

# FEMINIST SPACES

SUMMER 2023



ISSUE 9

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Cover Image, "Purple Night" by Rodion Voskresenskii

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ISSN 2476-1354

*Feminist Spaces* is an international journal of women's, gender, and sexuality studies that invites students, faculty, artists, activists, and independent scholars from institutions worldwide to submit formal essays, creative writing, and multimodal artistic pieces per our annual Call for Works. The online journal is published by the Department of English at the University of West Florida and designed by the Department of Art and Design at the University of West Florida.

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## Letter From the Editors

Dear Readers,

As the editors of *Feminist Spaces*, we wanted to take a moment to express our gratitude for your continued support and readership. Throughout our past annual editions, we have strived to organize a response to the critical conversation surrounding women's rights to bodily autonomy, and that retort is paramount due to the restrictions currently being placed on the feminine body. In the United States, feminist empowerment encountered a significant setback following the Supreme Court's June 2022 overrule of *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Now, amid women's struggle to be globally recognized as individuals with rights, we are witnessing a growing threat to autonomy for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Increasingly restricted access to health has become a crucial topic for people who identify as women and members of the queer community, and in this issue, we chose to speak against it in our theme "her body" by featuring work such as Keira Swift's essay "The Nation's Virtue," which emphasizes women's retribution for bodily experiences, and Jodi Brewer's art collection *assumptions*, a challenging look at the objectification and alienation of women's bodies.

We are extremely grateful for the international contributions to our journal for allowing us to open our space to many more

marginalized artists that allow us to diversify the perspective of our journal. The issue of bodily autonomy is a global one, which is why we chose to include several international submissions that explore the topic of the feminine body, including Zhangzu Wan's "Life of a Theory: Chinese Women's Blood as a Source of Power and Pollution" and Ilhan Mathangi's art piece *erschöpft*. Here, we can come together and explore feminist issues and their social implications, engage in discourse, and share our experiences. At *Feminist Spaces*, we are proud to uplift such a convergence in thought and culture.

Although much of this collection focuses on the feminine body, many of the featured essays, poetry, and art highlight complex issues such as women's alienation of labor, the liberation of queerness, and an emphasis on intersectionality. Katy Orsborn's essay "The Legacy of Cottagecore: A Sapphic Tradition" weaves a conversation on queerness and nature inexorably together while Sandra Cavanagh's art piece *Dos Madres* contemplates the multiplicity within motherhood and the grief experienced therein. The submissions we received are nuanced, contemplative, and represent the theme in all its subtle variations.

We are sincerely thankful for the continued support of the University of West Florida English Department. In particular, we would like to thank both our department chair Dr. Kevin Scott and our advisor Dr. Robin Blyn for encouraging the revival and continued efforts of *Feminist Spaces*. Due to both our advisors' interests in critical feminist dialogue, we are able to showcase the thoughtful work of our contributors in this third issue following the journal's hiatus. We would also like to thank the TAG Design Team for their creative journal design, which creates a structure by which to explore our theme. We value each of the contributions made by



our readers. We are always surprised and humbled by the volume of international submissions we receive, as each contribution shapes the direction of our journal. We encourage you to continue sharing your thoughts with us, as we believe in the power of discourse and the importance of creating a community of informed individuals.

Her body is so much more than a container: it is an abstract critical aesthetic. Despite the patriarchy's attempts at regulating the feminine body, our work in regaining autonomy continues. In artistry is agency, and it is here that we defend, protect, and claim the bodies that are rightfully ours.

Her body is our body. Her body represents that which evolves and adapts despite the yoke of oppression; a malleable vessel which has myriad faces and serves as a home for us all. In this issue, we deconstruct and reconstruct the concept of her body, and we hope you enjoy the process.

If you wish to contribute to our next issue or would like to learn more, you can follow us on Instagram @feminist.spaces, e-mail us at [feministspacesjournal@gmail.com](mailto:feministspacesjournal@gmail.com), or check out our website.

As always, thank you for your support.

*Feminist Spaces* Editorial Board



## Editorial Board Biographies

### Editors-in-Chief:

**Natalie Duphiney** is a graduate student at the University of West Florida pursuing her Master of Arts in English. She frequently writes poetry and short stories, and her poetry has been exhibited at the Pensacola Museum of Art and has been published in *Door Is a Jar* journal. She works as an English writing tutor and hopes to work in editing and publishing after graduation. She also enjoys playing piano, choral singing, roller skating, and running.

**Sydney Mosley** is currently pursuing an M.A. in creative writing at the University of West Florida, and she has the intention of obtaining a doctorate degree in her future. Sydney has a love for writing and enjoys many mediums such as poetry, long-form prose, and playwriting, but she loves writing thrillers and free verse poetry the most. You can read some of Sydney's poetry in UWF's creative writing magazine *The Spiral*. As a feminist and a creative, Sydney hopes to create a career path in which she can combine her love for the arts. Outside of writing, you can find Sydney baking vegan and gluten-free pastries; pole dancing; collecting used books; or taking her dog, Maple, for a hike.

### Managing Editors:

**Jurnee French** is a first-year graduate student pursuing her master's in creative writing. Though her passion originally pointed

to full-length novels, her years in academia have altered her focus to poetry and short-form writing. She hopes to eventually publish several works and even novels, but her prose in the *Unstamatic* journal will suffice for now. In tandem with her academics, Jurnee also tutors college students in English and secondary school students in any and all subjects. After graduation, she hopes to pursue teaching English as a foreign language. When not reading or writing (both creatively and academically), she is expanding her worldview by hiking or learning to roller skate, or just curling up with her elderly Shih Tzu, Max, or rambunctious orange tabby, Cheese.

**Ashley Byrd** is a graduate student currently pursuing a Master of Arts in English at the University of West Florida. She earned her bachelor's degree from UWF in 2022 with a minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and she has a passion for feminist theory and gender equality studies. Her poetry has been exhibited at the Pensacola Museum of Art, and she hopes to soon publish academic essays regarding feminism in literature from the Early Modern period. Ashley plans to earn her doctorate with a specialization in women's studies. Until then, when she isn't doing homework, she can be found writing, reading, playing video games, watching movies, or playing with one of her five rescue dogs.

### **Associate Editors:**

**Eve Knight** is a fourth-year student pursuing dual majors in psychology and communications with a minor in writing. The creative process of writing and editing has been a passion for her

since she could remember. The child of an Irish immigrant, she spent her childhood between Gulf Breeze, Florida, and Dublin, Ireland, where she developed a desire to explore and make heard the stories of all the women who fought for equality across the world with a unique multicultural perspective. After graduating from the University of West Florida with her degrees, she plans on getting her masters and later her PhD. When she isn't working or writing, she can be found traveling and reading anything and everything.

**Allissa Sandefur** is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in English. She is a poet and storyteller with an avid interest in old English literature and poetry. Some of her work has been featured in *Harness* magazine, *The Blackwater Review*, and UWF's own *Troubadour*. She focuses primarily on writing feminist fiction and poetry, but also academic theses which analyze literary works through a feminist lens. After obtaining her MA, she intends to pursue a PhD and teach English at the collegiate level. She believes that empowered women empower women, and it is only through engaging in open and artistic discourse that lasting ideological change can be achieved.

**Amanda Piestch** is a third-year Psychology major at the University of West Florida with a love for all forms of art. She enjoys writing different forms of poetry, though free verse is her favorite. As a passionate feminist and mental health advocate, Amanda aspires to use her knowledge to build a career in which she can help others overcome their hardships. When she is not at work or school, she spends her time cuddling with her two cats, Moonil and Toots, and playing video games.

**Molly Callahan** is a fourth-year English creative writing major at the University of West Florida with interests in pursuing higher education. Molly loves all things books. She is particularly fond of fiction writing, and she spends her free time drafting novels. She dreams of being a bestselling author one day, but in the meantime, she is navigating the world of self-publishing and culminating her authorial voice. When she's not writing, Molly might be on the beach or somewhere cozy with a cup of tea and a good book.

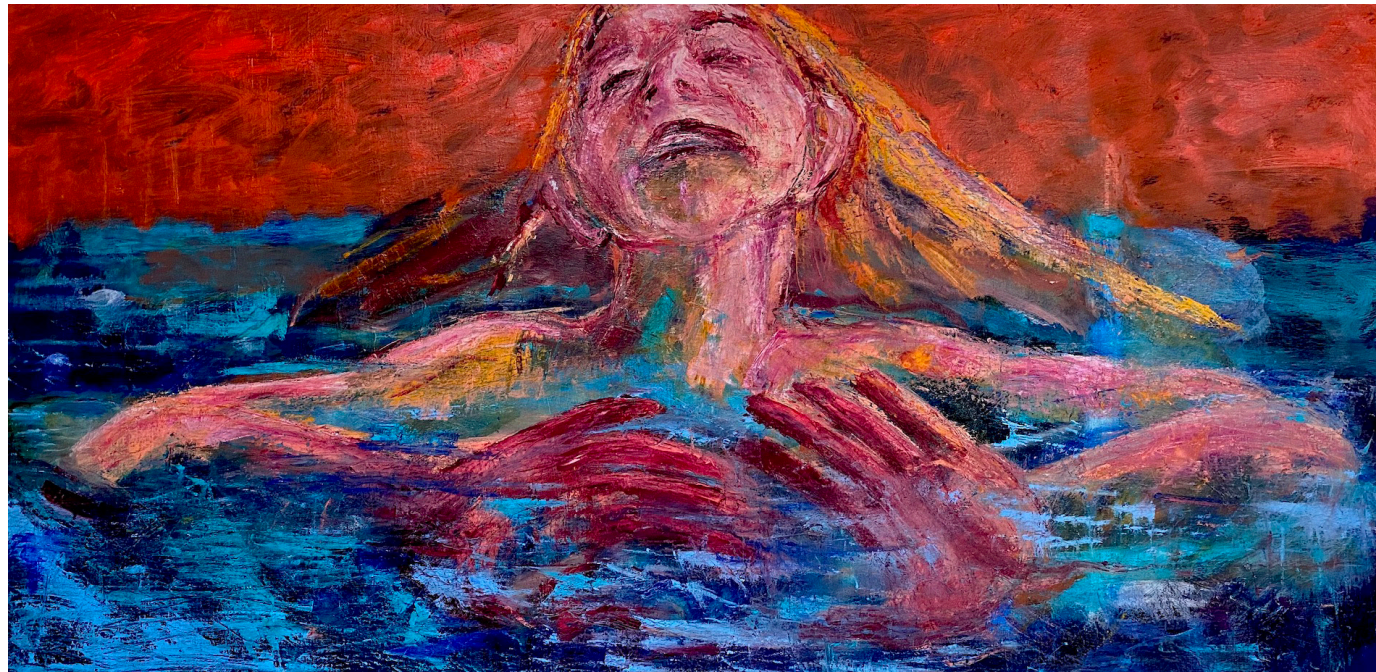




## “Venus Lives” & “Dos Madres”

### Sandra Cavanagh

Maintaining a consistent practice, Sandra Cavanagh has developed a large portfolio of work including paintings, drawings and prints. She sustains a mostly narrative focus, often as a reaction to sociopolitical events with the intention of codifying ideas and feelings. Within this development, various subjects recur such as the mythological feminine as a vehicle to explore patriarchal brutality and its weight on the collective, the consideration of mortality and the loss of innocence in transgenerational stories, and visceral reactions both to memories and events of current general concern. She often worked in series creating pictorial storylines with some urgency to exhaust the subject and form to the point of understanding or unburdening herself of it. The result is an annotation of feelings underscoring a dramatic approach to form and message.



“Venus Lives”

Sandra Cavanagh



“Dos Madres”

Sandra Cavanagh





# The Nation's Virtue:

## The Irish Free State, the Catholic Church, and the Shadow of the Magdalene Laundries

Keira Swift

Up until the publication of the McAleese report in 2013, the Irish government had continuously denied involvement in the running of the ten Magdalene Laundries that operated the length of the country.<sup>1</sup> Less than merely five years earlier, Minister for Education Batt O'Keefe refused to acknowledge State involvement, doubling down that "the Magdalen Laundries were privately-owned and operated establishments . . . the State did not refer individuals to the Magdalen Laundries nor was it complicit."<sup>2</sup> However, following the release of the report, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny conceded in a statement that "today we acknowledge the role of the State in your ordeal. We now know that the State itself was directly involved in over a quarter of all admissions to the Magdalene Laundries."<sup>3</sup> With these words, decades of State denial were refuted.

<sup>1</sup> Both "Magdalen" and "Magdalene" are spellings seen in previous research and official documents. For the sake of continuity, the latter spelling will be used.

<sup>2</sup> Patsy McGarry, "No Redress for Residents Magdalen Laundries," *The Irish Times*, September 18, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Kenny, Enda, "Statement on the Magdalene Laundries," *Irish Houses of Parliament*, February 19, 2013, video of statement, 3:39-3:55, <https://speakola.com/political/enda-kenny-taoiseach-ireland-state-apology-magdalene-laundries-2013>.

Although the McAleese report has been criticized by foundations such as Justice for Magdalene's Research (JFMR) for its lack of inclusion of survivor testimony as well as for downplaying the abuse that occurred, it does prove that the State was involved in all aspects of the running and upkeep of the Laundries.<sup>4</sup> Not only was the Irish State complicit in the mistreatment of thousands of women in the twentieth-century, but also its founding and subsequent fraternization with the Catholic Church following independence provided the backdrop for the prolonged longevity of abuse of some of Ireland's most vulnerable women.

The last laundry may have closed its doors in 1996 in Dublin, but the wounds of these institutions are fresh and are unlikely to heal quickly. These Laundries, oftentimes referred to as asylums, were a set of religious-led institutions with their roots dating back to the eighteenth-century. Within these confines, women were stripped of their individuality to be reformed in the image of a woman that was fundamental to female Catholicism, Mary Magdalene. A biblical companion of Jesus who symbolized Catholic devotion and repentance, Mary Magdalene acted as an apt role model for an institution whose original goal was the reformation of prostitutes in Irish society. The simultaneous glorification and villainization of Irishwomen who failed to live up to increasingly high standards was reflected in the shift of admissions being recorded over time, as throughout the twentieth century, women would be relegated to the confines of the Laundries for periods lasting from a few months to several decades. These sentences were designed to be punitive to the extreme with the goal of forcing women to perform hard labor for days on end in an attempt to atone for their moral

<sup>4</sup> Claire McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries: A Campaign for Justice*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 2.

failings. Magdalene Laundries operated in the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, the United States, and Australia, yet the Irish model is distinct due to its unique relationship with the Catholic Church. By the time of the founding of the Irish State in 1922, the Catholic Church was in a prime position to legally entwine itself with a country that yearned to prove its moral worth free of the English yoke. Sexual purity became the foundation of Ireland, and any woman who seemed to contradict the new national identity of virtue and piety was shut away with her voice silenced. In contrast to the Laundries being seen as a product of individual actors, these societal factors – both the entwinement of Church and State and its subsequent effect on gender norms—ultimately contributed to the longevity and preservation of the Laundries.

This notion of social causality requires understanding as to why the Catholic Church was so deeply connected with the establishment of the Free State in the twentieth century. Blame cannot simply be placed on the Catholic nuns or clergy who were working in these institutions for the abuses these women endured. The social dominance of the Catholic Church has a history rooted in colonization and mistreatment by the English and is integral to understanding the solidification of Catholicism as an institution.

Since the invocation of the first Penal Law in 1695, Catholics in Ireland were continuously relegated to second-class citizenship within the borders of their own country.<sup>5</sup> Mass was banned, priests were banished, and punishments could result in death for repeat offenders, particularly priests who attempted to return to the Island

<sup>5</sup> The first Penal Laws enacted included Catholic peers being barred from sitting in Parliament, a £60 fine for missing Protestant worship services, disenfranchisement of Catholic voters, and a refusal to allow Catholic children to be sent abroad for a Catholic education, among others.

to preach. Being Irish and Catholic became an act of rebellion as the percentage of Irish who wanted their independence and were also Catholic coincided greatly. The induction and eventual repeal of the Penal Laws were unintentionally successful in uniting both men and women of all economic classes in resisting English colonization and interference.<sup>6</sup> Between the cessation of the Penal Laws at the end of the eighteenth century and the Great Hunger, over two thousand Catholic churches were built in Ireland, demonstrating growing Catholic social power on the island.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, the social makeup and hierarchical barriers of Ireland changed, with the face of Catholicism also undergoing fundamental alterations.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Second Devotional Revolution was responsible for the solidification of Catholicism that was to be practiced in the twentieth century. The era saw a staggering increase of female laywomen in the Church following the Great Hunger. Mass attendance soared, religious institutions were built, and the nun population increased from 122 in 1800 to 1,500 in 1850.<sup>8</sup> By 1900, this number leapt to around eight thousand nuns who were spread across thirty-five various religious orders.<sup>9</sup> The Revolution saw a uniquely Irish devotion to the Virgin Mary, bringing women to the heart of Catholicism through Marianism. A new national ideology was being demonstrated, with the mother of Jesus being used as a mirror for the societal expectation of female

<sup>6</sup> Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: the Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987): 7.

<sup>7</sup> McGettrick et al, *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75," *The American Historical Review*, 77, no. 3 (1972): 626, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1870344>

<sup>9</sup> McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 9.



devotion to Mother Ireland and the Mother Church.<sup>10</sup>

The adoration of the Virgin Mary created an assumption for Irish daughters, wives, and mothers to personify the Eternal Woman, which would see women serving man's purpose without an inherent purpose of her own.<sup>11</sup> The Eternal Woman was conceived as the opposite of female emancipation, as Mary Daly writes, "By contrast to these authentic personal qualities, the Eternal Woman is said to have a vocation to surrender and hiddenness . . . self-less, she achieves not individual realization but merely generic fulfilment in motherhood."<sup>12</sup> Irish women were subsequently placed on pedestals, being both transformed into symbols of life and robbed of all individuality. The symbolic Eternal Woman was unchanging and saw women being defined only in their capacity as virgins, brides, and caretakers. This static nature proved to be a useful aid in attacks against women's rights movements of the twentieth century that aimed to better reflect a rapidly changing world.

As the Catholic Church was fighting to hold off those who wished to propel society to a more egalitarian state, Irishmen and Irishwomen worked together to secure freedom for a country they believed to be unjustly ruled by a foreign power. Female-led organizations such as Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Ireland) and Cumann na mBan (The Women's Army) were integral to the independence movement whilst also creating conversations about female participation in the political sphere, yet these groups are often overlooked in favor of more well-recognized male-led

<sup>10</sup> Cara Delay, *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism 1850-1950*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 101.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 119.

<sup>12</sup> Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 107.

institutions such as the Irish Republican Army. Independence was achieved in 1922, with a glimmer of hope shining on the women's movement as equal citizenship was promised in Ireland's first constitution, proclaiming, "Every person, without distinction of sex . . . is a citizen of the Irish Free State and shall within the limits of the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State enjoy the privileges and be subject to the obligations."<sup>13</sup> However, this message of equality was increasingly at odds with the pre-existing rhetoric regarding Irish female identity. With inequality being bolstered by Catholic social teaching that continued to uphold Marianism as the prime example of divine feminine virtue, women were placed with the task of "being guardians and upholders of virtue in the home."<sup>14</sup> The 1922 Constitution was created between the Irish War of Independence and the outbreak of the Irish Civil War, which fundamentally started due to disagreements regarding the terms of Home Rule granted by the British government. Over time, the 1922 Constitution saw amendment after amendment being tacked onto the document, and it was agreed that a new Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland) would be written. Between the 1922 Irish Constitution and its successor in 1937, the initial promise of equal citizenship for women was stripped away, uncovering a domestic discourse which had women resume their subordinate position within the walls of the home, something demonstrated through contemporary rhetoric and governmental legislature.

<sup>13</sup> Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eirann) Act, 1922. 13 Geo. 5 Sess. 2 c. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Clara Fischer, "Gender, Nation, and the Politics of Shame: Magdalen Laundries and the Institutionalization of Feminine Transgression in Modern Ireland," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41, no. 4 (2016): 822, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685117>

The 1937 Irish Constitution solidified how gender roles were perceived by the government. Women are specifically mentioned only twice throughout the fifty articles, explicitly stating the limited gender roles that have been designated in this new society:

1.1 The state recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

1.2 The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

2.1 In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.<sup>15</sup>

Women are never mentioned in this document without the sphere of the family to encapsulate them, as it was against governmental interests to envision a scenario where a woman would be without a father, husband, or children. At this moment in time, there had already been examples of female participation in society outside of the domestic sphere, yet the status quo of domesticity was upheld by the leading political party at the time, Fianna Fáil. Led by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Eamon de Valera, the party underwent a process of visibly distancing itself from the militancy of Sinn Féin. This process heavily relied on reintroducing a domestic discourse

<sup>15</sup> Irish Const. art. XLI, § 1 and 2.

for women that took them out of the political sphere and returned them to the home, where they were expected to stay.<sup>16</sup>

The social rhetoric and legislative acts passed in the 1920s and 30s contributed to the overall longevity of the continual use of Magdalene Laundries in Ireland. The women who entered these institutions were deemed morally reprehensible and threatened the moral fabric of Irish society. After the founding of the Free State, the laundries under operation were no longer seen as places for temporal asylum and rehabilitation but increasingly carceral complexes where those confined would atone for their sins.<sup>17</sup> The public viewed the Laundries as institutions where women deserved to be punished due to their failings, but the women who were discarded were more often than not women who were failed by the state and were frequently victims of sexual violence. As one bishop at the time stated, “Every section of society was glad somebody was dealing with it, I’d say knitted together in a circle that suited everybody except for the victims.”<sup>18</sup> It has taken decades for the victims who endlessly toiled in these institutions to reclaim the narrative and share their stories, and analyzing the contextual factors that contributed to their overall longevity will only further the discussion of religion and gender within the Saorstát Éireann (Irish Free State).

## Ireland and the Magdalene’s: A Brief Historiography

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Lee Shonk Jr., “Irish Blood English Heart: Gender, Modernity, and ‘Third Way’ Republicanism in the Formation of the Irish Republic,” PhD diss., (Marquette University, 2010), 92.

<sup>17</sup> McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Caelainn Hogan, *Republic of Shame: How Ireland Punished ‘Fallen Women’ and Their Children* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 37.

In 1991, a Magdalene Laundry known as St. Mary's was closed. In 1993, the land was sold to a property developer for 1.5 million pounds. As the developer worked on the property, they soon found human remains in the laundry graveyard. Over 155 bodies were found, yet only seventy-five death certificates existed to account for the remains. The exhumed bodies were quickly cremated and reburied, but there was public questioning and protest as to why the women were denied a public burial.<sup>19</sup> The bodies found at High Park spurred inspiration in both scholars and journalists alike to provide answers.

Even though ideas of female oppression within Catholic structures have been discussed by scholars for decades, focus on the Magdalene Laundries is a newer enterprise due, in part, to the heavy restriction of access to Catholic archives in Ireland to those who are not family members. Notable documentaries had been made that utilized survivor testimony, such as 1993's *Washing Away the Stain* by Sarah Barclay and Andrea Miller, 1998's *Sex in a Cold Climate* by Steve Humphries, and 2009's *The Forgotten Maggies* by Steven O'Riordan. Additionally, 1999 saw the premiere of *States of Fear*, a shocking three-part documentary that brought attention to the widespread physical and sexual abuse in Church-led industrial schools. The 1990s could be classified as a time of "growing public awareness of how State/Church hegemony in running the country led to corruption in both entities."<sup>20</sup> Following this decade of burgeoning public awareness, the 2000s saw an increase in Magdalene Laundries being explored creatively, both onscreen and onstage, with movies such as *Philomena* and *The Magdalene Sisters*

<sup>19</sup> Liz Allen, "Tears for the Tragic Magdalens," *Evening Herald*, September 13, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 31.

helping bring the conversation to the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>21</sup>

One of the first monographs written about the Laundries was *Do Penance or Perish* by Frances Finnegan.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on the asylums run by the Good Shephard Sisters in Cork, New Ross, Waterford, and Limerick, Finnegan's work examines how, in spite of preaching to the public that these institutions were centered on the rehabilitation of "fallen women" and an eventual return to society, survivor testimony described otherwise. Finnegan's thesis instead describes a system that actively sought out longer committals for women, with conditions being so dire that the sex workers whom the Asylums were originally created for now refused to enter. James M. Smith's work, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* can be considered the first in-depth monograph that was able to utilize the archives, situating the Magdalene Laundries within a wider historical context and analysing how cultural depictions of the laundries have shaped public perception.<sup>23</sup> Smith's work led to his joining Justice for Magdalene's, which at the time was compiling evidence of the Laundries as well as survivor testimony. Their original goal was to secure "a State apology for survivors; and a redress and restorative justice scheme."<sup>24</sup> Their research archive, evidence of State involvement, and the addition of their book detailing the political campaign continue to provide significant insight for scholars looking to examine the history of the Laundries.

<sup>21</sup> *Philomena*, directed by Stephen Frears (20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 2013); *The Magdalene Sisters*, directed by Peter Mullen (Miramax Films, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 45



The story of twentieth-century Ireland has been told repeatedly, with a few works acting as key players in the historiography of modern Ireland. R. F. Foster's *Modern Ireland* examined almost three centuries of Irish history, and Tom Inglis's *Moral Monopoly* charted Catholicism's rise and fall in modern Irish history.<sup>25</sup> In women's studies, recent work from Cara Delay has analyzed the role of women and Catholicism in Irish society from the end of the Great Hunger until the mid-twentieth century. Jenny Beale's *Women in Ireland* gives a voice to the lesser-known history of women's rights groups fighting for change against the institution of the Catholic hierarchy.<sup>26</sup>

These works do not place the Laundries at their center, in part due to little being known about the reality of the Laundries at the time of their publication, but Foster and Inglis still provide needed historical context detailing both Irish politics leading up to the formation of the Free State and the Catholic Church's complicated relationship within that sphere as to how the Catholic Church's complicated relationship within that sphere influenced the ebb and flow in Irish affairs. In particular, the latter half of Inglis's *Moral Monopoly* charts the fall of the influence of Catholicism over the last half century, coinciding with the closure of the remaining Magdalene Laundries and the rise of public desire for justice and compensation. Beale's work provides a useful detour to remind readers of the nuances and complexities of modern Irish history as there has always been retaliation in various forms to the Irish patriarchal structure and dominating shadow that institutions like

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25 R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989); Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*.

26 Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986).

the Laundries created.

The Magdalene Laundries have often been viewed within the wider realm of Catholicism in order to analyze the intersection between state and religion. However, the scope of this paper aims to adjust the lens to discuss the Laundries within the realm of female history and feminist philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Daly have written momentous works exploring the role of women within Western society and Christian religion and will aid in exploring how legislation and Catholic ideals contributed to the long-running history of the Laundries.<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir's idea that women have been designated as "other" throughout history is proven in the gendered legislation produced during the 1920s and 30s that revoked women's role in society and attempted to force them to again operate within the walls of the home and in purely generative roles. Subsequently, Mary Daly's work on women and Catholicism links how those within the Catholic hierarchy viewed women as subordinate to men, and these views were enacted in small-scale Irish communities. Neither Daly nor Beauvoir named Christianity as solely responsible for the oppression of women, but it did solidify that female subjugation was divinely ordained. Beauvoir and Daly act as a lens to contextualize twentieth-century Irish history in the larger theme of female religious oppression. This thesis aims to further prove arguments first put forward by *The Second Sex* and *The Church and the Second Sex*, primarily that the patriarchal "othering" of women was solidified in Catholic teaching and Irish institutions.

## **An Overview of the Magdalene Laundries**

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27 Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Random House, 2011).

In contrast to the carceral forms the Laundries took in the twentieth century, the early incarnations of the Magdalene Laundries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be described as having a rehabilitative purpose: acting as a voluntary respite for sex workers to find spiritual salvation and operating within the larger sphere of the Penitentiary Movement, thus further introducing restorative justice to the wider prison system.<sup>28</sup> Whilst demonstrating the rise of religious women in the United Kingdom, the widespread response of wishing to detain and rehabilitate “fallen” women demonstrates the social anxiety regarding the spread of venereal disease in British societies.<sup>29</sup> Initially, Laundries were run by laywomen on a small regional scale, with trustees aiding in financial support and Laundry upkeep. The Protestant iteration of the Laundries had ceased operation by the mid-1800s, and the Catholic Church received government funding to continue the upkeep of various social institutions, including the twelve remaining Laundries where approximately 4,500 women lived and worked throughout the 1920s and 30s.<sup>30</sup>

With the formation of the Irish State in 1922, social programs operating throughout the country were due for observation and possible reformation and restructure. However, the Irish Civil War had been costly, and the toll wreaked on the fledgling Irish Government reduced funds that were designated for social institutions. The ever-wealthy Catholic Church had been

28 Philippa Hardman, “The Origins of Late Eighteenth-Century Prison Reform in England,” PhD diss., (University of Sheffield, 2007), 6.

29 Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: A Study of Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

30 Government of Ireland, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries*, Martin McAleese, (Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality, 2013), 161.

continuously in control of social welfare in Ireland since the Great Hunger and made itself the sole provider of education and medical services, which included the Industrial Schools, Magdalene Laundries, and Mother and Baby Homes.<sup>31</sup>

The Irish government had tried to implement changes in healthcare to reflect those that were occurring in Britain such as the National Health Insurance scheme in 1911. This attempt, and a later one by Minister for Health Dr Noel Browne that would see hospitals take charge of women’s health preceding and following birth, were blocked by the Church on the grounds that family rights were being infringed upon.<sup>32</sup> The Church also forbade the Magdalene Laundry system to modernize itself with the times, even as prostitution rates fell throughout the country due to mass immigration and overall improved education rates for women. These decreasing admittance numbers would lead one to assume that the need for the Laundries ceased over time. Yet the pendulum swung the other way, with nuns “actively seeking committals” and doing the utmost to keep women within the Laundries even after their sentences

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31 As the Catholic Church was building its strength over the nineteenth-century, funds for churches and schools were often donated by the affluent Catholic population and bolstered by offerings from the poor. Over time, the Irish Catholic Church amassed a sizeable property portfolio that was tax free, so whilst not every parish was wealthy, the overarching Catholic Irish Church structure was. See also Brendan Grimes, “Funding a Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *Architectural History*, 52 (2009): 137-168; Emmet Larkin, “Economic Growth, Capital Investment, and the Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *The American Historical Review* 72, no.3 (April 1967): 852-884.

32 Anonymous, “Minister Releases Correspondence,” *The Irish Times*, April 12, 1951.

ran out.<sup>33</sup> This occurrence indicates that the Laundries in post-independence Ireland can only be described as punitive in nature. The women now being removed from society consisted of unmarried mothers, victims of physical and sexual abuse, women with mental or physical disabilities, women guilty of particular crimes, young women in “moral danger,” and women abandoned to the care of the nuns by family and friends.<sup>34</sup> The majority of these new admissions were women who were failed by one institution or another, whether that be the Irish State or the institution of the family. Where they should have received extra support, instead they were often blamed for their misfortunes and being shut away in the Laundries only furthered their suffering.

The Irish Republic and Catholic Church defined two classes of fallen women when deciding what institution would be preferable for someone designated as a “moral vice.” First-time offenders who were lured from morality and were not expected to fall into sin a second time were relegated to the openly State-funded Mother and Baby Homes.<sup>35</sup> The “hopeless cases,” ones deemed in need of protection from themselves and against the moral contamination of other women, were relegated to the Laundries for sometimes decades-long sentences. Sentence length was dependent on a myriad of factors, with age, previous internment, and reason for admittance all contributing to the duration. More than half of recorded admissions spent time at a Laundry for less than a year,

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33 McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 30.

34 Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries*, 30.

35 For clarification, for the majority of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the scope of this paper), both Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries admitted pregnant unmarried women. From the mid-twentieth century to the closing of the last Laundry, only one out of ten Laundries admitted pregnant women.

but fifteen percent of admissions in the twentieth century had a duration of stay over five years, with eight percent spending over a decade within Laundry walls.<sup>36</sup> How closely this blueprint was followed can be debated since girls as young as nine years old entered the Laundries and would be denied an education or formal qualifications to support themselves in the outside world if they were ever able to leave. Subsequently, this lack of support increased the likelihood of readmittance and demonstrates that the original “rehabilitative” purpose of the Laundries retained little to no importance in the new laundry structure.

Many girls would be transferred to the Laundries after reaching the end of their time at an industrial school, another Catholic-owned institution with its own dark history. Industrial schools were located throughout Ireland and were established in the 1860s for the care of “neglected, orphaned, or abandoned children” in an effort to combat child vagrancy.<sup>37</sup> The industrial school system was infamous for widespread sexual, emotional, and physical abuse of the boys and girls who lived there, with the 2009 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (referred to as the Ryan Report) stating that 170,000 children resided in one of the 50 Industrial Schools from 1936 to 1970. Out of the one thousand witness testimonies compiled by the committee, ninety percent report being physically abused while being in state care, with sexual abuse being reported by more than half.<sup>38</sup> The girls who grew up within the confines of

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36 Government of Ireland, *State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries*, XIII.

37 Government of Ireland, *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, vol. I, Sean Ryan, (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2009), 36.

38 Government of Ireland, *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, vol. III, Sean Ryan, (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2009), 393-394.



the industrial school system received no support for their physical and psychological injuries and were in fact often blamed for the abuse that they suffered.<sup>39</sup> As Simone de Beauvoir explains, it is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse another, so young girls who were already failed by the State were offered up as scapegoats for the actions of others.<sup>40</sup> Many were then transferred to the Magdalene Laundries during their teenage years, even though State law provided funding for continual supervision until the age of eighteen prior to 1941. Just over a quarter of Laundry referrals were facilitated by the State as girls and women were transferred from State-run penitentiary systems with underlying criminal charges ranging from petty theft to murder and manslaughter.<sup>41</sup> Committals also often occurred through self-referral, transfer from another Magdalene Laundry, family referral, or by the parish priest.<sup>42</sup>

Upon committal, a woman's world would exist behind locked doors, high walls and unreachable windows, as "it was like you know were wiped out of that area of the world."<sup>43</sup> Inmates received little to no information regarding why they were there, how long they would stay in the asylum, and when or if they would be transferred to a sister asylum.<sup>44</sup> The names of the women were often replaced with religious names or assigned numbers in an attempt to remove any semblance of remaining individuality. Days were filled with silence and steam as they were forced to do gruelling laundry work

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39 Government of Ireland, *Child Abuse*, 394.

40 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 11.

41 Government of Ireland, *Magdalen Laundries*, 70, I.

42 Government of Ireland, *Magdalen Laundries*, 162.

43 McGettrick et al. *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries*, 18.

44 Jennifer O'Mahoney, "Advocacy and the Magdalene Laundries: Towards a Psychology of Social Change," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2018): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1416803>.

for prisons, hotels, or hospitals, six days a week without breaks or compensation. The completed laundry work aided the Irish Republic directly as laundry customers included the Department of Fisheries, Education, Health, Justice, and Agriculture, as well as the National Transport Organization, the National Library, the Electricity Supply Board, Limerick Prison, and a variety of Irish hospitals.<sup>45</sup> Government officials tried to reassure trade unions that those working in the "institutional laundries" were paid fairly under a "fair wages clause" as set out in military contracts, although it has been proven by the McAleese Report that this was far from the truth.<sup>46</sup>

The voices of the penitents from the 1920s and 30s still go largely unheard due to a gap in survivor testimony from those decades, but their voices can still be heard in the testimonies of those staying in the Laundries during the succeeding decades. One survivor remarked upon entering one Laundry in Limerick, "I looked around and all I could see was... everyone I saw that I passed were all old people. 'Oh my God,' I said to myself, 'what am I doing in here?'"<sup>47</sup> Many of the new inmates would, understandably, question why they were there and protest to be released, as fellow survivor Sara W explains, "Oh I used to be crying to go home to get out, I wanted to get out of this place . . . except the old ladies, the old ladies wouldn't want to go . . . I mean they were there thirty or forty years."<sup>48</sup> The older inmates may have also cried for their release upon entering

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45 Caelainn Hogan, *Republic of Shame*, 63.

46 Ireland, Tithe an Oireachtais debate, Dáil Éireann, 7 May 1941, (Mr. Traynor, Minister for Defence), [https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1941-05-07/14/#spk\\_38](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1941-05-07/14/#spk_38).

47 Sinead, interview by Dr. Sinead Pembroke, 30 August 2013, transcript, *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History*.

48 Sara W, interview by Claire McGettrick, 20 March 2012, transcript, *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History*.

the Laundries in the 1920s and 30s, but decades of back-breaking work and the repeated stigma being communicated to them that they were worthless women who were not missed saw protest turn to anguish, which then turned to numbness.

In completing the never-ending loads of laundry, workplace safety was never guaranteed, with one woman stating that she was constantly burned from moving heavy boiling sheets directly from the steamer.<sup>49</sup> Another instance witnessed by a penitent saw an older woman having half her hand removed as she unsuccessfully tried to navigate an older machine and was locked in her dormitory for two days after trying to help the injured worker.<sup>50</sup> Silence was observed at all times save for the recitation of prayer, and relationships between penitents as a source of comfort or familiarity were strictly prohibited. Breaking the rules and attempting to forge bonds with other inmates would often result in the transfer of a girl to another Laundry, with no explanation or warning given. Other infractions such as failing to follow instructions, talking back, or attempting escape would be met with verbal humiliation, sleep deprivation, starvation, cutting hair, and physical abuse. If the women were ever able to leave, memories of the Laundries forever resided with them, and many waited decades before telling their spouses or children what had happened to them, if they ever told them at all.

Clearly, the shame of the laundries cut deeply, with some survivors still blaming themselves for the abuse. The hardships these women faced – the disregard for their wellbeing and care –

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49 Catherine Whelan, interview by Professor James Smith, 20 May 2015, transcript, *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History*.

50 Philomena, interview by Dr. Sinead Pembroke, 22 August 2013, transcript, *Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History*.

demonstrates that they were viewed only as commodities in terms of the labor that they completed, not because they were seen with any inherent value themselves. In doing this, the Laundry system was mirroring the Irish State, as Irishwomen as a whole were only valued within their potential generative functions.

### **Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Daly: A Feminist Lens**

The Magdalene Laundries are essential to understanding the intersection between Church and State, and Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Daly's concepts reemphasize the distinction that gender has in the aftermath of such an intersection. When using feminist theory as a lens, scholars are able to recenter women in both history and philosophy, two fields that are known for gendered historical exclusion. In the realm of philosophy, men like Aristotle, Kant, and Plato influenced hundreds of years of work with their views on women summarized in Aristotle's belief that "the female is, as it were, a deformed male."<sup>51</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex*, provides a useful lens through which to examine the patriarchal nature of early twentieth-century Ireland. Her work, written in 1946, is regarded as a "feminist bible," and is groundbreaking for being written before the widespread establishment of modern Western feminist philosophy and history. Beauvoir, who was raised Catholic but spent the majority of her adult life as a devoted atheist, argues that women have been categorically "othered" since before the introduction of Christianity to the Western world. This categorization is furthered as women are habitually scorned for having bodily experiences, namely pregnancy and menstruation, that are foreign to men and thus

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51 Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, translated by A. L. Peck (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1942), 175.

deemed unnatural. This “othering” is personified in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve as “humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being.”<sup>52</sup> As Eve was supposedly sired by God by using one of Adam’s ribs, womenkind since Eve’s creation and subsequent fall has been tied to this mythological beginning that was fully dependent on men. The timeline of Christianity sees this original subjugation repeated through the teachings of the Catholic Church, with the Original Sin providing a simple explanation for millennia of subjugation and mistreatment. Eve may have forever cursed women through her treachery and sin, so the Virgin Mary acts as an apt foil for women to aspire to in order to clean themselves of the stain they have been marked with before birth. Beauvoir explains that Mary is “the inverse figure of the sinner Eve; she crushes the serpent under her foot; she is the mediator of salvation, as Eve was of damnation.”<sup>53</sup> Within the scope of the Magdalene Laundries, both Eve and the Virgin Mary are shown as opposing ends in the spectrum of femininity, with Mary Magdalene acting as a conduit for how women can raise themselves from the pits of lust and deceit in order to become handmaidens of God.

Beauvoir’s argument holds true for the double standards regarding sexual transgressions in Irish modern society. Men are able to commit these acts without tarnishing their image whilst many women did not yet grasp that their entire identity and worth to the world around them is intrinsically tied to their sexuality. They are the dedicated providers of life, and as such, their womb holds more value than women themselves could ever hope to hold; therefore, chasing love outside of what is designated correct and

52 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 5.

53 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 189.

pure is deemed “perverted, corrupted, depraved, and good only for the reformatory.”<sup>54</sup> Since the moment of a girl’s first menstruation, her body no longer belongs to her, a notion demonstrated through Ireland’s second Constitution only framing women in the sphere of familial obligation and their supposed generative function. Carceral institutions in the twentieth century strove to remind women of that fact through punishment in Mother and Baby Homes—but more specifically—the Magdalene Laundries.

Twenty years after the French publication of *The Second Sex*, feminist philosopher Mary Daly took the ideas regarding female “otherness” in Catholic Christianity and expanded on it in her monograph, *The Church and the Second Sex*. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, commonly referred to as Vatican II, concluded three years earlier and hoped to refresh the teachings of the Catholic Church in the modern world. Daly explains, however, that “Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular, has not yet faced its responsibility to exorcise the devil of sexual prejudice . . . The Church must admit its past failures.”<sup>55</sup> Many did see Vatican II as an honest attempt at reform, but Daly was not convinced that it went far enough to attempt to address Catholicism’s history of female subjugation. *Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* concedes that “it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose [one’s path],” yet the continual exclusion of women from Catholic hierarchy and refusal to ordain female priests did little to remedy the aforementioned problem.<sup>56</sup> Beauvoir, reflecting on

54 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 653.

55 Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 177.

56 Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 158.



the various rights secured during the first half of the twentieth-century, writes, “Women’s actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received.”<sup>57</sup> Much of female Irish history follows this narrative, with Catholic views on women’s roles and their importance in the home being deeply embedded in the national psyche. One explanation that those in the Vatican were so opposed to female emancipation is that it reflected the modernization that they were trying to fight. This modernization, as scholar Mary Valiulis explains, goes against what the Catholic construct of women was: “pure, modest, deferential, respectful of hierarchy, unassuming, content with one’s station in life.”<sup>58</sup> Any woman who tried to take independence for herself constituted the larger threat of modernization and the looming loss of Catholic influence and was deemed enemy number one.

### Revoking Rights: Rhetoric and Legislation

Whilst language regarding gender roles could be implied through legislation written in the 1920s and 30s, these documents were not often read by the Irish public. Instead, many Irish newspapers would publish sermons or opinion pieces, aiming to further herd women and girls into their respective pens of domestic duties and Catholic idealism. As previously stated, the Second Devotional Revolution saw a shift in Catholicism, placing higher importance on women’s roles as wives and mothers. As Catholicism

<sup>57</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Valiulis, “Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman,” in *Chattel, Servant or Citizen? Women’s Status in Church, State and Society*, edited by Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert, (Belfast: Queen’s University of Belfast, 1995), 175.

became fundamental to Irish nationalism, Irish households became principal sites of Catholic worship, and women’s roles now took on mythical importance with their virtue coinciding with the virtue of the nation.<sup>59</sup>

In a sermon given by Reverend J.S. Sheehy in 1922, his thoughts on women’s influence on the country are made clear. “Mothers should realise that for them, at least, the home is the sphere of their best activities; that in fact is the realm in which they rule with undisputed sway. The ‘New Woman’ attacks Christianity, forgetting that it is Christianity she owes every privilege she has.”<sup>60</sup> This woman that Sheehy scorns supposedly rushes “headlong into the broad way of pleasure and self-indulgence of every kind . . . the way of false independence and the alluring freedom”—and in turn forgets her place within the home and at the side of her husband.<sup>61</sup> Another piece from the *Southern Star*, under an article about leeks and next to an advertisement for headstones, reads, “There has never been a time in all of history of the world when Catholic womanhood needed to be more devout to the Mother of God. The world is filled with temptations of every sort.”<sup>62</sup> Ireland did demonstrate changes such as later marriage for both women and men, but the end goal remained unchanged.<sup>63</sup> In an anonymous piece published in the *Leinster Express*, a woman defends the modern woman but concedes, “Do not imagine that the modern girl does not intend to

<sup>59</sup> Cara Delay, *Irish Women and the Creation of Modern Catholicism 1850-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 138.

<sup>60</sup> Rev. J.S. Sheehy, “The Influence of Women in Catholic Ireland,” *The Cork Examiner*, November 22, 1922.

<sup>61</sup> Sheehy, “The Influence of Women.”

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous, “Catholic Womanhood,” *Southern Star*, May 9, 1931.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Daly, “Marriage, Fertility and Women’s Lives in Twentieth-Century Ireland,” *Women’s History Review* 15, no. 4 (2006): 571.

marry. . . someday she will feel lonely if she has no husband and no children to brighten the home.”<sup>64</sup>

When analyzing the longevity of the patriarchal structure in Ireland, one can see the greatest indication of State enshrined values lies within its founding words. Popular-facing works may engage Irish citizens and create a discourse surrounding societal values, but legislative documents act as the final say in what is prioritized, what is demonized, and what is valued. Several gendered laws, such as the Juries Act, Dance Halls Act, and Criminal Law Act that were passed during the 1920s and 30s reveal a prioritization of women returning to hearth and home that subsequently values women’s roles as moral pillars of Catholic Ireland.

Notwithstanding the fact that the 1937 Constitution frames women within the domestic sphere, the 1922 Irish Constitution presents a notably different tone in discussing women’s roles in the newly formed state when compared to its successor. As previously highlighted, Article Three guarantees equal citizenship as “[e]very person, *without distinction of sex* . . . is a citizen of the Irish Free State.”<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Article Eight guarantees religious freedom and prohibits religious favoritism by stating, “practice of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen, and no law may be made either directly or indirectly to endow any religion, or prohibit or restrict the free exercise thereof or give any preference.”<sup>66</sup> It is important to note here that the aim of the 1922 Constitution was not to state that men and women shared

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64 Anonymous, “Why We Don’t Marry Early,” *The Leinster Express*, July 16, 1926.

65 Italics added by author.

66 Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eirann) Act, 1922. 13 Geo. 5 Sess. 2 c. 1.

equal rights, with Professor Magennis stressing at a Dáil Éireann (principal chamber of the Irish legislature) debate on the wording of the constitution that “[n]ow we do not allege that men and women are equal. I have no intention of drawing this House into a discussion as to the alleged equality of men with women . . . or women with men.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, the inclusion of a clause regarding equal citizenship demonstrates that Catholic influence at this time was not as influential in government proceedings. The years following the 1922 Constitution, however, saw leaders like Eamon de Valera and W. T. Cosgrave enshrine Catholic ideals regarding women and their role in society through several subsequent laws, slowly stripping women of their rights and delegating them to the domestic sphere.

Many states under Catholic influence were known for being strict and conservative in nature; however, Catholic Ireland was uncommonly authoritarian and mistrusting of outside influences due to its past history of colonization and subjugation, which is seen in legislation passed as a way of protecting its citizens from the threats of modernity. As early as 1924, the Free State passed the Juries Act, disbarring women from serving on local juries and denying them a pivotal obligation of equal citizenship as listed in the 1922 Constitution, instead reinforcing female familial obligations as the only ones that matter. The same year, the Civil Service Regulation Act allowed the Minister of Finance to “from time to time make regulations for controlling the Civil Service of the Government . . . and may at any time revoke or vary any such regulation.”<sup>68</sup> Due to this allowance, in April 1924, Finance Minister

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67 Ireland, Tithe an Oireachtais debate, Dáil Éireann, 18 October 1922, (Professor Magennis, Senator), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-10-18/32/>.

68 Civil Service Regulation Act, 1924, Section 9.



Ernest Blythe used these powers, stating that “[f]emale civil servants holding established posts will be required on marriage to resign.”<sup>69</sup> This legislation, as Keelin Rosaleen Burke explains, demonstrates an “expectation of male workers as the standard, and of women workers as auxiliary or expendable, was by no means exclusive to the Free State . . . but forms a broader picture of gendered legislation in action.”<sup>70</sup>

Since many women were teachers at the time, the attempts to have married women step back from these roles were met with more controversy. Regardless, in 1932 the Department of Education issued a regulation requiring any woman who obtained teaching qualifications after 1933 to resign upon marriage.<sup>71</sup> Both of these legislative acts show a desire for the Irish Government to return to past years and past notions of familial makeup, with the father acting as the sole breadwinner and the head of the family unit.

Legislation was also being passed during these decades that both increased public censorship and the government’s role in controlling social activities. In 1935, the Dance Halls Act was passed, which addressed the Catholic belief that dance halls acted as sites of immorality and sin. The Free State’s underlying fear that “the real threat of the immorality of dance halls was the possibility of pre-marital sex, and moreover, the possibility of unmarried motherhood,” was bolstered by the close proximity of young men and women in the same space and the use of secular music.<sup>72</sup> Whilst

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69 Regulations by Minister of Finance Under Section 9 of the Civil Service Regulation Act, 1924.

70 Keelin Rosaleen Burke, “Gender and the Politics of the Irish Free State, 1922-1937,” PhD diss., (University of Notre Dame, 2016), 61.

71 Burke, “Gender and Politics,” 70.

72 Burke, “Gender and Politics,” 31.

the Dance Halls Act did not prohibit dance halls altogether, it did tighten restrictions on the social outing and lengthened the number of requirements that had to be met in order for a dance hall to operate.<sup>73</sup>

One of the most often cited pieces of gendered legislation lies within Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution. The State, in declaring its aim to protect the institution of marriage, asserts that “no law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage.”<sup>74</sup> This constitutional banning of divorce further proves both a legislative and religious need to protect the image of perfect moral standing. “Problematic” women were hidden away for years at a time within the Laundries at the same time that women trapped in unhappy or abusive marriages were denied legal avenues of freedom. Even towards the end of the twentieth century, fiercely contested debates surrounding the repeal of the 1937 ban show just how deep public anxieties regarding marriage and its symbolic importance to the moral fabric of society ran.

The same year saw a new amendment to the Criminal Law Act passed that prohibited the selling or importation of contraceptive materials in the Irish Free State. The amendment did successfully raise the age of consent to fifteen for girls and introduced harsher punishments for sexual assault; however, its language on contraceptives is as follows: “It shall not be lawful for any person to sell, or expose, offer, advertise, or keep for sale or to import or attempt to import into Saorstát Eireann for sale, any contraceptive.”<sup>75</sup> Coupled with the slew of bans on outside literature due to the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, women were seeing

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73 Public Dance Halls Act, 1935.

74 Irish Const. art. XLI, § 3.2

75 Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1935, Section 17.

their access to the outside world and family planning methods being slowly torn away. This very denial of information regarding family planning continued to impact lower-class women in Ireland due to Irish family sizes being some of the largest in twentieth-century Europe. Unmarried women were blocked from access to information regarding sex education, contraceptive devices, or safe abortions, and consequently were set up to fail with many women inadvertently finding themselves inside a Magdalene Laundry or Mother and Baby Home after finding themselves pregnant. Put succinctly, the State and Church's removal of education or support backed Irish women into a corner, yet women were blamed for threatening a vision of purity that was built on lies.

### **From the Top Down: Papal Opinions and Community Control**

When examining Catholic views on female autonomy and family dynamics, one must go to the head of the Catholic Church itself. Tracing Catholic views on the regulation of women's bodies and actions can take one back a millennium, as it was Augustine of Hippo who originally cried out against abortion by stating, "Any woman who does what she can so as not to give birth to as many children as she is capable of is guilty of that many homicides, just as is a woman who tries to injure herself after conception."<sup>76</sup> Since the inception of Christendom, women were painted as living reminders of the Original Sin who were not to be trusted, only controlled. John Chrysostom compared women to wild animals, denouncing them as the most dangerous of the beasts of the earth, and Thomas the Apostle remarked, "It is a constant that woman is destined to live under the authority of man and has no authority of her own."<sup>77</sup>

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76 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 137.

77 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 104-105.

The Papal Encyclicals that were released in the early twentieth century make clear what values the Catholic Church was continuing to embrace, and what they were hoping to avoid in combatting a changing world.

As the Church was entering the twentieth century, Pope Leo XIII remarked that Catholicism was observing a gradual falling away from Christian virtue.<sup>78</sup> One might argue that the independence movement of the Irish State aligned itself amicably with the Catholic Church, as both attempted to renounce modernity and reinforce the values of Gaelic Ireland. Written by Pope Pius XI eight years after Irish independence, *Casti Connubii*, or "An Encyclical on Christian Marriage" clearly communicates Vatican opinion on the sanctity of marriage. In regard to the push for female emancipation, Pius XI states:

*This, however, is not the true emancipation of woman, nor that rational and exalted liberty which belongs to the noble office of a Christian woman and wife; it is rather the debasing of the womanly character and the dignity of motherhood, and indeed of the whole family, as a result of which the husband suffers the loss of his wife, the children of their mother, and the home and the whole family of an ever watchful guardian. More than this, this false liberty and unnatural equality with the husband is to the detriment of the woman herself, for if the woman descends from her truly regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel, she will soon be reduced to the old state of slavery (if not in appearance, certainly in reality) and become as amongst the pagans the mere*

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78 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

Once again, women were designated as the largest force in protecting Christian society from the thralls of pagan seduction and vice. Women who attempted to break free from unfulfilling or abusive relationships, or who found themselves in situations where they were pregnant with no support system, were invariably seen as threats who risked leading their community astray. Instead of questioning whether the larger system of patriarchal subjugation was to blame, these women would be honed in on and swiftly isolated. The efficacy of Papal opinion can be proven by looking locally as it was small-scale family units and communities within Ireland that enforced rigid ideas regarding female sexuality, and it was individual people who often referred forlorn relatives to the Laundries.

As Tom Inglis explains, the danger in female sexual transgression not only lies in self-realization but its subsequent contributing challenge to the existing social order.<sup>80</sup> This potential risk to society created a culture in which women were not only denied access to information and conversations regarding sex but were now also assigned as the moral upholders of virtue and were responsible for upholding male virtue as well as their own. In turn, this expectation often led to the women shouldering the blame in cases of sexual assault, with many incarcerated women within the Magdalene Laundry system being victims of assault. Various women who were locked inside the Laundries report in testimonials that

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79 Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*.

80 Tom Inglis, "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland," *Éire-Ireland* 40, no. 3&4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2005.0022>

they were abused by fathers, step-fathers, and brothers but were not believed if they ever reported the abuse, or worse, would be blamed for it themselves. One woman was repeatedly abused by her father preceding and following the death of her mother, and after running away from home several times, "I went up to the police on a Saturday afternoon and told them what was happening, and then the next thing I knew I was on my way to High Park [Magdalene Laundry location]. . . I hadn't even had my fifteenth birthday."<sup>81</sup> Another survivor, Lucy, endured sexual violence by both her father and then her brother after her father's death. Rape was forced in exchange for food, and eventually, a teacher reported the violence. However, not soon after, "there was a knock on the door and I was taken away from the home. I was put into Sean McDermott Street [Magdalene Laundry location] and I thought I was going to prison. . . I was terrified, I didn't know what was happening to me."<sup>82</sup> None of these girls received support or therapy for the things that they had endured; instead, the focus was on putting them in the nearest Laundry at the earliest convenience for everyone except the victim. Martha had been repeatedly abused by her brother, but focus was put on Martha's truancy at school, not on the reasons behind her absences. After a brief meeting with the Gardai (Irish Police), "down to Waterford we went. Got in the door anyway and [the nuns] cut me [sic] hair and took all me [sic] clothes, gave me rags to wear and straight to the laundry."<sup>83</sup>

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81 Evelyn, interview by Dr Sinead Pembroke, 2 March 2013, transcript, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History.

82 Lucy, interview by Dr Sinead Pembroke, 23 March 2013, transcript, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History.

83 Martha, interview by Dr Katherine O'Donnell, 28 February 2013, transcript, Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History.



Beauvoir's theory of othering can be seen clearly here as it is often easiest to place blame on the party that is not seen by those in power as fully human. The ideas first put forth by the top of the Catholic hierarchy, those of women having no authority and existing to serve others are shown at the local level through this disregard. Who was at fault for the sexual transgressions does not matter; what does matter is that a highly taboo subject has been interacted with, and control of the social order must be regained. Pope Pius himself scoffed at the idea of treating women equally regardless of their sexual history, writing "as though to suggest that the license of a base fornicating woman should enjoy the same rights as the chaste motherhood of a lawfully wedded wife."<sup>84</sup> This principle of scorn being directed at the women saw no distinction between victims and sexually independent women; they were one and the same, and both deserved to be punished.

## Turning a Page

When the last remaining Laundry closed in late October 1996, the shutting of the doors should have been greeted with great fanfare and a collective sigh of relief from Ireland that one of its most abominable institutions ceased operating. Instead, the Laundries stopped operating in the same way that they started, quietly and without fuss, with no mention made in Parliamentary debates or by the Catholic Church in the surrounding days. This echoed a time period when Catholic influence was beginning to wane in Ireland. At the time of Irish independence, around 92.6% of the population were Catholic, and this number steadily rose and peaked during the 1960s. However, the 2002 census showed the percentage had dropped to 88.4%, with the most recent numbers

84 Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*.

reporting another drop to 78.3% of the population, the lowest number since the census's creation in 1881.<sup>85</sup> Despite being a vast majority of the population, the drop in Catholic Ireland is indicative of a larger change for a country whose identity had been closely tied with Catholicism since its inception.

Despite the first half of the twentieth century observing a cohesive union between the Catholic Church and the Irish State, as Tom Inglis explains, "[W]hen the State began to pursue rigorously a policy of industrialisation and modernisation . . . the marriage began to break down."<sup>86</sup> Laws that had been put in place during the first period of Ireland's independence were altered, such as the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act allowing books that had been banned for twelve years to re-enter circulation. Additionally, the 1923 Censorship of Films Act was amended to allow films to be recertified by the censorship board after seven years of being rejected. As censorship on popular media decreased, new outlooks on all facets of life were introduced into the Catholic home. Over time, as more and more households in Ireland became familiar with television and radio inside the home, communities were slowly introduced to messages that were often in "direct opposition to the Catholic Church, [as it is] the media which have partly fostered and given expression to the increased interest in material possessions, individuality and sexuality."<sup>87</sup> The dynamic of the home itself changed, with televisions acting as the anchor at the end of a day's

85 Irish Central Statistics Office, "Religion – Religious Change", Percentage distribution of religious populations 1881-2016, figure 4.1, accessed 29 March, 2023, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8r-rc/>.

86 Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 75.

87 Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, 90.

work instead of communal prayer.

Women's rights in Ireland did experience more of a struggle in the attempt to modernize; as the unnamed foundation in holding the pillars of the family and the Catholic Church aloft, Catholicism's views were deeply embedded in the conscience of the lawmakers and the rest of the population. The 1980s saw constitutional referendums on both abortion and divorce, both of which remained illegal after winning slim votes. Both votes were initially unsuccessful in securing further rights for women, yet neither vote succeeded as much as polling services had originally forecast. Following decades of campaigning, the rights to divorce and abortion were recognized by law in 1996 and 2018, respectively.<sup>88</sup>

Organizations such as Justice for Magdalene's Research have been tirelessly campaigning for redress schemes and a state apology, yet it has proved to be an uphill battle to reintroduce the stories of women that for so long were written out of Irish history. Yeager and Culleton's article "Gendered Violence and Cultural Forgetting" explains that memory can be both a liberator and an oppressor, as forgetting becomes part of the national identity.<sup>89</sup> In regard to the Magdalene Laundries, many of the women have continuously suffered even after leaving due to social stigma and archival restrictions denying them the answers they desperately needed to process the past. This concealment retraumatized victims, and only recently have scholars and family members been allowed access to archival documents due, in part, to the publication of

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88 Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1995; Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act, 2018.

89 Jennifer Yeager and Jonathon Culleton, "Gendered Violence and Cultural Forgetting: The Case of the Irish Magdalenes," *Radical History Review* 126, (October 2016): 134. DOI: 10.1215/01636545-3594481.

the McAleese Report in 2013. Whilst battles still ensue regarding redress schemes and public re-education of the past, the increased awareness of the Laundries has helped these women re-occupy a necessary place within the cultural fabric of Ireland.<sup>90</sup> To fully take accountability for the past sins of Church and State, evaluation is needed to assess their role in the continued running of Magdalene Laundries throughout the twentieth century. As demonstrated in this thesis, Catholic control was upheld in Ireland through the policing of women's sexuality. This policing was not only conducted within the borders of a single parish but was also upheld by the laws of the land. The religious ideals that formed the consciences of politicians solidified this control by enacting gendered legislation, making the Irish State complicit in its wide-reaching effects. Irish women were continuously othered and were forced, for generations, to traverse a tumultuous tightrope in achieving the mythical status of the Eternal Woman. This identity was a myth, created out of fear of modernization and loss of control, but for those who failed to uphold these staggeringly high standards, the punishment was dire indeed.

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90 See Patsy McGarry, "Nuns who ran Magdalene Laundries have not contributed to redress for women," *The Irish Times*, March 2, 2022.

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## “No Comment”

Shiva Tamara



## Life of a Theory

### Chinese Women’s Blood as a Source of Power and Pollution

Zhangzhu Wan

#### Power and Pollution: What Does It Mean?

The myth behind Chinese women’s blood has long been contended by both professionals and laypersons in various fields and settings, including but not limited to medicine, religion, and folklore. First, what does it mean to say Chinese women’s blood is a source of power and pollution? Chinese women’s blood, especially their blood in reproduction (such as menstruation and blood loss during childbirth), has historically been considered unclean and seen as a part of their original sin.<sup>1</sup> Blood, in general, is also central to Chinese medicine’s treatment of women’s illnesses as it is considered essential to their reproductive abilities. This centrality invokes an inevitable dichotomy: If a woman’s blood is essential to her reproductive health, which is the arguably most important function of a woman (traditionally speaking), why is it still considered impure and polluting? At what point can the pollution and power of Chinese women’s blood be separated, if at all? These questions call for a close examination of the discourse around Chinese women’s reproductive blood in not only religious texts but also medicinal records, which has drawn interest from scholars in Chinese studies. This paper will track the theoretical development



of the understanding of Chinese women's blood as a source of both power and pollution by analyzing various scholars' work on this topic, ranging from publications in the 1960s to the 2010s.

Countless religious texts propose suggestions and limitations on how to repent for the pollution of Chinese women's blood. For example, the widely circulated Chinese Buddhist tale "Woman Huang Recites the Diamond Sutra" makes it clear that blood relating to female reproduction is a woman's original sin, whether it be menstruation or blood spilled during childbirth. Woman Huang is a devoted Buddhist woman married to a butcher. In this story, her only sin is for spilling blood during childbirth. She has to recite the Diamond Sutra to King Yama to save herself from Blood Pond Hell, which is the hell mothers fall into after death for their sin in parturition (or, in some cases, the failure to give birth and death during childbirth).<sup>2</sup> The imagery of blood is vivid throughout the story of Woman Huang. Moreover, there is a religious funeral ritual involving a son drinking the equivalent of his mother's parturition blood at her funeral to save her from damnation and is inspired by another religious tale of a son saving his mother.<sup>3</sup> While the discourse around Chinese women's blood usually takes place in a traditionalist religious and Chinese medicinal context, its impact can still be seen in modern and secular settings, which makes understanding its theoretical genealogy important.

### **Purity, Dirt, and Life/Death: The Basic Framework**

To understand the origin of the theoretical understanding of Chinese women's blood as a source of both power and pollution, one needs a general framework of understanding the beliefs of women's

menstrual blood around the world as most scholars interested in Chinese women's blood carefully tracked the historical and transcultural beliefs of menstrual blood. Mary Douglas' book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, published in 1966, is significant to the study of cultural taboos and pollutants. This book was published in 1966 and it is significant to the study of cultural taboos and pollutants. Douglas closely examines what is considered "unclean" in different cultures and is widely cited by scholars studying cultural taboos, including those investigating the cultural and practical significance of Chinese women's blood. Although Douglas' book does not directly address Chinese culture's take on the power and danger of women's blood, it is often used and cited as a theoretical framework for interpreting Chinese women's blood's pollution and (im)purity. Douglas introduces the idea of considering dirt as disorder and argues. Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formless, life to death."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Douglas proposes bodily fluids such as menstrual blood are considered an anomaly and danger to society because they are "matter out of place."<sup>5</sup> Her theory of dirt and disorder has frequently been adapted and applied to the analysis of Chinese women's power and pol, as discussed in the following section. Thus, Douglas' theory on bodily fluids needs to be included even though it does not specifically involve the discussion of Chinese women's blood.

Emily M. Ahern builds upon Douglas' framework of dirt and order in her article "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women," which was published in 1978. Ahern examines three different interpretations of Chinese women's dangerous power and pollution: the nature of unclean (dirty) substances and their relationship with birth and death, the reflection of young women's social role, and the systematic

ideas of pollution.<sup>6</sup> All three interpretations involve the discussion of menstrual blood as a source of dangerous power and pollution. The first interpretation revolves around the concept of dirt, uncleanness, and Chinese women's blood as polluting substances. For example, Ahern's sources informed her that women's blood is unclean because it is a discharge fluid from the body, and bodily discharges are all dirty. As a result, anyone who come in contact with menstrual blood is banned from worshipping gods. Here, Ahern cites Douglas and echoes Douglas' theory of bodily excretions being endowed with special properties that can be both polluting and dangerously powerful. Ahern accepts the first interpretation and various later scholars build on her assertion of menstruation as a source of both power and contamination. It is safe to say that Ahern has set the groundwork for understanding Chinese women's menstrual blood as a source of dangerous strength, as the later sections of the paper will show.

The second interpretation suggests the power and danger may come from women's social roles as mothers and wives, for they not only have the power to create new members for their husbands' families but also the power to destroy their husbands' ideal family structure. Ahern rejects the second interpretation because of its innate inconsistency. She contends that women do not necessarily benefit from the destruction of their husband's family structure by exploiting their disruptive reproductive power, such as disarranging their husbands' family structure by giving birth. Furthermore, if young women's polluting power is parallel to their reproductive ability, their prestige should decrease after menopause. However, anthropological accounts have shown older women exert and gain control over their family using influences of their words and respect from their sons. Thus, the social-role theory fails to establish a logical

and relationship between Chinese women's power and pollution. Indeed, young married women use their reproductive competency to elevate their status in the family, but whether they weaponize their polluting power must be considered in a broader framework about women's pollution, including pollution from death, as Ahern points out.

Ahern's contribution to the investigation of Chinese women's power and pollution lies in her proposal of ritualistic pollution. Ahern notes that her Taiwanese informants told her women's menstrual blood is extremely powerful because it creates babies, suggesting that part of menstrual blood's power comes from its ability to form new life, which is dangerously powerful. She pushes this discussion further by analyzing rituals that involve life and death and women's positionalities in them. Although her emphasis on menstrual blood fades in this section, she still discusses the blood and bodily excretions that come with childbirth and women's ritualistic practices after childbirth. She points out that most of the rituals following a woman's childbirth involve cleansing not only her own but also her child's body because of the tainting power of her reproductive system. Interestingly, gods are offended by the pollution of births as much as the pollution of deaths, explaining why pregnant women have to be guarded at funerals using various means. Ahern furthers her discussion of death by mentioning filial sons may drink red fluids that resemble reproductive blood in a Blood Pond ceremony to save their mothers from going to Blood Pond Hell. Ahern contests the relationship between life and death in ritualistic settings, similar to Douglas' theory on reflection of order vs. disorder and life vs. death, as aforementioned. It is worth noting that a great deal of scholarly work on the power and pollution of Chinese women involves the discussion of Blood Pond Hell. The moral of the

Blood Pond Hell story is that women who die from childbirth will be punished in the underworld for creating unclean fluids. Sometimes filial sons could save their mothers from Blood Pond Hell or at least lessen their punishment.<sup>18</sup>

## **Common Beliefs and Medicinal Understanding of Chinese Women's Blood**

Cordia Chu's article "Menstrual Beliefs of Chinese Women" was published in 1980 and influenced by the work of both Ahern and Douglas. She cites them both and uses Ahern's work as a part of her theoretical framework. She extends the analysis of Chinese women's blood as a source of power by distinguishing between clean blood and impure blood. This kind of distinction is not seen in Ahern's work as she focuses mainly on the polluting power of menstruation. Chu suggests clean blood is essential to maintaining health and nourishing life while impure blood often symbolizes death and suffering.<sup>19</sup> Chu also discusses the Blood Pond ceremony and how spilling blood during childbirth and menstruation is extremely polluting.<sup>20</sup> This notion goes to show how significant the Blood Pond ceremony is to the discourse around Chinese women's blood.

While Chu follows Ahern's path in exploring the cultural meaning of women's blood, she shifts focus to the medicinal properties of menstrual blood in both religious and secular settings. The concept of Yin and Yang is the basis of most Chinese traditional medicine practices. To achieve harmony/health in one's body, Yin and Yang have to be balanced.<sup>21</sup> Chu draws on this framework and introduces practical

uses of Chinese women's menstrual blood. For example, Taoist priests sometimes used menstrual blood as a part of their alchemical practices, and they believed that ingesting menstrual blood helped preserve one's vitality and youth.<sup>22</sup> The discussion of medicinal practices involving menstrual blood offers later scholars a multi-faceted understanding of the power in Chinese women's blood. Chu dedicates most of her article to the discussion of her informants' practices and beliefs about what a woman ought to do or how to behave while she is on her period, such as not eating or drinking cold substances and avoiding contact with coldness in general.<sup>23</sup> She introduces the sexual property of women's menstrual blood by presenting the practice of burning period cloth to attract desired men and her informants' opinion on sex during menstruation.<sup>24</sup> According to Chu, burned period cloths could be used to make love potions, which is considered as one of its sexual powers.<sup>25</sup> Ahern, too, ponders the question of sexual acts' role in women's polluting power and questions its contradicting meanings. Ahern does so also under the framework of Yin Yang balance and suggests that sexual acts cause men to lose their Yang energy, so they could and should be considered contaminating. Yet, the place where sexual intercourse happens is usually not considered a source of pollution.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while Ahern and Chu agree sexual intercourse could be a source of pollution, Chu takes Ahern's problematization of sexual intercourse further and notes that her informants believe sex during menstruation not only makes men absorb excessive Yin energy but also causes serious physical harm to women.<sup>27</sup>

Chu contributes to the systematic understanding of Chinese women's beliefs about their own blood and the cultural roots of those beliefs. She adds to the discourse around Chinese women's blood by reviewing the private vs. public binary in Chinese culture (i.e.,



Menstruation should be a private matter, bringing shame if it is shown in public). While Ahern talks about the polluting power of women's menstrual blood, she never includes the potential shame that comes with that kind of power and what it means to women in modern China. Chu, on the other hand, offers us a peek at the shame and struggle that comes with menstruation's polluting power. Although not mentioned by Chu, the internalized shame that comes with menstruation could present its own psychological polluting power. Some of Chu's informants reported experiencing intense shame when their menstruation was noticed by other people in public spaces such as schools.<sup>28</sup> Chu theorizes the shame of menstruation in relation to the common practice of not allowing women on their periods to worship deities in public, yet they may be allowed to worship gods in private homes. She concludes that the private/public dichotomy is a paradox that affects social rules for menstruating Chinese women.<sup>29</sup> Chu's argument broadens the understanding of Chinese women's blood as a source of pollution and informs the field of the real humiliation Chinese women suffer from, especially in real-life, secular settings.

Charlotte Furth is another scholar who endeavors in examining the complex relationship between women's blood as a source of pollution and the medicinal understanding of it. In Furth's 1986 article "Blood, Body, and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China, 1600-1850," she refers to Douglas and her theory of bodily fluids being "matters out of place."<sup>30</sup> Furth uses the term "power of pollution" instead of "power and pollution" in the introduction of her paper. "Power of pollution" stresses the the gravity of pollution that comes with Chinese women's blood, while "power and pollution" separates Chinese women's blood's strength and its polluting nature. Furth selects the former term because she aims to criticize the

anthropological accounts of "power of pollution" for not reflecting Chinese women's experiences; thus, the understanding of gender in China based on folklore is inevitably flawed.<sup>31</sup> She astutely points out one of the biggest gaps in the discourse around Chinese women's blood: "No one has shown that pollution beliefs are strongest in cultures where male solidarity is in fact most threatened, or that women themselves are normally aware of their condition as 'power.'"<sup>32</sup> As a solution, she turns to investigate the medical understanding of female blood and problematizes the male-centered narrative around Chinese women's health and female sickliness.

Furth extensively cites Chinese traditional medicine texts, an action in which almost no other scholars do. Her usage of Chinese male physicians' notes and knowledge of female reproductive health offers a novel perspective on the discourse around Chinese women's blood. Furth's conclusion is incredibly interesting as she argues, "The lesson society taught was that Chinese women had a choice between the power to disrupt the agnatic kin-group, and positive esteem as procreators if they accepted the weakness that physicians told them was their fate."<sup>33</sup> Her take on women having a choice to disrupt the agnatic kin group is similar to Ahern's view on Chinese women's power, but Ahern rejects this idea because she believes women do not benefit from such disruption. Furth's argument affords Chinese women more agency in self-defining and constructing the narrative around female blood and sickliness as she speculates women could use female sickliness as a means of self-protection to avoid unwanted male sexual demands and burdensome work.<sup>34</sup> Her intervention asks future scholars to reconsider and challenge the prevailing notion of female blood's power of pollution and builds the discourse with historical medical evidence.

## Religious Tales and Women's Original Sin

As the foregoing sections mentioned, all the scholars discussed so far acknowledge religion's role in shaping the concept of Chinese women's blood and various practices regarding menstruation. Many of them also refer to the Blood Pond ceremony as an isolated piece of evidence for Chinese women's reproductive blood being a source of pollution and sin. However, none pays close attention to the origin of the ceremony or what inspired this belief. Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, in their 2011 book *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang*, offer an analysis of the story behind Blood Pond Hell and the religious understanding of Chinese women's blood. The book is composed of Grant and Idema's translation of Woman Huang's and Mulian's stories. Both stories are in the form of "precious scrolls," which are extremely popular religious folklore in classical Chinese literature since the Ming and Qing dynasty.<sup>35</sup> In the tale of Mulian, his mother commits countless sins. She breaks the vegetarian diet and eats meat, which is a sin because it requires killing other living beings ruthlessly.<sup>36</sup> Her gravest sin lies in giving birth to Mulian because the physical blood and dirty bodily discharges that come with childbirth are viewed as a sin in themselves.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Mulian has to rescue her from the Blood Pond Hell, and this journey makes up the majority of his story. Anthropologist Gary Seaman documents the Mulian-inspired Blood Pond ceremony that involves the son drinking blood-like liquid, which symbolizes the blood spilled during childbirth.<sup>38</sup> It is crucial that we understand the origins of such tales because they are foundational to the construction of female

impurity in traditional Chinese culture.

Both Mulian's and Woman Huang's stories involve Blood Pond Hell and its connection to motherhood. Grant and Idema analyze the meaning behind Blood Pond Hell in the introduction of their book. They suggest a woman's body and her menstrual/childbirth fluids constitute sinfulness because they "defile the world and pollute the gods."<sup>39</sup> The pollution that comes with birth giving and menstruation is explicitly stated in woman Huang's story. A caveat in this theory is that, in some of the religious texts documenting Blood Pond Hell, women are sent there for failing to give birth and punished for the blood loss during their childbirth.<sup>40</sup> To put it simply, either way, women who engage in reproduction are going to Hell for offending gods with their blood. Grant and Idema's detailed documentation of different versions of Woman Huang's and Mulian's story offers evidence for the discursive development of Chinese women's blood as a source of pollution.

It is noteworthy that Grant and Idema omit the power component of Chinese women's blood, possibly because neither Woman Huang's nor Mulian's story makes any suggestion that women may hold power in their lifetime, considering they are going to Hell regardless of if they give birth successfully. Instead, Grant and Idema focus on the sinful nature of Chinese women in the eyes of religion and the development of Chinese female impurity. Their work is unique from the scholars discussed above because they heavily focus on the textual and historical evidence of Chinese women's blood as a source of pollution in imperial China instead of modern beliefs and practices. Although their book came out after all the other scholars discussed in this paper, the stories of Woman Huang and Mulian pose significant cultural influence in China and contribute substantially to

the religious construction of gender and, specifically, female impurity that comes with blood and reproduction. Grant and Idema's work adds to the existing research on this topic by illustrating how the concept of women's blood as pollution transpired over time.

## Conclusion

As Furth argues in her paper, Chinese women's blood as a source of pollution needs to be discussed in the context of women's actual experiences. Chu also makes a strong case for asserting the impact of this discourse on Chinese women's day-to-day lives. Period shame is still very much a real and concerning psychological menace to women (especially young women) in modern Chinese society, and it is inextricably linked to the narrative of Chinese women's blood possessing polluting powers. Women still have to sneak pads/tampons when they are in public, and cashiers at convenience stores are still offering non-transparent bags for women who purchase period products. Shamefulness in menstruation has perforated the Chinese society and an essential part of this shame comes from the polluting narrative imposed on period blood through cultural and religious practices, including but are not limited to hiding period products with non-transparent bags and prohibiting people who have been in contact with period blood from worshipping gods. As presented in this paper, scholars on this subject have various stances on whether Chinese women have actual "power" in manipulating the polluting nature of their blood. It should also be noted that contemporary research on period shame and Chinese women's beliefs and practices of menstruation remains extremely scarce. Moreover, it is unknown

what Chinese women themselves think of the "power" they supposedly have with their reproductive blood. This theory could be further developed by inquiring about its psychological impact on modern Chinese women across class and age. Such research could potentially benefit Chinese women and alleviate the existing culture of period shaming in China. Future research on this subject could divert attention to modern Chinese women's self-censoring when it comes to discuss their period in public. For example, it is common for modern Chinese women to refer to their period as "that time of the month," "dayima" (which literally means aunt), and "inconvenience." Whether their self-censoring is inflicted by societal pressure or internalized fear of their blood's power is up for debate, but investigating the colloquial representation of Chinese women's blood could serve to demystify and destigmatize the culture around women's period in China.



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**“Train Surfers”**

Rodion Voskresenskii





**“Purple Night”**

Rodion Voskresenskii



**“ə’sumptions”**

Jodi Brewer









## The Diet

Georgia Armstrong

I wake up with a scream stuck in my throat. Despite your best efforts, it is the only thing left that is keeping me full.

You cook me breakfast every single morning. I'm not sure why you still bother to. But you are a chef, and you love to cook, and don't worry, I understand the irony of you ending up with someone like me. I walk out of the bedroom, and I see you plating me breakfast, your coat on and your bag thrown over your shoulder. Even if it makes you late, you still do it. You have toasted sourdough bread, with sliced avocado and a fried egg on top, dressed with chili oil and scallions. It is, by all means, a healthy and filling meal. But I think about the oil you used bleeding into me, the bread blossoming like a flower in my stomach.

You kiss me gently, "I gotta go!" you say, "Have a good day, baby. I made you breakfast." And you are out the door. I let the door close softly before I hold the plate of food up to my face. I take in a steady, deep breath. It smells heavenly. I want to take a bite, let it explode in my mouth, let yolk run down my chin, feel the crunch of freshly toasted bread. I feel tears welling in my eyes because of how much I want it, how much I want to eat this food that you've lovingly made for me, but I know that I won't.

I open the trash can and throw the food out, the egg clinging to the side of the black bag. I stare at it for a few minutes, sitting there, and

then in shame, I pull a the paper towel from the roll and place it on top so you won't see the discarded food. I make a black coffee, and I eat an apple. I don't want to, but I have to. It's been five days, after all.

I think about the avocado toast in the trash the entire time I'm getting ready.



### "in situ 3"

Kristin O'Connor





**“Save for Later”**  
Kristin O’Connor



**“Body Scan”**  
Megan Hosmer





# The Emancipation of Janie Crawford

## Defining Womanism and Self-Identity in Zora Neale

### Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Monica Mendez

A short drive north of Orlando, Florida, lies the small town of Eatonville.<sup>1</sup> For the everyday traveler driving through, this town does not strike one as being any different from any other crumbling neighborhood in the outskirts of any major American city. However, if one were to dig a little more into the town's history, they would discover the significance of this span of land. According to an article by Anne Trubek, Eatonville is important since "it was the first all-black incorporated town in the United States, and it was the childhood home of Zora Neale Hurston."<sup>2</sup> With a history of a section of America's population finding identity here, it would make sense that Hurston found her inspiration for many of her stories within the community of this town. One such novel would be *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the most popular of Hurston's novels. The reason Eatonville and its idea of identity for African American culture is introduced at the beginning of this essay is to highlight one of the main themes of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the pursuit of self-identity. While Eatonville served as a source for many African Americans to find identity, Hurston's presentation of the protagonist's life journey serves as a narrative of an African American woman striving to establish her own identity and define womanhood. This establishment of identity

for Janie is important during the social and political atmosphere of racial tensions in the early twentieth century of the American South. Hurston's use of language and storytelling is the driving force in Janie Crawford's pursuit for self-identity, as a black woman, in contrast to stereotypes created by her environment.

## Background

It is important to reflect on the social and political landscape during the turbulent time when *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written. While the actual town of Eatonville was established in 1886,<sup>3</sup> the novel itself is set during 1937. This span of time includes significant historical events that affected the social and political atmospheres in the United States, which includes the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote in 1920. Even though the Civil War had ended, the United States was still in a battle to gain rights for major sections of the population. Racism and discriminatory segregation laws skew the identity of the African American population. Among these battles, black women hardly had a prominent voice at the time to express their identity.

Zora Neale Hurston is considered an important literary figure, since she was one of the first black women voices recognized for her ability to describe the identity for women of color. Hurston's experiences assisted in constructing this narrative. Hurston studied anthropology at Columbia University's associated Barnard College under famed anthropologist Franz Boas.<sup>4</sup> This anthropological background enhances her storytelling style. This experience led her to

complete fieldwork in Haiti and observe voodoo rituals.<sup>5</sup> During this experience, she penned her most famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>6</sup> Some of the observations detailed in *Tell My Horse*, her book on her experiences in Haiti, would explain how her time there would influence the issues of identity and womanhood that are expressed in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>7</sup> Reading through her works and autobiography, one can recognize that Hurston was met with many challenges of gender roles, how relationships work, and what it means to be a woman during her fieldwork.

## Aims and Approach

The main aim of this essay is to explore how Hurston's use of storytelling and language, interconnected with feminist theory, is an effective technique in building the characterization of Janie Crawford, in her search for identity and the meaning of being a woman. The reason this argument is important is the oppressive state that women, like Janie Crawford, experienced in the 1930s and how narratives like Hurston's constructed the foundation to shine light on a more accurate and human image of black women. Throughout the novel, Janie is progressively attempting to discover herself, while being inflicted with an oppressive environment projecting society's own views upon her.

One approach I will use in this essay is to analyze *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through feminist theory filters, specifically Womanism and black diaspora. If one dives deeper, Hurston develops a complex narrative that touches on different issues relating to intersectionality between feminist and African American issues. As Hua writes, "[B]lack diaspora feminism attempts to theorize Black femininities by

racializing womanhood, taking into account the intersectionality of interlocking systems of oppression in order to comprehend subaltern desires, subjectivities, possibilities, and imaginaries."<sup>8</sup> Throughout the novel, Hurston delivers imagery of how a black woman, Janie, interacts with her surrounding society and different relationships. The reader is made aware how these "interlocking systems of oppression" suppress Janie's dreams and desires by defining how she should behave and think. The answer to the issues brought up with black diaspora feminism can be enhanced with Alice Walker's theory of womanism. In Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," she explains that "black women are called... 'the mule of the world' because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else... refused to carry". She continues in stating, "[W]e have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted."<sup>9</sup> Hurston's novel serves as a foundational stepping stone that assists in establishing the identity of black women from a "distorted" pre-determined image inflicted by the general society.

Regarding the technique Hurston uses to express the novel's theme, her narrative style and language are driving forces for establishing the theme and characterization. The narrative style of allowing Janie to relay her story is important in helping her achieve self-identity. One of the most important aspects dealing with the narratology in the novel is that Hurston uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) for the character's dialogue. By using this dialect, Hurston establishes a more accurate representation of the characters. As Trudgill explains, "[P]eople do not speak as they do because they are white or black. What does happen is that speakers acquire the linguistic characteristics of those they live in close contact with."<sup>10</sup> With segregation common during 1930's southern United States, the language in Hurston's novel

gives more readers the ability to relate to these characters and break down stereotypes based on race and class, as Hurston uses a more standard English dialect for the main narrator. Concerning narratology, Barry states, “[W]e might say that the key to story-telling is not the imparting, but the withholding of information - readers often know things that characters don’t, and vice-versa, and narrators keep things back from both”.<sup>11</sup> The reader is able to understand Janie’s feelings regarding the events that happen in her life and how they transform her into a woman.

In relation to the narrative style, Louise Rosenblatt’s research on literature can help interpret how readers perceive the novel. In her book *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Rosenblatt discusses how “[t]he reader seeks to enter into another’s experience, to glimpse the beauty and intensity that the world offers, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain understanding that will make his own experiences more comprehensible, to find molds into which to pour his own seemingly chaotic experiences.”<sup>12</sup> This essay will delve more into this idea and how the readers interact with Hurston’s narrative. During this time period in which the novel was released, there were few narratives presented by voices such as Hurston’s. The novel serves as a platform to illustrate the experiences of a suppressed section of the population, who until this time, did not have a voice to relay their experiences in a more accurate depiction.

## Analysis

### Hurston’s Use of Narratology and Language

As an author who was influenced by Zora Neale Hurston’s writings, Toni Morrison writes, “[W]e are the subjects of our own narrative,

witnesses to and participants in our own experience.”<sup>13</sup> The focus of the narrative revolves around Janie Crawford, so it is important to hear her voice express the events of the story. Hurston’s methods of storytelling and narratology are the building blocks of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that provide a communication channel to voice Janie’s perspective. Language and voice also enhance the method of expressing the novel’s message of the discovery of self-identity for the main character.

The beginning of the novel introduces the structure of how narratology and storytelling are important for Janie’s journey through the story, which can be seen among the setting of gossiping townsfolk and Janie’s power to speak her story. The setting opens with Janie Crawford’s return to Eatonville after the death of her third husband, Tea Cake. As the townspeople of Eatonville gossip about Janie’s whereabouts and past relationships, Janie is given a voice to describe her own narrative to her old friend Pheoby Watson. Janie does not trust the townspeople, since “an envious heart makes a treacherous ear.”<sup>14</sup> While all of the citizens of Eatonville are spreading gossip about Janie’s adventures, Pheoby represents Janie’s closest confidant, in which she trusts to unleash her story “as a means to confront and deny the myths of the dominant mainstream.”<sup>15</sup> In this case, the “dominant mainstream” represents the town gossipers and the society who attempt to dictate what it means to be a black woman. In the first chapter of the novel, Janie, already transformed by her life experiences so far, voices her recognition of the gossip and her feelings to rise above it as she exclaims to Pheoby, “people like dem wastes up too much time puttin’ they mouf on things they don’t know nothin’ about.”<sup>16</sup> As Amoah states, “[R]ecognition that one is not alone



is itself an empowering revelation. Once empowered, marginalized groups will not remain on the periphery for too long.”<sup>17</sup> With Hurston allowing Janie to tell her story from Janie’s viewpoint, Janie achieves a sense of empowerment and claims her own a sense of empowerment and claims her own identity within the community. This perspective contrasts with the demands of society and the predetermined image of black women. The character of Pheoby provides Janie with solidarity in her empowerment, because she is not alone to face the gossipers. As Amoah explains, “[S]torytelling is not merely a means of entertainment [but instead] it is the only way to comprehend, analyze, and deal with life.”<sup>18</sup> By this point in her life, Janie has endured many trials and hardships through her relationships with her past husbands. By allowing Janie to be the voice of the events that had transpired, Hurston gives Janie power to express her own narrative, instead of relying on the perspectives of all the society around her. Throughout the narratives of Janie’s relationships, the character struggles to compete with louder male dominated voices that attempt to suppress her identity, as we will dive further into later in this essay. This self-discovery of Janie’s identity and voice allows her to have more freedom and power over the structure of her life.

The structure and layout of the narrative is important and builds Janie’s evolving characterization through each event that transpires in her life. Peter Barry explains narratology as “the study of how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling.”<sup>19</sup> The structure of the narrative within the novel allows the readers to follow through Janie’s journey of the events in her life that led her to her emancipation and discovery of self-identity. As in real situations, each event in Janie’s life leads to a different outcome that changes

her way of living, as the reader can see in her three marriages and how her life changes drastically with each relationship. The narrative of these relationships highlights gender roles that are structured both in general society and in the relationships themselves, as we will analyze further later in this essay. The decision to allow the main character (and most of the other cast) to speak in AAVE is another way that Hurston is able to give Janie a way to express her self-identity. As Anh Hua discusses, “[W]riting, language, and the spoken words are creative, political, and intellectual tools that Black diaspora women use to fight against their assumed and constructed invisibility, powerlessness, and voicelessness.”<sup>20</sup> Hua continues this discussion by stating, “[T]here is...a drive to reclaim feminism to speak of racism and racialization as well as sexism and patriarchy and to rethink the meaning of emancipation.”<sup>21</sup> With the characters’ use of AAVE, Hurston lifts a voice that would otherwise be oppressed in this time frame and setting. Hurston uses an omniscient third-person narrator for this novel. While the dialogue is presented in AAVE, Hurston’s voice throughout the novel is a literary, standard English voice. By approaching the language in this manner, Hurston is providing a more accurate voice for the population that she is writing for and providing a richer sense of identity for her characters. Hurston is also reaching a wider range of audience to present her story by including the two different dialects.

The transformation of Janie’s voice and her struggle to establish her identity is the main drive in the novel, which is expressed through her emancipations from her oppressive relationships with her husbands. The comparison of voices among genders is expressed during Janie’s courtship with Joe Starks. Joe Starks, who becomes Janie’s second husband, is described to “be a big voice” that “spoke

for far horizon.”<sup>22</sup> Janie is attracted to this idea of a more outspoken man, who can express his desire for his hopes and dreams. However, as the relationship progresses, this “big voice” is the downfall of their marriage. Joe’s dominating voice results in “all the fight out of Janie’s face,”<sup>23</sup> which suppresses her identity to transform her into a shell of herself and find herself in an oppressed position under her husband. Janie’s personality is affected by Joe’s sexist behaviors that cause her to be more stoic and detached from her normal actions, as we will dive more into detail later in this essay. However, when Joe is on his deathbed, Janie realizes he no longer holds power over her, and she finds her voice again to express her true emotions. Janie is even brave enough to tell Joe, on his deathbed, “And now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo’self if you want any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain’t tried tuh pacify nobody but up’self. Too busy listening tuh yo’ own big voice.”<sup>24</sup> Another segment that gives Janie a chance to express her voice is toward the end of the novel when she is on trial for Tea Cake’s death. Hurston writes, “[S]he talked...she just sat there and told and when she was through she hushed.”<sup>25</sup> Janie has a chance to express herself in her own words after a lifetime of society and dominating figures in her life speak over her and dictate how she should behave. The signs of oppression and persecution are visible when members of her community meet her disposition with animosity and initially blame her for Tea Cake’s death, even after listening to the events in her own words. Even with all the evidence in favor of Janie’s story, her words weigh less in the eyes of community, as she is greeted with looks that made Janie feel like, “so many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat her to death.”<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of the narrative gains a more accurate insight to the identity and struggles of black women. One way to interpret the portrayal of black women in the narrative is by taking into account the voice of Louise Rosenblatt, as she discussed in her text *Literature as Exploration*:

As soon as we recall the very obvious fact that literature involves the whole range of human concerns, we are reminded that it is impossible to deal with literature without assuming some attitude towards these human materials. Moreover, because our implied moral attitudes, our assumptions, our unvoiced systems of social values, are reinforced by all the electric intensity and persuasiveness of art, we should bring them out into the open for careful scrutiny.<sup>27</sup>

Considering the social atmosphere during the 1930s, readers during the time held different “moral attitudes, [...] assumptions” relating to how black women were portrayed. Examples of this suppressed and servitude identity of black women can be found in older films, such as *Gone with the Wind*, where the main representation of a black woman is relegated to a role of household servitude. Few outlets of expression offered an accurate and strong depiction of black women during this time period. The purpose of the narrative, at least in this novel, is to place awareness in its readers that the stereotypes and assumptions of black women are untrue, and the story reveals the real humanity from the voices of those living through it. It is an empowering idea for the black women community to be presented with a main character portrayed in a more accurate representation that breaks away from the racist stereotypes of the time. Concerning

empowerment in narratives, Hua reflects on the importance of how narrative strengthens identity within a character by stating:

By writing one's self into history and narrative using autobiographical stories and by making history and writing one's identities into imaginative landscapes, whether realistic or identities into imaginary, one can achieve narrative empowerment, especially for those subjects who must constantly struggle against the repression of their being and becoming.<sup>28</sup>

Hurston's form of storytelling and narrative style in *Their Eyes* does not only provide an interesting story for the readers, but it serves as an expression that could be self-reflective. Even though the character of Janie is fictional, by telling this story, Hurston provides a sense of empowerment for an otherwise oppressed section of humanity and provides an outlet to share a perspective that had, to this point, been inaccurately written. Hua argues that "many black diaspora women authors are interested in giving testimony and bearing witness to multiple histories and experiences to counter multiple oppressions and silencing."<sup>29</sup> The novel, *Their Eyes*, provided a new view on the identity of black women.

### **Janie Crawford's Resistance to Society's Oppressive Ideas on Gender Norms**

Through Hurston's narrative within *Their Eyes*, the readers can see the effect Janie's surrounding environment and society has on her ability to establish her identity as a woman. As Simone de Beauvoir declares in *The Second Sex* (1949), "[O]ne is not born, but rather becomes,

a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature."<sup>30</sup> Throughout the course of the novel, Janie's actions and definition of her character are influenced by figures in her proximity. Janie presents an internal struggle to rebel against society's preconceived ideas of gender norms; however, she is also heavily influenced by figures in her immediate proximity in regards to decisions concerning her identity of being a woman. One major character from Janie's close environment who leads Janie into decisions concerning her womanhood is her grandmother, Nanny. Outside of her immediate family, the gossip and criticism of the townspeople hold influence over Janie. These external forces are defining catalysts that help mold Janie's womanhood.

Maternal figures hold an important position in most civilizations, especially with the concept of molding the ideas of womanhood for the next generation, which we can see with the maternal forces in Janie's life. For Janie, her maternal figure is her grandmother.<sup>31</sup> Nanny is an important figure for the narrative, since she is one of the loudest voices in Janie's life that influences her to marry Logan Killicks, Janie's first husband.<sup>32</sup> The reason Nanny thinks marrying Logan would be a beneficial union is that the marriage would create economic security for Janie. When Janie begs Nanny not to make her marry Logan, Nanny says, "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection."<sup>33</sup> Prior to the first marriage, Janie had succumbed to her sexual desires and kissed a boy whom she was sexually attracted to.<sup>34</sup> In Nanny's perspective, Janie's ideas of sexual love and emotions are a threat to her well-being and independence. As discussed later in this essay, Janie's decision of succumbing to society's demands of what are important qualities for a marriage lead to her not feeling fulfilled in her sexual desires and womanhood. Nanny's background as a former slave explains her mindset on why she would push these



ideas of marrying for financial stability. Since Nanny has experienced a different lifestyle than her granddaughter, Nanny's idea of the identity of a woman is different from that of the era Janie lives in. By allowing Janie to discover her own womanhood and sexuality, Hurston's narrative asserts that black women should take control of their own identity as a woman and break free from this stereotype.

One of the major driving forces that sets up tension regarding Janie's display of gender norms is the gossip and criticism generated by the surrounding townspeople of Eatonville. As Staple explains, "Hurston recreated the porch storytelling sessions from her childhood to represent the male domination of the town. Hurston's authentic language produced an ethnographic authority that demonstrated the social structure of Eatonville."<sup>35</sup> This idea is visible throughout the novel, as Janie is criticized and judged on how she dresses, acts, and behaves as a proper woman. This demand from society on how a woman should behave is initially encountered when Janie first appears on her return to Eatonville after her life-changing and tragic relationship with Tea Cake. The townspeople question why she is dressed in dirty overalls, as they gossip to each other: "What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? - Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?"<sup>36</sup> As her previously accepted attire used to be a blue satin dress, this change goes against society's predetermined idea on what a woman should look like. The sudden appearance of Janie returning to Eatonville, alone, without a male companion, also generates a stir among the citizens of the town. The townspeople's gossip grows to assume that Janie must have run into some trouble with either the man running away or stealing her money. Janie's close friend, Pheoby, even questions if Tea Cake left "taken all yo' money and went off wid some young gal."<sup>37</sup> The idea of a

woman choosing to be alone and establish her own independence is not an accepted viewpoint in Eatonville during this time period. As the narrative progresses, the readers see Janie stand up to this constant wave of criticism from her fellow residents. The first instance of Janie raising her voice is when she expresses, "He [God] told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much bout us as you think you do."<sup>38</sup> This display of courage to speak up against the criticism directed toward her is one of the steps that creates the foundation of achieving her independence in her womanhood.

Predetermined ideas of womanhood can also be traced in the attitudes from the townspeople in placing more superiority in Janie's male partners and her resistance to these gender roles. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Janie's community placed blame on her for Tea Cake's death, resulting in her being ostracized during the trial for his murder. This attitude can also be recognized as Joe's health deteriorates and the gossip in town spreads that Janie may be attempting to poison Joe.<sup>39</sup> This viewpoint places more importance on the male side of society and places blame on the woman. The novel's rejection of male superiority continues as Janie is expected to mourn Joe after his death. Janie rebels against this idea by burning her head rags and "went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist."<sup>40</sup> This act gives her a fulfilling sense of independence and freedom. By taking control over her physical appearance, Janie establishes her own identity and refuses to acknowledge more dominating forces dictating how she should appear.

While Janie shows resistance to the gossip and criticism, she still

shows signs that she adheres to society's influence, and she worries about how the townspeople will think of her actions. One example is how Janie expresses concern is when she initiates a relationship with Tea Cake, her third husband, even shying away from asking Hezekiah about him for fear that "he might misunderstand her and think she was interested."<sup>41</sup>

In the case of Tea Cake, the town still talks behind Janie's back concerning how Tea Cake is not the correct match for her since he is too "low" and not in the same social class as Janie.<sup>42</sup> The danger and friction against society associated with Tea Cake initially provides Janie with a sense of rebellion since she feels like "a child breaking the rules."<sup>43</sup> Since Tea Cake is outside Janie's expected social class and values, the residents declare that Tea Cake is "draggin' de woman away from church."<sup>44</sup> This would suggest that church and religion assert values for a woman to follow. As religion and church attendance is considered the norm and moral in Janie's community, any deviant against this would be considered wrong. As Janie goes against the idea of these normal values, she is met with more criticism for following her own independent actions.

This narrative of the struggles of gender norms between Janie and society constructs the fight for womanism and self-identity. As the creator of the theory of womanism, Alice Walker eloquently describes this placement of woman in society within *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as "they lay vacant and fallow as autumn fields, with harvest time never in sight: and he saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment."<sup>45</sup> For women, anything outside the norm of being a wife and a mother is met with criticism from most mainstream societies, as seen with Janie Crawford in her pursuit to

find fulfillment in her life. In the case of black women, this oppression is even more prominent, given the history of their role during times of slavery and segregation in the United States. Wells-Oghoghomeh debates on this issue, stating, "[The very features that rendered woman more vulnerable and less mobile than their male counterparts - namely, their roles in the biological and social reproduction of enslaved families [...] also earned them elevated statuses within enslaved communities."<sup>46</sup> While slavery is officially over during the 1930s in *Their Eyes*, the accepted roles of women in an inferior placement below men acts as a form of enslavement. The enslavement of women in their gender roles is a common theme within literature. An example of this enslavement and suppression is the inequality that can be found in relationships revolving around the roles of wife and mother. One example could be Edna's own self-emancipation in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, in which one might perceive Edna as choosing death over her suffocating and unfilled roles as a wife and mother.<sup>47</sup> While these ideas of enslavement and gender roles for black women still exist in society, the narrative Hurston creates assists in providing a platform to raise awareness and create change.

The depiction of Janie Crawford is a welcomed change in the way she stands up for herself against society's demands on how she behaves, compared to the literature of the white voices that presented the black woman in a more oppressed identity. Regarding other black female authors who were influenced by Hurston's work and raised their voices to express their identity, Alice Walker explores black women's identity in literature:

When Toni Morrison said she writes the kind of books she wants to read, she was acknowledging the fact that in a society, in



which 'accepted literature' is so often sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant or offensive to so many lives, she must do the work of two. She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.<sup>48</sup>

This anecdote from Walker concerning Morrison falls in line with Walker's idea of womanism. While whole segments of the population felt unseen due to being inaccurately depicted in literature and other society outlets of the early twentieth century, Hurston's characterization of Janie could be seen as groundbreaking since it smashes the tradition of the established stereotypes of what defines a black woman. Through Janie's tendency to challenge gender and racial stereotypes, these actions blaze a path to encourage real black women to follow her footsteps.

### **Power Struggles in the Relationships of Janie Crawford**

One of the main approaches in which Hurston frames the narrative is the progression of Janie's independence and self-identity through her three marriages. Through these descriptions of her relationships with men, Hurston defines the power struggles that exist among the sexes. Each relationship Janie has with Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake show different aspects on how gender roles portray power struggles in relationships between men and women.

### **Power Struggles in the Relationships of Janie Crawford I: Logan**

To set up Janie's mindset on her relationships with the opposite sex, Hurston informs the reader of the background of Janie's birth, when

Janie's mother, Leafy, was raped, resulting in Janie's conception. As a result of the trauma caused by rape, Leafy turns to drinking and runs away from her family, leaving Janie in care of her mother, Nanny.<sup>49</sup> This rape has a direct effect on Leafy's identity and strips her of her fulfillment in life. With the effects of suffering through her daughter's agony, Nanny pushes Janie to not follow in the same path as her mother and encourages her to marry Logan, since Logan is financially stable with his "often-mentioned sixty acres."<sup>50</sup> Since Nanny lived a different life where she was placed in an inferior position in relation to men and society, Nanny directs these insecurities onto Janie as she pressures Janie to marry for economic and social status reasons. Nanny's ideas of fulfillment in life differ from Janie's. Janie values romantic love over material and economic foundations. Janie reflects on her union with Logan as "she knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman."<sup>51</sup> Janie's attitude of settling for Logan even though she does not love him parallels Alice Walker's idea of womanism and how the roles of wife or mother and how they interact with men questions the meaning of being a woman. With consideration to Janie's upbringing and the rape of her mother, Janie is encouraged to disregard her romantic desires and identity fulfillment, and instead place more importance on meeting society's accepted womanly roles that are said to offer more security and status.

Logan's mistreatment and domination of Janie is what dooms their marriage and leads Janie to seek fulfillment elsewhere. To Logan, the definition of wife is synonymous with slave. Logan treats Janie more as a house servant than a romantic partner. He even claims that she is "spoilt rotten" since she does not find joy in completing her housework.<sup>52</sup> Domestic duties are connected to wifedom. Concerning the psychological effects of the strains of being a housewife, Davis

argues, “[T]he psychological consequence is frequently a tragically stunted personality haunted by feelings of inferiority.”<sup>53</sup> This constant belittlement and oppression from Logan molds Janie’s idea of womanhood and stunts her ability to grow. While in this relationship, Janie accepts the idea of her identity as a wife and the tasks that are attached to this persona. In this stage of her life, this role is Janie’s definition of being a woman.

### **Power Struggles in the Relationships of Janie Crawford II: Joe**

Janie’s relationship with Joe provides Janie with a new meaning on what it means to be a woman, as her romantic desires are now stimulated. Joe enters Janie’s life with promises of ending her domestic enslavement and instead sitting pretty on a porch, as he exclaims to Janie, “You ain’t got no mo’ business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday!... A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you.”<sup>54</sup> While these temptations initially fulfill Janie, Janie represents a pretty trophy wife displayed on Joe’s arm, as Joe pursues his dreams of power as the mayor of Eatonville. However, Joe’s influence on Janie is suffocating: “Joe Starks and his creation compose the force that stunts Janie’s growth and stifles her desires: he embodies in his considerable girth the oppressive patriarchy of feminist theory.”<sup>55</sup> Joe’s power hungry personality can be seen in his attempt to take control of Eatonville as soon as they arrive.<sup>56</sup> Simultaneously, this power struggle can be reflected in his relationship with Janie, as he attempts to control everything about her. One example of this is when the townspeople request that Janie give a speech when Joe becomes mayor. Joe refuses to allow his wife

to speak and responds, “Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home.”<sup>57</sup> With a history of Janie’s voice being suppressed by her surrounding community and male figures, such as in this relationship with Joe’s “big voice,” finding her voice is one of the aspects that gives her fulfillment by the end of the novel. Reflecting on some of the language and descriptions the text uses to describe the relationship with Joe, such as the couple living in the “big house” while the townspeople live in the “servants” quarters,<sup>58</sup> the text gives the impression of Joe acting as a slave master oppressing the people around him, including his wife. Joe even has control over Janie’s choice to wear her hair down. This action shows that Joe has control over Janie’s sexuality by controlling her physical appearance. Janie lacks independence and is controlled by Joe, as the more dominating partner in the relationship.

It is not until Joe becomes ill and more vulnerable that Janie feels more powerful to step up to him and voice her grievances. Even in this weakened state though, Joe uses verbal abuse to attack Janie’s physical looks and attacks her aging appearance, which is a powerful attribute of Janie’s according to Joe.<sup>59</sup> Upon Joe’s death, “the young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair.”<sup>60</sup> This action can be seen as Janie’s second emancipation leading to her freedom from a stifling and overbearing marriage. She breaks through the accepted notion of the identity of a wife and embraces independence and sexuality.

### **Power Struggles in the Relationships of Janie Crawford III: Tea Cake**



The relationship with Tea Cake signals a new stage in Janie's pursuit for her identity, as she finds new meaning in womanism while in a relationship in which she feels more equal. Hurston expresses this: "[S]omebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. [...] She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points".<sup>61</sup> Reflecting upon the domestic slavery with Logan and the suppression of her voice with Joe, the beginning of the relationship brings Janie fulfillment to allow her to shine her own identity, while still allowing her independence. With Tea Cake, Janie finally finds what she was initially longing for, as described in a scene where "he drifted off into sleep and Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place."<sup>62</sup>

However, this intense love blinds Janie, causing her to ignore some red flags from Tea Cake, such as him stealing \$200 from Janie behind her back.<sup>63</sup> Her love for him deprives her of seeing through his vices, such as gambling and infidelity. Although Janie expresses that Tea Cake treats her as his equal, she continues to be in charge of the household duties, even after obtaining a job picking beans.<sup>64</sup> After the proverbial honeymoon period is over between Tea Cake and Janie, there are signs that the idea of equality is over between them. This is expressed in a quote by Tea Cake referring to Janie in which he states, "Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it."<sup>65</sup> As their relationship progresses, more warning signs take place when Tea Cake whips Janie in response to jealousy over Mrs. Turner's brother showing interest in her. Janie's love for Tea Cake allows her to place herself in a situation in which she is dominated and loses her independence, like the situations that took place with Logan and Joe.

By the end of the novel, after she loses Tea Cake to the insanity of rabies and Janie shoots him in self-defense, it is implied that Janie has truly found herself and she states, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons."<sup>66</sup> Although Janie has been through so many trials and hardships, her past experiences give her insight with what it means to be a woman. Her past relationships give her the ability to see what is important in life and provide her fulfillment. Janie meets the conclusion that the past relationships stifled her identity and did not allow her to reach her full potential to make her own life decisions. This emancipation in which she is now free without a partner provides her with an inner peace and gratification in life.

These depictions of Janie's relationships and labels as a wife explore the idea of gender roles and if they define being a woman. In her book, *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis discusses the idea that had started to take root in the 1870s referred to as "voluntary motherhood." According to her research, "the notion that women could refuse to submit to their husbands' sexual demands eventually became the central idea of the call for 'voluntary motherhood.'" This was an idea that started gaining popularity during the height of the woman suffrage movement.<sup>67</sup> This idea of "voluntary motherhood" can be applied to Janie's journey and Walker's idea of womanism. In lieu of "motherhood," by achieving this idea of "voluntary wifeness" by the end of the novel, Janie overcomes the inequalities placed upon relationships between genders during her time. In recognizing that her identity is more than being a man's wife, she is able to follow her own path in life and redefine the meaning of being a woman, as she embraces her emancipation from society's norms.

## Symbolism that Relates to Janie's Identity and Journey to Independence

The presence of symbolism and metaphors relating to femininity enhances the narrative for Janie's discovery of her womanhood and independence. These symbols relate to some aspect of nature, such as pear trees and mules. Early in the novel, the imagery of the pear tree relating to Janie's womanhood is introduced. Janie is described as "stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her [...] so this was a marriage!"<sup>68</sup> Janie relates the pear tree and related nature symbols as sexual desire and romantic love. The idea of the pear tree is introduced again when she is reflecting on her feelings for Logan and if they can be considered love. Janie states that love is "when you sit under a pear tree."<sup>69</sup> When Janie meets Tea Cake, she voices her attraction to him: "he could be a bee to a blossom - a pear tree blossom in the spring."<sup>70</sup> Tea Cake represents the ideas of sexual desire that Janie craved so dearly in her youth and pollinates Janie as she blossoms amidst her sexual awakenings as a woman.

In *Their Eyes*, the mule can be seen as an image of an oppressive figure that is burdened with labor. It is a repetitive image in Hurston's literature and, in this context, can be attached to the oppression placed on Janie, especially during her first marriage with Logan. The idea is first introduced by Nanny while she is trying to persuade Janie to wed Logan for the financial security, as she states, "[H]oney, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see."<sup>71</sup> This idea of

Nanny warning Janie of the idea of becoming a "mule" takes an ironic twist, as Logan treats Janie as a domestic animal. Janie and Logan's marriage becomes more comparable to the relationship between a slave and a master, which is the exact situation Nanny wanted Janie to avoid. As Janie is free from this enslavement later in the story, the mule imagery makes another appearance when Janie meets a mule that is being harassed by the townspeople. Feeling sorry for the creature, Janie shows pity and adopts it, liberating the creature from its oppressed existence.<sup>72</sup> Janie shows solidarity for the creature and understands the pains it experiences. This idea further solidifies the idea of the mule representing self-identification for Janie and the realization that she exists in an oppressed state, where she needs to be liberated.

These instances of symbolism and metaphors relating to feminist imagery are further examples on how Hurston uses language to drive her theme in the novel. In response to the events in *Their Eyes*, Alice Walker reviews Janie's actions:

I love the way Janie Crawford  
left her husbands  
the one who wanted to change her  
into a mule  
and the other who tried to interest her  
in being a queen.  
A woman, unless she submits,  
is neither a mule nor a queen though like a mule she may suffer  
and like a queen pace the floor<sup>73</sup>

The symbols of the "mule" and the "queen" are entirely different, but



in this context, they represent the identity of two different sections of Janie's life—first, her marriage to Logan and then second, her marriage to Joe. Both images create a sense of oppression on Janie that leads to her fighting for her own emancipation. Barry discusses this metaphor and argues that “words and meanings have a life of their own and constantly override and obscure the supposed simplicities and clarity of external reality.”<sup>74</sup> Hurston's work, especially the primary source discussed in this project, is packed with metaphors. This can be first introduced in the opening line of *Their Eyes*:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.<sup>75</sup>

This passage, along with the symbolism of the mule and pear tree, generates a visual representation of the narrative's themes among the readers. “Ships at a distance” represent the equality and desires that Janie keeps reaching for through the novel. “Time” could be considered an anthropomorphic metaphor, since Hurston gives human traits to a non-human entity—a language method that she used often in her works. The metaphors create a comparison that helps readers create imagery and better understand the plight of Janie's struggles, as a woman trying to break through the stereotypes of the metaphors attached to her image.

## Conclusion

Decades later, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* proves to be a novel

that transcends time. The issues of self-identity and womanism are just as important today as they were in the 1930s. While our society has gone through major transformative changes regarding sex and race since Hurston's novel was released, equality based on sex, gender, race, sexual orientation, and a slew of other characteristics is still fought for even today. However, the importance of this novel is the voice Hurston provides to a section of the population that is silenced.

This book serves as a stepping stone for women of color to speak up. As discussed earlier, Alice Walker is one of those voices, along with a list of other names that followed. Before women like Hurston spoke up, the image of black women was skewed, reflecting a more unequal and racist society. This distorted image created stereotypes and fixed roles in society for characters such as Janie Crawford. Hurston's narrative was able to bring awareness to the oppressed identities of black women. In the literary world before Hurston, the identity of women was told through a more skewed and inaccurate lens, relying more on third-party white and male voices to describe the experiences of black women. Janie Crawford painted a different image of black women in a society that still envisioned them enslaved. To break free of these stereotypes, “black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives.”<sup>76</sup> To write about a black woman breaking out of an enslaved society, Hurston initiates the start of a new identity for black women. Through Hurston's narrative and language, this new image of black women in literature sparks the emancipation of Janie Crawford, and so many like her.

# Notes

1. A previous version of this essay was submitted as a Bachelor of Arts thesis in English literature at Mid Sweden University, January 2023.
2. Trubek, Anne, "Zora's Place," (2011).
3. Ibid.
4. Boyd, Valerie, "Wrapped in Rainbows," (2003): 114.
5. Hurston, Zora Neale, "Dust Tracks on a Road," (2010): 168.
6. Boyd, Valerie, "Wrapped in Rainbows," (2003): 300.
7. Albano, Alessandra. "Nature and Black Femininity in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tell My Horse*," (2019).
8. Hua, Anh. "Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance," (2012).
9. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," (2011): 405.
10. Trudgill, Peter. "Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society," (2000): 43.
11. Barry, Peter. "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory," (2017): 226.
12. Rosenblatt, Louise. "Literature as Exploration," (1938): 8.
13. Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," (1989).
14. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 5.
15. Amoah, Jewel. "Narrative: The Road to Black Feminist Theory," (1997): 85.
16. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 6.
17. Ibid, 89.
18. Ibid, 84.

19. Barry, Peter. "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory," (2017): 223.
20. Hua, Anh. "Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance," (2013)
21. Ibid.
22. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 28.
23. Ibid, 76.
24. Ibid, 87.
25. Ibid, 187.
26. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 185.
27. Rosenblatt, Louise. "Literature as Exploration," (1938): 10.
28. Hua, Anh. "Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance," (2013).
29. Ibid.
30. DeBeauvoir, Simone. "The Second Sex," (1956): 273.
31. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 12.
32. Ibid, 21.
33. Ibid, 15.
34. Ibid, 12.
35. Staple, Jennifer. "Zora Neale Hurston's Construction of Authenticity Through Ethnographic Innovation," (2006): 65.
36. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 2.
37. Ibid, 6.
38. Ibid, 75.
39. Ibid, 82.
40. Ibid, 89.
41. Ibid, 100.



42. Ibid, 103.
43. Ibid, 102.
44. Ibid, 111.
45. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," (2011): 402.
46. Wells-Oghoghomeh, Alexis S. "'She Come Like a Nightmare': Hags, Witches and the Gendered Trans-Sense Among the Enslaved in the Lower South," (2017): 259.
47. Chopin, Kate. "The Awakening and Selected Stories," (2020): 140.
48. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," (2011): 8.
49. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 19.
50. Ibid, 21.
51. Ibid, 25.
52. Ibid, 26.
53. Davis, Angela Y. "Women, Race, & Class," (1981): 242.
54. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 29.
55. Beauchamp, Gorman. "Zora Neale Hurston's Other Eatonville," (2011): 85.
56. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 35.
57. Ibid, 43.
58. Ibid, 47.
59. Ibid, 78.
60. Ibid, 87.
61. Ibid, 96.
62. Ibid, 128.
63. Ibid, 122.
64. Ibid, 129.

65. Ibid, 148.
66. Ibid, 191.
67. Davis, Angela Y. "Women, Race, & Class," (1981): 207.
68. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 11.
69. Ibid, 24.
70. Ibid, 106.
71. Ibid, 14.
72. Ibid, 57.
73. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," (2011): 7.
74. Barry, Peter. "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory," (2017): 113.
75. Hurston, Zora Neale. "Their Eyes Were Watching God," (2006): 1.
76. Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose," (2011): 5.

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“erschöpft”

Ilhan Mathangi



## Straying from the Binary:

Exploring How American Society Can Rethink the Gender Binary to Benefit Intersex Individual

Ash Pugh

Throughout history, people who do not conform to the binary sexes have always existed. There is documentation of gender-nonconforming people in seventeenth-century colonial America in examples such as Thomas(ine) Hall, who presented themselves as masculine or feminine at different points in their life.<sup>1</sup> For hundreds of years, communities in countries like Pakistan and India have included hijras, or male-to-female transgender people, in their societies.<sup>2</sup> People who exist outside of the two binary sexes, otherwise known as intersex people, are individuals whose sex characteristics are a combination of both male and female traits. Many people view intersex people as deformed or flawed, meaning that intersex people need to change something about themselves to be accepted. As a result of

- 1 Cleves, Rachel Hope. “Beyond the Binaries in Early America: Special Issue Introduction.” *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (Fall, 2014): 459-468. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/beyond-binaries-early-america-special-issue/docview/1553321344/se-2>.
- 2 Jami, Humaira and Anila Kamal. “Myths about Hijras (Male-to-Female Transgender of Hijra Community)? Role of Gender and Commonly Held Belief about them.” *Foundation University Journal of Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2017): 63-76. doi:<https://doi.org/10.33897/fujp.v1i1.60>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/myths-about-hijras-male-female-transgender-hijra/docview/2465446368/se-2>.



this societal view, many intersex people are forced into conforming to one binary sex by society, through both presentation and surgery. Intersex individuals typically have no medical reason to surgically manipulate their bodies to fit into one binary gender; however, because of societal discomfort with those individuals who fall outside of the binary, many intersex people are coerced into conforming out of fear of discrimination. Intersex people should not have to decide to either conform to the binary or experience discrimination from society. If United States society was more educated on the nuances of gender identity, presentation, and the existence of intersex individuals, intersex people could be more empowered to make their own decisions about their bodies and presentations without fear of societal backlash. Therefore, the way gender identity is approached in the United States should be completely retaught in our school systems to include intersex and nonbinary identities to allow for intersex individuals and others who fall outside of the gender binary to freely express their identities.

The purpose of this research on intersex individuals is to change the way society views gender and those individuals who stray from the gender binary, so that these individuals are free to express themselves, regardless of whether their presentation fits a binary gender. The question I will be addressing in my research is the following: “How can we reform our ways of thinking about and perceiving gender in the United States so that intersex children are not forced to conform to one binary sex?” From a young age, many intersex people are forced to conform to a binary gender by their families, doctors, and society. Even when a child’s sex characteristics are ambiguous at birth because we live in a gendered society, the child is pushed into a gender identity that may not fit them for long. If society was less structured by binary gender, intersex people could have more

freedom to express their gender identity, regardless of whether their identity falls into one of the binary sexes. Thus, we must ask how society can change its thinking about gender to accommodate those individuals who do not physically conform to either male or female.

### Literature Review

In the United States, intersex children are often forcibly or wrongly assigned a sex at birth. According to one source, “sex ‘normalising’ interventions, to reinforce a sex assignment, include feminising and masculinising surgical and hormonal interventions, and gonadectomies, often during infancy, childhood and adolescence, before the recipient can consent and without firm evidence of necessity or good surgical outcomes.”<sup>3</sup> Because of these forced surgical interventions, intersex children are arbitrarily placed into one binary sex. As an intersex child ages, they may not continue to display the sex characteristics of their sex assigned at birth. Individuals with androgen insensitivity syndrome, or “hormone resistance characterised by a female phenotype in an individual with an XY karyotype and testes producing age-appropriate normal concentrations of androgens,”<sup>4</sup> may be surgically altered to appear male. However, these individuals will continue to produce high levels of estrogen, meaning that any surgery would eventually be reversed due to changes in characteristics and hormone levels, as almost 50% of intersex patients require additional treatments and surgeries to maintain the

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3 Carpenter, Morgan. “The Human Rights of Intersex People: Addressing Harmful Practices and Rhetoric of Change.” *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24, no. 47 (2016): 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2016.06.003>.

4 Hughes, Ieuan A, John D Davies, Trevor I Bunch, Vickie Pasterski, Kiki Mastroyannopoulou, and Jane MacDougall. “Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome.” *The Lancet*, 380, no. 9851 (2012): 1419–28. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60071-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60071-3).



results of the first treatment.<sup>5</sup> Because many of these surgical procedures are performed when the intersex individual is too young to consent, during infancy and early childhood, their characteristics often change over time, thus negating these surgical changes. Hence, most surgeries to reinforce an intersex individual's sex assignment are not performed for medical purposes; rather, these surgeries enforce the societal gender binary of male and female.

Though many intersex advocacy groups, such as the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), acknowledge that forced sex assignment surgeries are not performed for the individual's medical benefit<sup>6</sup>, this acknowledgement does not erase the damage to intersex people who have undergone these procedures. One source claimed, "A clinical study of 439 intersex adults, children and parents of intersex children in Germany undertaken between 2005 and 2007 showed that 81% of adults and children with intersex traits had undergone surgeries related to those traits; two-thirds of adults linked sexual problems to those surgeries."<sup>7</sup> Many intersex people undergo

5 Gupta, Deepika, Madhu Bhardwaj, Shilpa Sharma, A. C. Ammini, and Devendra K. Gupta. "Long-Term Psychosocial Adjustments, Satisfaction Related to Gender and the Family Equations in Disorders of Sexual Differentiation with Male Sex Assignment." *Pediatric Surgery International*, 26, no. 10 (10, 2010): 955-8. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00383-010-2661-y>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/long-term-psychosocial-adjustments-satisfaction/docview/807402094/se-2>.

6 Rubin, David A. "Provincializing Intersex: US Intersex Activism, Human Rights, and Transnational Body Politics." *Frontiers*, 36, no. 3 (2015): 51-83,196. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/provincializing-intersex-us-activism-human-rights/docview/1749624840/se-2>.

7 Carpenter. "The Human Rights of Intersex People" *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24, no. 47 (2016): 74-84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2016.06.003>.

surgeries related to their sex characteristics, and these surgeries often result in problems for the patients involved. Problems that intersex people may experience as a result of medical procedures are sexual dysfunction and incorrect sex assignment, which can both negatively and permanently impact intersex individuals. Since approximately 47% of sex assignment surgeries in intersex people result in adverse health effects<sup>8</sup>, the logical next step in this field is no longer requiring these surgeries for intersex patients.

Sex-affirming surgeries in intersex individuals lead to numerous negative side effects, but reasons exist outside of medical need that these surgeries are performed. For instance, several intersex patients are considered for sex-affirming surgery or hormone therapies to prevent them from discrimination from society as they age. In Thorn's study, researchers reiterate the societal pressures to perform surgeries:

Instead, these decisions were made upon cultural considerations: doctors believed that a male child would grow up to value only sexual satisfaction; thus, if he did not have a phallus that society deemed adequate enough, he would become maladjusted. In turn, doctors believed that a female child would grow up to value only her ability to reproduce, and thus they advised against any procedure which may have sterilizing effects.<sup>9</sup>

8 Zeeman, Laetitia and Kay Aranda. "A Systematic Review of the Health and Healthcare Inequalities for People with Intersex Variance." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, no. 18 (2020): 6533. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186533>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/systematic-review-health-healthcare-inequalities/docview/2441970246/se-2>.

9 Thorn, Erin D. "Drop the Knife! Instituting Policies of Nonsurgical Intervention for Intersex Infants." *Family Court Review*, 52, no. 3 (2014): 610-21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12110>.

Many of these surgeries are performed without medical intent, but rather with the idea that intersex children will not be able to integrate into society properly without some level of gender conformity; these surgeries are not necessary for intersex people to live healthy lives. Without the idea that intersex individuals need to fit into male or female roles, these sex assignment surgeries that are frequently performed on intersex children would be unneeded for patients at such a young age. According to one study, over 80% of intersex children undergo surgeries for their variance,<sup>10</sup> but these surgeries could be voluntary, meaning that intersex patients could choose them at their discretion as they age. Since these surgeries are frequently performed by medical professionals with the consent of these children's parents to protect intersex children from discrimination and mistreatment from society, if this societal pressure did not exist, intersex people would not be forced to conform. They would then be freed from undergoing these harsh procedures and could be free to express themselves and their identity.

As so many intersex people have experienced complications and issues from sex assignment procedures and other operations, intersex activists have begun advocating for anti-discrimination laws for their protection. Baur et al. discusses the importance of including sex characteristics as a protected category in discrimination laws: “many intersex social activists advocate that ‘sex characteristics’ best identifies their needs when it comes to protection from social discrimination. Only Malta has directly included sex characteristics as

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10 Jones, Tiffany. “Intersex and Families: Supporting Family Members with Intersex Variations.” *Journal of Family Strengths*, 17, no. 2 (2017). <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intersex-families-supporting-family-members-with/docview/2647680754/se-2>.

a protected category in a manner that includes unnecessary medical interventions as a form of childhood discrimination.”<sup>11</sup> Actively protecting intersex people socially is more beneficial than implementing harsh and often harmful surgeries. If countries like the United States and others in the Global North followed the lead of Malta and ensured that intersex individuals will not face discrimination based on their sex characteristics or gender identities, sex assignment surgeries and hormonal procedures would become less common. According to Lowry's research, because of improving regulations regarding informed consent and the rights of intersex children, these sex assignment surgeries are expected to decline in the future.<sup>12</sup> These surgeries are often dangerous and offer few benefits to intersex patients, so the logical solution to this issue is for more governments to implement anti-discrimination laws, such as the third-gender categories and protections offered by Australia and Germany,<sup>13</sup> that include sex characteristics and gender identity in their specifications. These laws would allow intersex people to express and openly present themselves in society.

11 Bauer, Markus, Daniela Truffer, and Daniela Crocetti. “Intersex Human Rights.” *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 24, no. 6 (2019): 724–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2019.1671354>.

12 Lowry, Caroline. “Intersex in 2018: Evaluating the Limitations of Informed Consent in Medical Malpractice Claims as a Vehicle for Gender Justice.” *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, 52, no. 2 (Winter, 2019): 321-356. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intersex-2018-evaluating-limitations-informed/docview/2169604523/se-2>.

13 Garland, Fae and Travis Mitchell. “Legislating Intersex Equality: Building the Resilience of Intersex People through Law.” *Legal Studies*, 38, no. 4 (12, 2018): 587-606. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/lst.2018.17>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/legislating-intersex-equality-building-resilience/docview/2210383766/se-2>.



## Methods

The research question I am confronting is the following: “How can we reform our ways of thinking about and perceiving gender in the United States so that intersex children are not forced to conform to one binary sex?” I have addressed this question by analyzing secondary data and through a critical review of existing literature. Primarily, I have utilized the existing literature on this subject to demonstrate why society should be rethinking the gender binary, specifically regarding intersex people. Through my analysis of this literature, I have found that most of the current practices of sex assignment surgeries and medical intervention to protect intersex children from discrimination are ineffective or do not address the problem at hand: intersex children should not be forced to conform to one binary gender to properly integrate into society. In the studies I have referenced thus far, researchers have shown that sex assignment procedures and other attempts to force intersex people to adhere to one binary gender have created more problems than solutions because of the high levels of danger involved for the patients. As a result, a change needs to be made in the way American society approaches intersex individuals, starting at birth. With a reform of how people in the United States learn about and understand intersex people, sex assignment surgeries will become increasingly less common, as stated in Lowry’s study.<sup>14</sup> Eventually these surgeries may be unnecessary for intersex individuals to adequately integrate into society, allowing intersex people to be perceived as they are without one specific binary sex.

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<sup>14</sup> Lowry. “Intersex in 2018.” *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, 52, no. 2 (Winter, 2019): 321-356. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intersex-2018-evaluating-limitations-informed/docview/2169604523/se-2>.

## Results

Intersex individuals who undergo sex assignment surgeries and other procedures to conform to a binary gender experience more harmful effects than positive outcomes. According to one source, “It could be argued that the practice of FGC, circumcision and surgical interventions on intersex children seem to be motivated by a body-oriented approach, rather than a person-oriented approach that acknowledges the dimension of the right of the individual freely to decide on one’s body.”<sup>15</sup> The bodies of intersex people are discussed before the autonomy and rights to their bodies. As a result, intersex people have continually been operated on without their consent because of the social discomfort with those individuals who do not fulfill a binary gender identity and presentation. If the focus was shifted from surgically manipulating intersex individuals to addressing the societal issues that cause intersex people to face discrimination and mistreatment, then intersex people could present themselves however they choose. A way to confront this mistreatment and discrimination is to implement education into the public education system of the United States that acknowledges intersex individuals and other nonbinary gender identities so that a greater portion of the United States understands and accepts those individuals who fall outside of the gender binary. With increased acceptance and understanding of intersex individuals and other people who do not conform to the gender binary, intersex people can present themselves in society as they see fit, without fear of societal discrimination or negative repercussions.

## Discussion

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<sup>15</sup> Ammaturo, Francesca Romana. “Intersexuality and the ‘Right to Bodily Integrity.’” *Social & Legal Studies*, 25, no. 5 (2016): 591–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663916636441>.

The practice of performing sex assignment procedures on intersex children is not helpful in addressing their judgment from society. One source claims that these surgeries create more problems than they solve: “Instead of creating gender assimilation as planned, these early interventions often lead to physical and mental complications that would not necessarily be present had the child not been subjected to surgery.”<sup>16</sup> Although sex reassignment surgeries on intersex patients are performed with the idea that the patients will be better equipped to socialize and integrate into society, these procedures cause a great deal of physical and mental harm to the individuals involved. Since these surgeries are performed under the guise of assisting intersex individuals in being accepted by society, a more direct and effective resolution would be to better inform society of the existence and identities of intersex and other gender-nonconforming people. With more adequate and comprehensive information about intersex people taught in schools by including nonbinary identities in sex education and incentivizing schools to include gay-straight alliances (GSAs) for students to utilize, United States society would be better suited to embrace both intersex individuals and others who do not conform to binary gender identities, thus reducing the amount of prejudice against intersex people. The most logical way to address the mistreatment of intersex people in the United States is to institute education in the public school system that recognizes intersex people and other nonbinary identities and includes GSAs and other groups that inform students about LGBTQIA+ identities so society overall can learn to accept and appreciate gender-nonconforming individuals. By instituting education that acknowledges intersex individuals, United States society will, in effect, rethink the

16 Thorn, Erin D. “Drop the Knife!” *Family Court Review*, 52, no. 3 (2014): 610–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12110>.

gender binary in a way that includes those individuals who do not fit into a conventional binary gender, allowing intersex people to be themselves without having to fulfill a typical binary gender role.

## Conclusion

In review, the United States needs to reevaluate the way gender is approached in society for intersex individuals to be accepted and included in social spaces. The ongoing solution for intersex people’s integration into society has been to undergo harmful procedures so that they can conform to one binary gender, as over 80% of intersex individuals have undergone these surgeries,<sup>17</sup> but these surgeries have caused more harm than good for intersex individuals’ health, as seen in the fact that 70% of intersex individuals experienced sexual complications from these procedures.<sup>18</sup> Almost half of intersex people who have undergone sex assignment procedures have experienced complications, as 47% of intersex individuals claim that they have had issues after their procedures.<sup>19</sup> These complications can lead to long-term negative effects for the individuals involved; however, these effects can be avoided if the surgeries are not performed.

17 Jones, Tiffany. “Intersex and Families: Supporting Family Members with Intersex Variations.” *Journal of Family Strengths*, 17, no. 2 (2017). <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intersex-families-supporting-family-members-with/docview/2647680754/se-2>.

18 Zeeman and Aranda. “A Systematic Review.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, no. 18 (2020): 6533. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186533>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/systematic-review-health-health-care-inequalities/docview/2441970246/se-2>.

19 Zeeman and Aranda. “A Systematic Review.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, no. 18 (2020): 6533. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186533>. <https://login.ezproxy.lib.uwf.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/systematic-review-health-health-care-inequalities/docview/2441970246/se-2>.



These sex assignment procedures only occur so that intersex people can become better socialized and accepted in society, but a more effective solution is to properly educate the public about intersex people and other gender-nonconforming individuals to directly address the problem of discrimination against those individuals who do not conform to the gender binary. If public schools in the United States instituted curriculum that addressed the existence and validity of intersex people and people with nonbinary identities, discrimination against those people who fall outside of the gender binary would slowly decrease. Thus, the appropriate solution to allow intersex people to freely express their identities is to institute education regarding intersex and nonbinary people in public schools in the United States, ensuring that intersex people are accepted by society and are no longer forced to undergo harmful procedures to be embraced by society.

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## Untitled

Babak Haghi



## The Legacy of Cottagecore:

### A Sapphic Tradition

#### C. Montgomery

As the world shut down during the spring and summer of 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the influx of free time due to closures and cancellations led to a renewed involvement with the natural world. This manifested especially clearly in the popularity of the so-called “cottagecore” aesthetic, which gained increased attention through social media platforms such as TikTok and encouraged participants to return to a simple, nature-based lifestyle. This lifestyle became especially popular among queer women, who saw it as a way of living a historical, nature-based fantasy without compromising those parts of their identity that would have been viewed as inferior or punishable in the past when such dependency on the natural world was an essential part of life. While this particular trend existed within the modern context of social media and a global pandemic, the relationship between women and nature exemplified by cottagecore’s glorification of the beauty of the natural world has long existed. Women and the queer community have historically had a special connection to the natural world, as argued by scholarly criticisms such as ecofeminism and as evidenced by efforts on the part of the queer community to return to a more nature-based way of living over the years. This connection, as encapsulated by the trend of cottagecore, allows women (and particularly those who identify as queer) to develop a sense of community centered around the ideals of simple living and a renewed relationship with the natural world.

This sense of simple, natural living based on historical depictions is something I’ve long sought to increase in my own life, up-

holding as a romantic ideal that I have long wished I could manifest. I've always been a little obsessed with ideas of the past that are only partially true. During my high school years, it was the 1950s: I would fixate on sock hops and soda fountains, only to learn of the severe social inequalities that plagued America during those years and made them less than a utopia. Later I fell in love with the Regency era, captivated by the Jane-Austen-movie-adaptation, walking-through-the-woods fantasy that's far from the reality of what people like Austen and the Brontë sisters experienced. It's the attraction to a life that's different and unattainable—the human obsession with trying to find perfect happiness, being convinced that if one had been born in a different time, life could have been so much better. As a homeschooler with little else to do aside from getting lost in historical novels, I read every book available to me and, in the process, developed my own sort of imagining of what the past had been like. I thought about what it would have been like to live during another time, to be a part of something so different from the monotony of my daily routine. As I lived a life in which I spent most of my time inside the house, separated from my peers and unable to socialize due to strict protective measures, it became a form of escapism. I soon found that I much preferred the life found between the covers of a book, on the silver screen, or inside my head, to my normal life.

However, in the process, I began to lose sight of the fact that life never has and never will be perfect and that there are always challenges faced by humans across history, regardless of the setting in which they live their lives. Of course, it was easy to expect that something so far removed from my own reality would be better, given that it was a figment of my imagination. But as I grew up and began to dig into the reality of history, searching for differing perspectives and trying to grasp what life had been like during the periods I had once fantasized about, I began to realize that humanity has never lived in a perfect utopia and that it never will. Discrimination has always existed in some form, even in the fairest and most equal of societies; governments have abused their power and exercised inappropriate control over the societies they are intended to support;

social stratification has caused inequalities that lead to dissatisfaction, tension, and rebellion. And yet, coming to this realization and recognizing that I likely would not have been happier, safer, or more comfortable in a different time or place did not take away the appeal of daydreaming about what it would have been like to live in the past. If anything, it made the imagined life I built for myself more enjoyable—if the perfect society has never existed and never will exist, then why wouldn't I want to dream up a perfected version of history that is superior to the way society exists in reality?

Because of this, romanticizing the past while still recognizing the flaws present in all historical periods has been exceedingly common, existing in the arts for as long as they have existed. Especially since media such as literature, theater, and film have become more accessible and widespread, people have rewritten history in many ways, giving voices to historical characters, both fictional and not, who did not have them at the time. While marginalized people have always existed, they haven't always been given a platform through which to publicize their experiences, and romanticizing the past in a way that represents those marginalized identities can remedy that historical erasure.

In addition to contributing greater representation and diversity to history, recalling eras largely different from our own is something that can provide comfort during times of uncertainty and stress. In an article written for National Geographic, author Nicole Johnson looks at the psychological reasons behind the phenomenon of nostalgia and why we tend to look to the past for consolation during difficult times. The overarching reason that she offers is simple: this type of reminiscing provides a sort of escapism and reminds one of happier times, suggesting that things will not always remain difficult and that happy times will return. Johnson also differentiates between personal nostalgia (or the 90's kids, Barbie movie, metal lunchbox type of reminiscing) and historical nostalgia: "Historical nostalgia is tied to valuing aspects of a time that happened before a person's birth, and it reflects a level of dissatisfaction with what is happening in the present."<sup>1</sup> This use of nostalgia as a coping mecha-



nism was especially prevalent during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. The devastation and sudden change experienced during this time were unlike anything that the world had seen in recent history, and as a result, many people were exposed to sudden changes that left them struggling mentally and emotionally. As a way to deal with these newfound experiences, these people turned to the past for comfort, and pop culture saw a recurrence of trends based on history, such as regency elements, 90's fashion trends, and early 2000s toys and television shows. In hindsight, the way that these trends blew up on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram and consequently inspired real-life fashion and popular culture reflects the increased dissatisfaction with the world during this time and the resulting urge to seek comfort in the past.

Social isolation had more of an impact on some groups in particular, notably those who relied on in-person social groups and organizations for emotional, mental, and communal support. For teenagers and young adults, social groups that had once been a crucial form of community and self-expression were suspended with little warning, leaving these people grasping for new ways to connect with others and share their talents. This was especially detrimental among marginalized individuals who normally had to look outside of their immediate family, school, or community to connect with others who shared a common identity. Because of this, young people saw the internet as the solitary form of socialization at the time, finding like-minded people and a sense of community through social media platforms and forums that, despite having existed for years, saw a significant uptick in user numbers due to the free time granted by pandemic closures and cancellations—one report points to a 10.5% increase in active social media users during the first few months of the pandemic, or a growth of approximately 376 million users.<sup>2</sup> While subgroups have always existed in the real world and have exploded on the internet since its founding, as unprecedented numbers of people with more time on their hands than ever before turned to the internet to find community, the subcultures present on the internet grew in size, number, and diversity, until there was a

group of some kind for nearly every single niche interest imaginable.

One subculture that became popular during the pandemic merges the historical nostalgia experienced by many during this time, the popularity of internet subcultures, and the need for community in marginalized communities, resulting in a trend that became one of the most popular of the period from 2020 through 2021. The term “cottagecore” has been used to define this subculture that rose to popularity on TikTok and quickly spread across social media platforms, and refers to a particular breed of romanticized history: think sun-dappled fields, embroidered flowers, freshly-baked bread, and cute farm animals—the romanticized sort of country living that exists in Jane Austen novels, video games such as *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley*, and Studio Ghibli movies.<sup>3</sup> While this trend appealed to a wide range of people and gained popularity in mainstream culture during the pandemic, it became especially popular among young adults within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly lesbians. This relationship between queer young people and country living stood in stark contrast to the way this sort of lifestyle has been perceived in recent years. As evangelical Christianity has spread across the United States, simple living, such as that romanticized within the cottagecore community, has also been claimed by those who call for a return to traditional, conservative values—consider famous evangelical families such as the Duggars who have popularized frugal living among likeminded religious families.<sup>4</sup> This lifestyle has been popular on social media within a community of women who desire to follow traditional gender roles, focusing their lives on marriage, children, and homemaking. Also known as the “tradwife” movement, this subculture “harks back to an earlier era, encouraging women to take pleasure in traditional domestic duties while promoting feminine submissiveness, domesticity, and wifeness.”<sup>5</sup> One TikTok, promoted with the hashtags “#tradwife,” “#serveyourhusband,” and “#cottagecore,” encapsulates this message perfectly. “I don’t think God put me on this earth to be a boss babe,” the text on screen reads. “I think God put me on this earth to be a stay-at-home farm mom.”<sup>6</sup> There are clear similarities between this

traditional view of country living and the more modernized, queer perspective of it. Both emphasize roles and hobbies that were historically considered feminine, romanticize domestic life, and promote a return to simple living—but the two groups attached could not be more different. While there is a clear association between traditional gender norms and this sort of country living, the queer connection with this way of life can seem a little cloudier. But upon analyzing the historical components that link queerness and nature, as well as the way that the COVID-19 pandemic inspired a longing for nature, beauty, and simplicity, the popularization of the cottagecore subculture on the internet can be proven to be the modernization of a culture that has existed nearly as long as queerness itself.

### **The Critical and Historical Precedent**

The relationship between nature-based living and LGBTQ+ individuals (especially lesbians) was not something new that cropped up in the twenty-first century. Historically, nature has frequently been connected with the feminine and, therefore, reflected in works typically regarded as queer. A web page published by the University of Alberta looks into possible reasons why this might be, referencing the etymology of the word “nature” (which has frequently been a feminine noun in gendered languages), the stereotypical roles and traits of women in society, the connections between the cycles evident in both the bodies of women and the movements of nature, and even mythology and religion.<sup>7</sup> Even though not inherently queer, these ties that have long existed between women and the natural world do represent a portion of gender studies—referred to as “ecofeminism”—that has a large amount of overlap with queer studies.

In an essay describing this overlap, Serpil Opperman quotes Ca-triona Sandilands to define ecofeminism as “a movement and a current analysis that attempts to link feminist struggles with ecological struggles,” pointing to the similarities between women and the natural world that this movement aims to point out and elaborate on.<sup>8</sup> This is especially the case in connection to the way in which modern patriarchal society treats both women and nature. Ecofeminism

views these oppressive societal forces as aligned with one another: quoting Noël Sturgeon, Opperman explains that ecofeminism “articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustice based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment.”<sup>9</sup> In her introduction to the anthology, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Carol Adams describes the specific examples of these overlapping ideologies, including the way that both woman and the natural world are viewed as serving, respectively, man and the industrialized world, as well as the way in which the latter view themselves as superior and therefore see the domination of the former as justifiable.<sup>10</sup> This ideological overlap can be seen in various cultural artifacts (such as literature, artwork, and religion) throughout different cultures and eras, speaking to the near-universal relationship between women and nature that ecofeminism prioritizes.

By finding and exploring the ways in which women and nature are tied to one another through their experience with oppression, ecofeminism provides an interdisciplinary response to gender inequality and ecological issues, and in the process aligns men with oppressive society. While various approaches to ecofeminism offer different perspectives of the role of men in society and, subsequently, different solutions for the system of oppression that they are inherently complicit in, ultimately, the alignment between women and nature lays the groundwork for the design of a utopia where the two exist in harmony, without the influence of the patriarchal society that has historically oppressed and threatened both groups. This is the ground upon which cottagecore has been built – in the alignment between femininity and nature, there is a space without men that allows those who have experienced oppression due to gender to design a community solely for themselves, without fear of the oppression that such individuals have long had to build their lives around. Additionally, this exclusion of men from the relationship between nature and women likely speaks to the draw that such a space has for romantic relationships that do not involve men. Existing within a utopia solely made up of women and nature makes lesbian relationships



a natural byproduct of the environment, negating the judgment that exists in a male-dominated society.

While ecofeminism is a fairly recent movement—the term itself wasn't coined until 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne<sup>11</sup>—the relationship between women and nature has long been a major subject of consideration for many, especially female writers. The poet Sappho is perhaps the earliest strong tie between lesbianism and nature — regarded in queer circles as an icon of lesbianism due to her lyric poetry about the beauty of women, the word sapphic has even come to be commonly used to describe lesbian culture. Sappho is very well-known for her poetry about her love for women, the natural world, and the customs and traditions of ancient Greek culture. “Don't ask me what to wear,” she writes in one poem: “A girl /whose hair is yellow than / torchlight should wear no / headdress but fresh flowers.”<sup>12</sup> In another, directed to another woman: “If you forget me, think / of our gifts to Aphrodite / all the violet tiaras, / braided rosebuds, dill and / crocus twined around your young neck.”<sup>13</sup> Sappho's sexuality and the lovers she addresses in her poems are the subjects of much debate, but no matter the original intent, these poems form the foundation on which many lesbians form their identities and culture, as evidenced by the annual Sappho festival held on the island of Lesbos (Sappho's home and the root of the word lesbian). One woman who attended describes her experience: “I liked spending my days alone, working... in cafés, listening to Greek women cackling hysterically during an afternoon dip, wandering along the beach, going for long walks, and getting massages in the village. Sometimes I played in the lesbian volleyball tournament, went to panel discussions, watched a tug-of-war competition, sat in a group meditation, took a writer's workshop, or went to yoga with Natasha.”<sup>14</sup> The sort of simple, easy living is the very basis of cottagecore, and so in connecting the roots of lesbianism's origin with its present-day reach, we can see a timelessness to this way of living, and especially the way that lesbians connect to it.

As time went on, other important female figures rose up who demonstrated this connection between femininity, queerness, and

nature. Paintings of a young Joan of Arc, who is widely heralded as a queer icon due to her dressing as a man to lead the French army to victory, portray her in flowing dresses, dreamily gazing over the shoulder of the viewer while surrounded by trees, flowers, and sheep. In the 18th century, Marie Antoinette - who was rumored to have relationships with her close female friends throughout her lifetime and is now frequently referenced in queer pop culture, such as drag shows, music videos, and fashion - built up her famous Garden of Versailles. This elaborate landscape included an orchard, an artificial pond, and a chateau that Marie turned into her personal villa where she could pretend to live a peasant life with her ladies.<sup>15</sup> In America, authors such as Louisa May Alcott and Emily Dickinson (both countercultural, unmarried women who have long been revered by lesbians across the world) wrote literature with a heavy emphasis on nature, simplicity, and virtue that has stood the test of time and continues to be enjoyed by many queer people today. Although the simple, nature-based lifestyles that these figures exhibit are certainly standard of the time, the way that they have had such an influence on modern queer culture and continue to be celebrated and perceived as role models by many members of the LGBTQ+ community speaks to how their lifestyles have influenced the community, its culture, and the trends that it sees over time.

The world soon began to move away from its sole dependence on nature, relying increasingly on technology as it further developed and streamlined many day-to-day tasks that had once been part of the slow, intentional lifestyle initially celebrated. However, as the twentieth century began, art and culture took a turn back to their roots, offering an alternative to industrial development and the increasingly busy, urban-based lifestyle that was becoming more normal. With the industrial revolution coming to a head and taking control of much of Western civilization, many artists felt a strong desire to return to handcrafting and humanizing art and design in what is now known as the “Arts and Crafts Movement.” According to an article written for the MET Museum, “William Morris [the leader of the movement] strove to unite all the arts within the decoration of the

home, emphasizing nature and simplicity of form.”<sup>16</sup> This movement involved a broad variety of people and had ties to prominent social activists of the time such as Jane Addams and Edward Carpenter, who are also important figures within the queer historical canon and who fought for LGBTQ+ rights alongside working towards artistic freedom. Additionally, this movement led to the formation of several utopian communities that allowed like-minded artists to live and create together, such as Rose Valley in Pennsylvania, the Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony in New York, and Arden, Delaware.<sup>17</sup> These communities encouraged these artists to live and create together, largely rejecting technological developments while emphasizing handiwork, simple living, and reliance on nature. While not necessarily queer, these places were established for those who felt like outsiders and who wanted a sense of community that they couldn’t find elsewhere, therefore, attracting individuals who felt as if they couldn’t truly be themselves in mainstream America, especially due to their gender and sexuality.

While this particular movement largely died out during the 1920s, there were still many people who maintained a love for the simple life, for handcrafting, and for living in a space apart from the urban world. A sort of countercultural movement existed throughout the 20th century as an undercurrent, rising as social justice issues became more prominent in popular culture. The 1970s ushered in an era of newfound liberty and freedom. In the years immediately following the Stonewall riots in 1969, LGBTQ+ identity and culture became increasingly normalized. In 1970, Gay Pride Week was established; in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from its list of psychiatric disorders. Homosexuality became better represented in the media, and antidiscrimination laws became more widespread.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite these moves to normalize homosexuality, many queer Americans still faced discrimination and sought an escape from the chaos of urban living, made only tenser by the battle for human rights and equality. Motivated by the political upheaval occurring and the hippie lifestyle during this time, and drawing inspiration from the previous Arts and Crafts Movement, a

new subculture rose to popularity. Rural women’s communes, often connected with the larger Landdyke movement, sprung up across America, appealing to lesbian women who felt a call to return to a nature-based, rustic way of living as a way of rebelling against once-beloved industrial environments now tainted by homophobia. They focused on giving back to the Earth instead of merely taking, living off of the land, and separating themselves from the rising culture of consumerism. These Landdyke communities offered a solution to queer women who found themselves growing weary of the tension of being in the world, while still wanting to be true to themselves and assert their identities within American culture. As one blogger explains, “[the Landdyke movement] is a search for a kind of utopia, but that the search itself is part of utopia’s creation, no matter how far away it may seem.”<sup>19</sup> While perhaps it will never be completely possible to escape culture while also continuing to work towards its improvement, the Landdyke movement suggests a sort of compromise that may appease those who search for a way to improve their lives, uniting traditional lifestyle choices that are based in nature and self-sufficiency while advocating for progressive values and equality within society at large. As the 20th century came to a close, the Landdyke movement largely died out. However, as evidenced by the historical precedents that had led up to its establishment, the connection between queerness and nature continued to remain a trend, only spreading further as the nation moved into an era of widespread community.

### **A Modern Reimagining**

The start of the twentieth century brought major developments in technology, which allowed for communication to exist in a way that the world had never experienced before. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, and TikTok became popular during the 2010s, attracting those with niche interests and allowing them to find other like-minded individuals at the touch of a button. These subgroups were very diverse in aesthetics and lifestyles, and alongside goths, hipsters, and fangirls, a group began to form around a shared interest in simple living, nature, and handcrafting. The first use of



the hashtag “cottagecore” appeared on Tumblr in 2014. It referred to an aesthetic similar to the historical elements discussed here: thatched-roof cottages, lesbian couples frolicking in the countryside, cute farm animals, freshly-baked pies cooling on the windowsills, and other fairy-tale-esque imagery.<sup>20</sup> The style’s beauty and simplicity had a broad appeal and attracted a wide variety of users as time went on. Some, such as the originators of the TradWife movement, viewed it as a way of spreading and adhering to “traditional” values, such as female subordination and separation from “progressive” politics. But as time went on, these internet subcultures were largely dominated by queer teenagers who found themselves drawn to the internet as a place to express their individuality, discover their identities, and find a community that wasn’t as accessible in day-to-day life.

These social media platforms continued to grow rapidly through the 2010s but for the most part remained separated from mainstream culture. While trends were certainly impacted by things popularized on social media, countless other forms of community, self-expression, and culture contributed to the conversation and kept social media from monopolizing popular culture. But this changed at the start of 2020 as the majority of the world shut down and people were forced to reevaluate how they lived their lives. Stuck in their homes, without the commitments of school, sports, extracurriculars, or any normal social activities, many young people turned to the internet more than ever before, latching onto trends with a vengeance. This brings us back to more recent history, back to an evaluation of the role that nostalgia played in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way that a desire for comfort and predictability impacted the things that popular culture focused on during the months of lockdown.

Between March and April of 2020, posts tagged “cottagecore” on Tumblr received more engagement than ever before, receiving 500% more “likes” than in prior months.<sup>21</sup> TikTok, too, saw a massive number of users begin to make videos sharing their participation in this trend, showing themselves taking walks through nature, bak-

ing bread from scratch, tending baby animals, or working on handiwork such as needlepoint and crochet. And, as before, many of those who became involved in this community were queer teenagers who found themselves without the regular types of communities that are available to minority students. While the cottagecore trend was not isolated to this group at all, it became extremely popular within the online lesbian community, with many of the posts falling under the hashtag showing lesbians in their teens or twenties living a sun-soaked, blissful existence. One video, viewed 1.5 million times, shows two young women with flowing hair and long white dresses embracing by a castle, water glittering beneath them and the sun setting in the distance.<sup>22</sup> This perfectly captures the essence of the cottagecore community—the desire to rewrite history and right past wrongs by openly existing and loving in a beautiful, traditional space without any fear of discrimination. One sixteen-year-old is quoted as saying, “Many of us aren’t really accepted in the modern world, so the thought of running away to a cottage is really, I guess, kind of soothing.”<sup>23</sup> Especially during a pandemic in which there was no way of escaping the monotony and dread of everyday life, the cottagecore trend on social media became a form of escapism, of being happy and free once again.

For many individuals, this pastoral, fairytale fantasy is far from a viable reality. For myself and other young people, there is little to no opportunity to escape the responsibilities of modern life and retreat to a woodland cottage, especially during a global pandemic that so strongly impacts employment, education, and major life decisions. As a full-time student and worker living in suburban Ohio, I can struggle to feel connected to nature and to find time to slow down and enjoy life as it comes. This is why I and people in situations like myself find cottagecore so appealing—it took something that for centuries has been a major lifestyle decision and romanticized it, boiling it down to its bare essentials and spreading it in a way that made it easily enjoyed by anyone, regardless of career, life stage, or location. Certainly, a social media trend is not the same thing as the centuries of people who had to live off the land or risk dying, but

this is exactly what attracted me and many others to the cottagecore trend. By taking something that has long been a part of humanity and making it accessible to a contemporary audience, we are participating in a long history of developing a connection with nature, and in the process connecting with a larger community of like-minded individuals who feel the same draw towards a romanticized connection with the natural world. While this community doesn't look the same as it did in the past, the cottagecore movement makes it clear that it exists now as strongly as it always has, developing alongside the changes that come with the passing of the years. Throughout time, simple living and pastoralism have been updated for shifts in culture and technology, used to reconnect to nature and to become more independent and self-sustained. Sappho turned to nature to understand and articulate her feelings for women; members of the Arts and Crafts movement saw simple living as a means to emphasize the importance of beauty, art, and design; during the COVID-19 pandemic, the elements falling under the umbrella of cottagecore became a way to distract from widespread fear and despair and to develop new priorities.

Although it was loved by many, the concept of cottagecore did attract criticism from those who believed it to present a false narrative about pastoral living and physical labor. Many of these complaints have to do with the way that the cottagecore trend, by romanticizing labor and a simple life, does not reflect the reality of what such a life entails. The Museum of English Rural Life discusses this in a thread about the problem of Marie Antoinette being a cottagecore icon. In discussing how Marie Antoinette appropriated an agricultural lifestyle for her own entertainment and aesthetic while turning a blind eye to those who had to live in a less romantic reality every day, the museum tweeted that "The life of rural, farming communities has always been tough, revolving around adapting against difficult conditions (from financial hardship, to weather, to loneliness) to make ends meet. This pastoral nostalgia for a simple life is simply not reflective of lived experience."<sup>24</sup> This is reflected in the way that many individuals who were involved in the cottagecore

aesthetic practiced it: many of those who found themselves wrapped up in the lifestyle were well-off and able to afford luxury items that became part of the trend. As many of those who were involved were young, they did not have to work, leading them to view cottagecore as more of a form of relaxation than the physical labor it was inspired by. As one author writes, "Cottagecore ignores the fact that rural areas have always been unattainable for some and inescapable for others," referring to how a country lifestyle is far from ideal, due to the workload and demands that it entails.<sup>25</sup> Many critics of the cottagecore trend saw it as the gentrification of a lifestyle that has long been the norm for the lower classes, making it something desirable after years of looking down upon those who lived off the land and were forced to labor in order to live. One article, written by Zoë Johnston, describes the downside of the cottagecore trend as such: "The aesthetic movement of cottagecore encourages rural gentrification by providing a cultural frame of reference for middle-class migrants of how the landscape can be cultivated to fit their romanticized agrarian lifestyle."<sup>26</sup> As this article argues, the popularity of cottagecore compels those who reside in suburban and urban settings to consider relocation into a more rural setting, despite the fact that they have no experience with the challenges that inherently come with rural living. Johnston explains that while the majority of those who are fascinated by rural living in response to cottagecore decide to migrate to the countryside, the argument still stands: those who enjoy this sanitized, aesthetically-pleasing content are digesting a fictional version of what rural living is like without a real understanding of the labor such life requires or the social and economical factors that have historically led to this lifestyle being viewed as inferior or undesirable. As a result, "aestheticized emotional desires can eventually inspire migration to and cultivation of rural areas," as those who have the capability to relocate do so.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps these complaints offer additional insight into why cottagecore became so popular in 2020. During this time, many people were forced out of work, school, and daily activities, pushed into isolation and a slower way of living. Perhaps, even for those with



backgrounds in agriculture and physical labor, the romanticization of this sort of life was appealing. Even in ignoring some of the more socio-political elements related to class, labor, and environment, the cottagecore trend remains true to many things that have long constituted country living: love and respect for the land, a desire to connect with and return to nature, and a yearning to escape the chaos of everyday life in an industrial world in pursuit of something slower and more intentional. Indeed, the historical elements of this trend that are ignored are concerning — Marie Antoinette, in creating a pastoral fantasy in the garden of her palace, lost sight of the real world, her subjects, and the lifestyle that she was inspired by. However, for many of us who are part of the class that Marie Antoinette would have told to eat cake, being able to romanticize the mundane can lend beauty to everyday life. In a time when one day looked much like another, with uncertainty and fear heavy in the air, and lacking the community that many of us, particularly LGBTQ individuals, relied on for support, romanticizing simple things and finding the beauty in nature and the commonplace world was a way of escaping the tension and fear and turning to something more grounding and known, returning to our roots and finding connection despite it all. Maybe I'll never live on a homestead in the middle of nowhere, have a garden full of lavender and lilacs, or have time every morning to make fresh bread. But being able to take a little bit of time for myself amid the chaos of everyday life, reflecting on my identity and history as a queer woman and my inherent connection to the natural world around me, has helped me feel a little less alone during a time characterized by uncertainty, and to surround myself with a community of like-minded people who otherwise I never would have discovered.

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## “Bush Blues”

Megan McGuyre

Sweet Flora, lush bush with striking flower,  
Leaves down and fine,  
Behold her softness, what makes her your weakness  
And do not shame her vines.

Sit yourself upon her trunks,  
Feel her strength between your legs.  
Don't prune the foliage that she grew  
She wants it to be longer.

Sweet Flora, the pink of her petals,  
With scents that drive you wild,  
The pollen that bursts from her  
Is sweet but sickly, only as infectious, to draw you so.

And look! Oh, see her fruit she bares:  
Berries, among the leaves and folds,  
With sugary juices and salty seeds,  
That has your tongue and holds.

Sweet Flora, the gifts you give  
From your blossomed brush,  
Do not sever her growth, her petals, her sweet jewels.  
Let the people love her, be sated, and flush.



“Me for Who?”  
Raylene Solis



## Artist Bios

**Sandra Cavanagh**'s first two decades were pitched on the tensions between a loving family life, political upheavals, and the dangers of politically sanctioned brutality and censorship in Argentina. Her career began in 1997 after studying Fine Arts at K.I.A.D., University of Kent, UK. She resides and works in NYC.

**Shiva Tamara**'s art seeks to explore the intersection of feminism and the representation of the nude female form. By reclaiming and challenging traditional notions of beauty, Tamara aims to empower women and challenge societal expectations placed upon them. Through their paintings, Tamara strives to depict the female body as a symbol of strength, resilience, and agency, transcending the objectification often associated with nudity. Each brushstroke becomes a celebration of individuality, diversity, and the inherent beauty that lies within all women. By embracing the female form in its unapologetic rawness, Tamara's art becomes a catalyst for dialogue and a visual manifesto for gender equality.

**Rodion Voskresenskii** is an independent artist without a certain residence, born in Taganrog, Russia, in 1994. Rodion is a painter, furniture designer, and scenographer. He graduated from university with a Marketing Design degree in 2016. He immigrated from Russia in 2022. Voskresenskii's work is a mixture of figurative subjects surrounded by long-lasting emotional sequences and a deeply sensual environment containing a lot of real and fictional objects. His work strives to bring the viewer his emotional experience and sense of moment with the help of ideas and visual means of romanticism, modernism, and impressionism.

**Jodi Brewer**, a resident of Memphis, Tennessee, is a multifaceted individual who embodies the roles of mother, artist, student, and textile teacher. She explores intricate themes of sexuality, identity, and belonging through her sculptural works. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Studio Arts at the University of Memphis to further her own artistic education. By refining her techniques and exploring new avenues for creative exploration, Jodi's artistic pursuits allow her to push the boundaries of her craft. She challenges societal norms and invites viewers to reflect on their own experiences through her thought-provoking art.

**Kristin O'Connor** is a painter whose work explores the intersection of feminism and sexuality. Drawing inspiration from her upbringing in the southern Evangelical church, her work incorporates elements of biblical symbolism and purity culture metaphors to challenge narratives that demonize sex and pleasure. Her work is a celebration of the power and resilience of women in the face of oppressive cultural norms and expectations. She graduated with a BFA in Painting from the University of Tampa in 2013, and she received her MFA from the New York Academy of Art in 2015. She lives and works in Brooklyn.

**Megan Hosmer** is an American artist, teacher, and a 2023 graduate of the NSCAD MFA program in Mi'kma'ki (Halifax). Since she is an experimental analog photographer, her work primarily centers around feminist questions of identity, disability, and community through photographic portraiture. As a Nova Scotia transplant from Oklahoma, Megan has been exhibited locally and internationally in the Stitches and Pics Gallery, the Anna Leonowens Gallery, and the Bus Stop Theater. More of Megan's work can be found at [meganhosmer.com](http://meganhosmer.com).

**Ilhan Mathangi** (he/him, they/them, she/her) is a trans non-binary Muslim photographer and multidisciplinary artist specializing in photo manipulation. Mathangi exhibited his work collectively and individually in the Netherlands, Mexico, and Argentina. He made the visual art for the First Festival for Senegalese Migrants' Rights of La Plata (2020). He was a finalist in the 1st Contest Of Photography Art-Jaén (2023); he was selected in the 40<sup>o</sup> National Salon of Visual Arts of Tucumán (2021); he won the First Prize in the National Salon of Visual Arts of Junín (2021); and he was awarded the prize of 3rd Vol. of The Collection of New York (2022).

**Babak Haghi** started professional photography in 2013 and since then, in addition to fine art photography, has also worked on theater and performance art photography. His main concerns are dialect of body, nature, and femininity inside humans and the outbreak of identity with the use of photography and video art. During this time, identity and body dialect have been Haghi's major subjects in his different series: dialect, which does not require a language, insinuates that if any human frees themselves to the level of reaching subconscious, their body language will automatically speak. Body language can even be an expression of a human's hidden identity, and this can be the reason to eliminate gendered borders and exhibit humans' hidden (sexual) attractions. Photography of performance and dance, or any other body art, is Haghi's real passion.

**Raylene Solis** is a Filipino American multidisciplinary artist primarily focused on two-dimensional artwork such as paintings, digital illustrations, and drawings. She is interested in identity, environmentalism, and the details of intersectionality in life experiences. Through educational and personal artistic practices, she aims to raise awareness of the environmental impacts of creating art while

working to integrate and create solutions; therefore, she carefully evaluates all the materials and mediums involved in the production and life cycle of creating art.



## Artist Statements

### **“Venus Lives” (and others) by Sandra Cavanagh**

Maintaining a consistent practice, Sandra Cavanagh has developed a large portfolio of work including paintings, drawings and prints. She sustains a mostly narrative focus, often as a reaction to sociopolitical events with the intention of codifying ideas and feelings. Within this development, various subjects recur, such as the mythological feminine, as a vehicle to explore patriarchal brutality and its weight on the collective, the consideration of mortality and the loss of innocence in transgenerational stories, and visceral reactions both to memories and events of current general concern. She often worked in series creating pictorial storylines with some urgency to exhaust the subject and form to the point of understanding or unburdening herself of it. The result is an annotation of feelings underscoring a dramatic approach to form and message.

### **“Train Surfers” and “Purple Night” (cover art) by Rodion Voskresenskii**

Rodion’s artwork is a unique blend of figurative subjects surrounded by long-lasting emotional sequences and a deeply sensual environment containing both real and fictional objects. His goal is to convey his emotional experience and sense of the moment to the viewer, utilizing visual means and ideas of romanticism, modernism, and impressionism. The genres of interest to him are primarily portrait and the naked human form. His artistic philosophy is rooted in the belief that beauty is closely related to naturalness and simplicity.

### **“e’sumptions” by Jodi Brewer**

Through her artistic exploration, Jodi Brewer has come to real-

ize the phonetic and visual connections between the word “assume” and the word “muse.” A phonetic spelling of the word “assume” is e’sum; spelled backwards it is “muse.” She is exploring the assumptions that have been put on her because she inhabits a female body. The concept of the muse, traditionally fragmented and belonging to someone else, resonates with her experiences of body disassociation as a means of survival. The muse is not whole – she belongs to someone else. Drawing upon experiences of sexual assault and stolen autonomy, “e’sumptions” is a sculptural work that speaks to the thoughts that her body and her being don’t belong to her. Nine carcass bodies are arranged in a repetitive manner, representing the original muses and reflecting an ongoing narrative. The cords spilling from the breasts like milk represent the energy being drained out from fatigue. These bodies are unable to make choices.

Fabric and stitching hold profound meaning for Brewer. It has history and it has been a consistent material for self-expression throughout her life. Using strings, threads and cords is her language. They speak about things for which she might not have words. Soft materials become vehicles for discussing challenging subjects, enabling the transformation of difficult experiences into something visually beautiful.

### **“Save for Later” (and others) by Kristin O’Connor**

O’Connor’s work explores femininity, sexuality, and religious de-conversion in a vibrant world of humor and irreverence. Drawing inspiration from her upbringing in the southern Evangelical church, this series reexamines narratives that demonize sex and pleasure. Painting through the eyes of her teenage self, O’Connor pushes against these repressive sexual ethics to find freedom from the shame that permeates these teachings. O’Connor references biblical

passages and purity metaphors meant to scare young women into chastity in effort to highlight the systemic disembodiment women are subject to. By injecting nuance between Madonna and Whore, O'Connor is able to create a space in which women are free to come home to themselves.

### **“Body Scan” by Megan Hosmer**

Endometriosis is a chronic but invisible condition that affects more than 10 percent of people who menstruate globally. It occurs when tissue like the lining of the uterus grows outside of the uterus to form lesions, cysts, nodules and other growths. Although excruciatingly painful and tied to a range of health problems, much remains to be known about endometriosis, and there is no known cure.

*Begin by bringing your attention into your body.*

*Find a position, either seated or lying down.*

*Start to notice your breath.*

*Inhale through the nose.*

*Exhale through the mouth.*

Megan Hosmer has been a yoga teacher for around five years, and meditation – as many with chronic pain will assert — is an essential tool for pain and symptom management. Of course, this does not mean that meditation is easy. For people with a busy mind and a jittery body like Megan, it can be a struggle to center and truly be in her body and fully feel what it needs her to feel, especially when these feelings are pain.

*Notice your body in this present space.*

*Starting with the crown of the head,*

*and moving to the brows, the nose,*

*the mouth, the jaw, the neck. Inhale to these parts of the body,*

*And as you exhale feel the tension melt away.*

The meditation Megan does regularly is always a variation of a body scan, a fragmentation of her body as a means to connect by isolating one part of her anatomy at a time. Fragmentation as a method of asserting ownership and power is interesting to her, and she thought of the ways that the meaning of fragmentation is determined by authorship.

*Shift your attention to your shoulder, your arms,*

*Your hands, your chest and your abdomen.*

*As you breathe into these parts of your body,*

*Notice the places of tension, perhaps of pain*

*Or discomfort. Don't run away from those feelings.*

*See if you can breathe into them. Imagining healing*

*Accompanying every inhale.*

What happens if she truly owns her body? She thinks of the way her own body has been controlled by the patriarchy, and for Megan, this has manifested in not only hyper-sexualization but also medical misogyny and gaslighting around the legitimacy of her experience of living with endometriosis in a feminized body — a hyper-masculine and ableist culture of pow-



ering through debilitating periods as a way to make society comfortable. She is the author of her body's fragmentation. Her fragmentation is meditation.

*Allow your attention to flow toward your pelvis.  
The pelvic floor is made up of thirty-six muscles.  
Can you imagine each of these muscles?  
Are you clenching your inner thighs?  
Exhale through the mouth.*

*Inhale through the nose. Do you feel tenderness in the tailbone?  
Try not to run away from the discomfort. Breathe into it, imagining the stress dissipating with each flutter of breath.*

Megan is making visible the involuntary commitment she has to a cycle that causes her pain and distress through her body's fragmentation and this grounding meditation is a way for her to make meaning out of this elusive disease. The self-portraits are shot on 4x5 film, and she processed the work with raspberry leaf tea, an ancient uterine medicine, causing the photos to be naturally rose-hued.

*Move your awareness to your lower body.  
Your thighs, your knees, your shins, your calves.  
Your feet, your ankles, and your toes.  
Begin to allow the breath to return to its natural rhythm.*

*And then when you're ready, you can return to your day.*

### **"Erschöpft" by Ilhan Mathangi**

Mathangi works in two main disciplines: photography and digital art (digital collage and photo manipulation). All of their photographs are intervened; although after the quarantine, with the impossibility of photographing models, they ventured into digital collage with stock images. In both cases, their artistic process is deeply intertwined with their spiritual, ethical, and moral principles. Mathangi's intention is to bring the inclusion of gender and ethnic diversities and the bodies traversed by social stigmas to the forefront. They seek to highlight the inclusion of humanity in its broadest spectrum, enhancing its subjective beauty through vivid colors. They propose a reflection and a questioning of normative ways and suggest another way of seeing the world through their own experience as a trans-non-binary, bisexual, autistic, Latinx, and Muslim person. The particular use of color is the formal element par excellence present in all the works that inescapably reinforces their images.

### **Photograph by Babak Haghi**

In the works of Babak Haghi, the body is not a reduced and figurative abstraction but rather a focal point of human perception. To elaborate on this point, we should refer to the three types of bodies that are referred to as the topography of these bodies in the critique of perspective or geography. These three types of bodies are the following: the body that is in union with the outside world, and therefore everything that passes through the world also passes through it; the cosmic body, or a body that has chosen a place, and therefore its coordinates become similar to a place; and the broken body, or a

body that is affected by external observation and society.

There are three types of bodies that are apparent in the delicate and broken bodies that Haghi portrays. Most of the subjects struggle with their own gender and sexual identity in the society they live in, which seeks to construct these bodies through its own observations; however, these bodies do not conform to what society wants or what the bodies themselves want. These bodies, which have masculine appearances, are challenged by many dimensions of gender and queer tendencies to define masculine and feminine, and ultimately, this challenge forms the basis of the artist's work. This challenge also arises in the space and place, which is not just a physical space but is transformed into the same surveillance that symbolic indices, from law to coercion, define for the subjects, and this definition also dominates the space. In Haghi's works, we escape from the domination of challenge and emptiness when the body is able to merge with the earth or the universe in its purposeless purpose and escape from domination.

### **“Me for Who?” by Raylene Solis**

“Me For Who?” is a self-portrait created to express the relationship of body image and specifically body hair to the mental attitude developed towards it. Feelings of both constraint and freedom from judgment. The conflict between beauty and comfort. The intentional color palette, breaking of edges as well as adherence to them, and the pose are all meant to bring a sense of tension with Solis' own emotions and expectations.

## **Author Bios**

**Keira Swift** will be graduating summa cum laude this fall with a Bachelor of Arts in History from Utah Valley University, where she worked as co-editor-in-chief for *Crescat Scientia*, the resident history and political science journal. Her love of history was ignited by Shakespeare and historical films, and she hopes to work as a dramaturg in film and theater to help share stories that highlight the lives of women, queer people, and people of color. After greatly enjoying her two years of heritage work in England and Scotland, she plans to return to the United Kingdom next year to begin a master's degree in female and queer history and aims to complete a PhD. Keira also enjoys reading, photography, and crochet.

**Zhangzhu Wan** is an MA candidate in public policy with a concentration in women's studies at George Washington University. She recently graduated with her BA in women's studies with honors. Her research interests lie in queer reproduction, queer self-representation, and reproductive justice in China. She is looking to further her research on diasporic Chinese queer youths overseas.

**Georgia Armstrong** lives in British Columbia, Canada, and she likes writing stories about angry women, our bodies, and capitalism. She has a master's degree in anthropology and sociology.

**Monica Mendez** was born and raised in Tampa, Florida, but she has been currently living in Stockholm, Sweden, since early 2018. While living abroad, she pursued a bachelor's in English, where she discovered an interest in feminist literature theory. She plans to continue her studies at Dalarna University for a masters in English literature.



**Ash Pugh** is currently pursuing their bachelor's degree in English at the University of West Florida. She is also currently pursuing minors in both sociology and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. They are a nonbinary, queer writer and artist, whose primary media includes poetry, formal essay writing, and crochet. They have been an active feminist since they were a teenager, and they have spent a significant portion of their life speaking and writing about the inequalities they have seen and experienced as a feminine-presenting person. Their main interests include sociology, feminism, queer theory, and the intersectionality of these fields. They are currently based outside of Pensacola, FL, with hopes of moving soon.

**Megan McGuyre** (any pronouns) is a Florida State University student majoring in creative writing and minoring in film studies. They will be graduating in the summer and have hopes to work in the film industry as a screenwriter. Previously, McGuyre graduated from Pensacola State College with an associate degree in arts, where they were published in the *Kilgore Review* for their short story "Libertango," and has most recently been included in the literary magazine *Outrageous Fortune* for their poems "Dawn on the Gray" and "On Rene Magritte's 'The Lovers.'"

**C. Montgomery** is a recent graduate, holding a degree in English and currently pursuing her master's degree in the same subject. She hopes to ultimately pursue another degree in library science and work in archival research. Montgomery is especially interested in the connection between queer culture and literature, with a specific focus on the impact that queer-centered narratives can have on a younger demographic.

FEMINIST SPACES