



INTERSECTIONALITY

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Redaktionsledelsens forord

I sommeren 2024 afholdt Copenhagen Business School i samarbejde med Foreningen for Kønsforskning i Danmark den nationale konference for kønsforskning, som afholdes hvert andet år og organiseres på skift af danske kønsforskningssmiljøer. Temaet i 2024 var interseksionalitet og dette temanummer udspringer af konferencen og de mange papers, som undersøgte og diskutererede begrebet eller analyserede konkrete cases i et interseksionelt perspektiv.

Interseksionalitet er et centralt begreb i kønsforskningen. Nordisk feministisk teori har siden 1970'erne arbejdet på tværs af kategorier og stillet spørgsmål til forholdet mellem for eksempel køn og klasse, eller køn og seksualitet. Men interseksionalitet som begreb og teoridannelse udspringer af sort feministisk teori og aktivisme i USA i 1980'erne og fokuserer på, hvordan kategorier af diskrimination og marginalisering virker sammen – med en særlig opmærksomhed på raciale kategorier og racisme.

Allerede i 2006 udgav *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* sit første temanummer om interseksionalitet – et nummer, der ligesom dette udsprang af en konference. Den fandt sted året før på Københavns Universitet under titlen *Interseksionalitet. Køn, race, klasse. Både/og eller enten/eller*, hvor Kimberlé Crenshaw var keynote. Crenshaw var som bekendt den første til at begrebsliggøre interseksionalitet i sine nu klassiske – og dengang banebrydende – artikler fra henholdsvis 1989 og 1991, og hendes arbejde blev et afgørende referencepunkt for både konferencen og temanummeret.

Temaredaktørerne fra 2006, Connie Carøe Christiansen, Stine Thidemann Faber og Marlene Spanger, indledte temanummeret med at citere Dorthe Staunæs og Dorte-Marie Søndergaard, der i samme temanummer skrev, at ”interseksionalitet er i vælten”. Temaredaktørerne fortsatte:

... begrebet er genstand for stadig mere omfattende akademiske og politiske debatter og positioneringer. Der er nemlig tale om ét af de begreber, som engagerer og bringer positioner

frem i lyset. Tyngdepunktet i diskussionerne er ofte for eller imod; har et begreb som interseksionalitet overhovedet værdi i forhold til at forstå og belyse hvordan forskellige strukturelle dimensioner former dominans- og ulighedsrelationer? (Christiansen, Faber og Spanger, 2006: 3)

Siden da har interseksionalitet fået en stadig stærkere betydning i kønsforskningen, og der er næppe mange, som i dag ikke anerkender begrebets relevans for analyser af køn og andre forskelssættende kategorier. Som temaredaktørerne for det aktuelle nummer viser i deres indledning, er der gennem de sidste tyve år blevet arbejdet omfattende og mangfoldigt med interseksionalitet i *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* – ja, endda i endnu et temanummer i 2010 med titlen *Intersectionalities at work: Concepts and Cases* redigeret af Camilla Elg, Hilda Rømer Christensen og Birte Siim.

Som temanummeret anno 2025 viser, er interseksionalitet fortsat ”i vælten” – men på nye måder. Diskussionerne handler ikke længere om, hvorvidt begrebet er relevant eller ej, men snarere om hvordan og med hvilke effekter interseksionelle analyser kan og bør udføres i feministisk vidensproduktion.

Vi vil gerne takke temaredaktionen for deres store arbejde med at tænke, samle og redigere dette flotte temanummer.

I dette nummer bringer vi også en diskussion foranlediget af antologien *Performative vendinger. Introduktion til nyere feministisk teori* (redigeret af Dorthe Staunæs, Katja Brøgger og Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen, 2024), som bl.a. undertegnede redaktører hver for sig har bidraget til. Det er en diskussion om oversættelsespolitikker og om det vedvarende og principielt åbne fortolkningsarbejde det er, at indarbejde teoridannelser i en lokal sprogradition. Det er også en diskussion om forholdet mellem teoretiske inklusioner og materielle udelukkelser, herunder hvem der (ikke) bliver husket og anerkendt i redaktionelle og institutionelle strukturer. Vi håber derfor at debatten vil stå som en invitation til mere og bedre samarbejde mellem de mange og åbenlyst

stærke kapaciteter, der findes inden for den danske intersektionelle kønsforskning.

Dette nummer udspringer som indledningsvis skrevet af den danske kønsforskningskonference i 2024, og vi glæder os allerede til den næste, som vil blive afholdt af kønsforskningsmiljøet på Syddansk Universitet den 2.-3. juni 2026 under temaet Cultures, Bodies and Technologies.¹

God læselyst.

På redaktionens vegne,

Michael Nebeling Petersen, Mons Bissenbakker og
Camilla Bruun Eriksen.

NOTES

[1] Læs mere på hjemmesiden: <https://event.sdu.dk/cultures>

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Intersectionality: Resistance, Care, and Decolonial Futures in Crisis Times

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INTRODUCTION BY THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

INTRODUCTION

We begin by acknowledging that we write from relatively privileged positions as academics based in Danish academia. Our positionalities inevitably shape how we understand and engage with the development of intersectionality, as well as the limits of knowledge production under such circumstances. The intersectional challenges we encounter here are, of course, distinct from those faced elsewhere in the world. Yet, while the classical divides between the Global North and the Global South or West and the rest of the world offer some explanatory power, they are far too simplistic and we need to have discussions that cut across these, and other divisions. An intersectional lens helps us complicate and enrich this picture. The contributions of this special issue critically investigate intersectionality from a wide variety of global perspectives.

The starting point for this special issue was, indeed, to make an effort to complicate classical divides and challenge privileged positionalities by inviting intersectionality into the discussion, not just as a theoretical lens, but also as lived experiences. The 2024 Danish Gender Conference, which historically has many ties to this journal, became our way of doing so. For the first time ever, the main language of the conference was not Danish, but English, and instead of spending our budget on keynotes and dinners, we made a commitment to intersectional representation and set aside a large proportion of the budget to scholarships, particularly for individuals who did not have the funding to support conference participation, e.g. because of precarious contracts or lack of research support at their institutions. The 2024 Danish Gender Conference, in this way, provided an important space for sharing diverse intersectional issues and struggles from across the globe. This created room for perspectives ranging from Indigenous Sami voices to those from the African continent, as well as reflections on Eastern Europe and racialization in Danish contexts. The conference was as such an important starting point for the call for papers that led to this special issue. Furthermore, the conference

strongly encouraged formats other than research papers. This opened up the conference for participation of practitioners, artists and poets and became a way of opening academia up for how intersectionality is lived and operationalized within and beyond academia. Several of the contributions in the issue began their journey there, which is reflected in both the composition of the articles and the multiplicity of intersectional perspectives expressed throughout—most explicitly the essay by Mira C. Skadegaard, which is a version of her keynote at the conference.

This special issue on intersectionality is obviously not the only one of its kind. We stand on the shoulders of years of important intersectional research, including prior special issues (e.g. Elg, Christensen & Siim 2010; Guschke, Khawaja & Myong 2023; Hvenegård-Lassen & Staunæs 2020; Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs & Lund 2020; Mørck & Staunæs 2003; Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher & Nkomo 2016; Villeséche, Muhr & Śliwa 2018), as well as many years' thorough engagement with intersectionality in this journal (Borchorst & Tiegen 2010; Einarsdóttir & Thorvaldsdóttir 2007; Emerek 2017; Fiig 2010; Jensen & Elg 2010; Jensen, Larsen & Christensen 2018; Lykke 2009; Méndez 2007; Phoenix 2006; Staunæs & Søndergaard 2006). Each of these important pieces of work contribute with unique perspectives on intersectionality, as they are all formed by the political struggles and activist agendas of their time and context. Our special issue is no different. It is formed by the intersectional research presentations, debates, and interactions at the Danish Gender Conference and by the space for hope it opened up in a time where intersectional research feels more under pressure than it has in a long time, and where underrepresented, marginalized and minorized identities are threatened in a way we have long not seen. Thus, this space for intersectional research and intersectional voices seems all the more important at this point in time.

CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE AND PERPETUAL CRISIS

This special issue appears in times of multiple crises

and upheavals. The current moment is characterized by “polycrisis” (Morin & Kern 1999; Tooze 2021) where crises are entangled with each other and produce new crises where they meet. To mention but a few, we are witnessing a vitalization of far-right positions and sentiments, threats to academic freedom in the shape of repeated attacks on gender studies and critical race studies, as well as increased islamophobia and expanding queer- and transphobia (Hsu 2025; Ng et al. 2015; Prasad & Śliwa 2024; Vertelyte et al. 2024). More broadly, the COVID-19 crisis, inflation crisis, crises of care, environmental and climate crises, warfare on different continents and the horrors of the ongoing genocides in (but not limited to) Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar, which all in unequal and unjust ways influence the worlds we live, work and write within (Ashcraft 2022; Duffy, Armenia & Price-Glynn, 2023; Just 2024; Klitgård 2024). Of course, the atrocity of a genocide cannot be compared or pluralized without somehow being relativized, thus mentioning a list or using the *etc.* cannot but feel like a betrayal of the singularity of the individual genocide. At the same time, the polycrisis concept allows us to see how crises and conflict overlap and feed into each other, which means that genocides – and the power structures that make them possible – are themselves also connected (see also Srinivas et al. 2025). It is therefore with great sorrow and heavy hearts that we write these words, particularly as we feel the weight of warfare and the genocide in Gaza, but also acknowledge that this is part of a larger and globally organized violence rooted in extractivism and colonialism. Hence, we urge ourselves and our readership to pause before moving on to take a moment and attend to that sense of weight of injustice.

While we know this special issue cannot make a tangible difference to the ongoing war crimes, we do believe that the interdisciplinary research field of intersectionality studies can help us reflect upon the intersecting power axes participating in this, and allows us to approach different aspects of the current polycrisis, by offering sophisticated theory and praxis to engage with related issues of inequality in complex ways. It raises questions about what

it means to think intersectionally about the various aspects of polycrisis: how to produce knowledge that ties them together, and how to do it in a way so that gender, race, sexuality, class, disability, etc. appear as co-articulated (Creary 2025; Klitgård, Liu & Horn 2022; Muhr & Ashcraft 2025; Ozturk 2021). The current moment calls for thinking about these forms of oppression together, across different cases, geographies and methodologies, and our special issue is but one attempt to do so.

Intersectionality as an analytical perspective allows us to draw out these connections and articulate connective elements that are otherwise thought of as distinct in order to ask new questions. How may the current rise in for example transphobia and islamophobia be seen as attempts to de-intersectionalize the idea of ‘woman’ or ‘queer’ as always cis and always white (see Puar 2007)? How may environmental and climate politics be leveraged for the eco-fascist protection only of white humans living in the global North (Darwish 2021; Mehrabi et al. 2024)? What even is this ‘human’, and how is it upheld through different vectors of oppression as well as various technological, affective and economic registers (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 1991; Wynter 2003)? How is dehumanization linked to the on-going global crisis of care that expresses interlocking postcolonial, gendered and classed oppressions (Fraser 2016)? Intersectionality provides a language that allows us to understand how these different cases and vectors of oppression relate and a critical perspective on the contingent inclusion of some at the expense of others.

The need to think intersectionally about contemporary topics is increasingly becoming acknowledged. Few concepts central to gender studies have travelled as far as the concept of intersectionality, and in the process it sees new applications and acquires different political significance (Lewis 2013; Nash 2014). Intersectionality as a framework is intuitive because it describes the diversity of perspectives and experiences within a given category and outlines an ever more defined division. In some versions, however, such adaptations of the intersectionality framework

risks depoliticizing the term by creating ever-smaller grits of categories that subjects may place themselves into rather than a more fundamental critique of the violence of these categories in the first place (Plotnikof et al. 2022). For example, various attempts at ‘intersectionalizing’ Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) have been criticized for caring more about minority representation and showcasing the on paper most oppressed than actually targeting structures or everyday acts of racism and sexism at the workplace (Luthra & Muhr 2024). Such a use of intersectionality to count and represent still more detailed identity categories may only reify and commodify identities instead of using them to undo the power structures that reproduce these differences (Creary 2025; Dennissen, Benschop & van den Brink 2020; van Douwen, Benschop & van den Brink 2025).

It is also worth paying attention to how the popularization of intersectionality can reshape the conditions for carrying out research in gender studies. The centrality of intersectionality to gender studies ties the concept to the discipline in a way that has long been criticized for disconnecting it from its origins in Black feminist struggle and theorizing. The “whitening of intersectionality” (Bilge 2014) must be understood in the context of the term’s mainstreaming and its institutionalization inside the neoliberal university and gender studies in particular (de los Reyes 2016; King 2015; Nash 2014). This uprooting and appropriation of intersectionality by the wider gender studies discipline raises a number of complex questions in a context of backlash against gender studies. When are far-right critiques of intersectionality actually an attempt at delegitimizing the wider gender studies discipline, and when are they, in particular, an attempt at delegitimizing studies of race and racism? How to defend intersectionality without abstracting it away from race or historical colonial power relations? And how to respond to critiques while not silencing important challenges to intersectionality from within Black and decolonial theorizing?

CRITIQUE AND DECONSTRUCTION OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Theoretical metaphors become powerful spaces that can imprison or liberate our thinking and imaginations. Intersectionality is one of these. The metaphor of the intersection, of a crossing, when applied to the examination of social reality and existence reveals something that otherwise is difficult to see. What intersectionality could reveal was the failure of justice and the lie of the taken for granted objectivity and neutrality of the legal system. The key intersection for such revelation was race/blackness and gender/woman identities. Kimberlè Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality as the interlocking of these two identity categories and their related forms of oppression. Crenshaw powerfully argued how discrimination against black women could not be equated to that of white women’s or to black people’s discrimination, thereby disclosing a major blindness in the legal system. Feminist intersectionality grew up from the tradition of Black feminist thought and activism which, while not using the specific term ‘intersectionality’, had in the late 19th and 20th century stressed the interdependency of race and gender (Allen 2022). Besides Crenshaw, early thinkers and precursors of intersectionality include Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davids, among others. The complex evolution of the term has been examined by Collins (2011, 2019) and Nash (2019) among others, and it is critically addressed by the authors of this special issue. Since the turn of the century, studies on the idea and application of intersectionality grew exponentially. The many different special issues mentioned earlier testify to the importance of the concept in gender and DEI studies.

As it often happens with concepts related to social justice and liberation (Butler 2025), over time the idea of intersectionality became co-opted and diluted in such a way that it risked losing its edge and revolutionary power. On the one hand, this co-optation happens through capitalism and the market (think of consultancy slogans) and by popular culture (think social media posts). As mentioned previously, when

used as an analytical tool, if taken out of the social justice context of its origins, the metaphor of intersection allowed for the criss-crossing of all imaginable identity categories independent of their connection to historical forms of discrimination. Applied in such a way, intersectionality can fuel an awkward combinatory game which resembles an all-you-can-eat buffet: one can keep on adding combinations of identity categories thereby achieving complexity but also risking making the concept both banal and useless. Intersectionality symptomatically manifested another version of what has come to be known as the *etc*-problem in feminist theorizing (Butler 1991). Furthermore, as presented in the philosophical article of *Katrine Høghøj* in this volume, what in its origins was created to address a specific contextual problem was over time turned into a “general theory of social identity”. This, she powerfully argues, is a key contradiction which points to a dual subject at the core of intersectionality: the subject of ‘lived experience’ and “a subject that is an effect of the intersection of various axes of oppression, that is a subject that is constituted through abstractions.”

We can envision such complex dynamics as a series of deconstructions, like the tearing apart of a signifier by an ever-expanding landscape of signifieds. While being aware of the epistemologies, politics and economics behind such dynamics, with this special issue, we propose *moving across and with* deconstruction and committing to keep on thinking *with* the concept. The danger in fearing the multiplicity of sense-making that a concept like intersectionality can foster is a return to foundationalism grounded in a longing for certainty, a nostalgic re-constructing of fixed meaning or identity. Instead, not abandoning social justice concepts such as queerness, feminism, safe spaces, me too, or intersectionality is a form of reaching towards justice through relational deconstruction. It is the acknowledgement that a concept (or a subject) as language and as sign can never be fixed and enclosed. Such recognition honours the long fight that characterizes the history of feminist and critical theorizing as well as discloses the awareness of co-optation and manipulation often suffered

by social justice movements.

Once multiple tearing apart and deconstructions have happened, the applications of the concept of intersectionality has lost its innocence. There is another way of saying this, the concept has been ‘queered’. We do not believe anymore that this or that concept is the magic key to healing or that once we take those epistemic or methodological lenses—the ones of intersectionality—we will immediately get to truth or to justice. Such is the fantasy that theories, including those of social justice, might attempt through their journey into our collective imagination. While this might be seen as a justice-fantasy, we do not believe either that the panacea is abandoning our social justice and feminist concepts in an ever search for the purity of the concept itself (a return to origins) or for the ‘innocence’ that often surrounds new concepts (a form of theoretical fast-fashion). Instead in this post-fantasy stage we hope to reach a maturity of the use of the concept, a form of theoretical adulthood that embraces imperfection, contradiction, paradox and multiplicity, where we see as much the limitations as we see the power.

We envision this type of engagement with intersectionality as a push towards extensions and layers of different truths and forms of justice, a call to radical thinking and activism, an invitation to renew our commitment to justice and equality. For forms of relational deconstruction towards justice, we take inspiration in the poetic (Lorde 2017) and in the arts (Butler & Athanasiou 2013). The essay by *Sif Lindblad* in this volume presents an inspirational example of the potential reparative power of art by examining the intersection between artistic practice and psychic diversity. While the article by *Devanik Saha*, also in this volume, shows the potential of a mature understanding of intersectionality. In his insightful study of Maternal Health Policymaking in India intersectionality helps reveal the double dimension of structural discrimination of identities and the experience of the particular and contextual.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS CRITICAL FEMINIST RESISTANCE, SOLIDARITY AND CARE

In many ways, then, intersectionality as a concept and as a field of study have come far since the seminal works of scholars such as Crenshaw (1990), Lorde (2017), and hooks (1984). Their ideas have spread across interdisciplinary research areas and, through that, expanded the scope of intersectionality theory and praxis with emerging conceptualizations, explorative methodologies, and a multiplicity of empirical foci and practices (for overviews see, e.g., Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs & Lund 2020; Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher & Nkomo 2016; Villesèche, Muhr & Śliwa 2018).

This multi-faceted maturing of the field, with all the diversity that brings in theory and praxis, is also evident in this special issue. For instance, the contribution of *Waithira Dhormal* explores how intersecting differences such as social class, education, and civil status amongst pastoralist women affect their different climate adaptation in Kajiado County, Kenya. On a very different note, another contribution is written and performed by *Richard Longman* and *Florence Villesèche*, who explore intersectionality in the classical music canon in Western Europe. These authors develop multimodal methods to think and understand intersectionality with the senses and acoustics of music. Furthermore, in a third example from this special issue, *Liesanth Yde Nirmalarajan* develops vignettes to make visible the invisible walls of digital welfare services experienced by different marginalized people who all depend on social care work in Denmark. While all of these contributions differ in theorization, methodology, and empirical focus, they materialize the width and breadth of current intersectionality studies, without losing sight of the fundamental concerns.

As such developments advance and expand *what* and *how* we perform intersectionality in our work in a myriad of ways, they are all somehow—some more explicitly, others more implicitly—underpinned by

feminist critique as a form of resistance that challenges the complex functioning of unevenly distributed powers and privileges and their performative effects on intersecting differences and inequalities. This continued focus and profound push to expand our concern with overlapping axes of oppression followed by exacerbated injustice, to include multiple marginalized identities, bodies, experiences, work and life conditions, is of course, sadly, also a testament to the persistence and backlash of these overlapping power systems and their troubles. But, in effect, it is also a testament to the tireless acts of resistance that current intersectionality scholarship embodies, while insisting on keeping with solidarity and care for differences, as hooks (1984, p. 65) called us to, so many years ago:

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.

As intersectionality studies continue to refuse to let various oppressed groups be pitted against one another but instead unravel how intersecting differences materialize different kinds of inequalities, power imbalances, and lacking privileges—they also show that this kind of feminist solidarity and care not only extend to the content of our theories and analyses. In line with the early intersectionality thinkers, and often with reference to Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), many intersectionality scholars have gone far to create knowledge and craft methods with marginalized people as equal “...*makers of theory and as leaders of action.*” (hooks, 1984, p. 161).

In this volume, the concern with solidarity and care in intersectionality is manifesting as a praxis, for example, in *Sayaka Osanami Törngren* and *Viveka*

Ichikawa's piece. In developing the concept of 'middle space' they not only seek to understand but also try to perform ways of embodying intersectionality beyond theory, and work (self-)critically and (self-)reflexively with changing positions of (lacking) power and (lacking) privileges in the workplace, in this case in Swedish academia. Likewise, another example in this special issue approaches the praxis of intersectionality, namely in the roundtable conversation with *Bontu Guschke, Molly Occhino, Mie Plotnikof, Mira C. Skadegård, and Sheena Vachhani*. This contribution also concerns intersectionality in the context of anti-discriminatory efforts in higher education in Denmark and the UK. Here, the scholars carefully address both the need for knowledge-based organizational efforts in existing intersectionality frameworks, and they discuss how to enable involvement of the typically excluded voices, experiences, and bodies, in order to gain insight *with* the lived experiences of intersecting inequalities.

These efforts, then, question what critique can do for us and how it may regenerate in the future - both within and beyond intersectional feminist scholarship. Because as Ahmed (2014, p. 11) painfully reminds us:

One time, I pointed out that a speaker list for an event included only white men. [...] Someone replies that they thought I sounded 'very 1980s', and that they thought we had 'got over' identity politics. Not only might we want to challenge the use of identity politics as a form of political caricature, but we might want to think of this 'over'. Feminist and anti-racist critique are heard as old-fashioned, as based on identity categories that we are assumed to be over.

Hence, when we move forward with intersectionality theory, methodology, and praxis, we are surely not leaving the fundamental concerns of feminist critique—both as a deconstructive and affirmative form of resistance, solidarity and care—behind. Rather, the current political climate and backlash indeed calls for us to keep engaging with intersectionality as

“generative labour” (Hvenegarrd-Lassen, Staunæs & Lund, 2020 p. 179), reminding us to critically focus on the ever-present value of different forms of feminist critique of intersecting axes of power and oppression. And as the contributions of this special issue shows, there is important hope, energy and inspiration to be found in caring for our differences, both regarding different positionalities, regions and locations, and regarding our different perspectives, methods, and forms of critique. So, as we move onward, we need to advance what we already know and do with intersectionality, but also to further expand and experiment with rethinking, reimagining, reworking *what, how, and with whom* we develop the future of intersectionality scholarship. Both amongst the actors, practices and fields we already know, and by daring to move beyond and look further away—to unknown places, practices, theories and knowledges.

DECOLONIAL AND HYBRID SCHOLARSHIP

The making of this special issue initiated at a European business school, where academics from various disciplines and backgrounds convened to discuss intersectionality. In this context, what materialized was not merely a thematic concentration; it constituted a collective engagement with decolonial and hybrid scholarship. The contributions compiled herein elucidate the potentialities and conflicts associated with integrating intersectionality, decoloniality, and hybridity into discourse within broader fields, such as management and organization studies and gender studies.

We began with the idea, based on Quijano (2000), that coloniality is still a structuring force long after formal colonialism has ended. The coloniality of power persists in regulating knowledge, subjectivity, and identity via Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize Indigenous cosmologies and critical, underrepresented scholarship in areas such as diversity, inclusion, and feminist or anti-racist discourse (Ramirez et al. 2024). Decoloniality is not merely a rhetorical flourish; it represents a continuous effort

to reevaluate and reform the methodologies of education, research, and organizational practice, contesting Eurocentric hegemony and fostering the development of more inclusive, contextualized, and transformative knowledge forms (Mignolo 2009; Lugones 2007).

However, Kapoor (2024) cautions that decoloniality may become romanticized when detached from political economy. Epistemic disobedience cannot resist neoliberal absorption; moreover, decolonial discourses may be appropriated by capitalist multiculturalism. Tate and Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2020) remind us that intersectionality already has a decolonizing aspect that comes from Black feminist and anti-colonial histories. When viewed in terms of history and relationships, intersectionality goes against universalism and breaks down Eurocentric binaries (Ramírez & Munar 2022). Thomas (2020) also warns that any decolonial critique should not erase or misrepresent the Black feminist roots of intersectionality. To do so would constitute an additional epistemic erasure, compromising the fundamental objective of decolonization.

The articles in this special issue show that decolonial scholarship is never pure. Instead, it is hybrid, arising from the cacophony of contextualized knowledges (Dhamoon 2015). Hybridity in this context does not signify a celebration of cultural amalgamation; rather, it acknowledges that knowledge and resistance are cultivated in relational and frequently contradictory environments (Bhabha 1996; Darling-Wolf 2007; Ramírez & Munar 2022). Mirza (2015) establishes this hybridity through embodied intersectionality: Black and ethnicized people in higher education occupy contradictory states of hyper-visibility and containment, yet assert marginality as a transformative locus of knowledge and resistance. These lived, embodied experiences serve as a reminder that hybridity and decoloniality are not merely theoretical constructs, but are actively manifested in daily struggles against surveillance, exclusion, and epistemic marginalization (Ramírez et al. 2024).

Zembylas (2025) posits that intersectionality and decoloniality are most effectively comprehended through a challenging yet productive dialogue. Intersectionality is inherently decolonial as it reveals interconnected hierarchies, whereas decolonization is fundamentally intersectional in acknowledging co-constitutive oppressions. This convergence generates opportunities for epistemic resistance in higher education, albeit always accompanied by tension. As editors based at European institutions, we are very aware of how our own privileged positions affect this issue. We acknowledge the systemic challenges of language, accessibility, and disciplinary dominance that persist in marginalizing diverse scholarship (Gani & Khan 2024). Recognizing our involvement in these structures is fundamental to engaging in a reflexive, decolonial editorial politics.

The articles in this issue also connect with Gale de Saxe and Trotter-Simons (2021), who argue that linking intersectionality and decolonization helps both students and scholars develop critical consciousness. They show that universities are still colonizing places where whiteness and neoliberalism pretend to be neutral. However, through praxis—by accepting cognitive dissonance, dialectics of consciousness, and relational learning—scholarship can contest the status quo. In the same way, the contributions collected here push back against both purity politics and simple binaries (Ramírez & Munar 2022). They show that intersectionality and decoloniality must be seen as praxis, as ongoing and contested struggles that link critique to change.

Seen together as a whole, this impressive collection of papers show that decolonial and hybrid scholarship does not look for a single synthesis. Instead, it embodies a pluriversal orientation (Escobar 2020; Blaser 2013) that embraces contradictions while opposing epistemic closure. Intersectionality is not neglected but rather repositioned within its Black feminist and Global South lineages. Decoloniality is not idealized; it is rooted in material struggles concerning land, sovereignty, and institutional power (Ramírez & Böhm 2021). Hybridity is not

depoliticized; instead, it is reasserted as a domain of relational knowledge and agency at the peripheries.

This special issue enriches diverse academic disciplines by promoting scholarship that is both decolonial and hybrid: scholarship that challenges Eurocentrism without erasure, recognizes complexities while fostering solidarities, and emphasizes praxis as the domain where critical knowledge and social transformation converge. It encourages readers to accept the chaos of decolonial and intersectional engagements—not as a constraint, but as a fertile ground for rethinking management, organization, and society and gender studies.

PRESENTATION OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The special issue consists of 9 articles, 2 essays, 1 round table and 2 book reviews. We are deeply impressed with all the contributions and wish you happy reading. Although we know this format won't do the contributions justice, we would like to end this editorial with a brief summary of each contribution. We divide the summaries into sections as they also appear in the issue: articles, essays, round table and book reviews.

ARTICLES

The first article is written by *Katrine Høghøj*, and has the title “The Dual Subject of Intersectionality: Between ‘Lived Experience’ and ‘Categories of Oppression’”. The article examines the dual subject within intersectionality: one rooted in “lived experience” that can be taken at its word, and another constituted through abstract intersections of oppression. Engaging with Marxist critiques, it argues that contemporary intersectionality often overemphasizes lived experience, leading to theoretical weaknesses. By distinguishing between intersectionality as a contextual response to specific problems and as a general theory of social identity, the author highlights how its expansion into the latter creates conceptual issues.

The article calls for a re-engagement with intersectionality's critical origins while integrating Marxist methodology for deeper structural analysis

The second article is written by *Devanik Saha*, and has the title “Re-examining Janani Suraksha Yojana: The Relevance of Intersectionality to Improve Maternal Health Policymaking in India”. The article critiques India's Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), a cash-transfer scheme aimed at reducing maternal mortality, through an intersectional lens. While JSY has boosted institutional deliveries, it has failed to significantly lower maternal deaths or reach the most marginalized women. The author identifies three key flaws: treating women as a homogenous group, ignoring lived experiences, and neglecting social determinants of health. Using the case of an Adivasi woman's death, the paper shows how caste, class, gender, location, and discrimination intersect to shape inequalities. It argues for adopting intersectionality in maternal health policy to better address inequalities.

The third paper is written by *Waithira A.C. Dormal*, and has the title “Climate adaptation as relational capacity: An intersectional study of pastoralist women in Kajiado, Kenya”. The paper explores climate adaptation during times of intensifying drought in Kenya across three ecologically distinct sites. To understand the variation of pastoralist women's adaptation to such crisis, the study applies an intersectional lens and recast climate adaptation as a relational capacity involving the conversion of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic resources. Further, the paper also uses its findings to identify policy levers in labour support, collateral design, and group governance that can support the shift from crisis coping in different environments towards adaptation involving relational capacity building.

The fourth article is written by *Zenia Henriksen* and *Kræn Kielsgaard* and has the title “Revolution and the Hijab in the Political Satire of Noor Khanom”. The article analyses the Syrian satirical TV show *Noor Khanom* (2018–2021), hosted by journalist

Noor Haddad, as a site of feminist resistance. Using intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and media theory, it examines how the show critiques authoritarianism and patriarchal norms by reappropriating domestic imagery and humour. Central to this is the hijab, framed variously as personal freedom, subject to the male gaze, and a tool of political resistance. Haddad's personal decision to unveil sparked public debate, reflecting contested ideas of agency and morality. Ultimately, Noor Khanom demonstrates how satire can reimagine gender roles and women's political participation in post-revolution Syria.

The fifth article is written by *Richard Longman* and *Florence Villesèche* and has the title "Singing a different tune: re-sounding intersectional voices in classical music". The article critiques the persistent exclusion of women composers in Western classical music, showing how intersections of gender, race, class, and geography shape structural marginalisation. Moving beyond additive accounts of representation, the authors combine intersectionality and feminist new materialism to highlight exclusion as an active, ongoing process embedded in institutions, aesthetics, and sonic practices. Through a multisensory approach integrating sound and performance, they challenge text-based scholarship and foreground embodied, affective ways of knowing. Their intervention urges a rethinking of canon formation, evaluative hierarchies, and institutional practices, calling for deeper transformations in how knowledge, music, and inclusion are produced.

The sixth article is written by *Helene Pristed Nielsen* and has the title "Mapping the margins of small places". *Helene Pristed Nielsen* rethinks Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality by applying it to small-scale and islanded communities. Drawing on feminist geography and island studies, she explores how limited anonymity, compulsory intimacy, and interconnectedness in such settings shape identity negotiations and processes of inclusion and exclusion. The article argues that in small places—whether literal islands or close-knit social groups—identities may resist reinterpretation due to social transparency and

overlapping relations. Through empirical examples from the Faroe Islands, Thailand, Europe, and the Danish Armed Forces, Nielsen shows how "islandness" influences power dynamics and complicates intersectional identity expression.

The seventh article is written by *Emilia Ganslandt* and *Emily Boyd* and has the title "Intersectionality and adaptation justice in Sweden: Where are we - and where next?". This article examines how climate adaptation justice is conceptualized in Sweden, a country often viewed as affluent, equal, and relatively invulnerable to climate impacts. Through a review of environmental and climate justice research, the authors find that scholarship focuses mainly on socio-economic status, migrants, and Sámi communities, while overlooking broader intersectional dynamics, privilege, and adaptation itself. They argue that Sweden's strong social contract and narratives of equality obscure hidden vulnerabilities and reinforce the "affluence-as-shield" assumption. Applying intersectionality can expand understandings of justice, uncover overlooked inequities, and strengthen adaptation policies by addressing power, privilege, and diverse lived experiences.

The eighth article is written by *Liesanth Yde Nirmalarajan* and has the title "Invisible Walls in the Digital Welfare State: How Parents Navigate Marginalization and Agency in Digitally Mediated Encounters". This article examines how marginalized parents in Denmark navigate digitally mediated welfare systems. Drawing on intersectionality and Donna Haraway's concepts of cyborgs and string figures, it shows how digital infrastructures co-construct experiences of marginalization and agency. Ethnographic data and vignettes of parents illustrate barriers such as opaque digital platforms, bureaucratic complexity, and cultural assumptions of "digital by default." Parents often face "invisible walls" that obscure their struggles from institutions, reinforcing exclusion while shifting responsibility onto individuals. Yet, parents also exercise agency through informal networks and digital communities. The study highlights broader implications for citizenship, social work, and

digital inclusion.

The ninth and final article is written by *Sayaka Osanami Törngren* and *Viveka Ichikawa* and has the title “Intersectionality beyond theory: Coming to Terms with our Embodied ‘Ambiguosness’ and the Courage to Choose the Middle Space”. This article explores “middle space” as a site of ambiguity, transformation, and resistance, where intersectionality is both lived and theorized. Written by two first-generation immigrant Japanese women scholars in Sweden and Canada, it combines autoethnography, personal narrative, and critical feminist methodology. The authors situate their experiences of privilege and marginalization within broader social and institutional structures, challenging binary categories of centre and margin. By emphasizing reflexivity, dialogue, and embodied knowledge, they highlight how identities are continuously negotiated. The middle space offers a framework for activism, solidarity, and academic praxis, linking theory with lived experience to advance intersectional feminist scholarship.

ESSAYS

The first essay is written by *Sif Landblad* and has the title “Unreason as a means to repair the art institution”. The essay examines how curatorial practice can embrace “unreason” as a reparative and transformative method rather than pathology. Focusing on the 2024 Palais de Tokyo exhibition *Approaching Unreason*, it draws on François Tosquelles’ institutional psychotherapy and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of the reparative. Through artworks and processes highlighting psychic diversity, vulnerability, and joy, the exhibition models how unreason can serve as both subject and curatorial strategy. The essay argues that such practices challenge normative frameworks, foreground collective creativity, and open institutions to care, resistance, and transformation, positioning unreason as a method of repair within art curation.

The second essay is written by *Mira C. Skadegård* based on her keynote at the Danish Gender Conference at

CBS in 2024. It has the title “Copenhagen Gender Conference 2024 Keynote: Intersectionality in the Nordics”. Mira C. Skadegård’s keynote at the Copenhagen Gender Conference (2024) explores intersectionality within the Nordic context, drawing on her research and lived experiences. She emphasizes the importance of structural perspectives in addressing discrimination, situating intersectionality within human rights frameworks and focusing on historically disenfranchised groups. Key themes include the dangers of overemphasizing intent, the concept of complicity in sustaining oppression, and the barriers posed by Nordic exceptionalism, which obscures systemic racism and sexism under myths of equality. Skadegård calls for confronting denial, amplifying marginalized voices, and dismantling entrenched power structures to realize a truly intersectional and inclusive future.

ROUNDTABLE

The special issue also includes a roundtable featuring *Bontu Guschke*, *Molly Occhino*, *Mie Plotnikof*, *Mira C. Skadegård*, and *Sheena Vachhani*. The roundtable is entitled: “Building Inclusive University Cultures: How can universities take action against discrimination?”. The roundtable explores how universities can combat discrimination by embracing intersectionality, unlearning simplistic categories, and fostering both formal and informal change based on the critical knowledge regarding intersectional forms of discrimination. In the roundtable, the panellists further stress the need for political will, critical self-reflection, and creating accountable spaces to include all kinds of bodies and experiences marked by intersectional forms of oppression and discrimination within and beyond the university. They highlight challenges of representation, discomfort, and privilege, while emphasizing collective response-ability and knowledge-based DEI practices.

BOOK REVIEWS

The special issue ends with two book reviews. First

Connie Carø has written a review of Sine Plambeck's 'Global Sex' and next Cathrine Bjørnholt Michaelsen has written a review of 'New Materialism and Intersectionality' edited by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Taru Leppänen, Tara Mehrabi, and Milla Tiainen.

A NOTE ON THE FRONTPAGE

Finally, we want to end with a few words about the frontpage image. The image is a picture of a painting by the artist Valkis López, who is an activist, and Muxe Gunaa from the Istmo of Tehuantepec.

Valkis López is a Zapotec *muxe gunaa*, artist, and human rights activist whose life and work emerge from the ancestral lands of Santo Domingo Ingenio, Oaxaca. Her story is one of intersectional resistance—she navigates the layered oppressions of gender non-conformity, Indigenous identity, and economic marginalization while transforming pain into beauty and exclusion into public voice.

Marked by violence in childhood and denied professional opportunities because of her identity, *Valkis* has forged her own path through art, hairstyling, community organizing, and public storytelling. Despite

holding degrees in law and education, she was only allowed to work under her deadname. Today, she lives and works as her true self, refusing invisibility.

Her exhibition *Resiliencia*—a visual testimony painted on broken roof tiles after the 2017 earthquake—reflects her practice of turning trauma into creative futurity. Each piece speaks to survival, memory, and the dignity of those pushed to the margins.

Valkis is an active member of Transformándome, a project supported by UNESCO and Fundación Artus, which empowers *muxe* and trans women through rights-based education, affective healing, and collective tools for justice. Her activism weaves together gender, culture, territory, and emotion, challenging both the romanticization and the erasure of *muxe* lives.

Her testimony reminds us that intersectionality is not just a framework—it is lived reality. And in that reality, *Valkis* dares to live and dream in full colour.

“Ser muxe gunaa es libertad”

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The Dual Subject of Intersectionality:

Between 'Lived Experience' and
'Categories of Oppression'

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that there is a dual subject at stake in contemporary invocations of intersectionality: on the one hand, a subject of 'lived experience', a subject that 'can be taken at its word', on the other hand a subject that is an effect of the intersection of various axes of oppression, that is a subject that is constituted through abstractions. In dialogue with a series of Marxist critiques of intersectionality, the article investigates how and why intersectionality has given rise to a 'subject of lived experience' in order to point to some of the weaknesses of this conception of subjectivity. Thereupon, I shall introduce a distinction between two concepts of intersectionality: intersectionality as a response to a problem and intersectionality as a theory of social identity in order to argue that many of the shortcomings of contemporary intersectionality theory seem to stem from the fact that they extend what was originally a response to a contextually specific problem and a metaphor to illustrate it into a general theory of social identity. This distinction, I argue, allows us to appreciate the initial critical gesture of intersectionality while remaining critical of some implications of intersectionality as a theory and methodology.

KEY WORDS

INTERSECTIONALITY, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY, MARXIST-FEMINISM,
BLACK FEMINISM, CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY, SUBJECTIVITY

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Oxford Philosopher Amia Srinivasan notes that her initial motivation behind writing her feminist bestseller *The Right to Sex* was “to point out a largely unremarked-upon tension between the commitment to consent-centric sex positivity and intersectionality” (Srinivasan, 2021b). Elaborating on this claim in an interview with the *Jacobin* podcast *The Dig*, Srinivasan explains that there is an interesting “if not contradiction” then at least a “very serious tension” within a lot of mainstream feminism between the “commitment to intersectionality,” which involves “taking seriously the way things like race and class inflect and shape people’s experiences of patriarchy,” and a tendency to abjure “a kind of political critique of sexual desire” which is, she claims, “a legacy of sex-positivity” (The Dig, 2022).

In the title essay of *The Right to Sex*, however, Srinivasan makes the seemingly opposite claim that “the case for pro-sex feminism has been buttressed by feminism’s turn towards intersectionality.” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 81). She provides two reasons for this: first, that intersectionality has made feminists reluctant to make universal prescriptions on behalf of women, including universal sexual policies. Second, that intersectionality has “deepened feminist discomfort with thinking in terms of false consciousness,” that is to say, Srinivasan explains, “with the idea that women who have sex with and marry men have internalized the patriarchy. The important thing now, it is broadly thought, is to take women at their word” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82).

Though the heyday of intersectionality might be behind us, these statements by a prominent contemporary feminist philosopher reveal something about the important status that the concept still has in the feminist imaginary. Here, intersectionality appears as something to which feminism is spontaneously, automatically, and necessarily committed; intersectionality *demand*s things of feminists. Yet, if intersectionality has demands to make it seems to demand

(at least) two different, if not contradictory, things: to take seriously the way in which ‘people’s’ experience of patriarchy’ is *inflected* and *shaped* by ‘things like’ race and class which might involve some idea of ‘false consciousness’ understood as the internalization of oppressive structures such as patriarchy; and to take women at their word. That intersectionality is paradoxically thought to both buttress the case for consent-centric sex-positivity and to contradict pro-sex feminism suggests that the tension Srinivasan brings to the fore is not so much one between sex-positivity and the alleged demands of intersectionality as one, largely unremarked by the philosopher herself, that is internal to the concept of intersectionality.

I am introducing this article with these statements by Amia Srinivasan because they point to a series of questions essential to intersectionality as an intellectual and political project, yet largely undertheorized in contemporary intersectionality scholarship: in what ways does the reluctance to make universal prescriptions on behalf of women as a group entail a reluctance to submit ‘lived experience’, whether it is the experience of sexual desire, the experience of living under patriarchy or the experience of what might or might not be an emancipatory feminist practice, to political critique? What does the claim that experiences of patriarchy are ‘shaped and inflected’ by ‘things’ like race and class entail? What kind of ‘things’ are race and class? And what other ‘things’ shape and inflect experience? What does it mean that experience is shaped and inflected by ‘things’?

In this article, I explore the hypothesis that the tension between two different, if not contradictory, demands of intersectionality points to a dual subject at stake in the contemporary use of the concept: on the one hand, a subject of ‘lived experience’, a subject that, to refer back to Srinivasan, ‘can be taken at its word’, on the other hand a subject that is an effect of the intersection of various axes of oppression, that is a subject that is constituted through abstractions. To unfold this argument, I shall first explore how and why intersectionality seems to have given rise to this ‘subject of lived experience’ in dialogue with a series

of Marxist critiques of intersectionality. Thereupon, I shall introduce a distinction between two concepts of intersectionality: an early concept of *intersectionality as a response to a problem* and a more contemporary concept of *intersectionality as a theory of social identity*, in order to argue that many of the shortcomings of contemporary intersectionality theory seem to stem from the fact that what was originally meant as a response to a contextually specific problem and a metaphor to visualise it has been extended into a general theory of social identity. This distinction, I argue, allows us to appreciate the initial critical gesture of intersectionality while remaining critical of some implications of contemporary articulations of intersectionality as a theory and methodology.

INTERSECTIONALITY'S REPROACH TO SUSPICION

Before turning to intersectionality, let us briefly clarify what Srinivasan understands by 'consent-centric sex-positivity', so as to unpack the tension identified in the beginning of the article. Srinivasan largely identifies pro-sex feminism with Ellen Willis's critique of anti-porn feminism in her 1981 essay "Lust Horizon: Is the Women's Movement Pro-sex?" and the position that women are "sexual subjects in their own right, whose acts of consent – saying yes and saying no – [are] morally dispositive" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 136). While radical 'anti-sex' feminists like Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin saw sexual desire "its objects and expressions, fetishes and fantasies" as shaped by oppression, as a "construction of patriarchy," the legacy of Ellen Willis's "Lust Horizon" has given rise to a feminism that does not moralize about women's desires and insists that acting upon them is only morally constrained by the boundaries of consent. Srinivasan complicates Willis's position by underlining that though she insists that choice and consent are the only parameters for distinguishing 'good sex' from 'bad sex', she also, by the end of "Lust Horizon", argues that "a truly radical movement must look... beyond the right to choose, and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose

what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?"

The 'task' that Willis sets for feminism is therefore, according to Srinivasan, "to treat as axiomatic our free sexual choices, while also seeing why (...) such choices, under patriarchy, are rarely free" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84). Srinivasan's main argument in the book is that, in its rush to do the former, contemporary feminism risks forgetting to do the latter. The consequence is a general reluctance to inquire into the ways in which sexual desires are shaped by oppressive forces, pushing towards a "naturalisation of sexual preference in which the rape fantasy becomes a primordial rather than a political fact" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84). Srinivasan argues that the sex-positive gaze, "unmoored by Willis's call to ambivalence" risks naturalising not only the rape fantasy but also something like "the supreme fuckability" of certain bodies and the unfuckability of others or the sexual disgust expressed towards, for instance, disabled, trans, and obese bodies. These "facts about fuckability" are, however, according to the philosopher, facts "that a truly intersectional feminism should demand we take seriously" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 84).

Leaving the 'sex wars' of the 1980s behind, what interests me here are the ontological, epistemological, and political features that Srinivasan attributes to 'consent-centric sex-positivity' and to what extent they either align sex-positivity with or bring sex-positivity into tension with the alleged demands of intersectionality. Srinivasan notes that there is an interesting, though unintentional, convergence between the way contemporary 'pro-sex feminism' conceives of the norms of sex and the way liberals conceive of the norms of capitalist free exchange: "What matters is not what conditions give rise to the dynamics of supply and demand – why some people need to sell their labour power while others buy it – but only that both buyer and seller have agreed to the transfer" (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). Sex-positivity and liberalism thus converge in their insistence on treating choice and desire as given, rather than as conditioned and formed by a system of exploitation.

In other words, they share an epistemic assumption about the relationship between the subject and its experience: the idea that the subject of exchange is undeceived and knows what it wants.

It would, however, Srinivasan notes, be too easy to say that sex-positivity merely represents the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism; the struggles of generations of feminists and gay and lesbian activists to free sex from “shame, stigma, coercion, abuse and unwanted pain” rest on the insistence that sexual preference is to a certain extent, something personal and private – something that cannot be understood and determined from a public or outsider’s perspective (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). Therefore, the question of self-deception and the imperative to take people at their word is not merely an epistemological issue, a question of experience and knowledge, but, perhaps more importantly, an ethical and political question, a question of agency and autonomy. Srinivasan argues that the imperative in contemporary feminism to take women at their word, to insist that “[i]f a woman says she enjoys working in porn, or being paid to have sex with men, or engaging in rape fantasies, or wearing stilettos – or even that she doesn’t just enjoy these things but finds them emancipatory, part of her feminist praxis,” we are “required to trust her,” is not merely based on an epistemic claim: “that a woman saying something about her own experience gives us a strong, though perhaps not indefeasible, reason to think it is true,” but perhaps primarily on an ethical claim: “a feminism that trades too freely in notions of self-deception is a feminism that risks dominating the subjects it presumes to liberate” (Srinivasan, 2021a, p. 82). The essential difference between the reluctance to think in terms of self-deception in liberalism and in pro-sex feminism, respectively, thus appears to be that liberalism, broadly speaking, insists on an undeceived subject acting out of its own free will to obscure the underlying system of exploitation that actually determines and constrains the actions and choices of this subject, whereas sex-positive feminism insists on an undeceived subject in order to affirm the agency and autonomy of the subject.

For that reason, there seems to be a certain similarity between the sex-positive critique of anti-sex feminism and French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s critique of his ‘master’ Louis Althusser’s idea that subjects under capitalism “work all by themselves”, i.e. that they act ‘naturally’ and ‘spontaneously’ in line with the dominant ideology (Althusser, 1970/2012, p. 136). In his *Althusser’s Lesson*, Rancière criticizes the assumption at stake in Althusserianism and some other strains of Marxism that “domination functions thanks to a mechanism of dissimulation which hides its laws from its subjects by presenting them with an inverted reality.” For Rancière, this logic collapses into “a pure thought of resentment which declares the inability of the ignorant to be cured of their illusions, and hence the inability of the masses to take charge of their own destiny” (Rancière, 1974/2011, xvi). Viewed this way, the confrontation that Srinivasan sketches out between ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ feminism becomes a confrontation between two subjects: underlying the pro-sex position is a free subjectivity, a centre of initiative, author of and responsible for its actions, a subject that can be taken at its word, underlying the anti-sex position is a constituted subject, a subject that “works by itself” acting in compliance with the dominant patriarchal ideology.

If intersectionality both buttresses the case for consent-centric sex-positivity and contradicts consent-centric sex-positivity, then there appears to be a dual subject at stake in intersectionality. On the one hand, intersectionality does indeed seem to be characterised by a reproach to suspicion similar to the one characterising ‘consent-centric sex-positivity’ and liberalism, respectively, at least according to some of its critics. Marxist theorists, for instance, have criticised intersectionality for being overly focused on experience and for subscribing to a neo-liberal idea of subjectivity. In the Marxist journal *Historical Materialism’s* special issue on ‘Identity Politics’, Chi Chi Shi argues that the contemporary framework of intersectionality epitomizes a form of identity politics in which identity has become “tied to the discourse of authenticity and disentangled from the material basis on which it is formed,” thus

converging with a “neo-liberal ‘authenticity-fantasy’” (Shi, 2018). Similarly, in a widely read and distributed pamphlet, Eve Mitchell argues that intersectionality simply creates “a list of naturalized identities, abstracted from their material and historical context” (Mitchell, 2014). These critiques tend to be directed towards simplified and sometimes straw versions of intersectionality conflating intersectionality with a certain version of identity politics. Yet to a certain extent, they resonate with a general theme in more substantiated Marxist critiques of intersectionality from a ‘social reproduction perspective’ reproaching intersectionality for being too focused on “social location” or “place” (Brenner, 2000, p. 293), for residing on the “micro-level” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 44) and for a “downplaying of theory” and a “resort to experience as the source of knowledge” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 90). Such is the importance given to the role of experience in the production of knowledge in intersectionality and Race, Class and Gender frameworks (RGC), Martha E. Gimenez notes, “that in the eight-page introduction to the first section of an RGC anthology, the word ‘experience’ is repeated 36 times” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 90). Though this excessive use of the word experience is far from being the case for all introductions to intersectionality and RGC frameworks, intersectionality scholars often emphasise the importance of seeing “lived experience as philosophically relevant” (M. May, 2015, p. 33) or of including narrative and experience “as valid sources of evidence for claim-making” (Hancock, 2016, p. 128). At the same time, it is often pointed out that intersectionality is and was always about systems and structures rather than simply about identity and subjectivity.¹ This is, to a certain extent true. Nevertheless, there appears to be a tendency to mostly rely on experience as a source of knowledge, due to the way in which intersectionality scholars theorize – or rather under-theorize – the relationship between the macro-level of intersecting structures of power and oppression and the micro-level at which these structures are lived and experienced. As Gimenez points out, intersectionality scholars often postulate the “existence of a more fundamental or ‘basic’ structure of unequal power relations and privilege which underlies race,

gender and class”, but they rarely offer a “macro-level theoretical perspective (...) to identify this basic, fundamental structure” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 89). This is, for instance, the case in Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s definition of intersectionality in their recent monograph:

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences of everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity and race – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 2)

According to this definition, intersectionality is an analytical tool based on the idea that power relations are ‘intersecting’ and that ‘categories’ are ‘interrelated’. However, a number of key questions remain unanswered: What is the relationship between intersectionality as a methodology or concept – one that assumes that categories are interrelated and mutually shaping one another – and its object: the material phenomena it aims to grasp, namely, the ways in which intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences of everyday life? In other words, how does intersectionality as methodology constitute its object?² How are ‘power relations’ constituted, and how are they reproduced materially, discursively, and institutionally? What concept of power is at stake here? And what is implied by the word ‘influence’ in the definition? What exactly is the relationship between intersecting power relations and the experience of living within them? Does being located in a specific intersection of power structures entail awareness of being thus located?

Investigating a series of statements from some of Collins’s other writings, Gimenez argues that the implication of Collins’s account of intersectionality is ultimately that an individual’s “structural location in the intersection of inequality and oppression” is conflated with their “identity”, that is their “subjective

understanding of who they really are” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 28). Gimenez sees this as a consequence of Collins’s assumption of a cause-and-effect relationship between two claims: the claim that “each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression” and the claim that “[e]veryone has a race/gender/class-specific identity” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 86). The assumption that structural location automatically leads to the development of an identity corresponding to this location is also partly reflected in Collins’s version of ‘standpoint epistemology’:

Individuals and groups differently located within intersecting systems of power have different points of view of their own and others’ experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.”(Hill Collins, 2015, p. 14)

Though much depends on the implications of ‘reflect’ and ‘typically’ in this sentence, it confirms the importance granted to experience in the construction of knowledge in intersectionality, though it does not explain to what extent standpoints should be seen as immediate or achieved.

To sum up this section, in the case of Patricia Hill Collins’s version of intersectionality, the reliance on experience as a source of knowledge seems to be a consequence of two factors: 1) The underdevelopment of the theoretical framework of intersectionality which means that it seems confined to micro-level analyses of the experience of oppression from different locations 2) The fact that the relationship between structural location and identity is seen as isomorphic. Collins’s definition of intersectionality in the passages I have analyzed further lacks explanatory power when it comes to identifying what might or might not be a relevant or salient category of analysis in a given situation. What Judith Butler has referred to as “the embarrassed etc.” at the end of the list” (Butler, 1990, p. 432) – the “among others” concluding Bilge and Collins’s list – suggests that

their account relies on a potentially endless series of categories resulting in a potentially endless differentiation between subject-positions. Combined with the claim that knowledge and identities are effects of structural location, the etc.-problem de facto leads to a concept of experience as irreducible or incommensurable. Hence, intersectionality carries with it the demand to take women at their word, to refer back to Srinivasan, because it has become a discourse of singularity: if the experience of each female subject is necessarily structured differently from most, if not all, other female subjects, then no woman will be able to represent or speak on behalf of them as a group.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS A RESPONSE TO A PROBLEM

Though I am thus in general agreement with the Marxist diagnostic of contemporary intersectionality as a methodology and theory as underdeveloped and thus in a way “‘up for grabs,’ (...) open to any and all theoretical interpretations,” as Gimenez puts it, I do want to vindicate intersectionality as a political concept. More precisely, I think that in their eagerness to prove the theoretical superiority of the ‘SRT’ framework, and their tendency to posit ‘intersectionality theory’ and ‘social reproduction theory’ as competing social ontologies rather than supplementary critical perspectives, some ‘social reproduction scholars’ tend to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Rather than posing the question of intersectionality’s compatibility with Marxist theory as a question of two competing theoretical frameworks, other Marxist scholars have posed it in terms of a political division to be superseded.³ In her recent book, *Marxism and Intersectionality*, Ashley J. Bohrer explores the conditions of possibility of an intersectional Marxism demonstrating, through a critical historiography, that the ‘Marxist tradition’ and the ‘intersectional tradition’ share a long series of themes and political commitments (J. Bohrer, 2019).

In reflecting on the compatibility of Marxism and intersectionality, it is useful, I argue, to distinguish between two concepts of intersectionality: an earlier

version of intersectionality as *a response to a problem*, and a more contemporary version of intersectionality as *a theory of social identity*. Bohrer suggests that though the image of an intersection might have been productive of certain misunderstandings, we should not let the mistaken idea that: [I]ntersectionality theorists conceive of oppressions as separate structures of entities that intersect *somewhere*” substitute for the content of the theories of most intersectionality scholars that conceive of the structures or axes to be “fundamentally and irrevocably inseparable in ways that cannot be adequately rendered by the image of a traffic intersection” (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 119). I suggest that the ‘mistaken idea’ Bohrer refers to is based on a misunderstanding of what the metaphor of an intersection is supposed to illustrate, both by its disciples and by its Marxist critics. The theoretical shortcomings of several contemporary accounts of intersectionality seem to stem from the fact that they seek to expand what was originally a response to a contextually specific problem and a specific metaphor to illustrate it into a general theory of social identity. On the other hand, many critiques of intersectionality are imprecise and unfair because they read the metaphor used to illustrate a contextually specific problem as an image of the social.

In that context, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s ‘traffic-metaphor’ has engendered a lot of discussion over whether roads crossing each other is a good way of explaining the interrelationships between race and gender and the constitution of raced and gendered subjects. Intersectionality scholars have suggested that the metaphor be revised or made more nuanced by adding more roads to the intersection or ‘a roundabout’ in its center, to talk about lines, axes or vectors rather than roads, to see these as ‘interacting’ or ‘interlocking’ (Hill Collins, 2000, pp. 24–25), ‘interwoven’, ‘intermeshed’ or ‘enmeshed’ (Lugones, 1994, p. 459) rather than ‘intersecting’. Marxist scholars, on the other hand, have often grounded their critique of intersectionality’s lack of conceptualization of the social totality in a critique of the “traffic model”. For instance, Susan Ferguson writes that Crenshaw portrays the social in spatial terms, in which “the

crossroads of Colonialism and Patriarchy represents a node of multiple oppressions. Identities and experiences here emerge from socio-specific spaces and times that cannot be reductively explained by any singular, overarching logic” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 41).

However, Crenshaw does not, at least not initially, use the image of ‘a traffic intersection’ to articulate an all-encompassing theory of identity and difference. She employs it to visualize a problem:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [or both]” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

As Crenshaw later pointed out, intersectionality was thus not originally offered as “some new, totalizing theory of identity” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Rather, it was coined to draw attention to the *problem* of the illegibility of multiple discriminations in American anti-discrimination law; because American anti-discrimination law defines sex discrimination and race discrimination as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, and because discrimination in race discrimination cases tends to be viewed in terms of sex-or class-privileged Blacks and sex discrimination cases focus on race-and class-privileged women, the legal interests of Black women can only be recognized if they can be assimilated with those of white women or those of Black men. Situating herself in a certain tradition of US Black feminist thought, Crenshaw argues that the same problem is reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics (Crenshaw, 1989).

The problem to which intersectionality, in Crenshaw’s articulation of it, is a response is thus that the legal interests of Black women – or more broadly their

political interests – can only be recognized if they are hit on either the “sex-discrimination road” or the “race discrimination road” but not at the intersection between them. She argues that *if* a ‘framework’ – legal, theoretical, activist or other – considers race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, it will not be able to recognize the interests of those who are burdened by both. However, she does not, as such, say much about what race is and what gender is, how they are related to each other more broadly and how they are related to other categories of social life.

To the extent that it is possible to subsume a series of Black feminist theorists and activists coining what is often referred to as ‘precursor concepts’ to intersectionality, such as ‘double’, ‘triple’ and ‘multiple’- jeopardy or ‘interlocking systems of oppression’, under the grand umbrella of intersectionality, it is because they respond to *the same problem* as Crenshaw, albeit not in a legal context. In the set of texts that intersectionality scholarship often characterises as ‘proto-intersectional’ we do not find the language of ‘intersectionality’, ‘intersections’ or ‘intersecting’ forces, categories, vectors, axes or systems of oppression. Nor do we find a coherent *theory* of how ‘systems’ and ‘categories’ of oppression, class, race, gender *etc.*, are mutually constitutive on a structural level and interrelated in ‘lived experience.’ What we do find is a constellation of concepts or phrases that, in different ways, seek to encapsulate the ‘special situation’ of women of color. This is not to say that these texts do not make ontological claims about what race, class and gender are, how they are reproduced *etc.*, but they do not respond to these questions in the same way. In these so-called ‘proto-intersectional’ interventions the more general problem to which intersectionality is a response is that the most privileged subgroup of an oppressed group often comes to define the interests of the entire group thus excluding those who are oppressed by more factors than the one that they share with the rest of the group.

Therefore, reading these texts through the lens of contemporary intersectionality theory often leads

to more confusion than clarity. Take, for example, Frances Beal’s 1969 pamphlet “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female.” It is oftentimes claimed that Beal’s concept of “double jeopardy” is an “important precursor concept to intersectionality” (Carastathis, 2016) or that she puts forward an “intersectional argument to explain Black women’s lives.” (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). At the same time, the “jeopardy approach” that Beal is presumed to represent is often contrasted to a “full-blown theory of intersectionality” because it is thought to represent “an ‘additive approach’ that conceives systems and phenomena of oppression to be ontologically separate and merely adding on to each other rather than “an intersectional approach” that conceives them as mutually constructed and integratively maintained (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 63).⁴

In “Double Jeopardy”, Beal does articulate an idea of *intersectionality as a response to a problem* through her critique of male-dominated movements for Black power and white dominated movements for women’s liberation from the perspective of the ‘special situation’ of African-American women. However, she does not, as such, seem to articulate a specific conceptual approach to understanding the interrelations of race, gender, and class that would correspond to either an ‘additive’ ‘jeopardy approach’ or an ‘integrative’ ‘intersectional approach’ as defined by contemporary intersectionality scholars. In its approach to understanding the interrelationships of race, class and gender, “Double Jeopardy” is closer to a Marxist-feminist approach that conceives the capitalist system as structurally dependent on sexism and racism in order to reproduce itself. Beal mentions three ways in which ‘the System’ is dependent on the oppression of women: first, that the oppression of women functions as an ‘escape valve’ for capitalism insofar as women are ‘scape goats’ for the evils of the system (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 170). Second, that women represent a surplus labor supply (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 170). Third, that women, and especially black women, can be employed to do the most degrading and badly paid jobs (‘superexploitation’) (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 172).

Contemporary intersectionality scholars are, to a certain extent, correct when they point out what they refer to as the foundationalist character of Beal's analysis; Beal does indeed give "causal and explanatory priority to capitalism" (Carastathis, 2016, p. 34). However, these scholars seem to misunderstand the consequences of this claim when they, in different ways, attempt to argue that this 'foundationalism' goes against what we might call 'intersectionality's rejection of primacy.' Bohrer explains that "the claim that oppressions cannot be ranked", conceived to be one of the key components of intersectionality theory, entails two claims: the claim that "no one oppression is *more important* (ontologically, experientially, politically) than the others, and the claim that "no one oppression *unilaterally causes* the others" (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 92). These two claims are, however, different in nature: the first claim is based on a value judgement about the importance of different forms of oppression, the second is a claim about causality. Thus, it seems possible to accept the first – at least its political aspect – without accepting the second: while Beal asserts that "no oppression" is more important than the others in the context of political struggle, her account does grant explanatory primacy to capitalism.

In light of this, it seems strange to criticise Beal's approach for being additive or incremental. Or, at least, this claim would have to be substantiated by specifying what exactly it is that Beal 'adds' to each other which brings us back to the question: what does intersectionality scholars speak about when they speak about 'race, class, gender *etc.*?' Bohrer argues that "the very language of "double" and "triple" and "multiple jeopardy" suggests "both a separability of race, gender, and class, and that the particular positions of women of color are produced through the addition of multiple oppressions together" which fails to see how they are fundamentally, structurally and experientially interarticulated and mutually constructing (J. Bohrer, 2019, p. 96). If the assumption here is that Beal merely adds categories to each other, the critique is misplaced insofar as Beal's account, as Anna Carastathis correctly points out, does not rely

on the notion of categories or axes but rather on the notion of a system or structure (Carastathis, 2016, p. 35). If the assumption is that she adds systems to each other, the critique is meaningless insofar as Beal does not operate with separate systems to begin with; she operates with one system, that is capitalism, emphatically referred to as 'the System' with capital S. If the assumption is that she merely adds phenomena of oppression to each other on the level of experience, it is unclear to me what this would mean. Intersectionality is often defined by the claim that experiences of oppression cannot be separated, that different forms of oppression are experienced *simultaneously*.⁵ But it is difficult to see how an 'integrative' or 'constitutive approach' and an 'additive approach' would differ from each other on this point. If the point is that there is no non-raced experience of gender oppression and vice versa, what is the difference then between seeing experiences of sex-based oppression or experiences of race-based oppression as either added on to each other or as enmeshed, interrelated or co-constitutive? In general, as long as the co-constitution, enmeshment, interrelation – or whatever other term is used to avoid the accusation of an incremental approach – of oppressions remains merely postulated rather than explained, there appears to be no essential difference between an 'additive approach' and an 'integrative' or 'constitutive' approach.

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND ABSTRACTION

The problem of potentially endless differentiation in contemporary intersectionality theory is, to an extent, a consequence of a radicalization of the critique of 'woman' as the subject of feminist theory and practice advanced by early intersectional interventions. Exposing how various women's rights struggles in the US have been explicitly orientated by the specific interests of white women, Frances Beal, The Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, bell hooks and others challenged the idea that women share experiences and political interests simply by virtue of being women. However, several early intersectional

interventions simultaneously point to the impossibility of considering African American women as such as a collective subject given that African American women as a group are differentiated by class, sexuality, ability, age etc..⁶

However, as I hope to have shown using Frances Beal's "Double Jeopardy" as an example, these so-called 'precursor concepts' were not coined to say something about the constitution of subjects in the intersection of structures of oppression on an ontological level, but to say something about the formation of political subjectivity or the dynamics of the formation of sub-groups within a larger group in the context of political struggle. Thus, they are not bound up on the same epistemological and ontological assumptions as contemporary intersectionality theory. For instance, Beal does not assume an isomorphic relationship between structural location and experience. Rather, she draws on a concept of experience as constituted through ideology. To the extent that subjects occur in Beal's text, they do not occur as subjects of 'lived experience,' as subjects that can be taken at their word, they occur as ideologically mystified subjects that works as functional constituents of the capitalist totality. Beal states that "the System" has "defined the roles to which each individual should subscribe," "manhood" and "femininity" "in terms of its own interests." (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 167). Thus, the System, capitalism, is attributed agency while its 'subjects' are mostly deprived of it: capitalism "manipulates", it defines the roles of each and every one, it has "goals" and finds things "necessary" and "expedient" to realize them.⁷ Subjects (here, Black women and Black men), on the other hand, are "manipulated by the System" (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 66), they do not understand "the true nature of the forces working upon them." (M. Beal, 1969/2008, p. 166) The 'subjects' at stake in Beal's text are thus closer to the Althusserian idea of subjects "working all by themselves" than they are to a subject that can be taken at its word. Though the experience of women of colour are indeed important in early intersectional interventions, a subject that can be taken at its word is hence not a necessary consequence of an

intersectional critique.

Rather, the reliance on a 'subject of lived experience' in contemporary intersectionality theory seems to be not so much a consequence of intersectional critique itself but rather of a certain 'zeitgeist' permeating many different theoretical fields and cultural tendencies. Invoked to underline the viscosity and non-vicariousness of experience, 'lived experience' appears to function as a marker of authenticity; a lived experience is an experience that cannot be communicated but needs to have been 'lived' in order to be understood. The frequent reference to lived experience in intersectionality theory might thus be interpreted as symptomatic of the same "anti-abstracting desire" or "jargon of authenticity" that Marina Vishmidt has detected in feminist discourses on 'the vulnerable body': "the positing of something basic and fundamental as a substratum to all further thought, something which produces but is itself not produced, which conditions but is itself unconditioned" (Vishmidt, 2020, p. 34) or what Anna Kornbluh in her recent book describes as a domination of 'immediacy' in contemporary theory, culture and politics (Kornbluh, 2023). Perhaps, it is then not so much intersectionality that has buttressed the case for sex-positivity, as it is the insistence on a 'subject that can be taken at its word' in contemporary theory, that has buttressed the case for a certain version of intersectionality.

I am suspicious of the idea of a 'subject that can be taken at its word' for the same reasons that Gayatri Spivak was suspicious towards Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze's call for *the oppressed to speak for themselves*. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak criticised the idea expressed by the two philosophers in "a friendly exchange" that "the oppressed, if given the chance (...) *can speak and know their conditions*" (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 252); that "the masses", in the words of Foucault, "*know perfectly well*," that "they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well" (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972/1977, p. 206). The problem with this reliance on a "naturally articulate

subject of oppression” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 259), is, according to Spivak, that it ultimately amounts to a reliance on a “self-proximate, if not self-identical, subject of the oppressed” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 248). Spivak’s critique of this “unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed subject” (Spivak, 1990, p. 241) is not just its implicit exoticism – the underlying idea that “[o]nly the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem” as Spivak puts it in an interview (Spivak, 1990, p. 66) – but also that it is symptomatic of a “disavowal of the role of ideology in reproducing social relations of production” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 241). More precisely, as I read it, Spivak’s problem with the idea of a self-proximate if not self-identical subject – a subject that is undeceived and knows what it wants, we might say – is that this conception relies on an idea of the transparency and immediacy of experience that forecloses an analysis of how oppression often operates through ideological mystification.⁸ Ultimately, this reinaugurates, Spivak argues, an abstract notion of a sovereign, constitutive and undivided subject.

In line with Spivak, Martha E. Gimenez, in the context of her critique of intersectionality, argues that “to be fully understood in its broader social and political implications”, experience “needs to be situated in the context of the capitalist forces that produce it.” Experience in itself is, Gimenez notes, “suspect” because “dialectically, it is a unity of opposites; it is unique, personal, insightful and revealing, and, at the same time, thoroughly social, partial, mystifying, itself the product of historical forces about which individuals may know little or nothing about” (E. Gimenez, 2018, p. 91). Spivak’s critique is immensely complex, and it is beyond the scope of this article to examine it in detail. What I want to tentatively suggest, however, is that a similar unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed subject – a “thematics of being undeceived” (Spivak, 1988/2010, p. 241) – may also be at stake in the reliance on lived experience in intersectionality theory.

How do we then conceive of experience as the ‘dialectical unity of opposites’ that Gimenez refers to? What

conception of subjectivity do we need to conceive of experience as simultaneously ‘personal, insightful and revealing’ and ‘social, partial and mystifying’? To an extent, the conception of lived experience seems to contradict, or at least be in very serious tension with, what is often represented as one of the core claims of intersectionality theory: the idea that ‘experience’ is influenced, shaped or structured by ‘interrelating power structures’ or ‘vectors’ or ‘axes’ or ‘systems’ or ‘categories’ of oppression, gender, race, class etc., that is by abstractions. This tension points back to the tension between two subjects at stake in intersectionality: a subject of lived experience that can be taken at its word and a subject that is an effect of intersecting structures of power and oppression. The challenge for intersectionality is thus to find ways of mediating these two subjects. In the beginning of her 1998 book *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, Kathi Weeks notes that feminists, in the wake of postmodern critiques of the 1980s, have been struggling to “develop theories of the subject that are adequate to a feminist politics,” that is theories of the subject that move beyond “models of the subject organized with reference to a natural core, authentic humanity or enduring metaphysical essence” while still acknowledging “feminism’s antagonistic force” and cultivating “its subversive potential” (Weeks, 1998, p. 1). The puzzle is, Weeks explains, “to understand how it could be that subjects so systematically constructed and well prepared to subject to the existing order can also collectively defy it” (Weeks, 1998, p. 1).

In line with Weeks’ project, we can ask: how can we think of ‘intersectional subjects’ in a way that recognizes a necessary opacity in the way in which the racial, capitalist and patriarchal order of oppression reproduces itself but without thereby depriving its ‘subjects’ of agency? In that context, I would suggest that intersectionality can benefit from Marxist methodology. The main problem pointed out by a series of critiques of intersectionality from a Marxist-feminist perspective is that intersectionality has become abstract: by conceiving what is *analytically discrete* as *actually discrete*, most contemporary accounts of intersectionality produce a “one-sided and abstract

accounting of reality”, as Susan Ferguson puts it (Ferguson, 2016, pp. 44–45).⁹ If intersectionality in parting from an imagined concrete, lived experience, has only been able to move towards “ever thinner abstractions” to end up with a “chaotic conception of the whole” to paraphrase Marx’s methodological reflections in the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1857–58/2005), it would be interesting to ask what an intersectional method that moves from the abstract to the concrete would look like. This would be an approach that does not part from gendered, raced and classed individuals and their lived experience of oppression, but rather

moves from the abstract categories of ‘gender’, ‘race’ and ‘class’ to the concrete individuals constituted through these categories.¹⁰ I have thus not proposed a critique of contemporary intersectional methodology in order to suggest that we replace intersectionality with a different concept and a different metaphor, rather the opposite: it should be an occasion to further develop the project. Intersectionality can, I believe, benefit from Marxist methodology, but only if Marxist scholars recognise that intersectionality considered as a response to a problem is not merely ‘compatible’ with Marxism, it is vital for Marxism.

NOTES

[1] See a.o. (Cho, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013)

[2] In her article “Intersectionality’s Definitional Dilemmas”, Collins elaborates on the relationship between “analytical categories” such as race, class and gender and “intersecting systems of power” – which here seems to be used interchangeably with “intersecting power relations” – such as “racism and sexism” but in a way that creates more confusion than clarity. Here analytical categories are somehow granted ontological primacy when Collins claims that “mutually constructing categories of analysis (...) underlie and shape intersecting systems of power” and that these systems of power “catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities.” See (Hill Collins, 2015, p. 14)

[3] For instance, in their introduction to a recent collection of essays on Marxist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya, Kevin B. Anderson, Kieran Durkin and Heather A. Brown suggests that today’s intellectual left is divided into two major streams: “The first stream, often espousing some forms of Marxism, highlights capital and class, accusing the left of the 1990s and after of being stuck in what it disparages as “identity politics.” The second stream holds to a focus on race, gender, and sexuality, attacking Marxists for a kind of class reductionism whose return they are shocked to see.” They then ask: “Can a Marxist theory and practice, albeit one that is informed by intersectionality, dialectically transcend (aufheben) this contradiction?”. See (B. Anderson et al., 2020, p. 4)

[4] See (K. King, 1988; Carasthatis, 2016)

[5] Anna Carasthatis refers to this as the “simultaneity benefit” of intersectional analysis, see (Carasthatis, 2016, pp. 54–55)

[6] For instance, The Combahee River Collective and Black Women for Wages for Housework – both breakaway groups from larger movements – drew attention to the fact that African American women are differentiated in terms of sexuality, arguing that Black lesbian women must assert autonomy not only towards white women and Black men but also in relation to Black heterosexual women. (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2017; Toupin, 2018)

[7] For instance Beal writes that “In keeping with its goal of destroying the black race’s will to resist its subjugation, capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment.” (M. Beal, 1969/2008)

[8] In that context, Spivak quotes Althusser: “The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers.” (Spivak, 2010, p. 240)

[9] Some scholars suggest that ‘woman of color’ has become an abstraction in contemporary intersectionality theory. Jennifer Nash writes that black women have become a ‘symbol’ within the field of US women’s studies ‘even if the field retains little interest in the materiality of black women’s bodies’ and Jasbir Puar emphatically refers to ‘woman of color’ with the acronym ‘WOC’ to ‘underscore the overdetermined emptiness of its graciousness.’ See (Nash, 2019, p. 4; Puar, 2012, p. 3)

[10] This is, for instance, the path followed by a 2014 article by Endnotes that, moving from the most abstract categories to the most concrete; from defining gender as a separation between spheres to specifying the individuals assigned to those spheres, traces the unfolding of gender as a real abstraction. (Endnotes, 2013)

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Re-examining Janani Suraksha Yojana:

The Relevance of Intersectionality
to Improve Maternal Health
Policymaking in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relevance of the intersectionality framework for designing maternal health interventions in India, using the case of Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), a government scheme that aims to reduce maternal deaths by financially incentivising women to deliver in hospitals. Research indicates that JSY has failed to reach the poorest Indian women and has had limited impact on maternal mortality. For this paper, I used a secondary research approach, wherein I applied an intersectionality framework to analyse existing evidence on JSY. To my knowledge, this is the first paper that adopts an intersectionality lens to analyse and critique the JSY program and advocate for its relevance in understanding maternal mortality in India. This paper outlines three major flaws underpinning JSY: treating women as a homogenous category, lack of understanding of lived experiences, and inability to address social determinants of maternal mortality. The paper further argues that maternal mortality is caused by an intersection of different identity axes such as gender, caste, class, location, and indigeneity. Thus, instead of using a universal approach towards reducing maternal deaths, policy interventions in India should be rooted in an intersectional framework that recognises the lived experiences and realities of the most marginalised women in India.

KEY WORDS

GENDER, INTERSECTIONALITY, MATERNAL HEALTH, PUBLIC HEALTH,
HEALTH INEQUALITIES, WELL-BEING, INDIA

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses why intersectionality is a relevant framework for Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), a maternal health policy in India, and addresses the gap around exploring the relevance of intersectionality in designing and implementing maternal health interventions in India. Addressing this gap is important as multiple studies (S. Banerjee et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2010; Montgomery et al., 2014) have noted a disproportionately higher burden of maternal deaths among marginalised groups and communities, who experience multiple and interlocking levels of oppression and discrimination.

JSY is a maternal health scheme in India that aims to reduce maternal deaths by paying cash incentives to women for delivering in accredited hospitals. The scheme is part of the National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005 in India. JSY focuses on poor pregnant women with a special focus on states having low institutional delivery rates. Furthermore, the scheme's launch coincided with the global interest in the reduction of childhood and maternal mortality as part of the Millenium Development Goal¹ review process (Das, 2017, p. 92). To analyse JSY, this paper uses the framework of intersectionality, which was conceptualised in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American race scholar. The framework refers to how a person's social experience is constituted by the interaction of their identities with power structures in society (Crenshaw, 1997). Over the years, intersectionality has increasingly been mainstreamed in global health research (Kapilashrami & Hankivsky, 2018). The concept of intersectionality holds significance because maternal mortality is a complex phenomenon which is caused by the interaction of multiple factors. India has committed to achieving the United Nations mandated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of reducing MMR to less than 70 by 2030 (Meh et al., 2022). Given this context, as JSY is the largest maternal health intervention in India, it becomes imperative to critically analyse it through the lens of intersectionality. Using intersectionality as the underlying framework, this paper will look

at how different factors such as institutional, social, cultural, and economic intersect with each other to cause maternal mortality.

While JSY has increased institutional deliveries significantly, multiple studies (Dongre, 2014; Mishra et al., 2021; Powell-Jackson et al., 2015) have found that the scheme has failed to reach the most marginalised women in India, and there is no association between the rise in institutional deliveries due to JSY and the reduction in India's maternal mortality ratio. While these studies outline the unequal distribution of maternal deaths among marginalised groups and communities, they do not delve into how the interaction of a woman's lived experiences, caste, tribe, religion, location, class, etc. marginalises them. Additionally, these studies do not consider the fragmented political economy in India and the prevalence of clientelism, which has a significant influence on the delivery of welfare services (Dasgupta, 2016). Apart from examining the existing literature, I evaluate the assumption of JSY's universality within India, which is a significant problem. There has been no critical examination of JSY's program guidelines and its one-size-fits-all approach towards curbing maternal deaths.

Given that access to maternal health has been construed as a human right by international conventions and mechanisms, to which India is a signatory, this paper also integrates a human rights lens, while discussing the relevance of intersectionality for JSY. In 1999, the WHO, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) declared: "human rights include access to services that will ensure a safe pregnancy and childbirth." (WHO, 1999). This holds significance in the context of maternal health as this would mean that when governments – as part of their economic and social rights obligations under specific international treaties – fail to provide health care that only women need such as maternity care, this failure is a form of discrimination against women that they are obligated to prevent and remedy (Cook, 2013). Building upon Cook's words, I argue that access to JSY, even though it has numerous flaws

and problems, should be a human right, as it is a government funded maternal scheme.

INTERSECTIONALITY: ORIGINS AND CONTEXTUALISATION WITHIN INDIA'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Since its introduction in 1989, the term 'intersectionality' has emerged as a key theoretical framework and become a buzzword in feminist scholarship.

It is a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social structural level (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1268).

In simpler words, it gave theoretical legitimacy to the already established idea of multiple discrimination faced by an individual. (McCall, 2005) terms intersectionality as one of the most critical theoretical contributions made by feminist literature. Over the years, the framework has evolved to include location, education, immigration status, indigeneity, caste, and other identities as axes of marginalisation as per local contexts.

Despite its relevance in feminist and social science scholarship, there have been multiple critiques of intersectionality, especially regarding its use as an analytic tool. (Nash, 2008) critically analyses intersectionality and outlines four key issues that need to be addressed. One, the lack of a defined intersectional methodology. McCall (2005, as cited in Nash, 2008, p. 4) finds that, despite the theoretical attention paid to intersectionality, there has been limited discussion around how to study or apply intersectionality methodologically. Two, the reliance on black women as prototypical intersectional subjects.

This reliance leads to black women being treated as a unitary and monolithic entity, i.e. Differences

between black women, including class and sexuality, are obscured in the service of presenting 'black women' as a category that opposes both 'whites' and 'black' men" (Nash, 2008, p. 8).

Three, the vague definition of intersectionality, which obscures the question of whether all identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalised subjects have an intersectional identity. Zack (2005, as cited in Nash, 2008, p. 10) argues that all women are intersectional subjects, precisely because of the possibility that their womanhood (already a socially disadvantaged position) will intersect with other social positions to further disadvantage them. This unresolved dispute makes it unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of marginalised subjectivity or a generalised theory of identity. Four, the coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities. ((Chang & Culp, 2002) as cited in Nash, 2008, p. 6).

Despite these critiques, (Bowleg, 2012) argues that intersectionality provides a unified framework for public health researchers who already engage in the impact of different social and cultural identities on health inequalities and outcomes. As my paper focuses on maternal health in India, it is essential to look at debates on intersectionality in India. The concept of intersectionality holds immense relevance as throughout India's history, several groups and communities have been discriminated against based on their identities. Due to India's diversity these identities are determined by caste, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location, and play an important role in determining the social position of an individual (Anne et al., 2013). Within this diversity, certain identities are privileged over others, due to existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

One such hierarchy is the caste system among Hindus (the largest religious group in India), which determines one's social position according to their one or more traditional occupations and is the world's oldest surviving social hierarchy. Outside of this Hindu caste

system are the Dalits or untouchables, categorised as scheduled castes (SCs) according to the Indian constitution. As of 2011-12, 29% of SCs lived below the poverty line (Panagriya & More, 2013). Throughout India's history, Dalits and lower castes have been denied political and civil rights and opportunities for economic mobility. Multiple studies (Human Rights Watch, 2007; International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2016) have documented how lower castes have faced discrimination and oppression. The Indian constitution provides affirmative action for socially excluded and marginalised communities in the form of reservations in educational institutions, jobs, loan waivers, and financial support. In 1989, quotas were extended to include a grouping called the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) which fall between the traditional upper castes and the lowest castes. Apart from populations belonging to lower castes, there are several indigenous communities and groups who are termed as *Adivasis* or tribals¹ who are constitutionally classified as Scheduled Tribes (STs), who make up 104 million (8.6%) of India's population. Though poverty levels have declined over the years, 43% of the Scheduled Tribes population still lives below the poverty line (Panagariya and More, 2013, p. 7). Over several decades, social scientists have written extensively about the discrimination faced by these communities and groups. They didn't explicitly use the term intersectionality or intersectional discrimination, but as in the US, in India, multidimensional discrimination had been discussed much before Crenshaw. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar, two prominent freedom fighters of India, had spoken, written, and fought against caste's inequality, injustice, and oppression in Indian society. However, it was Ram Manohar Lohia, a well-known socialist leader of the 1950s, who was the first scholar in post-colonial India to write extensively about multidimensional discrimination. (Kumar, 2010, p. 64) writes "Lohia contributed significantly towards the formulation of an intersectional approach for understanding the inequalities, exclusions, and exploitations in the power system of India".

Nivedita Menon, a prominent Indian feminist and

scholar, has critiqued the western model of intersectionality as she finds the assumption of its universal validity problematic. Menon (2015, p. 37) writes "in the Indian context, categories of women, caste, class and race are unstable and heterogeneous, and intersectionality as a universal framework doesn't capture this complexity". Citing Lohia's intersectional work (Menon, 2015, p. 37), she suggests, "there is a tendency when studying the 'non-West', is to test the applicability of theories developed through 'western' experience. The assumption is that the concepts emerging from Western (Euro- American) social philosophy necessarily contain within them the possibility of universalization— the reverse is never assumed".

I argue that apart from intersectionality, there is a lack of theoretical frameworks which can incorporate the multidimensional discrimination constituted by the interaction of identities and power structures. Therefore, it is important to critically engage with intersectionality. Concerns around the Euro-centric origins of intersectionality and the relevant categories of identity being unstable in India and possible depoliticisation of intersectionality are valid but aren't enough to discard the framework. Just as there is no one simple feminist position on any issue, similarly there is/should be no one position or perspective on intersectionality. Though intersectionality originated from the multidimensional discrimination faced by black women in the US, over the years, it has evolved significantly. It has been used as a tool in multiple countries in different contexts which implies that assumed universality is not a core tenet of intersectionality.

Sinha (2012) cited in Menon (2015, p. 44) writes that to bring a global perspective to gender means not seeing the world through a universalising perspective, but taking theoretical cognizance of the local and empirical, thus producing a dense contextual analysis. Menon (2015, p. 44) cites Sinha to advance her argument that intersectionality as a universal framework may not be applicable in India. However, interpreting Sinha's (2012) argument above

in a different way, I argue that we can use the original intersectionality framework as a starting point and then depending upon where we choose to use it, we can contextualise it as per the context.

In post-colonial India, electoral politics have been strongly influenced by caste, class, location, and in few cases, indigeneity. The domination of a specific group – either economically or socially privileged or backward – in politics can alter the allocation of resources. Multiple scholars (Banerjee & Somanathan, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2003; Varshney, 2000) have written that among the historically disadvantaged social groups in India, those that mobilised themselves politically gained relative to others. For instance, in the 1980s, the SCs established a successful caste-based party (Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP]), which significantly increased their representation in national politics and allowed them to extract more public resources from the state than other groups.

When it comes to the Scheduled Tribes (STs), Lele et al. (1991) refer to them as India's largest politically slumbering minority. Research by Xaxa (2016) and Banerjee & Somanathan (2007) found that politically, STs are the weakest social group, which means that they are unlikely to have much access to the coveted public goods. Furthermore, they have fared worse than SCs in terms of access to resources. These authors found that while SCs have benefitted from affirmative action policies, STs have not.

The case of Muslims, a religious minority in India, is complicated. Banerjee & Somanathan (2007) write that while Muslims have officially been recognised as a socially marginalised community, they have not received the same benefits as the Scheduled Castes. In 2006, a government commissioned study 'Sachar Committee Report' (Ministry of Minorities Affairs, 2006) revealed that Muslims are socially and economically backward and provisions must be made to improve their condition. The study also found that Muslim women refrain from accessing public health institutions as they face discrimination. This report was widely criticized by the Hindu right-wing

for being biased and antithetical to the secular ethos of India. Currently, India is ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu right-wing nationalist party, which has increased tensions between Hindus and Muslims and contributed to a polarising atmosphere. BJP also governs most of the states which have the highest maternal mortality rates, therefore, polarisation of politics has the potential to affect utilisation of maternal health services. However, Bowleg (2012) writes that intersectionality was not developed to predict behaviour. Nonetheless, the linkages between a polarised political atmosphere and access to maternal health services could be an area for further research.

While the linkages between domination of groups and allocation of resources is critical, the situation is more complex at the constituency level. Within a state, there is a high prevalence of clientelism i.e. constituencies which have legislators from the ruling party receive a larger share of public resources as they utilise their political influence to deliver additional public projects to their home constituencies to cultivate political support. However, communities that are best served by government are those that possess both top-down political connections to the ruling party, as well as high levels of grassroots local democratic mobilisation needed to place pressure on local politicians to deliver services (Dasgupta, 2016). Another unpredictable terrain is the behaviour of government officials. Irrespective of the government in power, the responsibility of last-mile distribution of public welfare services and goods are managed by government officials. The identity and bias of government officials results in corrupt practices and influence delivery of public services (Jeffrey, 2002).

As discussed in this section, in India, identities are deeply intertwined with local and national politics, therefore, any public welfare scheme must take the intersectionalities of political economy into account. While not all issues highlighted here hold relevance everywhere, they must be given due importance and consideration depending upon the context.

METHODOLOGY, LIMITATIONS AND POSITIONALITY

For this paper, I used a secondary research approach for analysis. A snowballing technique was employed to identify relevant sources. The process began with a set of key articles and seminal papers on maternal health in India, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and intersectionality. These articles were extracted from the reading lists of the MA Gender and Development program at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex of which the author is an alumnus. Using this approach ensured that the initial selection of literature reflected rigour of academic articles as well as covered contemporary debates on intersectionality and JSY. The bibliography lists from these papers were examined to identify further relevant literature. The case study discussed in section five was chosen from a range of fact-finding reports on maternal deaths conducted by Socio-Legal Information Centre, an activist organisation in India.

Furthermore, I am cognisant that my positionality and subjectivity may have affected the findings of this paper. As I belong to an upper-caste Hindu family and an economically privileged background in India, my lens for reading and critically analysing JSY may inadvertently obscure some complexities. As a public health and social science researcher, I am aware of the class and caste dynamics in India, but these understandings are filtered through my own Hindu upper-caste and class privileges. While I have made all possible efforts to address and mitigate unintended biases arising from my positionality, I acknowledge that my analysis may be influenced by upper-caste and class normalisation, which could obscure some of the nuanced realities and lived experiences of discrimination faced by marginalised groups.

To address these challenges while writing this paper, I have:

- Engaged reflexively, documenting my assumptions and reflecting on how my background may influence interpretation of the findings in this paper

- Tried to prioritise and include papers from authors belonging to marginalised communities

MATERNAL HEALTH IN INDIA: CAUSES AND STATISTICS

I argue that maternal mortality is an intersectional phenomenon, where social, cultural, biological, and political factors interact to cause a woman's death. In official records, maternal deaths are attributed to medical complications, but structurally, a maternal death is an outcome of discrimination at multiple levels and in different forms, which range from social exclusion of women from marginalised communities to lack of emergency obstetric care services in public health institutions. Therefore, a maternal death carries a history of lived experiences and discrimination the woman was subjected to (Krieger, 1999). This is because discrimination creates and structures exposures to noxious physical, chemical, biological, and psychosocial insults, all of which can affect a woman's ability to save her life (Krieger, 1999). Each of these discriminations needs to be discussed individually, but they are mutually interlocking.

In India, a woman's disadvantage starts with the immense importance placed on motherhood, which often is the primary driver for taking family-oriented decisions. The subordinated position of women leaves them with limited or no bargaining power regarding how many children they want. The decision regarding the number of children to be borne by a woman is usually taken by the husband or the mother-in-law. Drawing on her experience, Unnithan(2015) writes that in Rajasthan, a state in North India which has a highly patriarchal society, women's bodies and reproductive capacities are regarded as publicly 'owned', with decision-making vested in families or other social (kin) groups. Childbearing is intrinsic to the construction of women's personhood (in a structural sense) (Unnithan, 2015). Furthermore, the preference for a male child can lead to a woman having multiple pregnancies, which can severely affect her health and nutrition levels.

Apart from social and cultural inequalities which 'force' women to bear children, they are further disadvantaged by India's dilapidated public health system. Das (2017) writes that in the context of maternal care, key health services are still not universally available in all districts. This is particularly important because evidence suggests maternal mortality can be reduced when deliveries are conducted by skilled birth attendants and women have access to emergency obstetric care (Sidney et al. 2016). This is due to the given the unpredictable nature of life-threatening complications that can occur at the time of childbirth. Thus, with public healthcare institutions not being able to provide quality care, women resort to private institutions and traditional medicine practitioners – who can provide care services for money – resulting in high out-of-pocket expenditure. An analysis of government data found that 46.6% of Indian mothers are pushed into poverty due to maternal care expenses, which include pre-natal, pregnancy, and post-natal care (Singh et al., 2016). The disaggregation of the data revealed that 71.5% of ST women and 49% of SC women were pushed into poverty due to maternal care expenses, reinforcing the fact that they are more disadvantaged than others. Therefore, maternal death is a treacherously complex phenomenon which includes interactions between various discriminations by different actors. A study by Banerjee, John and Singh (2024) noted a disproportionately higher burden of maternal deaths among SCs and tribal populations.

India's maternal mortality ratio² (MMR) has declined from 600 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 103 in 2020, but India missed its target MMR of 109 in the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 (PIB India, 2024). An analysis of MMR data (Joe et al., 2015) revealed that the pace of reduction in MMR over the past two decades (particularly, the rate of decline) does not commensurate well with the observed improvements in socioeconomic indicators across states. Furthermore, the decline in maternal mortality was far less in poor rural populations, and access to services in these areas continues to be poor (Montgomery et al., 2014). This finding may

be associated with the regional inequalities in MMR data which are obscured by the national MMR figure. Assam, a state in India's North-Eastern region, has an MMR of 195 as of 2020 while Kerala, a state in Southern India, has an MMR of 19, highlighting the wide disparity (Government of India, 2022).

However, these statistics may not be completely reliable. A study (Barnett et al., 2008) used key informant surveillance systems to estimate the MMR in Adivasi populated areas in Odisha and Jharkhand. In a sample population of 228,186 people, their analysis found a maternal mortality ratio of 722 per 100,000 live births, much higher than the state's average of 367 (UNDP India, 2004) at that time. This study highlights the difficulties in measuring maternal mortality that are frequent constraints to having accurate measurements and monitoring the impact of interventions (Barnett et al., 2008). Furthermore, the official method of calculating MMRs does not address the underlying risks that women face. The MMRs cited above express the risk of dying during a single pregnancy. But most women have more than one pregnancy, especially in societies where a woman's value as a person largely depends on the number of children she has, as Unnithan (2015) highlighted from her work in Rajasthan.

An analysis of family survey data in India (Milazzo, 2018) found that strong preferences for male children are partly driving female mortality in adulthood, especially for women whose first born child is a girl. To ensure the desired sex composition of children, they can have repeated and closely spaced pregnancies until the ideal number of sons has been reached, a behaviour medically known to increase the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity (Milazzo, 2018, p. 14). Thus, many women run the risk of maternal death many times. Therefore, MMR data obscures the multiple risks of death a woman can face. Highlighting lifetime risk is critical because the only objective of maternal health interventions should not be to reduce MMR but also focus on ensuring safe pregnancies and deliveries.

JANANI SURAKSHA YOJANA: KEY FEATURES

The Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) is a maternal healthcare scheme under NRHM in 2005, which incentivises institutional deliveries by paying cash handouts to women for delivering in accredited hospitals. JSY focuses on poor pregnant women with a special focus on states having low institutional delivery rates – Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan, Odisha and Jammu and Kashmir. These states have been termed as ‘low performing states’, the remaining states with high institutional delivery rates are termed as ‘high performing states’. The guidelines and cash entitlements differ based on these two categorisations. In low performing states, 1) all pregnant women, irrespective of age, poverty status, and number of births, are eligible if they deliver in a government medical facility; 2) only women from BPL households and women from Scheduled Tribes (ST) /Scheduled Castes (SC) households (whether above or below the BPL) are eligible if they deliver in an accredited private medical facility.

In high performing states, 1) only those pregnant women who are aged 19 years and above and belong to the BPL households are eligible for cash assistance; 2) women belonging to SC/ST households, irrespective of their poverty status, are eligible, provided they are above the age of 19, and 3) cash assistance is limited to only two live births, even for women belonging to SC/STs.

In low performing states, JSY provides performance-based incentives to women health workers, ASHAs or Accredited Social Health Activists, to promote institutional deliveries. ASHAs are women community health workers employed by the government to manage and deal with public health programmes on the ground. To receive their JSY incentives, ASHAs have several responsibilities. They identify pregnant women as beneficiaries for the scheme as well as report or facilitate their registration for ante-natal care (ANC); to assist them in

obtaining the necessary certificates, wherever necessary; to provide and/or help women receive at least three ANC check-ups including tetanus (TT) injections and iron and folic acid (IFA) tablets; among other related tasks.

Though JSY does recognise the fact that SC/ST women are marginalised and vulnerable to maternal mortality, it doesn’t address the intersectionality and complexities of these identities further, which is why these women still face challenges accessing JSY services.

Category	Rural Area		Urban Area	
	Mother’s package	ASHA’s package*	Mother’s package	ASHA’s package*
LPS	INR 1400	INR 600	INR1000	INR 400
HPS	INR 700	INR 600	INR 600	INR 400

Table 1 Incentive structure for JSY (National Health Mission, 2005)

Existing evidence suggests that JSY met its primary objective of promoting institutional deliveries, but it has failed on other fronts: One, reaching the poorest and most vulnerable women in the country, and two, reducing maternal deaths and MMR proportionately.

Between 2005 and 2021, the percentage of institutional deliveries has increased from 38.7% to 88.6% (Tripathi et al., 2023) but multiple studies over the years (Dongre, 2014; Lim et al., 2010; Mishra et al., 2021) have found that JSY has failed to reach the poorest and most vulnerable women. Despite the implementation of JSY, women from SC/ST households have not experienced higher increase in institutional deliveries and access to the scheme relative to the non-SC/ST households in both the groups despite being more disadvantaged (Dongre, 2014; Mishra et al., 2021). The difference in availing JSY services between SC/ST (37.6%) and Non-SC/ST (61.8%) women is 24.2 points (Mishra et al., 2021).

These findings underscore the importance of understanding the intersectionalities underlying maternal

health. Though JSY intends to target the poorest and most vulnerable women, it fails to address the structural discrimination that affects its outreach. From a public health perspective, one can argue that we need improved public health facilities and accountability, but to address the complexities of social and cultural inequalities, an intersectional framework is needed.

JSY's second failure is to address maternal deaths and MMR adequately. Multiple analyses (Dongre, 2014; Powell-Jackson et al., 2015) have found that there is a lack of relationship between the rise in institutional deliveries and reduction in MMR, as the rise hasn't been mirrored by a proportionate decline in MMR. One persuasive explanation for this finding is that JSY incentivised women to go to health facilities whose purpose was not to manage life-threatening complications (Powell-Jackson et al., 2015). Yamin and Maine (1999) write that without a clear understanding of the causal chain leading to maternal mortality (and how to break it), programs intended to reduce maternal deaths are likely to be ineffective. I find that Yamin and Maine's arguments hold particularly true in JSY's case as it failed on multiple fronts. I will delineate four reasons which explain JSY's failure to reduce maternal deaths: One, lack of understanding of the local context. Two, the quality of care at public hospitals. Three, discrimination against marginalised women, and four, excessive focus on statistics.

Lack of understanding of the local context: JSY has failed to understand women's lived realities. It only promoted or 'forced' the dominant but faulty narrative of institutional deliveries being the panacea for tackling maternal deaths. A study conducted among tribal communities in Raygada district of Odisha showed that the health system is ignorant about the traditional pregnancy, delivery, and childcare practices of the tribal communities (Contractor & Das, 2015, cited in Das, 2017). The promotion of institutional deliveries as the only 'correct' way discriminates against traditional birth practices which may be safer.

Quality of care in public hospitals: While JSY

promotes institutional deliveries, the quality of care at government hospitals and centres is deplorable. The quality of antenatal care is vital to reducing the risk of stillbirths and pregnancy complications, and the absence of it explains why more women enrolling for hospital deliveries does not translate to fewer maternal deaths. A survey conducted by Water Aid India in 343 public healthcare institutions across six states, revealed a lack of basic hygiene, toilets, clean water, and waste disposal (Water Aid, 2016).

Discrimination against marginalised women: Das(2017) writes that marginalised communities are stigmatised for not adopting the policies to increase institutional deliveries. This is a discriminatory as women from marginalised communities have a deep mistrust of public health services and thus, they do not prefer institutional delivers.. A study conducted in rural Uttar Pradesh revealed that 74% of ASHAs in their survey belonged to general caste or other OBC families. They are often relatives of village leaders, and hence hesitate to visit scheduled caste/tribe women (Khan et al., 2010). In some cases, the perceived hostility towards, or non-acceptance of ASHAs by Muslim families also deprives Muslim families from receiving advice from the ASHA.

Excessive focus on statistics: It appears that JSY is more oriented towards chasing statistical achievements of reducing the nationwide MMR, than addressing the maternal needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This is associated with the fact that JSY incentivised women to go to health facilities whose purpose was not to manage life-threatening complications (Jackson et al., 2015). Khan et al. (2010, p. 14) found that if an ASHA worker feels that a segment of women may not opt for institutional delivery because they are not educated, the village is remote, or for other reasons such as the practice of *purdah* or religion, she does not want to "invest" her time in them for registration of ANC or persuading them to undergo at least three ANC check-ups. This finding reflects that the ASHA worker may be more concerned about their cash incentives than preventing maternal deaths.

KEY FLAWS OF JANANI SURAKSHA YOJANA

It should be emphasised that the reasons I have discussed above are based on an analysis of studies which evaluated JSY's implementation on the ground. However, hardly any study or report has critically examined the basic structure of JSY through an intersectional lens. I analysed JSY's program structure and guidelines and found three flaws.

Women as a homogenous category: JSY treats women as a homogenous and universal entity and assumes that every woman's maternal needs and desires are similar. It assumes that a caste Hindu woman, a Dalit woman, a Muslim woman, and an *Adivasi* woman – whose lived experiences and social statuses will be different – will have the similar knowledge, agency, and bargaining power when it comes to maternal choices. Furthermore, these categories are heterogeneous. It does address the marginalisation of SC/ST women, but it must be remembered that these categories aren't monolithic either. Neither all Dalit women nor all *Adivasi* women are the same. A study conducted among tribal communities in Raygada district of Odisha showed that "the health system is completely ignorant about the traditional pregnancy, delivery, and childcare practices of the tribal communities" (Contractor & Das, 2015, cited in Das, 2017, p. 95).

Lack of understanding of the local context and lived experiences of women: JSY promoted the dominant narrative of institutional deliveries being the panacea for tackling maternal deaths. This promotion discriminates against traditional birth methods and practices which may be safer. In rural areas, based on their lived experiences, different communities have different lenses through which they view the state. This is particularly important as JSY is a government scheme, and assuming every woman will be receptive to it is a flawed assumption. During their research on JSY in rural northern India, (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2010) found that government health care provision is characterised by widespread and long-term mistrust of

state services among Muslims. Therefore, encouraging institutional deliveries without addressing the perceptions of potential service users is a flawed approach to reducing maternal mortality.

No provisions or guidelines to address the social determinants of maternal health: JSY assumes that maternal mortality can be curbed by focusing solely on increasing institutional deliveries and that a woman's health is determined only by her biology. In Unnithan (2015, p. 52) words, "it (JSY here) does not consider the experiential, embodied, inter-subjective, and phenomenological aspects of health". This approach of JSY is rooted in clinical and biomedical connotations, which discards social determinants of maternal health. In a report documented through visits in Uttar Pradesh, Acosta (2016, p. 4) writes:

"JSY's approach to maternal health had an assumption that health is only measured as per the woman's biological self. This framing nurtures the idea that the body is the appropriate target for health interventions and assumes that culture or social life is a set of mutually exclusive concepts and practices".

Therefore, using (Sinha, 2012) words discussed earlier and interpreting them in this context, I summarise that JSY sees all women in India through a universalising perspective, which doesn't take theoretical cognisance of the local and empirical realities and given the India's cultural and social diversity, this universalisation is a critical roadblock in its objective to tackle maternal deaths.

MATERNAL DEATH IN ODISHA: HOW INTERSECTIONALITY OPERATES LOCALLY

Till now, I have discussed the issues at the national level, however, it is important to understand the relevance of applying an intersectional framework in JSY through a case study. In this section, I will discuss the maternal death of an *Adivasi*³ woman in Odisha. Using her case, I will discuss how her death was an outcome of multiple discrimination by different

actors.

In February 2016, the Socio-Legal Information Centre (previously known as the Human Rights Law Network), a human rights organisation in India, went on a fact-finding mission to Balasore, a coastal district in Odisha, to investigate the maternal death of an *Adivasi* woman and prepared a detailed report on their findings (SLIC, 2018).

Gauri Sasamal, a 30-year-old *Adivasi* woman, had two sons and became pregnant for a third time, hoping for a daughter. She was suffering from anaemia, too. She was registered under the JSY scheme. In November 2015, Gauri went for delivery at the local community health centre (CHC). As the designated gynaecologist and obstetrician were not present, the attending medical officer was Dr Bhuyan, a surgeon specialist. Though he didn't specialise in delivery and care of pregnant women, he still handled deliveries. The report found that during the delivery Gauri was subjected to significant verbal abuse from Dr Bhuyan for being pregnant despite having two sons. After she delivered a boy, Gauri started bleeding and in the absence of a blood bank at the CHC, no intervention was attempted by the medical officer.

Gauri's family repeatedly called the state government's run ambulance helpline⁴, so she could be taken to another hospital for treatment, but it didn't come. Her body was severely weak from anaemia, which exacerbated the situation. Within a few hours, Gauri bled to death as she didn't receive any medical help (SLIC, 2018). Furthermore, the family did not receive entitlements due under the JSY scheme and had to pay out-of-pocket expenses to take her body back to their village. Additionally, Gauri did not receive any services entitled to her under the Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) program⁵. The study further found, that in the CHC, the patient wards were filthy, with recently sterilised women lying on a blood-stained carpet on an unclean floor.

Situating this case in the realm of arguments and discussions in the first sections of this paper, I argue that her death did not occur due to excessive bleeding, as

it was documented in official records. Gauri's death was also due to an interaction of several factors. The common thread among these factors is the discrimination meted out to her by different actors.

Discrimination by the state government: As the HRLN report found, the public health facilities were pathetic, and this can be attributed to the state government's inaction and lack of interest in improving the ramshackle condition of health centres in *Adivasi* dominated areas. Official guidelines mandate that a CHC should be equipped to handle 24-hour delivery services, including normal and assisted deliveries, but clearly the CHC in Basta, an *Adivasi* area, was in dilapidated condition⁶. Furthermore, the non-arrival of the ambulance service and the lack of a blood bank at the CHC can also be attributed to the inadequacy of the state government.

Discrimination by her local legislator: In section 1.3, I had mentioned that as compared to SCs, STs have not been able to organise themselves politically to demand better public services. (Dasgupta, 2016) research found that communities that focus on top-down and bottom-up approaches are best served by legislators. It appears that in Gauri's village, people couldn't push the politicians to ensure basic health services. My analysis revealed that in 2016 the local legislator of Basta belonged to the political party which governed Odisha for 20 years. Therefore, not ensuring adequate health facilities in the constituency is neglect and discrimination on his part and since that led to Gauri's death, it's a human rights violation.

Discrimination from local health authorities: Gauri was verbally abused by Dr Bhuyan, the medical officer in charge at the CHC on her delivery day. This is consistent with what (Das, 2017) wrote about abusive discrimination against marginalised women. She or her family could not protest the abuse because Gauri and her family needed his services at that point, and they were helpless. Additionally, she wasn't given any additional assistance to manage blood or transferred to another hospital where she could have been

treated. Therefore, Gauri's right to free medical services was violated by the local health authorities.

Gauri's death is an example of Krieger (1999) argument discussed above on p. 9 – her death carried the history of the discrimination she was being subjected to. The cause of her death wasn't bleeding, but it was a result of structural discrimination, which found its way into the public health institution through the functionaries (state government, medical officer, and staff at the CHC), negating the legal and policy obligations of providing safe services. Gauri also had anaemia (SLIC, 2018) which is directly associated with 20%, and indirectly associated with 50% of maternal deaths in India (Anand et al., 2014). Gauri's death highlights how other factors, which are beyond the scope of JSY, may have led to her death.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since its introduction in 1989, intersectionality has become a buzzword for addressing issues of multi-dimensional discrimination. Several issues concerning intersectionality still need to be addressed (Nash, 2008) as discussed in the introduction, in any case, its usefulness as a tool to study, and possibly address, issues of inequality and discrimination cannot be undermined. From an Indian perspective, Menon (2015) has critiqued intersectionality for being a western framework assuming universalisation, but I argue that assuming universality has never been a core tenet of intersectionality. This argument is based on the premise that one of the key tenets of intersectionality – focusing on discrimination faced by historically oppressed and marginalised communities – holds immense relevance in India. The dominance of identity-based politics in India at the national and local level influences access to public welfare services (Jeffrey, 2002).

The case for applying intersectionality to the JSY is underscored by the fact that maternal mortality is an intersectional phenomenon due to the interaction between several factors, which range from structural discrimination against women to lack

of emergency medical services. While JSY's objective to curb maternal deaths is well intentioned, its sole focus on institutional deliveries as a panacea to tackle maternal mortality is problematic. The scheme's structure is geared towards chasing statistics as substantiated through the example of ASHAs in UP (Khan et al., 2010) who were more concerned about their cash incentives than ensuring safe pregnancies. Furthermore, JSY fails to give recognition to the lived experiences and social realities of women, and assumes that Indian women are a homogeneous category without accounting for the heterogeneous categories of caste Hindu women, Dalit women, *Adivasi* women, and Muslim women. This is reflected in its failure to reduce maternal deaths. These maternal deaths are attributed to the multiple forms of discrimination faced by pregnant women, as demonstrated through the discussion of Gauri's death. In the context of maternal health, these discriminations can be termed as human rights violations (Bouchard & Meyer-Bisch, 2016). Globally, access to maternal health has been construed as a human right and therefore, to reduce maternal deaths, JSY needs to treat access to the scheme as a human right. India is a signatory to several international human rights mechanisms and conventions, which makes it legally obligated to prevent maternal deaths.

Though there has been extensive research on JSY, my analysis found that the scheme doesn't treat maternal death as an intersectional phenomenon and assumes causality, which is evident through its standalone focus on institutional deliveries. Thus, I argue that JSY is a biomedical intervention on women's bodies rather than an evidence-based program. Furthermore, none of the existing studies critically question the basic structure and rationale of JSY. Their evaluation of the scheme's implementation assumes JSY's universality. Though it cannot be conclusively stated, my analysis tends to point towards the fact that none of the studies fully understand the process and reasons behind maternal deaths in India, which is sync with Yamin & Maine(1999, p. 564), who write “without a clear understanding of the causal chain leading to maternal mortality (and how

to break it), programs intended to reduce maternal deaths are likely to be ineffective”.

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated the relevance and utility of the intersectional framework in guiding maternal health interventions in India. Based on the discussions in this paper, I emphasise that JSY must take the intersectionalities of women into account and not follow a universal approach to reduce maternal mortality. However, demonstrating the usefulness of intersectionality to address maternal mortality in India - like this paper has done - is

not an end goal. This paper hopes to stir further research and conversations on how intersectionality can be employed in maternal health policymaking and practice in different contexts of India. Future research could focus on how the Intersectional-based policy analysis (IBPA) framework (Hankivsky et al., 2014) can be used to design and implement maternal health interventions in India, that can address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable women in the country.

NOTES

[1] MDG is Millenium Development Goals that were agreed as international development targets for the year 2015 during the Millenium Summit in 2000. As stated on p. 2 earlier, MDGs have now been replaced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are to be achieved by 2030.

[2] Maternal Mortality Ratio is defined as the number of deaths per 100,000 live births

[3] Adivasi is a term used for indigenous communities in India.

[4] With the support of the Central Government, Odisha State Government launched a free ambulance service (108) to provide a “high-end ambulance transportation system from the doorstep of the patient to the appropriate care in a hospital.

[5] JSSK was introduced in 2011 to curtail “high out of pocket expenses” incurred during institutional delivery. JSSK “assures free services to all pregnant women and sick neonates accessing public health institutions. The scheme envisages free and cashless services to pregnant women including normal deliveries and caesarean section operations and treatment of sick newborn[s] (up to 30 days after birth) in all government health institutions across state/UT.”

[6] CHCs are required to allow for a minimum 48 hour stay after delivery, and 3-7 day stay post-delivery for complicated deliveries. Furthermore, medical staff should be proficient in identifying and managing complications arising from post-partum haemorrhaging, eclampsia, and sepsis. Essential and emergency obstetric care, including surgical interventions like caesarean sections and other medical interventions, provisions for JSY and JSSK should also be available at the facility.

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Climate Adaptation as Relational Capacity:

an Intersectional Study of Pastoralist
Women in Kajiado, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Pastoralist women in Kenya's Kajiado County confront intensifying drought, yet adaptive capacity varies markedly. Using six focus group discussions across three ecologically distinct sites, this study applies an intersectional lens to explain that variation. Findings show that elders' ecological expertise stabilises herds only when labour and institutional recognition are available; livelihood diversification delivers secure gains for women with land, credit, or schooling, but channels the asset poor into precarious, time intensive work; and collective savings groups buffer shocks when fees and rules are inclusive but reproduce class and marital hierarchies when they are not. I reframe adaptation as a relational capacity involving the conversion of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic resources through everyday rules that allocate recognition and authority. My findings identify policy levers in labour support, collateral design, and group governance that can shift coping towards adaptation.

KEY WORDS

CLIMATE ADAPTATION, COLLECTIVE ACTION, INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE
SYSTEMS, INTERSECTIONALITY, LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION, PASTORALISM

INTRODUCTION

Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands cover roughly four fifths of the country and receive low, highly variable rainfall (Akall, 2021; Omolo & Mafongoya, 2019). These drylands are inhabited mainly by pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities whose mobility and livelihood diversification have historically enabled adjustment to harsh conditions (Ng'ang'a & Crane, 2020; Wangui & Smucker, 2018). This article intervenes in the everyday adaptation debate by reading climate response through ordinary practice and the relations of power that organise it (Carr, 2020; Nightingale, 2017). Pastoralism remains central to Kenya's economy, supporting about one third of the population and more than nine million direct dependents (Schilling & Werland, 2023). Within pastoralist livelihoods, women sustain livestock care, water provision, food processing, and household decision-making, although this labour often receives limited recognition (Anbacha & Kjosavik, 2019; Galwab et al., 2024). Viability depends on negotiated access to communal and private grazing and on flexible labour that redistributes effort within and beyond households (Camfield et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2017). Indigenous ecological knowledge guides herd movements and migration through close readings of vegetation and water points, as Tugjamba et al. (2023) note. However, prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and rising temperatures now strain these capacities and erode livelihoods in Kajiado County.

Policy texts frequently celebrate system resilience while leaving unspecified which actors are authorised to act and on what terms within daily pastoralist life (Akall, 2021). Without clear allocations of authority and recognition, responsibility diffuses across households, markets, and state institutions, and practical levers of response remain opaque (Carr, 2020; Rao et al., 2017). Furthermore, treating gender as a descriptive variable conceals how intersecting identities organise exposure to hazard, recognition, labour, and mobility (Carr & Thompson, 2014). Age, marital status, education, and socioeconomic position shape women's practical authority over assets,

exposure to hazards and mobility options (Djouidi et al., 2016). These patterned positions govern who can mobilise Indigenous Knowledge Systems, who can pursue livelihood diversification, and who can participate in collective mechanisms on meaningful terms (Sithole, 2019). Intensifying climate pressures in Kajiado County magnify these inequalities and raise the stakes for who speaks, who decides, and who benefits.

Our inquiry examines three domains in which authority and recognition are produced in practice: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, livelihood diversification and migration, and collective action, within a literature where intersectional analyses remain scarce (Alare et al., 2022; Djouidi et al., 2016). I attend to household decision forums, migration patterns, herd and crop management, savings groups and market transactions. Within these themes I track the rules and resources that shape entry, voice and benefit sharing, notably savings thresholds, speaking protocols, land tenure, access to credit and the time costs of care. The analysis stays with relations and positions rather than isolated attributes so that distributions of recognition, resources, and decision space become visible. I also consider formal planning in Kenya, which shapes whether Indigenous ecological knowledge informs decisions as Walker et al. (2022b) notes, while climate variability sets hard constraints even as social hierarchies determine whose practices are recognised as legitimate responses (Galwab et al., 2024). Accordingly, our aim is to explain why adaptation outcomes diverge among pastoralist women in Kajiado by showing how intersecting positions condition the conversion of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capitals into adaptive decision space. This is shown in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, livelihood diversification and migration, and collective action through recognition, resources, and rules.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I situate the paper within climate adaptation scholarship and contribute an explicitly intersectional account of how adaptive capacity is produced through

recognition, resources, and rules. Adaptation is defined as a sustained reorganisation of practices intended to reduce future climate risk, whereas coping refers to short-term responses (Carr & Thompson, 2014; Nightingale, 2017). Resilience denotes the capacity of a system to absorb shocks without losing essential function (Liru & Heineken, 2021). Intersectionality provides the lens for analysing how gender, age, marital status, and socioeconomic position combine to allocate the recognition and resources needed for such reorganisation (Crenshaw, 1989). In this article, adaptation is conceptualised as a relational capacity structured by intersectional hierarchies that distribute recognition, resources, and decision space in everyday practice. This conceptualisation keeps attention on relationships and positions rather than isolated individuals, and it names the core objects of analysis used throughout. Because these distributions are enacted through daily institutions and interactions, the same vocabulary is carried into the empirical analysis for coherence. I adopt a stance consistent with Carr (2020) and Nightingale (2017), anchoring explanation in position and relation and placing the study within work on everyday adaptation and power.

Selective use of Bourdieu's concepts of capital (1986) and field (1989) sharpens how recognition and authority circulate in pastoralist contexts without displacing the intersectional lens. Capital is treated as a composite resource comprising social, cultural, symbolic, and economic forms whose value depends on recognition within specific fields. Fields carry rules, thresholds, and tacit expectations, for example savings requirements or speaking protocols, that condition which actors can convert available resources into action. The term relational agency is used as shorthand for the intersectional mobilisation of these capitals within fields and is not introduced as an additional layer of theory. When recognised, Indigenous ecological knowledge functions as cultural capital that can translate into authority in household or community decisions; when unrecognised, it remains dormant. Livelihood diversification and collective action likewise yield divergent outcomes

across positions because conversion depends on credit, labour time, permissions, recognition, and other economic constraints. I use a parsimonious vocabulary: an intersectional analytical lens to structure categories and comparison; and, only where needed, the language of vulnerability and resources–agency–achievements to clarify how decision space expands or contracts in practice.

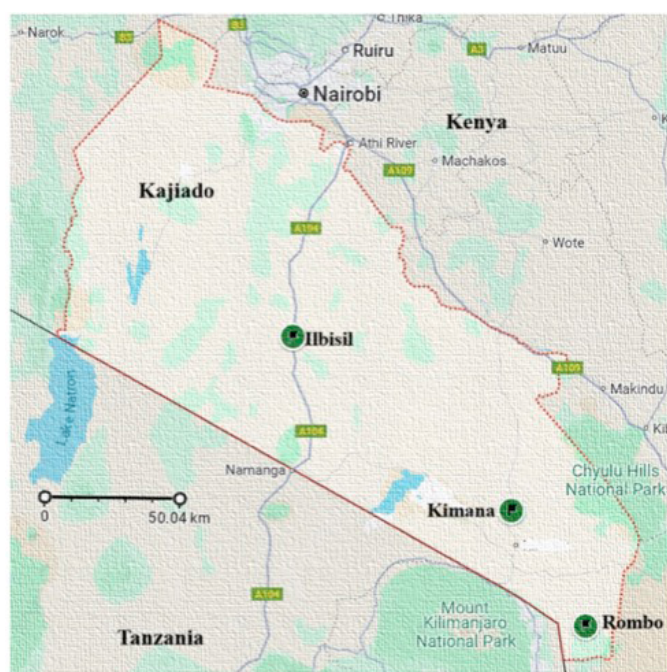
The lens is operationalised across the three domains through a single routine that travels across sites while preserving local nuance. For each practice, the analysis identifies intersecting positions and the social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capitals available to the actor, and it then assesses whether the practice reallocates recognition, resources, or decision space, which signals movement from coping toward adaptation. Next, I document the field rules that stabilise or erode the arrangement. This is because the same questions are applied across domains, comparison is possible without presuming uniform pathways and without abstracting away from everyday practice. Attention remains on relations and conversions rather than traits, so adaptive capacity is read as a product of position within hierarchies rather than individual ingenuity. Therefore, I treat climate adaptation as both a response to environmental variability and a negotiation of historically produced inequalities; in this study, the scope and direction of that negotiation are structured by intersectional position. This framework contributes two advances: it provides an intersectional explanation of how capitals convert, or fail to convert, into adaptive action in dryland pastoralism, and it offers a portable operational routine for analysis in other climate-affected contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Kajiado County, located in southern Kenya along the Tanzanian border, forms part of the Serengeti-Mara Ecosystem, a vital wildlife migration corridor spanning nearly 25 million hectares and supporting the annual migration of wildebeest, zebra, and Thomson's gazelle (Osano et al., 2013). The region experiences arid to semi-arid conditions, with temperatures

ranging from 10°C to 34°C and a bimodal rainfall pattern, with long rains from March to May and short rains from October to December. Climate change has resulted in declining rainfall, rising temperatures, and more frequent droughts, leading to crop failures, livestock losses, and increasing livelihood precarity (Imana & Zenda, 2023; Osano et al., 2013). Livestock rearing, the primary livelihood for approximately 75 percent of the population, has become increasingly unstable, while crop farming faces mounting risks from unreliable rains and flash floods. The study sites of Rombo, Kimana, and Ilbisil reflect these vulnerabilities (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Location of study sites in Kajiado County, Kenya. Focus group sites are marked with green flags.



(Google Maps, 2025)

To capture diverse socio-ecological conditions and livelihood practices, three communities were purposefully selected within Kajiado County. Rombo represents a rural pastoralist community characterised by traditional nomadic livestock rearing and limited access to services. Ilbisil constitutes a rural mixed farming community combining livestock rearing with small-scale agriculture. Kimana, a peri-urban pastoralist setting, features diversified livelihoods supported by irrigation alongside

traditional pastoralism. Site selection was aimed at capturing ecological, social, and economic heterogeneity relevant to pastoralist climate adaptation processes.

The study was undertaken in August 2023. Participants were selected if they were Maasai adults, native to the study sites, and had resided there for more than twenty years to ensure historical and contextual depth. Gender-disaggregated focus groups were used, reflecting the analytical focus on gender and respecting local norms around social interaction. Male respondents were moderated by a team led by a trained male assistant, while women's groups were moderated by the author with the assistance of female record-keepers. Focus groups were conducted in local schools and churches, neutral venues selected to facilitate accessibility and minimise external interference during discussions.

Participants were purposefully sampled to reflect diversity in age, education, occupation, and income. Each site hosted two focus groups per gender, comprising eight to eleven participants to ensure discourse saturation while maintaining manageability (Pinto da Costa, 2021). Socio-economic characteristics were recorded through a demographic register completed after each session (Supplementary Table 1). In total, 113 individuals participated, 56 women and 57 men. This article draws exclusively on women's focus groups, in line with the study's intra-gender analytical focus on women's adaptation practices. Discussions followed a semi-structured guide designed to elicit participants' interactions with climate change. Sessions began with an explanation of the study's purpose, confidentiality assurances, and consent procedures. Given low literacy levels in the study communities, verbal consent was obtained and audio recorded. All discussions were audio recorded with participants' permission and supplemented by written field notes to ensure comprehensive data capture.

Transcripts were produced in Kiswahili and Maa; the languages used during the sessions and translated

into English by a professional service to preserve meaning and cultural nuance. Data were analysed in MAXQDA using a hybrid thematic coding approach that combined inductive exploration with deductive framing from the study's intersectional framework. Intersectionality serves as the theoretical-analytical framework. I analysed how gender, age, marital status, and socioeconomic position combine to organise exposure to hazard, recognition within institutions, and the conversion of available capitals into decision space. This framework guided the coding scheme and comparison across the three adaptation domains and explains why similar knowledges or resources yield divergent outcomes for different women. Open coding was first used to capture recurring themes in women's accounts of climate-related challenges and responses. These were then refined into higher-order categories that aligned with both participant emphasis and the structural concerns of the analytical framework. The three adaptation domains discussed in the findings, emerged from this process as the most consistently referenced and theoretically significant across all focus groups.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Review Board of the Universidad de Oviedo (Ref: 28_RRI_2023). Informed consent procedures were adapted to respect local linguistic and literacy contexts. Pseudonyms were assigned in all transcripts to preserve anonymity. Attention was given to creating a culturally appropriate and respectful research environment that encouraged participants to share their experiences openly and without fear of reprisal. Building on this methodological approach, the next section presents the findings of the study, structured around the three adaptation domains identified through the thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Climate change manifests most clearly for participants as prolonged drought, hotter seasons and erratic rainfall. Women across age, occupation and status linked these shifts to shrinking pasture, longer water walks and higher food costs. Across sites respondents

listed a mix of coping tactics such as digging wells for domestic and irrigation use, trading, borrowing and exchanging seeds and self-help groups. Yet, respondents stressed that success depended on who controlled assets, labour, and knowledge. Those controls vary along intersecting lines of gender, age and socio-economic position, confirming the study's focus on adaptation as relational capacity rather than individual ingenuity. The first domain, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), illustrates how ecological expertise becomes an adaptive resource or remains latent depending on the resources and recognition available to different women.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems are central to pastoralist women's climate response, yet who can mobilise that knowledge and with what effect depends on intersecting identities that structure access and authority (Crenshaw, 1989; Sithole, 2019; Walker et al. 2022a). I treat cultural capital as ecological expertise and read social, economic, and symbolic capital as the enabling resources and recognitions through which expertise converts into action. Conversion turns on recognition, resource reach, and rules that set decision space. Using this routine across sites, I identify intersecting positions and available capitals for each practice and then assess whether recognition, resources, or rules are reallocated from coping toward adaptation. The evidence that follows shows how identical knowledge yields divergent outcomes when positions differ.

This tension is particularly visible in Rombo, where older widows act as custodians of ecological knowledge while lacking the labour and assets needed to scale it. One elderly widow described her practices:

“This land is hard, and we use what we know. My mother showed me how to find plants that keep the animals alive when there is no rain. We dig shallow wells and line them with stones to keep the water for longer, but it is not enough, and

without men to help, the work is very slow.” (R4F, Rombo).

Here cultural capital is strong, while social capital in male labour networks and economic capital for tools are weak; symbolic capital in formal programmes is uneven. This reading accords with reports of institutional neglect and makes visible the blocking rules of gendered labour allocation and credentialing over water works that interrupt conversion beyond the household (Rao, 2019). Recognition among peers is high but institutional uptake is limited, so authority and budgets do not widen. Decision space remains narrow despite competence, which shows how position, not motivation, sets the ceiling.

Kimana’s peri-urban setting layers education and connectivity onto pastoral practice, yielding selective knowledge hybridisation. Some women integrate traditional ecological indicators with modern technologies to navigate climate variability, yet this capacity is structured by intersectional advantages that privilege certain positions while marginalising others. One college-educated participant explained:

“We still follow the signs in nature, like the birds, but now also check our phones to confirm the weather to know when to plant or move the animals. But not all women here know how to use these tools, and some cannot afford them.” (R2F, Kimana).

The speaker illustrates how intersectional positioning combining gender with higher education and digital access enables knowledge pluralism where traditional and scientific systems are selectively combined. Cultural capital in reading clouds and birds merges with economic capital in handset and data and with symbolic capital from schooling, which sharpens timing for planting and movements. This evidence resonates with plural knowledge accounts and adds device access, data costs, and literacy as the rules that sort women within the same site (Agarwal, 2009; Liru & Heineken, 2021). Recognition tilts toward device holders and resources cluster around connectivity, so room to act expands for some and

contracts for others. Hybrid practice therefore displays innovation while reproducing exclusions rooted in intersectional inequalities. The result is an intra-gender divide produced by access and validation rather than by interest or effort.

In Ilbisil, where agro-pastoralist practices coexist with acute resource stress, the patriarchal control of assets limits married women, even when ecological knowledge is sound. One married woman recounted:

“We grow kitchen gardens and dig small wells to save water for the animals. I had a large herd of goats, but my husband sold them, even though we needed them for school fees.” (R6F, Ilbisil).

This testimony highlights how intersecting identities of gender, marital status, and economic dependency create fragile adaptive agency under conditions of patriarchal resource control. Although the speaker mobilises cultural capital in water saving and some economic capital in small infrastructure, a rule that centralises livestock sale authority in men severs knowledge from assets at the crucial moment. This pattern corroborates previous analyses of negotiated rather than autonomous agency and makes the property rule that neutralises women’s contribution explicit (Anbacha & Kjosavik, 2019; Kabeer, 1999). Recognition for care and water work does not translate into authority over herd portfolios. Resources are present but insecure, so decision space contracts exactly at conversion. Without rule change, this remains coping rather than adaptation. The disconnect between women’s knowledge and their ability to act upon it reflects how structural inequalities reproduce vulnerability even when other capitals are present and actively deployed.

Furthermore, biodiversity stewardship created another test of conversion. Biodiversity conservation practices emerged across all sites as another vital domain through which IKS is preserved and transmitted. Yet, intersectional positioning determined whether this cultural capital earned broader recognition and institutional support. In Rombo, one elderly woman explained:

“We grow the aloe and keep hardy trees because they heal the cows and protect the land. Younger women do not think much of these things, but when the drought comes, they remember what we taught them.” (R7F, Rombo).

These reflections show intergenerational tension in knowledge transmission that is produced through intersectional positioning and the conversion of capitals. Older women’s practices carry high functional value as cultural capital, yet symbolic recognition from younger cohorts is episodic, rising with drought salience and ebbing in ordinary seasons. This rhythm is consistent with hazard dynamics in Kenya’s drylands. In Bourdieu’s terms, conversion depends on the field rules that allocate time and labour, not memory alone. These cases therefore corroborate work showing that IKS requires institutional and social validation to travel into action (Rao, 2019; Sithole, 2019). Where recognition and small inputs are present, stewardship endures; where they are not, knowledge remains locally valued but dormant.

Among younger women in Kimana, traditional conservation knowledge persists yet rarely scales without resources. A youthful irrigation farmer reflected: “We are told to plant new trees to help with the soil. We already know which ones grow well here. If we had more resources, we could grow more to protect the land.” (R5F, Kimana). The speaker demonstrates how intersectional positioning combining gender, youth, and economic resources constrains the conversion of cultural capital into broader adaptive action despite clear knowledge and motivation. Traditional ecological knowledge continues to inform adaptive practices but remains constrained by infrastructural and financial barriers that reflect intersectional disadvantages in accessing economic capital and institutional support. This finding reinforces other positions that knowledge alone cannot offset the material deficits that hinder application when intersectional positioning denies access to the social and economic resources necessary for implementation (Sithole, 2019). The respondent’s position therefore is: on recognition, she receives encouragement without budget; on

resources, costs block expansion; on decision space, actions remain modest and easily reversed.

Thus, this section shows that IKS operates as an intersectionally structured field in which cultural capital converts into adaptive capacity only when recognition, resources, and rules widen women’s decision space. Through an intersectional lens, positions determine whose readings of pasture, water, and seasonality are treated as authoritative. Selective hybridity in peri-urban sites reshapes symbolic capital; elder stewardship reveals hazard contingent recognition; and patriarchal labour and asset rules halt conversion despite competence. In Bourdieu’s terms, conversion hinges on how social, economic, and symbolic capitals can be mobilised inside local rules. This refines everyday adaptation work by locating power in routine practice rather than traits. Where rules reallocate labour, inputs, and voice to the knowledge holder, IKS moves from coping to adaptation; otherwise, expertise remains local and reversible.

LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION AND MIGRATION

Diversification is widely promoted as an adaptive pathway (Ng’ang’a & Crane, 2020), yet feasibility and payoff vary sharply with intersecting identities that govern access to land, credit, education, and labour (Rao, 2019). I read economic capital as assets, cash, and credit and social capital as work ties and migration networks, and I follow how these resources convert under rules for ownership, wages, and mobility. Diversification signals adaptation when labour is reorganised, income becomes predictable, and authority widens; it reads as coping when effort increases without security or control. These results sit with studies that document diversification under climate pressure and specify intra-gender thresholds and conversion points in local markets (Rao et al., 2020; Tugjamba et al., 2023). Symbolic capital also matters because reputation shapes hiring and group credit. The lens remains on position and rules rather than assumed dispositions.

In Kimana, opportunities can be substantial bearing the mixed economy, yet those pre-conditions are steep. Women with land ownership and formal education combine pastoralist practices with innovations such as solar-powered irrigation systems, leveraging both economic capital (land tenure) and cultural capital (education) within fields that recognise these credentials. However, collateral rules and equipment costs limit who gets in. A younger, land-poor woman with limited education described a narrow set of options:

“I do not have land or cows like older women. I must work on other people’s farms, but the work is hard, and the pay is little. Sometimes I sell vegetables in town, but it is never enough.” (R6F, Kimana).

The respondent’s position shows how intersecting youth, landlessness and limited education create a deficit of economic and cultural capital, constraining agency to wage labour within exploitative field conditions. This reality exemplifies how intersectional positions condition what forms of capital women can access and convert into adaptive action (Crenshaw, 1989). This reading supports analyses of constrained agency and specifies the rules that block conversion into stability as piece rate norms, market fees, and spoilage risks that keep earnings volatile as the rules that block conversion into stability (Kabeer, 1999). In this case recognition remains transactional, resources are thin, and decision space is short and reactive.

Additionally, tourism extends the job menu yet introduces volatility and stigma in Kimana. One participant stated:

“When there is no work, some women turn to other ways to survive. It is shameful to talk about, (sex-work) but what can you do when your children are hungry?” (R8F, Kimana).

This account reveals how adaptation practices are entangled with social stigma and economic desperation when formal fields exclude women based on their intersectional positioning. Income from such

work is intermittent and risky; social capital can erode under stigma, and symbolic capital declines in community eyes. In the absence of protective labour policy, employers externalise risk, and women marked as risky workers lose access to safer jobs or loans, which matches accounts of precarious transitions and adds the social consequences that narrow future options (Liru & Heineken, 2021; Sithole, 2019). Consequently, recognition turns negative, resources lose reliability, and decision space compresses to immediate survival.

In Ilbisil, diversification efforts centred on beadwork, poultry farming, and small-scale horticulture, representing attempts to mobilise cultural capital (craft skills) and modest economic resources within highly constrained fields. These practices provided supplementary income but remained vulnerable to environmental variability and market volatility. One middle-aged participant shared: “I weave beads and grow vegetables near my home. Even when rains are scarce, I save water for my plants. These activities help me buy food and pay school fees.” (R4F, Ilbisil). Yet, a second participant added the time cost: “We spend hours fetching water and must look for extra work, like washing clothes for others, to survive.” (RF2, Ilbisil). These positions mobilise cultural capital in craft and water saving and modest economic capital in tools and inputs, but queue rules, service fees, and long walks drain resources needed to move into higher-return niches. Recognition for diligence does not open credit lines; decision space remains narrow, which refines material-constraint accounts by naming everyday levers (Kabeer, 1999) and fits evidence that, without institutional support, diversification rarely restructures livelihoods (Rao et al., 2020).

Moreover, constraint also reproduces across generations. A mother in Ilbisil reflected: “My daughter has little education and no land, so she will follow what other women are doing.” (R9F, Ilbisil). Without collateral for credit or certificates for training, young women enter crowded micro-enterprises with low margins. This trajectory matches classic accounts of transmitted advantage and identifies the chokepoints

that channel daughters into the same saturated niches (Bourdieu, 1986; Furusa & Furusa, 2014). Recognition is confined to family roles, resources are inherited as scarcity, and decision space funnels into limited options. Adaptation here is sustained effort under constraint rather than movement toward autonomy.

Furthermore, migration emerged as a widespread strategy, especially among younger women in domestic work, yet it often redistributes rather than reduces risk. Intersectional positioning is revealed as shaping both the decision to migrate and its consequences for those left behind. An older caregiver in Rombo explained:

“My daughter and her husband went to the city to work, leaving her children with me...it has been months since they sent money, I had to leave Manyumbani group because I am constantly needed at home.” (R7F, Rombo).

These remarks reveal how migration reconfigures household labour in ways that intensify unpaid care responsibilities for older multi-generational “de facto” mothers. For the respondent, remittances are irregular, attendance rules penalise missed meetings, and unpaid care expands for those who stay. Therefore, social capital in savings groups declines and symbolic capital as a reliable member is lost. These dynamics align with evidence on fragile remittance regimes and make visible how safety nets weaken when rules cannot be met (Camfield et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2020). When men move away, women’s authority at home may widen, yet legitimacy remains retractable, which fits reports of conditional openings in household power (Grillos, 2018; Rao, 2019). Migration thus shifts risk within already precarious households rather than producing adaptation.

These findings thus illustrate that diversification and migration present a spectrum of possibilities bounded by intersectional location and by rules that govern conversion. Women who align land, education, and credit translate economic and social capital into modest security; those missing one or more

elements face precarious work closer to coping than adaptation. Migration offers episodic relief while shifting care burdens and sharpening conflicts over authority for those who remain. These patterns are consistent with wider accounts of diversification under climate stress and add tangible thresholds that sort participants inside local markets and groups (Rao et al., 2020; Tugjamba et al., 2023). Relational agency appears as a function of status and design rather than personality. Recognition influences access to jobs and loans, resources define feasible steps, and rules widen or close decision space. Policy that loosens collateral conditions, stabilises wages, and invests in water and childcare would change the conversion calculus for those most constrained.

Collective Action and Social Networks

Collective action and social networks have long cushioned climate shocks in pastoralist communities (Speranza et al., 2017, p. 212). Yet benefits for women hinge on intersectional positioning within local social fields. In Kajiado, social capital moves through intra and inter household exchange, while savings groups offer formal channels to pool funds and share knowledge. Whether these arrangements reduce or reproduce vulnerability depends on who speaks, who pays dues, and whose reputations carry authority. These findings align with accounts of social resilience and add the concrete rules and thresholds that sort members inside women’s collectives (Adger, 2003; Rao, 2019). Reading outcomes through recognition, resources, and decision space clarifies why similar group labels yield divergent trajectories. This orientation keeps attention on position and rule design and reveals how unpaid care burdens intersect with class to reshape reciprocity.

This tension emerges clearly in Rombo and Ilbisil where reciprocity shifts from buffer to obligation as older carers manage out-migration and childcare, narrowing room for adaptation. An elderly widow in Rombo explained: “When my son left to work in the city, I care for his children and my niece’s as well. We share food and labour with neighbours, but

sometimes I feel like I give more than I receive.” (R6F, Rombo). An older woman in Ilbisil reiterated: “My daughter in the city sends our neighbour with gifts sometimes...we cannot eat alone; we must share with the younger women who help me with childcare, or they would be upset” (R9F, Ilbisil). These discussions show how intensified care and household fragmentation drain social capital without replenishment. While elder status yields symbolic capital as esteem rather than transfers; rules of respectability and reciprocity oblige giving before recovery, so economic capital leaks outward and decision space contracts. This reading treats vulnerability as socially produced and relational corroborating (Adger, 2003, 2006), in showing how intersecting age, gender, and marital status organise recognition. This finding explains, in conversion terms, why capitals present in these exchanges fail to become adaptive capacity.

Class shifts compound the erosion of reciprocity in Kimana. Economic stratification further reshapes access to collective support, with wealth differences interacting with gender to create new exclusions within historically reciprocal networks. A financially strained participant explained:

“I work for them on their farms for a little money. However, when I seek help, they say they need to save for their future. I turn to friends like me, but we’re all struggling.” (R1F, Kimana).

This account captures how concentrated economic and symbolic capital allow better off households to exit mutual aid and convert help into wages with no reciprocal obligation. Social capital becomes segmented, linking poorer women mainly to equally constrained peers. This observation updates capitals theory (Bourdieu, 1986), by showing how private insurance practices shift collective risk downward while preserving status at the top. Recognition privileges households framed as prudent savers, resources move toward employers, and decision space for low-income women contracts inside relationships that once buffered shocks. In our criteria this is coping, not adaptation, because capitals circulate as

obligation, decision space contracts, and no durable authority or income security is created.

Nevertheless, savings groups offer alternative platforms to rebuild buffering. Women’s increasing participation in formalised collective institutions such as Ilbisil’s “Tuinuane” and Rombo’s “Manyumbani” savings groups enables pooled funds and social learning. One participant described:

“Through our savings group, I borrowed money for farming...we also learn from each other; some women share knowledge of traditional crops. Other women bring ideas from their children who went to school”. (R8F, Ilbisil).

This account shows that when fees are manageable and meetings inclusive, economic capital grows, cultural capital circulates through peer teaching, and social capital deepens through routine interaction. These gains align with work on social learning and are sharpened here by intergenerational exchange as a channel that converts knowledge into planning and investment (Adger, 2003; Rao, 2019). Benefits, however, hinge on thresholds and penalties that not all can meet. Recognition expands for reliable contributors, resources become more predictable, and decision space widens for those who can comply. Voice also matters. Speaking protocols, literacy requirements for record keeping, fixed meeting times, and fines for lateness or absence can quietly filter participation. Where rules are flexible and roles rotate, quieter members contribute knowledge and access loans; where rules are rigid, decision-making concentrates and some women attend without influence. These design choices convert the same group form into different outcomes by reallocating recognition and resources through rules. These choices also explain why some groups appear inclusive in name yet remain closed in practice, despite similar labels and objectives. Consequently, without deliberate attention to intersectional inequalities, group-based practices risk reproducing rather than dismantling existing social hierarchies, reinforcing differentiated vulnerability even within collective spaces designed

for mutual support.

This hierarchical exclusionary drift is also evident in Kimana, where affluent women shape group rules and resource distribution in ways that exclude poorer members. One participant observed:

“The wealthier women decide how much to save and lend. The communal projects benefit their businesses, but we struggle to keep up. They know we cannot meet the savings requirements.” (RF9, Kimana).

This statement reveals how intersectional positioning shapes influence within collective spaces, with economic advantages interacting with social connections to maintain control over group governance and benefit distribution. Although savings groups ostensibly promote equality among women, internal hierarchies based on intersectional positioning restrict meaningful participation for those whose economic status, age, or education level disadvantages them within group dynamics. Here, economic capital translates into agenda control, symbolic capital consolidates through leadership, and social capital channels loans toward favoured ventures. Cultural capital in financial literacy then reinforces influence and gatekeeping. This outcome echoes cautions against uncritical praise of collectives and adds the mechanism of threshold setting that mirrors elite capacities in these groups (Djouidi et al., 2016). Recognition concentrates at the top, resources follow elite priorities, and decision space for poorer women shrinks inside institutions designed for support.

Overall, collective mechanisms remain indispensable, yet their adaptive power is neither automatic nor evenly shared. The results support the view that social relations underwrite adaptation and contribute precise rules that govern inclusion, including dues, fines, loan caps, attendance, and speaking protocols (Adger, 2006; Rao, 2019). Caregivers carry uneven exchanges as reciprocity thins; employers monetise help without mutual obligation; and savings groups widen options where thresholds are inclusive and narrow them when fees mirror wealth. Relational

agency appears as a function of status and rule design rather than a generic group effect. Recognition determines who leads and who is heard, resources decide who invests and when, and rules either widen or confine decision space. Practical reforms that cap fees, rotate leadership, credit unpaid care, and relax penalties would improve conversion for those most constrained.

Across the three domains, adaptation appears as relational capacity shaped by intersectional position. Women mobilise IKS, diversify livelihoods and navigate migration, and engage collective arrangements, yet conversion into durable change hinges on recognition, resources and rules that set decision space. Reading economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals as intersectionally distributed resources explains why similar efforts diverge, with some moving beyond coping while others stall. The implication is structural: equitable adaptation requires reforms to asset rights, credit, labour and institutional validation, not praise for adaptation that leaves hierarchical constraints intact.

DISCUSSION

This article contributes to climate adaptation scholarship by showing that adaptive capacity is relational and hierarchically distributed through recognition, resources, and decision space that vary with intersectional position. I asked why ostensibly similar pastoralist women experience adaptation so differently, and answer by keeping Crenshaw's lens at the centre (Crenshaw, 1989). Capitals operate here as intersectionally distributed resources: cultural capital as ecological expertise, social capital as labour and networks, economic capital as assets and credit, and symbolic capital as legitimacy in forums. What matters is conversion, which depends on recognition, resource reach, and the rules that set decision space. This moves beyond descriptive accounts toward a mechanism for why similar efforts diverge across women. In doing so, the analysis qualifies technocratic framings that treat adaptation as primarily technical or behaviourist (Carr, 2020; Nightingale,

2017). This study also refines relational approaches by specifying how conversion succeeds or fails in everyday practices (Adger, 2006; Bourdieu, 1989).

The findings on Indigenous Knowledge Systems confirm their centrality to day-to-day climate response while clarifying the conditions under which they count. Elders' plant and pasture expertise stabilise herds, yet conversion falters where male-controlled labour and assets are required, which supports prior observations of institutional neglect and makes the blocking rule visible (Rao, 2019; Sithole, 2019). Epistemic governance still privileges certified or market-aligned practice, consistent with reports of fluctuating legitimacy for traditional stewardship, and our data show how extension and procurement priorities shape uptake (Caine, 2021; Fernández-Giménez et al., 2022). In Kimana, hybrid practice that blends ecological signs with phone-based forecasts improves timing for those with devices and data resonating with plural-knowledge accounts while identifying device access and literacy as the thresholds as appropriation thresholds that sort women intra-locally (Agarwal, 2009; Liru & Heineken, 2021). Across sites, cultural capital travels into durable change only where social, economic, and symbolic capitals cohere and where rules recognise women as decision makers. Where recognition is episodic or costs are prohibitive, expertise remains localised and easily reversed.

Diversification appears as necessary yet uneven, with outcomes bounded by land, credit, time, and reputational status. This pattern accords with research that documents the turn to multiple incomes under climate pressure and adds the chokepoints that prevent movement beyond coping, including collateral design and wage norms alongside the time burden of water and care (Kabeer, 1999; Rao et al., 2020; Tugjamba et al., 2023). Seasonal tourism widens earning possibilities, but volatility and stigma can erode social capital and narrow future options, aligning with accounts of precarious transitions while showing the social costs borne by women marked as risky workers (Liru & Heineken, 2021; Sithole, 2019). Micro-ventures in

Ilbisil stabilise consumption yet remain vulnerable to input prices and rainfall, mirroring evidence that low-return diversification rarely restructures livelihoods without infrastructure and pooled marketing (Rao et al., 2020). Moreover, male out-migration sometimes widens household authority for women, yet legitimacy remains retractable, a conditional opening noted elsewhere in East African pastoralism (Anbacha & Kjosavik, 2019; Grillos, 2018). The implication is institutional: ease the rules that confine conversion by reforming collateral, stabilising wage setting, investing in water and childcare, and credentialing informal skills.

Collective action remains vital but not automatically equalising. Intra- and inter-household exchange still move food and labour, yet reciprocity thins as migration and costs rise, which fits relational vulnerability arguments and adds the mechanism of care-driven depletion among older carers (Adger, 2003, 2006). Savings groups can rebuild buffers where thresholds are inclusive (Rao, 2019). Our evidence supports work on social learning by showing how intergenerational exchanges convert cultural capital into planning and investment choices. At the same time, contribution levels, fines, loan caps, literacy requirements, and meeting schedules can mirror wealth and status, producing elite rule-setting inside women's institutions as warned by studies that resist romanticising collectives (Djoudi et al., 2016; Iyer, 2021). These patterns indicate that social capital is not a uniform asset, but a position-specific resource governed by rules and reputations. Where design caps fees, rotates leadership, and credits unpaid care, decision space widens; where thresholds harden, collective forms reproduce the inequalities they are meant to ease.

Viewed across the three domains, our contribution is to articulate adaptation as conversion from resources held to authority exercised, via recognition and rules, within intersectional positions. This mechanism explains why similar efforts diverge within the category "women" and identifies levers that shift coping toward adaptation. Policies should recognise elder women's ecological expertise, reform collateral to

include non-land assets, invest in water and child-care, and mandate inclusive rules in savings groups. These measures target the structures that organise recognition, resource reach, and decision space and make conversion feasible for those currently blocked. With such structures present, adaptation becomes a practicable reorganisation rather than a demand for endurance. While limited to three sites and focus group evidence, the study points to future work using longitudinal mixed methods to test the durability of temporary authority gains and comparative asset surveys to quantify how capital bundles shape outcomes across life stages and counties.

CONCLUSION

Climate adaptation in Kajiado is best read as a negotiated process in which intersecting identities determine whose resources convert into durable capacity. Our central problem was to account for stark within-group differences in how pastoralist women encounter and manage climate risk. Our analysis explains within-group divergence by showing that outcomes hinge on conversion rather than effort. Across Indigenous Knowledge Systems, diversification and migration, and collective action, the decisive levers are recognition, resources, and the rules that set decision space. Cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capitals are unevenly distributed and, more importantly, unevenly convertible. Elder women's

ecological expertise is indispensable yet frequently unrecognised; diversification helps only where land, credit, or schooling exist; collective forms buffer risk when thresholds are inclusive and reproduce hierarchy when they are not. Vulnerability is produced at the point where identity meets everyday rule-making.

The study covers three sites and relies on focus groups, a methodological approach with inherent limitations in generalisability. Nonetheless, future longitudinal mixed-methods and comparative asset surveys should test the durability and pathway effects of the following proposed moves. Based on the study's findings, we propose a set of politically feasible, practical moves that adjust the micro-rules of conversion. First, to promote the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, we recommend hiring elder women as paraprofessional extension partners and embedding their readings in early warning systems. Second, to support livelihood diversification, we recommend bundling credit and land access reforms with investments in water points and childcare. Finally, to strengthen collective action, we recommend requiring savings groups to use sliding contributions and rotating leadership. Without these changes, celebrating resilience risks restating inequality as fortitude. With the changes, adaptation becomes a practicable reorganization rather than a demand for endurance.

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Revolution and the Hijab in the Political Satire of Noor Khanom

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This article examines the intersections of gender, satire, and political resistance through a case study of Noor Khanom, a satirical Syrian television show that aired on Syria TV between 2018 and 2021. Hosted by journalist Noor Haddad, the program challenges dominant narratives surrounding the hijab, female agency, and public visibility in the context of Syria's revolution and its ongoing transitional period. Drawing on intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and feminist media theory, the study analyzes how Noor Khanom deploys satire to critique both authoritarian power and patriarchal norms. Through ironic reappropriations of domestic imagery and visual parody, the show reclaims the figure of the woman as an active political subject. Noor Haddad's evolving public persona is also central, for instance her choice of taking off her hijab, which sparked public debate and revealed the contested boundaries of religious expression, morality, and feminist agency. By analyzing selected episodes and audience reactions, this article argues that Noor Khanom turns satire into a form of feminist resistance, offering a critical space for reimagining gender roles and political participation amid the shifting realities of post-2011 Syria.

ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS

SYRIA, HIJAB, POLITICAL SATIRE, TELEVISION, REVOLUTION,
INTERSECTIONALITY, POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

THE HIJAB, GENDER, AND REVOLUTIONARY MEDIA IN SYRIA

The *hijab* has long occupied a central position in debates about gender, religion, and agency. For some, it remains a symbol of patriarchal oppression; for others, it represents religious devotion, personal empowerment, and cultural identity. These narratives often flatten the diverse experiences of Muslim women, particularly when viewed through patriarchal or orientalist lenses. In the context of Syria's revolution, the hijab takes on political and cultural meanings that reflect these negotiations over gender, identity, and public participation.

This article examines the debates through a case study of *Noor Khanom*, a weekly satirical TV-show that aired between 2018 and 2021 on the Istanbul-based Syria TV. Emerging at a critical juncture in Syria's revolution, the show provides a lens on the intersection of satirical resistance to gender norms and the broader political context of the revolution. The current leadership in Syria that took power in December 2024 has already faced criticism for its limited political inclusion of women in post-conflict governance, with only one female minister out of 22 in the new government (Hairsine, 2025). As such, questions of women's political participation and agency remain central to contemporary debates about Syria's nation-building process.

Drawing on feminist media studies, intersectionality theory, and postcolonial critique, this study investigates how *Noor Khanom* navigates these tensions through humor and satire. As Gouma and Dorer (2019, p. 345) argue, media act as "co-producers of social power relations," making them vital arenas for exploring how gender inequalities and intersectional identities are negotiated in times of political upheaval. The genre of political satire not only participates in shaping public discourse but also operates as forms of nonviolent resistance, constructing alternative narratives that challenge both authoritarianism and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Doona, 2016;

Milich et al., 2020). As feminist media theorists such as Evans (2015, p. 22) argue, media not only reflect but also actively negotiate patriarchal structures. Satirical media can function as both a site of critique and complicity, depending on how it deploys humor and visual codes to either reproduce or resist dominant gendered ideologies.

The show's host, Noor Haddad, is a journalist and political commentator. Her decision to remove the hijab after the show ended, as well as her public openness about her neurodiversity and diagnosis of bipolar disorder (Morjan, 2025), provoked intense public scrutiny over her personal choices. The controversy surrounding Haddad's persona reflects the broader societal tensions at stake: who defines acceptable expressions of Muslim womanhood, political participation, and feminist agency? Through the program's use of satire, *Noor Khanom* navigates socially and politically sensitive issues, such as mental health, gender-based violence, patriarchal authority and the politics of veiling, that are often too contentious to address directly. Specifically, this paper asks: How does *Noor Khanom* articulate resistance to dominant gender norms and the political order in Syria using political satire? By locating this inquiry within feminist media studies from the Global South, this study contributes to broader debates on how satire functions not only as cultural critique but also as a form of feminist resistance that reveals the contradictions and possibilities of revolutionary politics in the Southwest Asia and North Africa region (SWANA). In the following section, we provide a background of the TV show *Noor Khanom*, its content and context to explore the discourses on gender-related issues.

NOOR KHANOM: OPPOSITIONAL POLITICAL SATIRE

Noor Khanom was a weekly satirical talk show broadcast from 2018 to 2021. Combining political commentary with humor, sketches, interviews, and musical segments, the show quickly gained a following among Syrians. The show was hosted by Noor Haddad, a Syrian journalist originally from Aleppo,

who joined Syria TV in 2018 (Alasaad, 2024). Within the program's diegetic world, Haddad performed the role of *Noor Khanom*, a Syrian housewife who engaged in political discussions while performing domestic tasks. The term "Khanom", borrowed from Persian, connotes respectable, modest femininity traditionally associated with the domestic sphere. By adopting this title, the show ironically reclaimed and subverted these associations, positioning its female host not as a passive figure confined to the home, but as a bold, satirical commentator engaging directly with political power structures in the public arena. The visual and narrative structure of each episode reinforces this irony: for example, the opening sequence featured Haddad wearing both a boxing glove and an oven mitt, while a pressure cooker explodes with kitchenware, newspapers, pens, and a microphone.

Episodes were segmented under domestic titles such as "Kitchen Talk," "A Cup of Coffee," and "Gossip," staging gendered domestic spaces as arenas for political debate. It regularly addressed gender issues, including sketches turning stereotypical gender roles upside down, criticism of sexual harassment, and discussions of gender-based violence (Syria TV 2018a). Through this format, *Noor Khanom* carved out a space to criticize not only Syria's former regime but also the patriarchal norms that structure Syrian society. In what follows, we present the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and postcolonial feminism that inform our analysis.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN THE SWANA REGION

This study applies an integrated theoretical framework that brings together intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and feminist media theory to analyze how *Noor Khanom* negotiates gender, agency, and representation. This framework provides a lens through which to examine how Syrian women's identities are constructed, contested, and mediated during the Syrian revolution and in the current transitional

period. Through its use of satire, the show challenges intersecting systems of oppression and opens spaces for reimagining female subjectivity, political agency, and resistance in a transforming media landscape.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY IN DIASPORA

A key concept in the analysis is intersectionality as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality provides an analytical tool to understand how overlapping identities, including gender, religion, class, ethnicity, and migratory status, produce unique forms of both marginalization and empowerment among Syrian women. Crenshaw's intervention challenged the additive models of identity prevalent in earlier feminist theory by demonstrating how the lived experiences of women, particularly women of color, are shaped through the simultaneity of multiple intersecting power structures. In the context of *Noor Khanom*, intersectionality reveals how Syrian women navigate both patriarchal structures as well as Islamophobic and racialized discourses. These dimensions shape both their lived experiences and their mediated representations. Intersectionality thus provides the necessary scaffolding for analyzing how *Noor Khanom* engages with these overlapping social forces, particularly as it frames debates around the hijab, agency, public visibility, and political participation.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM: NEGOTIATING REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY

Building on intersectionality, this study draws on postcolonial feminist media theory, which investigates how global and local discourses intersect in constructing representations of women from SWANA. Postcolonial feminist scholarship has long critiqued the reductionist and often orientalist discourses through which (Muslim) women have been depicted, especially in Western media discourses where the hijab frequently serves as a visual

shorthand for female oppression (Ahmed, 2011, p. 226; Zimmerman, 2015, p. 148). As Odeh (1993, p. 1534) has argued, Arab women's bodies often become contested terrains onto which various ideological projects are inscribed, including patriarchy, capitalism, religion, tradition, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. Within this matrix, the hijab functions as a semiotic artifact whose meanings shift depending on the viewer's positionality "as affirmation of identity and community, as pride in heritage, of rejection and resistance to, and even as protest against, mainstream society" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 210).

THE MALE GAZE IN VISUAL REPRESENTATION

In addition to intersectional and postcolonial feminist approaches, this study incorporates insights from feminist media theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of *the male gaze*. Mulvey argued that visual media structures often position women as objects of male desire, rendering them passive spectacles for an active (typically male) viewer. In representations of veiled women, the male gaze operates with additional complexity. The hijab may simultaneously render Muslim women hyper-visible as cultural *Others* in diaspora and erase their subjectivity and agency. While Mulvey's work centers on the objectification of women in Western cinematic forms, her framework illuminates how visual markers like the hijab become sites of projection, where Muslim women are made visible in ways that emphasize their difference while denying them agency (pp. 809, 815). Yet, *Noor Khanom* subverts these visual logics by presenting women, using herself and her voice, as active interlocutors, political commentators, and satirical agents. Intersectionality, combined with postcolonial feminism provides a framework for analyzing *Noor Khanom* as a site of mediated gender negotiations. By situating the show within broader feminist and postcolonial debates, this approach challenges reductive binaries that continue to shape Muslim women's visibility in media across both the Global North and the Global South.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how the Syrian satirical TV show *Noor Khanom* constructs and contests narratives around gender, religion, and power. We draw on discourse analysis to explore how language, humor, and satire function as tools for negotiating meaning within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. Discourse analysis, as conceptualized by Fairclough (1992), reveals the socio-psychological and cultural dimensions of people's practices, rather than focusing solely on textual structure. It helps uncover the dynamics of socio-cultural life from a social constructionist perspective, where people act based on shared, often implicit, understandings of meaning and action (p. 72). In this study, media discourse analysis is employed to explore how *Noor Khanom* represents the hijab as a symbol of identity, resistance, and cultural belonging. These processes are "culturally mediated within a symbolic space laid out by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices" (Brockmeier 2002, p. 25), and the positioning of 'self' and 'other' remains fluid and contestable (Brockmeier 2002, p. 38). Through satire, the program creates a discursive site of political contestation where dominant narratives are challenged and alternative perspectives on gender, agency, and belonging emerge. A comprehensive viewing of all episodes aired between 2018 and 2021 on Syria TV's YouTube channel was undertaken, from which five episodes were selected for close analysis based on the presence of gender-related themes including attire, labor market participation, gender-based violence, migration, and law. Attire and appearance were chosen as the central focus, since the hijab debate provided an entry point into wider struggles over gender politics that extended beyond the program itself. Supplementary material included interviews and public statements by host Noor Haddad, debates in Arabic around her decision to unveil after the program's conclusion (Morjan 2025), and audience responses on social media and in YouTube comment sections. Our analysis followed a layered process: content analysis identified recurring patterns and rhetorical strategies across episodes;

critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) examined how humor and satire shaped narratives of the hijab as a contested symbol; multimodal discourse analysis (Esposito, 2024) explored how meanings were produced across spoken language, visual imagery, and performative gestures; and audience analysis traced how viewers interpreted and negotiated the program's feminist themes in digital debates. By combining these methods sequentially, we were able to connect thematic patterns with discursive and symbolic processes and situate them within wider contexts of reception and interpretation.

As researchers, we approach this study with strong personal and professional connections to Syria, where we have lived and studied. Our linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity enrich our ability to interpret satire, idioms, and intertextual references, while our commitment to gender equity shapes our analytical lens. By making this standpoint explicit, we aim to ensure transparency in the research process and remain attentive to how our own commitments shape the questions we ask and the interpretations we produce.

DISCOURSES OF THE HIJAB IN THE SHOW

Building on the intersectional, postcolonial, and feminist media theoretical perspectives outlined above, this study conceptualizes the hijab in *Noor Khanom* as a dynamic and contested symbol situated at the intersection of multiple discourses and power structures. The analysis is organized around three interrelated discourses that capture the complex ways in which the hijab operates as a site of identity negotiations and political agency in both the Syrian diaspora and post-revolutionary Syria. The three discourses are 1) the hijab as personal resistance, 2) the hijab as gendered resistance, and 3) the hijab as political resistance in (post-Assad) Syria. Through these three interrelated discourses, the analysis explores how *Noor Khanom* uses satire to navigate the complex politics of veiling, and women's political agency

across both the revolutionary context of Syria and its diasporas.

THE HIJAB AS PERSONAL RESISTANCE: NAVIGATING SOCIAL PRESSURES FOR THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

We start the analysis by looking at the hijab as personal freedom. In this discourse, the hijab is analyzed as an expression of personal autonomy, religious devotion, and cultural belonging. Rather than depicting veiling as either a purely imposed practice or a simplistic act of empowerment, *Noor Khanom* presents the hijab as part of women's individualized negotiations between private beliefs and public identities, particularly in the context of displacement, migration, and political upheaval. The show highlights the ambivalence and fluidity of these choices, reflecting the shifting social contexts facing Syrian women in diaspora. Noor Haddad's own personal decision to unveil after the program ended became a public controversy, illustrating how acts of self-fashioning, even when framed as personal, remain politically charged and subject to public scrutiny among Syrians. The hijab here becomes a symbol of women's right to navigate their own identities amid multiple and often conflicting pressures. In an episode opening the fourth season of *Noor Khanom* (Syria TV, 2020), called "Backstage", viewers can pose questions to Noor Haddad, who then answers as herself instead of as the TV persona. The episode offers a glimpse into her personal views on the role of the program, and its relation to its audience and the political reality it navigates. Haddad reads the questions aloud and several of the questions focus specifically on her hijab. One viewer writes, "You are *muḥajjaba* (wearing the Islamic headscarf) and your upper arms are visible all the way to the elbows? Well done, the epitome of belief" (Syria TV 2020, 12:00). The viewer employs sarcasm to criticize Noor Haddad for wearing a hijab, but not, in the viewer's opinion, according to "real" Islamic dress code. The viewer employs Islamic terminology *ma sha Allah* 'as God has willed it' to direct criticism towards her choices. *Ma sha Allah* is

commonly used to commend actions, but can also be employed sarcastically to deride someone, which is the case here. The soundscape accompanying the question, as well as Haddad's answer, features background music commonly associated with Salafism. Salafism is a puritanical strand within Islam that forbids music but allows a sort of acapella sung only by men. These connotations will be clear to Syrian viewers and creates an association that is intended to link the questioner to a religious strand that stresses outer features and appearances of religious piety. In her reply, she pokes fun at the position and says, "first, we have anatomy class". She proceeds to point out the location of the upper arm and elbow, adding a humorous effect while subtly undermining the questioner's level of (anatomical) knowledge. She then orders the questioner to "review the anatomy class and present the question again in the next season" (Syria TV, 12:17). By using the Salafi association and indicating that the questioner lacks basic anatomical knowledge, the program plays on a widespread perception among Syrians that Salafism's obsession with regulating the female body is grounded in a lack of basic religious knowledge. When reading the next question, we hear the Salafi hymn in the background again. The questioner asks, "why are you wearing the hijab when half of your hair is outside? Just take it off, and by the way, if your hair was any good it wouldn't appear" (Syria TV 2020, 12:30). Haddad employs irony to confront this comment and exclaims that she "congratulates" the viewer on his great sense of humor. Thus, she refuses to acknowledge the premise of the question. Instead, she presents the way she wears her hijab as her personal choice and insists on her freedom to wear it as she wishes. The last question is less bodily focused and instead looks at the hijab as pertaining to ideas about public morality. The questioner positions himself, or herself, as speaking on behalf of a presumed public, voicing opposition to perceived moral corruption caused by the show: "Madame Noor, we really love you, but fix your hijab a bit. There are girls who watch you and see you as a role model. In the future they will grow up and imitate you." (Syria TV 2020, 14:00). Here the background music changes to the theme song from a

famous Syrian historical drama series, *Bab al-Hara*. The series has popularized ideas about masculinity and femininity based on events taking place in Syria in the 1930's and 1940's, since its first season was broadcast in 2006 (Zaateri, 2014). Throughout the episodes of *Noor Khanom*, this same music is used to create an ironic distance from the hyperbolic nationalist rhetoric closely tied to the militaristic masculinity propagated by the former Baath-regime (Aldoughli, 2024). The comment here is therefore shaped less as a religious or doctrinal criticism, but more as promoting a certain national idea of femininity associated with motherhood and female virtues, as portrayed in the old-fashioned portrait of Syrian society of *Bab al-Hara*. The question directed at Haddad can be interpreted as an accusation of national betrayal and a lament over the moral decline of future (female) generations.

Haddad responds to the comment with laughter remarking that the viewer made it seem as if her actions were shameful by saying: "there are girls that watch you!". According to Haddad, her program contains nothing that could corrupt the morality of its (female) viewers as the questioner suggests. In the next section, she articulates further her refusal to be categorized by conventional representations of femininity or gender norms.

I am not an educational or a religious program and do not promote myself as a role model in those fields (...). And the way I wear my hijab is not exemplary or a role model to the girls whose hijab is, let's say, less (religiously) committed than me. Also, I will not 'corrupt' those whose hijab is more committed than me. (Syria TV 2020, 14:20)

Here, she challenges dominant notions of representations as well as societal and religious expectations, instead positioning herself as a "non-exemplary" individual, a journalist that conveys messages, but resists being seen as a figure to be emulated. She attempts to place the hijab, and the way she wears it, as a choice and not only as a moral obligation.

The next questioner shifts focus away from the hijab instead invoking stereotypical tropes of women, lifestyle and consumerism: “Bravo, each episode, a new look, and a new style and color. I wonder, how many families in a refugee camp could be fed only for the price of those clothes?” (Syria TV 2020, 15:20). The viewer again uses the Islamic expression *ma sha Allah* ironically. The questioner places her appearance in a public and moral context by hinting at the dire economic situation inside Syria and in refugee camps in the neighboring countries. Here it is important to remember the program’s deliberate play with, and subversion of, stereotypes associated with different social classes in Syria. On the one hand, the character *Noor Khanom* is presented as a stay-at-home housewife as indicated by the epithet *Khanom*, doing traditional Arabic cooking and gossiping with her female neighbors. On the other hand, she is a political satirist, journalist and oppositional figure who does not conform to expectations associated with stereotypical femininity within this social class. The questioner implies that she is certainly not the authentic working class *khanom* she pretends to be. Rather, she is yet another media celebrity indulged in an upper-class lifestyle who does not care about the victims she claims to defend. Instead of engaging directly with the criticism of her clothing choices, Haddad subverts the logic of the question by responding:

On the basis of that question, I could pose an indefinite number of questions: For example, if you went without dinner for thirty days how many families could you provide for? If you and your family didn’t eat meat for a year, how many families could that satisfy? (Syria TV 2020, 15:30).

By using sarcasm, she avoids being dragged into a battle of words about moral superiority, instead challenging the presentation of the veil as a moral obligation and an issue subject to public inquiry. Her message centers on personal freedom and agency, emphasizing a woman’s right to make her own choices regarding the hijab. By untangling the veil’s symbolic connotations from the complex web of religious, moral, and national values and representations, she

challenges the idea that the hijab must serve as a singular symbol of religious virtues, instead redefining it as an individual choice.

THE HIJAB AS GENDERED RESISTANCE: DEFYING THE MALE GAZE

Drawing on Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the male gaze, we explore how *Noor Khanom* challenges patriarchal visual and discursive regimes that attempt to regulate women’s bodies, choices, and public visibility. Through satire, the show exposes how women’s appearance, and their decisions regarding the hijab are continuously evaluated and policed through patriarchal norms that conflate female morality, respectability, and social worth with bodily conformity to male-defined standards.

Many of the critical and hateful voices come from men, who act as if entrusted with upholding religious and social norms in the public sphere. In our analysis, we found that critical, and often overtly hostile, comments regarding Haddad’s decision to unveil, in the domain of influencers and social media were dominated by male profiles. This is in line with recent research on the “manosphere” and “manfluencers” where social media platforms are used to promote misogyny and opposition to feminism (Zhu, 2024). In the following, we look at how journalists and influencers frame the veil as a matter of public scrutiny and importance for the moral fabric of society.

We therefore move beyond the content of *Noor Khanom* and look at an interview with Noor Haddad on Syria TV in 2024. After the program *Noor Khanom* stopped broadcasting in 2021, Haddad decided to unveil. This sparked intense debate on social media with many voices being critical of the step, some going as far as contributing her “mistake” to her mental state. The interview is titled “Noor Haddad... an honest conversation about work, end (of work), the hijab and other things” (Syria TV, 2024). The first part of the program is dedicated to the question of why she decided to unveil. The male interviewer suggests that the reason for the show’s success may

be due to her wearing the hijab, and her resembling “the majority of Syrian girls”, thus positioning the veil as a symbol of national identity in a majority Sunni Islamic country. Haddad agrees that the hijab might have contributed to the show’s success as it brought her “closer to the Syrian audience and the Syrian audience is in general conservative” (Syria TV 2024, 07:10). However, she does not believe that the veil was the secret of the program’s success. The interviewer keeps insisting on the public’s right to scrutinize her decision to unveil, “The question is not personal. You are a famous face among Syrians.” We see how the veil is caught up between the private and the public and how a (male) representative of the media claims the right to morally police the personal lives of a (female) public figure. Haddad attempts to deflect the question, by describing it as one of her “most inner secrets” but does answer in the end. She insists that it is a violation of her private sphere, by saying “Why did I take off the veil? I will answer you even though this is a very personal question” (Syria TV, 2024, 10:10).

Unable to avoid having her decision scrutinized and cast as a socially subversive act, she instead attempts to confront the interviewer by choosing a word with different connotations than *khala’* “to throw off”, the term preferred by most of her detractors. She explains that:

The Tunisians have a very nice expression; they say she took *aside* her hijab. They do not say she *threw off* her hijab. And the verb *to take aside* is very nice because it doesn’t confer a negative association like tearing off something by force or resistance. So, I *took aside* the hijab of my own personal will (Syria TV 2024, 10:25).

The interviewer uses the term only once and in a sarcastic tone after having used the *khala’* -terminology. This illustrates the difficulty in inventing a neutral language to talk about unveiling because of its religious connotations. Haddad also attempts to present the religious obligations as part of the private realm by arguing: “I don’t imagine anyone ever came

to you and said, why don’t you perform the evening prayer? Even though this is *farīda* (obligatory) and the hijab is *i’bāda* (worship).” (Syria TV 2024, 10:50). In Islamic jurisprudence *farīda* designates obligatory acts while *i’bāda* designates voluntary acts of worship. She thus draws on religious reasoning here to frame the hijab as a non-obligatory practice, thereby defending herself against the label “bad Muslim”. She also uses a rights-based discourse to situate the question of attire within the Syrian revolution’s struggle for freedom: “This is personal freedom, and the Syrians paid their blood for the cause of freedom” (Syria TV 2024, 11:05). Hence, she uses her position as a well-known voice of the Syrian revolution to defend her personal choice. She even performs this right in practice to push back against the male gaze by saying, that “it is none of your business” and “no one has the right to impose any social or religious control on anyone”. For Haddad freedom means “that a person can choose what to wear, what religion to embrace, what to believe in, what to strive for.” For her, freedom is not only defined as the collective freedom *from* a repressive regime, but also the freedom of “thought, freedom of expression, even the freedom of privacy” (Syria TV 2024, 15:10).

The interviewer attempts to prompt her to give her opinion of the religious and moral significance of the hijab. Haddad questions the logic of the question again drawing on a rights-based language stressing individual choice “It’s not an issue of whether you have an opinion or not. It’s a choice, an individual choice.” At the same time, she rejects the dichotomy of *religiosity* vs *personal freedom* that lies implicit in the interviewer’s question by referring to her own upbringing: “I was raised in a family, and our father raised us, even though he is religious and conservative and from a conservative family, but our father raised us with freedom.” She refuses to take a moral stand on the hijab by saying:

I am not a preacher, I respect those who wear the hijab or who put it aside and who make a choice. I didn’t promote the hijab or promote putting it aside. And I don’t criticize the *muḥajjabat*

(women wearing the hijab). By the way, when I was muḥajjaba, I was happy about my hijab, I was never forced to wear it (Syria TV 2024, 17:00).

Rather than opposing the *muḥajjabat*, she aligns with them, adopting a non-judgmental and intersectional stance that includes all women. We have seen how the male gaze dominates and imposes gendered expectations about how to wear the hijab and claim the right to interfere in the sphere of women's appearance. This interview has garnered almost 3400 comments (Syria TV, 2024), most of them revolving around her decision to unveil - most of them posted by men based on their username and profile picture. We will look at some of the comments, as this illustrates the way gendered expectations of male domination police women's behavior and bodies. Most of the comments are critical of her decision to unveil while others defend her right to dress as she wants. No one questions the legitimacy of public scrutiny of female attire, body, and psyche. As mentioned above, she touches upon mental health issues during the interview. Many comments employ a religious discourse to pray for her recovery, for example passages from the Islamic confession of faith *al-shahada* 'lead us on the straight path'. Others argue that when she recovers from her mental illness, she will certainly don the hijab again. Many comments criticize the way she links revolutionary ideals with her decision to unveil. One commenter asks, "Did the regime prevent you from taking off your veil? Do you really see the revolution from this perspective?" (@t6wsamnimashet, 2024.) Here we see how battles over values and conceptualizations of freedom within revolutionary circles are also taking place on social media using the veil as a prism. Another user accuses her of taking advantage of the revolution for personal gains using a language that combines religion and social class to discredit her revolutionary credentials. He writes:

(...)If it wasn't for the revolution, you wouldn't have become famous and earned a lot of money, the money corrupted your heart and your mind, and I wish you hadn't done it, may God forgive you and guide you (@yaserelhajras7856, 2024).

A few voices support her in her defense of personal freedom as a revolutionary ideal. Here as expressed by Fadi who addresses one of her detractors, "The woman expressed her opinion on the veil, if you see this opinion and right as a problem let me tell you that the revolution and freedom does not suit your thinking with all due respect" (@fadi9799, 2024).

We find similar examples of male domination by positioning her decision to unveil as an expression of female mental instability in other online fora. In a video by the influencer Samir al-Ahmad (Samer Alahmad, 2023) whose channel has more than 700.000 subscribers, he attributes her decision to unveil to her mental state. This is clear from the title of the episode: "News-presenter hit by insanity after unveiling". Here, he draws a link between mental health and gender suggesting that Haddad's decision to unveil is not only irrational but also the underlying cause of her psychiatric diagnosis. He even categorizes others who unveil as being "tools in the hands of organizations that seek to destroy society." The program (Samer Alahmad, 2023) uses videos from Haddad's Instagram account to picture her as an unstable person, who is incapable of making rational decisions. In the videos, she is seen talking about being diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and her treatment, but the influencer interweaves this with other clips of her dancing and acting in various roles to highlight her unstable mental state. Historically, the concept of hysteria was frequently used to pathologize women's emotions and behavior (Tasca et al., 2012).

This section has explored gendered expectations as a male gaze, and the attacks directed at Haddad and her decision to unveil by male media personalities and social media users. Through the male gaze Haddad's religious, moral state and political values are scrutinized and questioned, while Haddad confronts the attacks by drawing on a discourse of personal choice and privacy as a revolutionary ideal.

THE HIJAB AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN (POST-ASSAD) SYRIA

As Syria moves into its fragile transition, debates over women's roles have continued as part of competing projects to define the country's future. Despite women's central participation in the revolution since 2011, women remain largely excluded from formal leadership positions in the new Syria. Even after the fall of the al-Assad regime in December 2024, Noor Haddad remains an active participant in Syria's post-conflict media landscape. Through her Instagram account ([haddad_noor](#)), Haddad continues her political satire, now directed at both the newly established leadership within Syria and international actors. As in earlier periods, the hijab continues to function as both a symbol of contested domestic ideologies and as an object through which foreign powers project their own normative expectations onto Syrian women.

In Damascus and across public spaces, new campaigns have emerged promoting "proper Islamic attire" on public transportation and in the streets (BBC News, 2025). In response, counter-campaigns have used similar poster layouts to present alternative images of "the attire of the free Syrian woman" (Samism, 2025), including both unveiled and veiled women represented in ways that resist rigid prescriptions. This visual struggle illustrates how the hijab remains a battleground for defining the boundaries of women's public roles, autonomy, and national identity in post-conflict Syria.

Haddad directly engages with these tensions in her satirical Instagram video, addressing visiting foreign delegations: "Foreigners, every time you visit the new administration, you ask about the woman. Leave the woman alone; we will take care of her, we will take care of the Syrian woman, don't worry" (Haddad, 2025). Here Haddad criticizes both the patriarchal governance structures inside Syria and the neo-colonial gaze of Western diplomats who attempt to instrumentalize women's rights as a bargaining chip in Syria's international negotiations. This mirrors a broader discourse

on the region, where Western interventions are often framed as civilizational projects aimed at "saving Muslim women" (Abu-Lughod, 2002), reproducing the orientalist patterns described by Said (1978) and postcolonial feminists. The hijab also functions as a symbolic battleground within Syria's new political system, where the de facto leadership led by Ahmad al-Sharaa and his Islamist-aligned coalition, though having distanced itself from al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, continues to embed Islamic norms into public policy. Women's political participation remains constrained by ideologies that primarily position women within the private sphere as caretakers and mothers, rather than as political agents. This conflict between secular and Islamist visions of Syria's future has resulted in demonstrations and growing demands for the inclusion of women in leadership positions (Michaelson, 2025). Within this polarized context, Haddad uses her social media platform as a space for feminist political resistance, publicly criticizing the newly appointed President of the Office for Women's Affairs, Aisha al-Dibs. In an interview on TRT (TRT, 2024), al-Dibs argued that Syrian women should prioritize their "God-given" responsibilities to family and household, rejecting secular or civil models of governance. She framed foreign training programs aimed at empowering women as harmful "agendas" that have led to negative outcomes such as increased divorce rates, insisting instead on creating a Syrian model grounded in Islamic doctrine.

In her satirical response, Haddad embodies the role of an investigative journalist, mocking al-Dibs' vague references to foreign conspiracies and posing the question: "How did men manage to escape these agendas? Maybe we can learn from them" (Haddad, 2025). By humorously questioning why men are exempt from the same "foreign influence" narratives used to discipline women, Haddad exposes the gendered double standards inherent in both religious and nationalist discourses. Her intervention reflects the ongoing postcolonial feminist critique that such narratives are not simply rooted in religious doctrine but also serve to reinforce patriarchal control while simultaneously resisting Western stereotyping

of Muslim societies (Ahmed, 2011). Haddad's own personal history further informs this political stance: married at 19, later divorced, and having pursued her own education and career, she embodies the contradictions and possibilities facing many Syrian women navigating revolutionary, religious, and patriarchal structures simultaneously (Morjan, 2025). Through her satire, Haddad contests not only the state-sanctioned vision of womanhood promoted by the new Islamist administration but also the Western diplomacy that continues to instrumentalize Syrian women's rights within broader geopolitical interests. Haddad's satire situates itself precisely at this intersection, offering an alternative feminist voice that refuses both Western savior narratives and internal patriarchal prescriptions.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM - THE HIJAB AGAINST WESTERN HEGEMONY

Throughout *Noor Khanom*, the hijab operates not simply as a religious symbol but as a deeply contested site of identity negotiation shaped by overlapping global and local power structures. Within Western discourses, the hijab is frequently reduced to a marker of oppression, incompatible with notions of modernity. This binary portrayal reflects what Edward Said (1978) famously conceptualized as Orientalism; the essentializing of an imagined East as backward, exotic, and inherently "other." Such narratives persist in the representation of Muslim women, who are often positioned as either victims of cultural traditions or passive beneficiaries of Western intervention.

Noor Khanom challenges these postcolonial and orientalist frameworks by employing satire to deconstruct and subvert Western assumptions about Muslim women's agency and the meaning of veiling. Rather than presenting the hijab as an unambiguous symbol of either subjugation or empowerment, the show foregrounds the complex socio-political and personal negotiations involved in decisions regarding women's bodies and agency. In doing so, it criticizes

both orientalist discourses and internalized colonial logics within SWANA societies, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's agency as intersectional and context dependent. Intersectionality is crucial to understanding how these dynamics operate. The decision to wear or not wear the hijab is rarely made in isolation; it is shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, religion, migration status, class, and race. For example, while racialized bodies in the Global North are subject to forms of systemic social exclusion, the hijab represents a more fluid but equally politicized marker of identity. Women in France, for instance, face state-imposed bans that criminalize the hijab in public sector workplaces. Intersectionality reveals how pressures surrounding women's appearance are mutually reinforcing expressions of global power relations, which constrain women in different ways depending on their social positions.

In *Noor Khanom*, these intersectional tensions are addressed explicitly and implicitly across multiple episodes. In episode 8 ("Racism," Syria TV, 2018b), Noor Haddad interviews a Syrian woman living in Germany who describes the Islamophobic hostility she faces as a woman wearing the hijab. The woman recounts how people have pushed her and spat on her, while constantly questioning her choice to veil. "What does the hijab mean for you?" (Syria TV, 2018b, 47:40). Haddad's question to her guest creates an immediate shared identification between interviewer and interviewee, emphasizing their common experience as Syrian Muslim women navigating contexts where their choices are questioned. In this episode, the hijab becomes a visible boundary marker for inclusion and exclusion within Western societies, where racialized and religious difference is policed through both formal and informal mechanisms of discrimination.

Similarly, in episode 1 ("Empowerment of Women," Syria TV, 2018b), Haddad interviews the actress Azza al-Bahra, who recounts her experiences as a refugee in Sweden. Al-Bahra observes that most Syrian women she encountered in exile were veiled, in contrast to the more diverse dress practices in

pre-revolution Syria. She highlights the dual pressures Syrian women face: Western expectations that associate Syrian refugee identity with the hijab, and internal local expectations linking hijab-wearing with religious virtue. She describes how a Swedish migration officer expressed confusion when she, as an unveiled Syrian woman, presented herself at an asylum interview: “You don’t have to wear the hijab to be Syrian, and you are not necessarily not Syrian because you are not *muḥajjaba*” (Syria TV, 2018a, 48:40). In this exchange, al-Bahra resists both Western stereotypes that equate Syrian identity with veiling and internal community pressures that equate piety with outward appearance, thereby asserting the fluidity and individual specificity of veiling choices. The politicization of veiling extends beyond the diaspora to global debates about women’s rights and cultural authenticity. Within these discourses, the hijab is frequently framed as the battleground between “authentic” local values and “imported” Western norms. As seen in *Noor Khanom*, figures like Samer Alahmad frame women’s rights discourses and criticism of veiling as part of a foreign conspiracy aimed at undermining Muslim society’s moral fabric. Such discourses reflect both authoritarian anxieties and patriarchal defensiveness, positioning the hijab as a boundary marker of national and cultural sovereignty.

On a global scale, these debates often collapse into simplistic binaries that obscure the complexity of women’s lived experiences. The hijab becomes either a symbol of oppression or of resistance, leaving little space for recognizing its multilayered meanings. As *Noor Khanom* demonstrates, for many women the hijab represents a complex personal negotiation of religious belief, political identity, and social belonging. The show’s feminist satire allows for public contestation of reductive stereotypes while foregrounding the lived complexities of Syrian women negotiating multiple axes of power. In doing so, the show embodies what postcolonial feminist scholars describe as third space agency; a form of situated agency that neither conforms to dominant Western nor patriarchal expectations but carves out alternative

spaces of self-representation and resistance (Licona, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The hijab remains a highly contested symbol at the intersection of gender, religion, and political power. Through the lens of *Noor Khanom*, we have examined how media representations of the hijab both challenge and negotiate dominant narratives of femininity, agency, and oppression. Applying intersectionality and postcolonial feminist theory, the analysis has traced how the discourse surrounding the hijab across three interrelated domains: personal freedom, the male gaze, and political resistance in post-Assad Syria. *Noor Khanom* complicates reductive binaries that have long dominated both Global North and regional discourses, where the hijab is often framed as either a sign of victimhood or a marker of moral virtue. Instead, the show presents veiling as a fluid, individualized practice situated within broader negotiations over identity, exile, and political struggle. Whether through the personal controversies surrounding Haddad’s own unveiling, the show’s satirical deconstruction of patriarchal visual regimes, or its direct engagement with debates over women’s political roles in post-revolutionary Syria, *Noor Khanom* highlights how choices around the hijab remain embedded in complex structures of power that intersect across gender, class, religion, diaspora, and international politics. In the evolving landscape of post-Assad Syria, the hijab has become a highly politicized symbol in ongoing struggles over national reconstruction, women’s public participation, and foreign intervention. As this study demonstrates, *Noor Khanom* offers a space for feminist satire that resists both domestic patriarchal structures and external neo-colonial narratives. By mobilizing humor and critical engagement, the show foregrounds women as active political subjects capable of challenging authoritarianism, contesting the male gaze, and rejecting Western savior discourses. Ultimately, this analysis situates *Noor Khanom* within broader debates on feminist media practices in the SWANA region, demonstrating how satire

functions as a powerful form of creative resistance. Rather than viewing the hijab as a fixed emblem of either oppression or agency, this study underscores its role as a contested site of identity negotiation, constantly reconfigured within the shifting intersections

of revolution, diaspora, and global power. Through its satirical interventions, *Noor Khanom* contributes to reimagining feminist identities and opening space for alternative narratives of women's roles in Syria and beyond.

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Singing a Different Tune:

Re-sounding Intersectional Voices in Classical Music

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This article explores the intersectional exclusion of women composers in Western classical music. While feminist musicology has long challenged this exclusion, many approaches remain constrained by additive frameworks that do not sufficiently interrogate the institutional and aesthetic structures through which exclusion is continually reproduced. We integrate intersectional feminist theory with Karen Barad's concept of material-discursive entanglements to move beyond fixed identity categories, demonstrating how marginalisation emerges through entangled systems of power, institutional practice, and sonic hierarchy. In response to the dominance of text-based academic knowledge, we develop a diffractive, multisensory methodology that invites readers to listen as they read, foregrounding the affective, embodied, and sensory dimensions of musical exclusion. This materialises a feminist epistemic intervention that re-sounds intersectional voices within and through classical music, while also reconfiguring how exclusion is understood, felt, and resisted. In doing so, we contribute to feminist musicology and intersectional studies by offering a method for both analysing and unsettling exclusionary norms, with implications for institutions, pedagogies, and practices of cultural legitimacy.

ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS

CLASSICAL MUSIC; INTERSECTIONALITY; FEMINIST MUSICOLOGY;
GENDERED EXCLUSION; WOMEN COMPOSERS; MULTISENSORY METHODS

INTRODUCTION

Often idealised as universal and apolitical (Fisher, 2013), classical music – like jazz (Annfelt, 2003) – obscures deeply entrenched structures of exclusion. The Western classical canon remains shaped by practices that systematically exclude women composers at the intersections of race, class, and geography (Ritchey, 2019). These exclusions are not simply a matter of oversight: women composers face barriers to entry, limited training, restricted opportunities for publication and performance, and persistent lack of professional recognition (Dowd & Park, 2023), ensuring their exclusion from multiple forms of representation throughout musical careers. [1] Responding to this inequality, we examine how the intersectional exclusion of women composers in Western classical music operates not as a historical absence but as a structural presence, maintained through colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal forces embedded in the music's very institutions and practices. For classical music to *sing a different tune*, it must confront the exclusions woven into its sonic and institutional foundations.

Feminist critiques have long highlighted gendered exclusion in musicology (Bennett, 2018), yet many analyses focus on gender in isolation, neglecting the compounded oppressions experienced by women of colour and working-class women (Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Further, feminist scholars have also problematised “gender” itself, arguing exclusion is not merely underrepresentation but about how gender is constructed and maintained through musical discourse, institutional policy, and performance norms (Werner et al., 2021). In response, scholars have taken diverse approaches: some have traced parallel histories of women's music (McClary, 1991), others have worked within existing disciplinary frameworks (Fowler, 2006/07), while more fluid approaches (Weir, 2013) have been critiqued for privileging individualism over collective solidarity (Braidotti, 2006). Building on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), we extend this scholarship by integrating Karen Barad's theory of material-discursive entanglements (2007),

emphasising embodied and affective knowledge while resisting essentialist constructions of gender.

This article contributes to feminist musicology by explicitly bridging intersectionality and feminist new materialism, moving beyond additive frameworks. Rather than treating exclusion as a historical oversight, we show how it is actively sustained through the entanglement of sonic, institutional, and discursive processes. While intersectionality has exposed compounded oppression, it has also been critiqued for treating identity as fixed (Puar, 2012). By incorporating feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007), we foreground intra-action and co-emergence, reframing music and listening as dynamic, affective, and materially situated (Eidsheim, 2015). In doing so, we learn from, and with, broader concerns in organization studies around power, embodiment, and the more-than-human, offering a framework for understanding how exclusions are not only represented but materially enacted across institutional domains.

Our interdisciplinary approach foregrounds a reciprocal exchange between feminist musicology and organization studies, where each field brings distinct yet resonant concerns – around power, embodiment, and materiality – that deepen the other. While feminist musicology offers textured insights into the affective and sonic dimensions of institutional life, organization studies contributes frameworks for understanding systemic exclusion, gendered labour, and the structuring of professional practice. Together, they open space for rethinking how exclusions are materially enacted, and how listening, voice, and the more-than-human shape institutional possibility.

Rather than using marginalised composers as illustrative examples, we position music itself as agential – actively shaping understandings of inclusion and exclusion. By integrating sound into the work of knowledge production, we challenge the dominance of text-based research paradigms and respond to calls for more innovative, affective, and impactful scholarship (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2023; Harding & Ford, 2025). Although musicologists often frame music

as cultural text embedded in social and historical discourse (Kramer, 1995), this framing still centres interpretation that is tethered to text. Our approach moves beyond this by attuning to the material and affective force of sound – not as supplement to meaning, but as co-constitutor of knowledge. In doing so, we extend feminist and new materialist critiques by treating the sonic as representational, agential, and political.

Our work resonates with calls for multimodal methodologies that disrupt conventional research formats and expand engagement with inclusion and representation in the creative industries. Through a multisensory format (Bozalek, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2024) that integrates text and sound, we expose exclusionary structures in classical music while re-sounding embodied and affective encounters with intersectionality. Embedding listening links within the text disrupts disembodied modes of knowledge production. Adopting a diffractive approach, we treat our analytic practice not only as interpretative but as an epistemic intervention – one that reconfigures how exclusion is experienced, understood, and potentially undone.

ENTANGLEMENTS AND EXCLUSIONS

Through a diffractive engagement with feminist musicology, intersectionality, and feminist new materialism, we now trace how these frameworks interact, entangling with and reconfiguring one another to expose the material-discursive forces shaping exclusion in music. Rather than treating these perspectives as discrete or additive, we explore their entanglements to critically examine the structural, aesthetic, and affective mechanisms that sustain women's exclusion within Western classical music. This moves beyond merely identifying exclusions to analysing how they are dynamically enacted through intra-active material-discursive processes, reframing exclusion as an ongoing structuring force.

EXCLUSION FROM THE CANON AND FEMINIST MUSICOLOGY

Feminist musicology has extensively critiqued the

exclusionary mechanisms at work in the classical canon, highlighting how the idea of “musical genius” has historically been gendered as masculine, marginalising women composers (Citron, 1993; McClary, 1991). The exclusionary mechanisms are deeply rooted in informal social networks and homosocial spaces that favour men (Bayton, 1997; Goldin & Rouse, 2000). These informal structures extend to the technical and gatekeeping roles that men dominate, particularly in music production and sound engineering (Born & Devine, 2015). These informal exclusions create significant barriers for women, especially those engaging with the technical aspects of music.

Neoliberal ideologies further entrench these exclusions (Dungy & Krings, 2024) by endorsing tokenistic narratives of women who “have it all” (Shim, 2021; Wilkes, 2015). The selective celebration of exceptional cases does not dismantle systemic inequities (Scharff, 2017); rather, reflecting broader shifts in the cultural industries, where success is determined not by artistic merit alone but by alignment with dominant values of profitability, prestige, and marketability (León, 2014; Sanders et al., 2022). Assumptions that music inherently dissolves social inequalities are critiqued by Gadir (2016) and Morrison (2019), who reveal ongoing gendered, racialised, and class-based biases within both mainstream and alternative music spaces. Also, radical feminist approaches have sought to create a parallel history of women's music, inserting the names of women composers into the existing male-dominated canon (Hisama, 2002; McClary, 1991; Rieger, 1992).

However, feminist strategies that insert women composers into the canon, though important for recovery, risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to challenge. Liberal feminist approaches, which emphasise visibility within existing structures (Adkins Chiti, 2003; Macarthur, 2010) often align with neoliberal frameworks that valorise individual success over structural transformation. Neoliberal ideologies further entrench exclusion by endorsing tokenistic narratives of women, masking the persistence of

structural inequities.

However, women composers have also often operated within the same patriarchal and neoliberal structures that maintain their marginalisation, rather than challenging the deeper power dynamics that shape exclusion in classical music. Also, while feminist musicology has been instrumental in surfacing historical exclusions, it has often focused on supplementing existing narratives rather than integrating a critical interrogation of the structures that continually reproduce exclusion. Feminist new materialism problematises the very notion of “addition,” emphasising how exclusions emerge dynamically through entanglements of material conditions, institutional practices, and sonic hierarchies. This perspective aligns with critiques of neoliberal postfeminist frameworks, which emphasise individual success at the risk of undermining collective solidarity (Braidotti, 2006; Dines & Smith, 2012; Weir, 2013).

THINKING INTERSECTIONALLY AND INTRA-ACTIVELY

To address the systematic exclusion of marginalised voices in Western classical music, we must move beyond gender to account for how race, class, and geography intra-act to shape these exclusions. Intersectionality theory allows us to identify compounded marginalisation along race, gender, and class axes (Bull, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Yet, exclusion operates not only through identity-based barriers but also through institutional and economic structures – such as access to elite conservatoires, technological resources, and professional networks (Werner & Kuusi, 2023). Recognising these material-discursive conditions shifts the focus beyond identity markers to the structural and institutional mechanisms that actively sustain exclusion in classical music.

However, as Puar (2012) critiques, intersectionality has often relied on static identity categories, treating exclusions as pre-existing structures rather than seeing them as emergent through ongoing social,

cultural, and material processes. Feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007) pushes intersectionality further by highlighting how identities and exclusions emerge intra-actively, through ongoing institutional practices, compositional norms, and embodied interactions. The exclusion of Florence Price is often framed intersectionally as a static convergence of racial and gender bias (Brown, 2020; Scharff, 2017; VanderHart & Gower, 2021). A feminist new materialist perspective instead understands Price’s marginalisation as an ongoing process, enacted through archival practices, publishing silences, and aesthetic hierarchies that shape her reception in the present. Even when composers of colour are included on concert programmes, it is often tokenistic, reaffirming the dominance of white, patriarchal aesthetics rather than challenging them.

Recent scholarship in organization studies has begun to take seriously the affective, aesthetic, and embodied dimensions of organizational life (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Harding & Ford, 2025). These conversations resonate with feminist musicology’s attention to sound, voice, and the sensory, opening possibilities for post-disciplinary thinking around how institutions materialise exclusion and belonging. Our work brings these insights into dialogue, treating sonic and organizational forms not as parallel concerns but as mutually entangled processes through which gendered exclusions are produced, maintained, and potentially reconfigured.

Building on intersectionality theory, feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007) challenges the fixity of identity categories, reframing exclusion not as a pre-existing condition but as an emergent, intra-active process continually shaped through entanglements. In Western classical music, this supposes entanglements between composers, listeners, institutions, and sonic material itself. Feminist new materialism reconceptualises marginalisation as a dynamic process, where archival silences, institutional norms, and performance hierarchies continuously shape who is heard and who remains absent (Macarthur, 2014; Morrison, 2019). Barad’s conception of intra-action

(2007) offers further insight into how social identities like gender, race, and class are not static categories that intersect but are dynamically produced through their relationships with social, cultural, and material structures (Anthias, 2001; Holvino, 2010; Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). Barad emphasises that entities do not exist independently before their interactions but emerge through the ongoing dynamics of these entanglements. This notion is particularly valuable for musicology, where exclusion is not an event of the past but a continuously enacted process that determines whose work gains legitimacy and whose is silenced.

While intersectionality maps exclusion along identity categories (e.g., gender, race, class), feminist new materialism reconceptualises exclusion as an emergent phenomenon shaped by the entanglement of composers, listeners, institutions, and sonic material. This shift is particularly important for feminist musicology, where exclusion is often framed as a historical oversight rather than a process actively shaping contemporary musical practices. Viewing exclusion through intra-action reveals that historical omissions are not merely remnants of past discrimination but are actively sustained as performative acts, continuously reinforced through archival absences, institutional performance norms, and aesthetic hierarchies. For example, the limited availability of recordings and published works by marginalised composers does not simply reflect past discrimination, it actively determines their present-day recognition and legitimacy, demonstrating how exclusion is reproduced through material-discursive forces rather than existing as a fixed historical event.

TOWARDS EMBODIED AND SENSORY INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSES

Moreover, both intersectional and feminist new materialist thought critique the intellectual privileging of text-based academic knowledge. Notably, feminist new materialism calls for an embodied, sensory approach that disrupts the hierarchical separations between thought and feeling, subject and

object (Ahmed, 2013; Marks, 2000). Such sensory, embodied, and affective approaches hold potential for different modes of knowledge creation via 'sensible ruptures' (Acharya & Musasya, 2023). The prevailing dualism that privileges the intellectual (often coded as masculine) over the emotional and embodied (often coded as feminine) has historically reinforced the exclusion of women from classical music and, by extension, anyone who does not conform to the norms of cis-masculine dominance. This is not simply a matter of representation, but of epistemological bias, where dominant knowledge systems fail to account for the affective, material, and sensory dimensions of music. The dominance of text-based scholarship in musicology has historically reinforced disembodied forms of knowledge production, marginalizing the sensory and affective dimensions of music (Born & Devine, 2015). However, feminist scholars argue that engaging with sound as a material-discursive phenomenon challenges these exclusions by re-centring embodied experience in musical analysis (Werner et al., 2021).

In musicology, Smith et al. (2020) highlight the underrepresentation of women, noting that quantitative studies often focus on gender disparities without addressing the structural, aesthetic, and sensory barriers that underlie them. Similarly, Macarthur (2014) critiques those approaches that quantify representation but fail to challenge the aesthetic standards that marginalise women's contributions. This reinforces the argument that reducing feminist analysis to gender alone overlooks the embodied and emotional dimensions central to understanding exclusion. Neoliberal frameworks further entrench these exclusions by commodifying music, erasing its emotional and social potential (Macarthur, 2014). In contrast, sensory methodologies recognise music's material agency and its ability to disrupt hegemonic norms in academic knowledge production. This perspective emphasises that music itself is not just an object of study but an active participant in shaping knowledge, experience, and exclusion.

In this research, we enact diffraction, materialising

the entanglement of intersectionality and feminist new materialism. Just as sonic exclusions are produced through institutional practices, they can be disrupted through embodied engagements with music itself, challenging the epistemological dominance of text. Through its material-discursive entanglements, music is not merely a passive reflection of exclusion but an active force in its production – its performance, recording, and archival status directly shaping whose voices are heard and whose remain silent (Ahmed, 2013; Barad, 2007; Degórski, 2022). This methodological innovation not only enacts the theoretical entanglements of intersectionality and feminist new materialism but also resists the disembodied epistemologies that have historically marginalised embodied, sensory ways of knowing.

Barad's concept of agential realism (2007) further underscores that music, as a material-discursive entity, possesses agency in shaping knowledge. This perspective is evident in feminist art and sound-based interventions, which critique capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchal structures not as separate forces but as entangled phenomena (Kronberger & Krall, 2021). Degórski (2022), for example, examines Björk's transdisciplinary project *Biophilia* through an agential realist lens, demonstrating how the artist dissolves traditional dualisms by foregrounding the direct material engagement between music, technology, and sensory experience. Such work resists music's commodification under neoliberalism, reclaiming its capacity to shape knowledge through embodied, affective encounters.

Our diffractive engagement demonstrates that music, identity, and marginalisation are not merely intersecting concepts, but co-constituted phenomena that continually shape and reshape each other. This approach moves beyond the additive logic of representation to a relational, intra-active framework that actively reconfigures exclusionary structures. The challenge moving forward is to materialise this understanding into institutional and performative practices that resist exclusion and re-sound historically marginalised voices.

MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE INTRA-ACTIONS

This article builds on an intervention we staged at The Danish Gender Conference in September 2024, featuring reflective performances of solo piano pieces and art songs, selected for their relevance to our scholarly discussion of marginalised composers.

We here aim to disrupt hegemonic forms of academic writing, further challenging neoliberal, and patriarchal academic practices by inviting readers into a multisensory experience. Through our intersectional approach and multisensory method that engages the body and emotions, we aim to challenge the exclusion of marginalised voices in classical music. As part of this, we provide audio listening links, inviting readers to listen to the music while reading, reflecting on both the works and the composers' social contexts. Our approach challenges traditional academic scholarship by weaving music and sound directly into the fabric of knowledge production. This format employs feminist sensory methodologies to foreground affect and create a richer, embodied engagement. By inviting listeners into an embodied encounter with marginalised composers' works, we aim to challenge the disembodied nature of traditional scholarship and encourage a deeper sensory engagement with the lived realities of exclusion.

The multisensory approach outlined in this article has significant implications for academic practices, particularly in feminist musicology and intersectional research. By integrating embodied and affective experiences into scholarly work, this method challenges the dominance of text-based analysis and opens pathways for more inclusive and holistic methodologies. It encourages researchers to move beyond disembodied intellectual frameworks, fostering deeper engagement with the materiality and emotional resonance of artistic works. Moreover, this approach has the potential to transform how scholarship is communicated and experienced, creating space for sensory and participatory dimensions that re-sound marginalised voices. By bridging academic

inquiry with lived, felt experiences, the multisensory method offers a model for future research that is not only analytical but also empathetic and transformative, reshaping the way knowledge is produced and shared. Drawing inspiration from feminist sensory methodologies (Ahmed, 2013; Marks, 2000), we position affect and embodied experiences as central to our research. This methodology engages both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of intersectional exclusion, using music not merely as an object of analysis, but as an active participant in producing knowledge. By inviting readers to listen to music while reading the text, we encourage an emotional and sensory response that adds new layers of meaning to the intellectual content.

Our data collection process centred on uncovering musical pieces in the art song and solo piano repertoire composed by women, alongside conducting archival research into their socio-historical contexts and biographies. Guided by our intersectional feminist framework, we identified composers based on intersecting markers across gender, race, geography, and socio-economic background. Beyond these intersectional considerations, our final selection was shaped by practical and aesthetic considerations, including our ability to perform the music and our own affective resonance with them. This approach reflects our commitment to sensory, embodied methodologies, ensuring that the composers' voices are engaged with not only intellectual inquiry but also through felt, performative experience. In the intervention, we embodied this intersectional learning by performing the selected pieces ourselves, enacting an intra-active engagement with the music that extended beyond textual analysis. This performative dimension allowed us to immerse ourselves in the composers' experiences, rehearsing and interacting with their music not just as scholars but as active participants in their sonic narratives. Through this process, we explored how exclusion is not only theorised but also materialised through embodied encounters with marginalised compositions.

In our musical rehearsals for this intervention,

Richard played the piano and Florence sang; we both engaged with the composers' socio-historical contexts and reflected on how our own identities influenced the music's interpretation. Through this process, we explored how the embodied experience of performing these pieces shaped both our intellectual understanding and our affective engagement with the music. This allowed us to connect the sensory experience of performance with the intellectual analysis of marginalisation. Our methodological commitment deepened through this iterative process, which involved a collaborative narrative analysis informed by intersectional theories. We examined how intersecting identities – of both the composers and us as cis het performers – shaped artistic expression and marginalisation. This iterative process highlighted how knowledge is co-produced through embodied practice, affective response, and critical reflection.

The value we find in Barad's concept of agential realism lies in viewing music as an active agent that intra-acts with both the listener and its context. Listening, reading, and performing through the concept of agential realism reveal the entangled relationships between the composers, their music, us as performers and researchers, and the readers engaging with our work. Listening, in this context, is thus not passive but an intra-active process where intellectual and emotional engagement coalesce to produce new knowledge. The music not only affects the listener emotionally but also shapes intellectual insights about the intersectional exclusion experienced by these composers. Barad's concept of intra-action further highlights how identities are not only constructed intellectually but are also felt through embodied experience. Barad's work thus grounds multi-sensory approaches as an added dimension to classical social science methods (Petersen, 2016). This also resonates with other work in this journal exploring the extent to which Lady Gaga's embodied performance outside of dominant norms challenges our experience of popular culture (Dilling-Hansen, 2014). In this sense, listening to these composers' works while acknowledging their intersecting identities allows us to feel the compounded oppressions they faced, making the

emotional dimensions of exclusion palpable.

Our identities as performers, shaped by our race, gender, class, geography, and individual experiences, deeply informed how we interpreted and emotionally connected with compositions like Florence Price's *Sunset* and Alma Mahler's *Laue Sommernacht*. This interaction highlighted how the music's affective power and intellectual depth are intertwined, offering insights into the composers' lived experiences. This entanglement influenced our interpretations of the pieces, which in turn shaped how audiences received and understood them. The music, through its intra-action with us as performers, affected not only our emotional responses but also our intellectual engagement with the works, reinforcing Barad's assertion that knowledge is co-produced through material-discursive entanglements. As we navigated the intersectional identities of these composers, we experienced first-hand how their marginalisation was reflected in the affective dimensions of their compositions and in our own responses as performers. By recognising these entangled relationships, we underscore the co-constitutive nature of knowledge production, as described by agential realism, where intellectual understanding and emotional responses are inseparable from the material act of performance and listening.

The unfamiliarity of engaging with this multisensory format is itself a form of epistemic resistance. Discomfort signals a rupture in conventional ways of knowing, prompting audiences to move beyond intellectualised analysis into embodied experience. In this intervention, we invite readers to engage with knowledge not just through text but through sound and sensation. Sensory reflexivity is thus enabled in a way that engages not only the authors (Justenborg & Nilsson, 2023) – but, in our case, the readers of this article. By alternating between reading our words, listening to the music, or doing both simultaneously, audiences can experience the affective and embodied dimensions of the composers' work – dimensions often silenced in conventional scholarship. Importantly, no musical or musicological expertise is

necessary: music's immediacy as an art form makes it deeply accessible. The aim is not merely to deepen intellectual analysis but to reaffirm how affective and cognitive understandings are fundamentally entangled. In doing so, our intervention extends the insights of intersectional feminist theory, demonstrating that exclusion and marginalisation in Western classical music cannot be fully understood without engaging its sensory and affective dimensions.

This multisensory praxis opens new forms of feminist scholarship, ones that not only represent marginalised voices but actively re-sound them, reshaping the structures of what counts as musical, scholarly, and legitimate.

INTERVENTION: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the following intervention, we reprise the reflective, narrated performance first staged at the Danish Gender Conference. Rather than treating text and sound as separate modes of engagement, we invite readers into a diffractive experience, where listening and reading intra-act to generate new understandings of exclusion in classical music. While dominant academic practices prioritise intellectual engagement with text, this intervention materialises knowledge differently – through sound, embodiment, and affect. We acknowledge the privilege of being able to disrupt academic norms, first through the conference, and now through this journal. We also acknowledge that engaging sound assumes auditory access, and that not all readers will be able to participate in this way.

As you read and listen, we ask you to reflect on the composers' lived experiences and their music. Do their compositions express their turmoil or resilience? Is it helpful to imagine the composers' emotional states as they composed these works? How is it that personal struggles and intersectional standpoints can result in artistic expression of such universally perceptible beauty?

FAMILIAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL NORMS

Familial and marital relationships profoundly shaped women composers' creative identities. The stories of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn and Alma Mahler reveal how gendered expectations within family structures confined women's musical output to private spaces, limiting their public recognition. Their exclusion was shaped by intersecting societal expectations, not gender alone.

LISTEN: *Der Rosenkranz*, Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RD83njHE2Q>

Der Rosenkranz exemplifies the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, a tension that was embedded in Fanny's familial relationships. Born in 1805 into a well-known, musically educated family, Fanny shared the same musical upbringing as her brother Felix Mendelssohn, but the paths laid out for them were vastly different. Despite her immense talent, Fanny was discouraged from pursuing a public career in music by her father, who believed that her musical talents should remain a private pursuit, suitable only for the domestic sphere. Her brother Felix, although supportive of her talents, was complicit in reinforcing these limitations, reflecting the gender norms of the time. Feminist musicology critiques this divide, where Fanny's exclusion reflects how the concept of musical genius has been historically gendered as masculine. Through an intra-active lens, however, we see that Fanny's exclusion was not merely imposed by familial expectations but continuously enacted through the material-discursive forces of gendered institutions, social norms, and the domestic/private sphere divide.

The creative output of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn was therefore largely confined to private, intimate settings, where she organized *Sonntagsmusiken* (Sunday musical salons) in her family's home. These gatherings allowed her to compose and perform in a space where she had control, but they were still shielded from public scrutiny. Fanny's marriage to the painter

Wilhelm Hensel offered her a rare supportive relationship, which enabled her to continue composing. Her song *Der Rosenkranz*, with its themes of courtship and personal anxiety, could be read as a metaphor for Fanny's own struggle with the loss of personal creative freedom that accompanied her role as a wife and mother. The tension between public recognition and private creativity is central to understanding the challenges Fanny faced in navigating the patriarchal structures of 19th-century Europe.

LISTEN: *Laue Sommernacht*, Alma Mahler

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3v4nCYRWYQ>

Alma Mahler's life offers a striking parallel to Fanny Hensel's, though in a different historical and cultural context. *Laue Sommernacht* captures Alma's own unresolved struggle to balance her identity as a composer with the expectations placed on her by her marriage to Gustav Mahler. Alma was a talented composer in her own right, but upon her marriage, Gustav insisted that she renounce her compositional ambitions. This ultimatum reflects the patriarchal dynamics that defined their relationship and the broader societal structures that subordinated women's creative identities to the roles of wife and muse.

Despite her talents, Alma's legacy has often been viewed through the lens of her relationships with prominent male composers such as Gustav Mahler, Alban Berg, and Arnold Schoenberg. The unresolved nature of *Laue Sommernacht*, with its melancholic tone and unfinished narrative, mirrors Alma's personal frustrations and the creative constraints she faced. While Alma supported her husband and other male composers, her own musical ambitions were sacrificed to fulfil her prescribed domestic role. The suppression of her creative identity is emblematic of the ways familial expectations have historically limited women's contributions to the creative industries.

Together, the experiences of Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn and Alma Mahler offer a window into the broader dynamics of familial relations and gendered expectations. Yet, reading about their exclusion

tells only part of the story. Listening to their compositions invites a different kind of engagement – one that transcends textual analysis and allows us to sense, in the music itself, the tensions, struggles, and resistances embedded in their lived experiences. Both women, despite their talents, had to navigate restrictive family structures that constrained their artistic output. Their stories reflect the pervasive influence of familial and societal norms on women's ability to assert their identities as composers, highlighting the intersection of gender and family in shaping the trajectories of women in classical music.

CLASS CONFINEMENT

Gender and class intersected to constrain women composers like Poldowski and Mel Bonis, shaping how they navigated public and private musical worlds. Their stories reflect compounded exclusions and demonstrate how the classical canon cannot be understood without considering these intersecting forces.

LISTEN: *L'heure exquise*, Poldowski

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rwIs4XMmSU>

Poldowski, born Régine Wieniawski, the daughter of the famous Polish violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski, grew up in an aristocratic, cosmopolitan environment that afforded her certain privileges, but also imposed expectations that restricted her public visibility as a composer. Her decision to adopt the pseudonym “Poldowski” was not just a creative choice but also a strategic move to navigate the gendered and class-based pressures that accompanied her identity. This decision reflects feminist musicology's critique of how women composers have had to navigate exclusionary structures to be heard, demonstrating the ongoing challenges of gendered expectations in the production and reception of music.

L'heure exquise, a setting of a Paul Verlaine poem, reflects this delicate balance between refinement and artistic defiance, highlighting her ability to

work within the aesthetic expectations of her class while subtly challenging them. In common with Poldowski's music, the song is imbued with a sense of melancholy and introspection, offering a window into her personal struggles as a woman in the upper echelons of society. The use of a pseudonym allowed her to assert her identity in a male-dominated musical world, while simultaneously distancing herself from the expectations of her family's aristocratic legacy. Her cosmopolitan upbringing, spanning Belgium, England, and France, also influenced her work, as she navigated multiple cultural contexts that shaped her artistic voice. The tension between her refined public persona and her private creative ambitions is palpable in *L'heure exquise*, where the beauty of her composition is underscored by a sense of quiet resistance to the gendered and class-based constraints of her time.

LISTEN: *Sauvez-moi*, Mel Bonis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io0G0gWdCF8>

In contrast, Mel Bonis, born Mélanie Bonis, faced more overt class-based limitations as a middle-class woman in late 19th-century France. Mel Bonis's experience demonstrates how class and gender intersect to limit creative freedom. Intersectional feminist theory reveals how middle-class expectations confined her to the domestic sphere, further compounding her marginalisation as a woman composer. Unlike Poldowski, who had access to elite musical circles, Bonis's path was marked by greater obstacles. Despite her undeniable talent, Bonis was forced by her family to leave the Paris Conservatoire and find a wealthy husband who had little interest in music and did not care for her to spend time on this “hobby.” Her compositional output, produced under the pseudonym “Mel Bonis,” reflects the dual pressures of her gender and class, as she navigated a society that expected her to prioritise her domestic role over her artistic ambitions.

Sauvez-moi is a vivid example of the emotional depth Bonis achieved in her music, despite the societal constraints placed upon her. The shifting rhythms

and emotional turbulence of the piece reflect Bonis's inner turmoil, as she struggled to reconcile her artistic identity with the expectations of her middle-class status. Her use of a pseudonym, much like Poldowski, was a means of asserting her creative independence in a society that sought to confine her to the private, domestic sphere. Bonis's life, marked by her dual identity as a respectable bourgeois wife and a passionate, bold composer, reveals the intricate ways in which class and gender intersect to shape women's experiences in the classical music world.

The stories of Poldowski and Mel Bonis illustrate how class confinement adds an additional layer of complexity to the gendered expectations placed on women composers. Both women navigated the intersection of class and gender in different ways, using pseudonyms and their artistic output to resist societal limitations. Their music, characterised by emotional depth and subtle defiance, challenges us to reconsider the role of class in shaping women's creative identities. Moreover, rather than viewing gender and class as intersecting yet separate barriers, a diffractive lens reveals how these forces co-constitute exclusion, producing unique constraints that shape both the form and reception of women's compositions. For women, belonging to a higher class may be a source of intersectional exclusion as well as privilege. While acknowledging that upper-class status afforded them exposure to classical music, we also recognise the constraints imposed by societal expectations tied to their class.

GEOGRAPHIES AND CULTURES

The intersection of gender, geography, and culture shaped the creative expressions of composers like Dobrinka Tabakova and Agathe Backer Grøndahl. Tabakova, born in Bulgaria and educated in London, resists dominant compositional norms by prioritizing emotional clarity over complexity, thereby challenging aesthetic hierarchies that privilege masculine-coded abstraction. Her work exemplifies how gender, geography, and culture intra-act to shape musical voice and reception. Like others who

navigate transnational influences, Tabakova's music emerges from a negotiation between local identity and global expectations in classical music.

LISTEN: *Nocturne*, Dobrinka Tabakova

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLhd9VGYP6w>

Nocturne, composed in her twenties, reflects Tabakova's commitment to emotional directness and formal clarity. The piece is accessible yet richly expressive, blending her Bulgarian musical heritage with the cosmopolitan influences of her British education. Tabakova has spoken of the pressure to produce music that appears visually complex on the page, an academic aesthetic often aligned with masculine-coded authority in composition. Her resistance to this expectation challenges institutional norms that equate value with complexity, positioning emotional clarity as a feminist aesthetic gesture. In doing so, she exemplifies how women composers navigate entangled pressures of gendered reception, technical legitimacy, and cultural identity.

As we listen to *Nocturne*, we are reminded of how musical choices reflect more than personal style, they are shaped by institutional, geographic, and gendered expectations. Tabakova's refusal to conform to dominant aesthetic hierarchies opens space for thinking about voice, clarity, and resistance as entangled forces in contemporary music-making. Her work offers a compelling example of how feminist new materialist analysis can attend to affective, embodied choices shaped by transnational contexts.

Turning to another geographical and cultural context, we consider Agathe Backer Grøndahl, a Norwegian composer who, despite the progressive values often associated with the Nordic region, faced significant challenges in gaining recognition. Born in 1847, Backer Grøndahl's career reflects the complexities of navigating the intersection of gender and cultural expectations within a region that, on the surface, appeared more egalitarian.

LISTEN: *Lind (Blomstervignetten)*, Agathe Backer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ao3iiNHQ4>

The song we present – *Lind* – comes from her collection *Blomstervignetter*, and evokes the natural landscapes of her homeland, reflecting her deep connection to the Norwegian environment. However, despite her prolific output and critical acclaim as a pianist, Backer Grøndahl's music was often dismissed as "conservative" due to its adherence to traditional forms rather than the avant-garde trends of her time. This critique, frequently levelled at women composers, demonstrates the biases within classical music that devalue work not seen as innovative by male-dominated critical standards. It highlights feminist musicology's critique of aesthetic hierarchies, where male-dominated avant-garde trends are privileged over other forms of musical expression.

Like Tabakova, Backer Grøndahl's work reveals the influence of her geographical and cultural context, yet it also shows how these same factors can contribute to her marginalisation. Despite being from a region celebrated for its progressive values, Backer Grøndahl faced the same gendered limitations as her European counterparts, further illustrating that the challenges faced by women composers transcend geographic boundaries. Backer Grøndahl's experience reflects intersectional feminist theory's insight into how national identity and gender intersect to compound exclusion, as her Norwegian background and adherence to traditional forms marked her as an outsider within the male-dominated, avant-garde Western classical tradition.

Through the lens of these composers, we see how geography and culture intersect with gender to shape both the opportunities and limitations placed on women in classical music. Whether it is Tabakova's blending of Bulgarian and Western influences or Backer Grøndahl's connection to the Nordic landscape, these composers challenge us to consider how place and cultural background influence creative expression and recognition. By expanding our focus to include these geographical and cultural

dimensions, we deepen our understanding of how composers like Tabakova and Backer Grøndahl navigate complex social and artistic landscapes. Their stories remind us that the exclusion of women's voices in classical music is not just a result of gender alone but is shaped by intersecting factors of place, culture, and societal expectations.

RACIALISED DISCRIMINATION

Gender and race intersected to intensify the marginalisation of composers like Florence Price and Shelley Washington, whose music reflects both their gendered experiences and the racial discrimination they faced in a field dominated by white men.

LISTEN: *Sunset*, Florence Price

<https://youtu.be/Dvmd81khReg?si=DtpAtsLunFFG1Mvh>

Florence Price's *Sunset* exemplifies the resilience she embodied as the first Black American woman to have an orchestral piece performed by a major U.S. orchestra. Born in 1887 in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price's career was shaped by the systemic barriers of the racially segregated American South. Despite her immense talent, Price was often forced to compose under pseudonyms and faced significant racial and gender-based discrimination throughout her career. Engaging with Florence Price's music through a multisensory framework allows for a fuller appreciation of her contributions, revealing the emotional and embodied experiences that are often silenced by text-based analyses. This challenges the dominance of disembodied scholarship in understanding marginalised voices.

Price's personal life was marked by significant hardships, including financial instability and an abusive first marriage. However, she persevered, producing over 300 compositions that blended European classical forms with African American spirituals, hymns, and folk traditions. *Sunset*, written in 1938, captures the emotional depth and complexity of Price's music,

reflecting both the beauty of her artistry and the resilience required to navigate a field that systematically excluded Black women. Her work, long overshadowed by the dominance of White male composers, is only now beginning to receive the recognition it deserves, a testament to the enduring impact of race and gender on the visibility of women composers.

LISTEN: *Towers*, Shelley Washington

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxCaZHhAGLQ>

Shelley Washington's work, though composed in a more contemporary context, resonates with long-standing struggles around race, gender, and institutional exclusion. In *Towers*, Washington confronts the entanglement of race, gender, and academia, drawing on her experience as a Black woman in predominantly white musical and academic spaces. Her programme notes express the isolation, pressure, and hypervisibility she experiences; challenges echoed by many women of colour navigating historically white institutions in classical music.

Washington's compositional style blends classical, jazz, and rock influences, creating hybrid sonic spaces that foreground Black and queer voices within the classical tradition. *Towers* functions as both a personal reflection and a critique of institutional whiteness and patriarchy. Her genre-defying practice exemplifies intersectional feminist insights into how race and gender co-constitute exclusion, revealing how structural marginalisation operates not only through access but through the very aesthetic norms of the field. Washington's work resonates with feminist musicology's call to dismantle Eurocentric, masculine-coded genre hierarchies by redefining what counts as legitimate musical expression.

Together, Washington and Tabakova challenge us to reimagine the boundaries of classical music; not only through who composes it, but how its aesthetic and institutional norms are shaped by gender, race, geography, and power. Their work exemplifies the need for feminist analyses that are both intersectional and sensory, attuned to how exclusion operates through

sound as much as through structures.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we engage in a diffractive analysis of the exclusion of women from the Western classical music canon, intertwining intersectionality and feminist new materialism to illuminate how each perspective enriches the other for these ends. By examining the intra-action of gender, race, class, and geography in shaping musical exclusion, we foreground marginalisation not as a static or historical condition, but as a process that is materially and discursively sustained. This insight builds on existing feminist musicological work, while extending it through our methodological innovation: inviting readers to *listen* as they read, thereby fostering an embodied and affective engagement with feminist and postcolonial critiques of disembodied knowledge.

In doing so, we contribute to feminist intersectional studies of the creative industries and feminist musicology, with an aim not just to name exclusion, but to begin unlearning it and generating new grammars of knowing. Our article extends feminist critiques of canon formation by moving beyond additive or representational approaches. Rather than inserting women into existing evaluative frameworks, we interrogate how those frameworks (shaped by gendered, racialised, and classed norms) are themselves reproduced and naturalised. Our intervention also addresses limitations within intersectionality, responding to critiques of its tendency to fix identity categories, and instead offering a new materialist lens that understands marginalisation as dynamically produced through material-discursive entanglements. In this way, our diffractive methodology does not only analyse exclusion but enacts a mode of thinking, writing, and listening through which exclusion can be differently understood.

The implications of this work are significant for institutions that mediate cultural legitimacy, such as orchestras, conservatoires, festivals, and funding bodies. Repertoire choices, audition protocols, and

dominant narratives about “excellence” and “genius” remain bound to aesthetic hierarchies that systematically marginalise. Tackling these inequalities requires more than increasing the visibility of women and racialised composers; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the evaluative standards that render certain sounds valuable and others disposable. Our multisensory method offers one route; foregrounding listening, embodiment, and epistemic justice as practices through which institutions might begin to transform, not simply diversify, their cultures.

More broadly, our methodological reorientation speaks to academic knowledge production itself. By weaving sound into scholarly form, we resist disembodied models of rigour and open space for affective, plural, and relational ways of knowing. The performance-based intervention we first staged, and the listening experiences embedded in this article, challenge conventional understandings of what counts as data, method, and argument, and confront the epistemic hierarchies that continue to shape our disciplines. While we acknowledge that such interventions may

unsettle established norms and carry risk in institutions still shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and extractive logics, we argue that this very unsettling is a necessary condition for transformation. These practices offer a model for enacting feminist and decolonial commitments not only in what we study, but in how we study it, and in whose voices are made heard.

Looking forward, we contend that exclusion in classical music cannot be addressed through representation alone. What is needed is a deeper interrogation of how power moves through sonic regimes, institutional practices, and aesthetic values. Even well-intentioned diversity initiatives risk reproducing neoliberal logics of individual merit and market appeal if they do not attend to these entangled structures. Our intervention calls not only for rewriting history, but for listening differently: not simply to new names or repertoires, but to the relational, affective, and institutional forces through which exclusion is continuously (re)produced. This is not merely a call for action – it is a call for attunement.

[1] Represented statistically amongst composers; represented in the corpus of publicly available scores; and represented in performance programmes (nb: in French, the term *représentation* also designates a stage performance).

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Mapping the Margins of Small Places

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ABSTRACT

With inspiration from Crenshaw's paper, "Mapping the Margins" (1991), this paper attempts a theoretical rethinking of intersectionality specifically applied to small-scale settings. The theoretical question addressed is: how may we rethink intersectionality as a theory, if the social processes of inclusion and exclusion we wish to investigate take place in small-scale settings? Crenshaw's original aim was to "advance the telling" (1991, p.1242) of those places peopled by persons not usually at the centre of attention. But what if one lives in a place where it is literally difficult to escape notice? Do small-scale settings throw up particular conditions for expressing one's gender or other (intersecting) identities? While Crenshaw was concerned about (legal) practices that "relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1991, p. 1242), the concern raised here is whether some locations relegate identities to positions that resist retelling or reinterpretation? The paper discusses both geographic and metaphorical small-scale settings in the form of islands and close-knit communities. One characteristic of such settings is that they are typically places where people know each other in different capacities, leading to compulsory intimacy (Hayfield & Schug, 2019). This means that identities need to be negotiated in constellations where people often already have pre-existing ideas about and experiences with each other.

KEY WORDS

INTERSECTIONALITY, FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY, IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS, ISLANDED COMMUNITIES, ISLANDNESS, SMALL-SCALE SETTINGS, COMPULSORY INTIMACY

PRE-REFLECTIONS

Whenever I visit Tórshavn, the small capital (approx. 19,000 inhabitants) of the Faroes, I do one of two things: work or walk. Crisscrossing town by foot in rain, snow, and an occasional ray of sunshine, there is one house downtown which I cannot help but notice: a small house in the oldest part of town. I think most “Havnarfolk” (locals) will know which one I am thinking of: It is the one with rainbow flags and rainbow art in the windows, and a mock street sign which says, “Gay Street”. Passing this house has always made me smile, but also wonder about what it would be like to so strongly express identification with a particular social category in a place where most people know (or think they know) each other. Does this mean that whenever the owner walks out their front door, they will always be perceived as “that gay person”? Maybe even *only* as “that gay person”, rather than say, “a colleague”, “a piano player” or whatever other skills and identities this person may associate with?

This reflection partially ties in with an experience I had many years ago, when one of my sons started school, and all the parents were crammed in the back of the room, while the teacher started introductions and called out all the kids’ names. Calling out one particular name, a snicker went through the crowd of parents, as someone started whispering “isn’t he the one with two mothers?”. Well, yes, but as it turned out, he was also a kid with a great sense of humour, a good playmate, and - as they got older - a brilliant collaborator in group project work, because he actually pulled his part of the weight.

I do not know which one of the parents started the commotion at the back of the room, but probably it was someone who “knew” this kid already from his or her own child attending the same kindergarten. Coming to the school from at least four different kindergartens across town, the kids themselves were starting afresh on new social relations with each other. Yet, clearly some adults in the room already associated luggage with many of them, some kids being more visible and attracting more attention

than others. As I later learned, many of the parents themselves were in fact old schoolmates, and coming from a much larger setting myself, the amount of “inside knowledge” they all had about each other, the school and other aspects of local life never ceased astounding me.

In this paper, I aspire to revisit the concept of intersectionality in settings where people presume they already “know” each other, in this way bringing out nuances and adding to Crenshaw’s original conceptualisation. I ask how we may rethink intersectionality as a theory, if the social processes of inclusion and exclusion we wish to investigate take place in small-scale settings. By small-scale settings I refer both to literal island places such as the Faroes, which refer to geographic locations, but also to metaphorical small-scale settings such as schools, classrooms or workplaces, which I argue sometimes also function as delimited settings for social interaction.

Crenshaw’s original aim was to “advance the telling” of those places peopled by persons not usually at the centre of attention (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242) and therefore deprived of adequate legal protection (Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2013). But what if one lives in a place where it is literally difficult to escape notice, due to small population size? Do small-scale settings throw up particular conditions for expressing one’s gender, sexuality or other (intersecting) identities? Examining Crenshaw’s original metaphors at some depth, I explore what happens to the theory of intersectionality when it is conceptualised in the context of ‘small places’. While Crenshaw was concerned about (legal) practices that “relegate the identity of women of color to a *location that resists telling*” (1991, p. 1242, my emphasis), the concern I am attempting to raise is *whether some locations may relegate identities to positions that resist retelling or reinterpretation*.

THE ORIGINS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The concept of intersectionality is often accredited to American scholar and feminist activist Kimberley

Crenshaw (Phoenix, 2006; Pristed Nielsen, 2013; Davis, 2014; Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2020). She first wrote about intersectionality in an analysis of Black women's employment experiences in the US (Crenshaw, 1989). The word *intersectionality* refers to a metaphor in this paper, which explains how discrimination of Black women in the US labour market is analogous to traffic in an intersection. It comes from multiple directions, and it can be hard to establish beyond reasonable doubt – and therefore impossible to receive legal redress – which type of discrimination caused the injury. It is thus important to understand about this metaphor that the intersection is not between identities (*positions*) but between forms of discrimination (*effects*) (Rodó-Zárate & Jorba 2020, p. 28).

There is another, often overlooked, metaphor in Crenshaw's 1989 paper, namely the basement metaphor. As pointed out by Carastathis (2013, p. 698), this metaphor is significant for its account of the socio-legal production of *hierarchical* power. While the intersection is a two-dimensional model, the basement model introduces a third, vertical dimension of how discrimination is played out. As this metaphor is rarely discussed, allow me to quote it in full:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked - feet standing on shoulders - with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who - due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise

privileged position relative to those below - are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151-152).

While the intersection represents a flat geography of power (Carastathis, 2013, p. 712), the basement metaphor introduces a vertical as well as a temporal or diachronic element (Carastathis, 2013, p. 710), as it opens up for change over time, represented through the hope or prospect of eventually being able to "squeeze through" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152). I shall return to this notion of temporality and prospect for change below, as I introduce arguments by feminist geographers about negotiating identities in space.

Crenshaw's empirical observations, which sparked her theoretical arguments, came out of concerns with lived experiences of real people expressing different types of identities. As such, her observations were not new, although her usage of the term *intersectionality* was. The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organisation active in Boston between the years 1974-1980, had already more than a decade earlier called attention to the lived realities of Black women experiencing multiple simultaneous forms of oppression. As their 1977 statement says, "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 1). That their viewpoints and ideas correspond rather precisely to subsequent conceptions of *intersectionality* is also evident from a quote later in the statement: "We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual" (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 4).

While the Combahee River Collective initiated attention to what they termed “interlocking systems of oppression”, it was Crenshaw’s publication of her paper “Mapping the Margins” in *Stanford Law Review* (Crenshaw, 1991) which initiated usage of the term “intersectionality” among – in the first instance – feminist researchers. Based on observations of practices at battered women’s shelters in the Los Angeles area in the late 1980s, Crenshaw concluded that women of colour did not receive appropriate attention, treatment and support. Not even from the feminists and antiracists whose support and attention could perhaps have been assumed: “The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women” (1991, p. 1252).

Similarly, the Combahee River Collective also spoke about the inability or unwillingness of other liberation movements to consider the specific prerogatives of Black (lesbian) women; “it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 3). Directly addressing their connections to the Black liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the Combahee River Collective pointed out how “It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 2).

There are thus very many similarities between the arguments in the “Combahee River Collective Statement” and especially Crenshaw’s 1991 paper on “Mapping the Margins”, and both texts could be assessed as “activist” in the sense of attempting to call attention to what was perceived as social injustices. Crenshaw herself explicitly developed her theory of

intersectionality with the aim to “advance the telling” of the locations where the consequences of the failures of different equal rights movements made themselves felt (1991, p. 1242). This is why she was concerned with “mapping the margins”, so that those people whose needs often escape notice in policies and practices ostensibly designed to alleviate the consequences of processes of social exclusion might be included.

A whole host of feminist scholars have since debated, expanded and further developed the concept of intersectionality in different directions. While some primarily engage in debate over the concept’s theoretical usefulness (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2006 & 2011; Staunæs, 2003; Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006), others argue that its most significant contribution lies in the ability to develop more refined empirical analysis of social interactions (McCall, 2005; Jensen, 2006; Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Davis, 2014). The number of scholarly publications either debating or applying the concept is ever increasing.

Indeed, the publication of the present special issue of *Women, Gender & Research*, and the fact that this is the second special issue on intersectionality in the journal’s history (Christiansen et al., 2006), attests to the continued academic preoccupation with the concept. While the generalisability of the theory of intersectionality beyond the lived experiences of Black women in the US has at times been a hotly debated issue (Carastathis, 2013; Hvenegård-Lassen, 2020), the sheer volume of academic publications debating and applying the concept attests to its continued wide intellectual appeal. One recurring debate, which can be traced back at least to the Combahee River Collective statement (1977), pertains to which differences matter.

WHICH DIFFERENCES MATTER?

Crenshaw’s original concern was primarily with intersections of race and gender (Crenshaw 1989), although she explicitly acknowledged the relevance of other types of social differentiation in creating

experiences of marginalisation: “The struggle over which differences matter and which do not is neither an abstract nor an insignificant debate among women” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1265). Several subsequent feminist scholars building on Crenshaw have, through various contributions, reflected on which differences besides gender and race matter – age, class, sexuality often being among distinctions appearing at the top of such lists. Returning to use predating Crenshaw, The Combahee River Collective Statement is quite specific about the order of the Collective’s attention to systems of oppression: “A combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 3).

Other researchers have also debated which differences to include in intersectional analyses. One general trend is that priorities tend to differ among researchers working in respectively the US and EU (Christensen & Siim, 2006; Davis, 2009; Elg et al., 2010; Pristed Nielsen, 2013; Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2020). As argued by Davis, “the trajectories of reception have been different” (Davis, 2009, n.p.) in the US and the EU. Davis argues that in a US context, the concept of intersectionality is most frequently associated with critical race studies and the politics of anti-racism, whereas this issue is less salient in the EU, where “ethnicity” is a more frequently applied term. One explanation for this may be that while Europe was certainly highly complicit in slavery, there were relatively few slaves actually residing in Europe. This may well have occluded the sense of urgency in foregrounding questions of race and racism. Furthermore, in scholarly work from the US, focus is mostly on the triad gender-race-class (e.g. Hancock, 2007), whereas “European scholars seem more reluctant to prioritize, and sometimes bring in potentially endless lists” (Pristed Nielsen, 2013, p. 279). Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, gender tends to take priority as category among European researchers and policy makers alike: “[A]ppeals to gender equality historically precede appeals to anti-racism in most European countries

[...] This makes the EU context for debating anti-discrimination discursively different from that of the USA” (Pristed Nielsen, 2013, p. 280, see also Christensen & Siim, 2006, p. 35). Intersectionality has thus gained traction in Europe especially among feminist scholars – also among those not necessarily preoccupied with racism and racialisation. While race and racialisation have thus in some cases left the centre of attention in European academic publications on intersectionality, other types of identities have been brought to attention, one of them being place belonging.

ADDING PLACE TO DEBATES ABOUT INTERSECTIONALITY

While intersectionality as a concept has travelled through both space and time (Christensen & Siim, 2006; Phoenix, 2006; Davis, 2009; Pristed Nielsen, 2013; Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2020), and still is a concept heavily debated on each side and across the Atlantic, contextual readings of intersectionality have also emerged in quite a different sense. Feminist geographers, from the 1970s forward, started theorising place and space as fraught with social relations enabling and disabling exertions of power (whether economic, political, or social) (Massey, 1994, 2005; McDowell, 1999; Nelson & Seager, 2005). They also started theorising space and place as interconnected with gendered and classed identities (e.g. Massey, 1994, 2005; Forsberg, 1998, 2001; Fenster, 2005), arguing that “spaces and places are experienced differently by different people, and come to be associated with presence or absence of different groups of people” (Nelson & Seager, 2005, p. 15). These points are epitomised in Massey’s warning against romanticising public space as “an emptiness which enables free and equal speech” (Massey, 2005, p. 152). Rather, space - in Massey’s view - should be conceptualised as “throwntogetherness” (p. 141), as a continual process of negotiating the terms of social co-existence between differently situated and identified bodies. Massey’s views on space thus have some semblance with the views on temporality and prospects for

negotiating positions, which Carastathis (2013) identifies in Crenshaw's basement metaphor.

One geographer who has been concerned with negotiated embodied presence in place is Tim Cresswell, who in his book *In Place/Out of Place* (1996) points out how dominant ideas exist about what is acceptable (in place) or not (out of place) in a given place and context and performed by a given body. Hence, "rules" for social acceptability apply to specific places and for specific bodies. Such bodily specificity often relates to gender, but other socially differentiating factors such as age, class, bodily abilities, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. may also carry salience in specific settings. Furthermore, Cresswell makes the important point that moving between different places frequently alters conditions for acceptability and perceptions of bodily displays, *inter alia* altering the individual's social standing. This phenomenon is documented by Mills (1996, 2005) in her studies of female British travelers in the colonies during the heyday of British rule in India and Africa. Mills shows how these women were sometimes travelling as "honorary men" with different possibilities for mobility and agency compared to when they were travelling at home in Britain (Mills, 1996, p. 140). The overall argument is that we frequently have expectations about behaviour which relate particular social positions to possibilities for particular actions in particular places, but movement through space or between places can alter both social position and expectations about/possibilities for behaviour.

Returning to Crenshaw's basement metaphor, we may capture this idea by arguing that it matters which "house" we are in the basement of. The hatch works differently in different legal and social contexts, different arguments are accepted as the "but for" which allows one to "squeeze through" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152). Place is therefore a factor to be reckoned with in intersectional analyses. Feminist geographers argue that adding place to analyses of intersectional positionalities implies a contextual understanding of the relative ascendancy of different identities in different places. Island studies scholars, in turn, have argued

that islands constitute such special settings that they warrant research "on their own terms" (Baldacchino, 2008). This argument leads to the theoretical question: if islands are, indeed, such special settings, does this mean that they throw up particular conditions for negotiating one's embodied presence in space?

INTERSECTIONALITY IN ISLAND SETTINGS

Most prominently, it is the Greek *cum* Hawai'ian scholar Marina Karides (2017, 2020) who has argued that island places throw up specific parameters for identity expressions. She proposes that *islandness* is a factor which requires attention in feminist intersectional analyses of island life. But what is islandness? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an island is defined as "a piece of land completely surrounded by water" (2018). "Island Studies" as an academic field is centred on the argument that the fact of being "completely surrounded by water" shapes both social, economic and political possibilities on islands. Islandness is therefore a term referring to this fact. The term is coined by Maltese scholar Godfrey Baldacchino, who argues that islandness should be seen as "an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant, ways" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278).

Karides has proposed "island feminism" as a theoretical orientation which approaches island studies while drawing from feminisms of intersectionality, geography, (post)coloniality and queer theory (Karides, 2017, p. 31). Reminiscent of Crenshaw's point about the lacunae of respectively feminist and anti-racist struggles, Karides argues that:

Although places and spaces are gendered, oriented by sexuality regimes, class and racial hierarchies, and sculpted by coloniality and national status, Island Studies scholarship barely has considered how life and opportunities on islands and between islands are shaped by these factors (Karides, 2017, p.30).

In response to this absence, “Island feminism is offered as a synergistic perspective to enable critical analysis of the social inequalities and sexuality regimes within and across islands” (Karides, 2017, p.30).

Karides (2020) suggests that feminist analyses are particularly important when attempting to understand processes of social differentiation and emergence of new economic and social opportunities in island locations. The added emphasis on island locations entails that islandness “becomes a facet of intersectional analysis” (Karides, 2017, p. 34). This means that we need to pay specific attention to the fact of islands being “completely surrounded by water” and therefore being clearly delimited. For one thing, this means that it requires resources to leave (either access to a boat or other means of transportation and/or money to pay for transportation); and secondly – unless the island is large – you are likely to bump into people again. If we return here to Cresswell’s insight about how moving between different locations can make new bodies or new behaviour be in or out of place, this means that living on islands (or in other close-knit communities where mobility is difficult) could impede attempts to alter one’s social position. It may simply be impossible to move into “a new place” (literally or metaphorically) and negotiate the conditions for oneself to acquire a new social position or new expectations or possibilities for new types of behaviour.

Overall, my argument is that place matters in intersectional analyses, and further that islands are a special kind of place, which in turn matter in special kinds of ways. This is related to Shields’ ideas about space as being “causative”.

Rather than “a cause” the spatial is *causative*. Spatialisation has a mediating effect because it represents the contingent juxtaposition of social and economic forces, forms of social organisation, and constraints of the natural world and so on. But as “a cause”, in and of itself, it plays no role for it is not a locus of causal forces. Human agents

have causal power (Shields, 1991, p. 57, emphasis in original).

Developing Shield’s argument further, islands are causative spaces in particular ways, because their boundaries are clearly marked by natural borders at the water’s edge. The constraints of their natural world are intuitively identifiable. In such places, the arrival and departure of new people contribute to new juxtapositions of human agents, and therefore new constellations of social and economic forces. Obviously, *any* location and its attendant social relations will be marked by the arrival and departure of new persons. But the argument about islandness as an intervening variable is that islandness calls for heightened attention to the geographic boundaries of the location, and that the mobility efforts involved in crossing such boundaries should enhance our attention to the causative effects of spatial co-constellations of human agents. Conceivably, the “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005) of social relations in island spaces is intensified by the “settingapartness” of the islandness. There may literally be less wiggle room to negotiate the terms of being thrown together in a small-scale setting.

While the parallel to metaphorical islands such as work-related, educational or religious communities may seem to fade here, I would suggest that the arguments about mobility efforts and the inherent costs of attempting to move still apply. One’s presence in the social space or geographical place of a literal or metaphorical islanded community still requires negotiation.

NEGOTIATING ONE’S PRESENCE IN PLACE AND SPACE

Tying in Crenshaw’s arguments about the hatch in the basement ceiling (1989, p. 152) with those of feminist geographers’ about being in or out of place (Cresswell, 1996) and negotiating a “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005), questions of power and resources are brought to the table. Not everybody has the same possibilities for simply moving elsewhere,

calling out a “but for” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151) or negotiating their social position with new constellations of people. Furthermore, when living in a small place, perhaps the feeling of “being in the same boat” or already “knowing each other” limits one’s ability to negotiate (or perhaps conceal) certain aspects of one’s identity?

One researcher, who has addressed such questions, is the Faroese gender researcher Erika Hayfield. Having lived experience of doing research in Faroese society, she has published a paper in which she discusses “how islanders navigate multiple relations and how this might impact research ethics” (Hayfield, 2022, p. 233). While primarily concerned with a research ethics perspective, I argue that Hayfield’s insights also carry theoretical relevance for any close-knit community. Hayfield herself uses the term “islanded community”, which refers to communities characterised by interconnectedness, interdependency and intimacy (Hayfield, 2022, p. 237). She discusses these in terms of “the intensity of multiple relations” (Hayfield, 2022, p. 234), where public and private spheres often blend and overlap through meeting each other in different formal and informal roles. Hayfield fleshes out three different dimensions of how and why such intense and multiple relations matter through the concepts *interconnectedness*, *interdependency* and *intimacy*.

Interconnectedness refers to dual or multiple relationships between people who are connected through networks, socially and/or professionally. “They know and engage with the same people in overlapping social networks and there are high levels of familiarity amongst people, making anonymity impossible” (Hayfield, 2022, p. 237). She also speaks about this as “layers of relations, entailing that people gain insight into many facets of others’ lives. Thus, multiple relations lead to social transparency and extensive knowledge about others” (Hayfield, 2022, p. 237).

Interdependency is, according to Hayfield, a result of social ties becoming complex and overlapping, “meaning that people rely on each other and navigate accordingly by anticipating future situations” (2022,

p. 237). This, in turn, impacts power dynamics, which oftentimes will become (or be perceived to potentially become) circular rather than straightforward.

Finally, *intimacy* refers to closeness both physically and cognitively. Intimacy is to be understood in the sense that people are “compelled to have dealings with one another in multiple roles” (Hayfield, 2022, p. 237), even in cases of conflict. In a previous publication analysing the experiences of “strangers” in Faroese society, Hayfield and Schug find that “Familiarity is compulsory and it is impossible to remain unfamiliar given the extensive networks and the intimacy of place” (Hayfield & Schug, 2019, p. 395). A further point about intimacy in small places is that people will be able to observe each other’s multiplicity of roles, potentially revealing perceived inconsistencies in identity performance (Hayfield, 2022, p. 238).

I argue that also metaphorical islands, such as close-knit work communities or communities of interest – for example religious or lifestyle communities – are often characterised by interconnectedness, interdependency and intimacy in precisely the types of ways described by Hayfield.

Tying together the threads of Hayfield’s arguments about islanded communities with the ideas presented above, it seems possible to suggest that “throwntogetherness” in island settings takes the form of being interconnected, interdependent and intimate because island space is “causative” (Shields, 1991) in this way. The “throwntogetherness” becomes more intimate (even with people one potentially disagrees with) and more interdependent (including in currently unpredictable future power relations) with people you are caused to be interconnected with in either social space or geographical place. Negotiating such types of “throwntogetherness” may even entail a sense of being thrown - not together but - *against* each other, leading to risks of ethical harm (Hayfield, 2022), or bruised identities and intersectional misrecognition. Below, I unfold this theoretical proposition through a few empirical examples meant to illuminate how

islandness (whether literal or metaphorical) can impact possibilities for negotiating intersectional identities at the margins of small places. The examples are deliberately disparate, drawing both on extended analyses of other researchers' cases and my own field work notes. Jointly, they are selected to represent a span illuminating the extent and relevance of my conceptual argument. Thus, examples span from research in a literal island place in Thailand (Malam, 2008); to research in the (relatively large) city places of Copenhagen and Berlin (Schröder, 2025), which nevertheless contain sub-communities that seem metaphorically islanded; to my own field work in the Danish Armed Forces, which turned out to be islanded in ways I had not foreseen. All three examples illuminate how people may negotiate their presence in the social space and/or geographical place of respectively literal and metaphorical islanded communities.

A FEW EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES TO EXPLORE IMPLICATIONS

My initial empirical inspiration for this paper came from having frequently passed by that little house with the strong identity statement in Tórshavn during my work-related visits to the Faroes, where I have always only been a visitor and never a resident. Co-considering intersectionality and islandness, I have elsewhere argued that especially island tourism (as a phenomenon which brings new human agents and bodies into contact with each other in interconnected communities) "fundamentally alters the mixture of 'throwntogetherness', and therefore calls for new intersectional analyses of negotiations of power in place" (Pristed Nielsen, 2023, p. 32).

One author, whom I would argue explores such "throwntogetherness" to enlightening effect (however, without using that term), is Malam (2008). Researching how in-migrating male Thai bar workers on Pha-ngan Island in Southern Thailand negotiate their position both *vis-à-vis* female and male tourists, local island residents, and transgender sex workers in the neighbouring bar, Malam's analysis showcases

intersectionality at work in an islanded community fraught with structures of power and identity in a place where access to mobility alters one's positionality as being in or out of place.

Situating her work within feminist geography, but not referencing literature on intersectionality, Malam manages to execute what I would argue is an intersectional analysis, because it takes account of diverse social and spatial identities, including gender, sexuality, class, islander/non-islander, migrant and tourist positionalities. Arguably, islandness further becomes an intersecting variable in Malam's analysis at the point where she explains how access to a boat for some of her research subjects entail access to negotiate their positionality and potentially empower them beyond what is attainable behind the counter of the bar during working hours.

Bar workers could also mobilise resources outside of the bar space in order to seduce potential girlfriends or support existing ones. Some examples of this in-kind support include taking women on free trips to nearby deserted beaches in boats belonging to their employers [...] Mastery of space for bar workers was an expression of their creativity in applying strategic knowledge about the kinds of resources they could covertly acquire and the best times to do this (Malam, 2008, p. 588).

Malam argues about the site of her field work that it is "a site of intense encounters which can bring boundaries between identity categories into sharp focus" (Malam, 2008, p. 584). Although Malam limits herself to making claims about the particular island in which she did research, I would argue with reference to the work of Hayfield (2022) that many islands may be conceptualised as "sites of intense encounters" (Malam, 2008, p.584) or characterised by compulsory intimacy (Hayfield & Schug, 2019), perhaps especially for the resident population, certainly if they face material restraints in being able to leave.

Another empirical study, which brings out some interesting parallels, is Schröder's work (2025) concerning

the presence of LGBTIQ+ migrants in Europe. She describes how LGBTIQ+ identified migrants, who are dependent on receiving asylum status in the EU, experience their possibilities for negotiating their intersectional identities through time and space. Because some of these people may achieve asylum status based on their declared sexuality, such status acquisition may hinder or hamper further negotiation of their positionality and identity expressions. Furthermore, being an asylum seeker or a person with asylum status in this context may also hinder access to mobility, resulting in a “differential mobility” (Saleh & Tschalaer, 2023) for LGBTIQ+ identified persons with or without migrant background.

Schröder’s research is based on fieldwork in the cities of Copenhagen and Berlin, which are not islands. Yet, her research is grounded in the LGBTIQ+ communities in each of these cities. More precisely, in LGBTIQ+ communities that take part in migrant support networks, a characteristic which arguably *does* make them interconnected, interdependent, intimate – and therefore islanded – communities. Having accessed these networks based on an identity as LGBTIQ+ identified (and possibly having acquired refugee status on this background), entail that Schröder’s research subjects have been involved in compulsory intimacy (Hayfield & Schug, 2019) in the sense that they have been compelled to share information about their sexual preferences. Furthermore, they are equipped with a differential access to mobility in a spatial context where mobility may be necessary to achieve the freedom to make choices about one’s expressed identity. Their lived intersectional identity expression is stifled, and further alteration of expression hampered through the smallness or islanded character of the LGBTIQ+ migrant network communities in Copenhagen and Berlin. Jasbir Puar speaks about “circulating points of exchange and contact within a biopolitical control economy” in the context of intimacy for queerly racialised populations (Puar, 2007, p.xxvi). Puar thus rearticulates intimacy as a register which hinges on both spatial and representational public and private domains. Combining Puar’s point with Hayfield’s

notions of “islanded communities” brings forward the suggestion that the spatial and representational circulation (in some cases) takes place in very small circles with an exceedingly high number of “points of exchange and contact” – thus increasing the (sensation of) biopolitical control.

The examples above relate respectively to the literal island place of Pha-ngan Island in Thailand, and the physical places but metaphorical “islanded communities” of LGBTIQ+ migrant networks in Berlin and Copenhagen. However, it has increasingly dawned on me how other – not place-based – types of “islanded communities” may also be subject to some of the same intersectional dynamics and identity negotiations as described above. A case in point would be women in the Danish Armed Forces, who could arguably be understood as an islanded community in the “sea of men” and male dominated norms historically characterising this workplace (Sløk-Andersen & Persson, 2021; KVINFO 2025).

Just how interconnected, interdependent and intimate this community can be, was brought out to me several times while working on a research project for the Danish Veterans’ Centre (Pristed Nielsen, 2024). Although interviewing female veterans all over the country, who had between less than three and up to more than 30 years of experience as soldiers, it was apparent during interviews that some of the stories they told referred to the same superiors and the same military camps, although not having actually been in the same place at the same time. Yet they knew (of) each other. This became particularly apparent during one interview, in which I inadvertently broke standards of confidentiality and ethical behaviour. During our conversation, my interviewee described how you get better equipment and quicker access to spare parts during deployment. I responded that I had heard someone complain about a specific type of equipment. My interviewee promptly said: “Oh, you’ve spoken to XX!”. These two women, I found out, had been on several deployments of six months’ duration together, living *very* close to each other under very stressful circumstances. But because they

lived far apart, worked at different bases and specialised in different fields, I would have never guessed the connection. They were precisely intimate, interdependent and interconnected - at least for the duration of their deployments. And as they both foresaw a lifelong commitment to their workplace, they also engaged in a potential future “throwntogetherness” via my intervention, I realised after the fact.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: NEGOTIATING MARGINS AND HATCHES

While the empirical examples and discussions emanating from the points above may seem arbitrary and disconnected, the point I am trying to make is hopefully consistent: intersectional analyses of processes of social inclusion and exclusion need to take place and space into account. Not just as yet another aspect of individual people’s social position (another part of “the endless list”), but as a contextual setting for any negotiation over social positions. This argument constitutes a deepening of the concept of intersectionality. The social power that comes with skin colour, gender expression, sexuality, family relations, nationality, etc. alters depending both on space as a *causative* phenomenon and on the particular “throwntogetherness” in which one finds oneself.

Furthermore, I have argued that the *size* of the place matters in terms of how many individuals are engaged in negotiations, and whether one is likely to meet them again (perhaps in different capacities). Bringing together Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality (1989) and ambition to shed light on the margins (1991), Shield’s ideas about the causative nature of space (1991), Massey’s notion of “throwntogetherness” (2005), Cresswell’s concept of being in or out of place (1996), and Karides’ (2017, 2020) ideas about island intersectional analyses with Hayfield’s (2022) points about navigating in “islanded communities” leads to me to the following theoretical point: A small space is causative in a special way, because the number of persons “thrown” into the “togetherness” shrinks, causing a potential inability to hide in the crowd and/or negotiate wide-ranging changes to

one’s identity expression over time. Living in islanded communities can impede attempts to alter one’s social position or identity. When trying to “map the margins” of small places, we may discover that there is perhaps already too much spotlight on those people living at the margins of such places, causing inability to produce new intersectional readings of their identity expressions and embodied positions. In the figurative language of the basement metaphor, it matters which house we are in the basement of, as both ceiling height and how the hatch clasp works are context specific.

Engaging further with Crenshaw’s foundational work, my arguments in this paper could be conceptualised as an attempt to explore the nature of “the hatch” in the basement metaphor (1989, p. 151-152). Crenshaw describes the hatch as “generally available only to those who - due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below - are in the position to crawl through” (1989, p. 152). My argument is that the hatch works differently in different legal and social contexts, and that different arguments are accepted (or not) as the “but for” which will allow access through the hatch. For Crenshaw, the hatch represents possibilities for receiving legal redress for injustices due to discrimination. She describes how people in the basement are “stacked - feet standing on shoulders” (1989, p. 151), and only those at the top, whose heads brush up against the ceiling and who are able to call out a “but for”, will be able to squeeze through. Those who are multiply disadvantaged, by contrast, are metaphorically left in darkness at the bottom of the basement, where the light of legal, social and political intervention does not shine.

In contrast, small-scale settings are characterised by both physical and cognitive intimacy (Hayfield, 2022; Hayfield & Schug, 2019). Squeezing up and out through a claim of “but for” may thus be more difficult, as islanded communities are characterised by interconnectedness and interdependency, entailing that it is wise to navigate through social space in anticipation of future encounters. Social networks

are overlapping, anonymity impossible, and layers of relations multiple (Hayfield, 2022, p. 237). Staying with the basement metaphor, one might argue that it is harder to hide certain aspects of one's positionality in darkness in small-scale settings, and thus the cry of "but for" may become less credible. Furthermore, a claim of "but for" may prove an impediment in future social encounters, given the cognitive intimacy of islanded communities.

A high level of social transparency may thus impede any claim to crawl through the metaphorical hatch via a repositioning or negotiation of one's identity. Expanding on Cresswell's (1996) position, a particular place lends added or reduced valence to certain aspects of one's identity. Living in a (geographically or metaphorically) small community entails that the ability to trade in different aspects of one's positionality is limited by the interconnectedness, interdependency and intimacy of the islanded community.

While Crenshaw is concerned about (legal) practices that "relegate the identity of women of color to a *location that resists telling*" (1991, p.1242, my emphasis) at the bottom rungs of the metaphorical basement, the point I am attempting to raise is that *some locations may relegate identities to positions that resist retelling or reinterpretation*.

Negotiating positionality in both literal and metaphorical islanded communities requires resources.

In literal islands, such resources may be represented through physical objects such as boats, tunnels, bridges or plane tickets. These may in some cases represent avenues for telling a different story about one's social positionality, and as such, the hatch may be temporarily opened by the migrant bar workers in Pha-ngan Island through borrowing a boat. Likewise, the hatch to achieve asylum status may be more or less permanently opened for migrants coming to Berlin or Copenhagen, but the permanence of having squeezed through the hatch needs to be continually negotiated through being seen to demonstrate LGBTIQ+ identification. In both examples, the settings in which individuals may attempt to reinterpret or negotiate their identities, due to their smallness, seem to throw up obstacles for such a retelling or reinterpretation of positionality.

Finally, I would like to return to my opening reflections on crisscrossing on foot through the old town centre of Tórshavn. As anyone who has done so will appreciate, it is hilly, there are many dead ends, steep stairs and one-way streets, and the probability that you end up walking around in circles is high. If you have met someone walking up one hill, there is a high probability that you may meet them again walking down another. Intersections in Tórshavn do not represent a "flat geography of power" (Carastathis, 2013, p. 712). The vertical dimension is always already potentially inherent in any encounter.

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Intersectionality and Adaptation Justice in Sweden:

Where are We - and Where Next?

ABSTRACT

Intersectional and justice approaches to climate adaptation are increasingly recognized by scholars and policymakers as essential for understanding the complexities of climate vulnerability and preventing the exacerbation of inequalities. Yet little research to date explores what intersectional adaptation justice entails in Sweden, a country often perceived as highly equal and relatively invulnerable to climate impacts. Drawing on a narrative literature review of research on environmental and climate justice in Sweden, we identify emerging narratives, examine their focal subjects, and explore what they illuminate. We then assess the limitations of these approaches for adaptation justice and explore how intersectionality can broaden justice conceptualizations in affluent contexts. Our review reveals that environmental and climate justice research in Sweden remains geographically and demographically narrow with limited engagement with justice dimensions. Moreover, adaptation is scarcely addressed within these literatures. We argue that applying intersectionality can help adaptation justice research move beyond limited categories of difference, foster more critical understandings of justice, bridge justice concerns across spatial and temporal scales, and enable more nuanced analyses of power and privilege. We conclude that intersectionality offers significant potential to advance adaptation justice research and call for more empirical studies to explore its application in practice.

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CLIMATE CHANGE, CLIMATE ADAPTATION, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, CLIMATE JUSTICE, INTERSECTIONALITY, SWEDEN

INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires exposed the fallacy of the “affluence-as-shield narrative” (Jackson, 2024), which assumes that wealth, modern infrastructure, and technology mastery render affluent societies immune to climate impacts (Weatherill, 2024). These persistent imaginaries of modernity and control sustain a dangerous complacency, suggesting that such societies do not require climate adaptation. Climate adaptation is broadly understood as actions that reduce the negative impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems (IPCC, 2022). These actions can range from land use change and infrastructure retrofitting to behavioral shifts, education, and nature-based solutions.

In Sweden, climate adaptation as a distinct political agenda is relatively recent, with the country’s first adaptation strategy³ adopted only in 2018. Domestically, climate change is treated as a manageable risk, integrated into existing political and institutional frameworks (Englund & Barquet, 2023), rather than as a threat necessitating extraordinary measures. Adaptation efforts are fragmented, (Rylenius & Hamza, 2024) and responsibilities are devolved to the local level (Knaggård et al., 2025).

Still, this *laissez-faire* approach to climate adaptation does not affect everyone equally. Research shows that Swedish adaptation policies often overlook marginalized groups and differentiated impacts of both climate change and adaptation efforts (Arora-Jonsson & Wahlström, 2023; De Rosa et al., 2022), prioritizing “vulnerable infrastructures rather than vulnerable people” (Jonsson & Lundgren, 2015; p.456). This approach risks reproducing existing systems of power and deepening social inequalities. At the same time, scholars emphasize that justice is critical to the legitimacy of adaptation policies and to avoiding maladaptation (Araos et al., 2021; Schlosberg et al., 2017).

Sweden’s second “National Strategy and the Government’s Action Plan for Climate Change Adaptation”⁴, explicitly states that climate adaptation must not “exacerbate inequalities and alienation”

(own translation), signaling a growing political recognition of adaptation justice. Still, justice is not a singular or static concept. It is inherently place-based, plural, and context-dependent (Walker et al., 2023). As such, understanding how adaptation justice is conceptualized within Sweden is vital to identifying gaps and informing policies that are both effective and perceived as fair.

Justice has long been a central concern in adaptation research (see Tschakert et al., 2013; Schneider & Lane, 2006; Adger et al., 2006), particularly in relation to the majority world or “Global South”. Less explored, however, are questions of adaptation justice within affluent contexts – those perceived as secure or “invulnerable” to climate change. Yet, these contexts may also contain hidden vulnerabilities, intra-group inequalities, and uneven privileges. As the Los Angeles wildfires revealed, affluent residents may hire private firefighters, while already marginalized residents withstand the worst loss and harm (Arango & Kamin, 2025 January 12). This illustrates the need to consider intragroup differences and intersectionality when examining adaptation justice.

Intersectional approaches to environmental justice for adaptation are increasingly recognized (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; Mikulewicz et al., 2023), yet their application in Sweden remains limited. In this article, we examine Sweden – a country often viewed as affluent, equitable, and resilient – as a case to explore the following research questions:

1. What dominant environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) narratives shape adaptation in Sweden?
2. What perspectives and groups are included and excluded from these narratives?
3. Whose lived experiences are rendered visible in current scholarship?

We address these questions through a narrative literature review of EJ and CJ research in Sweden. Our aim is to highlight how intersectional approaches

can enrich the study of adaptation justice in affluent settings – an area of study which remains underdeveloped.

We also acknowledge that this work is shaped by our own positions as white, university-educated women who consider Sweden as home. We approach both justice and intersectionality through epistemological pluralism, recognizing the existence of multiple definitions and understandings. Rather than imposing fixed concepts, we deliberately leave these terms open, inviting further empirical explorations of their meaning in specific contexts. In terms of intersectionality, we view this as the intersection of constructed subjectivities (such as gender, race, and class) and the systems of power (such as racism, sexism, and classism) that shape them (see for example, Collins & Bilge, 2020). This article is not exhaustive. Instead, we offer it as a starting point – and an invitation for deeper engagement with questions of intersectional environmental justice in Sweden and beyond.

SWEDEN: A CASE OF PERCEIVED JUSTICE AND INVULNERABILITY

Sweden, a small country in Northern Europe of approximately ten million people, is internationally known for its socialist history, egalitarian ideals, and strong welfare state. It has long been seen as a leader in equality and environmental politics. However, these reputations are increasingly under scrutiny, with growing inequalities and diminishing environment leadership (Magnusdottir & Widengård, 2025; The Lancet Regional Health-Europe, 2023).

Sweden's political identity is also grounded in a strong social contract, characterized by high mutual trust between citizens and the state. This contract is built on ideals of collective responsibility and universal access to high-quality public services (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2022). Yet, climate adaptation policies increasingly shift responsibility from the collective to the individual (Rylenius & Hamza, 2024). Shaped by dominant narratives of equality and mutual obligation, there is a prevailing risk of assuming that

adaptation burdens are already fairly distributed – an assumption that could obscure underlying tensions and inequities. These include elite capture of resources, the concealment of structural advantages, normative ideas of fairness or protection, concentration of authority, and the maintenance of systems that disproportionately uphold structures benefiting affluent groups.

Sweden's tradition of consensus-driven politics typically integrates environmental, economic, and social concerns, avoiding trade-off framings (Bell, 2014). However, this integrative approach can depoliticize climate policy by minimizing attention to power, conflict, and inequality (Bradley et al., 2008). In adaptation planning, for example, “the messy world of gender, race, class are actively ignored to uphold an order that is considered knowable and possible to act on” (Arora-Jonsson & Wahlström, 2023; p.9). This leads to oversimplified models of the citizen as rational and homogenous, which in turn reinforces the erasure of differentiated and intersectional vulnerabilities (Singleton et al., 2022). Combined with broader cultural imaginaries of safety and resilience, Sweden's adaptation discourse risks naturalizing fantasies of invulnerability and obscuring the justice dimensions of adaptation. Thus, Sweden offers a compelling and underexamined case for exploring how the convergence of perceived invulnerability and strong social contract affects adaptation justice.

ADAPTATION & JUSTICE

In this article, we situate adaptation justice within the broader fields of environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ). While these fields are closely related, they differ in their genealogies, geographies, and conceptual emphasis.

Environmental Justice emerged from U.S.-based civil rights and grassroots movements in the 1980s, particularly among Black and Indigenous communities, in response to the uneven distribution of environmental bads (Schlosberg, 2013; Pellow, 2023). Since then, EJ has expanded geographically

and conceptually to consider justice issues of different natures in the United States and beyond. The EJ scholarship initially focused on distributional inequities – who bears the burdens of environmental degradation – but has since expanded to include procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice (Pellow, 2023). An expanded understanding of what these pillars focus on, the type of research questions they ask, and how they relate to climate adaptation is found in Table 1 to demonstrate the distinctions and interconnections between them. Recent research has also expanded towards more critical approaches of EJ that engage with for example intersectionality, the more-than-human, and decoloniality (Schlosberg et al., 2025; Pellow, 2023). EJ defines the environment broadly, not as pristine, or detached nature but as the material and relational spaces where humans “live, work, and play” (Novotny, 2000).

Climate justice (CJ), by contrast, centers on the unequal causes and consequences of climate change,

often at a global or intergenerational scale (Newell et al., 2021). CJ emphasizes the structural roots of climate vulnerability – colonial, economic, racial, and gendered systems – and challenges both historical responsibility and contemporary inequalities in emissions and impacts (Newell et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022). It tends to focus on large-scale questions of justice, including accountability, reparations, and ethical obligations to future generations (Sultana, 2022).

While mitigation (reduction of greenhouse gases) tends to be firmly rooted in CJ frameworks, and local environmental struggles align with EJ, adaptation occupies a hybrid position. Adaptation is influenced by global climate discourses and geopolitical inequalities, while also shaping – and being shaped by – the specific environment in which people live (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024). As such, *adaptation justice* must be understood as situated at the intersections of both EJ and CJ, drawing attention to lived experiences

Table 1: Summary of Environmental Justice perspectives.
Adapted from: Pellow, 2023; Schlosberg, 2013

Pillar of Justice	Focus	Example of Questions for Adaptation Research	Examples from the literature
Distributional Justice	- o Distribution of environmental goods and bads. - o Who should pay and for what. - o How environmental resources should be allocated.	- o How are adaptation strategies distributed? - o Who gets the benefits of adaptation? - o How are the costs of adaptation distributed? - o Does adaptation create new environmental bads and goods, and if so for whom?	o Shawoo et al., (2025) explore distributive issues of adaptation financing, finding it important to consider not only the distribution of financial resources but also how financing addresses root causes of vulnerability. They also find that intersectional and restorative approaches to distributive justice are more likely to achieve long-term reduction in vulnerabilities.
Procedural Justice	- o Differential access to decision-making - o Structural issues that prevent some from participating in decision-making over environmental issues	- o Who is part of adaptation agenda-setting? - o How are adaptation decisions made? - o Who is included and excluded in adaptation decision-making? - o How are actors involved in decision-making? - o What information and ideas are adaptation decisions made on?	o Juhola et al. (2022) explore justice elements in adaptation policies, finding procedural justice elements to be particularly common, including in Sweden.
Recognitional Justice	- o Which values, people, cultures, worldviews, and ways of life are recognized and considered in environmental decision-making - o Structural issues leading to the omission, obscurement, or neglect of certain values, people, worldviews, and ways of life	- o Who and what is recognized in the conceptualization of adaptation? - o How does lack of recognition affect adaptation policies effectiveness and outcomes? - o Which values and worldviews are adaptation based on, and which get omitted or obscure?	o Yazar & York (2022) highlight how recognitional justice, often lacking in adaptation policies, matters for opinions of different adaptation strategies.
Capabilities Justice	o The ability for people to flourish and thrive in their environment.	- o How does adaptation, or lack thereof, impact people’s ability to thrive and flourish? - o How do different people determine their own capabilities in relation to adaptation?	o Schlosberg (2012) argues that a capabilities approach to justice is well suited for adaptation and can allow for stakeholder engagement.

of climate change, systemic patterns of vulnerability, and questions of legitimacy, recognition, and fairness in adaptation policy and practice.

In this sense, Sweden stretches existing EJ and CJ frameworks by offering a case in which justice is undermined not by overt exclusion, but through norms of sameness, procedural neutrality, and institutional trust that obscure intersectional vulnerabilities. In this context, adaptation justice calls for a more reflexive and situated approach to adaptation justice and one that is reconceptualized not only as an issue of distribution or procedure, but as a fundamentally intersectional and political process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article uses a narrative review methodology (see Bourhis, 2017) to examine dominant narratives within environmental and climate justice research in Sweden and to explore the potential of more intersectional approaches to adaptation justice. The review was designed to map the conceptual and thematic landscape of justice related scholarship relevant to climate adaptation in the Swedish context. Academic articles were identified through Scopus using the search string: “environmental justice” OR “climate justice” AND “Sweden”. Although the review focuses on adaptation justice, a preliminary scan revealed limited scholarship explicitly engaging with this topic (as discussed in the findings). Therefore, we broadened the scope to include all articles addressing environmental or climate justice in Sweden, and examined their relevance for adaptation justice research, either directly or through conceptual extensions.

We limited the search to keywords, abstracts, and titles, of peer reviewed academic articles, yielding 48 results. We also trialed a Swedish version of the search string, but it produced only one article which was a duplicate.

We then screened the articles for relevance, with 23 excluded on the grounds that they did not engage substantively with environmental or climate justice

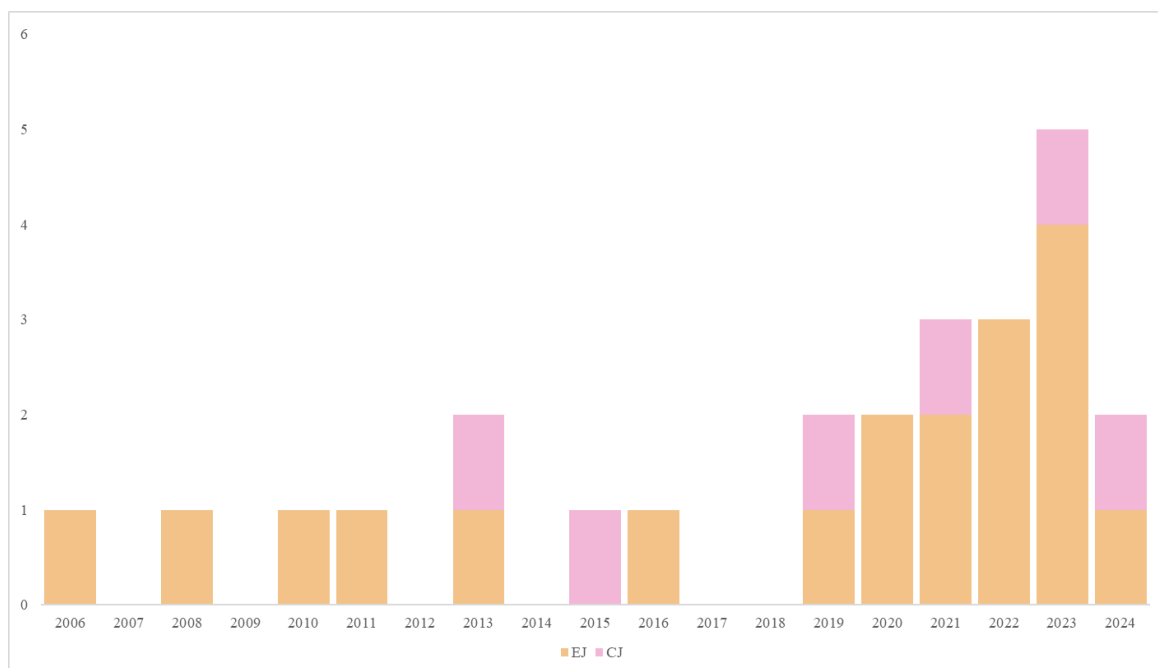
and/or did not focus on Sweden. A total of 25 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed.

The selected articles were read and coded thematically. Coding was conducted through an iterative process during which themes were developed inductively from the material and refined through repeated engagement with the texts. As new patterns and conceptual tension emerged, articles were revisited to further nuance the thematic structure of the review.

FINDINGS

As illustrated in Figure 1, articles on environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) in Sweden have gradually increased over time. However, the overall volume of research remains limited. The earliest article on EJ identified in this review was published in 2006, which is late compared to the development of the field in the United States, the EJ scholarship began in the 1980s (Schlosberg, 2013). The first CJ article in the Swedish context appeared in 2013. Given CJ’s global focus, it is likely that additional CJ-related studies authored by Swedish researchers exist but focus on other geographical contexts and were therefore not captured by our criteria or scope. Between 2006 and 2015, only eight articles on EJ and CJ in Sweden were identified. In contrast, between 2016 and 2024, 17 articles were published.

Figure 1: Articles of EJ and CJ in Sweden over time



Our findings indicate that research on EJ and CJ in Sweden has primarily focused on distributional justice. This focus is expected given Sweden's social contract and welfare state, its historical emphasis on redistribution, and the broader disciplinary orientation of EJ and CJ research (Pellow, 2023). The studies reviewed highlight uneven distribution of both environmental goods and bads across Swedish society (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2019; Aamodt et al., 2023; Chaix et al., 2006). However, the *distribuendum*, i.e., what is being distributed (Caney, 2020), varies across the literature, ranging from land, toxins, and emissions to access to environmental goods such as green spaces and national parks. The former categories align with early EJ work in the United States (Pellow, 2023), while the latter reflects culturally specific dimensions of Swedish society, where access to nature is deeply embedded, often uncritically, within national identity (Bell, 2014; Dahlberg et al., 2010; Bradley et al., 2008).

In contrast, procedural and recognitional justice have received comparatively less attention. Where they appear, they are often examined in conjunction with other approaches to justice. The relative neglect of procedural justice may reflect the widespread assumption that citizen consultation and

participation are already embedded within Sweden's social contract (Gunnarsson-Östling & Höjer, 2011). Yet, the few studies that do examine procedural justice raise critical concerns, illustrating that formal mechanisms of participation in environmental decision-making do not guarantee equitable inclusion (e.g., Nachet et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023; Bradley et al., 2008).

Similarly, recognitional justice is underexplored, potentially due to its perceived subsumption under distributional justice in socialist contexts, i.e., recognition is thought to be achieved through redistribution of resources (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The limited work that does exist tends to focus on the systemic lack of recognition of Sami⁵ worldviews, values, and livelihoods (Nachet et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023). A small number of studies also engage with substantive justice, which is not seen as one of the main pillars in mainstream EJ, but often incorporated into them, focusing on minimum standard approaches to justice (Bradley et al., 2008; Gunnarsson-Östling & Höjer, 2011; Rambaree et al., 2022). Bradley et al. (2008) position substantive justice as part of Sweden's social contract and, as such, it is perceived as achieved, an assumption they challenge. Nachet et al. (2022) further advance this line

of critique by employing capabilities justice, showing how mining activities are framed by Sami people as impeding both Indigenous and local inhabitants' fundamental capabilities.

Only a few scholars have drawn on more critical EJ frameworks in their research, including Indigenous EJ (Nachet et al., 2022), deep historical geography of EJ (Mels, 2020), and intersectionality (Singleton et al., 2022). Research on climate justice in Sweden tends to apply the concept more broadly, often examining how activists (Schack, 2024; Kaijser & Lövbrand, 2019), individuals (Isenhour, 2013), or municipalities adopt CJ discourses (Andersson & Gyberg, 2024). These applications resonate with the more global and abstract framing of CJ in the wider scholarship.

EJ research in Sweden has also been geographically, demographically, and thematically limited in focus. Most studies are concentrated in a few key locations, either Kiruna/Northern Sweden, Malmö (Sweden's third largest city), or Stockholm (Sweden's capital), leaving much of Sweden unexplored. Demographically, the literature clusters around three

main categories: individuals of lower socio-economic status (SES), immigrants, and Sami people. The emphasis on SES or income is expected, given the foundational role of equality and redistribution in Sweden's social democratic welfare model and the widespread perception of the population as relatively homogeneous (Singleton et al., 2022; Lundåsen, 2022). The focus on immigrants may be due to their demographic significance since approximately 20 percent of Sweden's population are immigrants (Lundåsen, 2022), or it may reflect broader societal debates on immigration intensified after the 2015 "refugee crisis" (*flyktingkrisen*) (Hagelund, 2020). This is noteworthy, however, in contrast to global trends where migrants often remain underrepresented in adaptation (Araos et al., 2021). The focus on Sami people reflects both the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Sami people and environmental conflicts in Sápmi⁶ (Båld, 2025). It may also indicate efforts to decolonize EJ discourses (Schlosberg et al., 2025). Missing from the scholarship is a focus on other axes of difference, such as race, ability, and age, in intersectional combinations. There is little to no consideration of intergenerational justice and limited critical examination of power and privilege. Furthermore,

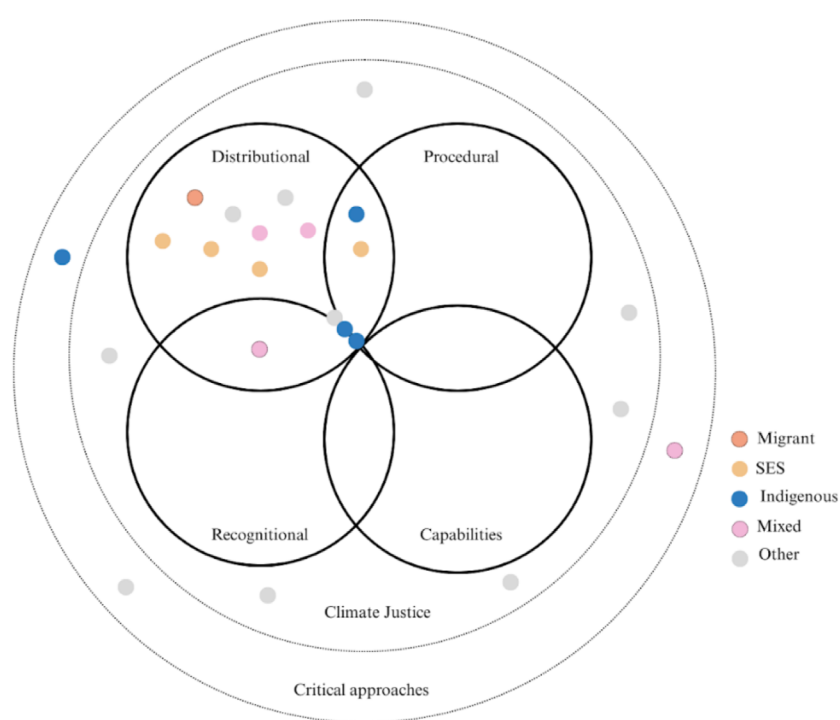


Figure 2: Approaches to EJ & CJ in Sweden

The figure plots 23 of the reviewed articles according to their dominant approach to EJ and CJ. Two articles were excluded from the figure due to their general treatment of EJ or CJ. The category "mixed" refers to studies combining one of the three dominant approaches in Sweden, with another dominant approach or a different perspective altogether. For example, three studies in this category focused on SES and migrants, while one focused on Sami and more-than-human. The "other" category includes articles that engage with EJ or CJ in general terms, without referring to a specific group or framework or articles that focuses on groups other than one of the three main approaches. Articles categorized under the "critical" approach often engage with the core pillars of EJ – distributinal, procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice – even when not explicitly visualized in the figure. One study focused on capabilities justice and was placed in the critical approach category, as this constituted its main conceptual lens.

climate-focused EJ remains limited, with only two studies addressing climate adaptation and justice. Granberg & Glover (2021) demonstrate how a failure to integrate justice consideration in adaptation planning can lead to green gentrification, while Wamsler & Brink (2015) show that adaptation strategies in Sweden often align with privileged lifestyles, overlooking the differentiated impacts of climate change. These studies, while few, highlight the presence of adaptation justice challenges in Sweden that need to be explored further.

From our review of the EJ and CJ literature in Sweden, we identify three dominant narratives: 1) a socio-economic status (SES) approach, 2) an immigrant approach, and 3) an Indigenous approach (see Fig.2). While not exhaustive and with some studies resisting categorization, these narratives' structure capture much of the current scholarship and offer a useful entry point for examining the topic in the Swedish context and beyond.

THREE MAIN NARRATIVES

The first dominant approach to EJ and CJ in Sweden, especially in studies examining exposure to toxins or access to nature, focus on socio-economic status (SES) (e.g., Chaix et al., 2006; Aamodt et al., 2023; Erixson et al., 2024). These studies primarily look at distributional justice, often overlooking how procedural and recognition justice shape these outcomes, as well as the historical drivers that lead to unequal environmental burdens. As such, studies tend to diagnose the symptoms of injustice rather than interrogate the root causes that need to be addressed to avoid reinforcing existing systems of inequality and to achieve transformative adaptation (Rice et al., 2022).

Findings across studies are mixed: while some demonstrate that SES is a predictor of environmental injustice (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2019; Chaix et al., 2006), others suggest that SES may not significantly influence outcomes (e.g., Erixson et al., 2024; Dawson et al., 2023). These inconsistencies may stem from variations in how SES interacts with specific

environmental issues. Alternatively, they may also reflect the Swedish welfare state's long-standing efforts to minimize SES-based inequalities. To deepen our understanding, further research is needed that engages other categories of difference and considers how these categories intersect with SES.

A second approach often found in conjunction with the SES approach is a focus on immigrants (e.g., Erixson et al., 2024; Aamodt et al., 2023; Singleton, 2021). In these studies, immigrants are often positioned as the racialized "Other", implicitly contrasted with a presumed white native Swedish subject in need, or not in need, of justice. Notably, race is seldom explicitly addressed in Swedish EJ research, reflecting a broader national tendency to replace race with ethnicity or country of origin (Osanami Törngren, 2022). However, this conceptual shift can obscure white privilege and how people are structurally racialized within Swedish society.

There are, however, important exceptions that take a more critical stance. For example, Bradley et al., (2008) and Singleton (2021) interrogate how understandings of pro-environmental behaviors are socially constructed in ways that align with middle-class, white Swedish norms, effectively excluding immigrants from dominant environmental narratives. These studies offer valuable insights into how privilege shapes definitions of what is considered environmentally friendly and just, pointing to the need for deeper engagements with race, class and belonging in EJ and CJ scholarship in Sweden.

Lastly, a third significant body of environmental justice research in Sweden centers on Sami people, formally recognized as Indigenous peoples in Sweden in 1977, and today numbering around 20,000 individuals (Båld, 2025). These studies examine the procedural, recognition, capabilities, and distributional dimensions of EJ as they relate to Sami people often framing injustices with the broader context of colonial violence, dispossession, and marginalization (e.g., Rambaree et al., 2022; MacPhail et al., 2023). This research is important for decolonial efforts,

both within academia and in wider society, highlighting how environmental policies and industrial activities can perpetuate systemic oppression and marginalization of Sami people (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 2010; Nachet et al., 2022). Most studies focus on Northern Sweden with a particular emphasis on the environmental injustices of mining or other extractive industries on reindeer husbandry (MacPhail et al., 2023; Nachet et al., 2022; Rambaree et al., 2022). The Swedish state often plays a significant role, either explicitly or implicitly, in perpetuating these injustices (Dahlberg et al., 2010; MacPhail et al., 2023), revealing the ongoing colonial entanglements within the governance of Sápmi.

While this scholarship is essential, it also raises critical methodological and ethical considerations. As noted by Goodman et al., (2018) in the Canadian context, there is risk of “over-researching” Indigenous peoples, wherein repetitive academic attention does not necessarily benefit those studied and may reproduce extractive research practices. In Sweden, there has been limited reflection on how, when, and by whom research in Indigenous contexts should be conducted (Drugge, 2016). Moreover, current approaches often treat indigeneity as a singular identity without sufficient consideration of how gender, age, ability, or other axes of difference intersect to shape experiences of adaptation and justice. This may lead to essentialist portrayals of Sami people. As such, more intersectional approaches to Sami peoples’ experiences of EJ and CJ would also be beneficial. Addressing this gap is essential in the context of climate change adaptation. For example, Buchanan et al. (2016) show that Sami men and women contribute differently to adaptive capacities. Furthermore, Schack (2024) finds that youth climate activists in Sweden frequently invoke the Sami as central to climate justice discourses suggesting that this narrative has resonance beyond academia and needs to be nuanced to avoid essentialization. Future research should look to these complexities to better support transformative, inclusive, and decolonial justice in Sweden.

Combined, these three dominant approaches

construct a prevailing narrative in which EJ and CJ are primarily seen as issues affecting “foreigners” (immigrant approach), the poor (SES approach), or Sami people (Indigenous approach). This implicitly reinforces what might be termed the “affluence-as-shield narrative” (Jackson, 2024) where white, Swedish-born, and affluent individuals are not only perceived as less exposed to environmental harms, but also as embodying environmentally friendly lifestyles, thereby reinforcing their social and environmental privilege. While migrants, people of lower SES, and Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by climate change (IPCC, 2022), much of the current literature leaves privilege, power, and structural drivers of inequality unexamined. To address this, intersectionality offers a crucial analytic lens, enabling researchers to move beyond single axis, and often reductionist framings of identity. By attending to the ways that multiple systems of power and difference, such as race, gender, age, and ability intersect, future EJ and CJ research in Sweden can more fully account for both marginalization and privilege in climate adaptation approaches.

While the SES, migrant, and Indigenous approaches have contributed valuable insights into environmental and climate justice in Sweden, they have largely treated categories of difference as discrete and rarely addressed how these interact or are shaped by systems of power. Moreover, they have largely overlooked climate adaptation as a key site where justice is negotiated and contested. In the next section, we explore how intersectionality can provide a more nuanced framework for understanding adaptation justice, moving beyond a single-axis or additive logic.

RESEARCHING ADAPTATION AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Discussions of adaptation within environmental and climate justice narratives in Sweden are missing. One way to approach this gap would be to work within existing EJ/CJ frameworks and approaches - focusing on Sami people, SES, and migrants, and simply add adaptation as another dimension, particularly by

looking at the distribution of adaptation benefits and costs. This research is important and much needed. However, considering growing calls for *intersectional adaptation justice* (e.g., Garcia & Tschakert, 2022), we suggest that intersectionality offers a more transformative approach that can expand and deepen understandings of adaptation justice in Sweden.

Intersectionality emerged in the 1980s from the work of Black feminist activists and scholars (Rice et al., 2019). It conceptualized how systems of oppression and privilege intersect to shape different lived experiences of power and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989), challenging the single axis focus of earlier identity politics, which often treated gender or race separately (Weldon, 2008). Intersectionality entered the Nordic academic discourse in the early 2000s, becoming widely discussed especially in gender and post-colonial studies (see de los Reyes et al., 2002; Lykke, 2003; Staunæs, 2003).

To date, few intersectionality studies have engaged with environmental issues in Sweden (notable exceptions include Singleton et al., 2022, and Jarnkvist, 2020) and focus on climate adaptation is limited. When intersectionality has been applied to the impacts of climate change in Sweden, it is often in relation to vulnerability or risk reduction (e.g., Jarnkvist, 2020; Kuran et al., 2020). As such, these studies tend to address preconditions of adaptation rather than focus on adaptation processes *per se*. This aligns with broader Swedish adaptation discourses, which frequently focus on risk-reduction and responding to harm rather than preventing it (Englund & Barquet, 2023). Research on intersectional justice issues of climate adaptation is needed to better understand how to adapt in a just and effective manner. Furthermore, it is important if the aim is to shift from equal opportunity (to be protected) to equal outcome (just adaptation).

In the next sections, we explore how intersectionality shapes and strengthens understandings of privilege and power in affluent welfare-state contexts such as Sweden.

MOVING BEYOND SINGLE-AXIS CATEGORIES: EXPANDING ADAPTATION JUSTICE THROUGH INTERSECTIONALITY

EJ and CJ research in Sweden has tended to rely on single-axis categories such as ethnicity, class, or indigeneity, which flatten the complexity of vulnerabilities to climate change (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014; Jackson, 2024). Yet, vulnerabilities to climate change are neither singular nor static. Intersectionality allows us to move beyond these limited framings by offering more nuanced and contextualized understandings of vulnerability (Tierney, 2019). However, of equal, but less noted, importance to adaptation justice is that intersectionality enables a critique of assumptions around *invulnerability* – such as wealth, whiteness, or citizenship often taken as proxies for adaptive capacity – and can unmask the limitations of these oversimplified indicators (Nielsen et al., 2023; Kuran et al., 2020). Such fixed and reductionist categories risk excluding those who do not fit neatly into vulnerability profiles and obscures how climate change reshapes lived identities and capacities over time (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014).

Extending beyond these categories could also help illuminate hidden vulnerabilities, important to climate adaptation, and the development of effective adaptation policies. Nielsen et al. (2023) demonstrate through an intersectional analysis how some people in Frederiksberg, an affluent municipality in Denmark, face vulnerability due to factors like mobility limitations or language/technological barriers that prevent access to information. These vulnerabilities remain “hidden” beneath a surface perception of affluence. Similarly, as Wamsler & Brink (2015) highlight with regards to Sweden, individual adaptive capacity does not always lead to adaptation actions, suggesting the need for deeper understanding of intersectional barriers and enablers.

Second, it cannot be assumed that the same intersectional subjectivities apply uniformly across environmental injustices. Subjectivities are not static; they

are context specific and performed differently across issues and places (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). Research focusing specifically on adaptation is needed to understand how individuals and groups enact and negotiate their subjectivities in adaptation contexts.

Third, most EJ research in Sweden is scale-bound, either focusing on the community or local level (EJ), and the national/global level (CJ). However, adaptation is inherently multi-scalar and fragmented (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024), both globally and in Sweden specifically, and cross-scale approaches are needed. Intersectional approaches are well-suited to tracing how “adaptation is enacted, negotiated, and contested across levels and scales” (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; p.652). Also, the added nuance and contextual understanding of vulnerabilities and adaptation experiences allow for the localizing of global goals on adaptation (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2024), an important aspect in Sweden where adaptation is primarily implemented locally (Knaggård et al., 2025).

Failing to consider how intersectional subjectivities operate across scales risk producing maladaptive outcomes or re-enforcing inequalities. As Wamsler & Brink (2015) highlight, local adaptation efforts may conflict with national strategies, underscoring the need for coherent cross-scale planning. While challenging dominant narratives, researchers must also remain legible to policymakers. Understanding and engaging with the language of current adaptation policy can enhance relevance and update on intersectional insights.

TOWARD CRITICAL AND INTERSECTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF ADAPTATION JUSTICE

Intersectionality is a vital approach for advancing critical understandings of environmental and climate justice, particularly in the Swedish context where such approaches remain limited. It challenges dominant epistemologies and ontologies, enabling more

pluralistic understandings of justice (Schlosberg et al., 2025; Mikulewicz et al., 2023). This is especially important for unsettling masculine, neoliberal, and colonial framings through which adaptation and invulnerability are often constructed (Weatherill, 2024; Garcia & Tschakert, 2022).

Intersectionality deepens our understanding of power by showing how it shapes both the conceptualization and practice of adaptation (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022). It also reveals how subjectivities are constructed and performed in specific ways that maintain or challenge dominant power relations (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). In this way, intersectionality helps move the scholarship beyond merely describing injustice toward actively challenging it. Understanding how intersectional differences emerge and persist over time is also essential for addressing the root causes of vulnerabilities and climate change through transformative forms of climate adaptation (Pelling et al., 2015).

Intersectionality also enables us to “come to grips with diverse experiences with inequality that erode *or elevate* opportunities for adaptation” (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022; p.656; own emphasis). It helps identifying nodes of power and possibility, both where change can be catalyzed for more environmentally just adaptation and where resistance may be needed. This aligns with the emancipatory goals of both intersectionality and EJ: not to view marginalized communities as passive or lacking agency, but to recognize their capabilities and agency (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). However, intersectionality is a valuable tool for examining how power is concentrated, as powerful individuals and institutions can shape climate policies in ways that reinforce inequality. Recognizing nodes of influence does not mean accepting systems of power as fixed or inevitable. Given the normative goal of adaptation justice, identifying nodes of change should be combined with critical examinations of questions of who gets to hold power and why and how more just systems can be imagined and built.

CONNECTING THE PILLARS OF EJ AND CJ

Most studies on EJ and CJ in Sweden primarily consider distributional justice, i.e., who gets what. Research that engages multiple pillars of justice are rarer, especially ones exploring tensions and potential contradictions between pillars. Even more limited is scholarship that connects CJ and EJ, particularly regarding potential conflicts between local environmental justice in the present and global climate justice for future generations. Yet, this is precisely where adaptation research can offer new insights. Situated at the intersection of immediate local needs and long-term global responsibility, adaptation raises justice dilemmas that span scales and time.

Intersectionality offers a way to understand and connect these dimensions in nuanced and context-sensitive ways. It reveals how justice claims may shift depending on which pillar is foregrounded, and how social categories interact with these shifts. For example, Kucera & Jenerette (2023) show that while income provides protection from drought in Los Angeles (USA), its effectiveness has declined over time, and race has become a more salient vulnerability factor. However, income may still shape procedural justice, as those with economic resources are more likely to influence adaptation decisions both in the present and future. This suggests that intersectional subjectivities and forms of justice are temporally dynamic and potentially contradictory. Intersectionality allows researchers to trace how power operates across distributional, procedural, recognitional, and capabilities justice, and how they align or diverge. It also helps to connect EJ and CJ debates and explore how justice in present context cannot be fully understood without consideration of responsibilities toward future generations.

Furthermore, as Bradley et al. (2008) argue, procedural justice must include not only who participates in decision-making but also who sets the agenda. This is particularly urgent in Sweden where adaptation debates often privilege dominant knowledge

systems and policy paradigms (Englund & Barquet, 2023). Justice-based adaptation, like climate justice more broadly, is prefigurative (Mikulewicz et al., 2023), meaning that it embodies the values of the future society it aims to build. Thus, it matters not only what adaptation policies are chosen but whose ontologies and epistemologies are recognized in the process of deciding them.

In this way, adaptation justice becomes a question of epistemic and recognitional justice and the inclusion of alternative ways of knowing, values, and ways of being in the world. Nachet et al. (2022) and Mels (2020, 2023) show how different understandings of justice and nature, respectively, can create deep tensions and contestation, reinforcing the need for integrative approaches. Intersectionality offers one such approach: a way to map and connect the pillars of EJ and CJ in ways that are both critical and constructive.

MAKING PRIVILEGE VISIBLE: REFLEXIVITY AND ‘COMMON SENSE’ IN ADAPTATION RESEARCH

Nader (1972) famously argued that social scientists must not only “study down” toward marginalized communities but also “study up” towards communities of power. This approach allows researchers to “ask many ‘common sense’ questions in reverse. Instead of asking why some people are poor we would ask why other people are so affluent?” (Nader, 1972, p.5-6). Though Nader’s article was published half a century ago, its message remains urgently relevant today, particularly in Sweden where most EJ research tends to focus on studying “down” towards the marginalized and vulnerable.

Applying an intersectional lens to study both forms of marginalization and privilege open space for asking “common sense” questions such as: Why are some groups seen as invulnerable to climate change? and Who gets to be protected from climate change impacts? Rather than focusing solely on those who are vulnerable or unprotected, these questions critically examine the structures that grant privilege and

protection. This is especially important for adaptation that takes place in affluent contexts and disproportionately benefits those who are already privileged (see Granberg & Glover, 2021; Hamza et al., 2024).

Asking these questions also enables critical examination of the Swedish welfare state's color-blind spots and the role of white privilege within the country, and how these dynamics affect climate adaptation. Nordic intersectionality has faced critique for insufficiently addressing whiteness (Lykke, 2020) but "studying up" in adaptation research provides a valuable opportunity to investigate how white privilege and other forms of power materialize as the right to be protected, the capacity to adapt, or the influence over adaptation policies, including how these privileges have developed over time.

Researchers must approach the study of privilege with caution, however, to avoid reinforcing the very systems they seek to critique – a persistent challenge in intersectionality studies of whiteness (Aldrin Salskov, 2020). Combining intersectionality with environmental justice frameworks helps not only to highlight disparities in power but also to analyze their implications for justice, fostering reflexivity and accountability in adaptation scholarship.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By synthesizing existing literature on environmental justice (EJ) and climate justice (CJ) in Sweden and drawing on intersectionality scholarship, we have identified ways in which intersectionality can expand understandings of adaptation justice. While our analysis focuses on Sweden, which we characterize as an invulnerable country, the discussion may be relevant to other affluent countries sustaining similar narratives of invulnerability. Intersectionality's flexibility allows it to accommodate different intersections depending on the context, making it a valuable framework across diverse historical, political, economic, and cultural settings. Expanding research across these contexts would enhance understanding of how vulnerability and privilege operate differently

worldwide (Garcia & Tschakert, 2022).

In Sweden, EJ and CJ discourses have been focused on illuminating injustices faced by Sami people, migrants, and people with low socioeconomic status. However, this constrained focus, shaped by the country's unique cultural, economic, and social history, leaves several experiences of injustice unrecognized. Intersectionality offers a means to broaden these perspectives and foster more critical examinations of power and privilege.

This article is, like all knowledge, limited. The small number of studies on intersectional adaptation justice in Sweden precluded drawing overarching conclusions; instead, we highlight emerging narratives based on the current state of the scholarship. Moreover, due to scarcity of research specifically addressing climate adaptation and justice, we drew from broader EJ and CJ literature to inform discussion related to adaptation justice. Lastly, our review prioritized academic literature, however, activists have played a significant role in developing EJ and CJ discourses, and their perspectives may differ (Schlosberg et al., 2025). As such, future research should engage with gray literature and activists' narratives to further enrich this field.

We echo calls for research on intersectionality to move beyond theory alone (Bilge, 2013; Lykke, 2020). Empirical studies are urgently needed to explore the relational, contextual, and material impacts of intersectional adaptation justice. Maintaining a critical edge grounded in both the historical movements that shaped environmental justice and intersectionality is essential. Adaptation researchers engaging with intersectional justice must understand these origins and the critiques they entail (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Continuous reflexivity is also crucial to avoid depoliticizing the concept (Bilge, 2013) or inadvertently reinforcing whiteness in intersectional studies (Aldrin Salskov, 2020). Intersectionality is a praxis that requires ongoing, active engagement from the researcher.

The field of intersectional adaptation justice remains

emergent globally, highlighting the need for expanded research. There is pressing demand for theorizing power and privilege within climate adaptation, including attention to studies on *affluent vulnerability* (e.g., Eriksen et al., 2020). To integrate these dynamics, scholars must deepen their understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression shape adaptation processes. This is critical for unveiling and challenging the privileges and systems of power often reinforced through climate adaptation efforts (Rice et al., 2022). A truly inclusive adaptation agenda must engage with power rather than focus exclusively on the most vulnerable.

Studying intersectionality in Sweden and other affluent regions raises important theoretical and practical questions: How does affluence shape vulnerability? Does an emphasis on affluent vulnerability risk diverting resources away from those most in need? How do historical assumptions that maintain the status quo – such as Gramsci’s concept of hegemony

(see Bates, 1975) – influence adaptation policies? Conversely, affluence might offer opportunities for redistributive adaptation models. Future research should explore whether affluent communities can contribute to reshaping adaptation responses to climate extremes.

Academic interest in intersectional environmental justice is rising alongside policy attention to just and intersectional adaptation. Despite these advances, empirical research on justice and adaptation in Sweden remains scarce. Further research is thus essential for investigating how intersectionality can inform adaptation policy and ensure just adaptation goals are meaningfully realized in practice.

In conclusion, we advocate for a broader, intersectional understanding of vulnerability and adaptation – one that fosters climate justice and collective action across all levels of Swedish society.

[1] Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), Lund University, Lund, Sweden.

[2] Swedish Centre for Impacts of Climate Extremes, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

[3] Prop. 2017/18:163. Nationell strategi för klimatanpassning [National Strategy for Climate adaptation]. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2018/03/prop.-201718163>

[4] Skr. 2023/24:97. Nationell strategi och regeringens handlingsplan för klimatanpassning [National strategy and the government’s action-plan for climate change adaptation]. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/skrivelse/2024/03/skr.-20232497>

[5] Indigenous people of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and parts of Russia

[6] Sami people’s Indigenous territory

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Invisible Walls in the Digital Welfare State:

How Parents Navigate Marginalization and
Agency in Digitally Mediated Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how marginalized parents navigate their digitally mediated contacts with the State. Combining intersectionality theory with Haraway's concepts of cyborgs and string figures, I ask: How do social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency? Using two vignettes based on ethnographic data collected through fieldnotes, future workshops, and interviews with marginalized parents, I display challenges, constraints, and moments of agency encountered as parents negotiate complex and interwoven power structures. I draw on key concepts that position digitalization not only as a mediator of citizen-state relations, but also as a structural force that shapes and reproduces social categories. Focusing on the fluidity of marginalization, I find that parents' struggles to assert agency and safeguard their rights are simultaneously shaped by, and push back against, intersecting categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class, as well as the digital infrastructures that organize access to welfare services. Due to the digital infrastructure mediating citizen-state interactions, these struggles may be invisible to the institutions responsible for providing equitable access to help, potentially exacerbating marginalization. I conclude by discussing the broader implications for citizenship, social work values, and digital inclusion in a welfare state increasingly governed through technology.

KEY WORDS

DIGITAL INEQUITY, INTERSECTIONALITY,
MARGINALIZATION, RIGHTS, PARENTS

INTRODUCTION: WHEN INTERSECTIONALITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND CYBORGS MEET

The idea for this article originated in a future workshop¹ with Marginalized parents², where a father reflected on his experience of navigating public institutions and the digital infrastructure in Denmark:

“Digital technologies are like additional walls when you meet the [public] systems. The systems consist of many institutions with different laws. It is entirely up to you to learn how the systems work. When you try to navigate through these systems, you will meet a series of walls. When we do this, we feel alone, without rights, and like second-class citizens. Just look at the Danish Prime Minister’s New Year’s speech [2021], and her statement that ‘some parents get too many chances’ to care for their children. This is just one example of how parents are alienated.”

Danish digitalization policies assume the citizen is *digital by default* and emphasize the citizen’s role as an active participant in managing their case (Schou & Pors, 2019). Yet as many as 17–22% of Danes are classified as *digitally vulnerable* or living in a *digital grey zone* (Agency for Digitisation & the National Association of Municipalities, 2021, p. 11). When public institutions operate under different legal frameworks, they create a complex and potentially marginalizing system that individuals must navigate, often with limited guidance, as the quote above illustrates. When marginalized parents struggle to access or interpret these systems, their struggles may be normalized, depoliticized, or erased from policy narratives, despite the emotional and cognitive labor they invest in caring for their children and themselves.

These struggles resonate with Ahmed’s (2012, p. 26) metaphor of “banging your head against a brick wall”, where the wall represents not just bureaucracy but also barriers that are structurally produced, symbolic, but highly consequential, connected with gender, ethnicity, race, class, and in this case

parental status. Ultimately, this can shape inequitable access to care, compassion, rights, and recognition (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011). While digitalization may benefit the majority of Danish citizens, it also risks reinforcing existing inequities for those unable to fully access or navigate digital systems, as highlighted in the literature on the *digital divide* (Ragnedda, 2020). In developing this concept, Ragnedda expands the discussion towards a more dynamic notion of digital equity, emphasizing how differences in access, skills, and outcomes can reproduce broader social inequities. This is further complicated by what Ahmed calls the “hard work of diversity.” With this notion, she describes the work needed to ensure inclusion, which is often invisible within the everyday routines of public institutions, as social workers and systems may not recognize the efforts required to accommodate all citizens (Ahmed, 2012, p. 50). This invisibility resembles what Star and Strauss (1999, p. 20) termed *functionally invisible work*: work that is overlooked, ignored, or slides into the background because it is taken for granted. As a consequence of the digital infrastructure, the struggles of marginalized parents to access help through digital systems while safeguarding their rights may sometimes go unnoticed by the institutions that perpetuate their marginalization, despite being essential for ensuring equity.

These inequities raise important questions about how digital transformation in the infrastructure of public institutions reflects the values of social work. What are the costs to marginalized parents when this infrastructure is fragmented and offers only partial perspectives, neglecting the situated nature of their everyday lives? What capacities and capabilities are required of marginalized parents to navigate these challenges? Such discussions call for reflection on how digitalization (re)organizes traditional understandings of citizenship and belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011), which are typically framed in terms of the “rights and responsibilities of the citizen” (Jørring et al., 2018, p. 12).

This article explores how parents navigate their digitally mediated contacts with the State. Combining intersectionality theory with Haraway's concepts of *cyborgs* and *string figures*, I pursue the following research question: *How do social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency?*

I draw on ethnographic data collected through fieldnotes, future workshops, and interviews, and use vignettes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 183) to display the challenges, constraints, and moments of agency encountered by parents as they negotiate complex, interwoven power structures. In the theory section, I discuss key theoretical concepts that view digitalization not only as a mediator but also as a structural force that influences social categories. In relation to the fluidity of marginalization, I discuss the broader implications for citizenship, social work values, and digital inclusion in a welfare state that is increasingly organized around technology.

Before outlining my theoretical concepts and methodological approach, I will provide an overview of how digitalization has transformed Child and Family Welfare Services (CFWS) in Denmark, emphasizing its dual role in shaping both access to rights and experiences of marginalization.

DIGITALIZATION AND DIGITAL INEQUITY IN CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE SERVICES

Digitalization is not a neutral process; it disproportionately affects Marginalized communities (Hansen et al., 2018; Ragnedda, 2020). Despite Denmark's status as a digital frontrunner (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023), the design of digital citizen interfaces often excludes those who do not conform to normative expectations. For example, reliance on the digital ID system MitID³ poses significant challenges for people experiencing homelessness, who frequently lose access to essential devices

such as phones or chargers (Nygaard-Christensen & Gamsgaard, 2023). At the same time, the emotional and administrative burdens that digital interactions place on citizens remain underexplored (Madsen et al., 2022). In CFWS, digitalization increasingly shapes how parents apply for support and engage with public institutions. Standardized digital templates often fail to reflect the complexity of marginalized parents' lived realities. Although this project focuses on CFWS, many participating parents had active cases across various public institutions and sectors, each governed by distinct digital systems and legal frameworks established by the State. The result is a fragmented landscape of drop-down menus, checkboxes, and mandatory platforms, such as e-Boks, AULA⁴, and MitID, that do not align with the life situations or aspirations of these families.

This illustrates that Denmark not only anticipates digital citizenship by default but also mandates it through a standardized technological and legislative framework. While these technologies serve practical functions, they also function as normative arenas of citizenship, assuming fluency in Danish, digital literacy, and the ability to navigate legal frameworks, all of which risk reinforcing marginalization. Numerous parents find it challenging to comprehend the written materials related to their cases or fully understand the legal implications that are communicated to them digitally. Dependence on social networks or civil society actors for support is often neither practical nor adequate, especially when resources are limited. The absence of public guidance diminishes many parents' capacity to assert or utilize their rights. Research indicates both overt and subtle ways in which limited *digital* and *bureaucratic skills*, exacerbated by social disadvantage, lead to greater marginalization (Hansen et al., 2018; Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023; Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). Meanwhile, a document analysis of Danish digitalization strategies and child welfare legislation reveals a tendency to downplay the conflictual and complex relationships between public institutions and citizens, assuming that the use of digital self-solutions should be as easy as booking a dream vacation

(Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023).

This assumption may be naive, as citizens, particularly Marginalized parents, often navigate these self-solution systems more out of necessity than desire. Public institutions have increasingly used digitalization to restructure their relationship with citizens, shifting responsibility onto individuals in ways that may obscure or legitimize institutional inequities (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023). Nowhere are these dynamics more significant than in child protection cases that involve the non-voluntary removal of children, one of the most intrusive legal actions permitted under the Danish Child Act and the European Convention on Human Rights. These citizens remain underrepresented in research, despite the critical need to investigate how digital technologies influence their interactions with the welfare state (Høybye-Mortensen & Højlund, 2024). Ultimately, digital infrastructures risk reproducing and legitimizing marginalization through the very systems designed to deliver care (Carbado et al., 2013).

COMBINING INTERSECTIONALITY, CYBORGS, AND STRING FIGURES

In this article, I combine intersectionality theory with Donna Haraway's (2016) concepts of cyborgs and string figures. I argue that power operates through the mutual shaping of social categories, digital infrastructures, and political narratives.

Intersectionality theory provides a lens for understanding how categories such as race, class, gender, and citizenship connect to shape Marginalization through patterned social processes. These categories are analytically important for identifying social injustice, particularly in relation to claiming rights (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), and their relative stability over time is crucial for establishing legal and political interventions. For this reason, I consider them particularly revealing of the unequal ways in which they affect parents' power in their relationships with authority.

Intersectionality remains a key framework for examining how overlapping systems of oppression structure individuals' experiences and rights. Studies of intersectionality (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2011; Villesèche et al., 2018) have analyzed how structural forces manifest in daily interactions with institutions and technologies, extending Crenshaw's (1989, p. 149) original *traffic intersection* analogy to capture the entanglement of macro-level power and micro-level subjectivities. Moreover, my aim here is to emphasize that intersectionality must challenge stable notions of identity, highlighting how social categories continuously shape one another. Intersectionality, as Carbin and Tornhill (2004, p. 112) argue, risks becoming "unusable" when categories are treated as inseparable in theory yet separated in practice. Their critique, echoed by Christensen and Jensen (2012), warns that structural simplifications can obscure lived subjectivities and agency.

To address the tension surrounding whether categories are stable or fluid, I draw on Haraway's concepts of cyborgs and string figures, which I use to unpack the complexities of agency and struggle in relation to digital technologies. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway (2016, p. 104) reconceptualizes cyborgs not as simple hybrids of machine and organism, but as "imploded entities, dense material-semiotic 'things'..." Cyborgs are constituted by partial, asymmetrical connections rather than stable wholes, offering a way to interrogate how digital technologies potentially distribute agency unevenly and reinforce marginalization, for example, through expectations of being digital by default (Schou & Pors, 2019).

In the context of digital governance, the cyborg concept helps us grasp how individuals are positioned in their encounters with institutions and digital infrastructures. The metaphor of string figures illustrates how technologies, bureaucracies, and discourses are knotted together in relational patterns. String figures are not simply about connection; they encompass the rhythm of giving and receiving, of making and unmaking attachments that carry consequences for how threads are picked up or dropped (Haraway,

2016, p. 3). This emphasis on relating makes it possible to trace how practices of sharing and caring are co-produced across human and non-human actors, including in the small, situated, and imperfect ways in which digital exclusion is reconfigured.

In the CFWS context, legal frameworks stabilize categories in order to define rights and responsibilities. Yet, following Crenshaw, oppression risks becoming invisible when categories are not stabilized clearly enough to make injustice legible. Conversely, too much stabilization reifies boundaries and reproduces the very distinctions that sustain marginalization. This paradox is at the heart of Carbin and Tornhill's critique. Crenshaw underscores the need for stability in categories for political and legal recognition, but Haraway (1991, 2016) reminds us that these categories are porous, shifting, and hybrid. Her ontology destabilizes rigidity, drawing attention to the sociotechnical entanglements through which marginalization and agency are enacted. Here, categories are historically configured and can be destabilized through semiotic relations, leaving them provisional and always open to reconfiguration.

Drawing on Haraway, I argue that individuals interface with public technologies as hybrid beings and, when we insist solely on stable categories, there is a high risk that these connections become functionally invisible or marginalized to the system. By combining Crenshaw's and Haraway's concepts, I argue that digitalization in public institutions not only reflects social inequity but also actively sustains and reshapes it through the design and functionality of systems. I consider the ontological tension in this approach as a productive feature rather than a flaw, because it enables me to analyze marginalization both as a condition anchored in structural categories *and* as an unfolding process shaped through hybrid relations. While Crenshaw grounds the analysis in the stability of legal and institutional categories, Haraway helps unpack how these categories are lived, negotiated, and destabilized in practice.

METHODS: MAPPING THE EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

The article draws on empirical material and insights from a research project called “*Involving Families in Vulnerable Positions with Digital Technologies*” (2022-2025). The project was carried out using a combination of qualitative methods and ethnographic fieldwork at multiple sites.

INVOLVING PERSPECTIVES OF MARGINALIZED PARENTS THROUGH FUTURE WORKSHOPS AND FIELDWORK

The project began with five ‘future workshops’ involving 22 parents, recruited through two service user organizations that support families with special support needs, a category defined in the Social Service Act (§46). The category of ‘special support needs’ can be understood in both a stable and fluid sense, as discussed above. These workshops aimed to generate empirical material and collaboratively shape the research design. The focus was on how the digitalization of public institutions impacts parents’ everyday lives (Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). Using a sequential research design, I later collected empirical data from four Men’s Centers and four additional service user institutions representing parents, two of which specifically focused on ethnic minorities. These sites were deliberately selected to address the underrepresentation of men and ethnic minority groups in family engagement research (Villumsen & Strandby, 2023).

The data consisted of transcripts, post-its, and photos from the five three-hour workshops, which led to 23 in-depth interviews with 26 participants. Eleven interviews were conducted with parents, while twelve were conducted with social workers, many of whom acted as intermediaries helping marginalized parents assert their rights. All parents gave written consent, while all social workers gave their consent

verbally. The additional data comprised 178 pages of field notes, including first impressions, settings, and key incidents that highlighted what contributed to their creation (Emerson et al., 1995). I kept a logbook, where I detailed how my research, professional (as a social worker), and personal experiences impacted my relationships with the participants and the process of knowledge production (for additional detail, see section “Intersecting Social Positions” and Nirmalarajan, 2023).

DATA ANALYSIS

I analyzed the empirical data in two stages to explore the experiences of marginalized families facing digital inequities. The first stage followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, where I developed a codebook with the three key themes: (1) (non)participation in digital opportunities, (2) digital skills, and (3) bureaucratic navigation skills.

I found examples of these three themes across the data, and based on this, I began the second stage of analysis, where I drew on situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2018). At this stage, I employed analytical mapping to capture the complexity of participants’ experiences. This involved selecting key situations where they expressed feelings of either being marginalized or experiencing agency in digitally mediated public encounters. To explore relational patterns (as outlined in the introduction) and then identify significant human and nonhuman actors, institutions, and discourses in this situation, I used situational analysis to examine the complexities of parents’ experiences. Some parents co-created visual maps of technologies, public institutions, and other key actors during interviews. When maps were not produced as part of the interviews, I constructed them afterwards based on what people had shared. This stage of analysis helped me understand how social categories, as well as historical, cultural, and geographic factors, intersect with digital infrastructures and shape parents’ experiences of marginalization and agency. Lastly, the maps allowed me to make entangled complexities more visible during data production and analysis.

The analysis led me to three central insights. First, marginalization is not a stable category; rather, it is fluid and context-dependent. Second, lives are not lived along a single axis, but through intersecting strands and string figuring of experience: ties of kinship and friendship, categorical labels assigned in different institutional encounters, and everyday negotiations with public institutions. As an example, many parents described how their rights were not adequately supported by public institutions, prompting them to seek assistance from informal sources such as Facebook groups, crisis centers, and non-profit or private organizations. Third, these dynamics also involve my own position as a researcher. The project and the lives I engage with are entangled, and my position(s) in research and life matters.

VIGNETTES AS ANALYTICAL DISPLAYS: SITUATING EXPERIENCES

To convey these insights, I crafted two vignettes drawing on Miles et al. (2014, pp. 185-187). I wanted the vignettes to illustrate the complex and emotionally charged experiences of marginalized parents with digital infrastructures in public institutions. Unlike standalone quotes, vignettes as data displays can draw on several types of empirical data, including insights from the researcher’s experiences, and illustrate the richness of context — all elements that can be relevant for showing the dynamics of marginalization and agency during everyday interactions. This method effectively maintains contextual depth while displaying how institutional structures (such as public institutions), technologies, and lived experiences interact.

I began by selecting situations in which marginalized parents navigated digital systems and institutional encounters in ways that directly spoke to my research question. I then drew on Haraway’s concept of the cyborg to trace how parents appeared as hybrid beings: dependent on and shaped by digital technologies and institutional structures, while also resisting them. As I read through the empirical data with this focus, I could see how such navigations

were constructed through entanglements of digitalization, marginalization, and agency. Finally, inspired by Haraway's metaphor of string figures, I explored the connections between people, technologies, and institutional practices, paying attention to how these ties distributed marginalization and agency. I then focused my attention on selected fieldnotes and transcriptions from interviews with parents that contained such experiences in rich, nuanced ways, which allowed me to show both shared and particular aspects of this. I then wrote two vignettes based on these fieldnotes and transcripts, supplemented with perspectives from other data sources from future workshops, and carefully crafted the vignettes to protect anonymity while preserving experiential density.

The vignettes are based on my interpretation of recurring patterns across the data. They are designed to illustrate how social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency while providing insight into experiences of everyday life by displaying what I see as meaningful moments and connections (e.g., Emerson et al., 1995). Writing about research in this way reflects a "deliberate moral perspective; [it] examines inequities and power struggles to achieve social justice and to empower the oppressed" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 328) and carries with it a hope for partial healing (Haraway, 2016, p. 71). Although each vignette is presented as the story of an individual, they are an amalgam of people I have encountered in the course of my work. The incidents and opinions they recount are typical of those reported to me during my research, but they did not necessarily all occur to a single person. In line with Miles et al.'s (2014) argument, the vignettes should thus be understood not as literal case histories, but as analytic devices that condense and illustrate broader patterns in the material.

INTERSECTING SOCIAL POSITIONS: REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND RESEARCHED

While Clarke et al. (2018, p. 128) advocate for including "everything you think might matter," Haraway (2016, p. 12) reminds us that "it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas with." Taken together, these orientations support an analysis of how categories and string figures emerge, both in the production of knowledge and in the empirical material. In this context, I see myself as part of the equation: my experiences as a social worker, service user, and researcher shape what becomes "emphasized, prioritized, or disregarded" (Nirmalarajan, 2023, p. 6). My perspectives are shaped through technological, ideological, and bodily-biological lenses (Haraway, 1992, p. 295), which influence the conversations I enter (Haraway, 1991, pp. 200–201). More metaphorically, it matters what string figures I can recognize and recount, as well as how I respond to the experiences of marginalization that parents shared.

My professional background as a social worker both enabled and complicated my role in the study. At times, it allowed me to advocate for participants' rights. Yet my identity as a social worker also provoked tensions in the future workshops. Parents frequently described alienation from social workers, and my use of the word *citizen* was met with mistrust, arising from their perception of themselves as "second-class" citizens (Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024, p. 85). While my professional position afforded certain privileges, parents also positioned me as a minority individual, referring to my skin color. My own experiences of marginalization, through race, ethnicity, and as a service user, shape the string figures I connect with. These enactments are informed by my past, entangled with participants' pasts, and oriented toward our shared present and possible futures.

My relation to citizenship is therefore not only analytical but also political. Having lived without formal citizenship until the age of six, due to my parents' status as refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka, I approach the concept with a heightened awareness of the relationship between marginalization and agency. These experiences help me recognize forms of marginalization that may remain invisible from other

perspectives (Star & Strauss, 1999; Ahmed, 2012). In sum, my position is not external to the research but entangled with it, shaping how marginalization and agency become visible.

DIVERGENT EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION AND AGENCY

The vignettes of Aisha and Anders illustrate two distinct yet widely resonant experiences of marginalization, showcasing two different ways of enacting agency. Aisha's story reflects the struggles of living with a refugee background, economic precarity, and experiences of an opaque bureaucracy. Her mental health issues are not recognized, and even the cost of a bus ticket becomes a meaningful stressor. Yet her agency is not absent: it is relational, quiet, and persistent. She seeks community-based support through District Mothers⁵ and WhatsApp groups, and she continues to care for her daughter despite limited resources and recognition. Anders, by contrast, experiences marginalization through gendered expectations about emotions, experiences of alienation, and digital misrecognition. His prior financial stability masks his current vulnerability, and his mental health struggles are misread as disengagement. Still, Anders enacts agency through peer networks, anonymous online platforms, and moments of direct resistance, such as calling the Men's Center supervisor to assert his rights. Both parents struggle to understand letters from the State, revealing how bureaucratic systems fail to accommodate diverse life situations. Their stories show that while marginalization is widely experienced, agency is also widely exercised, often in ways invisible to the institutions meant to support them.

AISHA: INVISIBLE MOTHERS IN A DIGITAL STATE: BUREAUCRATIC BURDENS AND THE POLITICS OF ACCESS

I began by searching for a location where participants would feel safe and comfortable during interviews. I worked with a service user organization and

a volunteer to arrange several carpools to the site where I planned to conduct the future workshops. It was just before Christmas, cold and snowy, when a volunteer generously offered his apartment near the metro for our meetings. He also helped prepare coffee, snacks, and sandwiches, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

That's where I met Aisha for the first time, following a brief phone call. She arrived about half an hour late, visibly stressed, and immediately apologized. At the time, I was in the early stages of my Ph.D., still learning to navigate the many responsibilities of qualitative research. I felt torn between adhering to formal academic guidelines and drawing on my prior experience as a social worker. I had worked with service users like Aisha before, refugees with families, who often needed help with transportation and reassurance in unfamiliar settings.

Feeling slightly unsure about how much of myself to share, I told Aisha how I, too, found Copenhagen's public transport confusing. Growing up in Jutland, where there was only one bus route, I wasn't used to the complexity of a capital city. I recalled my first time in Aarhus, when I bought a bus ticket but accidentally boarded in the wrong direction. I ended up at the last stop late at night with an expired ticket, not realizing that buses could travel in both directions. Aisha laughed and shared her struggles with public transport, explaining how her irregular work hours often clashed with transit schedules.

When I mentioned that I often conducted interviews in the evening to accommodate participants' availability, she immediately responded: she wished municipal meetings were more flexible. Reading Danish was difficult for her, and she often needed help. "I'm not the only one," she added, emphasizing that many others she knew faced similar challenges. Attending these meetings, she explained, was a balancing act between work, finances, and anxiety.

During the interview, Aisha described her frustration upon receiving her first letter in e-Boks. "I really did not understand a word of it," she said. I shared a

quote from another parent, whose first language was Danish, who had also struggled:

“Most of the time, we find that things are written in a language we simply can’t understand. Whether it’s three pages or 300 pages doesn’t really matter because we can’t see the relevance of it. If it’s so important to document, maybe they could consider writing more to us and not only about us.”

Aisha looked relieved. We sat in silence for a moment. I then showed her photos from Politiken’s series on the “digital underclass,” which prompted her to open up about her own negative experiences with what she called “the public system.”

She recalled baking a cake for her downstairs neighbor, hoping to ask for help translating a letter. But the neighbor also struggled to understand it. The letter informed Aisha that her daughter was being placed in an institution. Sharing such personal information with someone she barely knew made her feel exposed and uncomfortable. As she spoke, Aisha became emotional, recalling past traumas and losses. We slowed the conversation.

Her only family in Denmark was her daughter. She acknowledged that her psychological and social challenges had contributed to the CFWS’s decision. While she understood how these issues affected her ability to prioritize her daughter’s needs and best interests, she also expressed deep shame and guilt. Financial stress and social isolation weighed heavily on her. The area she lived in offered few opportunities to connect with others, so she joined a service user group called “District Moms,” located an hour away. She hoped to learn how to use the library to access e-Boks. With help from another member, she visited the library, only to find the IT café closed during her off-hours. Frustrated by the wasted trip and cost, she realized the library’s schedule would never align with hers.

As she explained this, Aisha recognized that her anxiety around e-Boks was not just about technology; it was connected with her social challenges. The

chronic nature of this anxiety had become a response to persistent instability.

Aisha felt isolated and burdened by traumas she couldn’t escape. CFWS had assessed her as showing significant PTSD symptoms from the civil war she had fled. But she was reluctant to revisit the past. “You know, the body just shuts down,” she said. “I don’t even react to gunfire anymore.” When she did want to talk, she turned to a WhatsApp group in her native language, where others shared similar stories.

She also expressed anger and frustration toward CFWS. While they focused on her perceived inability to care for her child, she felt no one acknowledged her past struggles or showed compassion. This lack of recognition made her hesitant to engage in collaboration.

Her self-criticism deepened. She said she was doing her best to meet her family’s basic needs, which, for her, took precedence over emotions. “It’s almost Christmas,” she said. “There’s no one asking how I’m doing – or if someone could help me, for instance, with helping my daughter.”

I referred her to someone who could inform her of her legal rights, including her entitlement to a support person.

ANDERS: STATE SLAVES AND SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS: DIGITAL EXCLUSION AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF WELFARE

I met Anders during my fieldwork at the Men’s Center. The social workers had arranged a quiet meeting room and set out coffee to create a welcoming space. Before agreeing to participate, Anders disclosed that he had ADHD and preferred not to talk about his children. To ease into the conversation, we began with a walk outside. When I asked if he smoked, and assured him it was fine if he did, he looked surprised. “That kind of flexibility is rare,” he said. “It helps.”

As we returned to the Men's center, Anders asked about my background, where I was from, and whether I had children. I told him I had a wife and two kids. Then he asked, "Do you ever wonder what life would be like without them?" I was caught off guard. Before I could respond, he added, "That's my situation. I have two children." He hesitated, then asked if I was sure I wanted to hear his story. He warned me that he might not like social workers. I reminded him that participation was voluntary and explained that the project aimed to explore men's perspectives on family engagement, voices often missing in research. He nodded but seemed puzzled. "I thought you were interested in digitalization."

I explained that I saw digitalization and the welfare state as deeply connected. He asked if I was an expert on platforms like AULA. I admitted I wasn't, but said that I used it. That moment revealed the gap between our experiences. Anders was frustrated that his ability to use digital tools like MitID, AULA, and e-Boks (self-service systems) was constantly questioned and implicitly criticized. His lack of digital engagement was often interpreted as a lack of engagement in his children's lives.

He shared that he had once earned a substantial income and had trusted his wife with access to his MitID and bank accounts. She managed their finances and digital platforms while he focused on work. After their breakup, she emptied the accounts. Only later did Anders realize he had been a victim of violence – something he said no one had ever explained to him. "For me, it was just everyday life," he said. At the same time, he felt that social workers showed compassion for his situation and had substantial expertise in the vulnerabilities connected to being a victim of violence. Furthermore, a psychologist spoke with him every week about his trauma. He felt both grateful and ashamed: grateful for the help, knowing it was only temporary, but ashamed of his lack of insight and digital skills.

Anders described his isolation. He didn't talk much with the other men at the Men's Center. None of his

friends knew he had moved out. He feared judgment. Online, he was active in Facebook groups like "Fathers," where members supported each other with parenting advice and questions about children's healthy development. More recently, he had joined "Coercion and Power," where people shared experiences of feeling oppressed by public institutions. He often posted letters from CFWS to get advice. Sometimes it helped. Sometimes it made things worse, increasing mistrust of public institutions. He did not fear judgment online, as he always posted anonymously when showing things like letters from CFWS. It helped him assert his rights, as the group provided information about rights and sometimes even offered legal assistance.

He felt hopeless about the future. He and his wife were living in separate crisis centers. They couldn't communicate. Their children might be placed in out-of-home care. He was certain the social workers would favor his wife; she was better at presenting herself. His anger and sadness made it difficult for him to speak clearly. He worried that his past focus on work would be seen as neglect. Like others in the study, he called it "e-Boks anxiety", the dread of opening messages that only brought bad news.

Despite being confident in his ability to earn money, Anders felt powerless navigating digital self-service systems like e-Boks and MitID. When he failed to respond to legal proceedings regarding visitation rights, the family court interpreted his silence as a lack of interest. He found out on a Friday afternoon. "They think I don't want to see my kids," he said. "But I didn't even understand the process." He relied on Facebook groups or called the Men's Center supervisor directly. The supervisor ensured that a social worker could assist him with the letter.

Anders felt alienated and without hope, and asked me critically, "Are you also helping to educate State slaves? People who can't, or won't, help citizens with anything?" He described himself as a "second-class citizen" because of his social struggles. He noted that children were rarely seen at the Men's Center:

“Is this even a place for them?” he asked, questioning whether it would be a suitable environment for them. On a sidenote, he added that he was dyslexic.

DISCUSSION

A critical reading of the two vignettes reveals how marginalization and agency are dynamically reconfigured at both macro and micro levels. The vignettes illustrate not only the structural constraints faced by marginalized parents but also their capacity to resist, adapt, and reimagine roles as both parents and citizens. These moments of ambiguity and negotiation highlight that, even within systems that often reinforce marginalization, parents retain agency and capabilities.

Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding the multiple axes of identities, such as race, gender, class, and disability. It allows us to explore how assumptions of ‘digital by default’ and digital technologies can distribute agency unevenly and reinforce marginalization. Digital infrastructures are not designed for those whose life courses differ markedly from conventional norms of family life. The technologies mentioned in the vignettes are built upon assumptions that users are fluent in Danish, possess digital and bureaucratic skills, and follow a conventional family structure. This not only fails to reflect lived realities but also actively erases the situated struggles (e.g., traumas or stigmatization) of those occupying precarious social positions. Thus, systems like MitID, e-Boks, and AULA function not only as administrative self-service solutions, but also as mechanisms of social classification, leading already marginalized parents to perceive themselves as “second-class citizens.” Lastly, intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how the design of digital technologies in practice often diverges from the principles of inclusion by design. When parents cannot or do not engage with digital technologies, they become vulnerable to moral judgment regarding their parenting, thereby reinforcing gendered assumptions about care and responsibility and challenging the notion of citizenship through the notion

of being digital by default. When these barriers arise and are functionally invisible, they can manifest as chronic ‘e-Boks anxiety,’ closely tied to human rights, particularly the right to family life, and intersecting with various minority statuses, increasing the risk of unequal access to those rights.

Haraway’s concept of the cyborg offers another layer to the theoretical framework for understanding how marginalization and agency emerge and are mitigated through digital infrastructure. Moreover, it allows us to explore how social media platforms can occasionally function as a protective measure when public institutions generate marginalization without acknowledging it. Through such engagements with other parents, parents can construct alternative networks of support that can be understood as a form of cyborg agency.

Thus, parents who experience marginalization can be seen as cyborgs, not entirely by choice, but by necessity. To gain voice and access support, cyborg engagement becomes a strategic response, trying to navigate the politics of belonging. Digital participation, even when undertaken under pressure, offers opportunities for peer connection, empowerment, and visibility. While their cyborg identities are shaped by marginalization, they also provide a platform for adaptation and resistance, enabling people to redefine what it means to be a parent and a citizen capable of asserting rights in a digitally mediated society. Such acts of redefining reflect that the struggles to belong somewhere are shaped by intersectional inquiries that are also mediated through digital infrastructures. Even in times of struggle, their negotiations serve as examples of seeking alternative modes of agency.

The metaphor of string figures serves to trace the co-produced, situated practices that unfold across human and non-human actors. This occurs in practices with particularly digital infrastructures, public institutions, and informal networks, where marginalized parents attempt to access rights and recognition. The stories of Aisha and Anders illustrate how entanglements occur as parents’ lives interconnect

with digital infrastructures, public institutions, and social networks, while they attempt to access rights and recognition. Through informal networks, they mitigate the risks of marginalization while simultaneously coping with personal challenges such as trauma and disability. Their experiences resemble the game of *Cat's Cradle* (Haraway, 2016, p. 35), where meaning is made not in isolation, but through relational and iterative struggles. My conversations with parents were saturated with this interplay, where voices were presented through collective experiences carrying hope for partial healing through justice and empowerment.

STRING FIGURING MARGINALIZATION AND AGENCY: NAVIGATING DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL INVISIBILITY.

In this last section, I outline four main points arising from my work.

First, the discussion shows that marginalization tends to occur more frequently than agency when citizens fail to meet expectations of being digital by default (Schou & Pors, 2019). These expectations can exacerbate existing inequities and risk becoming barriers to accessing help and safeguarding rights. Instead, citizenship becomes contingent on digital and bureaucratic skills (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023), which can be difficult for many minority groups (Hansen et al., 2018; Jørring et al., 2018; Ragnedda, 2020). These intersections shape how parents are seen, or not, by public institutions, and they often require what Star and Strauss (1999) call functionally invisible disembedding work: the emotional, time-consuming, practical, and interpretive labor required to navigate fragmented public systems. Yet this labor is often unrecognized, as it is simply expected that all citizens can and will manage these systems. What remains obscure is that people have very different starting points and resources for doing so, while the power to define what counts as legitimate participation or competence lies elsewhere. As Ahmed (2012, p. 26) describes, navigating

these systems often feels like “banging your head against a brick wall,” where the emotional and symbolic labor of being included remains invisible.

Second, while much of the literature on digital citizenship highlights its marginalization dimensions (e.g., Ragnedda, 2020; Madsen et al., 2022), the metaphor of the cyborg offers a more nuanced perspective on how marginalization can be fluid, also enabling agency. Digital infrastructures beyond formal public systems, such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups, function as counter-sites or counter-institutions where implicit or invisible barriers are translated, made visible, and shared. They also allow for the possibility of not declaring certain categories that parents are entangled in, due to the default settings of anonymity (e.g., not declaring gender, ethnicity, or race). These digital infrastructures, while operating outside formal public institutions, are also co-constitutive, as they become spaces where diversity matters, enabling alternative forms of recognition and support. Civil society organizations, such as District Mothers and the Men's Center, play a crucial role in this process. In Haraway's (2016, pp. 166–167) framing, cyborgs are not merely hybrids of human and machine, but dense, materially grounded, and semiotically rich entities that emerge through historically situated entanglements, constantly reconfiguring the relationships between humans and technology.

These entanglements involve human beings becoming entwined with the practices and artifacts of technoscience. Through their display of partial connections, the vignettes do not illustrate a unified or stable social world; instead, they show stratified, webbed, and non-optional worlds that appear and disappear in and out of people's lives. This reflects how design choices in the digital and legislative infrastructure of the Danish welfare state can marginalize certain voices. In the vignettes, the string figures emerge in specific, relational moments and carry real consequences for them. The concept of cyborgs helps capture how marginalized parents may fall through the cracks in the system, while also engaging in tentacular practices of resistance and

care. Although digitalization can be a barrier to the exercise of rights, it simultaneously offers avenues for connection and enables forms of agency that might otherwise be inaccessible. As Haraway (2021, p. 62) notes, citizenship is increasingly exercised electronically. Belonging, meanwhile, is spatial, temporal, and context-dependent, emerging when parents' collective string figuring enables them to claim recognition within a political community that upholds their rights (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 69).

Third, string figures offer opportunities to explore how tentacular thinking creates attachments and detachments in the stories of marginalized parents, how they form cuts and knots, and how they are both open and knotted in some ways and not in others. Given the string figures we relate to, careful consideration is necessary regarding how we, as researchers, declare our positionality, as this can lead to discrimination. According to Haraway (2016, p. 114), worlding is the act of opening the narrative of entangled life to the insistent multiplicity of being and the inescapable challenges it brings forth. I believe that my past experiences also provide opportunities for partial reparations and healing, integrating different types of knowledge through utopia, which can be utilized in collaboration with future workshops (see Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). I also believe that these tensions between researcher and researched constitute an engagement with institutions and

an attempt to transform them (Ahmed, 2012, p. 173). Offering advice about rights when conducting research is also a way to provide marginalized parents with a ladder that helps them overcome the brick walls of public institutions. In this way, diversity work is both a practice and a process of collaborative string figuring. It is a healing way of not just thinking of categories as phenomena that hinder movement, but also as something that can be reworked and transformed.

Finally, echoing Ahmed (2012, p. 187), this work has led me to reflect on solidity and partiality, about how string figures, though they appear fleeting and mutable, can nonetheless maintain their shape. This insight has shaped not only the analysis but also my sense of how movement and stability coexist in the worlds we study and help bring into being. And yet, if we are to get anywhere, we might first need to get in the way, to become the "blockage points" by naming them, to resist the smooth flow of interpretation to "stay with the trouble", as Haraway (2016) suggests. Sometimes, it is precisely in the interruption of the expected that new forms of understanding begin to take shape. In doing so, this article contributes to scholarship on how institutions (re)produce injustice (e.g., Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Villesèche et al., 2018) and offers new ways to trace discrimination, agency, and resistance in contemporary welfare governance.

[1] A Future Workshop is a participatory method developed by Jungk and Müllert (1984) to facilitate collaborative problem-solving and the envisioning of alternative futures. For details on how this research method was deployed in this project, see Nirmalarajan & Hansen (2024).

[2] I recruited participants according to the target group defined in §46 of the Danish Social Services Act. This political and legal definition rests on a relatively stable understanding of who is considered "vulnerable children and families." I combine Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which highlights stable and institutionally anchored axes of inequality, with Haraway's more fluid ontology, where categories are understood as relational, changing, and situated. This combined perspective enables me to capture both the institutional stability and the practical fluidity through which marginalization is experienced and negotiated in

digitally mediated encounters between citizens and the State. Inspired by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244), I use *Marginalization* (capitalized) to refer to the institutional and legal definition in §46 of the Danish Social Services Act, whereas marginalization (lowercase) refers to the situated, relational, and lived processes of parents.

[3] The Danish National eID is Denmark's digital ID that residents will use to access their public self-service solutions

[4] A Danish platform to communicate between public institutions and parents, e.g. day care or school

[5] District Moms (Danish: "Bydelsmødrene") were volunteer women, often from minority backgrounds, who supported families and children in local communities and acted as bridges between citizens and public authorities. They received education to prepare them for proactive community engagement and bridge-building roles. The Danish Agency for Digital Government had a long-term national collaboration with the District Moms to reach this target group.

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Intersectionality Beyond Theory:

Coming to Terms with our Embodied
'Ambiguousness' and the Courage to
Choose the Middle Space

ABSTRACT

This article emerges from a sustained transnational dialogue between two cisgender female, first-generation immigrant scholars of Japanese origin – one identifying as Nikkei in Sweden and the other as mixed-race Japanese (white) in Canada. Through collective autobiographical inquiry, we explore what we term a middle space – a site of ambiguity, tension, and transformation where intersectionality is both theorized and embodied. We situate our personal narratives within broader structural frameworks to contribute to scholarship that treats intersectionality as both theory and praxis – a tool for critical reflection and social transformation. Guided by critical feminist and collective methodologies, our writing emphasizes reflexivity, dialogue, and the interrogation of power dynamics in knowledge production. Our lived experiences reveal how positionalities shaped by sociocultural and institutional contexts resist binary categorizations of privilege and marginalization. These identities are continuously negotiated and inform our academic and personal engagements. We underscore the importance of collective methodologies in illuminating complex positionalities and advancing intersectional feminist scholarship. By inviting readers into our middle space, we offer a site of intersectional engagement, activism, and reflexivity where theory meets lived experience, and where shifting dynamics of power and identity are critically examined.

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INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, CENTER
AND MARGIN, BELL HOOKS, REFLEXIVITY, POSITIONALITY

INTRODUCTION

This article emerges from a sustained dialogue between two cisgender female, first-generation immigrant scholars of Japanese origin: a mid-career scholar identifying as Nikkei (persons of Japanese descent) in Sweden (S) and a junior scholar identifying as mixed race Japanese (and white) and living in Canada (V). Our collaboration began through email correspondence and developed into regular Zoom meetings, where we shared experiences, discussed our research involvement, and critically reflected on our personal and professional lives. Through this process, we developed a collective autobiographical inquiry into how intersectionality manifests in our lived experiences within and outside of academia.

We approach intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as a lived experience and form of collective action (Terriquez et al. 2018; Tungohan 2016). We engage with an awareness that lies at the core of intersectionality: that “privilege and oppression co-exist simultaneously, shift according to context, and characterize relationships” (Christoffersen and Siow 2024, 8). Intersectionality needs to be situated at the nexus of intersecting axes of domination within structural frameworks of white supremacy (Mills 2017; Christoffersen and Siow 2024), producing layered experiences of privilege and marginalization. Our positionalities across the contexts of Japan, Sweden and Canada do not fit neatly into binary categories of privileged or marginalized. Instead, we inhabit what we call a *middle space*, a site of intentional engagement and embodied navigation, where we critically reflect on and respond to the shifting dynamics of imposed privilege and marginalization. The middle space is shaped by ambiguity, tension, and transformation – where intersectionality is not only theorized but lived, and where our positionalities are continuously negotiated within institutional and social structures. Intersectionality offers us an opportunity to reflect on and transform our understanding of who is marginalized and who is privileged (Christoffersen & Siow, 2025) as theory but also as praxis (Freire 1970) within the middle space.

Guided by critical feminist and collective methodologies (hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003), our writing emphasizes reflexivity, dialogue, and the interrogation of power dynamics in knowledge production. We draw on our lived experiences to explore how intersectional identities are shaped by broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, and how these identities inform our approach in our daily engagements inside and outside academia.

Through this article, we aim to contribute to scholarship that treats intersectionality as both theory and praxis (Freire 1970; Ichikawa & Osanami Törngren in press) – a tool for critical reflection and social transformation. By situating our personal narratives within broader structures, we invite readers into our middle space – a critical site of intersectional engagement shaped by complex positionalities, and a space for both activism and reflexivity.

OUR AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

This article grew out of a conversation on activism in February 2024 during our regular Zoom meetings, where we began exploring our positions within the structures of Western academia and, in V’s case, her therapy practice. We exchanged personal narratives about our anti-oppressive and antiracist efforts, reflecting on our ancestral roots, communities of origin, and intergenerational legacies. This article is based not only on our intentional reflections on positionality, but also on casual text messages and emails about our readings, family events, teaching and daily experiences – the joys, disappointments and excitements of life. We discussed each other’s stories, shared insights, and engaged with bell hooks’ works, *Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness* (1989) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), interpreting them as a way to make sense of our own lived experiences. The context of bell hooks’ lived experience, marked by a clear line between the center and the margin, shaped our understanding of who she came to be, the distance she journeyed to reach that space, and what

remained within her from the place she began. This deep, chronological engagement with hooks' theoretical development and her evolving social location illuminated the critical importance of time, memory, and journey in understanding intersectionality – not as a static framework, but as one that must be continually adapted and interpreted through specific lived realities.

We describe our approach as a collaborative autoethnographic process (Chang et al. 2013), rooted in dialogic inquiry (Wells 1999). Through dialogue and shared writings (Denborough 2008), we engage in personal storytelling and reflection. By examining personal narratives, we use our experiences as tools for critical inquiry (Holman Jones 2005), exploring how individual experiences are situated within larger systemic, historical, societal and political contexts (Smith & Watson 2010).

Our collaborative autoethnographic process is rooted in hook's framework of memory work: we conceptualized the chronological existence and ongoing development of our identities, bodies, and social locations, what hooks stated as an intentional act of resistance and transformation of present, clearly differentiated from nostalgic or sentimental reflections of past.

I have needed to remember, as part of a self-critical process where one pause to reconsider choices, location, tracing my journey from small town southern black life, from folk traditions, and church experience to cities, to the university, to neighbourhoods that are not racially segregated, to places where I see for the first time independent cinema, where I read critical theory, where I write theory. Along that trajectory, I vividly recall efforts to silence my coming to voice. (hooks 1989, 17)

This process relates to feminist methods of collective memory work, and the growing body of scholarship that foregrounds lived experience, embodiment, and relational knowledge production. Some of the work that inspired us includes contributions that offer collective autoethnography as a transformative narrative

methodology. These works emphasize co-constructed meaning-making, reflexivity, and storytelling as tools for resistance and social change (Karalis Noel et al. 2023), collective narratives of embodied and often silenced pain as a way to disrupt dominant professional norms in social work (Ichikawa & Yoon 2025), and fostering personal and political transformation within feminist praxis through the emotional labor and supportive roles involved in sharing vulnerability through collective autoethnographic inquiry (Suzanne & Reiss 2024).

This process forged collective meanings, highlighting the challenges of navigating our lives inside and outside of academia shaped by various norms and assumptions. We critically yet unapologetically reflect on our positionality, revealing how we have internalized many assumptions about our privileged marginalization.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Theoretical discussions around how our intersecting social identities position us differently in the power structure of society have existed for some time in academia – for example, in Hughes' (1945) concept of "master status" and Du Bois' (1903) understandings of race, gender and nation – contributing to "intersectional sociology" (Rabaka 2023). However, it was Black feminist criticism and earlier work by Black feminists that became foundational, where intersectionality as a framework gained traction (e.g. Combahee River Collective 1977; hooks 1981; Collins 2002). Intersectionality expanded to be applied to the wider academic field and broadened activism in fields like disability studies (Garland-Thomson 1997), queer theory (Butler 1990) and Indigenous studies (Smith 1999).

Intersectionality is an analytical framework developed to examine how systems of power and oppression – such as racism, sexism and classism – interact to produce overlapping and compounding inequalities. The term intersectionality was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who emphasized

the interconnected nature of social identities such as race, gender and class. Intersectionality underscores that multiple social categories, such as race, gender, and class, are not isolated but interwoven, mutually shaping and influencing social marginalization and privileges (Collins 2002). Central to Crenshaw's framework is "demarginalizing", which names the experiences of specific groups to understand their particularity (Carbado 2019). Crenshaw's (1989) work highlights how single-axis approaches to discrimination fail to capture the unique experiences of individuals who live at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Intersectionality is about recognizing how these intersections create unique individual experiences, not just adding up forms of discrimination – centering the most marginalized rather than including intersecting identities. It requires recognizing "which differences make a difference" (Crenshaw 1989) in every aspect of society. As Collins (2002) further emphasizes, intersectionality illuminates the structural forces that organize and sustain social hierarchies, moving beyond individual identities to address the systemic nature of these interlocking oppressions.

For both hooks (2000) and Collins (2002), this distinction underscores the necessity of recognizing one's positionality within these intersecting systems of power and the relational dynamics between the politics of location and the spaces we choose – center and margin. In other words, intersectionality is not simply a personal choice – it is a necessity because our identities are shaped by structural forces. While we may choose to engage with intersectionality as a framework, the conditions that make intersectionality relevant as praxis – such as racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression – are not chosen. They are imposed through ideological, socioeconomic, and racial structures. This connects to hooks' critique of individualism in Western culture and the idea of "choice", a reminder that marginality can be both imposed and chosen as a site of resistance.

As intersectionality became a widely used concept,

many argue that intersectionality research does not align with the original Black feminist theory, often employing additive approaches that overlook the processes of intersectional privileging (Christoffersen & Siow 2024; 2025). Here, it is essential to understand the difference between intersectional identities and intersectionality. Intersectional identities refer to how individuals embody and experience multiple social categories – such as race, gender, class and sexuality – within their unique lived experiences and show how individuals occupy multiple positions. Intersectional identities are dynamic and fluid, evolving with shifting social contexts, personal histories and relationships. hooks (2000) argues that engaging with both one's identity and broader systems of power fosters a transformative perspective, challenging dominant narratives and envisioning inclusive realities. She asserts that no-one is always a victim and calls for accountability in identifying "interlocking systems of domination" (hooks 2013, 37) that promote injustice, writing "Loving justice means that we are willing to see the ways racism, sexism, and class exploitation are interconnected" (2013, 138).

Intersectionality highlights how these intersecting identities are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive within intersecting power systems, shaping their perspectives and encounters with privilege or oppression, and provides a framework for distinctive analysis of social inequality, power, and politics (Collins 2002, 2012; hooks 2000).

In the same critique of intersectionality not aligning with the original Black feminist theory, some scholars also raise concerns around how intersectionality has become colorblind, not centralizing the politics of racism and the racial specificity of being both white and non-white and not recognizing academic activism that emerged from social movements countering racism (Carbado 2019; Crenshaw et al. 2024; Tomlinson 2019). Even when race is included in intersectional research, it is frequently treated as a single axis and reduced to a simple marker of difference, leading to comparisons between white women/black women and white men/black men.

This approach often overlooks and fails to critically address the underlying structures of whiteness and white supremacy (Christoffersen & Siow 2024, 44). Lastly, intra-race intersectionality, also referred to as intra-categorical intersectionality, remains largely overlooked in both racial and intersectional research and discourse. Experiences such as the denial or misunderstanding of complexity among multiracial individuals' identities experiences of racial privilege and marginalization are often excluded from broader discussions of race and intersectionality (Albuja et al. 2020).

As discussed above, intersectionality is a theoretical framework which helps us understand how various social identities intersect and shape experiences of oppression and privilege. At the same time, we cannot forget that intersectionality emerged in the broader space between social movement and academic politics (Collins 2012), and that intersectionality informs and drives action. Tugohan (2016) writes that intersectionality in social movements requires a sophisticated understanding of power, emphasizing an awareness that it is about structural change rather than mere representation. The complexity of the question of "who is the most marginalized" makes it challenging for social movements to set clear agendas and determine appropriate forms of activism. The risk is that different groups may have varying conceptions of social justice, potentially leading to the dominance of one group over another (Tungohan, 2016, 348). This is why Montoya (2021) contends that intersectional positioning itself can lead to marginalization within social movements that aim to combat oppression, due to the tendency of these movements to focus on a single axis of identity or oppression (2). There are many examples of grassroots movements, including the Combahee River Collective, which challenged simplistic, one-dimensional views of oppression, advocating for intersectionality to eliminate inequality through collective action. Some critics of intersectionality misunderstand that intersectionality fragments movements into smaller parts, and in some cases appeals to the "universal interest" that falls back to the hierarchical power structure. Montaya argues

that social movement scholars believe that this opens up new and dynamic opportunities for interrogation as to why and how intersectionality fails and why and how single-axis dimensions of identity are mobilized. Intersectionality calls for destabilizing social categories and never dismisses or minimizes the effects of them in society (2021, 3-4).

POLITICS OF LOCATION – OUR MIDDLE SPACE

We use hooks' concept of "the politics of location" (1989; 2000) to encourage an understanding of the spaces from which we engage in cultural practices and political struggles (1989, 15). By "the politics of location," hooks refers to the idea that our identities, experiences, and social positions shape how we see the world and engage with it. We understand location as one's specific position within social, cultural, and political structures. It encompasses the various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which shape our experiences and perspectives on marginality and privilege. hooks emphasizes the necessary recognition of opposition and understanding one's positionality in these dynamics, which shapes cultural practices and the ability to envision alternative realities. She differentiates the politics of location from the spaces which we occupy, focusing on how we use our location to challenge and resist oppression. "Space" is therefore seen as a more fluid and dynamic concept representing areas of possibility and potential for resistance and transformation. hooks often discusses space in terms of creating or occupying the margins – space outside the dominant power structures where alternative perspectives and praxis can emerge. Marginality can be both imposed and chosen as a space of resistance where individuals can articulate experiences and create new meanings. This distinction between location and space highlights the potential for transformation and creativity from engaging with one's centrality and marginality (hooks 1989; 2000).

We conceptualize our middle space as a site of possibility where we interpret, position and mobilize

the intersection of our multiple marginalities and privileges. We view center, margin and middle as dynamic, fluid areas that shape and are shaped by our identities and experiences within our social, cultural and political locations. By focusing on the middle space, we advocate for intersectionality as a site of resistance and transformation – one that centers diverse marginality and experiences as essential to the pursuit of social justice, as envisioned by hooks. Montoya (2021) highlights the assets of those at the intersection of multiple marginalities referring to Barvosa (2008):

Interpretive – the ability to understand and explain various viewpoints; positional – the ability to move within and between groups; and motivational – the drive to address group conflicts so as to be able to claim and live their own multiple identities in peace (Barvosa 2008 in Montaya 2021; 6).

Between us, intersectionality means being mindful about our similarities and differences and recognizing that these differences distinctly shape our individual life experiences (Murphey-Shigematsu 2018, 113). Through our repeated conversations, we relearn, acknowledge and challenge our own assumptions about who we are. Intersectionality enables us to recognize multiple viewpoints, move between spaces and come to terms with our multiple identities.

By choosing to work from the middle space – a space of resistance to binary thinking where we confront our own contingency – we aim to challenge fixed categories, bringing the margins to the center and the center to the margins. Through this middle space, we approach intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as a reflective praxis that helps us understand how our identities interact with specific contexts and structures. It allows us to see how we are contingently positioned in both spaces of power and marginalization. In doing so, we intentionally activate intersectionality, resisting alignment with any singular identity or position.

Tugohan (2016) notes that there is often insufficient

dialogue between academics and activists regarding their interpretations and applications of intersectionality. hooks also argues that uniting theory and practice is essential for a liberatory feminist praxis, as defined by Paulo Freire (hooks 2000, 113–114). We argue that the divide between theory and practice fosters a binary mindset of purity versus impurity, leaving little room for ambivalence or contradictions. Douglas' framework of societal obsession over purity from *Purity and Danger* (1996) conceptualizes societal judgment of activists, showing how cultural norms create dichotomies between the “pure” and the “impure”, often delegitimizing the latter as threatening, resonating with the idea that intersectional positions can themselves become marginal in social movements (Montaya 2021, 2). This divide of purity and impurity leads some activists to feel that their actions are more politically correct than those developing ideas and fostering anti-intellectualism among elitist academics who disconnect their ideas from real life. However, this binary perspective overlooks intersectionality, which recognizes that privilege and oppression are interconnected and shape each other, and overlooks how “impurity” can be a source of strength and transformation. Hybridity, the blending of distinct elements, challenges rigid boundaries and emphasizes the dynamic nature of identities and practices (Bhabha 1994; Young 1995). Douglas' framework suggests that what is deemed impure can yield resilience and utility as well as courage in seeing our intersectional positioning in the space between the center and the margin. In today's context, where overt segregation may appear blurred but structural inequalities persist under the guise of invisibility, we propose a more fluid and nuanced notion of the “middle” – a space we have come to occupy within Euro-Western academia. The middle is often judged as impure; however, we argue that it fully embraces our intersectional identities – identities that are contingent, shaped by both privileged and marginalized aspects. Within this space, intersectionality enables us to use education and academic activism as a practice of freedom (hooks 2000, 116). The strength of impurity lies in the complexity of intersectionality, inviting people into a middle space of ambiguity,

ambivalence and flexibility – qualities that enable us to thrive in shifting landscapes of identity and belonging. This middle space accepts our locations of privilege and oppression, where our identities continuously shift. We embrace and accept ambivalence and contradictions in ourselves and in our activism, despite a world that often demands certainty.

By reflecting on our past and tracing our journeys to academia, we deepen our understanding of our intersectional positionalities – how we came to occupy the “middle”. Our ambition is to develop an understanding of intersectionality as praxis – one that acknowledges our multiple privileges and marginalities. We critically reflect on how our positions within various social, institutional, and historical contexts grant us privileges in some situations and marginalize us in others.

EXCERPTS FROM OUR PERSONAL ACCOUNT

S's story

Today, I identify as a first-generation Asian immigrant of Nikkei/Japanese descent – a cisgender woman, heterosexual and able-bodied. As far as I can remember, I have always identified as Asian and Japanese.

I started my life in the location of the center, taking everything for granted, never needing to think about oppression. I was born and raised on the northern island of Japan, Hokkaido, originally called Ezo, which was ruled by the Ainu people (the indigenous native Japanese population), until the island was formally annexed and renamed by the Meiji government in 1869. Throughout my obligatory education in Japan, I do not recall any specific history lectures on Japanese settler-colonialism or the colonization of the rest of Asia. I am still actively learning about and acknowledging my history as a colonizer over China, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar, New Guinea, Guam,

East Timor and Nauru.

I often overlook my class privilege, being from an academic, upper-middle-class family, which says a lot about my location in the center. My father was a professor and my mother a housewife. As part of my father's post-doctoral journey, we lived in Northern California from when I was 4 to 6 years old. This is when I realized that I was not white. When my parents registered me at the public school, they were advised to give me an “American” name but they insisted on keeping our original names – small acts of resistance. There was no #MyNameIs campaign in 1986. It became part of me to pronounce my name with an American accent: Say-ya-kha. I still struggle to pronounce my name as I should whenever I speak in English.

I pledged allegiance to the US flag every morning in school and thought I was American until we returned to Japan. On my first day back in Japanese school, my teacher corrected my sitting posture, saying, “This is not how we sit in Japan”. Teachers introduced me as “S who lived in the US” and my effort to not understand English became unsustainable when it became a subject in grade 7. I felt excluded and began to disassociate from the idea of being “Japanese”.

I had a “white” upbringing alongside my Japanese one. My connection with the US continued through our “extended American family” – an Irish-Italian family in the Pacific Northwest. My mother met “mom and dad” on a West Coast trip before marrying my father and the bond persisted. I have had a special relationship with my white American grandparents, aunts and uncle, filled with moments of love: drawings I made with my aunt as a child, my favorite chocolate-chip cookies, being introduced as “our adopted grandchild” and the occasional airmail that always said “Love, Grandpa and Grandma”. When I was 11, they visited Japan, which was very special for my Grandpa, who was in the Navy. I stood holding hands with him in Aomori, looking at the Pacific Ocean. He said, “I never thought that I would be standing in Japan during my lifetime, with a Japanese

family that I cherish, holding hands with a Japanese granddaughter.” Age 14, I visited Pearl Harbor and, at 16, visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial for the first time. At 33, I revisited both sites. By then, I had reflected deeply on my identity as a Japanese person and the history of war from both perspectives – as both the colonizer and the colonized.

I have lived in Sweden since I turned 23. Initially, my presence felt temporary but, over time, it became more permanent, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the geographical divide between me and my family in Japan. In Sweden and Europe, I learned new ways in which people perceive me: I am Japanese and symbolize the North in the South/North dichotomy in the European context. I have one foot in the West and one in the East, feeling both visible and invisible.

At one of my favorite Asian restaurants in Sweden, a delivery guy mistook me for an employee, highlighting my unique position. Every time I arrive at Narita airport, I think “Oh my, there are so many Asians here!” and then realize that I am one of them. This is how I feel and embody my middle space today and every day.

V's story

I am a mixed-race Japanese, cisgender, able-bodied woman and immigrant currently residing in the traditional land of Indigenous peoples, now known as Toronto, Ontario, Canada. As a mixed child in Japan raised by a single Japanese mother, our lives were largely lived on the margins, surrounded by others navigating diverse forms of outsider-ness within Japanese society. My mother, who later returned to her traditional farming family but also pursued her passion for alternative living through organic farming (another story of “middle space”), was deeply involved in student activism, the hippie movement and the women's liberation movement. This fostered a circle of friends who formed a vibrant, diverse community, united by their conscious rejection of Japan's neoliberal focus on productivity and the materialism that fueled the bubble economy. Instead,

they embraced alternative values, forming a unique, supportive and political community of parents and children who chose to live outside mainstream expectations.

Looking back, I can now recognize the shadow of this alternative lifestyle – the way it often went hand-in-hand with family breakdowns, poverty, trauma and mental-health struggles soothed by alcohol. Many being single-parent, often mother, families navigating economic hardship – reflecting the ongoing challenges single parents face in securing full-time employment within Japanese society. Furthermore, what might appear to be a voluntary step out from the mainstream could be far more complex than it seemed. When individuals are unable to find belonging, acceptance, or safety within mainstream society, alternative spaces often serve as vital refuge offering a sense of community and emotional shelter. Still, what was unique about that marginalization was its deliberate decision not to strive towards the center. This marginalization was seen as a sense of pride and a source of belonging. It was a choice to live differently, to reject conventional aspirations and to find value and meaning outside the dominant cultural narrative and societal race for success. Without over-romanticizing it, I can still see the profound impact this has had on how I perceive the concepts of center and margin. This experience might have shaped my understanding of these spaces in a non-hierarchical way. There is a center and there is a margin; each comes with its own benefits and challenges. Rather than viewing the center as superior, favorable and a desired final destination, I see them as different realms of existence from the margin, each offering different fruits. This perspective of the center and the margin may also arise from my experience as a mixed-race child in Japan who felt like a ‘permanent outsider’, which made the concept of existing in a center feel abstract and foreign, if not irrelevant.

In my therapy practice, I work with racialized migrant families. In a way, their experience of outsider-insiderness meets me in a middle space – an open and hopefully safe space that can foster healing

and empowerment. I would like to think that this is indeed a space where we, as co-authors, found each other despite our regional (Sweden and Canada) and disciplinary (Migration and Ethnic Studies and Social Work) differences.

HOW WE SEE THE SPACES WE OCCUPY

Through our stories, we explore and acknowledge the social and political locations we are embedded in, and how we approach the middle space – the space between the center and the margin – as an overlapping site of intentional engagement, where collective action is rooted in intersectionality. S is accepting and relearning her history as a majority Japanese, upper-middle-class female, shifting from racial majority to minority. V, a mixed-Japanese individual raised by a single mother and a single mother herself, resists hierarchical structures, differing from S's upbringing. Through her dialogue with S, V deepened her reflections on her own privileges – such as her European roots, able-bodied status, and cisgender identity. This exchange helped us gain greater awareness of how we inhabit the middle space as a site shaped by intentional engagement with the contingency of intersectionality, where privilege and marginalization shift across contexts and our positionalities are continuously negotiated through lived experience. Here, we center our claim that our shared marginality and privileges exist within an ambiguous middle space formed by our intersectional identities. This middle space is a critical site of intersectional engagement, shaped by complex and negotiated positionalities – a space for both activism and reflexivity. Understanding and accepting this space means recognizing intersectionality not only as an analytical framework for examining where privilege and marginalization intersect, but also as a tool for intentional engagement with each other's lived experiences and practices.

UNDERSTANDING OUR POSITION IN THE MIDDLE

We embody unique experiences that highlight

intersectionality, manifested in various forms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and privilege at different physical and metaphorical social locations, underscoring our navigation of middle space. In understanding our past, hooks' insights into her childhood experience, highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of racial desegregation on Black students, caught our attention. She emphasizes the feelings of hostility, rage, conflict and loss experienced during this period. The story illustrates the pain of being forced to leave a familiar, supportive environment and enter a cold, unwelcoming one. It underscores the burden placed on Black students to make desegregation a reality, often at great personal cost. As hooks writes, "We were certainly on the margin, no longer at the center, and it hurt" (2000, 1). It is powerful to read about hooks' anger at being removed from the center and relocated to the margins. This anger became fuel for reclaiming her place at the center and bringing the margin to the center. Although neither V or S feels the same kind of anger, our conversation led us to our understanding of what hooks argues as "oppositional political struggle" (hooks 1989, 15) and our understanding of our positionality in the dynamics of these oppositional social, cultural and political locations, formed by not always a choice but necessity.

V recognizes that her past and current affiliations with various centers and privileges come from the location of power. As a PhD student at a prestigious university in North America and a former social worker at the Japanese government office, she has occupied central locations in both academia and social work. On the other hand, her internalized marginality still connects her closer to the margin, where she feels home. V is shaped by her intersectional identity as a racialized, first-generation migrant single mother, an English-as-an-additional-language-speaker in an anglophone Canadian university and a low-paid, contract-based employee in the Japanese government – a precarious situation known as "government-made working poor." These intersectional identities are often the most marginalized in different contexts. Despite the privileges and power of

being affiliated with institutions of power, she often felt confined to the lower end of the hierarchy. This is why, even when she is situated in positions of power – at the center – her identity renders her closer to the margins, or rather, the margin lives within her, persisting regardless of the spaces she comes to affiliate with or occupy. However, in her everyday therapy practice, she experiences a constant dilemma: the unsettling sense of profiting and making a living from people's suffering. This feeling is particularly strong when working with those living on the margins – newcomers, single parents, racialized women, and people with precarious status and belonging to Canada – with whom she feels a deep sense of connection, far more than she does in academic spaces.

Listening to V's story and her upbringing, S sees a similarity in V and hooks' experience, looking at the center from the marginal space. S interprets V's feeling of marginality as stemming from her upbringing, rooted in the social and political context she was located in, which was outside hierarchical structures, and influenced by her mother's choice of activism. V's space of marginality was not always a matter of personal choice, but more about what options were available – formed through ideological, socioeconomic, and racial structures that shaped her lived experience. Contrary to V, S has often found herself in positions of power, looking at the margin from the center. This location was not a matter of personal choice either, and rather a structural necessity – shaped by ideological, socioeconomic, and racial positioning. Having lived in the Western world for much of their life, authors experience marginality yet also recognize the privilege of being able to claim and navigate white spaces without being questioned. This privilege is not self-selected, but socially and politically conferred.

Our experiences reveal that no one is permanently located in either the center or the margin; rather, intersectional identities are contingent and relational. The spaces we occupy – whether of power, oppression, or resistance – are fluid, shaped by how “similar enough” we are perceived to be (Ahmed

2007; Osanami Törngren & Shinozaki 2021), and how our experiences are recognized in relation to other marginalized identities. V shared that our experiences show that choosing the middle space is not just a temporary transition but a distinct and enriching identity. Our stories illustrate that intersectionality is not only a framework for understanding structural positioning, but also a necessary praxis for navigating the shifting terrain of identity, belonging, and recognition. Intersectionality, in this sense, is not only a tool for reflection and resistance, but a necessary response to the contingent and imposed realities of privilege and oppression.

THE FLUIDITY OF SPACES WE OCCUPY

This space in the middle may offer possibilities for transformation both towards the margin and the center, but it is also where we feel pain. The middle space is not neutral or safe and should not be mistaken for comfort or passive acceptance of privileges that come with passing or blending in. As hooks reminds us, transformation begins with identifying and reflecting on one's own starting points. This self-awareness within the middle space is crucial to our efforts to challenge dominant power structures and to transform norms and practices in ways that embrace intersectionality.

We continued our discussions on the locations we are called into, the necessity of negotiation, and the spaces we choose. We understand being called in from/into the center or margin not merely to describe an invitation, but to signal how our intersectional identities position us in relation to structures of power and expectation. Being called in refers to moments when we are drawn, sometimes voluntarily with choice, sometimes through obligation or necessity, into roles, spaces, or relationships that reflect shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization. V is called in from the margin and S from the center, but both choose to occupy the middle space when we can. V envisions a location without a center, margin or hierarchy – one with fluidity and interconnectedness – though she wonders if it is her relative

privilege and stability which enable her to envision such a space. S feels more comfortable in recognizing her oppositional position in the location of power and marginalization.

Together we delved deeper into the questions of whether this comfort reflects a yearning for the location of the center and emphasizes hooks' reminder about the importance of the spaces we occupy and the relative power we use in them. The location of the center should not be a place in which to exercise privilege and perpetuate oppression. hooks (1989; 2000) acknowledges her struggle to maintain marginality while living in the center, questioning how power is used and abused there, even by those on the margin. She notes that, before desegregation, the Black community had power that it was later deprived of by white control. hooks warns that women of color may harbor resentment or compete with one another, engaging in internalized racism and aligning with white people by harboring negative feelings towards Black and other marginalized people. This competition for power and internalized racism can lead to self-hatred, misdirected anger and harm towards each other instead of challenging oppressive systems (2000, 57).

When S is called into the location of the center, she consciously strives to see the oppositional space of the margin and the center, choosing the middle space as a place of resistance. In lectures and public debates in Sweden, she often highlights her positionality in different social and political locations across contexts and uses herself as an example to emphasize the importance of centering race in understanding inequalities and discrimination. Her Black Swedish friends remind her that she has the privilege to do so because she is not Black, underscoring the importance of her privileges compared to those who are the most racially marginalized. She tries to be conscious and mindful of when to speak and when to step back, a process that can be painful – such as being told that she is not a person of color and does not belong. This also hits deep into V's thoughts, as a person identifying as mixed Asian.

V, drawn to the locations of the margins, leans towards the space of marginality as spaces of connection and resistance. She uses her privileges in her social location to provide her therapy practice, integrating critical, anti-oppressive and anti-racist principles into therapeutic work. This approach grapples with contradictions, as mentioned earlier, such as the ethical tension of profiting from individuals' suffering rooted in systemic inequalities. Some view the hybridity of critical theories, activism and therapy as impure, but V sees it as part of resistance, though not a solution or replacement for societal and systemic change. From her privileged social location, she faces the oppositional struggle from the middle space.

We navigate and perceive middle spaces differently according to which locations within intersectional oppressive structures we lean towards. For both of us, the middle space embodies the bittersweet experience of being a “permanent outsider-insider” (Collins 1986, 14), a concept describing individuals who navigate both inclusion and exclusion within dominant and marginalized spaces. While they may affiliate with certain communities or institutions, they often remain at the periphery, bringing unique perspectives while facing barriers to full acceptance. This duality creates a tension whereby belonging is partial and marked by constant negotiation between connection and distance, necessity and choice. Belonging can occur in the center, as a mono-racial or mixed-race individual, a cisgender female or an able-bodied person – but it is never absolute. This is the courage of inhabiting the middle space – to acknowledge the conflicting feelings of privilege and marginalization, and to choose to remain present in the tension – not to compete with one another, but to engage with internalized racism, sexism and ableism.

OUR OWN SURVIVAL IN ACADEMIA

hooks writes, “Our survival depends on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole” (2000, 21). We wonder: Is there an awareness of the

middle space as a necessary part of the whole? Are we seen?

S holds firm to academia as a place for transformation and resistance. Navigating the fluidity and invisibility of being drawn toward the center – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes with discomfort – S reflects on the oppositional power dynamics at play in academia. The more recognition S receives, the more doubt emerges. Do I want power? Do I want to be seen? What do I know of the margin? Am I just palatable? These questions interrogate the politics of location and the complexities of occupying a space shaped by both privilege and exclusion. Here we remind ourselves of hooks' critiques of the emphasis on individualism in Western culture, a tendency that can undermine collective struggle and solidarity among women. Citing Zillah Eisenstein, hooks argued that a focus on personal achievement and success can detract from the broader goals of feminism, which include addressing systemic inequalities and fostering community support. Instead, hooks advocates for a balance: individuality should be recognized and valued, but not at the expense of collective action and community-building (hooks 2000). Reflexive conversations with V help S to understand how societal boundaries create and sustain privilege, and how we may move between spaces while confronting the reality of choice and location (hooks 1989, 15). V's acceptance, affirmations, and presence strengthen S's ability to acknowledge her location as part of the necessary whole – leaning toward the center, while remaining oriented toward the margin as a site of accountability and transformation through the middle space. As long as there is a separation between margin and center we can be a necessary, vital part of that whole.

V holds a skeptical view of academia as the center of impact creation. In social work, where field-based and lived experience-based knowledge are valued, she sees activism and social impact emerging outside academia. She believes that the center is defined by output (impact on lives) rather than input (resources and power). Over the years, she observed colleagues

leaving academia while others, including herself, returned to academia, frustrated with the limitations of field social work and hoping for broader social justice impacts from academic work. In social work academic activism, clinical practice can be seen as “impure”. V, with her mixed identity, feels less pressure to conform to purity and believes in the middle ground – the hybridity of clinical work, critical theory and activism. Her choice to return to academia while continuing clinical social work allows her to explore the challenges and rewards of the middle space, embracing contradiction, frustration, doubt, ambivalence and impurity but also integration, reflection, connection and transformation. We reflect here on the words of Murphy-Shigematsu (2018, 209):

We may realize that we are not one of those few exceptional individuals who have the capacity to act and to inspire others on a larger scale. Yet each of us can take a stand by choosing how we want to be, making our mark.

Moving between these spaces, the center, the margin and the middle through academia, is not without pain. Remaining in the middle space is not a retreat from marginality or a move toward comfort. We face isolation, dismissal and discouragement. The challenge lies in how we use our intersectional power and privilege in the middle space and continue to engage in self-reflection. It is a conscious effort to engage critically with both privilege and oppression, to protect and uplift marginality even when we ourselves embody privilege. We come to an understanding that occupying the middle space is not always a choice for us, but a necessity.

ACTIVISM AND SOLIDARITY

What do our similar yet distinct understandings and embodied experiences of the margin and the center – and the reflexive conversations that foster our awareness of middle spaces – reveal about our intersectional identities and our activism and work in solidarity? Both of us inherit an intergenerational legacy rooted in activism and radicalism – not in the sense

of extremism, but as Davis articulated, radicalism as “grasping things at the root” (1983, 19). However, our first encounters with activism were shaped by different contexts: S’s perspective was influenced by her upbringing in an academic upper-middle-class family, while V was immersed in grassroots student activism, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the hippie movement in Japan through her mother’s community. These divergent beginnings shaped how we engage with activism and how we understand our place within it.

Migration to Canada and Sweden brought different experiences of marginality which also shaped how we engage with activism and solidarity. For S, the move intensified her sense of marginalization both physically and emotionally. For V, it brought emotional proximity to the center in a racially diverse city, yet she remained on the margins due to language fluency, socioeconomic status, and migration background. Our Japanese-ness also places us in other divides – more often privileged than marginalized, more often dominant than oppressed – which shape our activism. Though our racial experiences in Japan differ, we now share experiences of being racialized as non-white, and racialized identity as Asian – neither Black, Indigenous, MENA, nor white. We are “falling between the cracks of that divide,” as Okiihiro (1994, xi) describes – sometimes seen as “just like Blacks” or “almost whites.” This ambiguous othering is a lifelong experience for V as a mixed-race person, but a new realization for S. The racial ambiguity experienced by people of mixed roots often leads to “chameleonization,” a coping strategy involving adaptation to different racial or cultural groups (Daniel 2002; Root 1996; Shih & Sanchez 2005). While this adaptation has been framed as a vulnerability, V reinterprets it as a source of strength and possibility – for her own survival and for her broader commitment to intersectional identities, activism, and anti-racism. S has formed a deeper understanding of flexibility in ambiguousness – not in terms of racial and ethnic identification, but as an Asian woman navigating Japan, Sweden, and the U.S.

We realize that while some aspects of our location are

continuous, we also choose spaces that differ from our original privileged contexts. This layered perspective enriches our understanding and highlights the flexibility of our identities. Often, societal categories push us toward the center or margin, limiting our agency (Jenkins 2008). As Japanese American civil rights activist Yuri Kochiyama reminds us, “life is not what you alone make it.” (Kochiyama 2004, 6). As discussed earlier, our middle space is shaped by both necessity and choice, shaped by contingency. This ambiguity allows us to see marginality in the “basement” (Crenshaw 1989), where intersectionality reveals itself as a dynamic interplay of privilege and oppression. hooks (2000) critiques feminism for excluding those close to power and for racial hierarchies perpetuated by white women. She calls for solidarity rooted in difference, not sameness: “We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (67).

This is where we find purpose in the middle space – committed to solidarity that does not erase difference but works through it. Our activism is our consciousness to intentionally move between spaces, paying attention to who calls us, where we are anchored, and how we can move intersectionality beyond theory to identify and uplift those most marginalized. This involves knowledge dissemination, networking, and leveraging our privileged positions in terms of class, nationality, and proximity to both privilege and marginality – a middle space where we are confronted with the choice to resist and the necessity to surrender.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our presence in the middle space is shaped by both intention and constraint. While we speak of “choosing” it, we recognize that this choice is often shaped by intersecting systems of power and identity (hooks 1994). Navigating between margin and center reveals the complexity of our intersectional identities, where privilege and oppression coexist

and shift with context (Christoffersen & Siow, 2024). Acknowledging the middle space becomes a form of collective action, a commitment to understanding intersectionality not as a collection of single-axis categories, but as a dynamic relational framework. It is not about selectively foregrounding one identity but about committing to a praxis that centers the most marginalized voices and lived realities – including our own – while recognizing our privileges.

In doing so, we challenge traditional understandings of these categories as fixed and oppositional. Instead, we propose a middle space that reflects the fluidity of intersectional identities and the shifting nature of power and marginalization. We aspire to destabilize the binary by occupying the middle space through both choice and necessity, and by holding each other accountable for perpetuating existing structures – guided by hooks’ (2000) view that power itself is not inherently negative. The middle space is not always chosen, but it is necessary for us to embody intersectional identities and the burden of privileged marginality. Activism, for us, is not about occupying a space but about showing up as individuals with unique intersectional identities. It is the power to use our privilege to connect the center and the margin, feeling “right where I am” (Murphy-Shigematsu 2018, 184).

While our approaches may differ – V focused on bringing the margin to the center, while S focused on bringing the center to the margin – we ultimately aim to cherish each step we take: past, present, and future. We recognize our differences in the social and political locations we feel comfortable with, and share a common space of marginality within spaces of resistance, bearing the burden of choosing to be in the middle, between the center and the margin. With a hope that our very presence itself can be a disruption (hooks 1989, 22). We grasp our ambiguousness

as a “space for radical openness” (hooks 1989), which allows marginalized experiences to become sources of insight and change. Intersectionality allows us to understand diverse perspectives, navigate different spaces, and reconcile our multiple experiences and identities.

Murphy-Shigematsu (2018) writes about gratitude as a peaceful realization – appreciating being where we are, moment by moment. The autoethnographic process gave S the opportunity to express long-held thoughts, instilling the courage to publish them as an academic text. V reflects on the transformative power of serendipity in finding a sisterhood with S, renewing hope in the possibilities that academic activism can foster. As hooks (1994) suggests, sharing our narratives and linking embodied knowledge with academic information increases our capacity to know and claim knowledge. These moments exemplify how we engage with intersectionality and inhabit the middle space – not as a theoretical abstraction, but through our lived experiences in a relational and transformative process. We hope our reflections invite readers to engage in dialogue and critical reflection – not only to understand their intersectional locations, but also to recognize how their presence in the center, the margin, or the middle space may be shaped by both choice and necessity. In doing so, we can collectively create space for openness, accountability, and transformation.

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Unreason as a Means to Repair the Art Institution

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Cand.Mag. in Art
History and MA in
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ESSAY

“Personally, I call psychiatry ‘mess-up-atry.’”

With these words, Spanish-French psychiatrist François Tosquelles playfully critiques his own field in an interview for filmmaker François Pain’s 1990 documentary work *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie* [*François Tosquelles: A Politics of Madness*]. A pioneering figure in institutional psychotherapy, Tosquelles reimaged psychiatric institutions as participatory, creative and collaborative spaces. His work played a crucial role in shaping more humane and socially engaged approaches to mental health care, most notably influencing practices in institutional psychotherapy at La Clinique de La Borde founded in 1953 by French psychiatrist Jean Oury. Later joined by Tosquelles himself and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, La Borde became, and remains, a seminal site for implementing and refining principles that demonstrated the transformative potential of rethinking institutional care to prioritize human dignity and creativity.

François Tosquelles. *Une politique de la folie* was featured in the 2024 group exhibition *Approaching Unreason* at Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Curated by François Piron, the exhibition brought together artistic practices emerging from or inspired by mental health care institutions, especially influenced by institutional psychotherapy. The exhibition was guided by the premise that psychic diversity cannot be separated from its social and institutional contexts, showing works and experiments that, according to the exhibition text, “expand our understanding of the reasons for making art, and the ways of making it, by foregrounding the desire for self-expression of people for whom the ‘simple’ and the ‘everyday’ is anything but self-evident” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024).

In this essay, I am particularly interested in how, as framed in the exhibition text, these ways of making art operate as curatorial choices within the exhibition. *Approaching Unreason* intersected psychic diversity and artistic practice in a way I would describe as “reparative”, drawing on queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of “reparative

reading”. In her seminal essay “Reparative Reading and Paranoid Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You”—published in her 2003 essay collection *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*—Sedgwick distinguishes between paranoid and reparative positions. The paranoid position is fixated on anticipating and exposing power structures, often limiting engagement to critique and fostering an excessive fear of surprises. By contrast, the reparative position gathers fragments to create new, critical fabulations that embrace surprise, the unpredictability of human experience, and, notably, joy. As Sedgwick explains, the reparative reader is “driven by a seeking of pleasure rather than an avoidance of pain” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147). Crucially, she frames the reparative as an active mode of engagement rather than the paranoid’s more passive critique.

In this light, I think that Tosquelles’ playful term for psychiatry, “mess-up-atry,” has a strong resonance with Sedgwick’s approach, particularly her embrace of pleasure and her assertion that “mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147).

Thus, this essay argues that both “mess-up-atry” and the concept of “unreason” in *Approaching Unreason* offer intersectional potential to challenge normative frameworks, resisting the marginalization of non-conformity. It explores how curatorial practice can embrace unreason as a transformative and reparative strategy, drawing on the intersectionality of institutional psychotherapy, queer theory, and artistic practice. Tosquelles critiques psychiatric practices that focus on control and correction, whereas, in contrast, unreason positions madness as a potential form of resistance against dominant societal structures. Poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari have discussed how unreason challenges psychiatric and societal norms that suppress the multiplicity of human desire and creativity. For them, unreason is not merely a site of exclusion but a potential force for liberation from repressive structures that regulate

thought and behavior.

While unreason and madness have been explored and exhibited in art history since the early mid-20th century, I argue that *Approaching Unreason* offers an example of how to move beyond merely displaying these. By coupling unreason with Sedgwick's notion of the reparative, I suggest that the exhibition frames unreason not only as an object of display, but as a curatorial strategy for transformation. Building on the radical legacy of Tosquelles as well as Sedgwick's reparative framework, I aim to shed light on how unreason—when approached reparatively—can serve as a curatorial means of repair, inviting a rethinking of the art institution. In doing so, it foregrounds the intersection between artistic practice and psychic diversity—what 'Tosquelles' notion of “mess-up-atry” suggests—emphasizing how curation can engage critically with institutional psychotherapy not merely as themes to be represented but as modes of knowing and being that reshape curatorial methodologies themselves.

WHERE ART AND PSYCHIC DIVERSITY INTERSECT

In the context of this essay, I use the term “psychic diversity” to refer to the spectrum of mental, emotional, and perceptual experiences that fall outside normative psychological frameworks. By using this term, I aim to foreground the value of these varied experiences—not as deficits, but as sources of insight, creativity, and resistance. Within the context of *Approaching Unreason*, psychic diversity becomes a way to articulate how unreason can be understood as a generative force within artistic practice. The phrase allows for a framing that is attuned to complexity and the dismantling of hierarchical structures of normativity.

As the director of Palais de Tokyo, Guillaume Désanges, writes in the accompanying exhibition catalogue *Cosa Mentale: Disalienating Institutions*:

The history of madness shows that it is at once a

suffering and a refuge, a pathology and a site of resistance, a poison and a remedy, a dissonance and an alliance. The inclusion of vulnerabilities and psychic differences within a cultural institution can thus be seen as a matter of enrichment as well as a reduction of inequalities. How to concretely approach this question in an establishment which has neither this purpose nor the skillset? How to avoid going no further than intentions or theory? The answer probably lies in the right blend of ambition and humility. An ambition based on the idea that mental health should create an attention that radiates throughout the entire institution. (Désanges, 2024, p. 7).

Accordingly, the museum adopts a humble, yet experimental approach intended to permeate the institution. Désanges underscores the importance of recognizing the complexity of psychic differences and urges a reconsideration of the societal and institutional structures that uphold normative frameworks through a new understanding of the art museum. A significant challenge, yet also valuable task for the art institution of today, of which *Approaching Unreason* represents a decisive step.

The exhibition opens with Danish artist Signe Frederiksen's drawing series *Ni étrange ni étranger* [*Neither strange nor foreign*]. One drawing spans an entire wall (see Figure 1); another is animated, morphing into shifting forms; others hang as smaller framed pieces. Created during her commute while working as a support teacher for children with special needs, Frederiksen's drawings began as a form of emotional release and evolved into poetic reflections on violence and control across educational, domestic, and social settings. The drawings offer an evocative and subtly unsettling introduction to the exhibition's themes of psychic experience and institutional critique.

The exhibition design avoids linearity, encouraging an open-ended navigation. Turning right, I encounter Spanish artist Dora García's *Mad Marginal Chart*, a sprawling wall drawing that explores the

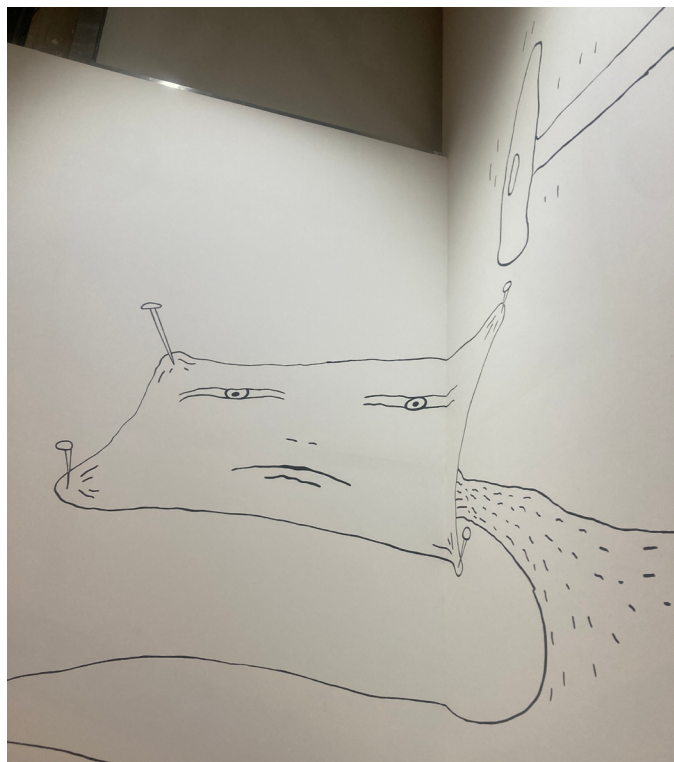


Figure 1
Signe Frederiksen, *Ni étrange ni étranger*, acrylic wall drawing, 2024. Courtesy Signe Frederiksen

intersections of emancipation, poetry, and psychiatry. Composed from García's annotations on texts by Jacques Lacan and Philip K. Dick, the work blends references to Freud, Joyce, wordplay, ritornellos, and phrases like "Aus der Krankheit eine Waffe machen" [To turn illness into a weapon]. An associative logic that echoes Tosquelles' concept of *déconner*—a playful, non-linear way of engaging the psyche.

Tosquelles himself appears in François Pain and Joséphine Guattari's video works documenting life at La Borde in the exhibition, namely the documentary *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie* (see Figure 2). In another video, the Japanese Butoh dancer Min Tanaka performs his "dance of darkness," capturing its profound emotional resonance with the residents. The absence of doors in communal spaces is one of La Borde's ethos of openness and non-hierarchy. This principle is illustrated in a video documenting a conversation between Jean Oury, Félix Guattari, and La Borde's residents, who debate whether to install

a kitchen door after complaints about the chef, who is also a resident. Guattari argues that a door would isolate rather than resolve the conflict, affirming the value of transparency and collective problem-solving. The accompanying exhibition text highlights how Oury and Guattari's concepts—such as "the atmosphere", "collective assemblages of enunciation", "groups of agency over their own subjectivity" (Palais de Tokyo, 2024)—extended psychiatry into a holistic, relational practice. The exhibition title, *Approaching Unreason*, resonates with this vocabulary, suggesting a tentative engagement with what is often dismissed as irrational. This same ethos recurs in French artist Patrik Pion's *Objets blancs* [White objects] (see Figure 3 and Figure 4): poetic, surreal sculptures of oversized everyday objects made from crumpled blank newspapers. Originally developed in workshops with psychiatric patients, these dreamlike forms seem to challenge the apparent normalcy of reality.

Further into the exhibition's rather rhizomatic structure, Belgian filmmaker Boris Lehman's film diaries, *Ne pas stagner* [Do not stagnate], document his collaborations with residents of Le Club Antonin Artaud, a psychiatric outpatient center in Brussels.

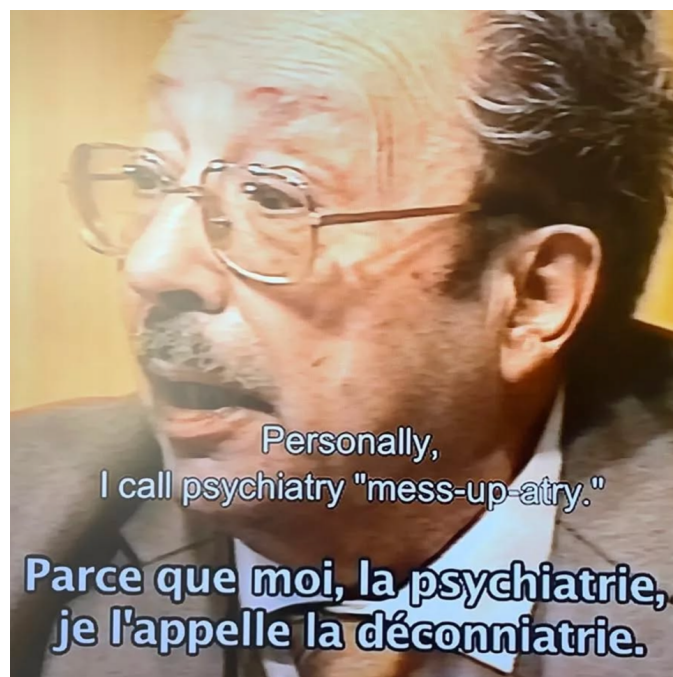


Figure 2
François Pain, Jean-Claude Pollack & Danielle Sivadon, *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie*, 1990, video, 54 min. Courtesy François Pain.



Figure 3

Patrik Pion. View of the exhibition *Approaching Unreason*, Palais de Tokyo, 16.02–30.06.2024. Photo: Aurélien Mole

Working collectively, residents authored scripts and shaped narratives, which Lehman describes as “an instinctive, playful creation with no particular artistic or cultural intent (...) of the members of the theatre

group, a need to live a different life, to perform an authentic act” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024).

According to Sedgwick, the core distinction between paranoid and reparative reading lies in the contrast between exposing power structures and actively engaging in reparative practices. (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137) When this distinction is translated from a reading technique to curatorial analysis, it calls for continuous re-examination of institutional practices. This, I argue, is exemplified in *Approaching Unreason*’s emphasis on process and practice—whether in the introspective journey captured in both the making and finalized work of Frederiksen’s drawings, or in the collaborative creativity and sensitivity evident in the videos and documentary works by Pain, Joséphine Guattari, and Lehman. Pion’s work stands as a testament to collective and intersectional practice, showing how the act of making art can become a process of healing. At the same time, *Objets blancs* as a finalized artwork embodies a different way of thinking—or a way of viewing the world on a different scale.

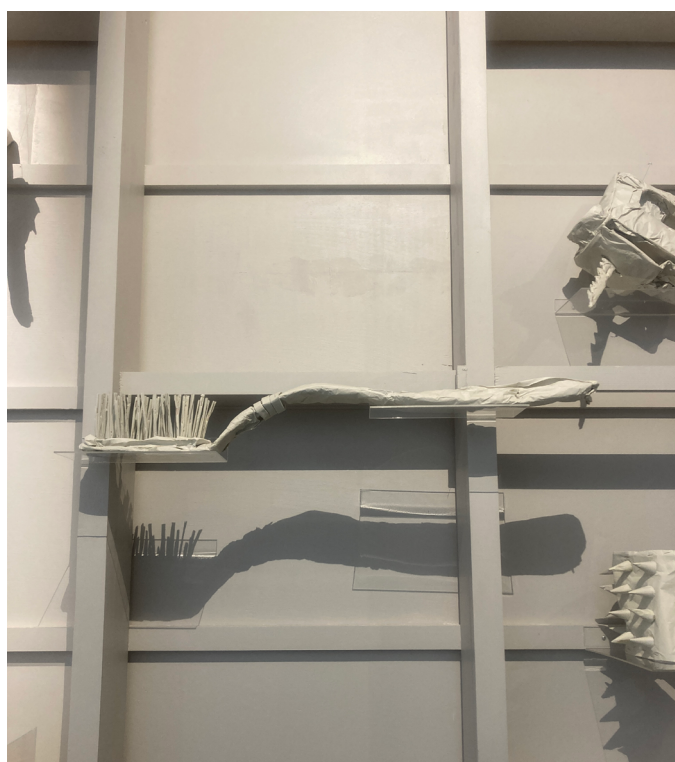


Figure 4

Patrik Pion, *Objets blancs*, 2003–2022 (*La Brosse à dents* [Toothbrush], 2016), newspaper, staples. Courtesy Patrik Pion

To me, this signals a curatorial engagement with

reparative practices, rather than merely exposing or critiquing power structures. It is an invitation to engage with unreason and to allow the potential of “mess-up-atry” to exist. In this, I argue, artistic practice and psychic diversity intersect. Through their focus on unpredictability, collaboration, and process over product, the works on view offer a glimpse into how the art institution might begin to embody an ethos of radical openness and reinvention. This is not to say that art institutions have never engaged in such practices. Other recent exhibitions—such as documenta fifteen (2022), with its emphasis on collective practices of resource-sharing, or MoMA PS1’s *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (2020–21), which foregrounded artistic practices shaped by structural vulnerability—also reflect a broader reparative sensibility in curatorial practice. *Approaching Unreason*, however, represents a sustained engagement, in which unreason itself becomes both subject matter and curatorial method. It generates a structure that is as processual and open-ended as the works it presents—an approach that resonates with Sedgwick’s reparative framework. Repairing the art institution through the intersection of psychic diversity and artistic practice involves challenging normative frameworks and recognizing the potential for enrichment through the inclusion of fragility, difference—and joy. Joy, which is powerfully present in the works described above, is not, in Sedgwick’s reparative framework, a fleeting emotion but a critical mode of engagement. It resists the paranoid fixation on exposure and instead embraces surprise, pleasure and transformation. Joy signals an openness to new ways of thinking, making, and relating—an insistence on creative abundance rather than critique alone.

By giving equal weight to the artistic process, documentation, and finalized artworks, the exhibition adopts a reparative approach to institutional critique. It invites the audience to re-imagine the art institution, not as a site that merely contains artworks, but as a sanctuary—a space that illuminates the reasons for making art, the ways of its creation, and its broader social, political, and ethical significance. This ethos is

especially clear in Lehman’s description of his workshops, which “had no particular artistic intent other than to perform an authentic act” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024). As curator and professor Nora Sternfeld points out, a defining feature of contemporary exhibition-making is the recognition that the impact—or transformative potential—of an exhibition is as vital as the exhibition itself. Exhibitions, in this view, are not static displays, but active, unfolding processes with the capacity to enact change. Applied to the art institution, this perspective calls for a departure from traditional museum models and the embrace of the disruptive potential embedded in marginalized voices.

CURATING FROM THE MARGINS

Approaching Unreason seamlessly blends documentary material with artworks, making no hierarchical distinctions between the two. Notably, many of the artworks originate from workshops, conversations, or experiences rooted in institutional psychotherapy. In this context, Felix Guattari’s influence seems to permeate much of the exhibition, extending beyond his work at La Borde. Walking through the exhibition feels, as previously mentioned, almost rhizomatic in its choreography.

The “rhizome,” a concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in their 1975 book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—and later defined in their key work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* from 1980—proposes a non-hierarchical and interconnected mode of thinking, knowing, and being. In *Approaching Unreason*, this rhizomatic structure is not merely aesthetic—it actively generates dialogue between the works, forming a network of meaning and affect rather than isolating and elevating individual pieces. Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “a minor literature” reflects their belief that revolutionary energies and transformative ideas emerge not from dominant institutions, but from the margins—those excluded from or positioned outside mainstream social, cultural, and political structures. These marginal positions, often marked by reduced visibility or

power, become potent sources for challenging normative narratives and imagining alternative futures.

In this spirit, curator and art historian Helen Molesworth argues that rhizomatic approaches enable feminist, non-hierarchical curation that resists traditional art historical and institutional logics (Molesworth, 2010). Building on this, I argue that Piron, the curator of *Approaching Unreason*, adopts a similarly non-hierarchical logic—one that exemplifies how curatorial strategies can elevate overlooked or marginalized contributors. This is especially evident in how documentary material and artworks are placed in dialogue, enabling multiple, fragmentary perspectives to surface. In my experience of the exhibition, this curatorial logic allows the residents of La Borde and Le Club Antonin Artaud to emerge not as peripheral subjects in the video works, but as some of the most vital artistic practitioners within the exhibition.

Approaching Unreason suggests that what is often perceived as “unreason” holds the potential to generate new forms of creativity and connection. It argues—both in content and curatorial method—that unreason resists the imposition of a singular, rational framework for defining and managing mental health. Positioned as both subject and curatorial method, unreason opens up a space for reimagining creativity and practice in institutional settings. It gestures towards more inclusive, expansive models of engagement—ones that welcome uncertainty and unreason.

In a Danish context, one historically marginalized artist who fully embraced unreason is Overtaci (1929-1985). “Overtaci” is a wordplay on the Danish “Overtossen” [Chief Lunatic]—a name the artist gave himself. He spent most of his life in psychiatric care, where he developed a distinct artistic practice exploring themes of identity, transformation, and inner worlds. His works are now part of the collection of Museum Overtaci, and in 2017, Kunsthall Charlottenborg hosted his first institutional exhibition—an exhibition that I argue represented the opposite of a reparative curatorial approach to

unreason.

Titled *Overtaci and the Art of Madness*, the exhibition’s framing suggested that madness is something to be put on display: the art of madness. Overtaci’s artworks were presented as display items, rather than inviting the audience to enter or engage with the world that was Overtaci’s. As Kasper Bonnén wrote in a review of the exhibition in 2017:

It is difficult to understand Overtaci’s work without feeling the gentleness he felt for his works, the conversations he had with them. In this exhibition I cannot see and feel the practice that the artist actually lived, a practice that intervened in space and time, defying more rational and objective outlooks on the world. I would like to have seen his home-made tools, his small objects, pipe bowls, amulets, papier-mâché spirits—all these things that were to him living beings with whom he lived, held conversations, kissed. He even took them out on bike rides when he was allowed to (...) In this sense, the installation can seem rather like a post-colonial jaunt into the lands of the mad—like a display of objects robbed of their home and habitat. (Bonnén, 2017, p. 3)

In relation to this view, I want to again call attention to the importance of joy, which is so vital to Sedgwick and the reparative. If one is to understand the art world of Overtaci, or the concept of “mess-up-etry” and what Tosquelles brought to La Borde—as seen in the video works that documented life there—I believe joy is key and essential to curatorial practice as a whole today.

I began writing this essay shortly after visiting the exhibition at Palais de Tokyo in spring 2024, where I introduced Sedgwick’s emphasis on the value of joy. It feels significant, then, that as I finish this text in the spring of 2025, Palais de Tokyo’s seasonal theme, as introduced in Désanges’ editorial, is “Collective Joy” (Désanges, 2025).

I thus sense a reparative curatorial turn emerging that does not only involve rethinking how unreason

is presented, but also how it can function as a curatorial method for transformation. By integrating Sedgwick's reparative framework as both an analytical tool and curatorial practice, my approach in this essay aims to introduce a subtle yet significant shift in academic discourse—one that brings attention to the reparative potential within curatorial practice. As a curator engaged in questions and methods of fragility and joy, I see this exhibition not only as a case study but also as an invitation to imagine how reparative approaches might transform institutions from within. Unreason as an intersectional and curatorial method may not hold all the answers, but it offers a place to begin. Within this context, *Approaching Unreason* can be seen as a starting point for exploring the potential for transformation—through its structural openness as well as its thematic focus on unreason.

Inspired by the conversation between Félix Guattari, Jean Oury, and the residents of La Borde about the

significance of La Borde's no-doors policy, perhaps the next step for Palais de Tokyo is to embrace even more radical openness, continuing the legacy of La Borde's no-doors policy not just in space but in method. This raises broader questions for art institutions more generally: how might they move beyond display to address the deeper, structural changes required within systems that often remain opaque and self-protective?

Approaching Unreason was on view at Palais de Tokyo from 16 February to 30 June 2024, curated by François Piron, showing works by Accroc, Carla Adra, Astérotypie, Agathe Boulanger, Centre Familial de Jeunes, Michel François, Signe Frederiksen, Dora García, Generativ Process, Tania Gheerbrant, Jules Lagrange, Joséphine Guattari, Boris Lehman & Club Antonin, Artaud, François Pain, Patrik Pion, Abdeslam Ziou Ziou & Sofiane Byari.

[1] For a comprehensive understanding of the curatorial research, see the Palais de Tokyo's official website or refer to *Cosa Mentale: Disalienating Institutions* (Palais de Tokyo, 2024), Issue 37 of P.L.S. *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo*.

[2] See explanation of my use of the term in the next section.

[3] In her book *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France*, scholar of French intellectual history, Camille Robcis, recounts that between 1940 and 1945, 40,000 patients died in French psychiatric hospitals due to the Vichy regime's neglectful policy of "soft extermination." Yet in Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole in central France, one hospital—led by François Tosquelles—defied this trajectory. With help from local residents, the staff stockpiled food to sustain patients and began reimagining psychiatric care. This collective effort marked the birth of institutional psychotherapy, a movement that would go on to shape postwar French thought.

[4] See Foucault, M. (2006). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (R. Howard, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1961); Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1972); Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1980).

[5] See Sternfeld, N. (2016). "Inside the post-representative museum." In C. Mörsch, A. Sachs, & T. Sieber (Eds.), *Contemporary curating and museum education* (pp. 175–186). transcript publishing. Sternfeld writes: "The last couple of years have seen a quick succession of 'turns' in advanced exhibition theories and curatorial practices, which have expanded the functions of the exhibition space. There was the turn towards education, to discourse, to performativity, to dance and to activism. Often, they were intertwined. What do all of these developments have in common? They no longer understand exhibitions as sites for the presentation of precious objects and for the representation of objective values. Rather their focus lies on the creation of possibilities, on social as well as bodily experiences, unexpected encounters and shifting interrogations in which the unplannable is of more importance than precise hanging design. Exhibitions turn into spaces of action."

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Copenhagen Gender Conference 2024 Keynote:

Intersectionality in the Nordics

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Good afternoon, everyone

Thank you to all of you. To those helping make this conference run so smoothly, to the organizers, and to students, academics and others for being here and participating in gender research in each their own way. Thank you for the invitation to speak.

First, a few words of introduction. I work within two main areas. I am an Associate Professor at Aalborg University in Copenhagen and a Senior Advisor & consultant on social sustainability and DEI. Both fall within a social justice framework, and each is informed by the other. My academic research revolves around the study of discrimination and its explicit and implicit forms and expressions. My consultancy work centers on non-discrimination, DEI and social sustainability, how these are interlinked, and how they are integral to the international sustainability framework and requirements to practice.

The aim of this keynote is to highlight some significant issues and challenges related to intersectionality in Nordic contexts. To do this, I discuss and emphasize interconnections between several core tenets in intersectional scholarship. First, I emphasize the necessity of incorporating a structural perspective in intersectional work. This perspective requires an understanding of how intersectionality is intertwined and linked with historical and systemic dynamics that shape social realities.

Second, I argue that these structural dynamics are essential to maintaining a clearly defined and specified intersectionality framework. This framework should, in my theoretical perspective, center around *all* internationally recognized, disenfranchised and minoritized groups, as outlined in the international Human Rights framework. Historical oppression, along with the conditions that perpetuate inequity, is critical for grounding intersectional analyses.

The third issue I raise is the *role of intent*. The *role of intent* (not intent in itself) is closely linked to structural dynamics, particularly the asymmetric distribution of power. I discuss how emphasis and focus on

the role of intent manifests as a significant challenge when addressing and navigating issues of intersectional inequity and discrimination.

The fourth tenet I discuss is complicity in connection with our entanglement and imbrication within structural frameworks. Examining complicity, I argue, invites a critical, introspective approach to intersectional work. It centers around how inequity can be unwittingly reproduced, even within intersectional and social justice work itself.

Finally, I address Nordic exceptionalism as a significant barrier to effective intersectional scholarship and practice in the Nordic context. I argue that it operates as a structural dynamic that normalizes specific narratives and myths about equality, thereby limiting how we understand and implement intersectionality. By obscuring the full range of oppression axes — the recognized grounds of discrimination and identity central to intersectional analysis—Nordic exceptionalism undermines the integration of intersectionality into policy and academic work. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing reproduction of oppression and discrimination, often under the guise of equity and progress.

But let me begin by sharing part of my personal trajectory. I was born here in Denmark and moved to the U.S. as a small child. Being in Denmark during summers and spending time with family gave me a sense of being connected to and part of the concept or notion of Denmark and Danishness. My primary and secondary education took place in the States, where I also attained a degree in philosophy. As a matter of happenstance, I returned to Denmark in my early twenties. This transition brought both gifts and challenges. When I started living here full-time as a young woman, I came to realize that while Denmark was familiar in many ways, it was also fundamentally different. Among other things, the shift of context meant being seen, imagined, and understood through an entirely new lens. This came as something of a surprise.

In the U.S., I was accustomed to being perceived

through the intertwined lenses of “race,” class, gender, and other identity markers. I am privileged, highly educated, cis-gendered, able-bodied, primarily heterosexual, and female. I am also non-white, with mixed Danish and Indian heritage. Growing up, I knew how I was viewed, the codes and interpretations connected to my body, skin color, gender, way of speaking, class: in short, where and how I fit within my primary societal framework (the U.S.). However, moving to Denmark, I found myself being read and construed fundamentally differently.

The context had shifted, and with it, so had the interpretation of not only my own identity – but of identity categories in general. The narratives of “race,” gender, belonging, and difference that I had lived with in the U.S. didn’t quite translate here. That is to say, they were interpreted in very different ways than I was accustomed to. Living here, I encountered resistances in regard to being able to define myself as I saw fit. I had never had my right to define myself challenged until arriving here, where I was met with troubling narratives and experiences based on how my body was interpreted, racialized, sexualized, and gendered. I encountered discrimination and racism on multiple axes, denial of that discrimination, and more.

This experience profoundly shaped my understanding of identity, inclusion, and the frameworks we use to navigate our social realities. It brought with it a new and visceral awareness of what it means to exist and navigate within the perception of others. It brought a sudden loss of what I previously could take for granted. Not only did I experience a personal sense of loss in terms of the entitlement and privilege that came with being perceived as I was in the U.S., but I also encountered a very material loss – of position, status, validity and dignity.

I found myself, now, no longer part of what hooks (1984), among others, might call “the center.” Having taken that experience of center for granted, this was an unwelcome change. Being placed in the margin – marginalized – and othered – drastically reduced

my material opportunities in terms of employment, academic access, and more.

While quite unsettling, this marginalized position also provided new insights. Tacit positionings and privileges I had previously not directed much attention to, or consciously considered in any deeper sense, were now issues I could reflect on in new ways. As an outsider, and now a target of discrimination and racism, I could see and feel the open, unfettered, and normalized intersectional discrimination (with a heavy emphasis on racism and sexism) in everyday Danish contexts, language, and practices. I could recognize and identify how different, interwoven and linked categories together formed discriminatory patterns. Though I didn’t yet have the language for all of it, these experiences with sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism were the catalyst for my trajectory within intersectional discrimination research.

Had I lived here all my life, I’m not sure I would have taken note of or experienced the complex and often denigrating situations I met in quite the same way. They would likely not have been as apparent. Perhaps they would have felt normal. Had I grown up here, I might have accepted the narratives of denial and the discrimination, sexism, racism and so forth that I was experiencing and witnessing. It is likely that I would not have experienced the feeling of disappointment that arose when I realized that Danishness, or Nordic identity more broadly, was not what I presumed it to be, nor what it was widely perceived to be. I would most likely not have found it disturbing that sexism, racism and discrimination were denied or deflected. I may even have been so convinced by and invested in the dominant Nordic ideology of equality (Myong 2009) that any suggestion of inequality would have seemed preposterous. I might have believed, along with many others, that calling these out was due to a misunderstanding and misreading of the different situations.

But I didn’t grow up here, and I was deeply concerned about the consequences of this kind of thinking and the practices I was witnessing. How was it

affecting young people, children, *my children*, health, economy? Belonging? What about Danes of color – how were they navigating in this? How could I find a way to talk about these issues? How could I protect my own family? What were some of the reasons that discrimination could exist so openly while being so wholeheartedly denied?

This experience, and the concerns it provoked, not only led me to think deeply about the concept of intersectionality, it was the catalyst for my work with intersectionality for the past 3 decades.

In order to understand why it seemed so difficult to have this conversation and acknowledge discrimination, I delved into my own academic background in philosophy, anthropology, and critical theory. In particular, I found valuable perspectives in gender & Queer studies, feminist & postcolonial theory, critical race theory (CRT), and human rights.

Using this framework, I began working with discrimination as an intersectional concept in everyday and organizational contexts. To do so, I relied on several core tenets. These tenets have been central to my work over the past thirty years. They draw on the intersectional approach pioneered by early black feminists (Collins & Bilge 2020) and cemented in research by Crenshaw, among others (Crenshaw et al. 1995), as well as the work of critical scholars like Spivak (1988) and hooks (1984) – but applied specifically to discrimination. In the following, I will emphasize some of these key themes: 1) a structural perspective, 2) Human Rights, 3) the role of intent, 4) complicity.

1 - A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE:

Firstly, at the core of my own work is the importance of shifting focus from the individual level to include more abstract and structural perspectives and levels. This means directing attention to the mechanisms, norms, and historically anchored, implicit processes that underscore how individuals come to enact, reproduce, accept, excuse, and – importantly – become complicit in oppression, racism, and discrimination.

It means focusing on identifying and addressing structural inequities and systems that perpetuate discrimination and racism, how these inform and link to other forms of discrimination, and how these are connected to and enmeshed with individual and collective forms and expressions of discrimination.

Emphasis on the structural means looking at how discrimination is reproduced and carried from generation to generation. One could see it as an inheritance, albeit a questionable one (Skadegård 2023). It means being wary of thinking about oppression, discrimination and intersectionality mainly in terms of personal experiences, prejudice, bias, good and bad folks, or the political right or left.

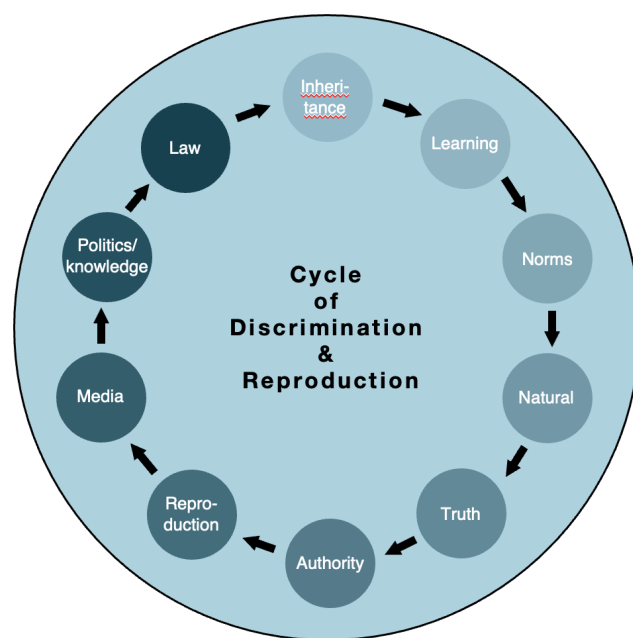


Figure 1

In figure 1, this process is illustrated in the form of a type of cycle. The small circles within the large figure each represent an element of the cycle, and how they are interlinked. The figure describes a process in which structural aspects of discrimination are culturally and historically inherited, and how this inheritance informs, continuously reproduces, and perpetuates discrimination.

These issues are not merely questions of opinions and beliefs, but about practices, systems, structures. They

are about understanding how systems of power operate in ways that maintain inequality – but also how these are enmeshed and normalized within individual practices, bodies, emotions, and so forth.

I should emphasize that I am not, of course, referring to *structuralism* when I use the term structural. I am referring to formative, normative frameworks. Historical processes, naturalized beliefs and habits, social, cultural, historical, ideological and institutional heritage and inheritance. Perhaps this is a moot point here, but I am often asked to clarify, so there you are.

2 – HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE DISCRIMINATION GROUNDS:

In order to address oppression as an intersectional challenge, we need to be able to identify not only how discrimination is reproduced and perpetuated, but also what comprises discrimination more specifically. This requires us to ground intersectionality within clearly defined categories of discrimination, such as race, class, and gender. As Crenshaw (1991) has shown us, it is important to think about these categories not as arbitrary or eclectic choices, but as legally protected categories that are central to understanding power dynamics.

Intersectionality, and understanding discrimination as an intersectional challenge, means addressing and encompassing – focusing – on historically disenfranchised groups. Legally protected groups. In European and international contexts, these are defined within the international human rights conventions. This framework provides a common, normative denominator. That is, it defines and identifies historically oppressed and disenfranchised categories of identity that we have made a commitment to protect, categories that are protected under our national laws (Gerards 2013; Justesen 2003).

In Europe, we must continue to build on this legacy, ensuring that discussions of intersectionality remain centered on historically oppressed and

disenfranchised categories of identity. When we prioritize a single group (such as gender) or introduce arbitrary categories, we dilute the integrity of intersectional work, causing it to lose meaning. At its core, intersectionality examines normative power structures, axes of oppression, and power asymmetry which underpin discrimination and the grounds of discrimination (Skadegård & Yang 2025). When we incorporate unrelated or eclectic categories without a historical connection to oppression, we shift away from addressing the core issues and underlying powered dynamics that underscore discrimination and inequity. It is essential to recognize that not all instances of unfairness or unequal treatment fall within the framework of discrimination and intersectionality.

Working with discrimination and intersectionality in practice, be it in educational, academic, organizational, or everyday contexts, requires knowing what we are looking at, understanding the subtle, historical and normative power dynamics that underscore these issues, and even more importantly, which categories are vulnerable and require protection. Without clarity, we run the risk of weakening not only our efforts for social justice, but also the integrity of our work.

An important — and perhaps reassuring — point is that recognized grounds of discrimination are neither fixed nor inherently rigid categories (Banton, 2003). They are fluid and evolve over time, albeit gradually. The nature of intersectional categories also varies depending on the context. For instance, in the United States, they are referred to as “protected classes” and are defined within a civil liberties framework, whereas in Europe, they are grounded in human rights principles. Crenshaw’s concept of “axes of oppression” highlights the role of power, encompassing both frameworks while acknowledging their distinctions and ongoing evolution (Crenshaw, 1991).

3 – DISCRIMINATION AND THE ROLE OF INTENT

My third tenet – or point of contention – is the need

to critically examine the role of intent in discussions of discrimination. Let me point out that I am not interested in intent in and of itself. It is rather *the role of and emphasis on* intent, which is a somewhat different issue.

These underlie a tendency to overemphasize *the role of intent* in the specific context of inequity and discrimination, while underemphasizing the discriminatory act or practice, as well as the impact of discrimination on the target. Within this understanding, a disproportionate focus on intent serves to obscure the broader structural issues at play in cases of discrimination.

Discussions on the role of intent in discrimination naturally intersect with broader debates in consequentialist ethics and utilitarianism. However, I do not aim to engage in a wider exploration of intent or motivation as stand-alone issues. My focus is guided by a social justice and human rights perspective, highlighting the connections between structural inequalities, historical oppression, and power dynamics. These elements underlie and contribute to a tendency to overemphasize *the role of intent* in discussions of inequity and discrimination, often at the expense of acknowledging the discriminatory act itself and the tangible impact on targets. Within this framework, a disproportionate focus on intent can obscure the broader structural factors at play in discrimination, ultimately reinforcing the power held by those in majoritized positions and positions of authority to define what constitutes discrimination.

To address discrimination requires keeping in mind that discrimination, as defined within human rights and legal frameworks (Justesen 2003), is an action or an identifiable dynamic. It is not necessarily an opinion, belief, moral position, or feeling. I think about it this way: Discrimination can be divided – roughly speaking – into 3 parts. 1) The source of discrimination, 2) the discrimination/discriminatory act itself, and 3) the target or impacted individual or group (Skadegård 2023).

Traditionally, emphasis when discussing and defining

discrimination has weighed heavily on the *source* of discrimination and intent. That is — was there negative intent or intent to harm? In contrast, the discrimination itself (the act, law, practice, etc.) in question, and the *impact* of discrimination on the target (as well as the knowledge or experience of the target) has been attributed less focus (Crump 2010). This way of thinking about discrimination is connected to seeing discrimination as a primarily individual and moral issue, rather than a historically and structurally informed, deeply rooted dynamic. It is linked to seeing discrimination as less complex, non-intersectional, and not linked to historical oppressions. It is also a handy way to maintain the power of definition in the hands of the powered positions.

Further, when discussions of discrimination and oppression center on “intent,” they frame discrimination as an individualized issue — one contingent on the morality and beliefs of the alleged perpetrator. This perspective not only narrows the understanding of discrimination, preventing it from being seen as a collective, socially embedded, and structural issue, but also provides an avenue for the alleged perpetrator (individual or collective) to claim a lack of negative intent. In doing so, it grants significant authoritative weight to the subjective experience of the alleged perpetrator. Furthermore, because intent and beliefs are inherently inaccessible to others, assessing the truthfulness of such claims becomes a nearly impossible and murky business.

By definition, discrimination involves the negative differential treatment of minoritized groups or individuals by a dominant, majoritized individual, group or representative system. When intent is given undue focus, its subjective nature allows those in positions of power—the very individuals or groups with the ability to discriminate—to control the narrative and define what constitutes discrimination.

Overemphasis on intent thus centers the source of discrimination and shifts attention away from other critical and equally important elements of discrimination, including the discriminatory act itself, the

target of discrimination, and the impact of such practices on those affected. As such, an imbalance emerges when *the role of intent* is given greater weight than other elements of discrimination. Emphasizing *the role of intent* disproportionately prioritizes the perspective of the source of discrimination — who, by definition, belongs to a majoritized group — while diminishing the significance of the discriminatory act, the perspective of the target, and the broader structural dimensions of discrimination (Skadegård 2023).

Moreover, when majoritized individuals hold normative authority to define and validate discriminatory actions, it reinforces and perpetuates existing inequity and power dynamics. Overvaluing intent thus exacerbates the imbalance between majoritized groups (source) and minoritized groups (targets), effectively granting greater legitimacy to the source or dominant position than to the discrimination itself and the lived experiences of targets and the impacts on targets.

Such an imbalance reinforces and legitimizes both systemic and individual discrimination. For both the source and the target, subjectivity plays a role in how intent and experienced discrimination are perceived. Prioritizing the *role of intent* over the lived experience of discrimination assigns greater value to the subjective perspective of the source than to that of the target.

In doing so, disproportionate emphasis on intent perpetuates an inherent discriminatory power asymmetry, legitimizing the viewpoint of the majoritized position while diminishing the validity of the target's experience. This focus on *the role of intent* not only serves as a distraction but also contributes to the further marginalization or erasure of those subjected to discrimination.

4 – COMPLICITY

The fourth theme I want to address is complicity. Complicity refers to the acceptance of wrongdoing

or passive acquiescence to injustice. It implies a form of partnership in harmful actions — whether immoral, illicit, or criminal—and carries with it a sense of accountability. In legal contexts, complicity can result in criminal charges. But beyond overt legal violations, we must also consider how complicity operates more subtly within our everyday practices and institutional structures.

In both feminist and postcolonial critiques, complicity — especially in its unconscious forms—remains a persistent force. The acceptance or normalization of oppressive structures, whether through ideological alignment or passive compliance, reinforces existing hierarchies. Transformation begins with recognizing complicity not as inevitable, but as a kind of practice requiring structural change in both thought and action.

Complicity is inseparable from broader discussions of power, ideology, and oppression. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) critiques white, middle-class Western feminists for their role in upholding Western masculinist discourses, demonstrating how certain feminist positions can wittingly and unwittingly reinforce dominant power structures. As she notes, “When publishing women are from the dominant ‘culture,’ they sometimes share, with male authors, the tendency to create an incoherent ‘other’” (Spivak 1988, p. 113). In my work, complicity is central to understanding how power and discrimination are sustained—through normalization, inherited practices, assumptions, beliefs, and language (Skadegård 2018). Complicity is embedded in these processes.

As academics and theorists, we are often complicit in power structures, wittingly or unwittingly. Our complicity lies in the forms of knowledge we produce and legitimize, and in the academic norms we uphold. We are complicit when we privilege European epistemologies over others, when we tolerate discriminatory practices in our institutions, or when we allow harmful comments and actions to go unchallenged. It manifests in hiring practices that favor closed,

majoritized networks, and in organizing academic events without ensuring equity in representation or compensation. The list is very, very long.

Complicity is a lived paradox. It reflects our entanglement in social structures that may feel or be unavoidable — shaped by history, norms, and shared conceptual frameworks. The challenge lies in becoming aware of how we are imbricated in systems of oppression and actively seeking ways to resist them. As Spivak (1988) suggests, it is about cultivating awareness and, wherever possible, pushing against the grain.

INTERSECTIONALITY

The above issues are all central to the way in which I think about intersectionality. It is well known that intersectionality as a theoretical and analytical concept was developed to explore the ways various forms of discrimination—such as those based on race, gender, class, and sexuality—are interwoven and enmeshed (Crenshaw 1991). In the U.S., this concept has been deeply connected to the realities of racialization, colonialism, and enslavement. It has served as a powerful tool for understanding the complexity of identity and the multiplicity of oppressions individuals face, and the complexity of that oppression.

However, as intersectionality has traveled across the Atlantic and into the Nordic context, it has undergone significant transformations. In its journey from the U.S. to the Nordics, intersectionality has come to be redefined in ways that often strip it of its central focus on “race” and other key categories of discrimination. Here, the concept has been absorbed into a framework that frequently prioritizes certain identity categories, particularly gender, while sidelining discussions of other discrimination grounds such as “race,” religion, ethnicity, age, heritage, and especially the links to historical oppression and systems of power.

In some contexts, we even see arbitrary categories introduced that are not connected to historical axes

of oppression and do not address recognized discrimination grounds or protected categories. As a result, intersectionality risks becoming a tool for addressing social differences more generally, rather than a framework for addressing historical and systemic power, inequalities and oppression. To understand this shift or change in how intersectionality translates to the Nordics – and to better understand several of the challenges I have discussed earlier, I look to Nordic exceptionalism.

Nordic exceptionalism is an important factor, one that informs and contributes to these and other related dilemmas. These include denial, complicity, focus on the individual level, normalized discrimination, sidelining race, religion, and so forth.

Nordic exceptionalism is a shared belief that the Nordic countries are fundamentally different from, and superior to, other nations, particularly in terms of social progressiveness, equality, and human rights. This narrative paints the Nordics as essentially non-racist, non-sexist, and inherently egalitarian societies. It permeates public discourse and shapes how these societies see themselves and are seen by others. It was part of the narrative that informed my own expectations when I moved back to Denmark. As a person with Danish heritage, this narrative was a point of pride.

However, exceptionalism has a more sinister side. It functions to support denial and exoneration of these societies from the very issues they claim to have transcended. It shrouds and even contributes to erasures of knowledge and awareness of Nordic colonialism, past and present, of Nordic patriarchy, of the Nordic history of eugenics and other violent, oppressive practices. It contributes to a narrative of saviorism deeply rooted in notions of moral superiority - being “better than” racist and discriminatory “others.”

In the context of intersectionality, this means that conversations often shift away from the lived realities of racism, sexism, islamophobia, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and other forms of discrimination, instead focusing on maintaining or even

protecting the myth of the progressive Nordic identity. As such, intersectionality risks being co-opted to reinforce exceptionalism rather than challenge it. Instead of exploring the intersecting forms of historical oppression within Nordic societies, intersectionality is too often employed to highlight how these societies *are already* good and progressive. Because of this, they can claim to only need to look at *improving* on a few axes of oppression. Among other things, this has contributed to a disproportionate focus on (majoritized) gender equality — particularly the advancement of majoritized women, while largely ignoring how race, religion, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, and other factors complicate these narratives. This reinscription of intersectionality in the Nordic context has several practical implications, for example:

One of these is a tendency to prioritize whiteness. That is, discussions around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) often end up exonerating the majoritized center rather than addressing the actual targets of discrimination, that is, those marginalized due to racialization, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexuality, or other intersecting protected categories. This can happen when we reproduce exceptionalist narratives that tend to seek neo-racist explanations for inequality in challenges presumed to be inherent in constructions of *cultural* or *ethnic* difference. That is, we blame target groups for being “culturally” unable to adapt, rather than address structural and historical discrimination which is likely to play a far more significant role. Further, those of us with platforms within academia, business, leadership, media, politics, etc. may often focus on our own experiences of oppression, centering aspects most relevant to our own lives. However, when we overlook other forms of oppression and fail to critically examine our own privilege, we risk missing how we might be complicit in the very systems of oppression we seek to challenge.

Another consequence of Nordic exceptionalism is widespread denial of discrimination. As described earlier, there is a tendency to defend and protect a good, exceptional Nordic identity. This means that the

realities of racism, sexism, and other forms of historical oppression are often downplayed, underdiscussed or denied within educational practices, as well as in policy, practice, political discourse, etc. There is minimal knowledge dissemination in schools, pedagogical contexts, across educational sectors, in research production, etc. There is little or no cross-disciplinary research focus and/or integration of discrimination and racism research perspectives in academic disciplines where such knowledge is highly relevant and would therefore benefit from addressing these issues in their research. For example, in AI, psychology, sociology, medicine and health, organizational studies, DEI, architecture, tech, and much, much more. This is also evident in a widespread tendency to individualize discrimination and conceptualize it as a matter of personal opinion and morality, rather than addressing it as structural, historical, as well as a cross-disciplinary scientific field that has existed for well over a hundred years.

Another related issue or consequence of the above is the way power dynamics in institutions function in practice. Even spaces that speak the language of non-discrimination, diversity, or DEI, and as such claim commitment to non-discrimination & diversity, are often co-opted by persons high on a majoritized spectrum or scale. As such, the power dynamics tend to remain largely unchanged. For example, those in positions of power in universities, research centers, and other institutions are overwhelmingly white. Non-white academics, when and if present, often find themselves sidelined and in precarious positions and employment. This is also the case in many organizations and companies that are obligated to redress inequality and discrimination. As such, the promise of exceptionalism, as well as of intersectionality and non-discrimination, remains unfulfilled. Single-axis approaches and reproduction of power create complicity, regardless of intent.

So, how do we move toward a truly intersectional and inclusive framework in the Nordics?

This is a difficult question. It requires that we confront

what for many of us is rather uncomfortable, perhaps even counterintuitive. Discrimination is too often framed as an individualized problem that can be “fixed” through awareness or attitude changes, rather than as a systemic issue requiring a deeper and collective reckoning with history and power. We need to acknowledge – and recognize - how the narrative of Nordic exceptionalism has shaped and limited our understanding of intersectionality as well as discrimination, equality and oppression. This involves questioning our own motivations, desires, fears, and assumptions, and recognizing that the closed hubs of power and privilege may not be as progressive or inclusive as they claim or seek to be.

We need to expand the conversation beyond a narrow focus on gender, sexuality, and whiteness to include the full spectrum of intersecting identities and oppressions. I fervently argue that our discussions of intersectionality must remain focused on oppressed and disenfranchised categories of identity. This requires a commitment to listening to and amplifying marginalized voices, rather than speaking for them or co-opting their struggles to reinforce existing power structures or our own positions.

We need to be honest about the limitations of the current approach to intersectionality in the Nordics. This means acknowledging that the structures claiming to support diversity and inclusion are often part of the problem. We must be willing to dismantle these structures and build new ones that truly reflect the diversity of our societies. We must remember that

intersectionality means addressing axes of oppression and historical disenfranchisement. Intersectionality is not a question of any social difference or randomly selected categories. It is also not sufficient to address the individual level. Structures and systems of oppression are key to intersectional work.

A CALL TO ACTION

My hope is that we raise our hands and voices against oppression. Acknowledging discrimination, intersectionality, exceptionalism and so forth is a first step – but it is not enough. All of us must be willing, and brave enough, to act and engage critically, to speak up, speak out and act on the injustice we see, also when this is uncomfortable.

As I conclude, I want to leave you with a challenge: How do we break the mold? How do we move beyond the narratives of exceptionalism and denial to create a more inclusive and intersectional future? What can we do collectively? And what can we do individually, with whatever platform we may have?

This is a collective task that requires all of us to engage critically with our own positions, to listen deeply to those who have been marginalized, to redistribute power – that is, to be willing to share our power in ways that may be uncomfortable, may even cost us, but are ultimately necessary.

Thank you.

[1] This text is a revised version of my keynote address delivered at the Danish Gender Conference, hosted by Copenhagen Business School in early fall 2024. As it was originally presented to a live audience, I refer to the reader as part of a collective — using “we,” “you,” and “us” to reflect the rhetorical style and inclusive intent of the address.

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Building Inclusive University Cultures:

How can universities take action
against discrimination?

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ROUNDTABLE

INTRODUCTION¹

This piece is based on a discussion that took place in the culminating episode 5 on Building Inclusive University Cultures in the webinar series “Let’s Talk, Let’s Act: Addressing Discrimination in Danish Higher Education” headed by the Gender and Equality Team at the University of Southern Denmark as part of the Danish National Impact Plan in the EU GENDERACTIONplus project. The series was a five-part webinar series held in spring 2025 aimed to address different forms and aspects of intersectional discrimination in higher education, specifically focusing on how to build a less discriminatory university context that actively fights against racism, sexism, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination and inequalities.

These issues are not only highly relevant, but are also being discussed more and more, not least since the #MeToo movement started spreading into Danish Academia in 2020, when a group of scholars started a petition that collected more than 800 testimonials about harassment and discrimination from researchers in Denmark (Einersen et al. 2021). In 2024, the research institute VIVE published a report on sexism at Danish universities, commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science as a response to the #MeToo movement in Danish academia (Lesner et al. 2024). The findings of this report show that scholars, especially junior scholars, continuously experience sexist as well as other intersectional forms of discrimination in Danish higher education institutions (2024). This work shows that taking action against discrimination should be a core priority for universities.

The participants in this roundtable, Mie Plotnikof, Associate Professor at Aarhus University, Mira C. Skadegård, Associate Professor at Aalborg University, and Sheena Vachhani, Professor at the University of Bristol, discuss discrimination in higher education from an intersectional perspective and focus on the important question of how to implement meaningful and intersectional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

(DEI) work in universities.

UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING THE COMPLEXITY OF DISCRIMINATION

Bontu Guschke: I would like to start with a question that relates to the overarching challenge of how to do anti-discrimination work that pays attention to more than one aspect of inequality. So, how to do gender equality work that also pays attention to queerphobia and transphobia? How to do DEI work that explicitly addresses racism? How to do feminist work that talks about ableism? Etcetera. How do we make sure that this anti-discrimination work and knowledge doesn’t just reproduce one “dominant” DEI or equality discourse, but actually stays open to the plurality of different perspectives?

Mira C Skadegård: For me, when I hear your question, I think, well, how hard could that be? Because as I see it, discrimination is inherently intersectional. You can’t think about – or, I can’t at least – I don’t know how to think about discrimination without thinking about all of the different bases for discrimination. My work is grounded in the human rights framework which means that there is a very, very clearly defined group of protected categories or protected groups that all are included under this notion of non-discrimination in our laws. And you’re right, on the one hand, legally what we have traditionally done is this single axis approach where we thought, well, either it’s gender or it’s disability. But if you look at humans, that’s not a thing. There’s no such thing as a free-floating gender or free-floating ability. We are always all of those things.

What we have to do is unlearn what we have learned and relearn what discrimination means and what it’s about, because we’re talking about how power is implicated in the body, or in the subject. And that there’s no two subjects that are going to be meeting discrimination in the same ways because of the way in which we are all this complex.

So, what does this mean? My answer would be that if

we have genuine knowledge around discrimination and anti-discrimination and racism and gender, if we really understand those concepts well, then we would be able to better embrace the complexity of those identities. The problem isn't the lack of knowledge sometimes, it's the inability to embrace complexity because we've all been taught that simplicity, easy answers, and simple categories are the effective way to work. So, thinking in one category becomes the easy way out, but it's not the knowledgeable way out.

Mie Plotnikof: I think we can argue that we need to knowledge-base the way that we work with it. If, say, a new economic model was developed we would expect organizations to consider and implement that in relevant work practices. This is exactly the same; we have lots of emerging frameworks that are thoroughly working with intersectional perspectives. So, we should be able to expect that organizations – including educational institutions – will consider and use them in future work with those issues. In my view, we have reached a point where we can insist on this fact and say: “This is a knowledge area. We have got advanced knowledge to lean on, including both theories and actionable frameworks suggesting how to deal with this and how to explore these intersectional matters. So, we expect that this is the basis of this kind of work in our organizations”.

Sheena Vachhani: I was just going to follow up on that because you've really made me think also about how this connects to the will to change. We can say this knowledge exists, or the frameworks are there, but what foregrounds the learning is the kind of political impetus or the will to move, you know, have the wheels in motion to get to a better place. And that political will is the thing that I think we sometimes might struggle with. There's no shortage of good intention, but then there's little being put forward in terms of commitment of resources or sacrifice. What do universities let go of in order to build time, money, and effort into the longevity of different DEI practices? And I guess that, you know, there's a real connection that needs to be made between the existence of the knowledge and then the desire to have that developed.

Bontu: Which relates to this point you were just making, Mira, that it needs to be an unlearning and a relearning. So, we need the step of unlearning first in a way to let go of what we expect this kind of knowledge to look like, what we expect to be easy solutions, single-sided approaches. And understanding that maybe that is part of the sacrifice: letting go of that kind of idea of what it might look like. And then being open to that plurality and being open to bearing the weight of differences.

ANCHORING CHANGE IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL STRUCTURES

Bontu: A related question to that is: who is part of organizing that process of unlearning and relearning, and who is then bringing that knowledge to the table, so to speak? The VIVE report shows quite clearly that discrimination is an issue for many people, but there are groups that are at a higher risk of being discriminated against, people in precarious positions, junior scholars, but also, as the report shows, bisexual women, women not born in Denmark, etcetera. So, it also makes me think about this question: Who is actually part of creating this knowledge? Who has a voice in these discussions? Whose perspectives are being valued, and who is currently missing in the equality and anti-discrimination work? And how do we make sure that these perspectives are brought in and that they actually have a say? Is that through DEI councils? Is that through self-organized work? Is that in the formal structures? How do we make sure that a variety of perspectives is actually represented and listened to, and what is hindering us from achieving that so far?

Sheena: Yeah, it's a really good question: Who is excluded? And I think there's probably too many to mention, right? There are those 'protected characteristics' in the UK inequality language. But within that is the messiness inside those categories of difference, and then all those dimensions of difference that we probably don't readily talk about or invoke day-to-day.

I think what really struck me is that there is a whole range of politics around what grassroots movements can do when they're not institutionalized in formal structures. We talk about structural systemic change, but then we also have to talk about spaces of resistance that are organizing separately from those structures and architectures that have historically, certainly for feminist progress, been incredibly important. And we have to have that combination, but also recognize the paradox that pushing more and more into informal spaces means that existing structures in organizations don't get critically pushed at or their boundaries don't get pushed far enough. So, I think that for me, there's a lot of reflexive work that we need to do in feminist communities or in anti-racist movements that then can, in some ways, trickle into universities. You know, almost having spaces that feel more politically agile and less institutionalized.

In the UK we've had equality legislation since the 1970s, yet we don't see the progress that we would expect from having that very important intervention. And that's a very reductive way of saying we need multiple, varied strategies here. So, I don't know if the answers are councils, I guess that is one way. But I find the DEI architecture, certainly in UK higher education, very challenging to engage with for meaningful change because there is so much instrumentalization: "Let's market the equalities we have rather than focusing on the inequalities." So, we get pay gap reporting, but what happens on the basis of that in terms of meaningful change is really difficult.

Bontu: As I hear you, it's maybe also a bit of an issue of: there is formal work happening, there's informal work happening, but it doesn't always connect in a way that actually leads to change. I would be curious, Mie and Mira, how you see that in the Danish context? Do you see potential or maybe even also positive examples of where there's formal and informal work coming together, broadening the perspectives, bringing in voices that otherwise maybe wouldn't have a space in the formal structures of higher education?

Mira: I'm, in a way, very disappointed to hear that

it's not much better in the UK because there's been a much more explicit and practical application there, and I've looked to the UK for much of the research we draw on the Danish context. So that's a little bit sad, but of course, there's always the geopolitical and the political, different things that also play into this. In the Danish context, we can still hide a little bit behind the fact that we simply really, actually, genuinely don't have much qualified academic knowledge around these things that people have been used to using. It's been there - it's been around for a very long time. It's not that, but it's like it hasn't been an integrated part.

I do see some good examples of practice in some student organizations. For example, some years ago, the University of Copenhagen got quite a lot of attention around the fact that there was a discriminatory curriculum and there were problems in different departments, certainly in terms of gender and race. And I believe also disability. And that push back - even though it became a conflict and the student organization that did this put themselves in a terrible position, and their academic opportunities were impacted. For example, some of them experienced that they could not get hired for a PhD because of their participation in this critical group; so the repercussions for this minoritized group of students became a taxation - however, we did see that what they did created some waves and we did see that universities started thinking in a different way.

And there's another university where you see a very active institutionalized practice, trying to get people working with the diversity framework and doing some monitoring within the different departments. And while I have a lot of critique in regard to the way that they're doing it, it is still something. So, somehow this discussion over the last 5-10 years at the informal, the political, at the activist level has done something for some areas. What it actually means in practice, especially in the current political situation, that would be interesting to see. But we can't live without the informal processes. We can't live without the activisms, and the different movements because

without them, we wouldn't have anything.

Bontu: I think this links back to the question of how we make sure that this knowledge is not just the dominant discourse and not just from the dominant perspective, even within the DEI work. I think it's exactly that point of being consistently self-critical, inviting people in who maybe make us uncomfortable or challenge us, but that's what we need to do consistently.

Mira: And can I just say one thing? I know we're all very upset about the American situation and what they're saying and all that, but in some strange little way, it's also really important to address that critique seriously. We need to ask. What has been going on in this DEI conversation? How much of it has been a diversity industrial complex? How much of it has been diversity washing? How much of it has been genuine? Maybe this really awful situation forces us to think more critically about what this field is. How is it situated in knowledge? In which ways is it a reproduction of power? In which ways is it not? Because, as much as I find it upsetting, I'm actually not that worried. I think it's interesting. What will this do to the conversation? Will we become open to more critically assessing what we're doing? I'm just thinking that we could see this as an opportunity.

Bontu: Mie, maybe I can pass this on to you and also add a little bit to it. I know that in our audience, we have quite a wide variety of people working in different positions across higher education. If we have people working in HR, people working in the DEI boards, maybe people working in law or legal positions within universities, how can they be part of creating that push towards equality and anti-discrimination from these organizational positions? Which challenges might there be, but also what should be prioritized because it really makes a difference?

Mie: I want to start by saying that I think they are already doing it. And that's really important to acknowledge when we talk about it. It can sound like people do not want to do it. But I do think that we've seen lots of changes the past 5-7-ish years. And one

of the main changes or shifts that I have seen as crucial is that this has become a legitimate issue to raise. So, we can actually raise discriminatory issues and expect to be heard in a proper manor. And this shift is super, super important. And it is happening thanks to a lot of these people working from those different organizational positions.

The other shift that I want to attend to is that 5 - 10 years ago this was often referred to as opinion-based discussions. And now more and more people respect that those are knowledge-based discussions. And especially people who are sitting in HR functions or in different committees or councils know that advanced knowledge about these issues and various types of solutions exists, which can help them inform their work. Of course, we don't have simple, easy fixes when it's about discrimination, but we still have lots of knowledge. I have experienced this quite a lot the past five years when giving talks or being asked about relevant literature. I see this as a gesture of the people working with the formal structures of the universities; they are helping to push all of us in the university forward because they want to make sure that if we don't know how to deal with it, we need to figure out how to get more informed. So there's this upskilling often coming from people themselves, but I want to stress that such upskilling can also be formalized. And it should be, because we need everyone to who works in this area to know about the newest policies or anti-discriminatory efforts and so on. Of course, upskilling can also be on a case-by-case basis. And I think we need to think of it in both ways actually.

And then, the last thing that I want to touch upon in this discussion: you started asking who are we missing or which voices might not be represented in these both formal and informal groups, but maybe especially in the formalized groups. And I think this is really one of the biggest challenges we are facing, because the people with the most important experiences regarding intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination, the people we really need to learn from, those are the people who are often trying to hide because they don't want to become a problem.

So, there's really a dilemma built into anti-discriminatory work: we need knowledge from people who are already extremely vulnerable. And this is one of the areas where I'm really thinking that everyone who's working with DEI somehow either as practitioners, as activists, or as researchers, we have an extra responsibility to somehow sensitize ourselves to those vulnerable positions without outing them. And also without being or taking on this normative, better-knowing kind of arrogant position. That's not what I'm advocating. This is really one of the challenges that we're facing to move beyond white feminism, to move beyond this white saviour complex. And I'm really unsure how to do it. And I don't see examples from the formal structures of how to do it. Of course, we have representatives from different positions in the councils, for example. But I don't think that's the point here.

STAYING REFLECTIVE AND SELF-CRITICAL

Mira: I was thinking about it in a slightly different way because I immediately started thinking about how we do teaching. We're a university. We automatically already exclusive and elitist. If you just look at our groups of students or the people who are working there, we have to ask who's missing? That's a good place to start. Who's not there, who's not represented? This isn't rocket science. A simple way to start is to look at each protected group, look at the context you are assessing, and you're like, oh, that's interesting. There seems to be a low representation of people with particular types of disability or people with a particular class, social class background, and so on.

So, it's not that hard to look at who's here, who's not here, who's missing if we were to do it that way. But it's also how we do our institutions, how we do our practices, how we do our meeting structures, how we do our teaching practices, how we invite students to participate in which ways. And we've been talking about this for years. So, it's nothing new really. There's all of these different ways in which we can invite without speaking for, speaking on behalf of, or

presuming about individuals that they may or may not be vulnerable in different ways.

I always go back to: How are we understanding ourselves in these rooms? How am I able to stay vigilant about my own knowledge position, my extremely privileged position? It's also very much our own introspective work and facing ourselves, looking at ourselves in the mirror, which is not always fun.

So, how do you do that work? By making a lot of mistakes along the way, I think. And being able to live with that and being able to apologize in that process when we do step on toes, because there's just no way around stepping on toes. But then you go back to this discussion. And there is a challenge here, because this sometimes involves giving up the privilege of authority – the presumption that we are right merely because we are academics. People in these positions of power and privilege, giving up the right to always be right; that is an entitlement that we have. You are probably going to have to give something up if you're going to do this.

Sheena: I think that it's such an important point around the fear and anxiety that many people have doing this type of work. It's both, as Mira was saying, deeply introspective and reflexive. Or it could be collectively reflexive. If we talk about, as a kind of case example, our ability to discuss race is fraught with huge challenges in terms of language. I mean, we just had mandatory acceptable behaviour training in our university, and it started with: "Don't worry, nothing's gone hugely wrong. We just want everyone to be on the same page." But of course, the language that's used in these rooms doesn't always lean towards a reflexive, embodied, maybe vulnerable kinds of spaces that we need in order to progress or move forward in terms of the discussions we have.

It also brings up this kind of relationship between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge what our lived experiences, our embodied experiences offer - we spend our time masking some of those and sometimes exposing our individual experiences.

So, there's something around the question: How do we tackle the anxiety of DEI work, from all of us who question ourselves every day? But then there are plenty of people who don't even think in these terms. What is our role to then be able to open up conversations with them?

Someone raised a question about the impossibility of even invoking terms like feminist when there is an increasingly hostile environment to using politicized language around equality. But I would also agree with Mira's point around how, as horrific as the now probably global attacks on DEI work are, and partly as a result of far-right populism, it does open up critical conversations. If we move beyond outrage, what does it do to strengthen our communities? And that could be a source of potential change or social transformation where we aren't simply moving between feeling sometimes disenchanted with some of these policies and practices because they're not doing enough, and then to create new ways of thinking/being with DEI. It maybe opens up conversations.

Bontu: It's really interesting that both of you mentioned that. I think often when you feel like your field is under attack, there's this intuitive reaction to close down and defend it. And I think it's very interesting that both of you are rather saying, well, if we get beyond that state of maybe outrage or wanting to defend, and also to some degree needing to defend, how can we also use it as an opening to challenge ourselves and discuss more?

Molly Occhino: A related question that the audience finds relevant is the following: Sometimes racism can be experienced in non-typical ways. There's, for example, linguistic and cultural racism towards different communities. So, how can we address different forms of racism?

Mira: Naming and bringing these also atypical forms of discrimination into a conversation, looking at them. Naming it, understanding it, addressing it. We've got to confront the different assorted elephants in the room. We've got to address them, and we've got to try to understand: What are the dynamics? In

which ways are which power axes in play here? So, naming it, addressing it, and looking at it and having the uncomfortable conversation would be my take on that. And to do that, you do have to learn *how* to have the uncomfortable conversation. How do I act in that situation in order to make that conversation possible and empathetic and caring?

Mie: That's the point I wanted to raise with response-able leadership. It's doing that difficult labour and developing that relational capacity to take responsibility, to respond in relation to others when you encounter these moments, but without prior to that thinking that you have a fixed answer or an easy solution, but that you know that you need to become response-able to the problem when you meet it in a caringly and ethically responsible way. This is really where we are at regarding DEI and anti-discriminatory work in my view. I'm seeing it with the formal leaders and managers, but also other practitioners that I'm working with – how to develop that capacity? It will be full of discomfort. It will be affective labour. But it will also be empowering. It is actually the capacity to be in that discomfort and to dare hold on to that moment without knowing how it's going to unfold but knowing that you know how to take care of it in ethically considerable and caring ways.

Sheena: It really made me think about the context and the environment that actually allows that discomfort to feel OK or to feel palatable because something that has come up in different events I've been part of is we talk about cultivating spaces or self-organized forms of solidarity, for example, which feel intuitive and embodied and you connect to certain individuals who have similar skills of active listening or suspending their own ego in order to lean into discomfort. But that is not as common as it could be if we're talking about proliferating this work across universities.

How do you build spaces of vulnerability that allow people to not get it right and explore experiences that they never have before, certainly in the workplace? I think that for me has been the real challenge.

How do you build these within the power dynamics of institutions? How do you build spaces where these conversations are OK and that my words are not going to be politicized at a later date or reabsorbed by managerial architectures/structures that then reduce that space.

I was just thinking about those good examples that I was struggling to find earlier. There's been some great work around sexual harassment especially student activism against sexual harassment, and reducing the use of NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) so that they're not silencing victims. And there's also been some great work on decolonizing the curriculum and universities more broadly.

FOSTERING TRUST AND UNCOMFORTABILITY IN SPACES FOR CHANGE

Molly: I want to connect that to another question. It reminded me of Audre Lorde's brilliant quote about how the classroom is still one of the most radical spaces in the university. What actions do you recommend that the teachers among us take up in their teaching?

Sheena: We have these conversations certainly at Bristol, kind of ad infinitum. I feel that the student cohorts I teach are very different from 10, or even 15, years ago, and there is much more unspeakability, and that means you have to be a much more agile teacher, I guess, being able to sense what is possible to talk about. We have had some not particularly great examples of colleagues trying to bring in very difficult topics, for example, slavery, but then not creating what I was just talking about, not cultivating those spaces by which to have an open, relatively safe or reflective conversation. Safe is probably not the right term, but a situation where students, students of colour in particular, don't feel uncomfortable in highly disproportionate ways. You know, Bristol, the institution as well as the city, has been reckoning with its relationship with the slave trade and the history of slavery. But for some time now with marketization of

the sector, and certainly in the Business School, it has been quite challenging to realize Lorde's notion of a radical space of pedagogy. I'd love to hear more about the Danish context. I want to be more hopeful here. But I often find it more of a challenge now than years ago because of censorship in UK institutions and the very live conversations around academic freedom - and that's been particularly evident with the problematic of 'gender critical' scholars and free speech arguments in the UK more generally - in some ways, it has made it more difficult to have these spaces.

Mie: First, I want to touch upon a very basic point about the space that you talked about before, Sheena, namely creating that space. I don't think safe spaces are necessarily possible, but at least accountable spaces, creating such spaces also dependent on the size of a class. If you have 120 students, creating a radical course, a norm-critical pedagogy is extremely difficult. But sometimes we are lucky enough to have smaller classes.

As educators, we really need to think: When am I in a working condition where I can develop these radical spaces? And I think this is really also a critical issue in higher education where we are pressured to include more and more and more because of economic reasons. It becomes harder and harder to create those spaces and to really push the learning space into radical discussions. But I do think at least in the Danish system -and this of course also depends on which educational program you're in - we do have classes that are small enough to experiment with this.

The other thing is that we really need to think much more in terms of collegiality because I cannot become radical on my own. I need my great colleagues. I need time to think with literature and with history and with potential futures. So, daring to insist that this is time-consuming and creating those more radical courses where we really have time to think through the different aspects of teaching is as equally important labour in line with, say, writing a paper, going to a conference, or submitting a grant proposal.

Molly: I'm going to ask one last question: How can

we create and encourage more male allies? And I think it's an important thing to address when we're also talking about privilege, when we're talking about power, when we're talking about positionality, also institutional positionality. Is it through the collegial solidarity that you're talking about Mie? Is this through the critical utopian work? Is this through something totally else?

Mira: I think the best way for me to respond to that is that if we understand discrimination as structural, historical, cultural, institutionalized and as part of the world we're living in, we need to move into a more knowledgeable understanding of what that actually means. And that would be in one way certainly to say that this is not about the oppressed versus the non-oppressed. It's a much more complex and interwoven problem in which everybody's actually implicated. It may implicate you in the sense that you have privileges you did not ask for, did not know you were going to have, and that you take for granted. But you are certainly implicated in your different privileged positionalities as well, which whether you like it or not also puts you in the position of being part of – imbricated in – this very contentious debate which has become a kind of 'bad guys versus good guys' space.

I'm not saying that all people are implicated equally.

It's not to speak to that at all, but it is to speak to the fact that this notion of us against them is an extremely simplified, debilitating and problematic way to go about this issue. We need to see ourselves as we actually are, that is part of the problem as well as the solution, all of us.

Sheena: I think we've sometimes got to suspend a sense of shame around distributed privileges. I think a key driver for anti-DEI sentiment is that many people who would be socially designated as having certain privileges don't feel that they have them, in an experiential or lived sense. And so the resentment that then comes out of that is a barrier to opening up conversations and creating the shared burden that you're talking about, Mira. And the difficult work of trying to reduce that resentment would maybe open up the potential for normalizing that discomfort and sharing the burden.

Mie: I agree, and we do have agency, we can create all kinds of allyships, and we need to think about that instead of thinking in the oppositional terms that we are trained to think in.

Bontu: A huge thank you to all three of you, Mie, Mira, and Sheena, for everything you shared. It's been a pleasure discussing with you and learning from and with you.

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Global Sex – hvad sexarbejdere ved om kærlighed og kapitalisme

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IN
REVIEW

***Global Sex – hvad sexarbejdere
ved om kærlighed og kapitalisme***

Sine Plambech

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REVIEW

Plambech fortjener stor anerkendelse for sin fordomsnedbrydende forskning og sit krævende feltarbejde igennem en årrække blandt kvindelige sexarbejdere i bl.a. Thailand, Nigeria og Danmark. Hun har udført et omfattende formidlingsarbejde af, hvad sådan et liv byder på. Mange læsere vil måske genkende nogle af bogens kvinder fra to dokumentarer, 'Fra Thailand til Thy' og 'Fra Thy til Thailand'. Her mødte seerne kvinder, der kom til Danmark gennem ægteskab. Nogle af dem solgte eller havde solgt 'global sex', altså migreret for at tjene penge på at sælge sex. Der er ingen tvivl om, at de fleste af os véd for lidt om de risici, savn og sorger, kvinderne gennemgår i denne form for liv og om den fattigdom, som er dets udgangspunkt, såvel som kvinders styrke og handleevne.

Plambech lader i *Global sex* læserne komme tæt på fire kvinder, så de får mulighed for at forstå de valg og de risici, som kvinder, der migrerer for at sælge sex, løber. Således forlader Becky sit hjem i Benin City, Nigeria, for at krydse den nordafrikanske ørken og for tredje gang forsøge at komme over havet, selvom hun véd, at hun med stor sandsynlighed kan komme til at betale for rejsen mod Europa og en bedre tilværelse med sit liv. En anden af de fire kvinder, Sommai, kommer til Danmark fra Thailand og lever i stedet i mange år i en forholdsvis tryk tilværelse frem mod børnebørn og alderdom sammen med sin danske mand. Imens drømmer hun om at vende tilbage til Thailand, og holder sig bl.a. beskæftiget i Danmark med at hjælpe andre kvinder fra Thailand til at migrere, til at tjene penge og dermed forsørge de børn og andre familiemedlemmer, der stadig bor i hjemlandet.

Bogen er skrevet som en åben fremlæggelse af dét, som jeg vil kalde forfatterens professionelle venskaber med to sexarbejdere fra Thailand og to sexarbejdere fra Nigeria. Jeg kalder det sådan, fordi der ikke noget sted i bogen lægges skjul på at relationen til kvinderne tjener forfatterens forskning. Til gengæld står der ikke mange ord om venskab, men der er en form for venskab mellem dem, bl.a. fordi deres kommunikation afslører gensidig omsorg. Igennem denne form for venskab afdækker Plambech de processer,

der fører kvinderne frem til at migrere bl.a. til Dubai, Italien og Danmark, med henblik på at tjene penge på at sælge sex eller om muligt på andre måder. Det har stor værdi, at der er tale om kontakter, der forløber over en årrække. Dermed afslører fortællingerne også udviklingen af forholdet til hjemlandet og familiemedlemmer derhjemme, såvel som de skift, nogle af dem går igennem, fx fra at være fuldtidsdatter, til at være på en risikabel rejse mod en usikker fremtid, til at være migrantarbejder i hjemlandet, så fuldtidsmor, så migrantarbejder igen, men denne gang i udlandet, hvor indtjeningen er større. Vi hører også om de overgreb, som nogle af kvinderne udsættes for og om deres erfaringer på andre dele af arbejdsmarkedet, der ofte befinder sig i en gråzone mellem et formelt og et uformelt forhold. Fx gennemlever én af kvinderne en voldtægt begået af en mand, som har ansat hende som hushjælp. Bogens undertitel refererer til, at kvinderne véd, at kærlighed først og fremmest er noget man kan leve af – bortset fra den kærlighed som de nærer til deres børn. Den kynisme, kunne man sige, er tydeligvis et svar på den mere grundlæggende kynisme, som gennemsyrrer deres livsomstændigheder, fx når forældre har en udtalt forventning om, at man skaber indtjening til familien gennem sexarbejde.

Bogen er forskningsformidling, og dermed er der grænser for, hvor langt læseren bliver taget med ind i Plambechs forskningsmæssige 'maskinrum' eller hvor meget læseren får præsenteret af hendes værktøjskasse. Desværre, har jeg lyst til at tilføje, for det er ikke mindst det forhold, der opstår mellem antropologen og de fire kvinder, som står centralt som et metodisk greb. Det er nu engang ikke bogens ærinde, kunne man indvende. Og dog. Indledningsvist påpeger Plambech, at hendes håndskrevne notesbøger spiller en nøglerolle i hendes praksis som feltarbejder, og en bunke af dem er afbildet på én af de første sider. De er selvfølgelig centrale, fordi de udgør en vigtig del af hendes dokumentation, ved siden af forskellige fotos af både Plambech, hendes børn og de fire kvinder. Jeg kunne tænke mig at vide mere om, hvordan det er at være i sådan et 'professionelt venskab', der er asymmetrisk på flere måder, og hvor den

ene part sidder og tager noter en stor del af tiden. Bortset fra en indledende anerkendelse af antropologiens koloniale arv og forsikring om, at kvinderne selv har ønsket og medvirket til bogens skabelse, får man som læser ikke rigtig nogen indsigt i, hvordan det er at være i den form for venskab. Måske fordi Plambeck ikke anerkender venskab som en del af arbejdet? Til gengæld fremgår det, at inddragelse af hendes eget 'livsrod' og livsbetingelser (og familiehistorie) i hendes forskning er en bevidst strategi. Med mellemrum gør Plambeck således opmærksom på de store kontraster, der er imellem de livsbetingelser, som de fire kvinder har over for Plambecks egne. Det er måske at gøre en dyd ud af en nødvendighed, for de er iøjnefaldende. Således dør Becky under en fødsel på rejse mod Europa, hvor hun ikke har adgang til hverken jordemoder eller fødselsfaciliteter, mens Plambeck selv føder på et hospital i New York, uden for alvor at komme i livsfare, da fødslen ikke forløber 100% som forventet.

Uanset forfatterens måske forståelige tilbageholdenhed med at gå i detaljer om alle de prøvelser og fias-koer, som sådan et feltarbejde uvægerligt også byder på, så fremgår det, at det kræver både stamina og mod. Måske først og fremmest kræver det dog stor personlig integritet at tilbyde sit professionelle venskab til kvinder, der mere end blot en gang imellem har brug for støtte, også økonomisk, og som nok forstår at værdsætte kontakten til en europæisk kvinde med forbindelser og ressourcer.

Læseren får indblik i forskellige ydelser og penge-forsendelser til kvinderne, som Plambeck foretager, fx hjælp til at købe en flybillet. Udover at de holder dørene åbne for hende, indgår de ikke i hendes overvejelser om deres relation. Det professionelle venskab fremstiller Plambeck som en naturlig og forholdsvis uproblematisk række af rejser, besøg og hængen ud sammen, og løbende kontakt gennem sociale medier m.m. Således lykkes det på næsten forunderlig vis for Plambeck at leve op til forventninger hos kvinderne om forskellige former for støtte, sådan at det netop bekræfter venskabet, tilsyneladende uden at det korrumpere det. I hvert fald reflekterer Plambeck ikke

over, hvad disse ydelser betyder for relationerne til kvinderne. Når Plambeck ikke italesætter denne vellykkede balancegang, kunne man forledes til at tro, at den er udtryk for et talent, som Plambeck bare har?

Jovist, fremgår det af Plambecks formidling, at der er farer forbundet med feltarbejdet, og jovist, fremgår det, at der også er savn forbundet med at rejse væk på feltarbejde igen og igen over længere perioder. Når den personlige fortælling om feltarbejdet og inddragelsen af egen familie i denne, fremstår som forholdsvis uproblematisk, bliver den stressreaktion hos hende selv, som hun beretter om midt i bogen, lidt overrumplende. Der var nemlig ikke meget i fortællingen forinden, der kunne lade læseren forstå, at feltarbejdet er stressende. Ved nærmere eftertanke, er denne stress reaktion nærmere logisk.

Velovervejet eller ikke, så må evnen til at vedligeholde det professionelle venskab være én af de faktorer, der betyder, at Plambeck lykkes med at 'indsamle' materiale (som det hedder i antropologien), der gør hende i stand til at forske og publicere om dette emne, der ellers er omgærdet af stigmatisering, fordomme og forestillinger. Eller er det igen ikke helt så uproblematisk? Efter min mening kunne den måde, hvorpå kvinderne lever med fordomme rettet imod dem have fået mere opmærksomhed i bogen, og ikke bare blive antydnet i form af det ofte altoverskyggende behov for at tjene penge og thailandske kvinders modstand mod at blive kaldt 'sådan nogle' af andre thailændere.

Målet om at lade betingelser og begivenheder i forfatterens eget liv spille sammen med informanternes liv kommer ikke frem til læseren på en helt balanceret måde. I sagens natur er forfatteren trods alt tættere på sit eget liv og bedre i stand til at skildre de tildragelser, som livet byder hende på en mere indfølt måde. Det bliver især tydeligt i skildringen af sin egen mors sygdom og død, som ufrivilligt fremstår som nogle af de mest rørende sider i bogen. Der er ellers nok af ulykker, problemer og kriser, som rammer de fire kvinder – deportering, ufrivillig indespærring, voldtægt, m.m.

Endelig kunne man godt forvente, at *Global Sex*

placerede sit emne i et større tematisk perspektiv, også selvom bogen er tænkt som forskningsformidling. I bogens titel er der dog måske en skjult reference Barbara Ehrenreich og Arlie Russell Hochschilds antologi, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2003). Da denne bog udkom, var den skelsættende i forhold til at sætte kvinders globale migration og deres omsorgsarbejde på dagsordenen som et bidrag til verdensøkonomien.

Den blev dødsstødet til den opfattelse at kvinders migration blot følger mænds, og derfor ikke kræver særsilt opmærksomhed og forskning. Plambeck lægger sig i kølvandet på dette paradigmeskift og har igennem de seneste to årtier vist, at kvinders migration, på trods af hårde betingelser, savn og risici, igangsættes af dem selv som et væsentligt bidrag til at forsørge og opretholde deres familier – på tværs af kloden.

The Challenging Middle of New Materialism and Intersectionality

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IN REVIEW

***New Materialism and
Intersectionality: Making
Middles Matter***

Edited by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Taru Leppänen,
Tara Mehrabi & Milla Tiainen.

262 pages, published by Routledge in 2025, € 175

REVIEW

New Materialism and Intersectionality: Making Middles Matter aims to both deepen and widen the engagement between intersectionality theories and feminist new materialisms, arguing that they can enrich each other both theoretically and empirically. First, by weaving the theoretical threads of intersectionality, such as race, colonialism, and inequality, together with those of feminist new materialism, such as non-anthropocentrism, intra-action, and agential realism, the book demonstrates that what has previously been perceived as conflicts are in fact fruitful frictions that can contribute to a transversal understanding of complex, context-specific realities. The book then introduces the concept of 'the middle' and the practice 'middling' as a heuristic or analytic device, which is capable precisely of "working form the *middle* of the friction" (p. 13) instead of trying to erase it. Second, by employing the concept and practice of middling to an array of different topics unfolding in various contexts. The book is divided into three thematic parts: 'Non-Anthropocentric Intersectionality', 'Makings of race in the middle', and 'Responsible Relationalities', and the chapters explore empirical, affective, memory-based work in various contexts, e.g. art-based environmental activism, birthing-stories of Laestadian women, memory work with affect, waiting as a socio-political intersectional matter in studying asylum-seekers, allergies as a way of rethinking debility studies and trans-corporality, outlining an ethics of 'unease' with regard to the uneasy topics of transgender and race, and more.

In its introduction, the book presents a very enlightening conceptual and temporal mapping of the frictional relation between intersectionality and feminist new materialisms and how this relation has brought to light certain possible limitations of each perspective. For instance, feminist new materialism has accused intersectionality approaches of a non-dynamic tendency towards freezing identity formations and power structures into more or less static essences and positions. Related to this non-dynamic tendency is an overemphasis on discursive and linguistic structures of power and subjectification, which, according to feminist new materialism, risks overlooking the

formative relations with other-than-human beings and agencies. In turn, feminist new materialism has been critiqued for not being critical enough and for abandoning sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues of race and class.

By way of their methodology of 'middling,' the editors have composed a volume in which the perspectives of intersectionality and feminist new materialism enrich rather than combat each other *through* their mutual frictions and limitations. As such, the focus of 'middling' is on how issues like agency, temporality, spatiality, and materiality beyond the human are implicated in identity formations and the shaping of social differences. The suggestion is that difference, subjectivity, power, identity, and therefore also race, gender, class, etc., are neither pre-given nor purely social, but emerge through relations among material, human, and more-than-human elements: *in-between* spaces, times, processes, and intra-actions. Rather than static places and measurements, 'middles' are thus presented as dynamic relational zones, and 'middling' as an ongoing methodological practice and ethical gesture that seeks to trace how intersectional and material differences unfold in concrete, situated contexts.

BEYOND BINARIES

The effort to combine intersectionality, which often emphasizes sociopolitical and socioeconomic relations, identity axes, etc., with feminist new materialism, which emphasizes matter, agency of the nonhuman, relational becoming, etc., is ambitious, well-conducted, and offers fresh theoretical and methodological tools. Offering the 'middle' as a concept and 'middling' as a method and practice, the volume helps to move beyond binaries such as the social/material, human/non-human, inorganic/organic, and fixed/fluid in useful and enlightening ways. By offering empirically rich case studies and affective, memory-based research, the contributions ground the theory rather than leaving it too abstract. This helps illustrate how the concept and method of 'middling' can work in practice. However, even if the

book gestures toward coalitional politics, ethics, and responsibility, it is less clear how the method and practice of ‘middling’ translates into concrete political action or change. How do scholars or practitioners use the concept of middle and method of middling in activism, policy, or political organizing? More work might be needed on the possibility of such extended praxes of middling.

The book does not stay in theory but shows a heightened ethical and political sensitivity by reflecting on what kinds of power relations, exclusions, or coalitions emerge when thinking with and by ‘middling.’ Not only does it attend to both intersectional concerns, such as race, gender, trans, and more-than-human concerns, such as environment, vegetal biodiversity, and geopolitics. It also shows how the two ‘types’ of concern are intimately related. Moreover, there is a constant and vigilant attention throughout the volume to how methodological decisions matter ethically and politically. For scholars in feminist studies, gender studies, queer theory, cultural studies, art studies, etc., this volume provides and opens new pathways for thinking about and researching difference, identity, embodiment, materiality, environment, and power.

Although, I generally find the book to be very nuanced and non-reductive in its engagement with both theoretical perspectives and empirical topics, I find the presentation of how poststructuralist and postmodern perspective have overlooked the nature/culture-divide by overemphasizing “linguistic and discursive aspects of living and reality” (p. 18) to be a reductive generalization. One can find many engagements with and reflections on precisely this difference in so-called poststructuralist thinking. To mention but a few examples, Jacques Derrida’s seminars on *La vie la mort* from 1975-1976 (2020) or *La bête et le souverain* from 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 (2009; 2011) focus specifically on the deconstruction of the distinctions of life and death, organic and inorganic, spiritual and material, as well as that between the human and non-human animals. Moreover, the relational ontology by Jean-Luc Nancy

is deeply concerned not only with human intra-actions but with the constitutive intra-actions of human with non-human, since, as he writes: “We would not be ‘humans’ if there were not ‘dogs’ and ‘stones’” (Nancy, 2000: 18). One could also highlight the work of Bernard Stiegler (e.g. 1998, 2018), which drawing on deconstructive work by Derrida and Simondon among others, is thoroughly committed to the advancement of non-anthropocentric, and indeed non-entropocentric, thinking and practice. While I am aware that this is not an explicit focus point of the book, a more careful description of so-called post-structuralist thinking would have suited the volume.

UNABASHEDLY AMBITIOUS

Overall, *New Materialism and Intersectionality: Making Middles Matter* is a strong, theoretically ambitious, and well-composed volume that contributes significantly to ongoing debates in feminist theory, intersectionality, new materialism, as well as to broader disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy and sociology. It moves the existing literature forward by proposing new ways of thinking about and researching identity, difference, and power that take materiality, spatiality and temporality seriously, yet remain sensitive to sociopolitical and socioeconomic dimensions. It will be especially useful for scholars who already have some grounding in both intersectional theory and new materialist and non-anthropocentric thinking, and who are seeking to explore how to do research, both methodologically and ethically, in ways that do not privilege one dimension (for instance, social vs material, human vs non-human) at the expense of others.

As is often the case with works at the intersection of new materialism and intersectionality, the language is sometimes quite dense, theoretical, and conceptually heavy. For readers less familiar with intersectional and new materialist philosophy or with some of its philosophical genealogies (Deleuze, Barad, Haraway, etc.), some chapters might be challenging with regard to accessibility and complexity. That said,

I personally enjoyed the unabashed insistence on the complex reality of both things and thought as well as on the ethical and methodological implications of 'staying with the trouble' of such complex realities.

I estimate that the book will be very useful for doctoral students, researchers in feminist theory, gender studies, cultural studies, art studies, philosophy, sociology, etc., especially those interested in theory and methodology. Also, it will be valuable for people generally interested in rethinking identity

categories, relational ontologies, and posthumanism. The volume will perhaps be less immediately helpful for those looking for clear, prescriptive guidebooks for teaching, activism, or policy-making, or for those who are new to the theories engaged with. While many undergraduate and graduate students might find the volume too inaccessible, it can still serve as an aspiration or inspiration to engage with the complex middle of new materialism and intersectionality.

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Stereotype kønskonstruktioner i daginstitutionen – stik imod hensigten

ABSTRACT

Denne artikel viser, på baggrund af observationer og samtaler med pædagoger i fire daginstitutioner, hvordan traditionelle forståelser af køn, til trods for intentioner om det modsatte, gøres og kommer til udtryk i børnehavers hverdagsliv. Artiklen viser, hvordan traditionelle forståelser af køn skabes og reproduceres igennem komplekse forbindelser mellem børn og pædagogers samspil, institutioners materialitet og kulturelt indlejrede pædagogiske idealer om anerkendelse og gode legerelationer, som tilsammen skaber kønsstereotype erfaringsrum for børn.

This article demonstrates, based on observations and conversations with professionals in four kindergartens, how traditional understandings of gender, despite intentions of the contrary, are enacted and expressed in the everyday life of kindergartens. The article shows how traditional understandings of gender are created and reproduced through complex connections between interactions between children and professionals, the materiality of institutions, and culturally embedded pedagogical ideals of recognition and good play relationships, which together create gender-stereotyped experiential spaces for children.

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INDLEDNING

Børnehaven har historisk set været knyttet til idealer om at udjævne sociale forskelle og understøtte alle børns lige muligheder for at tage del i samfundets arenaer og fællesskaber (Bayer & Kristensen, 2015). I de øvrige skandinaviske lande har dette også været knyttet til idealer om kønsmæssig ligestilling, samt et arbejde med at modvirke diskrimination på baggrund af køn. I henholdsvis Norge og Sverige har der således i mange årtier været fokus på ligestilling mellem kønnene i såvel lovgivningen på daginstitutionsområdet, som i den pædagogiske praksis (Nordisk Ministerråd, 2005). I Danmark fik pædagoguddannelsen først i 2014 et obligatorisk modul med titlen "Køn, seksualitet og mangfoldighed" (Uddannelses- og forskningsministeriet, 2014), mens køn først eksplicit blev en del af de juridiske tekster på daginstitutionsområdet med "Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan" for dagtilbud i 2018. I denne kan man således læse at "[a]lle børn skal have mulighed for at udfolde deres fulde potentiale uafhængigt af social baggrund, køn, alder mv." (Børne- og socialministeriet, 2018, s. 46), at "[d]agtilbuddets børnefællesskaber skal skabe rum for, at børn kan etablere venskaber på tværs af alder, køn og kultur" (Ibid, 21), samt at "[d]et pædagogiske læringsmiljø skal understøtte, at alle børn udfolder, udforsker og erfarer sig selv og hinanden på både kendte og nye måder og får tillid til egne potentialer, [hvilket] skal ske på tværs af blandt andet alder, køn samt social og kulturel baggrund" (Ibid, 37).

Formuleringerne i læreplanen lægger op til, at daginstitutioner skal skabe muligheder for, at børn kan gøre sig mangfoldige erfaringer med sig selv og hinanden, samt at pædagoger er opmærksomme på ikke at gøre forskel på børn på baggrund af køn.

I denne artikel undersøger vi, hvad det er for mekanismer, der ser ud til utilsigtet at bidrage til reproduktionen af traditionelle og stereotype forståelser af køn i daginstitutionens hverdagsliv til trods for hensigten om det modsatte. Artiklen bidrager således med bud på forklaringer på, hvordan traditionelle

kønsforståelser konstrueres og reproduceres i en politisk og pædagogisk kontekst, der eksplicit er optaget af, at børn ikke skal opleve forskelle i deltagelses- og udfoldelsesmuligheder på baggrund af køn.

Artiklen trækker på data fra forskningsprojektet Køn i Børnehaven (Christensen et al., 2023), hvor vi konkluderer, at køn gøres og forhandles på mange forskellige måder. Projektet viste, at der i børnehaverne både eksisterer praksisser, der åbner for, at børn kan gøre sig mangfoldige erfaringer med at være barn uanset køn og praksisser, som reproducerer og skaber traditionelle måder at gøre køn. I denne artikel zoomer vi ind på de måder, hvorpå traditionelle forståelser af køn utilsigtet konstrueres og reproduceres, netop fordi de går imod de politiske og pædagogiske hensigter, og fordi de samtidig ser ud til at være relativt upåagtet i den pædagogiske praksis. Med begrebet traditionelle forståelser af køn mener vi forståelser, hvor drenge og piger opfattes som grundlæggende forskellige i relation til adfærd, behov og interesser, og hvor piger i forlængelse heraf betragtes som mere sårbare, forsigtige, ansvarsfulde og relationelt orienterede end drenge, mens drenge opfattes som mere modige, fysiske, sagsorienterede og konkurrencefokuserede end piger.

KØN I BØRNEHAVEN I ET NORDISK PERSPEKTIV

Kønsforskningen på daginstitutionsområdet i Danmark er relativt begrænset (Kampmann, 2000; Olesen mfl., 2008; Thorsen, 2022, Christensen et al. 2023), hvis man sammenligner med skole- og uddannelsesområdet (Gilliam, 2009, 2018; Nielsen et al., 2018; Staunæs, 2004; Søndergaard, 2006; Frederiksen, 2015). Dykker man ned i daginstitutionsforskningen på tværs af Danmark, Sverige, Norge og Finland viser den, at børn på trods af politiske intentioner om ligebehandling og ligestilling alligevel behandles, fortolkes og vurderes forskelligt afhængigt af deres køn, samt at forståelser af det normale, passende og ideelle barn hænger tæt sammen med forståelser af køn. Det betyder, at drenge især mødes med forventninger om at være fysisk aktive, udfarende og om at tage plads,

mens piger i højere grad mødes med forventninger om at være stillesiddende, tilbageholdende og veltilpassede (Eidevald, 2009; Hellman, 2010; Hellman et al., 2014; Hallström et al., 2015; Månsson, 2011; Odenbring, 2010; Sandström et al., 2009; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Olesen, 2008; Thorsen, 2022). Yderligere viser et svensk/finsk studie, at pædagoger ofte antager, at børn foretrækker at lege med børn af samme biologiske køn som dem selv, og at pædagoger opfatter det som mere normalt og positivt, når børn danner kønshomogene relationer (Alasuutari & Markström, 2011). Ligeledes viser flere studier, at der er sammenhæng mellem institutionernes indretning, og hvad og hvem børnene leger med (Børve & Børve, 2017; Günther-Hanssen et al., 2019; Østrem et al., 2009).

TEORETISKE INSPIRATIONER

I artiklen anlægger vi et kulturanalytisk perspektiv og henter inspiration fra socialkonstruktionismen. I forlængelse heraf forstår vi mennesker som kulturelle væsner, der former og formes af de kulturelle sammenhænge, de indgår i. Desuden forstår vi børnehaven som en kulturskabende og kulturbærende institution, der producerer og trækker på kulturelle og samfundsmæssige værdier, idealer og normer for det gode børneliv, det passende barn og den ideelle barndom, og som et sted, der producerer kategorier, betydninger og forskelle, som har indflydelse på børns hverdagsliv (Gulløv et al., 2017; Hasse, 2011). Vi forstår kultur som "forbindelser mellem handlinger, materialitet og betydning" (Hasse, 2011), der over tid bliver til selvfølgelige tænke- og handlemåder, som er med til at forme, hvad der opfattes som normalt og afvigende, rigtigt og forkert. Samtidig forstår vi børn og pædagoger som kulturelle aktører, der er med til at producere, reproducere og forny børnehavens kultur og de kulturelle betydninger, der knytter sig til børnehavens materialiteter. I vores forståelse af materialitet er vi desuden inspireret af sociologen Madeleine Akrich (1989), som peger på at forskellige former for teknologier – i bred forstand – er designet ud fra et ideelt formål og med en ideel slutbruger som

modtager. Selvom mødet mellem teknologi, kontekst og bruger skabes i praksis, kommer teknologien/materialiteten samtidig med et designet *script* i form af en forventning, et ideal og en invitation til, hvor og hvordan materialiteten skal bruges, og dermed også med en række (fysiske) begrænsninger for, hvad den kan og ikke kan bruges til (Akrich, 1989). Udover de fysiske begrænsninger, som forskellige former for materialitet indebærer, har den samfundsmæssige og kulturelle kontekst, hvor materialitetens indbyggede *script* afkodes og fortolkes, ligeledes betydning for, hvordan materialiteter bruges og hvilke former for brug, der opfattes som normale.

Med inspiration fra Akrich forstår vi legetøj, legezoner og indretning af institutioner som materialiteter, der bærer et indbygget *script* om, hvilken adfærd, aktiviteter eller lege materialiteten lægger op til. I forlængelse heraf bruger vi begrebet *legescrpts* til at belyse, hvordan køn og kulturelle forståelser af leg kan hænge sammen. Et legescript skal her forstås som et mentalt og sprogligt handlingsrepertoire, der knytter bestemte roller, fortællinger, materialiteter og handlingsforløb sammen. I artiklen bruger vi disse perspektiver til at analysere, hvordan materialitet, pædagogiske idealer om børn og barndom, samt forståelser af køn, får betydning for de erfaringsrum, lege, fællesskaber og positioner, der skabes i børnehaven.

I vores forståelse af køn trækker vi på socialkonstruktionismen, som den udfoldes hos Dorte Marie Søndergaard (Søndergaard 1996) og Judith Butler (Butler 1990), hvor køn forstås som en social konstruktion, der produceres, reproducere og forandres historisk, socialt og kulturelt. I forlængelse heraf forstår vi køn som et performativt fænomen (Butler, 1990), hvilket vil sige, at køn både betragtes som et processuelt fænomen, der gøres, forhandles og herigennem konstrueres, samt som et fænomen, der har praktiske, materielle og identitetsmæssige effekter for konkrete mennesker. Samfundsmæssige og kulturelle konstruktioner af køn skabes, forhandles, brydes og udvides af mennesker gennem interaktioner. Samtidig taler konstruktionerne til os, trækker i os

og opsætter normer for, hvordan vi skal performe og citere køn på 'rigtige og passende måder'. Når mennesket citerer kønnede normer, vedligeholdes og naturaliseres disse, samtidig med at mennesker herigennem gør sig selv genkendelige, som kulturelt 'passende og normale subjekter'.

EMPIRISK FUNDAMENT

Artiklens analyser bygger på observationer foretaget i fire børnehaver med et fokus på at udforske, hvordan køn gøres og kommunikeres igennem sproglige ytringer, handlinger, samspil og materialitet (Hasse, 2011). De blev foretaget på baggrund af et åbent observationsdesign med fokus på at beskrive, hvad børn og pædagoger gør og siger til hinanden, hvad børn laver sammen, hvordan de kommunikerer med hinanden, hvad børn er optaget af, hvor de befinder sig, sammen med hvem, og hvordan pædagoger indgår i samspillet med og fortolker børnehavens børn. Børnehaverne er udvalgt efter geografisk og demografisk spredning og er forskellige i størrelse. I hver børnehave er der foretaget ni observationer af tre timers varighed over en periode på ti måneder. Inden observationerne blev børnenes forældre informeret om projektet og gjort opmærksom på deres mulighed for at trække deres børn ud af projektet. Samtidig sørgede vi løbende for at spørge børnene om tilladelse til at observere deres lege og aktiviteter. For at få indblik i pædagogers forståelser af og arbejde med køn har vi desuden afholdt tre refleksionsværksteder i hver af de deltagende børnehaver. På værkstederne, hvor der deltog mellem 6 og 20 pædagoger, fremlagde vi udpluk af vores empiri, lyttede til pædagogernes fortolkninger af empirien og fremlagde vores egne tentative analyser, som gav anledning til yderligere refleksion. Da projektet ikke var designet som et aktionsforskningsprojekt, fungerede værkstederne snarere som rum for fælles undren og refleksion end et værksted med fokus på udvikling af den pædagogiske praksis. Alle børn, pædagoger og institutioners navne er anonymiseret i artiklen.

Analytisk er materialet bearbejdet ved at læse på tværs af datamaterialet fra de fire institutioner med

henblik på at fremanalysere mønstre i, hvordan forståelser af køn konstrueres, og hvilke betydninger disse har for børns erfaringsrum og fællesskaber.

De empiriske observationer og citater, som indgår i artiklens analyser, skal ses som eksemplariske i den forstand, at de udgør eksempler på bredere mønstre i vores empiriske materiale. I analyserne har vi valgt at benytte os af betegnelserne *dreng* og *pige*, som emiske begreber og dermed i overensstemmelse med de måder, som børnene betegnede sig selv. Analysen udfolder ikke, hvordan pædagogerne mødte og fortolkede de børn, der ikke identificerede sig med det køn, de var blevet tildelt ved fødslen (for en udfoldelse heraf, se Christensen et al., 2023, kapitel 9).

I det følgende udfolder vi, hvordan børns sociale orienteringer, institutionernes materialitet og pædagogiske idealer som tre sammenhængende forhold er med til at reproducere traditionelle forståelser af køn.

BØRNS SOCIALE ORIENTERINGER OG MÅDER AT GØRE KØN

Det første forhold handler om, hvordan børnene i børnehaven orienterer sig i forhold til hinanden, og hvordan køn ser ud til at få betydning for, hvem børn leger med og hvad de leger. På tværs af de fire børnehaver ser vi, i lighed med Børve & Børve (2017), at selvom børnene ikke i særlig høj grad bruger køn som eksPLICIT in- og eksklusionskriterium i deres lege, så fordeler de sig alligevel i overvejende grad i kønshomogene grupper, hvor de ofte leger kønstraditionelle lege i de tidsrum, hvor de selv må bestemme, hvad de skal lave. Det vil sige, at pigerne typisk leger en version af *far, mor og børn, butikslige* eller *prinsesselege*, mens drengene typisk leger forskellige former for superheltelege med biler eller med forskellige former for konstruktionslegetøj. Det er ikke sådan, at drenge og piger slet ikke leger sammen i børnehaverne. Det er dog primært de mindre børnehavebørn på mellem tre og tre et halvt år, der leger på tværs af køn, mens de fire- og fem-årige børn typisk leger i kønshomogene grupper, medmindre børnene er i familie med hinanden eller kender hinanden uden

for institutionen. Dette mønster, som også genkendes af pædagogerne, forstår vi som udtryk for, at børn i og uden for børnehaven med alderen lærer kulturens forbindelser mellem køn, kroppe, venskaber og legeformer at kende, samt som udtryk for, at de bliver mere bevidste om at handle i overensstemmelse med disse. Ved at iagttage, hvem andre børn leger med, og hvad de leger, lærer børn, således hvem det er 'normalt', 'passende' og 'legitimt' at opsøge og danne relationer til og hvilke former for lege, det er normalt at lege, når man har de kønnede kropstegn, man har. Herigennem lærer børn særlige måder at gøre køn på, ligesom de ved at finde sammen i kønshomogene grupper, kan gøre sig selv genkendelige for hinanden, som 'passende' drenge og piger og dermed også som attraktive legekammerater, der signalerer 'rigtig 'drengethed' og 'pigethed'.

I vores empiri har vi flere eksempler på, at børnene, især drengene, praktiserer at kalde hinanden på plads eller tilbage i den herskende kønstraditionelle orden, hvis nogle skulle komme til at udfordre de gængse måder at gøre køn på, en smule for meget. Det sker fx igennem verbale kommentarer, som når Gustav (fire et halvt) siger: "kom vi leger ikke med dukker vel?" ved synet af August (fire et halvt), der standser op og med stor interesse iagttager tre pigers leg med nogle af børnehavens dukker. Andre gange sker det igennem kropslige handlinger, forhandlinger og positioneringer, som det fx gør sig gældende i følgende eksempel:

Vi befinder os på en af stuerne i børnehaven Nelliakbakken, hvor børnene er i gang med at lege. I en legekrog sidder fire-årige Alfred og August. De jævnaldrende Pelle, Erik og Gustav kommer til. Alfred rejser sig og henter en dukke fra en af kasserne, som han holder i armene, som om den var levende. "Skal vi ikke sige, at det her var vores baby?", siger han. De øvrige drenge flokkes om ham. Pelle knipses dukken i hovedet. "Stop, stop, stop", siger Alfred højt og løfter dukken op i vejret. Da han tager den ned igen, bukser Erik sig ned og bider dukken i øret, mens Gustav begynder at slå dukken i hovedet. "Det gør ondt på dens hoved", siger Alfred og krammer den ind til sig.

Erik, som nu er på knæ, bider efter Alfreds fødder. Lidt som om han leger, han er en hund. "Nej, nej, nej", siger Alfred igen. Pelle hiver bukserne af dukken, og Alfred tager igen dukken op over hovedet, men Pelle fortsætter, og August hjælper til. "I er megairriterende", siger Alfred og flytter sig over i den anden ende af legekrogen, hvor han sætter sig med dukken på skødet. De andre drenge begynder at rulle rundt på gulvet. August og Erik finder en dukke i en kasse samt en potte og begynder at pille dukken i numsen og sige, at den laver lort. De griner. Alfred råber, at han siger det til sin far, som kommer og giver dem tæsk. De øvrige drenge ignorerer ham. Alfred sidder lidt uden at sige noget. De øvrige drenge fjoller sammen og slår på dukken og spreder dens ben og griner. De henvender sig ikke til Alfred. Så tager Alfred bukserne af sin dukke og råber: "Hvem vil have de her sure bukser?". Han smider dem hen til drengene. De kigger på ham, men svarer ikke. "Ha ha ha", råber Alfred så med høj stemme. "Min har også bar røv". Han svinger dukken i benet. De andre drenge kravler hen til ham, og de begynder at slås og kaste med dukkerne.

Man kan forstå Alfreds orientering mod børnehavens dukker som et udspil til at gøre dreng på andre måder end de traditionelle, som imidlertid overskridet de øvrige drenges opfattelser af, hvordan man kan lege med dukker på legitime måder, når man er en dreng. Med udgangspunkt i Butlers begrebsrepertoire kan man forstå situationen som udtryk for, at Alfred ikke performer køn i overensstemmelse med de kulturelle forbindelser mellem køn, leg og legetøj, som de øvrige drenge trækker på, hvilket de gør Alfred opmærksom på. Både ved at overtage hans leg; ved at demonstrere hvordan legen skal leges, samt ved i sidste ende at ignorere Alfred. Situationen kan i dette lys betragtes som et eksempel på, at børnenes måder at gøre køn har sociale konsekvenser. For igen at fremstå som en legitim og passende deltager i drengenes fællesskab må Alfred overgive sig til og lade sig indrullere i den traditionelle måde at gøre dreng på. Det kræver, at han viser, at han også kan være voldsom og nedværdigende over for dukken og indgå i slåskampslignende lege. Herigennem gør han

sig igen genkendelig som 'passende og rigtig dreng', der ikke længere udfordrer måden at gøre dreng på ved at nærme sig det, der kulturelt set forbindes med pigenkønnets være- og legemåder. På den måde viser eksemplet, at der er grænser for, hvordan man kan performe sit køn, hvis man skal opfattes som legitimt medlem af fællesskabet og som en 'rigtig dreng'.

Vi ser også andre eksempler på, hvordan børn trækker på og aktiverer traditionelle forståelser af køn, når de forsøger at skabe og vedligeholde fællesskaber. For flere af drengenes vedkommende gøres dette igen-nem verbal afstandtagen til ting og fænomener, der kulturelt set forbinder sig med pigenkønnet. På denne måde markeres det, hvilke børn der hører sammen, og hvilke børn der adskiller sig fra hinanden.

Vi befinder os i Marguerithuset, som er en aldersintegreret børnehave. Her har fire børn sat sig ved et bord for at tegne. På bordet ligger en mappe med kopiark. Øverst ligger en kopi af en prinsesse. "Ad", siger Frederik på fem år og skubber chartekket lidt væk. Sebastian, som også er fem år, siger også "ad" og skubber til chartekket. Frederik tager fat i mappen og tager kopiarket ud. "Ej en til af de grimme", siger han, da han opdager, at den næste også forestiller en prinsesse. "Hvorfor er der kun de her grimme?" Anton på fire et halvt år begynder også at bladre i mappen med kopiark. "Hvorfor er der kun pigeting?", spørger han. Sebastian får øje på en halv farvelagt kopitegning af en prinsesse. "Ad en pige", siger han og vipper den ned fra bordet med en blyant, så han ikke skal røre ved den. Frederik siger, at det er Elsa. Han rejser sig og tager tegningen op fra gulvet og siger, at Elsa er grim. Så krøller han tegningen sammen. Anton har lagt mappen fra sig og tager et kopiark af en prinsesse. Han løfter det op i vejret og viser, at han skal til at rive det midt over. Han kigger på observatøren, som spørger ham, om han ikke vil farvelægge kopitegningen. Han ryster på hovedet. Observatøren spørger, om hun skal hjælpe ham med at finde en kopi, han kan farvelægge. Han nikker og tager mappen. "Det skal være en, der skyder", siger han.

Som i det forrige eksempel med drengen Alfred,

kommunikeres og markeres det her, hvad der hører til, og især hvad der ikke hører til drengekønnet, og hvad man således i hvert fald ikke skal gå op i eller kunne lide, hvis man er en dreng. Således ser vi en tendens til, at drenge skaber fællesskaber ved at markere forskelle til piger, mens mange af pigerne i højere grad er optaget af at skabe fællesskaber og relationer til andre piger ved at påpege enskab. Det gør sig især gældende ved at påskønne andre pigers ejendele, ved at sammenligne eller komplimentere tøj, spænder, hårbøjler, smykker eller andre *accessories*, som traditionelt set forbinder sig til pigenkønnet. Det kan fx være ved at sige: "Se, jeg har også lyserøde strømpebukser på", ved at sige: "Ej, en pæn bluse, du har på, sådan én kunne jeg også godt tænke mig" eller ved at spørge, om man må prøve hårbøjlen, spændet eller armbåndet, som en anden pige har på. Denne påpegning af enskab og pænhed fungerer ofte som en yderst virksom kontaktform, der fører til yderligere interaktioner og legefællesskaber blandt pigerne, men er samtidig også indirekte med til at reproducere pigenkønnet som ét, der især genkendes og anerkendes på de måder, hun ser ud.

I vores materiale ser vi en tendens til, at børnene opsøger hinanden på tværs af køn, men også at deres lege enten nemt går i opløsning eller efter kort tid bliver til et kønshomogent legefællesskab, fordi 'det ene køn' forlader legen. Når børnehavens børn således relativt ofte leger i kønshomogene grupper, hvor de typisk leger kønstraditionelle lege, får det betydning for, hvilke erfaringer de får med at lære forskellige legescripts at kende og deres roller og indhold. Det betyder, at børnenes viden og erfaringer med at lege (deres legereferencer) bliver forskellige, og at det dermed kan blive vanskeligt (eller endnu vanskeligere) for dem at koble sig på lege med det andet køn. Denne analyse understøttes af forskning, der fremhæver fælles referencer som betydningsfulde for børns lege og fællesskaber (Jørgensen & Koch, 2018; Prins, 2019; Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008). Følgende observation er et eksempel på, at børn på tværs af køn opsøger hinanden og gerne vil lege, men også på, at det kan være svært at følge hinandens udspil og ideer til legens forløb, hvis ikke man kender til de

legescripts, som de andre børn trækker på.

Vi befinder os igen i Marguerithuset, hvor vi har observeret, at Grete og Peter på fire år ofte søger hinanden. Det samme gør sig gældende i dag, hvor Peter har stillet alle bilerne op ad en af væggene i børnehaven, mens Grete sidder ved siden af og begynder at tale om, at nogle af bilerne skal i børnehaven, og at hun er en baby. Peter kigger på hende og tager nogle flere biler og stiller op på rækken. Grete kravler rundt på gulvet og snurrer rundt på numsen. "Så er der en af bilerne, der slipper fri", siger Peter og tager en af bilerne og kører den stærkt hen over gulvet. "Den er sluppet fri, politiet må fange den", siger han. Han tager en anden bil og følger efter. Grete kigger på hans leg og snurrer igen rundt på numsen og siger som en baby. Peter kigger på hende. "Her er mad", siger han til hende. Hun tager imod noget usynligt mad og fortsætter med at dreje rundt på numsen. "Så skulle vi lege med biler, baby", siger Peter. Baby tager tre biler og kører dem langt væk med fuld fart. "Neeeeejjj", råber Peter. Grete rejser sig fra gulvet og sætter sig op til to andre piger, der sidder tæt på og tegner. "Kom nu Grete", siger Peter. Men Grete reagerer ikke. I stedet siger hun til de to piger, der tegner: "Jeg kan godt tegne en rigtig flot enhjørning". "Må vi se?", svarer en af pigerne, og Grete går i gang med at tegne. Peter sidder i hjørnet med bilerne med korrslagte arme og kigger på at Grete tegner, mens de øvrige piger fortæller hende, at hun tegner flot. Kort efter kommer August og Villads på fire år og begynder at lege med biler sammen med ham. De hjælper Peter med at stille bilerne op på række.

Selvom Peter udviser god forståelse for, at Grete gerne vil lege baby og forsøger at inkludere baby-legen i sin egen bil-leg, viser eksemplet også, at det i sidste ende bliver vanskeligt for Grete og Peter at forene deres erfaringer og viden i en fælles leg med fælles retning. Derimod har Grete med sit kendskab til enhjørninger tilsyneladende ikke vanskeligt ved at få adgang til og at koble sig på tegnefællesskabet med to andre piger. Her bliver hun genkendt og anerkendt som deltager med relevant viden, der kan bidrage til fællesskabet og den fælles aktivitet. At også August

og Villads, med en tilsyneladende lethed kan afkode og koble sig på Peters leg, kan forklares med, at de ofte også selv leger med biler og derfor kender legescriptet og således har mange referencer at trække på i forhold til, hvordan man leger bil-leg. Hvis drenge og pigers legereferencer og erfaringer er for forskellige, kan det således blive for vanskeligt at etablere fælles lege. Samtidig viser eksemplet, at materialiteter som biler, dukker, enhjørninger og tegnebordet udgør vigtige elementer i børns forhandlinger om, hvad og hvordan der skal/kan leges.

I det følgende afsnit kigger vi nærmere på, hvordan materialiteter i form af børnehavernes indretning og legetøj spiller en aktiv rolle i reproduktionen af traditionelle forståelser af køn, og hvordan materialitet herigennem får betydning for børns lege, erfaringer og fællesskaber.

MATERIALITET SOM REPRODUCERENDE KRAFT

I tre af de fire institutioner er stuerne indrettet med en dukke-/køkkenkrog med dukker, senge, køkkening, dukketøj osv., samt et bilhjørne, ofte markeret med et tæppe med veje og huse til at køre med bilerne på, et P-hus og kasser med biler. Derudover er der kasser med legetøj, som børnene selv kan tage frem. Det er fx kasser med Barbieting, My Little Pony, Ninja Turtles og superheltefigurer. Desuden er der alle steder kasser med Lego, magneter eller andet konstruktionsmateriale, der ofte også har et fast hjørne eller er markeret på en reol, hvor børnene selv kan trække kasserne ud. Institutionerne har ofte også et område, hjørne eller rum med klæd-ud-tøj, et hjørne med bøger og puder og forskellige typer af tumlerum, samt en legeplads med forskellige oplæg til bevægelse og leg. Herunder en fodboldbane og forskellige former for små legehuse. Både ude og inde er institutionerne typisk indrettede sådan, at der kan foregå flere ting på samme tid i de tidsrum på dagen, hvor børnene selv kan vælge, hvor de vil lege og med hvad.

Denne indretning, der kan genfindes i mange andre

daginstitutioner i forskellige variationer (Prins, 2019; Gulløv, 2012), kan ses som en installation, der med sit oplæg, inviterer til, at børnene af sig selv fordeler sig efter interesse for at lege netop den slags lege, som installationen lægger op til.

I det forrige afsnit viste vi, hvordan børnene ofte fordeler sig i kønshomogene legegrupper. I det følgende kigger vi nærmere på, hvordan disse fordelinger kan forstås som en interaktion med de materielle oplæg, invitationer og scripts, som børnehavernes indretning er præget af, og som så at sige kalder på børn med bestemte kroppe og på den måde er med til at fordele børnehavens børn. Med inspiration fra Akrich (Akrich, 1989), skelner vi mellem det, vi kalder for prækønnet legetøj, som er legetøj, der i sin udformning og branding, kommer med et mere eller mindre færdigt legescript for den ideelle brug, og legetøj, der ikke i sig selv kommer med et prækønnet script, men som kulturelt set forbindes med kroppe med bestemte kropstegn og bestemte former for leg.

Kategorien prækønnet legetøj betegner materialitet, som på forhånd er kodet som enten maskuline eller feminine figurer, såsom Barbiedukker, mandlige superhelte, riddere, Ninja Turtels, Disney-prinsesser osv., og som i de fleste institutioner også genfindes i samlingen af klæd-ud- tøj, samt i mappen med kopiark, som vi så i forrige afsnit. Det er materialiteter, der for en stor dels vedkommende indgår i kommercielle forbindelser med film, spil, bøger osv., hvorfra børnene kender det script, som materialiteten forbinder sig til; hvad de gør, hvad de kan, hvilke opgaver de har, hvad der overgår dem osv. Man kan sige, at materialiteten her kommer med et relativt omfattende legescript, idet figurerne allerede indgår i en fortælling om, hvad og hvordan der kan leges. De kommer desuden også med en relativt klar fortælling om, hvilke børn materialiteten henvender sig til, dvs. hvem den ideelle slutbruger er, hvilket meget ofte enten er piger eller drenge. Når Frederik og August ikke vil farvelægge, endsige røre ved et kopiark med prinsesser på, og hellere vil have "en, der skyder", kan det således ses som et udtryk for, at de opfatter de forskellige figurer som nogle, der hører til enten

hos det ene eller det andet køn. Desuden forbinder ideen om slutbrugeren sig ofte til stærke velkendte kulturelle forståelser af køn, som fx at drenge/mænd er stærke og modige, hvilket passer godt til figurer som Hulk og Spiderman, mens prinsessekjolerne og Barbiedukkerne forbinder sig godt til forståelser af piger/ kvinder som smukke og omsorgsfulde, og som nogle der er optagede af deres udseende. På den måde kan materialiteten være med til at reproducere og forstærke særlige kulturelle forståelser af, hvad der er passende for forskellige børn med forskellige kropstegn at beskæftige sig med, ligesom de kulturelle forståelser af køn kan understøtte materialitetens ideelle formål og idé om en slutbruger, samt være med til at gøre den genkendelig og attraktiv for bestemte børn med særlige kropstegn. Forbindelserne mellem materialitet, legscripts og bestemte køn forstærkes desuden også af velkendte kulturelle forbindelser, der er bredt til stede i massekulturen, også udenfor institutionen, og som børnene derfor genkender, bringer i spil og til tider efterspørger i institutionen. Disse forbindelser er samtidig også mulige at skabe og reproducere, netop på grund af tilstedeværelsen af prækønnet legetøj i institutionerne. Yderligere ser det genkendelige legescript ud til at gøre det nemt for henholdsvis piger og drenge at koble sig på disse, fordi de kender til rollebesætningen, de typiske legeforløb og de mulige retninger, legen kan udvikle sig i, mens det ser ud til at være vanskeligt for børn at involvere sig i lege og benytte sig af legetøj, hvis deres køn ikke matcher legescriptets prædefinerede kønnede koder. Det prækønnede legetøjs tætte forbindelse til kønnede legescripts ser således ud til at understøtte, at børnene ofte leger kønstraditionelle lege.

I institutionerne findes også legetøj og legezoner, der ikke på samme måde, i sig selv kommer med eksplícitte invitationer til bestemte kønnede slutbrugere og kønstraditionelle lege, men alligevel kulturelt set ser ud til at indgå i relativt stærke forbindelser med bestemte køn og bestemte former for (kønnet) leg. Det kan forstås som udtryk for, at materialitetens invitationer fletter sig sammen med kulturelle normer for køn. Det gør sig fx gældende for dukkekrogen, hvor vi især iagttager, at piger leger og bilhjørnet,

hvor vi især iagttager, at drenge leger. Med udgangspunkt i begrebet om legescripts kan dette mønster forklares som udtryk for, at kulturelle forståelser af drenge som nogle, der især interesserer sig for teknik, fart og komplekse konstruktioner, forbinder sig til bilens indbyggede invitationer, som handler om at få bilen til at køre, bremse, parkere, dreje, mv. Ligesom dukkens materielle invitationer til at give den mad, omsorg og tøj på, forbinder sig til forståelser af piger som nogle, der er gode til omsorg, relationer og hjemmeliv. Selvom disse typer af materialiteter ikke i sig selv bærer specifikt prækønnede invitationer, ser de således alligevel ud til at indgå i forbindelser med dominerende og kulturelt kønnede normer, der gør dukkeleg til et mere oplagt og kulturelt genkendeligt valg for piger og bil-leg til en mere attraktiv og legitim leg for drenge. Selve tilstedeværelsen af dukkekroge og bilhjørner ser således ud til at understøtte børns egne fordelinger i kønshomogene grupper, som vi viste i forrige afsnit. Analysen af materialitetens betydning for de legescripts, som børn lærer at kende, kan samtidig bidrage til at belyse, hvad det er for kræfter der kalder på Grete og Peter, som læseren mødte i forrige afsnit, og som trækker dem ind i hver sin leg og på den måde er med til at spænde ben for deres ønske om at lege sammen.

Sammen med det prækønnede legetøj, ser legetøj, der kulturelt set forbindes til det ene eller det andet køn, således ud til at understøtte reproduktionen af kønsstereotype forestillinger om, hvad drenge og piger leger med og bør interessere sig for.

KØNSFORSTÅELSER OG PÆDAGOGISKE IDEALER BLANDT PÆDAGOGER

I det næste afsnit udfolder vi, hvordan generelle idealer i daginstitutionspædagogikken fletter sig sammen med forståelser af køn og herigennem giver anledning til, at børns kønstraditionelle lege utilsigtet reproduceres i den pædagogiske praksis. Det på trods af en udbredt intention blandt pædagogerne om, at køn ikke bør have betydning for de muligheder, børn tilbydes, eller for de måder, de mødes på i institutionen (Prins et. al., 2024). At børn skal mødes

lige uanset køn, kommer til udtryk på refleksionsværkstederne, når en pædagog fx siger: "Det er vores rolle at sætte aktiviteter i gang, hvor begge køn kan være med", mens en anden siger: "Vi bør snakke køn, hver gang vi snakker læringsmiljø, så vi kan tilbyde forskellige ting og man har hele paletten, så der kan være mandlige og kvindelige kokke, og så det er ok at være dreng og lege med Barbie". Ligeledes er pædagogerne enige om, at ansvaret for at skabe læringsmiljøer med mangfoldige muligheder for at gøre køn, ligger hos dem. Det udtrykkes fx på følgende måde: "Det er lige meget, hvad vi taler om, så kommer vi frem til, at det ender ved os og ikke ved børnene (...) fordi det er os, der introducerer børnene til alle de her normer omkring køn (...) derfor er det også sindssygt vigtigt, at vi reflekterer over vores praksis og vores forståelser af køn". En anden pædagog siger: "Jeg synes ikke vi gør forskel på køn, og det skal vi heller ikke. Børn skal behandles forskelligt, men ikke på grund af deres køn, men på grund af den personlighed de nu engang har".

Når kønstraditionelle lege på trods af disse idealer alligevel understøttes, kan det ses i lyset af to helt centrale og udbredte idealer i daginstitutionsfeltet, som ser ud til at forbinde sig til køn på ubemærkede måder. Det drejer sig om henholdsvis at sikre, at alle børn er med i gode legefællesskaber, samt at anerkende børns udtryk og interesser. Begge idealer kan siges at være definerende for de senere årtiers udvikling i børnesynet og de pædagogiske værdier inden for daginstitutionspædagogikken (Kristensen & Bayer, 2015; Broström, 2021; Gulløv, 2015) og kan desuden genfindes som centrale værdier i den nordiske førskolepædagogik (Johansson, 2018). Yderligere fremgår værdierne også i "Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan" (Børne- og Socialministeriet, 2018) som centrale grundsten for udviklingen af pædagogiske læringsmiljøer, idet læringsmiljøer skal tage udgangspunkt i børnenes perspektiver (Ibid, 16) og al leg, dannelse og læring skal finde sted i børnefællesskaber (Ibid, 21).

Pædagogerne gjorde sig i forlængelse heraf en del overvejelser om, hvordan børnehavens børn kunne

fordeles hensigtsmæssigt, når de fx skulle organisere spisegrupper, turgrupper, aktivitetsgrupper eller legegrupper, så sammensætningen bedst muligt kunne styrke børnenes fællesskaber. Ved disse fordelinger fremstår køn ofte som en slags fordelingsnøgle, der betyder at grupperne enten består udelukkende af det ene køn eller af en ligelig fordeling af begge køn. Argumentet bag denne fordeling er, at børn leger bedst med andre børn af samme køn, og at der således vil være større chance for, at børnene vil finde gode legekammerater, når de er sammen med andre børn af samme køn. Det kommer bl.a. til udtryk, når der skal sammensættes turgrupper, hvor der skal være gode legekammerater til alle og når de skal omorganiseres, hvis nogle af børnene bliver syge og derfor ikke kan komme med på tur. I disse situationer bliver det som i nedenstående eksempel vigtigt, at der findes et andet barn med samme køn, så de potentielle (kønshomogene) legerelationer ikke ødelægges.

I børnehaven skal en mindre gruppe børn fra Søløvestuen på tur. Børnene er på forhånd inddelt i turgrupper, men Sisse er desværre blevet syg. Tilbage er Elina, Thor, Alex, Albert og Simon, som alle sammen er fire et halvt-fem år.

Pædagogen Zascha siger til pædagogen Sanne: "Skal vi tage Majse med på tur, så der er en veninde til Elina?" Sanne siger, hun synes, det er en god ide, "så bliver det ikke alt for kedeligt for Elina". Majse hopper ned fra bordet. Hun vil gerne med.

Som det fremgår af eksemplet, ser der ud til at være en bekymring for, at Elina kan komme til at kede sig, hvis der ikke er andre piger og kønsfordelingen dermed bliver skæv. I sådanne situationer, taler pædagogerne ofte om, at det er "synd" for barnet, og at de derfor bliver nødt til at finde et andet godt "match" til barnet. Det forekommer fx i følgende situation: Medhjælperen Sisse og pædagogen Jørgen taler om, at bordene står godt, og at det fungerer godt, at de store spiser ude, selvom det er lidt synd for Sine som nok føler sig lidt alene, da hun er den eneste pige på stuen..

Forestillingen om, at drenge og piger ikke udgør den

samme tryghed for hinanden, eller leger lige så godt sammen, som drenge leger med drenge og piger leger med piger, kommer også til udtryk på vores refleksionsværksteder, hvor pædagogerne taler om deres pædagogiske arbejde med at understøtte børnenes venskaber og relationer. I det følgende citat kommer vi ind i samtalen, hvor en af pædagogerne fortæller, hvordan hun har arbejdet med at styrke børnenes relationer i forbindelse med overgangen fra vuggestue til børnehave og hvordan dette arbejde ofte følger en kønnet logik. Hun siger:

"Jeg syntes bare, det var vigtigt, at der var to jævnaldrende piger, der kunne følges, og to jævnaldrende drenge, der kunne følges, så det er derfor, vi netop arbejdede med at styrke disse børns relation til hinanden (...) det er jo, fordi jeg bruger min erfaring. Jeg har også lige nu Sigrid og Ingrid derinde (i vuggestuen). De har det fantastisk sammen, de leger med dukker og alt muligt, og nu skal de så skilles ad, fordi Ingrid skal i børnehave. Så for mig er det vigtigt, at Sigrid får en anden pige, der kan udfylde den rolle, som Ingrid har haft".

Som det fremgår af alle tre situationer, væves forståelser af den gode legerelation sammen med pædagogens arbejde med at skabe gode fællesskaber for børn, hvor forestillingen om, at kønshomogene relationer skaber de bedste legefællesskaber, bliver styrende for, hvilke relationer og legefællesskaber pædagogerne arbejder på at understøtte. Som en pædagog fx siger: "Det handler også om, at hvis jeg sidder med seks piger og én dreng, og den dreng vil lege med biler, og pigerne ønsker mest at lege med dukker, så bliver det svært at skabe fælles lege".

Det ser således ud til at de pædagogiske idealer om at sikre, at alle børn er med i fællesskaberne, i kombination med forståelser af drenge og piger som mere eller mindre naturligt væsensforskellige, kommer til at understøtte forestillingen om at kønshomogene relationer er de mest normale og naturlige. Noget som samtidig medvirker til at børn gør sig mange erfaringer med at lege de samme kønstraditionelle lege.

Det ligeledes udbredte pædagogiske ideal, som handler om at anerkende børns perspektiver, ønsker og interesser for at møde barnet som subjekt og give det indflydelse på sit eget liv, er ligeledes utilsigtet med til at understøtte børns kønstraditionelle lege. Det skyldes, at det anerkendende ideal ofte giver anledning til, at børns udspil, præferencer og interesser betragtes som indre, individuelle og naturlige forhold, "der kommer fra barnet selv", som det ofte udtrykkes, fremfor forhold, der er sociale og kulturelle og dermed som nogle, der må forstås i relation til de kønnede kulturelle forståelsesrammer, som børnene har været, og er, en del af. I relation til køn ser idealet om den anerkendende tilgang ud til at betyde, at børns kønstraditionelle lege ofte opfattes som udtryk for børns egne autentiske valg, præferencer og interesser, som pædagogerne derfor ikke skal udfordre, forstyrre eller sætte spørgsmålstegn ved. I stedet opfattes det snarere som noget, pædagogerne skal beskytte, anerkende og understøtte ved fx at etablere særlige legezoner med legetøj, der kan understøtte børnenes leg (fx dukkekrog og bilhjørner) ved at 'matche' børnene i legegrupper, som vi beskrev ovenfor, eller ved at indkøbe legetøj, der matcher børnenes præferencer (som fx prinsessekjoler og superheltekostumer). Samtidig med at pædagogerne generelt er optagede af at arbejde bevidst med at udvikle børns alsidige kompetencer (fx motorisk, sprogligt og socialt) og udvide deres nysgerrighed, interesser og erfaringsrum (gennem en vifte af forskellige aktiviteter både i og udenfor institutionen), ser det således ud til, at pigers interesser for prinsessekjoler og familielege og drenge interesser for superhelte og biler, mere eller mindre opfattes som 'naturlige' udtryk for indre præferencer, som derfor betragtes som erfaringsrum, som pædagogerne ikke oplever de skal præge og udvide. Denne forståelse, kommer bl.a. til udtryk i følgende udsagn fra et af refleksionsværkstederne, hvor en pædagog fortæller om, hvordan hun oplever, at drenge og piger på hendes stue har meget forskellige interesser, som hun meget gerne vil imødekomme for at anerkende børnenes perspektiver:

"Børnene fra store gruppen har ryddet op og kommer ind til mellemgruppen med en kasse

med biler. Drengene kaster sig over bilerne, mens pigerne begynder at brokke sig: 'Ej er der ingen pigeting', siger de. Så siger jeg til dem: 'Der er biler. Dem kan piger også lege med'. Men alligevel tænker jeg, at det jo er rigtigt, der er ikke så meget, pigerne kan lege med, fordi der er så mange drenge på stuen. Derfor er det lidt blevet til en drengeverden herinde, og det er pigerne meget bevidste om, og der tænker jeg jo også, jeg skal lytte til".

Kombinationen af det pædagogiske ideal om vigtigheden af at anerkende barnets interesser og perspektiver, og børnenes udtrykte ønsker om at lege med forskellige ting, giver således kraft og legitimitet til at pædagogerne understøtter børnenes kønstraditionelle valg af lege, legetøj og relationer, samtidig med at idealet om anerkendelse slører de kønstraditionelle kræfter, der samtidig er på spil og står i modsætning til pædagogernes intentioner om at køn ikke skal have indflydelse på børns muligheder og erfaringsrum i daginstitutionen.

AFSLUTTENDE PERSPEKTIVER

Som vi har vist i artiklen, væver børns (tillærte) sociale orienteringer og kønnede præferencer, institutionens materialitet samt pædagogiske idealer og forståelser af køn, sig snævert sammen og giver kraft til kønstraditionelle reproducerende praksisser. Det vil sige praksisser, der fastholder traditionelle og til tider stereotype forståelser af køn, som kommer til at præge de forståelsesrammer og erfaringsrum, som børn er en del af. Der er således tale om et komplekst samspil mellem forskellige reproducerende forhold, der er med til at skabe de rammer, hvorigennem børn lærer om kønsstereotype forståelser af, hvem de er, hvad de kan, hvad de bør interessere sig for og hvem de bør lege med, som dermed modvirker de politiske og pædagogiske ambitioner om, at køn ikke skal betyde noget for de muligheder, man tilbydes som barn. På den måde peger analysen på, at børn allerede fra en tidlig alder møder en række af de kønsulighedsstillende forhold, som "Den styrkede pædagogiske læreplan" ønsker at bekæmpe

(Social- og undervisningsministeriet, 2018), og at dette samtidig sker på upåagtede måder, som kommer bag på pædagogerne. Artiklen illustrerer således et behov for at refleksioner over kønnede forståelser og deres betydninger bliver en langt større del af den pædagogiske praksis, hvor køn ikke blot forstås som et fænomen, der ikke skal ses for at møde barnet, 'som det er' eller som en biologisk størrelse, hvor drenge

og piger betragtes som grundlæggende forskellige. I stedet må køn i højere grad forstås som et socialt og kulturelt fænomen, der konstrueres i tæt samspil med børns institutionelle hverdagsliv, materialiteter, legescripts og velmenende pædagogiske idealer som daginstitutioner og pædagoger kan være med til at forme.

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Bandits and Prostitutes:

The Role of Gender in the
Stigmatization of Former
Child Soldiers

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ABSTRACT

Returning home and reintegrating into families and communities often pose significant challenges for former child soldiers, who frequently face profound stigmatization. Yet little is known about what motivates this stigma and how it differs between returning boy and girl soldiers. Through a feminist analysis of narratives from former child soldiers and their community members, this article examines how gendered threat perceptions shape negative attitudes toward returning child soldiers in CAR and DRC. The comparative analysis reveals that while returning boy soldiers are primarily perceived as physical threats, returning girl soldiers are often viewed as symbolic threats to the community's sense of ontological security. These binary perceptions, however, do not necessarily reflect reality, as girls are often involved in violence and boys also experience sexual exploitation. Instead, they illustrate how stigmatizing narratives are deeply shaped by gendered expectations to the roles, identities, and behaviors of boys and girls. Beyond advancing knowledge of the gendered nature of the stigmatization of former child soldiers, this study situates the phenomenon of stigma within broader patriarchal power structures, demonstrating how stigma serves to uphold and reinforce existing gendered hierarchies. Addressing this stigma, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that challenges these underlying hierarchies and power dynamics within affected communities.

**STIGMATIZATION, GENDER, CHILD SOLDIERS,
REINTEGRATION, FEMINIST NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

INTRODUCTION

Across conflict zones, the recruitment of children by armed forces and groups remains a persistent problem, with a particular prevalence in central Africa. Children are recruited for various purposes including as combatants, cooks, spies, porters, “wives” and for sexual exploitation. Some child soldiers are released as part of a peace agreement or a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, resulting from negotiations by an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO), or payments made by their parents. Others manage to escape or negotiate their demobilization independently (Verhey, 2003, p. 13; War Child, 2018). However, returning home and reintegrating into families and communities have proved to be a troublesome affair for many children and young adults (Akello et al., 2006; Derluyn et al., 2013; Mazurana et al., 2002; Tonheim, 2012; 2014, 2017).

Existing research demonstrates how former child soldiers often return to precarious life situations characterized by poverty, lack of opportunities and severe stigmatization (Betancourt et al., 2010; Hartog et al., 2020; Vindelvoel, et al., 2012). Stigmatization is often identified as a core obstacle faced by returning child soldiers which both impacts their reintegration and general well-being (Betancourt et al., 2010, 2019; Denov & Marchard, 2014; Tonheim, 2012; McKay, 2005). Interviews reveal that large numbers of former child soldiers consider or decide to return to armed groups due to rejection and lack of acceptance by their family and community. This is making stigmatization a significant risk factor for re-recruitment (Child Soldier International, 2017; UNSC, 2019). In addition, research indicates that community acceptance is more significant for the psychosocial recovery of former child soldiers than the level of violence and abuse they experienced within the armed group (Betancourt et al., 2010; Tonheim, 2014). To advance family and community acceptance of former child soldiers, I argue that a deeper understanding is needed on what motivates this stigma and why it is so prevalent. This entails an examination of how

stigma is closely connected to threat perceptions that are embedded within a broader system of gendered power structures.

A growing field of literature demonstrates how former girl soldiers, in particular, face stigmatization upon return and highlights the connection to established gender norms within the given society (Haer, 2018; Mazurana, 2002; Tonheim, 2017). However, it is well-documented that many boys also experience severe stigmatization when returning to the communities. Former boy soldiers have, for example, reported discriminating treatment, degradation, and exclusion after demobilization, affecting their mental well-being and life opportunities, while putting them at high risk of re-recruitment (Mukosa, 2014; War Child, 2018). Yet, there is a tendency to leave gender out of the analysis when the experience of returning boy soldiers is investigated. This omission reproduces a flawed idea of “gender” being equivalent to “women” which clouds the understanding of how gendered stereotypes and norms are not only affecting women and girls, but also men and boys. To adequately encapsulate the dynamics between gender and the stigmatization of former child soldiers, this article explores the gendered dimension of stigmatization of *both* boys and girls in a comparable analysis. This approach contributes to elucidating how this stigmatization is deeply motivated by gendered threat perceptions, produced by norms and stereotypes that function to reproduce particular gendered hierarchies.

In this article, I examine this dynamic in two selected case studies: the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These countries have recorded some of the highest numbers of child soldiers in recent decades, with girls being recruited at rates nearly equal to those of boys. In the DRC, for example, an estimated 40% of child soldiers are girls, while in CAR, girls constitute approximately 30–40% of recruited children. These cases are therefore well-suited for studying the role of gender in the stigmatization of both boys and girls (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8; World Vision 2019, p. 12).

To analyze the underlying motivations of the stigmatization of former child soldiers in CAR and DRC, I establish an analytical framework using the concepts of *symbolic threats* and *physical threats*. Physical threats refer to tangible threats against a groups or individual's "power, [material] resources, and general welfare," whereas symbolic threats refer to immaterial threats against a groups or individual's "religion, values, belief-system, ideology, morality and/or worldview" (Stephan et al., 2009, p. 258). Adding a feminist lens, I use these concepts as analytical tools to unravel how stigmatizing community perceptions are motivated by gendered understandings of acceptable behavior and identities. While the analysis reveals some overlaps and nuances, former boy soldiers appear significantly more likely to be narrated as physical threats, whereas former girl soldiers are more frequently narrated as symbolic threats within their communities, despite reality being far more complex. These differences suggest that gendered norms and expectations profoundly shape the way threat perceptions emerge and lead to stigmatization. Concurrently, they demonstrate how these norms and expectations are reproduced and enacted through the process of stigmatization, making stigma an effective tool in sustaining gendered power hierarchies.

The article is organized in three parts. The first section establishes the connection between stigmatization, threat perceptions and gender norms. The research design is outlined in the second section, elaborating on the case selection, research material, and the ethical consideration guiding the research strategy. The last section explores how the stigmatization of returning boy and girl soldiers is produced by gendered threat perceptions within the two cases. The article concludes with a discussion on how this stigma is part of a system of patriarchal power dynamics, adding an additional layer to the understanding of effective reintegration of formerly recruited children.

STIGMATIZATION AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Understanding threats and the perceptions underlying them is crucial because it forms the foundation for unraveling the complexities of how and especially why prejudices and discrimination are constructed. In social psychology integrated threat theory has been developed to explain the origins of biases and discriminatory practices, particularly within groups. The theory can be summarized through two core components: "realistic threats" and "symbolic threats" (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). In this study, I use the term "physical threats" instead of "realistic threats" because I believe the latter may suggest that symbolic threats are less real. While physical threats are often more tangible than symbolic threats, they are equally real to the individual or groups who experience them. Additionally, the consequences of being perceived as a symbolic threat are often as tangible as those of being seen as a physical threat because both perceptions often lead to exclusion or violence.

Physical threats refer to concerns related to material losses of for example resources, economic and political power, and the infliction of physical harm or death. These threats are perceived to threaten the *physical security* or even the existence of a group or individual. In contrast, symbolic threats refer to concerns about immaterial loss, such as threats against individuals or groups' values, morality, and belief-system (Stephan et. al., 2009). Symbolic threats are, therefore, perceived not as threats to physical security but rather to the moral and social order. As social order is a fundamental part of how people relate to and make sense of the world, I argue that symbolic threats can be experienced as attacks against the *ontological security* of a group or individual. Ontological security defined as "security not of the body but of the self" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344), thus pertains to the preservation of one's identity, whether individually or collectively.

Events, groups, and individuals can threaten a group's ontological security by challenging its

self-understanding, including its morality, social norms, and worldview. The preservation of moral and social order is essential to maintaining a group's ontological security, as it upholds collective identity and coherence (e.g., Mitzen, 2006). Since gender norms and roles are integral to identity, gender plays a crucial role in shaping ontological security within societies – a point I will return to in the next section (e.g., Dingley, 2020). Notably, individuals or groups can simultaneously be perceived as physical and symbolic threats, with these perceptions reinforcing and influencing one another.

The social response to threats varies based on the type of threat and its perceived severity, but it is predominantly characterized by an attempt to reduce or remove the threat. This response can manifest through direct violence or through more silent forms of violence, such as stigmatization. Stigmatization is a social process in which an individual, or group of individuals, is perceived as devaluated, tainted and not quite human. This degradation is disqualifying them from full social acceptance, rendering them outsiders and unworthy of equal treatment (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2014). Research investigating why stigmatization occurs, suggests that it stems from a universal motivation to avoid danger. This displays how the production of stigmatization is closely linked to threat perceptions and can be understood through threat theory (Stangor & Crandall, 2000).

Stigmatization can be viewed as a social response to threat perceptions used by individuals, communities or societies to discipline or correct the behavior of the threatening individual or group. Within this framework, the purpose of stigmatization is to reinstate the stigmatizers' sense of physical and/or ontological security to preserve a sense of social order. This underscores the observation marked in recent stigma research, that stigma often perpetuates existing power hierarchies and social inequalities (Link & Phelan, 2014; Tyler, 2020; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Threat perceptions, and the stigmatization it invokes, are socially constructed implying that, *what*

is stigmatizing, *how much* and *for whom* is narrated within a particular context and shaped by social structures and norms (e.g., Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). As noted by Charles Stangor and Christian Crandall (2000) a person is not really stigmatized at an individual level "... but rather by the society that creates, condones, and maintains such attitudes and behaviors. ... a stigmatizer is only, by and large, repeating his or her society's norms about appropriate behavior" (p. 70). I argue that gendered norms and power structures play key roles in shaping threat perceptions, and consequently, in the production of stigmatization, notably against former child soldiers.

HOW GENDER STRUCTURES SHAPE THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Gendered power structures are embedded in all social interactions, shaping expectations for the behavior and identity of both individuals and groups (Connell, 2002; Risman, 2004). These structures are rooted in a hierarchical differentiation between men, women, masculinities, and femininities, giving rise to various gendered assumptions and unequal opportunities (Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004). Organized within patriarchal power structures, gender relations often privilege heterosexual men and conventional masculinity in political, public and economic spheres. Within patriarchal ideologies, femininity is typically devalued in spheres of agency and dominance, and because femininity is associated with women, both are subordinated and perceived as incompetent in public domains of politics and power (e.g., Tickner, 2001). However, while patriarchy grants men extensive privileges, it also constrains and polices their identities and behavior, punishing those who fail to conform to established masculine gender norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2015).

Gender norms serve as important building blocks in patriarchal gender structures, delineating the expectations that apply to individuals in specific social contexts. Across cultures, men are typically socialized to associate with masculine gender norms and stereotypes encompassing attributes such as strength,

dominance, risk-taking and aggression, and assigned societal roles such as “provider” and “protector.” These perceived characteristics imply that men are more likely to be understood as potentially violent and physically threatening compared to women (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). At times, this potential for violence is not only condoned but actively encouraged, as seen in practices such as military service and the validation of male violence under the pretext of protecting “women and children” and the nation state (Enloe, 2007, p.11). The interconnectedness of “violence, power, legitimacy, and masculinity” positions men within the public sphere of dominance and leadership, where certain forms of violence are legitimized and even expected as a means of asserting acceptable masculinity (Henshaw, 2020, p. 72).

However, while societal expectations dictate that men must be capable of using violence to defend and protect, “the institutionalization of (male) power depends on the existence of something in need of protection” (Henshaw, 2020, p. 72). In that way, women’s dependency on men’s protection is constructed, forming an essential part of any patriarchal gender order. Women are commonly associated with feminine gender norms and stereotypes characterized by passiveness, weakness and obedience, while being assigned societal roles as “caregiver” and “the protected” (Moser & Clark, 2001, p. 4). In contrast to men, women are rarely expected to use violence and less likely to be seen as physically threatening, owing to their perceived physical weakness and the ‘pacifist norms’ attached to femininity. Consequently, women’s violence is considered anormal and something which requires explanation. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2007) highlight how women who engage in violence is labeled as displaying: “pathological deviance from prescribed feminine norms” and that this deviation is “identified as the prime cause of their violence” (p. 37). In other words, violent women fail to conform to the feminine roles and stereotypes assigned to them by patriarchy.

From this logic, the core problem with women’s

violence lies in the fact that it grants women power equal to men, disrupting established gender norms and symbolically threatening the social order. Society, therefore, often seeks an explanation for women’s violence and preferably a means of diminishing their agency in committing it. A commonly used strategy is to sexualize women, diverting attention from their violent actions and instead portraying them as immoral and “impure.” This approach emphasizes their “sexual inferiority,” contributing to relocate them in the sphere of subordination and objectification, thereby reinstating gendered hierarchies and a sense of social order (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). This construction is termed “the whore narrative,” by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007), referring to the process of sexualization as a means to reduce women’s agency and reinforce gendered power relations.

These gendered expectations play a significant role in shaping narratives around both physical and symbolic threats, influencing who is perceived as threatening, in what ways, and why. However, while gender structures shape threat perceptions, individuals also exercise agency in shaping social structures. As Barbara Risman (2004, p. 432) observes, “social structures shape individuals, but simultaneously, individuals shape the social structure. Indeed, social structures are created not by mysterious forces but by human action.” Gender structures co-determine who is perceived as a threat and why, thereby influencing who is subjected to stigmatization. At the same time, the act of stigmatization itself, arising in response to these threat perceptions, reinforces gender structures by punishing and excluding those who deviate from gendered norms of appropriateness. In this way, threat perceptions and gendered power structures are mutually constitutive, with stigmatization functioning as a mechanism of power that upholds the gender order and the inequalities it sustains. In the following section, I empirically illustrate this dynamic by examining how gender shapes threat perceptions, leading to the stigmatization of returning child soldiers in CAR and DRC.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

To analyze the impact of gendered threat perceptions on stigmatization of former child soldiers, I employ an interpretivist approach. Drawing on feminist narrative analysis (Metha & Wibben, 2018; Wibben, 2011; Woodiwiss et al., 2017), I unpack community perceptions of returning child soldiers, exploring the interconnections of narrations between boy and girl soldiers and gendered power structures. The use of feminist narrative analysis aids in understanding how gendered threat perceptions underpins the way community members' construct narratives about former child soldiers. Narratives have the dual capacity to disrupt and confirm dominant orders and perceptions. However, as Annick Wibben notes: "Narratives tend to confirm the existing social, symbolic, economic and political order. As such, narratives are always also an *imposition* and a *form of violence* in their insistence on singular meaning" (Wibben, 2011, p. 43, author's italics). In this article, I am particularly interested in examining how stigmatizing narratives confirm the dominant gender order and simultaneously co-constitute this order by insisting on singular meanings of gender roles and binary relations.

The cases of CAR and DRC have been selected for this study as these countries are estimated to have had some of the highest rates of child soldier recruitment throughout the past decades (UNGA/UNSC, 2022). As many cases of child recruitment and release of child soldiers go unreported, particularly for girls, no exact estimates exist (MONUSCO, 2015). Yet, there is evidence in both CAR and DRC that there has been a substantial recruitment of girls as well as boys. This is making these two cases particularly interesting for examining the connection between gender and stigmatization of *both* returning boy and girl soldiers.

In CAR 30-40% of children associated with armed groups are believed to be girls (World Vision, 2019, p. 12) and despite claims of the opposite in some reports (War Child, 2018, p. 10), evidence suggests that many of these girls are directly participating in hostilities (Arte Reportage, 2020; Save the Child,

2014). In DRC, the recent escalation of violence has resulted in a renewed increase in child recruitment (Ochab, 2025). The gender division among these children is yet unknown, but since the beginning of the 2000s, up to 40% of recruited children were estimated to be girls, and while most are used as cooks, porters and for sexual exploitation, many have also been involved in combat (Amnesty International, 2003; MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8). CAR and DRC are vastly different countries, yet they share similarities in terms of geographical location, conflict dynamics which are marked by prolonged civil war(s) and sectarian violence, and low gender equality rankings with both countries placed among the lowest on global gender equality indexes (UNDP, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2022). Therefore, while numerous cultural distinctions exist, it is still possible to locate broader patterns in how stigmatization materializes for boys and girls within these two countries and analyze its gendered foundation.

The article presents a theoretical argument situated in empirical analysis by drawing on a diverse array of sources. These sources include organizational and scholarly reports, video material, UN documents and expert reports on the two cases. This material has been selected using a maximalist approach, meaning that I aimed at gathering as much material as possible from which direct stories and interviews with returning child soldiers and their communities could be derived and analyzed. This approach was guided by a feminist principle that the empirical basis for knowledge production should primarily rests on the narratives from the returning child soldiers themselves and their communities. However, a key limitation of this method is that the material consists predominantly of English-language sources, some of which were translated from French. While aiming at amplifying local voices, I was not able to include a vast range of local sources to derive these voices from.

I compiled the stories from these different sources to create a 'narrative archive.' Establishing such archives by selecting and compiling existing interviews represents an innovative and effective method of

creating unique datasets that spans different cases and extended periods of time while prioritizing individual stories and perspectives (e.g., Rose, 2023, 2024). One limitation of this approach is how using existing sources eliminates the possibility of returning for follow-up questions and sharing research results with participants. In addition, it also constrains the study to certain materials, both in terms of language and the ways in which the data is generated. Much of the existing material comes from well-established international organizations with their own agendas and, at times, opaque methodologies. However, similar challenges often arise when conducting original interviews, including accessibility issues, researchers bias and ethical challenges.

Despite these limitations, the ethical advantages of using existing sources warrant greater recognition in social sciences. Interviewing vulnerable populations, particularly marginalized children and youth in fragile environments, presents significant ethical risks including potential re-traumatization and exposure within their communities which can exacerbate stigmatization or even endanger their security (see Rose, 2024). While firsthand interviews are key for building knowledge from the voices of affected individuals, relevant material often already exists and can be analyzed to advance our collective understanding without posing additional risks to participants. None of the material used in this study contains identifying information, and the same pseudonyms as in the original sources are retained. To mitigate the risk of misinterpretation, which is an inherent challenge when analyzing secondary data, I continuously contextualized my analysis by juxtaposing the narratives with additional information on gender norms, child soldiers, and conflict dynamics within CAR and DRC.

I organized the narrative archive into two separate parts based on the gender of the children. This is not to reproduce binaries but to enable me to systematically analyze how the stigma of boys and girls are framed respectively. As such, the categorization enabled a comparison of how stigmatization materializes

for returning boy and girl soldiers across the two cases and facilitated an in-depth analysis of how the narratives underpinning this stigma align with the two threat perceptions described above. To identify the gendered meta-narratives motivating these perceptions, I investigated the narrations surrounding boy and girl soldiers and how these relate to gendered understandings of appropriate identity and behavior within the two countries.

GENDERED STIGMATIZATION IN CAR AND DRC

Through the lens of threat theory, this section explores the gendered dimension of stigmatization of returning boy and girl soldiers in CAR and DRC. The two threat types should not be understood as distinct categories, but rather as overlapping and co-constitutive components, both generated by the motivation to (re)establish a sense of security, be it physical or ontological. To encapsulate this intersection and elucidate the gendered underpinnings of this stigma, the analysis is organized according to the gender of the returning child soldiers, not the two threat perceptions. Both case studies will be simultaneously analyzed and compared under each section.

“THE ASSASSIN HAS RETURNED:” STIGMATIZATION OF FORMER BOY SOLDIERS

Many former boy soldiers, in both CAR and DRC, face significant stigmatization upon returning to their communities. This stigma seems particularly pronounced because the returning boys are often understood as physical threats towards the already scarce material resources and precarious security environment within their communities. Notably, these threat perceptions are depicted in two intersecting narratives: “the thief narrative” and “the killer narrative.” Together, these narratives contribute to form an understanding of returning boy soldiers as ‘dangerous bandits,’ who pose a risk to the community’s physical security, thereby justifying their

exclusion. Several studies show that girl soldiers may also be involved in theft and violence (a point I shall return to) and that boys are also frequently subjected to sexual violence (e.g., Drumbl, 2012). Yet former boy soldiers seem significantly more likely to be perceived as criminals and potential murderers, than girls. This demonstrates how the stigmatizing narratives attached to formerly recruited boys and girls do not necessarily reflect reality on the ground which is much more complex. Rather, these narratives align with gendered stereotypes that associate masculinity with agency and aggression, highlighting how societal expectations and gendered norms shape threat perceptions and, in turn, contribute to form the stigmatization experienced by the individual child in their everyday life.

Armed groups often sustain themselves through looting, stealing from villages, and extorting money at roadblocks. Since child soldiers are obliged to partake in these crimes, it is often very challenging for returning boys to disassociate from the reputation of criminals (War Child, 2018, p. 14; War Child, 2019, p. 10). For instance, a 16-year-old boy from the DRC explained: “When there is a case of theft in the community, everyone points the finger at a returned *boy*, which leads them to re-join to take revenge.” (War Child, 2018, p. 63, author’s italics). Similarly, a focus group discussion on child soldiers’ reintegration in the DRC uncovered a shared perception among community members from various sites that “... many boys join armed groups with *the explicit intention of stealing* from communities – their own or neighboring communities.” (War Child, 2018, p. 47, author’s italics). The “thief narrative” helps to explain why many boys’ face harassment and arbitrary arrest by police and security forces after leaving armed groups. Already labeled as criminals, this bias legitimizes their arbitrary detention and mistreatment by authorities. As a 16-year-old boy in DRC explained, “Sometimes, they are arrested by the police on suspicion simply because they are former rebels” (War Child 2018, p. 63).

Additionally, security forces sometimes exploit these

boys, demanding bribes or favors in return for their release, thereby trapping them in a cycle of violence and corruption. In CAR, for example, reports shows that boys who escaped from armed groups operating along the border have been detained in neighboring countries such as Chad without any formal charges (Mukosa, 2014). This form of stigmatizing practices seems to be a distinct challenge faced by former boy soldiers, as very few girls in the material used for the study reported experiences of arbitrary arrest or encounters with security forces.

The perception of former boy soldiers as criminals is closely linked to the prevailing belief that these boys represent uncontrollable behavior and the potential for exceptional violence which makes them a perceived danger for society. Both cases feature instances where boys express how they are stigmatized by their community members because they are feared. For instance, an 18-year-old boy from CAR noted how reintegration and community acceptance was especially challenging because community members understand him as a dangerous: “Going back home was much more difficult than I imagined. People were *afraid of me*. I was lonely and frustrated at the fact that they judged me for having been part of the militia” (Disaster Management, 2017, p. 5, author’s italics). This fear, thereby, contributes to the stigmatization, resulting in exclusion and sometimes even physical violence against the boys, who in turn may decide to re-recruit with armed groups:

“Whenever a theft or murder is committed in the neighborhood, the first to be suspected are the former child soldiers. Those who deserted are hunted, arrested, and tortured. To escape their lot, several of them have decided to reintegrate with the army.” – Group discussion with parents of former child soldiers, Kisangani, DRC (ILO 2003, p. 54).

The tendency to associate former boy soldiers with potential murderers is particularly visible in the nicknames assigned to some of the boys within their communities.

“I was looked upon badly by the population. When I killed people in K, I was nicknamed ‘*the Assassin*’ and the name became known. People started to say that the Assassin has left the army and so now we are going to make him pay. It would be suicide for me to dare to go back there. They would *kill me*.” – “Albert,” aged 19, DRC (Amnesty International, 2003, p. 11, author’s italics).

These narratives demonstrate how stigmatization, stemming from physical threat perceptions, can materialize as physical violence or threats of physical violence against the boys, because it instills an understanding that these boys are dangerous and therefore must be excluded from society. However, there is little systematic evidence supporting the idea that former child soldiers are particularly violent or morally incapable (e.g., Boyden, 2003). Instead, these narrations depict how masculine stereotypes linked to aggression and violence impact the perception of returning boy soldiers as physical threats, because they are *expected* to behave as thieves and killers.

However, a closer examination of the stigmatizing narratives surrounding boys reveals that boys are not solely perceived as physical threats within their communities but also as symbolic threats because the imposed identities as “thieves” and “killers” conflict with two of the most valorized masculine roles: the “provider” and the “protector.” While men’s capacity for violence is essential for asserting hegemonic masculinity and maintaining their dominant social position within a patriarchal logic, this violence must be legitimized, organized, and contribute to upholding gendered hierarchies that sustain the social order. Thieves and killers disrupt this order both by undermining the physical security of society and by contradicting some of the most important masculine norms and roles which condone these gendered hierarchies (Lusey, 2016; Slegh et al., 2014).

In both CAR and DRC, as in many societies, men’s dominant position is rooted in the perceived duty and ability to serve as breadwinners and protectors of their families and communities. As a young man

in CAR explained, “... real men are seen by their capacity to buy food and drink to feed their family members” (Lusey, 2016, p. 20). Similarly, a focus group discussion on gender and masculinities in CAR revealed that most participants associated masculinity and the concept of “real men” with being a protector, “especially of their family members, peers and girlfriends and of themselves in the current political instability in Bangui” (Lusey, 2016, p. 21). In the DRC, the ideal man likewise “takes responsibility for his family,” which entails earning an income, making household decisions, and protecting his kin and community (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 33). Against this backdrop, former boy soldiers who are labeled as killers and thieves pose not only a physical threat to society but also a symbolic threat. Their perceived identity and behavior clashes with the community’s norms, values, and belief systems, ultimately undermining the society’s sense of ontological security.

While the “thief” and “killer” narratives clearly dominate the material analyzed in this study, notable discrepancies warrant further discussion. For instance, research from CAR and the DRC suggests the existence of a “hero narrative,” in which some former boy soldiers are not stigmatized but instead celebrated upon their return. These boys are perceived as having contributed to the defense of their communities – in CAR, for example by joining the anti-balaka, a “self-defense group” emerging from the majority Christian community (Plan International, 2017, p. 13), and in the DRC, by enlisting in community-based Mayi Mayi militias, originally formed in defense against Rwandan invasion (CSCS, 2010, p. 11), a conflict that has recently re-escalated.

The hero narrative can, thus, be explained, in part, by the specific conflict dynamics of a given time and context and, in part, by dominant masculine norms, as some recruited boys are perceived as simply fulfilling their expected male duty to protect the community and, in that way, asserting a “protector identity.” As a result, they may evade stigma, as they are not viewed as threats but rather as contributors to both physical security and the established gender order of

the community. This underscores the importance of assessing the interplay of these multiple factors when seeking to understand why some former boy soldiers face stigmatization while others do not.

“EVERYONE KNOWS IT’S A WHORE WHO RETURNS:” STIGMATIZATION OF FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS

In both CAR and the DRC, girls are frequently recruited by armed groups. Some are forcibly captured and enlisted, while others join “voluntarily” for reasons similar to those of boys, such as seeking revenge, protection, financial resources, or food (e.g., Tonheim, 2017). Upon returning to their families and communities, many of these girls face severe and persistent stigmatization. This is often linked to narratives of perceived “sexual impurity” and associations with violence. Such perceptions generate stigma, particularly because they contradict gendered stereotypes of appropriate feminine identity and behavior which tend to emphasize “purity” and pacifism. Unpacking the narratives from community members, local NGO staff, and former girl soldiers reveals that their stigmatization is largely driven by the ways in which their (perceived) identity and (expected) behavior challenge the moral order of society and disrupt established gender hierarchies. As a result, former girl soldiers are primarily perceived as *symbolic threats* to the community’s ontological security rather than as direct threats to its physical security despite often having participated in violence.

Girl soldiers are often subjected to sexual violence and forced marriage in armed groups. In DRC, for example, numerous testimonies by formerly recruited girls show how a majority experience sexual violence, regardless of whether they were forcibly recruited or joined “voluntarily” (Child Soldier International, 2017). “Natalia’s” story reflects that of numerous girls in DRC who chose to enlist with an armed group due to lack of opportunities and protection. After witnessing the murder of many of her relatives and the rape of her sisters and her mother, she joined an armed group to seek protection and learn

to defend herself, but life in the armed group was not what she expected:

“It was horrible because I was only 12 years old, but I was frequently beaten and raped during the night by the other soldiers. One day, a commander wanted me to become his wife, so I tried to escape. They caught me, whipped me and raped me every night for many days” – “Natalia” aged 16, South-Kivu, DRC (Amnesty International, 2003, p. 12).

Notably, several reports from CAR include testimonies from recruited girls in both the majority-Muslim Séléka faction (now dismantled) and the majority-Christian anti-balaka militias (active 2013–present) that do not mention experiences of sexual violence, neither against themselves nor others. This suggests that sexual violence may not have been a widespread issue in all elements of these groups. Instead, many emphasized how they performed military tasks and engage in combat (Arte Reportage, 2020; Save the Child, 2014). However, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which continues to operate and expand into CAR, has been reported to systematically use sexual violence against recruited girls (UNSC, 2021), and many girls from different groups have also described experiences similar to those in DRC. For example, a 21-year-old woman who spent five years with the Séléka from age 16 told:

“The leader gave me to his son in marriage ... At first, he abused me because I did not want to, and [they] told me that if I was going to be defiant my husband would kill me, and I was afraid. So, I was submissive, and he took me with him everywhere.” (World Vision, 2019, p. 13).

While these abuses are clearly non-consensual and often completely contrasting the girl’s expectations of what life in an armed group would entail, community members often understand these sexual relations as consensual or at least self-inflicted. This perception is depicted in numerous narratives showing a common tendency to stigmatize returning girl soldiers because they are considered prostitutes who *chose* this path themselves. This exacerbates the depiction of them

as moral threats, with concerns that their “behavior” could negatively influence other girls in the community. This tendency is particularly visible in DRC, for example in the narrative by a 17-years old former girl soldier: “I was called a ‘prostitute;’ people would not allow their daughters to associate with me.” Similarly, another 14-years old girl explained: “Not two days goes by without neighbors making us feel we have known men... We are not allowed to associate with their daughters.” (Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 28). Some community members appear to believe that girls are explicitly joining armed groups to profit from selling sex and that this is inspiring other girls to join as well: “Girls go as prostitutes and come back to the community with lots of money, so other girls want to do the same.” – Girl aged 17, DRC (War Child, 2018, p. 51).

These narratives reflect an understanding that former girl soldiers are promiscuous and morally corrupted, and therefore symbolic threats towards the values and morality of the community. Following this logic, stigmatization is performed to reduce this threat and reestablish the gendered social order by punishing the girls for their “moral decline.” Testimonies show how stigmatization is often so severe that many girls chose to return to the armed group: “It is better to die there than come home and be rejected.” – Girl aged 16, DRC (Child Soldiers International, 2016). The UN has documented how elements of the Allied Democratic Forces in DRC use stigma strategically to deter girls from escaping. “Baluku ... ordered that the girls and women be raped *so that they would not return to Beni*. They were then raped once outside, in front of other people in the camp who laughed at them” (UNSC, 2019, p. 23, author’s italics).

Although recruited girls are often abused for sexual exploitation and domestic tasks, several research reports demonstrate how girl soldiers in both CAR and DRC are frequently trained to use weapons, manage roadblocks, and are involved in combat, looting and espionage (see e.g., Arte Reportage, 2020; Child Soldier International, 2017). In CAR, recruited girls mention how they were given military ranks

involving decision-making power. “It wasn’t difficult to join [the armed group]. They took my name, gave me a uniform ... I was a corporal. If there was a problem at the checkpoint, they would ask me to sort it out.” – “Cristal” aged 17, CAR (Save the Child, 2014, p. 15). In addition, the UN mission MONUSCO has documented that 89% of girls recruited by an armed group in DRC, were directly used in hostilities by 2020 (Save the Child, 2020, p. 24).

“We were forced to kill using a big stick and were told exactly where to hit. When I was ordered to kill, I trembled. They gave me a little time, but if I did not manage to kill soon, they told me I’d be killed.” – Girl aged 15, DRC (Child Soldier International, 2017, p. 24).

Yet, despite girls’ involvement in fighting, the narrative of “prostitutes” is clearly the dominant depiction of former girl soldiers and a core reason for the stigmatization they face. This highlights a common tendency to narrate girls’ roles in armed groups as insignificant, both among community members and (former) boy soldiers. Several community members told the interviewers that no girls are recruited because they are not suited for fighting and “can’t carry a weapon” (War Child, 2018, p. 41). In fact, several boy soldiers in DRC rejected entirely that there are any girls present in armed groups, and if they are, they are only there as wives, girlfriends, and prostitutes, *not* as soldiers, according to the boys. A 13-year-old boy, for example stated: “The girls don’t join. Maybe those who are *wives* of soldiers and who live in the community, they can go whenever they want.” Similarly, a boy aged 16 told that: “The girls are not really in the armed groups here at home. The girls do not go as soldiers, but *they go to prostitute themselves* with the soldiers in the armed groups to find money.” (War Child, 2018, p. 42, p. 49, author’s italics). Comparable narratives can be found in CAR, where some boys do not seem to understand girls’ association with armed groups as a form of recruitment. “Most of the girls in the armed groups are simply there as *girlfriends* or *wives* of other boys and men who joined.” – Focus group discussion with boys

aged 15–17, CAR (World Vision, 2019, p. 12, author's italics).

These perceptions are both pointing at the complex recruitment patterns for girls, but also how the understanding of girl soldiers is deeply shaped by stereotypes about feminine roles. Moreover, these narrations also indicate an attempt to diminish girls' agency in committing violence. The capacity to use violence may be seen as an appropriation of masculinity, rendering girls' roles equal to boys, and, therefore, threatens gendered hierarchies. Men's dominant social position is closely linked to their monopoly on violence and the idea that women are too weak and sensitive to engage in combat and protect themselves or others. Girl soldiers' identity as agents of violence contests this proposition and, therefore, challenge the gender order which underpins the community's sense of ontological security. To reduce this (symbolic) threat, recruited girls are mainly narrated as "prostitutes," "wives" and "girlfriends." Sexualization contributes to restoring gendered hierarchies (e.g., Sjöberg & Gentry 2007) where women's roles always exist in relation to that of men, and not in the same capacity.

As such, the girls' involvement in violence is problematic, not so much because it is perceived as a security risk when they return to their communities, but rather because it threatens the gender order. For example, a local NGO worker in CAR told that: "The girls had worn military uniforms when they belonged to armed groups ... and that helped them feel *superior*, but now at home *they no longer have the opportunity to be big*" (Olsson, 2018, author's italics). It suggests that the deconstruction of traditional gender roles within armed groups, to some extent, empowers the girls. This empowerment challenges the gender order and, consequently, generates stigmatization of the girls as a punishment for their social deviation. In DRC, statements show that some local NGO workers reproduce sexualized narratives of former girl soldiers and link emancipation with promiscuity: "The majority of ex-associated girls have become *emancipated and are frequenting boys*" – NGO worker, DRC

(Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 30). This is depicting a tendency to understand female empowerment as a form of moral decline.

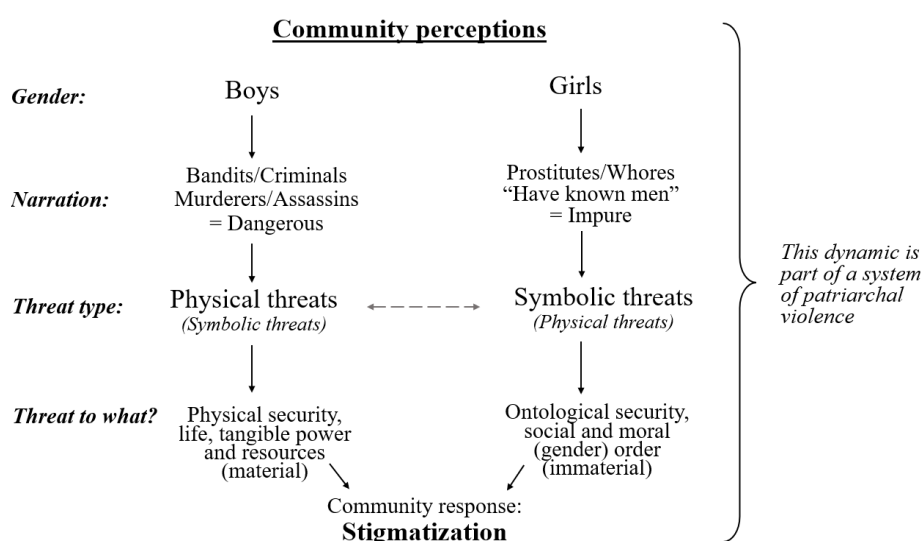
Several girls in DRC also explained that they would attempt to reduce the stigmatization by complying with feminine stereotypes such as being "*humble and obedient*," "*accepting unjust accusations*," and "*avoiding boys*" (Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 32, author's italics). Although these strategies did not appear to remove the stigma, it did limit the level of discrimination and insults for some. None of the former boy soldiers highlighted that submissive behavior could be de-stigmatizing for them; rather they emphasized how earning an income, providing for their family or joining the security forces could help them regain social value. It signifies how the reestablishment of socially accepted gender relations, roles, and behaviors, may be a direct or subconscious objective of the stigmatization, and that it to some extent succeed.

Interviews conducted in CAR and the DRC on local understandings of gender relations and perceptions of masculinity suggest that patriarchal power structures are widely viewed as essential for maintaining social order and stability. As one man in the DRC explained: "Women in Congo can never have an equal position to men. If so, they may start to dominate us, and that would be *the end of everything*" (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 38, author's italics). Similarly, another man from a military camp in the DRC stated: "Give our power to women? If we ever accept gender equality, it will be *the end of the world*" (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 38, author's italics). Comparable views are expressed by men in CAR, emphasizing the perceived necessity of maintaining patriarchal gender roles for the social order. As one interviewee asserted: "God created men as leaders, and they should stay that way" (Lusey, 2016, p. 26). Another reinforced this belief, stating: "It's an obligation! It's the man who leads, commands, and decides everything" (Lusey, 2016, p. 26, author's italics).

While perceptions of acceptable gender relations

clearly vary in both CAR and DRC, these statements demonstrate how maintenance of gendered hierarchies is not a trivial matter, but an existential question forming the foundation of many people's ontological security. This understanding contributes to explaining why threats against the gender order – although symbolic – are responded to with such severe stigmatization as that experienced by returning girl soldiers. The gendered narratives shaping the stigmatization of former boy and girl soldiers, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The role of gender in the stigmatization of former child soldiers.



CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study explored how boy and girl soldiers are perceived differently by relatives and community members upon their return from armed groups, highlighting the significant role played by gender in the stigmatization experienced by former child soldiers. By analyzing stigmatizing narratives through the lens of threat theory, the study identified the key motivations and gendered assumptions that shape societal perceptions of returning boy and girl soldiers. It demonstrated that while boys are often perceived as physical threats to their communities or as failing in their roles as providers and protectors, girls are more frequently labeled as prostitutes and seen as symbolic threats to the moral order of society. This is despite girls' involvement in military tasks and the

diverse forms of victimization experienced by boys, including sexual violence.

As such, these binary understandings do not necessarily reflect the lived realities of boys and girls in armed groups, rather, this study elucidates how such perceptions are shaped by gendered expectations surrounding the roles and behaviors of boys and girls. The analysis thus illustrates how the stigmatization of returning child soldiers is deeply influenced by pre-existing gender norms while simultaneously reproducing these norms to uphold a sense of social order. This study not only contributes with a deeper understanding of the gendered nature of stigmatization of *both* boy and girl soldiers – a topic that has received limited attention in academic and policy discussions – but also situates the phenomenon of stigma within a broader framework of patriarchal violence.

As demonstrated in this article, patriarchal violence does not merely sustain male dominance; it also condones and perpetuates a system of gendered inequalities with broader implications for communities as a whole. The purpose of this violence is to protect the gendered power structures in which it is embedded, and stigmatization contributes to this purpose by disciplining people whose identity and behavior are perceived to threaten established gendered hierarchies. Consequently, the gendered stigmatization of former child soldiers' functions as an instrument to sustain and reinforce the existing gender order, thereby maintaining the community's sense of ontological security.

These findings provide two key insights. First, in order to address the stigmatization, it requires challenging the gender norms that produce this stigma both at a community and family level. While support for returning child soldiers, such as income-generating

activities and education, can significantly empower returning children and help restore some of their perceived 'lost social value,' these measures alone are insufficient. Destigmatization must be understood primarily as a community-based effort, as stigma is a relational phenomenon. If initiatives focus solely on enhancing the social value of returning child soldiers without addressing the norms that motivates the stigma, its root causes remain intact. Thus, the challenge of reconstructing acceptable (gendered) identities will persist whenever a child returns from an armed group. To effectively mitigate and prevent stigmatization, the gendered threat perceptions driving these biases must be addressed within communities. This calls for further research into how culturally sensitive interventions can reshape normative perceptions of acceptable feminine and masculine roles and behaviors in different contexts. The findings of this study support existing research that points at how tackling stigma not only strengthens reintegration processes and improves the well-being of returning children but also reduces the risk of re-recruitment.

The second insight is primarily theoretical, highlighting how the temporal dimension of stigmatization against former child soldiers extends beyond the war/peace dichotomy. The patriarchal system of violence in which this stigma is embedded operates across conventional distinctions between war and peace. To maintain gendered power structures across different contexts, patriarchal violence continuously

adapts and travels between wartime and peacetime. This dynamic underscores that the stigmatization of former child soldiers is not merely a consequence of war but is sustained by deeply entrenched gendered power structures that exist independently of armed conflict. Addressing the foundation of this stigma, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that challenges these underlying hierarchies and assumptions in both wartime and peacetime.

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Performativ feminisme

OVERSÆTTERKOLLEKTIVET:

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EVA OBELITZ RODE

I efteråret 2024 blev antologien over nyere international feministisk teori, *Performative vendinger. Introduktion til nyere feministisk teori* præsenteret ved The Danish Gender Conference om intersektionalitet, mens Beyoncé blev spillet i baggrunden. Antologien er redigeret af Dorte Staunæs, Katja Brøgger og Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen, og en stor del af den danske forskerstand, hvis område berører feministisk teori, var repræsenteret i publikum heriblandt også medlemmer af vores oversætterkollektiv. Vi erfarede derved, at redaktørerne havde trykt en nyoversættelse af Sara Ahmeds "Affektive økonomier" ved Gustav Hoder. Dette blot fire år efter, at vores antologi *Et ulydigt arkiv* (Ahmed 2020), udkom med et kurateret udvalg af Ahmeds tekster i dansk oversættelse, inklusiv omtalte tekst oversat ved Mette A. E. Kim-Larsen. I "Affektive økonomier" fremfører Ahmed, hvordan følelser cirkulerer i en følelsesøkonomi og klistrer sig fast på overfladerne af alt fra sprog til mennesker, som tager form heraf og får tilskrevet bestemte værdier (Ahmed, 2004). "Affektive økonomier" har status af at være en kernetekst indenfor den poststrukturalistiske gren af affektteori (Bissenbakker, 2012, s. 8; Staunæs, Hvenegård-Lassen og Bissenbakker, 2024, s. 166), hvilket var årsagen til, at vi valgte den til vores antologi.

Den korte periode mellem *Et ulydigt arkiv* og *Performative vendinger* fik os til at undre os over nødvendigheden af en nyoversættelse af "Affektive økonomier". De få år imellem udgivelsen af de to oversættelser betyder, at sproget i den første oversættelse ikke er forældet. Samtidigt var der tid nok til, at redaktørerne kunne have nået at gå i dialog med Kim-Larsen om enten at medbringe hendes oversættelse eller at genskrive den. Vi mener derudover også, at den første danske oversættelse er i tråd med motiveringen for *Performative vendinger* om at "hjælpe de studerende og undervisere med at kortlægge og bevæge sig rundt i et nyere feministisk teoretisk landskab", som Staunæs og Brøgger skriver (Staunæs og Brøgger, 2024, s. 16). Vi stiller os derfor kritiske overfor, om den nye oversættelse skulle rette op på nogle mangler i den første oversættelse med de

ændringer, der er foretaget.

"DEN SORTE"

Den mest bemærkelsesværdige forskel på de to oversættelser er, hvordan den engelske term "the Negro" er blevet oversat til "den sorte" i *Performative vendinger* (se appendiks). Termen dukker op i en passage, hvor Frantz Fanon beretter om et møde mellem jeget og en lille dreng. Ahmed har taget dette fra Fanons *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) i Charles Markmanns engelske oversættelse *Black skin, white masks* (2002 (1967)).¹ Som dansk oversætter må man derfor forholde sig til både det franske, det engelske og det danske sprogområde. I Fanons kilde tekst associeres "nègre" med "une bête" ("et dyr"), "mauvais" ("slet"), "méchant" ("led"), "laid" ("grim"). Associationskæden er betinget af etymologien for "nègre", hvor termen historisk er blevet brugt eksempelvis som synonym for "esclave" ("slave") som en markering af racial alteritet. Herefter flettes gentagelsen af "le nègre" sammen med gentagelsen af "le petit garçon", som herved danner en glidende bevægelse og fremdrift i sproget, der oscillerer mellem den anden og drengen i for eksempel epanastrofen "le petit garçon tremble parce qu'il a peur du nègre, le nègre tremble de froid" ("den lille dreng skælver, fordi han er bange for negeren, negeren skælver af kulde", Kim-Larsen, 2024, s. 35). Sproget materialiserer derved cirkulationen af frygten, som klistrer sig fast på overfladerne af de pågældende personer og konstruerer dem som den racialiserede sorte mand, hvis fremtræden fremkalder frygt hos den racialiserede hvide dreng. Denne konstruktion finder sted ved, at den anden fremkommer som et racialiseret objekt for(-anlediget af) subjektets koloniale blik, som får den andens skælven til at fremstå som vrede. Markmann har i sin engelske oversættelse forholdt sig til denne dehumaniserende objektivisering af den anden ved at indføre et skifte i sin oversættelse af "le nègre" fra "the Negro" – som dels betegner en fornedrende kolonialistisk historisk konstruktion og dels er en reappropriering af ordet skrevet med versal som et egennavn på en racial identitet – til det

ekstremt brutale “nigger”. Det er netop den historiske vold og voldsomhed i kildeteksternes sprogbrug, der eksemplificerer de effekter, som cirkulationen af affekt kan have, når det er betinget af race og racisme, der er med til at gøre frygten og Ahmeds analyse heraf begribelig for læseren. Det bliver herigen- nem tydeligt, at den danske nyoversættelse udvisker objektiviseringen og den sproglige vold ved omskriv- ningen af Fanon og Ahmeds brug af “le nègre” og “the Negro” til “den sorte”.

Vigtigheden af de franske og de engelske kildeteksters sproglige vold for Ahmeds analyse gjorde, at vores oversætter tog et bevidst valg om at oversætte “the Negro” til det danske n-ord efter flere diskussioner i oversætterkollektivet. Vi havde andre alternativer oppe at vende, såsom hvorvidt det engelske ord over- hovedet skulle oversættes, eller om der skulle tilfø- jes en etymologisk forklaring i en fodnote. Men det endelige valg blev taget ud fra vores overbevisning om nødvendigheden i at formidle brutaliteten, som er indlejret i citatet, for at gøre Ahmeds affektteori mere forståelig for den danske læser. Problematikken omkring racistisk sprogbrug adresseres i forordet til *Performative vendinger* af redaktørerne Dorthe Staunæs og Katja Brøgger, som spørger: “Skal vi være tro mod den historiske brug? Hvilke alternative ord findes, og hvilke kan muligvis bruges? Hvornår [skal man] stoppe en prekær, sårende eller voldelig sprogbrug?” (Staunæs og Brøgger, 2024, s. 22). Ifølge Staunæs og Brøgger, er der (imod oversætterens egen vilje, *ibid.*) blevet taget et redaktionelt valg om at bruge “sort” som et “mindre stødende ord i den nutidige danske oversættelse” for at respektere “den historiske kontekst, samtidig med at oversættelsen følger de sprogpolitikker, der gør sig gældende i dag om nedsættende og diskriminerende sprogbrug” (*ibid.*) Men sprogpolitikkerne om racistisk sprogbrug i en engelsksproget kontekst i 2004, hvor “Affektive økonomier” blev publiceret i *Social Text*, er ikke så radikalt forskellig fra sprogpolitikkerne omkring emnet i Danmark i dag, at det burde afstedkomme omskrivningen af “the Negro” hos Ahmed til “den sorte” i *Performative vendingers* nyoversættelse. Den gode intention med at nedtone volden i *Performative*

vendingers oversættelse negeres i øvrigt af de ni klammer, som angiver (og ironisk nok fremhæver) det engelske ord (“den sorte [the Negro]”), hvilket stadigvæk eksponerer den engelskkyndige læser for den sproglige vold. Samtidigt ændrer omskrivningen og det store antal klammer også på formen i denne passage, fordi den bryder den sproglige rytme op, der fremkom som en materialisering af frygtens cirku- lation. *Performative vendingers* nyoversættelse frem- står derfor både semantisk og stilistisk utro(-værdig) imod Ahmeds og Fanons kildetekster qua redak- tørernes valg.

REPRÆSENTATIONSPOLITIK I DANSK FEMINISTISK TEORI

Problemerne omkring *Performative vendingers* ny- oversættelse af “Affektive økonomier” skriver sig ind i en bredere samtale om oversætterpraksis og om de citerings- og repræsentationspolitiske konsekven- ser i dansk akademisk, som dansk feministisk teori er inkluderet i, og som ikke kan undsige sig de sys- temiske uligheder, som rammer minoriserede per- soner. Heriblandt også vores oversætterkollektiv, hvor størstedelen består af personer, der er minoris- erede på køn, race, og handicap. Et af problemerne er den kontinuerlige udviskning, som finder sted, af racialiserede minoriteters stemmer og vores arbejde. Denne systemiske ulighed reproducere for eksem- pel, når to hvide redaktører vælger at omskrive en sort og en brun forfatters sprogbrug så drastisk, som det er tilfældet i nyoversættelsen af “Affektive økon- omier”, og når man helt undlader at gå i dialog med eller at nævne den første brune oversætter, Mette A. E. Kim-Larsen i eller udenfor oversættelsen, samti- digt med at man får en hvid person, Gustav Hoder, til at foretage nyoversættelsen. Derudover har man *en passant* kun fremhævet én af vores redaktører, nemlig Daniel Madsen (en anden hvid person), i den eneste korte kommentar, der forholder sig til oversættelsen af “Affektive økonomier” fra *Et ulydigt arkiv*: “Teksten er tidligere oversat i tekstsamlingen *Et ulydigt arkiv* (Madsen m.fl., 2020), og man kan med fordel sammenligne de forskellige valg, denne

samling og vi har taget i oversættelsen af Ahmed” (Staunæs, Hvenegaard-Lassen og Bissenbakker, 2024, s. 166). Udover den føromtalt omskrivning til “den sorte”, uddyber redaktørerne dog ikke yderligere, hvilke valg, der er foretaget i den nye oversættelse, og som adskiller sig fra den første. Der mangler derfor en reel begrundelse for, hvorfor “Affektive økonomier” skulle hvidvaskes på denne måde. Med til udviskningen af vores arbejde hører også, at Staunæs et al. ikke nævner nogle af de tidligere oversættelser af Ahmeds tekster til dansk heriblandt *Et ulydigt arkiv*. Andre oversættelser af Ahmed tæller “Hvorfor lykke, Hvorfor nu?” (2016) oversat ved Thomas Takla Helsted fra, *Killjoy-manifest* (2018) oversat ved Iben Engelhardt Andersen og *Følelsernes kulturpolitik* (2025) oversat ved Poul Borum. Vigtigheden af danske oversættelser for dansk feministisk teori understreges ellers gentagne gange af redaktørerne. Blandt andet nævnes det, at “bogen bidrager med intet mindre end 19 oversatte primærtekster skrevet af feministiske tænkere” og at “tekstsamlingens formål er at bidrage til et dansk kønsvokabularium” (Staunæs og Brøgger, 2024, s. 16-17). Det er derfor påfaldende, at ingen af de tidligere oversættelser af Ahmeds arbejde til dansk er nævnt. En 15-sider lang introducerende tekst om affektteori i *Performative vendinger* skrevet af Dorthe Staunæs, Kirsten Hvenegaard-Lassen og Mons Bissenbakker beskriver Sara Ahmed og Mel Y. Chens bidrag til feltet for en dansk læser. Selvsamme Bissenbakker skrev sammen med Michael Nebeling, en anden forfatter af de introducerende tekster i *Performative vendinger*, forordet til *Et ulydigt arkiv* (Bissenbakker og Nebeling, 2020). Det var her oplagt, at redaktørerne kunne have anerkendt eksistensen af nogle af de forudgående udgivelser og deres bidrag til dansk affektteori heriblandt også den første oversættelse af “Affektive økonomier”.

Arbejdet med at oversætte akademiske tekster er oftest dårligt lønnet, hvis ikke helt ulønnet. En stor del af motivationen er i stedet det bidrag, man som oversætter håber på, at ens oversættelse vil bringe til det pågældende forskningsfelt. Anerkendelsen heraf kan komme til udtryk i form af citering, diskussion og anvendelse i pensumlister, som synliggør

det intellektuelle arbejde, der ligger bag. Men i dette tilfælde skaber akkumulationen af de forskellige valg, hvor store dele af den publiceringsmæssige kontekst er udeladt, og man har undladt at gå i dialog med den første oversætter og oversættelse af “Affektive økonomier”, en intransparant citationspraksis, som usynliggør vores arbejde og vores beslutninger, der blev taget som et oversætterkollektiv. Det viser – i al sin ironi – hvorfor det er imperativt at konvertere feministisk teori til praksis. En akademisk kultur, som inddrager minoriserede stemmer i stedet for at overskrive dem, bliver ikke bare mere inkluderende, men skaber også en bedre og mere valid vidensproduktion. Fremadrettet kunne man derfor i en eventuel anden udgave af *Performative vendinger* korrekt citere vores antologi og adressere de problematikker, som nu er blevet påpeget. Som Staunæs og Brøgger skriver, så er “en oversættelse [...] med andre ord en performativ handling” (Staunæs og Brøgger, 2024, s. 20), og det er muligt at modarbejde tendensen til at overskrive og udgrænse minoritetssubjekter i academia.

Oversætterkollektivet Mette A. E. Kim-Larsen, Nina Cramer, Daniel Nikolaj Madsen, Heeja Lea Kim Kramhøft og Eva Obelitz Rode.

APPENDIKS

Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952): “Mon corps me revenait étalé, disjoint, rétamé, tout endeuillé dans ce jour blanc d’hiver. Le nègre est une bête, le nègre est mauvais, le nègre est méchant, le nègre est laid; tiens, un nègre, il fait froid, le nègre tremble, le nègre tremble parce qu’il a froid, le petit garçon tremble parce qu’il a peur du nègre, le nègre tremble de froid, ce froid qui vous tord les os, le beau petit garçon tremble parce qu’il croit que le nègre tremble de rage, le petit garçon blanc se jette dans les bras de sa mère: maman, le nègre va me manger” (Fanon, 1952, s. 91-92).

Charles Markmanns engelske oversættelse (2002 (1967)): “My body was given back to me sprawled out. Distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro

is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up" (Fanon, 2002 (1967), s. 18).

Mette A. E. Kim-Larsens danske oversættelse (2020): "Min krop blev givet tilbage til mig udspreddt. Forvrænget, genfarvet, klædt i sorg på den hvide vinterdag. Negeren er et dyr, negeren er slet, negeren er led, negeren er grim; se, en neger, det er koldt, negeren ryster, fordi han fryser, den lille dreng skælver, fordi han er bange for negeren, negeren skælver af kulde, den kulde som går gennem marv og ben, den smukke lille dreng skælver, fordi han tror, at negeren

sitrer af vrede, den lille hvide dreng kaster sig selv ind i sin mors arme: Mama, negeren vil fortære mig" (Ahmed, 2020, s. 35).

Gustav Hoders danske oversættelse (2024): "Min krop blev givet tilbage til mig opsplittet. Forvrænget, omfarvet, klædt i sorg på den hvide vinterdag. Den sorte [the Negro] er et dyr, den sorte [the Negro] er slem, den sorte [the Negro] er ond, den sorte [the Negro] er grim: Se, en sort [a nigger], det er koldt, den sorte [the nigger] ryster, fordi han fryser, den lille dreng ryster, fordi han er bange for den sorte [the nigger], den sorte [the nigger] ryster af kulde, den kulde, der går gennem marv og ben, den kønne, lille dreng ryster, fordi han tror, at den sorte [the nigger] ryster af raseri, den lille hvide dreng kaster sig i sin mors arme: Mor, den sorte [the nigger] vil æde mig" (Ahmed, 2024, s. 186).

[1] Der foreligger desuden en nyere engelsk oversættelse af Richard Philcox fra 2008 (Fanon, 2008). François-Eric Grodin har oversat værket til *Sort hud, hvide masker* (2024) på dansk.

[2] Simone Delesalle og Lucette Valensi har kortlagt, hvordan "nègre" udviklede sig til at betegne alteritet i diverse fransk-sprogede opslagsværker, i forbindelse med at fransk involvering i den transatlantiske slavehandel tog til op igennem det 17. århundrede. Således blev "nègre" blandt andet associeret med "esclave" (Delesalle og Valensi, 1972; se også Edwards, 2003, s. 26). Som en følge af ordets koloniale historik bar det voldsomt negative konnotationer i det tidlige 20. århundrede (ibid. s. 28). Den franske maler og forfatter Lucie Cousturier noterer sig i *Des inconnus chez moi* (1920) eksempelvis, at det er et stødende og indholdsløst ord: "[le mot nègre] ne saurait s'appliquer à des objets réels [...] ce mot étant employé par les colonisateurs" ("[ordet neger] lader sig ikke bruge om virkelige ting [...] dette ord, som anvendes af kolonister", Cousturier, 2001 (1920), s. 8). Lamine Senghor indleder sit essay "Le Mot 'Nègre'" (1927) med at erklære, hvordan "nègre" er et skældsord: "C'est le gros mot du jour, c'est le mot que certains de nos frères de race ne veulent plus être appelés ainsi" ("Det er et tidens skældsord, det er et ord som nogle af vores sorte brødre ikke længere vil kaldes"), men slutter med at appropriere ordet sidst i teksten: "Nous nous faisons honneur et gloire de nous appeler Nègres, avec un N majuscule en tête" ("Vi sætter ære i og drager hæder af at kalde os for Negre, med et stort N i front", Senghor, 1927). Aimé Césaire gør ligeledes også hævde på ordet som en positiv interpellering af sort identitet ved introduktionen af ordet "negritude" i hans essay "Conscience Raciale et Révolution Sociale" (1935): "Oui, travaillons à être nègre dans la certitude que c'est travailler pour la Révolution" ("Ja, lad os arbejde for at være negere med visheden om, at vi arbejder for revolutionen" (Césaire, 1935, s. 1-2). Tak til Marie Louise Krogh for hjælp med oversættelse.

[3] Fanons refleksioner over forholdet mellem kolonisten og den koloniserede i *Peau noire, masques blancs* er blandt andet informeret af Sartres subjekt-objekt relation, der i Fanons version er betinget af et historisk-racialt skema, hvori den sorte krop, som er situeret i et hvidt koloniale rum, altid allerede fundamentalt set vil fremstå som et objekt for beskueren, fremfor som subjektet, der beskuer.

[4] Fanon bruger i sit forfatterskab forskellige modi af “nègre”, hvor betydningen må læses ud af konteksten på fransk. Sarah Scales har kritiseret, hvordan Markmann repositionerer sproget i hans engelske oversættelse af *Peau noire, masques blancs* fra at være situeret i Fransk Caribien til at være domesticeret til en nordamerikansk læserkontekst under indflydelse af datidens borgerrettighedsbevægelser i 1960-ernes USA. For eksempel nedtoner oversættelsen de levede erfaringer, som er specifikke for den sorte mand i Fransk Caribien, samtidigt med at dialogerne i den engelske oversættelse tillægges en sydstatsdialekt (Scales, 2018).

[5] Fanon skelner også selv mellem “le nègre” og “le Noir”. Diskussionen om oversættelsen af “nègre” ligger i forlængelse af en større diskussion om oversættelserne af *Peau noir, masques blanc*. Sunit Singh (2010) observerer for eksempel i sin anmeldelse af Richard Philcoxs (Fanon, 2008) oversættelse, hvordan Philcoxs brug af “black” som oversættelse af “nègre” i visse passager slører den affektive ladning af det antisorte sprogbrug, som Fanons tekst undersøger. Singh fremhæver, at “the cumulative effect is that the newer [translation] shrouds a claim at the heart of BSWM: Blacks as much as whites share the connotations or stereotypes associated with what is ‘black,’ so that the ‘nigger’ is always someone else, somewhere else.” (“det endelige resultat bliver, at den nyere [oversættelse] dækker over et udsagn, som er centralt for BSWM [Black skin, white masks]: Sorte såvel som hvide deler konnotationerne eller stereotyperne, som associeres med, hvad der forstås som “sort”, således at [the ‘nigger’] altid er en anden et andet sted”, Singh, 2010).

[6] “Oversætteren har dog haft indvendinger mod denne løsning [at oversætte “le nègre” til “den sorte”] og finder, at det er en forfladigelse af Ahmeds og Fanons analyser af racisme, som endda implicerer, at deres valg af sprog reduceres til deres historiske kontekst” (Staunæs og Brøgger, 2024, s. 22-23). Oversættelseskollektivet har været i dialog med Hoder, som også har fået nærværende tekst til gennemlæsning og godkendelse inden udgivelse.

[7] Grodin oversætter også “the Negro” til “negeren” i *Sort hud, hvide masker* (Fanon, 2024).

[8] Denne problematik ligger i forlængelse af, hvordan oversættelse historisk har faciliteret imperialistisk politisk kontrol, undertrykkelse og appropriation af koloniserede befolkningsgrupper igennem eksempelvis en tilsløring af førstesprogenes meningsdannelse (Niranjana, 1992).

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Replik om oversættelser, epistemisk vold og punktummer, der ikke findes

DORTHE STAUNÆS

KATJA BRØGGER

KIRSTEN HVENEGÅRD-LASSEN

Tak til Oversætterkollektivet Mette A. E. Kim-Larsen, Nina Cramer, Daniel Nikolaj Madsen, Heeja Lea Kim Kramhøft, og Eva Obelitz Rode bag bl.a. *Et ulydigt arkiv* (2020) for interessen og den faglige debat, som jeres indvending lægger op til. Det byder vi velkommen, fordi I berører mange af de vanskeligheder, kollektivet bag *Performative vendinger. Introduktion til nyere feministisk teori* (2024) har tumlet med. Vi vil i følgende replik forsøge at tydeliggøre sværheder og overvejelser bag projektets oversættelser og interventioner. For uddybninger henviser vi til introduktionskapitlet samt til de små afsnit kaldet 'tanker om oversættelser', der optræder under hver sektion.

De seneste år har budt på et væld af nye oversættelser af monografier og kortere, prægnante tekster hos mindre forlag som fx Aleatorik, Antipyrine, Mindspace, Republik, Laboratoriet for Æstetik & Økologi, Forlaget Nemo (som også er udgiveren af *Et ulydigt arkiv*) og fra lærebogsforlag som fx Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne og Klim. Oversættelser er bekostelige, fordrer tid og ofte gratis (over)arbejde, men oversættelser af svært tilgængelig litteratur er også afgørende for en kvalificeret og planetært orienteret feministisk diskussion i Danmark. Det er ikke gjort en gang for alle. Det kræver kollektive indsatser med mange forskellige kompetencer og erfaringer.

For otte år siden gik vi i gang med det arbejde, der har materialiseret sig i *Performative vendinger. Introduktion til nyere feministisk teori* med ønsket om at bidrage til samtalen. Hovedambitionen med antologien er at skabe nemmere adgang til nyere feministisk teori, bidrage til et dansk vokabularium og at supplere det sprog, der allerede tales og skrives af dansksprogede læsere først og fremmest i videregående uddannelsesinstitutioner. Det er en ambition, der for øvrigt flugter med oversætterkollektivet bag *Et ulydigt arkiv*, som i efterordet til deres Ahmed-antologi skriver: "Vi håber, at oversættelsen ikke blot bidrager til at gøre os klogere på Ahmed og hendes teoretiske begreber, men at vi også kan være med til at udvide sproget." (Ahmed, 2020a, 192). I *Performative vendinger* citerer vi i epilogen Kathrine McKittrick for at sige, at man ikke kan vide for altid

(se McKittrick 2021). Vi skriver også, at vi sikkert har oversat noget. Det vil vi gerne indledningsvist gentage. I det følgende koncentrerer vi os om noget lidt andet end at udpege det, vi ikke fik med. For på den måde at tydeliggøre bogens ambitioner og vores kvaler med at indfri dem.

Vi har ønsket at udvide det feministiske arkiv – ikke for at trykke en slags autoritativ bibel, men fordi vi syntes, der manglede et intersektionelt og performativt vinklet tillæg til tekster og oversættelser, der allerede findes på dansk. Bogen er ikke tænkt som en erstatning af tidligere bidrag men som et tillæg til en igangværende vidensproduktion. *Performative vendinger* indeholder i alt 19 oversatte tekster fordelt i 7 tematiske sektioner. Hver af disse sektioner indledes af en introduktion (en mellemtekst, har vi kaldt det) til undertemaet og teksterne, forfattet af i alt 11 skribenter (Mons Bissenbakker, Katja Brøgger, Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø, Camilla Bruun Eriksen, Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen, Iram Khawaja, Nazila Ghavami Kivi, Nina Lykke, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Tobias Raun og Dorthe Staunæs). Mellemtekst-forfatterne er alle ansat på universitetet. Vi deler en langvarig feministisk erfaringshorisont rundet af forskellige fagligheder, liv og subjektive positionalteter, der igen er gjort af forskellige magtakser og forskelssættende kategorier. Som krumptap i projektet har vi arbejdet sammen med et kollektiv af fire professionelle oversættere (Andreas Hjort Bundgaard, Louise Bundgaard, Gustav Johannes Hoder og Andrea Pontoppidan), der har flere fælles projekter bag sig, og som har været med på ideen om, at de sammen med de 11 fageksperter løbende diskuterende og kvalificerede oversættelsesteksterne. Med pointen om at oversættelser ikke er endelige eller afgjorte, har vi valgt i mellemtekster, introduktionskapitel og epilog at være transparente om kvaler og uenigheder for at give læseren mulighed for at tænke med – og imod.

Den gennemgående bestræbelse på at bidrage til et dansk kønsvocabularium er ikke udtryk for et nationalt identitetspolitisk projekt om modersmål, men er i stedet begrundet i, at det gør en forskel at

læse tekster på det sprog, man på forskellig vis og på godt og ondt er vokset op med. Man har erfaringer støbt igennem sproget. Det indebærer også, at man erkender, sanser og føler igennem ord, der har været talt ud af ens mund, hørt igennem ens øre og lejret sig i kroppen. Vores formidlingsambition har været at fastholde læseren, når først bogen var slået op og læsningen begyndt. Derfor har vi prioriteret at understøtte dette gennem et flydende dansk sprog og en dansk sprog-tone og metaforik hvis muligt. Nogle gange har vi måttet opfinde ord (fx animacitet), når det danske arkiv ikke rækker. Når det er sagt, ved vi godt, at sproget er upålideligt, og ja, nogle gange ulydigt. Vi kan ikke kontrollere sprogets performative effekter. Tekstsamlingen er selv for det trænede og venligt stemte øre krævende. Nogle af teksterne er fortættede, kræver kontekst-viden og bruger et svært sprog. Nogle skaber ubehag og trang til at smække bogen i igen.

Vi opfordrer i bogen læseren til at sammenholde vores oversættelser af tekster og brug af begreber med andre oversættelser til dansk. Vi nævner bl.a. *Et ulydigt arkiv* oversat af kollektivet (og Mette A.E. Kim-Larsens oversættelse af Sara Ahmeds "Affektive økonomier" (Ahmed 2020b)). Vi diskuterer også med andre oversættelser af 'assemblage' end vores eget 'ansamling', fx Niels Lyngsøs legendariske oversættelse af Gilles Deleuzes *Tusind Plateauer* (Deleuze 2005), hvori 'assemblage' bliver til 'sammenpasning'. Ord om 'tilpasning' og 'anpasning' bruger vi i stedet for at understrege spørgsmålet om 'det passende' i oversættelsen af Rosemary Garlands leg med ordene 'fit' og 'misfit'. Ligesom vi vælger at oversætte Donna Haraways 'critter' til 'småkravl' og 'væsner' i stedet for at undersøge, dvs. lave en lydlig overførsel, til ordet til 'kritter' som Ole Lindgård Henriksen vælger i sin (med egne ord) 'genskrivning' af *At blive i besværet* (Haraway, 2021). Endelig kan vi nævne, at Sara Ahmeds 'align bodies' oversættes til at 'flugte andre kroppe' og ikke 'ensrette' kroppe, som i Mette A.E. Kim-Larsens oversættelse af artiklen "Affektive økonomier" (Ahmed, 2020b). For os at se læner 'ensrette' sig for langt ind i en governmentalitets-for-tolkning og for lidt ind i den kropsfænomenologi

og psykoanalyse, vi ser som klangbunden i Ahmeds arbejde. 'Killjoy' oversættes til lyseslukker og ikke til det ellers slagkraftige 'glædesdræber' andre oversættelser har foreslået (fx Ahmed 2020a). 'Lyseslukker' valgte vi, fordi udtryksformen allerede findes i hverdagssproget og vil være det ord, der på dansk bruges i de situationer, Ahmed henviser til, når nogen ødelægger den gode stemning (for den udlægning af Ahmeds arbejde se antologiens mellemteksten om affekt).

Samtidig og for netop at holde muligheden for at se oversættelse som en ikke-afgjort forretning men en kontinuerlig 'wor(l)ding' praksis (altså en kontinuerlig verdensskabelse gennem ord) har bogen hele vejen igennem andre danske oversættelser af Ahmed, Butler, Haraway og de øvrige forfattere arbejder i referencelisten. Ligesom forlaget online tilbyder (gratis) 'supplerende materiale' i form af et skema med 'udvalgte oversættelsestermer' (<https://samfundslitteratur.dk/performative-vendinger>). Med de tilbud og greb lægges op til en nuanceret diskussion af det vokabular, som er ved at blive til og herunder også at medtænke den historiske, kulturelle og epistemiske kontekst, som teksterne ikke bare er skrevet i, men også rejser ind i. Der er forskel på 2004 og 2025 og på at læse Ahmed som økonom, pædagog eller kulturteoretiker. Danmark er hverken England eller USA ('This ain't Texas', som vi prøvede at sige med Beyonces sang), hvor de fleste af de oversatte forfattere kommer fra. Specificitet betyder noget.

EPISTEMISK VOLD

Hensigten med oversættelsen af den specifikke tekst "Affektive økonomier" var at tematisere Ahmeds fænomenologiske og marxistiske perspektiv på affekt og affektiv økonomi i samtale med og til dels i kontrast til antologiens anden tekst om affekt, der er skrevet af Mel Y. Chen og handler om animacitet. Vores katalog over tekster, vi ønskede at oversætte – og som forlaget købte rettigheder til at oversætte – startede qua projektets udspring otte år tidligere i 2016, og dermed også før *Et ulydigt arkiv* udkom, og det er et andet mere tværgående oversættelsesprojekt end

den formidling af nedslag i Ahmeds samlede forfatterskab, som er det vigtige omdrejningspunktet for *Et ulydigt arkiv*.

Oversættelser af historiske tekster med ord, vi i dag opfatter som diskriminerende, har voldt os mange kvaler. Skal vi gengive ordene tro mod originalen eller tilpasse dem nutidige etiske og sprogpoltiske hensyn? Hvornår stopper man sårende sprog, og hvornår risikerer man at videreføre dets vold? (Butler, 2020). Vi diskuterer i bogen oversættelser af 'transsexual' og 'transgender' til 'transseksuel' og 'transkønnet', og vi diskuterer oversættelse af 'disabilitet', og hvordan vi pendler mellem undersættelser som 'disabel', ikke 'kapabel' og 'oprindelig' for så at skippe anglicismens greb og lande i 'handicap' og oprindelig i nogle af bogens kapitler, men ikke i andre. Særligt har det været svært for os at afgøre, hvordan vi ville oversætte n-ordet. Det optræder i Sara Ahmeds tekst gennem hendes citering af en engelsk oversættelse af Franz Fanons *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Det indgår også i originalteksterne af henholdsvis Hortense Spillers og C. Riley Snorton, der begge refererer til historiske tekster fra en Nordamerikansk kontekst. I alle tre tilfælde sætter (den meget bevidste) brug af n-ordet en tydelig performativ affekt i omløb. Det vækker ubehag og peger racismens sproglige forskydninger frem. Oversætterkollektivet dykker i deres kommentar til vores valg af at oversætte n-ordet til 'sort', ned i en grundig og interessant afdækning af konteksten omkring Fanons brug af n-ordet. De påpeger i den forbindelse på Fanons skelnen mellem 'noire' og 'négre', og fremhæver, at Ahmed bruger citatet netop for at aktivere affekten. Derfor finder de, ligesom i øvrigt vores oversætter, at en omskrivning af 'négre' til 'sort' udvisker både Fanons pointe og Ahmeds analyse. Det er vi sådan set enige i, og vi var også omkring den udlægning med vores oversætter. Når vi alligevel i redaktionen har valgt at oversætte 'negro' med 'sort' og indsætte det oprindelige ord i klammer, er det ikke for at afsvække dets vold, men for at understrege tekstsamlingens pointe: Sprog skaber verdener, og voldeligt sprog må forhindres i at fortsætte uden modsvar. I den nylige oversættelse til dansk af Frantz Fanons værk *Sort hud, hvide masker*

(2024) har oversætteren François-Eric Grodin, som også kort påpeget af *Et ulydigt arkiv*s oversætterkollektiv, valgt at oversætte 'négre' til det danske n-ord i den specifikke passage, som Ahmed citerer. For at tilføje et lag mere til kompleksiteten, så er det imidlertid ikke den gennemgående oversættelse i bogen. Grodin skriver, at det vil være problematisk at oversætte det fransk 'négre' med n-ordet, fordi i den (franske/caribiske) kontekst, blev 'négre' optaget som en slags approprierende sproglig modstandspraksis, mens det i en dansk sammenhæng stadig er entydigt racistisk og udskammende. Grodin laver derfor en overenskomst med det franske forlag om at indsætte en fodnote alle de steder, hvor ordet 'négre' er blevet oversat til sort. Om valget af i nogle tilfælde faktisk at bruge n-ordet (som fx i det citat, vi har til diskussion her), skriver oversætteren følgende: "Ordet "neger" optræder også i min oversættelse, men kun de steder, hvor jeg har vurderet, at Fanon tydeligvis bruger "négre" som et racistisk begreb..." (Grodin i Fanon, 2024, viii). I øvrigt udgør oversættelsen af passagen i sin helhed endnu en udgave, som hverken er identisk med *Det ulydige arkiv*s eller de *Performative vendingers* valg (se også Fanon, 2024, s. 116). Det franske og danske ords genealogier er simpelthen forskellige, og sammenfiltreret med tid og rum – sådan som også oversættelserne og oversætterne er det. Det er en uafbrudt kamp, hvor velvalgte løsninger også kan blive til ontologiske sovepuder (Elg 2024). Uagtet aftalen mellem Fanons forlag og Grodin vedstår vores dilemma, fordi vi også ønskede et konsekvent valg i forhold til n-ordet på tværs af Ahmeds Fanon-referencer og de historiske referencer i Spillers og Riley-teksterne, hvor US-konteksten var/er en anden.

AN-ARKIVERING OG ET VELVILLIGT ØRE

Vores løsning med klammerne er en måde at fastholde påpegningen af racisme og af volden, så den ikke går upåagtet hen i et muligt undervisningslokale, hvor teksterne diskuteres. Den kluntede løsning forsøger at balancere mellem respekt for den historiske kontekst og nutidens etiske og sprogpoltiske ansvar (Staunæs,

Brøgger og Hvenegård-Lassen, 2024, s. 22 og 44). Vi diskuterede det ganske længe indbyrdes i redaktionen og med vores oversætter, men vi så ingen entydig løsning, der overkom dilemmaerne, mens arbejdet stod på. Sproget er performativt – i betydningen verdens- og forestillingsskabende. Ved at konstruere klammerne og vise oversættelsen diskuterbarhed og uafgjorthed arkiverer vi ikke blot Fanons historiske tekst eller Ahmeds arbejde med den. Vi har snarere forsøgt at 'an-arkivere' (Acharya 2024; Massumi, 2017; Springgay, Truman og MacLean, 2020) teksten, dvs. at bekræfte den uro og de impulser, der ligger i den, som afsæt for at sætte måder og former i gang gennem et overskud af energi og betydning, der samtidig ikke bærer ved til at fortsætte racisme eller en racistisk sprogton. Tanken er at invitere læseren til at tænke med og overveje, hvordan arbejdet med at udvide og oversætte det feministiske arkiv også er et arbejde med at undgå uforvarende at bidrage til at videreføre sprogets vold, men samtidig at vise den historiske vold gennem an-arkiveringspraksisen. Vi ønsker ikke, at 'hvidvaske' denne tekst eller de øvrige. Vi ærgrer os over, at vores forsøg på at undgå at bidrage til epistemisk vold kan opleves som netop epistemisk vold. Ambitionen har netop været det modsatte. Og vi har også brugt en del kræfter på at sammensætte og samarbejde i et feministisk, anti-racistisk kollektiv af oversættere og fagekasperter, der (foruden at være dygtige på deres metier og evne til gensidig konsultation) også samlet repræsenterer en

vis diversitet i forhold til intersektionelle magtakser og kategorier samtidig med, at vi netop gør eller performer disse forhold temmelig forskelligt. Den tilgang, man finder i 'kluntede klammer' og 'kollektivet med en vis diversitet' trækker på Jasbir Puar's friktionelle rammeværk i teksten 'Jeg vil hellere være en Cyborg end en gudinde' – at blive intersektionel i ansamlingsteori (der også oversættes i *Performative vendinger*). Puar insisterer på at arbejde med fikserede positioner og bevægelse, bagud og forud i tid simultant – snarere end at fastholde/skabe en(s)hed eller polarisering. For Puar handler det ikke om at syntetisere, men om at holde positioner og tilgange sammen med henblik på at bruge friktionens energi produktivt til komplekse re-artikulationer. Det projekt kræver i sig selv et venligt øre, fordi det lander i en debat, hvor der allerede er historisk rundede positioner og strukturer, der kalder på os. For at høre, hvad der faktisk siges/skrives/oversættes, må man arbejde på at udstyre sig med et ivrigt øre, dvs. et velvilligt indstillet øre (Derrida, 1985).

Vi skriver i epilogen, at dette er et midlertidigt punktum, og vi ihukommer Stuart Hall (1987), der skriver, at punktummer ikke findes. At vi overhovedet diskuterer oversættelsesvalg og performativitet, viser jo dette. Det peger også på, at vi i fremtiden fortsat må gen-reflektere og reparere såvel oversættelser, friktionelle tilgange som (an)arkiverings-praksisser.

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