

ART AND CONFLICT

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Jahan Ara Rafi,
Silence! 2023.
Acrylic on
canvas,
24 x 30cm



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EDITORIAL

Between Art and Conflict: Prefiguration, Heterotopia, and the Archive

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Introduction

‘Creation and existence in the face of death and colonial violence will always be an act of insubordination,’ writes Kency Cornejo, ‘to the nation-state, to hegemonic narratives, to the violence of erasure, to empire, and to the art world and its institutions’ (2024: 234). In *Visual Disobedience: Art and Decoloniality in Central America* (2024), Cornejo explores the ways that anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism open onto myriad forms of intersecting and overlapping harms: sexism, class-based exploitation, border violence, and persecutions against gender and sexually diverse communities. Indigenous-led art practices from Mayan artists, and Indigenous-led narratives about art practices, provide an existential challenge to the roaming powers of the imperial State. Insubordination is not a mere theme or a point of view, but rather a precondition for expressive sovereignty and collective meaning-making. And along the way, Indigenous-led art in response to State violence ‘has unearthed new forms of witnessing sorrow, testifying to injustice, and insisting on accountability from systems of power’ (236).

The Art and Conflict Special Issue edited by members of Hunar Symposia arises from an approach to art and art-making as sites of witnessing, and as scenes for the making of communities to bear witness. Art made in relation to conflict makes a claim upon its witnesses and audiences: ‘this happened’, ‘this is the effect’, ‘this is what it was like’, or ‘this is what could be’. These mixed tenses of witnessing link together what Grabska and Horst (2022), in a special section on art for *Conflict and Society*, characterise as the capacity of art to generate alternative ‘ways of knowing’ with the potential for art to create or disrupt visions of the future. It is this potential which led to the existence of Hunar Symposia, and its inaugural activities in 2022 consisting of the *Art/Conflict* researcher and artist conference at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS); the *Missing Time* art exhibition at UTS Gallery; and the mural painting at the Addison Road Community Centre (Sydney), led by Afghanistan-based art collective ArtLords and by Aboriginal Elder and Kaanju-Birri woman Auntie Kathy Dodd Farrawell. Taken collectively, these Hunar Symposia activities aimed to cultivate a relational art community that could participate in knowledge exchange and foster a reciprocity of ideas and creative practice, especially between professional academics and those working primarily in the arts through involving members of the public as witnesses.

In this article, we first consider the critical paradigms and challenges for art understood as a form of witnessing and sense-making around conflict, and in doing so, build on this interdisciplinary scholarship across arts, aesthetics, and the study of trauma and conflict. We identify three ideal contributions of art in the domain of conflict: art as moral compass, art as descriptive and analytic tool, and art as a forum for experiencing the unknowable of conflict. The article then turns to consider the real lived problems that arise with these ideal conceptions by way of examples arising from the inaugural activities of Hunar Symposia in 2022. In particular, we consider the affordances of public and participatory art through a collaborative mural painting activity at Addison Road Community Centre in Sydney, with a focus both on political prefiguration, or the ways that art can be positioned within social movement studies as

showing that ‘another world is possible’, and on Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which allows for an understanding of the ways that the contradictions and incongruencies subtending ‘art and conflict’ can create new knowledge. Similarly, consideration of the *Missing Time* exhibition hosted at the University of Technology Sydney in 2022 also points toward the strength of contradiction and incongruence for those Australian Indigenous artists reimagining colonial histories and interrogating violent archives. Finally, we briefly reflect on the promises and pitfalls of these collaborative approaches in relation to the multiple conjunctures of art and conflict.

The promise of art in relation to conflict

The study of art and conflict is inherently interdisciplinary, and a considerable diversity of approaches is available in the study of art and aesthetics and in the study of violence, trauma, and war.¹ Nevertheless, there may be benefits in providing a provisional schematic for the ways that art can be understood as contributing to understandings of or responses to conflict.

In its most ideal form, art has the capacity to create and affirm a collective ‘we’. Practices of art and art-making presuppose a collective human orientation toward the sharing of ideas and experiences, even as this pushes toward and works within non-human entanglements (see Meskimmon 2020). Art engenders a shared process of meaning-making, even when it is obnoxious, revolting, or misanthropic. The open-endedness of art as creative endeavour naturally summons either a real community or a potential community to come. Some approaches to art do, of course, strive against humanist or human-centric understandings. In *Semblance and Event*, for example, Brian Massumi suggests a provisional exploration of ‘elements brought together in such a way as to become-immanent to the coming event’ (2011: 154), wherein questions of artistic intention exist downstream from process and combination. Elsewhere, Joanna Page’s *Decolonial Ecologies* (2023) draws on decolonial approaches to natural history to consider the ways that Latin American artists challenge the Western colonial and ‘scientific’ frames for understanding nature, in part by exploring pre-modern understandings of aesthetics that sidestep the Enlightenment separation between artistic agency and the passivity of nature. But even when art refuses to communicate social messages or ideas, and even if humans are decentered *vis a vis* the non-human as privileged agents of aesthetic invention, the ‘we’ of art would still seem to persist - as a community that witnesses, that explores its own boundaries, that allows itself to be swept up in movements toward other times and places (see Douglas, Geczy and Lowry 2022). The ‘we’ of art may be unintentional or have fuzzy boundaries, but it is a ‘we’ nonetheless. As a condition for its possibility, art affirms plurality, diversity, and heterogeneity.

The ‘we’ of art is also not a harmonious ‘we’, as much public policy discourse and arts funding criteria might suggest. Writing about the ‘Schackville’ protests in post-apartheid South Africa, Nomusa Makhubu coins the term ‘art-rage’ to describe ‘the role that creative forms of protest play in opening up and uncloaking underlying racialised rage and the fault lines of racial segregation that engender alienated civic engagement and separate and materially different “publics”’ (Makhubu 2020: 216). Citing campus-based creative protests at the University of Cape Town, and subsequent police violence toward artist activists, Makhubu reminds us that art may usefully amplify collective feelings of those injustices and inequalities that remain unreconciled within the dominant racial order. Despite mobilising the seemingly destructive affects of anger and frustration, art-rage has the capacity to cultivate and affirm communities bound by shared experience and political desire.

Against the 'we' promised or invoked by art is the undoing of the 'we'. Human diversity, plurality, and heterogeneity are actively destroyed through violence, and through the dehumanization implied and enacted through acts of violence. Dehumanization can occur through the engineering of situations in which perpetrators feel authorised to commit mass violence against victims (see Ajour 2025; Kelman 2017), and through technologies of war that allow aggressors to distance themselves from places of human habitation (see von Heinegg, Frau, and Singer 2018). Dehumanization can also happen slowly to those communities seeking to escape conflict, who may be subjected to further impoverishment and devastation by global securitization and border control regimes (Schindel 2022). Conflict can destroy practical opportunities for art making, but it can also destroy the forms of human multiplicity and heterogeneity affirmed by artistic practices. Commenting on ongoing colonial violence directed toward Central American communities, Cornejo (2024: 2) notes that collective 'deletion' can occur 'through blatant exclusion of historical narratives, reduction into objects of gaze, disappearance into homogenized groups and geographies, or existence as targets of empire'.

Art may appear well suited to help to ward humanity off its most inhuman impulses, and to affirm those diverse ways of thinking, feeling, and being that armed conflict seeks to delete. The 'we' of art nourishes empathy, relationality, and interdependency against the undoing of the 'we' demanded and pursued by acts of dehumanization. Scholarship on art and conflict therefore foregrounds not only the ways that art can represent conflict, but also the affordances of art in generating new ways of knowing about conflict itself. In *Aesthetics and World Politics* (2009), for example, Roland Bleiker positions aesthetic practices as offering different epistemologies to those in the social sciences:

Aesthetic sources can offer us alternative insights into international relations; a type of reflective understanding that emerges not from systematically applying the technical skills of analysis which prevail in the social sciences, but from cultivating a more open-ended level of sensibility about the political. We might then be able to appreciate what we otherwise cannot even see: perspectives and people excluded from prevailing purviews, for instance, or the emotional nature and consequences of political events. (Bleiker 2009: 2)

More recently, Daniele Rugo has extended this argument, pushing against the rationality of Bleiker's approach by elevating the role of art in communicating the unknowable:

We should look at the arts not because they have a descriptive power, but precisely in what is non-descriptive about them and not simply because they lead to an epistemic rethinking of the foundations of studies of conflict, but because the very non-descriptive, sensuous, non-identical elements of arts find an echo in experiences of conflict themselves. They find echoes and resonances in those residues of experience that are not easily expressed, precisely because their density resists being channelled into an intelligible whole. (Rugo 2024: 87)

Rugo's argument for the role of art in conflict aligns with the philosophical positions adopted by Juan G. Ramos in *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts* (2018), which considers art not simply as endeavouring to present the world 'as it is', but as an opportunity to enhance and diversify our affective capacities outside of dominant regimes of representability.

Taking these approaches together, we might consider three distinct contributions of art in the domain of conflict: first, art as a moral affirmation of human relationality, interdependency,

and diversity; second, art as an epistemological resource not only to identify but to analyse and explain conflict; and third, art as an experiential forum for exploring those aspects of conflict that reach beyond the wholly describable or knowable. But each of these conceptions of art and conflict faces a common problem. The normative role ascribed to art in relation to conflict rarely aligns with the multiplicity of really-existing connections between the two. As a preliminary sketch of such connections, we might consider the use of art in propaganda to justify war (Staal 2019); the appropriation of art objects as an extension of extractive relations between oppressor and oppressed social groups (Black & Barringer 2022); the epistemological violence involved in redescribing diverse cultural practices within the narrow Eurocentric discourse on art (Juneja 2011; Ramos 2018); the persistence of art critical discourse that valorises disembodied contemplation over forms of meaningful social or political action (Sonik 2021); and the reluctance of many artists themselves to strongly align their works with a particular conflict, community, or identity, often for fear of being pigeonholed or marginalised *vis a vis* art institutions (Ralph & Gibson 2023). Finally, the categories of ‘conflict’ and ‘violence’ are themselves troublesome. The violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed are by no means equivalent, and artists cannot claim political neutrality when choosing to document violence or conflict. Indeed, as Sawsan Malla Hussein (2025: 33) has recently argued in discussion of comics journalist Joe Sacco, the concept of witnessing in art leads ‘away from detached objectivity and toward a participatory and accountable position, where truth is relational and grounded in the experience of those whose lives are most impacted by violence’. Taking this line of argument further, Duncan MacIntosh (2022) has provocatively argued that justifications may exist for the destruction of cultural works in the context of some conflicts, should such works have been commissioned and employed in the service of oppression. Art is by no means a panacea to conflict or a reliable path away from the kinds of forces mobilised in acts of cultural deletion and mass dehumanization.

These are not new concerns. Many artists, curators, and community arts professionals have been attentive to the tensions and challenges attached to artistic practices, art critical discourses, and arts institutions as bearers of, and sometimes as continuations of, historical practices of exploitation, colonisation, and dehumanization (see Pitman 2021). To the extent that curatorial practices within the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) sector can enact change, there has been a push toward understanding the situatedness of art practitioners and audiences within and beyond gallery walls, including a heightened awareness of the ways that public art connects to advocacy, activism, and social movements (see Tait 2023; Zebracki 2020). Commenting on Palestinian graffiti art on the Segregation Wall separating Israel from occupied Palestine, Hasan and Bleibleh (2023) argue that ‘everyday nonviolent practices, such as singing, trading, and walking, are all considered “tactical in character” to resist and transform the traumatized sites into empowering *resistancescapes*’ (10, emphasis in original). What is the use, in such contexts, of such traditional aesthetic notions as curator, artwork, and audience, if not to simply contain and depoliticise the radical challenge posed by these resistant practices against an oppressive occupying force?

We have been involved in organising events and activities for the Hunar Symposia project² as one way to explore these sometimes fraught intersections between art and conflict. The organisational premise has been to prioritise the involvement of artists, activists, and academics in shared decision-making around the emergent priorities of a group concerned with conflict and with forms of social justice connected to conflict. Diverse and possibly incommensurable theories of art and conflict inhere within the different strategies and events supported under



[1] Addison Road Community Centre mural painting, November 2022

the Hunar Symposia umbrella, and in this respect, we borrow our approach from those working in participatory art and art as an 'educational' practice, wherein the focus is on the process rather than product (see Birchall 2017).

Process in practice: experiencing the mural as prefiguration

Through its academic conference, gallery exhibition, workshops, movie nights, and mural painting, Hunar Symposia's activities united a diversity of voices from different nationalities to exhibit different forms of artistic expression and debate their potential to contribute to what Paulo Freire (2005) has famously called a critical awareness of and intervention into reality. In the process, participants produced temporary collective experiences that sought to challenge the epistemological, disciplinary, and ideological borders that potentially restrict our understanding of both contemporary artistic practices and political conflicts.

On 20 November 2022, Hunar Symposia organised a collaborative painting of a mural at the Addison Road Community Centre. The mural [1] was led by Afghanistan-based art collective ArtLords, key members of which work in exile, and by Aboriginal Elder and Kaanju-Birri woman Aunty Kathy Dodd Farrawell. The artwork moves from the colonisation of Australia and the continuing Aboriginal heartbeat of Country to the ongoing military conflicts in Afghanistan, including the involvement of Australian soldiers. Drawing on their own creative approaches and inclinations, members of Hunar Symposia, Conference attendees, and friends, were all encouraged to pick up a brush and join the painting process – regardless of any prior painting skills. In keeping with practices now widely understood as 'participatory art',¹ everyone could be an artist, and Artlords and Aunty Kathy became facilitators of a convivial experience that

troubled professional boundaries and that affirmed non-institutional means for creating, exhibiting, and responding to art.

Social movement studies provides useful conceptual resources that dovetail with key themes in the study of participatory art. Coined by Carl Boggs (1977), 'prefiguration' describes the present instantiations of the social relations and human experiences that orient the future goals of social movements, and Marianne Maeckelberg (2011) has shown that some social movements deliberately prefigure alternative social structures so that people can experience them in the present. As David Graeber (2002: 72) puts it, 'it's one thing to say, "another world is possible"; it's another to experience it, however momentarily'. By linking together artists and non-artists from different nationalities to collaborate on the wall mural at Addison Road Community Center, Hunar Symposia supported participants to experience a mode of artistic production that challenged the conventional distribution of roles between artist and audience. Those involved were empowered to embrace their roles as active agents in reflecting upon and reacting to political conflicts. In this context, the production of the mural prefigured a world in which communities are more democratic and inclusive spaces for building shared social and political worlds.

Prefigurative politics may seem most suited to utopian social movements that advocate for completely different political and social structures in the future, although as Aragorn Eloff argues, these news worlds must still be created 'in the shell of the old' (Eloff 2019: 44). But we might also consider prefiguration in an affective register, or a register not organised around the primacy of shared principles. By 'affect', we mean the

impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those ... resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1, emphasis in original)

The circulation of affect through common projects has the potential to activate a shared social imagination for a different world. Affect can contribute to prefigurative politics by 'galvanising protesters, creating a shared sense of purpose, and widening people's sense of what might be possible' (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021: 653). But to better understand the link between art, conflict, and prefigurative affects (654), we need to recognise that affect is not only a tool of resistance: it can also be a tool of repression. For example, fear is an affect often cultivated to foster social and political division, and has often been theorised in relation to the biopolitical control of bodies as part of the neoliberal assault on all aspects of life. Ben Anderson (2012: 34) has argued that 'all of life is assayed in ways that may reproduce forms of racialised suspicions or fears... At its limit, security becomes war and life is killed to protect valued lives'. The 'politics of fear' is also routinely promoted by right-wing (and sometimes even 'moderate') political actors in relation to refugees seeking asylum (see Heins 2021; Noble and Poynting 2016). Yet affect can never be fully controlled or exhausted by power, and shared affects can become a source of shelter or line of escape from the affective worlds built by fear. 'A politics of fear is always possible,' writes Volker Heins, 'but so is a politics of hope' (2021: 501).

Repurposing public space is one way to activate an affective politics of hope against the affective malaise of fear. By connecting ArtLords' public art practices to the important local community

and artistic work of Aunty Kathy, and doing this through a participatory and public art practice, the Addison Road Community Centre mural sought to activate hope and confidence in the possibilities for international collaboration and connection against colonial and neocolonial violence. This approach also linked to a longer history of public works and interventions led or co-led by ArtLords in Afghanistan. For example, a key part of the international securitization of Kabul in the conflict post-2001 were 'blast walls' designed to shield specific people and buildings against attacks. These walls also divided the city and signalled a separation of life: they communicated to the population of Kabul that some lives were more valued than others. Through an ArtLords project, these walls were transformed into art murals with giant eyes acting as sentinels for the public watching those inside. Adding a multiple reading to the wall changed the affective experiences of those walking past: it could no longer be a wall of fear and division, for it now also spoke of a potentially changed future (see Ghani forthcoming). Later on, as the ArtLords collective grew, murals across the city tackled a multitude of social issues.⁴ Building on this approach, the Addison Road public art mural strived for a multiplicity—and indeed, juxtaposition—of meanings. Painting images of war and colonisation, and doing so in a collaborative spirit of improvisation, solidarity and love, opened the possibility for alternative visions of the future to be imagined.

This multiplicity of meaning brings us to the theory of 'heterotopia', which has historically been drawn from the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. In the context of social movement studies, Zembylas and Ferreira (2009) argue that

heterotopias constitute certain structures of feelings and produce particular forms of socialization through which new identifications and alliances may be formed between individuals and groups. This process takes place through the construction of alternative affective spaces that oppose, for instance, identities grounded in hostile emotions about the Other. (6)

Heterotopias are not simply utopian spaces that celebrate or buttress a shared ideology. Rather, Robert Topinka (2010) notes that while many scholars discuss heterotopias as sites of resistance, they can also be understood to create 'an intensification of knowledge' (55) through juxtaposition of multiple differences. This juxtaposition is seen in the amateur and professional artists, but also in the images within the Addison Road mural itself. The mural brings together ideas about Australian colonialism and its ongoing legacies for First Nations Australians with a critical commentary on Australia's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. It also happens that the mural emerged at the same time as shocking news reports of Australian soldiers having engaged in war crimes in Afghanistan.⁵ When the different panels of the mural are read together, this gives a reading to the shadowy soldiers within the legacy of colonial violence extending from white settlement.

Returning to the concept of prefiguration, we can see how heterotopias can also function as prefigurative spaces. Following Topinka, Beckett, Bagguley, and Campbell (2017: 172) describe heterotopias as

real experiments in thinking and being differently, lived in the present. They provide escape routes from the norm, enlarging the possibilities for self-determination. They are spaces that facilitate and organize resistance practices. In enabling practices that are rule-breaking, they have the potential to effect a rupture in the current order of things. (Beckett, Bagguley, and Campbell 2017: 174)

The prefigurative act of the art mural encaptures many of these aspects of heterotopia. While not actually ‘rule-breaking’, professional and amateur artists working collectively on a public wall is certainly outside of norms and a rupture of the art order. Heterotopias are also described as ‘spaces that are connected to the rest of space, and yet somehow at variance with it’ (171), thus for a participant familiar with the history of the site, the transgressive art practices may have mattered less for ‘enlarging the possibilities of self-determination’ than the place of the mural itself. Somewhat ironically, given the anti-war message of the mural, the Addison Road Community Centre is a former army depot (see Castrique 2018). Together with the important ongoing cultural events promoted by the Addison Road Community Centre,⁶ participatory art on this site contributes to a reworking of the historical meanings of the location, while also pushing against the commodification and gentrification of inner city Sydney by saving some interstitial spaces for creative practices. Further, the organisations using the Addison Road Community Centre have historically included multiple, specific multicultural and multilingual communities, such that some mural participants may also have brought affective associations and memories connected to culturally specific community events hosted at the site. Bringing together the experiences of diverse migrant communities with the histories of First Nations sovereignty on Gadigal Country, the mural asks non-Indigenous participants to reckon with their own complex roles as settler migrants (see Birch 2020; Pugliese 2002), and with the new realities of conflict in Afghanistan that produces mass displacements in ways that may be both similar and different to the experiences of multicultural diasporas in Australia.

Finally, we need to acknowledge some shortcomings to this prefigurative interpretation of the mural. A process-oriented approach can run the risk of pushing more conventional means of advocating for political change to the background, such as the advocacy and protest work that commonly emerges within social movements. Further, as noted in a study by Matthew Reynolds (2012) of public art in Hollywood, there are ways in which art in ostensibly public locales can still contribute to, or become complicit in, urban transformations that reinforce existing hierarchies of physical, social, and cultural access. Our argument is certainly not for a uniform celebration of collaborative public mural-making as a guarantee of egalitarian or democratic community building. However, we do think that these experiences have the capacity to support less alienated and individualised forms of creative expression and knowledge production, especially in the capacity of collaborative arts projects to connect differently oppressed or marginalised communities who share the same urban spaces. As Paulo Freire (2005: 72) puts it, ‘knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’.

Missing Time and archival recovery

The work of both local and international artists in the exhibition *Missing Time* (UTS Art Gallery and other spaces, 2022), organised in conjuncture with the Hunar Symposia Art/Conflict conference and Addison Road Community Centre mural, and with a focus on loss, erasure, and disappearance in the context of political conflict. In the curatorial rationale, *Missing Time* curator Chrisoula Lionis invoked the notion of ‘missingness’, pointing to a tension in the exhibition between art and archive that manifested in a range of material and conceptual ways. Numerous artists across the Global South are engaged in the decolonisation of the historic record through the radical repurposing of materials and records amassed in colonial archives (Al-Zayed 2024). Where the artists’ context is authoritarian repression, those historical records,

like the victims of these regimes, may be missing without official explanation. In the situational urban guerrilla art of Brazilian collective *Coletivo Aparecidos Políticos*, people who had been 'disappeared' under Brazil's anti-Communist military regime were named and referenced in ceremonial public actions and displays (see Mourão et al. in this issue). Radical artist and cartoonist Badiucao explored historical erasure in the People's Republic of China through his work *Tick-tock* (2021), which included a commemorative watch that the Communist Party of China (CCP) had awarded to those members of the armed forces involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Kani Kamil and Shero Abbas drew attention to unacknowledged histories and stories of women in Iraqi Kurdistan in video work *The Spot* (2015), which left most of the screen black and deliberately obscured all but tiny fleeting circles of archival domestic footage. In related ways works by Australians First Nations artists Fiona Foley (Badtjala) and Megan Cope (Quandamooka) engaged critically with colonial histories and archives, but we want to briefly provide some contexts for First Nations artists in the Australian art field before discussing these specific works.

For First Nations peoples in Australia, British colonisation and post-Federation settler governance constitute foundational and ongoing crises of conflict, dispossession, and decimation (see Moreton-Robinson 2015). The artistic practices of First Nations artists bear a complex and heterogeneous relation to this history. At one polarity, in the face of loss and destruction there is art that preserves and revives traditional knowledges, material practices, and ceremonial cultures. For example, since the inception of the Central Desert dot painting movement in the early 1970s (see Barden & Barden 2004; Johnson 2010), work by First Nations artists drawing on traditional methods and ceremonial designs has been produced and commissioned for both museum collections and private sale (Thomas 1999: 216). Such community artmaking practices challenge dominant public discourses that fixate on deficit and disadvantage (see Stringer 2007) and contribute instead to community development and cohesion (Myers 2020). At another polarity, although sometimes overlapping with works that foreground traditional methods, there is art as guerilla resistance directly oriented against the settler colony and against the ongoing erasures of frontier violence in Australian public culture (see Perkins 2022; Thomas 1999).⁷ For example, Badtjala artist Fiona Foley is a founding member of the radical Aboriginal art collective, proppaNOW, and her large wall work, 'Dispersed' (2008), spells out this term DISPERSED – a colonial euphemism for the killing of Aboriginal people – in bullets. Despite sometimes sharp contrasts between traditional works and those that thematise protest and resistance, the relationship between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' Aboriginal art is more complex than might first appear (see Gilchrist 2019). For example, the Tjanpi collective uses traditional grass weaving techniques to create sculptures ranging from ancestral dreaming figures to elements of contemporary community life. As Richard Bell has noted in his influential essay 'Bell's Theorem' (2018), non-Indigenous art discourse in Australia has produced overly narrow conceptions of acceptable and authentic Aboriginal creativity, such that certain comfortable versions of "Aboriginal art" come to attract commercial value and institutional accolades, while other less comfortable versions continue to be marginalised.⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art has often been dehistoricised under the umbrella of the 'traditional' (or even 'primitive'), in tandem with the wider erasure of Indigenous histories in non-Indigenous public culture. For these reasons and others, many artists across the Global South are engaged in the decolonisation of historical records through the radical repurposing of materials and records in colonial archives (see Al-Zayed 2024; Page 2023; Pitman 2021). In Australia, artists are destabilising the Social Darwinist premises of many Western historical records (e.g., exoticising

ethnographic photographs) by repurposing and retrofitting archival objects into decolonial and anticolonial works (see Andrew & Neath 2018). Artistic appropriations of archives enable artists to reclaim and reframe received histories, instantiate alternative scenarios, and reimagine collective futures (see McMillan 2019).

In the *Missing Time* exhibition, works by Fiona Foley (Badtjala) and Megan Cope (Quandamooka) engage with colonial histories and archives through a range of approaches and across different mediums. Fiona Foley's inkjet prints were drawn from two photomedia series, *Horror has a Face* (2017) and *The Magna Carta Tree* (2021), which both play on and subvert the visual conventions of 19th and early 20th century settler colonial photography, and in doing so affirm the sovereignty of those Badtjala communities either exoticised or infantilised in European photographic archives. Writing on *Horror has a Face* (2017) as part of Foley's exhibition 'Who Are These Strangers and Where Are They Going?', Odette Kelada observes that Foley 'strips through this haze' of foggy (and criminal) settler colonial memory 'by creating the sets and stages, characters and costumes, enacting the story of the opium dens and the role of church and state in the violent erasure of Aboriginal culture, language and life' (2019: 9). Working with similar themes in the effort to counter historical erasure, the three lithographs by Megan Cope in the *Missing Time* exhibition were from her series *The Black Napoleon (Eulope)* (2019). This series engages with a historical figure that disrupted false narratives of Indigenous passivity in the face of settler colonial invasion. 'For me the story of the Black Napoleon is just one of the many stories of powerful and clever people defying Empire at the turn of the 19th and 20th century throughout Australia' writes Cope (2024). The works from both Foley and Cope resituate archival elements within an alternative social imaginary, a re-staging of Eurocentric colonial histories and a reframing of stories about place and identity. The artistic reframing of the language and tools of the coloniser subverts archive, history and place alike by challenging the seemingly fixed subject positions of coloniser and colonised, self and other.

Conclusion: On collaboration and conflict

An interdisciplinary conference, a gallery exhibition, a public art project. To have been involved in the collaborative effort of any one of these would be a thrill; to be entwined in all three does create an emotional intensity that makes critical distance difficult. Nevertheless, to contribute to an idealised notion of art as a panacea to conflict does not progress the aims of this Art and Conflict special issue of *Axon*. We hope this brief survey of a collaborative art project between academics and artists has illuminated, at least in some way, the reflexivity required when seeking to sidestep or overturn traditional hierarchies of knowledge and knowing. In practical terms, the effort to collaboratively mix an art exhibition, a conference, and a mural work, can create significant organisational and personal challenges, especially given that each part of the Hunar Symposia project has required quite different kinds of trust and reciprocity. But collaborative tensions may be a necessary result of trying to stage quite different relationships between art and conflict, and as Hunar Symposia members, we experienced these events as heterotopic. In a world where the promise of art in relation to conflict is too often unmet, collaborative processes may help to centre the claim of the 'we' at the heart of art's promise for a more humane world.

Notes

- ¹ For a significant interdisciplinary effort to bring diverse approaches together, see the chapters collected in Bjering et al. (2024).
- ² See URL: <https://hunarsymposia.com/>
- ³ On participatory art, see the examples collected in Claire Bishop's *Participation* (2006).
- ⁴ After regaining power in August 2021, one of the Taliban's first acts was to paint over these murals with victory slogans. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/the-soul-of-kabul-taliban-paint-over-murals-with-victory-slogans>
- ⁵ See *War crimes in Afghanistan: the Brereton Report and the Office of the Special Investigator*. URL: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Briefing_Book/47th_Parliament/BreretonReport
- ⁶ The centre also seeks to support subsidised rents for a diverse range of community organisations. See the Addison Road Community Centre website at URL: <https://addiroad.org.au>
- ⁷ A high profile example of this latter approach was the work collected in 'Culture Warriors: the National Indigenous Art Triennale' (2007-8), curated by Brenda Croft.
- ⁸ On the problems attending distinctions between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' Indigenous arts, see also Thomas (1999: 223).

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Cover Artist Statement by Jahan Ara Rafi

I am an Afghan born artist who fled Kabul with the return of the Taliban in 2021. I have continued to pursue my art practice, now from diaspora. My subject is the voice of women. I paint portraits of women who have problems in their lives, but these deformed faces have something to say.

I see myself as a quiet and calm person on the surface, but inside I have a lot of energy and passion. This inner energy and passion drive me to strive for freedom and to work toward the well-being of my Afghan community and the defense of human rights. I have always struggled with the idea of true freedom in my life. Unfortunately, society has never been able to give me a clear understanding or definition of individual freedom.

Most of my works are centered on women; their identity and their social role are recurring themes in my paintings. Most importantly, I question, why is it that women are made to experience gender differences when aiming to find their place in society. The Works remind the viewer of the limitations, and the "silence" imposed on women that they have inherited from history. My work is meant to partially break this silence through artwork. I have lived in societies where individual freedoms have not been understood and defined clearly.

The symbols and portraits in my artworks are generally drawn with bent necks and closed eyes at the end of motionless and mobile roads. They are as red as twilight, and they have withdrawn into themselves. They are filled with the cold feelings of hurried passersby and travelers.

Tired bodies with tall and bent necks, counting the lines of the ground while sighing and searching the footsteps of the sun.

Silence in my artwork has another meaning. Within the thoughts of these giraffe necked women, they want to break free from small thinkers, they seek freedom from the thoughts of others.

Silence isn't the lack of sound here, but it is the sound of the other side; from hidden secrets behind the closed walls in the eyes of a woman when she is stoned, when she is buried alive and when...

Women are the best subject of all my artworks.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POST-DICTATORSHIP MEMORY IN HUNAR'S *MISSING TIME*

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Abstract

This article analyses the postmemorial remediation of archival photographs as a strategy of memory activism aimed at challenging collective perceptions of traumatic histories. Drawing on scholarly literature concerning postconflict visual arts (Rosenberg, 2016; Catela, 2024; Monegal, 2016) and memory studies (Rigney, 2020; Rothberg, 2019; Hirsch, 2012), it examines two artworks by Latin American artists Marcelo Brodsky and Aparecidos Políticos. The discussion explores how archival images can be creatively reinterpreted to animate repertoires of memory activism. It is proposed that these artworks utilise the capacity of photographs to emphasise the dialectic between past and present, and through postmemorial remediation, they draw attention to the enduring effects of human rights violations. Beyond the analysis of these works, the article also considers their placement in Hunar's *Missing Time* exhibition and how the exhibition's rationale situated them within the gallery space and in relation to each other. It is argued that their exhibition alongside international artworks depicting both historical and contemporary injustices has the potential to suggest geographic and generational linkages within systems of oppression. Nonetheless, there is a risk of unintentionally reinforcing these oppressions if it fails to foreground the imperial and colonial histories that underpin them. Overall, the article investigates how postmemorial remediations of victims' photographs can complicate memory dynamics, promote identification, and implicate viewers in historical human rights violations. This investigation expands by examining how the presentation of victims' photographs within an art gallery may inadvertently elevate the moral standing of viewers while absolving them of responsibility for their indifference (Rosenberg, 2016), especially if a clear connection between individual stories and broader systemic forms of oppression is not established.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POST-DICTATORSHIP MEMORY IN HUNAR'S *MISSING TIME*

Luis E. Quintão Guerra

Introduction

The exhibition *Missing Time* (2022), organised by Hunar Symposia at UTS Gallery in Sydney, Australia, showcased artworks from different countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Palestine, and Australia, with the aim of exploring 'the critical tension between art making and the stories, archives, people, that—for diverse reasons—are absent, erased, or actively "disappeared".' As I walked through the gallery, I encountered various installations featuring photographs of victims of past dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina. Nearby, other artworks examined past and ongoing political conflicts in different parts of the world, such as the oppression of Indigenous Australians and Palestinians. The exhibition's effort to depict stories and people from diverse regions was commendable. However, while these stories of absence were presented together, they were understood separately as consequences of 'diverse reasons'.

As articulated by SupGaleano, from the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, the oppressor changes names, but the war of dispossession, which serves as the driving force of capitalism, remains identical for Palestinians and native peoples of Mexico, for instance (EZLN, 2016).¹ This perspective can be expanded to include Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries that experienced dictatorships between 1960 and 1980. According to Idelber Avelar (1999: 231), the introduction of late capitalism was precisely the epochal role played by Latin American dictatorships. The author recalls Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who once stated that people were tortured so prices could be kept low. Claiming to liberate these countries from corruption and communism, and to restore democracy in the name of Western Christian moralism, right-wing military regimes emerged with the support of Western democracies, particularly the United States (Fico, 2008; Anderson, 2015), and began to propagate 'a discourse permeated by threats and the mobilisation of fears' (Bauer, 2020: 176).

The origins of practices of disappearance in Latin America can be traced to the doctrines employed by military forces from France and the United States to wage colonial and imperial wars in Algeria and Vietnam, but they are also linked to experiences during Spain's Francoist dictatorship and Germany's Nazi regime (Bauer, 2014; Martins Filho, 2008). The disappeared represent what Gabriel Gatti (2014) describes as a break in meaning, or a catastrophe for identity and language, emphasising its irrepresentability. Simultaneously, the disappeared can also be regarded as a polysemic category that encompasses diverse practices and beliefs, as explained by Ludmila Catela (2024) and demonstrated by the artworks analysed here.

While the artworks featuring photographs of desaparecidos during Latin American dictatorships, and the other pieces assembled in that sector, demanded empathy from me as a viewer in relation to the victims of past and ongoing forms of oppression—namely, Brazilians, Argentinians, Palestinians, and First Nations Australians—something was missing. There was a lack of a unifying element to link these diverse stories of oppression. Perhaps what is needed is an approach akin to what Ariella Azoulay (2019) describes as an anti-imperial framework, through which all phenomena affected by Western imperialism could be thought together.

This article is a theoretically informed reflection of my personal experience as a viewer attending the exhibition. I draw on my own perspective as a Latin American man living and working on the stolen lands of the Gadigal people and on literature about postconflict visual arts (Rosenberg, 2016; Gatti, 2014; Catela, 2012; Monegal, 2016; Huyssen, 2022; Hirsch, 2012) to examine the use of archive photographs of victims of past dictatorships in works of memory art and activism. In the subsequent sections, I analyse how the works of Argentinean artist Marcelo Brodsky and Brazilian collective Aparecidos Políticos (AP) animate the archive and turn repositories of memory into repertoires of memory activism (Zamponi, 2018), incorporating photography as a tactic for expanding collective understandings regarding the dictatorial period and its legacies in the present. I conclude by considering their placement within the gallery space by Hunar's *Missing Time*. I contend that Hunar's *Missing Time* (2022) exemplifies the potential of the creative arts to foster empathy towards various forms of oppression. Simultaneously, it bears the risk of unintentionally perpetuating these oppressions by failing to accentuate the imperial and colonial histories that underpin them. In sum, this article explores the postmemorial remediation of the photographs of victims of violent conflicts and the potential risks and opportunities of their exhibition in Hunar's *Missing Time* to make visible entanglements between political conflicts separated temporally and geographically.

La Clase: photography and the interspace between personal memories and historical implication

In opposition to the artistic evidence of the painting, Walter Benjamin (2015: 66-67) states that photographs introduce something new, 'something that cannot be silenced, obstreperously demanding the name of she who has lived, who remains real here and will never consent to enter fully into "art"'. Despite the photographer's planned actions, the observer feels compelled 'to find the inconspicuous place in which, in the essence of that moment which passed long ago, the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back, are able to discover it.' This *optical unconscious*, as named by the author, is made tangible through photography.

In *Excavation and Memory*, Benjamin (1999: 576) stated that memory is not 'an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium'. And, if one wants to approach the past, they must scatter and turn the soil 'like a man digging.' As noted by Pinho (2020), Benjamin highlights the processual aspect of memory in which meaning is rearticulated and transformed. Thus, the optical unconscious enabled by photographs allows the viewer to grasp the dialectical relation between the now and then. It helps with the process of turning the soil and excavating through memory.

Photographs of disappeared were used in Argentina during the military regime (1976-1983) by victims' relatives in the search for their loved ones, but also as a tool to denounce human rights abuses. As explained by Ludmila da Silva Catela (2012; 2015), what was initially used to individualise a loved one in the search process, once taken into public space, became part of a *corpus* denouncing the dictatorship. The use of photographs as a political tool to denounce human rights violations committed by the military regime continued '(...) from grandmothers (in search of grandchildren) to children (the stolen babies) in search of relatives as they themselves have grown to adulthood.' (Arruti, 2007: 105). The practice can still be seen in contemporary demonstrations organised by associations engaged in the Argentinean struggle for memory, truth, and justice, such as Madres de Plaza de Mayo, H.I.J.O.S., and artists like Marcelo Brodsky. These images from the past 'are covered with new meanings based on social relations, new

questions and the identities that interpellate them' (Catela, 2012: 113). They function as a window, as Rosenberg (2016) suggests, which works both ways: compelling viewers to confront the past and allowing the past to project itself into the future and interpellate us, the onlookers.

The work *La Clase*, by Argentinean artist Marcelo Brodsky, is a photographic testimony about what happened to the 1967 class of *Escuela Nacional de Buenos Aires*, and it alludes to the complex relationship between image, personal memories and history. Marcelo Brodsky was born in Argentina in 1954 and, after his brother was disappeared in 1979, he was exiled in Spain. Following the end of the Argentinean dictatorship in 1983, Brodsky returned to Buenos Aires and tracked down every living classmate that appeared in the 1967 photograph. This work was exhibited at the same school where it was taken allowing interaction with current students. The work acknowledges those pupils who, like the artist's brother, disappeared during the Argentinean dictatorship.

Photograph's ability to unfold the complexities of the now and then is enhanced by the artist's inscriptions making explicit the innocence of those young students that did not know about their tragic fate. Roland Barthes wrote about the photograph of young North American Lewis Payne who tried to assassinate a Secretary of State in 1865. Payne was photographed while waiting to be hanged. According to Barthes (1981: 96) 'the punctum is: he is going to die'. The punctum in the photograph of Brodsky's classmates strikes the viewer as it reveals the interaction between the ingenuous past of those children unaware of the tragic future ahead. This interaction is explored and made explicit by the artist's inscriptions, which describe his classmates' fates after the Argentinean dictatorship. At the centre of the picture, we see a boy with a relaxed semblance staring at the camera and leaning towards another boy sitting at his right. According to the inscription 'Martin was the first they took. Didn't get to know his son Pablo who is 20 years old now. He was my friend; the best'. The boy at Martin's right is Brodsky himself and the inscription reads 'I am a photographer, and I miss Martin'. The inscriptions tell us that *this* [Martin's death] *has been*, but for young Brodsky and Martin, posing together for the class photograph, *this will be*. As in Barthes' analysis, the viewer is struck by the horror of 'an anterior future of which death is the stake' (1981: 96).

Similarly, Susan Sontag (2005: 55) explains that 'photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people,' The indexical nature of the photo signifies life through the presence of the object before the camera and, at the same time, announces death, the 'having-been there' of that object. The 'having-been there' of the photograph enables a retrospective look shared by those who survive. In Brodsky's work, the students photographed are 'irrefutably there at a specific age in their lives', but they don't know what we know; as viewers, we carry the weight of knowing they will have their destinies marked by the rise of State violence during the Argentinean dictatorship.

Huyssen (2001) classifies Brodsky's practice as memory art, which recalls the complex tradition of mnemotechniques. The series *La Buena Memoria*, in which *La Clase* appears, questions the limits between installation, photography, monument, and memorial. It inquires the viewer not only as an individual but also as a member of a community that has been through a catastrophe. In the context of a state of exception the disappearance of a human being means the denial of humanity, it lacks interpretative framework, it is 'a catastrophe for identity and for language' (Gatti, 2014: 16). I suggest that the reaction emerging from my encounter with *La Clase* resonates

with what Marianne Hirsch (2012: 86) understands as a ‘heteropathic’ form of recollection that allows recognition across difference, a form of ‘nonappropriative identification and empathy’.

The concept of *postmemory*, as developed by Marianne Hirsch, can be useful in understanding the role of photographs in memory activism. Postmemory is understood as a generational structure of transmission mediated by cultural forms of expression. According to Hirsch (2012: 9) postmemory refers to the responses of second generations to the cultural or collective traumatic experiences of their parents, ‘experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.’ Photographs, according to the author, ‘become screens—spaces of projection and approximation, and of protection’. While on the one hand, viewers are protected by their frame and two-dimensionality, on the other, they are open to narrative elaboration and to possibilities of materialising past atrocities in the present. Photographs, in this sense, can imprison reality in an inscriptive and archival sense, but they can also be used to enlarge and even question reality.

Brodsky’s *La Clase* opens up the private memories of direct victims of the Argentinean dictatorship (including Brodsky himself) into the public realm, animating ‘the absence that breaks normality’ (Gatti, 2014: 101) to younger generations. By exploring decades of history within the boundaries of the personal and the public, it transforms viewers into bystanders, prompting them to consider their ethical stances regarding past human rights violations and the social and political conditions that enabled them to occur in the first place. However, it is crucial that the heteropathic identification, which recognises the other without internalising it, does not result in the viewer’s depoliticised resignation, shielded by a safe distance from minoritarian memories.



[1] *La clase*, 1er. año, 6ª división, foto de clase, 1967 (1996). Marcelo Brodsky. Provided by the artist. Use authorised by the artist.

Animating the archive and mirroring complicities

A few steps after Brodsky's *La Clase*, the viewer could find mirrors with stencilled photographs (or silhouettes) of victims of the Brazilian dictatorship. As explained by Guerra (2025), the pictures used in AP's actions were taken from the official report *Direito à Memória e Verdade* (Right to Memory and Truth), organised and published in 2007 by the Comissão Especial de Mortos e Desaparecidos (Special Commission of the Dead and Disappeared). Next to the mirrors, the artwork's description explained that in 2014, the 50th anniversary of Brazil's military coup, collective Aparecidos Políticos (AP) carried out an unauthorised intervention on the walls of the 23rd Military Headquarters in the city of Fortaleza, a former torture centre, with mirrors containing images of the dead and politically disappeared.

AP is a collective founded in 2010 by young artists and students that merges art and activism, promoting urban interventions such as radio art experiments, public performances, and street art, thus contributing a rejuvenated voice to debates on Brazil's dictatorship legacy (1964–1985). If Brazil's democracy emerged from the silenced memory of political repression (Teles, 2018), AP was established during what could be described as the country's (brief) turn to memory (Atencio, 2014), when conversations about the dictatorship became more prominent in the public sphere, leading up to the country's first National Truth Commission in 2012. AP is part of a movement of third-generation activists utilising creative works to encourage participatory, affective, and political engagement with Brazil's hesitant efforts to confront its dictatorial past (see Soares et al., 2021).

As stated in the artwork's description, the military staff at the 23rd Military Headquarters continues to celebrate the anniversary of the 1964 Coup. For this reason, on the 50th anniversary of the coup, AP's action, carried out at night during the changing of guards, challenged military authority and questioned the site's violent history. In this temporary and unauthorised installation, as documented in photographs (see [2] and [3]), the victims' faces seem to emerge from the walls of the military building while reflecting the viewers' faces among them.

Understanding that spaces are created through repeated performances (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014), it is important to consider the transmission of dictatorial memory as performed by (and within) the building where the action took place (a military headquarters known for celebrating the 1964 Coup). In this context, AP's work can be better understood as a counter-performance, subverting official discourses by making the crimes committed by the military visible and alluding to their persistence in the present. Disrupting the celebratory discourse surrounding the military dictatorship by revealing its crimes and exposing the everyday bystander's complicity, the action made tangible the contradictions of Brazil's liberal democracy and, as observed by Edson Teles (2018), its acceptance of impunity in the name of national reconciliation and governability. As the headquarters' wall transformed into an animated archive, with images of those who (and whose ideas) were meant to be erased from Brazil's political life, the mirrors implied passers-by implication in dictatorial violence.

This piece seems to echo the Argentinean series *Identidad*, an installation organised by Parque de la Memoria and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo,² that intercalates photographs of disappeared people and mirrors. As explained by Rosenberg (2016), this strategy asks the viewer to confront the traumatic heritage, raising questions about the involvement of the bystander. These works echo Michael Rothberg's ideas that we should 'enlarge our understanding of the actors involved in injustices beyond the most often invoked figures of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders'

(2019: 202). In this sense, AP's mirrors might prompt questions about one's own involvement in past atrocities. The implicated subject can refer to those who, for example, recognise their blood ties to perpetrators and change their surnames to disconnect their identities from their relatives' crimes during Argentina's dictatorship, as analysed by Guglielmucci (2020). The implicated subject can also refer to any civilian who was 'obedient' to the dictatorship's human rights violations and the inequality generated by the neoliberal model, as studied by Lazzara (2018). The implicated subject can be the passerby who looks away with indifference, or 'simply accepts the benefits of evil in both its extreme and everyday forms' (Rothberg, 2019: 20).

The work of postmemory, as explained by Hirsch (2012: 33), is to uncover the layers of forgetting, to reactivate more distant memorial structures through 'resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.' At the same time, the concept of remediation can be relevant for cultural memory studies, as noted by Erll and Rigney (2009), because it encourages consideration of the dynamics between the available media and how they are used by different social actors. The idea of postmemorial remediation refers to an intergenerational representation of the past, characterised by their understandings and uses of the available media.

AP's performance remediated archival photographs of victims, liberating them 'from the servitude to the documentary function (...) to re-inscribe it with new meaning' (Monegal, 2016: 259). The action illustrates how objects of memory (photographs in this case), or the 'repository of memory (the set of products, both implicit and explicit, formal and informal, symbolic and material that act as objectified carriers of the past)' can become part of a 'repertoire of memory (the set of mnemonic practices that social actors put in place in reference to the past)' (Zamponi, 2018: 7). In this case, the photographs were re-inscribed with new meaning through a third-generation post-dictatorship memory work.

As explained in the work description and on the collective's website, the action aimed to recall the stories of victims to raise awareness about the legacies of that period in democratic times. Hanging outside a military headquarters that still celebrates the dictatorial regime, the mirrors with victims' silhouettes positioned the viewer simultaneously as victim and bystander, highlighting layers of implication in past atrocities and their persistence in the present. In that context, the mirrors functioned as a powerful artistic and political tool to disrupt military celebrations of the dictatorship and question bystanders' complicity.

But what occurs when the mirrors are displayed in a gallery space? As Fernando Rosenberg (2016) argues, the continual dissemination of images of the dead fosters an indifference that may be complicit in the violence it claims to condemn. At the same time, the reproduction of victims' faces can be understood as a means of remediating outrage (Rigney, 2020); sometimes, remembering the past can ignite future political protest. In the concluding section, I will suggest that Hunar's *Missing Time* failure to acknowledge the imperial and colonial ties behind the works exhibited might affect the potential of these works to deepen our understanding of past and present atrocities, and contribute to the objectification of political violence within the 'neutral' space of art galleries which only serve to elevate the moral standing of the viewer while absolving them of their indifference.



[2] AP's 2014 action at the 23rd Military Headquarters, in Fortaleza, Ceará. Image retrieved from www.aparecidospoliticos.com.br. Use authorised by the artist



[3] AP's 2014 action at the 23rd Military Headquarters, in Fortaleza, Ceará. Image retrieved from www.aparecidospoliticos.com.br. Use authorised by the artist.

Conclusion

The role of artistic practices within the dynamics of memory has been explored from different perspectives. Saltzman (2006: 1) recalls Pliny the Elder's tale of the Corinthian maiden who outlined on the wall the shadow of a man she loved before he went abroad as an allegory to consider visual representations as the material trace of a fugitive body. In the context of postdictatorial Latin America, the fugitive body becomes the disappeared body, and their photographs the material traces commonly used to demand memory, truth, and justice. These traces can be picked up and transformed according to their time's aesthetic possibilities and political demands. As Andreas Huyssen (2001) explains, the efforts to advance human rights agendas in the contemporary period depend on the depth and amplification of discourses around memory in the public sphere, and the work of artists can contribute to this public discourse. But to what extent do they help enlarge our understanding of *the pains and wounds that humanity has suffered*?

By examining the works of Marcelo Brodsky and Aparecidos Políticos, I have demonstrated how archival images can be creatively reworked to animate repertoires of memory activism. I have suggested that the works of Marcelo Brodsky and Aparecidos Políticos utilise the ability of photographs to highlight the dialectics of the present and, through postmemorial remediation, draw attention to the lasting effects of human rights violations following the end of military dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina. Revisiting Benjamin's ideas regarding the optical unconscious (1999), it becomes possible to understand how photographs enable a retrospective view shared by those who survive, carrying the weight of knowing what will become of the future. Brodsky explores this retrospective view with handwritten inscriptions on the school photograph that describe the fate of his classmates after the Argentine dictatorship. Approaching questions regarding the implicated subject (Rothberg, 2019; Lazzara, 2018), while engaging with literature on the geographies of political performativity (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014), I have demonstrated how third-generation activists from the collective Aparecidos Políticos (AP) reworked and recontextualised archival photographs to challenge discourses of authority and subvert official spatial identities. AP's mirrors, temporarily installed on the walls of the 23rd Military Headquarters, recalled the building's past as a former torture centre and positioned the viewer both as victim and bystander.

However, these works' exhibition at Hunar's *Missing Time* raises questions of site-specificity, as they were displayed as memory objects, serving as an archive of their performances in 1996 and 2012, respectively. It is important to consider what Azoulay (2019) refers to as the institutional violence of the white cube, alluding to its connection with the overlooked crimes committed by the West. In this context, we might ask how the supposed neutrality of the white cube, which detaches objects from their origins, influences the presentation of stories of people affected by Western violence. Will the status of art objects overshadow their political significance? Will the works of art 'kill' our human complexities by reducing us to mere spectators? How can Hunar's *Missing Time* exhibit such works from sites impacted by colonial and imperial projects without surrendering to the colonial and imperial ideologies of the white cube?

Hunar's *Missing Time* attempts to bring together the voices of oppressed people from different parts of the globe. Looking to the right in the sequence of works on the gallery's right wall, Brodsky's artwork *La Clase* (1996) challenges the boundaries between public and private, past and present, calling for an ethical and emotional response from the bystander. A few steps ahead, AP's mirrors exemplify how archive photographs can be remediated to question

bystanders in front (literally) of physical markers of dictatorial regimes. Next to these works, the viewer encounters Khaled Hourani's *Watermelon Flag* (2021), a symbol of ongoing resistance and unity against the Israeli government's attempt to annihilate them, and the 2019 lithograph *Black Napoleon (Eulope)* by Quandamooka artist Megan Cope, reflecting on the history of the Aboriginal leader who defied British colonial forces. Moreover, these works were reunited in a single sector of UTS Gallery that stands on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Displayed together, these pieces hold the potential to, on a subtle level, suggest links between the violence of the West in its different forms. However, if the exhibition rationale makes no attempt to uncover the colonial and imperial ties that enable the various forms of violence being displayed, the potential might be lost.

For instance, in recent times, revisionist viewpoints that contradict official accounts of past State violence, along with anti-communist discourses supporting neoliberal agendas, have emerged in both Brazil and Argentina. This was exemplified in Brazil by the election of Jair Bolsonaro's militarised government in 2018 (Martins-Filho, 2021), which reinforced a celebratory view of the dictatorship (Pedretti, 2020) and adopted a denialist attitude towards science (Castro, 2024), contributing, for example, to the 700 thousand deaths during Covid-19. In Argentina, the rise of a far-right discourse culminated in the election of Javier Milei in 2023, who also tends to relativise the State violence carried out during the military dictatorship. In Brazil and Argentina (as in other South American countries), past State violence, supported by the United States and legitimised by anti-communist, patriarchal, and Christian moralism, persists in the ongoing US support for radical right-wing political figures, as evidenced by their backing of the Argentinean President and their recent announcement of tariffs for Brazil (Martin and Dingwall, 2025).

Additionally, it is not difficult to understand Australia's ongoing violence against First Nations people, who, despite constituting 3.8% of the Australian population, account for 36% of all prisoners (ABS, 2024). Equally evident is the long history of violence against the Palestinian people, as currently demonstrated by the ongoing genocide committed by Israel's government in Gaza, which has killed more than 60,000, and is now experiencing a swift rise in deaths due to starvation (Tlozek and Sockol, 2025). By encouraging the viewer to explore individual stories related to historical injustices, the exhibition *Missing Time* might contribute to questioning the limits of our tolerance – in Aimé Césaire's (2001) words, how long can we wait, hope, and hide the truth from ourselves, 'that it is barbarism'?

Ariella Azulay (2019) advocates for unlearning imperialism by examining the conceptual origins of imperial violence and proposes an anti-imperial onto-epistemological framework through which every site affected by Western imperialism can be understood collectively. This means, according to the author, unlearning the differential principle to connect what imperialism separates. I argue that while Hunar's *Missing Time* cannot entirely escape the white cube ideology, it can challenge it by emphasising its complicity in a shared history of oppression by patriarchal and Western institutions. A first step could be recognising that the stories and voices featured in these artworks were not silenced 'for different reasons' but for the same logic of capital accumulation that turns people, land, and natural resources into commodities.

Much more could be said regarding the risks and opportunities associated with postmemorial remediation of photographs of Latin American desaparecidos and their exhibition within gallery spaces. For now, I have concentrated on how certain artworks exhibited in Hunar's *Missing Time* exploited photography's capacity to complicate memory dynamics, foster identification, and implicate viewers in past human rights violations. I believe that their presentation alongside

international artworks depicting the lives of victims of both historical and contemporary injustices may hold political potential to suggest geographic and generational interconnections of systems of oppression. Nonetheless, I contend that this potential must be actively pursued through the exhibition rationale to bridge, as Azulay (2019) recommends, the normalised separation between all the 'others' dispossessed by imperialism.

Sup Galeano, from the EZLN, reminds us that '(. . .) in the reconstruction of the genealogy of the pains and wounds that humanity has suffered, one has a choice: one can either search for cruel and corrupt individuals, or one can search for the material bases.' (EZLN, 2016: 265). I propose that such material bases be taken into account, not to restrict the artworks to predetermined discourses, but to equip viewers with a political and economic understanding through which they can assess and map their role within current structures of inequality and envisage strategies for overcoming them. In essence, the 'missing' element in *Missing Time* must be contextualised within a history of colonialism and imperialism- not to lament, but to foster solidarity.

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Notes

¹ All translations from the Portuguese and Spanish were made by the author.

² <https://parquedelamemoria.org.ar/catalogo-identidad/#identidad98> [accessed 1 Nov 2025]

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ART AND CONFLICT IN BRAZIL

The Role of the Aparecidos Políticos Collective in the Struggle for Memory, Truth, and Justice

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Aspásia Mariana Santos Melo
Eduardo Bruno Fernandes Freitas (Eduardo Bruno)
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ART AND CONFLICT IN BRAZIL: THE ROLE OF THE APARECIDOS POLÍTICOS COLLECTIVE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR MEMORY, TRUTH, AND JUSTICE ¹

Alexandre de Albuquerque Mourão, Aspásia Mariana Santos Melo, Eduardo Bruno Fernandes Freitas (Eduardo Bruno), Marcos Venicius Lima Martins (Marquinhos Abu), Maria Ursula Andrade Arruda de Figueirêdo, Miguel Francisco de Paulo Rodrigues dos Santos, Sara Vasconcelos Cruz (Sara Nina)

To begin this journey of thought about art and conflict in the context of Brazil, we would like to start by discussing the origins of our collective, Aparecidos Políticos Collective, along with a brief contextualisation of Brazil's history.

When we mention Brazil to foreigners, certain images may come to mind: samba, football, joy. These elements are indeed part of Brazil's reality, but they also mask a recent and fragile democracy that we, as Aparecidos, along with other national collectives, are continually exposing.

The Brazil State exists as a political structure that might be described as emerging from a long-running, or frequently repeated, coup. Portuguese colonisation from the 16th century to the 19th century led to the decimation of our Indigenous peoples and the creation of a vast territory through internal wars against the Indigenous population. Several dictatorships and antidemocratic regimes have followed the colonial period, and in relation to Indigenous peoples, the genocide has never stopped: we still do not know how many Indigenous people were annihilated during the last period of military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985). The post-dictatorship State in Brazil also inherits these histories. Most recently, Brazilians and the international community witnessed the human rights abuses committed by President Jair Bolsonaro president from 2018 to 2022. With the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2022, we felt immense relief: at least a part of the population seemed to understand the alarming direction that discursive and physical violence against historically marginalised groups had been taking under Bolsonaro. However, we are far from achieving the right to memory, truth, and justice, especially concerning the last period of military dictatorship in Brazil.

With this brief explanation of the Brazilian political context, we can begin to explain the emergence of the Aparecidos Políticos Collective. In October 2009, the family of guerrilla fighter Bergson Gurjão Farias finally received his remains. Bergson had disappeared in 1971 during the last military dictatorship in Brazil,² but his family only received the official news in 2009, almost forty years later. *Forty years*. When someone has disappeared, our hearts cannot be at peace. We do not know whether they are alive or dead, whether we will see them soon, or whether we have to say goodbye. *Forty years of waiting*. How can a mother live without knowing about her child? When Luiza Gurjão, Bergson's mother, received her son's remains in a small box, she could finally find some peace.

The funeral ceremony took place at the Federal University of Ceará's rectorate. In this location, Alexandre Mourão noticed the contradiction that inspired him to create Aparecidos Políticos. The auditorium where Bergson was received was named in honour of dictator Castelo Branco, one of the direct perpetrators of the disappearance and death of over 400 people during the military regime. It was from this contradiction that Alexandre decided to establish the collective with other artists.

Aparecidos Políticos was born in Fortaleza in the northeastern state of Ceará. Our main goal is to work at the intersection of art and politics, understanding art as a political activity in itself. We have primarily worked from the remnants of the dictatorial periods, which exist in abundance. People often wonder about our collective: “Why still talk about the dictatorship, even after so long?” However, many laws and customs from the repressive 1964-1985 period persist in Brazilian government and institutions. Further, a pronounced characteristic of the Brazilian military dictatorship was the erasure of memory. Due to the Lei da Anistia (Amnesty Law) and other distinct features of the post-dictatorship transitional period,³ Brazil did not engage in the forms of immediate memory work, such as truth and reconciliation commissions, found in some other Latin American countries of that period. This lack of adequate reckoning with dictatorship memory has allowed for the growth of renewed political movements that call for military intervention in political affairs, or for closer and anti-democratic relationships between the civilian government and the military. The work of our collective is necessary to increase collective awareness and understanding of what transpired during the military dictatorship, especially in response to the growth of pro-dictatorship political sentiments in recent years.

Art has been a key feature of political struggles worldwide. In Brazil, it has been no different. You may be familiar with Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, or Gilberto Gil, who are famous for their protest songs against the authoritarian regime. But the military dictatorship in Brazil also cultivated its own artists. Censorship not only targeted those who denounced the regime, but also promoted artists who projected an image of ‘samba-football-carnival’ to the world. It was also during the dictatorship that the first arts education colleges were established. The Brazilian dictatorship knew how to create its own circus, its own attractions that diverted the people from what was happening.

The erasure of memory led many people to forget this period and not question monuments honouring dictators and torturers. But we continue to question, to denounce, and to never forget—to ensure it never happens again.

We began our work in 2010 by pasting photos of missing individuals on the city walls in Fortaleza. We needed to show their faces, speak their names. We often say there are different ways to die, and one of them is to fall into oblivion. We cannot let those who fought for us be forgotten while those who killed our heroes continue to be remembered through street names, buildings, and even schools. So, we decided to appear alongside the disappeared. The aesthetics of poster collage and names painted in black on the walls hark back to the struggle against the dictatorship.

Art finds refuge in the streets. In the absence of an official space to honour our heroes, we opted for street art. When they take away all our means, burn our museums, close our exhibitions, and prohibit our works, the street is what remains. Art in the urban space does not wait for curators or openings. Urban intervention imposes itself, is seen, and is lived.

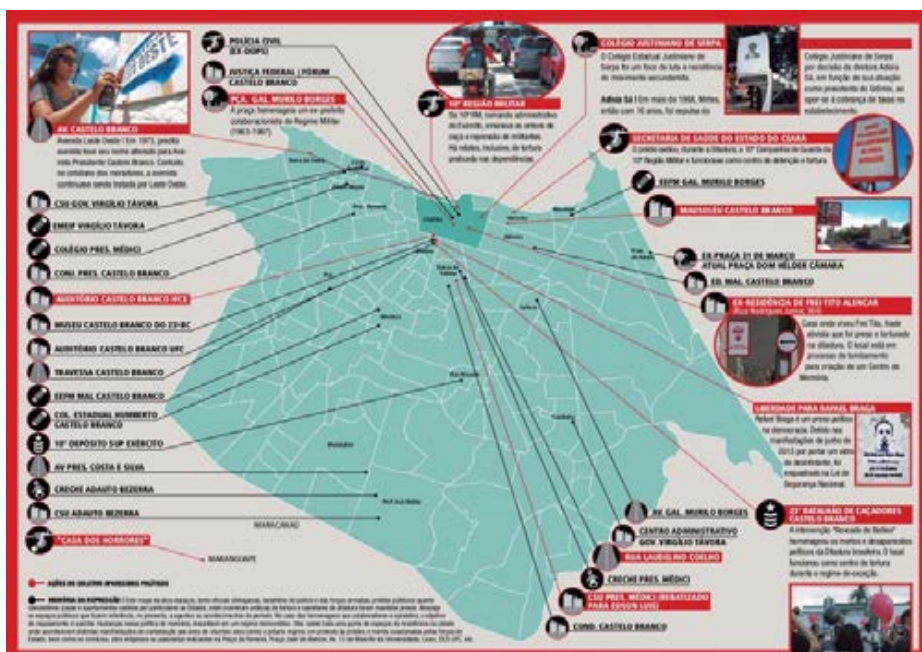
The street is violent, just like art itself. The Portuguese language dictionary defines “violent” as something that employs force and intensity, contradicts what is established, lacks moderation, and is excessively emphatic. The dictatorship was violent, but we cannot afford not to be. The erasure of memory is violent, but confronting it should be even more so. In Brazil, just as we were harmed, we forgave. The Amnesty Law granted secrecy to those who committed crimes against freedom. But there is no room for forgiveness: there is a need for justice.

So, in 2010, we began the fight for Memory, Truth, and Justice. We demanded both through art and in social, academic, and institutional settings, the end of secrecy for those who tortured. We demanded the disclosure of the names of the perpetrators, and we demanded that the guilty be punished. One of the foundations of the modern Constitutional State in Brazil is the right to resistance. Ultimately, it asserts that any action against an illegal state is a legitimate action. The weight of a state apparatus and all its possible repressive forces cannot be equated with organisations and individuals who exercise the legitimate right to resist. Therefore, when pro-dictatorship voices claim that we took violent actions or that our members were violent, we would like to remind them that the state has been the originary and primary cause of violence.

Our work began collaborating with survivors' collectives, family members, and social and political movements. We understood that dialogue would be our foundation, not as passivity, but as the strength of being in a group. That is how we started offering workshops, teaching courses, and writing articles. For a while, we thought we might be moving away from art, but today we see that art is truly everywhere.

One of the projects we undertook was a cartography of locations in Fortaleza that served as torture centres or that paid tribute to dictators and direct participants of the dictatorship. The map was known as “Conexões Cartográficas da Memória” (“Cartographic Connections of Memory”) [1]. We then initiated a series of interventions in these places, such as the Castelo Branco Mausoleum, the largest mausoleum in Latin America dedicated to a dictator, the 23rd Hunter’s Battalion, and others.

Among the interventions conducted in these spaces, we would like to highlight an occasion in 2013 when we visited the Castello Branco Mausoleum, accompanied by the Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) from Argentina. The GAC has always been a collective that greatly inspired us in our work against the remnants of the military dictatorship. In 2013, we had the opportunity to engage in an artistic residency with them, partly in Fortaleza and partly in Argentina. At the Mausoleum, we created lanterns in honour of former prisoners and political dissidents [2].



[1] A map containing information about streets and locations related to the memory of the dictatorship. Alongside it, markings of some of the locations where we conducted interventions. Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/2020/03/cartografia-da-ditadura-em-fortaleza/>



[2] Intervention at the Castello Branco Mausoleum, accompanied by the GAC (Fortaleza, Brazil, 2013) Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/fotos/nggallery/page/1>

We also met with the GAC in Argentina, engaging in conversation with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo [3]. We believe strongly in the unity among Latin American peoples, who were victims of colonialism and dictatorships imposed and supported by the USA. This collective strength makes us even more significant. It is not about the number of official collective members but rather about all the informal and unexpected connections that collectives can establish and sustain.

In 2015, we returned to the Mausoleum to perform a recitation of a narrative by Mauricio Rosencof, a former political prisoner during the Uruguayan military dictatorship.⁵ He spent 11 years in solitary confinement, seeing the sunlight for a maximum of eight hours. Eight hours in eleven years. He lost his perception of colours but resisted by dreaming of walks. “Freedom”



[3] Alexandre Mourão with a Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, Mirta Acuña de Baravalle. Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/fotos/nggallery/page/1>



[4] Renaming of the Square of the Disappeared Political Prisoner (2011). Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/fotos/>

is the word that human dreams nourish, a word that needs no explanation, yet no one fails to understand, as Brazilian poet Cecília Meireles would say.

Our idea for the mausoleum and many similar buildings is to rename them. We want their current, official names to fall away. To achieve this, we rename them with the names that deserve to be remembered. The work of Aparecidos is not solely about speaking of the horrors of the dictatorship, but also promoting a discourse for those deserving of collective memory.

In 2011, we renamed a public square in front of the 23rd Hunter's Battalion [4]. This battalion celebrates "the 1964 revolution" every year on March 31 in an event called "remembering is living". Similarly, every year on April 1, April Fools' Day, we conduct an intervention at the site to remember the lies of the dictatorship. In April 2011, we placed a plaque in the square, renaming it the "Praça do Preso Político Desaparecido" ("Square of the Disappeared Political Prisoner"⁶). The action involved family members and former political prisoners. After that, the square became formally known by the name we had given it.

When the street is not an option, the air becomes a choice. This is how Zuada Rádio Livre, our airborne urban intervention with radio wave transmission, was born. In Brazil, one of the significant remnants of the military dictatorship has been state control over radio and television broadcasting. The state determines who has the right to speak, who can listen, and what they can listen to.

Only a few families hold the rights for radio and TV transmission in Brazil. The largest television network, Rede Globo, was granted its concession in 1968 during the military dictatorship. In Brazil, unlicensed FM transmission is a federal crime that can result in up to 2 years of imprisonment for those who practice it. Even possessing an FM wave transmitter without state authorisation is a crime. Nevertheless, we broadcast.

We were inspired by an action by Carlos Marighella, who took over Radio Nacional in São Paulo in 1969 and broadcast the "Rádio Nacional Libertadora" ("National Liberation Radio") calling on the population to engage in urban guerrilla warfare and announcing that we were in a dictatorship (something many Brazilians did not yet know). Drawing on Marighella's example, we created our own radio [5].



[5] Aerial Urban Intervention at the Pernambuco Visual Arts Week, Recife, Brazil (2011)

Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/fotos/nggallery/page/2>

Even today, nearly half of the population in Brazil does not have internet at home. In the North and Northeast regions, the radio serves as a source of information for a significant portion of the population. We began transmitting interviews, music related to the dictatorship, speeches from social movements, and free programs on the 103.5 FM frequency.

Zuada Rádio Livre reached several Brazilian cities and covered four regions of Brazil: Recife (2011), Campinas (2012), Marabá (2012), Fortaleza (2012), Brasília (2013), and Tefé (2015). In all these places, we participated simultaneously in government-funded programs and initiatives. In other words, there was—possibly counterintuitively—official support for our actions from a government that recognised the need for change.

In 2013, we had the honor of hosting Iara Xavier, who was the voice of the introduction to Marighella's *Radio Libertadora*. Iara recorded our intro and visited our studio, "O Aparelho", a name that refers to the hideouts and meeting places of those who resisted the dictatorship.

We also made our beer, Molotov [6], which we see as an artistic work. Molotov is the name of an improvised explosive device used in guerrilla actions. Initially, Molotov was just an evocative label. Later, we started brewing the beer by hand for collective events at "O Aparelho". Parties are an important part of the struggle: joy is a way of resisting.

The Molotov also marked the launch of our first book: the "Minimanual da Arte Guerrilha Urbana" ("Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla Art"). The Minimanual was the result of the collective's research and was inspired by Carlos Marighella's handmade "Minimanual do Guerrilheiro Urbano" ("Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla"), which provided instruction in anti-dictatorship guerrilla techniques and was banned in Brazil for years. Our Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla Art was released in 2015, and included the techniques we have used throughout the history of the collective and the duties of the artist guerrilla:



[6] Molotov Beer on a poster designed by the Aparecidos Políticos Collective.
Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/fotos/nggallery/page/2>

Transgress the imposed order
Attack and retreat
Protect your comrades
Wear down and distract the authoritarian forces
Denounce conservatism
Weaken the media siege
Attack from all sides, even from within the system
Expose the unsustainable state of current politics
Ensure freedom of action
Exist because the idea exists. Resist.

In 2016, we also carried out an urban intervention against the arbitrary imprisonment of Rafael Braga,⁷ who was arrested during the civil protests of 2013-2014 for carrying disinfectant. The police claimed erroneously that disinfectant could be used as a weapon, and drawing on dictatorship-era law - the National Security Law—this excuse was used to arrest Rafael, who is Black and from a marginalised community.⁸

Between 2002 and 2016, we had a government that could be criticized and we lived in a democracy—albeit, one burdened with some draconian legislation such as the aforementioned the National Security Law. This progressive democratic period was abruptly interrupted by an unjust and misogynistic impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, leading to another six dark years for Brazil. The attack was so severe that when there was a proposal to offer a course to study the 2016 coup, the Federal University of Ceará was blocked by the Federal Public Ministry.



[7] Urban Intervention—50 years of the coup (2014). Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/2014/03/intervencao-urbana-50-anos-do-golpe/>

In response, we proposed a monetary donation campaign for each day the course remained blocked. We also staged a communications intervention, “Tudo Mentira”⁹ (All Lies), at the Globo studios in Ceará, an action that responded critically to the Globo TV Network’s support of the coup against Rousseff.

Returning to our actions at the 23rd Hunter’s Battalion in 2014, we carried out two interventions to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the military coup.¹⁰ In the early hours of March 31st to April 1st, 2014, during the changing of the guard, we glued mirrors with photos of people who had disappeared, tortured, and killed by the dictatorship on the wall of the 23rd Hunter’s Battalion [7]. Like many of our interventions, the action was brief and ephemeral.

In addition to the action with mirrors, we also planned “Operação Carcará”. Once again, we went beyond the walls and into the air. Operation Carcará was a proposed intervention approved by the 64th Salão de Abril, one of the most traditional art exhibitions in Fortaleza. The planned intervention involved dropping 140 handmade mini-parachutes from an aircraft, each carrying the faces of political dissidents who had disappeared during the military dictatorship. The flight plan? To fly over the 23rd Battalion of Hunters. Were we crazy? Perhaps. But above all, we were artists.

All the air taxi companies we contacted refused due to fear of repression. We spent three days going from one company to another to find someone willing to participate. The parachutes did not weigh more than 500g each and did not pose any danger. So, why fear repression or retribution in a free country?

With the deadline fast approaching on the day of the exhibition’s opening, we managed to convince a pilot to transport one of our members at the pilot’s own risk. While we were trying to persuade the owner of the company, the pilot entered the room and asked what it was all about. After learning about the history of the Aparecidos Políticos Collective, he decided to help.

The aircraft even took off, but when the pilot requested permission from the control tower for the flight plan, he discovered that Fortaleza’s airspace had been closed. He landed and waited for a new permission. In the meantime, the owner of the company arrived, took the pilot’s documents, sealed the aircraft, and sent us away, stating that the army commander had

prohibited the action and closed the capital's airspace until 10pm. The *entire airspace* closed by someone who had no jurisdiction to do so, but who wore a uniform.

Military vehicles were on the streets around the 23rd Battalion of Hunters, pointing their weapons and waiting for the "attack." Our action was prevented.¹¹ The intervention was not illegal, but closing the airspace caused chaos in the fifth-largest city in Brazil. We were not going to harm anyone, but the weight of exposing the fragile Brazilian democracy revealed the power of art to disturb conservative institutions. The discomfort and chaos affected the lives of thousands of people that day. Censorship is a desperate measure adopted by illegitimate governments that lack popular support and that need to assert themselves. Censorship is, above all, weakness and cowardice.

But when art is censored, it screams. And it does not scream alone: on that same day, we won the main prize at the exhibition. And we learned that it did not matter whether the event had progressed as planned; what mattered was that it had happened. We exposed and disturbed the military forces. The prize was awarded to us by those who were shouting alongside us in indignation. That's art for you; it finds a way. Oppression is fuel, an impetus.

Persecution of artists is common in authoritarian regimes. It was the case during the Brazilian dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, and it happened during the 2016 coup when the government shut down the Ministry of Culture and numerous exhibitions across Brazil. The persecution of artists also intensified during the Bolsonaro government from 2019 to 2023, which imposed censorship and arbitrary rules on artists during festivals. If the enemies of democracy feel the need to bark at artists, it might be because they know that the fight will continue and take on new forms.

Notes

¹ This is an excerpt from the lecture presented at the Hunar Symposia 'Art/Conflict' in Sydney, Australia, in November 2022.

² We often refer to this period as "The Military Dictatorship" in Brazil, but the truth is that we have had several such regimes since the beginning of the republic.

³ Law No. 6,683, dated August 28, 1979. Grants amnesty and provides other provisions. Article 1: Amnesty is granted to all those who, between September 2, 1961, and August 15, 1979, committed political crimes or crimes related to them, electoral crimes, those who had their political rights suspended, and employees of the Direct and Indirect Administration, foundations linked to the public authorities, employees of the Legislative and Judicial branches, the Military, and union leaders and representatives, punished based on Institutional and Complementary Acts (BRAZIL, 1979).

⁴ Conceived by the Aparecidos Políticos Collective, the "Conexões Cartográficas da Memória" (Cartographic Connections of Memory) project presents a mapping of the physical remnants of the Military Dictatorship in the capital. Available at: <https://aparecidospoliticos.com.br/2020/03/cartografia-da-ditadura-em-fortaleza/>

⁵ Artistic Residencies—"Cartographic Connections of Memory" Project, 'Performance at the Mausoleum.' Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zon8m5WtRg

⁶ N.T.: 'Square of the Disappeared Political Prisoner - Next to this square, in that barracks, people were tortured during the military dictatorship. We chose this square in memory of all the dead and disappeared political prisoners of Latin American dictatorships. For the right to memory, justice, and truth. The Aparecidos Políticos, Fortaleza, 11/26/2011.

⁷ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCD0if0kyXc>

⁸ The LSN of 1983 (Law No. 7,170), which was updated by President Jair Bolsonaro in Law 14,197/21, sets forth the rules to ensure national security against the subversion of law and political and social order, as well as establishing the trial process (BRAZIL, 1983).

⁹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok5H42QcQVQ>

¹⁰ One of these was later included in the "Missing Time" exhibition in November 2022 at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

¹¹ The action can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_edGDDbpm3I&t=2s

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SWANA WOMEN ARTISTS NARRATIVISE THIRD SPACE

A Decolonial Tool Kit for Undoing the Victim Activist Binary

Izabella Antoniou

Abstract

An underexamined aspect of Australia's relationship to refugeehood is how the state's approach to resettlement is informed by the colonality of power present within its institutions and bodies of governance. This has led to a blind spot in understanding how women's experiences are crafted as a colonially managed population. Subsequently, this has created a gap in exploring how the laten coloniality of Australian policy, systems of migration, governance, and settlement services shape the relationships and ways of living for Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) women who've experienced forced migration. This article outlines the research methodologies and frameworks that governed research on the realities of being categorised as a refugee woman as told by displaced women from SWANA who are resettling in Australia. The study focused on women who are actively contributing to knowledge and artistic production. A specific methodology was required to be developed to support the collaborators of the study, minimize power imbalances, as well as embody the decolonial ethos of the work in a way that centered the participants as knowledge holders. Using this framework of SWANA feminist scholarship and Indigenous epistemologies I was able to illuminate SWANA women's experience of colonality in Australia as diverse experiences. These frameworks allowed for testimonies and insights to be used to critically analyse core aspects of Australian cultural history to provide an appraisal of how the colonial history of the Australian modern state affects its ways of interacting with people who are marginalised due to a combination of class, race, and gender factors.

SWANA WOMEN ARTISTS NARRATIVISE THIRD SPACE: A DECOLONIAL TOOL KIT FOR UNDOING THE VICTIM ACTIVIST BINARY

Izabella Antoniou

Introduction

Within settler-colonial countries such as Australia, and much of the Anglophonic world, there is a hyper-focus on consuming SWANA (Southwest Asia North Africa) women as either Activists or Victims. This is particularly present in how Australian audiences interact with and interpret art and knowledge production by SWANA women artists who have experienced displacement and refugeehood. It is within a global context where presenting artists as occupying a victim or activist position stems from and benefits global coloniality, rooted in the idea of women's liberation (Luibhéid 2020), is entangled with systems of management, such as the settlement sector and art industry. In response, women artists have developed differing ways to navigate the space and the dominant narratives around migration and trauma that their work is contextualised within. To better capture this unique navigation of displaced SWANA women, and the victim/activist binary they are filtered through, I have put together decolonial toolkit using methodologies of what I call SWANA feminist theory supported by a framework of Indigenous epistemologies laid out by researchers Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), and Irene Watson (2015)—this methodology was primarily relational, culturally aware, trauma informed, and incorporated ethical storytelling to centre the participants as knowledge holders and experts.

This article presents a toolkit that seeks to better support the collaborative research process between researchers and experts/interviewees who are marginalised and have been managed under colonial power structures. In this instance, that includes the identity of SWANA refugee women living within Australia.

This article poses displaced artists who have had their art practice managed by colonial state structures, benefit from a research methodology that centres decolonial praxis, and dives into the key tenets and practical considerations of the toolkit itself. Finally, this article seeks to provide a demonstration of the output of these tools and methodologies can achieve, and the nuance they can capture and communicate. This ability to leave space to explore individual testimonies and self-assessment of the experts' own interplay between the reductive categories they are often placed under is the ideal example of how this work attempts to reject reductive understandings of marginalised women's experiences, while providing an alternative intervention using the women's own voices.

Displaced communities as colonial subjects

As colonially managed populations of which First Nations communities are an example, refugees draw attention to the inherent coloniality of the modern Australian state by which they are managed. In other words, when looking at the relationship of both Indigenous peoples and refugees to so-called Australia, the category of coloniality can be productive in highlighting the continuity of colonial practices and epistemes in contemporary times. The complexity of intertwining both Indigenous scholarship and that produced in the Global South and settler-colonial countries is a point of interest and requirement in connecting the experiences of

colonised individuals from transnational contexts as posited by Warrimay historian and writer Victoria Grieves-Williams (Grieves-Williams 2019). This section explores a brief overview of key concepts my research methodologies centre, and the way the victim/ activist binary, and the Third Space that disrupts it, is made uniquely visible by Indigenous epistemology and SWANA Feminist theory.

In seeking to challenge colonial narratives regarding refugee women and to simultaneously critique the ways Australia's coloniality affects the refugee position, it must be acknowledged that many of the traditional tools, such as anthropological and broader academic language, are not necessarily fit for a study that seeks to centre decolonial epistemologies. Indigenous scholars have noted that colonial settings and disciplines, particularly anthropology, have been used to 'translate' non-settler identities into the language of the colonisers (Tuhivai Smith 2021). This specific position in the system of knowledge production is then enshrined and replicated through institutional processes, before being reflected back to the colonised population, as a means to maintain control through the creation of a singular, authoritative cultural representation to which colonised people are compared (p.1-2). Therefore, there is the danger that in the research process, under-examined tools, language, and methods may obscure the participants' experiences, and actively recreate the established power structures that exist within institutions, leading to potential re-traumatisation and perpetration of a colonial status quo. Conversely, decolonial methods highlight how historically dominant practices favour a stagnant, universal image of the participant and subject position that aids and reinforces colonial power structures. Centring decolonial methods allows for a more nuanced understanding of positions within settler-colonial societies and makes space to critique how individual subjectivity, as a site of experience and understanding, is affected by coloniality. In the case of this article this pertains to the use of SWANA feminist theory to uncover the victim/ activist binary.

SWANA feminist theory

Initially formally organised in response to both colonial and local discourses around ideal womanhood, gendered rights, and public participation, what I refer to as SWANA Feminist Theory inherits the diverse work of early women's movements across a broad range of countries and contexts, each directly informed by varying individual subjectivity and political conjuncture. However, I bring together these diverse positions through their concern with women's negotiation between the public and private spheres. This movement in between spheres is shaped by factors such as coloniality, religion, politics, cultural and social expectations. These factors can be effectively used when mapping the movement of individuals within The Third Space due to its embodiment of decolonisation through a centring of local feminine experiences (Antoniou 2023).

In debunking generalisations and binary constructions of refugee women, participants' narratives must be critically examined within the socio-political contexts these women have experienced throughout their settlement process. SWANA women's writing supports this approach as it has been conceived and practised across a greatly diverse area, both in-country and in diaspora. Though there is an understanding of the power of common experiences, SWANA feminist epistemes highlight a need to critically analyse individual experiences within the context of regional histories and cultures.

This toolkit is a series of understandings and actions that centre an individual woman's understanding of the self and her narrative as micro-history. An intertwining of individual accounts with a more relational approach was sought after, in particular to reify, break down and challenge the victim/activist binary.

In my work, The Third Space is my conceptualisation of the area of existence between and beyond a binary understanding of refugee women; it is a particular response to the victim/activist binary. The Third Space is a term borrowed from Homi Bhabha (2004) and his work within postcolonial sociolinguistic theory that points to the unique, and inherently multiple nature of individual identity and associated communities. The concept of a third space has been expanded upon in other fields to denote physical spaces where the self exists as a hybrid encompassing civil society, domestic and professional life. The Third Space is a highly relational site where both empowered and disempowered groups have effects on one another. Although uneven, these relationships are multidirectional and dismantle binary understandings of identity.

The victim/activist binary

The victim/activist dichotomy is a colonial tool used to minimise refugee women's position to one that serves macro narratives of settler-colonial host nations. Therefore, SWANA Feminist theory foregrounds personal narratives, which are crucial in making visible and unpicking the victim/activist dichotomy.

Palestinian-American scholar Lila Abu-Lughod writes about the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013). She discusses the use of the image of Muslim women as victims to justify colonial exploitation and the rule over the Middle East by powers such as the United Kingdom and France (p. 33). These colonial representations continue to influence the public discourse and justification of foreign intervention in the Middle East. While the focus is solely on women's suffering distracts from the culpability of the United States and allied forces, such as Australia, in creating danger for women through occupation and destabilisation of states within the Middle East and Africa (p. 32). This obfuscation allows the victimhood of SWANA women to be constructed in a way that reductively ties their situation to their relationship with their state and culture, as opposed to the myriad of global and local factors that create their reality.

When the plight of SWANA women is compared to that of men, it becomes evident that the victim position affects perceptions of female political engagement. Law and gender anthropologist Arzoo Osanloo refers to this 'masculinist prohibition' as targeting men-as-terrorists (Osanloo 2017). Colonial and security-based narratives use the victim representation of women refugees not only to intervene internationally but to manage borders in a way that excludes SWANA men from being seen as vulnerable and deserving of refuge. Women are painted as subjects with no agency, even as they enter exile, whereas men are read as potential threats.

Inversely, the activist stereotype provides the suggestion of action and agency, particularly regarding refugee women, much like the victim figure; it is used by the dominant culture, including transnational feminism, to reduce the range of refugee women's experiences. The activist stereotype obscures the multifaceted realities of violence experienced through the migration and resettlement process at the hands of host nations. Instead, this stereotype perceives women refugees as occupying a 'feminist' role, who exclusively critique the religious

patriarchy of their birth country, and in some cases systems of their host nation. Therefore, just like the victim stereotype, the activist one must be interrogated and deconstructed through the narratives of those with refugee lived experiences.

By acknowledging refugee women as occupying a third space that bridges and extends beyond the victim/activist binary, a broader avenue is open to understand refugee women who are partaking in active critique and knowledge production. It allows these women to narrate their own work in a way that challenges external categorisations as either submission to the binary or benefitting from the voyeurism of misery testimonies.

Collaboration and ethical story telling in practice

Building off the theoretical basis of SWANA Feminist Theory and Indigenous Epistemologies that centre relationality and draw upon research methods used by SWANA and Indigenous women, as well as the actions of community organiser, activists and those outside of academia partaking in what could be called de or anticolonial work, a protocol of ethical engagement became clear. Key tenets that govern this decolonial toolkit are self-reflexivity and collaboration, understanding and attempting to minimise the power in my own positionality, and ethical storytelling. By examining these tenets, the appropriate ways of framing the researchers' actions revealed themselves and were subsequently turned into specific protocols and actions that this article lays out.

Self-reflexivity and collaboration

Visweswaran defines self-reflexive anthropology as juggling questioning and abandonment of authority (Visweswaran, 1994). Bringing self-reflexivity into this research means that I not only acknowledge the fallibility of my position, its power, and the biases I potentially carry, but I also seek to minimise the effect of these factors on the research by challenging my own thoughts and previous academic discourses as I deal with the participant's own interpretations of their lived experiences and stories. My approach did not offer a universal authority on refugee women artists from the SWANA region but, instead, highlighted the diversity of refugee women's individual subjectivity and noted the commonalities of experience that exist despite such diversity. Additionally, I prioritised the participants' ability to dictate and communicate the meaning of their words and experiences. This was made possible through the participants' ability to interact with my interpretations and challenge them if they felt they did not accurately represent them and their experiences. Tuhiwai Smith emphasises that decolonial methods do assert colonised subjects as knowledge holders that are to be engaged with within a long-term commitment (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). This aims to frame the relationship and research as an ongoing learning experience for the researcher, as the experience and knowledge of a colonial subject cannot be encapsulated and understood within the lifetime of a single project. It also highlights a commitment and interest in the participant's life beyond the immediate benefit of data extraction. Therefore, my starting point was talking about the theoretical basis of my research with participants. Lenette also notes the importance of a reciprocal research model that seeks to provide mutually beneficial outcomes for all parties, particularly when dealing with women from refugee backgrounds who sit at an intersectional disadvantage (Lenette 2019). Other features of reciprocal models I incorporated include informed consent and justice, and the challenge of "dip in and out research methods" (p. 89). This has been sustained by my continued relationship with most of the participants, including ongoing artistic collaborations.

In connection with self-reflexivity, I incorporated tools and techniques used by SWANA feminist theorists in their own fieldwork. One of my major sources of methodological inspiration to minimise the risk of 'othering' regarding the lived experience of marginalised communities is the work of the Egyptian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod. By masterfully weaving the stories of the participants with the context in which they are a part, accompanied by an explicit explanation of how she has worked, Abu-Lughod's work gives a clear pathway to understand how positionality is inevitably constructed (Abu-Lughod 2008). This transparency and self-reflexivity, when used in my own research, allows the reader to understand how the coloniality of Australia thoroughly affects the participants' lives. This self-reflexivity most prominently manifests by questioning the researcher's own position.

Regarding the specific colonial power dynamics between researchers working within settler-colonial nations such as Australia and their refugee participants, cultural studies scholar and member of the Forced Migration Research Network, Caroline Lenette draws attention to the tensions between cross-cultural encounters and how the refugee position is commonly painted as 'vulnerable' (Lenette, 2019). Lenette argues that, due to experiences of displacement and their ongoing interfacing with the potentially violent system of settlement, refugees are seen to occupy a victim position and thus hold no autonomy or power. This perceived power imbalance is entrenched in and replicated through institutional research and ethics processes, which construct the refugee subject as an object of cultural vulnerability (p. 89). Despite researchers' demographics shifting to include more individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds (p. 90), this does not fully prevent the researcher from causing potential harm by replicating or creating new power dynamics that feed into a broader Australian social hierarchy (p. 91). I note my position not to align myself with my participants and distance myself from colonial institutions, but to show how living in Australia entwines all citizens with coloniality. Despite members of my family identifying more with the term 'migrant', my family would come under a broad definition of refugee, considering the complicated internal and external displacement following a series of conflicts, themselves spurred by colonial powers and proxy ethno-nationalism within Cyprus in the 1960s and the 1970s. The experience of displacement that I have heard from the participants in my research echoes my own family's memories. I have experienced racialised treatment and share similar cultural traditions and day-to-day experiences with the participants in this research, and these commonalities allowed me to develop a deeper relationship and trust with the participants. However, ultimately, I have learned, worked, and lived within institutions and colonially informed circles that seek to propagate the status quo of white supremacy.

My identity alone as a Cypriot-Australian is not enough to decolonise this work. Therefore, I have drawn upon the work of decolonial and Indigenous scholars, practitioners, and community activists to develop this decolonial tool kit. This includes employing and being in conversation with research methods conceived by First Nations and SWANA scholars, coupled with trauma-informed and reflexive ethical storytelling practices that seek to minimise the power discrepancies between researcher and participant.

Ethical storytelling

Ethical storytelling methods are appropriate in the context of this work as they assert the power of the individual through their knowledge sharing and deconstructs colonial processes by empowering autobiography as ethnography. In seeing ethical storytelling as a means

through which autobiography becomes ethnography, I could analyse the information and data shared with me through a micro-historical lens. Interviews conducted with participants are autobiographical catalogues, examples of oral history, and when combined with other forms of creative production, such as art, create a multi-faceted historiography of the individual subjectivity of refugee women.

Principles of ethical storytelling in an Australian context are being pioneered in activist spaces led by Cronin's work, particularly regarding the use of personal testimony to bolster social justice causes and campaigns (Cronin 2020). In these spaces, the tools I observed to be associated with the practice of ethical storytelling include providing formal preparation of the storyteller for the event; ongoing aftercare including a debrief; centring the storyteller's perspective; not challenging foundational experiences, particularly as they relate to identity; and understanding their subjective account as evidence for broader social trends and experiences. Additionally, it is considered best practice to let the storyteller use their own words, whatever tone, manner, or language they see fit to express themselves. By interacting with the participant as an expert in their experience, the researcher can engage with not just the words spoken by the participant but also understand their position through their actions and priorities in what they share. As Visweswaran's work notes, the researcher requires an understanding of how gaps can be created and understood in the ways women speak. This is encapsulated by her use of the concept of 'situated knowledge' and 'subject refusal' where personal positioning is seen as a feminist epistemological process, certain aspects of their story are foregrounded, while others are minimised, omitted, or their account and participation are denied completely (p.67). These acts are just as valid points of data related to how participants view their own participation, boundaries, and power, which researchers should be particularly aware of in the case of refugees, where those with insecure residency may have their words and knowledge used against them. Ethical storytelling allows for knowledge holders to create and maintain these lines and boundaries and, therefore, retain power in their testimony while also showing the limitations certain identities have in sharing their experiences. As poet, professor, and *mestiza salvaje* Sarah Motta explores through the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones - the power of storytellers, including those outside of institutional networks and education push against limits of oppression and create a new terrain that interweaves a fractured and multiple understanding of the self that nurtures processes of critical intimacy (Motta 2017). This is a process that stands in stark contrast with the colonial narrative placed upon marginalised women. Ethical storytelling can be used both within the participant interviews and readings of their art and cultural knowledge production and therefore is useful in examining the epistemological weight of the personal histories of creatives.

Practical applications of the toolkit

The governing tenets of the toolkit produce a series of practical actions and considerations, which include my participant recruitment, the use of semi-structured interviews and minimising barriers by leaving definitions open and allowing participants to self-identify. The practical application of the pre-discussed methodology are outlined below.

Participant recruitment

The study was open to participants who identified as women and as artists/creatives, from a refugee background, having been displaced from countries within the SWANA region, i.e. Iran,

the Levant, Afghanistan, Egypt, and autonomous regions such as Kurdistan, to name a few examples. There was a particular focus on those who had arrived in Australia between 2001 and 2019.

Open definitions allow for participants' own identification and understanding of their identity and work to be foregrounded. Thus, the research moved away from labels that rely on Australian-specific criteria for who is and is not deemed an 'artist'. The label 'artist' is problematic due to our own cultural assumptions about the term that do not sufficiently address the socio-economic barriers refugees face in being recognised as artists while sitting at the intersection of multiple, marginalised identities. This is the case particularly when one's artistic output is not necessarily seen as 'art' within its new context. Within the scope of this study, the category of refugee has been left as a category of self-definition, including those who have been granted humanitarian, bridging or temporary protection visas, as well as those who are currently detained with no legal status awarded to them. Participants' status ranged from currently being on a temporary protection visa to having secured Australian citizenship.

As settlement services are delivered at the state level, my focus was on those who had been settled in New South Wales. All participants currently reside in Sydney, one participant was originally settled outside of NSW for an initial detention period before being moved. Participants had arrived in Australia between 2007 and 2017, before which some had lived in 'transitional' countries, including Indonesia and Turkey, after their initial displacement from their country of birth.

Two out of the three participants, Tabz and Zee, used their artist pseudonyms in the work; however, Ari requested to be referred to under a pseudonym.

In recruitment, I reached out to organisations that support creative individuals from refugee backgrounds. Interested parties were engaged in an initial meeting to get to know me, the project, the key ideas the research was based on, and the responsibilities associated with being a participant. Additional measures taken included remuneration of participants to not only honour them as knowledge holders and experts, but also to help alleviate the financial concerns many displaced people living in Australia have, particularly when their access to work, social services and welfare is restricted.

Due to the nature of this study and the participants' varied backgrounds, a range of variables such as languages spoken, cultural and religious background, and time spent in Australia were identified. Also noteworthy are the potential discrepancies in the services experienced by the women during their settlement, which would vary depending on their age, their arrival period, the provider, and the caseworker they were assigned. Participant ages ranged from 23 to 40. Two of the participants identified as Iranian, and one as Egyptian-Albanian. Religions of the participants included Baha'I and Muslim, both practising and non-practising, and first languages spoken included Farsi and Arabic. All women had completed tertiary education, with one participant having multiple degrees awarded both in Australia and her country of birth. Mediums used by the women in their work included photography, graphite drawing, animation, and comics. At the demographic level, the participants had minimal points in common; their main commonality was that they had experienced exile and resettlement in Australia. This allowed my research to dive deeply into how this facet of identity affects the way the participants live their lives in Australia and intersects with the other aspects of their identity.

Data collection & analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2022 through to March 2022, with questions split into themed sections (Kelly 2010). They aimed to gather a set of demographic and qualitative data on their creative practice, their settlement experience, and the relationship between their experiences and their artistic production. Participants were given access to the questions before the interview, so they were able to prepare, minimising the potential distress. This strategy also ensured that the interview was focused on what the participants felt were the most pertinent areas and themes relevant to their experience. As my study was concerned with subjectivity, narrative analysis was used to allow for the participants' individual understanding and to avoid conflating the women's varied experiences. All interviews were conducted using the governing principles of the toolkit listed in this article.

To obtain additional qualitative data on how art produced by refugee women is interacted with, understood, and disseminated, I observed a series of events that advertised themselves as 'refugee art'.

Other practical considerations taken were an adherence to trauma-informed practices the research will be carried out in ways that prioritised; physical safety, meaning interviews were conducted in a familiar location that is close to amenities. Trust was also central, ensuring a level rapport was established with participants before formal interviews where participants were able to flag boundaries, which was reviewed regularly. Agency and choice of the participants was foregrounded in their ability to stop the engagement at any time. They were able to answer questions in line with their own interpretations or refuse outright. I also made sure to minimise probing questions, and flag problematic topics.

Knowledge production and knowledge sharing are a long-term commitment (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), and so participants were able to be involved with the study in a collaborative manner. This meant having an open, informal dialogue about the study, its theoretical basis, authors, and artists related to the field. This built on participant agency by engaging with participants as experts in this field through their own work and lived experiences.

Participants were also provided the option of access and information to culturally appropriate and responsive, in-language support through NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), who specialise in trauma experienced by and within refugee communities.

Throughout the process, I conducted regular check-ins with participants. Minimising the risk of harm saw my choice to engage participants who were already creating art around their experiences and therefore are comfortable engaging with and sharing their personal histories. Knowledge of these processes and best practices were informed by my training in the National Youth Settlement Framework, which included key 'good practice capabilities' of being: Culturally responsive, trauma-informed, family-aware, flexible and responsive, reflective practice, rights-based and collaborative (Nadine Liddy & Helena deAnstiss, 2020).

Drawing on interview data, my research was able to illustrate the participants' navigations through the web of public and domestic interactions as a Third Space for SWANA women artists. These entanglements affected how their art is produced and exhibited, as well as how they inhabit their everyday lives. Therefore, women's navigation as such became a key site

of tension and understanding of coloniality, acting upon marginalised women, and how they understand and navigate these complexities.

Undoing the victim/activist binary: examples of the methodology at work

This methodology was able to produce a collaborative intervention point on reductive colonial narratives of SWANA women was shown in the research output itself, and the way the participants spoke about their own interplay between refusal of a political identity and entanglement within the settlement system they were tied to during their first 5 years post-arrival. Below is an excerpt of the research thesis that acts as an example of the unique quality of information and ability to narrativise the Third Space between the victim/ activist binary that becomes available when these decolonial tools and methodologies are centred.

Political Motivations and Essentialising the SWANA Refugee Women

The victim/activist binary is one manifestation of how audiences essentialise refugees and, particularly, feminine knowledge producers. The critique that I present of the approach of the mainstream Australian audience's understanding of the art produced by SWANA refugee women, as dictated predominantly by their refugee status, echoes the critique Abu-Lughod put forward in her essay *Writing Against Culture* (1996), where she posited Muslim women were categorised by dominant society as being oppressed (p. 471). Although Abu-Lughod was referring specifically to women's Muslim identities, this phenomenon is recreated for those seen exclusively as refugees. As explored previously, The Third Space that sits within and beyond this binary is the interplay between political identities of individual women, their relationships, and their public and domestic lives. This heterogeneous entanglement greatly informs their unique artistic perspectives and their individual experiences. To better understand the space beyond dominant assumptions of victimhood within SWANA refugee women's work, I asked the participants about their motives and aims in knowledge production, and whether they had a relationship with politics. Tabz highlighted the very personal nature of her creative practice. She added that the informal and organic practice was therapeutic for her, as can be read in the following excerpt:

I don't think there is an aim. There is a reason why I make art: I like the feeling of when I finish an art piece. I like that, being proud of what I've made. I look at a piece and go 'I made that'...

Throughout our conversation, Tabz continually referred to her work as being for her and not having a political agenda. When I asked directly if she saw herself as a political person, she answered:

Not really, like I have political views, obviously. And my family is quite political: they talk about politics a lot. But I tend to, I guess, stay away from it, in a way, because it depresses me, to be honest.

Tabz's answer pointed to an attitude that I had seen in my own community and in my work in the settlement sector: a difference and personal separation of political knowledge and political action as a means of self-preservation.

When I asked Tabz if she felt the need to correct people's assumptions and interpretations about her work, she explained that she did not think it was worth it. This element highlights the

way audiences seem to consume cultural production by individuals who happen to be refugees: they anticipate meaning and attempt to box their work, therefore, reducing the complexity of their humanity in the process. Tabz's frustration also points to a disconnect between audiences' assumptions on how a single facet of her identity plays a part in her work, despite her own multifaceted artistic motivations and acts of autonomy.

Zee further discussed the motivations and aims of her works, as providing critiques of life in Australia. She explained that, although her comics are heavily inspired by her own lived experiences, her work extends beyond what would be understood by an audience as unique problems faced by refugees, as revealed in this exchange:

Zee: [I'm] a very critical thinker, and this society, the way the system operates, that's what my work is about. It's mainly about Australian society, racism, and working conditions.

I: Is that exclusively your experiences, or ones that you see other people have as well?

Zee: It was until now my own experiences, but I'm doing this comic about racism, which I interviewed some people on their experiences of racism. So, it's about their experiences too.

This interweaving of her personal experiences and those of others around her was in action throughout the interview and some casual conversations we had prior to and after the interview. Indeed, there were moments where Zee would suggest she should do a comic about whatever we were just chatting about, whether that be the economy or relationships. My conversations with Zee often drifted towards the broader political state of our lives, so I was keen to hear how she understood her own political identity. Zee described herself as 'a bit political' and gave the following answer when I asked if she had a positive relationship with politics:

Zee: Oh, I don't think there is any positive thing about it. No, no, politics is very stressful; but when I was in political economy, it was very stressful. And there's no solution to it and it's just stressful [laughs]. You know how bad everything is.

I: So, do you try to remove yourself from it a little bit?

Zee: Yeah, I think so. I think I decided for my mental health it's better to just accept that this is what it is.

Zee's exhaustion had shifted her focus to cultivating fun and joyful experiences. However, she also noted the ways political identities are very much present within individuals and, thus, hard to separate from. Using the example of refugee art spaces, she spoke on how she felt the community of practice is shaped quite heavily by the politics of individuals within it.

Considering Zee's dynamic political position, her insertion within and removal from political spaces depending on her needs and comfort level, I asked her if this made creating her art difficult, given the critical nature of her work:

Zee: I'm more critical towards Australia because I've lived here 15 years, I don't want to do criticisms about 20 years ago. I don't want to go back. And what I realised is the refugees that have been through detention, talk about detention, and the ones that didn't go through detention talk about their back home country.

Zee's answer points to a difference in how she views her political critiques of Australia and those of her birth country. Zee posed an idea of political orientation, where the object of political critique was directly informed by the varied settlement experiences faced by refugees in Australia, highlighting the importance of personal experiences. The comics Zee creates are not necessarily an expression of her identity as a refugee but, rather, her identity as an Iranian woman living within Australia.

The keen awareness of the political position that they inhabit demonstrated by the participants can be seen as an expression of historical events, and political trends mixed with personal experiences of oppression and marginalisation. The stories recounted above highlight that the subjectivity of these 'formative experiences' opens the door for an analysis to centre on the heterogeneity of women as is a key feature of SWANA feminist theory. These 'formative experiences' do not necessarily determine political action, but frame choices (Al-Ali 2000). This includes the movement in and out of political spaces and discussion at the will of the individual women, regardless of their perceived identity and position as refugees.

The interplay between refusal and entanglement

By examining the participants' testimonies, one can see how the participants' lives are shaped by a series of relationships entangled with one another. However, the settlement system that manages them and their art perpetuates a one-to-one relationship between refugeehood and identity, where one's experiences as a refugee are seen as the central identity marker of a person. The tension between an audience's expectations of knowledge produced by refugee women and the creator's intentions comes to the fore when engaging with the complex entanglement of relationships and identity the refugee women experience and, therefore, are inspired by.

Ari defined her identity as someone who has existed within a minority, both within her country of birth and in Australia. This was a key factor informing her work and project interests, particularly around visibility of minority issues. She explained this as follows:

Yeah, as I said, I always liked to do photography because, as I was in a minority group in Iran, and [I] had a lot of problems. I always liked to do documentary photography in these groups to show their problems and their issues with the community, with the broader community, with the government, with other people from other communities. I see some works of other famous documentary photographers that I am inspired by them.

Ari's work deals with the intersectional experiences of minority groups, how they interact with dominant society, their access to certain services such as health care, as well as their inter-community relations. She characterised her work as an act of solidarity through shared experiences and her unique ability to relate to the vulnerable position of an oppressed group. This came up as a particular passion in the way she spoke about her drive to create a piece in collaboration with First Nations groups.

Like that of the other participants whom I interviewed, Ari's relationship to politics and her political identity is highly personal and mediated as a means of self-care and preservation. Ari expressed her opinion of formal political spaces and politicians as harbouring violence that she wanted to remain separate from. As Ari and I spoke about audience reactions to her work, she focused predominantly on her intentions, what she wanted the audience to take away from

her work, and her interest in improving her craft through critique. One of her comments is reproduced below.

Something I feel as far as people engaging [with] me, [they] encourage me for doing my work even if it is study or a photography job. I see more encouragement than seeing me as a victim. I feel that they encourage me, they say it's very good: you came here and learned English language and you're studying and working. I really like people seeing my work and giving their real feedback and critiques. They say if there is something bad in my work, so they can give their feedback and I can improve my work. I don't want to be told 'your photos are good or something.'

Ari's concerns related more to the framing of her as an artist and her work by organisations as opposed to the audiences' opinions:

Sometimes organisations tell me 'come here for this meeting' or something. For example, there is an exhibition for refugees, always I think they want to label me. The thing is I don't like this.

Participants discussed their decision to remove themselves from certain dimensions of the political sphere. I use the term dimensions here as the participants indicated their distaste for certain political spaces and expressions that are directly tied with political parties and government agencies. The self-mediation of these relationships between individuals, state apparatus, and government affairs was identified earlier in the chapter as a difference between political knowledge and political action and can be understood as acts of political refusal. Coined by Mohawk anthropologist from the Kahnawake community Audra Simpson, the notion of refusal denotes the ways certain Indigenous individuals resist the structure of settler-colonialism, which chiefly manifests itself through the touchpoints between people and their governments, for example, in taxation, military service, and voting (Simpson 2017). Taking into consideration that these touchpoints that Simpson singled out are not necessarily rights awarded to refugees depending on their visa status, Simpson herself points to the politics of refusal as a tool of analysis as opposed to a practice (p. 19). Therefore, the idea of refusal may be used to understand the way other groups who face violent management by settler-colonial regimes choose to interact with certain realms of politics that do not affect their relationships with agencies and organisations managing their settlement journey and, therefore, do not put them at any unnecessary risk.

It could be argued that partaking in acts of refusal, particularly when one occupies a highly politicised position as a refugee, is itself a political act. However, in the research report here, I wish to emphasise the act of refusal primarily as a method of autonomy and self-care which allows for the varied motivations of the respondents. I also wish to foreground their desire to not view themselves through a hyper-political lens.

However, in this context, it is a useful exercise to examine not just how the respondents describe themselves in their own words, but what they leave out or seek to overtly refute. Their responses follow:

Zee: I don't know, I think I just am. I don't even see myself as an artist that much. I think I'm just expressing myself.

Ari: Yeah, so... I came as a refugee here because I am from a minority group. Even when I was in Iran and here, but I don't like to have the label on myself. I think here

people are labelling each other. I don't do this. For example, saying this 'as a woman' 'as a refugee' 'as a photographer' I don't see a difference between myself and other people. Even if there are some limitations, for example, English language or something like that. I don't like to see myself that I'm different to people. I think all people are the same and equal. I don't like to have a label on myself.

Tabz was unsure of how to respond to this question, feeling it was too broad to answer. But even that inability to put oneself into words speaks to the point each of these women mentioned regarding the complexity and fluidity of their identities and how they extend beyond the reductive lenses dominant Australia seeks to understand them through, particularly regarding their status as refugees.

Since our initial interviews, Tabz and I collaborated on an artist profile which was published in *Variations; A more diverse picture of contemporary art*, in which she expressly chose to completely omit her experiences of refugeehood: she felt they were irrelevant to a piece devoted to her life as an artist.

In the interest of subjectivity and to celebrate the individual as carrying a unique experience that cannot be understood to be emblematic of a unified refugee position, I asked each of the participants how they would describe themselves. I concede putting one's identity into words will always be difficult. One edits aspects of the self, depending on the audience.

Conclusion

By utilising a research methodology that centres a decolonial toolkit and the practices found throughout Indigenous Epistemologies and the work of SWANA women researchers, focusing on women's lives, I've been able to craft a decolonial research toolkit through its centring of cultural awareness, trauma-informed and incorporated ethical storytelling. The result of this framework is the disruption of traditionally colonial methods that reinforce existing power dynamics and potential re-traumatisation of extractionist processes between researchers and racialised individuals who have experienced displacement. This alternative way of working pushes past the reductive narratives traditionally applied to women from the SWANA region to centre the participants as knowledge holders and experts, which in turn helps illuminate the unique ways these women navigate and understand their position within Australia.

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About the author

Izabella Antoniou is a writer, researcher and community organizer working across Gadigal and Wangal land with a special interest in elevating and supporting untold stories of women from cultural communities. She completed her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts (Research) at the University of Sydney. Her essays have appeared in *Overland*, *The Guardian*, *ABC*, *YEMAYA* literary journal, and *Deepcut*, among others. Her film collaborations have been exhibited internationally at Documenta15 and locally at the inaugural SWANA Film Festival. Her career has intersected across youth and settlement policy, research into people's responses to alt-right and state violence, and working to navigate the intersections of creative arts and community organising to highlight how marginalised people support one another when governments fail.



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SEEMINGLY INNOCENT

Jagath Dheerasekara

Abstract

This article explores some aspects of the Sri Lankan state's systematic use of violence as a tool of political and economic repression. The militant struggle for an independent Tamil state in the North East intensified from the 1970s onwards. Meanwhile, the discontent of the predominantly Sinhalese southern masses gave impetus to two mass uprisings, in 1971 and the late 1980s. The state's counter-campaign to suppress the latter cost some 60,000 lives. Public spaces were frequently commandeered by the military as detention and interrogation facilities as part of its counter-campaign efforts during this era. Within these environments, ordinary household objects were transformed into instruments of torture. My 8-channel video installation, *Seemingly Innocent*, grew from documenting these sites in the south of Sri Lanka.

The documentation and the artwork that followed was an opportunity for me to resist the erasure of private and collective memories of this period. Tens of thousands of families, from the South and the North East, are still seeking justice for their lost loved ones. Access to international mechanisms for holding the Sri Lankan state and military accountable for its record of routine human rights violations has time and again been impeded by the strategic and geopolitical interests of world powers. The full video of *Seemingly Innocent* can be found at <https://jagath.com.au/seemingly-innocent>

SEEMINGLY INNOCENT

Jagath Dheerasekara

Field Notes

Boarding a crowded bus in greater Colombo, as I did one afternoon in 1991, is a relatively commonplace affair. As I moved towards the back of the bus in search of a vacant seat I recognised a familiar figure—a man in his thirties, of dark brown complexion and sporting a stubble beard—seated at its far end. A gale force of panic unsettled my mind and I was overwhelmed by a feeling of unease. I was standing just meters away from a man I had met about a year and a half prior at K-Point, a notorious military-run interrogation facility in southern Sri Lanka. This particular man had a habit of digging his left thumbnail, which was grown to over an inch long, and which was now in full view as he rested his hand on the seat-rail before him, into the eye sockets of detainees when interrogating them. Not only could I see his thumbnail, I could feel its pressure too.



[1]

The history of post-independence Sri Lanka is marred by mass state-sponsored violence, frequently involving torture and death in custody. In 1971, the government launched a ruthless military campaign to suppress the first uprising of the People's Liberation Front (JVP) which sought to establish socialist rule on the island. The JVP's second uprising and the socialist-nationalist fervour it inspired loomed large over Sri Lankan politics between the years of 1987 to 1990. The JVP garnered popular support in the majority-Sinhalese south of the island. The Sri Lankan state once again responded with a forceful military counter-campaign. The vast majority of the Sri Lankan military had been deployed to the majority-Tamil north and east of the island up to this point. It was engaged in suppressing the burgeoning liberation struggle for an independent Tamil state which was led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As they were redeployed to the south, the Indian military took their place in the north and east in accordance with the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987.



[2]

The military counter-campaign in the south was targeted at all forms of political dissent, including opposition to human rights violations. Even human rights lawyers were not spared from being subject to State violence in this atmosphere. Between 1987 and 1990, military-run interrogation centres like K-Point proliferated across southern Sri Lanka. The majority of individuals who were detained at military-run interrogation facilities, such as K-Point, did not survive to tell their stories. Many of those who did survive are silent about their experiences, both as a means of managing their trauma on their own and due to fear of retaliation. These facilities were largely housed in structures originally built to advance societal progress. School buildings, public theatres, community centres, gymnasiums, factory halls and such were commandeered by the military to be used as detention centres and interrogation sites during this period. Some, such as K-Point, were private properties. Today, a large number of these establishments have returned to their original purpose.

Seemingly Innocent draws on more than two decades of my research into Sri Lanka's torture chambers. I began my survey of military-run torture sites upon returning to Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s following a period of exile abroad. Between 2013 and 2018, I filmed in these sites—often alone, sometimes with my daughter. These include the one most intimately tied to my own experience. I do not know exactly why I did it—perhaps to preserve memory, to resist the state's erasure. When I finally chose to preserve this material in an artwork, I selected eight videos. Creating the work was both an endurance and a catharsis: a way to honour the thousands lost, including close comrades and friends, and a fulfilling of an obligation carried within for decades.

My 8-channel video installation, titled *Seemingly Innocent*, grew from these documentations. Various methods of torture were commonly applied during the interrogation of persons in detention. Among the tools used during such interrogations were a range of ordinary household objects—screwdrivers, scissors, electric irons, ballpoint pens, plastic bags, hardcover books and so on—which in everyday circumstances seem harmless and innocent. As Amnesty International's September 1990 *Sri Lanka: Extrajudicial Executions, 'Disappearances' and Torture, 1987 to 1990* report notes, "[r]eports of torture by members of the security forces in



[3]

the south have been widespread. Torture has sometimes been so severe that it has resulted in prisoners' deaths."¹

Detainees who were killed in custody and whose bodies were disposed of by the military unbeknownst to their families and without coronial inquest were simply classified as "disappeared." The European Parliament's mission to Sri Lanka in 1990, which myself and two other members of Students for Human Rights met with in clandestine,² reported that "[v]arious estimates we have received suggest that at least 60,000 people disappeared in the south of Sri Lanka since 1987. This represents about one in every 250 of the [southern] population."³ In October 1991, by which time I was in exile, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances visited Sri Lanka. Despite the severe risks, Students for Human Rights met with the UN delegation. Its report stated that the disappearances which had



[4]

occurred in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 1991 amounted to “by far the highest number ever recorded by the Working Group for any single country.”⁴

Having crushed the JVP’s second uprising, the Sri Lankan state turned its full attention to defeating the LTTE-led Tamil liberation struggle and Sri Lankan military forces were once again deployed to the north and east of Sri Lanka in 1991. The Sri Lankan state was apporportioned a costly victory at the conclusion of this military counter-campaign in 2009. The conflict, and particularly the behaviour of the Sri Lankan military, has left deep scars on the soul of Tamil society. The *Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka* noted the Sri Lankan government’s extensive use of heavy weapons and intentional disregard of human casualties during this conflict.⁵ In reference to the number of civilian deaths that occurred during the final stage of the conflict, another probe by the UN concluded that there exists “credible information indicating that over 70,000 people are unaccounted for.”⁶

Men in uniform, like the one I encountered at K-Point, who tortured detainees often to death, and those who held positions of higher command during this period, remain free to go about their daily lives. They, along with the political leadership of the time, have been generally unaffected by repercussions for their conduct. Four Presidential Commissions were appointed over the years of 1994 and 1998 to investigate the “disappearances” that occurred across the island between 1988 and 1994. As has been noted by the United States Institute of Peace, the result of these Commissions was that “[o]f the several thousand suspected perpetrators that the commissions identified, less than 500 were indicted and even fewer were convicted.”⁷



[5]



[6]

Access to international mechanisms for holding the Sri Lankan state and military accountable for its record of routine human rights violations has time and again been impeded by the strategic and geopolitical interests of world powers. While attending the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo, Tony Abbott, the former Prime Minister of Australia, reflected the laissez-faire attitude that such world powers take towards the Sri Lankan State. Upon being asked about the war crime allegations that have been levelled at the Sri Lankan military, Abbott responded, “we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen.”⁸



[7]



[8]

Tens of thousands of families, from the south and the north, are still seeking justice for their lost loved ones. The Sri Lankan state refuses to bring about any mechanisms of transitional justice by which torture survivors and the families of the dead and disappeared may seek redress. In doing so, the State forces the erasure of the memories of individual survivors and families, as well as the collective memory of the communities that it targeted.

Work Details

[1-8] Stills from Jagath Dheersekara, *Seemingly Innocent*. 8-channel video installation.
<https://jagath.com.au/seemingly-innocent>

Notes

- ¹ Amnesty International 1990, *Sri Lanka: Extrajudicial Executions, 'Disappearances' and Torture, 1987 to 1990*.
- ² Founded in 1988, Students for Human Rights (SHR) was a grassroots student organisation which was part of the border student movement of the time. SHR was intrinsically linked to Socialist Student Union (SSU), JVP's student wing and the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF).
- ³ Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament 1990, *Report of Investigative Mission into Alleged Violation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka 27 October–4 November 1990*.
- ⁴ The Asia Watch Committee of Human Rights Watch 1992, *Human Rights Accountability in Sri Lanka*.
- ⁵ United Nations Security Council 2011, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka*.
- ⁶ Internal Review Panel of the United Nations Secretary-General 2012, *Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Actions in Sri Lanka*.
- ⁷ United States Institute of Peace 1995, Commissions of Inquiry: Sri Lanka, viewed 21.02.24, [https:// www.usip.org/publications/1995/01/commissions-inquiry-sri-lanka](https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/01/commissions-inquiry-sri-lanka).
- ⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 2013, Abbott's Torture Comment Sparks Response, viewed 21.02.24 <https://www.smh.com.au/national/abbotts-torture-comment-sparks-response-20131116-2xnfl.html>.

About the author

Jagath Dheeraseskara is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work is informed by personal and collective memory, the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and the fragility of the principles of humanity. Born in Sri Lanka, Dheeraseskara was forced to flee the island due to political persecution in Sri Lanka's 1987-1990 Southern Uprising. He was granted political asylum in France, unable to return to Sri Lanka until the mid-1990s. In 2008, Dheeraseskara moved to Australia with his family, and now lives on Gundungarra Country in Western Sydney.

Dheeraseskara is a recipient of grants from the Amnesty International Human Rights Innovation Fund and Creative Australia and has presented work in several solo and group exhibitions. He has undertaken residencies, as an artist and curator, in several institutions including Bundanon Art Museum; UTP; ArtsHouse; and Museum of History NSW, and has work held in both institutional and private collections, including the Campbelltown City Council Art Collection; the Museum of Australian Photography; the State Library of New South Wales; the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; and the Liverpool City Council Art Collection.



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PEACEBUILDING CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE 5WS AND H FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Growing policy consensus suggests that embedding culture, cultural heritage, and the arts within global development agendas can play a role in advancing peace. The objective of this scholarly inquiry is to provide an examination of the application of cultural expressions and arts in conflict resolution. It seeks to interrogate a series of fundamental inquiries: the rationale for employing artistic measures in peacebuilding initiatives; the identification of cultural and artistic programs that excel in such contexts; the optimal timing and locales for these interventions; the identification of the most suitable agents for execution; and the methodologies for their implementation. The discussion concludes with a set of recommendations on how to best implement artistic projects in conflict situations. This paper synthesises the findings derived from an analytical examination of fifteen elite interviews conducted with individuals from prominent Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), European Cultural Institutes, and senior policy makers working for the European Union.

PEACEBUILDING CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE 5WS AND H FRAMEWORK

Georgios Terzis

Introduction: Research Question and Methodology

There is increasing recognition in policy circles that integrating culture, cultural heritage and the arts into wider global development frameworks and partnerships, including those of international cultural relations, could enhance efforts towards sustainable peace and global stability. Substantial groundwork exists - evident in initiatives by international bodies such as UN and UNESCO, the EU, as well as national governments. Research also increasingly acknowledges the significant role of culture and the arts in fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and conflict transformation (Grincheva, 2010; Schneider, 2009; Naidu-Silverman, 2015; McPherson et al., 2018).

Yet, despite growing evidence and supportive policy statements at the UN and EU levels there remains a persistent gap whereby policy ambitions are not matched by empirical evidence, strategic frameworks, or operational tools. Culture remains peripheral to security thinking, disconnected from research and practice, and largely absent from international crisis peacebuilding systems.

This context is met with four specific key challenges as shown by existing research, policy and practitioner feedback, namely of a policy-practice gap, insufficient evidence-base cultural interventions, fragmented methodologies, and persistent institutional silos and echo-chambers particularly between cultural actors, policymakers, and the peacebuilding and security community that limit coordination, mutual learning, and policy innovation.

This paper tries to offer a small contribution to address some of those challenges, by exploring the practical and conceptual challenges faced by policymakers and NGO staff in utilising arts as a tool in peacebuilding. Specifically, it investigates the question: What are the perceived barriers and enabling factors in implementing effective arts-based peacebuilding initiatives, as experienced by cultural practitioners and policy stakeholders?

Through interview data and comparative literature, this paper aims to propose actionable recommendations grounded in empirical insight. In this context, the paper encapsulates the synthesis of insights from fifteen interviews with representatives from leading NGOs, European Cultural Institutes, and senior policy makers from the European Union that were conducted as part of the EU project RePAST (Terzis, 2020).¹ There is a discernible consensus amongst these experts regarding the potential role of art in conflict prevention and resolution. They agree that the practicality of integrating culture and the arts into the reconciliation process is neither simple nor direct; however, the endeavour is validated by its potential impact on communities. Conversely, it has been acknowledged that the arts are occasionally romanticised, with their contributions to conflict resolution not being universal. Artistic initiatives, whether deliberately or inadvertently, have also the capacity to reignite tensions due to the unpredictable nature of public reception, which resists anticipation, orchestration, or management.

Studies in Arts and Peacebuilding

Over the past decade or so, the field of arts and peacebuilding has evolved from idealistic celebrations of cultural healing toward a more critical discourse. Artistic interventions—encompassing music, theatre, visual arts, and dance—are increasingly recognised as tools for conflict transformation through therapeutic, symbolic, and dialogic functions (Shank & Schirch, 2008; Cohen et al., 2011; Lederach & Lederach, 2011). Real-world applications range from community theatre in conflict zones to music education with displaced youth, offering emotionally resonant spaces for healing and re-humanisation. Yet scholars caution against assuming that arts are inherently transformative. Howell (2023), for example, identifies six ‘critical junctures’ that determine whether arts interventions succeed or reproduce inequalities—such as mismatched aims, unsustainable infrastructure, and exclusive pedagogies.

Recent literature also foregrounds how arts programs operate within complex systems shaped by policy frameworks, donor agendas, and local socio-political conditions. Ware and Dunphy (2019, 2020) document a wide range of outcomes, including increased interpersonal trust, social connectedness, and cultural self-esteem—particularly when programs are participatory, sustained, and culturally embedded. They also note that dialogic forms of practice—story circles, co-created murals, playback theatre—often help address trauma and division more safely than direct verbal engagement. However, these outcomes are not guaranteed. Arts interventions may reinforce power imbalances when externally imposed or lacking community ownership (Vlassis et al., 2021). Recent studies have similarly warned against instrumentalising artists or framing arts projects as neutral ‘add-ons’ to peacebuilding work (Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023).

A persistent concern in the field is also the challenge of evaluation. Funders often demand proof of impact, yet standard metrics poorly capture affective or long-term changes. Ware and Dunphy (2019) found that only one-third of studies used robust methodologies, with many relying on anecdotal evidence or vague attributions. Their critique echoes earlier calls for more rigorous, interdisciplinary research designs that combine qualitative and participatory methods with longer timeframes and contextual indicators. Another limitation is that many projects are short-term or pilot-scale, limiting their potential for structural change. This creates a sustainability gap, where inspiring but fleeting programs struggle to achieve lasting peace outcomes without policy or institutional backing (Zupančič et al., 2023; Fairey et al., 2020; McPherson et al., 2018).

The literature thus offers both validation and caution. It affirms that arts can enable healing, dialogue, and social cohesion, but also insists on clearer frameworks, better evaluation, and attention to power structures and duration. This evolving body of knowledge provides a rich foundation for new empirical research. The present study contributes by offering grounded reflections from cultural practitioners and EU policy actors, interrogating how well current assumptions hold in practice—and where they fall short. In doing so, it addresses gaps around operational translation, cross-sectoral cooperation, and sustainable infrastructure for arts-based peacebuilding.

Why Cultural and Artistic Interventions?: Understand the Differences, Act on Commonalities²

Scholarly inquiry has consistently highlighted the diverse roles of art in conflict and post-conflict settings, with its impacts resonating across individual, communal, and societal levels. Lederach and Lederach (2011) describe the arts as operating simultaneously at micro and macro scales—engaging personal healing and shaping collective reconciliation. Zelizer's (2004) model further disaggregates this impact by identifying three levels of peacebuilding engagement: the individual (where art aids in processing trauma), the community (where shared narratives and memory work take form), and inter-community relations (where dialogue and collaboration become possible). These functions reflect the nuanced role of art—not merely as a communicative tool, but as a mechanism for reflection, reimagining, and relational transformation.

This conceptual framework was echoed in interviews, where participants repeatedly framed arts as a critical medium for conflict resolution. These reflections should not be interpreted as universal truths, but rather as situated perceptions from professionals embedded in cultural and peacebuilding fields. One NGO director, expressing a view shared by multiple respondents, described art as a way for divided communities to gain insight into each other's perspectives, stating that 'art actually creates a way for members of conflicted and divided communities to get an insight into what the other community thinks and it enables empathy.' While anecdotal, this perception is well-supported in the literature, where art is frequently framed as a bridge for empathy (Aho, 2014).

Such views were particularly strong among practitioners with experience in regions marked by entrenched identity conflicts. One interviewee noted that, 'when you watch a film, the adversary is absent... you might as well let the art soak in and there is a chance you see a different point of view.' This perspective highlights the affective and indirect nature of aesthetic mediation—aligning with the idea that artistic platforms enable viewers to 'step into' opposing narratives without direct confrontation (Cohen et al., 2011).

Other participants framed arts as a vehicle for understanding underlying human drivers of conflict. One NGO worker claimed, 'when we work with art and culture, what we're doing is going into the root of who people are.' Again, while this perspective carries powerful emotional resonance, it should be read as an aspirational interpretation, not a tested general principle. Nonetheless, it corresponds with findings in participatory arts literature, where identity exploration and self-expression are frequently linked to post-conflict resilience (Ware & Dunphy, 2020).

A common thread across many interviews was the sense that art can reach audiences often disengaged from political or elite discourse. As one senior program manager explained,

Art and culture can give people the opportunity to express themselves freely... It can also raise awareness and understanding about the conflict for people that are not involved in it.

This theme—of arts as a democratizing force—is mirrored in studies exploring youth engagement (Wright et al., 2006) and cultural outreach (Edelman, 1996; Hicks, 1990).

Several interviewees, particularly those from leading cultural institutions, reflected on the emotional and imaginative dimensions of artistic experience. One director articulated this view by saying that art 'awakens human feelings, desires, imagination more than other discourses

like politics might do.’ While this perspective is inherently subjective, it aligns with Figueira et al. (2023), who argue that art’s aesthetic force can reframe identities and create openings for post-conflict reimagining.

Overall, the interview data reveals a largely convergent perception among arts practitioners and peacebuilding stakeholders: that arts-based interventions offer distinctive and often underutilized modes of fostering empathy, rehumanisation, and communication. As it is already stated, while these insights align with prevailing literature, they remain expressions of professional belief rather than empirical proof—and should be interpreted with both enthusiasm and epistemological caution.

What are the best cultural and artistic programmes for Conflict Resolution?: Content and Tools in Arts-Based Peacebuilding

A recurrent theme across the interviews was that decisions about how to employ arts and culture in peacebuilding must be responsive to local contexts and anchored in community participation. Participants emphasised that engaging local stakeholders early in the planning stages was not simply desirable, but essential. As one cultural practitioner put it, ‘without that, the impact of any cultural intervention aiming at conflict resolution is compromised.’ This view aligns with literature in conflict-sensitive and participatory development, which stresses co-creation, cultural safety, and stakeholder engagement as prerequisites for legitimate interventions (Bergh & Sloboda, 2010; Ware & Dunphy, 2020).

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that there is no single or ‘correct’ model for cultural programming in peacebuilding. Rather, the content must be adapted to the specific sociopolitical needs and sensibilities of the community involved. One programme designer explained:

You look at a country and you just employ the type of content necessary in order to facilitate the connection. Sometimes it has to do with freedom of speech: people need safe spaces to talk. Other times it’s about stressing values and strengthening the civil society.

This adaptable approach was echoed by another respondent who emphasised cultural sensitivity:

A cultural programme ought to be very sensitive to the needs of communities that live in conflict or in a fragile context of pre or post conflict, and show an understanding of what it would take for them to feel more included in society, to feel like they have a voice and a safe space to express themselves.

Such statements are consistent with ongoing scholarly discourse that warns against overly standardised models and urges practitioners to work from ground-up frameworks tailored to local history, identity, and needs (Ware & Dunphy, 2020). Practical examples reinforce these perspectives. In Colombia, the *Sensory Expedition* and *Music for Reconciliation* programs aim to rebuild social cohesion post-civil war. These initiatives engage youth and communities in activities promoting personal healing and community solidarity. In Rwanda, projects such as *Itorero* and *Kwibuka* function both as national identity-building platforms and spaces for intergenerational education about the past. In Syria, initiatives like *Saiyar* and *The Prophecy* leverage the arts to provide psychological relief amid crisis while simultaneously preserving cultural identity (McPherson et al., 2018).

Some interviewees also discussed how cultural content can play a critical or confrontational role, particularly in dismantling harmful myths or narratives that sustain conflict. One remarked that the arts can ‘address myths and stereotypes about history and about harm done by other communities.’ Another suggested that cultural programming could help by ‘showing some of the bleak reality of life under conflict; focusing on the cruelty of violence rather than letting people be informed by the sound bites on the news.’ These views reflect a more activist interpretation of arts’ role, echoing traditions of agit-prop, documentary film, and testimonial theatre, where art becomes a space of contestation (Cohen et al., 2011).

Several respondents also valued symbolic and interpretive functions of the arts. ‘*Art can help conflict resolution through symbolism open to interpretation, iconic works that inspire and become points of reference for whole communities,*’ said one senior practitioner. This echoes Murray et al. (2019), who describe the creation of shared artistic symbols as one pathway to collective memory and reconciliation.

In terms of tools, interviewees underscored the importance of adapting not only the content but the mode of communication. While many acknowledged the usefulness of digital tools and online platforms, there was a strong emphasis on analogue, face-to-face modalities in certain cultural contexts. ‘We may live in the digital age, but there are cultures that communicate better through face-to-face or analogue means,’ explained one respondent. This aligns with literature on culturally embedded art forms—such as community theatre or ritual-based music and dance—as more accessible and resonant than imported or high-tech interventions (Morris, 2015; Bergh & Sloboda, 2010).

There was strong agreement that local consultation was key in ‘delivery tool’ selection as well. ‘You don’t just go there and tell people what they should do. You ask them what the best communication tools would be. You listen to them. Then you consult with them,’ one cultural institute representative stated. This participatory ethos is widely advocated in community arts literature and policy, and aligns with best practices for ethical engagement (Ware & Dunphy, 2019).

Again, case studies from the literature reinforce these perspectives. In Colombia, the *Sensory Expedition* engages local communities through interdisciplinary artistic research, blending sound, movement, and visual arts to facilitate trauma recovery and heritage recognition. Similarly, the *Music for Reconciliation* program, led by the National Batuta Foundation, uses collective music-making as a vehicle for inclusion and dialogue. In Rwanda, *Itorero* promotes unity through traditional performance, *Never Again Rwanda* supports youth-led arts for peace education, and *Kwibuka* ensures intergenerational remembrance through symbolic events. In Syria, *Saiyar* uses art therapy for street children’s well-being, while *The Prophecy* theatre production draws historical parallels to foster resilience and empathy (McPherson et al., 2018).

Some interviewees pointed to music and film as particularly effective and widely used tools. ‘Music and film are popular and accessible; they travel easier across borders,’ said one. Another noted that, ‘especially films are easier for people to relate to. It’s an important way of learning about other cultures. It doesn’t have to be about conflict or peace—it’s about seeing others as human.’ This perspective aligns with Kim et al. (2016), who found that visual storytelling promotes empathetic engagement even without explicit conflict-related themes.

Technological developments were also cited as tools for expanding access. ‘With current platforms and subtitle options, the language barrier has essentially been broken, making video

more effective than ever,' said another interviewee. This optimism must be balanced with an understanding of digital inequalities, but it does point to the growing importance of audiovisual content in peacebuilding efforts.

Another essential aspect of the content frequently highlighted was continuity. Interviewees stressed that one-off interventions may lack the longevity needed for deeper impact. Formats like TV or radio soap operas, which build character familiarity over years, were cited as effective in shaping public attitudes and values (Legatis, 2015). A different kind of continuity was described in relation to cultural institute buildings—such as Goethe-Institut, British Council or Alliance Française centres—which can act as long-term neutral and safe spaces for dialogue. However, one interviewee cautioned that this effect is often undermined 'when the colonising partner is involved.'

Finally, a more expansive understanding of cultural tools emerged in some interviews. A few respondents advocated for broad definitions of culture that include not only the arts, but also tourism, education, video games, and mobile applications. 'Culture includes everything from education to digital tools,' one policymaker argued. Another interviewee added to this theme:

The school is where young people can learn about the other community in a safe and secure environment which protects them from getting stigmatised as disloyal to their community or even as traitors to their community, supposedly showing too much interest or sympathy or empathy for the other community.

This view resonates with Hicks (1990) and contemporary efforts to integrate peace education through cultural content within formal education systems. Once again, it must be noted that the above positions, although widely shared among respondents, reflect specific professional experiences rather than a universally applied practice.

When is art best employed for conflict resolution?: Timing of Arts Interventions Across Conflict Phases

A recurring topic in both the literature and interviews is the appropriate timing of artistic and cultural interventions in relation to the conflict cycle. While some scholars argue that the arts can be employed across all stages—pre-, during, and post-conflict (van Westrhenen, 2017)—the question of *when* these interventions are most effective remains debated. Shank and Schirch (2008) argue for tailored activities that vary by phase, emphasising that the level and nature of conflict should dictate the approach. Similarly, Ouchtati et al. (2023) propose that the phases are not strictly linear, but dynamically interlinked—each one shaping the trajectory and possible resolution of the conflict.

Interviewees offered varied but overlapping perspectives on this matter. While most agreed that cultural engagement holds potential throughout the conflict cycle, several emphasised the preventive potential of pre-conflict engagement. One cultural policy advisor remarked, 'no doubt, better to avoid conflict than to have to resolve it.' This belief—while widely expressed among respondents—should be understood as aspirational rather than predictive. Literature similarly underscores that pre-conflict interventions often focus on cultural diplomacy and intergroup dialogue to preempt violence (Ouchtati et al., 2023). Nonetheless, as one interviewee pointed out, 'no amount of culture and arts can make certain that no conflict will break out. They never have.' This reflects a more cautious, reflective position that aligns with academic critiques of overly idealistic peacebuilding narratives (Antoniou & Triga 2023, Zupančič et al. 2023).

In the conflict phase, both interviewees and scholars describe a more complex and constrained operational environment. Cultural programming becomes logistically and ethically more difficult, yet its symbolic and emotional relevance may grow. Ouchtati et al. (2023) point to three key areas of cultural utility that could be essential at this phase: preserving cultural heritage, supporting cultural professionals, and deploying artistic practices for psychosocial support. One interviewee elaborated: 'During conflict, culture can heal and speak against it. It can also communicate outside of the conflict zone to raise awareness or offer different perspectives.'

However, these insights are tempered by critical reflections from the field. Several practitioners noted the limited and under-documented nature of in-conflict arts programming. 'It's not because we don't want to, but it's hard—mainly for security reasons,' explained one interviewee. This sentiment, voiced by multiple respondents, highlights the pragmatic limitations imposed by conflict contexts: access, safety, political sensitivity, and public receptivity. Furthermore, the arts may be co-opted or backfire, particularly when their messages are politicised or misinterpreted. As one participant put it,

When a conflict is taking place in a country, arts and cultural appreciation can become a bit of a luxury. What's more, during the conflict art can even be used to foster it, and some interventions can backfire, thus policy makers and civil society organisations tend to be extra careful.

This reflects findings in critical peacebuilding literature that caution against instrumentalising culture without regard for local context and risk (Cohen et al., 2011).

Interestingly, several interviewees observed that more art may actually be created during conflict, even if formal support is absent. This was framed as a personal coping mechanism among artists rather than an organised peacebuilding strategy. 'It's likely that during conflict more art might be created—but the broader impact and appreciation may come after, if the art survives,' noted one practitioner. This distinction between personal expression and collective impact is important and echoes the idea that the arts' influence on peace may be delayed or indirect, surfacing most clearly in post-conflict environments.

In the post-conflict phase, interviewees consistently viewed arts and culture as uniquely positioned to support transitional justice for example through healing, truth-telling, and re-engagement. This is also a dominant theme in academic research, where cultural tools like storytelling, theatre, and music are credited with helping to process trauma, foster empathy, and bridge divided communities (Speiser, 2014; Lederach & Lederach, 2011). This phase was seen by most respondents as the point where cultural work can be safest and most visible—but also where it faces competition for attention and funding from other post-war priorities.

Notably, several respondents emphasised a critical caveat: even post-conflict arts work requires careful calibration to people's psychological and social readiness. One interviewee warned that 'it only works when people are ready for it.' This insight reflects a key theme in literature on trauma-informed practice: interventions are most effective when participants are *willing and able* to engage with painful histories or identities (Lederach & Lederach, 2011; Ware & Dunphy, 2019). In this sense, the arts do not operate in isolation—they require enabling conditions, both emotional and institutional.

Taken together, both the interview data and scholarly literature suggest that the timing of cultural interventions must be flexible and context-sensitive. While each phase presents

unique challenges and opportunities, the success of arts programming ultimately depends on local readiness, ethical grounding, and the ability to adapt to changing conflict dynamics. As several interviewees suggested, cultural initiatives cannot substitute for political solutions, but they can enrich the process of peacebuilding by offering spaces for reflection, recognition, and renewal—when the moment is right.

Where is art best employed for conflict resolution?: Risks, Constraints, and Ethical Tensions in Arts-Based Peacebuilding

As with any peacebuilding tool, the use of arts and culture in conflict resolution entails a range of risks. As previously stated, both academic literature and interview insights emphasise that artistic interventions—especially those engaging with memory, identity, or trauma—can unintentionally reignite tensions rather than resolve them. Several interviewees warned that cultural expression, if not sensitively framed, may provoke rather than pacify. As one cultural mediator explained, ‘any intervention can backfire and create more conflict. Societies in conflict are quite fragile. It doesn’t take much to provoke somebody.’ This concern reflects broader critiques in peacebuilding studies that caution against interventions which oversimplify conflict histories or reintroduce polarising narratives under the guise of healing (Graham, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011).

The politicisation of culture is a particularly acute risk. Both state and non-state actors have historically employed cultural tools for propaganda and division, particularly through the instrumentalisation of heritage objects, language, and symbolism (Graham, 2016). One interviewee stressed that artistic tools and media are often used to glamorise or legitimise conflict. While this viewpoint may not have been shared by all respondents, it is consistent with critical heritage studies and reflects wider anxieties about the dual-use potential of cultural expression (Antoniou & Triga 2023, Zupančič et al. 2023). Issues such as religion, nationalism, and historical grievance were identified as especially sensitive domains where arts-based projects can inadvertently validate exclusionary or inflammatory positions.

Yet, even amid these risks, several participants argued that the projects with the greatest transformative potential often carry the highest stakes. One respondent made the following observation:

Actually, there are often people who are actively looking for reasons to be provoked and to make projects backfire, so that they have an excuse for returning to conflict or doing something they should not do. So, there are risks involved. Despite this, the projects that offer the best potential to deliver great outcomes sometimes face the highest risks.

This position aligns with literature on conflict-sensitive design, which advocates for careful stakeholder mapping and iterative risk assessment, rather than avoidance of complex topics (Ware & Dunphy, 2019).

In addition to political and emotional risks, structural constraints also shape when and where arts interventions are feasible. Interviewees highlighted barriers such as insufficient funding, lack of trained facilitators, weak infrastructure, and fragmented coordination among stakeholders. However, they were quick to counter the perception that the arts are inherently expensive or inaccessible:

You don't necessarily need a lot of resources ... When we say invest in culture, it doesn't have to be an opera house; it's more about cultural education and community centres. That's the beauty of it, you can do it on the streets, with kids from different communities, you can even do it in the desert. You don't need expensive materials; you might just use mud from the ground and do something that is worthwhile.

This reflects a recurring theme in literature that artistic value is not dependent on material sophistication, but rather on relational impact and accessibility (Morris, 2015; Ware & Dunphy, 2020).

Still, as multiple respondents noted, the arts are often the first sector to suffer cuts in times of crisis, due to perceptions that they are secondary to 'hard' sectors like security, health, or infrastructure. This trend has been widely documented in both cultural policy and development literature (Zupančič et al., 2023). As one practitioner framed it, 'But that's not to say art doesn't need funding or resources, and unfortunately, arts are the first sector to suffer funding cuts in times of crisis, because it's not regarded as an area of prime importance.'

Beyond external constraints, respondents also raised important ethical and attitudinal tensions. These pertain not only to audiences but also to the artists themselves. On the audience side, interviewees mentioned that some participants may resist engaging with cultural programming if they sense they are being manipulated or instrumentalised. 'People don't like to feel used,' said one facilitator. At the same time, artists, too, may resist the framing of their work as merely functional for peacebuilding. 'Some artists just want to do their own stuff,' one respondent explained. 'They don't want to be part of a project or labelled as conflict-related.'

This distinction—between artists as autonomous creators and artists as peacebuilding agents—is frequently discussed in the literature. Scholars warn that instrumentalising the arts can diminish both their aesthetic and ethical integrity (Cohen et al., 2011; Ware & Dunphy, 2020). However, other interviewees reported more positive experiences, describing artists who were already embedded in conflict-affected communities and motivated to use their work for healing or dialogue. These artists, they argued, were better positioned to gain trust and 'speak the language' of their audiences—not just literally, but symbolically.

In sum, interviewees offered a nuanced view: while arts-based interventions carry inherent risks and constraints, they also offer unique possibilities when implemented with care, local engagement, and ethical awareness. Balancing creative freedom, community ownership, and risk mitigation remains a central challenge in this field—and one that must be continuously navigated rather than assumed solved.

Who is the best actor to implement cultural and artistic programmes for Conflict Resolution?: Funding Dynamics, Power Asymmetries, and Legitimacy in Artistic Peacebuilding

A recurring concern voiced by interviewees relates to funding asymmetries that shape which artistic interventions are realised in conflict-affected contexts. Multiple respondents observed that projects which secure funding are often not those that are necessarily the most innovative or community-rooted, but rather those led by organisations with superior institutional capacity, grant-writing skills, or reputational advantage. As one NGO representative noted, 'Often it's not about the best project, but the one that seems least risky to funders—financially and

creatively.’ While not universal, this perception was expressed by a majority of practitioners, highlighting a structural imbalance in who gets funded and why.

This critique intersects with broader concerns about competition between large international NGOs and smaller, local organisations. Interviewees emphasised that well-resourced international actors often have the legal protection, infrastructure, and staffing that local groups lack. One participant explained that ‘international NGOs sometimes have immunity from prosecution and critical distance—advantages local groups don’t enjoy and because of that they can do better or more.’ However, this perspective was not unqualified. The same interviewee, along with others, stressed that local NGOs should be prioritised in project implementation due to their sustained presence, cultural fluency, and long-term accountability. ‘The locals live there—they’ll still be working after the international people leave when the funding dries up,’ another interviewee remarked.

This point supports the normative principle of subsidiarity, long advocated in development literature: that functions should be delegated to the lowest possible level capable of performing them effectively (Martínez, 2001). While international NGOs may have a role in training, funding, or capacity-building, interviewees broadly agreed that project ownership should rest with local actors whenever possible to enhance sustainability, trust, and legitimacy.

In addition to funding disparities, interviewees identified significant capacity and communication gaps across the peacebuilding ecosystem. According to our interviewees there is also a lack of people with appropriate specific skills and competences and in addition there is a big ‘knowledge gap’ between policymakers and practitioners/implementers as they tend to be most of the time ‘detached’ from each other. They argued that one area that needs to improve is the exchange of information and the cooperation between the different sectors involved. According to an interview with a policy maker,

These matters need to be addressed by training and creation of stakeholders’ communities that will increase the interactions and cooperation between different actors ... there are ever more players on the field, but they need to improve on working together like partners rather than isolated, like competitors. Not only that, but also all the players need to work more closely with the artists.

Practitioners’ networks and some development organisations have for a while also focused on culture. An interviewee working for a cultural institute explained that

We also need the opportunity to work closer together and share more information, for example, between the cultural institutes. There used to be a lot of programs and projects that were overlapping or looking at things from quite a national perspective. This seems to be changing. So, this is an opportunity to be seized.

This observation echoes academic analyses of the cultural field’s fragmentation, and calls for better intersectoral collaboration (Ware & Dunphy, 2020) and align with recent efforts within international cultural policy to build consortia, shared funding platforms, and practitioner networks that reduce fragmentation and improve coherence (Zupančič et al., 2023).

An additional theme raised by interviewees concerned the notion of legitimacy in artistic peacebuilding. This concept was linked not just to the project’s aims or content, but also to its governance and sustainability mechanisms. One interviewee argued that projects gain legitimacy when they incorporate an exit strategy or ‘sunset clause’, enabling a planned and transparent

transfer of responsibility from external actors to local stakeholders. ‘It’s about ensuring that the community can continue without us,’ said one cultural implementer. This emphasis is consistent with the work of McPhearon et al., (2018), who note that external interventions that lack a credible exit strategy risk generating dependency—or even destabilisation—after withdrawal.

The importance of transition planning is also recognised in global policy frameworks such as the United Nations’ New Agenda for Peace (UN 2023), which identifies local ownership, as well as ‘exit strategies and transitions from peace operations [that] need to be planned early and in an integrated and iterative manner,’ as a core success factors. Mitchell and Hancock (2018) argue that well-structured sunset clauses not only safeguard against overreach but also empower local actors by embedding adaptive management and resilience into programme design. Several interviewees echoed this view, stressing that an exit strategy signals ethical intent: ‘It shows we’re not here to dominate. We’re here to support and then step back.’ However, others issued a caution. Premature withdrawal, they warned, can jeopardise project outcomes, especially when local capacities are not yet robust. One interviewee noted: ‘If the timing is premature, the project collapses. But if you overstay, you also hinder local empowerment.’ These concerns reflect the delicate calibration required for effective transition planning—balancing external support with gradual disengagement, in ways that align with community readiness and institutional maturity.

Taken together, these insights highlight several interlocking themes: the power dynamics embedded in funding allocation, the need for collaboration across policy and practice, and the importance of local legitimacy, capacity-building, and ethical exit planning. Interviewees presented a range of perspectives, but a unifying thread is clear: for arts-based peacebuilding interventions to be sustainable and just, they must reckon with the structural, institutional, and epistemic conditions that govern their implementation.

How can we do things better?: Conclusions and recommendations

This final section presents a set of consolidated, actionable recommendations. These draw from both the interview insights and recent literature, aimed at strengthening future arts-based peacebuilding efforts across institutional, procedural, and audience-related dimensions.

The Sender: Strengthening Stakeholder Roles and Practices

First, to build sustainable peace through cultural and artistic interventions, stronger collaboration between policymakers and implementers is essential. Currently, a disconnect persists, where knowledge and strategic direction often fail to align across stakeholder groups. This fragmentation—between ministries, cultural institutes, and artistic actors—limits the coherence of peacebuilding initiatives. Semi-permanent stakeholder communities that encourage knowledge exchange and align interests could bridge this divide. By consolidating efforts and limiting duplication, such structures could maximise collective capacity and create meaningful new opportunities.

Second, structural imbalances in funding allocation also persist. Local NGOs, embedded in the communities they serve, bring cultural fluency and long-term presence—yet they often lose out to larger international NGOs with greater legal protections, fundraising capacity, and administrative resources that while may be better positioned for sensitive interventions in

volatile contexts, they can also be disconnected from local realities. A subsidiarity-based model would help determine whether local or international actors are best suited to lead in each case, with local ownership to be the norm unless there is a compelling reason for external leadership (Antoniou & Triga 2023, Zupančič et al. 2023).

At the same time, representation remains a sensitive and critical issue. NGOs, though often well-intentioned, may inadvertently serve the interests of only a subset of the community—owing to cultural, linguistic, or political divisions. This calls for, among others, a more intentional and transparent approach to equitable funding. Whether the support is for NGOs or individual artists, funders must ensure that allocations are balanced across divided groups to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities (Antoniou & Triga 2023, Zupančič et al. 2023).

Third, a more strategic and balanced approach to funding is urgently needed. Currently, frameworks are often overly rigid, heavily results-oriented, and poorly adapted to regional dynamics. Most funding is bilateral or nationally focused, leaving little scope for regional cooperation and long-term cultural infrastructure. Moreover, artistic practice must be understood as relevant at all stages of conflict—not just post-conflict. Its dynamic qualities make it uniquely suited to anticipate tensions, intervene during crises, and aid recovery and reconciliation. If art is to reach its full potential as a tool of conflict engagement, funders and practitioners alike must embed it as a core component across the full conflict timeline—not just in moments of resolution.

Ultimately, funding models must shift toward flexibility, regional inclusivity, and intentional equity—supporting both local agency and the long-term cultural work required for sustainable peace.

The Messages and the Channels: Strategic Use of Communication and Artistic Practice

First, artistic collaboration—especially through cultural exchange programmes—can strengthen cross-community relationships while also developing creative skills. These encounters create a space in which participants not only share practices but also form personal bonds that foster longer-term integration. When artists co-create, the outcomes are more inclusive and reflective of plural perspectives. Such programmes, whether local or transnational, can challenge division and foster new opportunities for dialogue and trust (Antoniou & Triga 2023, Zupančič et al. 2023).

At the same time, the content of cultural interventions must be shaped with care and clarity. Art has the capacity to counteract myths and stereotypes by offering more nuanced representations of marginalised or misunderstood groups. Artists should aim to humanise the ‘Other’, revealing shared values, vulnerabilities and hopes. In doing so, art can challenge entrenched narratives and cultivate empathy. Beyond promoting that recognition, cultural interventions should also highlight the costs of conflict and the stakes involved in continued division. When art underscores shared humanity and the consequences of violence, it strengthens the emotional and moral case for peace (Zupančič et al. 2023).

Moreover, popular media—particularly music, film, radio, and television—offer the most direct access to public audiences. These everyday cultural forms are familiar, accessible, and widely consumed. If used strategically to humanise and centre marginalised groups, they can help normalise intergroup understanding. Lower production and distribution costs, enabled by new digital technologies, further enhance their utility as channels for peace-oriented messaging.

New technological tools are indeed also rapidly expanding the potential of cultural intervention. Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) allow for innovative forms of artistic engagement, including mobile apps, social media platforms, video games, and virtual reality (Prier 2017). These tools make artistic expression more accessible—simple devices like phones or cameras can generate powerful media, widely shared via digital networks (Zupančič & Milioni 2021). Virtual reality, in particular, enables users to imagine the experience of the ‘Other’ or explore spaces marked by past conflict (Jones & Dawkins 2018). Interactive and immersive formats, including post-conflict video games, are already being used as storytelling tools (Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023).

Still, ICT-based engagement comes with limitations. Access remains unequal; in some conflict zones, 50–60% of people lack basic digital infrastructure. Merely donating devices is insufficient if connectivity and training are unavailable. One interviewee aptly noted that digital tools, while helpful, cannot replace the value of face-to-face engagement. True knowledge exchange and healing still depend on physical presence and relational trust built over time.

Education systems offer another promising entry point. By embedding artistic literacy into formal education—from early exposure to creative practice to deeper engagement with artistic meaning—future generations can develop both expressive capacities and interpretive skills (Christofidou & Milioni 2023). This supports the long-term sustainability of an artistic ecosystem, nurturing both creators and critically engaged audiences. Community-based and cooperative art practices, used within diverse educational settings, also offer a pedagogical means of conflict transformation (Bang 2016; Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023).

Finally, museums, cultural centres, and community spaces also have a key role to play. These institutions can facilitate dialogue by curating exhibitions that place art within complex historical narratives. By presenting multiple perspectives—including those of minorities or formerly silenced groups—museums can challenge dominant narratives and foster inclusive memory cultures (van Beurden et al. 2024). As stewards of public knowledge, these institutions have a responsibility to present conflict histories with both artistic and historical integrity (Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023).

The Audience: Building a More Receptive Audience

For arts-based conflict interventions to succeed, their accessibility must be carefully considered. Artistic content must reach diverse audiences across geographic, cultural, and linguistic lines; otherwise, the potential for shared understanding is diminished. Too often, access is limited—whether through location (such as installations in areas avoided by some communities) or cost (as with museum entry fees). If only one side engages with the work, the opportunity for dialogue and mutual recognition is lost. Techniques such as travelling exhibitions can help bridge these divides, ensuring broader exposure and access across communities (Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023).

Beyond access, audience engagement should be deepened through participatory practices. Passive spectatorship has limited transformative potential; in contrast, participatory art invites introspection and action. This may involve inviting responses via social media, open calls for community contributions, or incorporating feedback from local audiences and critics. Such models decentralise authorship and foster a greater sense of shared ownership over cultural

narratives (Antoniou & Triga 2023; Zupančič et al. 2023). Participation also increases the likelihood that audiences will internalise and reflect on the messages conveyed.

While the value of artistic interventions in conflict contexts is increasingly acknowledged, the impact of the field remains under-researched. Understanding how such interventions shape conflict dynamics requires multi-layered inquiry. At the informational level for example, research could further explore how artistic experiences alter people's knowledge of opposing groups. At the attitudinal level, the focus could be on changes in perception, empathy, and emotional resonance. Behavioural outcomes—such as shifts in interaction and cooperation—could also be measured. Moreover, research of these impacts need to take into consideration that they vary over time: short-term impressions may differ significantly from long-term transformations.

Although important foundational work exists (e.g., Cohen et al. 2011), the evidence base remains fragmented. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, mixed-method approaches, and cross-disciplinary frameworks to better capture the complexity of art-based interventions. Crucially, this involves not just evaluating outcomes, but unpacking the processes through which art influences change in conflicted communities. Only through sustained empirical inquiry can we build a clearer picture of art's role in transforming perspectives, relationships, and ultimately, the broader structures of conflict.

Final reflections

The findings of this study highlight the largely untapped, yet complex potential of the arts in conflict transformation. They affirm the multidimensional role of the arts in conflict resolution, drawing on the perspectives of practitioners from NGOs, cultural institutes, and EU-affiliated bodies. They reveal that while artistic interventions are not universally applicable nor risk-free, they offer distinctive strengths in conflict prevention and response—especially when designed not as one-size-fits-all solutions but with contextual sensitivity and ethical awareness. The findings reflect broader frameworks from the available literature advocating for local agency, cultural specificity, and the integration of affective dimensions in peacebuilding processes (Cohen et al., 2011; Ware & Dunphy, 2020).

Finally, the findings also underscore the fragility and inconsistency of current support structures. While artists and cultural actors are often celebrated for their symbolic roles, the systemic challenges they face—underfunding, instrumentalisation, exclusion—remain unresolved. They also thus indicate that if artistic peacebuilding is to evolve beyond an occasional or symbolic activity, it must be supported by coherent policy, ethical funding, research, and intersectoral collaboration, and that with sustained support and critical reflection, the arts can help societies not only recover from violence but reimagine coexistence altogether.

Notes

- ¹ Details about the interviewees selection can be found at Terzis (2020), as well as some of the names of 12 of the interviewees, except from those that requested to omit their name but use only their affiliation. Three requested complete anonymity.
- ² This is actually the motto of Search for Common Ground (www.sfcg.org), one of the organisations that was included in those interviewed for this research.

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RAISING WAR AWARENESS THROUGH PRINTED ART

Social centre Forte Prenestino's posters for Rojava

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Abstract

Art, in all its diverse forms, has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for reflecting upon global conflicts. In particular, posters have been used worldwide to generate awareness about wars, gaining significant momentum during the Vietnam anti-war campaigns in the 1960s. The production of posters involves a broad array of actors from various backgrounds, including political parties, student movements, and humanitarian agencies. In this paper, I examine the use of posters by the Italian social centre Forte Prenestino to communicate and raise awareness about the conflict that has impacted Western Kurdistan between 2011 and 2024. Specifically, Forte Prenestino's posters have promoted events supporting the Kurdish population, and in particular the women living in Rojava—a Syrian region in Western Kurdistan. The conflict in Rojava was part of the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 and ended with the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Despite the end of Assad's rule, the region continues to experience the effects of military operations, and the civilian population in Rojava persists in grappling with socio-economic challenges and safety concerns. My decision to focus on Forte Prenestino's posters is based on the observation that the posters produced by Italian social centres are frequently overlooked in academic discussions concerning this form of visual art. Despite this oversight, such materials have been used by social centres as their primary means of communication with the public since their origins. Social centres, which emerged in Italy during the 1970s, are self-managed, occupied spaces for political, cultural, and social experimentations. They represent an example of urban social movement practices aiming at producing grassroots urban regeneration of abandoned spaces. The social centre Forte Prenestino, in Rome, is the biggest social centre in Europe and one of the oldest in Italy. It was established in 1986, and over the years, its activists have consistently used posters to promote its diverse array of activities and events, including initiatives aimed at supporting individuals affected by wars.

RAISING WAR AWARENESS THROUGH PRINTED ART: SOCIAL CENTRE FORTE PRENESTINO'S POSTERS FOR ROJAVA

Eleonora Cerqua

Introduction

This paper is grounded in the broader discourse concerning the capacity of art to serve as an influential instrument for reflecting on conflicts occurring around the world. Specifically, I examine a selection of posters produced by Forte Prenestino, an Italian social centre, between 2015 and 2021, as a means of disseminating information about and enhancing awareness of the conflict in Rojava, as well as offering support to its population.

Posters have been extensively employed in political and social activism for communication and mobilisation purposes. Drawing upon Kladermans and Kurtz, Tomaž Deželan and Alem Maksuti argue that 'posters are one of the best visual tools that social movements can use to persuade their targeted public audience. [Additionally, poster] is an inexpensive means of mobilisation and information dissemination' (Deželan and Maksuti 2016). Being a cost-effective method, posters have been widely used by social movements to convey their messages in the streets, where, I argue, they not only reach their targeted public audience but also may draw the attention of 'untargeted' passers-by. Indeed, posters aim to attract the widest range of individuals. To do so, they rely on pictorial features to initially capture people's attention, followed by the potential reading of written messages, if provided, by the passersby (Hutchinson 1968). This strategic approach effectively widens the reach of the poster transmitter, expanding its audience base. Additionally, as argued by Elizabeth Guffey, posters 'exert a palpable physical presence, shaping spaces while reflecting and altering human behaviour' (Guffey 2014), and represent one of the longest-lasting forms of visual communication (Guffey 2014).

Historically, the success of posters has been closely associated with the widespread adoption of lithography. This technique represented a significant advancement in poster production, as it enabled the printing of larger quantities with greater efficiency. In the early 19th century, amidst the Industrial Revolution, posters became increasingly prevalent in cities such as Paris, London, and New York (Guffey 2014). In the 20th century, posters were widely used as tools of propaganda, first adopted for this purpose by the USA during World War I. Concurrently, they have been used in anti-war campaigns and as a means of advocating for social justice.

The use of images specifically as a mobilisation tool has a rich history, dating back to the invention of printing (Mattoni and Teune 2014). An early example of the use of posters in activism is represented by the Boycott Campaign in China in 1905, during which its organisers, in order 'to scandalise the discrimination of Chinese immigrants in the US, they relied on an imagery of national pride, hoping to increase participation in a boycott of US-manufactured goods' (Mattoni and Teune 2014). The 1960s witnessed the proliferation of antiwar posters in response to the Vietnam War, particularly with its escalation during 1965 and 1966 (Benson 2015). The significant role played by these posters continues to be acknowledged worldwide. In 2020, the Australian War Memorial presented a selection of anti-Vietnam War posters from its archives to celebrate 'the 50th anniversary of the first and biggest Vietnam Moratorium protest march' (Cullimore 2020).¹ Currently, as 2025 represents the 50th Anniversary of the

Vietnam War's end, the role of anti-war posters is being acknowledged again through new exhibitions (Hayden 2025). Furthermore, '82-year-old artist Tran Duy Truc, one of the last remaining wartime propaganda painters' (Hatem 2025) has been commissioned to create four new posters.

Posters have also played a pivotal role in movements fighting regimes, especially amid the downfall of European socialist governments. Specifically, 'with the collapse of communism in the 1980s, the poster remained dialogical, but was tied to the languages of communism, religion and romantic nationalism. As the facade began to fall apart the poster took on a more aggressive posture' (Aulich and Sylvestrová 1999). In particular, posters were used to subvert authority through the exposure of satire.

Contrary to the scope of posters summarised above, they have also been used as a mechanism of repression and a vehicle for hate propagation. Such a utilisation is widely recognised; however, an in-depth discussion of the subject falls outside the scope of this article; therefore, I shall present only a representative example. The Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA) is a collection of Palestine posters started by Dan Walsh in the mid-1970s that currently counts more than 5,000 items (Walsh 2009-2024). He has 'arbitrarily defined a "Palestine" poster as:

- 1) Any poster with the word "Palestine" in it, in any language, from any source or time period;
- 2) Any poster created or published by any artist or agency claiming Palestinian nationality or Palestinian participation;
- 3) Any poster published in the geographical territory of historic Palestine, at any point in history, including contemporary Israel;
- 4) Any poster published by any source which relates directly to the social, cultural, political, military or economic history of Palestine; and/or
- 5) Any poster related to Zionism or anti-Zionism in any language, from any source, published after August 31, 1897' (Walsh 2009-2024).

In 2015, UNESCO vetoed the registration of the collection as a world heritage, stating that some of its posters 'could fuel hatred and lead to anti-Semitism and violence' (Walsh 2009-2024).

Having provided a brief overview of the history of posters in the context of wars and conflicts, I will now concentrate this paper on the recent utilisation of posters to inform and rally support in such contexts. Specifically, I will illustrate how the Italian social centre Forte Prenestino employs posters to communicate and raise awareness about ongoing conflicts, with a particular focus on the conflict in Western Kurdistan. Social centres, which emerged in Italy during the 1970s, are self-managed, occupied spaces for political, cultural, and social experimentations. They represent a practice implemented by urban social movements to achieve a grassroots urban regeneration of abandoned spaces. Such a practice falls under the umbrella of the right to the city theory, meaning the inhabitants' right to participate in the decision-making processes that shape a city and to benefit from its resources (Lefebvre 1968). The social centre Forte Prenestino, situated in the southeast quadrant of Rome, Italy, is the biggest social centre in Europe and one of the oldest still active in Italy. It was established in 1986, and over the years, its militants have constantly utilised posters to promote a wide range of activities and events, including those supporting people afflicted by war. I have been a visitor of the social

centre Forte Prenestino for over 20 years and have conducted research on it over the last 4 years. Consequently, I have gained a comprehensive understanding of its practices, which has been instrumental in writing this paper. Here, my analysis focuses on Forte Prenestino's posters promoting events supporting the Kurdish population, particularly women living in Rojava—a Syrian region in Western Kurdistan. The conflict in Rojava was part of the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 and ended with the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Nonetheless, the region continues to experience the effects of military operations conducted mainly by the Turkish government, and the civilian population in Rojava persists in grappling with socio-economic challenges and safety concerns. Below, I explore how the art form of posters has been utilised by Forte Prenestino to promote its events aiming to enhance understanding of this specific conflict and support the people in Rojava.

In this paper, I begin by presenting an overview of Italian social centres in order to provide context for understanding Forte Prenestino, which I expand on in the following section. Then, I briefly summarise the war in Western Kurdistan. Lastly, I conduct a content analysis of the selected posters. I provide only a brief insight into the events they promote, as a detailed investigation of the events themselves lies outside the scope of this study, which is to explore how art can serve as a tool for reflecting on wars and conflicts worldwide. Additionally, as the events occurred several years ago, obtaining detailed first-hand accounts was not feasible.

Italian social centres

Social centres are venues for social aggregation, 'countercultural' and political activities, and they represent an example of grassroots initiatives carried out by urban social movements. Their shared features are self-management, self-financing and occupation of abandoned buildings (Piazza 2011). Besides giving a disused space back to the community, the occupation is also a political statement. Social centres' activists propose a different approach to social life based on equality and focusing on the collective. They also affirm the right to participate in the decision-making processes that determine the production of space in opposition to the interests of the local and national powers. These demands can be summarised with the expression 'right to the city', coined by Henri Lefebvre (1968); the expression refers not only to the inhabitants' right to access urban resources but, above all, to their right to enjoy the city as a work of art, a space for encounter and exchange in constant transformation through collective practices (1996). The activists claim such a right by occupying spaces and transforming them according to their needs and desires (Purcell 2002, Chatterton 2010). Social centres, therefore, embody 'a desire for secession—secession from the dominant forms of life, from the myths and rituals of the victors, and from the din of the media' (Virno and Hardt 1996).

Social centres emerged in Italy in the 1970s, and they reached their peak in the 1990s. They are traditionally linked to the Italian extra-parliamentary left. The Italian philosopher and activist Paolo Virno has explored the broad range of activities implemented in social centres, which encompasses 'concerts, theater, collective cafeteria, assistance for foreign immigrants, and public debates. In some cases, the centers have given rise to small artisanal [*sic*] enterprises' (1996). This list has been expanded by the geographer Pierpaolo Mudu, who adds to it courses, sports activities, solidarity actions and further activities (2004). Nowadays, their presence in the territory still influences the social, cultural and political life of the cities where they are located, continuing to attract mainly individuals with left-wing political views. According to the latest study conducted by the Italian Ministry of the Interior in 2019, in Italy, there are 165 social centres, among which 87 have been legalised (ADNKRONOS 2019). Forte Prenestino

has been an occupied, self-managed social centre since 1986. It is located in Centocelle, a neighbourhood in the southeast of Rome. It is the biggest social centre in Europe and one of the oldest in Italy. Activists and visitors of Forte Prenestino share a set of values and ideals that encompass anti-fascism, anti-sexism, and anti-racism. Its values and ideals are at the base of its support to Rojava.

CSOA Forte Prenestino

Forte Prenestino currently operates as a CSOA (*Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito*, 'Self-managed Occupied Social Centre'); however, in its almost 150 years of life, it has been utilised for diverse purposes. It was originally built between 1880 and 1884 as part of a defensive system established to protect Rome, which, in 1871, had been designated as the capital of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy. The defensive system, commissioned by the first King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele, comprised fifteen forts and three batteries, and Forte Prenestino was one of them. The military structures were strategically positioned in a circular formation, roughly 4–5 kilometres from the inner circle of the Aurelian Wall surrounding the city, built during the reign of Roman Emperor Aurelian (270–275 AD) and extended in the following centuries (Spadafora et al., 2023, p. 884).

During WWI, Rome faced its first significant threat since being declared the capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Due to advancements in military techniques, weapons, and combat vehicles at the beginning of the 20th century, the forts proved inadequate to defend Rome and were repurposed as barracks and warehouses (Gerundino, 2016).

Despite its inefficient defensive role in WWI, Forte Prenestino proved to be of significant importance during WWII, particularly in relation to the Nazi occupation of Rome which started on the 10th of September 1943 and ended on the 4th of June 1944, when the Allied forces entered Rome and liberated it. During those nine months, the fort was occupied by the Nazis and transformed into their military base (Sansone, 2018). Concurrently, some partisans—fighters of the Italian Resistance Movement—were operating in disguise within Forte Prenestino, daily stealing weapons from it to arm the Resistance. Such a contribution was instrumental in the liberation of Rome from the Nazi soldiers.

After WWII, Forte Prenestino was abandoned and, for approximately three decades, its only visitors were 'children [who] used to sneak in it to play, thieves [who] used to hide their loot, people [who] used to come to shoot up' (Giannoli, 2016). The fort's fate changed on the 1st of May 1977 when inhabitants of the Centocelle neighbourhood decided to occupy it during Labour Day celebrations to assert their right to participate in the decision-making processes shaping their neighbourhood, embodying Lefebvre's right to the city theory. This first occupation of Forte Prenestino lasted for a short time, as the remains of a child who had disappeared in 1970 were found in the fort, and the event required the police to conduct an extensive investigation. However, the first occupation of the fort sparked a second one, which occurred on the 1st of May 1986, and this time, it was implemented by a broader range of actors, including punks and individuals from left-wing to anarchist backgrounds. Consistent with Lefebvre's theory, this occupation represented a claim for 'the right to appropriate urban space' (Sadri & Zeybekoğlu Sadri, 2012, pp. 1,2). Currently, Forte Prenestino's offerings encompass a diverse array of activities, including sport and music classes, hospitality services and amenities such as a hostel and a tearoom, as well as events like concerts and festivals that draw numerous visitors. The centre sustains itself financially through donations of gold coins and modest entry fees from

attendees. Notably, the celebration of the social centre's 30th anniversary in 2016 was among the most well-attended events, attracting approximately 15,000 individuals over a weekend. (Giannoli, 2016).

Since its inception, all events and activities of Forte Prenestino have been promoted through posters. The activists recognise the significance of this means of communication, and the entire production of posters is maintained and documented in the Forte Prenestino archive. Furthermore, in May 2021, activists from Forte Prenestino organised an exhibition to display a selection of posters. This selection encompassed posters promoting events to protest and raise awareness about wars, as well as supporting individuals impacted by them. While these posters constitute an important part of the collection, I have chosen to concentrate solely on those associated with Rojava, as they constitute an appropriate sample for the scope of this study.

Rojava: history of a war

Before delving into the use of posters to inform about the war in Rojava, I deem it necessary to offer an overview of the conflict's history.

Rojava, which means 'west' in Kurdish, is also known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. As its name suggests, it is an autonomous region in northeast Syria, composed of self-governed cantons (Park 2016). Its population includes mainly Kurds but also Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, with an estimated population of approximately 2 million in 2018 (Balanche 2018).

The establishment of Rojava is founded upon the uprising that commenced in Syria in 2011. The Kurds and the aforementioned minorities residing in Syria opposed the Assad regime and its efforts to Arabise them. In 2012, the Kurds assumed control of their institutions by adopting the charter of 'The Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in Syria', which represents 'the constitution of a self-proclaimed union of Kurdish autonomous cantons'(Radpey 2021). The Charter states:

We the peoples of the areas of self-administration of Democratic Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians (Assyrian Chaldeans, Arameans), Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, by our free will have announced this to materialize justice, freedom and democracy in accordance with the principle of ecological balance and equality without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, creed, doctrine or gender, to achieve the political and moral fabric of a democratic society in order to function with mutual understanding and coexistence within diversity and respect for the principle of self-determination of peoples, and to ensure the rights of women and children, the protection defense and the respect of the freedom of religion and belief(ypg 2016).

The political power is held by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The two main pillars of the Rojava model are direct democracy, meaning that citizens actively participate in the management of the cities and the relevant decision-making process, and the rejection of a nation-state structure in favour of an administrative structure that incorporates different religions and ethnic groups (Aretaios 2015). Moreover, as stated in the Charter, the model is based on gender equality across all institutions, including the military, which have both a male and a female president. Rojava is defended by the military groups YPG (People's Protection Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units), the latter composed of women. From August 2014 to March 2019, they defended Rojava against the jihadist terrorist group Islamic State, also

known as ISIS (Holland-McCowan 2021). With the support of the US, they managed to liberate cities and absorb the different populations into Rojava.

In 2016, 'the committee for the foundation of a Democratic Federation of Northern Syria/Rojava was proclaimed' (Knapp and Jongerden 2014); however, the Syrian government did not recognise the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Alongside, Turkey considered Rojava as a 'proto-PKK state' (Gunter 2016). PKK is a Kurdish militant group that has been fighting for decades against the violence perpetrated by Turkey against the Kurds.² For this reason, Turkey attacked the region of Rojava in August 2016 (Leezenberg 2016). Meanwhile, the YPG and the YPJ were still fighting ISIS, and they managed to defeat it in March 2019 (Holland-McCowan 2021). With the defeat of the ISIS, US President Donald Trump announced 'his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria' (*President Trump Announces U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Syria*, 2019), with the goal of preserving relations with Turkey, a powerful NATO ally, even if this meant forsaking the Kurdish forces in Rojava. As argued by the Political scientist Ted Galen Carpenter, 'the Trump administration tilts more sharply toward Ankara's position [...] [sacrificing] Kurdish allies for larger geopolitical goals' (Carpenter, 2019). Therefore, Rojava kept fighting without the US support against the Turkish army, which is much bigger and better equipped and organised than the ISIS one.

Elham Ahmad, who is the co-president of the executive council of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which governs Rojava, asked in 2021 to recognise Rojava and include it, as she said, 'in all dialogue regarding the country's political future' (Christou 2021). The Rojava Revolution has attracted international media attention, and Rojava has received humanitarian aid from international organisations. Individuals from all over the world have been joining the YPG and the YPJ since the early stages of the war, including several Italians (ANSA 2018). In this scenario, Forte Prenestino's posters have played a crucial role in promoting fundraising and informative events in Rome to support Rojava's population.

Recent events have produced a new political scenario. On the 8th of December, President Bashar al-Assad was overthrown by a variety of rebels, including Kurds from the PKK, former ISIS members, Bedouin tribes and pro-Turkish individuals (Battistini, 2024). Nonetheless, Rojava continues to experience the effects of military operations, and the civilian population in Rojava persists in grappling with socio-economic challenges and safety concerns. Despite the significance of the overthrow of Assad, an analysis of these recent circumstances falls outside the scope of this paper, whose focus is on Forte Prenestino's posters promoting events in support of Rojava's population, which I expand on below.

Forte Prenestino's posters

In recent years, the Italian social centre Forte Prenestino has organised fundraising events on a regular basis to support the women in Rojava through the international organisation *Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê* ('Kurdish Red Half Moon') and the *Rete Kurdistan Italia*, an Italian network of solidarity with the Kurdish people gathering 'various associations, informal groups, individual personalities (journalists, lawyers, social workers, trade unionists, activists) that in the various territories make information and support cooperation projects with the regions of Kurdistan especially Turkey' (Rete Kurdistan Italia). The events have been advertised on Forte Prenestino's website as well as through posters disseminated throughout Rome. The website is primarily accessed by the community associated with the social centre, including its activists and visitors, while posters are disseminated throughout various neighbourhoods with the aim of engaging

a more diverse population. The combination of drawings and writings, arranged in an artistic composition, attracts the attention of the passers-by from different backgrounds and political beliefs. As mentioned before, Forte Prenestino uses posters as a means of communication to reach a broader audience and states its political views.

Below, I examine the content of five posters created between 2015 and 2021, emphasising both the textual and visual elements. I accessed the posters via Forte Prenestino's website,³ as I currently reside in Sydney and therefore it was not possible for me to examine the printed version. Additionally, I decided to concentrate exclusively on the posters without engaging in an analysis of the events themselves, given that too much time has passed; therefore, collecting detailed first-hand accounts was not feasible. However, based on my personal experience as a long-term visitor of the social centre, I would surmise that the participants of the event included activists and regular visitors of Forte Prenestino, individuals with an interest in the topic, as well as members and supporters of the organisations involved in organising the event, such as Rete Kurdistan Italia.

In 2019, Forte Prenestino organised the fundraising event *Gemme dal Rojava – la rivoluzione verde delle donne* ('Gems from Rojava – the green revolution of women': my translation), specifically referred to as an 'info-benefit' event [1]. The event took place on the evening of the 29th of November, and, as we learned from the poster, it included debates, presentations, live music, and the screening of documentaries; additionally, it was possible to buy Kurdish food. The poster was realised by the artist Tinka, who has been collaborating with Forte Prenestino for a long time. In the central part of the poster stands the figure of a woman holding a plant and carrying a rifle on her back. She is wearing a military uniform, and a red headscarf partially covers her hair. This simple image summarises some of the main features of Rojava's model. In particular, it stresses the centrality of gender equality, including women's participation in the war. Significantly, the poster also highlights the importance of ecological sustainability, both through the visual element of the plant and the name itself of the event that defines the revolution of Rojava's women as 'green'.



¹ 'Gemme del Rojava, 29th of November 2019'. Digital poster from CSOA Forte Prenestino's website, courtesy of CSOA Forte Prenestino, access date 16/05/2024.

On the 1st of February 2020, another fundraising event took place in Forte Prenestino. The event was called *Beats for Kurdistan*, and Tinka realised a new poster to promote it [2], based on her design for the 2019 poster. This fundraising event included a concert of the Italian-Kurdish duo Mübin & Giano and the underground sound system by Kernel Panik. Moreover, during the event, the Turkish-Kurdish artist Zerha Doğan sold her art pieces. Most of her works were realised while she was in prison using her menstrual blood, hair, and clothes (Hanson 2020). Specifically, she was in jail multiple times between 2016 and 2019 on terrorism charges because she used her art to denounce the struggle of Kurds (Hanson 2020). ‘The painting that irked the Turkish authorities was based on a photograph of the Turkish military’s destruction of the majority-Kurdish town of Nusaybin, which Doğan witnessed in 2015. She was there as a reporter for JINHA, the all-women news agency she had founded’ (Jilani 2021).

In Forte Prenestino’s 2020 poster, the same woman from the 2019 poster appears in the centre of the space; this time, she is surrounded by other women. The women’s appearances and the variety in their clothes seem to stress their different nationalities and backgrounds, which is evocative of the support women in Rojava receive internationally. Additionally, in the 2020 poster, there is no rifle, which underscores the message of peace and support. The poster is almost entirely in black and white. The only elements that are drawn in colour are some textual elements, the three plants in the 2020 poster, and the protagonist’s red scarf covering her head. The scarf recalls the partisan Resistance Movement, whose ideology is strongly supported by Forte Prenestino. The textual elements provide crucial information about the event, including name, date, address, performers, and nature of the event. Notably, a sentence written in red and situated below the women says, ‘DON’T LEAVE THEM ALONE’, stressing the importance of supporting women in Rojava.

On the 2nd of June 2021, Forte Prenestino organised a further event in support of the Kurdish women called *Rose del Kurdistan – Rojava: la rivoluzione delle donne* (‘Kurdistan roses – Rojava: the women’s revolution’) (my translation) [3]. The event lasted from 1 pm to 10 pm, featuring a Kurdish lunch and dinner, debates, and a movie screening dedicated to the artist Zerha and other imprisoned women. The poster design is different from that of the previous posters analysed above; unfortunately, it was not possible to trace back the artist who realised it. Tinka’s cartoon-style characters characterised the first two posters, while the 2021 edition shows women’s faces drawn by a simple line. The women are not characterised as belonging to any specific nationality or background: their heads are rendered in a solid cream tone. They



2 'Beats for Kurdistan – 1st of February 2020', digital poster from CSOA Forte Prenestino's website, courtesy of CSOA Forte Prenestino, access date 16/05/2024.



3

4



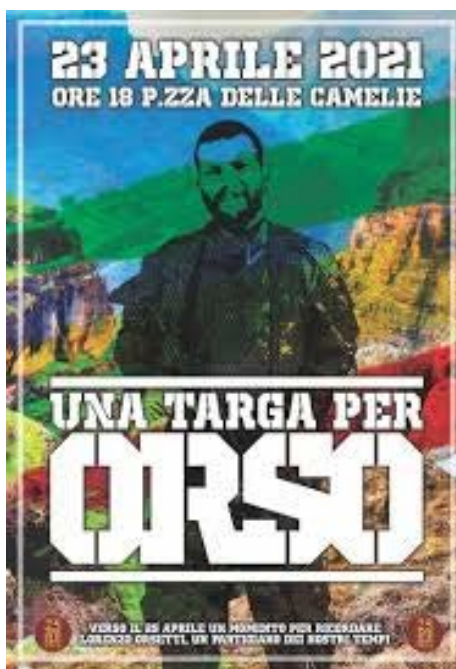
3 [L] Kurdistan roses – Rojava: the women's revolution, digital poster from CSOA Forte Prenestino's website, courtesy of CSOA Forte Prenestino, access date 16/05/2024.

4 [R] Sagra del peperoncino rebelde', digital poster from CSOA Forte Prenestino's website, courtesy of CSOA Forte Prenestino, access date 16/05/2024

all wear the same military uniform coloured in light green, dark green, brown and black. The colours are distributed in patches and extend seamlessly to form a single, non-geometric shape, upon which fine lines outline the women's bodies. One of the women is carrying the YPJ flag, which is green with a red star. The background hosts mountains and the sun. The visual elements of the poster clearly recall the fight of YPJ women in Rojava.

The three posters presented above refer to events in support of Rojava organised in Forte Prenestino between 2019 and 2021. However, the social centre has been supporting the Rojava population since the early stages of the conflict. In 2015, for instance, during the event *Sagra del peperoncino rebelde* ('rebel chilli Festival') (my translation), the social centre hosted an international delegation of activists who had just been in Rojava to offer their support to the population. The poster [4] was designed by Zerocalcare, one of the most famous Italian graphic novelists, who was also nominated for the Italian literature award Premio Strega in 2015 (Rai).⁴ ZeroCalcare participated in the delegation's mission and realised the graphic novel *Kobane Calling*,⁵ written in Italian and translated into several languages, including English. The book is a report of his experience in 2015 in Mesher, a village on the Turkish-Syrian border, close to Kobane. One of the characters is Ayse Deniz Karacagil, a member of the YPJ who was killed by ISIS in Raqqa in 2017. The book was republished in 2019 to give an update on the situation in Rojava and add the history of Lorenzo 'Orso' Orsetti.

Lorenzo Orsetti, also known as Orso, which translates to 'bear' in Italian, was an Italian chef born in 1986 in Florence who joined the YPG in 2017. He was killed in the village of Baghouz in



5 'Memorial event – 23rd April 2021', digital poster from CSOA Forte Prenestino's website, courtesy of CSOA Forte Prenestino, access date 16/05/2024.

Syria on 18 March 2019. In 2021, the neighbourhood of Centocelle in Rome, with the support of the social centre Forte Prenestino, organised a memorial event and a plaque dedication. The event was promoted through a poster [5] that provided specific details, including the date, time, and location of the event (23rd of April 2021, at 6 pm, in Camelie Square). In the poster, the information written in white stands in the foreground, while in the background, we can see a black-and-white image of Lorenzo, the mountains of Rojava and the colours of the Rojava flag. Once again, posters proved to be the preferred means of communication to inform about events linked to the war in Rojava.

I want to end this paper with Lorenzo's words. He wrote a letter in case of his death that states: 'If you are reading this message, it is a sign that I am no longer in this world. Well, don't get too sad, I am fine with that. I don't have regrets; I died doing what I thought was the right thing, defending the weakest, and being loyal to my ideals of justice, equality, and freedom. Therefore, despite my premature departure, my life is still successful, and I am almost sure that I passed by with a smile on my lips. I could not have asked for better'(Falcioni 2019) (my translation). His final message conveys his strong commitment and deep belief in justice, equality, and freedom. The event organised to commemorate him, advertised through the above poster, has contributed to drawing attention to the conflict in Rojava.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined a selection of posters as significant exemplars of how visual art can communicate messages and promote awareness regarding the ongoing global conflicts. Posters function as efficient instruments for attracting public attention and motivating further inquiry into particular issues. Specifically, I have conducted a content analysis of posters created by Forte Prenestino to promote its fundraising and informative events related to the conflict in Rojava. My choice to focus on Forte Prenestino's posters was motivated by the limited recognition within academic discourse of posters produced by Italian social centres, including those informing about wars. This neglect is particularly significant, as posters have been a fundamental communication tool for social centres since their emergence in the 1970s and they are consistently used today, serving as distinctive communication instruments of Italian social centres, including Forte Prenestino, which routinely produce posters to advertise their events, including those addressing contemporary local and global issues. These posters are disseminated throughout urban areas and are also accessible via relevant websites, bridging traditional media with modern technology. Although this study examines specific cases, numerous other examples would deserve detailed investigation.

Notes

¹ The Australian Vietnam Moratorium was an Australian anti-war protest movement claiming the immediate withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam. It organised several protests across the country. The first protest march took place on the 8th of May 1970, and it was joined by more than 200,000 people.

² Numerous facets of this matter warrant consideration; however, due to the limitations of this article, it will not be examined further herein.

³ <https://www.forteprenestino.net/>

⁴ Michele Rech, also known as ZeroCalcare, was born on the 12th of December 1982. He has participated to several editions of Forte Prenestino's Crack!Festival, a festival dedicated to drawn and printed art held every year in the social centre since 2005.

⁵ Kobane is a city in Rojava.

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Dr Eleonora Cerqua hails from Rome, Italy, and has recently completed her Ph.D. at the Faculty of Art and Social Science (School of International Studies and Education) at the University of Technology of Sydney, Australia. In her doctoral research, Dr Cerqua has investigated Italian social centres, which are an example of grassroots regeneration carried out by urban social movements converting abandoned buildings into self-managed occupied spaces for social and cultural experimentation and political activities. Her research particularly focuses on the social centre Forte Prenestino, of which she has been a long-term visitor. Her transdisciplinary approach integrates fieldwork and historical research, utilising her background as an archaeologist and historical researcher. In 2009, she achieved a bachelor's degree in 'History and Conservation of Artistic Heritage' and in 2011, a master's degree in 'Archaeological Science and Historical and Archaeological Research Methods', both issued by the University Roma Tre' (Rome, Italy).



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ORBIT OF NEGLECT

Ranji Masel

ORBIT OF NEGLECT

Ranji Masel

I am stuck in an orbit of neglect—neglect over my sense of self and my future self.

I want to write many words. I want to scribe clarity in my thoughts, but it is muddled by the multiple contradictions and highway jamming in my mind.

I want to take you on loops and circles. We may never take the turn off.

• • • • •

Wouldn't it be great if we could use art to process who we are, and communicate to others the difficult stories we can not say simply by words spoken.

I want to tell you that art is infinite, that art is boundless in its willingness to let us be our true self. But I ask, has art become something that is not us, but of us? Has art lost its connection to self?

• • • • •

They sit in a plush red seat, comfortable on their muscles and luxurious to the eye. We are to perform our life to them, raw, incapable of being there without vulnerability. They walk out, affected, but able to critique the form, the art as it may be. We are slave dancers, we are tools to inject them with moments of vulnerability. We are a hit to their senses, a reminder there is more suffering in the world, far beyond that they live day to day. We are a reminder of their unprocessed trauma, generations locked up in cabinets within grandeur homes, coffins of grief and pain, that have been lacquered by consumerism and comforts. We are their heroin crash, but just for those moments. They go back to their homes with hidden coffins.

• • • • •

We are a spectrum.

On one end, there are the artists that perform their life on stage, unable to live it simply in the day to day, the stage is their catharsis. They move within the confines of those four edges and allow themselves the chance to be free, they method it, they become their characters, characters of themselves, so that they can be seen in those hours of performance.

On the other, they are thinkers, crafters of stories. They know the tales that will make the muscles on plush seats twitch, enough to make them feel mentally stretched, but not so much they snap. Art is an intellectual and mental exercise that helps flex a neurological need. Our stories are but conduits of this need being met. We are content, scroll on.

• • • • •

Some stories are not meant to be told. This was meant to be one of them. I still don't want to speak the words that follow but it's almost like they're just tumbling out of my mouth. I want to put them back in. I want to make them unsaid.

Why do I even want to say it? Is it because I want to be famous because I want to be part of History? Or is it because my body just does not want to hold it anymore that I must release? It is an active task to withhold and I'm a talker so it's even harder for me. But in what form do

I let it tumble out? Is it just a consistent release of words or is it performance? Is it what one might ask—Art.

Must it be my story or can I hide my story in someone else's tale to shield myself through autofiction? What is my position in that? Is that appropriation? Could it be that that tale is a real one? That I've squeezed my narrative into a bolder story that belongs to someone else? Or I've meshed up many different stories and made it my own. Is that okay? Is it no longer true?

My fingers are trembling at the thought of being seen for what I am—judged for the steps that I took back then. I've been burying it all, but now to expose it for people to poke at, to pontify as Art. People may call it interesting, or nice, or boring, or even worse, they may gawk at... me.

I will be like some snake that sits in a cage behind a glass door performing to us—performing its existence.

There are many snakes. We are all snakes trapped in a glass cage. Some of us have a better story. I'm one of those people. I know that because I made decisions that weren't boring and I suffered the consequences of being interesting and now I want to make it glorious and I want to promise you that I am a better version because of those decisions to not be boring.

Some may call it brave but I would call it... absurd, nonsense and even at times cowardly, because I might have taken a brave turn but at some point I just followed.

There's a good chance that I'm not going to tell you my story, that you're going to read pages and pages or listen to this rant and it will be someone else that folds me into their tale. Someone who's safer, someone who can hold it and earn from it and who has the capacity to pontify of my existence. Why? What made her be? What made her take that very, very strange road? They will imagine many things that I saw on that road, some of which I would have seen, some of which I may have not. Maybe their memory of that road is more informed than mine - because I have forgotten. Maybe they travel down that road on a satellite map and they tell you exactly the tree at which I crashed. The moment and the surroundings I was in when I buried secrets, bodies, lives.

Maybe they will do better.

It is not certain what is right or wrong and when writing is a weapon more efficient than bullets, setting the story straight might have to take crooked paths.

But, when I sit and I watch this performance, some of which is my story or some of which will feel so close to my story. I no doubt will feel disempowered because I never was part of creating it. I will get infuriated when asked. "Is that what you experienced?" as though suddenly an outsider understands those trees that I saw when I saw many fall. They might feel like they understand my pain but I didn't get to tell it. I didn't shape how my pain was presented. My pain is jarred up against another and it feels in the least, misrepresented.

So is it on me to tell my story? Do you deserve it? Do you as consumers of narratives deserve to judge my life? Maybe the way you judge it will depend on how well I tell it and there comes the question of craft.

Craft decides how well people experience another person's journey and yet craft has almost nothing to do with the journey. They may be someone who is cleaning and she has a tale million

times more worthwhile to listen to than some bereft young privileged youth, crying about worried woes.

Yet, because of the lack of craft or because of the lack of access to craft or because of the fear of repercussions, she is not ready to pick up the instrument to tell her tale, to hold the instrument, to bang on the drums, or to play the xylophone melody of her life. She's most probably the cleaner at the school your child attends. That school which is cleaned by her who has a tale to tell.

Will it be okay if your child decides to tell her tale? They watch her everyday and they have found space for this cleaner to trust them, to divulge the gruesome details of her tale while she cleans the feces that your child expels.

Is it okay for your child to tell that tale? And what are the limits within which they can tell that story? Are there certain instruments that they shouldn't use, instruments such as glorification, pornographing trauma, ridiculing, or humour? Was that part of the craft that will keep you watching or reading or expelling?

I've been criticized for judging those that tell tales that they never experienced while they enjoyed being the child at the school, not the cleaner or even remotely close to the cleaner. I have criticized their right to tell the tale from a place of safety and prosperity. To prosper from the story of those who have endured when they also have the luxury to not have to clean the toilet for that cleaner had the cleaner fell apart from the repercussions of that tale.

But by presenting the story in craft, your child is trying to advocate.

The question remains—what is the position of the teller when it is a form of advocacy which is not a story of their own?

Is it okay for a man to tell the tale of a woman who was beaten up by a man? Can he portray that woman when he too benefits from the system that allowed the violent man to exist? Can someone who never attended a protest tell the story of those who the protest was for. Can they tell the story many years after the deaths had happened? It is a question of active storytelling, passive storytelling and almost the legitimacy of existing in that space.

This is an experience for many, many educated people of color, First Nations, people, women, migrants and even men. People who have stories, they don't tell their own but they tell another and yet craft is key to advocacy and comfortably uncoupling this is tough work.

If your child did not tell the story of the cleaner, then who will? Because the system might not allow that cleaner to walk out those gates and present her story in a way that others will be willing to hear. But maybe just that one student who heard it could translate the experience to a way that can be consumed by the other students, their families and beyond.

It is problematic because I too am not that cleaner and here I am speaking about her. Nor am I that child.

Invisibility is at the core of this problem. Taking positions around that place of not being seen, be it a child or a hidden worker, be it scars from the private sphere in a patriarchal, class driven world. That invisibility, when shone light on, will never be the equivalent to being seen.

She wipes the mirror in the toilets so your child can see clearer.

Her words could be: I walked out of the bathroom stalls, wooden stick in hand, a mop. My eyes were deep and I looked you in the eye. Are you going to turn away from this gaze? I ask. This life I lead, you witness parts of it. You hold other tools and do you not have more institutional power than me? You can tell my story with a small piece of wood with graphite in it. Here, I use my tools to keep your mirror clean. Go look in it. What will you make of you? A silent witness of a tale that will die untold.

Author's notes

This series of provocations speak to many intellectual questions pivotal to the production and performance of stories. This is discussed in Linda Alcoff's "the problem of speaking for others" where questions of authority to speak for from a different social location (Alcoff, 1991-1992). She also speaks to the dangers of speaking from locations of privilege. Equally, remaining silent is also problematic. While her inquiry is placed within an academic context, the questions permeate further into the common ways in which we are influenced, how thought change is part of social change, including in artistic representations. A key distillation of this comes to whether we are speaking for, or about others (Alcoff, 1991-1992; 9). Questions of permission, co-design and the inherent tension with seeking to have neutrality (Alcoff, 1991-1992; 12) when presenting such stories. This is key as neutrality is context relevant, and it also engages deeply in the existing power dynamics and hence, reinforces the role of institutional power in the process of producing art.

The role of the consumer is equally important, in light of their way of receiving stories, what they do with it, how they view it, all play a role in whether we can deem the story in itself to be problematic. The level of empathy and compassion a story receives is determined by the audience, not necessarily the delivery of the story. Story telling for the sake of advocacy enmeshes these stories with broader strategic goals, that may usurp the desire of the person who had the experience. What does it mean for someone to become a spokesperson and to represent the experience of others? What responsibilities come with that position, particularly in context of social location and privilege. For those stories hidden behind a spokesperson, how has their story been dissected and selectively incorporated? How do we situate the person at the centre when they could even be reduced to a data point? Such questions are explored within the academic space at length (eg. Trevisan et al. Story Tech; Hoffman; 2023), and the meta elements often usurp the question of the individual with experience.

An artistic exploration of these questions were presented in the theatre production P.O.V where a child was able to direct a performance, where two actors who were unfamiliar with the script were required to play her parents on stage. The piece spoke closely to agency, and how placing power with those who are typically silenced can manifest in moments of discomfort but also shine a deeper light to those spaces of invisibility. No doubt this can always be critiqued for its imperfections, but we must talk about this, and strive to always do better when reflecting light and representing the world of those silenced.

About the author

Ranji Masel remains a writer in shadow educated in colonial tertiary institutions. While appreciating the value in sharing biographies, she hopes that her words can hold their own and would not need a face, credentials, or a profile for the thoughts to have legitimacy.



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SILENT VIOLENCE

Colonialism, Famine and Artistic Response

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Abstract

Conflict, by definition, is almost always associated with violence. This essay is an examination of what I here call an example of “silent violence”—the traumatic event of the great famine in Bengal in 1943-4—news of which, in the interests of colonial war policy and policing of nationalist and Left movements, was suppressed. Word of course soon got out, not only through the hordes of starving refugees arriving in Calcutta, but particularly through the work of artists—painters, poets, novelists, theatre activists and musicians—who documented the event in a multitude of vivid forms, visual, literary and performative. The essay examines the range of artistic responses to the famine and the attempts to silence voices and images revealing its extent and causes, the silences of much of Indian art history which frequently ignores the tragedy and its artistic representations, and raises again the perennial question of the social role and impact of the arts.

SILENT VIOLENCE: COLONIALISM, FAMINE AND ARTISTIC RESPONSE

John Clammer

Violence can take many forms: some overt in the form of brutality, and torture, some less obvious in the myriad forms of psychological oppression and micro-aggressions that humans have been able to invent to inflict on each other. Some violence is noisy as in war or sports that involve the deliberate infliction of injury on the Other, human or animal. But much is silent: psychological cruelty, denigration, slavery, exclusion from opportunities or resources. And much violence is directly or indirectly politically motivated: to punish, starve, massacre, annex, to promote genocide or “ethnic cleansing”, or can of course be, paradoxically, (given their announced commitment to peace) religiously motivated. Silent violence in the context of this essay then refers not to an example of armed oppression, but to the situation in which an avoidable tragedy is left to unfold with its massive effects on individuals, families and whole communities, motivated by cynical political calculations. The example in case is that of the great famine that swept much of the Indian state of Bengal in 1943-4, and of the artistic responses of socially concerned painters and writers to this event, one which never needed to happen, but was met with indifference by the colonial authorities who still ruled India until 1947.

The actual or potential role of the arts in alleviating conflict, drawing wider attention to the reality of the violence that almost always accompanies it, and suggesting methods of healing from trauma is itself a wide field, and one which offers numerous examples, both historical and contemporary, including the use of the past to send warnings to the present through the representation of the realities of conflict, usually wars. Francisco Goya famously produced his remarkable series of etchings *The Disasters of War* in response to the atrocities of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, Natalia Goncharova produced her lesser-known series *Mystical Images of War* (1914). The period of the writing of this essay saw the remake of the classic anti-war movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the release of two other films that could be read in the same way—*1917*, and *Oppenheimer*. The role of the arts in the *healing* of post-conflict situations is another important area, including the role of poetry, as in the case of post-genocide Rwanda (Grieder 2014). Involved in this process of artistic representation are many levels including those memorialization, representation, hope and anticipation, critique, the promotion of political alternatives, warning and mapping of consequences, and, very importantly, the overcoming of silences by allowing representations to emerge: the silences that otherwise make a situation of violence invisible, and consequently ensure that the true causes of an event are left unstated, and to prevent the possibility that the event is left uninscribed in memory, except among those who have experienced the trauma of violence themselves.

This essay will take up one such example that in various ways combines all these levels—the great, and avoidable, famine that ravaged the eastern Indian state of Bengal in 1943-4, less than two years before the end of the Second World War, and only three years before the end of colonialism and the achievement of Indian independence in 1947. The example is telling because it illustrates a wide range of factors in interplay with one another: war, colonialism, censorship of news about the reality of the suffering created by the famine, the indifference of highly placed officials, including Winston Churchill, and the cynical prioritizing of the British war effort (including outside of India) on the one hand (Greenough 1982). On the other hand it also it triggered vigorous artistic responses to the famine by a number of prominent Indian

artists and writers, who combined their visual and literary work with critical politics, anti-colonial struggle and the attempt to create an authentic local aesthetics, not only one that was “indigenous”, but that was also socially committed without sacrificing artistic quality. It also raises questions about what many other Indian artists were thinking in their lack of response to the famine, continuing such “business as usual” as was possible under wartime conditions and with the Japanese approaching India’s easternmost borders through Burma. The case also suggests more theoretical reflections on the relations between art and conflict/violence that have more universal implications, and to these we will come at the conclusion to the essay.

The Bengal Famine and Artistic Response

By 1942 India found itself in an interesting geo-political situation. The World War was raging and while far from the Western front and the situation on the Eastern front in Russia, India was, post Pearl Harbor, faced with the possibility (that became briefly an eventuality) that Japan would attack India as it progressively occupied Southeast Asia and reached the easternmost borders of India through Burma. Japan did occupy the Andaman Island chain that, while physically closer to Southeast Asia than to India, was Indian territory and brought important cities such as Calcutta and Madras within bombing range. At the same time the Indian independence movement was faced with a dilemma. Its more militant end, led by the charismatic Subhas Chandra Bose, went on to form the Indian National Army, allied with the Japanese and comprised to a great extent of British Indian Army soldiers who had been captured in Southeast Asia, on the grounds, supported by many, that the enemies of British colonialism were India’s best friends (Toye 2023). The Gandhi wing, while certainly desiring independence, had temporarily allied themselves with the British war effort. There were complex reasons for this, including the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to wrest from the British the promise of freedom as the price of India supplying men and resources to the war effort (the literature on this is large: for a short and accessible summary see Smith 2011: 824-829). India had of course long been a source of material for the British economy, and one of the principle arguments for independence on the part of indigenous and anti-colonial Indian economists was indeed the huge drain of agricultural resources, bullion, tax revenue and profits from commercial enterprises, that actually left a rich India much poorer than it has been with the advent of the British East India Company and the subsequent conversion of India into a full-fledge colony after the great rebellion (the “Indian Mutiny” to British historians) in 1857. Such arguments were not new either: as early as 1901 the nationalist economist Dadabhai Naoroji published his famous “economic drain” theory of the actual impact of British colonialism in India, despite the (colonialist) rhetoric of imperialism bringing growth, railways and the other supposed benefit of civilization to benighted India (Naoroji 1901).

India had experienced many famines, including a previous one in Bengal in 1770, and many others during the period of British rule, and all occurred with little or no intervention or relief on the part of the colonial authorities. During the great Orissa famine of 1866 in which approximately one and a half million people died of starvation, the British exported 200 million tons of rice from India to the UK (for a good summary account of the history of famines, see Tharoor 2016, pp. 176-190). No famine has occurred in post-independence India, and as Amartya Sen among others have pointed out, famines are usually avoidable, and while such events as cyclones and drought play a role, the main factor is not the unavailability of food, but issues of distribution, public accountability and democracy (Sen 1983). In 1944, in the wake of the famine, the colonial government admitted that while there had admittedly been some cases of “administrative

breakdown”, the real reasons for the famine lay in Indian society—corruption, price-gouging, “moral breakdown”, and weak local government, anything and everything in fact except for the responsibility of the central government, which, as in the past, insisted on collecting taxes and refusing to mandate price controls on essential foodstuffs. An earlier Viceroy, Lord Lytton, had indeed specifically banned the reduction of food prices during famine and instructed district officers to abstain from providing relief works (Davis 2001).

It is against this background that the Bengal famine must be understood as an outstanding example of long-standing colonial callousness towards suffering, and an unwillingness to provide relief, or even to sanction relief efforts by foreign charities, churches and individuals, and in fact to actively discourage such intervention. The causes of the famine were diverse: a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal that had destroyed standing crops and done substantial damage to infrastructure in the southern part of the state, the continuing export of Indian grain to Ceylon, the diversion of Indian rice to supply British troops in the Mediterranean area of operations and to create stockpiles in the Balkans and elsewhere, failure to permit India to use its sterling reserves to buy food or to use its ships to import it, rejection of Canadian and US offers of food aid, and racist comments and policies on the part of Winston Churchill who commented that Bengalis were underfed anyway and bred like rabbits (Tharoor 2016: 188). The issue once again was not the availability of food in other parts of India (which by the 1940s possessed an extensive rail network), but a combination of callousness, the British government’s own policy of buying up Indian grains at inflated prices to ensure supplies for its army, and thus driving up food prices to unaffordable levels, a blind unwillingness to allow active relief efforts, and certainly the contribution of nature. Britain was of course under immense pressure: the war in Europe was far from over and the Japanese were highly active in Burma, throughout the rest of Southeast Asia, and in the Indian ocean and Andaman Sea and threatening the naval bases in Ceylon and were close to the eastern borders of India itself. As Madhusree Mukerjee has exhaustively documented (Mukerjee 2010), the famine was entirely preventable and largely the responsibility of British policy, leaving a substantial area of India, already long exploited by colonial economic policies, ravaged by a combination of factors, all of which, apart from natural disaster, were all the outcome of human (colonial) agency.

There were in fact additional factors at work. The Tamluk division of the Midnapur district, which was severely damaged by the strong cyclone of 16 October 1942, was also a centre of Left wing nationalist resistance to colonial rule. Midnapur had indeed been a *surplus* producer of rice and other food crops, and in 1943 Bengal as a whole produced more food than it did in 1941. This has led some commentators (e.g. Mallik 2022: 112) to question whether the devastating shortages should be called a “famine” at all, rather than a manufactured event certainly worsened by the cyclone and subsequent crop failures, but profoundly intensified by the expropriation of grain destined for the war front, the appalling greed of hoarders and the failure by the administration to mount any significant relief efforts. The fact that not only Midnapur, but much of Bengal, was radically opposed to the colonial presence and a hot-bed of Left politics and cultural resistance, quite naturally did not dispose the colonial authorities to favour it. Indeed, the lack of relief response and the failure to reign in price gouging and hoarding can be interpreted as a form of collective punishment on districts that had the temerity to resist colonial rule. Before the famine the cultural squads of the (Communist) Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) had been active in the area performing street theatre communicating protest, discontent and hope, promoting gender equality, and ultimately revolution, often in cooperation with (politically

Marxist) visual artists such as Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915-1978) who assisted with set and costume design for the IPTA (Chakraborty 2018 167-8).

Chittaprosad has an important role in this story. A self-schooled painter he had seen the consequences of the British “scorched earth” policy in Chhattagram, an area believed to be vulnerable to a likely Japanese attack. This experience led him into association with the Communist Party for whom he became a sort of official artist, creating propaganda posters and other works (although he subsequently left formal association with the party, while retaining his core political beliefs). In 1943 he was sent to Midnapur to make a visual documentation of the famine, an endeavor that culminated later that year with the publication of a dossier entitled *Hungry Bengal*, an eye-witness account of twenty-two black and white sketches linked by a written text. The booklet was immediately seized by the British authorities and destroyed, and it is thought that only one copy (of the 5,000 printed) survived (a reprint from a rare surviving copy was made in 2011 by the Delhi Art Gallery). Of course this wanton and transparently political act of destruction did not prevent the artist from continuing to paint and draw, which indeed he did. Sanjoy Mallik argues that his drawings constitute a departure in visual arts, at least in India: rapid sketching, abbreviated form, immediate documentation of the brutal reality observed by the artist, and a complete separation from the dominant forms of contemporary nationalist art, with their reference to the past and to past traditions of painting (Mallik 2022: 114-5). While certainly a form of realism, Chittaprosad’s work is a far cry from examples of “Socialist Realism” emerging from the Soviet Union and subsequently China, but rather an immediate and unmediated visual impression of starvation and death (Sen 1993), and one not meditated by any pre-existing models, but deeply spontaneous in nature (1).

Chittaprosad was not the only artist to document the effects of the famine. Many villagers left their now uninhabitable villages and fled to the local metropolis—Calcutta, where they were forced to beg or sell themselves in order to survive. One such example was Zainul Abedin (1914-1976), a relatively conventional product of the Government Art School in Calcutta, who, shocked deeply by the scenes of misery and deprivation that he witnessed in the streets of the former



1 Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Bengal Famine. <https://scroll.in/article/1075567/ulcerous-wounds-skin-and-bones-how-chittaprosads-searing-sketches-chronicled-the-bengal-famine>

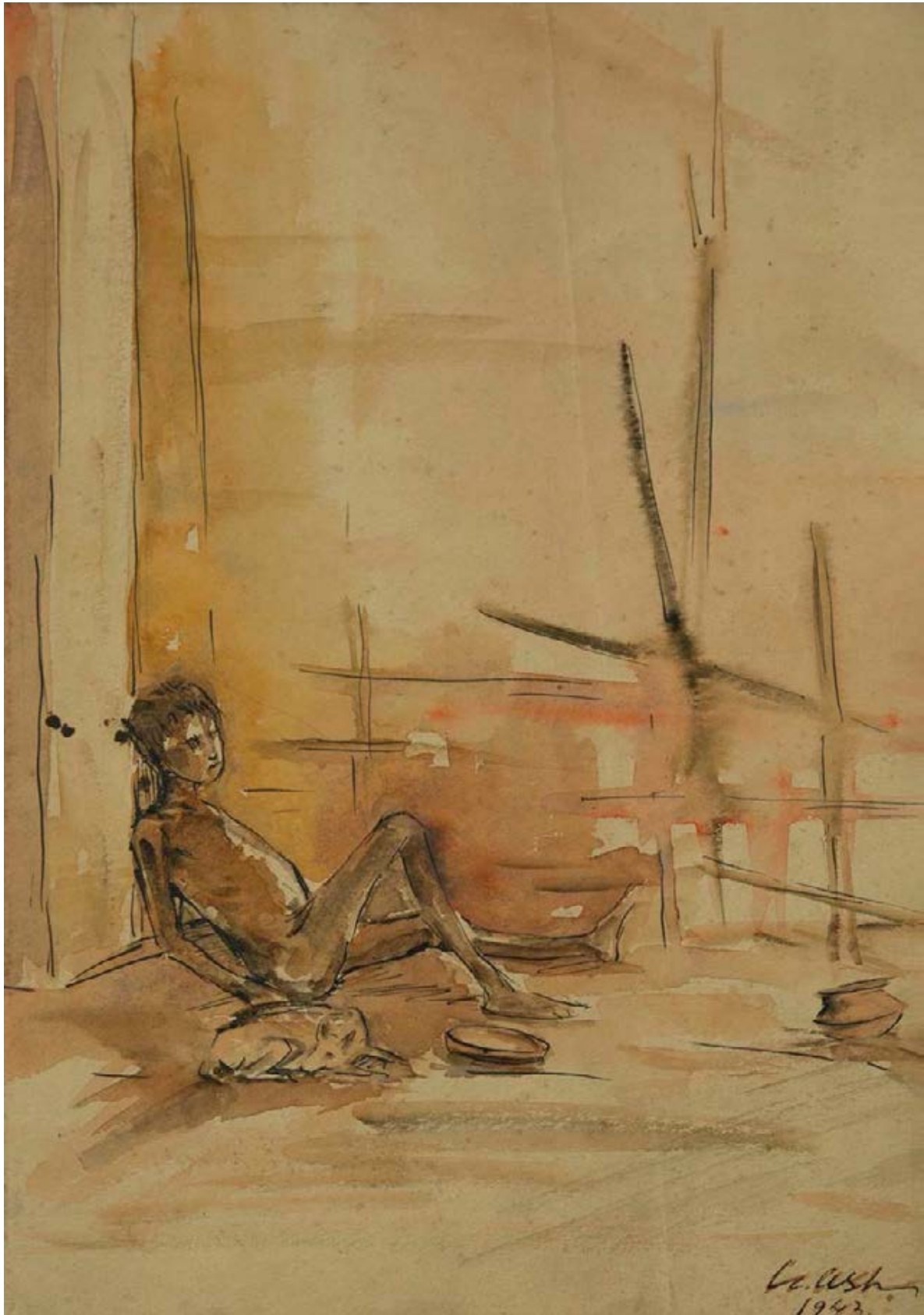


2 Zainal Abedin, Bengal Famine. <https://www.abirpothi.com/recording-the-horrors-of-the-bengal-famine-the-social-realist-art-of-chittoprasad-somnath-hore-and-zainul-abedin/>

capital of India (by then relocated to New Delhi) produced a series of *Famine Drawings* (1943) also in stark brush-drawn lines, documenting the tragic scenes in the city and still the state capital of Bengal (Sen 1944). His immediate contemporary, Govardhan Ash (1907-1996) likewise documented the famine in the district of Begumpur through sketch-like watercolors of starving villagers, reduced to mere silhouettes, painted in ochre and brown, individuals unidentifiable, but the effects of famine on anonymous bodies unmistakable (2). Others certainly referenced the famine while not directly addressing it, as in the cement works of the sculptor Ramkinkar Baij, who in commenting on his sculptures and paintings noted that they were created in the context of war and famine, events that impacted but did not deeply disturb the district of Santiniketan, the site of the residence of Rabindranath Tagore and the university that he created there, including

its celebrated art school, the *Kala Bhavan*. Not all Bengal based artists directly referenced the famine, or the war raging on the borders of India not far to the east. The “Calcutta Group” which flourished from 1943 to 1953 focused not on social critique or visual response to the famine, or even to colonialism, but to creating an aesthetics of modernism in the Indian context, which can perhaps be read as a subtle form of anti-colonialism, at least in the sense of attempting to establish a distinctively Indian and non-derivative form of artistic identity.

Govardhan Ash, for example (3), was also a member of the Calcutta Group, and other than his famine paintings he became known for his post-impressionist works. One of the most elusive figures in this context was the internationally known painter Jamini Roy, instantly recognized for his icon like style of oval faces and elongated eyes. Roy, himself a Bengali from the small town of Beliatiore in the Bankura district, was something of a non-joiner. He did not actively associate with artistic groupings or political parties. His significance, recognized as early as 1944 before he became internationally celebrated (Dey and Irwin 1944), was his appropriation of folk idioms and popular Bengali art. Although Roy was not actively associated with the Left politics of Bengal of the time, it was widely recognized that propaganda—not only for specifically Leftist ones, but for the nationalist movement in general (with which Roy did identify)—could be best pursued through folk forms, not only in the visual arts, but equally in theatre, an art form with which Bengal is very much associated. Partha Mitter, in his book on modernism in immediately pre-independence Indian art, devotes a whole chapter to Roy entitled, appropriately, “Jamini Roy and Art for the Community” (Mitter 2007 pp.100-122), in which he depicts the painter as a contemporary folk artist well able to mimic the artisan styles of Kalighat and other Bengali forms, the constructor of an anti-colonial utopia through the adoption of authentically indigenous art forms rooted in village life, and as such an intensely political artist despite his reclusive personality and lifestyle since his work embodied not only the recovery of folk forms,



3 Govardhan Ash. Source: <https://prinseps.com/research/gobardhan-ash-the-quiet-master-artist/>

but their transmutation into a genuinely Indian art untouched by the incursion of Western themes, styles and techniques, thus promoting not only the “decolonization of the mind” of which the celebrated Kenyan novelist Thiongo-Wa Ngugi writes (1981), but also, and equally critically, the decolonization of the senses.

Roy did not directly address the famine, but many other contemporary Bengali artists did. In an album published in 1944 showcasing the art of twenty-eight artists (the cover of which was illustrated with an image by Roy), at least half addressed the famine in one way or another. These included Debiprasad Roy Chowdhury’s *When Calcutta Sleeps*, depicting in an expressionist style the street sleeping refugees from the countryside, Muralidhar’s *Begging by a Crowded Tram Car*, Adinath Mukherjee’s *The Destitutes*, Sudhir Khastagir’s *In Search of Food*, Nirode Majumder’s *Orphan*, and Kamrul Hasan’s *After the Cyclone*, among others (Das Gupta, Hasan, Mukherjee and Ahmed 1944). As Mallik (2022: 121) rightly points out, the formalist approach of many of the Calcutta Group painters and social awareness are not necessarily contradictory, and as an example he cites the case of Gopal Ghose, one of whose works appears in the *Bengal Painters’ Testimony* on the famine, and at least two other famine related painting are known. Ghose indeed continued as a socially committed artist, and is better known for his paintings inspired by the violent 1946 communal riots in Calcutta, the seeds of which were sown by the famine and the influx of refugees that it triggered, the aftermath of the war, and political, religious and economic upheavals. A similar case is that of Somnath Hore who continued his socially and politically committed paintings into the post-famine period, and who was an admirer of Chittaprosad and *Hungry Bengal*, which he must have seen before almost the entire edition was seized and destroyed. Junior in age to his mentor, “the younger artist’s work was an instance of continuity of engagement in which the famine ceased to be merely a topical theme relevant to the period of the disaster. For him, the scars were permanent, and they transformed into a lifelong metaphor through a series of works centered around the generic theme of ‘wounds’” (Mallik 2022: 121). Hore spent the war and famine years in his hometown of Chattagram, from which, under Chittaprosad’s guidance and inspiration he produced documentary drawings and sketches of the devastation, many of which appeared in Left party journals such as *People’s War* and *Janayuddha*. In 1945 at the end of the war the Communist Party encouraged him to develop his technical skills, which he did, enrolling at the Government Art College in Calcutta, where one of his major teachers was Zainal Abedin, where he was also influenced by seeing Chinese Communist woodblock prints and copies of the engravings of the German artist Kathe Kollwitz, and going on to make a powerful collection of woodcuts based on his observation of the share-croppers movement called *Tebhaga* in which peasants in north Bengal were struggling to have their percentage of their crops increased to two-thirds from the only half-share that they were currently allowed to retain from the landlords (for more context on peasant movements, see Dhanagare 1983). Not all the visual artists who commented through their work were members of the Communist Party or even fellow-travelers. Some, such as the sculptor and painter Devisprosad Roy Chowdhury, who did indeed produce moving images of the famine, was certainly aligned with socialist (but not necessarily Marxist) thought and the trade union movement, and much of his work centred not on peasants, but on urban labourers as depicted in his celebrated 1940s sculpture *Road Workers*, or the slightly later *Dignity of Labour*, elderly workers, or social justice issues such as his *Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation* (1936) which celebrated the opening of caste Hindu temples to “Untouchables” from which they had always been excluded in South India (Mitter 2007, 171-176). While quite naturally it was Bengali painters who were closest to the famine

and were driven to depict the suffering that resulted, other Indian artists also responded from other parts of the country, and particularly from the thriving arts community in Bombay (now Mumbai), such as with Pran Nath Mago's painting *The Bengal Famine*, or Harkrishan Lal who painted *Destitutes of the Famine* (Mago 2001: 57).

The emphasis here has been on visual artists, but it is also important that responses to the famine were not only from painters, but also from theatre workers and even music. Bengal has a rich tradition of folk and street theatre as well as more conventional forms, and this tradition was extensively mined by the Bengali Left, as with the work of the afore mentioned IPTA, also active elsewhere in India as the cultural wing of the Communist Party, but with particular intensity in Bengal. Some such productions such as Bijon Bhattacharya's 1943 play *Nabanna (New Harvest)* specifically took the famine as its theme, and music saw the emergence of *Ganasangeet* or people's/mass songs, derived from an earlier tradition of patriotic nationalist songs, but in this case giving rise to protest music, and causing poets and song writers, confronted with the terrible reality of the famine and the flood of the homeless and starving who filled the streets of Calcutta to respond. One such was the song writer Jyotiindra Moitra who produced the celebrated cycle *Nabajibaner Gaan* (Songs of new Life) mixing themes of hope with those of protest and mobilization against the deep ills that the famine had so graphically revealed (Mallik 2022: 119; on the IPTA see Bhattacharya 1995). Parallel movements were occurring in Bengali literature associated with the progressive literary movement, or *Pragati Sahitya Andolan* in Bengali, motivated by the same themes of anti-colonialism, social justice, and equality as the other artistic movements, but then further deeply motivated by the famine (Bhattacharya 2020, Dasgupta 2021), and by photography, with its ability to capture intensely graphic and immediate images of the consequences of systematic hunger (Ghosh 2019).

Representing Hunger

Responses to the famine then took visual, dramatic, musical and poetic forms. A number of Indian scholars have tried to theorize this to some extent. Here we will take two examples. In her book *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization*, Sanjukta Sunderason (2020) discusses the arts engagement with war, famine, displacement and mass politics particularly during the crucial 1940s, and utilizes the term "partisan aesthetics" to conceptualize this movement. Here she argues that art *became* political through its interaction with left wing activism during this period, and that to discuss Indian modernism in art it is necessary to understand this political engagement, not only as documentation of the famine and its contemporary problems, but through participation in the left movements of the period (and its afterlife, as Bengal was after independence ruled by a Communist government for over thirty years), and through their negotiations with those same movements. A number of the artists that we have discussed were at one time members of the Communist Party of India, but subsequently resigned, not so much on direct ideological grounds as because of party interference with their artistic freedom and choice of subjects. Art, artists, and art movements and collectivities played an important but usually ignored role in the decolonization process, through aesthetic activism, the creation of new and independent modes of representation, and through what I have called in a different context "aesthetics of the South" (Clammer 2021).

A second example is that of the analysis by Babli Sinha of the "famine novels" of the Bengali Anglophone novelist Bhabani Bhattacharya (Sinha 2020). Bhattacharya, an author, teacher of English and journalist, wrote two such novels: *So Many Hungry!* In 1947 and *He Who Rides*

a Tiger a decade later. Sinha argues that both novels should be read as a counter-cultural discourse that resists the representation of the famine victims as passive and lacking all agency, and does so through a realism and through a performative notion of identity for the characters depicted in the two novels. In doing so, she argues, Bhattacharya creates not a sense of distance from the victims, but to the contrary, a sense of kinship and identification. Similarly he draws in issues such as the ways in which caste, class, age and gender worked to distribute hunger and resources differentially, the workings of the colonial “justice” system that often worked to punish the victims (for theft of food for example) rather than the hoarders and price-gougers, the terrible vulnerability of children, and sexual violence. Both books set out to counter the imperial accounts of the famine and its causes (war, natural disaster and the shortcomings of Bengali society), shifting responsibility to nature and the victims, rather than admitting (and responding to) its own complicity and failure, indeed refusal, to act. While the state was active in erasing evidence of the famine and its own inhuman lack of response, it then becomes the role of the arts to break this silence in the written word in literature, poetry song and theatre, through music with its powerful ability to arouse emotions, and through visual depictions in painting, sculpture and photography that showed graphically the reality of the suffering and its impact (for a broad survey of “resistance” art in India during the anti-colonial struggle see Lal 2022).

Towards a Global Theory

The immediately preceding paragraphs have discussed the work of two Indian commentators on the artistic responses to the Bengal famine and the estimated three million deaths that it directly caused, most or all of them avoidable. But the issue of the depiction of violence, in this case in the form of manufactured starvation, touches on wider issues of interpretation that have resonances throughout discussions of the social role and social position of the arts. At the heart of this issue is the question of what images *do*. This issue was foregrounded by the visual anthropologist Alfred Gell, who, opposing a purely aesthetic analysis of art objects, proposed that the real question is to ask what they do in the social context in which they are embedded. Gell’s own answer to this was that art objects have *agency*: they are not passive subjects of contemplation, but do work in the sense that they act to change perceptions, modify social relationships, reflect through taste issues of class, gender and ethnicity, and form an important part of social history, as well as the history of art in its conventional emphasis of schools, intra-art influences and a generally hermetic approach to the study and explanation of art objects or forms (Gell 1998). Certainly in the work of the Bengali “famine artists” we can see this notion of agency at work in an intensive way. While Gell’s concept of artistic agency is for some people controversial, it is certainly the case that images have power—they influence perceptions, and through them behavior, and as any scholar of propaganda knows (or scholars of advertising for that matter), images can shape the course of history (Freedberg 1989, Belting 2001), and most certainly violence and images are intimately tied together (Mitchell 2005). Possibly Picasso’s most celebrated and recognizable painting—*Guernica*—graphically illustrates this point: hardly “realistic”, but a powerful visual indictment of not only the unannounced bombing of the unprotected Basque town of that name, but also by implication of war and violence in general.

Art, then, can stand as witness to conflict, violence and atrocity (Danchev 2009), as memorial and as a supporter of memory after an event or conflict, and can be embodied in museums, as well as in war memorials, photography and even architecture (see the series of essays in the special number of the art magazine MARG (New Delhi) on art and conflict, dealing with

museums, architecture, war memorials, design, photography and risk: MARG 71, 4, June 2020). Art has a long history not only of remembering and representing, but also of resistance to the many varieties of fascism that the 20th Century in particular seems to have specialized in inventing (Spyer 2014). Gene Ray has suggested that “Through what Kant called ‘negative presentation’ art can mark those points at which Auschwitz, Hiroshima and other collective traumas exceed conventionalized representation. By negatively evoking such crimes and testifying to their unrepresentability through the positivities of traditional and narrative means, art can avow the damage they have wreaked” (Ray 2005:6), precisely the intention of the artists and writers that we have discussed above. Ray goes on to note that the challenge is to represent suffering without doing further injustice to the victims. If art does indeed have ethical and political dimensions and responsibilities, it is important that aesthetic strategies and activism respect this fact, while formulating means by which the arts can positively influence situations of extreme need and injustice (Malzacher 2014).

The Witness of Famine

The art inspired by the Bengal famine is largely unknown to most art historians outside of India, and indeed within India many of the standard art and visual histories either pass over the crisis in silence, or make but a passing reference. This essay is in part an appeal to recover the rich vein of painting, theatre, music, poetry and writing that responded to the famine in their various ways. It is also an attempt to show that themes of conflict, social crisis, and what I would here call “slow violence”—violence by neglect and indifference and even active turning away from a human disaster unfolding before the very eyes of the colonial government—are of major importance to art history, a discipline all too ready to retreat into formalism and with little reference to the social conditions under which art is produced, in any period, not only in those of conflict and upheaval.

The art of the Bengal famine consequently throws up quite universal themes: the role of art in de-colonizing processes, the often intimate links between art and politics, a fresh perspective on the now fashionable sociology of the body, in situations in which the bodies in question are suffering and starving, and that the bodies of the elderly, of children, of the already-poor, are as much involved as those of the able-bodied, and of the depiction (and possibly healing) of trauma outside of the confines of psychiatry. Babli Sinha for example argues that the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya demonstrate clearly that by way of a realistic aesthetic, trauma is far from unrepresentable, but rather can be shown in ways that resonate immediately with the emotions of the reader, who, while not sharing the same situation, is brought to both an understanding and sympathy with the conditions that have engendered extreme psychic and physical stress, and with their impact on the victim (on this subject see also Tal 1996).

The contemporary world is far from immune to the specter of famine. Climate change is likely to be the harbinger of rural displacement, new waves of environmental refugees, crop failures, drought, extreme weather events including the kind of cyclone that was a contributing factor to the Bengal famine, and hunger. Conflicts contribute their own quota: the Ukraine is one of the bread-baskets not only of Europe, but of much of the world; famine stalks the Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and other African conflict zones, conflicts sometimes ethnic, sometimes the outcome of religious fundamentalism, sometimes over resources, but all resulting in hunger, deprivation and displacement. The Bengal famine, now receding in history and memory, is far from being an event that should be forgotten. At one level it shows dire failures of policy, sharing, and

sheer inhumanity, and of the “politics of famine”—in that case of a colonial administration, one right at the end of its control of a country which would be independent in two to three years, yet was willing to sacrifice the lives of its citizens to its own ends and in opposition to demands for elementary social justice, without even concern for how its legacy would be considered after its imminent departure. At another it shows the power of art, not to avert calamity, but to record it, to show the dimensions of suffering, to hasten the end of the morally bankrupt colonial administration, and to keep the memory of the event alive long after the crisis itself had passed. In its critical role, the art of the famine showed up the true quality, self-interest and unconcern of the political agencies supposed to be working in the interests of its subjects, the still colonized Indian people. In its positive role it produced a vibrant body of art of many genres, demonstrating that art, without compromising either its autonomy or its quality, can indeed have a vital social role, linked to, but outside of the formal political realm, in representing what should have never needed to be represented.

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THE POWER OF PARALLELS

Creative Collaborations Across Reimagined Worlds

Daz Chandler, Eloise Chandler, Safdar Ahmed

Abstract

What impact can parallel worlding have on the profound crises of our times? This question underpins the collaborations of The Parallel Effect, an expanding collective of artists and interdisciplinary thinkers committed to democratic practice across disciplinary, temporal, and geographical borders. Responding to contemporary crises, these creative interventions reimagine alternatives to the “present” we inhabit. Unlike other futuring projects that extrapolate forward from today, our parallel reality speculations emerge from identifying critical moments in diverse pasts—engaging in historical dialogue between institutional and community archives—to imagine how things might have been otherwise. In doing so, we develop a praxis of sustainable knowledge that cites, honours, and acts in solidarity with the intellectual, cultural, and organisational labour of communities past and present. This paper critically reflects on four projects that reclaim spaces for collaborative care and imaginative renewal: *Vigil for the Smooth Handfish* (2020), *Message From Another You* (2021), *I’ve Been to a Parallel World* (2023), and *The Parallel Effect Podcast* (2025/2026), each offering speculative frameworks for rethinking sustainability, grief, and collective possibility through creative world-making.

THE POWER OF PARALLELS: CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS ACROSS REIMAGINED WORLDS

Daz Chandler, Eloise Chandler & Safdar Ahmed

The Beginning

The Parallel Effect invites audiences to imagine alternative realities through the lens of parallel worlds, blending archival research, collaboration, and speculative storytelling. Our multidisciplinary approach combines performance, visual art, technology, and scholarly research to explore urgent social, cultural, and environmental issues—fostering new ways to think about how we might address these challenges in our own world. By deliberately breaking down the silos between academia, art, and technology, we create work that speaks across disciplines and connects diverse audiences. Grounded in both creative exploration and real-world inquiry, the project offers pathways toward more just and sustainable futures, imagining the radical possibilities of tomorrow through the lens of today.

Drawing on the many worlds theory in quantum physics, we engage with the idea that multiple, parallel realities are not only possible but also necessary for thinking through alternative futures. As Karen Barad suggests, the counterintuitive and multifaceted nature of quantum physics encourages a reconsideration of how we understand science, ethics, and the production of knowledge across disciplines. By embracing quantum theory's inherent complexity and uncertainty, we open up new ways of thinking that challenge established narratives and make space for radically different understandings of our world, its possibilities, and the very act of knowing itself.

When Daz Chandler and Safdar Ahmed first discussed *The Parallel Effect* concept in 2019, Daz had just returned to Aboriginal land after a few years of living in the United Kingdom. Daz had made the decision to leave Australia following soul-destroying attempts in the colony to receive support for a feature documentary. They were repeatedly told by Australian funding bodies that the film which documented a coming-of-age story about a remarkable Palestinian teenager—born the year of the intervention known as the 'Oslo Peace Process'—was not interesting to Australian audiences. The filmmaker was also told that the documentary would probably offer broader appeal if it also chronicled an Israeli girl's passage through a similar window of time. Chandler was no stranger to *bothsidesism*, which 'constructs conflict as identitarian disagreements, in which the parties can harm each other equally in the quest to fulfil the ingroup's cause' (Hakim et al., 2023, p. 25) and was not interested in producing work that insists on juxtaposing egregiously asymmetrical political claims and collective experiences alongside one another (see Zalloua, 2023, pp. 130-135).

Their experiences in London—where discourses about Palestine were more expansive, commonplace, and sophisticated—were emboldening and healing. Daz later returned to Aboriginal land determined to continue to create artistic works with peers that tackled urgent issues and aligned with their principles. As Safdar and Daz talked in 2019—imagining worlds that offered practical pathways to different realities—they remarked on how instructive and practical the 'parallel worlding' process can be.

The Parallel Effect project emerged when the concept of 'futuring' was just starting to gain interest and momentum (see Oomen, 2022). However, unlike futuring projects which extrapolate

forward from 'today', *The Parallel Effect* stems from identifying critical yet forgotten moments in our diverse pasts. Drawing on the 'many worlds' interpretation of quantum mechanics as a foundational framework (see Saunders et al., 2010), *The Parallel Effect* considers that there are an untold number of realities—or worlds—all existing in the 'here and now.' Within this playground of infinite possibilities, we can imagine, and engage critically with, a series of counter-narratives to the one we're predominately living in this paradigm.

This project deliberately emphasises the present, or an alternative present, rather than the future. We do this for several reasons but largely to prioritise the urgency that is already with us. *The Parallel Effect* argues that we do not have the luxury of projecting forward. As Safdar explained at the LSE Millennial Conference 2019, it feels as though the solutions we need to address global heating are not out there on the horizon but must come immediately if we are to avert significant global disaster.

Opening fields of possibilities through archives

Imaginations of the future are by their very essence removed from the present. They emerge from a place of forecasting and speculation established through distance from our current reality. By contrast, the process of imagining different versions of the present moment is to view history as an open field of possibilities. This approach is significant because for too long we've been dominated by grand theories of history that are teleological in aiming towards some final, ideal destination or end point. Whether it's the vulgar Marxist view of historical determinism which sees capitalism's internal contradictions finally resolving into something better or Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis (Fukuyama, 1992), in which liberal democracy becomes the consensually agreed model to which all states should aim — all these theories are deterministic in a way which precludes us from imagining radically hopeful or different outcomes.

Underpinning our creative approaches, is a desire to empower individuals and communities to act. We believe it is our responsibility as creators, to amplify a range of voices whilst making engagement with, and knowledge of histories accessible, personally relevant and captivating through an intersection of mediums, experiences and technologies. We also want to champion the inspirational stories and actors from our diverse pasts which demonstrate an ability to act. Afterall, here in this reality when it comes to systemic change, humans have done extraordinary things before and it's important to remind ourselves that humankind *can* do extraordinary things again.

So many of the parallel worlds and alternative pasts and presents we explore have been inspired by research we have conducted across community, activist, institutional, national and international archives. As we have researched, we have found realms of forgotten materials documenting many ideas, possibilities, political exchanges, conversations and movements that potentially—without spoilers—would have resulted in very different todays. These materials testify to multiple stepping off points from our histories; illuminating possible pathways—political, social, legal, economic, technological—which might in turn have led to other pathways. In other words, our histories and 'presents' were and are not inevitable, there were and are alternatives, alternatives we can be inspired by.

Combatting the disposable economy of memory with seeds of sustainable knowledge

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, it is crucial to learn as much as possible from the intellectual, social, cultural, scientific and organisational labour of our forerunners. Therefore,

the process of reconceptualising our notion of and engagement with history is an essential part of respecting and acting in solidarity with the knowledge and labour of our elders and predecessors. Often contemporary discussions of knowledge of climate change are cast ahistorically. Knowledge of climate change is regularly discussed as the stuff of “now”, the very recent past, or temporally bookended to the 1980s. We have discovered reams of documentation that speaks to the currency of the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in responding to climate change in the early 1970s suggesting a remarkable level of awareness and knowledge in institutions and governments of the “Global North”—the US, the World Bank—around the threat contemporary industries, norms and practices posed to human survival by the late 1960s and 1970s. This includes recorded attempts by thinkers both inside and outside, and marginalised by, mainstream institutions to intervene, sometimes in much more radical ways than are contemplated or conceived as possible today. Even “mainstream” ideas from the past are redacted from contemporary discussions of where we are, what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we might do better or differently. Too frequently “new” ideas and actions fail to cite the intellectual, social, cultural, scientific and organisational labour of those that preceded them. In this project, we’ve begun thinking about how the preoccupation with “new ideas” and the lack of citation or reference in popular discourse as reflecting a kind of disposable economy of memory—an economy that perhaps reveals the vested interests in climate change denialism.

Vivien Sansour’s work with the Heirloom Seed Library offers a compelling model for how we might revitalize and conserve a “living archive” of knowledge. As Sansour (2024) explains, “The world is in a hospice state and we need all the different tools and biodiversity we can in order to adapt.” Her project is a powerful reminder that, like seeds, knowledge too can be passed down and sustained—resilient across time and adaptable to shifting conditions. In developing a praxis of sustainable knowledge, we pay tribute to, act in solidarity with, and cite the labour and ideas of local and international communities and actors past and present which inspire our parallel realities. So, while and when parallel worlds speculations riff from archival research, we believe it is important to directly cite and share (where possible) the artefacts that inspire us. We also believe it is important to document (and provide a guide to) how the different histories, actors, and materials we engage with across different archives may relate or talk to each other. We are actively building a repository of the materials we’ve found and forming connections between different archive collections. By directly sharing artefacts of the different pasts, ideas, and possibilities they represent, and working respectfully across institutions and archives borders, we seek to create spaces for ongoing creative dialogues—within and without this project—reimagining possibilities, in the past, present, and future.

In this paper, we critically reflect on four projects which reclaim spaces for collaborative care and strive to provide sustenance to rethink possibilities for sustainable futures: *Vigil for the Smooth Handfish* (2020), an opportunity to collectively respond to the profound losses of our times; examine the parameters of grief and pay tribute to what we have lost, are losing and may act to save; *Message From Another You* (2021), an immersive adventure utilising artificially intelligent (AI) vocal synthesis to send participants a voice message from another version of themselves describing life inside an entirely different paradigm; *I’ve Been to a Parallel World* (2023) an in-conversation event inviting audiences to hear some of our reality’s most important thinkers describe the histories, structures, and systemic workings of the parallel worlds they have visited, in detail and; *The Parallel Effect Podcast* (2025/2026) a transdisciplinary series

featuring in-depth conversations with specialists about their imagined experiences in parallel worlds, accompanied by reflexive, creative responses designed by artists.

Vigil for the Smooth Handfish (2020)

Although when it comes to creative processes, The Parallel Effect is always mindful to combat fatalism and despair with practical pathways and new possibilities that exist beyond the constraints of our present circumstances, at the height of Covid, we felt there was a palpable need to provide a global space for us all to collectively honour the 200 species we're losing each day, the intersectional nature of this crisis and the very rational sadness and grief that stems from all of that.

This two-and-a-half-hour congregation features 27 unique contributions by renowned First Nations speakers and artists, musicians, scholars and scientists from communities across the globe including 'Australia', India, Turtle Island, UK, Germany, Morocco, Syria, Afghanistan and Palestine. Contributions take on a multiplicity of forms: music, spoken word, performance, academic papers and video essays. Many have been developed collaboratively between contributors, as the Vigil created a space to foster reflexive interdisciplinary multimodal works at the nexus of art, politics, science and geography.

Among the list of those sharing tributes is scholar, environmental activist, and food sovereignty advocate Dr. Vandana Shiva; ecological theorist and writer Dorion Sagan; celebrated American poet Jane Hirshfield; Aboriginal Australian writer and scholar Bruce Pascoe; Canadian cellist Zöe Keating; and Palestinian artist and conservationist Vivien Sansour, who joins us from the Heirloom Seed Library in Palestine. Each contributor has been given the freedom to mourn, remember and respond to the loss of the Smooth Handfish however they wish. Australian First Nations man, Chris Bonney, shares a 130,000 year old Ngarrindjeri Dreaming story about sustainability; biological anthropologist, Dr Barbara J. King presents some of her research documenting grief and bereavement across the animal kingdom; filmmaker Benjamin Gilmour confronts the parameters of empathy and care; and Afghan artist Kabir Mokamel — joining us from his home in Kabul — articulates the relationship between time and daily tragedy in a war-zone and explores whether in our reality, grief can ever truly be egalitarian.

The *Vigil for the Smooth Handfish*, which was first held online in November 2020 across three timezones, was attended by 3000 people and has continued to be presented by communities and is even utilised as a teaching tool by certain academic institutions.

Message from Another You (2021)

Alongside the destruction of this earth and the genocide of a people, there is great concern everywhere surrounding advancements made in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). Many of these discussions divert attention away from immediate concerns (such as bias in algorithms, and data privacy) which require focused and practical solutions. This type of panic also spreads misinformation leading to a lack of understanding about what AI actually is and how it works. Productive discussions about the ethical and social implications of AI require a proactive knowledge of its applications followed by calm and rational dialogue. If history has taught us anything, it's that once technology emerges, it cannot be put back in the bottle. So, while it is always necessary to interrogate and be wary of emergent technology, we argue that it is just

as vital for artists, activists, scholars and innovators to dream up altruistic applications for this tech that benefit the broader community—because it’s not going anywhere.

It is for these reasons that *The Parallel Effect* decided to utilise AI voice synthesis for one of its creative interventions called *Message From Another You*. This project asks: what could we learn if we could communicate with one of the infinite versions of ourselves, living in a parallel universe?

The immersive journey begins the very moment the participant arrives when they are greeted by a space-suit clad performer—a Many Worlds Guide—who takes them into an atmospheric chamber complete with live music and a curated exhibit of artefacts acquired (ethically, of course) from other realms. The artefacts and curiosities on display range from ceramics through to photographs to ticket stubs, sculptures, vinyl records, objects, paintings and manuscripts and speak to pivotal moments that have transpired inside these other realities, leading to very different outcomes and truths.

After the guided tour, the audience is seated at an interdimensional “hot-spot” where—via a series of videos and interactive software—they are introduced to ‘Everett’—a benevolent entity from another dimension, who has agreed to facilitate the union across parallel worlds. Over the course of this personalised session, audiences learn about the Many Worlds Interpretation and some of the wondrous keystone species that make our particular universe unique. Then, in the name of collaborative care and interdimensional solidarity, Everett guides the participant towards helping another reality. A catastrophe has occurred there, and audiences must read (aloud, into a microphone) a bedtime story about some of the extraordinary local wonders from our world. Importantly, *Message From Another You* is a site-specific, community-driven project that collaborates with local people to craft bespoke bedtime stories for each presentation. For example, when the work was commissioned on Aboriginal land for Newcastle, NSW, we worked closely with local voices to create an experience that was deeply connected to the region’s history and its people. A local environmentalist took participants on a journey through the astonishing histories of Ash Island; Worimi knowledge holder Carol Ridgeway-Bissett guided participants through a sacred women’s site in Salamander Bay; and refugee Louis Ndagijimana shared his moving tale of survival from fleeing a civil war in Burundi to starting a new life in the coastal town.

These diverse voices, histories, and stories serve not only to honour the people and cultures of each place but also to build a bridge between worlds, connecting participants to parallel realities grounded in their local context. In return for their participation, the audience receives an uplifting sound file delivered in their inbox, in which a version of their own voice describes life in a different world where crises have been averted through alternative action.

I’ve Been To A Parallel World (2023)

This in-person and podcasted event takes the premise at the heart of *The Parallel Effect* project—that an untold number of universes exist alongside each other—and invites audiences to gain direct access to some of our reality’s most important thinkers as they describe the histories, structures and systemic workings of the parallel worlds they have visited, in detail.

The launch took place in Naarm (also known by its colonised place name of Melbourne, Australia) at The Wheeler Centre on November 8, 2023 and featured four Many Worlds’ Travellers including Barkandji writer, artist and curator, Zena Cumpston; CEO and artistic

director, Arts Access Victoria, Caroline Bowditch; writer, critic and cross-platform storyteller, Jinghua Qian; and Head of Research and Investigations at environmental organisation, Lock the Gate, Georgina Woods. It was also broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Big Ideas program.

These testimonies of what was witnessed outside our normative paradigm included vivid descriptions of a realm where access and equity had been prioritised; of a world that had centred Indigenous truth telling as a vital means of healing for people and country; of a sphere where individuals are free to blossom without the imposed parameters of gender constructs; and of a paradigm very close to this one, where climate change was halted towards the end of the twentieth century. These articulated experiences serve to awaken our sense of collectivity behind our individual subjectivity while also providing brave and visionary tools for redreaming our present world.

The Parallel Effect Podcast (2025/6)

The success of the live event has led to the creation of a new transdisciplinary series featuring in-depth conversations with global thinkers about their imagined experiences in parallel worlds, complemented by reflexive, creative responses from interdisciplinary artists.

Each episode of *The Parallel Effect* Podcast invites a specialist from our reality to describe the histories, structures, and values of a parallel world they have "visited." These conversations—ranging from utopian to cautionary—are crafted to inspire audiences to imagine more sustainable, expansive, and equitable futures. The podcast blends rigorous archival research with creative, poetic, and political responses, resulting in a cross-platform, public-facing body of work that bridges art, scholarship, and civic engagement. The format is designed to foster new collaborations and facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue between thinkers, makers, and producers, contributing to urgent conversations around systemic change and creating space for diverse voices often underrepresented in mainstream discourse.

To accompany each episode, an artist is commissioned to create a response in their chosen medium—be it illustration, mixed media, video, or photography. These artworks are not only creative extensions of the podcast but also standalone works that amplify the ideas explored, offering visual interpretations of the imagined worlds. This synergy between thought and art fosters community engagement and creates reflexive, reciprocal dialogues that open pathways for ongoing creative exchange.

For example, in one episode, Koori scholar Amanda Porter imagines a parallel world where First Nations justice, led by the leadership and vision of survivors and families, replaces colonial systems of law. The visual response to this world is created by Syrian-Australian artist Miream Salameh, whose work—shaped by her experience as a migrant artist—explores themes of identity, displacement, policing, and memory. Salameh's artwork not only reflects Porter's abolitionist vision but expands on it, connecting the struggles for justice in Indigenous, Syrian and migrant contexts.

In another episode, MJ Barker envisions a world free from heteronormativity, where sexual identity, personal growth, and relationships are liberated from traditional norms. This vision is brought to life through the work of Audax M. Gawler, a multi-genre artist and symbiopunk, whose work blends queer and trans ecologies with speculative worldbuilding.

In a further episode, Vanessa Andreotti guides us through a parallel world where the collapse of extractive habits leads to a future of symbiosis. The visual response to this world is created by Zena Cumpston, a Barkandji artist and environmental activist, whose work is deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and food sovereignty, offering a powerful visual connection to Vanessa's speculative vision of deprogramming dominance.

In another collaboration, Richard Falk's vision of a world where international law *actually* prevails is explored through the illustrative practice of artist Safdar Ahmed. His visual response engages with the themes of justice, social representation, and resistance, drawing on his own experience of creating work that challenges issues of representation and belonging. Ahmed's collaboration deepens the conversation around global governance, offering a visual lens through which to consider the metrics of justice.

The depth of truth and the place for imagination at times of depravity

In an article published in *The Guardian*, the Nigerian British poet and writer Ben Okri coined the term "existential creativity" to refer to "the creativity wherein nothing should be wasted" (Okri 2021). He explained that artists should use their talents and platforms single-mindedly to dedicate themselves to "bringing about the greatest shift in human consciousness and in the way we live." That we, as a species, "can only make a future from the depth of the truth we face now."

Against the backdrop of the climate crisis, the truth for the past 717 days (at the time of writing) has also included a live-streamed genocide. For close to two years, the world has watched countless innocent lives lost, widespread destruction, and immeasurable suffering. This barbaric truth has also exposed the impotence of global interventionist frameworks; scaffolding that supposedly exists to stop atrocities of this nature from occurring and continuing. Instead, we have been shown that these safety mechanisms and our rules-based order are utterly ineffectual against the potency of existing power structures and geopolitical might.

Okri (2021) suggested that the "ability to imagine what we dread most is an evolutionary tool that nature has given us to transcend what we fear." What happens, then, when our greatest fears are already a reality? In the dark shadows of this ongoing cruelty, it is easy to question the place for imagination and creative intervention. Yet history repeatedly demonstrates that art not only aids in collectively processing the unbearable, but can also catalyse radical transformation. As bell hooks puts it: "To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality" (2014, p. 110). It is imperative that the depth of the truth we face now continues to inform our work as artists. The practices we undertake and what we ultimately produce must speak to and honour these unforgiveable realities whilst enriching our understanding of the oppressive systems that enabled them to transpire and must urgently be dismantled.

In this context, the work of *The Parallel Effect* aligns with what Zachary Horton describes as the human tendency to engage with "scalar alterity"—to confront and experiment with different scales of reality that exist beyond our own anthropocentric worldview (Horton, 2021). Horton's critique of humanity's attempts to force nonhuman realms into our logics mirrors the project's goal to create space for other ways of knowing, being, and imagining. Just as Alice learns to engage with new scales in Wonderland, we as creatives involved in *The Parallel Effect* must continue to shift our perception and understanding, challenging the established narratives and

power dynamics that have brought us to this point. Our relation to these unbearable truths must continue to cite the histories that provide context and solutions for alternative pathways to just realities, while amplifying the voices and concerns of those most affected today.

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SENSUOUS MICRO-INTENSITIES

Representations of ambivalence, disgust, and Bad Sex in short fiction

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Abstract

This article examines how the short prose form can express the complexities of “bad sex”—experiences marked by uncertainty, unequal negotiation, ambivalence, or shame (Angel, 2021). Combining creative and critical approaches, I develop the idea of *sensuous micro-intensities* to describe the rhythmic and imagistic techniques through which short fiction conveys the bodily and emotional dimensions of such encounters. Through readings of Mary Gaitskill and Nicole Flattery, alongside my own creative practice, I explore the short story’s capacity to privilege sensation over resolution and to dwell in contradiction. In doing so, the form becomes a site for rendering the rhythmical, corporeal moments in which disgust and desire intertwine—producing a violent immediacy that lingers as an afterimage, extending into social and ethical reflection.

SENSUOUS MICRO-INTENSITIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF AMBIVALENCE, DISGUST, AND BAD SEX IN SHORT FICTION

Eve Nucifora

This article looks at the ways that the short prose form can enable or encourage more nuanced considerations of the complexities of ‘bad sex’—experiences marked by uncertainty, imbalanced negotiations, ambivalence, or shame (Angel 2021). This exploration draws on a confluence of rhythmical and imagistic techniques, which I label “sensuous micro-intensities”, as a methodological approach to exploring the insidious personal and political violence of bad sex and affective, embodied and temporally complex responses that complicate desire and disgust.

In this analysis of bad sex in contemporary short fiction, I consider works from Mary Gaitskill and Nicole Flattery alongside my own creative practice, in which sensuous micro-intensities express ambivalence in complex, and sometimes coercive, sexual scenarios. I consider how short fiction can represent experiences of Bad Sex using fractured images, rhythms and temporalities that speak to corporeal experiences of intimate, minute, memory-forming moments. These micro-intense moments include tropes of intrusive intimacy, the nearly simultaneous turning towards and away, and the mutual imbrication of desire and disgust. I focus on disgust as it appears in short fiction as a bodily, abject response that may signal potential harm, placing it in a complicated and often ambivalent relationship with both desire and consent. Rather than framing ambivalence as a wavering between yes or no, I argue that the dual experience of desire and disgust within characters, and in readers’ own affective responses, opens a different register for thinking about consent: one that acknowledges the body’s warnings even as it registers attraction or attachment. In the examples I consider, the short story becomes a distinctive site for investigating the paradoxes of desire, disgust, and coercion, precisely because of its brevity, intensity, and reliance on elliptical, rhythmical form.

Short fiction is uniquely suited to this form of intensity because, as Angela Carter observed, it has an ‘artistic unity’ that allows sign and sense to fuse in ways unsustainable in longer prose forms (1995, 459). This compression also creates what Julia Kristeva might call a semiotic effect — rhythm, imagery, and affect that ripple through the reader, carrying emotional and ethical weight beyond the surface of the words (Kristeva, 1980, 184). It is precisely these formal qualities—brevity, intensity, and affective resonance—that make short fiction an ideal site for examining the affective and ethical complexities of bad sex.

My exploration of the dual affects of desire and disgust aims to challenge binary debates around female sexuality, which are often reduced to the contrast between sexual liberation and sexual coercion, frequently downplaying or ignoring complexities around the ambiguities of sexual response beyond or in the wake of the negotiation of consent. For Lauren Berlant, desire is not inherently liberatory but ambivalent—shaped by fantasy and often binding subjects to damaging norms under the guise of fulfillment (in Berlant and Edelman, 2014, 13). Disgust, as Sianne Ngai argues, is similarly ambivalent: politically equivocal and aesthetically charged, it reveals the tensions of power and identity without offering clear resolution (Ngai, 2005, 337). The short story’s capacity to hold contradiction, to remain unresolved, and to privilege sensation over resolution, enables a more nuanced and ethically attuned engagement with these tensions.

This present exploration examines the ways sensuous micro-intensities are used in short fiction to express the irrational and the disgusting aspects of desire. I look at ways that desire with its polymorphous, slippery complexities (Ngai 2007, 338), and disgust with its vivid and instantaneous rejection of stimuli (Kristeva 1984, 210), may be folded into the short prose form. Both experiences may be expressed as a coalescence of broken images and rhythms, creating fragmented moments that open, unfold and often develop recursively. This research builds upon a formal preoccupation of many short story writers—namely, the use of fragmentation to craft narratives closer to lived experience (Cox 2006, 34)—to enable exploration and criticism of society’s pervasive harms.

The question of where to place desire in the context of bad sex is a complex one. While the entanglement of desire within accounts of coerced or un-pleasurable sex risks evoking the damaging suggestion that a person may somehow “want” to be violated, this exploration explicitly rejects such a reading, favouring instead dwelling within moments of simultaneous desire and disgust. These moments exist within the larger context of the disgust many feminists feel towards the way patriarchy continues to exploit, take advantage of, and abuse women and their bodies. For example, Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that feminist emotions such as anger and disgust are not merely reactive feelings but are formative orientations that align subjects against the very structures that produce harm—here, the systemic misogyny embedded in patriarchal power. Similarly, Sianne Ngai (2005) suggests that negative affects like disgust are politically revelatory, exposing the fraught tension between the recognition of structural oppression and the constrained agency available to resist it. In this way, feminist disgust becomes not a sign of passivity, but a potent affective response that signals both critique and resistance. This creative research approach proposes that embracing the dual affects of disgust and desire in fiction provides a means through which the reader can explore their relationships to others and their own social potential. The use of sensuous micro-intensities is in part an encouragement for readers to sit with ambivalence—to experience disgust along with desire in a way that is akin to human experience. In her essay on eros in classical literature, Anne Carson argues that desire always contains a kernel of repulsion: ‘pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, inasmuch as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack’ (Carson 1986, 33). This bittersweet edge, she writes, ‘is not incidental, but fundamental to the structure of eros.’

Bad Sex: Insidious violence, coercion, and the primacy of consent

While this article affirms the fundamental importance of consent as a legal and ethical baseline, it also acknowledges that consent alone is not always sufficient to capture the full complexity of sexual experience. Drawing on Katherine Angel’s framing of bad sex as encounters that may be “frightening, shame-inducing, upsetting... sex that, because of its inequalities in pleasure, is of grave importance, even if it is not, strictly speaking, assault” (2021, 27), this paper turns to the ambiguous terrain where consent is present but dissatisfaction, discomfort, or harm still occur. This framing highlights the ambivalent space where desire is entangled with disgust, vulnerability, and inequality. Angel’s exploration of Bad Sex critiques the primacy of dominant consent rhetoric, which—as Angel has suggested in interview—tends to imply that ‘we can only be safe from violence if we know what we want. And the truth is, we don’t always know what we want — not least because a misogynistic culture makes that difficult’ (Krantz 2021). While consent is of course a concern for all genders, this research focuses on women’s experiences because cultural scripts around female sexuality which frequently position women as gatekeepers of desire, coupled with enduring gendered power imbalances, place women

at greater risk of both physical and social harm in contexts of sexual negotiation. Angel writes that formulations and everyday invocations of consent, despite acknowledging that consent must be ongoing, are nonetheless suspicious of tentativeness, instead privileging 'a robust self-knowledge about desire, and a capacity for vocal expression of it' (Angel 2021, 17). She further elaborates:

In urging women to be clear and confident about expressing their sexual desire ... [consent rhetoric] risks denying, wishfully, the fact that women are often punished for the very sexually assertive positions they are being urged to embody. What's more, consent rhetoric doesn't allow for ambivalence, and it risks making impermissible—indeed dangerous—not simply a difficulty in expressing desire, but the experience of not knowing what we want in the first place. (Angel 2021, 18)

Lauren Berlant helps explain this dynamic within the frame of cruel optimism: desire is never directed at an object alone but at the cluster of promises it seems to hold (2010, 93). To desire is to lean toward those promises, an optimistic movement into potential futures. Yet because such promises may include both fulfilment and harm, desire always involves risk: the very attachment that sustains us may also injure us (Berlant 2010, 94; 2011, 1). This research foregrounds disgust as a corporeal, abject response that signals a threat of harm. Disgust emerges at the very moment one leans toward the promises of desire, complicating the attachment by registering bodily warning and recoil. In this sense, disgust unsettles the optimism of consent, exposing the way erotic attachment may mask injury even as it beckons with possibility. Here, bad or disgusting sex is not mapped onto the clean binary of yes or no, nor absorbed into redemptive or punitive arcs for the characters who experience it. Instead, the narrative dwells in ambiguity, contradiction, and the embodied complexity of simultaneously wanting and recoiling. According to Angel, all sex involves play with power and its relinquishment, play with 'the ambiguous space between desire and uncertainty' (Angel 2021, 101). Pleasure, she argues, often requires a negotiation with oneself as much as with another (*ibid.*). This research is concerned with precisely that self-negotiation: the ways disgust and desire act in tandem to complicate self-knowledge and to shape one's decision to consent, even in anticipation of harm.

Kristen Roupenian's viral short story 'Cat Person' demonstrates one kind of Bad Sex. This story has proven to resonate with audiences, which according to Zoe Brigely-Thompson, is due to its confessional tone, akin to essay or narrative non-fiction (Brigely-Thompson 2021, 375). The narrator-protagonist in 'Cat Person' experiences unwanted sex with the character who, up until this point in the story, she had been both attracted to and repulsed by:

Yeah, right, she thought, and then he was on top of her again, kissing her and weighing her down, and she knew that her last chance of enjoying this encounter had disappeared, but that she would carry through with it until it was over. When Robert was naked, rolling a condom onto a dick that was only half visible beneath the hairy shelf of his belly, she felt a wave of revulsion that she thought might actually break through her sense of pinned stasis, but then he shoved his finger in her again, not at all gently this time, and she imagined herself from above, naked and spread-eagled with this fat old man's finger inside her, and her revulsion turned to self-disgust and a humiliation that was a kind of perverse cousin to arousal. (Roupenian 2017)

This moment of Bad Sex cements the protagonist's disgust. Yet even at the height of her revulsion, she registers a flicker of arousal—a 'perverse cousin' to humiliation. There is an

almost jouissance, a pleasure in the very experience of disgust (Hook 2017, 607). This relishing of the harmful or degrading is not unique to 'Cat Person', but recurs across short fiction in distinctive ways. Mary Gaitskill revisits her story 'Secretary' (1989) in the 2023 short story in 'Minority Report'. 'Secretary' follows a young woman, Debby who takes a secretarial position and becomes entangled in a coercive BDSM relationship with her employer. 'Minority Report' is written from Debby's perspective, reflecting three decades later how the dual desire and disgust of the coerced relationship with her employer continued to reverberate throughout her life and shape her intervening sexual relationships. Across the intervening years, she continued to be drawn to masturbatory fantasies around resonant shame. Flattery's protagonist in 'Track' (2020) is financially reliant on her famous older boyfriend, and takes pleasure in humiliating him online. My own characters in 'Solstice' and 'Pain au Chocolat' are similarly entangled in relationships marked by subtle or overt forms of control. They, too, relish in performing or amplifying their disgust, weaponising consent to seed shame in their partner.

Rather than relying on a confessional tone like Roupenian's, Gaitskill's, Flattery's and my own stories use sensuous micro-intensities to explore the contradictions of desire, coercion, and consent. Through these micro-moments, the stories pry open the binary logic of 'yes' or 'no', revealing instead a terrain of ambivalence—where protagonists are aware of power imbalances, yet participate anyway, caught between attraction and resistance. In 'Track', the narrator reflects on her relationship with a mix of affection and unease: 'Physically, we were unmatched. On forms, we were in different age brackets: he ticked one box, I ticked another. But we weren't the sort of people who filled out forms' (Flattery 2020, 85). Similarly, in 'Secretary', the protagonist reflects on her boss's inappropriate comments with both irritation and vulnerability: 'On the one hand, this lawyer was just an asshole. On the other, his comments were weirdly moving, and had the effect of making me feel horribly sensitive' (Gaitskill 1989, 102). These moments—simultaneously tender and repulsive—exemplify how short fiction registers the contradictions of erotic ambivalence. They also expose the insufficiency of contemporary models of consent, which often presume clarity, autonomy, and transactional logic. As Groenveld and Rentschler argue, consent is typically framed in public discourse as a contract between autonomous individuals, ignoring the subtle negotiations that occur within unequal relations of gender and power (2023, 191). This model presumes that women can freely assent or refuse, when their choices may be shaped by coercion, vulnerability, or dependence. Elise Woodard argues for the necessity of recognising bad sex as a way to avoid the collapsing of unpleasant, confusing, or shameful sexual experiences into the category of rape, and legitimising all consensual sex as inherently unproblematic. She writes:

Both proponents and opponents of consent frameworks have failed to fully recognize that consent is, at best, a minimal standard for avoiding rape. On the one hand, this is bad news for consent theorists: it limits consent's powers of moral transformation. On the other hand, it is good news: apparent problems for consent frameworks can be accounted for by acknowledging the existence of Bad Sex. (Woodard 2022, 322)

Angela McRobbie (2011) and Rottenberg, Gill, and Banet-Weiser (2020) further problematises over-reliance on consent rhetoric by arguing that consent promises women empowerment, choice, and agency, but only within structures that sustain inequality. In such a system, consent is valorised as individual choice, while the social conditions that constrain choice remain unacknowledged. Carole Pateman (1980, in Kessel 2020) identifies this paradox clearly:

women are cast as both incapable of consenting and always already consenting, with refusals reinterpreted as agreement.

Short fiction is especially attuned to representing this paradox. Sensuous micro-intensities (SMIs hereafter) function as ruptures or leaks—moments of emotional shock, rhythmical pressure, or bodily intensity—that reveal the processes of micro-consent, micro-harm and micro-pleasure. In staging the simultaneity of desire and resistance, pleasure and shame, these stories echo Swales and Owens' (2020, xvi) reminder that ambivalence is always present: devotion coexists with protest, trust with suspicion. In this sense, the aesthetic strategies of the short stories analysed here not only depict bad sex but also unsettle the primacy of consent itself. Flattery's, Gaitskill's, and my own stories show how moments of coercion are not isolated acts but accumulations of subtle pressures, small surrenders, and intimate betrayals that extend beyond the sexual encounter. Sensuous micro-intensities encourage palpable responses, inviting readers to experience the contradictions of erotic ambivalence alongside the characters. This is evident in the protagonists' awareness of power imbalances—and their decisions to engage anyway. This simultaneous tenderness and repulsion is reminiscent of Kristeva's theory that we return again and again to the abject, despite it being repulsive (Kristeva 1982, 9, 107). The difference here is that the cruelty of myths of desire and relationships of pleasure and power are not readily and immediately repulsive. The harm is pervasive and duplicitous, sneaking its way into minds and bedrooms. This creative exploration is concerned with the types of insidious, compounding minute moments of harm that coalesce within bad sex. The type of aesthetic exploration I am proposing uses SMIs to unfold the processes of consent—the micro-consents and the micro-harms. These micro-intense moments also facilitate an unpacking, a disentangling, of the moments of coercion and other power imbalances that resonate outside moments of sexual activity, but which inform and colour them.

Sensuous micro-intensities

Within the dynamic of ambivalent consent and bad sex, readers may locate sensuous micro-intensities—moments of bodily intensity that encapsulate the mood of a story, hint at its broader meaning, and linger long after the text is finished. Short stories offer a particular site of interest, and I identify SMIs when three elements converge: where there is a heightened sense of rhythm, where the language is focused on the corporeal and sensory, and where attention is drawn to the nexus of disgust and desire.

As a first example of this technique, look to Giada Scodellaro's short story, 'Peach' (2022, 82). 'Peach' is a lyrical meditation on a daughter's anticipatory grief as she cares for her dying mother, using visceral imagery of flesh, decay, and resemblance. Though this story is not centred on coercive relationships, it dwells strongly in ambivalence using bodily intensity to explore the affective contradictions of grief and corporeal realities of care and death. 'Peach' offers a striking example of how fragmentation, rhythm, and visceral focus on the body can evoke emotional complexity. The narrator's repeated refrain, 'When my mother dies', punctuates the story with a staccato rhythm that enacts grief's relentlessness and anticipatory mourning (Scodellaro 2022, 82). This repetition becomes a kind of emotional percussion, echoing through the text and layering the narrator's longing with dread. The story's sensuality emerges through the detailed naming of body parts—both the mother's and the daughter's—as a way of mapping difference, intimacy, and decay. 'My mother has small breasts and full lips. [...] My breasts are larger and my hips are slighter. [...] I do not have my mother's long fingers, long toes, or

the arches of her feet'. This cataloguing of the body is both tender and estranging, evoking a desire to connect and a recognition of irreconcilable difference. In this way, the daughter's gaze becomes abject: she is drawn to the mother's dying body, even as it threatens the boundaries of identity and selfhood.

Julia Kristeva writes in *The Power of Horror* that the abject 'disturbs identity, system, order' and compels us to confront what we must reject to maintain our subjectivity (Kristeva 1982, 4). Sensuous micro-intensities crystallise in moments where disgust and desire converge. In 'Peach', the narrator describes her mother's dying body with a mix of revulsion and affection: 'Her bottom lip is drying and dying, her purple nipples are dead. I touch her back and feel the bump of her spine. It is curved like a peach. Her skin is an accessory, hanging down from her buttocks like loose stockings, soft.' The image of the peach condenses mortality and sensuality, while the soft, sagging skin evokes both vulnerability and grotesque beauty. These moments register conflicting intensities—love, loss, revulsion, longing—and linger with the reader as rhythmic shocks of sensation. Deborah Levy identifies something similar in Paula Rego's drawing *Nursing*, in which a young woman holds the body of an elderly woman. Levy writes that the flower in the young woman's hair signals 'life, sexuality, resilience' even as she tends to an 'elderly, prostrate body' (Levy 2024, 53). Like Rego's drawing, Scodellaro's story dismantles neat binaries of care and desire, tenderness and repulsion, replacing them with raw affective complexity. In this way, 'Peach' demonstrates how SMIs can operate outside the realm of sexual coercion, yet still embody the aesthetic and ethical ambivalence that defines the form.

Sensuous micro-intensities operate as what C.J. Hallett calls the 'framing of empty space'—the breadcrumbs that guide a reader toward the underlying emotional event of a story (1996, 487). Short fiction is uniquely suited to this form of intensity because, as Angela Carter observed, it has an 'artistic unity' that allows sign and sense to fuse in ways unsustainable in longer prose forms (1995, 459). In this sense, SMIs are both aesthetic and ethical: rhythmic shocks of image and sensation that disrupt linear meaning, unsettle patriarchal myths of sex and consent, and invite readers into the lived ambivalence of bodies in relation.

Emotional intensity/ bodily intensity

Building on these definitions, I turn to the short fiction of Mary Gaitskill, Nicole Flattery, and my own creative work to examine how sensuous micro-intensities emerge through moments of erotic ambivalence—where desire and disgust converge in rhythmical, corporeal images that linger beyond the text and shape the reader's emotional and ethical response.

In Nicole Flattery's 'Track', a story about a young woman in a relationship with an older comedian navigating her sense of displacement amongst his life of fame and glittering parties, and grappling with his obsessive listening to a tape recording of his mentally ill mother's maniacal laughter at his childhood performances. The description of a cassette tape captures something both intimate and unsettling:

When we returned to the apartment, he produced it as if he was doing me a favour. The track—its black tentacles coiling around two circular empty eye-sockets, trapped forever in a seventies style playback box—was his lucky talisman. (Flattery 2020, 87)

Similar themes are explored in my short story, 'Pain au Chocolat', about a life model whose attraction toward her boyfriend's female coworker complicates their already controlling

relationship. Here, bodily and sensory detail carries the reader into a scene where desire and disgust intertwine:

My heart beats in my chest and in my ears. My stomach turns to hot, guilty acid. 'I like her, too,' I say. 'She's cool,' I add. Nonchalant. 'She said the two of you hung out the other night,' he says, finishing his beer. Unbuttoning his shirt. He takes up too much space in the kitchen and makes me shrink. ... My boyfriend joins me on the mattress, tears away the blankets that I had curled around my back and replaces them with his too-warm, too-big, too-hard body. I curl tighter into myself. He curls tighter around me. Forces his way inside. I let him fuck me while I lie there and look at the chocolate stains. (Nucifora 2019, 94)

Both passages rely on close bodily attention and sensory evocation to produce what Christine Reynier terms the 'emotional intensity' of short stories. Reynier draws together Virginia Woolf's theories of fiction from her *Collected Essays Vol II*, and writes that for Woolf, short stories have 'honesty' which is made up of inconclusiveness, freedom, and emotional intensity (Reynier 2003, 3). Reynier writes that emotional intensity is a three-fold process, occurring in text, writer, and reader and is derived from sincerity and exactitude: 'the intensity of the text produces an intense emotion in the reader very much like the violent shock produced by a personal emotion, and this comes before any sort of understanding does'. There are two key points I would like to parse out here: first, the idea of emotional intensity as 'violent shock,' and second, the understanding that comes after reading short stories. Emotional intensity like 'violent shock' is achieved in the stories analysed here with the use of close bodily, or corporeal writing. Often, this violent shock of emotion is created with attention to female bodies. Women writers have used and continue to use violence, horror, and repulsion used to draw attention to structural inequalities, falsehoods of gender-norms, and harm towards women (Rapoport 2020, 36). The stories analysed here have subtle aspects of bodily horror and undercurrents of violence, including through the use of the female body, but also through descriptions of intimate objects, as evidenced through the use of the cassette tape in the above excerpt from 'Track'.

The emotional force of these depictions can be understood through Julia Kristeva's notion of the 'eroticisation of the abject' (1982, 55) and Jacques Lacan's *jouissance*, which Derek Hook defines as 'an enjoyment intermingled with suffering ... poised on the verge of the traumatic' (Hook 2017, 607). Characters in these stories often find themselves caught in the ambivalence of being desiring subjects who nonetheless inhabit situations of manipulation or coercion, oscillating between repulsion at and relishing in their own desires. As Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman suggest, sex becomes invested with 'a weighty burden of optimism as well as with an often-overwhelming burden of anxiety,' which may signal our 'too-near approach to what we're driven to enjoy' (Berlant and Edelman quoted in Angel 2021, 102). Sianne Ngai similarly observes that 'the disgusting itself has the power to allure,' not only because of repression but because we are often conscious of our fascination even as we turn away (Ngai 2005, 333).

This desire toward disgust is in part what gives the stories examined here its intensity: a push and pull between disgust and longing, a rhythm of corporeal shock that stretches beyond the pleasurable. This ambivalence is not only immediate but enduring. In 'Minority Report' (2023), written more than thirty years after 'Secretary', Mary Gaitskill revisits the same protagonist, Debby, who continues to dream of her former boss, a lawyer, who once coerced her into a

sexually coercive relationship. The dreams are not simply traumatic flashbacks, but complex, affectively charged returns:

They are erotic dreams even when they are not about sex. That sounds romantic but it is not. The dreams are terrible and disgusting. Or they are banal. I cannot explain them. Even when they are affectionate and tender, the sweetness strikes a weak note amid the dominant noise and adds to my fading impression of a bewildered pain that must, for some reason, be accepted. (Gaitskill 2023)

Here, erotic ambivalence is not resolved but sedimented: its emotional intensity reverberates across decades, surfacing in dreams that are at once intimate, repulsive, and inexplicable. We see Gaitskill return to what Woolf might have described as the delayed after-effect: '[a]fterwards, it is true, the sensation begins to spread in wider rings through our minds ... we are aware of echoes and reflections...we learn through feeling' (Woolf 1966, 7). Emotional intensity in short stories can thus provoke not only an immediate shock but also a lingering resonance, a rhythm born of brevity, repetition, and echo. Though not strictly a short story writer, Jeanette Winterson, whose novels are often comprised of syncopated fragments and narrative bursts marked by temporal or bodily intensity, provides a useful explanation of this kind of emotional and lyrical intensity. She writes, 'in my own fiction I try to drive together lyric intensity and breadth of ideas. It is not possible, not desirable, I think, to maintain lyrical intensity over long stretches' (Winterson 1996, 173). She conceives fiction as the 'realisation of complex emotion' (Winterson 111), considering that through fiction the writer should manage to 'bring back to us starts of feeling that can volt through the thickness of the day' (Winterson, 185). In this way, short stories can condense and crystallise experience in a way that novels, by their expansiveness, can often dilute. This condensing and crystallising quality is crucial to the formation of sensuous micro-intensities: rhythmical, corporeal moments that bind together disgust and desire, delivering both a violent immediacy and an afterimage that extends into social and ethical reflection.

Rhythm

In my own story, 'Solstice', about a woman reflecting upon a formerly coercive relationship, rhythmic repetition builds a tension between intimacy, violence, and longing:

She wanted to take handfuls of his hair and rip it out of his pink scalp.
She wanted her fingers to tread carefully in the strands, to take his hurt away.
She wanted to scratch his face. Let her fingernails scream that it wasn't fair that she should have to comfort him.
He was the cruel one. The bad one. The violent one. The one who should be begging her to stay. (Nucifora 2021, 154)

The rhythm here lies not only in the repeated "She wanted", but also in the escalation from tenderness to aggression, in the alternation between comfort and violence, intimacy and refusal. These repetitions form sensuous micro-intensities: rhythmic beats that punctuate short fiction and leave a lasting affective trace as affective impressions, breadcrumbs to an emotional state. The clipped, staccato phrases accumulate with a percussive force, embodying the 'violent shock' that Christine Reynier identifies as the hallmark of emotional intensity in short fiction—an immediate, bodily jolt that precedes rational understanding (Reynier 2003, 3).

Nicole Flattery's 'Track' similarly uses rhythm to register ambivalence and power dynamics through the repetition of short, declarative sentences:

My boyfriend was famous and I wasn't. ... I loved my boyfriend. Our back and forth reminded me of black-and-white films I hadn't seen. (Flattery 2020)

The recurrence of 'my boyfriend' acts like a refrain, a beat to which the text keeps returning. Each iteration slightly shifts its meaning, moving from statement to affirmation to comparison to mismatch. The rhythm accumulates as both a structure of thought and an affective pulse, mirroring the protagonist's ambivalence: attraction, assertion, diminishment.

Later in the story, Flattery uses clipped, staccato phrases to evoke emotional dislocation and performative intimacy:

During our first few weeks together, he encouraged me to act. I looked like something audiences might want. I didn't have a problem with the parts, but it was the rooms I had to go into to get the parts. It was the places I had to stand to get the parts. Before I walked in, I told myself 'get it right, get it right' and I froze.' (Flattery 2020)

These moments, like those in 'Solstice', embody rhythmic readings which resonate with Woolf's 'emotional intensity' which, she argues is achieved through 'some regular, recurrent beat' that produces a shock in the reader that precedes understanding' (Woolf 1966, 6). It is rhythm that makes intensity memorable, lodging itself in both body and memory. Woolf's understanding that rhythm may be an ethical force, as explored by Helen Rydstrand, is grounded in her belief that rhythm can elicit a mimetic, bodily response in the reader or listener—a response which precedes rational thought and has the potential to shape behaviour and emotion. As Rydstrand notes, Woolf's playful suggestion that music could resolve social discord reflects a deeper conviction that artistic rhythm can influence the rhythms of everyday life (2020, 151). This is what makes rhythm an ethical as well as aesthetic force: it embeds itself, resurfaces later, and provokes reflection.

In other words, rhythm forces attention: by circling back, by stressing certain beats, it creates a heightened awareness that can open onto social and ethical thought. This echoes Woolf's insistence that the intensity of short fiction produces 'echoes and reflections' (Woolf 1966, 7) that spread after reading, teaching us 'through feeling' (Woolf 1966, 9). Helen Rydstrand's discussion of 'difficult rhythm' clarifies this dual function. She distinguishes between rhythm we can 'tap to' (like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony's opening motif) and rhythm we can only sense at the level of a whole form (Rydstrand 2020, 73). Literary rhythm holds together paradoxes—unity and fragmentation, similarity and difference—and thus mirrors the tensions of lived experience. Rydstrand proposes that 'rhythmic mimesis' enacts 'an innate link between literary rhythm and the "real" rhythms of life itself', creating an echo between text and world (Rydstrand 2020, 47).

Sensuous micro-intensities operate by weaving syntactic rhythm (repetition of words and sounds) with narrative rhythm (patterns of imagery and affect). In the passages above, rhythm dramatises ambivalence, the push and pull between tenderness and violence, and makes that ambivalence unforgettable. It is precisely because rhythm mimics the oscillations of life, as Rydstrand (2020) notes, that it allows short fiction to connect aesthetic form with ethical resonance. Taken together, these examples suggest that rhythm in short fiction is not merely a stylistic flourish but a structuring device that enables SMIs to resonate beyond the page.

By condensing affect into patterned beats, rhythm turns fleeting sensations into something memorable, echoing in the reader long after the story ends. This echo is what allows rhythm to bridge aesthetics and ethics: it translates private shocks of desire, shame, or disgust into recognisable social patterns. In this way, SMIs not only shape how stories are felt but also how they are thought, inviting readers to connect the intimate details of narrative with broader cultural and political structures.

Erotic ambivalence

By foregrounding the simultaneity of desire and disgust, Flattery and Gaitskill's respective stories show how erotic ambivalence is not simply a thematic concern but an aesthetic force. Through sensuous micro intense moments of rhythm, repetition, and bodily metaphor, short stories can render ambivalence palpable to the reader, allowing the experience of coercive and complex intimacies to be felt at the level of form as well as content.

In Nicole Flattery's 'Track', the following passage is steeped in bodily intensity that hints at the duality of desire and disgust within and surrounding women's bodies:

I watched her daily, peeking out warily from my place in the cupboard, drool pooling around my mouth, as if all the water wanted to leave my body. They tried to make her wholesome, a fellow professor, but she had certain aspects that couldn't be contained—her breasts, her lips. I figured she was from Miami or LA or one of those places, had seen a lot of ceilings... One afternoon, I came home and heard them having sex. It wasn't a secret. I was supposed to hear. I stood in the hallway and tried to guess the position. Afterwards, we went out. All three of us got dressed up and went out. In the cab, he told her she was the first person he'd played the track for. I went into the restaurant bathroom to throw up but found I couldn't. On the bathroom floor, I felt my whole body shrink, like it could fit in a suitcase, be placed on a baggage carousel. (Flattery 2020, 97)

This example foregrounds a corporeal messiness—the drool, the shrinking body, the sense of being both drawn in and repelled. These images speak to what Elizabeth Grosz refers to as the slipperiness of desire: 'sexual desire is slippery, just as sexuality itself is slippery, refusing to be confined to borders' (Grosz 1994, iii). The word 'slippery' evokes not only desire's elusiveness, but also its seepage across boundaries, its moist viscosity echoing the embodied acts themselves. In this way, Flattery's story demonstrates how desire is represented through sensuous micro-intensities: rhythmic repetition of imagery and sound, metaphorical evocations of bodies and their porousness.

If desire is elusive, disgust is invasive. This second aspect of erotic ambivalence can be understood through affective and aesthetic lenses, as well as through its relation to abjection (Kristeva 1982). According to Sianne Ngai, 'disgust takes us closer to political potential than any other negative affect. It is an affect that floods in, unannounced and profound.' (Ngai 2005, 337). According to William Ian Miller, disgust is a combination of the sensation of nausea instigated by 'uneasiness, panic, of varying intensity, that attends the awareness of being defiled' (1997, 8).

Disgust exists in a complicated relationship with desire. They are not always equal opposites—ostensibly, something or someone could be so disgusting as to banish any feeling of desire. De Jong et al. (2013, 247) suggest that disgust is focused on 'the border of the self' and the physical

places at which the borders of the body are opened or breached, namely the mouth and vagina. As well as having key roles in sexual activity, these organs are associated with bodily excretions, which 'are among the strongest disgust elicitors.' They posit that the critical questions are not around how disgust interferes with sexual desire, 'but rather how people succeed in having pleasurable sex at all' (ibid, 249).

'Secretary', 'Minority Report', 'Track', 'Solstice' and 'Pain au Chocolat' explore the notions of enjoyment beyond disgust, as well as the ways that disgust may proceed, or even lead to, desire by questioning desiring subjects' 'enjoyment in the margins' or 'voluptuous contempt' (Hook 2017, 689). Each story is narrated by a female protagonist who is disgusted by a male counterpart's treatment of her and his abuse of a position of relative power. In doing so, the disgust of the female narrator-protagonists hints at the larger disgust of societal attitudes and inequalities. For example, in 'Track':

He said I didn't deserve clothes and he was probably correct. In the wardrobe I found his favourite coat and slipped in a printout of the most horrific post on the forum. I also included my fortune from the fortune cookies we had eaten earlier. I guess I still wanted us to have open communication. I couldn't let go. I could never let go. I didn't know how. A part of me was disgusted by how he treated me and another part was profoundly grateful... He had a lot of unusual ideas. 'Feel that,' he said, grasping at my hips and thighs, 'that's the texture of rejection right there. (ibid., 174)

The protagonist names her own disgust, but admits gratitude alongside it, laying bare the push-pull of erotic ambivalence.

Mary Gaitskill's 'Secretary' is a seminal short story that exemplifies the exploration of erotic ambivalence, where desire is entangled with shame, disgust, and pain. Her characters often embody both *jouissance*—a pleasure that borders on suffering and Cruel Optimism. As D'Erasmus (2015) observes, 'desire and damage have long intertwined, an inseparable couple, in the work of Mary Gaitskill'. In 'Secretary', Debby enters a sado-masochistic relationship with her employer. While her consent is ambiguous, she exhibits a complex awareness of her shame and a sense of agency, even within a clear power imbalance. Gaitskill revisits Debby decades later in 'Minority Report', a literary return to this knowing/not knowing and wanting/not wanting. Reflecting on Debby's desire to humiliate herself, Gaitskill notes in interview that

It may be accurately described as self-hatred; however, looked at less judgmentally, it's an ardent and truthful desire to represent, with her own being, the distorted world around her and inside her...Hunger for contact underlies her perversity and to some extent drives it. (Treisman 2023)

This hunger for contact, even through perversity, underscores the paradox of seeking intimacy through pain. As Gaitskill (1994) notes, 'Pain can be an experience that defies codification.' Her characters' pursuit of desire, despite the knowledge of potential harm, is central to her interrogation of power, intimacy, and the limits of consent. Gaitskill's minimalist realism, according to Lauren Berlant, 'is cerebral, representing thinking as central to living; visceral, located in affect-laden scenes of intimacy and aversion; passionate, about pain and survival. It is feminist work, where the wounds of romance feel familiar and confirming to the female characters, in contrast to male confusion, surprise, or resentment' (Berlant 2004, 268). The following demonstrates this duality of intimacy and aversion, with Gaitskill's aesthetic economy and viscosity:

He took my hand with an indifferent aggressive snatch. It felt like he could have put his hand through my rib cage, grabbed my heart, squeezed it a little to see how it felt, then let go. 'Come into my office,' he said. (Gaitskill 1989, 99)

The image of the snatched hand is punctuated by the curt 'come into my office'—this passage is characteristic of Gaitskill's work, where stretches of description are steeped in ironic dullness. Or, rather, where dullness expressed through the ironic voice of the narrator-protagonist. These slow the narrative so that the moments of intensity are pronounced, even when expressed in the same flat, disengaged tone. For example, after the lawyer first assaults Debby, she notes that she is not shocked. She is repulsed, and yet states:

When I went home that night, everything was the same. My life had not been disarranged by the event except for a slight increase in the distance between me and my family. My behind was not even red when I looked at it in the bathroom mirror...But when I got into bed and thought about the thing, I got excited. I was more excited, in fact, than I had ever been in my life. That didn't surprise me, either. I felt a numbness; I felt that I could never have a normal conversation with anyone again. I masturbated slowly, to put off the climax as long as I could. But there was no climax, even though I tried for a long time. Then I couldn't sleep. (ibid, 104)

Importantly, there is a repetition of the abuse cycle throughout the story that contributes to its narrative rhythm. Debby is derided, assaulted, momentarily confused or hurt, and then self-pleasures before the cycle repeats. The story begins with Debby in a typing class and is punctuated with the rhythm of the typewriter, which echoes in the story's flat, percussive tone.

In Nicole Flattery's 'Track', a young woman is in an ambivalent relationship with an older, well-known comedian. He treats her poorly, makes fun of her in front of his friends, and together they listen to a horrifying track of his mentally unwell mother laughing maniacally:

He pressed play and manic laughter burst from the lips of the ancient tape. 'My mother was mentally ill,' he repeated as though he was strangely proud of it, as if it legitimised him... I imagined the comedian as a child, pirouetting desperately through his act, loosening an imaginary adult tie, preparing for a lifetime of being loved. A 12-year-old channelling his frantic and obsessive energy in the basement, as the laughter drowned out the sounds from the other world directly above him. (Flattery 2020, 88)

The narration in 'Track', like in Gaitskill's work, is marked by a flat, ironic psychic distance—its irreverence and lack of emotional introspection create a surface onto which the reader can project, imagine, and feel. This narrative flatness generates a rhythmic baseline that allows moments of bodily or emotional intensity to rupture with greater force, producing what Barthes might call *bliss*: a violent, affective pleasure that emerges when narrative coherence is disrupted but not destroyed (Barthes 1975, 8, 51–52). In this way, the text becomes writerly, inviting the reader not just to interpret but to *experience* ambivalence—through rhythm, repetition, and rupture. There is at once something clinical and transparently emotive that imbues the story with 'violent shocks' of emotion and allows the reader to experience the story as we experience life—simultaneously on some level aware of the social structures, invisible forces moving around us, but also living in real flesh and blood bodies. The following passage from Flattery provides an example:

But we started going out. That's where we went wrong. Once summer ended, we got dressed up and went out. That first night, before it all became usual, we went somewhere monstrous and glassy, a carpet rolled out like a plush red tongue. Atmospherically, this restaurant was not unlike a morgue in its coldness and we sat solemnly at a round table as if preparing for a seance. My boyfriend was seated far away from me, almost on a different continent, and he glanced over occasionally to see if I was still upright. He loves me, I thought. I examined the cutlery, my reflection in the cutlery, everyone's reflection in the cutlery. They were so easy to agree with, these well-dressed people! I had a thrilling, weightless feeling as if I had taken several painkillers. I remembered I had taken several painkillers. I understood everything. (Flattery 2020, 87)

This passage not only hints at the narrator's ambivalent relationship, but also evokes SMIs, creating a tension between the sense evoking details and the abstract thought process of the protagonist. Rhythmically, the strange and alluring images are punctuated by the repetition and varying sentence lengths. The precariousness of the protagonist's situation resonates throughout.

Sensuous micro-intensities: feeling the personal and political

Through the use of sensuous micro-intensities, the short prose form presents an ideal medium for the creative exploration of social questions around unwanted or Bad Sex. Importantly for contemporary feminism, the short story is, according to Ellen Burton Harrington, 'open ended and symbolic, even as a form itself seems to defy facile definition... The modern short story, which de-emphasises plot or removes it entirely, moves toward feminism by relinquishing the all-important notion of a linear narrative' (2008, 8). This freedom from linearity creates space for micro-intense moments: it opens the short prose form to repetition of image and sound and allows these moments to sink into the memory of readers.

Because the short story is necessarily brief, it privileges intensity over expansiveness; it compels concentration, both in the writing and the reading, producing affective shocks that reverberate beyond the text. According to Paul March-Russell, 'the short story has acted at various times as a resource for writers to contest the dominant beliefs in social progress and formal cohesion' (Paul March-Russell quoted in Sacido-Romero and Lojo-Rodríguez 2018, 232). The very compression and ellipticism of the form means that what is left unsaid becomes as powerful as what is spoken, making it especially apt for staging the unspeakable dimensions of sexuality, ambivalence, and power.

As Woolf suggests, it is the moments of intensity that spread in wider rings through our minds, reaching remoter sensations and allow us as readers to become aware of echoes and reflections (Woolf 1966, 7) of the world around us. Sensuous micro-intensities invite the reader to construct the world in which they are experiencing the story conceptually—building the context around the text, resonating with all that vibrates outside of it. SMIs offer a way to examine the unexaminable.

To return to Angela Carter's words on the powers of the short form: 'sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative' (1995, 459). This fusing is sharpened by brevity, which allows rhythm and image to carry disproportionate weight and ethical charge. The fusion of sign and sense allow us to

look closely. Not necessarily to resolve, but to embrace ambivalence and irresolution. As Ailsa Cox writes 'I suspect that the short story writer's compulsion is similar to that of the poet—to struggle with human complexities for which ... explanatory discourse never quite account' (2006, 158). According to Cox, 'the kind of complexity that fascinates masters of the short story is not captured by using more and more words but by using just the right ones. Good stories, like good poems, don't pontificate. The best stories reflect a conscientious effort to provide a structure and a syntax for feelings unspeakable until just the right rhythm makes what was loose and lying around clench and cluster into a meaningful pattern' (ibid.). Like poetry, short fiction relies on rhythm and elliptical suggestion rather than exhaustive description, which makes it especially capable of crystallising experiences of ambivalence, disgust, and desire into images that endure. Because of the inherent complexities in discussing desire towards disgust, or turning towards harm or coercion, the short story is an ideal medium for speaking the unspeakable, creating fragmented and authentic moments which develop recursively within text and reader.

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About the author

Eve Nucifora is a PhD candidate and early-career academic at the University of Canberra, and a writer of short fiction living on Ngannawal country. Her research investigates how short prose can articulate erotic ambivalence—where desire and disgust converge in depictions of Bad Sex (Angel, 2021), coercion, and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). Through fractured imagery, disrupted rhythm, and compressed temporality, her creative-critical work explores the intimate textures of bodily experience. Eve has presented her research at the European Network of Short Fiction Research (ENSFR) and AAWP, and her stories appear in *Axon* and *Meniscus*.



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THE NIGHTMARE SEQUENCE CANBERRA LAUNCH

In conversation with Safdar Ahmed

Bilquis Ghani

University of Canberra

Abstract

This work features a conversation between Dr Safdar Ahmed and Dr Bilquis Ghani about Ahmed's co-authored book, *The Nightmare Sequence*. This was a public talk event to launch the book, hosted at Smith's Alternative in Canberra. *The Nightmare Sequence* is a compilation of poems authored by Omar Sakr and sketches by Ahmed. Together, this creative work presents a powerful critique of the media's complicity in perpetuating narratives that justify occupation and violence against the Palestinian people. In this conversation, Ghani spoke to Ahmed about the genesis of the book and their own roles in both silencing and speaking up about injustice when we see it. Ahmed speaks to the inspirations and political contexts for some of the key images in the book (re-presented alongside this dialogue). The conversation offers the thinking behind *The Nightmare Sequence* and all that we can learn from the creative process in speaking truth to power.

THE NIGHTMARE SEQUENCE, CANBERRA LAUNCH, WITH SAFDAR AHMED

Bilquis Ghani

On a cold winter evening in Canberra in June 2025, I sat with Dr Safdar Ahmed at Smith's Alternative to talk about his recently released book, *The Nightmare Sequence*. Ahmed and his co-author, poet Omar Sakr, have curated a book of poetry and illustrations that responds creatively and powerfully to the latest Israeli genocidal attacks on Gaza that started on 7 October 2023.

The work speaks to the regime of silence and fear that critique of Israel inspires, with accusations of antisemitism all too readily deployed. *The Australian* newspaper's national art critic, Christopher Allen, whose article 'Creative Australia's word salad defense can't hide its failures' (judiciously shared by Ella Dreyfus, Head of Public Programs at National Art School, on her Instagram), is but one example. According to Allen, Khaled Sabsabi is anti-Semitic, and Creative Australia should not have reinstated him and Michael D'Agostino as the Australian Venice Biennale creative team. 'It is entirely inappropriate', writes Allen, 'especially at this time, for our official representative in Venice to be associated with anti-Semitism and to show work that even appears to flirt with the celebration of Islamic terrorism'.¹

That there is absolutely no evidence that Sabsabi holds anti-Semitic views, goes unquestioned. That calling Sabsabi anti-Semitic by virtue of his faith and ethnicity, or because he spoke out about Gaza, is inherently Islamophobic, or that the weaponisation of such a heinous worldview that anti-Semitism represents actually does more damage to Jewish peoples than good—all this goes uncriticised. Yale Professor of Philosophy Jason Stanley writes, in a *Guardian* article titled, 'My life has been defined by genocide of Jewish people. I look on Gaza with concern',

. . . in its desire for revenge, Israel is engaging in the mass killing of innocent civilians, largely children, which may spiral even further out of control. Israel claims it is not targeting civilians. But what does such a claim mean when Israel is conducting such a fierce bombing of an urban area as dense as Gaza? For those of us who are Jewish, and particularly for those of us who bear the trauma of our own ancestors' genocide, it is time to face the consequences of these actions, not only for the Palestinians, whose tragedy is obvious, but for ourselves . . . Israel's actions are providing fertile ground for preexisting antisemitism to grow more virulent. Anyone who denies that this is happening is not paying attention.²

More recently, Jillian Segal AO, appointed Australia's Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in July of 2024, released her 'policy-oriented framework for government and Australian community'.³ The report has had no shortage of critique⁴ with its endangerment of artistic, journalistic and academic freedoms and its recommendation to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism which conflates critiques Israel and Zionism with anti-Semitism. The Jewish Council of Australia have also spoken out against the Special Envoy's plans, noting, 'The Council criticised the plan's emphasis on surveillance, censorship, and punitive control over the funding of cultural and educational institutions: measures straight out of Trump's authoritarian playbook. We caution that some of the recommendations—including visa powers and judicial inquiries into student activity — risk censoring criticism of Israel, deepening racism, and failing to meaningfully address the root causes of antisemitism'.⁵

The examples above offer just a small sample of routes through which narratives are constructed and others erased. Through art, *The Nightmare Sequence* sheds light on the frustration, double speak, and censorship experienced by Palestinians and their allies. Art speaks to a common humanity from a specific subjectivity; the message is interpreted through the experiences of the viewer. In what follows, I present the transcript of the conversation between myself and Ahmed, edited for clarity and length, about the role of art in moments of crisis, such as the one we are seeing unfold in Gaza today.

Indeed, the praxis of making art is a responsive and dynamic process—responsive to context as much as it is shaped by it. Sociology from art praxis, which I have developed as a way of thinking through the role of art through crisis, accounts for the ecology of art's production—physical spaces, values and norms, contextual realities, artists' intentions, relationship with audiences—a form of sociological enquiry. In doing so, through art, I consider the social within the complex of war, fear and hope. As an ecology of art, sociology from art praxis perceives cultural products and the processes of their creation and evolution as a part of the social and cultural landscape. Combined with a focus on the artists' subjectivity as a dynamic and changing presence, sociology from art praxis resists the quantification and reduction of experiences to their constituent parts and distances the phenomena of art from being merely a social by-product. It is this approach and the earlier outlined context, through which the conversation below unfolds.

BILQUIS: Good evening, my name is Bilquis Ghani and I'm in conversation tonight with Safdar Ahmed. I think as we begin this evening's conversation, a conversation that will no doubt traverse the long histories of oppression, I want to acknowledge the Ngunnawal peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands upon which we meet tonight. Aboriginal peoples in this country have for a very long time been all too familiar with the struggle against oppression, against erasure, against reductive narrative-making. It's a struggle that is seen and witnessed in lives lost, in land lost, in connections broken, communities displaced. Despite the ongoing efforts to erase we continue to be enriched by these knowledges despite every attempt at their erasure. Indeed, this always was and always will be Aboriginal land and I pay my respects and offer my humble gratitude to their elders past and present and to those first nations for joining us here tonight as well.

We come together this evening for the Canberra launch of *The Nightmare Sequence* by Omar Sakr and Safdar Ahmed. Omar is an Australian poet, novelist and essayist. Omar's poetry penetrates the mind, it puts in black and white a raw and painful reality. Indeed as Palestinian-American poet George Abrahm says in the introduction of this book, 'Sakr has written a love letter to Palestinians by meeting us here in the depths of our terrors'. He adds, 'Sakr's speaker is unafraid to confront the ways genocide shapes our most intimate social relations.' Indeed, reading the book, I had to put it down several times and come back to it, which, I think we'll talk about, is also a privilege.

Omar was unable to join us this evening but I have co-author Dr Safdar Ahmed here, who is a multi-award-winning artist, writer, musician, scholar and cultural worker. Safdar's graphic novel, *Still Alive*, a work of graphic journalism which highlights Australia's cruel policies towards refugees, won the 2022 Multicultural Award and the Book of the Year in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and multiple other awards as well, but I didn't want to embarrass you too much, Safdar.

Safdar did the illustrations in the book. The coming together of these creative minds has produced the work that speaks the truth that we're often reluctant to see or we struggle to articulate into words. So I think without further ado we'll jump in. Safdar, good evening.

SAFDAR: Hi.

BILQUIS: I think we might just start as most book launches do, I suppose, with a bit of a question around the birth of the book. I'd like to ask Saf what compelled this book, *The Nightmare Sequence*, now and what does the title signify to you? I know that in the book Omar in one of his poems of the same name, he says 'the nightmare learns the dark adapts'.

SAFDAR: Omar and I have been friends for a few years and we often said it would be nice to collaborate so the opportunity came up in the wake of what was happening in Gaza. Omar was writing poems and sharing them to Instagram. Each poem had genocide in the title and I thought they were very powerful, so I was sharing them, as were thousands of other people, online. Then we thought, now's a good time to collaborate, particularly on something that might hopefully make a difference. *The Nightmare Sequence*, I should point out, is a fundraiser, all royalties that we earn are going to Palestinian charities. So we got together and decided to collaborate. He'd already written about 30 poems by that time so I had to think about how I was going to illustrate, visualise and intellectually respond to the images from Gaza.

My approach was not simply to try and interpret what's happening there, but to consider what it means to view images of genocide here, from a distance, as a settler, as a migrant in Australia and what our responsibility is as citizens of this country. A country that staunchly supports Israel to the point of selling weapons parts that goes into the fighter jets that are bombing and killing Palestinian families. So I think for Omar, as well, that was a strong dimension of this collaboration. It wasn't just an attempt to interpret what's happening there but also to think self-critically and self-reflexively about our responsibility as witnesses here.

The Nightmare Sequence: I like the title. The poem is very powerful and I also feel as though the genocide which has gone on now for over 600 days feels like a waking nightmare that we can't really escape from. A lot of that connects with a feeling of despair at our government's inaction and what it means to be continuously told this isn't a genocide. The gaslighting that we get from our political and media establishments is very difficult to take and that's a strong part of the book—thinking critically and reflecting on that.

BILQUIS: You mentioned that a lot of—well, all of Omar's poems, except for *The Nightmare Sequence*—ends with ' . . . in the genocide'. Are you able to expand on that a little bit?

SAFDAR: That was Omar's creative decision so he'd be best to expand on it, but for me it underscores that this word genocide is so absent from the Australian Government's entire response to what's happened since October 7th, since the whole thing began, despite the fact that many experts said there was a plausible genocide; despite the South African submission to the International Court of Justice; despite the UN Special Rapporteur to Palestine, Francesca Albanese, saying that there are the conditions for genocide; despite all the experts and genocide scholars saying unanimously that this is a genocide. Despite all that evidence—the unwillingness and silence, of our politicians to use the 'G word', and the incapacity of our media to repeat what those people are saying, is deafening.

BILQUIS: He uses—it's really interesting, he uses everyday mundane things like writing or product placement, Father's Day, Mother's Day, 'in the genocide'. Things that we experience

every day in our lives, but frames it within the ongoing genocide that's happening. I think a lot of us will probably relate to what that feels like—we go about our days, we go to work and sometimes we might hit mute, as some of your images show, but the genocide's still happening. There's this thing that's still going on that nobody wants to talk about, as you say.

The book blends illustration and poetry, and there's explanations in the back as well. Can I ask why you chose that hybrid form?

SAFDAR: Just because we thought it would be interesting to blend the poems and the images, and I should point out I didn't see this as a process of illustrating Omar's poems. In fact, once I realised I was contributing to this book I made a point of not reading his poems so as to not be too influenced by them and to think and formulate my own approach. That was quite a challenge. As I said before, a lot of it was about trying to puncture the silences and the things that are being suppressed or not adequately shared or represented—so should we talk about the images?

BILQUIS: Yeah, definitely—

SAFDAR: There's a group of images called 'Genocide Culture' which was an attempt to point out that a lot of the evidence that the South African lawyers submitted to the International Court of Justice was not just showing the genocidal statements of Israel's political and military leaders, but the genocidal actions and sentiments of the soldiers, that this is a widespread feeling if you like, and that this comes from the colonial experience, that this saturates culture, that Australia is implicated in that, that genocide isn't just a legal category. So, there is one picture in the book which talks about Australia's role in a massacre—actually ANZAC troops who massacred the men of a Palestinian village during the first World War. My image draws upon the Light Horsemen to remind readers of Australia's contribution, our role in the British imperial project in colonial Palestine [1]. Interestingly, Paul Daley wrote a book about that massacre, *The Massacre at Sarafand al-Amar*, and he pointed out – I think the book's called *Beersheba* – he points out that the attitude of those soldiers was not that different to the attitude they had back in their homes, in rural Australia, where they would have gone on expeditions or known of expeditions that were killing Aboriginal people. Their attitude to Arab villagers and the Bedouin, the Palestinians that they encountered, would have been very similar. So that's a parallel. [2-4]

BILQUIS: You talk about virality, how some of those images depict photos that actually went viral and there's something about that virality that's quite powerful?

SAFDAR: Absolutely. The Gaza genocide has often been described as the most documented genocide, as a livestream genocide. That's because if you're following Palestinian social media accounts, and I followed it mostly on Instagram, and Palestinian citizen journalists like Bisan Owda, you're seeing more information perhaps and more visual records than we've experienced. I think the trauma of that, of seeing dying children on your phone in the morning, when you wake up, and checking again in the evening and seeing pretty much the same thing and seeing it every day—this horrific accumulation of images. So they're being shared, they're being spread around. There are videos that Israeli soldiers had themselves uploaded to the internet often in celebration of the schools that they were bombing and the mosques and the hospitals and the war crimes that they were in the process of committing.

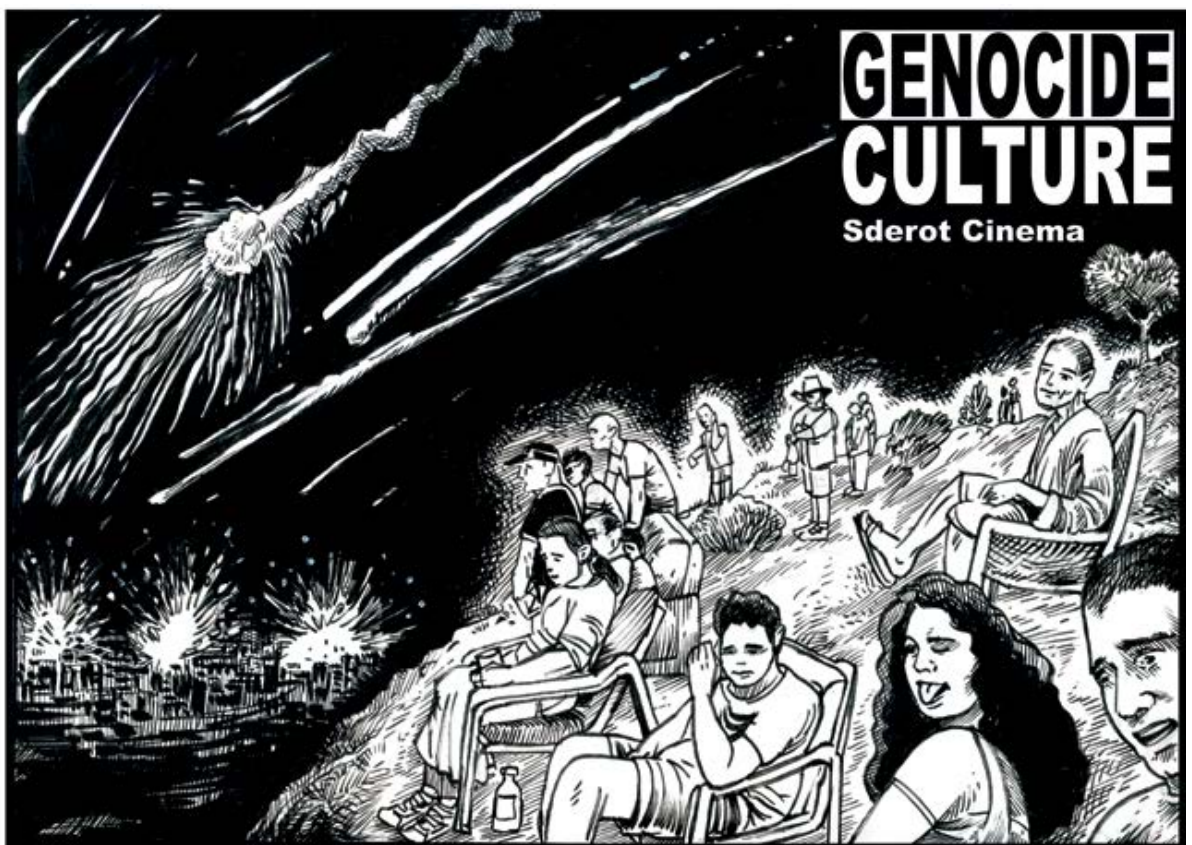
So this has been an experience that we've all shared through social media and some of my images respond to that. The internet can be a horrible dark place, but it's not just that, it's also a

GENOCIDE CULTURE



Sarafand
al-Amr
1918

¹ Safdar Ahmed,
image from
*The Nightmare
Sequence*, p. 38.



2-4 Safdar Ahmed, images from *The Nightmare Sequence*, pp. 21, 60, 66.

place where we form community, where we can create new bonds of solidarity, where people out of great love and grief can share pictures that affect them. So, I was really touched by the images that went viral, particularly which showed the humanity of Palestinians. Often, they are images of tragedy, such as the killing of Hind Rajab, the young five-year-old who was shot with her whole family by a tank [5] or the image of Khaled Nabhan who was the grandfather whose home was bombed. There's footage of him cradling and dancing with the dead body of his grandchild, Reem. [6]

Those images were being shared and people were drawing them and doing amateur portraits of them. Sometimes they were AI but sometimes they were very simple portraits, by artists and amateurs, and I found that really inspiring. A very loving tribute and, if you, like an informal counter-discourse to the dehumanisation of Palestinian people, particularly the image of Khaled cradling his granddaughter. That counteracts the constant stream of dehumanising images that we've all received about Arab men as violent and misogynistic and intolerant and hard-edged and so on. So those viral images I felt deserved a tribute. I contributed portraits in the same spirit, drawings the likeness of Hind Rajab, Khaled Nabhan and others.

BILQUIS: When we were talking earlier, we talked about the responsibility and the complicity that we sometimes feel and sometimes also—and we've mentioned it briefly—but sometimes we do swipe or mute or don't look. It's the privilege of switching off the news when you've had a rough day. We talked about that as well. I'd like to come back to that and I might just read—

5 Safdar Ahmed, image of Hind Rajab, p 77, and
6 'Soul of my Soul', p. 120, from *The Nightmare Sequence*.



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SAFDAR: You want to read it? Yeah, great.

BILQUIS: Oh please, go ahead. I think we were both thinking the same thing.

SAFDAR: We were both thinking the same thing. Time to read a poem.

So this is one which I think beautifully captures what you were just saying. It's the first one in the book called 'Writing Poems in the Genocide' (p. 3):

Some will mutter
This is not your genocide
To write poems about
Not your relatives killed and killed and killed –
Thinking being Arab
Or of the Ummah means I am writing
From the position of the dead.
Oh Habibi, how I wish that were true.
I am writing from the trigger
Of empire. It was not this poem
That paid for the blast, but another.

BILQUIS: That line, writing from the trigger of empire, I think that really resonated and stuck with me. Do you want to speak to that a little about that? I know it's not your poem...

SAFDAR: Sure, absolutely. This poem relates to why I drew Albo⁶ and Penny Wong as missiles [7], because they've obstinately denied any Australian connection to the weapons that have been used in Gaza. They've done this in bad faith, saying we don't sell arms to Israel as in we perhaps don't directly sell missiles to Israel, but we are selling the parts that contribute to the supply chain that goes into these fighter planes. So, yeah, what can you say? The suppression of our despair as Australian citizens is hard to wrap words around. I feel as though we're living in an alternative reality. I must have been a stupid and naïve person because I thought international law meant more to the Australian Government, to my government.

I thought if Israel was committing a full-blown full-on genocide that it would be called as such and recognised for what it is. But the characterisation of Israel as this friend and ally, this inability to see that Israel has committed the most abhorrent



7 'Albo & Wong as missiles', p. 11, from *The Nightmare Sequence*.

crime humanity is capable of, and not just doing it reluctantly, but loving it, with soldiers celebrating their actions. For our own government to just breeze on like nothing has happened is very hard to take.

BILQUIS: I mean that's the nightmare...

SAFDAR: Yeah, that's the nightmare—exactly. . .

BILQUIS: —It's like crying in a pool of water—you know the sound's coming out but it's not getting anywhere. You can see it, you can see the bubbles but somehow it doesn't seem to get to where it needs to get to. I think that's the nightmare sequence. When I was reading this book, I was thinking of it and I think a lot of what your images show and Omar's poems depict, it's written within the positionality of, as you say, bearing witness, of watching and seeing it unfold which I think is really, really powerful.

SAFDAR: One little point is that I don't think we're alone in this. I mean in the UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer was himself a international lawyer, who tried to prosecute the Serb leadership for genocide against Croatia, so he knows what the legal definition of genocide is. So too does David Lammy, another member of the British Government. They know exactly what genocide is but they're pretending it isn't . . . so we're not alone in this feeling of frustration towards those in power, obviously.

BILQUIS: I did want to come back to your reference to genocide culture. In the back of the book, when you talk about some of the images, you say it's time for a serious moral reckoning. Can I ask you about genocide culture and what you mean by that?

SAFDAR: Relating back to the picture I described earlier, Australia as a colonial state hasn't really reckoned with its own past when it comes to frontier violence - I guess it makes sense that Australia can't summon the resources to identify and decry the genocide of another colonial state, right? So I feel as though our inability at this point says a lot about our own history of denial. So that's the connection I make.

BILQUIS: I mean Ilan Pappé writes about this as well and he says that Israel can't find peace until it does the same, it needs a reckoning with its own settler colonial history -

SAFDAR: With its formation.

BILQUIS: With its formation, yeah, exactly. I want to talk about—as Patrick Wolfe says, the logic of elimination—it echoes and vibrates through this kind of settler colonial logic. There's a poem that I want to read that Omar's written that actually brings this together really nicely. I'm going to read this one—it's called Genocide in the Genocide (p.15):

I walk in the fields of genocide
I came here for Palestine
The crowds are enormous, see
Stand shoulder to shoulder, heart
To heart. Here are my Yemeni brothers
They're my Sudanese sisters;
Here my Rohingya kindred
There are my Uigur beloveds;
Here are my Congolese uncles
There are my Wiradjuri cousins;

Here my Armenian comrades
There are my Kurdish aunties;
Here my Afghan elders
There are my Syrian blood;
Here are my Iraqi family -
I came here for Palestine and found the world.

If you are searching for yourself, stop.
Everywhere is here. The question is:
What are you doing with your hands?

That was one of the points at which I put the book down for a bit. I think the weight of what we're talking about is difficult to think about. So, what I'm saying is, what is the role of non-Palestinians like you and I and Omar and most people here I imagine? Who speaks for whom? What can we do as an act of solidarity, do you think?

SAFDAR: Yeah, I think a strong inspiration for this book came from what people in Gaza were saying to the outside world which was to share their stories, to not look away, to not ignore this. Whenever someone asks what can I do? I guess my only answer is whatever is in your capacity. So as an artist this felt to me like the most productive way to do and say something. But I think everyone has some social capital, everyone has some ability. I think that can be said for all of us but I think it deserves particular direction towards our media and something we haven't touched on yet, which is the utter failure of our arts and cultural organisations.

BILQUIS: Yes, I was going to get there now. . . In February 2025 Creative Australia which, as we know is Australia's key federal arts body, announced that Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator, Michael D'Agostino, would represent Australia in the 2026 Venice Biennale. We were really happy. I was at the Adelaide Biennale just the year before, I think it was the year before where his work was really, really powerful. So hearing that he'd been announced to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale was a really strong and powerful—I guess it renewed my faith a little bit, to be honest. A week later after sustained media and political attacks highlighting Sabsabi's past artworks, the Creative Australia Board reversed the decision, citing concerns that a sustained controversy would pose an unacceptable risk to public support for the arts.⁷

Another example: Kelly Green lost her \$25,000 Queensland Music award after her acceptance speech referenced 'from the river to the sea'. More recently in May we've had Ren Wyld, a Martu first nations writer who had a \$15,000 black&write! Fellowship withdrawn from the State Library of Queensland when the Arts Minister and a Premier intervened, citing a deleted social media post that she had posted.

Of course we have the cancelling of Antoinette Lattouf's ABC contract. We've got Randa Abdel-Fattah's ARC Future Fellowship being potentially removed. The list goes on and so there is this real price to pay.

SAFDAR: Yeah.

BILQUIS: There is a price to pay for those who speak out and it is a tension that we juggle for those of us who feel, who want to stand in solidarity but who also—there's a fear there, right?

SAFDAR: Yeah, exactly and just to clarify, I think Khaled Sabsabi's cancellation for Venice had everything to do with the fact that he was also speaking about Gaza at the time. Even in The Guardian article that announced his placement, he was interviewed, and he spoke about Gaza. The actual kerfuffle surrounding one of his past artworks was utter racist bullshit. He'd done a video work that was using images from the 9/11 attacks and the aftermath of that, the 9/11 attacks being some of the most shared media images in human history, and he was commenting on those critically. He comes from a place of great love and spirituality. There was nothing at all problematic about those artworks, it's just a total beat-up by the right wing media and the Liberal Shadow Arts Minister who brought it up.

BILQUIS: I think it was Penny Wong who was asked about it—

SAFDAR: Yeah and Labor capitulated. Really I think to me what this also highlights is our inability to get past a word like terrorism, our inability to critically deconstruct it, understand how it's been used, how it's weaponised and frankly it has to be scrapped because it's only ever used in a racially profiling way. As a legal category it doesn't really mean anything so why do we use it? Khaled was a victim of that as well as all the other people who've lost their jobs. So yes, there's a climate of fear but here I think if more people were speaking up for what was right I don't think they can sack everyone.

I don't think they can make one person the scapegoat when everybody else in the organisation is saying 'no way'. I think the sacking of Antoinette Lattouf is a perfect example of that. I wish more ABC figureheads had actually stuck up for her because she was the only one sticking by journalistic standards, essentially and they all went quiet so I really do wish the Annabelle Crabbs and the Leigh Sales and all the ABC types had actually backed her up. Where's the risk to them? If everyone's saying it together then there's less risk and you may as well stick up for the values of your profession and not see them being trampled.

BILQUIS: It's an insidious fear, isn't it?

SAFDAR: Yeah.

BILQUIS: That kind of seeps into—you start to second guess yourself.

SAFDAR: Yeah.

BILQUIS: I think that's why evenings like this are really important, right? To bring us together. I wanted to talk about—I guess while we're on that resistance to complicity as we witness, I want to talk about Senior Airman Aaron James Bushnell and one of Omar's poems is actually dedicated to Aaron Bushnell, who in 2024 set himself on fire in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC. He was a US Airforce cyber defence specialist as well. He was only 25. He livestreamed the whole thing.

As he did it he declared 'I am an active duty member of the United States Airforce and I will no longer be complicit in genocide' and repeatedly shouted 'free Palestine' as he immolated himself. Despite Secret Service and EMS and DC Fire trying to intervene, he died later on. Omar's poem, 'Refusal in the Genocide', as I mentioned, is written for Aaron Bushnell. In some ways I guess, as I said, we all navigate our complicity and your image on page 4 [8] captures this: the muting of your phone.

SAFDAR: Okay, this is the luxury to look away.



BILQUIS: Can you talk about that—

SAFDAR: Oh sure. This relates to my routine. I would wake up and look at my phone in bed and normally I would see stuff about comics and illustrations by friends—but as the genocide got going and I started following more Palestinian accounts, I was seeing real footage pretty much in real time of children in distress, just the worst injuries and accompanying that were the screams of dying people and their families. So sometimes I felt duty-bound to look at this, especially once I realised I was drawing for this book—duty-bound to look and to not look away but also not wanting to disturb the person in the other room, so one time I pressed mute. It's an acknowledgement that we can swipe off or put down our phones. It's a reflection on our relative privilege and responsibility, of the creeping guilt of not doing enough, of knowing I have the luxury to swipe away, or to not look at it, or to just get on with my day and pretend everything's fine. But it's not fine.

BILQUIS: Yeah, it's in the genocide.

SAFDAR: That's right.

BILQUIS: I'd like to zoom out now and talk a bit more holistically about the role of arts in the face of a crisis. I think—personally I talk a lot about how it can form identity and be resistant, but it can also be problematic, right? Like art can serve all of those purposes. I'd like to get your thoughts on the role of art in moments of crisis, conflict.

SAFDAR: I think all movements for social justice and social change have had artists and writers and poets and musicians playing some role. Being an artist myself, I'm quite idealistic about the arts' function and ability to change things and to visualise—sounds like a Hallmark card, I'm sorry—to visualise the world that we want to create. So yeah, I do think art has an important role, which includes a critical role and I'm a firm believer in the subversive role of art. I think one source of inspiration for me was the drawings of the German



9 'Please don't scroll', p. 86, from *The Nightmare Sequence*.

expressionists like George Grosz who experienced The Great War and did these awful pictures of life in the trenches, as well as Keiji Nakazawa's manga about the bombing of Hiroshima. He was a mangaka who survived the bombing of Hiroshima. He was about five or six years old. Then later as an adult he drew this epic 10-volume story based on his experiences called Barefoot Gen and that's a powerful visual accounting of what it was like to survive that atrocity.

So I feel as though the arts has a special role in critiquing and bearing witness but, as you say, it can be used for everything. It can be used for very problematic things, it can be used to sedate and nullify us as well.

BILQUIS: Well it's narrative-making. I think the early Zionists used to have images of Palestine, like where there's a village, they would paint it or draw it as arid and empty and distribute that and create that as the narrative that there's nobody here kind of thing.

I guess we talked about the book being a work of art and an act of goodness. Who did you write it for and what do you hope it does in the world?

SAFDAR: Who did I make it for?

BILQUIS: I threw one at you, didn't I?

SAFDAR: [Laughs] Well, when you do a drawing or a comic, you're always doing it because you want to make something that needs to be made, you know? Other people might be doing it but only you can do it the way you do it so it feels worthwhile and you hope that it reaches people and impacts in some way. So yeah, I was just conscious of trying to highlight the ignored and suppressed narratives that were coming from Gaza and the awful untruths that were circulating about and around the issue of Gaza here in Australia. That to me felt like the most urgent thing I could do as an Australian.

BILQUIS: We talked about that fear component. How has the book been received so far?

SAFDAR: Oh really well. Look, I'm very grateful to University of Queensland Press. I think most other publishers wouldn't have touched this book. That's a given. I don't know if our book will be in the book festivals. There is second guessing at every level when you have this climate of self-censorship. So even with this book, there were stages in the editorial process where I suppose people might have been worried about how things could be interpreted. But ultimately that doesn't mean you dilute or change what you need to say. It's really important to just speak truthfully about what's happening.

BILQUIS: Absolutely. What's next for you, Saf?

SAFDAR: Oh what's next? Well, I did 'Still Alive' which is all about human rights, about how it's—

BILQUIS: Amazing graphic novel, by the way, folks. If you haven't seen it please do.

SAFDAR: Please buy it [Laughter]. . . and that's all about how Australia treats refugees and that came from 10 years of doing voluntary work, conducting art workshops with asylum-seekers and refugees. Then after that I swore I wouldn't do any more human rights stuff. I thought that's it for heavy themes, I'm going to do solipsistic self-indulgent art [laughter]. . .

BILQUIS: Landscapes and such.

SAFDAR: Yeah. Or those autobio comics that men do where they just moan about their hangups and their insecurities around women, that kind of thing. But then Gaza happened, so now I feel dragged back to trying to say something meaningful.

BILQUIS: Thank you. I might go to audience . . . I'm getting the green light for audience questions. Like I said questions, comments are all welcome. Please keep them short so that we can fit as many people as possible but also if you've been browsing the book while we were speaking and you feel compelled to share a poem please do that too. If you do speak and ask a question or make a comment you are consenting to your voice being used in that recording.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: You mentioned that you didn't read some of Omar's poems while you were in the process of drawing. Were there any surprises when you saw the book come together or any reactions that you hadn't anticipated?

SAFDAR: Yeah. I'm glad you asked that because that sort of gets to the alchemy of collaboration, which was really special. So we were showing each other what we were doing along the way but it was only when we got together near the end, and printed all the poems and all the pictures and put them on the floor, that we thought about structuring the book for the first time. Then we thought what speaks to what—how do words and images bounce off each other? So we did that over a couple sessions and there were times when we thought 'you know what? I really should do an image about what you said in that poem 'cause we haven't covered that much'.

That was when we thought about it as a whole and that was really exciting. I haven't done a collaboration like that before and there were times when I felt it intensely—I mean it's a heavy book so there were occasions when we put everything on the floor and said oh fuck, this is hard stuff. But we're proud of it.

BILQUIS: Yeah, I mean how do you continue to be creative in the—when you're carrying this psychological weight?

SAFDAR: Just the short-term goal of knowing that our book was a fundraiser was enough motivation for me to churn out things and to keep working. New horrors were unfurling all the time and so occasionally there were new things we felt needed to be addressed. At one point we just had to stop but I think it was cathartic for both of us and a good collaborative journey. Omar's a deeply intelligent, sensitive guy so it was nice to go on that journey with him. He's a good human being so a good person to collaborate with.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONER 2: Safdar, I kind of want to know how did you come to sit down and do the drawings? Were you like, 'I'm going to do a drawing every day or am I going to react to something that I see on social media or in the press?' Do you have any kind of routine for yourself there or was there a process of how you came to the images?

SAFDAR: At first it just happened in a very unplanned way. It was a feeling of 'I need to draw' because sometimes the drawing is your indication of how you're going, in a way. The process is the point. So I just had to start drawing and that helped me figure out as I drew what I was doing or what worked as a type of visualisation and what didn't. So there was some trial and error, but I think drawing itself is a process of thinking, and that's what helped me get into it. Then once I had about 20 and I thought 'okay, they're strong' then I felt more confident, like I knew what I was doing. This was accompanied by the urge to address specific subjects, once I felt like I had a style or an approach.

I've done a few collaborations with people in medical, health and advocacy circles here in Australia, which have been published for the Guardian online, and I was really disappointed to see some of those people not talking about Gaza. No Australian medical orgs were speaking about it. Yet the entire health infrastructure and all the hospitals had been systematically destroyed, and all these health personnel were being targeted and killed. So that was something that I felt compelled to make a drawing about. The subjects were quite pressing in terms of what I felt I should draw. I hope that answers the question.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONER 3: In the context of artists having their prizes removed for speaking about this genocide, Your book, *Still Alive*, won the NSW Premiere's award, very well deserved—everyone in Australia reads that book—I just wonder, do you have any insights about why speaking out about this particular genocide is so controversial when in that book you shone a light on atrocities directly done by Australia government?

SAFDAR: I've often wondered about that as well. It feels as though Palestine is still something that's difficult to broach even amongst the left, even amongst the people who run cultural organisations. Maybe again 'cause they're afraid of how easily this can be turned into a political wedge issue and how easily they can be attacked as we saw with Creative Australia just rolling over and having no spine in sticking up for Khaled Sabsabi. So maybe it's that? Whereas when you're talking about refugees and human rights in a more general context that isn't seen to be as threatening. So definitely I think—what's the acronym? PEP, progressive except for Palestine is a genuine problem. There are so many PEPs, I don't know what's wrong with them.

BILQUIS: I guess the tension, is as a person who has a not-for-profit, as an artist, do we go to funding from Creative Australia from now on or do we not? If we don't then who else is out there that's going to be able to fund the kinds of projects that we want to do? There's that tension.

SAFDAR: Yeah, that's a good question and the answer is yes because it's our arts organisation, it's our money so we need them to do the right thing and send Khaled to Venice because he got that—from a panel of his peers he was judged the best of the bunch and all of the others who were shortlisted have said they don't want to be second choice to this political decision, they all want him to go. So the right thing is to reinstate him and to not smother the whole issue with some fluff about process or reviewing processes or whatever bureaucratic speak they're going to use to excuse it.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONER 4: When did you know you could use your comic art in step with political art in the tradition of [unclear] and Joe Sacco . . . when you can use it to say something . . . [unclear]?

SAFDAR: Yeah, I guess I—in my life I really wanted to be an artist when I was in high school and then I went to art school and I had nothing to say 'cause I was too young and stupid to know anything about the world and I didn't know how the art world worked. Then I got lost and just travelled around and decided to go to uni and study history and do a PhD. After that I came back to art in the last 14, 15 years slowly through community work, through the stuff at Villawood Detention Centre. That got me back into art and that was when I fully realised that there is this wonderful tradition of graphic art which has always been political, inherently political.

I mean all art is political anyway, that as a subject—doesn't need to be dragged around. There's always some historical or political context to what we do but I love the hard-edged political tradition of satire, satirical cartooning and truth-telling, going back to Goya's disasters of war. I've always seen graphic art as having a special role in political critique. So yeah, it was I guess over the last 10 years when I really embraced it and tried to do it myself.

AUDIENCE QUESTIONER 5: Can you guys talk about the work you've done together in the past?

SAFDAR: Oh yeah so for those who are unaware, Bilquis was a founding member of our group, our nonprofit community art organisation called Refugee Art Project which started in the Villawood Detention Centre. We were both at Sydney Uni and—

BILQUIS: Got a few more greys now but—

SAFDAR: That's right.

BILQUIS: So we'd go into Villawood Detention Centre and this is—I guess you were saying this is when academic Safdar and artist Safdar kind of collided in a way, right.

SAFDAR: Yeah.

BILQUIS: They still couldn't turn me into an artist. Unfortunately I just don't have it. I tried. You were very gracious. But yeah, we would hold exhibitions, get into trouble sometimes by Villawood staff back then for sneaking artworks out and such and we would say they were gifted or it was mine or we had all sorts of techniques for that.

SAFDAR: Bilquis has gone on to write a fantastic PhD about art activism in Afghanistan amongst young people in Kabul 'cause she's been to Kabul and the important role of art in that little window of time before the Taliban came back.

BILQUIS: So we like art, basically, and we see its value! I think we might kind of wrap up there. I did want to take one—take liberties to—

SAFDAR: Oh read another poem. . .

BILQUIS: yep—I am going to finish with another poem. It is called 'October 7 in the genocide':

You think I fear to enter October 7th?
Habibi, I never left. I'm still there with you

Dying as I do every day. I admit I can't see
the murdered you heap murder on.

Which of us disgraces them more, do you think?
Ten thousand children want to know.

You think the world didn't break that day
For me the world breaks every day.

You think the heart's task isn't remaking loss.
You think I won't write of your loves,

When the real danger is that I will. Relax.
My hands are cramped around the million epitaphs.

It will take me roughly all the time in the world
To get there. You think my poetry is a weapon.

And it is. Each line is my first strike in your chest,
Each stanza is my ear pressed against it, hoping

To hear a single beat. (p.65)

All of Omar's poetry and the images that go with them, make for a really powerful book. As we wrap up I want to extend a very special thank you to Safdar for—I think you've travelled the farthest? Having travelled from Sydney today? The longest to be here. Thank you for being here, Saf, and being in conversation with me. I think it's been an excellent night, talking about really important things. I also want to thank UC Centre for Creative and Cultural Research and Paul Magee and all the work he puts into that Centre for helping to bring the evening together and I want to thank everybody here for coming to this event with generosity, with curiosity and with compassion. I just want to remind you all that book sales and tickets for this evening are going to Gaza and Safdar's signing books as well.

SAFDAR: Oh yeah, happy to sign now.

BILQUIS: If anybody wants to get that signed as well otherwise get home safe tonight, thank you, everybody.

Applause

To purchase a copy of *The Nightmare Sequence*, go to <https://www.uqp.com.au/books/the-nightmare-sequence>

Notes

¹ Christopher Allen, 7 July 2025, 'Creative Australia's word salad defense can't hide its failures. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/creative-australias-word-salad-defence-cant-hide-its-failures/news-story/f44065402fed056cf790c836bc9e58a5>, (accessed 29 Oct 2025).

² Jason Stanley, 11 Nov 2023, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/11/my-life-has-been-defined-by-genocide-of-jewish-people-i-look-on-gaza-with-concern> (accessed 10 July 2025).

³ Jillian Segal AO, <http://www.aseca.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-aseca-plan.pdf> (accessed 29 Oct 2025).

⁴ See, for example, the response from the Antidiscrimination commissioner, Giridharan Sivaraman: <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/jul/17/push-to-end-antisemitism-is-welcome-but-envoy-plan-raises-concerns-australian-race-discrimination-commissioner-warns-ntwnfb> (accessed 29 Oct 2025).

⁵ Jewish Council of Australia, 10 July 2025, <https://www.jewishcouncil.com.au/2025/07/jewish-council-rejects-special-envoys-antisemitism-plan> (accessed 29 Oct 2025).

⁶ Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

⁷ Creative Australia later reinstated Khaled Sabsabi and Michael D'Agastino.

About the authors

Dr Safdar Ahmed is an award-winning artist, writer, musician and cultural worker. His graphic novel *Still Alive* won the Multicultural NSW Award and was named Book of the Year in the 2022 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. *Still Alive* also won the 2022 Eve Pownall Award and a Gold Ledger in the 2022 Comic Arts Awards of Australia. Safdar is a founding member of the Refugee Art Project and a member of eleven, a collective of contemporary Muslim Australian artists, curators, and writers. *The Nightmare Sequence*, a collaboration with Omar Sakr, is his latest work.

Dr Bilquis Ghani is Lecturer in Arts at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the mobilisation of the creative process through moments of social and cultural rupture. Bilquis is lead for Hunar Symposia, a collective of academics and artists creating spaces of decolonisation, discourse and collaboration between practice and theory. Bilquis's book, *Sociology from Art Praxis in Afghanistan: Expression and Resistance in Kabul* will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2026. Before returning to academia, Bilquis was also Head of Inclusion at the Sydney Opera House.
