

The Euclidean space dominance

Euclid (ca. 325–265 BC), states Robert, "did geometry without knowing space."[25] Speaking of Euclidean space is, therefore, an anachronism. Nonetheless, the term is necessary to understand a fundamental shift in the Renaissance that allowed for the emergence of the modern concept of space. Pictorial vision, from the Renaissance on, pretends to represent reality as it is, more than how it appears to the observer's eye. For achieving this, a perspective technique using Euclid's geometry was invented, giving rise to the

[23] Robert, "Place," 103.
[24] Patrick Heelan, *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (University of California Press, 1983), 8.
[25] Robert, "Place," 92.

Euclidean notion of space. It was a linear perspective, called "mathematical" or "artificial," that allowed the fixation of pictorial elements, such as points or segments of lines, on a flat surface.[26]

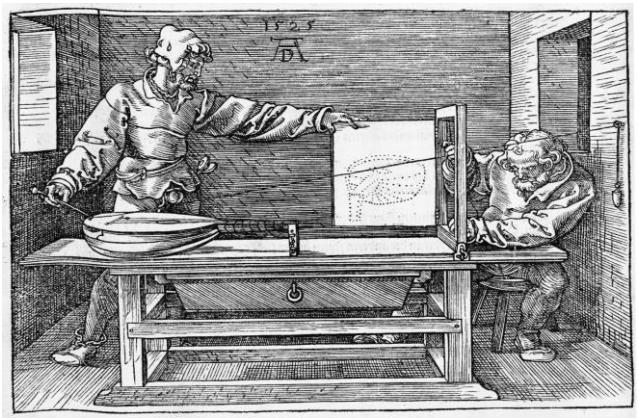

Figure 1: Albrecht Dürer, Unterweisung der Messung (1525)

This notion of Euclidean space is the background against which the 17th-century Scientific Revolution takes form. "For Newton and for most philosophers up to the time of Immanuel Kant, (...) geometry was conceived to be an idealization of (...) that aspect of crude, particularly visual, experience which dealt with relationships between certain kinds of physical items such as lines and figures *as constructed* (...) *in space*."[27] These are the objective elements of what Heelan calls the Cartesian-World Picture, and of what, for practical and synthetic purposes, I call Modernity.

The project of Modernity, the Cartesian-World, emerges given the need to give coherence to the explanation of nature after the Copernican discovery that the Earth is not the centre of the universe. To explain motion, Descartes relied on the atomistic philosophy of Democritus (fifth century B.C.) and designed a mechanistic understanding of the world and nature.[28] The idea of a neutral space by Descartes was originally formulated to support his theory of inertia as the explanatory cause of all movement in the

[26] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 100–102.
[27] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, p. 40. Italics in the original.
[28] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

universe (1645). Accordingly, each body in motion or at rest will continue in that state until an external force acts on it, colliding or pushing it, forcing it to change its state of movement or rest. Following this logic, Euclidean space became essential for explaining the constant and linear motion of the smallest particles. This theory was the main support for Newton's second law, or fundamental law of dynamics (1687). Newton even worked with Euclidean space as an absolute and characterised it as God's sensorium to deny the notion of emptiness, which it was obviously charged with.

As noted, Kant assumed space to be a universal a priori or pure intuition of thought, on which he built the entire conceptual edifice of modern philosophy. He was so persuaded of the apodicticity of Newtonian physics that he proposed as a self-evident truth that the space of empirical objects and intuitive experience is Euclidean. Interestingly, however, during the 20th century, Euclidean space became non-apodictic; it was strongly contested and considered not necessarily true by the Theory of Relativity and Quantum mechanics. For this reason, those of us living in the 21st century face a similar situation to that of those who lived in the 17th century. The mathematical calculus developed by Copernicus in the 16th century forced philosophers and scientists to provide a new account of physics and nature. In the 21st century, we are called to do the same.

Nature and hyperbolic space

As with the fish wondering what water is, the problem with space is that there is no possibility to think about it from outside its borders. This is why Patrick Heelan's concern with what he calls the "horizons of visual space" is so useful. "In any individual act of perception, the perceived object has an outer horizon, or boundary, which separates it from the background against which it appears."[29] But, since the horizon is not itself a visual object —it does not have an outer visual horizon to contrast it with—, "the term 'horizon of visual space' will refer then to the spatial horizon of all horizons of

[29] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 8.

visual objects, or the invariant geometrical structures exhibited by every visual profile of every visual object."[30]

In the line of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, Heelan develops a phenomenological and hermeneutical non-Cartesian philosophy of perception. He is concerned with the odd fact that many perceptual events are rejected as distorted or illusory merely because "they *do not obey* those scientific laws against which they would stand in evidence."[31] He delves deeper, however, into a subject that, in his predecessors' work, began only as an outline: the central role that technology plays in perception. He notices that, contrary to the modern axiom of space, our unaided natural vision of landscapes is not Euclidean but hyperbolic, that is, not inhabited by a constant geometry of straight lines but by curves. Relying on several experimental works in the last century, he states that "it was demonstrated that, when normal observers are presented with a configuration of points of light dispersed in an otherwise dark background, they tend to construe the spatial organisation of the configuration in a way not consistent with Euclidean geometry."[32]

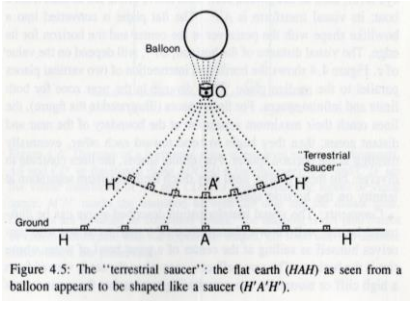

Figure 4.5: The "terrestrial saucer": the flat earth (*HAH*) as seen from a balloon appears to be shaped like a saucer (*H'A'H'*).

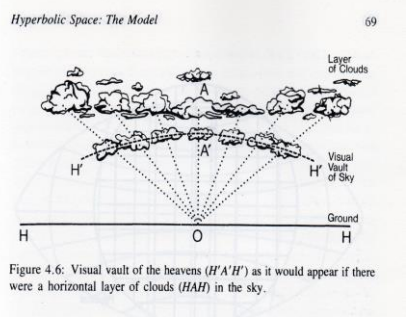

Figure 4.6: Visual vault of the heavens (*H'A'H'*) as it would appear if there were a horizontal layer of clouds (*HAH*) in the sky.

Figure 2. Graphics by Patrick Heelan illustrating hyperbolic landscape vision.

If the naked eye sees space in a hyperbolic fashion, then Euclidean space, as Heelan says, should be a scientific artifact, and our everyday world an artifact of scientific imagination. Since we

[30] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 11.
[31] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 2. The bold text is mine.
[32] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 46.

have come to believe in Newton's laws as the laws of nature, our everyday world, as modern humans, has basically a Euclidean normative structure. This is constantly exacerbated by technological developments always running ahead, not only causing an irreconcilable disconnection between humanity and nature, but also between rich and poor societies, as lucidly observed by Heelan:

> *The readable technologies necessary to convert primitive terms into scientific terms are ready to hand in our culture. That such technologies are ready to hand, particularly, but not exclusively, to the culturally advanced levels of our society, makes plausible and, to some extent, inevitable the substitution of World horizons that depend on technology for those that do not. Indeed, Western societies seem to be driven by a deliberate teleology to replace the primitive horizons of perception with new horizons accessible only through technology, thereby replacing common naturalistic descriptive terms at a primitive level in everyday language with a new repertoire of scientific terms for more cultured users of everyday language.*[33]

Jean Robert follows Heelan in his thesis that "space is (in fact) a product of technological mediation and visual education."[34] It is also for this reason that he advocates technological asceticism, since it is only by preventing the feet from being numbed by motorised vehicles or the gaze trapped by the TV that "the practice of agnosticism among the certainties of the space age" is possible.

The big enclosure

In his article, Jean Robert poses three questions: 1) How did space become a crucial element for developing modern management in a technological society? 2) How has that belief influenced the much older notion of place? and 3) How does the modern notion of space impact the ethical and political perception of the place as the atmosphere that people create when they live together? This last

[33] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 247.
[34] Robert, "Place," 96.

question is perhaps the most pressing in a world where we seem to be dragged by the exercise of power without ethics. But although it may not seem obvious, questions 1 and 3 are closely related. Our contemporaries tend to view technology and ethics as separate spheres of knowledge, in contrast to how Robert considers them in his text and how Ivan Illich does in all his work.

For Robert, the enclosure of all beings, of being itself, within space, the historical event in which space came to be conceived as an a priori, is the prelude for specialised and managed spaces "where children, the sick, and the mad are put to be among themselves."[35] When he states that space "became the crate of the world, the supreme enclosure,"[36] is implicitly pointing to Michel Foucault's idea about the enclosure of docile bodies and societies of control.[37] But he goes further: "When I think of enclosure, what comes to mind is the enclosure of pastures that turned commons into private space." [38] He refers to the 18th and 19th-century enclosure movement in the British countryside, "which has been dubbed a 'war against subsistence,' the 'tragedy of the commons,' the 'demise of people's moral economy,' or 'the social construction of scarcity,'" [39] and which finally made capitalism and industrialisation materially possible.

The process described by Heelan, in which the picture of nature with unaided senses is replaced by a world where common descriptive norms refer to Euclidean space, led to scientific and technological interventions that reshaped the world as a "carpentered environment." "Such a World is, in a special sense, artificial." [40] The "carpentered environment" to which Heeland refers is precisely what Robert means by "the big enclosure:" pre-planned and engineered structures that permanently require governmental management. Heelan speaks of "engineered forms of

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[35] Robert, "Place," 104.
[36] Robert, "Place," 104.
[37] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Since it was also considered by Jean Robert in other places of his work, we could also consider Gilles Deleuze's notions of *enclosure*.
[38] Robert, "Place," 104.
[39] Robert, "Place," 104.
[40] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 248. Italics in the original.

fixed markers, such as buildings, equally spaced lampposts, and roads of constant width."[41] Robert speaks of "a world of highways, airports, educational precincts, and penitentiary wards."[42] In both cases, what stands out is that the visual phenomenon in our everyday world is Euclidean.

When Jean Robert speaks of enclosure, he is not referring, in Foucauldian terms, only to the modern institutions of enclosure for those who are considered the weak. He is also referring to the engineered sets that we normally consider to be in the open. The idea of a carpentered environment describes a world in which visual phenomena of everyday life are Euclidean.[43] It is the environment of the big, modern cities. Heelan describes it in the following way:

> *Works of engineering, such as the rectilinear facade of a large apartment building or the shapes and sizes of cars in motion, must be included in the 'texts' that the carpentered environment provides; from their paradigmatic Euclidean geometric forms is 'read' the fact that things of different sizes or in different locations can be similar, a property characteristic of Euclidean space.*[44]

For Jean Robert, a priori space is, in a metaphorical sense, a kind of endemic disease, but a strange one because "those who are infected by it in turn affect reality, render it shallow, cause it to dwindle and fade, make it uninhabitable for themselves and for others."[45] But above all, and perhaps the worst setback, the malady seems to provoke "that things and people lose their relatedness to each other and fall apart."[46]

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[41] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 251.
[42] Robert, "Place," 105.
[43] From the very beginning of his article, Jean Robert positions himself at the opposite extreme from that of the modernist architect Le Corbusier. One only needs to look at the works and designs of this utopian urban planner, to whom the "invention" of modern life is attributed, to get an idea of what a completely engineered world would look like.
[44] Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 251.
[45] Robert, "Place," 105.
[46] Robert, "Place," 105.

A plea for a new science

The Theory of Relativity and Quantum mechanics, even when they are not mentioned at all in Jean Robert's article, are necessarily in the background. Both are scientific discoveries that, in the 20th century, profoundly challenged Newton's laws of physics, forcing a rethinking of space, time, and matter. With them, especially with the first one, non-Euclidean geometries in relation to space were successfully applied and thus accepted as valid. They are necessarily in the background because both Jean Robert and Ivan Illich based their work on the philosophy of science of Gaston Bachelard, who saw his task as searching for a philosophical characterisation of contemporary thought that should differ from the one appropriate to classical Newtonian science, in the wake of those discoveries.

A non-Euclidean representation of space leads, in Bachelard's terms, to a non-Cartesian epistemology. Mary Tiles, writing about Bachelard's philosophy of science, writes the following: "The acceptance and successful application of non-Euclidean geometries was seen by many as putting a final nail in the coffin of rationalist paradigms of knowledge, by showing that even in geometry there is no possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge."[47] In this regard, seriously questioning the reality of space seeks to provoke the epistemic break we need for escaping our still confining modern certainties. If we accept that the Theory of Relativity constitutes a cognitive advance, as Bachelard does, this requires us "to recognize that what had for so long been found to be self-evidently correct, Euclidean geometry, is not thereby objectively guaranteed," [48] and thus scientific knowledge cannot find a foundation in a priori intuition, or in a so-called clear and distinct perception.

Here is where the big debates around subjectivity and objectivity, and the way in which the subject reaches knowledge, arise.[49] Ivan Illich and Jean Robert respond to it in a very particular

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[47] Mary Tiles, *Bachelard: Science and Objectivity* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 222.

[48] Tiles, *Bachelard*, 31.

[49] Mainly, from here on, my paper can only turn out to be evocative. I am nearing the end, and I don't have much room left to elaborate. Maybe, for now, it is just

way, by incarnating in their own bodies, by fully sensing the place in which they happen to be, the real source not only of their experience but also of what they can truly know.

From "prophecy" to science

In 2002, one year after Jean Robert presented "Place in the Space Age," the book *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*[50] was published. It was a collective reflection by Illich's friends and collaborators. In the opening chapter, Lee Hoinacki, one of Illich's closest friends, sets the tone for both the rest of the book's chapters and for the approaches to the Viennese thinker since his death in December of that same year. With their friend's personal charisma strongly present in their reflections, those who collaborated with him have been very careful in remaining loyal to his ideas and to what they interpreted as his intentions. Hoinacki states that people have problems approaching Illich because they look in the wrong direction. It is, in his view, not by the quest for objectivity that we will understand him, but mainly by the subjective approach in relation to the person of the author, rather than his work. He presents Illich as a witness, in the style of Primo Levi, who wrote and testified about his experiences as a victim in Auschwitz. In the same sense, Illich would be bearing witness to "the overarching evil of recent Western history."[51]

This phenomenon surrounding Illich has been, of course, due not only to his personal charisma but also to the religious story behind him. As a young man, Ivan Illich worked as a Catholic priest. In fact, one of the few wide criticisms of his work, in the book *The*

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worth mentioning that, as well as Bachelard, Patrick Heelan discusses modern subjectivity widely. For Bachelard, Cartesian philosophy necessarily stems from Cartesian science. Tiles, *Bachelard*, 30. For Heelan, one of the major consequences of this is that, since classic modern science had no place among the objects of its inquiry for the mind, it was unable to account for the phenomenon of human persons. Heelan, *Space-Perception*, 257.

[50] Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, eds., *The Challenges of Ivan Illich: A Collective Reflection* (State University of New York Press, 2002).

[51] Lee Hoinacki, "Reading Ivan Illich" in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich : A Collective Reflection*, ed. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (State University of New York Press, 2002), 2.

Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West,[52] dwells precisely in the dramatic tensions between Illich and the Church. Hoinacki's writing, for its part, clearly demonstrates religious admiration, or at least religious influence. The account of multiple personalised experiences around Illich's figure has deeply influenced how people have approached his thinking.[53] Most people who discuss his ideas do so in a way that appears to follow his personal stances, rather than in a philosophically rigorous study of his thoughts. This overly personalised approach is one of the main reasons his work has not been widely discussed or at least read and seriously considered in academic circles.

But the conditions Ivan Illich and Jean Robert faced at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century are not the same as those we are already facing in the second quarter of the 21st century. The main thesis I want to propose for further exploration, inspired by Bachelard's philosophy of science, is that after space agnosticism as an epistemological rupture challenging Modernity, we should now favor the construction of a proper philosophical account for our world and our relationship with nature. A non-Cartesian account of objective knowledge is of main importance for that purpose. Objectivity, more than a condition for science, is the vocation of both philosophers and scientists.[54] Amid our crisis of credibility in the broadest sense, we are called to understand that the central focus of scientific work is neither the object nor the subject,

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[52] Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West,* (Oxford Academic, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190204563.001.0001

[53] For more examples and discussions about the topic, see: https://thinkingwithivanillich.net/

[54] For Bachelard, objectivity in science is not a condition but a vocation. "Knowledge has to become objective. Not only are there no starting points, no epistemological foundations for natural science, there are no already fully objective views, right or wrong, about how the world is." Tiles, *Bachelard,* 40. Bachelard provides an alternative account of objectivity of science in contrast to Popperian realism, which he sometimes called "chosiste" for being grounded in the states and intrinsic qualities of independently existing objects. Science progresses *towards* objectivity as a goal that "can structure a cognitive field and thereby introduce an order which overarches particular theories within it without requiring any absolute yardstick for the imposition of that order." Tiles, *Bachelard*, 47.

but the horizon, the spatial horizon of all horizons; "the invariant geometrical structures exhibited by every visual profile of every visual object."[55]

Trust between us can only grow if we become more credible. For that purpose, Ivan Illich and Jean Robert should be brought back from the academic peripheries to which they moved in the 1980s. This article is a double call, for academics to read Illich and Robert on the one hand, and for those who read Illich to walk towards objectivity on the other.

Conclusion

Since I cannot provide further explanations in this article, what remains for us, after all this, is to call for further scientific and philosophical research based on a better understanding of what its scope and purpose should be. I hope to have at least achieved the objective of providing good reasons for bringing Ivan Illich and Jean Robert back from the academic peripheries and, especially, for considering Jean Robert's space agnosticism as a challenge to Modernity. After Robert's and Illich's philosophical journey, a new critical theory of Modernity may be on the verge of development. I think Humberto Beck is right in comparing what he calls the Cuernavaca School with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.[56] But perhaps what remains to be emphasised is that, amid a crisis as profound as the one the West is going through, there is too much work to do to find our way out of what seems to be a deep civilisational predicament.

If Jean Robert is right and, due to the demise of Cartesian space, Modernity is reaching its end, we are faced with the heavy and urgent task of building a new scientific account before war, rivalry, or "natural" catastrophe disrupts and threatens the collapse of civilisation. Perhaps not only technological asceticism, but also Heelan's representation of Euclidean space as a scientific artifact will help us grasp what we should leave behind. Even more, the understanding of hyperbolic space as what is, in fact, given to our unaided perception, provides us, so to speak, a way to go. We are,

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[55] *Supra*, p. 9.
[56] Beck, "Ivan Illich," 58–61.

as philosophers and scientists, carrying a heavy burden, but we must continue looking at the horizon and searching for a better explanation of our environment, one that would provide us with grounds for better coexistence between humans and within nature.

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Our Place in Space: An Experienced Rather Than a Measured Reality

Patrīcija Bauze

Abstract

Research in cognitive psychology has found that healthy individuals systematically distort body image representation, overestimating the length and underestimating the volume of their body parts. This article argues that such systematic distortions are not merely methodological limitations but evidence of a deeper conceptual problem of attempting to measure a lived, experienced body as though it were an external object. Based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, orientational metaphors as theorised by Lakoff and Johnson, and embodied cognition theory, this article proposes that the body is not an object occupying space but the egocentric origin of all spatial experience, and that body image is an ongoing construction shaped through sensorimotor engagement with the world rather than a fixed internal map. Body image conceptual reframing carries clinical implications, discussed through the case of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). Finally, this article suggests that BDD treatment should shift from correcting perception against an external norm to spatial reorientation through embodied engagement.

Keywords: body image, embodied cognition, phenomenology, orientational metaphors.

Imagine there is a bottle in front of you, and you pick it up. A relatively simple task for most people, but in reality, your brain must perform precise calculations and considerations to execute the task successfully. For example, how far the bottle is, how long your arm is, and how high the bottle is positioned in relation to you. Thankfully our brains are usually quite good and fast at performing such tasks, otherwise we would be walking around knocking things over or missing them entirely. To perform actions like picking up a bottle successfully, it is important for us to have an accurate understanding of our body in space.

When we think of measuring space from an egocentric perspective, we must include insights from perception and action. Research in cognitive psychology has investigated the perception of body image in healthy adults — individuals with no known mental or physical disorders — with the results revealing unexpected findings. One would expect that healthy individuals would be able to perceive and represent their body parts accurately, but the results show that there are systematic errors of overestimating the length and underestimating the volume of body parts.

This article argues that the systematic distortions found in cognitive psychology's measurements of body image are not only methodological failures but evidence that the body is a lived, orienting space. Using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a theoretical framework and orientational metaphors as further evidence, this article suggests that the main problem is not how to measure body image more accurately, but rather that measuring a subjectively experienced concept with external and objective measurements is not the correct approach to begin with. Furthermore, with the rapid rise of digital media, societal standards surrounding physical attributes such as weight, height, and BMI have gained more importance. The rise of importance of physical attributes is increasingly linked to mental health concerns including low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders.[1] The ideas

[1] Mariana Merino et al., "Body Perceptions and Psychological Well-Being: A Review of the Impact of Social Media and Physical Measurements on Self-Esteem and Mental Health with a Focus on Body Image Satisfaction and Its Relationship with Cultural and Gender Factors," *Healthcare* 12, no. 14 (2024): 1396, https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12141396.

discussed in this article have further implications in understanding and developing treatment methods for disorders that include distorted embodied experiences, such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), shifting the perspective from perceptual correction to reorientation.

The article discusses the systematic distortion findings in body image research across five sections.[2] The first section, Body as a Measured Space, examines empirical research on body image through four studies, examining the results and evaluating the methodological limitations. The second section, Body as an Experienced Space, introduces French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to argue that body image is not an object that can be externally measured but the egocentric origin of all spatial experience. The third section, Understanding Space Through Language, further extends Merleau-Ponty's idea to orientational metaphors as theorised by American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, showing that abstract thought is structured through bodily experience, and that conceptual grounding is culturally shaped rather than universally fixed. The fourth section, The Body as an Active Constructor of Space, extends conceptual grounding through embodied cognition theory, using Casasanto's body-specificity hypothesis and Merleau-Ponty's discussion of inverting goggles to argue that body image is continuously constituted through sensorimotor experience rather than stored as a fixed internal map. The fifth and final section, From Perceptual Correction to Spatial Reorientation: The Case of BDD, discusses the clinical implications of body image reframing using body dysmorphic disorder as a case study, suggesting that treatment should shift its aim from perceptual correction to spatial reorientation through embodied engagement.

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[2] The theoretical frameworks used throughout this article, including phenomenology, conceptual metaphor theory, and embodied cognition, emerge from a particular intellectual tradition, as do the clinical approaches to body dysmorphic disorder discussed in the final section. The findings and suggestions are therefore limited in their cross-cultural applicability, and further research would be needed to explore how these ideas translate across different cultural contexts.

Body As a Measured Space

Navigating the world requires continuous integration of visual information and knowledge of our body's position in space, which is a process that operates through an egocentric frame of reference, largely beneath conscious awareness. Consider the bottle example from the introduction — moving your hand towards a bottle to pick it up requires knowledge of where you are in respect to the bottle. Thus, it is necessary for humans to have explicit mental representation of their body, often referred to as body image.[3] Body image describes a conscious representation through which individuals perceive the dimensions and configuration of their own body parts and is generally assumed to be highly accurate in healthy individuals.[4] However, research has revealed that healthy participants tend to overestimate their body parts in length and underestimate them in volume, raising doubts about the accuracy of the human internal representation of body image.

In a study conducted by Longo and Haggard, healthy participants demonstrated greater accuracy when visually matching their body parts to external sources than when estimating their measurements.[5] The researchers assessed perceptions of hand length and width using three approaches: depictive, metric, and implicit tasks (see fig. 1). In the depictive task, participants selected from visually manipulated images of hands to determine which appeared more slender or wider than their own. The metric task involved participants judging whether a presented line was shorter or longer than specific parts of their hand. In the implicit task, participants placed their left hand beneath a board, out of view, and used a baton to indicate the perceived locations of various anatomical landmarks on their hand. Results showed high accuracy

[3] Christina T. Fuentes, Matthew R. Longo, and Patrick Haggard, "Body Image Distortions in Healthy Adults," *Acta Psychologica* 144, no. 2 (2013): 344, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2013.06.012.

[4] Fuentes, Longo, and Haggard, "Body Image Distortions in Healthy Adults," 344; Renata Sadibolova et al., "Distortions of Perceived Volume and Length of Body Parts," *Cortex* 111 (2019): 75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2018.10.016.

[5] Matthew R. Longo and Patrick Haggard, "Implicit Body Representations and the Conscious Body Image," *Acta Psychologica* 141, no. 2 (2012): 166, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2012.07.015.

in the depictive condition, while the metric task revealed moderate distortion, with participants perceiving the hand as approximately equal in width and length. The greatest distortion appeared in the implicit condition, where participants estimated the hand to be about 1.5 times wider compared to its length. These findings suggest that body image representations are more precise when based on external visual references, whereas internally generated representations of actual body dimensions are substantially less accurate.

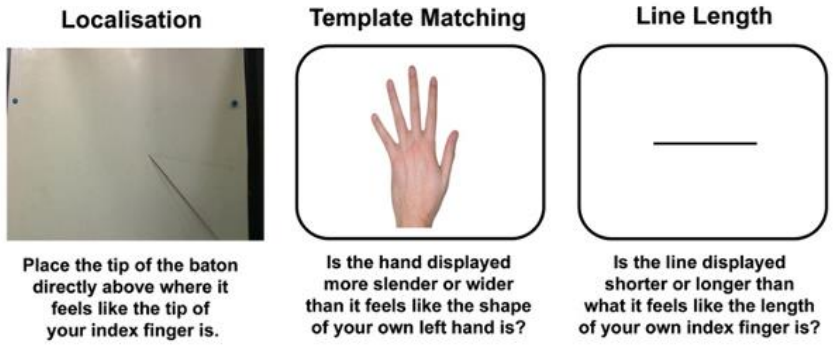

Figure 1. *Condition designs. From Matthew R. Longo and Patrick Haggard, "Implicit Body Representations and the Conscious Body Image," Acta Psychologica 141, no. 2 (October 2012): 165. Licensed under CC BY.*

Using a similar visual matching task, Fuentes, Longo and Haggard found that participants were accurate when matching their bodies to visual templates, but less precise when identifying the spatial locations of specific body parts.[6] 78 participants were tested in person and 274 participants tested online with two tasks: the Body Image Task (BIT) and a template selection task. In the BIT condition, participants clicked on a screen to indicate where they believed different body parts were located relative to the head. The template selection task included participants choosing the body template that best aligned with their own. Results from the BIT revealed systematic distortions, with participants overestimating

[6] Fuentes, Longo, and Haggard, "Body Image Distortions in Healthy Adults," 347.

shoulder width and upper arm length, while underestimating the length of their lower arms and legs (see fig. 2). In contrast, performance in the template-matching task was highly accurate. Consistent with the findings of Longo and Haggard, these results suggest that internal representations of body structure are less precise than representations supported by external visual references.[7]

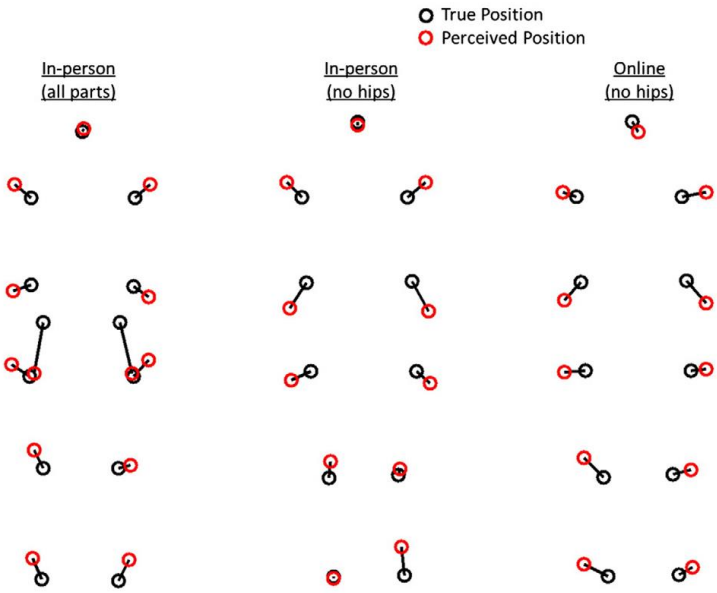

Figure 2. *Average resulting body representation figures. From Christina T. Fuentes, Matthew R. Longo, and Patrick Haggard, "Body Image Distortions in Healthy Adults," Acta Psychologica 144 (October 2013): 348. Licensed under CC BY.*

However, the understanding of our bodies comes from a combination of tactile and visual cues, therefore researching only one modality does not accurately reflect body image in the three-dimensional world that we live in.[8] In a series of experiments

[7] Longo and Haggard, "Implicit Body Representations," 167.
[8] Sally A. Linkenauger et al., "The Perceptual Homunculus: The Perception of the Relative Proportions of the Human Body," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no. 1 (2015): 103, https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000028.

investigating the relationship between body sensitivity and physical size Linkenauger et al. found that participants tend to overestimate the length of less sensitive body parts, which are body parts with sparse somatosensory fields.[9] Across six experiments, participants estimated lengths of different body parts using either other body parts or external objects as a metric tool. There was a consistent pattern of participants overestimating the length of less sensitive body parts, like arms, torso, and legs, relative to more sensitive body parts, such as hands, feet, and face. Since more sensitive body areas have denser receptive fields and greater tactile acuity, such results could be considered as support for reverse distortion, suggesting that overestimating the size of less sensitive body parts compensates for the differences in tactile receptive field sizes. The findings indicate that perceptual distortions in body image may not simply reflect inaccuracy but could serve a functional purpose in maintaining a more uniform and coherent body representation.

In a study conducted by Sadibolova et al., length estimates using a hand standard led to systematic overestimation, whereas volume estimates did not follow such pattern.[10] Extending prior work on two-dimensional body perception, the researchers examined the three-dimensional experience of embodiment by assessing representations of body volume by investigating whether the ratio of a body part's surface area to its volume predicted perceived volumetric size. Participants were assigned to either a hand standard group or an object standard group. The object standard group used foamboard sticks matched to their hand length for length judgments and books of varying sizes for volume judgments. The hand standard group utilised the perceived length and volume of their right hand to estimate both dimensions.

Additionally, catch trials were used to control for the impact of measuring units. The trials included participants estimating the other group's measurement tool and confirmed that participants

[9] Somatosensory fields refer to the areas of the body represented in the brain's somatosensory cortex, which processes sensory information such as touch and pressure. More sensitive body parts, like the fingertips, have denser neural representation than less sensitive ones, like the upper arm.

[10] Sadibolova et al., "Distortions of Perceived Volume and Length of Body Parts," 79–82.

overestimated both length and volume when using hand units, suggesting that hand-based measures distort perception. Consistent with findings by Linkenauger et al., length judgments made with the hand standard were larger than those made with external objects, with the torso showing the greatest overestimation.[11] In contrast, volume judgments were not significantly influenced by the measurement tool. Moreover, body parts with a larger surface-area-to-volume ratio were associated with smaller degrees of volumetric underestimation (see fig. 3). Such findings suggest that distortions in body perception may vary across spatial dimensions, highlighting the complexity of internal body representations and pointing to the need for multidimensional models of body image and awareness.

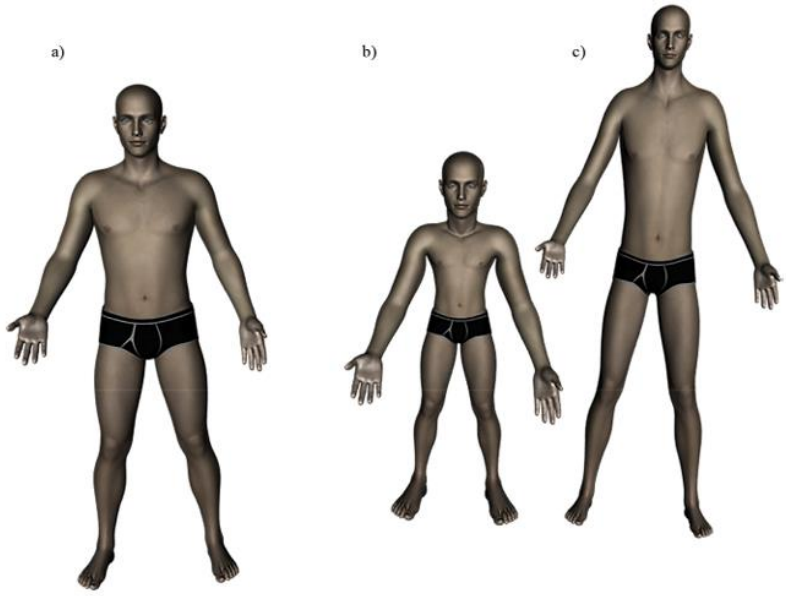

Figure 3*. Perceptual distortions of body image: a) normal body proportions, b) resemblance to somatosensory homunculus, c) body parts underestimated in volume tend to be overestimated in length. From Renata Sadibolova, Elisa R. Ferrè, Sally A. Linkenauger, and Matthew R. Longo, "Distortions of Perceived Volume and Length of Body Part," Cortex 114 (February 2019): 83. Licensed under CC BY.*

[11] Linkenauger et al., "The Perceptual Homunculus," 109–110.

Overall, our perception of body image is influenced by factors such as sensitivity and the methods used to measure body parts. Healthy participants show consistent distortions, with individuals often overestimating body part lengths and underestimating volumes, especially for less sensitive areas. However, the findings are constrained by recurring methodological and conceptual limitations. Inconsistencies in operational definitions, such as differing definitions of hand length, variation in measurement tools, and reliance on visually based estimation tasks complicate comparison and reduce generalisability.

Several experiments utilise abstract or artificial procedures, such as estimating body dimensions using one's hand or a dowel, or mentally "fitting" a hand into other body parts, which have limited resemblance to everyday embodied experience, raising concerns about ecological validity.[12] Online data collection without direct body measurements, potential misunderstandings of anatomical landmarks, the absence of controls for participants' professional background or perceptual expertise further introduce variability that may influence results.[13] Moreover, many tasks isolate visual or metric judgments, despite evidence that body representation emerges from an integration of tactile and visual cues.

Thus, while the studies offer valuable insight into systematic distortions in body perception, they also highlight the persistent difficulty of operationalising and measuring a fundamentally subjective, metaphysical, and multidimensional concept such as body image. The distortions are most striking when the body is used as its own measuring tool. If the body image is an abstract concept that can only be grasped through embodied positioning, then a question arises whether body image can be measured the same way

[12] Aitana Grasso-Cladera et al., "Mobile Brain/Body Imaging: Challenges and Opportunities for the Implementation of Research Programs Based on the 4E Perspective to Cognition," *Adaptive Behaviour* 31, no. 5 (2022): 426, https://doi.org/10.1177/10597123211072613.

[13] Lara A. Coelho et al., "Long- but Not Short-Term Tool-Use Changes Hand Representation," *Experimental Brain Research* 237 (2019): 138, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-018-5408-y; Gianna Cocchini et al., "The Magic Hand: Plasticity of Mental Hand Representation," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 71, no. 11 (2018): 2322, https://doi.org/10.1177/1747021817741606.

as that of objects. Instead of treating the body as an object, this article proposes to understand the body as the origin of the measurement itself.

Body As an Experienced Space

Consider the bottle example from the introduction again. To pick it up, one must make a calculated movement by considering how far the bottle is and how long their arm is. In doing so, the person becomes the reference point for their movement, the origin of the measurements. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology theorises. He argues that the body does not just exist in the world as a measurable object among other objects; rather, it actively forms the space around it through the very act of existing.[14] Merleau-Ponty proposes that the body is not in space the same way a chair is in a room; it is the condition through which space becomes meaningful. Space is not a container one is inside of, like a chair in a room, but it is something one continuously organises around themselves. Concepts like "near/far" or "reachable/unreachable" are relative to the body as the centre point.[15] Therefore, oneself is the point of departure for determining their relation to the world. The physical space around us is shaped through our experiences, senses, perceptions, movements, etc., which provide us with reference points and allow for movements like picking up a bottle. Meanwhile, psychological research continuously attempts to operationalise abstract, subjectively experienced phenomena into discrete measurable variables. An attempt that, by its nature, risks oversimplifying constructs that resist objective quantification.

To measure our body image, like the length and volume of different body parts, one must imagine themselves in an outside perspective regarding a rather subjective experience — our lived world. Psychology treats the body as an object to be measured externally, but Merleau-Ponty's framework suggests that such an approach misunderstands what the body is. The widely used metaphor PLACE YOURSELF IN ANOTHER PERSON'S

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 81.
[15] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 83.

SHOES illustrates this distinction.[16] The metaphor does not require one to place themselves in another person's position. This would simply result in a change of physical space, but the perceived world would not change. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology framework suggests, the metaphor requires one to temporarily inhabit someone else's spatiality of situation entirely, not merely their location within it. The body is not like other external objects that possess spatiality of position but can be thought of in terms of spatiality of situation — a bodily orientation that structures how the world is experienced.[17] Reducing one's body to measurements misses what makes the body distinct from any other object in space.

If the body truly is the embodiment of our experienced space in the world, then measuring it using external techniques misses the essence of our body image being not just a map of physical dimensions but a representation of one's lived and experienced space. Two people with different body images are inhabiting different spatial realities and distorted body image is not a calculation error, but rather differently embodied spatial experience. What is described as "distortion" may therefore be less of a perceptual error than a differently structured embodied experience. Hence, when researchers ask participants to estimate the length of a body part, they are not measuring the body as an external object. Instead, they are engaging with the body as the origin point from which spatial reference itself emergers. Thus, estimation of the length of a body part is not an objective assessment of physical dimensions, but an expression of how one's lived body organises and constitutes space.

Understanding Space Through Language

The notion that the body is not merely an object occupying space but rather the origin of spatial experience has implications regarding how we speak and think about the world. If the body is, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the origin of all spatial experience, then the way we talk about abstract things should reflect that. While Merleau-Ponty provides the basis for understanding why bodily experience

[16] Metaphors are written in uppercase following the convention established in Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
[17] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 114–115.

structures thought, Lakoff and Johnson provide linguistic evidence for the claim. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that our conceptual system structures how we perceive and experience the world, with the primary way of expressing our conceptual structures being metaphors.[18] Orientational metaphors are used to organise whole system of concepts in terms of another, such as up-down, in-out, on-off, central-peripheral.[19]

Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphorical orientations are based on our physical and cultural experience. For example, a slumpy posture usually implies sadness and depression, while an upright posture is associated with a positive emotional state, thus happy is "up" and sad is "down": I'M FEELING UP, MY SPIRITS ROSE, I'M FEELING DOWN, I FELL INTO DEPRESSION. Health and life are associated with up, while sickness and death with down, since serious illness forces us to lie down physically: HE'S IN TOP SHAPE, ANNA ROSE FROM THE DEAD, HE FELL ILL, HIS HEALTH IS DECLINING. Future events are also thought of as up, as our eyes look in the direction in which we typically move, such as forward: WHAT'S COMING UP THIS WEEK, I'M SCARED OF WHAT'S AHEAD OF US IN THE COMING MONTHS.[20]

However, while oppositions like up-down are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can differ between languages. For example, in Aymara, a language spoken mainly in Bolivia and Peru, future is behind the ego, and past is in front of the ego. Past is something known, therefore it is placed in our field of vision, while the future, the unknown, is behind us.[21] Núñez and Sweester (2006) found that Aymara speakers gesture forward when talking about the past, and gesture backward when talking about the future. While the abstract concepts behind the

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[18] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 12.
[19] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 22.
[20] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 22–24.
[21] Rafael E. Núñez and Eve Sweetser, "With the Future Behind Them: Convergent Evidence From Aymara Language and Gesture in the Crosslinguistic Comparison of Spatial Construals of Time," *Cognitive Science* 30, no. 3 (2006): 411–412, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0000_62.

orientations may vary, the contrasting interpretations suggest that metaphors are grounded in shared bodily experience within a world, not in universal biology alone, suggesting that sharing the same physical bodily aspects, such as body parts, does not guarantee a shared understanding of our embodiment in space. The body's orientation in space becomes the scaffolding through which abstract experience is made meaningful. Orientational metaphors are not based on physical world, but rather the shared subjective perceived bodily reality with its distortions, which resonates with Merleau-Ponty's account of the body as lived space.

For Merleau-Ponty, language is not a separate system laid over experience but is itself rooted in the body's immediate engagement with the world. When we say we are "carrying" a burden, "reaching" for a goal or feeling "crushed" by expectations, we are not simply using creative figures of speech. We are referencing the body's actual experiences of weight, extension, and pressure to give form to something that would otherwise be inaccessible to language. Likewise, we can communicate a shared understanding of body image as we all have an experience of existing in a body and space, but the body image itself varies between people due to subjective experiences.

The Body as an Active Constructor of Space

The evidence from orientational metaphors suggests that bodily experience structures not just movement but abstract thought itself. Embodied cognition theory extends evidence from metaphors to a broader framework for understanding how bodily experiences influence the mind. The theory proposes two basic manifestations of embodiment: the lived and experienced structure of the body, and the body as the active materialisation and immediate environment of cognition. From a neural perspective, this can be understood as the mapping of cognitive limits within the sensorimotor system. Some theorists, like Mahon and Caramazza (2008), argue that conceptual properties operate at a higher order

than purely sensorimotor processing.[22] Others, such as Gallese and Lakoff (2005), suggest stronger embodied accounts that ground concepts entirely in sensorimotor experience.[23] In other words, according to embodied cognition theory, the body shapes our cognition through the ways we physically experience our bodies and through the ways the body restricts and enables our thinking. Therefore, cognition is partly organised around movement and sensation in the brain. The central debate between the strong and weak embodied cognition scholars concerns not whether embodiment is sufficient to ground abstract concepts, but whether it is necessary.[24] In terms of body image, a strong embodied cognition account would suggest that body image is made up of solely sensorimotor experiences, and its distortions could alter cognitive functioning. The weak account would argue that other factors like interaction between abstract concepts and sensorimotor experiences and its distortions would still allow a person with distorted body image to navigate the world and perform different cognitive functions successfully.

Casasanto's body-specificity hypothesis presents that motor experience has a role in shaping abstract concepts. Left- and right-handed people systematically associate positive valence with opposite sides of space, which is a pattern attributed to perceptual-motor fluency. Since the dominant side is more practiced and responsive, it acquires an affective quality of familiarity and proficiency that becomes mapped onto abstract judgments of goodness. However, such "sided" thinking does not imply that the two groups hold categorically different concepts of "good" and "bad". Rather, the process by which valenced judgments are constructed differs based on asymmetrical bodily experience. Thus,

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[22] Bradford Z. Mahon and Alfonso Caramazza, "A Critical Look at the Embodied Cognition Hypothesis and a New Proposal for Grounding Conceptual Content," *Journal of Physiology, Paris* 102, no. 1–3 (2008): 59–70, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jphysparis.2008.03.004.

[23] Vittorio Gallese and George Lakoff, "The Brain's Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Conceptual Knowledge," *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 22, no. 3 (2005): 455–479, https://doi.org/10.1080/02643290442000310.

[24] Tim Reinboth and Igor Farkaš, "Ultimate Grounding of Abstract Concepts: A Graded Account," *Journal of Cognition* 5, no. 1 (2022): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.214.

concepts are not fixed representational ideas retrieved from our cognition but are constituted dynamically through sensorimotor activation.[25]

Such functionalist view of embodied cognition is further supported by Merleau-Ponty's discussion of inverting goggles.[26] When a participant wears lenses that correct retinal images, the world is initially rendered upside. After a week of wearing the inverting goggles, taking them off results in reversed motor actions, but objects do not appear inverted. The body is simultaneously presented with two incompatible spatial maps — the inverted visual field and the intact sensorimotor representation of an upright body. The representations cannot be accommodated at once, and their conflict persists until one is gradually displaced by the other. The resolution occurs not through deliberate cognitive recalibration but through action. Participants who engage actively with their environment, such as by washing their hands, reorient themselves significantly faster than passive participants. Through repeated motor engagement, the body remaps its spatial coordinates, learning that directions previously experienced as downward now correspond to an upward visual signal, until a new coherent spatial reality is established. When the goggles are removed, the world does not appear inverted but rather unfamiliar, yet motor responses remain temporarily reversed, serving as evidence that the body had fully internalised the new spatial schema at a deeper level.

Therefore, Casasanto's body-specificity hypothesis and Merleau-Ponty's account suggest that space is not computed and then acted upon, but is continuously created though bodily movement itself, which is contrary to the initial example of reaching for a bottle and the brain calculating the movement. Based on the view of embodied cognition, body image is not a static internal metric, but an ongoing development and result of sensorimotor engagement with the world. Body image is something learned, revised, and embodied through inhabiting space, rather than represented as a fixed geometric map, and therefore cannot be

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[25] Daniel Casasanto, "Embodiment of Abstract Concepts: Good and Bad in Right- and Left-Handers," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 138, no. 3 (2009): 351, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015854.
[26] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 286.

measured with objective, external measurements, such as centimetres or dowels.

From Perceptual Correction to Spatial Reorientation: The Case of BDD

If even healthy individuals perceive their bodies as distorted, how would, for example, a person with body dysmorphic disorder perceive themselves? Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is characterised by preoccupations with one's physical appearance, causing distress and decreased social functioning. Body image and self-esteem are two very important components of an individual's self-concept, and individuals with negative body image consistently report lower self-esteem, which is often correlated with causing BDD.[27] Contrary to the above-mentioned studies where body image is assumed as a physical, measurable concept, clinical psychology settings define body image as more imaginary and conceptual, describing body image as "positive" and "negative" rather than "accurate" and "inaccurate". Instead of directly comparing the patient's perception to an objective physical standard, the positive/negative dimension engages a patient's perception of their lived experiences, including subjective appreciation and functional relationship with one's body rather than perceptual accuracy. Thus, the positive/negative dimension aligns more closely with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account.

However, in the case of BDD, binary oppositions like positive/negative risk having an inverse effect on the patients, as they could unintentionally propel towards self-destructive behaviours where poor body image becomes associated with a desired outcome of obtaining "correct" body image. Clinical frameworks tend to operate on a binary distinction between positive and negative body image, where positive image is associated with body and functionality appreciation, and negative body image with body

[27] Norfilita T. Lamba, "Self-Esteem, Body Image, and the Tendency of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) in Generation Z," *Observasi: Jurnal Publikasi Ilmu Psikologi* 3, no. 3 (2025): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.61132/observasi.v3i3.1259.

dissatisfaction and body shame.[28] Framing body image in terms of correctness and distortion risks pathologizing a particular way of inhabiting space, which may paradoxically manifest body image more distinctly as an identity — something that a person is rather than something that can be experienced. Body image becomes a way of inhabiting space that is recognised, named, classified and labelled, and for a person whose lived spatial reality is organised around a particular experience of their body, the negative body image becomes marked as something to be corrected. Therefore, the binary evaluation risks unintentionally reinforcing the very problem it seeks to address, as the pursuit of "correct" body image can become, from the perspective of the patient, a pursuit of desired outcome rather than a mental state to overcome.

Current treatments for BDD consist primarily of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and serotonin reuptake inhibitors, with CBT techniques including cognitive restructuring, exposure and response prevention, and mirror retraining.[29] Each of these approaches operates within the same conceptual framework critiqued throughout this article, by treating distorted body image as a cognitive error to be corrected against an objective standard, and training the patient to align their perception with an externally verifiable reality. For example, mirror retraining requires the patient to use an external visual reference to revise their internal body representation, which contradicts Merleau-Ponty's school of thought – accuracy in front of a mirror does not entail a transformed lived spatial experience.

An approach incorporating Merleau-Ponty's perspective would shift the treatment aim from correction to reorientation. Rather than asking whether the patient's body image is accurate, the

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[28] Sara Iannattone, Silvia Cerea, and Gioia Bottesi, "Seeing Both Sides: Examining Profiles of Negative and Positive Body Image among Italian Adolescents Using a Person-Centered Approach," *Body Image* 54 (2025): 101943, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2025.101943.

[29] David Veale, "Advances in a Cognitive Behavioural Model of Body Dysmorphic Disorder," *Body Image* 1, no. 1 (2003): 113–125, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1740-1445(03)00009-3; Sabine Wilhelm et al., "Modular Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Body Dysmorphic Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Behavior Therapy* 45, no. 3 (2014): 315, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2013.12.007.

approach would attend to how their body orients them in the world: what movements feel possible, what spaces feel navigable, what social situations feel inhabitable. The experiences of existing and taking up space in the world can be expanded through embodied engagement rather than perceptual correction. Like the logic of the inverting goggles experiment, spatial reorientation occurs not through deliberate cognitive recalibration but through action and movement within the world. Treatments that engage the patient's lived and actioned experience of space rather than their abstract judgments about physical dimensions may prove more effective precisely because they operate at the level where body image is actually constituted.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the systematic distortions documented in cognitive psychology's research on body image are not only reflections of methodological limitations that need to be corrected with more relevant measurement techniques, but also a reflection of the attempt to measure a lived and experienced body as if it were an external object. Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body as the origin of spatial experience rather than an object within it offers a more compelling framework, which is further supported by the structure of orientational metaphors in language and embodied cognition. Orientational metaphors reveal that abstract thought is grounded not in universal biology but in the shared, subjectively perceived bodily reality, while embodied cognition theory suggests that body image is not a fixed geometric map, but an ongoing construction shaped through sensorimotor engagement with the world. Abstract inner states, such as body image, become communicable precisely because they can be mapped onto the shared bodily experience of inhabiting space, but vary between individuals due to personal sensorimotor engagement with the world. The question of whether body image is accurate presupposes an external standard against which it can be measured, which this article has aimed to challenge. A more productive question is not how closely body image mirrors physical reality, but how well it enables a person to inhabit and navigate their world.

The reframing of body image extends to practical consequences in clinical settings. If body image is the departure point from which spatial experience is organised, then treating its distortions as errors to be corrected against an objective standard misunderstands what body image is. The inverting goggles experiment illustrates the alternative that spatial reorientation occurs not through deliberate cognitive correction but through action and movement. Therefore, when considering disorders like BDD, treatment approaches that engage patients at the level of lived, embodied spatial experience may prove more effective than those correcting perception with an external norm. Further research could implement the embodied treatment strategies and investigate their effectiveness, as well as examine how these frameworks hold across different cultural contexts, given that the theoretical and clinical traditions drawn on here emerge from a particular intellectual lineage.

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Species of Scriptures: An Infraordinary Methodology for Urban Observation

Simona Bizunovičiūtė

Abstract

This paper analyses Species of Spaces *(1974) by Georges Perec to bring into focus Perec's notion of the infraordinary. Through the lens of Michel de Certeau's and Henri Lefebvre's work on everyday life, social production of space and tactical resistance it demonstrates how Perecquian poetics of the infraordinary can facilitate practice-based research of hypermediated urban environments. While traditions of urban observation such as* flânerie *and psychogeography have largely remained within artistic and historical frameworks, this article repositions the infraordinary as a methodological tool for research practices. It does so by combining literary analysis with site-specific study of unauthorised urban inscriptions (stickers and tags) in the Hague. This empirical component is not illustrative but constitutive, testing how sustained attention to the infraordinary reveals patterns of spatial practice, contestation and visibility that are often obscured by digitally mediated attention economies. The combined analysis of* Species of Spaces *and the fieldwork shows how everyday urban environments are written, (re-)appropriated and experienced.*

Keywords*:* everyday life, Georges Perec, infraordinary, The Hague, urban studies.

In an era defined by the ubiquity of smartphones and constant mediation of urban experience through digital media platforms, the question of what it means to truly perceive spaces we inhabit in everyday life acquires urgency. The streets of contemporary cities are no longer simple physical environments to be walked through, they are layered, annotated and restructured by the invisible infrastructures that shape what we notice, where we go and how we move through the city. Yet, before the smartphone became an extension of the urban infrastructure, Georges Perec was already preoccupied with similar concerns. In his 1974 work Species of Spaces (SoS), Perec puts into use his concept of the *infraordinary* – a mode of radical attentiveness to the overlooked aspects of the everyday life.[1] This article argues that Georges Perec's notion of the infraordinary – articulated through his attempt to rethink everyday practices in Species of Spaces – can be read alongside Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space and Michel de Certeau's concept of tactical resistance, thereby offering a methodology for urban observation in contemporary hypermediated environments.

While other practices of urban observation such as *flânerie*[2] or Situationist psychogeography[3] and more recent iterations of walking as research practice have been extensively discussed, they have largely remained within the domain of artistic practice or have been treated as historical curiosities. This article proposes that these

[1] Proey Liao, "An Attempt to Approach A Void, or Georges Perec, Cause Commune, and the Infraordinary" (Master's thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Design), 7.

[2] The figure of the *flâneur*, first articulated by the poet Charles Baudelaire and later developed by Walter Benjamin, refers to a mode of urban observation defined by aimless wandering, a heightened sensibility to the fleeting dimensions of modern urban life. The *flâneur* is typically understood as an aesthetically detached observer of modern urban experience who is simultaneously blending into the crowd and stands outside it through occupying a position of the observer.

[3] Psychogeography refers to a set of disparate artistic practices related to avant-garde movements, urban wandering, *flânerie* and critical geography. It aims to engage the disinterested spectator to reconsider the status quo of their urban environments and to analyse how infrastructures affect mental state of pedestrians. See also Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Oldcastle Books, 2018).

traditions and especially Perec's infraordinary can be rehabilitated as an interdisciplinary methodology capable of responding to the specific challenges posed by the experience of hypermediated contemporary cities. Beginning with a literary analysis of Perec's *Species of Spaces* and how it textually unravels the concept of the infraordinary, the article then formulates a methodology for site-specific study of unauthorized urban inscriptions in the Hague to demonstrate how literary principles can be transformed into methodological tools. Ultimately, the fieldwork conducted in the Hague will demonstrate the way infraordinary occurrences can be put into a relevant dialogue between urban everyday life and digital spatial practices.

> *The walk begins with Stationweg, a long street leading North-West from the train station to the Hague's city centre. The surfaces are mostly clean. Or rather, they appear clean at first glance. A few stickers appear on the way: two on a signpost near the cross walk, another at the back of a sign, three or four stickers appear to be partially removed from the municipal trash can, one sticker stamped on a utility box around the corner. They do not accumulate. People pass without slowing down. The movement is streamlined, nothing seems to ask for attention beyond what is necessary to cross the street, to avoid a bicycle, to follow the flow towards the station or away from it. It would seem that there is nothing to observe, yet this thought is precisely what must be resisted. I continue. On Wagenstraat, the first changes become noticeable: lampposts, utility boxes and some mailboxes in this area appear to bear more stickers of variable sizes. No clear patterns yet. Further along, on Grote Marktstraat the stickers disappear, this main shopping street is sterile. Raamstraat is a tiny street connecting Grote Marktstraat to Vlamingstraat and is covered in a large mural, some tags here and there, no stickers. I keep moving through Vlamingstraat, Schoolstraat, Dagelijkse Groenmarkt, around Grote Kerk – these streets appear to be more colourful, more layered, bearing more inscriptions. Similar elements recur: poles, signs, boxes. Some are more densely covered*

than others. My task is to look, to note, to return, and to see what begins to emerge through this observation.

Setting the Ground: Space, Everyday Life and the Infraordinary

Published in the 1970s, around the critical moment when scholars became increasingly drawn to the exploration of everyday life, *Species of Spaces* by Georges Perec appeared alongside major theoretical works by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. The works remain cornerstones for researchers in fields related to urban studies to this day and re-discover space as a socially produced, lived, and practiced phenomenon. In this context, ***SoS*** is a response to a condition that Lefebvre identifies as central to urban experience—the conflict between conceived space of the urban planners and the everyday experience of the city.

Lefebvre distinguishes between three moments of space: spatial practice, representation of space and representational spaces. *Spatial practice* refers to perceived space as it appears to a user in everyday life through urban networks and routines shaped around them. *Representations of space*[4] describe space as imagined and realised by the urban planners and architects. It also constitutes the dominant space in society because it is ideologically charged and physically shapes the spatial practice of its users. For Lefebvre, ideology can only exist because of its intertwinement with space: "what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and its production and thus taking on body therein."[5] For Lefebvre ideology emerges once social reality is fully integrated into existing mode of production. Moreover, the dominant ideology reifies itself through marginalisation, and by denying space to some of the users standing outside its mode of production: "[a]ny 'social' existence aspiring or claiming to be 'real', but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity."[6] This way, production of space becomes a necessity for any community striving for recognition of its existence.

The dialectical tension between the space produced by the state that supports a certain mode of production and the space

[4] Often used interchangeably with "conceived spaces."
[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), 44.
[6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 53.

occupied by its users can be observed in the third moment of space proposed by Lefebvre. *Representational spaces*[7] are subjectively experienced and expressed: "[t]his is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."[8] This "symbolic use of its objects" resurfaces through the everyday use of spatial arrangements, for example, through cutting corners and creating desire paths, or through the means of artistic expression and discursive practices. Departing from Lefebvre's argument that ideology asserts itself through the three moments of space, this article interprets the language of the representational spaces in *Species of Spaces* and unauthorised inscriptions in the Hague as a form of re-appropriation of space.

> *A pole is placed to hold a street sign. It does not only hold a sign. The back of sign carries two stickers. Placed too high to properly see them. One seems more torn than the other, probably older. The front of the sign remains untouched. The sign continues to function. Its pole bears three more stickers at the eye level. A fourth sticker appears to be partly gone, the pole still carries its traces. The pole continues to carry the sign. An empty surface repurposed. The stickers greet a passersby's gaze. Unless their gaze is directed downwards. The sign continues to signify and carries additional signs with it. Not destroying but adding onto it.*

What would appear here to be a transformation of space in the sense of overt destruction, reveals itself to be a quieter form of temporary appropriation. Similarly to Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau is concerned with the ways urban spaces affect everyday life of its users and how these processes translate into and via culture. De Certeau counterintuitively states that "a marginal group has now become a silent majority," with the "marginal group" here referring to a massive, non-homogeneous group of non-producers of culture (i.e., consumers and users thereof) who perpetuate the articulation

[7] Sometimes referred to as "lived spaces."
[8] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

of production through economic means.[9] Extending the inquiry into panoptic power theorised by Michel Foucault,[10] de Certeau looks into the ways that the marginal group can evade the mechanisms of control through "miniscule" quotidian actions such a reading, cooking or walking.

This preoccupation with everydayness, and the ordinary—or in Perec's formulation, the infraordinary, to which I will return shortly—is at the heart of resisting the omnipresent control exercised through the means of production. For de Certeau, everyday actions with rebellious potential constitute *tactics* as a response to the *strategies* employed by the dominant order. If strategies rely on mastery of space, similarly to Lefebvre's argument that domination reifies itself through space, de Certeau posits that tactics then "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power."[11] Stickers in this case appear to be temporal contestations of space and will therefore be considered as spatial tactics from hereon. If conceived space is understood as an ideologically charged top-down projection of spatial arrangements, then the urban stroller structures their everyday activities around specific mode of living, shaped around an inherently dialectical relationship between producer and consumer.

If de Certeau theorises how everyday tactics resist strategic spatial control, Perec's concept of the *infraordinary* provides concrete insights for observing those tactical practices. The spatial preposition "infra" suggests an attempt to look at that which remains under what we call "the ordinary": "[b]y excavating what is below everyday life, the infraordinary shows just how unfamiliar we are with everyday life in the first place as we constantly come up against and avoid a void, and something about it—through creative acts and life itself."[12] In Perec's own words, the infraordinary aims at capturing that which remains systemically overlooked: "what is of no

[9] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), xvi.
[10] See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1997).
[11] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.
[12] Liao, "An Attempt to Approach A Void, or Georges Perec, Cause Commune, and the Infraordinary," i.

interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless."[13] While the purpose of a sticker is to guide the passersby's attention to something specific would seem to contradict the notion of the infraordinary, its omnipresence in the cities remains undertheorized since it forms something that would otherwise be considered a form of "visual noise" or an obvious truth. The choice to focus on the stickers is therefore motivated by their being an intrinsic part of the urban fabric—an infraordinary detail—whose presence is rendered too mundane to be closely observed.

Perec's concept of the infraordinary is considered here as a methodological tool that departs from detached observation and moves towards engaged focus on the normalised aspects in everyday life. Moreover, this practice aligns with de Certeau's tactics: both attend to what official systems render invisible, and both operate through small gestures of re-appropriating strategically built representational spaces and subjectively experienced representations of space through spatial practices. In contemporary hypermediated urban environments the infraordinary's methodological relevance intensifies. Digital media platforms function as attention economies which follow an opposing logic than the economy of material goods: instead of relying on scarcity of matter, it relies on scarcity of the users' capacity for reception of cultural production.[14] Navigation apps optimise commercially viable routes, put forward reviewed business, social media geotags cluster around photogenic landmarks. This systemic curation of consumption patterns renders vast stretches of urban experiences infraordinary not because they lack significance but because they refuse algorithmic commodification. Yet, Perec's literary texts offer something that escapes de Certeau's theoretical framework: a system of textual tactics to articulate the infraordinary and render it visible. In what follows I demonstrate how these textual tactics take shape, and how they can be adapted from literary technique into a scholarly methodology.

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[13] Georges Perec, "Species of Spaces" in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. J. Sturrock (Penguin Classics, 1999), 50.

[14] Yves Citton, "Introduction: From Attention Economy to Attention Ecology," in *The Ecology of Attention* (Polity, 2017), 2.

Writing with Perec: From Literary Technique to Method

In order to better understand how Perec uses the concept of the infraordinary in his writing it is crucial to begin with the formal analysis of *Species of Spaces*. *SoS* is a multifaceted text that cannot be attributed to a single genre: it uses essayistic, autobiographical prose alongside experimental techniques, similar to those of concrete poetry, that play around with the concept of space and the space of the book itself. Perec is also very particular about the structure of *SoS*, the book follows a path of spatial expansion: it begins with pondering space opened up on a page, then moves to the bed, the room, the apartment, then apartment building, the street, and so on, until reaching the entire world. Moreover, Perec's fragmentary style of writing, especially his attention to lists, creates interesting tensions by juxtaposing fragments consisting entirely of paratactic text with those that follow the principles of hypotaxis. If parataxis omits clarification of subordinance and hypotaxis flushes out syntactic relationships within the text, Perec plays with the two in order to bring into attention the curious paradoxes arising in the gap between them instead of spelling them out.

Perecquian textual techniques in *SoS* reveal the infraordinary aspects of spatial experience. As noted previously, *Species of Spaces* assumes a rigid taxonomic approach with the self-ascribed premise of producing a totalising understanding of space beginning with the page and consequently enveloping the entire world. Such premise is inherent in the title itself—the word "species" suggesting a study of the different kinds or types of spaces. Perec allows his mind to wander even in this enclosed self-imposed system. For instance, the chapter dedicated to the street attempts to define precisely what a street is: it begins with a description of the alignment of the buildings along with their system of numbering, how the streets are separated into pedestrian and vehicle zones, the traffic lights, the gutters and surveillance cameras. The second subchapter then abandons this idea completely and moves onto observing two blind people walking down the street.[15] This attempt to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of space constantly falls back onto the limitations imposed by the style of writing; something that also

[15] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 46-49.

manifests in the difficulty to ascribe the book itself to any single genre. Aiming for an exhaustive and completed taxonomic system only draws attention to the artificial contractedness of categories and questions their boundaries. This way, Perec's taxonomy is generative because by undermining the very notion of categorisation, it allows for porousness between categories and creates space for doubt which is a crucial moment for analytical work to happen.

> *First distinction between different types of unauthorised inscriptions one can encounter in the city – there are tags and there are stickers. I focus on stickers; among them there are those that contain text, those that contain images, and those that contain both. The latter is the most popular kind. Among those with text: band names, slogans, tattoo shop titles, online shop titles, artists' websites or social media handles, memes, illegible fragments that resist being read. Among those with images: brand logos, recognisable symbols, flags, memes, seemingly random pictures, unfamiliar things; the image of a cat is used more than that of the other animals. The third category uses at least one element from each aforementioned category. Condition varies: new, faded, partially removed, layered over other, written over with a marker, reduced to traces of glue. Longevity depends on placement as well as on content. Placement differs too: at the eye level, above eye level. It is rarer to encounter stickers below eye level – they are usually on utility boxes, municipal trash cans or extremely densely covered lampposts. Stickers rarely appear on façades or walls, even more rare on the asphalt. Quantity: an isolated lonely sticker, a couple dispersed stickers, a cluster, dense accumulation. More categories could be added: commercial, personal, political. Is a personal sticker a political one? Is a commercial sticker a personal one? Is a political sticker commercial? The system expands. The categories layer one on top of the other. Distinctions begin to dissolve.*

Another notable aspect of Perecquian writing is his penchant for cataloguing. *SoS* contains a large amount of lists, in the chapter dedicated to the bed, for example, there is a list that takes up almost the whole page to list objects scattered on the bedhead and consists entirely of everyday items, such as stacks of books, pens, paper, a glass of water, aspirin bottles, or banal souvenirs such as "a pebble picked up on the beach at Dieppe."[16] This poses a question: why would such a mundane list even exist? Yet, a lengthy list of unsurprising items that take up so much space on the page points to the importance of the bed as an intimate dwelling place. In addition, accumulation of the objects considered of the utmost importance reveals the mundanity of everyday life, as the piling effect created by jumping from one item to another drowns the reader in a detailed inventory of banal trinkets making none of them stand out particularly bright against the backdrop of the surrounding clutter.

Lastly, while the list contains cliché items the extreme detail still garners the reader's attention:

> ...a hard brush that enabled me to give my (female as it happens) cat's fur a sheen that was the admiration of all, a telephone, thanks to which I was able, not only to give my friends reports on my state of health, but to inform numerous callers that I was not the Michelin Company...[17]

Such descriptions render each object almost tangible and distinct, marked by the author's insistence on cataloguing even the most quotidian and boring items—each object here becomes a valuable part of one's existence. In other words, Perec's persistent play with parataxis and hypotaxis constitute a significant aspect of the infraordinary. As the author confesses: "everything I couldn't do without was to be found assembled there in the areas of both necessary and pointless."[18] But it is precisely the decision to write down something as mundane and banal that ascribes the importance to the objects that one way or another take up certain mental or physical space either in the realm of the crucial or in that of the useless, to paraphrase Perec.

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[16] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 19.
[17] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 18.
[18] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 18.

> *A black cylindrical pole coated in a glossy paint. On it: a faded poster for a music event, layered with stickers that are either equally faded or ripped, glue marks, tape, some of the contents remain partially legible. At eye level: a bright red square sticker, a red fist that is also a flower, text states "JS in de PvdA[19]", the edges still crisp, recently applied, or at least more recent than the surrounding ones; it refuses to blend in with its surroundings because of its larger size and bright colous. Below it: a square, mostly purple sticker, text stretched across it – "je bent geen capitalist, je bent een arbeider met stockholmsyndroom"[20] and an indication to an internet website. Lower still: a faded round blue and pink sticker, partly scratched off at its edges, the only partially decipherable word being "Münster." The rest of the stickers on this side of the pole are illegible, faded, ripped off.*

Exhaustive listing allows a closer look at the surroundings: the description of the stickers on a pole, for example, shows what is or was considered a relevant message and allows to notice patterns. Some scholars, however, interpret Perecquian impulse for cataloguing, that permeates his work beyond *SoS*, as a move towards depersonalisation. Anna-Louise Milne argues that despite all the descriptions Perec provides, he fails to appropriate place.[21] In the chapter "The Bedroom," where Perec provides a "typology of bedrooms" he inhabited, he encounters a problem: "[w]hat does taking possession of a place mean? As from when does somewhere become truly yours? Is it when you've put your three pairs of socks to soak in a pink plastic bowl? [Perec then lists some more quotidian details of inhabiting a room]"[22] Milne in turn reads "the pink plastic bowl" as an object that anyone could acquire for their laundry, the

[19] A Dutch social-democratic youth organisation, affiliated with the Dutch Labour Party.
[20] "You're not a capitalist, you're a worker with Stockholm syndrome."
[21] Anna-Louise Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," in *Georges Perec's Geographies*, ed. R. Phillips, A. Leak, and Ch. Forsdick (UCL Press, 2019).
[22] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 24.

description is simultaneously detailed enough to create an impression of a possible fact from Perec's life and yet it is a generic, mass produced everyday item that can easily be imagined at any household.[23] Milne then concludes that conversely to de Certeau's idea of tactics for re-appropriating space, Perec hints at the impossibility of truly "taking possession of a place."[24]

Moreover, Milne argues that Perec's scepticism towards re-appropriating space extends to larger urban contexts, because Perec treats neighbourhoods as places inhabited out of necessity rather than networks of interpersonal connections and community practices.[25] Milne claims that de Certeau promotes "poetisation of everyday life" through practices such as frequenting the same butcher's in order to escape strategic spatial control. [26] Simultaneously, she argues that Perec is cynical towards gestures such as greeting employees of local businesses, regarding it merely as "a way of dressing up commercialism."[27] However, I argue that this is not the case: Milne's misinterpretation stems from misreadings of both Perec and de Certeau rather than from Perec's cynicism towards the notion of community. De Certeau posits that "[h]aunted places are the only ones people can live in—and this inverts the schema of Panopticon."[28] Hence, going to the same butcher's is not considered a poetic act, rather it is a question of what makes (or rather, what forces) one to go there and not somewhere else. Likewise, Perec is clearly against "putting a mawkish face on necessity."[29] Further he goes on to say that it is important to unite people by other-than-commercial means—"you could start an orchestra, or put on a street theatre [...] Weld people of a street or a group of streets together by something more than a mere connivance" [30] —suggesting that arts offer more longevity in

[23] Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 85.
[24] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 24.
[25] Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 82.
[26] Milne, "Accumulation versus Dispersion: Perec and 'His' Diaspora," 83.
[27] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.
[28] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108. Here, "haunting" refers to personal narratives that turn otherwise denotative, function-oriented physical spaces into a meaningful location.
[29] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.
[30] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 58.

community formation than a mere arrangement springing out of necessity. Seen this way, stickers cease to function as "visual noise," becoming instead an example of shared narratives haunting urban spaces.

Species of Spaces, therefore, exhibits a preoccupation with the everyday beyond personal relationship to urban environments. As the chapter "The Neighbourhood" has shown, Perec is critical towards communities built around commerce and consumption habits that are ideologically shaped and often reify themselves through creating a necessity to consume one type of product over the other—or, in Perec's case, buying cigarettes at the tobacconist around the corner because he stays open on Sundays.[31] Perec insists on necessity of music, theatre and cinema go beyond mere connivance and are crucial for a sense of true belonging to a community. In line with de Certeau's assertion that "dispersion of stories points to the dispersion of the memorable,"[32] emphasising the importance of shared narratives that foreground the very notion of belonging far more than the disparate individualised stories.

SoS also grapples with the overwhelming focus on the functionality of space. For instance, the chapter dedicated to the apartment results in two conclusions: the apartments consist of rooms, and each of the rooms has a function.[33] Perec approximates the movements of traditional middle-class family members across the apartment throughout the day and summarises the result of his observation: "I don't know, and I don't want to know, where functionality begins or ends. It seems to me, in any case, that in the ideal dividing-up of today's apartments functionality functions in accordance with a procedure that is unequivocal, sequential and nycthemeral."[34] This list is an attempt at critiquing the late capitalist insistence on functionality of spatial practice conceived through architectural planning. Perec notices that society is structured through the prism of productivity understood via the lens of production processes. That is, the room exists insofar as it performs a certain function, and by extension, space exists insofar as it

[31] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 57.
[32] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.
[33] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 28.
[34] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 28.

generates profit. In other words, the fixation on the mundane details of everyday life propels Perec to question their givenness.

If the aforementioned episode focuses on the functional relationship to lived spaces, then the following chapter attempts to conceive of a place without use, which ends on a rather ambiguous note: "... I don't think I was altogether wasting my time in trying to go beyond this improbable limit. The effort itself seemed to produce something that might be a statute of the inhabitable."[35] Here, the author approaches a void, the ineluctable modality of being stuck within a function-oriented system that puts epistemological bounds on our very conception of space; a space is thus either something to be in possession of, or something to come in contact with upon a practical need. This way, Perec shows how the infraordinary aspects of daily life can reveal themselves as intricate ideologically charged constructions despite the overwhelming extraordinary consumable narratives propelled by capitalist system of production.

As demonstrated through the close readings of select passages, Perec uses several writing techniques to approach the question of space. First, Perec's use of lists and taxonomies stands out as one of the main principles of his poetics in *Species of Spaces* and other writings. For instance, his book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1975) is composed entirely of lists of things he observed in place Saint-Sulpice on three consecutive days. According to the translator of *An Attempt*, Marc Lowenthall, this book is the clearest example of the infraordinary.[36] Indeed, a large portion of the book is dedicated to listing busses passing by, following a remark: "no one ever sees busses pass by unless they're waiting for one, or unless they're waiting for someone to come off one."[37] The amount of space dedicated to busses here performs a function that goes beyond a quirky remark, it creates a sense of constant movement across Saint-Sulpice that would otherwise remain unnoticed. The actual listing of each bus that passes gains more importance than a descriptive sentence stating that "a lot of buses stop at place Saint-Sulpice," which in addition to being

[35] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 35.
[36] Georges Perec, An Attempt at Exhausting A Place in Paris (Wakefield Press, 2010), 51.
[37] Perec, An Attempt at Exhausting A Place in Paris, 34.

unremarkable would be a glanced-over as a self-evident truth to anyone familiar with Paris.

List-making, according to Joanne Lee, can be described as a technique for creating a sense of defamiliarisation.[38] In the chapter "The Street," one of the sub-sections provides some "Practical exercises" where Perec explicitly writes about his method of observing: "Don't say, don't write 'etc.'. Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid [...] Force yourself to see more flatly."[39] Moreover, Perec urges to look at the mundane and to "carry on until the scene becomes improbable." [40] This technique of "exhausting a place," or defamiliarising the infraordinary, be it busses or breeds of dogs passing by, allows to bring the most banal occurrences and question their taken-for-grantedness. This technique is in line with the objective of a researcher to analyse what kinds of everyday practices remain overlooked, how they occur and what shapes them.

Ultimately, Perecquian techniques that render visible the infraordinary aspects of everyday life can be adapted into three protocols for urban observation. Firstly, list-making to excavate that which remains overlooked. Then, defamiliarisation through exhaustive description allowing to question the habitual, and finally, generative taxonomy which points to the social constructedness of classification systems and becomes a productive self-reflexive textual device. These writing tactics enable the refusal of the extraordinary elements of spatial experience which is the main driving force of the strategic control over urban environments: the less one is concerned with looking at the mundane—the more they are propelled to participate in consumption patterns that sustain the apparatus of control. If consumption patterns are shaped around attention ecologies, then the move towards the infraordinary and the overlooked aims at circumventing the algorithms supporting strategic control over shared environments.

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[38] Joanne Lee, "Force Yourself to See More Flatly: A Photographic Investigation of the Infra-Ordinary," in Georges Perec's Geographies, ed. R. Phillips, A. Leak, and Ch. Forsdick. (UCL Press, 2019), 230.
[39] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 50-51.
[40] Perec, "Species of Spaces," 53.

An Infraordinary Observation: Who has the Right to Write the City?

As shown through the practical application of the infraordinary methodology for urban observation, this method is not an act of passive observation of the *flâneur*. The literary topos of the *flâneur* was first theorised by Walter Benjamin as a new socio-economic subject whose existence is first and foremost conditioned by capitalist rhythms of production.[41] Conversely, the observer of the infraordinary resists the political ambiguity of the *flâneur*, whose privileged socio-economic position allows them to exist in-between strategies of spatial control on one hand and its users defined through production-consumption processes on the other. Instead, Perecquian tactics oppose this ambiguity by consciously rejecting the spectacular and the mediatised: "'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year."[42] This logic contrasts with what Benjamin calls "an unconscious protest against the tempo of the production process" inherent to the *flâneur*.

Furthermore, the infraordinary methodology offers something that has previously escaped the practitioners of psychogeography, associated with the movement of Situationist International (SI).[43] The aim of a psychogeographer is to overcome "the process of 'banalisation' through which the experience of our familiar surroundings is rendered one of drab monotony."[44] Psychogeographers, rejecting the political ambiguity of the flâneur, insisted on counter-cultural aims, however due to the internal intellectual disagreements within the SI group, Debord's focus on

[41] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 337-338.
[42] Perec, "From 'L'Infra-Ordinaire' (1989)," 209.
[43] Situationist International (SI) was an international organisation, active from 1957 to 1972, composed of avant-garde artists, scholars and political theorists based around the critique of capitalism and society of the spectacle, theorized by Guy Debord. SI was concerned with ideas of resisting commodity fetishism and alienation through everyday actions, such as practicing psychogeography.
[44] Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 17.

political theory rather than the potentials of practicing the *dérive*,[45] and his insistence on "objectivity" in psychogeography, there is a lack of literature that can really attest to the effectiveness of the method.[46] Debord and SI were exploring a Paris that was on its way towards privileging motor vehicles, and Lefebvre, de Certeau and Perec confronted those changes and the disillusionment with rebellion after the nation-wide student protests in May of 1968. Perec's Paris is thus not only a part of the capitalist apparatus of control, but it is also a Paris that has reified its strategic control and successfully undermined the tactics of the opposition. Thus, Perec's writing techniques are treated here as a more relevant, concrete and politically engaged tools than earlier iterations of urban observation such as *flânerie* and psychogeography.

Through documentation of stickers in the Hague, certain patterns emerged. Firstly, inscriptions tend to form clusters in spaces where spatial control is weaker—in backstreets, transit nodes, or in areas with less security cameras. On one hand, this has to do with practical reality of writing in public areas being an illegal activity. On the other, it creates a visual map of surveyed urban areas thus distinguishing between privileged and under-privileged zones of the city. Graffiti is more abundant outside the central zone of the city, whereas tags that are quicker to write and require less skill are still present on such infrastructural details as electric utility boxes rather than walls. Stickers, however, are more abundant in the city centre than in residential areas, appearing more often than tags or graffiti due to their easier application process. Utility boxes, street signs and lamp poles become their main habitats.

Moreover, the taxonomic principle applied during the observation process reveals that stickers constitute the vast majority of urban inscriptions. Their abundance stems from their smaller size, quick application and no skill required for placing them.

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[45] *La dérive* refers to a psychogeographer's method to stray away from habitual function-oriented paths, following instead the ambiance or the attractions of the cityscape. It is often translated as "aimless drift," however such translation risks downplaying the importance of intentionality while drifting, which is essential for the practice of psychogeography.

[46] Coverley, *Psychogeography*, 117.

However, their capacity to remain intact due to sun and rain damage is lesser than that of graffiti or tags that usually require intervention of municipal cleaning services. This means that large portion of stickers are barely visible or legible. In addition, stickers often form large clusters which creates a sort of "visual noise," and makes it difficult not only to distinguish between them but also to observe them as single entities.

Stickers also demonstrate a complex relationship with digital media. Some include social media handles or QR codes re-directing the gaze to the screen. Others ignore it entirely and display only text or visual imagery. Stickers embracing digital media often direct to social media profiles of the artists or webpages of small businesses. This demonstrates that public spaces are saturated with production-consumption processes, and stickers as a tactic tend to serve less established enterprises as a free-of-charge advertisement placement. If promotion of certain physical spaces such as local night clubs and less established cultural venues has always been the case, the possibility to advertise an enterprise separate from the spatial reality of the city, increases the number of people who participate in creation and distribution of stickers. Promotional stickers do not advertise well-known and culturally recognisable venues or products or brand names and mostly feature underground and subcultural ones instead, proving that stickers constitute tactics in de Certeau's sense—they appropriate infrastructure of conceived spaces and transform those into lived spaces of everyday users.

Stickers can also be categorised in terms of their content: usually they feature a brief textual message alongside an image, however, some rely solely on either text or image. Those relying solely on visuals are less common, although they usually are easier to recognise. Reliance on the visual language requires the use of recognisable symbols, making the communicative function more efficient than that of textual messages. Unlike images, textual inscriptions require the observer to come into a close contact with a small inscription which becomes difficult in the already oversaturated and busy streets of the Hague. Purely visual stickers often feature flags and subcultural icons, thus the most visible ones usually constitute a political statement—they are not selling a

product, and by abandoning textual referencing they employ recognisable imagery to spread the message.

While hypermediated navigation renders the city legible primarily through commercial interest and algorithmically optimised, functional routes, Perecquian infraordinary method of observation reveals an entire layer of tactical spatial production: unauthorised inscriptions mark political contestations that remain a largely invisible part of the mediatised image of the city. If the mediatised image coincides with the Lefebvre's notion of conceived spaces, then a tactical response to that in form of unauthorised inscriptions allows lived spaces to emerge and contest the way cities are fragmented into different zones of priority. The central areas with historical landmarks, commercial streets, business centres receive more attention in terms of surveillance and upkeeping, while residential areas remain outside the zone of high maintenance when it comes to curating the image of the city (despite the fact that residential areas are denser in terms of inhabitants than the ones being prioritised). This coincides with the capitalist interest to construct everyday life around the production processes. Ultimately, the inscriptions analysed in the Hague function as a form of tactical resistance because they occupy the realm of the infraordinary: too small, too ephemeral, too numerous for strategic power to fully exercise its control over. Yet their presence, absence and traces reveal an ongoing struggle over who has the right to write the city.

The Infraordinary as a Method

This article shows that Perec's concept of the infraordinary combined with Lefebvre's and de Certeau's theoretical contributions to understanding spatial interactions in everyday life can function as a methodology for observing hypermediated urban environments. Perecquian approach successfully renders visible spatial practices that the overabundance of algorithmically curated spatial experience often excludes from the city imaginaries of its users. Exhaustive inventory of stickers found in the Hague reveals patterns of movement across the city: clusters at transit zones, avoidance of surveillance cameras and tactical appropriation of strategically conceived spatial arrangements. The object of this fieldwork, which is usually ignored as a form of visual noise, has

resurfaced through the practice of exhaustive observation not as an unmappable chaos, but rather as systematic tactics allowing for contestation of conceived spaces through the acts of everyday resistance.

The methodology also exposed some productive tensions. Sustaining attention and "seeing more flatly" proved to be challenging. The pull towards larger, more visually striking imagery reveals how deeply hierarchies of attention are embedded, even for the researcher committed to the notion of the infraordinary. Moreover, even if the methodology's focus on physical inscriptions might risk romanticising resistance, it also points towards hybrid tactics that merge physical and digital spaces. The analysis of results gathered during the fieldwork indicates a direction for future research, namely, the convergence between the physical and the digital spaces that shape urban imaginaries. Despite these minor limitations, future applications of this methodology could extend its scope to spatial formations shaped by digital media, particularly in contexts where mediascapes converge with physical urban space. Ultimately, various modes of sustained attention practices resist commodification of attention through algorithmic curation, and the infraordinary method of observation is a possible tactic that aims to reclaim the right to notice that which cannot be monetised.

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PART TWO

BETWEEN REALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Grieving without soil: Digital spectrality and the necessity of physical space in *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*

Eline Balster

Abstract

This article examines Janilda Bartolomeu's _when_scrolling_becomes_scrying *(2023) as an audiovisual meditation on grief in the digital age. Through close formal and visual analysis, it argues that the film stages the structural incompatibility between digital permanence and the need for closure in the grieving process. Drawing on an interdisciplinary methodology that brings together media theory, spectral theory, and Black Atlantic thought (including the work of Lev Manovich, Mark Fisher, Édouard Glissant, and Gloria Anzaldúa), the article reads Bartolomeu's film as both a singular portrait of loss and a node within broader transnational and diasporic networks of mourning. The article follows a three part structure. First, it analyses how the desktop documentary format generates a specific form of subjectivity that immerses the viewer in the database logic of digital experience. Second, it situates the film's oceanic imagery within the Black Atlantic tradition. Third, it considers how the film theorises digital spectrality as a form of stagnation: a haunting that forecloses rather than enables mourning. The article concludes by examining the film's decisive turn toward physical memorialisation—the creation of a ceramic sculpture of Bartolomeu's deceased father—as an act of resistance against the immobilising temporality of cyberspace. Closure, the film proposes, requires grounding: soil, stillness, and embodied tactics of interruption.*

Keywords: grief, desktop documentary, Cape Verde, cyberspace, migration, spectrality.

This article stems from a personal and theoretical interest in the effects of the digital world on everyday life. Constant connection through online networks, a hyperaware state of being, the permanence of data: how do these phenomena change our experience of the world? And how do we relate to them? *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*[1] is a short film that contends with these questions in relation to grief. The film documents the grief surrounding the loss of a parent and explores the digital dimension that contemporarily comes with this experience. A digital legacy, in the shape of pictures and videos across abandoned platforms online, is presented as a virtual connection to the lost person. The work, which occupies a space somewhere between lyrical video art and a poem set to moving image, considers the conscious and subconscious effects of an online archive of memories on the modern-day grieving process. Is there still a space for grief in the digital age? How do we deal with (im)mortality online?

The film ultimately moves toward a decisive gesture: the creation of a ceramic sculpture of the filmmaker's deceased father. This physical memorial interrupts the digital circulation of spectral traces and reintroduces grief into material space. This article asks: How does *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* formally and thematically stage the limits of digital mourning, and how does it propose that closure requires stepping outside online cyberspace into grounded, material space? I argue that while the film initially immerses the viewer in the database logic of digital spectrality—where time collapses, absence becomes perpetual presence, and mourning risks stagnation—it ultimately demonstrates that creating space for closure in a grieving process requires stepping outside of online spaces. Through its final turn toward ceramic memorialisation, the film frames physical grounding as a form of resistance against the immobilising temporality of digital archives. Ground, and the practice of grounding in specific digital as well as physical spaces, will function as a theoretical hinge of sorts, leaning into and consciously blending the plurality of its definitions, in an

[1] Janilda Bartolomeu, dir. *_when_scrolling_becomes_*scrying (2023; Amsterdam: LI-MA).

attempt to bring these different facets—spatial, geopolitical, medial, emotional—into closer dialogue.

This article argues that *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* can be seen as an exemplary case for exploring and depicting contemporary grappling with grief in a networked world. It employs a close reading and visual analysis of *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*, paying careful attention to its form as a desktop documentary and the filmic techniques that come with it: editing strategies, textual overlays, duration, and sound-image relations. However, rather than treating the film as a mere illustration of theory, the article aims to approach the film as a complex audiovisual object whose formal decisions generate conceptual insight. By examining the interface as both creative and representational space, by considering how temporality is constructed spatially on a desktop, this article aims to make a link to the importance of rejoicing with spaces outside of the interface when faced with complex emotional situations.

The methodology applied here is consciously interdisciplinary. It draws from media theory, spectral theory, and Black Atlantic thought. Importantly, the article situates the film within transnational and diasporic thought, particularly through the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera,*[2] as an attempt at understanding the fragmented digital self and diasporic identity as structurally plural. This theory is again not simply applied but placed in dialogue with the film's form. The reading that cumulates from this theory and method is rather personal in tone; the argument set forth stays very close and true to Bartolomeu's film, resulting in conclusions about a singular experience of grief, ones that are best understood as an attempt of capturing a larger attitude towards grief in digitised society whilst not exhausting that category of experience in full. By combining close visual analysis with relational theoretical frameworks, this essay argues that the film's formal tactics enact its philosophical position: that digital accumulation without grounding produces spectral stagnation, and that mourning requires physical grounding. It requires soil, duration, and embodied interruption.

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[2] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

Database form and desktop subjectivity

_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying is an experimental desktop documentary from filmmaker and researcher Janilda Bartolomeu. The short film, spanning a modest twelve minutes in total length, was originally presented in a museum exhibition titled "REBOOT. Pioneering Digital Art" at Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam and is now part of the collection of Living Media Art (LI-MA) in Amsterdam.[3] Instigated by the grief for the sudden death of her father, Bartolomeu wanders through the data traces of her own digital existence. Not consciously looking for anything, she finds a digital legacy consisting of fragments of past presences scattered across forgotten platforms online. What is one supposed to do with roaming, outdated versions of oneself and others, existing in a plagued space that refuses to forget?

In the late 90s, digital media theorist Lev Manovich described the database as "a new symbolic form of the computer age [...] a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world"[4]. In a changing (media)world—which is increasingly presenting itself as a stream of unstructured images, texts and other data—we gravitate towards representing our experience of that world in the form of a database, because a linear narrative has increasing difficulty doing justice to the multifaceted nature of that experience. Complex emotions, such as grief in the case of *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*, rarely behave as a linear narrative and are therefore perhaps better captured in the multifaceted form of the database. Cinema is a medium par excellence that sits at the intersection of database and narrative, when the material collected during a film shoot is seen as a database, and the editing of this material is seen as "a unique trajectory through

[3] See the website of Nieuwe Instituut for further information on the exhibition and the film's set-up, https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/reboot-baanbrekende-digitale-kunst. The exhibition was a collaboration between LI-MA and Nieuwe Instituut. For this exhibition, 20 artists were asked to re-interpret canonical digital artworks. *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* (2023) by Janilda Bartolomeu is a reimagining of *the_living* (1997) by Debra Solomon.
[4] Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," *Convergence* 5, no. 2 (1999): 81.

the conceptual space of all possible films which could have been constructed."[5]

The urge to represent stories of complex emotions does not, however, disappear with the advent of the database, nor does the urge to find "a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics"[6] of that form. *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* seemingly embraces the database logic. The act of finding new photos, messages, and thoughts becomes the guiding method of information gathering, but these findings are not presented in a causal sequence. Instead, the film unfolds associatively through this searching narrative form: finding the story becomes the story. *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* is more about a process than a final product. The process *is* the final product. It is therefore a misconception that database and narrative are two perfect opposites. Instead of a dichotomy, database and narrative produce an endless list of hybrid forms,[7] of which the desktop documentary is one.

Kevin B. Lee, the inventor of the term *desktop documentary*, writes on his website that it is an audiovisual recording method that treats the computer screen as a camera lens and a canvas simultaneously.[8] In this way, the desktop displays the unique path—the element of the desktop being clicked—and the conceptual space—all the elements of the desktop not being clicked—at the same time. Furthermore, the viewer's gaze merges with the filmmaker's, digitised as a clicking mouse. The viewer is supposed to identify with the mouse, and thus indirectly with the filmmaker, through *desktop subjectivity*, "the unique form of first-person perspective that results from linking the spectator's gaze with the author's desktop."[9] Pre-production, post-production, and final product converge in *_when_scrolling_becomes _scrying*, as happens in many desktop

[5] Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," 94.
[6] Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," 81.
[7] Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," 92.
[8] Kevin B. Lee, "Desktop Documentary," 2014, http://kevinblee.com/desktop-documentary.
[9] Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar, "Desktop Documentary as Scholarly Subjectivity: Five Approaches," *NECSUS* 12, no. 1 (2023): 277. The term desktop subjectivity appears in several places; it has been mentioned and used (undefined) in website descriptions and lectures since the conception of the desktop documentary in 2014.

documentaries. The collection of footage via screenshots (pre-production), in which a dynamic element adjusts that footage (post-production), is what appears in the film (final product). Although the final product doesn't encompass all pre- and post-production, the three move closer together. In Bartolomeu's film, this merging of gazes and faces of production creates a specific way of relating to the filmmaker's emotion. The viewer does not merely observe her grief; they are there with her, scrolling through it.[10]

One scene, early in the film, demonstrates how these technical strategies of database logic and desktop subjectivity intensify a sense of haunting. Bartolomeu types "He only calls me on Facebook. No one uses Facebook anymore."[11] A series of failed login attempts follows.[12] During the series of failed login attempts, multiple messages from Janilda's father (who goes unnamed throughout the film) appear on screen.[13] With all these overlapping frames on screen, one can talk about a "spatialized narrative,"[14] a form of narrative where time acquires a spatial dimension by being distributed across the screen's surface.[15] The old messages make multiple moments exist within the same frame—the present moment when Janilda tries to log into her Facebook account, the earlier

[10] This approach leads me to believe that *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* fits well within the emergent category of *thanatographical fiction*, a genre term recently coined in Cornelia Ruhe, "Thanatographical Fiction: Death, Mourning and Ritual in Contemporary Literature and Film," *Memory Studies* 17, no. 6 (2024): 1519–1535. The term points to works of (visual) fiction that have tasked themselves with commemorating unmourned death and understanding grief as an attempt of being *with* the dead. Especially the first characteristic of thanatographical fiction as delineated by Ruhe is important: the central role for *implicated subjects*. Thanatographical works, as is the case for *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*, do not centre perpetrators or victims; rather, they centre those affected by loss, those implicated in the death. They foreground the emotional, ritual, and psychological labour of grieving those whose deaths resist closure.

[11] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling*, 00:00:49–00:01:01.

[12] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling*, 00:01:54–00:02:12.

[13] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling,* 00:02:12–00:02:32.

[14] Lev Manovich, "What is digital media?" In *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film* (REFRAME Books, 2016), 40.

[15] Manovich, "What is digital media?," 40–41.

moments when her father sent the messages to her, and an implied future moment when Janilda reads the messages.

These images, which function as a kind of unfolded file of memories, first gain meaning in relation to earlier images "No one uses Facebook anymore" so the calls remained unanswered and the messages remained unread. Secondly, the images acquire meaning in relation to each other: the unanswered "missed call" messages are made very definitive by the failed login attempts.[16] "No one uses Facebook anymore" and the non-answered phone calls may have been rebellious statements before, but now, combined with the impossibility of ever receiving such a Facebook call again, let alone (not) answering one, they acquire particularly bitter retrospective weight. Yet, in this online space where grief becomes entangled with interface logic, there is no true sense of tragic finality. The database form does not permit finality. Failed login attempts do not delete messages; they intensify their presence.

Memory and multiplicity in the Atlantic

Midway through the film, a sequence unfolds in which various photos of Bartolomeu appear one by one, overlapping each other. Sourced from Facebook, Instagram, Google, and YouTube, these images accumulate across the desktop. Over them, Janilda repeats "Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore."[17] On an initial level, it refers to the multiplicity of archived[18] selves: profile pictures,

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[16] This technique – wherein images acquire meaning both in relation to previous or upcoming images as well as to simultaneous images – is what Harun Farocki calls *soft montage*: "There is succession as well as simultaneity in a double projection, the relationship of an image to the one that follows as well as the one beside it; a relationship to the preceding as well as to the concurrent one." Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence / Soft Montage," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (London: Raven Row/Koenig Books, 2009), 70. This process occurs in *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* in one and the same image, as opposed to the dual projection that Farocki describes, but this does not detract from the effect.

[17] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling,* 00:05:30–00:06:15.

[18] For further discussions of the concept archive, which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this article, see Ernst van Alphen, "The Decline of Narrative

tagged images, curated identities. These representations crash over the present self like a tidal wave. How do these bodies relate to one another? Can they be reconciled? Because they exist simultaneously within one frame, their friction becomes visible, multiple but not integrated.

More importantly, this passage carries racial and historical charge. When a Black filmmaker speaks in oceanic metaphors, invoking the image of bodies washing ashore, the image resonates beyond the personal. Think here of bodies of colour washing ashore as a result of experiences on slavery ships or refugee boats. In this sense, water and race, but also water and death, become closely intertwined. Here, *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* becomes more than a portrait of individual loss: it becomes a meditation on Black death at sea that resonates with collective genealogies of transatlantic violence. The ocean, specifically the Atlantic Ocean, continues to function as what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls "a cathected space of history and a sea [of] slavery"—a body of water that, quoting from Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams*, "remembers the dead."[19]

Édouard Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation* that for enslaved Africans, "the next abyss was the depths of the sea [...] For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge."[20] When Bartolomeu speaks of bodies

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and the Rise of the Archive," in *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2017), 68–83. In this text, Van Alphen discusses how the archive relates to the database, using the paradigm–syntagm considerations from Manovich, and considers the changing role of the archive in the modern-day context.

[19] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 704; Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 56. For a contemporary exploration of the inherent interrelation of grief–water–race, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

[20] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 6–8.

washing ashore, the metaphor participates in this longer Atlantic temporality. Her digital selves become entangled with historical bodies. The desktop becomes an alluvial field. What makes the wave of bodies so discrepant for her, on a personal level, is the recognisability of all previous bodies on the one hand—the recognition of all bodies as previously lived selves—and the transience of all previous bodies on the other—the decay of those same bodies into unremembered memories. In the accumulation of all these bodies, time collapses in upon itself, rather than being allowed to meaningfully layer upon itself. The digital ocean floods: it does not ground.

Glissant's poetics, thus, guide this essay's interpretive strategy. Rather than read *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* as a story about individuals alone, I read it as a node within a larger, transgenerational network of Black oceanic death and survival. Still, it is crucial to keep sight of the specificities of different historical moments within the Atlantic context, to better understand and represent the social context surrounding a locally specific "culture of migration" and "culture of mobility."[21] When thinking of Cape Verde's culturally specific position as a key juncture point of many forms of (in)voluntary (im-/e-) migration,[22] certain parts of this collectivising argument become quite convoluted, perhaps harder to strictly separate.[23] However, when thinking of Rotterdam, specifically of the large diasporic Cape Verdean community living in

[21] Stefano degli Uberti, "Victims of their Fantasies or Heroes for a Day? Media Representations, Local History and Daily Narratives on Boat Migrations from Senegal." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 213-214 (2014): 90; 105.

[22] Jørgen Carling and Luís Batalha, "Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora." In *Transnational Archipelago: Perspectives on Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora*, ed. Jørgen Carling and Luís Batalha (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 13.

[23] Extensive discussion of Cape Verde's position within transatlantic slavery exceeds the scope of this article. It seems worthy of mention however that historically speaking the Signare, also known as the Nhara in Portuguese, is a pertinent figure in (neo)colonial history, whose role has been researched extensively. See, for example, Hilary Jones, "Women, Family & Daily Life in Senegal's Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Towns," *African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability*, ed. Mariana P. Candido and Adam Jones (Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 233—247.

the district Delfshaven, one can definitely speak of a specific group with similar migratory experiences across the Atlantic Ocean (even if that experience could perhaps be better marked as one of labour migration instead of slavery migration).[24]

Continuing with Glissant, while the Atlantic abyss produces relational knowledge through duration, cyberspace produces repetition without transformation. Here, Gloria Anzaldúa's theorisation of a new consciousness, her titular "new *mestiza,*" becomes illuminating. She writes:

> The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. [...] She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.[25]

Anzaldúa's formulation resonates with Bartolomeu's digital multiplicity.[26] The database self is pluralistic. Nothing is rejected. Everything persists. Yet the crucial difference lies in actionability: the *mestiza* "turns the ambivalence into something else." The database, by contrast, produces simultaneity without reconciliation or transformation. It sustains the contradictions but does not shift them into something productive or meaningful.

When all the photos in the aforementioned scene from *_when_scrolling_becomes_ scrying* have appeared, they are closed

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[24] Carling and Batalha, "Cape Verdean Migration," 22.

[25] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera,* 79.

[26] A discussion on multiplicity, in relation to unity, also appears in Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (2011): 5. When asked by Diawara what departure means for him, Glissant replies, "It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is *the passage from unity to multiplicity*." He argues that when enslaved people return to their country of origin, they return as a free entity, as a being who has gained something. "And what has this being gained? Multiplicity. In relation to the unity of the enslaving will, we have the multiplicity of the anti-slavery will."

one by one. Sporadically, it still sounds "Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore," but the new recurring phrase is "I do not remember anything."[27] In the digital age, remembering a memory is no longer a prerequisite for its existence, provided the memory is stored as data. When photos and videos allow us to be never more than a few clicks away from a captured version of a forgotten memory, it can be easy to get sucked into this memory archive. In her personal essay *Notes on Grief*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes "I watch videos, saved on my computer, that feel like revelations because I do not remember them, even though I made some of them."[28] Video footage, from personal archives or on social media, functions not only as recorded fragments from the past, but also as an external memory of forgotten moments which can be accessed again at any time. How do we as humans cope with this permanent access to the past? And what happens when the recorded, stored, and stagnant past lingers around in the present?

Digital spectres and the necessity of soil

About halfway through the film, just before the "Hundreds of my body / Washing up on shore" scene, a Tumblr post titled *the internet is haunted* appears onscreen. It describes abandoned forums, frozen profiles, obituaries disguised as incomplete accounts, and concludes "what a fuckin graveyard."[29] A new screen appears in the background, on which the text "What have I been doing on

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[27] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*, 00:06:15.

[28] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief* (New York: Knopf, 2021), 35.

[29] fairycosmos, "the internet is haunted," *Tumblr*, 28 June 2019, https://fairycosmos.tumblr.com/post/ 185909202096/embed. The full post goes as follows: "the internet is an inherently haunted place if you think about it like. it's so weird to see long abandoned discussion boards stuck in a snapshot of the past, old conversations between kids from over a decade ago who have now grown into their own lives, obituaries taking the form of half finished profiles. and the silence that fills the gaps between. there's a constant ghostly record of each generation's thoughts, fads, their sense of humour. back when the future was at their fingertips. even stranger, people used to know exist openly in that space, and they watch you watching them. if you want, deceased musicians can play through your headphones. there's always an underlying sense of reminiscing and time escaping our ever shortening attention span. what a fuckin graveyard."

here? Who is using my time besides me? I do not remember anything." is typed repeatedly. The two screens gradually merge, a process by which the text of the Tumblr post becomes increasingly difficult to read due to increasing transparency, and the typed text resembles the original less and less, due to increasing uncorrected typos. Finally, both screens fade away into the black background.[30] In this section, I argue that the topic of this scene from the film—the idea that the internet is a cemetery haunted by the digital spirits of the deceased—is crucial for understanding grief in the digital age.

The usage of this Tumblr post, alongside other academic sources cited throughout the film, situates the work amidst a larger academic debate surrounding spectrality and hauntology. The origin of the spectral turn is often dedicated to the book *Specters of Marx* (1994) by Jacques Derrida, in which he conceptualises hauntology as the opposite of ontology, and typifies cinema as an inherently ghostly medium.[31] A contemporary voice that has become formative for spectral readings is Mark Fisher, specifically his book *Ghosts of My Life*. In the preface to this book, he writes, "In conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost."[32] This aligns closely with the idea of a digital ghost that continues to haunt us, thus hindering moving towards closure.[33] Unlike a classic haunting by a ghost, there's little supernatural about digital haunting. Fisher writes that it is useful "to think of hauntology as the *agency of the virtual*, with the spectre

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[30] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling,* 00:04:28–00:05:27.

[31] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Derrida very explicitly remarks this in the documentary film *Ghost Dance*, dir. Ken McMullen (1983) when he states that "Cinema is the art of ghosts."

[32] Mark Fisher, "Lost Futures: The Slow Cancellation of the Future," in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: Zero Books, 2014), 2.

[33] Later, in the same chapter, Fisher states that "Haunting, then, can be construed as a failed mourning." (22). The word "mourning" in this quotation refers to the term coined in Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 14)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1917]), 243–258. This text is an indispensable point of reference when writing academically about grief. Arguably, a form of "failed mourning" occurs in the "No one uses Facebook anymore" passage in *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*.

understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing."[34] A "spectre," a type of ghost similar to what I call a digital ghost in this chapter, is thus primarily defined by a presence that isn't physical, but only virtual.[35]

A digital ghost inherently occupies a virtual, and therefore non-physical, space, but this doesn't prevent them from bringing things about in the actual, physical world. Precisely in their absence, digital ghosts maintain a fractured presence. In this sense, they function as a broken hyperlink. In a chapter on the broken hyperlink, Ilios Willemars argues that the broken hyperlink creates a presence of absence, which thus nullifies presence.[36] Broken hyperlinks are "hyperlinks that go on living even after their physical correlates have no need for them any longer. They live-on, so to speak, they persist, they remain in place, even when the place they occupy no longer warrants their holding of that place."[37] Maintaining a space when it is no longer justified also applies to Janilda's father; his virtual self, in the absence of his actual self, has no real reason to continue existing. In a discussion of a similar Facebook ghost, Willemars writes that when a digital ghost continues to exist, it is a

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[34] Fisher, "Lost Futures," 18, emphasis in original.

[35] *Virtual*, here, is a word Fisher borrows from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In his book *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Deleuze describes how an optical image always carries within it an actual image and a virtual image. He explains this dichotomy using the example of the mirror image: the individual looking in the mirror carries actuality within them, and the image of the individual that exists in the mirror carries virtuality within it. This also applies to an individual with a digital mirror image: the individual carries actuality within them, while the digital image carries virtuality within it. What happens with a digital ghost, then, is a lack of actuality creating an imbalance: there is no longer any actuality of the individual to which the virtual can attach itself. As a result, the virtual is dependent solely on itself for existence, while the essence of the crystal relies precisely on the constant interplay between actual and virtual. See Gilles Deleuze, "The Crystals of Time," in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005 [1989]), 67–68.

[36] Ilios Willemars, "Cécile B. Evans' "Hyperlinks Or It Didn't Happen (OIDH)"," in *The Political Life of Placeholders: Poetics of Sacrifice in Digital Video Art* (Lisbon: UCP Press, 2025), 227.

[37] Willemars, "Cécile B. Evans," 219.

way to continue living after death.[38] This stationary sustained existence becomes problematic when something variable is needed. When Janilda continues interacting with her father's digital ghost, she can only keep having the same conversations, experiencing the same moments, repeating the same patterns. The movement she makes is not fruitful and dynamic, but repetitive and stagnant.

Then, the film's conceptual turning point happens. A new textbox appears, in which Bartolomeu types "What remains?"[39] What will be left? When all parts of her father exist in this constantly accessible yet completely untouchable space, what will, actually, materially, remain? In his text "The Internet is a Graveyard," Oliver Misraje writes "Like traditional ghosts, HTTP ghosts are everywhere, invisibly haunting the annals of cyberspace."[40] Cyberspace is a rather undefined, intangible space; this intangibility is one of the difficulties Janilda faces at the end of the video work. Misraje writes "Whereas a tombstone is vulnerable to erosion, cyberspace can transcend time."[41] While cyberspace makes good use of its dimension of time, there is only very little concrete *space* in cyberspace. Because an entire history of times past come to exist in an immediate and simultaneous space, despite their spatial distance, the space where all time coexists becomes nonspatial.[42] Cyberspace contracts time and space. Cyberspace is primarily a collection of past time. Cyberspace will not erode, or otherwise wear away spatially. Cyberspace is a space you cannot touch.

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[38] Willemars, "Cécile B. Evans," 236.

[39] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling,* 00:08:48–00:08:54.

[40] Oliver Misraje, "The Internet is a Graveyard," *ZORA ZINE*, 6 December 2022, https://zine.zora.co/web3-hauntology-oliver-misraje. Bartolomeu also cites from this text in *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying*, namely "On Facebook alone there are over 30 million dead people, with 3 million additional users dying each year. By 2070 the dead will outnumber the living online." While this citation is being shown in the film, a voiceover speaks the following sentence three times: "The web will soon consist of spectators and spectres. / From spectators to spectres." Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling*, 00:02:56–00:03:22.

[41] Misraje, "The Internet is a Graveyard"

[42] Fisher describes something similar when he writes about teletechnology (an umbrella term for communication and entertainment technologies like television and telephone): they collapse space and time, with the newest iteration of teletechnology, cyberspace, having "most radically contracted time and space". Fisher, "Lost Futures," 20.

After the question "What remains?" the voiceover calls for a "PAUSE." The background noise disappears, the image freezes, and nothing happens for almost 10 seconds. A new text box appears, and Janilda types "Grief requires a standstill."[43] The "PAUSE" seems like a kind of breaking point. Until this point, the video had been operating within the logic of cyberspace: multiple images and sounds simultaneously, various times intertwined, in completely indefinable, ephemeral spaces. The demand for a pause, a standstill, in a space that is by definition mobile, is quite radical. A final text box appears, this time typing "How does one grieve without soil?"[44] Mourning requires ground, and the experienced lack of ground derives from the groundless nature of cyberspace, due to the presence of a ghost. The film argues that a grieving process cannot take place in this space.

Additionally, and again looking from a history in which the land of people of colour has been structurally dispossessed, the statement "How does one grieve without soil?" carries more than just an individual load.[45] As Anzaldúa writes "The struggle is inner [...] The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society."[46] From this perspective, the final scene of *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying* can be understood. For the entire last minute of the film—a fairly substantial portion of a film that runs only twelve minutes—the viewer sees only an image of a ceramic statue in the shape of Janilda's father's face. Simultaneously with the image of the statue, a video of a few gently flickering candles appears. The screen surrounding this video is titled "Rest."[47] The turn towards physical

[43] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling*, 00:08:54–00:09:14, underlining in original.
[44] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling*, 00:09:18–00:09:36.
[45] This scope of larger histories is also reflected in Bartolomeu's own description of her research. For example, she states that her works aim "to question ambiguous, non-linear histories and interact with immaterial heritage". See „Janilda Bartolomeu," *mediakunst.net*, https://mediakunst.net/professional/#!/artwork/ma-1022484?query=~.
[46] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 87.
[47] Bartolomeu, *_when_scrolling,* 00:11:28– 00:12:28.

material at the end of the film aligns once again with a turn towards physical space in the theory; Anzaldúa closes her theory as follows:

> *Mamagrande Ramona también tenía rosales*. Here every Mexican grows flowers. [...] We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*.
>
> This land was Mexican once
> was Indian always
> and is.
> And will be again.[48]

A sculpture, a garden: both ways of commemorating and celebrating the growth, death, decay and birth of lived cultures, people, and spaces. In *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying,* creating a ceramic sculpture, a physical piece of earthenware, is a way to give grief the ground that it calls for. Keeping the ceramic sculpture on screen for a full minute, offering it a moment of peace and stillness within the span of the video, is a way to give grief the standstill it needs. By showing the explicit actions taken outside the stagnating realms of the virtual, the video breaks the echo chamber that cyberspace formed around Janilda's grief, in order to move toward the conclusion of the grieving process, to move towards closure. Cyberspace gave a static dimension to the grieving process. This dimension gets broken by Janilda by creating a space for her grief outside this undynamic dimension.

[48] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 90-91, emphasis in original.

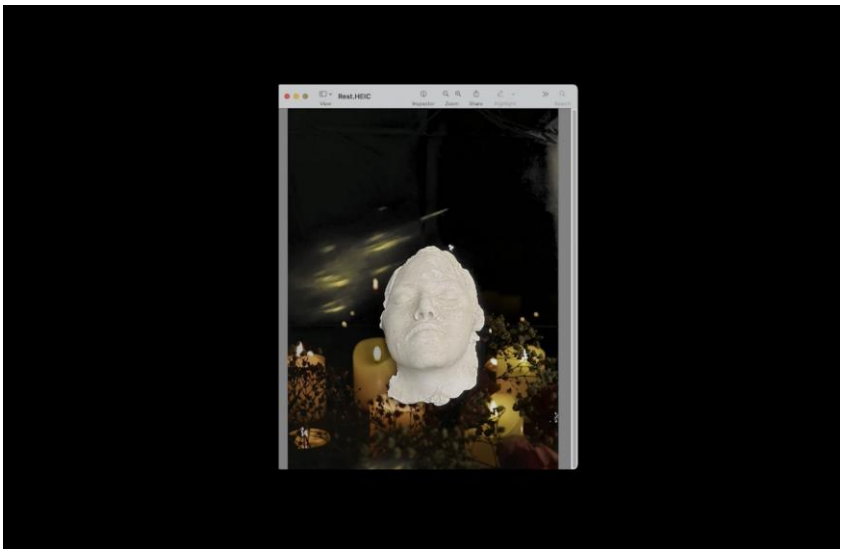

Figure 1. Still from *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying.* © Janilda Bartolomeu, 2023.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have explored topics of grief in digitised society through an analysis of *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying.* In my reading, the film demonstrates the structural incompatibility between digital permanence and grief's need for closure. In the final movement of the film, Bartolomeu steps outside cyberspace. The desktop documentary ends not with more scrolling but with stillness. Grief requires a standstill and standstill requires ground. Creating a ceramic sculpture—a piece of earthenware—is a way to give grief the ground it needs. The sculpture refuses the logic of cyberspace; it embodies a stillness appropriate to death. Unlike the digital ghost, which simulates animation, the sculpture acknowledges immobility. It does not repeat past conversations, it does not promise return: it offers rest. Janilda's father's life is captured in a tangible statue, a tribute to his life. The sculpture brings the stagnation of the virtual mind into the actual world. It is precisely the permanent stillness in the sculpture that falls in line with his absence, and restores a sense of balance. Moreover, it is a tribute to the inefficiency of human emotions. The database and cyberspace are not constructed with this in mind; they are not made to care about a tangible tribute in

the same way people are. One way to counter the pragmatic, purely functional logic of the controlling network is to refocus on human impulse and emotion. Bartolomeu manages to give her grief and her reflections on sustained existence in online spheres a place, by removing those emotions and actions from digital cyberspace, in order to place life and physical ground at the centre of her grieving process again.

Grief in the online era cannot solely happen online. Or, at least, so Bartolomeu concludes in *_when_scrolling_becomes_scrying,* and I am inclined to agree. While this article has mainly argued in favour of analogising grief, it does not necessarily argue against virtualising grief. In an era marked by polarising and pluralising experiences of the world, wherein practices of/with/against digitisation are still actively being shapen, this paper is not meant as a prescription of the quintessential way of grieving in times of digitisation. Rather, it is best understood as an example of a singular exploration within a broader network of theorisation of digitalised grief. Taking charge of one's grief by, in Bartolomeu's case, taking it outside its digital atmosphere, and thus creating the conditions for closure on one's own terms, can be seen as a form of personal resistance to that atmosphere, given that it feels oppressive to you. Closure, the film suggests, does not lie in deletion; it lies in grounding. In *_when_scrolling _becomes_scrying*, clay becomes a method of closure, and physical memorial practice becomes a tactic of digital resistance.

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Navigating Space as a Disabled Creature: Undergoing Medieval Womanhood, Disability, and Spiritualism in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Stephanie Lones

Abstract

In The Book of Margery Kempe*, medieval English mystic Margery Kempe continually refers to herself in the third person by using "creatur" [creature], which this article views as part of Kempe's engagement in the practice of* imitatio Christi*. Whilst scholarship has studied her engagement in this practice of self-injurious behaviour to become like Christ, it fails to consider Kempe as a disabled woman. By adopting a disability studies perspective this article views Margery Kempe as disabled with her use of creatur and her engagement in* imitatio Christi *as expressions of her disabilities. Finally her Book will be considered her ultimate 'space' for her disabled body through which Margery Kempe reinvents ableist notions.*

Keywords: Margery Kempe, disability, imitatio Christi, autobiographical writing, ableism, medieval women's writing

To matter is not only to be of importance, to signify, to mean, but also to claim a certain physical space, to have a particular presence, to be uniquely embodied.

Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters* (2012)

Born in the late fourteenth century, Margery Kempe was an English mystic famous and infamous for her intense public displays of religious devotion. She would later create what is widely considered to be the first English-language autobiography. Her *Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter *Book*) provides readers with insights into not only the life of fourteenth and fifteenth century Lynn; but also of the many pilgrimages Kempe took during her lifetime. Kempe painted a picture of how she experienced medieval womanhood. A close reading of the text, however, reveals more, namely a woman who was disabled by both her body and society. It also reveals a woman with a strong emotional connection to Jesus Christ, which she expressed through engagement in the practice of *imitatio Christi*. This connection is present in her narrative, her embodied experiences, and in her constant references to herself in the third person using the word "creatur" [creature].[1] To understand the argument that Margery Kempe attempts to claim her 'own' space as a disabled woman, this article adopts a disability studies perspective to demonstrate that the *Book of Margery Kempe* is her ultimate expression of her disabled body, with *creatur* and *imitatio Christi* also being considered expressions of her disabilities.

Connected to the ideas of *imitatio Christi, creatur,* and disability, is the notion of space. Margery Kempe's bodily experiences dictate how she navigated and reinvented literary space in the creation of her book. Her disabilities and her public displays of them caused her to be excluded from physical space and society. Tied to this struggle are her enactments of *imitatio Christi.* Despite there being evidence of women's engagement in *imitatio Christi,* Kempe's version of it is unique and is often negatively remarked upon by her peers. As a result, she struggled to take up space in society. Additionally, the constant referral to herself as *creatur,* reflects and reaffirms her status as an outsider. With space being such a ubiquitous feature of these key aspects of Kempe's life, this paper will view each component of the thesis statement in its relationship to space.

Through dictating her own life in the third person to three scribes, Margery blurs the lines between author/character and was

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

fundamentally involved in the production of the text. Whilst some scholarship separates the character Margery Kempe from author Margery Kempe, this paper will side with Kim Phillips' approach to acknowledge three Kempes: the character, the writer, and the historical subject, and treats the text as a collaborative production of a holy woman's life. Her approach is in accordance with Margery who separated her written self from the writer self by for example referring to herself in the third person. In line with Phillips this article will also alternate between using 'Margery', 'Kempe', and 'Margery Kempe' for stylistic purposes and not for meaningful reasons.[2] It is worth noting that is it is not entirely clear whether Kempe was literate, with literacy then having different and more complicated definitions than it does today. It is also possible she was literate but lacked the physical ability to write by hand.

Moreover, it helpful to view the *Book* not just as an autobiography, but as an autohagiography. Whilst acknowledging that Kempe's writing has autobiographical impulses, such as Margery's everyday activities, Tory Vandeventer Pearman argues labelling the *Book* purely as an autobiography, which many scholars do, is "inherently problematic as autobiographical writing as we define it today did not exist in the Middle Ages."[3] In arguing against the assumption the *Book* is a hagiography (i.e., writings of a saint's life) or work of fiction, Pearman notes the following: "Relegating the text to the status of a hagiography or a fiction erases [autobiographical] impulses, vacating Margery Kempe the historical woman from the text."[4] As each option seems to limit, Pearman considers the *Book* a hybrid or as some call it an 'autohagiography.'[5] Julian Yates describes his choice for the term hybrid as follows: "[autobiography refers to] details in the text which, while they

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[2] Kim M. Phillips, "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 18.

[3] Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 117.

[4] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 117.

[5] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 117; Barry Windeatt, introduction to *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004): 12.

contribute to the hagiographical impulse, enforce an awareness of Margery's social and material position. I view 'autobiography' as one impulse among many in this self-divided and hybridized text."[6] As Yates indeed notes, through an approach that enforces an awareness of Kempe's social and material position, the audience is reminded that knowledge production is only possible from such a material position. There is a double marginalisation Margery experienced through her gender and ability, but she still benefited from a position of economic security that grants her access to pilgrimages and producing her *Book.* This article will then view Margery Kempe's *Book* as a hybrid text with autobiographical impulses.

Through first exploring disability as theoretical framework, then discussing the expressions of her disabilities, this article will then engage with the space that Kempe creates for her disabled body.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Disability

Through an analysis of the term *creatur* and *imitatio Christi,* this article aims to demonstrate Margery Kempe was a disabled medieval woman whose *Book* contributes to a fuller understanding of these disabilities. To help substantiate these assertions a theoretical framework is necessary.

At the foundation of disability studies lie the models of disability, with the medical and social model being the most influential, the latter being more relevant for Kempe. This paradigm asserts it is not the disability that makes a body or mind 'dysfunctional', but inaccessible architecture, social infrastructures, and physical and non-physical ableist barriers.[7] Using the social model, it is then clear how disabled people are excluded from physical space due to inaccessible environments, ranging from staircases to there being no accommodation for neurodivergent behaviour. Non-physical ableist barriers include discriminatory legislations and discrimination from society. Society can exclude

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[6] Julian Yates, "Mystic Self: Margery Kempe and the Mirror of Narrative," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995). 85n22, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2g27r8vk

[7] Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability,* ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 5.

disabled people from space just as much as inaccessible architecture can. As a result, the social model emphasises "it is society's interpretations of and responses to bodily and sensory [and mental] variations that are the problem, not the variations themselves."[8]

Additionally, it is vital to adopt a cross-cultural understanding of disability rather than a universalising definition as there is no monolithic experience of disability, making it hard to define. In her convincing attempt to define disability, Susan Wendell calls for "cross-cultural comparisons and criticism of structure, function, and ability to perform activities."[9] She describes ability and cross-cultural comparisons as follows:

> How much ability is basic, like how much ability is normal, seems to depend on how much is necessary to perform the most common tasks of daily living in a particular physical and social environment. For example, far more strength and stamina are necessary to live where there is no water on tap, where it gets cold and there is no central heating, where a fire has to be built every time a meal is cooked, and all the clothes are washed by hand.[10]

Despite Wendell's claims pertaining to her own lived experiences in North America versus an example of a woman in Kenya, these words can be applied to Margery Kempe.[11] By using universalising

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[8] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 75; Found on page 129 of *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* Kafer's criticism of the social model is relevant for Kempe for she argues the "pervasiveness of the social model has prevented disability studies from engaging with a wider environment of wilderness, parks and nonhuman nature." Indeed, much of the social model's physical aspects are found in the built-environment, postdating the *Book's* medieval context making the social model, and its solutions, not suitable for all the settings Margery found herself in.

[9] Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (Routledge, 1996) 16.

[10] Wendell, *Rejected,* 15.

[11] Susan Wendell is disabled as a result of ME and on page 14 of *Rejected,* she writes how "in some societies, in Eastern Africa for example, where women normally walk several miles a day to obtain water for the household, I would be much more severely disabled." She continues on page 15 to explain that by using

contemporary understandings of disability, the way Margery's disabled bodied functioned, or did not function, changes. Kempe's disability therefore must be understood in the context of her society.

As well as contemporary models, scholars have also created models specifically for the Middle Ages, such as Pearman's gendered model. Her model allows for analysis of biblical, religious, and medical discourses and how these are intertwined with the disabled female body. Merging these discourses with the Aristotelian construction of the female body as a deformed male body, reveals an embodied Otherness between gender, sex, ability, and ethnicity, demonstrating the subversive power female bodies have to challenge these discourses.[12] Thus, a feminist disability perspective offers a "historicized consideration of the links between sociocultural production of gender and bodily ability."[13] In applying feminist disability theory to Margery, Pearman views Kempe's bodily differences as inextricably linked to the medieval notions of the female body and its moral makeup.[14] In the case of Kempe specifically, her bodily differences are especially linked to textual production as argued below.[15] A similar feminist approach can be seen in disabled women's life writing where writers exhibit critical awareness of the intersection between gender and disability in their crafting of literary spaces for their lives.[16] Importantly, Pearman's

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universalising descriptions for disability "a woman in Kenya who can walk only as much as I can will still not be considered disabled with respect to walking, because her ability falls within the worldwide range considered normal."

[12] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 5.

[13] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 1-2.

[14] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116-117; Pearman uses Karma Lochrie's feminist theoretical work *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Lochrie's work views Kempe's written text as one that articulates her bodily experiences, with particular attention being paid to associations of the leaky female body and associations of female flesh. Lochrie makes no mention of disability and Pearman adapts Lochrie's work to associate it with disability. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 3, https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.9783/9780812207538.

[15] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 114.

[16] Sami Schalk, "Disability and Women's Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 177.

chapter on Kempe in *Women and Disability* is the only text in a vast assortment of research into Margery Kempe that labels Margery as disabled. This research builds upon Pearman's work, extending it further to include other disabilities as well as linking Margery's disabilities to the notions of *creatur, imitatio Christi,* and space—which Pearman notably does not do.

Another medieval model of disability is the religious model in which medieval people understood disability through the institutional practices of the church and its doctrine.[17] This model acknowledges the religious discourses on disability and sinfulness, however, research into medieval disability studies has demonstrated the elasticity of these beliefs and the agency of disabled people living in the Middle Ages.[18] Simply put, in a deeply Christian society, bodily or mental difference was not necessarily linked to sin. These two medieval models help to view Margery's disability within her cultural historic context.

It is worth noting this article considers disability a neutral experience. Pearman draws from Wendell to describe disability as a process "wherein cultural standards for normalcy dictate whether those who do not fit such standards can fully participate in society."[19] It is "a form of difference from what is considered normal or usual or paradigmatic in society."[20] Furthermore, "labelling disability as difference allows for a value-neutral description while recognising that both stigma and being 'the Other' are aspects of the social oppression of people with disabilities."[21] In other words, describing disability as neutral does not imply it negatively impacts people,

[17] Edward Wheatley, "Monsters, Saints, and Sinners: Disability in Medieval Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability,* ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 19.
[18] Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, Joshua R. Eylerand, introduction to *A Cultural History of the Disability in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, Joshua R. Eylerand (Bloomsbury, 2020) 4, 11.
[19] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.
[20] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.
[21] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 3.

instead, it demonstrates that its presence does not predict quality of life.[22]

Margery Kempe and Creatur

Margery addressed herself almost exclusively in two manners in her *Book*: through the third person singular feminine pronoun 'sche' [she], which she uses a handful of times in over 6000 lines, and by using *creatur.* Kempe first used *creatur* to refer to herself in line 16: "and hys creatur turnyd helth into sekenesse", with "hys" referring to Christ.[23] In fact, her use of *creatur* often occurs in conjunction with the mention of Christ. Despite her striking use of *creatur,* not much research into her usage has been done other than to remark upon *creatur* as signifier for humility before God.[24]

Dictionaries primarily define *creatur* as something that has been created. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in Margery's lifetime, c. 1373 to sometime after 1438, *creatur* could be used to mean an individual with modifying words used to express admiration, compassion or commiseration.[25] *Creatur* could also refer to someone without qualification or a despicable person, but in Kempe's lifetime this meaning depended on the modifying noun. The Middle English Dictionary yields comparable results with the definitions ranging from a 'created thing' to a 'living creature, i.e., a person'.[26] Many examples of *creatur* here refer to women, whilst others have clear biblical references like the commandments or being created by God. Some denote a despicable person with modifying words like "lathly" [loathly] or in combination with "sorweful" [emotionally distressed]. In contrast to the *Book*, the results from the dictionaries do not show examples of *creatur* being used to refer to oneself. These databases reveal how *creatur* was

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[22] Harriet McBryde Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations" in *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century,* ed. Alice Wong (Penguin, 2020) 9.

[23] [and his creature turned health into sickness]; Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. Lynn Stanley (Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1996) 1, l.16.

[24] Yates, "Mystic Self", 85.

[25] Oxford English Dictionary online, 2000, s.v.,"creature". Accessed 4 June 2025.

[26] Middle English Dictionary online, 2000, s.v. "creatur". Accessed 4 June 2025.

used during the late Middle Ages and how Margery adapted this word to suit her needs.

It is helpful to analyse Kempe's contemporary Julian of Norwich to understand Kempe's use of *creatur*. The *Book* contains a meeting between Margery and the anchoress, making it plausible that Julian inspired her to use this term.[27] In her writing, Julian also referred to herself using creature, but where Margery used 'the' or 'this' creature, Julian portrayed herself as 'a' creature. Julian used a modifier, for example: "a simple creature unlettered."[28] Interestingly, whilst Julian did use creature to indicate herself, she also used it to address other people in her *A Revelation of Love*.[29] Margery's *creatur* is never modified with an adjective, the only words attached to it are the article and the demonstrative. When she uses *creatur,* she only refers to herself. Whilst it is possible that Julian of Norwich may have inspired Margery Kempe's word choice, both women use it differently. Julian's usage complies with the dictionary, whereas Margery's appears to be quite unique.

Margery also frequently places *creatur* with the proximal deictic 'this'. In pragmatics, "deictics are words such as 'this', 'I', 'now', 'here', 'today' that do not have a constant meaning but depend for their meaning on the time, place or situation in which a speaker is speaking (or writing), and which are to be interpreted from the position of the speaker."[30] According to Ruth Evans, most readers are aware Margery is talking about herself when using the third person due to the autobiographical impulses in the *Book.*[31]

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[27] Kempe, *Book* 1 l.955

[28] Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich, A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love,* (n.p., Brepols and Penn State University Press, 2006) 7–8.

[29] Ruth Evans, "*The Book of Margery Kempe*: Autobiography in the Third Person," in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Laura Kalas and Laura Varnam (Manchester University Press, 2021) 91, https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146625.00014.

[30] Evans, *Autobiography,* 93; An example in the following sentences is 'this' implies something different based on the situational position of the listener/reader: I am going to do 'this' tomorrow / "this creatur whych many yerys had gon wyl" [this creature whom for many years had gone wayward].

[31] Evans, *Autobiography,* 85.

Despite this awareness, her rhetoric has an alienating effect on the text as if Margery is "interposing another narrator between Kempe and the reader, not the second scribe translating Kempe's words for the reader, but Kempe ironically dissociating herself from who she was and marking the intervals of the self."[32] Evans stresses the necessity of 'this' to mark Kempe as the narrator of the text, highlighting a semantic deficiency: "'this creatur' is never contrasted with 'that creatur' [a distal deictic], revealing the extent to which the narrative sees events from Kempe's point of view and not that of her scribes or her audience."[33] In sum, by adding the proximal deictic 'this' to *creatur,* Margery narrows the space of the author/narrator gap and stimulates the reader to observe the unfolding narrative from her viewpoint.

Furthermore, the advantage of *creatur* being a gender-neutral term must also be acknowledged. Kempe's *creatur* is "in accordance with the widespread medieval belief that men and women are spiritually equal in God's sight."[34] However, Evans notes one effect of Margery's rhetoric the suggestion that "there is no place in her culture—in late medieval, female, devotional culture—from which she can speak as an I."[35] Whilst men and women may have been created equally by God, Hetta Howes asserts women's speech or in Kempe's case, women's 'writing' was problematic in the Middle Ages: "Jesus may have appeared first to a woman after her [*sic*] resurrection, and relied on her voice to spread the good news, but medieval women were far more likely to hear about the destructive power of Eve's voice...than of the potential transformative power of women's words."[36] She argues the belief was held devout women should keep quiet.[37] Margery, through her loud fits of tears, does not keep quiet and is constantly confronted with

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[32] Evans, *Autobiography,* 89.
[33] Evans, *Autobiography,* 93.
[34] Quoted in Evans, *Autobiography,* 91.
[35] Evans, *Autobiography,* 91.
[36] Hetta Elizabeth Howes, *Transformative Waters in Late-Medieval Literature: From Aelred of Rievaulx to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, 2023) 91, https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1017/9781800102941.
[37] Howes, *Transformative Waters,* 92. She bases her research off, amongst others, prolific medieval writer John Chrysostom's commentary on Paul.

people who wish to silence her. For example, she is banned from a sermon by a visiting friar, where she wept, howled, and roared in response.[38] It is also likely that her exclusion from the sermon, as well as exclusion from other social spaces, are reflected in her alienating lexical decision to use *creatur*. Howes makes no mention of Kempe's lexical choices, but it is entirely possible that choosing to use a gender-neutral term in a time when women were expected to remain silent was one of Kempe's innovative ways for subverting to expectation to be quiet. In viewing the autohagiography as Margery's safe and sacred space, her use of *creatur* as a reflection for her experiences can certainly be understood.

Imitatio Christi

To understand *imitatio Christi,* an explanation will first be given on medieval asceticism and historian Caroline Walker Bynum's work. Medieval asceticism is the denial of worldly pleasures including sex, money or food. In her highly influential work *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum explores an area of medieval ascetism which involved women renouncing food to live a pious life. *Imitatio Christi* is a major component of this renouncement. Bynum emphasises it is mostly women who engage in penitential ascetism, a more extreme variant of asceticism. Mystics, like Margery Kempe, were more inclined to self-inflicted suffering and their engagement in this suffering surfaced in medieval women's writing through, for example, erotic nuptial themes.[39] Bynum creates a model for women previously labelled as masochistic and offers a view of them through medieval ascetism.

Imitatio Christi is, put simply, a desire to become the suffering body of Christ. According to Bynum women were "more likely than men to inflict injury on themselves systematically with flails or thorns, stones or nettles, and that they were a great deal

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[38] Howes, *Transformative Waters,* 108; Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 122; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.3533-3534.

[39] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (University of California Press, 1988), 26; In Kempe's writing, examples can be found of her practising basic aspects of ascetism such as abstinence from sex (*Book* 1, ll.255-259) as well as examples of penitential asceticism including erotic devotional writing (*Book* 1, l.2102-2111).

more likely than men to have their desire for pain result in somatic changes and to have these changes scrutinized and recorded by admirers and biographers of both sexes."[40] As for Margery, she too engaged in this self-punishment, and the *Book* is evidence of her commitment to her *imitatio Christi* being recorded. Bynum iterates that for the medieval women in her research, *imitatio Christi* was eucharistic ecstasy, with *imitatio* being more than an imitation: it was a union with the ultimate body of Christ: "[These women] strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation."[41]

Reworking Bynum's theory, Karma Lochrie distinguishes between two types of *imitatio Christi*: the imagination/memory and the body.[42] Both these types are relevant for discussing Kempe. Margery engaged with the memory form of *imitatio Christi* in numerous manners, most notably through creating the *Book.* Lochrie argues the act of remembering in the Middle Ages is a kind of *imitatio Christi*: "The human faculty of remembrance constructs a region of images or similitudes and, in so doing, enacts an imitation of Christ."[43] She asserts one method medieval people could re-enact Christ is through pilgrimages: in visiting the sites where Christ both lived and suffered, they re-live key moments from his life.[44] Kempe undertook many pilgrimages including visiting sites connected to Jesus. During one pilgrimage, Kempe fell into an intense fit of tears when visiting Mount Calvary: "sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hlr armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr".[45] Sarah Salih writes how Margery

[40] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 212.
[41] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 246.
[42] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 36.
[43] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 29.
[44] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 28.
[45] [she fell down as though she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, broadly spreading her arms, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would burst apart]; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 1572-1574.

brought these roarings home, almost like a souvenir.[46] In line with Bynum and Lochrie's research, it was not rare for women to display an extreme emotional reaction when visiting a holy site, but it was rare to continue to do so back home.[47] Ultimately, Kempe's *Book* is the greatest expression of memory as *imitatio Christi*, with Lochrie suggesting her corporeal narrative can be read as a series of readings of Christ's body and Margery's desire to suffer.[48] Barbara Zimbalist also argues the blurring of Margery's speech with that of Christ is in itself an imitation of Christ.[49]

Moreover, Kempe engaged in the bodily aspect of *imitatio Christi* that Lochrie describes. Her self-inflicted sufferings ranged from wearing a hair shirt to sexual abstinence.[50] She also renounced food to control not only hunger and thirst, but also erotic desire for her husband.[51] Instead, she experienced erotic desire for Jesus Christ as was frequent in medieval women's devotional writing. She was so attracted to Christ's maleness that she would weep whenever she saw a male baby and had visions in which Christ asked her to take him as her wedded husband.[52] Tears are her most obvious bodily expression of Christ's suffering. Kempe had uncontrollable fits of tears for which she received public scorn, at the same time; however, other pious women also had similar fits of tears, albeit in different circumstances such as only at holy sites. She was unsupported in her tears, as the discussion on disability will demonstrate below.[53]

Her uncontrollable tears served a purpose in *imitatio Christi,* with them acting as a means to purge moisture in a similar

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[46] Sarah Salih, "Margery's Bodies: Piety, Work, and Penance," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Brewer, 2004), 173.
[47] Salih, *Margery's Bodies,* 173.
[48] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 168–169.
[49] Barbara, Zimbalist. "Christ, Creature, and Reader." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41, no. 1, (2015) https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.41.1.0001, 2–3.
[50] Salih, *Margery's Bodies,* 168.
[51] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 215.
[52] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.2104.
[53] Cf.: Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 197.

manner to Christ's bleeding body on the cross.[54] According to Lochrie, Kempe's articulation of her bodily experiences draw attention to the medieval associations of the leaky female body and female flesh. In translating their bodies into discourse, as Margery does in the *Book,* "the woman writer has recourse to a power derived from the taboo which defines her and which she breaks with her speech".[55] With the belief being that Christ's blood is redemptive, it is understandable that devout women like Margery would want to identify her excessive tears with Christ's leaking fleshy body. Their desire is reminiscent of Bynum's basic idea of ascetism: "No wonder women manipulated their bodies; in doing so, they became God—a God who feeds and saves."[56] Margery's tears of *imitatio Christi* literally brought her closer to Christ.

Interestingly, disability can be seen as a component of *imitatio Christi* with extremely devout women not only desiring to suffer, but also wishing to be ill. Kempe's contemporary Julian of Norwich, for example, prayed to receive a sickness.[57] After falling ill, Julian had visions of Christ's passion.[58] In addition, women in this group prayed specifically to receive an illness to abstain from food, similar to Margery's behaviour. Some women were already disabled before becoming mystics and viewed a cure as a temptation.[59] Kempe never sought a cure for her disabilities, but did look for reassurance in her meeting with Julian that her fits of tears were appropriate. According to Bynum, illness was a valid form of *imitatio Christi* as "[w]omen's illness was "to be endured," not "cured," and patient suffering of disease or injury was a major way of gaining sanctity for females.[60] In fact, a body marked with a disability, i.e., the physical reality of stigmata, was considered

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[54] Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings,*" in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature,* ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 155.
[55] Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh,* 4.
[56] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 275.
[57] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 200.
[58] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 115.
[59] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 200. Lidwina of Schiedam is an example of one of these women.
[60] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 199.

spiritually superior.[61] Disability cannot be ignored in a discussion of *imitatio Christi.*

Creatur and Imitatio Christi

Imitatio Christi is an inherently gendered activity. Interestingly, it is the gender-neutrality of *creatur* where the connection between these concepts lies. Bynum claims women writers saw themselves as a symbol for all humanity, subsuming the male/female dichotomy into a more cosmic divine/human dichotomy through, for example, using androgynous imagery for the self, ignoring their own gender. For them, "the notion of the female as flesh became an argument for women's *imitatio Christi* through physicality."[62] In this same passage, Bynum argues Margery embraced the male/female dichotomy through her use of traditionally female imagery. However, this article disagrees with Bynum's assertion because Kempe enforces the divine/human dichotomy through using the gender-neutral *creatur* in her text. She forces her readers to view her as the subject by adding the proximal deictic 'this' making it clear that she is the human created by the divine being. *Imitatio Christi* and *creatur* are thus inextricably linked and, as key components of the *Book,* contribute to a fuller understanding of Margery's disabilities.

Disability

Margery Kempe had a list of disabling health problems, ranging from her fits of tears to her experiences giving birth, as well as an injury. Using Kafer's terms Kempe's disabled body is an assemblage, in which disability is not an attribute of Margery, but rather an encounter between bodies and categories.[63] She first falls ill after one of at least fourteen pregnancies and sees visions of Christ during her recovery from giving birth. In her *Book,* she recalls a confession of her experience of being ill after childbirth, showing the true extent

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[61] John P. Sexton, "Atypical Bodies: Seeking after Meaning in Physical Difference" in *A Cultural History of the Disability in the Middle Ages,* ed. Jonathan Hsy, Tory Vandeventer Pearman, and Joshua R. Eylerand, (Bloomsbury, 2020) 31.
[62] Bynum, *Holy Feast,* 263.
[63] Kafer, *Crip,* 10.

of her illness: "this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd with spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days.[64] These severe symptoms, like suicidal ideation, scratching her skin, and seeing visions, led to her family restraining her.[65] Interestingly, her use of "labowryd" in that line is synonymous with labour of childbirth. In fact, her fits of tears in which her body flails and she loudly cries resemble a woman in labour.[66] She also experiences weakness after each fit and describes comparable weakness after giving birth.[67] If her crying fits were disabling to her, then her pregnancies certainly were too.

Similar to her having no control over her mind and body postpartum, Kempe later also experienced uncontrollable crying fits, and the Mount Calvary passage discussed in the section on *imitatio Christi* demonstrates how incapacitated she was during these fits. Their frequency differed: she sometimes would have them once a month or seven times a day, and sometimes the fits would occur fourteen times in one day.[68] It is due to these fits that most early scholarship tries to diagnose her with hysteria.[69] Recent feminist works maintain the medicalisation by diagnosing her with postpartum depression or psychosis.[70] This article follows Pearman and Bynum in their approach by acknowledging that Margery was disabled within the *Book*'s fifteenth-century context and observing medieval notions of bodily and mental responses to spirituality.[71] Simply put, this article refrains from diagnosing her with anachronistic diagnoses.

Nevertheless, both the scholarship that tries to medicalise Kempe's body and the scholarship that defines her as disabled fail to discuss that Margery also sustained a severe physical injury. Whilst praying in church, Margery dictated how a stone and wooden

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[64] [this creature went out of her mind and was very afflicted and laboured with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some days]; Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 149-150.
[65] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.157–165.
[66] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 136.
[67] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.867.
[68] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1592-1594.
[69] Windeatt, introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe,* 3.
[70] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116.
[71] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 116.

beam suddenly fell from the highest parts of the church vault and landed on her head and back. The shock and pain left her wondering for a moment if she had died. After crying out "Jhesu mercy", her pain went away.[72] A couple of lines later, she admitted it took twelve weeks to fully recover and both she, and a doctor, consider it a miracle of God.[73] Despite claiming she no longer felt pain, it is easy to assume such a severe injury could cause a long-term disability especially given the historical context Margery lived in. It is also plausible this injury is the reason for her dictating the *Book.* As was briefly mentioned, it is possible she did not have the physical ability to write, perhaps due to a disability. Scholarship tends to assume she was illiterate, however, just before the stone and beam fall from the church, she dictated how she was holding a book in her hand.[74] This brief remark indicates that she could have been literate after all. As well as sustaining an injury, she then possibly lost the physical ability to write at some point in her life.

Furthermore, for Kempe, her disabilities serve as a catalyst for her spirituality and writing her *Book.* During the period following her postpartum illness(es), she saw Christ stand at her bedside, an image that restored her.[75] This comforting vision of Christ, as well as the extreme physical reactions to Christ that would plague her, prompted her to document her experiences. Research into the practice of life writing and disability studies reveals a link between the disabled body and the desire to create a safe literary space for oneself.[76] In this narrative form, disabled writers recover their bodies and memories to offer a counterrepresentation to stigmatised depictions of disability.[77] Kempe employed self-narration in her *Book* to explain her disabilities: she recounts, for example, how her post-partum health problems lasted the best part of a year, but she deviated from the present-day life writing tradition

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[72] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 485-489.
[73] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 493-502.
[74] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll. 483-484.
[75] Kempe, *Book* 1, l.177.
[76] G. Thomas Couser "Signifying Selves: Disability and Life Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 200.
[77] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 126.

of trying to transcend one's disability through text.[78] Margery's main objective was instead to glorify the works of Christ, which she merged with her lived experiences. In doing so, she used the format of life writing to create a sacred space for herself. Similarly, her retelling of her experiences to scribes, other peers, and Christ is indicative of her trying to bridge the space between her inner self and outer world created by her bodily aberrances.[79] Drawing from Lochrie's idea that medieval women writers occupied and exploited the ideology of the flesh in translating their body into discourse, Pearman asserts Kempe's "body becomes her text and her text becomes her body—and her body, in its excessiveness, resists normalization."[80] That is to say, her disabled body initially produces the texts and causes her spirituality.[81] These expressions of her disabilities are both disabling and freeing: it motivates her to write and purges her emotions.

As a consequence of her public displays of her disability, Margery was treated as an outsider and was excluded from physical and societal spaces. Suffering upwards of fourteen (mostly) public fits a day resulted in her being infamous in Lynn and on pilgrimages. Her loud tears and roarings were seen as an annoyance. Kempe suffered abusive remarks wherever she went, ranging from the assumption she was inebriated to claims she was possessed by an evil spirit. The abuse was so severe that some people wished she were dead and others spat on her. In this same passage, she notes that people, such as the aforementioned visiting friar, banned her, and how her former acquaintances avoided her and also barred her from their property.[82] It is unclear exactly how often she was forbidden to enter various places but it is clear she was excluded from social and physical spaces. Additionally, she was arrested multiple times on the suspicion of heresy and Lollardy—keeping the social model in mind, it is likely her (bodily) differences played into these suspicions.

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[78] Couser "Signifying Selves", 205.
[79] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 119.
[80] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 118.
[81] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 127.
[82] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1599-1602; Kempe, *Book* 1, l.2480.

Though the *Book* was created to glorify Christ, it can be seen as being written in response to the scorn she receives. Kempe initially tried to control her fits but learned that controlling them only increased their severity.[83] Christ functioned as a comfort for Margery and she compared her own suffering to Christ's torments. By creating her *Book* as a form of *imitatio Christi,* she put herself in charge of her narrative; she changed the negative space into a positive one. Moreover, she learned she can navigate the space that scorned her in her quest of devotion by comforting others: some began to see her tears as holy, and she used her tears to visit those on their deathbeds, increasing her "spiritual merit" with every insult.[84] Notions of abled-mindedness/abled-bodiedness prevail in research done on Margery Kempe and this discussion has shown that disability can not only be found in the *Book*, the *Book* itself can be understood as her expression of her disabled body. In true disability fashion, she demonstrated that she could reinvent negative space by turning a life of exclusion into one of self-fulfilment. Her *Book* became her safe-space; a place where she could be *creatur* and show her love and inspiration of Christ.

Conclusion

Whilst there has been a considerable amount of work done on Margery Kempe's life, research into her disabilities has been extremely limited and not inclusive of all her conditions. Likewise, research done into the practice of *imitatio Christi* and into Kempe's rhetorical use of *creatur* is insufficient as it fails to connect it to disability. This article used disability studies to establish Margery Kempe as disabled and viewed *creatur, imitatio Christi,* and her *Book* as expressions of her disabilities. Accordingly, she embodied the disability aspects of *imitatio Christi* with her visions of Christ starting after her health problems and her disabling fits of tears bringing the hopeful prospect of sanctity. In addition, her constant use of the gender-neutral *creatur* to refer to herself is a unique feature, distinct from her contemporaries, reflecting her place as an outsider and the dichotomy many women who engaged in *imitatio*

[83] Kempe, *Book* 1, ll.1611-1612.
[84] Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 125; Pearman, *Women and Disability,* 128.

Christi strove for. These components therefore contribute to a fuller understanding of Margery Kempe as a disabled medieval woman.

The greatest expression of disability for Margery is the literary space she created. As disability studies scholar Simi Linton writes: "[Disabled people] found a voice not to despair at our fate but outrage at our social positioning. Our symptoms, though sometimes painful, scary, unpleasant, or difficult to manage are part of the dailiness of life. They...have existed in all communities throughout time."[85] The *Book* more than exemplifies the statement Linton makes. The autobiographical impulses of it are, as the prefix suggests, a deeply personal medium. Kempe's word choice from the narrowest sense of using *creatur* to the broadest sense of writing in the vernacular are all personal reflections of her daily life. She included all the painful, scary, unpleasant, and difficult symptoms her disabilities brought her, including ableist exclusion. She turned her outrage over her treatment into an imitation of and love for Christ. The *Book* is her space for her disabled body.

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Sound of Subscendence: Navigating Soundscapes in George Orwell's *1984*

Zuzia Dzierzędzka

Abstract

This paper examines the sonic environments of 1984 *by George Orwell through the lens of Timothy Morton's concept of subscendence, arguing that sound operates as a paradoxical force within the novel's oppressive system. While the Party seeks to construct a sensory-controlled, prison-like environment that limits perception and embodied experience, sound continually exceeds these constraints by occupying space, shaping affect, and enabling fleeting moments of resistance. Methodologically, the paper combines close reading with insights from prison literature studies and ecocriticism, particularly subscendence from Morton's* Ecology without Nature. *It analyses key scenes, including the Two Minutes Hate, the Ministry of Love, the Thrush's Song, and the Prole Washerwoman's Singing, to demonstrate how soundscapes are co-produced by both the regime and its subjects. These environments immerse individuals in affective atmospheres that discipline perception, yet never fully eliminate the possibility of alternative experience. The analysis shows that subscendence emerges through the interaction between individuals and their environments, where the collective sonic field both reinforces and destabilises power. Moments of immersion—whether in orchestrated hate or spontaneous song—reveal that sound cannot be fully contained, as it continues to press into bodies and space. Ultimately, the paper argues that Orwell's soundscapes expose the instability of total control, demonstrating how even within a tightly regulated sensory regime, the material and affective qualities of sound preserve the potential for life, expression, and resistance.*

Keywords: Orwell, *1984*, ecocriticism, sound, soundscape, resistance and oppression

A scream rips through the air, uncontrollable laughter breaks the silence, a beautiful melody moves the soul of those who are listening, and suddenly one's mind floods with emotion. No matter the decor or the candlelight, a dinner accompanied by shrieks makes one's blood run cold, and a gentle harmony can turn even the sharpest of rooms into a peaceful sanctuary. The shimmering ecology of sonic and visual interactions envelops in its affective possibility, stringing listeners along roads of serenity or, with just one note astray, paths of discord. No matter containment, this ability of sound is almost inescapable, allowing for this perceived duality and multitude of feelings in between. A voice rises and the room is no longer still. A song swells and something unseen expands, filling the air with tension, warmth, memory, and possibility. Sound does not merely pass through space—it settles, spreads, presses against the body, rearranges what can be felt and imagined. Where voices gather, feelings expand; where melody lingers, thought begins to move. Power lives here, in this invisible occupation of space, and power rarely goes unnoticed. Speech is watched, song is restrained, expression narrowed— not by accident, but by design.

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell imagines a world that understands this all too well. There, sound is monitored, shaped, and suppressed because wherever expression resonates, hope finds room to breathe—and where hope breathes, control begins to fracture. It is no surprise that such a regime recoils from the arts, from unregulated voices, from anything that vibrates beyond command. For sound carries more than noise—it carries the dangerous possibility of freedom. This tension between resonance and restraint frames the central paradox of *1984*. The regime described in this novel seeks to engineer a world stripped of sensory depth, where perception is narrowed and embodied experience flattened into obedience. Yet sound continually exceeds this picture, because it presses into space and bodies, reintroduces affect, relation, and presence even within conditions meant to eliminate them, exposing the instability of a system that depends on sensory deprivation to maintain control. This paper argues that viewing soundscapes in *1984* through Timothy Morton's subscendence—the notion that a whole is less than the sum of its parts—makes space for

the sound to operate paradoxically. By applying subscendence, sound simultaneously allows for the attempts of the regime to construct a sensory-controlled prison that limits perception and embodied experience and for a space of resistance and living.

Literary and Theoretical Context

1984, written by George Orwell and first published in 1949, has become one of the most influential and widely recognised works of dystopian fiction. [1] The novel portrays an anti-intellectual, authoritarian society defined by near-total surveillance, a system that continues to feel disturbingly relevant in a modern world where similar regimes and governing practices have gained visibility and strength.[2] Within this setting, the protagonists Winston and Julia navigate a reality shaped by endless war, pervasive governmental control, and a constantly shifting sense of truth. Because of its complexity and popularity, the novel has inspired a vast body of academic research. Scholars have examined its socio-geographies, archival practices, and representations of childhood education, its connections to Ancient Greek and Biblical traditions, as well as Orwell's literary inheritors.[3] Studies have also focused on seemingly more detailed elements of the text, including the dirt that covers Oceania's streets, the mechanisms of torture, and the novel's recurring animal metaphors.[4] Beyond literary analysis, the work has even been explored through its musicality and its influence on pop, rock, and opera music.[5]

Yet despite this extensive scholarship, the novel's soundscapes themselves have rarely been examined in detail. For the purpose of this article, I define soundscapes as "sound understood as an environment," which encompasses an individual

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[1] Nathan Waddell, "Introduction: Orwell's Book," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1st edn, ed. Nathan Waddell (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.
[2] Waddell, "Introduction," 2.
[3] Waddell, "Introduction," 8–9; to access the articles mentioned see *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
[4] Waddell, "Introduction," 10.
[5] Jamie Wood, "Making Nineteen Eighty-Four Musical: Pop, Rock, and Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1st edn, ed. Nathan Waddell (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

or a group of individuals in an auditory landscape.[6] This essay addresses that gap in the secondary literature on *1984* by analysing the sonic environments of the text through a combination of close reading of five scenes from the novel, prison literature studies, and ecocritical theory. Drawing on the concept of subscendence developed by British philosopher Timothy Morton, I argue that sound in the novel carries a paradoxical potential: the same acoustic environments that reinforce prison-like oppression and surveillance, simultaneously generate spaces in which resistance and fleeting experiences of freedom can emerge.

Why describe the world of *1984* as a prison when its citizens are not literally locked behind bars? The answer lies in the profound absence of freedom experienced by Party members and the extent to which their lives are controlled from the outside. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the Thought Police, an organ of surveillance that does not merely maintain order but penetrates deeply into private life, wiring homes and monitoring communication so that individuals live in constant fear of being overheard and observed.[7] Their purpose is to ensure absolute obedience: Party members must love Big Brother, believe in the greatness of Oceania in whatever war it happens to be fighting, and avoid any form of independent or critical thought. Even minor acts of self-expression become dangerous. Winston's attempt to write in a diary, for example, is treated as a punishable offense, forcing him to conceal his efforts from the telescreens—surveillance devices that cannot be turned off and that broadcast propaganda while simultaneously functioning as microphones and cameras.[8] In this way, Party members are constantly reminded that they are being watched. The famous slogan plastered on every building wall, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," captures the atmosphere of

[6] Marinna Guzy, "The Sound of Life: What Is a Soundscape?,", Folklife Local Site, 4 May 2017, https://folklife.si.edu/talkstory/the-sound-of-life-what-is-a-soundscape.

[7] George Orwell, *1984* (1959), Project Gutenberg of Australia, 6, https://archive.org/download/NineteenEightyFour-Novel-GeorgeOrwell/orwell1984.pdf.

[8] Orwell, *1984*, 6; Orwell, *1984,* 9.

permanent observation that structures daily life.[9] In such a system, conventional crimes are almost impossible to commit; instead, the Party defines *thoughtcrime* as "the essential crime that contained all others in itself," meaning that even the act of thinking against the Party becomes punishable.[10]

The prison-like nature of Oceania's London is also reflected in the visual organisation of the city itself. All Party members must wear blue overalls, the official uniform of the Party, visually marking their expected lack of individuality.[11] London's streets appear bleak and controlled: the sky is described as a "harsh blue," helicopters of the Thought Police peer through people's windows, and the city is filled with rubble left from war, largely devoid of natural life.[12] This architectural and sensory environment reinforces the experience of confinement. As Julian Murphet notes in her analysis of the acousmatics[13] of prison writing, from the prisoner's perspective, the prison is an architectural space in which the faculty of sight—normally dominant in everyday life—is drastically limited because the environment provides so few new visual stimuli.[14] In such conditions, auditory perception becomes heightened, acquiring an intensified sensitivity. Life under the Party operates in a similar way. With visual and spatial freedom restricted, the auditory world grows disproportionately significant. The inhabitants of Oceania, much like prisoners, live within an acousmatic environment in which sounds—voices, announcements, commands, and propaganda—shape their experience of space and power. This sensory imbalance allows the Party to construct soundscapes that profoundly affect its subjects, reinforcing control even without physical imprisonment.

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[9] Orwell, *1984*, 6.
[10] Orwell, *1984*, 20.
[11] Orwell, *1984*, 5.
[12] Orwell, *1984*, 6-7.
[13] Acousmatics refers to an experience of sound that is heard without the listener seeing its source. An audible presence detached from any visible origin results then in a heightened experience of hearing. For more information of acousmatics see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* and Pierre Schaeffer *Sound Object*.
[14] Julian Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Sound Studies*, ed. Helen Groth (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 167.

Yet the Party's authority would be meaningless without the participation of its members. It is, after all, the individuals who obey the rules, attend Party rituals, and live their daily lives within the structures the regime establishes. Through their embodied experiences, they become connected to the abstract idea of the Party itself. In this way, Party members link the immanent reality of lived, physical existence with the transcendental notion of belonging to a larger political whole. Because of this dual relationship, the individuals who compose the Party also have the capacity to exceed the abstraction it represents. The system depends entirely on its parts; without the participation of these individuals, the collective entity could not exist.

This dynamic corresponds to the concept of subscendence, a term developed by Timothy Morton. Within a broader scholarly context, subscendence emerges from engagement with the philosophical field of Object-Oriented Ontology, where attention shifts from dominant wholes to the relational agency of their constituent parts. As a relatively recent (coined in 2017) and innovative concept, subscendence challenges hierarchical thinking by foregrounding distributed significance and ecological interdependence, making it particularly relevant to contemporary work in the environmental humanities and ecocritical literary analysis.[15] Subscendence invites the reader to shift attention from the overwhelming scale of a system to the individuals who constitute it, granting them equal if not greater significance than the distant totality they form.[16] Rather than emphasising transcendence or the desire to rise above one's conditions, the concept foregrounds the importance of the ordinary components that sustain larger structures. In doing so, it recognises the value of being part of something greater without reproducing the capitalist impulse to dominate or surpass it, instead highlighting the inherent significance of the small and the everyday.[17] Subscendence is crucial in my analysis of this novel as the soundscapes created are always a matter of the whole environment and the people within it. It highlights the tight

[15] Timothy Morton, "Subscendence - Journal #85," accessed 10 April 2026, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence.
[16] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 114.
[17] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.

bond between the Party and its members, while creating a space between their mutual efforts to create sonic environments—between how they *appear to be* and *what they are*.[18]

Everyday Rhythms of Hate

I will begin by examining the spaces of everyday existence that the Party engineers for its members, beginning with the Two Minutes Hate—a supposed occasion for party members to release their anger towards Emmanuel Goldstein. Goldstein is "the primal traitor", an infamous enemy of the Party who wishes ill to the whole society, leads the rebellion, and commits acts of heresy.[19] The Two Minutes Hate program occurs every day and requires mandatory participation, during which all the members are monitored and measured in their anger. Compared to the usual silence of the sensory deprived daily life of the party members, the sudden loudness and chaos serve as powerful mechanisms to silence one's mind and replace their thoughts with those of the party.[20] In the rigor so characteristic of a highly surveyed environment, the affective experience of Winston begs to be examined.

The sound coming from the screen is sudden, "bursting," "grinding," and "monstrous," establishing the tone of the Hate from the very beginning.[21] It is not enough that Hate awakes in the hearts of the party members towards Goldstein, but with the environment surrounding it, it is meant to be deeply internalised. The "noise" is one "that set one's teeth on edge and bristled the hair at the back of one's neck" intentionally evoking fear just from the telescreen turning on.[22] That significant beginning finds a mirror in the crowd "hissing" and "squeaking in disgust."[23] As a call and response, the soundscape gets created and directly reflects on Winston and others like him among the crowd as the rage filling them is described as

[18] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.
[19] Orwell, *1984,* 14.
[20] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 174.
[21] Orwell, *1984,* 13.
[22] Orwell, *1984,* 13.
[23] Orwell, *1984,* 14.

"uncontrollable" and "breaking out" of the people highlighting the perceived involuntariness of this action.[24]

As seconds pass people begin to shout "in an effort to drown the maddening bleating voice that came from the screen," a direct recall to the effort of the noise from the screen to silence the thoughts of party members.[25] This loudness reminds of its flattening property enacted in the erasure between the subjective and the social.[26] In their screams, people during the Hate join in an environment of chaos and subjectivity dictated to them by the party precisely because the use of loudness as their experience is "profoundly personal but also profoundly shared."[27] This appears especially visible when Winston realises that he is also shouting and kicking, already catching himself in the act rather than consciously making a decision to join.[28] The environment of the event itself, with its affective power, thrusts one into the experience as "it was impossible to avoid joining in."[29] Winston and other party members become completely immersed in the meticulously crafted soundscape of hate. The Hate itself would have been nothing if not for the party members shouting, kicking, and screaming as they together subscended the event itself.

This demonstrates that subscendence is neither inherently positive nor negative, but fundamentally paradoxical, as Party members, through their subscendent participation, simultaneously reinforce and enact the Party's mechanisms of manipulation. The sum of their individual emotions released in scream and loudness push them into the listeners' collapse.[30] The Hate dissolves the boundaries between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self. The soundscape that the party members

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[24] Orwell, *1984,* 15.
[25] Orwell, *1984,* 15.
[26] Michael C. Heller, "Between Silence and Pain: Loudness and the Affective Encounter," in *Just Beyond Listening: Essays of Sonic Encounter*, 1st edn, vol. 4 (University of California Press, 2024), 19.
[27] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 19.
[28] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[29] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[30] "An experience of listener collapse occurs when loud sound dissolves the ability to distinguish between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self." Heller, *Just Beyond Listening,* 17.

find themselves in "does not only touch, but it also saturates and fills mental and physical consciousness, eliminating the possibility of detached listening."[31]

However, Winston recognises that as much as his environmentally induced rage is involuntary, it is "abstract and unidentified" enough that its object can be shifted.[32] Suddenly, the sonic environment created by propaganda induced speech becomes a powerful tool for Winston to rage towards the party and the Big Brother. In the listeners' collapse Winston submerges himself so deeply into his environment it creates space for a moment of freedom among this controlled overstimulation. As an individual part of the collective Hate, in his subscendence he overtakes the Hate, occupying particularly this gap between how he appears to the eye and how he truly is as those two become inseparable. In his brief moment of rebellion, he hoists himself off propaganda and by embracing it, he subscends it trusting "the mere power of his voice [capable] of wrecking the structure of civilization."[33] In this way, both Winston and the Party members participate in subscendence, yet in divergent forms: the collective subscendence of the crowd reinforces the Party's control, while Winston's brief, internal redirection of the same sonic immersion allows him to subscend differently only for a moment, exposing the paradox that the very process sustaining domination simultaneously allows for resistance. Thus, the Two Minutes Hate reveals how the Party's engineered sonic environment simultaneously enforces collective submission and, through the subscendent intensity of immersion itself, unintentionally opens fleeting internal spaces where control can be momentarily reoriented rather than simply obeyed.

A Prison from within a Prison

Another crucial environment that demands closer examination is the literal prison embedded within the already prison-like world of the novel. With an ironically haunting name, the Ministry of Love is introduced as a terrifying building lacking windows, defined by a maze-like structure and steel doors, implemented by the Party to

[31] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 17.
[32] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[33] Orwell, *1984,* 16.

ensure law and order.[34] It carries the reputation of a high-security prison so feared that even the surrounding streets are filled with guards, and regular Party members make certain never to linger in its proximity.[35] When Winston eventually finds himself inside in one of the later chapters, he immediately understands where he is. The cell is empty, white, and submerged in a low humming noise, supposedly from a ventilator, creating a visually sterile room of extreme surveillance with no fewer than four telescreens mounted on each wall.[36]

The prisoners are kept in a state of sensory deprivation and are forbidden to move; if they do, they are "yelled at [...] from the telescreen."[37] From the very beginning of incarceration, Winston and the other political prisoners are submerged in an environment of stark contrast—forced into stillness and silence while their captors exploit the embodied consequences of loudness through sudden commands from unseen sources. The acousmatics of the cell rely on visual and sonic opposition: as one sense is suppressed, another becomes hyper-attuned, only to be manipulated. The deprivation of visual complexity heightens auditory sensitivity, which is then weaponised through bursts of amplified sound that puncture the fragile quiet. The high ceiling and windowless white surfaces are not incidental but deliberately engineered to intensify sonic distress, reflecting telescreen-generated noise across the room and into the prisoners' constantly exposed organs of audition.[38] Here, much like the sonic environment constructed during the Hate, loudness functions not merely as stimulus but as substitution. It overwhelms the mind, replacing independent thought with fear, anticipation, and submission to impending punishment. Silence becomes tension; sound becomes invasion. Together they create a regime of listening in which perception itself is disciplined.

Yet this environment of terror is not produced solely by architecture and guards. It is equally sustained by the prisoners themselves, who quickly divide into Party prisoners and others.

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[34] Orwell, *1984*, 8.
[35] Orwell, *1984,* 8.
[36] Orwell, *1984,* 207.
[37] Orwell, *1984,* 207.
[38] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 178.

Party prisoners, described as "always silent and terrified," stand in stark contrast to those who "seemed to care nothing for anybody."[39] The latter are permitted—and also permit themselves—to "yell insults at the guards," "shout down the telescreens," or even address the guards familiarly by "calling them by nicknames."[40] These seemingly minor acts of sonic expression directly contribute to the acoustic structure of the prison, shaping the very environment they inhabit. Sound does not merely occur within the prison; it participates in constructing it. In cases where political and regular prisoners are separated, sound sometimes can serve as a bridge between them, in this case, however, it reinforces division rather than overcoming it.[41] The possibility that shared sonic expression might disrupt the Party's carefully calibrated environment remains unrealised. Instead of creating solidarity or rupture, the inmates' vocalisations become absorbed into the existing order. Their participation in a shared subscendence—a collective immersion in the sensory field of confinement—strengthens the very system that contains them. The prisoners' ears equipped "with political radar, capable of new ranges of journalistic perception" effectively sort and interpret sound on behalf of the Party itself, placing political and petty criminals into neat separate boxes.[42] Listening becomes surveillance internalised.

Conversation is rare, brief, and typically confined to the subject of one's conviction. One exchange that demands particular attention occurs between Winston and his former colleague Parsons, previously characterised as an enthusiastic devotee of the Party.[43] Winston is therefore deeply surprised to encounter him in the Ministry of Love. Parsons explains that he has been arrested for a thoughtcrime committed in his sleep, reported by his own daughter.[44] Within an environment so thoroughly structured by sonic sensitivity, even unconscious speech becomes evidence. Parsons's sleep talking alone is sufficient for his imprisonment, and

[39] Orwell, *1984,* 208.
[40] Orwell, *1984,* 208.
[41] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 173.
[42] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 173.
[43] Orwell, *1984,* 22.
[44] Orwell, *1984,* 213–14.

more strikingly, he believes this outcome is justified.[45] In this moment, the power of the system reveals itself most fully. Individual Party members, through belief and self-regulation, subscend the Party's mechanisms, expanding them through their own affective and perceptual investment. The prison does not merely confine bodies; it organises listening, fear, and response so completely that its subjects help sustain it. The Ministry of Love thus becomes not only a site of punishment but a fully immersive sonic environment—one in which power resonates through architecture, technology, and the disciplined perception of those contained within it.

Song of Freedom

Contrary to the controlled and planned environment of the Party facilities, nature outside of the city borders offers a sensory abundance. After a few conspiratory exchanges hidden within crowds of party members, Winston and Julia manage to arrange an escape into a zone outside of London, seemingly out of Big Brother's reach. The song of the thrush, described during that very first private sexual but also truly personal encounter, serves almost as an instruction for the two on how to embody subscendence, confronting them with this very sense of individuality. The bird demonstrates a profound connection to the natural world it inhabits, as seen when it "ducked its head for a moment, as though making a sort of obeisance to the sun." Through personification, the bird is portrayed as consciously in harmony with its surroundings.

However, harmony does not imply invisibility, as "in the afternoon hush the volume of sound was startling," clearly asserting its presence. The thrush, though just one small part of the ecosystem, holds its significance and seems to subscend instinctively. It sings not for a tangible audience but into "nothingness," as its song alone is reason enough to continue. Winston and Julia focus on the bird, rather than the meadow around them, reinstating how "the whole is subscended by its parts" and emphasising the profound impact of small, individual elements within a larger system. The animal, in its most natural state, seems to be writing an instruction for the two lovers on sound making—existing—just for its own sake.

[45] Orwell, *1984,* 214.

A melodical excretion of freedom subscending the soundscape it creates demonstrates the utopia living outside of the prison of Big Brother could be. As a symbol of freedom, through subscendence, which both the thrush and Winston and Julia are capable of, it rebels against the reality created by the party.

Moreover, the bird's song becomes the catalyst for Winston to find the courage to embrace intimacy with Julia, symbolising a push toward life in subscendence. "Winston and Julia clung together" as they listened to its song, which then led to their kiss and embrace. Even when the thought of surveillance crossed Winston's mind, it did not evoke fear but rather a sense of curiosity—wondering whether the microphones could capture the thrush's melody—revealing a momentary shift in his perspective. This shift allows Winston to "stop thinking and merely feel," enabling him to focus on his own embodied existence and material place in the world. Like the thrush, he is simply present, aware of his connection to the natural world. Outside the city's oppressive structures, Winston and Julia fully experience subscendence, briefly reclaiming their sense of individuality and interconnectedness. The thrush and its song play a significant role in facilitating this moment of connection, both to each other and to the larger web of life around them.

Unlike the engineered soundscapes of the Two Minutes Hate or the Ministry of Love, where loudness and silence are strategically imposed to discipline perception, the thrush's song emerges without intention of control. In the Hate, subscendence arises collectively, the crowd's voices exceeding propaganda; in the Ministry, it is coerced, produced through sensory deprivation and sonic intrusion. The thrush, however, subscends differently: its sound does not overwhelm but expands, filling space without domination. Rather than collapsing individuality into a collective, it affirms singular presence. Yet it still subscends, as its small, local song exceeds its source, reshaping the environment and inviting Winston and Julia into a lived, embodied freedom.

Melodies of Silence

In the prison world made by the Party, privacy is a luxury that nobody under the telescreens can afford. Even if you are not being watched by the telescreen, you can be sure you are being heard, so

the only soundscapes which Winston takes part in are either forcefully constructed and upheld by the Party and its members or experienced in secret from it. The only subscendence allowed in sound is that of violence and constraint, so to experience the song of the bird they had to escape outside the city. In another effort at privacy, Winston wanders around the prole districts free of telescreens and stumbles upon a shop filled with antiques, which becomes a sort of privacy heaven—it is there that he buys a journal, beginning his journey of rebellion mentioned from the very first pages of the book.[46] After returning to this shop once again and holding the very first truthful conversation about the past of Oceania, upon his return to London, he even dares to hum an improvised tune, a sign that perhaps song is a physical manifestation of him subscending the Party's ideology—he sings, like the bird, for the sake of song.[47]

Another instance that brings Winston closer to subscendence is his encounter with the washerwoman's song, which introduces an element of play into the Party's rigid propaganda. It reaches him from an apartment he rents from the owner of the very same shop he previously attended in the prole district. Initially kept for his affair with Julia, the room quickly becomes much more—a promise of a slightly more permanent privacy than what they have ever experienced before.[48] The tune the woman sings beneath Winston's window is described as having been "hunting London for past weeks," as it was one of the songs created without human intervention specifically for war propaganda.[49] While the song initially strikes Winston as a grim reminder of the war, the washerwoman transforms it, singing "so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound."[50] By singing, the woman takes a serious indoctrinating tune and makes it her own, with humanity and playfulness. For Morton, play is an essential tool in subscendence, as it introduces imperfection and individuality into otherwise ineffable systems—for example like the workings of the

[46] Orwell, *1984,* 87.
[47] Orwell, *1984,* 93.
[48] Orwell, *1984,* 126.
[49] Orwell, *1984,* 127.
[50] Orwell, *1984,* 127.

Party.[51] Through her playful reinterpretation, the washerwoman connects herself to the whole by engaging with its parts, reclaiming a piece of propaganda meant for Hate Week and reshaping it into a moment of joy. Her act highlights how subscendence can occur even within a structure as oppressive as the Party, allowing small, meaningful expressions of life and resistance. This moment exposes the paradox of Party-induced soundscapes: a song designed for ideological control appears as propaganda, yet through embodied performance becomes something entirely different. Unlike the collective immersion of the Two Minutes Hate or the coercive acousmatics of the Ministry of Love, subscendence here emerges through reinterpretation, occupying the gap between what the soundscape is meant to be and what it becomes in lived experience.

The booming voice of the washerwoman created a striking tension between silence and sound, drawing Winston's attention to his auditory surroundings. He described the area outside as noisy, while the room he resides in remains "curiously silent, thanks to the absence of a telescreen."[52] The use of the word "curiously" conveyed Winston's surprise and joy at discovering this rare silence. It reconstructed silence not merely as the absence of sound but as a physical and mental state tied to privacy and safety—a soundscape created by the lack of it. This silence became a meaningful contrast to the oppressive noise of the Party's constant surveillance, offering Winston a sense of security. His auditory environment created a whole in which he felt comforted by the realisation that he is still part of it, even while finding freedom within the quiet. The absence of the telescreen subscended Winston outside of the Party's regime, allowing him, for a brief moment, to live and breathe freely, unfazed by its control. In this way, silence itself becomes a subscendent soundscape, where the absence imposed by the Party is reconfigured into a space of embodied freedom.

The Morbid Chorale

Unfortunately, the rented room shelters the couple for only a month, after which they are arrested by the Thought Police.[53] The

[51] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.
[52] Orwell, *1984,* 127.
[53] Orwell, *1984,* 138.

return of the washerwoman during Winston and Julia's final moments of freedom serves as a powerful symbol of life in subscendence and death without it. To subscend is to engage and open yourselves to the possibility of its rebellion-oppression paradox, without which you become still and drown under the currents of the prison-like reality. As stark as this statement may seem, it is reflected in Winston's own words: "You were the dead, theirs [proles'] was the future."[54] While the washerwoman once again sang her war tune, Winston was compelled to reflect on the truths he had just learned from *The Book*—a work allegedly created by Goldstain containing the manifesto of the rebellion.[55] The soundscape she conjured with her song induced "a single shared vibration—a shimmering together that nevertheless is always experienced individually."[56] He viewed the washerwoman as representative of the proles—the lowest social class in the novel, yet he did not strip her of her individuality. Instead, he recognised her as a symbol of the greater whole, embodying life through her act of subscendence. "The birds sang, the proles sang. The Party did not sing." —these words highlight the alignment of the proles and nature, both existing in a state of vitality, while the Party is tied to a lifeless netherworld, separated from the natural order.[57]

The Party's soundscapes, as seen in the frenzied noise of the Two Minutes Hate and the sterile hum of the Ministry of Love, replace organic expression with mechanical repetition and enforced silence, producing an acoustic environment devoid of spontaneity, and therefore aligned not with life but with stasis and death. Both "birds" and "proles" are plural, emphasising the ability for individuals to subscend within a collective, whereas the Party defines itself as a rigid, monolithic block. This rigidity ensures its eventual collapse, as it denies the fluidity and connection that sustain life. Just as a fortress cannot exist without its individual bricks, the Party cannot endure without its members. Without acknowledging this interconnectedness, it fails, and subscendence emerges as the only viable path forward. Ultimately, the vitality of song—whether from

[54] Orwell, *1984,* 203.
[55] Orwell, *1984,* 203; Orwell, *1984*, 15.
[56] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 16.
[57] Orwell, *1984,* 203.

birds or proles—reveals that life persists through the subscendent interplay of individuals within a shared environment, something the Party's rigid totality cannot sustain. In denying this dynamic relationality, the Party aligns itself with silence, stasis, and death, ensuring that the very subscendence it suppresses becomes the condition of its eventual undoing.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that soundscapes in *1984* operate paradoxically through Timothy Morton's concept of subscendence, revealing that the very sonic environments designed to discipline and suppress embodied experience simultaneously create conditions in which resistance, individuality, and affective life re-emerge. From the collective immersion of the Two Minutes Hate, to the coercive acousmatics of the Ministry of Love, and finally to the spontaneous song of the thrush and the washerwoman, sound repeatedly demonstrates its capacity to exceed the intentions of the Party. These environments show that subscendence is not inherently liberatory or oppressive; rather, it is the dynamic relation between individuals and the systems they constitute. The Party relies on subscendence to sustain its mechanisms of control, yet those same participatory processes allow sound to reintroduce unpredictability, play, and embodied presence into an otherwise flattened sensory world.

Reading *1984* through subscendence materialised in soundscapes therefore highlights an often-overlooked dimension of literary analysis: the inaudible layer of texts. While scholarship has traditionally prioritised visual metaphors, spatial organisation, or ideological structures, attending to sound reveals how power operates through affect, atmosphere, and sensory experience. Soundscapes expose political systems not only as visual architectures but as environments of listening, vibration, and resonance, demonstrating how literature encodes ecological and relational dynamics within its sensory fabric. Subscendence becomes crucial here, as it foregrounds the importance of small, embodied interactions that sustain—and potentially destabilise—larger systems.

This study, however, remains limited to textual analysis. Future research could extend this approach to the audio drama

adaptations and film versions of *1984*, where sound is no longer implied but materially produced, offering new possibilities for examining how sonic environments shape perception and power. Such work would further illuminate the relationship between literature, soundscapes, and political context, encouraging a broader engagement with the environmental humanities. By listening more closely to literary worlds, we uncover not only how control is imposed, but also how, even within the most oppressive structures, sound continues to sustain the possibility of life.

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PART THREE

TERRITORIAL CONTESTATIONS

Sounding Hakka Spaces in Taiwan

Matthijs Verzijden

Abstract

In this article, I explore how notions of space are crafted and contested through singing and listening to Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan. Through five case studies, I show that local initiatives create space to sing mountain songs in reaction to national policies, and that local space to sing mountain songs is challenged by transnational developments. Furthermore, the case studies reveal how audible differences between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs are used to distinguish between China and Taiwan as different spaces. Lastly, they demonstrate that Hakka people claim their space in Taiwanese history and contemporary society through singing and listening to mountain songs. I situate my discussion in the framework of the Sinophone, which denotes places of cultural production by linguistically and culturally Chinese people worldwide who relate to one another rather than to a shared homeland in China. I aim to redefine this concept as "spaces that sound Chinese", placing music and sonic culture at large at the centre of debates on what it means to be Chinese. This enables me to provide a perspective on the nexus of music and space more specific to the lived experiences of Taiwanese Hakka people, demonstrating that Hakka people sing mountain songs to craft Hakka spaces both in and beyond Taiwan.

Keywords: music, space, Hakka mountain songs, Sinophone, Taiwan

Music, as a cultural form of sound, is intrinsically bound to space: sound needs space to be heard, travels through it, and is altered by its different shapes.[1] Music and sound can both be ways for people to understand space and place, contribute to the social production and transformation of space, and play a major role in claiming space for diverse identities.[2] In this paper I explore how notions of space are crafted and contested through singing and listening to mountain songs in Taiwan. Mountain songs (*sân-kô* 山歌) are a sonic cultural expression of the Hakka people, an ethnic group of approximately 65 million people who live in China, Taiwan, and a worldwide diaspora.[3] In Taiwan, Hakka people are involved in a complex dynamic between cultivating relations with their ancestral places of origin in southern China and the struggle for recognition as a less dominant group within Taiwanese multiethnic society. This dynamic evolves to the background of a looming yet ever more probable conflict between China and Taiwan. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2025 and January 2026 in northern Taiwan, I analyse five case studies.[4] These case studies show how Hakka people shape, negotiate, and challenge the dynamic described above in local, national, and transnational spaces through singing and listening to mountain songs.

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[1] Andrew J. Eisenberg, "space," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 193–194.

[2] Matt Sakakeeny, "music," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 118.

[3] I provide Hakka pronunciation in the Vernacular Script (*pha̍k-fa-sṳ* 白話字) transcription system, Taiwanese Southern Min pronunciation in Tâi-lô, and Mandarin pronunciation in Hànyǔ Pīnyīn. For personal names, I follow individual preferences. Corresponding written forms are given in traditional characters.

[4] During this period, I attended festivals, opera and pop music performances, and singing competitions, over 20 events in total. Alongside, I participated in four mountain song classes with 20-30 participants each: weekly for three months in the principal one and more incidentally in the others. In these events and classes, I combined participant listening and observation with audio and video recording. Additionally, five private singing lessons expanded my understanding of mountain song singing. Lastly, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with key actors in the field.

Attending to mountain songs as an embodiment of such a dynamic, I take inspiration from the *Sinophone*. This concept, coined by Shu-mei Shih, denotes cultural production by ethnically and linguistically Chinese people worldwide who relate to one another rather than to a shared homeland in China.[5] Most Hakka people can be considered ethnically and linguistically Chinese: they share ancestral relations to southern China and speak a Sinitic language, Hakka.[6] However, historically they have been stigmatised as outsiders and non-Chinese, reflected in the name Hakka, which means 'guest families' (*hak-kâ* 客家).[7] In response, many have tried even harder to prove their Chineseness, reclaiming their outsider status as proof for a migration history that links them to the Central Plains, seen as the birthplace of Chinese culture.[8] In the various places around the world that Hakka people now call home, they are seen as Chinese, might self-identify as Chinese, but also may identify either with these various places of residence or with Hakka communities all over the world, therefore potentially rejecting Chinese identities.[9] Investigating these relations within the Sinophone gives 'space' to all these layers, challenging the one-to-one relation between people, ethnicity, identity, language, citizenship, and nationhood, which are often subsumed under the term *Chinese*.[10]

Nevertheless, the concept of the Sinophone also has its limitations. Despite the suggestion raised by the term, *Sino-phone*

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[5] Shu-mei Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 716.
[6] Nicole Constable, *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (University of Washington Press, 1996), 5; Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 222.
[7] Constable, *Guest People*, 14.
[8] Thoralf Klein, "Constructing Subjects of Knowledge Beyond the Nation," *Monumenta Serica* 69, no. 1 (2021): 167.
[9] Paul B. Tjon Sie Fat, *Chinese New Migrants in Suriname: The Inevitability of Ethnic Performing* (Vossiuspers, 2009), 46; Wang Lijung, "Diaspora, Identity and Cultural Citizenship: The Hakkas in 'Multicultural Taiwan'," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 5 (2007): 880.
[10] It should be noted that this is in particular a problem of English (and other European languages). Sinitic languages have several corresponding terms to *Chinese* that offer more fine-grained distinctions, although these do not take away the issues pointed out here. In any case, this discussion deserves a different paper.

meaning 'Chinese-speaking', its use has been mostly relegated to visual cultural expressions such as written literature.[11] Recently, however, sonic cultural expressions such as sound in film, spoken language, and music have started to receive attention.[12] Attending to music in particular can advance the concept in three ways. First, the combination of visual and sonic modalities in music bridges earlier with newer work in Sinophone studies. Second, studying the spatial movements of music demonstrates the politics of music circulation and translation across borders.[13] Through making music, social and spatial boundaries are created, and music forms a powerful tool for political movements.[14] Third, as a sonic cultural expression through which affective relations are (re)created, music moves across the spectrum that ranges between longing for and rejecting Chineseness.[15] By studying how Taiwanese Hakka people navigate between being Hakka, being Taiwanese, and being Chinese through singing and listening to mountain songs, I aim to show the potential of interpreting *Sino-phone* alternatively as 'spaces that sound Chinese'. Taking this theoretical angle also contributes to extant literature on Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan and beyond: this field has focused on the form and content of the songs rather than on relations between mountain song singing and processes of Hakka identification, or the connections made through singing mountain songs within and across Hakka communities at a global level.[16]

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[11] Nathanel Amar, "Editorial: Including Music in the Sinophone, Provincializing Chinese Music", *China Perspectives* no. 3 (2019): 3.

[12] Lim Song Hwee, "The Voice of the Sinophone," in *Sinophone Cinemas*, eds. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Tom Hoogervorst and Caroline Chia, *Sinophone Southeast Asia: Sinitic Voices across the Southern Seas* (Brill, 2021); Howard Chiang and Shu-mei Shih, *Sinophone Studies Across Disciplines: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

[13] Amar, "Music in the Sinophone," 3–4.

[14] Georgina Born, "Introduction," in *Music, Sound, and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experiences* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22; Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1–2.

[15] Lily Wong, "Moving Serenades: Hearing the Sinophonic in MP & GI's Longxiang Fengwu," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 227.

[16] Hsu Hsin-wen 許馨文, "Dǎoyán: Táiwān Kèjiā yīnyuè yánjiù de huígù yǔ qiánzhān 導言：臺灣客家音樂研究的回顧與前瞻 Introduction: Studies of Taiwan Hakka Music, A Review and New Perspectives," *Global Hakka Studies* 12 (2019): 57–58.

Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan

In Taiwan, Hakka people number 4.6 million, amounting to 19.8% of the total population.[17] This makes them the second largest ethnic group in Taiwanese society, after the far larger group (70%) of Hoklo people. Like Hakka people, Hoklo people have roots in southern China, but in a slightly different area, and both groups speak different languages: Hakka and Taiwanese Southern Min.[18] Because of their dominant position in Taiwanese society, Hoklo people are often simply called 'Taiwanese', and they typically identify much more strongly with Taiwan than Hakka people do. Both Hakka and Hoklo people started to arrive in Taiwan from southern China from the 17th century onwards, pressing the more than twenty Indigenous peoples of Taiwan into the margins over the following centuries. Two other populations have moved to Taiwan more recently: *mainlanders*, or people from all over China following the Republic of China government in their retreat to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949, and *new residents*, a diverse group of labor migrants arriving since the 1990s predominantly from Southeast Asia.[19] Together, they make up the highly diverse and complex society that Hakka people navigate by singing and listening to mountain songs.

Hakka mountain songs were traditionally sung during farming, forestry, and mining work in the hills that range across the adjacent cities and counties of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli in

[17] Hakka Affairs Council, *110 Nián quánguó Kèjiā rénkǒu jì yǔyán jīchǔ zīliào diàochá yánjiù* 110 年全國客家人口暨語言基礎資料調查研究 [*The 2022 National Hakka Population and Language Elementary Information Survey Research*] (Diantong Co., Ltd. 2022), 6.

[18] Both languages belong to the Sinitic language family, but they are mutually unintelligible. See also: Gareth Price, *Language, Society, and the State: From Colonization to Globalization in Taiwan* (DeGruyter Mouton, 2019), xiv.

[19] Executive Yuan, *The Republic of China Yearbook 2014* (Executive Yuan, 2014), 48-49. *Mainlanders,* being the conventional English term, is a mistranslation, as the original (*wàishěngrén* 外省人) means 'extra-provincial people' (Taiwan is the province here) and *mainlanders* (*dàlùrén* 大陸人) refers to current citizens of the People's Republic of China, i.e. China. With origins all across China, mainlanders initially spoke various Sinitic languages. However, as representatives of the Republic of China government, they most prominently introduced Mandarin as the dominant and government language of Taiwan.

northern Taiwan.[20] Through the songs, Hakka people could express romantic and erotic feelings that were taboo in everyday speech in the village and the household.[21] Furthermore, experiences of mobility and expressions of belonging also formed major themes in the songs.[22] Later, mountain songs became an important part of opera and theater performances and were sung at religious festivals and festive occasions. Since industrialisation and urbanisation started to reshape Taiwanese society in the 1960s, efforts to sustain the songs as intangible cultural heritage have folklorised and commercialised them as an art form performing Hakka culture.[23] Nowadays, the songs are mediatised on CD, radio, TV, and social media, are the subject of singing competitions, and get adapted into opera and pop music.[24]

Formwise, the songs typically consist of one or more rhyming quatrains. In singing, the seven semantically active syllables in each line are alternated with padding syllables that are part of the melody.[25] Typically, multiple song texts are sung to the same melody. In Taiwan, melodies are categorised as either one of the Three Major Tunes (*sâm thai thiau* 三大調), including the Old Mountain Songs (*ló-sân-kô* 老山歌), Mountain Ditties (*sân-kô-chṳ* 山歌仔), and Equal Metre (*phiàng-pán* 平板) melodies, or as a Little Tune (*siáu-thiau* 小調). While minimally six varieties of the Hakka

[20] Yang Kuo-hsin 楊國鑫, *Auˇ san´go´: Táiwān Kèjiā gēyáo yǔ wénhuà* 詏幺ˇ・山歌 臺灣客家歌謠與文化 [*Debating Mountain Songs: Taiwanese Hakka Folksongs and Culture*] (Cradle Studio 搖籃工作室, 2012), 26–27.

[21] Mei-ling Chien, "Leisure, Work, and Constituted Everydayness: Mountain Songs of Hakka Women in Colonized Northern Taiwan (1930-1955)," *Asian Ethnology* 74, no. 1 (2015): 53–54.

[22] Wilt Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel: Traditional Hakka Songs and Ballads* (World Century, 2015), 16; Chien, "Leisure, Work, and Constituted Everydayness," 40.

[23] Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel*, 23.

[24] These developments are audible and visible in the performance of an Old Mountain Song on TV by Lai Jen-cheng, professional mountain song singer and musician, and in the pop song 'Taking Flowers Along' (*Lám fâ hi* 攬花去) by Lo Si-rong, which draws from a mountain song melody called Equal Metre. Both are accessible via QR codes 1 and 2, respectively, in the Appendix.

[25] Idema, *Passion, Poverty, and Travel*, 15; Phâng Ngiān-Jî 彭彥儒, personal communication, March 2024.

language are spoken in Taiwan, mountain songs are mostly sung in the Sixian (*si-yen* 四縣) variety. Recent years have seen some efforts to popularise singing in other varieties, a development from which I will start my discussion of how Hakka people create and challenge notions of space through singing and listening to mountain songs.

The Beipu Hailu mountain song competition

Across Taiwan, Sixian and Hailu (*hói-liuk* 海陸) are the most spoken varieties of the Hakka language, accounting for 56% and 42% of the total number of Hakka speakers.[26] In Hsinchu city and county, my main area of research, Hailu speakers actually form the majority. Nevertheless, Sixian enjoys government recognition as the standard Hakka variety, and is dominant in public as well as educational space throughout the country. This is reinforced by a rapidly declining proficiency in the Hakka language as a whole, under the pressure of Mandarin and Taiwanese Southern Min.[27] Likewise, mountain songs in Taiwan are sung in the Sixian variety even by singers who do not speak this variety in daily life, as is the case for a third of the participants of one of the mountain song class I attended: they only speak Hailu. My research participants tend to explain this discrepancy from the differences in linguistic tones between the varieties, arguing that the Sixian variety sounds more joyful than the Hailu variety. Therefore, Sixian would be more suited for singing mountain songs, which, probably because of their origin as work songs, should sound happy and energetic. Hailu, on the contrary, would only be appropriate for funeral chants. However, to many of my research participants that speak Hailu or other Hakka varieties, this preference for Sixian amounts to 'Sixian chauvinism'.

In response, small-scale movements to develop mountain song singing in the Hailu variety have emerged. One of them is the Hailu mountain song competition held in Beipu, a small village in the hills of Hsinchu county that profiles itself as a center of Hakka culture. Singing competitions, and the mountain song classes that

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[26] Huei-ling Lai, "An Introduction to Taiwan Hakka: Focusing on its Sounds, Morph-Syntax and Social Background," in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis*, ed. Chris Shei (Routledge, 2019), 583.

[27] Ralf Vollmann and Tek Wooi Soon, "Convergence of Hakka with Chinese in Taiwan," *Global Chinese* 8, no. 2 (2022): 225.

prepare contestants for them, are a common strategy of sustaining musical cultural expressions in Taiwan, but the Hailu competition is unique in promoting singing in a specific variety of the Hakka language. On 30 November 2025, I attended the third edition of this competition. Forty-five people participated in the afternoon-long event, each singing two out of a total of eighteen preselected quatrains drawn from an accompanying lyrics writing competition. Among these eighteen song texts, six took up Hailu mountain song singing and its inheritance, whereas the rest dealt with morals and life ethics, both common themes in mountain songs. The organisation of a read-aloud competition for children and teenagers as side event and the continued presentation of the event in Hailu further demonstrate how the event tried to promote the Hailu variety.

The existence of a competition specifically for mountain songs in the Hailu language variety demonstrates how spaces for group identity can be constructed on a local level, by both challenging and making use of the linguistic and ethnic policies that work to construct the Taiwanese nation. By establishing Sixian as the dominant Hakka language variety in Taiwan, these policies stimulated the emergence of a countermovement advancing cultural expression in the Hailu variety. The policies also provide a positive stimulation to this movement through subsidising and marketising ethnic and linguistic difference. Since difference can now be sold, every sub-group can have an opportunity to represent itself, or in sonic terms, every voice can be audible. People that do not speak Hailu, or even fervently oppose singing mountain songs in any other variety than Sixian, can all take part in this contest or provide lyrics for it and win prizes, supported by the local and national governments.

Although the Sixian-Hailu debate seems of local relevance only, it has larger implications. Indeed, the dominance of the Sixian vis-à-vis the Hailu variety is particular to Taiwan. Outside of Taiwan, these varieties are not spoken.[28] Moreover, Taiwan is the only

[28] Wu Zhongjie 吳中杰, "Kèjiāhuà de zhǒnglèi 客家話的種類 [Varieties of Hakka]," in *Rènshì Táiwān Kèjiā* 認識臺灣客家 [Getting to Know Taiwanese

country worldwide to recognise Hakka as an official language—China only recognises Standard Mandarin.[29] On the other hand, in Hakka-speaking areas in southern China, issues of language decline are not as imminent as they are in Taiwan. Therefore, there is less need to 'save one variety rather than lose them all,' which seems to be the case in Taiwan. Thus, the Sixian-Hailu debate that underlies the Beipu Hailu mountain song competition works to create space for group identity not only on a local but also on a transnational level, as it contrasts Taiwan with China. In the next section, I show that the interplay between local and transnational space is bidirectional, investigating how transnational developments affect local society.

The Daqi mountain song class

Under rising tensions between the Chinese and Taiwanese governments, Taiwan increasingly relies on its Sacred Mountain Protecting the Nation (*Hù Guó Shénshān* 護國神山). For long, this Sacred Mountain was physical: the Central Mountain Range protects the island from typhoons from the Pacific while also harbouring its natural and cultural diversity. However, in a time when AI and access to computer chips dictate international politics, it is Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) that now forms the country's metaphoric Sacred Mountain. Yet, the forty-year development of this company at the Hsinchu Science Park has been and continues to be at the expense of natural environment—the foothills of the Central Mountain Range—and local society, formed by the Hakka people. In this section, I discuss how these transnational developments influence mountain song singing at the Baosheng Temple (*Pó-sên-kiûng* 寶生宮) in Daqi.

Daqi is a village part of Baoshan Township in Hsinchu County, at the border between the foothills that form the environment of northern Taiwan Hakka society and Hsinchu City.

Hakka], eds. Lin Pen-Hsuan 林本炫, Wang Li-rong 王俐容, and Lo Lieh-shih 羅烈師 (Hakka Study Association Taiwan, 2021), 60–63.

[29] Henning Klöter, "One Legacy, Two Legislations: Language Policies on the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait," in *Language Diversity in the Sinophone World*, eds. Henning Klöter and Mårten Söderblom Saarela (Routledge, 2020), 111–114.

The village, founded some 200 years ago, was once surrounded by rice paddies, farmland, and bamboo groves. However, its close location to the city also made it prone to urbanisation and economic development. After the government of the Republic of China that ruled Taiwan lost international recognition in the early 1970s, it sought renewed international and domestic legitimacy through economic development.[30] Major steps in this development were the establishment of the Industrial Research Technology Institute (ITRI) in 1973 and the Hsinchu Science Park (HSP) in 1980. In 1987, TSMC was founded as a spin-off of ITRI. Over the course of the following thirty years, the HSP slowly grew, initially within the borders of Hsinchu City. Yet, with the second phase of the Baoshan Expansion plan, announced in 2019, the growth of the Science Park started to influence Daqi directly.[31] For the construction of TSMC's newest 2nm chip fabs, the entire village was expropriated by the government, its inhabitants offered housing elsewhere, and their homes demolished. As the final step in this process, Baosheng Temple was closed and its god statues moved to a new location for the temple.

Until its closure, Baosheng Temple was the location for a monthly mountain song singing event organised by the Hakka Folksong Study Association (*Hak-kâ Mìn-yàu Ngàn-kiu Hiap-fŭi* 客家民謠研究協會). On each second day of a lunar month, musicians and up to a hundred singers from Daqi, Baoshan, and beyond came together at the temple square to sing and make music together, cook, eat, and socialise. The half-open location central in the village enabled outsiders to the event to take a look or join right away.[32]

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[30] Murray A. Rubinstein, "Taiwan's Socioeconomic Modernization, 1971-1996," in *Taiwan: A New History* (M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 370.

[31] Ann Cheung 張家安, "Xīnzhú Kēxué Yuánqū duì Kèzhuāng shèhuì biànqiān zhī yíngxiǎng: yǐ Bǎoshān kuòjiàn jìhuà'àn wéi lì 新竹科學園區對客庄社會變遷之影響：以寶山擴建計畫案為例 The Impact of the Hsinchu Science Park on Hakka Community's Social Transformation: A Case Study of Baoshan Expansion Program" (MA thesis, National Yangming Chiaotung University, 2024), 106.

[32] Daqi Literature and History Workshop 大崎文史工作室, "Jìlùpiàn: Shénshānxià de Kèjiā shān'gē 紀錄片｜神山下的客家山歌 [Documentary:

After the closure of the temple, the event moved to the community center that was newly-constructed in between the existing Science Park and the former village. Here, the event is held inside, with place for just about fifty people, and cooking is not possible. This is how I experienced the mountain song classes and other events at Daqi during my fieldwork period. Many of the participants continued to attend, yet others had moved too far away. The various Hakka dishes prepared in cooperation had been replaced by preordered lunchboxes. Lastly, a rectangular concrete building surrounded by parking lots had substituted the temple, losing all connection to the community history and the religious connotations of the singing events. Changes like these demonstrate how transnational developments, like the growing importance of the computer chip industry to the world economy and increasing tensions between the Chinese and Taiwanese governments, directly limit the space in Taiwan for mountain songs to be sung.

Hearing difference

In the previous sections, I discussed how national policies working to construct the Taiwanese nation, and transnational developments that form the difference between life and death for that Taiwanese nation, directly influence the space for singing and listening to mountain songs. In this section, I turn towards perceptions of mountain song singers and listeners: to them, Taiwanese mountain songs are audibly different from Chinese mountain songs. Participants in my fieldwork would declare a mountain song to be Chinese immediately after hearing a few seconds of a recording. Not only do the melodies differ, but Chinese mountain songs also vary more in lyrical length: whereas Taiwanese mountain songs only feature lines of seven syllables, Chinese mountain songs also feature lines of five syllables. To mountain song singer Lai Jen-cheng 賴仁政, Taiwanese mountain songs sound much more happy than Chinese mountain songs. He argues that this difference originates from the much higher life-standard in Taiwan compared to China

Hakka mountain songs under the Sacred Mountain]," *Youtube*, posted 18 October, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EocrpwkDx_8&t=99s, accessible via QR code 3 in the Appendix.

over the last hundred years. As music reflects the social and natural spaces in which it sounds, mountain songs from both sides differ considerably.[33]

Folk scholar Yang Kuo-hsin 楊國鑫 offers a different explanation, based on the socioeconomic history of Taiwan. To early migrants from China in the 17th and 18th century, including Hoklo as well as Hakka people, Taiwan was a new, empty land that needed to be developed. Most early migrants were men, who often migrated back to China after some time. Because of this, Yang suggests, there was little space for any cultural expressions in early Taiwanese society.[34] Only after society started to stabilise in the 19th century, mountain songs reemerged in Taiwan and continued to develop independently from their counterparts in China. Therefore, he argues that there is no direct, ancestral relation between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs, although he acknowledges that there has been and continues to be mutual influence.[35]

Furthermore, Taiwanese mountain song singers stress the similarities of Little Tunes, one of the categories of mountain songs distinguished in Taiwan, to other Taiwanese musical expressions, such as Hoklo folksongs. For example, the Hakka song 'Poling a Boat' (*Chhang-sòn-kô* 撐船歌) is very much the same as the Hoklo song 'Peach Blossom Takes the Ferry' (*Thô-hue kuè-tōo* 桃花過渡).[36] This adds to the argument that contact and mutual influence between Taiwanese mountain songs and other, non-Hakka Taiwanese musical expressions is as (if not even more) profound than contact between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs. Finally, the categorisation of mountain songs in the Three Major

[33] Interview with Lai Jen-cheng, held on December 10, 2025; the idea that music reflects its physical and social environments matches with theoretisations of the relations between music and space such as Steven Feld's *acoustemology* and R. Murray Schafer's *soundscape*. See also: Eisenberg, "space," 197–199; Sakakeeny, "music," 118.

[34] This view, however, wipes out the presence of Indigenous societies with their various cultural expressions at the time.

[35] Interview with Yang Kuo-hsin, held on December 24, 2025.

[36] Recordings of these songs can be accessed through QR codes 4 and 5 in the Appendix.

Tunes and the Little Tunes as discussed in the second section is actually a heuristic particular to Taiwan. According to Lai Jen-cheng, this categorisation does not exist as such in China: it was developed in Taiwan during the late 1960s as part of the competition circuit that was just established at the time.[37] Working from the various audible differences between Chinese and Taiwanese mountain songs as discussed here, in the following two sections I elaborate on how these differences are used to claim space for Hakka in Taiwanese history and present.

Songs of the Islanguage

On November 23, 2025, the Riverside Red House Performance Hall in Taipei's most uptown Ximen district staged an afternoon-long concert called *Songs of the Islanguage* (*dáoyǔ zhī gē* 島語之歌). This quirky title makes good use of the fact that in Mandarin, the second syllable of 'island' (*dáoyǔ* 島嶼) is homophonous with 'language' (*yǔ* 語). Put together by Hakka singer and artist Lo Si-rong 羅思容, the concert featured performances by Seredew Sang Mei-chuan 桑美娟, an Indigenous singer of the Paiwan people who sings in the Paiwan and Amis languages, Tudi-Voice, a grassroots band from rural western Taiwan singing in Taiwanese Southern Min, and the organizer herself.[38] After each performed their own music, the concert came to a closure with a collective performance of 'Song of Four Seasons' (*Si-kui-fùng* 四季紅), composed by Teng Yu-hsien 鄧雨賢 (1906–1944). Hailed as the Father of Taiwanese Folksong (*Táiwān gēyáo zhī fù* 台灣歌謠之父), Teng was one of the first writing popular music in Taiwanese Southern Min, although he was Hakka himself. To this song, each performer incorporated the sonic cultural expressions representing their group: Paiwan songs, Hoklo folksongs, and Hakka mountain songs.

I analyse this concluding performance as a sonic embodiment of the argument underlying the concert. As emerges

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[37] Lai, Interview.

[38] The activist character of Tudi-Voice comes out much more clearly in their name in Mandarin, The Village Armed Youth (Nóngcūn Wǔzhuāng Qīngnián 農村武裝青年), but in English, they style themselves as Tudi-Voice, *tǔdì* 土地 meaning 'soil'.

from the title, this concert aims to present the music representative of this island, simultaneously incorporating 'language' into 'island'. 'Song of Four Seasons' is then taken as a musical framework representing Taiwan, made possible by the ethnic, linguistic, and historical background of its composer. To this framework, each of the ethnic and linguistic groups adds their music and language, just as Taiwan also consists of these parts. Thus, the argument presented by the concert holds that Taiwan's identity can be expressed through sonic cultural expressions as music and language. Furthermore, this identity consists of the very music sung and the languages spoken at this performance: Indigenous in all its varieties, Hoklo, and Hakka. Notably, this selection excludes Mandarin, the dominant and government language of Taiwan and China, and any references to Chinese music.

However, there is more to this argument. While Tudi-Voice mostly used Taiwanese Southern Min and Lo Si-rong some Hakka when talking to the public, the prevailing language outside of the songs was Mandarin. In fact, an event like this would not work without Mandarin: as a common language, it acts as a bridge between the three groups. In some sense, Mandarin also works as a neutral language, as it is the language of none of these groups, that would not have been willing to learn each other's languages in the past. Furthermore, as Mandarin is now the Taiwanese *lingua franca* and sounds differently from Mandarin as spoken in China, it might also be a sonic cultural expression that defines Taiwan, alongside the Indigenous, Southern Min, and Hakka languages. In this way, the aim of the concert to claim space in Taiwan for Indigenous, Hoklo, and Hakka cultural expression is limited by the ethnic and linguistic constellation of Taiwanese society.

This notion is reinforced by the concert location, as Taipei is the only place in Taiwan where Indigenous, Hoklo, and Hakka people and cultural expressions all come together. During industrialisation and urbanisation from the 1960s onwards, these three groups experienced the same process of migration to the capital for work, disappearing in the immense, indifferent space of the city, and trying to recover connections to the cultural expressions of their home society from there. Thus, Taipei harbours the largest Hakka population of Taiwan, yet it is not seen as a city with Hakka

identity.[39] Similar to the issue of Mandarin as common language at the event, organising the concert elsewhere in Taiwan would be seen as promoting one ethnic group over the others. The concert shows how Taipei forms a stage to claim space for ethnic, linguistic, and musical variety, necessary in order to be heard in Taiwanese society. *Songs of the Islanguage* claims space for Hakka, alongside Indigenous and Hoklo, people and cultural expressions in contemporary Taiwan.

Xu Xiang and *Wu Tangxing*

In this final case study, I turn from pop music to opera. I focus on two pieces of the Rom-Shing Hakka Opera Troupe, which is well-known in Taiwan and abroad for sustaining Tea-Picking Opera (*chhái-chhà-hi* 採茶戲), a Hakka performance art of which mountain songs are an important part. In sustaining this art form, the Troupe emphasises two aspects: maintaining the Sixian variety of the Hakka language as their main language of performance and retaining the prominence of mountain songs in the opera pieces. Adhering to these two principles, they produce two new plays each year in an innovative approach, adapting all kinds of stories into opera instead of only performing traditional pieces. Among their productions are two pieces staging the efforts of Hakka gentry in defending the Republic of Taiwan (*Táiwān Mínzhǔguó* 臺灣民主國) against the invasion of the Japanese army in 1895: the 2008 play *Loyalty in the Resistance War: Wu Tangxing* (*Yǐwèi Dānxīn—Wú Tāngxìng* 乙未丹心－吳湯興) tells the story of Wu Tangxing, and the 2025 play *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang* (*1895 Yǐwèi Yīngliè – Xú Xiāng* 1895 乙未英烈－徐驤) that of his fellow guerilla commander Xu Xiang.[40]

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[39] Hakka Affairs Council, *2022 National Hakka survey*, 6–7; R. Scott Wilson, "Making Hakka Spaces: Resisting Multicultural Nationalism in Taiwan," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 16, no. 4 (2009): 426–427.

[40] HakkaTV 客家電視臺, "Yǐwèi Dānxīn Wú Tāngxìng xúnyǎn jiéhé fǎn huìxuǎn 乙未丹心吳湯興巡演　結合反賄選 [Loyalty in the Resistance War Wu Tangxing tour combines with anti-election fraud campaign]," *Hakka Village News* 客莊新聞, 24 February 2008, http://web.pts.org.tw/hakka/news/detail.php?id=17653.

Following the philosophy of the Troupe, both plays feature a large number of mountain songs: within the two hours of playing time, around 30 mountain songs are sung, complemented by about 10 songs from other genres. In *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang*, mountain songs are also important in a different way: the play portrays how many Hakka women joined the resistance, some by fighting, others by providing intelligence on the movements of the Japanese army to the guerilla fighers through mountain song singing.[41] In the last act, when Xu Xiang is the last one still fighting Japanese soldiers, his wife Lin Shimei sings a mountain song in the background, as to accompany him from afar. Both these songs and the actors' stage lines convey the sentiment that Wu Tangxing, Xu Xiang, and their compatriots would not flee to China as they were losing to the Japanese. Rather, they would perish together with Taiwan, as this was where they were born and where they had taken root. I argue that this is a portrayal of Hakka people defending Taiwan as their homeland, (re)claiming space for Hakka people and cultural expressions in the historical narrative leading up to contemporary Taiwan.

This space is also claimed physically. *Hero of the 1895 Resistance War: Xu Xiang* was performed indoors, in theatre halls around Taiwan during the late summer and autumn of 2025, similar to *Loyalty in the Resistance War: Wu Tangxing* during its initial tour in 2008. However, to commemorate the 130 years since the 1895 Resistance War, the latter play was restaged on the square in front of Tongluo train station in Miaoli County. This small village is the birthplace of Wu Tangxing, and his efforts in the 1895 war are memorialised in the Tongluowan 1895 Culture and Life Hall (*Tùng-lò-vân 1895 Vùn-fa Sên-fàt-kón* 銅鑼灣 1895 文化生活館), adjacent to the train station and the performance location. Staging the play outside claims physical space, tangibly by blocking the road several days in a row, and audibly through the sounds of the play that are not kept inside the walls of a theater hall. Furthermore, it alludes to the traditional yet ever more sparse practice of performing Tea-Picking Opera outside, either next to a temple or near a central place

[41] This is audible from 2:40 in the trailer the Troupe made for this piece, accessible through QR code 6 in the Appendix.

in a village such as the market or the train station. Finally, the fact that the restaging of *Wu Tangxing* on the Tongluo station square was sponsored by the national government's Hakka Affairs Council shows how attempts to craft space for Hakka cultural expressions on a local level relate to efforts to claim space for Hakka people in the Taiwanese nation.

Sounding Hakka spaces in Taiwan, sounding Taiwan in the Sinophone

In this article, I have explored how Hakka people navigate the dynamic between being Hakka, being Taiwanese, and being Chinese through singing and listening to mountain songs. Together, the five case studies demonstrate how space is created and challenged through singing and listening to mountain songs while tying local, national, and transnational levels together. Moreover, they show how Taiwanese Hakka people engage with their ancestral homes in southern China, their current homes in Taiwan, and Hakka communities all over the world. This challenges the idea of the nation-state and the assumption of a binary opposition between China and Taiwan. Sinophone studies aim to highlight the experiences of ethnically or linguistically Chinese people outside China, such as the Taiwanese Hakka people that I have given prominence to in this paper. Additionally, the case studies discussed here make clear that relations with diverse people inside China also need to be considered in Sinophone studies, without reducing them to citizens of the Chinese nation-state or members of a unitary ethnic group called Han-Chinese. Crucially, it is through investigating how space is crafted and contested by making and listening to music that these nuances come to light.

Attending to Hakka mountain songs shows how music is shaped by the spaces in which it sounds: the sound of Hakka mountain songs does not resonate between hillsides anymore, but is mostly kept between the walls of private homes, community centers, and concert halls. Mountain songs travel through space as they circulate between Hakka villages and the capital Taipei, between Taiwan and China, and across the Sinophone world. By singing and listening to mountain songs, Hakka people adapt to the drastic changes in their environment and society, foster relations with the

other groups making up Taiwanese society, and navigate the varying political constellations of the Taiwanese nation-state. Singing and listening to mountain songs is a key part of efforts to claim space for Hakka people and their cultural expressions sonically and physically, in Taiwan and beyond.

Mountain songs articulate the Sinophone: they are a sonic embodiment of all that is complicated about language, nation, ethnicity, culture, and power. This insight underlines the importance of music and sonic culture at large in debates on what it means to be Chinese in all its diversity. As a first attempt of such an approach, I have provided a perspective on the nexus of music and space that acknowledges the complexity of Taiwanese Hakka people's lived experiences. Mountain songs make audible how Hakka people relate to China and Taiwan, and how their struggle for space in Taiwan is part of a larger effort to contest space for Taiwan in the world.

Appendix

1. 

Old Mountain Song performed by Lai Jen-cheng

edu.nl/wbmct

2. 

'Taking Flowers Along' by Lo Si-rong

edu.nl/3ynn3

3. 

Daqi mountain song class

edu.nl/gwqfm

4. 

'Poling a Boat'

edu.nl/wkpam

5. 

'Peach Blossom Takes the Ferry'

edu.nl/d8jp3

6. 

Trailer for the play *Xu Xiang*

edu.nl/wdd4a

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"It is not German, it is replacing German": Why a Multiethnic Youth Variety is Perceived as a Threat to the German Nation

Katharina Eder

Abstract

The idea that the state of the standard language is indicative of the state of national identity has shaped the German nation. Kiezdeutsch (lit. "hood German"), a multiethnic youth variety spoken in Germany's urban areas, is seen as a threat to this space. Analysing online data, I examine a three-layered ideology. The first layer construes Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as immigrants from spaces culturally different to Germany. The second layer builds on this: because the linguistic variety and its speakers have been portrayed as foreigners, they can now be depicted as taking away space from the German standard and the German national identity. Through this, a third layer emerges: the standard language and national identity are believed to be decaying as they become the minority in what is perceived to be their rightful space. The analysis shows how exclusionary and racist ideologies do not operate in isolation but rather build on one another. Not only does it demonstrate how German nation building goes hand-in-hand with racialised processes of group construction, but they also highlight how standard language ideologies are inseparable from German nationalist beliefs.

Keywords: language ideologies, nationalism, immigration, xenophobia, discourse analysis

All over Europe's urban centres, young people in multiethnic neighbourhoods are shaping new ways of speaking.[1] One such way is *Kiezdeutsch* (lit. "hood German"), a multiethnic youth variety spoken in Berlin.[2] It is characterised by loanwords from minoritised languages, such as Turkish and Arabic, as well as structural changes, such as the option to have the verb in a non-standard position in the sentence.[3] Its multiethnic character stems from primarily being spoken amongst young people in areas of the city which have a high number of inhabitants with a migration background from a variety of countries. Many speakers are second or third-generation immigrants who speak a minoritised language at home. However, there is a substantial number of German monolingual speakers without a migration background in the variety's speaker base as well.[4]

In the present article, I investigate the discourse around Kiezdeutsch between 2009 and 2012, using a selection of online comments from a corpus. I focus on comments that maintain Kiezdeutsch as a sign of German national decay and examine two assumptions underlying this ideology, namely that Kiezdeutsch and its speakers are foreign elements in the German "space", and that they are taking away "space" from German(s).

Given that popular and media discourse associates the variety with the topic of immigration, any analysis of the discourse around Kiezdeutsch entails analysing discourses around immigration, thus engaging with xenophobic and racist beliefs, mechanisms of othering, as well as group identity and enemy construction. Exploring how these operate in the specified time period is relevant for two reasons: first, it precedes the European migration crisis in 2015, which changed Europe's immigration

[1] Jacomine Nortier, "Youth Languages", in *Jugendsprachen / Youth Languages. Aktuelle Perspektiven internationaler Forschung / Current Perspectives of International Research*, ed. Arne Ziegler (De Gruyter, 2018), 3.

[2] While *Kiezdeutsch* was originally coined as a name for the youth variety in Berlin, specifically, the term is now used in a more general sense for multiethnic youth varieties all over Germany's urban centres.

[3] Heike Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," in *Handbuch Sprache in sozialen Gruppen*, ed. Eva Neuland and Peter Schlobinski (De Gruyter, 2018), 333.

[4] Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 334-335.

system and the sociopolitical culture around the topic.[5] Second, the partially far-right[6] party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which makes immigration their main campaigning point, was founded in 2013, directly following the time period in question.[7] The period of 2009-2012 is thus one in which many ideologies that shape today's discourses around immigration coalesce. Their investigation provides a useful—if not crucial—context for analyses of subsequent discourses, and may shed light on how some of today's extremist ideologies began taking shape.

Adopted here is a conceptualisation of ideology that relates it to the maintenance or acquisition of positions of power – termed the "critical conception" of ideology.[8] It can manifest itself in the form of discourses, signifying practices, or ideas that are directly linked to the upkeep of structures of domination and of asymmetrical distributions of power.[9] In language ideologies, this tool assigns social values to linguistic structures. This relationship is constituted by implicit and explicit signals that assign value to language-in-use, resulting in some linguistic forms that are considered "less" and some forms that are considered "more" (e.g., less or more educated, less or more formal).[10] It is also characterised

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[5] Christiane Fröhlich, "Migration as Crisis? German Migration Discourse at Critical Points of Nation-Building," *The American Behavioural Scientist* 69, no. 6 (2023): 691-692.

[6] This phrasing stems from the fact that the German domestic intelligence service has confirmed some institutions headed by the AfD (e.g. its youth organisation) to be legally far-right. However, they did not declare the entire party as far-right.

[7] "Etappen der Parteigeschichte der AfD," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 2 December 2022, https://www.bpb.de/themen/ parteien/parteien-in-deutschland/afd/273130/etappen-der-parteigeschichte-der-afd/; "Welche Themen entscheiden die Wahl?," *Tagesschau*, 24 March 2025, https://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2025-02-23-BT-DE/umfrage-wahlentscheidend.shtml.

[8] John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Polity Press, 1984), 4.

[9] Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, 4.

[10] Kathryn Woolard, "Introduction: Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry," in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity (Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

by tensions between languages or language varieties; in the present case, a linguistic standard and a "substandard" variety.[11]

It is important to note some terminology specific to German discourses around immigration, especially as these are frequently dominated by racist and xenophobic themes. The racialisation of the words *(im)migrant* and *migration background*—in German, *Migrant* and *Migrationshintergrund*—ought to be addressed. The German word *Migrant*, instead of neutrally referring to an individual who has moved from their own country to another, has undergone semantic narrowing. Activist Swami Dhyānānanda summarises German *Migrant* to not include white Northern and Western Europeans, and as a racialised term: "The darker, the more migrant."[12] Additionally, the prototypical German *Migrant* in public discourse is an economic immigrant, connecting immigration to prejudices about social class.[13] Similarly, *Migrationshintergrund* is not only used as defined by the German government, who applies it to individuals if they or their ancestors migrated to Germany after 1955.[14] Instead, it is often used for all people of colour, regardless of their (family) history.[15] Dhyānānanda also points out beliefs around deservingness—the two terms contain the assumption that white Germans perceive themselves to have a much stronger right to exist in Germany than individuals they denote as immigrants or as having a migration background.

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[11] Woolard, "Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry," 4.

[12] Noah Sow, "Migrant," in *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache: ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, ed. S. Arndt, S. and N. Ofuatey-Alazard (Unrast Verlag, 2011), 444. (Note that Dhyānānanda changed their name to reflect their non-binary identity after the publishing of this article, which is the reason for the mismatch of names.)

[13] *Migrantinnen in den Medien: Eine systematische Literaturanalyse*. Ministerium für Generationen, Familie, Frauen und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/kommwiss/arbeitsstellen/journalistik/media/2009_11_31-broschre_migrantinnen_ansicht.pdf, 8.

[14] "Das Konzept des Migrationshintergrundes bzw. der Migrationsgeschichte," *Integrationsmonitoring der Länder*, n.d., https://www.integrationsmonitoring-laender.de/zielsetzung-und-konzeption-das-konzept-des-migrationshintergrundes-bzw-der-migrationsgeschichte.html.

[15] Sow, "Migrant," 444.

The racialisation of the terminology goes hand-in-hand with other racist beliefs around immigrants. Most importantly, an analysis of the German discourse around immigration from 1945 to the 2020s, Christiane Fröhlich finds that in the late 2000s and the 2010s, the perception arose that "migrants from the Middle East and other non-European countries [were] fundamentally different from and potentially dangerous for a supposedly homogenous group of dominantly white and Christian German citizens."[16] This underlines again how, in discourses around immigration, only certain immigrants are considered in a negative light.

The nation as a contained space

We organise the world around us—and this includes sociopolitical issues—into conceptual schemas, which are also referred to as metaphors.[17] When immigration is discussed, a schema of spatial containment is often used to conceptualise nations as closed containers, which can be both sealed (from within) and penetrated (from outside).[18] It appears, for example, in notions of a country being "full", or of an "inflow" and "outflow" of migrants.[19] In such contexts, the term *container* refers not to a three-dimensional object (e.g. a box), but rather to a bounded space—an abstract spatial entity delineated by borders.[20]

The connection between immigration discourse and the container metaphor is not arbitrary: the existence of a container implies an inside and an outside and therefore expresses the us-and-them dichotomy present in the political discourse around immigration.[21] In addition, what is inside of the space, the "us", is construed as morally good, while what is outside, the "them", is not.[22]

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[16] Fröhlich, "Migration as Crisis?," 697.
[17] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).
[18] Paul A. Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2004), 118.
[19] Jonathan, Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container: Immigration Metaphors in the 2005 Election Campaign," *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 5 (2006): 578; Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*, 114.
[20] Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container," 563–581, 575.
[21] Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container," 577.
[22] Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*, 172.

In anti-immigration sentiments, this gives rise to the perception that the movement of people across borders, i.e. coming into the space from the outside, causes the contents of the container (i.e. the nation) to weaken.[23] This provides a base for the racist portrayal of immigrants as a threat. Van Teffelen states that this perceived threat is motivated by fear of "a disturbance of the social order or cultural integrity of the self, [...] whether due to the other's numerical power [...] or its social influence."[24]

In Germany, the contained space that is the German nation is deeply intertwined with ideologies about the standard language. This strong connection between the German standard language and the German national identity is almost unparalleled in Europe.[25] From the early stages of the nation-building process, the German nation utilised its language to define its people.[26] This emerges clearly in the discourse of the time, for example, in Jacob Grimm's speech in front of the *Germanistenversammlung* (lit. "assembly of the Germanists' society") in 1846, where he stated that "a people is the epitome of those who speak the same language."[27] It was in the context of such sentiments that the German standard language was created. Because variation was seen as a sign of language decay, the mission was to return German to its "pure" original form.[28] In the beginning, the standardisation process was thus aimed at battling dialectal forms, rooted in the idea that the coherence of a nation's

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[23] Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container," 576.

[24] Toine Van Teffelen, "Racism and Metaphor: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict in Popular Literature," *Discourse & Society* 5, no. 3 (1994): 381–405, 382.

[25] Stephen Barbour, "'Uns knüpft der Sprache heilig Band.' Reflections on the role of language in German nationalism," in *'Das unsichtbare Band der Sprache.' Studies in German Language and Linguistic History in Memory of Leslie Seiffert*, ed. J. L. Flood, P. Salmon, O. Sayce, and Christopher J. Wells (Akademischer Verlag Stuttgart, 1993), 322.

[26] Michael Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland. Language and Politics in Germany* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 77.

[27] Martin Durrell, "Language, Nation and Identity in the German-speaking countries", in *Standard, Variation und Sprachwandel in germanischen Sprache*n, ed. C. Fandrych and R. Salverda (Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2007), 40.

[28] Martin Durell, "Standardsprache in England und Deutschland," *Zeitschrift Für Germanistische Linguistik* 27, no. 3 (1999): 296-297.

society is positively influenced by the existence of only one language.[29] Soon, however, strong racist sentiments entered this purist discourse—the goal became to keep the German language free from foreign elements in order to retain what was considered the "true spirit" of the German language.[30] This development went hand-in-hand with the change from German being perceived as a symbol of the nation, to the language being perceived as a symbol of national supremacy and national self-confidence.[31] In these perceptions surfaces the belief that language has the power to affect the nation on the societal level.

These historical processes have consequences today. Contemporary Germany is still considered restrictive and purist in its standard language ideology compared to other European countries. For example, there is an explicit and universal expectation that teaching the grammar and pronunciation of the standard language is a primary goal of early school education.[32] The focus on the standard language still stems from the nationalist ideologies it originated from, which considered the upkeep of the standard as a means to preserve societal coherence. Hence, rejections of other linguistic elements—whether that be dialects, (multi-)ethnolects or loanwords—are still affected by the connection between fear of linguistic decay and fear of social decay.

Attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch

Given the ideological construction of the standard language in Germany, it does not come as a surprise that attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch, a non-standard variety containing a plethora of loanwords, are highly negative. The variety itself is seen as hard and

[29] Jef Blommaert and Jan Verschueren, „The Role of Language in European Nationalist Ideologies," in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. B. B. Schieffelin, K. A. Woolard and P. V. Kroskrity (Oxford University Press, 1998), 191.
[30] Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland*, 98.
[31] Townson, *Mother-tongue and Fatherland*, 98.
[32] Durell, "Standardsprache in England und Deutschland," 298.

aggressive.[33] It is rejected as part of the German dialects by many, as it is considered a deficient version of German or even as harming the German language by initiating a process of creolisation, i.e. a mix between German and other languages.[34] Its speakers are stereotyped as aggressive, uncultured and uneducated young men with a migration background (often with Turkish roots), and are associated with criminal activities and rejection of liberal values.[35] Such a perception reflects wider stereotypes about immigrants and is reminiscent of Iris Wigger's concept of intersectional stereotyping, which describes discriminatory patterns that combine prejudices based on race, gender and religion.[36] This view does not accurately reflect the variety of gender, personality, education and ethnicity of Kiezdeutsch speakers.

In her analysis of attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch, Heike Wiese identifies an interesting pattern: attitudes that occur on the linguistic level are mirrored on the social level. Although Wiese does not apply semiotic methods, i.e. the study of signs and their meaning, this pattern is clearly created through what the semioticists Gal and Irvine term *iconicity*. Iconicity causes an index to be interpreted as an icon: something that is taken as a marker of a social group is perceived to share attributes with the social group. For example, the speech of the working class is often described as "simple" language. Hence, through iconicity, the speech is considered to reflect the speakers' assumed simpleness. A false level of transparency is assumed that does not reflect reality.[37] Most

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[33] Jan Androutsopoulos, "Ethnolekte in der Mediengesellschaft. Stilisierung und Sprachideologie in Performance, Fiktion und Metasprachdiskurs," in *Standard, Variation und Sprachwandel in germanischen Sprache*n, ed. C. Fandrych and R. Salverda (Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2007), 121.

[34] Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 338ff.; Philipp Krämer, "Deligimatising Creoles and Multiethnolects: Stereotypes and (Mis-)Conceptions of Language in Online Debates," *Caribbean Studies* 45, no. 1/2 (2017): 109.

[35] Wiese, "Die Konstruktion sozialer Gruppen," 343.

[36] Iris Wigger, "Anti-Muslim Racism and the Racialisation of Sexual Violence: 'Intersectional Stereotyping' in Mass Media Representations of Male Muslim Migrants in Germany," *Culture and Religion* 20, no. 3 (2019).

[37] Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

notably, Wiese finds that the linguistic belief of Kiezdeutsch threatening the integrity of the German language is mirrored on the social level in the belief that Kiezdeutsch speakers threaten national cohesion.[38]

Especially when considering the position of the German standard language in the construction of a national identity, Wiese's findings demonstrate how this historical linguistic ideology shapes the contemporary immigration discourse. A closer examination provides insights into how discourses and beliefs on language, national identity and immigration interact in the German context.

Data selection and analysis

The discourse analysed in the present article is taken from the KidKo/E corpus, a corpus on attitudes towards Kiezdeutsch.[39] It is comprised of e-mails to the researcher Heike Wiese as well as comments left under online newspaper articles. They consist of two main clusters: the first is from May and June 2009, following a far-right website reporting on her research. Comments were scraped from this article, while e-mails were likely sent by its readers. The second wave is from early 2012, when e-mails were motivated by the publication of Wiese's pop-linguistic book about Kiezdeutsch.[40] Comments stem from 19 online articles that followed the publication of the book. The corpus contains 1362 e-mails and comments, most of which convey negative sentiments. Given the self-selected aspect of the corpus (i.e. only people who wanted to comment something are included in the corpus), Wiese warns that

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[38] Heike Wiese, "Voices of linguistic outrage: Standard Language Constructs and the Discourse on New Urban Dialects," in *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies 120,* ed. B. Rampton et al. (King's College London, 2014), 19.

[39] Heike Wiese, Ines Rehbein, Oliver Bunk and Martin Pohle. *KiDKo/E - A corpus of emails and readers' comments from the public debate on "Kiezdeutsch", a new German vernacular from multilingual urban neighbourhoods ("attitudes"/"Einstellungen" supplement to the KiezDeutsch-Korpus, KiDKo).* 2012ff. https://www.linguistik.hu-berlin.de/en/instituten/professuren-en/german-in-multilingual-contexts/corpora/kiezdeutschkorpusen/kidko-e-corpus-on-attitudes.

[40] The book in question is: Heike Wiese, *Kiezdeutsch: Ein neuer Dialekt entsteht* (Beck, 2012).

there is a likely over-representation of strong attitudes, which mainly take on right-wing/far-right manifestations.[41] Many individuals with more tame opinions on Kiezdeutsch and immigration presumably did not go to the effort of leaving a comment or even sending an e-mail to the researcher. In the present case, however, where one specific negative ideological construct is analysed, the over-representation of right-wing/far-right attitudes is an advantage, as the corpus thus contains the extreme points of the ideology. At the same time, neither the entire corpus nor the selection of comments used in the present article must be mistaken for an accurate representation of the entire German discourse on immigration.

As an analysis of the entire corpus was impossible due to limited resources, it was conducted by initially considering the first 300 entries of the corpus and analysing the patterns in which the ideology of "language decay = social decay" were articulated. Based on this, certain terms were used to find other entries in which the ideology also manifested itself (e.g. *Raum/Platz* meaning "space", *wegnehmen* meaning "taking away", *Nation* meaning "nation", *Hochdeutsch* meaning "high/standard German", *Integration* meaning "integration", etc.). Tendencies that appeared in this selection of comments were noted down, and from there, a three-layered ideological construct emerged. In order to specify the exact dimensions of these layers, the relevant comments were annotated as each belonging to a layer, and their contents were examined via a close reading. In what follows, this construct will be analysed and exemplified using individual comments that illustrate the beliefs present in the selection.

The ideological construct

The purist ideology identified by Wiese—according to which Kiezdeutsch is causing decay of the German standard language and its speakers are causing decay of the German nation—is the final layer of an ideological construct that is based on the notion of the nation as a contained space. Iconicity is present on all three layers,

[41] Heike Wiese, ""This migrants' babble is not a German dialect!" The Interaction of Standard Language Ideology and 'us/them' Dichotomies in the Public Discourse on a Multiethnolect", *Language in Society* 44, no. 3 (2015): 351.

meaning that there is a perception of the variety and its speakers sharing attributes. The base ideology consists of a construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign elements in a German space. Building on this, these foreign elements are then considered to take up, and, in that, take away space from a German "us". These two layers are the requirements for the final construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers causing—or threatening to cause—the decay of the German nation.

Layer 1: Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign elements in a German space

One of the most frequently expressed beliefs in the selected comments is that Kiezdeutsch is a foreign variety. The belief is two-fold: commenters either construe it as German with many foreign elements, or as entirely originating from outside of Germany. In the former expression of the belief, Kiezdeutsch is portrayed as having many components, German being one of them. All of the other components, however, stem from outside of Germany. This is exemplified in i., where the components of the variety are "multi-cultural", Turkish, Lebanese, Arabic and German.

> i. "This multi-culti-Turks-Lebanese-Arab-German is—at least on the metro and in our inner cities—very widespread at this point."[42]

The comment considers Kiezdeutsch an immigrated variety—in the narrow sense of the word. In naming a mix of countries and regions, the author construes a vague foreign origin of the variety, not rooted in a particular language or place. Additionally, in naming both Lebanese, which is an Arabic variety, and the Arab-speaking world in general, the author demonstrates a conflation of various languages and cultures that surfaces frequently in the discourse. Thus, they deny the speakers of Kiezdeutsch individual identities in grouping them all together as immigrants.

[42] All of the translations of the selection of comments were done by me. Errors regarding punctuation, grammar or spelling were not kept due to the difficulty of translating them.

In example ii., the components of Kiezdeutsch are extended to even further foreign origins, as it considers Kiezdeutsch to consist of the components "from-everywhere-in-the-world", German, and "migrant". Additionally, it devalues it through the lexical choice of "mumbo-jumbo". Again, the author construes a variety that originates largely from outside of the German space, while assigning it vague foreign origins.

> ii. "Now this from-everywhere-in-the-world-German-migrant-mumbo-jumbo is being made an alleged language."

This construal of Kiezdeutsch as consisting of one part German and of many parts of non-German origin is also present in other derogatory terms used for the variety in the comments, such as "foreigners' German", "pidgin German", or "primitive half-German".

The latter, more extreme manifestation of the belief is one in which Kiezdeutsch is seen as originating entirely from outside of Germany—unlike the former, it is not considered to contain any "German-ness". This manifestation surfaces less frequently but does so in some of the terms used for Kiezdeutsch, which portray it as a linguistic variety based entirely on foreign language(s), such as "Turkish slang". It is also explicitly articulated in excerpt iii.:

> iii. "The so-called "Kiezdeutsch" is carried into Germany by foreigners like Turks and other people from the Arabic-Near-Eastern cultural space and spread here by them."

Both articulations of the ideology that Kiezdeutsch is "foreign" reject it from the German linguistic space—it is not seen as a colloquial variety of German, but rather as a linguistic variety defined by foreign elements. On the one hand, these elements are kept deliberately vague in a refusal to engage with the actual identities of the speakers. On the other hand, they are restricted to certain regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa. Additionally, even in the comments that ascribe it a status of "German-ness", such

is limited and relativised. Consequently, there is a strong refusal of accepting Kiezdeutsch as a manifestation of the German language.

This foreignness is construed on the level of the speakers as well. It has been shown that the speaker base of Kiezdeutsch is commonly considered to consist of immigrants or individuals with a migration background, although this does not reflect the actual diverse speaker base.[43] This perception is a prominent theme throughout the selected comments. Almost all excerpts assume that Kiezdeutsch is spoken mainly by migrants. It is also implicitly stated in comments that complain about monoethnically and monolingually German teenagers adopting the variety: they portray young people with a migration background as the original speaker base and contrasts them with those perceived as "Germans", who are considered a secondary speaker base. This is the case in excerpt iv., where Kiezdeutsch is not described as a dialect or variety, but rather as a foreign language, and ascribed to young migrants by means of the genitive (i.e. "the language of..."). Through this, the author indicates that it is the immigrants' variety, which is then "spreading" to "German" children.

> iv. "East Prussian, Bohemian, Silesian dialects are dying, but our children are now speaking the language of additional needs students[44] from X countries."

One important facet of this perception that is present in the selection of comments is the accusation that Kiezdeutsch speakers refuse to integrate (e.g. in excerpt v.).

> v. "The "immigrants" do not want to integrate, so the Germans have to learn a new language."

Being a Kiezdeutsch speaker is perceived as a sign of refusing to integrate. Thus, in addition to being construed as migrants, the

[43] This is not specific to right-wing and far-right discourses, but a general perception of Kiezdeutsch as a multiethnic youth variety.
[44] The original word is *Hilfsschüler*, which has no direct translation to English, but is an archaism denoting a student attending an additional-needs school.

speakers are accused of refusing to let go of their foreignness. The authors of the comments consider this something negative, which can be explained by Fröhlich's findings about the perception of non-European migrants posing a threat due to assumed cultural differences.[45]

The authors of the selected comments refuse to see Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as German but rather perceive them as foreign elements in the German space. This allows a racist "us"/"them" dichotomy, in which monoethnic Germans are considered the "us", while migrants from specific countries (i.e. North Africa, Middle East) are categorised as the "them". Perceived linguistic and social foreignness is the base for this dichotomy.

Layer 2 – Taking space away

The second layer consists of hostile judgements of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers, which were construed as foreign, for taking away space in the container that is the German nation. This ideology is based on the dichotomy that emerges from the first layer, which allows a contrasting of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers as foreign and Germans as non-foreign.

On the linguistic level, this surfaces in fears of Kiezdeutsch taking away space from standard German. It is explicitly stated in excerpt vi. but also manifests itself in a variety of other ways.

vi. "It is not German, it is replacing German."

For example, it emerges in complaints about Kiezdeutsch speakers not being able to speak standard German, so as a consequence, standard German speakers have to learn Kiezdeutsch. This is based on the construal of its speakers as refusing to integrate, which stems from the first layer of the ideology. Excerpt vii. illustrates it—the author complains about having to "abandon" the German standard language.

[45] Fröhlich, "Migration as Crisis," 691-692.

vii. "Why should we abandon our grammar, only because some of our "guests" are too lazy to integrate and learn?!"

Kiezdeutsch being perceived to take away space from the German standard also surfaces in one author calling Kiezdeutsch "new German", indicating their belief that it is taking up linguistic space that was previously inhabited by standard German. Another articulation manifests itself in the previously mentioned complaints about German teenagers speaking Kiezdeutsch. Based on the "us"/"them"-dichotomy that emerged in layer one, these German teenagers are not supposed to speak Kiezdeutsch, as the variety is tied to "foreign" teenagers. Thus, German teenagers adopting it is seen as an initial step towards Kiezdeutsch taking up linguistic space that should belong to standard German (cf. example viii.).

viii. "That even German youths are speaking this linguistic botch-up and are ruining their own language through that is everything but a sign of integration in the right direction."

The author portrays the adoption of Kiezdeutsch by German teenagers as a step of integration in the wrong direction—implying what they consider "correct" immigration. Instead of teenagers with a migration background speaking standard German, which they construe as correct, teenagers without a migration background are speaking a "foreign" variety. In the author's perception, Kiezdeutsch is taking up more space than it should. It is through these mechanisms that Kiezdeutsch is explicitly and implicitly construed to take away space from standard German.

On the speaker level, the fear of Kiezdeutsch speakers—which, in layer one, have become synonymous with speakers with a migration background—taking away space from Germans manifests itself in a variety of anti-immigration sentiments. One major manifestation is found in complaints about the number of immigrants, and, often in the same statement, complaints about German culture becoming more like foreign (specifically Middle Eastern) cultures, e.g. in excerpt ix.

ix. "With so many "migrants" we are all already Turks anyway, who once did a crash course in German."

The sentiment also surfaces when one author calls Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin that is famous for its high population of people of Turkish origin, "Little Istanbul", implying a cultural enclave of Turkey within the German nation.

Some authors voice a more drastic articulation of the perceived take-over of non-German societies, as is the case in comment x. In these rare, but extremist sentiments, the fear of what the authors perceive to be their rightful space being taken away by forces from outside becomes especially clear.

x. "GERMANY is currently being colonised by ARABIA and NEAR ASIA, or conquered by uneducated, arrogant, nationalist and aggressive peoples and sects!"

The few authors that foresee a colonialisation scenario use tropes from far-right conspiracies in other parts of their comments. For example, one accuses the German government of actively "breeding" Germans with immigrants to dilute the German people – reminiscent of the Grand Replacement conspiracy theory.[46] While it is impossible to be certain due to the anonymity of the authors, it seems like individuals propagating a take-over scenario are in contact with other extreme beliefs, too. Hence, the portrayal of immigration into Germany as a colonisation of the space appears to be an extreme point of the second layer of the ideological construct. While the fears of space being taken up and taken away emerge in more moderate comments as well, the final step of space being taken over, is restricted to an extreme manifestation of the ideology.

Both on the linguistic and the speaker level, the discourse about space being taken away provides insights in perceptions of linguistic and cultural ownership. The homogenous portrayal of a

[46] "AfD-Wähler glauben öfter Verschwörungserzählungen," Tagesschau, 28 April, 2023, https://www.tagesschau.de/ faktenfinder/fes-studie-verschwoerungserzaehlungen-100.html.

foreign "them" and a German "us", which emerged from the first layer allows a contrasting of who has a right to the German space. Due to the perceived foreignness of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers, they are placed as lower on the hierarchy of ownership—the German space is considered to first and foremost belong to the "us". Thus, the perceived spreading of a foreign variety and foreign cultures is seen as a threat to those who consider themselves to have a more valid right to the space.

Especially interesting in this regard is xi.

> xi. "I cannot stop laughing. What will happen tomorrow? "I no understand. You go away here" becomes the new trend language?"

While the comment is similar to many others in that it expresses fear of Kiezdeutsch replacing the common language, the example the speaker uses not only includes them not being understood when speaking standard German but also being told "You go away here". In this constructed scenario, the author is being told to leave a certain space that they were in, reflecting fears of their space being taken away. It is unclear to which extent this was a conscious choice, yet it illustrates how fundamentally Kiezdeutsch and its speakers are seen as a force taking away space from Germans.

In the construal of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers taking away space from Germans on the cultural and social level, the container metaphor is very prominent. Because the amount of space in a container is limited, so is the amount of content that can fit in it. Based on this, there is a belief in the comments' discourse that the simultaneous existence of too many cultures is impossible; the spreading of one linguistic variety or culture is seen to correspond to the marginalisation or vanishing of another. This links back to Van Teffelen's argument about negative views on immigration being fuelled by fears of the space inside the container being disturbed.

Layer 3 – A multiethnic variety causing national decay

This third layer is the final belief in the ideological construct. The fears of the marginalisation of the German standard language and German national identity culminate in the perception that the

existence of Kiezdeutsch is a sign of the German nation decaying. The third layer is constructed somewhat differently than the previous two in that it does not directly mention Kiezdeutsch speakers. Whereas the first two layers involve Kiezdeutsch affecting the German language and its speakers affecting the German nation, the third layer allows a direct link, allowing the mere existence of Kiezdeutsch to be taken as a sign of national decay. As Wiese notes, it is frequently implied by statements like "Poor Germany", which lament the perceived decay of the nation as a whole.[47] It is also explicitly stated in a number of comments, such as xii. and xiii.

> xii. "It is bad for our society if German youths adopt such mumbo-jumbo and maybe, one day, that is considered something entirely normal."
>
> xiii. "A gradual [...] damage of society can be created by conscious tainting of the language. [...] Therefore, one could also consider this South-Eastern-European / Arabic linguistic cacophony a subtle form of terrorism."

Excerpt xii. illustrates a sentiment that comes up frequently—that the spreading of Kiezdeutsch has negative consequences for society. Authors of such comments do not give reasons for why this might be the case—they take the connection between Kiezdeutsch and social decay for granted, stating it as if it were a fact. The same occurs in excerpt xiii., where the connection between linguistic deterioration and societal damage is presented as fact. Moreover, the author accuses Kiezdeutsch speakers, which, because of their construal in the first layer, are synonymous with immigrants who refuse to integrate, of causing this damage consciously. While these two excerpts demonstrate the perceived connection between language and society, excerpt xiv. shows that the concept of the nation plays a role in the third layer.

[47] Wiese, "Voices of linguistic outrage," 23.

xiv. "[...] to counter all these worrying side effects of de-nationalisation (multiculturalisation of nations = monoculturalisation of the world)"

The author of this comment makes a series of conjectures: they take the existence of Kiezdeutsch as a sign of German society changing to become more multiethnic, i.e. of non-German cultures spreading. This resembles the ideology present in the second layer of the construct. The second conjecture, however, perfectly conveys the third layer: because of the spreading of multilingualism and multiculturality, and the perceived marginalisation of German identity, the German nation is believed to be under threat of vanishing. This is reminiscent of the view outlined by Charteris-Black: when elements from the outside are allowed into the container that is the nation, the container weakens.[48] An image is created of the boundaries around the container vanishing until it merges with all the containers around it—this is evoked by the concept of global monoculturalisation.

The first two layers are influenced by the German nation-building myth around standard language in perceiving threats to the standard to be mirrored by threats to the German nation. In the third layer, however, this ideology is even more integral. Because the conceptual connection between one nation and one language is so powerful, the existence of a multiethnic variety immediately evokes fears of national decay and even downfall. It represents the pinnacle of an ideology in which the state of the German language is seen as indicative of the state of the German nation.

Conclusion

The analysis in this article results in a number of findings. First, it establishes that ideologies are based upon one another. Some fundamental mechanisms of othering are extended to further belief: the foreign(er) as the other as the foreign(er) causing decay. It shows that ideologies do not suddenly become extremist, but that assumptions build on previous assumptions. Through this process, beliefs like the construal of Kiezdeutsch as a foreign variety

[48] Charteris-Black, "Britain as a Container," 114.

culminate in racist conspiracy theories such as Germany being colonised by non-white immigrants. Second, it investigates how these mechanisms of othering and enemy construction intertwine with language ideologies. Beliefs around the standard language, which are rooted in the history of the German nation-building process, strongly influence the ideological construct examined here. Because the standard language is still seen as a symbol of national cohesion, the perceived foreignness of Kiezdeutsch and its speakers is taken as a threat and a sign of decay. Third, the analysis follows previous research in showing how integral the metaphor of the nation as a contained space is in immigration discourses. Many of the fears and the hostility present in the comments are defined by the dichotomy of an inside and an outside of this space, as well as the belief that space is limited. Especially the latter perception of limited space strongly motivates negative attitudes towards immigration, driven by the fear of one's space being taken away.

While the comments stem from the time period between 2009 and 2012 and therefore do not necessarily reflect the current discourse on Kiezdeutsch, immigration, or the German language and nation, contemporary German discourse has not undergone fundamental changes. In fact, extreme manifestations of the analysed ideologies have become tentatively accepted in the mainstream. For example, a study on discourse around immigration in the years of 2015 and 2016 found that the discourse was almost exclusively shaped by an emphasis on cultural differences between Germans in immigrants—resembling the first layer of the ideological construct analysed here.[49] Thus, rather than being an analysis of outdated data, the findings of present study can inform investigations of more recent discourse by providing information on its earlier stages. Moreover, they may be used outside of the academic sphere, for example by information campaigns, activist movements and policy makers who are battling racist and xenophobic sentiments. Knowing that the linguistic and cultural group construction is based on a portrayal of the foreign as negative, and the consequences this portrayal has in the further layers of this specific ideological

[49] Lisanne Raderschall, *Implizierte Leitbilder im medialen Diskurs um außereuropäische Migration in Deutschland. Eine Leidbildanalyse aus dem Herbst/Winter 2015/2016* (IF-Schriftenreihe, 2016).

construct, enables these actors to make informed decisions about how to engage with and counter hateful ideologies.

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Affective Territories of Resistance in Iran's Women, Life, Freedom Movement

Farah Pahlevan

Abstract

This article examines how resistance persists under repression by shifting attention from visible protest to the affective and relational processes that sustain political agency. Focusing on the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, it challenges dominant spatial approaches that privilege physical territory as the primary site of political struggle by developing a three-dimensional conceptual framework of affective territories, understood as relational formations sustained through embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. It demonstrates how dispersed practices (re)produce infrastructures of resistance beyond moments of collective mobilisation. By emphasising the affective and intimate dimensions of political life, the article offers a way of analysing forms of resistance that are often overlooked and shows how these can function as enduring sites of political possibility even under conditions of sustained repression.

Keywords: social movements, affective territories, Women–Life–Freedom, resistance, Iran

September 2022. 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested in Tehran for allegedly wearing the mandatory hijab incorrectly. Her death caused large-scale protests to erupt across Iran and in the Iranian diaspora. One of the most significant uprisings since the 1979 revolution, this episode of contention became known as the Women, Life, Freedom protests, named after a slogan originally coined by the Kurdish independence movement (*Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*).[1] The Women, Life, Freedom movement challenged the Iranian government's authoritarianism and also called for fundamental changes in gender, social, and political rights.[2] Like many episodes of contention before and since, it was met with severe government repression. It is estimated that at least 500 people were killed and more than 20000 were arrested for participating in the protests. Out of those arrested, many have since been executed.[3] Nevertheless, resistance in Iran continues. Occasionally, this takes the form of large-scale street protests, but it also persists in more dispersed and less visible ways. Many approaches to studying protest and social movements tend to privilege visibility and scale, as well as the institutional outcome(s) as indicators of political agency. Within such frameworks, movements that fail to achieve regime change or that are violently suppressed are often implicitly or explicitly framed as unsuccessful.[4] However,

[1] This connection is significant given the longstanding marginalisation of Kurdish populations in Iran, who have been subject to political repression and cultural erasure and because Jina Mahsa Amini was herself Kurdish. The frequent erasure of her Kurdish name, Jina, in the discourse surrounding the protests reflects the layered forms of violence that shape the context of her death. Her death cannot be fully understood outside of these intersecting structures, nor can the movement that followed be reduced to a singular national or gendered struggle.

[2] Tara Mehrabi, "Woman, Life, Freedom: On Protests in Iran and Why It Is a Feminist Movement," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 2 (February 2023): 114.

[3] Jessica Peake et al., *Disappearances, Deaths, and Denials* (Berkley Human Rights Centre, 2025), 8.

[4] See, for example, David A. Snow et al., "Introduction: Mapping and Opening Up the Terrain," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow et al. (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018); Raza Saeed, "Conceptualising Success and Failure for Social Movements," *Law, Social Justice & Global Development Journal*, no. 2 (2009); Robert H. Dix, "Why Revolutions Succeed & Fail," *Polity* 16, no. 3 (1984): 423–46.

these perspectives do not adequately account for how resistance endures under conditions in which public space is heavily securitised and collective action is violently constrained. While political agency is certainly produced and articulated in physical spaces, this article focuses on the intimate, emotional and embodied dimensions in which such agency is sustained through interpersonal bonds.

This article proposes a re-reading of the Women, Life, Freedom movement that challenges mainstream assumptions about protests and social movements. Rather than interpreting the movement primarily through moments of visible mobilisation or through the lens of success and failure, it conceptualises resistance as an ongoing process sustained through *affective territories*. These are relational spaces constituted through shared vulnerability, grief and emotions that enable political agency to persist even when formal protest becomes impossible. Resistance, in this view, is not confined to occupying physical space but involves the continuous production of new, affective spaces through relational practices. This article proposes that affective territories can be understood as relational formations sustained through three overlapping dimensions in which political agency is produced, circulated, and maintained beyond moments of visible mobilisation: embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. The slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" itself can be read as pointing toward such a reconfiguration of political struggle. It does not interpret the movement primarily through institutional change but implies the reorganisation of everyday life, embodied existence, and social relations. "Woman" positions the female body as a site of both control and resistance; "Life" can be understood to concern everyday practices and social reproduction, and "Freedom" may stand for a collective form of life that extends beyond political institutions. Read in this way, the slogan already encapsulates a spatial and affective logic.

After establishing the conceptual framework, the article examines how authoritarian regimes seek to regulate emotional and intimate life through forms of affective governance. Building on this, it then explores how everyday relational practices reproduce affective territories as infrastructures of resistance.

Finally, it applies this framework to the Women, Life, Freedom movement to show how affective territories were produced and sustained political agency under conditions of repression. This article contributes to spatial analyses of authoritarianism by demonstrating how resistance persists beyond geographic protest sites. It shows how affective territories function as infrastructures of sustainable resistance and enable movements to continue even when streets are inaccessible, and dissent is met with violence. Space can be occupied, but it can also be produced anew in response through interpersonal bonds and feelings that transcend physical terrain. This framework helps remain attentive to forms of resistance often overlooked and shows how these dispersed and intimate practices can function as enduring sites of political possibility.

From Territory to Affective Territory

Territory is traditionally understood as a bounded spatial unit linked to sovereignty and political control. However, more recent scholarship emphasises that territory is produced through social practice and discourse instead of accepting it as a fixed geographic element. [5] Territories are enacted through processes of territorialisation that organise bodies, identities, and forms of belonging.[6] This shift aligns with the broader affective turn in the humanities, which foregrounds the role of bodily and emotional experience as well as relational interaction in shaping both social and spatial life.[7] Affect here refers to the ways bodies affect and are affected by one another through sensory encounters that often precede conscious interpretations. [8] While closely related to emotion, affect does not denote named or articulated feelings, but captures the pre-conscious intensities and forces that circulate between bodies and environments. Emotions can be understood as the socially and culturally mediated expressions through which such

[5] Joe Painter, "Rethinking Territory," *Antipode* 42, no. 5 (2010): 1090.
[6] Jan Smitheram and Ian Woodcock, "Affective Territories," *Idea Journal* 9, no. 1 (2009): 9.
[7] Paul Stenner, "Bridging the Affect/Emotion Divide," in *Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication*, ed. Lei Zhang and Carlton Clark (Routledge, 2019), 2.
[8] Smitheram and Woodcock, "Affective Territories," 10–11.

affective intensities become recognisable and communicable. This distinction allows for an analysis of how political subjectivity and spatial relations are shaped through explicit discourse and visible action, as well as through embodied and relational processes that may remain partially inarticulate.

Florentien Verhage's conceptualisation of intimacy as a political phenomenon provides another entry point into this expanded understanding of space. She argues that oppression operates intimately. Power is enacted in close interpersonal proximity where it enters the body, emotions, habits and everyday interactions. Drawing on French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she contends that human bodies are, fundamentally, "without borders."[9] Humans are always mutually shaping each other through affective and sensory exchanges, which Verhage refers to as an intersubjective embrace. Oppression is then conceptualised as an "intimate terror," [10] a condition in which multiple social forces converge directly on the lived body. Crucially, it is a condition that is felt, ongoing and spatially distributed across everyday life. When oppression is continuously reproduced in micro-relations, it eventually becomes emotionally internalised. However, Verhage also shows that these multiple affective pressures open possibilities for pushing back and grounding resistance in embodied practices.[11]

These approaches suggest that territories should be understood as dynamic relational spaces produced through affective interactions between bodies, narratives and material environments. While Smitheram and Woodcock conceptualise affective territories as spatial formations emerging through affective relations between bodies and environments, Verhage's notion of *intimate terror* foregrounds how power operates through the embodied and interpersonal dimensions of everyday life. This perspective opens the possibility for affective territories, spaces that emerge through collective practices and shared sensations and continuously expand and reproduce through the circulation of affect and interpersonal relations. The notion of affective territory extends existing

[9] Florentien Verhage, "Living With(out) Borders: The Intimacy of Oppression," *Emotion, Space and Society* 11 (May 2014): 112.
[10] Verhage, "Living with(out) Borders," 116.
[11] Verhage, "Living with(out) Borders," 118–19.

understandings of territory as socially constructed by emphasising the role of embodied intensities, emotional circulation, and interpersonal relations in the production of space. Instead of focusing primarily on discourse or institutional organisation, it highlights how territories are continuously enacted through affective encounters that bind individuals into shared—though often diffuse—spatial formations.

Affective Territories and Political Struggle

The concept of affective territory is particularly useful for understanding political mobilisation and resistance. Political struggle unfolds not only within formal institutions and physical protest sites, but also through affective relations between bodies and their environments. Revolutions and social movements involve affective processes that expand or contract the capacity of individuals to act collectively. Political movements generate new spatial relations through affective engagement with place, terrain and social networks. [12] Understanding resistance, therefore, is aided by attention to the processes through which affective territories are produced and maintained. Mobilisation can generate affective territories through the mediation of emotional narratives that authenticate different experiences of suffering or injustice. These affective practices enable dispersed individuals to recognise themselves as part of a shared political community. Thus, affective territories are sites where personal experiences are translated into collective grievances and where belonging and identity are negotiated.[13]

Ann Ferguson's conceptualisation of the *affective economy* further highlights the role of emotional circulation in shaping political belonging. She argues that emotions are material and embodied forces unevenly distributed across systems such as capitalism or patriarchy. For example, she considers love not just a

[12] Gastón Gordillo, "Hostile Terrain: On the Spatial and Affective Conditions for Revolution," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 13, no. 6 (2025): 814–15.

[13] Sara Tafakori, "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 1 (2021): 73–74.

private feeling but equally a bodily force which moves between subjects and shapes agency and social attachment. Further, she theorises solidarity love as a collective practice that redirects emotional energy towards mutual recognition and care.[14] This type of political belonging enables subjects to reclaim agency through embodied connection. Thus, interpersonal relations are positioned as central infrastructures of resistance movements.

While these approaches demonstrate how affect, space, and political subjectivity are deeply intertwined, they do not yet provide a clear analytical framework for examining how such dynamics sustain resistance over time, particularly under conditions that constrain visible mobilisation. As a result, it remains difficult to trace how dispersed practices, interpersonal relations, and embodied experiences coalesce into durable forms of political agency.

Dimensions of Affective Territories

To operationalise the concept of affective territories, this article develops a three-dimensional analytical framework that aims to capture how such territories are produced and sustained in practice. It proposes that affective territories emerge through three interconnected but distinct dimensions: embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. These dimensions are treated as overlapping processes through which affect circulates, social relations are formed, and political agency is maintained over time.

First, affective territories emerge through embodied affect: emotions expressed through bodily practices and sensory experiences. Affect theory emphasises that emotions circulate through gestures, movements and encounters between bodies that often precede conscious interpretation.[15] In resistance movements, this can refer to symbolic gestures and forms of embodied defiance. Asef Bayat, for example, highlights joy and fun as politically significant affective practices. Activities often dismissed as trivial, such as dancing or

[14] Ann Ferguson, "Love as a Political Force: Romantic Love, Love-Politics and Solidarity," in *The Radicalism of Romantic Love: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Renata Grossi and David West (Routledge, 2017), 25–26.
[15] Smitheram and Woodcock, "Affective Territories," 10–11.

celebration, become forms of resistance in authoritarian contexts where regimes seek to regulate emotional life.[16]

Second, affective territories are sustained through relational solidarity. This dimension refers to the interpersonal networks through which emotions circulate, and collective trust is built, including practices of care and community. Asef Bayat expands this dimension through his concepts of *undersocieties* and *non-movements*. These are informal networks of kinship, friendship, and shared survival strategies that cultivate trust and solidarity within repressive environments.

Non-movements and undersocieties are relational infrastructures constructed against affective authoritarian governance. Here, social bonds and political subjectivities are reproduced over time, and larger mobilisation becomes possible. Friendship groups and small circles of trust offer emotional security while simultaneously serving as spaces of political dissent. Bayat emphasises that most participants in revolutionary movements develop political consciousness not primarily through protest but through daily struggle.[17]

Third, affective territories are reproduced through small acts embedded in daily life, which subtly challenge repression and state power. These acts can be grouped together under the label of everyday resistance. Theories of everyday resistance can help demonstrate how affective territories are reproduced in spaces beyond those where visible mobilisation takes place. Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen build on James C. Scott, who initially framed everyday resistance as subtle, often hidden acts that occur outside formal channels of protest. They argue that resistance is not merely reactive but dynamically intertwined with power relations. Thus, it encompasses a broad spectrum of practices that can be semi-conscious and non-dramatic as they are embedded in daily interactions and lifestyle choices. Everyday resistance is not

[16] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 137-58.
[17] Asef Bayat, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 19–30.

about overt confrontation but about subtly undermining power through routine actions that reflect personal agency.[18]

These dimensions form the conceptual infrastructure that allows affective territories to function as spaces that sustain political mobilisation. Through embodied affect, relational solidarity and everyday resistance, movements can maintain a collective identity and political agency over time, even under conditions of severe repression.

Affective Governance

If resistance can be sustained through affective territories, it is because authoritarian regimes also attempt to control these same spaces. While authoritarian power certainly operates through coercion, surveillance and (institutional) violence, it simultaneously extends into the affective and intimate dimensions of everyday life. This section conceptualises these dynamics as affective governance and refers to the ways authoritarian regimes attempt to manage the emotional atmospheres in which political life unfolds by regulating and controlling emotions and interpersonal relationships to constrain dissent.

Within the dimension of embodied affect, Younes Saramifar shows how emotions are historically produced and embodied through state-sponsored memory practices.[19] This is an affective and embodied account of authoritarian power. He argues that political consciousness is shaped through a regime of remembering that colonises the everyday. Saramifar highlights how emotions emerge as historically saturated experiences assembled through language and institutional propaganda, in a process he calls an *assemblage* where feelings circulate between bodies, narratives, objects and infrastructure. Crucially, Saramifar notes how embodied subjects negotiate this type of affective governance by splitting their agency from their subjectivity. They continue to act but resist

[18] Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, "Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2016): 419–21.
[19] Younes Saramifar, "Emotions of Felt Memories: Looking for Interplay of Emotions and Histories in Iranian Political Consciousness Since Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 30, no. 2 (2019): 134–35.

emotionally.[20] Resistance in an affective territory occurs not only in overt dissent but persists in the ongoing effort to live with, reshape and even refuse the emotional infrastructures imposed by authoritarian rule.

Shirin Saeidi and Paola Rivetti discuss the dimension of interpersonal solidarity when they show how securitisation, specifically in post-2009 Iran, reshapes intimacy through the gendering and seclusion of space. They illustrate how these infrastructures of seclusion reorganise affective relations, because subjects are compelled to navigate suspicion, solidarity, care, and mourning within very tightly constrained interpersonal spaces. In resistance movements, relationships formed under repression are shaped by grief and alienation as well as the need to sustain life, and less so by explicit political commitments.[21] Authoritarian regimes suppress relationality and erode trust, yet this produces conditions in which new affective territories can emerge, as resistance persists through fragile interpersonal ties. Mahsa Fariman and Ahmadreza Hakiminejad argue that the Islamic Republic systematically produces public space as gendered and masculine by rendering female bodies invisible or conditionally included. Women who refuse to bend to the tactics used to produce these repressive spaces, such as compulsory veiling, become marked as out of place, as "space invaders."[22]

Saeid Golkar illuminates how in everyday life, authoritarian regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran engage in systematic social manipulation of minds, bodies, and emotions. Most notably, this manipulation is enacted through what Golkar terms the *politics of sadness*.[23] He goes on to show how authoritarian power deliberately manufactures despair and hopelessness in order to cultivate

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[20] Saramifar, "Emotions of Felt Memories," 148–50.

[21] Shirin Saeidi and Paola Rivetti, "Out of Space: Securitization, Intimacy, and New Research Challenges in Post-2009 Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 515–19.

[22] Mahsa Alami Fariman and Ahmadreza Hakiminejad, "Women, Life, Freedom: Revolting Space Invaders in Iran," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 28, no. 5 (2025): 1320.

[23] Saeid Golkar, "Manipulated Society: Paralyzing the Masses in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29, no. 2 (2016): 135.

emotional paralysis. This, in turn, neutralises dissent and diminishes collective desire for change. Expansive regimes of propaganda, bodily regulation, and ritualised mourning embed the state's authority directly within the subjects' affective lives. Public joy is actively suppressed while sadness is normalised. Golkar demonstrates that authoritarianism actively engineers emotional atmospheres that produce compliant subjects and constrain the possibility for relationships.[24] Indeed, Arastoo Dabiri argues that at the core of Women, Life, Freedom lies a struggle over dignity and life itself. The slogan represents a demand to reclaim everyday existence from authoritarian control. The movement's emphasis on reclaiming life signals that resistance has become more than opposition to state violence, and it has become a reconfiguration of social relations grounded in dignity.[25]

Digital media offer a counterspace where the spatial control of authoritarian repression can be circumvented. Asma Mehan conceptualises the movement as a form of digital feminist placemaking in which women use social media, digital art and online protest strategies to challenge gender-segregated spatial regimes. In the context of mass surveillance and internet blackouts, digital platforms nevertheless enabled the circulation of testimonies, images, videos and art that highlighted women's presence across both physical and virtual public spheres. These practices created spaces in which marginalised voices could articulate alternative futures. Digital feminist placemaking thus functioned as a transnational affective territory and linked local protest to diasporic solidarity and global feminist networks.[26]

Women, Life, Freedom as an Affective Territory

To examine how affective territories are produced and sustained, this article draws on a set of narrative and testimonial sources. *In the Streets of Tehran* by Nila is a personal portrait of the protests by a witness who remains anonymous, *For the Sun After Long Nights* by

[24] Golkar, "Manipulated Society," 149–51.
[25] Arastoo Dabiri, 'Woman, Life, Freedom': A Movement in Progress in Iran," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 8, no. 1 (2023): 3.
[26] Asma Mehan, "Digital Feminist Placemaking: The Case of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement," *Urban Planning* 9 (January 2024): 2; 15–16.

Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy explores the protests through the interwoven stories of two Iranian journalists and the edited volume *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran* edited by Malu Halasa is an anthology of essays, testimonies, interviews, and visual art produced in response to the uprising. These texts compile firsthand accounts, reflections, and observations from participants and witnesses of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Here, they are treated as situated narratives that enable a re-reading of the movement based on the conceptual framework this article proposes.

The Women, Life, Freedom movement illustrates how resistance can be sustained through affective territories even under conditions of intense repression. Nima Orazani and Ali Teymoori emphasise that the movement is built on an exceptionally strong cultural and symbolic repertoire. This includes hair-cutting rituals, rooftop chants and widespread acts of civil disobedience. For example, cutting off a lock of hair became a shared gesture of grief and moral outrage, intelligible across a wide range of actors.[27] These embodied practices produced affective infrastructures that lasted even when the possibility for street protests was precluded. They are made up of a distributed network of symbolic acts that sustained collective identification even in the absence of centralised leadership.

Embodied Affect

"*We are a wave of anxious bodies, of fierce heads with our hair free in the wind.*"[28]

– *Nila, protester*

Accounts of the Women, Life, Freedom movement repeatedly highlight how bodies became sites of protest. Participants describe how resistance unfolded not only through slogans and organised demonstrations, but also through gestures and bodily interactions

[27] Nima Orazani and Ali Teymoori, "The Manifold Faces of Political Resistance: The Woman, Life, Freedom Movement," in *Resistance to Repression and Violence: Global Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Fouad Bou Zeineddine and Johanna Vollhardt (Oxford University Press, 2024), 137–156.
[28] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran* (Ithaka Press, 2023), 15.

that communicate grief, anger, and courage. One of the most significant embodied gestures to emerge during the protest was the public cutting of hair. Only days after Jina Mahsa Amini died, a journalist witnessed a young woman cutting off her ponytail with a pair of scissors while shouting "You are forever dishonorable" at the present riot police and security personnel.[29] This embodied act of defiance quickly became emblematic as a ritual of grief and anger. The public cutting of hair has often been interpreted as a symbolic act of defiance directed at compulsory veiling laws. However, this practice can be re-read as more than symbolic protest. It constitutes an embodied production of space in which the body itself becomes a site of political expression and collective recognition. Through repetition across dispersed contexts, this gesture generates an affective territory that enables participants to recognise one another as part of a shared struggle, even in the absence of coordinated mobilisation. In her account of demonstrations in Tehran, participant Nila emphasises the physical intensity of collective protest. She describes how emotions like fear, determination and anger circulate through the crowd of bodies and bind individuals together.[30]

Beyond street protests, Nila notes that shared bodily affects still unite dissidents: "In taxis, shops or doctors' waiting rooms, I occasionally notice someone crying noiselessly next to me. There is a painful comfort in knowing that other people understand why you are crying: it is a kind of unity in itself."[31] She also emphasises the power of the protesters' shared anger, an anger she says is "both terrible and romantic."[32] Shared emotions and their shared bodily experience are what bind participants together and what turn them from individuals into a united collective. They create affective infrastructures that enable participants to recognise each other as part of the same struggle, even when direct protest becomes temporarily impossible.

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[29] Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy, *For The Sun After Long Nights: The Story of Iran's Women-Led Uprising*, First hardcover edition (Pantheon Books, 2025), 10–11.
[30] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 15.
[31] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 68.
[32] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 25.

The embodied practices of singing and dancing also came to play important roles in the movement. The song "Baaraye" by Iranian singer Shervin Hajipour quickly became its unofficial anthem. In a video, a group of schoolgirls can be seen joining hands and singing the song together.[33] During confrontations with security forces, protesters often sang together in an expression of collective courage and defiance that stood in stark contrast with the fear and isolation the state tries to evoke.[34] Similarly, dance emerged as a powerful embodied form of resistance. During protests, participants "danced around makeshift fires."[35] Both singing and dancing had long been subject to government restrictions; women, for example, are prohibited from singing in public. Thus, "simple ancient arts such as dancing, singing, even a brief kiss in the street, which dare to envision a different way of life, have perhaps already defeated the mighty Islamic state."[36] Joint bodily movement itself becomes a form of political imagination and allows participants to temporarily escape the politics of sadness and inhabit the freedom they seek. Singing and dancing together amplify emotional experiences through repetition and foster affective bonds that emerge from the shared bodily participation. Embodied practices help produce spaces of resistance that challenge authoritarian attempts to regulate emotion and behaviour. Protesters transform their bodies into sites of political expression, and by doing so, affective territories emerge that sustain solidarity and collective identity even under conditions of repression.

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[33] Alexander Cyrus Poulikakos, "Queering of a Revolution: On Reappropriation," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, 1st ed, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), 9.
[34] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 40.
[35] Malu Halasa, "Introduction," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, 1st ed, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), iv.
[36] Halasa, "Introduction," xii.

Relational Solidarity

"*Hand in hand, we become the sea.*"[37]
– *Fatemeh, protester*

While embodied practices cause affective territories to emerge, relational solidarity enables these emotions to circulate across individuals and persist beyond immediate encounters. Gestures of mutual support, care and kinship build relational infrastructures that sustain collective struggle. In this sense, affective territories are not only constituted through shared feelings but also through practices of care that bind individuals into communities.

During the Women, Life, Freedom movement, solidarity emerged through everyday interactions among protesters, as small gestures among strangers created a sense of shared purpose during demonstrations. Participants exchanged handwritten notes and encouraging messages in public spaces and formed quiet bonds with individuals they often did not know. Young women would secretly pass notes containing poems and protest slogans to others in the streets: "These days, young women without hijab put these notes in our hands secretly in the streets as we walk past them (. . .) It is such a joy among all the difficulties and dangers that we choose to face every day."[38] These exchanges represent small moments of solidarity and reinforced the sense participants were part of a shared struggle, even when the notes were passed with "shaky hands."[39]

Another significant practice of care that emerged during the movement was tending to injured protesters. During particularly brutal crackdowns, injured participants were often transported to hospitals by ordinary civilians and fellow protesters who rushed them to emergency rooms in their private cars. However, because hospitals were monitored by security forces seeking to identify and arrest injured protesters, many people avoided formal medical care and relied on "sympathetic doctors and nurses who make underground house calls."[40] Even though they were warned not to

[37] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 33.
[38] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 31.
[39] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 33.
[40] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 72.

and risked punishment, medical professionals continued to provide treatment to the injured and medical care itself formed the underpinning to networks of care and solidarity.[41] This network functioned even transnationally when "Iranian medics all over the world have begun to do remote consultations to those injured by tear gas, truncheons and bullets."[42] Another participant remembers his brother Azad, a Kurdish dentist who repeatedly joined demonstrations and provided aid to injured participants. He "transported the injured people to a safe place and treated them."[43] 32-year-old Azad, whose name means *free* in Persian and Kurdish, was killed on 17 November 2022 during a protest in Mahabad. In the absence of institutional protection, protesters relied on one another to provide medical assistance and safety from state violence. These practices of mutual care and aid that make up this dimension of affective territories can help transform a movement into a community capable of sustaining itself under conditions of repression.

Relational solidarity also develops and is expressed through the simple act of being present together in public space. In fact, protest gatherings often began informally as individuals moved through the city: "You can simply walk in the streets, and people will join you, and before you know it, you are part of a small group."[44] During gatherings, participants protected each other. One describes how security forces tried to detain her, and in response, bystanders immediately intervened: "men, ordinary men, leapt out of their cars and motorcycles. . . 'Let her go,' they shouted, pushing the officer off me."[45] These practices of care also extend to the families of protesters who were injured, arrested or killed on the streets. When the family of a young woman who was killed during demonstrations struggled to pay the large sum demanded by authorities in order to retrieve her body for burial, the neighbourhood mobilised to assist

[41] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 11.
[42] Kamin Mohammadi, "Jin Jîyan Azadî: The Kurdish Heart of Iran's Female-Led Uprising," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), 28.
[43] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 239.
[44] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 11.
[45] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 28.

the family: "All the neighbours join in helping to collect the money."[46]

These practices demonstrate how resistance is sustained through networks of care and kinship. By protecting one another, treating the injured, exchanging gestures of encouragement, and recognising shared grief, protesters construct relational infrastructures that allow collective action to persist. Acts such as exchanging notes, protecting strangers, or providing medical care are often understood as spontaneous expressions of solidarity during protest. However, these practices are constitutive elements of affective territories. They do not simply support mobilisation but actively produce relational spaces through which trust, care, and collective identity are sustained over time. In this sense, solidarity is not a byproduct of protest, but an actively practised infrastructure that enables resistance to persist under conditions of repression.

Everyday Resistance

"*Hijabs are like the petrol in our Molotov cocktails: fuel for the revolution.*"[47]

– *Nila, protester*

Unlike large demonstrations or overt political mobilisation, everyday practices of resistance are often dispersed, informal, and difficult for authorities to fully suppress. Yet their effect can still be politically significant. Within the framework of affective territories, everyday resistance operates by gradually reshaping public space. Through repeated acts of subtle defiance, individuals normalise dissent and create environments in which resistance becomes part of ordinary social life.

One of the most visible forms of everyday resistance in the Women, Life, Freedom movement involves changes in clothing, in particular the refusal to fully comply with compulsory hijab regulations. Many women began quietly altering their behaviour in public spaces even outside formal demonstrations: "For a while

[46] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 66.
[47] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 41.

now, I, like many other women, have stopped pulling up my scarf to cover my hair when I pass by the guards."[48] This subtle gesture represents a significant form of everyday resistance that undermines the state's attempts to regulate their bodies by gradually normalising noncompliance in routine interactions. Rather than viewing these practices as isolated or merely symbolic, they can be read as cumulative processes that gradually transform the spatial and social norms of public life. Through repetition across everyday interactions, such acts produce spaces of resistance that normalise noncompliance and reshape the boundaries of what is politically possible.

Another important expression of everyday resistance emerges through the persistence of ordinary pleasures and social practices that authoritarian governance attempts to regulate or suppress. Even seemingly mundane activities take on political meaning under the Islamic Republic: "We try to live our everyday lives every moment — every time we laugh, dance, or drink. In the Islamic Republic, everyday life is a struggle for the most basic human rights." [49] In this context, actions that might otherwise appear apolitical become forms of quiet defiance and demonstrate how resistance can take the form of sustaining ordinary forms of life that the regime attempts to discipline. For example, resistance was often confined to "an underground life of partying or cursing the ayatollahs behind closed doors."[50] Everyday resistance also unfolds through informal conversations, for example, when individuals begin questioning the ideological foundations of the regime through discussions circulating on social media and messaging platforms.

People used digital spaces to reflect on contradictions within the system and to articulate grievances that had previously remained unspoken: "On social media platforms (. . .) we write about hypocrisies that we have only recently woken up to."[51] Everyday forms of communication can gradually transform political consciousness and produce alternative interpretations of social and political life. Everyday resistance operates through the ordinary

[48] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 15.
[49] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 171.
[50] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 10.
[51] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 68.

practices of daily life. Practices such as maintaining spaces of joy, engaging in everyday political discussion, expressing dissent in private gatherings or dressing in a way that defies state-sponsored dress codes allow individuals to challenge authoritarian authority without necessarily confronting it directly. These actions may not appear dramatic in isolation. Yet, when repeated across many interactions and social contexts, they gradually transform the emotional and relational landscape in which resistance takes place. Everyday resistance, therefore, plays a crucial role in sustaining movements under conditions of repression.

By embedding dissent within routine practices and intimate spaces, individuals create subtle but persistent forms of opposition that persist even when visible mobilisation becomes dangerous. In this way, everyday acts of defiance help reproduce the affective territory of the Women, Life, Freedom movement.

Conclusion: Rethinking Resistance and the Possibility of Hope

This article began with an attempt to think differently about the Women, Life, Freedom movement, specifically, and social movements generally. That is: less in terms of its visible moments of protest, and more in terms of the relations, practices, and emotions through which it was sustained. I began working on this article only a few weeks after the massacre on 8 and 9 January 2026 that cost tens of thousands of Iranian protesters their lives after new large-scale protests had erupted at the end of 2025. I had been working on it for only a few weeks when all-out war broke out in Iran. It was difficult when writing, not to feel constantly outpaced by the present. Repression intensified, protest re-emerged in altered forms and eventually war unfolded. I had to resist the sense that my object of analysis was constantly slipping out of view, that it was at once ongoing and already past.

Maybe this experience highlighted even more sharply the need for rethinking how resistance is recognised and studied. The events that unfolded during the writing process neither confirm a continuous trajectory of resistance nor mark its definitive rupture. Instead, they make visible how quickly the conditions under which resistance is lived can shift, and how difficult it is to trace what carries over from one moment to the next. Movements do not simply

appear and disappear, nor do they unfold in a linear or continuous manner. They shift, fragment, and reconfigure and at times become difficult to locate without being entirely absent. The framework of affective territories offered in this article is meant to make space for uncertainty. It is not meant to stabilize the object of analysis, but to hold open the possibility that resistance might endure in dispersed, uneven, and at times barely perceptible ways. If this article has sought to think resistance differently, it does so without claiming to fully grasp it, but it is an attempt to remain attentive to those forms of resistance that are easily overlooked. The spaces and relations that come into view through this framework may also be among the few sites in which change remains visible, and hope can still be located, even in times of despair.

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Transitional (In)Justice: How French Cambodian Communities Claim Political Space from Below

Daniëlle Baan & David Sary

Abstract

This article evaluates transitional justice and remembrance in relation to the Cambodian genocide by using the concept of political space *to capture the act of political participation by the Cambodian government and the French Cambodian community, as well as the physical and discursive space in which this participation occurs beyond formal institutional politics. Using an actor-focused approach, it highlights how actors experience and practice the meaning and relevance of transitional justice. This article argues that while formal transitional justice mechanisms such as the ECCC have contributed to legal accountability, they risk institutional monopolisation of the use of transitional justice and remembrance, which limits the political space of individuals rooted in Cambodian communities. Moreover, this monopolisation may limit the ideas in this discursive space to standardised, often Western-centric notions of transitional justice and ideas that serve the interests of the Cambodian government. Nevertheless, institutions do not hold arbitrary power over political space, and French Cambodian communities continue to claim and expand political space through bottom-up practices rooted in community and cultural dynamics. Using such initiatives, including FRAGMENTS #KH50 and the work of Rithy Panh and Vann Nath, this article explores how survivors engage with institutional transitional justice frameworks and challenge this institutional monopoly and how, in doing so, they claim and expand political space. French Cambodian communities challenge the distinction between victim and perpetrator, extend responsibility beyond high cadres, and conduct remembrance through cultural and everyday practices.*

Keywords: Cambodian genocide, transitional justice, remembrance, political space, bottom-up.

The Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a hybrid tribunal jointly established by the United Nations and the Cambodian government, with millions of Cambodians following the trials on television and tens of thousands of survivors attending or participating in the hearings. Despite widespread access and opportunity for participation, however, many survivors felt that their testimonies about their experiences during the genocide were insufficiently considered.[1] By taking the notion of political space as a starting point, this article argues that transitional justice does not have to be limited to formal institutions. This article follows the conceptualisation of Eva Weiss and Meredith Hansson, who use the term political space to capture the act of political participation and the physical or discursive space in which this participation takes place beyond formal institutional politics. The emphasis on space helps to conceptualise that political space has boundaries that define which actors, interests, and ideas may be included or excluded. Various actors with conflicting interests and/or unequal power may seek to establish, delimit, or enforce the boundaries of political space to advance their interests. In this case, the Cambodian government pushes its own narrative of responsibility and selective approaches to genocide remembrance and accountability. Other actors seek to claim presence in this political space by expanding its boundaries through activism and even through everyday practices, to advance (whether intended or not) the interest of, in this case, the French Cambodian community.[2]

Based on this concept, how can the French Cambodian community challenge the institutional monopoly on the use of

[1] "Cambodia," International Center for Transitional Justice, accessed 17 February, 2026, https://www.ictj.org/where-we-work/cambodia#:~:text=Over%2030%2C000%20people%20have%20visited,is%20now%20appealing%20his%20sentence; "Cambodia: On final day of UN-backed trial, former leaders deny war crimes charges," United Nations, accessed 17 February, 2026, https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/10/454282.

[2] Eva Hansson, and Meredith L Weiss, "The Contested Domain of Political Space in Southeast Asia." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Norms in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux, Astrid Norén-Nilsson, and Gabriel Facal (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 467–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9655-1_27.

transitional justice to claim political space? By analysing three examples of the French Cambodian community, this article examines how actors' experiences and practices can shape the meaning and relevance of transitional justice and, in doing so, how they claim political space.

Therefore, this article argues that while formal transitional justice mechanisms such as the ECCC have contributed to legal accountability, they risk institutional monopolisation of the use of transitional justice, which limits the political space of individuals rooted in Cambodian communities. Moreover, it may limit the ideas in this discursive space to standardised, often Western-centric notions of transitional justice and narratives that serve the interests of the Cambodian government. This article, however, highlights three French Cambodian projects and practices that challenge these ideas and narratives through bottom-up practices rooted in their community and cultural dynamics. After examining the top-down judicial mechanisms and how they seek to limit the boundaries, actors, and ideas within transitional justice, this article analyses how the French Cambodian community challenges the institutional monopoly on the use of transitional justice to claim political space. By using the bottom-up initiatives such as FRAGMENTS #KH50, the work of Vann Nath and Rithy Panh, and everyday practices, this article argues that survivors and their descendants engage with institutional transitional justice frameworks, challenging the institutional monopoly on the use of transitional justice, and claim and expand political space.

Transitional Justice

From a theoretical perspective, transitional justice is broadly understood as a practice and framework of justice to address the perpetrators and survivors of past human rights abuses during political change. It comprises legal and non-legal measures. [3]

[3] Michal Krotoszynski, "Transitional Justice Models and Analytic Philosophy: Towards Theory," *Polish Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2017): 10-11. https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2017201; Phil Clark and Nicola Palmer, "Challenging Transitional Justice," In *Critical Perspectives in Transitional Justice*, ed. Nicola Palmer, Phil Clark, and Danielle Granville (Cambridge:

Attempts are made to identify idealised models of transitional justice based on common elements or empirical cases that are deemed successful, such as the tribunals discussed hereafter.

However, such models risk portraying justice as something delivered by states or international institutions to a passive society. Transitional justice is shaped by the dominant political orthodoxy of the time, meaning that chosen approaches often serve to legitimise policy agendas. This can sideline local social movements and local needs, which can ultimately undermine the effectiveness of measures. Moreover, even the meaning of the seemingly accepted goal of justice differs from cultural and ideological perspectives.[4] During the process of transitional justice, actors thus forge the boundaries of this political space by determining which narrative gets included, how the genocide is remembered, and how it should be rectified. Herein, governments and international institutions are powerful actors that can advance their interests. In the case of the ECCC and the Cambodian government, both actors frame their approach as necessary for political stability, although the Cambodian government also pursues political consolidation.[5]

Indeed, while the ECCC, located in Phnom Penh, created a physical political space that was accessible to the public, established an official record, and offered survivors a platform for recognition, it also contributed to their sense of alienation. Its international structure, foreign personnel, and reliance on international legal standards created a sense of alienation among rural populations, making justice appear performative and aimed at an international

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Intersentia, 2012) 1–3, https://doi-org.leidenuniv.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/9781839700224.

[4] Michael Newman, *Transitional Justice: Contending with the Past* (Newark: Polity Press, 2019), 9–17, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leidenuniv/detail .action?docID=5808419; Tine Destrooper, "Introduction. On Travel, Translation, and Transformation" In *Human Rights Transformation in Practice,* ed. Tine Destrooper and Sally Engle Merry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) 3–13. https://doi-org.leidenuniv.idm.oclc.org/10.9783/9780812295467-003.

[5] Khamboly Dy, "Challenges of Teaching Genocide in Cambodian Secondary Schools," in *Policy and Practice: Pedagogy about the Holocaust and Genocide Papers*, 2013, 1–10, https://dokumen.pub/the-justice-facade-trials-of-transition-in-cambodia-2017958197-9780198820956-9780198820949.html.

audience, thereby excluding them from the discursive political space.[6] Similar patterns appeared in other international tribunals, such as those for Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, where symbolic justice often prevailed. In both cases, trials were held far from affected communities in Arusha and The Hague, making the procedures difficult to access for many survivors, something the ECCC did manage to improve. Moreover, international justice in these contexts has been shaped by political negotiation and selective accountability. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, for instance, was criticised for its bias as the attention following the Srebrenica massacre led to a focus on Serbian perpetrators in its early years.[7] Similarly, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, established after the 1994 genocide, failed to address crimes committed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, reflecting a form of selective accountability that directly limits the boundaries of the political space by determining what actors, ideas, and interests matter in transitional justice.[8] However, despite attempts to delimit this space and exert a monopoly on transitional justice, institutions do not hold arbitrary power over it.[9]

Top-Down Actors: Institutional Organisations

Following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia entered a period of political reconstruction and a prolonged and contested transitional justice process. While institutional justice mechanisms such as the ECCC would emerge decades later, the state already started to set the boundaries of political space by producing the foundations for transitional justice and the remembrance of the genocide. The Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and later the Cambodian People's

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[6] Alexander Hinton, *The Justice Facade: Trials of Transition in Cambodia*,. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 243, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/97801 98820949.001.0001.

[7] Klaus Bachmann and Aleksandar Fatić, "Accepting the Political Face of International Criminal Justice," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 57 (2019): 26–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2019.01.005.

[8] Peter M. Juma, *An Assessment of the ICTR's Failures and Successes* (31 December, 2022), SSRN, 9, https://ssrn.com/abstract=4315844.

[9] Hansson and Weiss, "The Contested Domain of Political Space," 471–72.

Party (CPP), positioned themselves as liberators of the nation. Even though many CPP leaders had been affiliated with the Khmer Rouge, the ruling elite constructed a political identity rooted in victimhood. This framing offered a simple narrative where the "evil" was embodied by Pol Pot and a narrow circle of leaders, while the broader society, including reintegrated cadres, was recast primarily as victims.[10]

In theory, transitional justice seeks to balance accountability, reconciliation, and institutional reform. However, in Cambodia, the state prioritised political stability and political consolidation.[11] Memorial sites such as Tuol Sleng (S-21) and Choeun Ek (The Killing Fields) were rapidly transformed into genocide museums. Whilst they preserved evidence of atrocities, they also served to legitimise the new regime, justify the Vietnamese intervention, and establish the Cambodian government as the arbitrator of memory (and remembrance) of the genocide. The state shaped how the genocide was understood, and who, how, what, and why it is remembered. This limited genocide acknowledgment to serving the Cambodian government's interests, a dynamic fostered by international actors who primarily engaged with the Cambodian government's version of its memory.

The clearest account of this international dimension is the ECCC, which illustrates both the promises and limits of transitional justice. According to Alexander Hinton, the court's hybrid structure and procedures transformed justice into a staged event that cements power's hierarchies and inequalities. The ECCC then re-enacts traumas rather than resolving them; it only offers the appearance of closure without profound transformation.[12] International interventions have at times been perceived as intrusive or neocolonial, privileging westernised models of justice while sidelining local practices of mourning and reconciliation.[13] Moreover, global frameworks often overshadow the complicity of

[10] Dy, "Challenges of Teaching Genocide," 1–10.
[11] Dy, "Challenges of Teaching Genocide," 1–10.
[12] Hinton, *The Justice Facade*, 243.
[13] Brigittine M. French, "Technologies of Telling: Discourse, Transparency, and Erasure in Guatemalan Truth Commission Testimony," *Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2009): 92–109, https://doi.org/10.1080/14754830902717734.

external powers in Cambodia's troubled history, producing selective narratives of responsibility. These tensions highlight the contested nature of memory and remembrance in post-genocide Cambodia, where questions of legitimacy and ownership remain unresolved within transitional justice, which ultimately excludes many communities from the political space. Thus, this article will examine two dimensions of international use of transitional justice and Cambodian remembrance: first, the role and limitations of the ECCC and broader international justice frameworks; and second, critiques of internationalisation, including issues of neocolonialism and the legitimacy of international actors in defining which ideas and practices may be included or excluded in political space.

Following the end of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993, a more stable political context allowed for a better prosecution of the Khmer Rouge perpetrators. Despite the earlier establishment of the People's Revolutionary Tribunal trial in 1979, overseen by Vietnamese advisors that convicted Pol Pot and Ieng Sary of genocide in absentia with a death sentence, the international community did not pay much attention as they were deemed "mere show trials" inscribed in Cold War politics.[14] Most early discussions centred around political considerations rather than the pursuit of justice for victims. "Trying the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique for the crime of genocide will, on the one hand, expose all the criminal acts that they have committed and mobilise the Kampuchean people more actively to defend and build up the people's power, and on the other hand, show the peoples of the world the face of the criminals who are posing as the representatives of the people of Kampuchea."[15] From the 21st of June 1997 onwards, negotiations between the Cambodian government and the United Nations over the establishment of a justice mechanism to address the crimes of the Khmer Rouge began.

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[14] Cheryl S. White, "The Creation of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia," in *Bridging Divides in Transitional Justice: The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2017), 111, https://doi-org.leidenuniv.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/9781780684970.

[15] Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 44.

These negotiations were lengthy; for the then Prime Minister Hun Sen, "it was important to distinguish between those members of the Khmer Rouge who committed genocide and those who helped to overthrow the genocidal regime," such as himself.[16] The attitude of the government was to "dig a hole and bury the past," whereas the tribunal was "restrictive vis-à-vis its temporal jurisdiction."[17] The ECCC was established in 2003 after a back-and-forth between the two parties regarding the interpretation of the language that would be the basis of the prosecution. It was designed to combine national and international law, reflecting Cambodia's sovereignty and its dependence on global legitimacy. Nevertheless, only a handful of leaders were convicted: Kang Kek Ieu (Duch), Nuon Chea, and Khieu Samphan, all important cadres from the Khmer Rouge, convicted for crimes against humanity and genocide, while other important figures died before trial, such as Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith. Though the procedure did create a space for survivors to testify publicly, putting an end to long silences and gaining recognition of their suffering, and bringing valuable archives and recordings towards the international understanding of the genocide.[18] Nevertheless, the tribunal, designed as a mechanism of transitional justice, faced significant limitations.[19] Hun Sen and his party leveraged their collaboration with the UN to show an appeal for justice while remaining in control of the process. Indeed,

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[16] Hans Corell, "Agreement between the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia concerning the Prosecution under Cambodian Law of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea," *United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law*, accessed February 20, 2026, https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/abunac/abunac.html

[17] James A. Tyner, Gabriela Brindis Alvarez, and Alex R. Colucci, "Memory and the Everyday Landscape of Violence in Post-Genocide Cambodia," *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 8 (2012): 862, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.73484.

[18] Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), *Official Website of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, accessed October 5, 2025, https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en

[19] Hinton, *The Justice Facade*, "Refer to an assemblage of discourses, institutions, capital flows, technologies, practices, and people devoted to providing redress for mass human rights violations and enabling a transformation of a society from this violent past to a better future." 5, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198820949.001.0001.

interference from the government was not insignificant. Chea Leang, Cambodian co-prosecutor, rejected several new cases proposed by her Canadian co-prosecutor, arguing that Cambodia is an unstable land and needs to prioritise national stability over the prosecution of a greater number of Khmer Rouge.[20] An argument repeated by Hun Sen, who declared that prosecuting more people could endanger the current peace in Cambodia and plunge the country back into war.[21] As a majority of the judges were Cambodians and appointed by the government, negotiations over expanding the tribunal's reach were rendered unsuccessful. The ECCC thus illustrates the paradox of international justice in post-conflict societies. While it established an official historical record and offered survivors a platform for recognition, the ECCC also reproduced existing hierarchies of power and created a sense of alienation among rural populations.[22] Justice felt performative and aimed at an international audience rather than taking into consideration the plurality of the Cambodian community.

Furthermore, in all these cases, international justice has been shaped by political negotiation and selective accountability. For many observers and participants, the tribunal embodied the illusion of international justice. Hinton argued that the ECCC operates as a performance of justice, a facade whose purpose is to please international audiences while failing to address the deeper wounds and traumas of Cambodians.[23] Then, the ECCC simultaneously offered recognition, participation from victims, control from the government, and international frameworks. The tribunal reflected unequal relations of power and interpretation. Western notions of justice, trauma, and remembrance often diverged from the various local cultural practices in Cambodia. Despite facilitating a physical political space for transitional justice, the ECCC and Cambodian government directly limited the boundaries of the political space by

[20] Human Rights Watch, "Cambodge : Les pressions politiques fragilisent le tribunal," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed 22 April, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2009/07/22/cambodge-les-pressions-politiques-fragilisent-le-tribunal
[21] Human Rights Watch, "Cambodge."
[22] Hinton, *The Justice Facade*. 243.
[23] Hinton, *The Justice Façade*, 21–23.

determining what actors, practices, ideas, and interests should be included.

For the 50th anniversary of the fall of Phnom Penh, the Institut Français in Phnom Penh curated the exhibition: "Face aux Khmers rouges – L'Ambassade de France prise dans la chute de Phnom Penh (17 avril–8 mai 1975)", which focused on the role of the French embassy during the events.[24] These cultural exchanges contributed to historical awareness while also reinforcing France's long-standing influence in Cambodia's intellectual and cultural spheres. Indeed, governments pursue influence through the tools of culture, education, and humanitarian support as pathways for soft power. Genocide commemoration becomes likewise a 'moral' tool through which states assert their commitment to universal values while consolidating diplomatic ties. Yet, the transformation of the genocide into a diplomatic asset raises questions about who truly owns this memory and whose voices are sidelined in the process of its internationalisation.

When memory is managed through these broad international frameworks, it can develop significant blind spots regarding contextual causes of the tragedy. Specifically, the global discourse surrounding the Khmer Rouge genocide tends to isolate the 1975-1979 period as a catastrophe fairly disconnected from the whole political landscape at the time. This is even noticeable in everyday life, for example, in a conversation with retired American tourists he was serving at work, co-author of this article, David Sary, found himself explaining his background and his family's history as refugees. Their response left a lasting impression on him: "Communism is hell," they remarked, shaking their heads. Yet, he perceived their reaction as reflecting a limited awareness of the U.S. bombing campaigns of the early 1970s that were part of the Vietnam War.[25] The bombings of the Ho Chi Minh trail that ran through Cambodia destabilised the country and accelerated the Khmer

[24] Personal communication with an intern who participated in the curation of the exhibition, November 5, 2025.

[25] Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 19, https://research-ebsco-com.leidenuniv.idm.oclc.org/c/5ntpxs/search/details/vgmgcson5z?request-context=plink&db=e000xww.

Rouge's rise, who took over Lon Nol's government, which was supporting the US agenda; they were using the damages done "by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda."[26] This selective remembering illustrates what Trouillot wrote concerning the Haitian revolution and the systematic silences of inconvenient narratives that would complicate or degrade one's moral clarity.[27] By projecting Cambodia's suffering as an isolated tragedy, those international narratives preserve the image of the magnanimous arbiter. This obscures the structural violence and geopolitical complicity that enabled the Khmer Rouge's emergence and rise to power. Moreover, this silence is not only external but also reinforced by domestic politics. The past has indeed been streamlined; the Cambodian government's portrayal of itself as both a victim and a saviour creates a Manichean simplification that leaves little room for the turmoil of history.[28] It thus becomes easier for the CPP to contain narratives that may disturb their political authority.

The internationalisation of remembrance has also provoked issues concerning its cultural dissonance.[29] While these frameworks enable recognition and funding, they risk weakening the cultural and historical specificity of Cambodian suffering. The western models of transitional justice emphasise individual accountability, public testimony, and historical documentation. In many Cambodian communities shaped by Theravada Buddhism, mourning practices often involve restoring relationships between the living and the dead through ritual offerings and prayers intended to guide restless spirits. For these communities, annual ceremonies such as Pchum Ben thus embody a shared conception where justice is restorative rather than punitive, where communities collectively address the consequences

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[26] Sony Ouch and George Wright, "Henry Kissinger's Cambodia Legacy of Bombs and Chaos," *BBC News*, 3 December, 2023, https://www.bbc.co m/ news/world-asia-675828.

[27] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 96, https://hdl-handle-net.leidenuniv. idm.oclc.org/2027/heb04595.0001.001.

[28] Roth Santepheap, "Thailand's Dangerous Game of Accusations: Who's Really the Victim?" *Khmer Times*, 19 July, 2025, https://www.khmertimeskh.c om/501719774/thailands-dangerous-game-of-accusations-whos-really-the-victim/

[29] Hinton, *The Justice Facade*, 243.

of the genocide.[30] However, such practices are fairly invisible in international reports and memorial initiatives, which privilege tangible juridical forms of remembrances such as trials, archives, exhibitions, and more generally, narratives embedded in 'truth'. This creates a gap in which the universalising language of international justice fails to incorporate local understandings of mourning and remembrance. Legal mechanisms and museums, while essential for documentation, cannot substitute for the spiritual dimensions of mourning central to many survivors. Thus, while the ECCC and related projects have preserved evidence and provided recognition to victims, they have not necessarily facilitated remembrance in the cultural and spiritual sense understood by many Cambodians who are still mourning.

A meaningful engagement with Cambodia's past would incorporate the plurality of memories of those whose voices remain outside of the official scripts. This approach would allow for a shift in emphasis, where sharing the memory would take priority over its management, facilitating the expansion of political space by furthering transitional justice and remembrance beyond institutions. Thus, the internationalisation of Cambodian memory has many achievements, such as the preservation of records, affirming victims' dignity, and inscribing the genocide within the global realm. Yet, the same processes have also cemented hierarchies of power and interpretations, limiting political space, especially for minority or disadvantaged communities. Justice, as envisioned through international frameworks, remains entangled with neocolonial patterns of authority and Western paradigms. The challenge in Cambodia's case lies in reconciling the worlds of the legal and spiritual into a more inclusive remembrance and transitional justice, enhancing its effectiveness. These tensions reveal that transitional justice for the Cambodian genocide is not only negotiated in tribunals and museums, but also across borders, generations, and communities. Standardised practices need not be rejected, but local

[30] Anne Yvonne Guillou, "An Alternative Memory of the Khmer Rouge Genocide: The Dead of the Mass Graves and the Land Guardian Spirits (Neak Ta)," *South East Asia Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): 207–226, https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2012.0102.

actors must be treated as active participants rather than passive recipients.

Bottom-Up Actors: Local Communities

Institutional actors thus forge the boundaries of political space by attempting to monopolise the use of transitional justice and remembrance. This section, therefore, focuses on three bottom-up projects and practices emerging from French Cambodian communities whose experiences of commemoration and remembrance illustrate how they interact with transitional justice and how it can be used beyond institutions to challenge the institutional monopoly to claim and expand their political space.[31] In this community, the genocide is mainly remembered through fragments: oral stories, rituals (such as Pchum Ben), and memorials.[32] Yet, these memories are not solely reflections of the past; they are also acts of reconstruction and survival. While the Cambodian state and international institutions have crafted official narratives of justice and reconciliation, Cambodian voices originating outside of Cambodia often feel alienated. Survivors reimagine memory in specific forms, through film, literature, and cultural practices, to claim a certain space over their history and identity. Indeed, in local French Cambodian communities, the genocide is not transmitted through official histories as it is rarely present in school curricula abroad, but rather through fragmented anecdotes and quiet gestures. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as the inheritance of trauma and silence by those who did not directly live through it. This concept "describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that

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[31] Sally Engle Merry, "Transnational Human Rights and Local Activism: Mapping the Middle," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 41–49, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2006.108.1.38; Destrooper, "Introduction," 3–13.

[32] "'L'oubli est une seconde mort' : Lognes accueille un monument dédié à la mémoire des victimes des Khmers rouges," *Le Parisien*, Seine-et-Marne, accessed 22 April, 2025, https://www.leparisien.fr/seine-et-marne-77/loubli-est-une-seconde-mort-lognes-accueille-un-monument-dedie-a-la-memoire-des-victimes-des-khmers-rouges-18-04-2025-3GCANNMGVBGUPLZSFWMV7FXLG U.php.

preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[33]

For these communities, then, remembrance can be seen as both a burden and a duty to connect their lives with the history that preceded them yet still remains impactful to their present life. Cambodian communities are actively reclaiming political space through grassroots remembrance initiatives, thereby challenging the dominant control that formal institutions hold over transitional justice. Despite being conceptualised in the context of the Holocaust, Hirsch's concept of postmemory offers us a useful framework for understanding how the Cambodian genocide is transmitted across generations within Cambodian-rooted communities abroad and how it could be transformed into a movement that would allow them to claim and expand political space.[34] The events happened in the past, but their effects are still present for those who succeeded the events. Despite its importance, this intergenerational dimension has often been neglected by the government and by the ECCC during the tribunal's early years.[35] It was only later on that the court introduced a form of "Testimonial Therapy" which focuses on the expression of traumas by incorporating a "Buddhist offering ceremony."[36] Survivors received blessings from Buddhist monks through Bangsokol ceremonies.[37] Thus, "exposure to traumatic material through the narrative creation process was followed by transformation and release through an embodied form of 'culture-as-treatment'."[38] For many survivors and

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[33] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019.
[34] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", 104.
[35] Sarah J. Parry et Ewan Wilkinson, "Mental Health Services in Cambodia: An Overview," *BJPsych International* 17, no. 2 (2020) : 29–31, https://doi.org/10.1192/bji.2019.24.
[36] Elena Lesley, "Therapeutic Improvisation in Cambodia: Moderated Exposure, the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes, and the Quest to Weave the 'World's Longest Krama,'" *Memory Studies* 16, no. 3 (2023): 593, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980231162334.
[37] Ceremony held after the passing of an individual. A white cloth is placed over the body of the dead and then removed by a monk to represent the passing of the spirit.
[38] Lesley, "Therapeutic Improvisation in Cambodia," 594.

their descendants, the memory of the Cambodian genocide is neither unified nor state driven. Instead, it emerges as an embodied and intergenerational process that manifests through silence, gestures, and emotions that persist in plurality and in everyday life. More attention to this dimension would challenge dominant, state-centred narratives of transitional justice and instead foreground the lived and fragmented ways in which survivors are dealing with their past.

Fragments #KH50

Prior to the Khmer Rouge period, Cambodian social identity was strongly structured around kinship, with its inhabitants' identity trickling down from that relationship.[39] The genocide heavily disrupted these social foundations, leaving the diverse Cambodian identity intertwined with the genocide. This dynamic becomes apparent as co-author of this article, David Sary, personally recounts asking his parents about that period; even after fifty years, they continue to express enduring anger toward the regime. For them, the regime persists as a lingering presence in their memory: "il faut vivre avec, mais on n'oublie pas, et je vois toujours les mêmes images," as his mother explained.[40] This four-year period has become a key reference in time through which they interpret both past and present. It continues to shape their perception of their home country, which remains associated with trauma and recurring memories of violence. Simultaneously, it has also been influencing their "new life" where they have migrated and built a family. In such instances, oral history plays a relevant role in better grasping first-hand experience in research.[41] Since the year 2025 marked the 50th anniversary of the fall of Phnom Penh, it was an occasion to commemorate the genocide. One of the commemorations took place in France, in Lognes, with the creation of a monument. The

[39] Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 107, https://hdl-handle-net.leidenuniv.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb33862.0001.001.

[40] Translation: We must live with it, but we cannot forget, and I still see the same images.

[41] Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*,. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 103–136.

project called "FRAGMENTS #KH50" was initiated by descendants of survivors who fled to France, with the aim of doing a devoir de mémoire, considering that because of exile and war, those individuals only possess a few fragments of history and of their family's past.[42]

Thus, the objective of this organisation was to gather fragments from Cambodians who were forced into exile, and to then combine them to reconstitute a collective memory. This oral history is not solely about remembering, but also about claiming their agency and legitimacy. Their stories are not being told through court documents or state museums, but rather through their own perspective. "For many in the diaspora, rebuilding lives and community means weaving meaning and continuity from fragments and disorder, and transnationally re-stitching relational fabrics that have been frayed by time, distance, and politics."[43] Despite this bottom-up project taking place in France, the essence of this project challenges the institutional monopoly of the Cambodian government on transitional justice and remembrance by reclaiming the agency of the victims, thereby claiming and expanding political space. The monument erected for the project is only written in Khmer, meaning that it is directed to survivors and their descendants. Therefore, remembrance creates this sense of belonging and continuity despite the forced displacement. To remember and, perhaps more importantly, to not forget becomes a duty for future generations, an important contrast with the official narratives that will favour memories that are politically beneficial for the party. National stability is still crucial for ordinary Cambodians, but in the making of those memories, the sieve of the politics has been reinterpreted. Yet, while these Cambodian-rooted spaces encourage remembrance and resilience, they also expose profound tensions. Between silence and speech, belonging and estrangement, displaced and official versions of history, these tensions form the core of the transnational struggle over remembrance.

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[42] Fragmentis Vitae Asia, "Fragments #KH50," accessed 16 November, 2025, https://www.fragmentis-vitae.org/.

[43] Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 1st ed., vol. 14 (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 6, https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479801978.

Rithy Panh and Vann Nath

"Justice is not a spectacle," claimed the filmmaker Rithy Panh, who came to France as a refugee.[44] Yet, as seen earlier, places such as Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek have been depoliticised to the point of commodifying death. For many French Cambodians, for example, such forms of institutional memorialisation feel deeply inadequate.[45] The spectacle of the suffering in museums curated for tourists, the selective narratives of the ECCC, and the Cambodian government's shying away from their responsibilities seem to be disconnected from the lived experiences of survivors, local and abroad. Albeit difficult, it still seems possible to at least promote healing for those who carry their traumas. Bottom-up projects and practices matter, as they allow the use of various media and practices, reflecting the specific needs of various communities, which may then open up political spaces for survivors. Rithy Panh and his filmography are examples of such bottom-up projects. His work constitutes a quest toward creating spaces through narratives and experiences that have been erased in the genocide, often using archival material and evidence often overlooked in institutional transitional justice, and working together with survivors.[46]

French Cambodian communities often perceive this official narrative as incomplete and distorted to serve political agendas rather than collective healing.[47] Their expectations of justice extend beyond the legal framework of the ECCC; a deeper acknowledgement is required for the traumatised. This gap has generated a distance between the French Cambodian communities and the Cambodian state. Indeed, while the CPP promotes a narrative centred on national unity and closure, many survivors abroad struggle to forgive or move on.[48] The institutional remembrance that has been offered by this hybrid tribunal does not

[44] Soko Phay-Vakalis, "Le génocide cambodgien: Déni et justice," *Études* 408, no. 3 (2008): 300, https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.083.0297.
[45] Phay-Vakalis, "Le génocide cambodgien," 297–307.
[46]Katarzyna Grabska, "Visual Storytelling about Genocide, Displacement, and Exile: Encounters with Rithy Panh," *Conflict and Society* 8, no. 1 (2022): 193, https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2022.080112.
[47] Hinton, *The Justice Facade*, 241–252.
[48] Phay-Vakalis, "Le génocide cambodgien," 297–307.

necessarily align with personal remembrance, which in turn becomes the responsibility of families and, more generally, communities. This divergence produces competing claims where the state asserts its authority to define national remembrance, while the individuals rooted in Cambodian communities assert their right to interpret the past from a point of view of exile, loss, and trauma. There seems to be a discrepancy between this specific narrative and the international ones. Western humanitarian frameworks tend to universalise genocidal trauma, thus sidelining cultural particularities.[49] Indeed, while such terms can provide recognition, they also risk depersonalising lived experiences and imposing a specific vocabulary on what many Cambodians understand through Buddhist moral frameworks. Local critics, therefore, highlight the limitations of international justice, which often prioritises documentation and archives over spiritual reconciliation, rituals, and everyday forms of remembrance.[50]

Throughout S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine, Rithy Panh brings together Vann Nath and Chum Mey, survivors of the S-21 prison, with the guards who subjugated them to torture.[51] The victims then become interrogators as they are given a platform to directly question the perpetrators to try to understand how their behaviour came to be. Rithy Panh allows for Vann Nath and Chum Mey to show their suffering and the torture they have been through with the reenactment of guards on duty. Vann Nath survived the S-21 prison by being a painter, as he was forced to paint for propaganda purposes. Following the end of the regime, his painting abilities were used to document and convey his experience inside the prison and were presented during his testimony at the ECCC. He gave the context of each painting that was presented, which were

[49] Sonya Andermahr, ed., *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism* (Reprint; Basel: MDPI Books, 2016),1–5. https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03842-196-2.
[50] Hinton, *The Justice Façade*, 241–252.
[51] *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, directed by Rithy Panh. (2003; INA), Streaming video.

all representations of torture.[52] By showing the atrocities committed on a daily basis by the guards, this blurs the Manichean narrative of the Cambodian government.

The Missing Pictures also has links to transitional justice.[53] Through a blend of archival footage and Rithy Panh's lived experiences, illustrated with clay figures, the director constructed a semi-fictional story to demonstrate the lived realities of survivors. This perspective challenges the view that only the high cadres were perpetrators; instead, it offers us a more nuanced narrative that highlights the implication of low-level Khmer Rouge in the everyday regime. Both of these movies demonstrate the everyday workings of the regime through the perspective of ordinary citizens, highlighting the atrocities rather than pointing responsibilities, a contrast from the Cambodian government, which is trying to pin the responsibility of the genocide on a few officials. By being a filmmaker based in France who operates independently from the Western industry, he is able to portray narratives unrestricted by the Cambodian government and Western narratives, thus offering us a different perspective, built bottom-up, thereby challenging institutional monopoly on transitional justice and remembrance.

Everyday Practices: Sinn Sasamouth and Ros Serey Sothea, and GoGoCambodia

Regarding ordinary everyday practices, musicians/music from Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea, who were killed during the genocide, are still being listened to by older and newer generations in Cambodia or abroad. Their music was almost lost during the Khmer Rouge regime, but a few individuals made sure to keep their creations alive. The reminiscence Cambodians might experience from listening to their music is difficult to measure, but it does create a counter space for what has been engulfed, as these two artists

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[52] Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), "Vann Nath," accessed 10 April, 2026, https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/directory/witness-profile/vann-nath.

[53] *The Missing Pictures*, directed by Rithy Panh. (2013; Les Acacias), Streaming video.

represent so much of the culture they have lost.[54] Those small everyday practices are necessary to deal with mental health issues that are lingering and also to instate the suffering into the politics. History exists within relations of power, and certain voices are systematically marginalised not by accident but by the structure. The bottom-up remembrance disrupts these silences by refusing the closure proposed by both the Cambodian government and the narrative of the international community. However, it is essential to acknowledge the power dynamics that are prevalent within this resistance itself. Yes, there is a grassroots resistance, but this resistance is also subjugated to specific structures and powers.

A relevant parallel could be made with the Jeju model of transitional justice in South Korea, which integrated elements of mutual forgiveness, government-civilian cooperation, and perpetrator-victim reconciliation. Despite all the bottom-up initiatives, this model of transitional justice is still incomplete as it overlooks state accountability.[55] In a recent paper, co-author Daniëlle Baan argues that an additional element should be included in the Jeju model: citizen-to-citizen cooperation. This would allow for the model to rely on "the local community, especially activists supported by local governance, which are the driving force behind transitional justice."[56] Thus, local practices, mainly bottom-up, could embody the action of creating the political space for survivors. Here, a claim of the agency over the narratives imposed by the state and international actors can be observed from the bottom up. A similar approach by Cambodian communities can then be envisioned. To remember is insufficient for survivors; there needs to be an active movement to transform this remembrance into an object that would reclaim their dignity and restore a sense of belonging. Discussions of reconciliation must include a bottom-up approach that centres

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[54] Chris G. Parkhurst, dir., *Elvis of Cambodia: The Legacy of Sinn Sisamouth* (USA/Cambodia: Barang Films, 2023), Streaming video. https://elvisofcambodia.vhx.tv/packages/elvis-of-cambodia-the-legacy-of-sinn-sisamouth/videos/eoc-vimeo-20240314.

[55] Daniëlle Baan, "The Jeju Model of Transitional Justice: A Replicable Model or Adaptable Framework for Localization?," *The New Scholar* 4 (2025): 1, https://www.thenewscholar.nl/index.php/tns/article/view/jeju.

[56] Baan, "The Jeju Model," 15.

those who continue to suffer today. Initiatives such as the world's longest krama made by GoGoCambodia in Phnom Penh transform everyday cultural practices into meaningful acts through which people can reclaim identities shaped and disrupted by history.[57] The krama, a multi-versatile cloth, becomes then a symbol of unity and resilience that allows Cambodians to turn away from certain imagery, specifically those "that triggered memories of mass starvation", and instead those that focus on the aesthetic and Khmer tradition.[58] This krama turns into a metaphor for reappropriating what has been severed by the violence: a cultural and communal link between individuals that now needs to be reconciled. Claiming and expanding political space, by challenging the institutional monopoly on remembrance and transitional justice, then makes it possible for Cambodian communities to actively narrate and practice transitional justice. Such multiplex narratives and practices may reflect the complexities of their different experiences, survivorhood, and backgrounds. Such consideration is primordial as government accountability remains difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

It has now been more than fifty years since the Khmer Rouge took over; fifty years of Cambodians enduring their past. While a cacophony of the genocide has been ringing through their ruined memories, can survivors claim the political space that is mainly dominated by the Cambodian government and international institutions?

This article has examined how top-down institutional transitional justice by the Cambodian government and the ECCC limits the boundaries, actors, and ideas in transitional justice. Subsequently, this article has explored the projects, and FRAGMENTS#KH50 and the work by Rithy Panh and Vann Nath to exemplify how survivors interact with institutional justice frameworks and challenge the institutional monopoly on the use of transitional justice through bottom-up projects. These examples

[57] Living Cambodia Team, "Weaving the BIG Krama," *Living Cambodia Blog*, accessed 20 April, 2025, https://www.livingcambodia.asia/2018/weaving-the-big-krama/

[58] Lesley, "Therapeutic Improvisation in Cambodia," 607.

demonstrate how the Cambodian community challenges the institutional monopoly on the use of transitional justice to claim political space.

What seemed to be effective for claiming and expanding political space has been highlighted by Lesley: a bottom-up approach that focuses on grassroots initiatives. The project FRAGMENT#KH50, led by survivors and second-generation Cambodians, was directly aimed towards the Cambodian community in France. It created a physical space for commemoration without influence from the Cambodian government. The cultural productions of Rithy Panh and Vann Nath highlighted lived experiences that would dismiss the Manichean conception of the Cambodian government regarding responsibility. And lastly, ordinary everyday practices such as listening to Cambodian music can allow survivors and their descendants to better grasp a culture that almost disappeared in the genocide. Or more specifically, in the case of GoGoCambodia, the act of weaving was turned into a project to reclaim identities disrupted by the genocide. The political space that seems constrained by international institutions and the Cambodian government can be claimed and expanded by bottom-up initiatives, as seen above, which in turn would allow for a better recognition of survivors' experiences in that space.

Albeit difficult, considering the political landscape of Cambodia with the presence of ex-Khmer Rouge in the government and society, the claiming of the political space by survivors and their descendants remains a possibility that needs to be envisioned. This motion is a continuous project that allows for perpetual (re)adjustment. The French Cambodian communities challenge this monopoly by creating political space through their own practices of remembrance, reorienting transitional justice towards the very communities that the government claims to serve.

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Simona Bizunovičiūtė is a resMA student in Arts, Literature and Media at Leiden University, with a background in French Philology. Her work begins from the overlooked: minor gestures, habitual routes, and fleeting encounters that structure everyday life. Moving between literature and visual culture, she combines textual analysis with practice-based creative methodologies, focusing on how urban space is perceived, recorded, and narrated. Simona's MA thesis traces narratives of stalking, following, and pursuit, drawing on Blanchot, Derrida, and Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine the relation between tracing, deferral, and textual production. Approaching research as a form of following — of ideas, images, and signs — she explores how urban imaginaries are produced and distributed, asking how visibility is organised. Her work attends in particular to the thresholds where presence slips into absence, and where questions of precarity, exclusion, and knowledge emerge from everyday life.

Zuzia Dzierzędzka is an MA Book and Digital Media student. In her article she addresses space through its ability to be constructed with sound. Sound-created environments meet at a cross-section of her passion for music making and her academic interest in literary ecologies within the field of environmental humanities. Equipped with that, she tackles soundscapes and their properties within Orwell's 1984. Being able to conduct research from a new perspective about a book equally over-analysed and relevant till today is something that really excites her in her research. Her creative and academic work inform one another as she has presented her poetry at the conference at London Art Based Research Centre, and her work is currently exhibited in the Queer Underground exhibition in Amsterdam.

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Stephanie Lones is a second year resMA Arts, Literature and Media student. Coming from her experiences as a disabled student, she is particularly interested in all things disability studies with her preference being medieval disability studies. For LEAP, she used her own embodied knowledge to uncover the medieval mystic Margery Kempe's disabilities. As part of LEAP, Stephanie was a member of the PR-team in which she wrote social media posts and organised and photographed the symposium. When she is not cutting down the number of words for her article (she has a habit of going over the limit), Stephanie can usually be found drinking a cup of tea and reading a book or two. Her other academic interests include postcolonial studies and dolls. Stemming from her hobby of collecting dolls, Stephanie is part of a research group of scholars working on American Girl dolls and their material culture.

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David Sary is an MA student in International Relations: Culture and Politics at Leiden University. He holds a Bachelor in Humanities from the Paris Nanterre University and first came to the Netherlands as an exchange student in Amsterdam, where he became enamoured of several aspects of the Netherlands. With his paper, he is trying to reconnect with his Cambodian roots and better understand his family. In his free time, he enjoys cooking for others, playing Lacrosse, and reading.

Matthijs Verzijden is currently writing his thesis for the resMA Asian Studies on Hakka mountain songs in Taiwan. His contribution to LEAP explores how space for Hakka culture and identity is crafted and contested in- and outside Taiwan through singing and listening to these songs. Beyond, he takes interest in Taiwanese and Chinese languages and cultural expressions, the question of how making and listening to music connects people, and the interplay of language, culture, and identity. One day per week, he works in secondary newcomer education in Rotterdam, teaching Dutch to children from China and other Mandarin-speaking countries. In the time that remains, he likes to play drums and percussion, cycle and walk shorter and longer distances, and work in a community veggie garden.

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