Exchanges

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Exchanges is an open-access (non-fee-charging), scholar-led, and peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal dedicated to the publication of high-quality work by researchers from all disciplines and designed for a broad scholarly audience. Since its founding in 2013, the title has published innovative research articles, critical essays and interviews by emerging experts and early-career researchers from around the globe. *Exchanges* also publishes scholarly work by author-practitioners and independent scholars.

Based at the University of Warwick, the Managing Editor-in-chief oversees development, policy and production, while an international Editorial Board comprised exclusively of early-career researchers provide advice and practically contribute to the production of each issue. Additionally, Associate Editors are recruited to work on specific issues. *Exchanges* currently publishes two regular issues annually alongside special issues commissioned in collaboration with scholars in the local and international research communities.

Exchanges' major missions are to encourage intellectual exchange and debate across disparate research communities, along with developing academic and authorial expertise. These goals are achieved by providing a quality-assured platform for disseminating research publications for and by an explicitly cross-disciplinary audience alongside ensuring a supportive editorial environment geared toward helping authors and editors develop superior academic writing and publishing skills. Achieving enhanced contributor esteem, visibility and recognition within these broader scholarly communities is a further goal.

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Editorial, Volume 13, Issue 2
'*Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch*-changes'

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'Turn and face the strange.'

– David Bowie, 'Changes'

Introduction

Welcome to the thirty-fourth edition of *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*. I began the editorial of my inaugural issue of *Exchanges*, published this past March, with an epigraph from a film—a quotation from Wes Anderson's animated classic *Fantastic Mr Fox*—a practice I had intended to continue indefinitely during my tenure as editor-in-chief. As it turns out, with this follow-up issue, *Exchanges'* first 'regular' issue with me at the helm, I'm already breaking my rule. But I couldn't think of a better way to kick off this issue than with a quote from Ziggy Stardust himself, David Bowie (although pedants might want to point out that the song is actually on the album *Hunky Dory*, not *Ziggy*). That's mainly because *Exchanges* is going through the proverbial changes soon, and big ones at that, if not necessarily 'strange'.

If you are a journal subscriber, you will likely already be aware of this, but for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the journal or for more casual readers, I should reiterate the news. We recently announced that *Exchanges* will soon be radically altering its production model. In the interest of staying truer to our interdisciplinary mandate, we have decided to discontinue publication of regular issues and move to a specifically themed-issue publication model.

This means our popular 'special' issues, which highlight research on specific topics, practices, and themes, will now become our 'regular' issues. In other words, moving forward they will be all we publish. As with our special issues, themed issues will approach one topic from the standpoint of a variety of disciplines—including those from the arts and humanities, STEM, and the social sciences—encouraging, we hope, the exchange of ideas and

leading to new avenues for collaboration and exploration in the way only a truly interdisciplinary approach can.

Each issue will be produced in partnership with guest editors and have its own separate call for papers. We aim to publish two to three themed issues a year in the first instance, with the potential for more depending on demand and resources. If you are interested in pitching a proposal for an upcoming issue, email me at Michelle.Devereaux@warwick.ac.uk for more information or simply to have an informal chat about your idea.

So, what does this mean for our regular issues? Well, these aren't going away just yet—this one you are currently reading will not be our last. Our goal is to publish as many current submissions that pass the review process as possible. That means one more regular issue this year and potentially up to two more for spring/autumn 2027. That means *if you have a general-issue submission currently under consideration at* Exchanges*, don't worry.* We are also actively accepting unsolicited submissions for the time being, although not for too much longer. If you are interested in having your work appear in one of these final regular issues, you have until **29 June 2026** to submit. After that, our submissions portal will only be open when we are soliciting responses to a specific call for papers.

You might be wondering why we are doing this. Well, there are several reasons. Since its inception thirteen years ago, *Exchanges* has gone through several momentous changes. Originally our full title was *Exchanges: The Warwick Research Journal*, a reference to our home at the University of Warwick's Institute of Advanced Study. In 2018, we dropped 'Warwick' from our masthead to emphasise our new outwardly focused approach, becoming *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, the journal you know (and love!) today. While we continued to champion the professional development of early-career researchers (a primary mandate for the IAS), we now strove to consider interdisciplinary research from a global point of view, one committed to fostering collaboration between international researchers at all career stages while taking on diverse subject matter. Collaboration—whether it be between disciplines, departments, institutions, or whole cultures—is really our *thing*, as is continuing to evolve the journal in tandem with the evolution of the research-culture landscape.

This brings us to the major reason for the switch: interdisciplinary collaboration. In the recent past, it's become clear that too often regular issues, by dint of necessity, end up being more *multi*-disciplinary than *inter*-disciplinary—that is, they are comprised of articles that don't complement each other, or inform each other, or *cohere*, so much as form a heterogeneous group of unrelated research. And that's simply not good enough. To be truly interdisciplinary, we need to be able to explore a

subject at the *intersection* of disciplinary inquiry. For instance, how does one disciplinary approach inform the other? How does this multi-pronged approach illuminate the subject as a whole? What happens when one disciplinary approach contradicts another? Themed issues allow us to explore these questions. From interdisciplinary approaches to solving urgent issues like climate change and environmental degradation ('The Anthropocene and the More-than-Human World'; Sustainability Culture) to exploring current research culture and the state of HE (our popular annual Research Culture issue) to examining more idiosyncratic contemporary trends or even outré artistic and cultural subjects ('The Lonely Nerd'; 'Cannibalism'), these special issues tackle challenging subject matter from a variety of angles. Moving forward, we will do only this.

Our online metrics tell us you are likely on board with this change, as the holistic approach of our special issues has continually proven popular. Since the introduction of special issues in 2020, they have dominated our list of most-downloaded issues, steadily growing our readership. For example, our latest special issue on Sustainability Culture, our most popular issue to date, has been downloaded 2.5 times more than our most popular regular issue.

Themed issues also provide the opportunity for collaboration. Produced in conjunction with other departments at Warwick and/or other HE institutions—from UK-based universities such as Oxford University, Buckinghamshire New University, and the University of Nottingham to universities in the Netherlands, Australia, and Taiwan—the journal's interdisciplinarity benefits from a more global outlook, especially when it comes to addressing wide-reaching, important issues like climate change and the changing academic landscape, challenges that will remain at the forefront of the work we publish, with the hope of driving real-world change through collaborative, interdisciplinary innovation.

Not many journals do what we do, and I believe what we do is important, with the potential to become even more so. Our goal is to transform *Exchanges* into the premier academic journal for interdisciplinary inquiry while still providing an invaluable publishing and professional development resource for ECRs. I hope you decide to join us for this next evolution of *Exchanges*, either as a reader, a contributor, or both.

In This Issue

Just because we are winding down our regular issues doesn't mean we don't have plenty of interesting, innovative work left to publish, including the articles you will find in this edition. There are also several thematic and theoretical connections weaving their way through the research published here, including (auto)ethnography, identity, and socio-cultural privilege. James Cleverley's expert formal and narrative analysis of recent Spanish TV series *Veneno,* itself an exploration of transgender 1990s television sensation Cristina Ortiz (a.k.a. *'la Veneno'*, or 'the Poison'), coins the apt term 'trans bio-epic' (**p. 1**) to describe the series' affective dimensions, at once sweeping and personal, relating to questions of stardom and exposure, on the one hand, and intimacy and identity on the other. Smith Joseph takes a very different approach to socio-cultural analysis via a detailed, empirical study of the naming practices of Telugu-speaking Indian Catholics (**p. 25**) but offers a similarly compelling glimpse into an underexplored (sub)culture.

Continuing in the vein of ethnography but shifting emphasis to personal experience, two Critical Reflections pieces draw on the emerging practice of auto-ethnography (AE). Beekeeper and academic Tony Murphy charts his discovery of AE and how it has informed his research journey on beekeeping and sustainability (**p. 73**), while Devika Bahadur gives an auto-ethnographic account of her PhD research on migration and masculinity in India, in which she draws on 'feminist and sensory methodologies' in order to examine 'how the researcher's lived experiences of childhood mobility, linguistic fragmentation and cultural fluidity shaped her approach to fieldwork and interpretation' (**p. 86**).

We return to sustainability culture (a popular theme at *Exchanges*), with an article that serves as a follow-up, or potential rebuttal, to one on carbon capture recently published in our Sustainability Issue. While that article was written by industry representatives, the one in this issue was authored by two academics from the University of Nottingham, Catherine Price and Carol Morris, whose own research suggests land-based greenhouse gas removal technologies (in this case, biochar) might not be the magic bullet some industry reps are claiming them to be (**p. 48**). Finally, Reece Sodhi provides a decolonial framework for higher education through an exploration of what he terms the four 'Pillars of Privilege', 'interlocking structures—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism—that shape (un)belonging within HE', suggesting ways to combat them (**p. 105**).

Call for Papers

Our call for Expressions of Interest regarding our upcoming special issue, A Woman's Labour: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Work, Health, and Care, is still open, but will be closing on **8 June**. Please get in touch with the editor-in-chief if you have any related questions. You can read more about the issue and submit your abstract here.

Open calls for papers

We are still accepting unsolicited manuscript submissions until **29 June 2026**. These can be on any subject and should either (a) demonstrate a degree of interdisciplinary thinking or research or (b) be written for a wide-reaching academic audience from within a singular discipline. Hence, while pieces which draw directly or indirectly on interdisciplinary methods, methodologies, praxis and thinking are especially welcome, this is not a prerequisite for consideration in our pages.

Additionally, *Exchanges* accepts submissions from researchers, practitioners, and independent scholars globally. We consider manuscripts from authors at any scholastic level and especially encourage submissions from early-career researchers, but all submissions must meet the same minimum academic standards to be published. See our Selection Policy for more information.

Deadlines: Manuscripts therefore may be submitted for consideration via our online submission portal by **29 June 2026**.

Formats: Manuscripts can be submitted for consideration as traditional **peer-reviewed** research or review article formats, which will undergo a rigorous, double-anonymised external review process. Alternatively, they may be submitted under our **editorially reviewed formats** for briefer works (up to 4,000 words), which often are able to transit to publication faster.[i] Editorially reviewed formats can be especially suitable for first-time authors or those looking to embrace reflexivity, posit an opinion, or share professional insights. It is notable that all article formats receive extensive reader attention and downloads.[ii]

Requirements: Word counts and requirements for all content formats vary, so prospective authors are strongly encouraged to review our Author Guidance.[iii] Where an exception to these standards is required, authors should discuss this with the chief editor ahead of submission. Manuscripts passing our review processes and accepted for publication will subsequently appear in the next available regular issue, which are normally published in spring and autumn.

Review: All submitted manuscripts undergo initial scoping (suitability and initial quality) and originality checks by the chief editor before being

accepted for further editorial review. Manuscripts seeking publication as research articles additionally will undergo one or more rounds of formal peer-review by two or more suitable anonymised assessors. Editorial decisions on manuscript acceptance are final, although unsuccessful authors are normally encouraged to consider revising their work for later reconsideration by the journal.

Authors: Notably, *Exchanges* has a mission to support the development and dissemination of research by early- career and post-graduate researchers (**IAS, 2025**). Consequently, we are especially pleased to receive manuscripts from emerging scholars or first-time authors, although contributions from established and senior scholars are also welcomed.

Further details of our open-call requirements can be found online (**Exchanges, 2024a**). To submit, go to:

exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/submission.

Informal approaches

Exchanges has always welcomed approaches from potential authors to discuss prospective article ideas or concepts with the editor-in-chief. However, abstract submission or formal editorial discussions ahead of a submission are *not* normally a prerequisite, and authors may submit complete manuscripts for consideration without any prior communication.[iv] During the submission process authors are encouraged to include a note to the editor outlining the article format or call under which their manuscript is to be considered or any other considerations they wish to bring to our attention.[v] *Exchanges* regrets we cannot offer extensive feedback, advice or critique on outline manuscripts or text ahead of formal submission and review.

Author fees

Exchanges is a 'diamond' (a.k.a. 'platinum') open-access, scholar-led journal, meaning there are **no fees or charges** for readers or authors. All published content is made freely available online globally (**Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013; Bosman et al, 2021**). Furthermore, authors retain all rights over their work, granting *Exchanges* first publication rights during submission as a pre-requisite for publication consideration. *Exchanges* is also happy to support translations of our published articles subsequently appearing in other suitable journals, and requests only that a link back to the original piece is incorporated. Authors may wish to consult *Exchanges'* journal policies for further information on how we handle author contributions (**Exchanges, 2024b**). Further advice can be found on the *Exchanges* and IAS websites (**Exchanges, 2024c, IAS, 2025**).

Forthcoming Issues and Continuing the Conversation

We will be announcing the Call for Papers for a new special issue very soon. I am particularly excited about this one. Please keep an eye on our social media channels and subscribe to our newsletter for updates. You can find us via the following links:

Bluesky:	@ExchangesJournal
Editorial Blog:	exchangesdiscourse.wordpress.com
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Newsletter:	www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A0=EXCHANGES-ANNOUNCE

The Exchanges Discourse Podcast

The Exchanges podcast has been dormant since Gaz's departure in late 2025, but the hope is it will be resurrected soon. It will likely continue the tradition of inviting journal authors to talk about their papers and work and offer publishing advice for early-career scholars. The journal archive includes episodes looking at academic podcasting, early career monographs and the emerging practice of 'open' monographs, as well as Gaz's valedictory episode, in which he discusses his lengthy tenure as *Exchanges'* editor-in-chief.

All episodes are free to listen on Spotify for Podcasting, and many other podcasting platforms. You can also find a full listing of past episodes here:

exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/podcast.

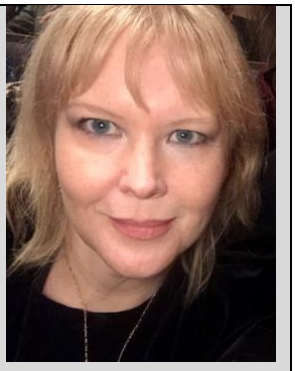
Contacting

For general inquiries (for instance, to discuss a potential submission), contact us at: exchanges-journal@warwick.ac.uk.

Acknowledgements

Once again, I would like to thank my predecessor, Dr Gaz Johnson, who continues to provide me with invaluable counsel. I would also especially like to thank Dr Fiona Fisher, who is sadly leaving the Institute of Advanced Study at the end of the month (sad for us, not for her!). Fiona's continued commitment to people-centred values and empathy is unfortunately increasingly rare in the neoliberal workplace, and her strong moral stance and general allyship are hugely appreciated and will be greatly missed. I am sorry we didn't get to work together longer, Fi, but I wish you all the best on your upcoming adventures in Italy and beyond.

Finally, welcome to the world, Nicolas Alex—you don't know it yet, but you lucked out in the parent department, Nicky!



Dr Michelle Devereaux is the managing editor-in-chief of *Exchanges.* She is a former Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow in film and television studies at the University of Warwick, where she also teaches screen studies. Her research interests include romantic and post-romantic philosophy, contemporary screen culture, gender and feminist theory, film aesthetics, critical neurodiversity studies, and genre studies. She served on the *Exchanges* editorial board between 2022 and 2025 and has worked as an editor for various print and web publications in North America and the UK.

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Endnotes

[i] **Editorially Reviewed Formats**: i.e., Critical Reflections, Conversations (interviews) or Book Reviews, which do not undergo external peer review and are thus usually able to be more swiftly published. While the acceptance rate is higher for these types of material, those which fail to meet our required editorial standards in any respect will be declined and returned to their authors.

[ii] **Top Articles**: This diversity of format interest is frequently reflected in our annual Top Articles list, which appears in the IAS annual report, and on our blog.

[iii] **Word counts**: We do not typically include abstracts, references, endnotes or appendences when considering word count. Submissions slightly over/under our required word count limits will be considered for review at the chief editor's discretion. However, significant excess will normally be automatically declined.

[iv] **Expressions of Interest**: We do on occasion solicit expressions of interest ahead of submissions for special issues, as promoted on our Announcements page, blog, and other social media channels. For regular (open or themed) issue submissions, authors may submit their manuscripts without any prior contact.

[v] **Formats**: For more on formats, word counts and other requirements for any prospective submissions, see: https://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/guidance#formats.

Veneno (2020) and the Trans Bio-epic: Queering remembrance between trauma and joy

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Abstract

Veneno *(Atresmedia, 2020) chronicles the life of Cristina Ortiz, a transgender woman who suddenly became a public phenomenon in 1990s Spain. The series explores queer memory, narrativizing both her story and the young journalist and writer Valeria Vegas' process of writing her biography.* Veneno *weaves together multiple temporalities of trans history, blending remembrance and imagination to evoke both past traumas and hopeful futures and emphasizing challenges and strengths of (gender)queer experience within cis-heteronormative reality. This paper employs an embodied, affective theoretical lens to examine* Veneno*'s emotionally charged portrayal of traumatic experiences. It explores* Veneno*'s epic form as a means of queering the biopic genre, asking how its aesthetic excess and affective mythology reconfigure the remembrance of trans life on screen. The show's sensorial qualities are evaluated within a consideration of the history of onscreen representations of trans lives that focus on violence. The analysis considers how the series' sensorial and mythic registers transform memory into collective, embodied experience. In an era of expanding trans visibility, it becomes crucial to understand how screen narratives of gender non-conformity might reimagine past and present, challenging normative chronologies while sustaining new modes of affective recognition.*

Keywords: *Veneno*; queer television; memory; queer affect; trans biography; temporality; biopic; epic film; *los* Javis

Introduction: The Truth Machine

'*¿Es cierto que siempre te has sentido mujer?*'

('Is it true that you have always felt like a woman?')[i]

- Jaime Cantizano, host, *El Precio de la Verdad*

'*Si*'.

('Yes'.)

- *La Veneno* ('The Poison')

It is 2006, and Cristina Ortiz, a.k.a. 'La Veneno', is attempting a comeback on Spanish television screens via an appearance on the tabloid show *En Antena*. As part of the segment called *El Precio de la Verdad* ('The Price of Truth'), she must face a series of probing, invasive questions while wired to a polygraph. Dazzling in a flowing, bright yellow skirt and blouse, golden earrings, and dramatically high heels, Cristina takes her seat while the studio audience applauds her arrival. The lie detector's black cables are attached to her exposed skin, resembling restraints. In her heyday (the 1990s), Cristina Ortiz Rodríguez was arguably the biggest trans icon on Spanish television (**Ingenschay, 2023: 1**). Now, after a fall from public grace, she is introduced by host Jaime Cantizano as television's 'broken toy'. However, despite her apparent nervousness, '*la Veneno*'s' trademark sharp wit and fiery tongue have not abandoned her. Without missing a beat, she retorts, '*Juguete roto tú. Yo soy un bombón, ¡qué valor!*' ('Broken toy yourself! I'm a delight, what courage!').

Cantizano indicates his desire to begin the interrogation. The questions seem framed to cast doubt on elements of Cristina's biography, as she has previously told it:

> *¿Huiste de tu pueblo para venirte a Madrid, porque allí te maltrataban e insultaban? ¿Es cierto que siempre te has sentido mujer? ¿Empezaste a vender tu cuerpo como mujer porque al ser travesti no conseguías trabajo?*
>
> (Did you leave your village to go to Madrid because of being mistreated and abused? Is it true that you've always felt like a woman? Did you start selling your body as a woman because you were unable to get work, being a transvestite?)

When the *máquina de la verdad* ('truth machine') returns its results, Cristina is deemed to have been truthful when responding that she 'always felt like a woman'. The machine also accepts her account of childhood trauma, being driven away from the Andalusian fishing town of Adra. But things become unpleasant when the polygraph claims she lied about her need to take up sex work, about her famous clientele, about suffering abuse in prison, and much more.

Adapted from Cristina's real-life story, *Veneno* (**Atresplayer Premium, 2020**) unfolds over eight episodes in a form that broadly resembles the biopic, a feature film-length biography of a historical figure, with some key differences: it is episodic, appeared on television, and featured the unusual addition of a second protagonist, the journalist and writer Valeria Vegas (**Ingenschay 2023: 1**). Within this framework, the scene described above crystallizes the series' central aesthetic and ethical preoccupations. As viewers, we experience the cheap, sensationalizing, *telebasura* ('teletrash') show being reenacted within *Veneno*'s slicker, more contemporary production. The disparate aesthetics of the two shows is highlighted technically: *Veneno*'s first images replicate *En Antena* in the 4:3 aspect ratio of 1990s TV and feature a low-definition effect to appear dated, almost as if they are being played back on a VHS tape.

From here, we jump to the rich and vibrant colour palette that characterizes *Veneno*'s general aesthetic. By framing the reconstructed *En Antena* segment within *Veneno*'s contemporary aesthetic, the series makes clear that Cristina's mistreatment by television media is being critically restaged. A critique of spectacle itself emerges, evoking modern media's 'scopic regime', in which 'we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense' (**Jay, 1988: 3**). Multiple studio cameras, a panel of presenters casting judgement, and the artifice of the set—which features a large screen projecting Cristina's image back towards her and the public, whose affection she craves—exemplify *Veneno*'s deliberate attention to exploring corporeality and spectacle. It was tele*vision* which made Cristina a star, after all. Here, strapped to the polygraph and called a liar, she appears vulnerable, if still defiant.

This sequence emblematizes the scrutiny under which trans bodies are placed in cis-hetero society. The focus on 'trans issues' has sharpened dramatically over the last decade, producing a 'paradoxical simultaneity' of increased visibility and a greater threat of violence (Koch-Rein et al., 2020: 2). For trans and non-binary people, visibility does not necessary translate to more safety, rights, or freedoms (**Keegan et al., 2018: 6**). A wider recognition within Western society has meant communities 'have also been scrutinized with growing intensity' (**Straube, 2020: 56**). Koch-Rein et al. (**2020**) find that '[f]or the longest time trans representations

were closely tied to narrow and problematic depictions of gender non-conforming people as either dangerous psychopaths and sexual predators … or as victims with little agency' (**2020: 2**).

Analysis of these historically prevalent tropes of trans representation indicates that a (cis-hetero) dominant culture is desperate to know the trans body, to master it, and ultimately deem it worthy of either desire or rejection. Susan Stryker expands on the tense relations governing physical appearance, as trans people are perceived as inherently deceptive, societally judged to be making 'a false representation of an underlying material truth, through the wilful distortion of surface appearance' (**2006: 9**). Given this field of scrutiny, trans visibility can feel like, according to Malatino (**2022**):

> *…exposing the raw nerve of your self—a self that is always already interdependent, always already reliant on intercorporeal exchanges—to socialities and systems of perception that you know will respond to such exposure with reliably repetitive brutality* (**2022: 75**).

Let us return to *Veneno*'s depiction of Cristina at the mercy of the lie detector. While the surveillance machine attaches to her 'raw nerves', purportedly measuring skin conductivity in search of an internal truth, the rationale of this objectification is plainly ocular-centric and voyeuristic. A front-on shot of the set shows a cameraman kneeling before her, camera in her face, recording every expression in close-up—all in service of spectacle.

To explore how *Veneno* seeks to elide a voyeuristic gaze, this study presumes an embodied spectator, who grasps it 'not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole' (**Marks, 2000: 145**). This feels suited to the task, given *la Veneno*'s fame revolved around an eroticization of the body. (Take, for example, the title of the euro-dance record she released, '*Pa' tu piel*', or 'For Your Skin'.) *Veneno* works with the audio-visual schema of the 'epic' film to evoke multiple sensorial responses, as it explores the value of queer kinship, the power of representation in a progressive politics, and how to honour the lives of queer icons or heroes—all pertinent within the fraught contemporary discourse around trans rights.

The series unfolds through an intricate structure that continually shifts between timelines and perspectives, recounting Cristina's childhood as the young Joselito—played by Guille Márquez at age eight and by Marcos Sotkovszki at age fourteen—in the 1960s fishing town of Adra on the Andalusian coast. It traces the emergence of Cristina herself, embodied successively by trans performers Jedet, Daniela Santiago, and Isabel Torres. These re-castings do more than mark different stages of her life:

they evoke an epic sense of continuity across rupture, fragmentation, and transformation. As Anamarija Horvat observes, they affirm the political and historical importance of centring trans actors and trans communities on screen, providing a 'subversive depiction of family which counteracts hetero- and cisnormative assumptions' (**2024: 160**).

Parallel to Cristina's story runs that of Valeria Vegas (Lola Rodríguez), whose early encounters with her television idol lead her both to writing Cristina's biography and to her own gender transition. Intercut with these threads are Cristina's later years, marked by abusive relationships, media exploitation, imprisonment for fraud, and eventual death. Alternating between spectacle and vulnerability, these narrative strands weave a televisual biography that is as much about the making of *La Veneno* as about those who remember and reconstruct her story. In bringing these moments into dialogue, *Veneno* invites the viewer to inhabit a network of testimonies, intimacies, and conflicting gazes. As an eight-part miniseries—rather than, say, a feature-length biopic—its scale and temporal expansiveness amplify the sense of journey and myth, establishing what I term a *queer/trans bio-epic*, an act of remembrance that both questions and celebrates the making of a modern queer legend.

La Veneno's notoriety flourished among a national television audience in the 1990s, which was thrilled by her brash, scandalous quips, the uncensured, erotic way she presented her body, and the way she combined glamour and vulgarity into an authentic, 'exotic' package. It follows that a biopic seeking to capture this larger-than-life icon would demand an epic format. Given the history of unrealistic and harmful onscreen representations of trans figures, there is a tension in the approach to memorializing a figure like Cristina *'la Veneno'*—there being an ethical imperative to avoid exploiting traumatic memories for the purposes of 'mere' spectacle. This consideration grows more pertinent when considering the vulnerability of a person marginalized within cis-heteropatriarchal society who suddenly finds herself a public figure.

Veneno creators Javier Ambrossi and Javier Calvo—two gay, cisgender men formerly in a working and romantic partnership and collectively known as '*los* Javis' ('the Javis')—make clear they are aware of the capricious nature of the media's spotlight. Nevertheless, they also seem convinced of the importance of representation for marginalized people and communities. Their approach has been described as 'a kinder, less combative form of queer audio-visual representation', and a 'strategic way of appealing to a wide range of audiences and infiltrating the mainstream without appearing too subversive' (**García López, 2024: 257**). According to Paul Julian Smith, the success of *los* Javis demonstrates 'the emergence of a new youthful sensibility and a new gay auteurism' (**2021: 9**), signalling a

new taxon in Spain's genealogy of queer screen culture that extends back to Pedro Almodóvar's negotiation between the popular and the auteurist. Smith observes that their work, beginning with the web series *Paquita Salas* (**Netflix, 2016–2019**), reveals a sustained preoccupation with a 'self-conscious attention to visualizing technologies', media history, and the mechanics of celebrity itself (**2021: 22**). While *Veneno* is critical of television's exploitation of Cristina for mere spectacle, the series' own approach counters these past abuses through spectacle itself: an epic, exaggerated, and heroic form.

Yet this epic scale also opens onto the intimate and multiple perspectives, a form that is as much embodied and multi-temporal as it is mythic. In this regard it resonates with the American streaming series *Transparent* (**Amazon Studios, 2014–2019**). As Horvat has argued, trans media often layers time so that 'seemingly separate temporalities exist not only at the same time, but within the same person' (**Smith, 2021: 67**). While *Transparent* was criticized for casting a cis actor in the trans leading role, *Veneno* achieves a similar temporal complexity through its both narrative structure and casting itself: Márquez, Sotkovszki (as 'Joselito'), Jedet, Daniela Santiago, and Isabel Torres collectively embody what Lucy Donaldson calls the biopic's epic sense of 'the whole person', for whom '[t]he actor's body is of critical importance […] as the dramatic vehicle' (**Donaldson, 2013: 105**).

Through much of their previous work, *los* Javis have cultivated a 'family of actors' across theatre, cinema, and streaming (**Smith, 2021: 12**), establishing a community ethos that continues in *Veneno*. Cameos by Pepe Navarro, the host who first introduced Cristina to Spanish television audiences, and the real Valeria Vegas, alongside the inspired casting of Cristina's longtime friend Paca *la Piraña* as herself, reinforce this collaborative network. In *Veneno*, embodiment becomes a shared act of trans and queer authorship rather than a performance imposed upon it from the outside.

This essay seeks to explore the tension between self-directed and outwardly imposed performativity by examining the series' desire to move away from historically voyeuristic representations of trans people and their bodies through a queering of epic aesthetics and form. It asks, How does *Veneno* transform the televisual spectacle of trans visibility into an epic mode of remembrance? What forms of queer kinship, temporality, and coming-of-age narratives emerge from its dual-protagonist narrative? And how might its epic scale and affective excess contribute to imagining alternative genealogies of trans and queer life in contemporary Spain?

A Note on Language and Terminology

In writing *trans* without the common endings –*gender* or –*sexual*, I follow Wibke Straube's emphasis on 'the multiple factors that make it unnecessary, problematic and apolitical to differentiate between them' (**2014: 32**). The term denotes 'a movement away—an escape—from imposed categories or starting points' (**Raha and van der Drift, 2024: 2**). Drawing on David Valentine's conception of transgender as 'a collective category of identity' and his critique of how institutions make certain forms of gender variance intelligible, I use *trans* to signal collectivity while resisting its stabilization as a closed taxonomy (**2007: 4, 14**).

The term *queer*, meanwhile, is not (only) a synonym for 'LGBTQIA+' but a theoretical and aesthetic orientation that questions normativity and temporal coherence. As Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz argues, the Spanish term *rarito*—like *queer*—names *'una identidad imposible de clasificar'* ('an identity impossible to classify') within binary systems of sexuality and gender (**2005: 165–66**), *'una identidad sin esencia'* ['an identity without essence'] that avoids rigidity while blurring its object of study (**2005: 169**). In this sense, *Veneno*'s queer and trans orientations work together as an epic mode of storytelling—one that unsettles linear-progress narratives, reimagines kinship across time, and transforms a coming-of-age / gender motif into a shared practice of survival and remembrance.

Queering the Bio-Epic: Historicizing trans memories

How does *Veneno* represent the 'epic'? While in his seminal text on epic film, Derek Elley acknowledges the meanings ascribed to the term epic are 'frighteningly broad' (**1984: 9**), generally epics may be understood as 'fictional tales that offer size, length, spectacle, and, above all, unusual human feats—possibly of heroic proportions' (**Santas, 2007: 1**). Heroism, spectacle, and the unusual all mark *Veneno*'s depiction. True to form, reviews have often described it as epic: it is, for example, '*la épica historia de un icono televiso*' ('the epic story of a television icon') (**Ander, 2020**) and '*muy épica en lo emocional*' ('very epic emotionally') (**Ortega, 2020**). Cristina's dramatic reminiscing launches vivid flashbacks, 'often aggrandizing her own achievements, making them more epic, more fabulous' (**Betancourt, n.d.**). The scale of the 'epic' series has also been found to be epic, 'spanning both characters' lives with rich, multifaceted, and often glorious storytelling' (**Oaks, 2022**).

Elizabeth Freeman's notions of queer temporality help clarify how *Veneno* epic treatment of time unsettles conceptions of linear biography. Freeman defines chrononormativity as 'the use of time to organize individual

human bodies toward maximum productivity' (**2010: 3**). In contrast, queer lives are asynchronous, being 'denizens of time out of joint' (**2010: 19**). *Veneno*'s narrative embraces multiple timelines: memories of Cristina's past—her traumatic childhood in Adra and her fraught relationship with an abusive mother—are brought consistently into different 'present' tenses. Frequent use of techniques such as split screens and crosscuts blends present-tense action with past events, making them appear simultaneous and inflating the sense of epic scale. In this way, the series can be seen to work against chrononormativity, encouraging our emotional involvement with Valeria and Cristina throughout the epic sweep of their lives. As Katie Sutton explains:

> *Distinguishing the transgender gaze is a distinctly temporal element: cinematic representations of gender variance also tend to 'queer' ideas of time, history, and human milestones, working against 'chrononormative' expectations of generations, reproduction and heterosexual intimacy* (**Sutton 2021: 226**).

Sutton draws on Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of a visual practice that resists 'the gendered binary on which the stability, the pleasure, and the purchase of mainstream cinema depend' through a 'nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body—a mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body' (2005: 85, 92). In *Veneno*, such a look operates through the camera's oscillation between depicting performance and self-exposure, pulling the viewer into embodied modes of seeing, between complicity and resistance.

The narrative thread that binds the series together is the very act of writing, of recording memory. In 2016, Vegas published *¡Digo! Ni puta ni santa. Las memorias de la Veneno* (*Neither Whore nor Saint: The Memories of la Veneno*). *Los* Javis take from the events recalled in the book, dramatically adapting them using conventions of the biopic, blending truth with fantasy often with a wild, orgiastic sense of abandon. In particular, Cristina's sexual encounters, both working and recreational, are depicted in vivid colours, loudly and unapologetically. The series explicitly questions its own veracity, opening with a frame of text declaring the validity of blending reality and fantasy to achieve an emotional authenticity:

> *Esta historia está basada en las memorias de Cristina Ortiz, la Veneno, y en los relatos de algunas de las personas a quienes ella cambió la vida. Como en todas las historias que provienen de la memoria, hay en ella algo de realidad y algo de ficción. Y, como en todas las historias de ficción, hay en ella algo que es profundamente verdadero*.
>
> (This story is based on the memories of Cristina Ortiz, *la Veneno*, and on the stories of some of those, whose lives she changed. As in all

> histories which come from memory, there is some truth and some fiction. And, as in all fictional stories, there is something within that is fundamentally true.)

At the core of *Veneno*'s dual-protagonist structure is the relationship between Cristina Ortiz and Valeria Vegas. While still a student and not yet 'out' as a trans woman, Valeria learns that her childhood idol, *La Veneno*, has been spotted in her hometown of Valencia and sets out to find her. She eventually tracks Cristina down and a friendship quickly develops—one that enables Valeria to articulate her own desire to transition. Recognizing the significance of Cristina's life, Valeria writes a short essay about her for a university assignment. When her professor encourages her to expand it, she begins recording Cristina's memories for what will become the published autobiography. As this narrative thread unfolds, the series cuts to recreated flashbacks of Cristina's childhood, where her younger self is figured, before transition, as 'Joselito'. These dramatizations, prompted by Cristina's oral recollections, move fluidly across key moments in her biography: a difficult upbringing, her early transition, and her rise to fame through *Esta noche cruzamos el Mississippi* (*Tonight We Cross the Mississippi*), Telecinco's late-night *telebasura* show once so popular it was credited with changing Spanish sleeping patterns (**Horvat, 2024: 158**). Her time in Torremolinos—remembered as a haven for queer nightlife under Francoism—frames her first encounters with sexual freedom (**Valcuende del Río et al., 2023: 54**).

One of the difficulties with depicting trans history is that 'a lot of the evidence we have for gender-nonconforming lives comes from legal and medical contexts' (**Heyam, 2022: 10**), which risks carrying a history of pathologization into the present. Processes of normalization have 'been dominated', as Jennifer Evans explains, 'by sexology and the way medical narratives have sought to humanize the trans* subject' (**2023: 87**). While this 'has indelibly and productively placed gender variability in the historical register', Evans explains, '[i]n order to open up a space for a wider spectrum of bodies and experiences […] we need to look beyond the sexological for other examples of gender enactment' (**2023: 87**).

Derived from memoir, *Veneno* gives voice to trans testimony. While *Veneno* has been lauded for its casting trans actors to play each trans character, there remain aspects of the series which call for further investigation, to determine whether it represents progress in onscreen portrayals of gender-diverse experience. Certain sequences are troubling to watch, including the sexual violence during Cristina's imprisonment, intimate partner abuse, and the portrayal of a violent, traumatic upbringing. We might also be concerned that the series adds to a long list of stereotypical representations of trans people as sex workers. As Shon

Faye observes, trans folk have long been confined to a narrow repertoire of images in popular culture: 'the "trans hooker" or prostitute was a cultural archetype for trans women who appeared usually as a source of comedy (except in crime drama, where they appeared as a dead murder victim)' (**2021: 136**).

To counter this history of reductive visibility requires what Cael Keegan calls a refusal of the demand to be merely 'good' or 'positive' on screen. Keegan argues a purely 'positive' model of representation 'folds transness into the visual economy of existing normative media', thereby disciplining what can count as trans life (**2022: 27–28**). As Mocarski et al. (**2019**) note, trans visibility in mainstream media often becomes *transnormative*, privileging white, middle-class, post-operative, heterosexual subjects while excluding sex workers, migrants, and the economically precarious (**2019: 419–26**). *Veneno*'s critical look at television exposes this visibility paradox: its empathetic portrayal of Cristina's life revisits the stigmatized figure of the trans sex worker while reasserting her agency and authorship.

Exploring Spanish-language queer self-writing, Alfredo Martínez-Expósito details how the genre confronts stigma through language's own transformative flexibility:

> *El escritor homosexual se enfrenta, en su egoscritura, al leviatán del estigma, a su peripecia personal de resistencia o claudicación, y a las siempre maleables posibilidades expresivas del lenguaje* (**2022: 10**).
>
> (The homosexual writer confronts, in his ego-writing, the leviathan of stigma, his personal ordeal of resistance or surrender, and the ever-malleable expressive possibilities of language.)

Martínez-Expósito articulates a poetics of resistance that links subjectivity, affect, and form. This mode of *autoescritura* finds a striking echo in *Veneno*, where Cristina's spoken reminiscences—later mediated through Valeria's writing—enact a movement from orality to inscription. The process mirrors the transmission of myth in classical epic: Elley (**1984**) observes that 'the spread of writing resulted in poetry as we know it today—composed on paper and imprinted with the personality of its author, and more and more expressing personal emotions rather than recording history and tradition' (**1984: 10**).

In this shift, the collective transmission of myth gives way to the subjective-authorship characteristic of later narrative forms. Mikhail Bakhtin similarly describes the novel as inheriting the epic's formal legacy while relocating it within 'the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality' (**1981: 58**). *Veneno*'s passage from Cristina's oral storytelling to Valeria's written memoir and its televisual re-enactment mirrors this broader cultural transformation: centring the movement from

communal myth to authored self-narration. By translating Cristina's mythic self, *los Javis* recast trans testimony as the personal, albeit epically conceived.

Cristina's messy, complex memories, first published in the memoir *¡Digo!* before being transmitted to the screen, expand on rigid ideas of what is permissible. Regarding the ancient epic, Elley reminds us that 'strong literary associations arise from the fact that the earliest surviving examples are naturally in written form' (**1984: 10**). In terms of posterity, the writing of *La Veneno*'s memoirs carries extra weight, given Cristina's own lack of literacy. Valeria's capacity to write empowers both characters: Cristina's education suffered in small-town Francoist Spain, where abuse and rejection drove her to escape at thirteen. By eschewing a single-protagonist biopic, *Veneno* centres the transfer from oral history to written word.

The 'writing' of the self is significant for both Valeria and Cristina; there is contrast between Cristina's spectacular, oral self-mythologizing and the quieter, reflective depiction of Valeria's transition. Jay Prosser situates trans autobiography as both testimony and transformation, explaining that 'autobiography […] allows the transsexual to integrate the self after transition: to make sense of a dramatic shift in sexed plots, to produce continuity in the face of change. Narrative composes the self […] [and] allows a self to be instated in the present' (**1998: 120–121**). Autobiography here is not merely descriptive but constitutive through 'narrative's intrinsic capacity to construct identity' (**1998: 120**). Ina Linge extends this insight from the perspective of sexological and queer life writing, proposing that such narratives perform 'both a documentation of self, and the process of writing this self into existence at the moment of composition. Here life is written into existence' (**2023: 26**).

Starting a story *in medias res* ('in the middle of things') means that the 'epic begins with a question mark', as Frederick Turner observes (**2017: 97**). This was once thought a defining characteristic in the European epic tradition. While no longer considered a 'fixed convention' following wider study of epic narrative (**Paul, 2013: 8**), this distinctive formal trace remains potent in storytelling, in describing a blurring of temporalities in the audience's reception: '[The] epic always, despite being usually set in the remote past, seizes a moment when the present trembles on the precipice of the future' (**Turner, 2017: 97**). Let us consider *Veneno*'s opening in this light, which features a warm and cozy, softly lit domestic interior. A child's hand runs along a balustrade in close-up, as the camera tracks, tentatively, toward the direction of voices heard offscreen.

With a cut, we see the living room below, a television showing an episode of *Esta noche cruzamos el Mississippi*. The child gazes at the television

from the stairs, clearly fascinated. The voices we are listening to belong to la Veneno and Pepe Navarro, the show's host. The hazy, distant sounds clarify into proper sound bites, as we catch Cristina's distinctive turn of phrase. We will eventually discover that this 'boy' will become Valeria. How much a toddler may sense their own gender at this age is unknown, but the show makes clear this moment is significant for Valeria's own 'crossing'. This is underscored in the sixth episode, when Cristina lies seriously ill in hospital. Valeria, about to go on an important job interview, takes a phone call and learns the gravely ill Cristina may not survive. The episode cuts to Valeria at the hospital as she enters Cristina's room, and it flashes back to the series' opening sequence, with the young child gazing at the television. We recognize, together with Valeria, the profound relationship of these women, their shared journey.

'[T]he beauty of the *in medias res* device', Turner finds, is that 'meaning is then determined by the interplay of future action with past flashbacks' (**2017: 97**). Traced chronologically, Cristina travels from her birthplace of Adra, first to Marbella, then Torremolinos, visiting Bangkok, moving to Madrid—her site of transition, where she works the *Parque del Oeste* (Western Park) and is thrust into celebrity. We follow her arrest and imprisonment, her release, her life in Valencia with her close friend Paca *la Piraña* ('the Piranha')—where she meets Valeria—and her final days back in Madrid before her untimely death. The series shows Valeria's journey to begin, as outlined above, 'in the middle' of Cristina's. La Veneno's appearance on *Mississippi* is portrayed as a 'turning point', which we might understand, following Sara Ahmed, as a queered directionality, a resistance against life's 'straightening devices' in both protagonists' lives (**Ahmed, 2006: 92**). Valeria's journey of gender identity is shaped by a new orientation made possible by Cristina's adventurous 'disorientation', a 'wayward' turn against orthodoxy (**2006: 72**).

In the opening sequence, the 'transgender gaze' itself becomes *Veneno*'s central message. Beginning *in medias res* foregrounds trans kinship and the idea that the represented trans body can be emancipatory for trans viewers. This embodied, affective gaze builds solidarity across audiences—offering recognition and joy for trans spectators while inviting others to share in the intimacies and sorrows of a trans-ed world. The interlacing of Cristina's and Valeria's stories visualizes a broader historical reconfiguration of trans childhood and generational relation. As Halberstam writes, '[C]ross-generational contact has been crucial for trans* people […] but young trans* people increasingly discover information about themselves online rather than through older trans* people' (**2018: 64**). *Veneno* embeds this shift into its very structure: Valeria's encounter with Cristina is mediated by television, the internet,

and autobiography, dramatizing how trans knowledge circulates across time and media.

Yet, as Jules Gill-Peterson attests, '[T]he narrative that we are in the midst of the first generation of trans children […] is repeated ad nauseam in the media, online, by doctors, and by parents' (**2018: 2**). By tracing Cristina's 1990s fame alongside Valeria's digitally connected transition, *los* Javis expose the illusion of trans childhood's 'newness' and reveal, instead, an ongoing archive of lived trans experience. 'The fact that trans children have been forced […] to fare without a history,' Gill-Peterson argues, 'may itself be a major cause of the generational tension that Halberstam identifies' (**2018: 7**). *Veneno*'s temporal crossings thus become a form of historical repair: a televisual mode through which trans embodiment, knowledge, and care are transmitted between generations, recuperating a lineage that media once erased.

The Trans Community and Epic Distance

Veneno queers the epic not only through its structure and acts of writing but also through its communities of belonging. Elley notes that epic narratives depend on an 'all-important mythic element' that lifts them 'above mere reportage by the introduction of the irrational, the inexplicable or magical' (**1984: 9**). Bakhtin theorizes 'an absolute epic distance [that] separates the epic world from contemporary reality' (**2005: 51**). Joanna Paul further distinguishes epic from historical distance, allowing modern works to be 'epics without their necessarily originating or depicting the ancient world,' in which 'the present feels distant' (**2013: 16–18**). *Veneno* achieves this paradox of distance and immediacy through flashbacks that feel like journeys to another world yet collapse temporal and spatial boundaries through affect. Moving through memory and fantasy, the series embraces Cristina's self-mythologizing to evoke epic distance. A visually arresting instance of this opens episode two. As a *paella* simmers on a portable gas cooker in Paca's living room, Cristina recounts her exploits to Valeria, as her queer family from the *Parque del Oeste* look on, her vulgar remarks provoking uproarious laughter. As she serenades the group, song turns the domestic scene ritualistic, the homely and the epic merging in a shared act of remembrance.

Veneno depicts spatial and ritualistic journeys, thematizing multiple transitions. While working as an orderly in the hospital, Joselito (later Cristina) meets the woman who will initiate her transformation. On the rooftop, bathed in the amber light of sunset, a patient called Cristina Onassis offers Joselito not only access to hormones but also a fantastical lineage. Framed against the vast skyline of Madrid, their conversation

fuses confession and mythology. '*Me lo puse yo*' ('I named myself'), Cristina Onassis declares, recounting the tragedy of her namesake—the '*elegante, famosa, divina*' ('elegant, famous, divine') heiress Cristina Onassis—who died in a bathtub only days after inheriting her fortune.

By taking the name Cristina, Joselito transforms a fatal inheritance into a mode of self-fashioning. '*Me puse el nombre de una estrella*' ('I took the name of a star') she says, invoking both celebrity and the cosmic. The sequence's languid rhythm and open horizon visualize the tension between transcendence and precarity that structures *Veneno*'s trans aesthetics. The rooftop becomes a threshold between genders, myth, and everyday life, one where, as Preciado writes, '*Lo que denominamos subjetividad no es sino la cicatriz que deja el corte en la multiplicidad de lo que habríamos podido ser*' ('What we call subjectivity is only the scar left by the cut in the multiplicity of what we might have been') (**2019: 23**). Cristina's naming enacts such a scar: a self-creation that acknowledges loss while opening to new multiplicities.

Later, this mythic lineage takes material form in the dress Cristina receives from her *madre trans* ('trans mother'): In her wardrobe, surrounded by mirrors and shimmering garments, Cristina explains that, just as Cristina Onassis had been her symbolic mother, she now becomes Valeria's. She places the dress in Valeria's hands, suggesting that one day Valeria might pass it on to her own 'daughter', along with her book on Cristina. With this gesture, *Veneno* renders trans heritage as both tactile and textual: the dress and the memoir operate as twin archives of touch and remembrance. Through this relay of name and garment, the series transforms mourning into continuity, articulating what José Esteban Muñoz calls 'a horizon imbued with potentiality', that is, 'a mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present' (**2009: 1**). The passing of the dress envisions a queer and trans futurity rooted in care, where affect and memory sustain collective life.

Coming midway through the series, episode four, *The Curse of the Onassis*, marks a turning point in Cristina's self-fashioning, intercutting moments of humiliation, mythmaking, and defiance to show how Cristina reworks lived experience through performance and fantasy. The episode's disorienting montage moves fluidly between timelines: Cristina, newly transitioned, receives a visit from her sister Mari Carmen; an older Cristina struggles with a televised scandal; and her mythic confrontation in the *Parque del Oeste* is staged. When Mari Carmen first sees Cristina after her transition, initial shock gives way to recognition as she remarks on her resemblance to their mother. The two then move before a dressing-room mirror, where Cristina's reflection is doubled and familial memory enters the frame. The moment visualizes Jay Prosser's (**1998**) 'mirror dynamic' both literally and

metaphorically, transforming autobiography into spectacle. As Prosser writes of the mirror-scene trope in trans autobiographies in particular: 'the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject, freezes it, frames it schematically in narrative' (**1998: 100**). Here, the mirror becomes a site at which Cristina's self-recognition is immediately shadowed by the fear of maternal inheritance.

For Cristina, the mirror reveals a divided self-image, refracting the haunting of the past and the burden of inheritance. 'That's my biggest fear, Mari Carmen … to be like Mama', she confides to her sister. A sudden cut transports us to the *Parque*. The song '*Dame Veneno'* by *Los Chunguitos* plays on the soundtrack as blue shadows envelop *La Veneno*. Striding in a red harem outfit, she confronts her nemesis in the hierarchy of workers, Fanny. The weather turns biblical—thunder, drenching rain—and they wrestle in the mud, kinetic handheld camerawork adding to the chaos. Cristina gains the upper hand, screaming as the camera circles them. In a flash, she is transformed into her mother as she strangles her combatant, the violence of her past erupting into the present. In a sudden shift to stylized body horror, Cristina's teeth tear off Fanny's nipple: a surreal eruption of memory into mythmaking, as *los* Javis depict the event just as she had claimed it happened earlier in the series while strapped to the lie detector.

As this scene unfolds, the series intersperses a scene of Valeria struggling to contain her mentor's volatility after the polygraph scandal, their relationship fracturing under the weight of Cristina's trauma and addiction. This overblown, mythic battle is thus juxtaposed with Cristina's ongoing despair in the present: drunk, erratic, and haunted by visions of her abusive partner, she lashes out at Valeria before retreating into solitude. Across these events, *los* Javis deploy their most 'epic' storytelling strategies—the emotional excess and sensory intensity of melodrama—to stage the coexistence of trauma and transcendence. These sequences are governed less by factual realism than by affective truth. They privilege emotional force over strict reconstruction, retelling experience with greater fidelity to feeling than to fact.

As Prosser observes, '[L]ike two mirrors, autobiography and transsexuality are themselves caught up in an interreflective dynamic, resembling, reassembling, and articulating each other' (**1998: 103**). In the *Parque*, Cristina and Fanny's fight is interrupted by the arrival of a group of neo-Nazis attacking the community of sex workers. Blood glistening on her lips, scythe raised high as neo-Nazis flee, her cry—'From now on, all of you will call me Cristina!'—marks her self-naming as both battle cry and rebirth. This convergence of autobiography, fantasy, and violence epitomizes *Veneno*'s bio-epic form: it transforms the trans life story into a legend and

legacy of endurance, where memory itself becomes the stage of historical and mythical reclamation.

For trans folk, 'Sexuality can be thought of as deeply related to beauty, since the evaluation of a person's seductive power often lies in self-confidence, which derives from a reassuring way of thinking about one's body' (**Mauriello, 2017: 58**). This is more than personal; it is political. At the *Parque del Oeste*, *la Veneno* wears her beauty like armour. Throughout the series she repeatedly affirms the importance of being and feeling attractive. Financially crucial for her sex work, appearance becomes central to her self-conception. She recollects, 'Back then, there were four thousand prostitutes working in the *Parque del Oeste*'. The episode cuts to the park, and we see the image of a seemingly endless throng of women set to Bizet's 'Toreador March'. We hear Paca exclaim in voice over, 'Four thousand prostitutes? Tell the truth, it was thirty or forty!' Cristina shakes this off, taking full *'La Veneno'* flight, and resumes her tale. Key figures from her past are introduced onscreen, cat-walking through the misty night towards the camera like goddesses in lingerie. Of course, *la Veneno*'s turn is the sexiest. Suddenly, the *paella*, the sofa, and the whole gathering are present in the park, surrounded by the past. The domestic and the epic combine, as if we are invited to share in the communal meal and sharing of memories.

In episode six*, La sonrisa del pelícano* (*The Pelican's Smile*), Pepe Navarro's short-lived 1997 talk show, is cancelled. As the camera pulls back, the set is dismantled around Cristina: bright lights flicker and panels collapse while Leiva's *Nunca debiste cruzar el Mississippi* plays over the scene, its mournful arpeggios accompanying television's self-destruction. At the centre stands Cristina, clutching a live lamb, an emblem of both sacrifice and redemption. Philosopher Elizabeth Duval critiques this symbolism: *'El platό se derrumba y la Veneno sujeta al Agnus Dei… La misma televisión fue responsable de su dolor'* ('The set collapses and *la Veneno* holds the *Agnus Dei* [….] The very television that made her a symbol was responsible for her pain') (**2021: 108–109**). Here, the televisual world that made Cristina famous collapses around her. Earlier, singer Juan Antonio Canta had warned Cristina, *'La tele te va a pedir estribillo. Y si les das estribillo, te quedas en eso'* ('Television will ask you for a refrain; and if you give it to them, that's all you'll ever be'). *Estribillo*—the refrain—suggests here the repeated hook or catchphrase to which television reduces her. By the episode's end, that warning returns as a requiem, with splendour and collapse held in the same frame.

Beyond Trauma: Trans joy and the dance scape

At the height of its mythmaking, *Veneno* turns inward once more, converting the grand gesture of the epic into an intimate choreography of touch. This section examines two key sequences, exposing the contrasting negative and positive affect each arouses and considering the (dis)orientations produced in each case. To do this, I draw on two concepts theorised by Wibke Straube (**2014**): the naked-body-shot and the 'exit scape'. Straube defines 'exit scapes' as 'moments of intense filmic engagement that temporarily allow an escape from the cinematic dominance of the negative affects of constraining scenes' (**2014: 48**). In these sequences, trans characters experience an uplifting, freeing break from the oppression of the threat of violence that seeps in and out of the mediated world. Such moments of affective identification allow the viewer not only to enter this realm, but also to 'be temporarily constructed as trans—they become transing subjects in their feelings for and with the character' (**2014: 49**).

The third episode of *Veneno* closes with a sequence that demonstrates the utopic pleasure of trans joy through a form of 'exit scape', the *dance scape.* The dancer is Cristina, in a glittery red dress, with a boa and lipstick to match her dramatic outfit. The phenomenology of dance, both on and off the screen, 'draws on issues of contact between bodies and spaces as well as movement and links them to an understanding of becoming embodied through space and through temporalities' (**2014: 79**). Typically for the series, multiple timelines and characters merge. We see a younger Cristina (played by Jedet), walking on stage in the Torremolinos nightclub to lip-sync in drag as '*la Coneja*' ('The Doe Rabbit'). With frequent cuts, we slip into the present, where an older Cristina (Isabel Torres) is reenacting the show for her friends in Paca's lounge, looking fabulous in the same outfit and supported by cries of admiration from her trans kin.

The carnal thrill of the sensual dance performance enfolds the present-day Cristina with her past self during a turning point in her transition, touching, at the same time, on Valeria's own transition. The song on the soundtrack—which lends the episode's title, '*Acaríciame*' ('Caress Me'), its name—is a sensual disco-pop 'sexadelic' record from 1980 by Susana Estrada, a provocative sex symbol during the period of transition to democracy post-Franco. The lyrics conjure the intimacy and eroticism of touch, '*Tú me has hecho vibrar sintiendo tu piel / Me has sabido dar lo que yo esperé*' ('You've made me vibrate feeling your skin / You've given me what I've been waiting for'). As the song reaches its instrumental break, which provocatively features Estrada's orgiastic moans, we are thrust into two new settings, interrupting the dance sequence. One portrays Valeria in the present, while the other features Cristina in the past, both

experiencing sexual bliss with respective partners. A rapid succession of images appear in split-screen—horizontal, vertical, and diagonal—confusing the coherent sense of where one body begins and another ends.

Ahmed writes, 'Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy' (**2006: 107**). The disorientation produced by the temporal and carnal confusion of this scene continually shifts the dramatic focus between the two protagonists' lives. We might understand this as a necessary precondition for the (gender)queer *orientation* that follows. This dance scape reveals the sensorial techniques enabling positive identification between Cristina and Valeria through an erotics of movement and touch, which allows us access as viewers to the exit scape: '[T]he characters create worlds together in their dance movements, the affirmation of being in touch and open towards each other allows me as an entrant to feel utopian possibilities of different worlding in these scenes, of how things could be different' (**Straube, 2014: 117**).

Occasions of potential disorientation for (trans) spectators in *Veneno* are those featuring what Straube has termed the 'naked-body-shot', where 'the trans character is shown as partly naked, exposing breasts, a flat chest, or genitals that are in "discrepancy" with the gender identity of the character' (**2014: 46**). The *Acaríciame* dance sequence is immediately preceded by a portrayal of a powerful, re-orienting turning point for Cristina during a trip to Bangkok, which she won by participating in a reality dating show. At this stage, presenting as a gay man, she visits a bar and is stunned by the trans performer singing on stage. Cristina finds her way backstage, and we catch a glimpse of the remarkably beautiful singer loosening their silken robes to reveal their naked body.

This naked-body-shot differs from stereotypical onscreen nudity, identified by Straube, which conventionally 'conceptualize[s] the trans characters as untruthful, deceptive and fake' (**2014: 46**). Here, Cristina's nudity is self-authored, rather than punitive. We are encouraged through the accompanying uplifting music, softly erotic red lighting, and our perceived knowledge of what Cristina feels in this moment, to sense the image of the naked body as revealing of an authentic truth. The disorientation that has marked Cristina's life so far is stilled, as sexual desire, sexuality, and gender identity now blur in a transformation of her subjectivity. In voice-over, Cristina explains her realization that her previous infatuation with a boy named Tomas had proven to be just a distraction: the key to her identity and happiness was not to be found in another, but in herself. 'I was so obsessed with Tomas, I was unable to see beyond that," she says.

La Veneno's notoriety rested in part on the scandalous way she would expose her body. While her appearances on *Mississippi*, flashing her breasts at host Pepe Navarro while delivering iconic catchphrases, portray an agency and self-ownership over the presentation of her body, the series depicts moments where that control is lost. One of these is involves being cajoled into performing in a cheap and degrading pornographic film, by her abusive and exploitative partner, Angelo. According to Cristina, it was Angelo's actions that also led to her imprisonment for insurance fraud after he set fire to her apartment—being illiterate, she had signed an insurance form without knowing what she was purchasing.

Episode eight, the series' penultimate, tells the story of Cristina's imprisonment and depicts transphobic violence at its harshest—it is the heaviest, most sombre episode in tone. The gender euphoria of the dance scape scene feels a lifetime away from the harshness of incarceration, as she is violently misgendered and forced into a male prison—Cristina's transition is not legally recognized by the state. (On arrival, the guards shave off her long hair.) The emotional intensity of the episode is heightened as these traumatic memories are interspersed with flash forwards in which we see Cristina and Paca's relationship deteriorating. Cristina is unhappy, unstable, and self-destructively renounces her friendship with Paca. This is especially devastating with the knowledge that Paca is playing herself and must relive these traumatic memories through her performance. The episode again foregrounds Cristina's body, but this time it strips her of control over it. Where the earlier naked-body shot stages exposure as self-authored and affirming, prison renders it coercive and disciplinary: Cristina is forced to strip for the guards, and she is sexually assaulted by both guards and fellow inmates.

Straube finds that the touch longed for by trans characters which is 'achieved in dance' is 'always connected with the actuality of violent touch, or of neglect, or of not being touched at all' (2014: 117). This precise proximity of a haptics of pleasure juxtaposed with pain is demonstrated in *Veneno*, especially in the contrasting deployment of the naked-body-shot with this scene of involuntarily nakedness. In the latter, we could find a repetition of the kind of scopic violence that the series itself has critiqued in the polygraph sequence at the beginning of the series. However, when considered in conjunction with the joyful haptics of the dance scape, together with the emancipatory potential embodied by Valeria's transgender gaze as a young child, the series' overarching narrative aims not to reduce trans experience to violence but to combine the stark reality of Cristina's life with more hopeful, even utopic visions of queer kinship.

Conclusion

In *Veneno*, Cristina's path-breaking visibility extends through Valeria, who learns to see her body differently. Their connection stages a relay of generations: Cristina's life, marked by solitude and spectacle, creates the necessary conditions for Valeria's supported transition. The series thus locates trans becoming within relation and community—between mothers and daughters, mentors and protégées, myth and memory. As Evans reminds us, '[W]e fall into the trap of telling stories of competing experience instead of commonalities and difference […] we fail to see queer and trans* lives as associative, as part of elaborate histories of relationality, of kinships bad as well as good' (**2023: 7**). *Veneno*'s power lies in this associative texture. Its heroine is 'neither whore nor saint'; she is a figure through whom viewers experience the bodily and affective intensities of (a) trans life.

Duval claims that *Veneno* canonizes Cristina in its final moments: '*La Veneno acaba en un sofá, llena de sangre, para redimirnos de nuestros pecados*' ('*La Veneno* ends on a sofa, covered in blood, to redeem us of our sins'), turning her into both icon and martyr (**2021: 103**). Yet the series' mythic form converts this sacrifice into an *exit scape*. Its affective excess refuses the demand, noted by Rage (**2023**), that trans images be either tragic or exemplary. As Rage writes, '[A]n instance of joy does not negate the violence […] but it does evidence that trans* joy is beyond the reach of these same systems' (**2023: 56**). In *Veneno*, that joy is produced formally and affectively rather than offered as a moral corrective, a way of feeling history through spectacle.

Read as both a queer and trans bio-epic, *Veneno* expands what history the biopic can reenvision. It transforms the televisual archive into an affective one, where memory, myth, and community intertwine. In this light, *Veneno* offers a historical correction: Just as Vegas' book sought to rescue Cristina's legacy from infamy or (worse?) oblivion, the show's creators have crafted an audio-visual record of Cristina *la Veneno* that is both historical and fantastic, ensuring her enduring place in trans history, one as abrupt, in-your-face, strident—and fabulous—as the original, both hardened by unspeakable trauma and softened by beautifully flawed human relationships.

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[i] All Spanish-to-English translations are the author's own.

Exploring the Sociolinguistic Dynamics of Naming Motivations among Telugu Catholics

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Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the motivations behind given names among the Telugu Catholics. By distributing survey questionnaires, data were collected on participants' motivations, aiming to generate qualitative insights. A total of 173 Telugu Catholics participated in this study on naming motivations. The findings revealed that Telugu Catholics negotiate their pre-Christian and Christian identities through naming styles. It is noteworthy that Telugu Catholic parents had the option of choosing between Christian names or pre-convert Hindu names. Consequently, parents tend to associate with specific categories of names while dissociating from others when selecting names for their children. The research conducted on the naming practices of this Indian Christian group opens up possibilities for further socio-onomastic investigations. Future studies can explore how different Indian Christian communities adapt through naming and examine the various naming techniques employed. By delving deeper into these areas, one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics within Indian Christian communities and their naming practices.

Keywords: personal names; socio-onomastics; Social Identity Theory (SIT); Social Categorisation Theory (SCT); Telugu Catholic; naming motivations; Indian Christianity

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Telugu Catholics construct their social identities through naming practices. Based on recent studies in the field of socio-onomastics (e.g., on the use of name motivations in **Aldrin, 2017**),[i] this study analysed the names of Telugu Catholics.[ii] Current approaches in the field take into account the varied societal and ethnic needs of communities that are achieved through naming practices. To put it another way, names serve more than just 'identificatory or reference' functions (**Ainiala & Östman, 2017**). In the discussions that follow, I first give a brief introduction about the cultural, religious, and historical aspects of Telugu Christians. The community's background will give us a better understanding of the Indian Christian group and establish the context and significance of the study. This will be followed by the study's research questions.

The Telugu-speaking community first encountered Christianity at the beginning of the sixteenth century through the efforts of Franciscan missionaries (**Schurhammer, quoted in Babu, 2005: 32**). The Franciscans were the only congregation involved in the evangelisation of the Telugu-speaking people at this time. However, from the latter half of the sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries began their evangelisation activities in the community (**Babu, 2005: 33**). The Augustinians and Theatines were the next sets of missionaries to try to convert the Telugu people to Christianity, arriving in the seventeenth century (**Babu, 2005: 38**). Of these two groups, the Theatines arrived first (**Joseph, quoted in Babu, 2005: 42**). The Capuchins, another Catholic congregation, arrived in the year 1645 (**Leoncini & Ames, quoted in Taneti, 2022: 32**). None of these congregations were able to win over many Indigenous people to Christianity. Instead, the first missionaries were limited to meeting the religious needs of the non-natives (e.g., Europeans). Therefore, Christianity did not begin, spread, or stabilise in the region during this period (**Joseph, quoted in Babu, 2005: 42-43**).

However, since the 1700s, the local population has embraced Christianity, the success of which can be attributed to the Jesuits of the Carnatic Mission.[iii] This period also marked the beginning of conversions of people from the upper castes, such as the Velamas, Reddies, and Kammas (**Kroot, 1910; Babu, 2005**). The first person who was baptised among the Reddies of Madigubba, a village in present-day Andhra Pradesh, was Timma Rayappa.[iv] Since he was a powerful and influential person, many people in the nearby localities also embraced Christianity. There are fascinating stories about the naming practices that began among the initial converts of the Carnatic Mission. After being attacked

by a group of bandits, the Reddy Christians abandoned their hometowns and relocated to Nellore during the 1700s. From then on, the Christians of the Reddy community have continued the tradition of using their family surnames, which are also the names of their place of origin. The community's descent can be traced to this place in the present day (**Babu, 2005: 55-56**).

In another instance, the first person in the Kamma caste group to convert to Christianity, under the Carnatic Mission in 1733, adopted the personal name Annamma. This name quickly gained popularity in the community among Kamma Christians (**Kroot, 1910: 241)**. A large number of converts from the Kamma caste settled in Cuddapah (Andhra Pradesh).[v] However, when conditions deteriorated, they returned to Nellore and Guntur, where they had originally lived. Place names indicating their place of origin are appended to the proper names of Kamma Christians (e.g., Pudota, Etur, etc.) (**Babu, 2005: 56–57**).

As a result, many of the personal names of early Christians among the Telugu-speaking population became well-known in their respective caste-based communities. For example, Annamma, the personal name of the first Christian among Kammas, became popular in the community, whereas the name Rayappa gained popularity among the Christians of the Reddy caste group (**Kroot, 1910: 241**). Venkatagiri Christians (i.e., Christians from Venkatagiri, a place in Andhra Pradesh) are another group whose names indicate their Christian affiliation in Telugu. In the 1700s, Venkatagiri played a significant role in Christian missionary activities. The early Christians in this area were members of the Kuraba caste, a community traditionally associated with the occupation of weaving blankets. To this day, their descendants' Christian names can be traced back via this lineage (**Kroot, 1910: 64**).

In 1735, the Christians of Bukkapuram, a place in Andhra Pradesh, were strengthened by the addition of the Reddies, who had the surname Thumma appended to their proper names. The Reddy groups with the surname Thumma were originally from Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh. The Reddy Christians of Bukkapuram were reputed for their devotion to Christianity. Rayalseema and Batsalakurapadu (both of which are in Andhra Pradesh) are also noted for having large communities of Reddy Christians (**Kroot, 1910: 59-61**).

Methodology

This study is based on data gathered from surveys administered to Telugu Catholics. The survey was made available to participants in different

modalities—both in person and remotely (e.g., via Google Forms, long-distance modes of participation wherein participants could return their filled-out questionnaires at their convenience). It was also circulated to participants in groups. Specifically, parish priests of Catholic churches in Hyderabad were approached for assistance, who would then make announcements requesting the participation of community members. Participants sat in groups and responded to the questionnaire individually. The questionnaire was bilingual, as questions on personal names were provided in English and Telugu (**Joseph, 2023**).

The research questions of the study are as follows:

(1) What reasons do parents from Telugu Catholic communities provide for giving their children certain names?
(2) What factors influence the naming motivations of the Indian Christian community?
(3) What kind of linguistic, socio-cultural, and regional adaptation strategies can be seen in the given names of Telugu Catholics?

In total, 173 Telugu Catholics participated in the survey. Participants were asked to provide their full official names and the official names of their family members. Information was also collected on the social variables that could impact naming, such as the age of the participant and the ages of their family members, their employment details, and their educational and linguistic profiles. The community members were also required to provide information regarding their pre-Christian names (i.e., the given names of community members before they converted to Christianity) and caste backgrounds. I wanted to understand how caste interacted with participants' personal names because—among Telugus, and hence among Telugu Catholics—caste is a very important component of one's social identity (**Joseph, 2023: 153–169**).

In addition to questions that elicited information about participants' demographic profiles, the questionnaire included 23 test items exploring different aspects of Telugu Catholics' naming practices. Questions that elicited data on the reasons for the naming of community members were as follows:

(1) 'Did your parents/relatives ever tell you why you got this name?'

(2) 'Why did your children/siblings/spouse/parents get this (official) name? Please list the main reasons… ' (**Joseph**, **2023: 162–164**).

Judgment sampling was used to collect the names of Telugu Catholics in this study. In this sampling technique, the researcher decides the speaker categories before conducting the fieldwork. This can be contrasted with techniques in which community members or ethnographic participation guides the researcher about speaker categories in the community **(Schilling, 2013: 35–36; 41–42)**. Two types of social groups were investigated for names: the Scheduled Castes and the General Category. Participants in these two categories were approached via local social networks, such as parish priests. Though this sampling technique was not wholly representative[vi] of the larger population, the patterns observed regarding the naming styles of Telugu Catholics can be generalised to the Telugu-speaking community as a whole. This is because decisions about which speaker groups to focus on were based on the study's research questions, which were drawn from informal interviews with members of the community and in-depth ethnographic participation within the community.

Historical Origins of the Community

As mentioned in the Introduction, Christianity was introduced to Telugu speakers in the first half of the sixteenth century. Friar Luis do Salvador, a Portuguese Franciscan missionary, was the first Christian missionary to begin evangelistic work among the Telugus, dispatched as a Portuguese diplomat to the Kingdom of Vizayanagaram. Besides forging a treaty between the Kingdom of Vizayanagaram and the Portuguese, Friar Salvador was also granted the formal approval to spread Christianity to the native population (**Schurhammer, quoted in Babu, 2005**). He succeeded in converting a few locals. At the same time, other members of the Franciscan Order were involved in spreading Christianity in southern India. The initial converts belonged to lower-caste groups, such as the Golla (herdsmen), Saale (a caste traditionally associated with weaving), and Kummari (potters) (**Babu, 2005**).

Under the direction of Fr. Nicolas Pimenta, the Jesuits made their initial contact with the Telugus in 1597 (**Thanugundla, quoted in Babu, 2005**). A report that Fr. Pimenta gave to the Jesuit General provides an account of the Jesuits' activities among the Telugu-speaking people between 1598 and 1600. The Guerreiro report also details the Jesuits' activities between 1600 and 1609. These documents show that the Jesuits and the King of the Vizayanagaram Empire (Venkatapati Devaraya II) had a cordial relationship (**Babu, 2005**).

Because of this, the king and his family supported the Jesuits in their evangelical activities in the kingdom. But despite the Royal family's

support, the Jesuits could not spread their religion among the Telugus for various reasons. They failed partly because the Indians rejected the imposition of a foreign culture (**Babu, 2005**). The Portuguese were particularly disliked by locals because they ate beef, and in those days, only people from the lower castes did so. The eating of beef was actually prohibited for the upper castes in the highly casteist Telugu society. In addition, the Portuguese married women from the lower castes, further alienating them from the upper castes. The strained relations with the people and the King of Vizayanagaram Empire only worsened when the Portuguese razed a few Hindu neighbourhoods in Mylapore. All these factors contributed to the Jesuits leaving the Vizayanagaram Kingdom by the first quarter of the seventeenth century (**Kroot, in Babu, 2005**).

It was only in the eighteenth century that locals began embracing Christianity. The missionaries of the Carnatic Mission made this possible. From this point onward, individuals from the upper castes (Velamas, Reddies, Kammas, etc.) began adopting the religion (**Kroot, 1910; Babu, 2005**). Following the dissolution of the Jesuit missionaries of the Carnatic Mission in the eighteenth century, the Paris Foreign Missions carried on this work among the local populace (**Kroot, 1910: 61–64**), although the Carmelites also played a role in the early conversions of the Telugu people, arriving in Telugu-speaking regions in the last decades of the seventeenth century along with the Protestant missionaries and focusing on the local upper castes (**Taneti, 2022: 33**).

Social Identity Theory: A theoretical perspective

Across all societies, people attempt to project a positive image of themselves (**Tajfel, 1981: 254**). This is driven by the need of every individual to see themselves in a positive light in a given community (**Turner, 1975: 9**). A person's self-image is shaped through membership in various social groups (**Tajfel, 1981: 254**), and an individual can belong to many social groups at any given point in time. The correlation between self-image and membership in various groups is closely related to the concepts of 'social categorisation,' 'social identity,' 'social comparison,' and 'psychological group distinctiveness' (**Tajfel, 1981: 254**).

Let us briefly look at each of these concepts. For Tajfel, social categorisation is a means by which 'the social' is equated with 'the individual'. Showing uniformity in 'actions, intentions and system of beliefs', a social group is a collection of individuals that can be conceptualised as a cognitive entity (**Tajfel, 1981: 254–255**). Additionally, a social group becomes relevant only in the context of other groups (**Tajfel, in Turner, 1975: 7–8**). Social categorisation refers to differences

between ingroup and outgroup memberships, in which the value system of a group plays an important role in preserving the distinctions between ingroups and outgroups (**Tajfel, 1981: 254–255**).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) are closely related. Van Knippenberg conceptualises SIT as that aspect of an individual's 'self-concept' that is derived from their understanding of belonging to (a) particular social group(s) and the salience of that belongingness (**1984: 563–564**). The salience attached to membership in a particular group includes the values and the affective components ascribed to it (**Tajfel, 1981: 255**). In contrast, SCT allows people to determine theirs as well as others' position in society based on their memberships in certain groups (**Turner, 1975: 7; van Knippenberg, 1984: 563–564**). One's social identity is based on how one defines themselves and their rank in this social order (**Turner, 1975: 7**). While SCT is a theory of mental classification, SIT combines the cognitive aspects of SCT along with the overt motives of people to build positive social identities (**van Knippenberg, 1984: 563–564**).

According to Tajfel, the core goal of SIT is for every individual to build a positive social identity (**van Knippenberg, 1984: 563**). The term *positive* here refers to the set of shared ideologies common to group members. These ideologies, or aspects of identity, are essential for creating and maintaining differences between relevant outgroups. In other words, intergroup differences are based on comparisons of differential values leading to hierarchical relations between the relevant social groups in question (**Turner, 1975: 9–10**). Therefore, members of a community can build a positive social identity by contrasting ingroup members with outgroup members. This differentiation can generate positive meanings for ingroup members if comparisons portray them in a positive light. There are various mechanisms for achieving a positive social identity, including moving to another social group that more accurately reflects one (**van Knippenberg, 1984: 563**), changing the characteristics of a group to be more favourable to its members, or assigning positive meanings to traits previously conceived as negative if changing group(s) is not possible (**van Knippenberg, 1984: 563; Tajfel, in Turner, 1975: 7**).

According to SIT, people generally engage in intergroup comparisons between ingroups and relevant outgroups. When members of a lower-ranking group realise the status differences between their ingroup and relevant outgroups, they either attempt to improve the comparable attributes of their ingroups or seek other ways to show supremacy. Since individuals derive their self-conceptions partly through the social group(s) to which they belong, membership in a low-ranking group might

have negative effects on one's social identity. As a result, members work on improving the group's standing by employing the strategies mentioned. In contrast, members of high-standing groups rarely feel the need to elevate their social status owing to it being assured by membership in said social group(s) (**van Knippenberg, 1984: 564–565**).

The features of a social group derive salience with respect to recognisable distinctions compared with the features of other relevant groups (**Tajfel, in Turner, 1975: 7**), such as the distinction in the personal names of upper- and lower-caste members, which is quite significant in societies stratified by caste hierarchies. The naming conventions of the lower castes are disparaged in relation to those of the upper castes (e.g., Kovind < Govind, 'another name for Lord Krishna'). If names are conceptualised as indicators of one's position in the social hierarchy, then this deliberate manipulation of meaningful names by the upper castes so that they become 'meaningless' is an attempt to maintain caste-based differences (**Buswala, 2023; Joe S. S., 2024**).

The Motivations for Telugu Catholic Names: A thematic analysis

In this section, I address the research questions of this study. The first research question sought to investigate the motivations for Telugu Catholic names and was framed as follows: 'What reasons do parents from Telugu Catholic communities have for giving their children certain names?' The personal names of community members could be mainly classified into two main categories, Hindu and Christian.[vii] There was further sub-categorisation within these Hindu and Christian categories based on naming motivations. The next section looks at the different reasons for assigning Hindu names to community members.

Hindu Names[viii]

Category I

The first category of Hindu names features names that were inherited from ancestors.[ix] These could also be pre–Christian conversion names of those individuals who converted to Christianity later in life as adults and chose not to change their names to maintain consistency in official records (**Joseph, 2023: 46, 82**). Names belonging to this type include common Indian names (e.g., Saritha, Deepak), names of Hindu gods and goddesses (e.g., Venkateshwar, 'Lord Venkateshwara'), symbols associated with Hinduism[x] (e.g., Lingaiah, a name based on a symbol representing Lord Shiva), etc. One of the respondents explained that this

type of name is assigned to community members because there is a tradition of 'naming children in memory of ancestors' and therefore 'a Hindu name' is selected (**R.R.T., 2019**).[xi]

Category II

Hindu names belonging to this category reflect those in Category I but are given in order to avail caste-based reservations in government sectors (**Joseph, 2023: 82**). Dalit Christians hide their Christian identities because if they are revealed there is a high likelihood of being denied the caste-based privileges that are given to Dalits by the Indian Constitution. Since Christians lie outside the Indian caste system, they are not conventionally associated with the caste system. As a consequence, after embracing Christianity, Dalits would automatically be classified as Christians and not as Dalits (**Taneti, 2022: 17–18**).

A summary of participants' responses for this name motivation is as follows:

People use Hindu names for various reasons. They reflect the cultural heritage of the community and also function as an adaptation strategy. The upper castes use it because of their 'caste pride', but among the lower castes, they are used to avail reservation benefits (**S.A., 2019**). Christian names carry a stigma within the mainstream Hindu population—all Christians are seen as members of lower castes. Therefore, it is thus common to use the baptismal, Christian names in church, in the village, and in the private domains among family and friends, and Hindu names in public domains (**Joseph, 2023: 82, 127**). The use of two names, a Hindu and a Christian name, is like maintaining 'two identities' (**S.P., 2024**). Since the community embraced Christianity relatively recently, these two identities are maintained through naming practices.

Category III

A third category features common Indian names or Telugu names which have covert Christian meanings (**Joseph, 2023: 53**). These kinds of names were derived through various linguistic processes.

The first of these are *loan translations*. The Telugu name Rayi ('stone') refers to the name Peter (**Joseph, 2023: 80, 96**), as Peter also means 'rock' or 'stone' in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, the name's source languages (**Hanks & Hodges, 2003**). Other instances of this type of name include Chinnamma/Chinnappa, which is a combination of the Telugu word

chinna ('small') plus the Dravidian nominal *amma*/*appa* ('mother/father'), and refers to St Poulina, the feminine derivative of St Paul or Paul (from the Latin for 'small') (**Joseph, 2023: 80**). Another such name is Balaswamy, a combination of the Sanskrit *bala* ('child') and *swamy* ('lord, master'), which refers to 'infant Jesus'[xii] (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Telugu Hindu names based on loan translations

S. No.	Name and its Variants	Target Language	Source Language
1.	Deva Swaroop	Sanskrit *deva* 'god' + *swaroop* 'wise' meaning 'one who knows god'.	English Dominic < Latin Dominicus 'god' (**Hanks & Hodges, 2003**)
2.	Rayi, Rayappa, Rayanna, Rayapu, etc.	Telugu *rayi* 'stone'	English Peter < Latin and Greek *petros* 'stone, rock' (**Hanks & Hodges, 2003**)
3.	Chinnamma, Chinnapu, Chinnappa	Telugu *chinna* 'small'	English Paul < Latin Paulus 'small' (**Hanks & Hodges, 2003**)
4.	Balaswamy	Sanskrit *bala* 'child' + *swamy* 'lord, master'	'Infant Jesus'

The second kind of names in this category are common Indian names wherein the original meaning of the names is *interpreted within a Christian context* among community members. Examples of such names include Prasad/-a, Sanskrit for 'food offered to God/deity/idol' (Christian meaning, 'offering to Jesus Christ, Communion'); Jyothi/Jyoti, Sanskrit for 'light' (Christian meaning, 'light of Jesus Christ'); Pavitra, Sanskrit for 'holy' (Christian meaning 'Holy Spirit'), etc. (see Table 2). One of the participants described such names as 'Telugu with a Christian sense' and as 'adaptation of Christianity into Telugu' (**G.J., 2019**). Hindu names in this category are also derived from the morphological process of compounding, such as the name Krishanti, in which *Kri* refers to 'Christ' and *shanti* the Sanskrit word for 'peace'.

Sometimes a specific sound in a Hindu name is given Christian meanings.[xiii] Examples include *Ajin*, where the first (*a*-) stands for St Anthony. The *-jin* is used to derive many neutral (non-religious) names, such as Rojin, Jojin, etc.[xiv] Another example identified in the dataset is *Dheeraj,* in which the first (/d̪ʰ/) is linked to the sound /t̪ʰ/ in the name Anthony, orthographically represented as 'th' (**Joseph, 2023: 53**).

Similarly, the name *Sharan,* which in Sanskrit means 'shelter', is interpreted as *Xavier* (*Showaraialyo* in Telugu) because of its phonetic similarity to the local Telugu variant of the Christian name. In the name *Devayani*, the first (/d̲/), orthographically represented as 'd', is linked with the initial sound in the name *Theresa* (as in, 'Mother Teresa'), or /t̲/, orthographically represented as 'th'.

*Table 2: Indian names with inherently Christian meanings (**Lugano & Mohan, 2024**)*

S. No.	**Name/Variant Forms of Names**	**Derivation**	**Christian Meaning**
1.	Avinash	Sanskrit 'one who cannot be destroyed'	'The indestructibility of Jesus Christ'
2.	Abhishek	Sanskrit 'anointment'	'One who is ordained to serve Jesus'
3.	Krupasagar	Sanskrit 'ocean of mercy/compassion'	'Jesus' divine mercies'
4.	Rajarao	Telugu 'king'	'The three kings in the New Testament'
5.	Jayaraju	Sanskrit 'victorious king'	'Jesus', 'devotee of Jesus'
6.	Ratna	Sanskrit 'consisting of pearls'	From the Book of Revelation where each of the 12 gates of heaven is made up of a single pearl
7.	Prasad, Prasada	Sanskrit 'food offered to God/deity/idol'	'Offering to Jesus Christ', 'Holy Communion'
8.	Jyothi, Jyoti	Sanskrit 'light'	'Light of Jesus Christ'
9.	Pavitra	Sanskrit 'holy'	'Holy Spirit'
10.	Rajesh	Sanskrit 'king'	The final component of the name -jesh is interpreted as Jeshua 'Jesus'.
11.	Samadanam	Sanskrit 'reconciliation', 'resolve', etc.	Peace, commonly understood as a Christian attribute
12.	Kiran	Sanskrit 'ray of light'	Vision from God
13.	Guna	Sanskrit 'virtue'	< Gunadala Matha, the name of a Catholic shrine in Vijayawada devoted to Mother Mary

Category IV

Names belonging to this category could be Telugu-sounding (e.g., the name *Rajapu*, or 'kinglike', which is a combination of *raja* (Sanskrit for 'king') and *pu* < *pole* (Dravidian for 'like'); derived from local flower names (e.g., the name *Vardhan* is derived from local flower Nandivardhan)[xv]; or are common names used by Telugu speakers (e.g., Chiranjeevi). Table 3 lists the names belonging to this category. Such Telugu names help maintain Telugu culture and are generally preferred over English names; as one participant replied, since 'Telugu Catholics are deeply rooted in their culture […] they keep local names…' (**K.V., 2024**).

Table 3: Telugu names

Serial No.	**Name**	**Derivation**	**Telugu Meaning**
1.	Rajapu	Sanskrit *raja* 'king' + *pu* < *pole* 'like'	'kinglike'
2.	Vardhan	< Nandivardhan 'a local flower name'	Name of a local flower
3.	Suvarna	Sanskrit 'gold'	A common 'pet name'
4.	Chiranjeevi	Sanskrit 'one who lives long'	A common name among Telugus
5.	Moorthy Raju	Sanskrit *moorthy* 'idol' + *raju* 'king'	A compound name consisting of two local names *moorthy* + *raju*

Category V

A significant number of names featured in the survey were those of Hindu gods and goddesses or based on Hindu customs and practices (e.g., names based on birthstones or Hindu astrology) (**Joseph, 2023: 46–47, 94–95**) (Table 4, next page). For a significant number of community members in the dataset, official (legal) names were the pre–Christian conversion names; none of the respondents used baptismal names as official names.

*Table 4: Names based on Hindu gods, goddesses, and rituals (**Smith & Narasimhachary, 1997; Lugano & Mohan, 2024**)*

S. No.	Name	Derivation and Meanings	Name Motivation
1.	Ravi	Sanskrit 'sun', 'the sun god'	'Ravi is the sun god' (**V.T., 2019**)
2.	Keshavulu	Keshav is another name for Lord Krishna, and Krishna is an avatar of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu is a manifestation of Lord Venkateshwara, a popular deity among Telugu speakers.	'Named after Lord Venkateshwara' (**V.T., 2019**)
3.	Sheshaiah	Shesha is the snake on which Lord Vishnu is depicted as lying down. In this position, one sees Lord Vishnu's avatar in the form of Lord Ranganatha. Lord Ranganatha is a popular deity in south India.	'Sheshaiah means snake, … Lord Vishnu' (**V.T., 2019**)
4.	Mahanandi	Sanskrit 'of Shiva'	'Named after Lord Shiva's vehicle "Nandi"' (**B.B., 2019**)
5.	Ramulu, Ramanna	In Hinduism, Lord Rama is perceived as an avatar of Lord Vishnu + Telugu -*anna* masculine ending.	'Lord Rama' (**K.K., 2019**)
6.	Dheeraj	Sanskrit 'patience'	'… his name starts with dh as per his birthstone' (**K.V.B., 2019**)
7.	Kondal Rayudu	Kondal Telugu 'name of a local rogue', Rayudu *rayi* + -*du* masculine ending	'Kondal Rayudu means Venkateshwara Swamy. The name refers to the famous Hindu deity at Tirumala' (**J.K.R., 2024**)
8.	Atchaiah	*achuthan* Sanskrit 'Lord Krishna' + Telugu -*aiah* 'father,' masculine ending	'Another name for Lord Venkatesh "achyuth"' (**A.A., 2024**)

Category VI

Category VI features common Indian names defined as Sanskrit-derived, but are not associated with a particular religion, region, or ethnic group. There is a three-way distinction between Hindu, Christian, and these 'neutral' Indian names. For instance, one of the study participants was given a name that had a 'neutral' status, neither perceived as Hindu nor Christian, which could therefore be considered 'an acceptable Christian name' (**K.M., 2024**). One Christian participant felt that neutral 'Indian names were okay', while 'names based on Hindu mythology and Hindu gods and goddesses were not okay' (**R.K., 2024**).

Members cited various reasons for assigning Category VI names to their children. Some were either influenced by social media or by their real-life social networks. Examples of these names include Priyanka, Akshay, Raj, and Sivaji. Common Indian names were also given because they had a neutral status. In a typical case, one respondent, who converted to Christianity after marriage, changed her name from *Brahmini* to *Mini* because *Brahmini* means 'a woman belonging to the Brahmin caste' (**Merriam-Webster, n.d.**) and this was seen as an unacceptable Christian name by her husband's family, who thought *Mini* sounded more neutral.

Christian Names

Another major category of names assigned to community members is Christian names. This section presents the types of Christian names given as well as the motivations for doing so. The stock of Christian names can be biblical, the names of saints, or epithets for saints or biblical characters. These names can also be Telugu variants of Christian names or Christian names that are English-derived (**Joseph, 2023: 80, 97–99, 103**) (Table 5).

In Telugu, the fricative sound /z/ is rendered as fricative /ʃ/ in word-initial position of names (e.g., Showr or Shour < Xavier) and as affricate /dʒ/ in the word-medial position of names (e.g., Jojappa/Jojaiah < Joseph; Moijeelu < Moses), as it does not exist in the language (**Talkpal AI, 2026**). Most male names end with either *-appa* (**Joseph, 2023: 98**) or *-ayya* ('father') (**Burrow & Emeneau, 1984: 15, 19**) (e.g., Showraiah, Showrappa). Occasionally, male names may end in the Telugu suffix *-lu* (e.g., Showrilu, Moijeelu).[xvi]

Female names end with the Dravidian nominal *-amma* ('mother', a marker of respect) (**Burrow & Emeneau, 1984: 18**) (**Joseph, 2023: 98**), e.g., Mariamma, Theklamma (Table 5). Where names have been derived by adding nominals *-amma, -appa, -ayya,* etc., the morphological process of compounding applies. Compounding can also be seen in the derivation of other kinds of names, such as Yesupadam (< yesu ('Jesus') + padam

('foot, servant') = 'servant of Jesus'). In cases where *-lu* is added to name bases, the morphological process of affixation[xvii] applies (Table 5).

Telugu words which end with consonant sounds are pronounced with vowels in word-final positions, i.e. the sound in which a word ends. (For example, in the word 'car', *r* occurs in the word-final position.) This rule is also extended to English loan words that end with consonant sounds, as they are pronounced with *-u* endings in Telugu (**Kuncham & Padya, 2016**). The non-native name *Lourdu* also follows this pronunciation rule (Table 5). Telugu variants of Christian names can be based on local church names (e.g., Showri vari Devalayam); be Telugu adaptations of saint names (e.g., Anthaiah) or Christian symbols (e.g., Sleevayya); or names of local martyrs (e.g., Teclamma) (**Joseph, 2023: 46, 96–97, 100**). They are perceived as a 'nativisation of Christianity' (**G.S., 2019**). Instances of non-native variants of Christian names (e.g., English-language variants) given are Mary, Maria, Regina (i.e., 'Mother Mary'), John, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Benjamin, and Noah.

Christian names convey strongly Christian identities and contrast with more traditional Hindu names (**Joseph, 2023: 54**). One study participant stated the reason for assigning Christian names was because 'people should know by the names of Christians that they are Christians' (**K.V., 2024**). Participants stated that their (Christian) given names were based on 'a symbol of Christianity' (**G.S., 2019**) or demonstrated devotion to a particular saint or biblical character. Additionally, Christian names function as an antithesis to Hindu religious practices.

Table 5: Telugu variants of Christian names

S. No.	Telugu Variant of Christian Name	English Variant of Christian Name	Type of Linguistic Adaptation	Derivation
1.	Showry/-i, Shourulu, Showrilu, Showraiah, Showrappa	Xavier	Phonological and morphological[xviii]	Word-initial consonant /z/ in Xavier changes to /ʃ/ + Telugu -aiah/appa/-lu ending
2.	Mariamma, Marreddy	Mary	Morphological	Mariamma < Mary + Dravidian -amma; Marreddy < back clipping of the name Mary to Ma + caste title Reddy
3.	Seceliamma/Ceciliamma	Cecily	Morphological	Cecily + Dravidian -amma

4.	Joji, Jojaiah, Jojappa	Joseph	Phonological and morphological	Word-medial fricative /z/ in Joseph changes to affricate /dʒ/ in Jojaiah/Jojappa/Joji + Telugu aiah/appa/-i ending[xix]
5.	Antonamma, Anthaiah	Feminine variant of Antony	Morphological	The Dravidian nominals amma and ayya have been added after back clipping the original name Anthony/Antony
6.	Theklamma	Tecla, Thecla	Morphological	Thecla + Dravidian -amma
7.	Yesupadam	Jesus	Morphological	The compound word comprising Yesu 'Jesus' + Sanskrit padam 'of the foot, servant', 'servant of Jesus'
8.	Lurdu/Lourdu, Lourdamma	Lourdes, referring to Mother Mary	Phonological and morphological	Lourd + Telugu -u ending; Lourd + Dravidian -amma
9.	Sleevayya	Sleeva	Morphological	Syriac sleeva 'cross' **('Saint Thomas Christian cross,' 2025**) + Telugu ayya
10.	Moijeelu	Moses	Morphological	Word-medial fricative /z/ in Moses is rendered as affricate /dʒ/ leading to the following derivation: Moij + Telugu -lu
11.	Mathiya	Mathew	Morphological	Either of the two derivations: (1) The Hebrew variant of the name is Mat t thia (**Hanks & Hodges, 2003**) (2) Math (via back clipping of Mathew) + ayya
12.	Annamma	Anne	Morphological	English Ann + -amma
13.	Theresamma	Theresa	Morphological	English Theresa + -amma

Christian-Hindu Compound Names

Even after a widespread conversion to Christianity, the Telugu-language community has maintained, to an extent, 'pre-Christian worldviews', including Hindu ones (**Taneti, 2022**). In this section, I discuss the influence of both Hindu and Christian worldviews in naming practices.

Several Christian naming conventions show the influence of both religions. In the first type, two first names, one Hindu and one Christian, are given. Instances of such names in the dataset include Lourdu Ajay and Mary Sandhya. In such naming styles, the reasons for bestowing Hindu names, as well as the types of Hindu names, are similar to the motivations and types mentioned in the previous Hindu names section, and the motivations and name types of Christian names were also similar to those discussed in the Christian names category.

A few of the first names in this subcategory function as modifier-modified pairs. For instance, the name *Mary Rani*, which combines Mary and Rani (Sanskrit for 'queen'), can be translated as 'Mary, the Queen'. Similarly, the name *Mary Suvarna* (Sanskrit for 'gold') can be translated as 'Mary House of Gold'. These are epithets or titles ascribed to 'Mother Mary' in the Catholic Church.

The second type of names reflecting both Hindu and Christian identities are names that embed caste titles or are compounded with a caste title.[xx] Instances of such names include Marreddy, Showreddy (Showr + Reddy), Bala Sunder Reddy, and Mary Naidu, etc.[xxi] According to one participant, the 'caste system is very deeply rooted in the Catholics of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states' (**C.K., 2019**), which results in such names (**Joseph, 2023: 82**). Another respondent commented that 'two names' are given to 'maintain both Hindu and Christian identities' for recent converts (**S.P., 2024**).

Conclusion

Telugu Christians are a composite of Dalit, Hindu, and Christian identities (**Taneti, 2022**). Dalits are a marginalised community within Hinduism, and the majority of Telugu Christians comprise the different subgroups of Dalits. Their conversion to Christianity can be understood as an attempt to improve their social status. Telugu society is highly stratified by the caste system, and in this system, Dalits are excluded from mainstream Hindu communities that are casteist in nature. As a result, they often imitate the practices of the dominant castes, such as Brahmins, to elevate their social status—a process referred to as Sanskritisation (**Taneti, 2022**).[xxii]

According to the dataset of Telugu Catholic names analysed, two kinds of names are given to community members, Hindu and Christian. Hindu names are mainly Sanskrit-derived, and the use of such names by community members can be seen as an act of Sanskritisation. Another motivation to use Hindu names instead of Christian ones is to avail the benefits provided by the Indian government to Dalits (see discussion in 'Hindu names'). The use of Hindu names by Telugu Catholics can thus be seen as a mechanism to achieve a positive social identity.

The Telugu variants of Christian names represent instances of colloquialisms in speech through naming. Such practices seek to create and maintain distinctions between the ingroup (e.g., Telugu Catholics) and the relevant outgroup members (e.g., non-Telugu Catholics). It can be argued that appropriating the local variants of Christian names is an instance of creating a positive social identity, as it distinguishes between the ingroup and outgroup members in a way that is advantageous to the ingroup members (i.e., this naming style creates solidarity among ingroup members, Telugu Catholics).

Furthermore, participants who saw Hindus as outgroup members preferred neutral names over names of Hindu gods and goddesses. More instances of neutral names include names with inherent Christian meanings (see Category III in 'Hindu names') vis-à-vis common Indian names with inherent Sanskrit meanings. The simultaneous use of Hindu and Christian personal names can be seen as an act of negotiating Hindu and Christian identities. In some cases, two first names are used officially, one Hindu and one Christian (see discussion in 'Christian-Hindu Compound Names'); in other cases, a Hindu name is used in public domains and a Christian name in private (see Category II, 'Hindu names').

Telugu Christians' compound Dalit, Hindu, and Christian identities (**Taneti, 2022**) is reflected in their naming styles. Within the SIT model, these styles can be understood as building positive social identities by members of low-ranking social groups as they seek membership in various social groups that contribute positively to their self-image. Within the SCT framework, a social group demonstrates consistent patterns or features that can be generalised to the entire community. This aspect of the theory's framework can be extended to a community's naming styles. Among Telugu Catholics, for instance, community members always have a choice to assign Hindu or Christian names (see 'Hindu names' and 'Christian names'). Other religious groups show similar trends. The traditional names of Kerala Syrian Christians, for instance, consist of a family name, the personal name of the father, and the individual's 'first' name, generally given during baptism (**Fenwick, 2009**).

SIT is a theoretical tool for analysing that part of one's self-perception based on membership(s) in different communities (**Tajfel & Turner,**

1986). In the event of naming, parents generally assign those names to their children that reflect the parent's identity, and, at the same time, resonate an identity that they aim for in their children (**Aldrin, 2017**). For instance, assigning a Christian name along with a caste surname can be seen as an accommodating strategy, wherein the caste surname reflects the ancestral identity of the parents and the personal, Christian name reflects the aspirations of the parents, so that the child will imbibe the qualities of the saint or the Christian virtues they are named after. The central purpose of SIT is to build a positive social identity based on ideologies which maintain intergroup differences (see 'SIT: A theoretical perspective'). While assigning names, parents often favour one kind of name over the other (e.g., Christian names vs. Hindu names, common Indian names vs. common Indian names with inherent Christian meanings, names of Hindu gods and goddesses vs. neutral names), thereby maintaining intergroup differences through naming.

The main theoretical claim that this study makes is that multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual societies often lead to the adoption of heterogeneous ideologies among that society's ingroups, such as those multi-religious ideologies taken up by the Telugu-Christian community (**Taneti, 2022**), which are reflected in their personal names.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this article appeared in the author's monograph *Proper Names of Telugu Catholics and Kerala Syrian Christians: Sociolinguistic and Historical Perspectives* (**2023, Lit Verlag**). It has been substantially updated and is reprinted here with permission.

List of Tables/Images

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Endnotes

[i] While onomastics mostly concentrates on the genesis and structure of names, as an extension of onomastics, socio-onomastics examines the pragmatic applications of names, i.e. the socio-cultural settings in which names are employed. The significance of names in the formation of social identities has recently been the focus of attention in the discipline. Such a viewpoint stresses the significance of names in day-to-day conversation, including changes in name use, the rationale for avoiding particular names, etc. This applies to the study of all name types, including first names, the focus of this study (**Ainiala & Östman, 2017: 2**).

[ii] The terms *Telugu Catholic* and *Telugu Christian* have been used synonymously in this article.

[iii] The Carnatic Mission started in the late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth century. For the Jesuits, the term *Carnatic* referred to the 'Kingdom of the Peninsula below the Ganges, the coast of Coromandel', but the Mission was not confined to the Carnatic region and covered parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh/Telangana, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. It also included a number of smaller regions under the indirect control of Mughal rulers. Most of these regions were Telugu-speaking at the time (**Kroot, 1910: 9, 12–13, 73–74**).

[iv] He was also called Tumma Rayappareddi (**Kroot, 1910: 100**).

[v] The Kamma Christians moved out of their ancestral home after converting, when family members disowned them for having embraced Christianity (**Kroot, 1910: 294**).

[vi] Many participants dropped out of the survey because they worried that I was sent by the Indian government to spy on them and that any sensitive information about names and caste they provided me might deprive them of caste-based benefits. Some also said they considered me an 'outsider' (**Joseph, 2023**).

[vii] Besides Hindu and Christian names, there were two other name types identified, unique names and western (non-English) names. Since these types of names constituted a small fraction of the dataset, they are not included in this discussion.

[viii] In this article, 'Hindu names' refers to names derived from Sanskrit.

[ix] Other studies on Telugu onomastics report similar findings regarding members of Telugu Hindu communities being assigned ancestral names (see **Shanmuganathan et al., 2021**).

[x] A study based on upper-caste Hindu names in southern Kerala makes this observation (**Joe S.S., 2024**).

[xi] The given names of participants have been used to exemplify patterns, but their full official names have been shortened to initials when they appear in citations. Participants were ensured that their full official names would not be revealed since this study is based on caste-based naming practices.

[xii] This is an epithet used to describe Jesus Christ from his birth through early teenage years.

[xiii] In Hinduism, the personal (given) name is developed from the first phonetic segment of the name that is governed by Jyotisha (**Gatrad, et al., quoted in Shanmuganathan et al., 2021: 35**). In Jyotisha or Hindu astrology, the horoscope becomes a deciding factor for assigning personal names, for example, by considering the most suitable sound segments in name-initial positions (**TOI Astrology, 2024**). In this subcategory of Telugu Catholic names, personal names are generated through Hindu rituals and practices but their connotations are Christian (**Joseph, 2023: 47**).

[xiv] See **Joseph (2020)** for further discussion on such types of names, called 'rhyming names', that constitute modern Kerala Syrian Christian names. Mesthrie (**2020**) also discusses rhyming names, a type of 'neutral' (i.e. non-religiously affiliated) name given to modern Indian–South Africans.

[xv] Traditional Telugu personal names can also be based on flora and fauna (**Shanmuganathan et al., 2021**).

[xvi] Shanmuganathan et al.'s (**2021**) study also attests the presence of this marker on Telugu male names.

[xvii] An affix is a part of a word that, when added, changes the word's meaning, form, or syntactic category. Unlike a word, it cannot stand on its own. For example, in the word *teacher*, the affix *-er* changes the meaning (from 'teach' to 'one who teaches') and the syntactic category (from verb to noun) of the base word *teach*.

[xviii] The appending of names with Dravidian nominals is seen as morphological because they are added to name bases like suffixes (e.g., Jojappa/Jojaiah < Joj + *-appa/aiah*, Mariamma < Mary + *-amma*).

[xix] The *-i* ending in the name *Joji* is similar to how diminutives or pet names are derived in names like Robbie (< Robert), Katie, Katy (< Katherine).

[xx] Family names also form a component of Telugu proper names (see **Shanmuganathan et al., 2021**). However, since the focus of this study is the personal names of Telugu Catholics, I have omitted any discussion pertaining to family names.

[xxi] In the study based on the immigrant Telugu population in Malaysia, the use of caste titles in given names functioned as indicators of ethnicity (**Shanmuganathan et al., 2021**).

[xxii] Because Dalits face discrimination in mainstream Indian societies because the practice of untouchability excludes them, there is 'statutory benefit, protection, reservation or entitlement' for the community guaranteed by the Constitution (**The Supreme Court of India, as cited in Rajagopal, 2026**). However, the constitutional benefits and privileges accorded to Dalits do not apply to Dalit Christians, as 'caste system is not recognised in Christianity'(**The High Court of Andhra Pradesh, in Rajagopal, 2026**). This was affirmed in a recent Supreme Court judgement dated 24 March 2026 (**Rajagopal, 2026**). In this context, it becomes important for the community to retain their pre-Christian conversion names.

Losing out in Land-based Greenhouse Gas Removal: A critical justice perspective on biochar

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Abstract

Biochar is an emergent technology that is currently being investigated for its greenhouse gas removal potential at scale. This provides an ideal opportunity to investigate the potential injustices that may arise with biochar production and deployment so that these can be addressed. We draw from original data collected in 2022—consisting of 37 semi-structured interviews with mostly UK-based stakeholders who have an interest or potential interest in biochar—supplemented with a document analysis. The paper uses the 'multioptic vision' model of who*,* what*, and* how *to explore the potential injustices of biochar production and deployment. A relatively small number of potential distributive injustices, with slightly more multispecies injustices, were identified. Procedural, recognition, and cosmopolitan injustices may be associated with biochar production and deployment, but these were not identified by our stakeholders or by the organisations in the document analysis.*

Keywords: biochar; greenhouse gas removal; GGR; distributional justice; multispecies justice; climate justice; climate change; carbon removal

Introduction

Alongside the reduction in the use of fossil fuels, greenhouse gas removal (GGR), sometimes known as carbon dioxide removal (CDR), has become an increasingly prominent dimension of policy discussions around climate change mitigation, including in the context of net-zero targets. GGR encompasses a wide range of technologies, including 'engineered' approaches such as direct air capture (DAC) and carbon capture and storage (CCS), the latter associated with energy production (e.g. as 'BECCS', bioenergy and CCS) and other industrial manufacturing processes. Also promising to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere are land-based GGR approaches. Somewhat distinct from their engineered counterparts, they rely on relatively large areas of rural and other semi-natural land (including transport verges) for activities such as growing trees or biofuel crops, restoring peatlands, producing feedstocks for biochar, and deploying biochar (**Jaschke & Biermann, 2022**).

However, some land-based GGR methods have engineered dimensions, making a clear-cut distinction between them difficult to uphold. For example, biochar can be produced through industrial pyrolysis methods, and rocks for rock-weathering GGR are typically derived from commercial scale quarrying. Proponents of land-based GGR argue that it has the potential to contribute to climate mitigation efforts, albeit to varying degrees. This raises the question, Can this be a *just* contribution? We are prompted to pose such a question by an increasing body of scholarship that applies a justice lens to the evaluation of climate technologies, particularly in the context of the energy sector, in which interest has focused on green energy technologies and the concept of the just transition (e.g. **McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Sovacool et al., 2017, 2021)**. However, justice perspectives are notably under-utilised within critical assessments of land-based GGR technologies (Forster et al., 2020).[i]

For example, there is a notable absence of justice considerations in media discourses **(Buck, 2013; Mclaren et al., 2016)**. Analysing the media discourses of climate engineering, which includes land-based GGR technologies, Holly Buck notes that 'the justice issue is seldom considered; even when it was present, it was rarely the dominant frame' (**2013: 176**). The reporting of biochar in UK print media illustrates this point well (**Morris et al., 2024**). As such, this paper seeks to contribute to this body of work by applying justice concepts to carbon removal as a distinct form of climate mitigation and by testing the mettle of these concepts in a land-based context, where the relationship between the human and 'more-than-human'[ii] is strongly to the fore, therefore suggesting utilisation of the novel concept of multispecies justice.

We undertake our task through the case of biochar, a relatively less familiar land-based GGR approach. Biochar is currently being investigated through a £30 million GGR 'demonstrator' programme funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a significant public investment that reveals the ongoing, experimental nature of land-based GGR approaches while simultaneously seeking to demonstrate their potential for 'scaling up'. Whilst the justice considerations of land-based GGR technologies such as biochar are often sidelined **(Buck, 2013; Morris et al., 2024)**, there is value in attempting to reveal these.

As McLaren argues, examining justice issues can 'helpfully illuminate key questions regarding the research, funding, and governance of potentially appropriate techniques for climate engineering as part of a portfolio of climate responses' (**2016: 154**). As biochar is an emerging technology, this is an ideal opportunity to investigate potential injustices that may arise from its production and deployment, so they can be addressed early. As a land-based GGR technology, biochar has a direct impact on other living and non-living entities throughout its lifecycle, especially soil, when it is deployed to the surface of rural or agricultural land. This study is among the first to consider potential multispecies injustices associated with land-based GGR technologies.

The article proceeds by firstly discussing our theoretical approach, outlining the literatures on key justice dimensions, particularly as these have been developed within the context of climate, climate change, and climate mitigation and the more-than-human. We then provide additional context on biochar as a land-based GGR technology. The multi-method approach to the production of empirical material is described before we present evidence of distributional and multispecies injustices, the two most prominent framings around biochar evident within our data. The paper concludes that addressing these injustices will be an important part of future research and policy development.

The Many Faces of Justice in the Climate Crisis

Questions of justice are key to addressing environmental problems, including the climate crisis. Several theories of justice can be used to reveal the potential injustices which may arise from climate technologies such as land-based GGRs. These are distributional justice, procedural justice, recognition justice, intergenerational justice, and cosmopolitan justice. Multispecies justice can also be considered as an additional analytical dimension.

Distributional justice focuses on the fairness of outcomes and how social goods and ills are allocated across society **(Jafino et al., 2021; Newell et**

al., 2021; von Platz, 2020). *Procedural justice* relates to the fairness and legitimacy of the process or procedures that lead to an outcome, as well as to those who make decisions and those who can participate in these processes (**Jafino et al., 2021; von Platz, 2020**). *Recognition justice* acknowledges the injustices relating to Indigenous and other marginalised groups facing social, political, and cultural discrimination **(Fraser, 2008; Fraser & Honneth, 2003**). *Intergenerational justice* recognises the rising engagement of the youth movement within climate justice in which the current generation of polluters and decision makers are held to account for failing to act on climate change (**Newell et al., 2021**). *Cosmopolitan justice* focuses on individual wellbeing as opposed to communities or nations and considers all humans, bound and protected by moral principles, as having equal moral worth regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class (**Brock, 2009; Sovacool et al., 2019**). Finally, *multispecies justice* 'aims to identify a politics for composing a common world that considers the needs and livelihoods of a diversity of human and nonhuman life' (**Jones, 2019: 485**). Multispecies justice decentres humans and instead focuses on *living* and *non-living* entities and their processes, interconnections, and interactions (**Price, 2023; Tschakert et al., 2021**). This approach to justice is said to be more inclusive and more effective in revealing the complexities of the climate crisis.

Whilst multispecies justice may be a novel approach, particularly when considering land-based GGR technologies, similar theories are being considered for further advancing energy justice research. Given the impacts of modern energy systems on the living and non-living, Sovacool et al. (**2017**) have called for energy studies to seriously engage with animal-centred, biocentric, and ecocentric theories of justice. As they argue:

> *[R]ealising the enormity of the impacts of modern energy systems upon the nonhuman world, the limited success of past efforts to mitigate and reverse this harmful trajectory, and the increasingly widespread efforts to extend and redesign modern energy systems, it is ever more urgent that energy studies engage seriously with issues of justice to nonhuman nature* (**2017: 681**).

With the allied field of energy systems taking justice seriously for both humans and more-than-humans, scholars should be considering a similar approach for land-based GGR technologies.

These various dimensions of justice all have a role to play in revealing (un)just practices around climate change and land-based GGR technologies. Drawing on them simultaneously provides 'multioptic vision', which is 'a way of seeing that takes disparate justice claims seriously without privileging any one presumptively' (**Kim, 2015: 19**). Kim (**2015: 19**) argues that multioptic vision 'entails seeing from within various

perspectives, moving from one vantage point to another, inhabiting them in turn, holding them in the mind's eye at once' (**2015: 19**). This form of vision enables multiple viewpoints to be considered simultaneously and encourages investigation of the *who, what,* and *how* of potential injustices arising from the production and deployment of biochar. A multispecies-justice dimension extends the *who, what,* and *how* to other *living* and *non-living* entities. The *who* can include animals, plants, soil, water, land, etc., and there are numerous scholars arguing that these entities are able to suffer injustices (see **Chao et al., 2022)**. Biochar has a direct impact on other living and non-living entities throughout its lifecycle and provides an ideal opportunity to be disruptive and radical in terms of justice concerns. At this juncture, it is worth considering in more detail what biochar is.

Biochar: A land-based GGR technology

Biochar is produced through pyrolysis, a process in which biomass is heated in limited oxygen. Under these conditions, the material does not fully combust but instead transforms into a stable, carbon-rich solid. Carbon from the original biomass source (such as virgin wood, agricultural or forestry residues, food, animal and human wastes, or fibres) is stored in biochar in a stable form and can remain in situ from decades to millennia (**International Biochar Initiative, 2023; Otte & Vik, 2017; Pourhashem et al., 2019; Rittl et al., 2015**).

There are several uses for biochar, although significant emphasis is placed on deployment in agricultural settings (**Schmidt & Shackley, 2016**). In agriculture, biochar's main asset for its proponents is its ability to store carbon, although its co-benefits include increased soil fertility, increasing the water holding capacity of soil, and as a soil conditioner **(Otte & Vik, 2017; Pourhashem et al., 2019; Rittl et al., 2015**).[iii] Also in an agricultural setting, biochar has been investigated as an animal feed to establish if it has the potential to improve livestock health and milk quality and to reduce ammonia emissions from livestock (**Innovative Farmers, 2020**). Biochar can be used as a peat substitute in the horticultural industry (**Carbon Gold, 2023**), and can be applied to quarries, embankments, and mines for land remediation, soil restoration, and carbon storage (**TerrAffix, 2022**).

Other uses include the application of biochar to aggregates in cement and concrete production, in road construction materials, and in the production of textiles, ceramics, and paper **(Buck, 2019; Schmidt & Shackley, 2016**). There is also the potential for carbon removal through bioenergy with biochar capture and storage (**Buck, 2019**). Due to this versatility, biochar is beginning to attract attention from scientists, policy makers, industry,

and entrepreneurs, especially as a land-based GGR technology. The estimated potential of greenhouse gas removal from biochar in the UK is 6 to 41 megatonnes of carbon dioxide ($MtCO_2$) per year, although globally it is projected to be between 1.9 and 4.8 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide ($GtCO_2$) per year (**Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering, 2018**).

Having provided additional context on biochar as a land-based GGR technology and discussed our theoretical approach outlining the literatures on key justice dimensions, we now turn our attention to our contribution. The aim of this paper is to add to the emerging body of work on justice perspectives around land-based GGR technologies. Given the existing research on the benefits of biochar, the paper uses the multioptic vision of *who, what,* and *how* to explore the often-overlooked potential injustices of biochar production and deployment in the UK.

Three questions guide the inquiry:

1) *Who* might suffer from the potential injustices associated with biochar production and deployment?

2) *What* are these potential injustices that may arise from biochar production and deployment?

3) *How* are these potential injustices arising?

The discussion now turns to how data were generated to provide answers to these questions.

Methodology

The work reported here arises from a UK-based, interdisciplinary research project on the application of biochar to agricultural land. This article presents one aspect of the social science research. Our overall objective was to explore stakeholder understandings of biochar.

We were interested in organisations and individuals with a specific interest in biochar who have made past statements and claims about biochar which were either positive, negative, or neutral. We considered these individuals and organisations as stakeholders in biochar. This diverse group consists of biochar industry representatives; biochar producers (commercial, farmer-led, and community based); a biochar pyrolysis machine manufacturer; environmental advocacy groups; research and development organisations within the agricultural sector; farming industry representatives; carbon trading companies; government departments and local authorities; and forestry organisations.

By engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, we tried to ensure that a diversity of understandings and opinions around biochar production and deployment were considered.

Data collection and selection

We identified stakeholders through a variety of approaches, listed below:

1) A social science literature review of biochar

2) An online (Google) search on the terms 'biochar and UK agriculture', and 'biochar and UK'. These search terms were used to ensure we initially identified only UK stakeholders due to the wider project's focus on carbon storage in a UK-only context. The searches were conducted on 29 September 2021

3) Reports related to 'net zero' or climate change that included biochar as a GGR approach

4) Twitter/X announcements of the publication of reports related to net zero or climate change that included biochar as a GGR approach

5) Suggestions made by other stakeholders (individuals and organisations), a method known as 'snowballing'

6) Stakeholders (individuals and organisations) who directly contacted us following national and local media coverage of the interdisciplinary demonstrator project.

In total, 94 individuals and organisations with an interest or potential interest in biochar were identified. Of these, 37 stakeholders agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview (see Table 1). Most stakeholders we interviewed were UK-based, although seven international stakeholders agreed to take part. We included these participants because of the role they could potentially play in the UK biochar landscape. Interviews lasted up to one and a half hours and were conducted online via MS Teams.

The interviews were conducted to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the claims and arguments related to biochar. Specifically, to gain insights from stakeholders regarding their expertise on biochar, its potential applications, the perceived benefits and risks, the opportunities and challenges associated with biochar feedstocks, and perspectives on the incentivisation and regulation of biochar.

Type	Number of Stakeholders
Farmer Focused	
Science / R & D	3
Representation / Advocacy	4
Provision of Goods and Services	2
Environmental	
Advocacy	2
Government (National and Local)	
National Government	4
Local Authorities	3
Biochar Producers	
Commercial	6
Farmer led	3
Community	1
Pyrolysis Machine Manufacturer	1
Forest Focused	
Tree and Woodland Management	2
Biochar Industry Representatives	
Representation / Advocacy	4
Carbon Trading	
Carbon Trading Companies	2
TOTAL	37

Table 1: *Types and the number of stakeholders who were interviewed.*

To complement our stakeholder interviews, we also conducted a document analysis. Individual websites were reviewed for any documents or reports related to biochar that had been released by an individual or organisation. The term 'biochar' was used in this search. Any document or report mentioning biochar in relation to the UK was included. Additionally, documents related to net zero that were produced by key agricultural stakeholders, such as the National Farmers Union (NFU), were included. This was to ensure we captured key arguments about other potential land-based approaches to greenhouse gas removal recommended to biochar stakeholders. A total of 36 items were identified (see Appendix 1 on this article's home page).

N.B. We *guaranteed all stakeholders interviewed their anonymity*. As such, the type of stakeholder (e.g., 'carbon trading company') and a generic respondent number (e.g., 'R13' for 'Respondent 13') are noted when interview data is presented.

Data analysis

As we began to analyse the data, it became clear from the interview data and document analysis that stakeholders were anticipating potential injustices associated with the production and deployment of biochar. Therefore, we pursued this initial finding through a thematic analysis that drew on the different dimensions of justice, as previously mentioned: distributional, procedural, recognition, cosmopolitan, and multispecies justice.

Although there are several different approaches to thematic analysis (**Clark et al., 2021; Ryan & Bernard, 2003**), we used the six-stage process developed by Braun and Clarke (**2006**) in this study. For each potential injustice we noted *what* injustice may be transpiring, *how* the injustice may be occurring, and *who* may be impacted by the injustice. In addition, we noted which stakeholders from the interviews and document analysis were identifying these potential injustices.

Potential Injustices Associated with Biochar Production and Deployment

Our analysis revealed a relatively small number of potential distributive injustices and slightly more multispecies injustices. Whilst procedural, recognition, and cosmopolitan injustices may be associated with biochar production and deployment, these were not identified by our stakeholders or by the organisations in the document analysis.

The potential injustices of biochar production and deployment are discussed in detail below, described in terms of the multioptic vision approach of *who, what* and *how.* We start with distributional injustices.

Distributional injustices

Agricultural residues

Agricultural residues include straw and corn stover and are mostly left on fields after crops are harvested. These agricultural residues currently have several uses including animal feed or bedding, incorporation into the soil for nutrient provision and soil conditioning, in-field protection of high value crops, and co-fired energy production **(Glithero et al., 2013; Groves et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2014**). Whilst these residues may appear to be a 'waste' product and are sometimes deliberately identified as such, they do have several uses and a monetary value.

Who is willing and able to pay the most money for agricultural residues will determine who wins and loses access to these 'waste' products as a feedstock for biochar production. Potential economic tensions due to competition over agricultural residues may lead to different injustices occurring. Three different scenarios were identified.

In the first scenario, the *who* were arable farmers; the *how* was 'afford to pay for agricultural residues'; and the *what* was 'loss of nutrients to soil from the removal of straw for biochar production'. (As straw decomposes, nutrients return to the soil.) For arable farmers, straw from cereal crops is an important nutrient resource **(Glithero et al., 2013; Groves et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2014**). A farmer-focused (in terms of representation and advocacy) stakeholder ('R13') we interviewed argued,

> *'Actually, farmers should be going, hang on a minute, if this [straw] stuff's taken away, it has nutrient value which I'm going to lose from my land, so I should be thinking, at the very least, of not removing it from the field until I'm getting more [money] than its nutrient value'* (**R13, interview, 2022**).

The second scenario arises from the use of straw for animals. The *who* of this potential distributive injustice were 'livestock farmers'; the *how* was 'affording agricultural residues', and the *what* was 'loss of animal feed and bedding'. In this scenario, a farmer-focused (in terms of provision of goods and services) stakeholder ('R28') described how 'waste products at the moment may be […] going into animal feed, so again, there's going to be an economic tension there because […] animals want feed' and straw could potentially become unaffordable for livestock farmers (**R28, interview, 2022)**.

In the third and final scenario, the potential *how* of the distributive injustice arises from 'competition for agricultural residues between differing GGR approaches', which results in the *who* of 'biochar producers' facing the *what* of 'losing out on purchasing biomass'. The Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering describes how biochar could be produced from waste biomass 'although again there is competition for use of this waste from various GGR methods' (**2018: 36**). During an interview, a carbon-trading stakeholder identified one GGR technology that biochar could potentially be in competition with for biomass: bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS). They explained, 'Depending on the feedstock that you would use that there was a kind of clear competition upstream […] with BECCS' (**R33, interview, 2022)**.

The first and second scenarios could indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of agricultural residues to the farming community. In scenario three, potential competition between 'wastes' are identified. Not being specific enough about the types of wastes used for biochar production, in particular agricultural residues, may create increased competition and therefore economic injustice for some types of farmer. A lack of clarity around the existing uses of agricultural residues may result in those less versed in agriculture to be unaware of their importance to the agricultural community.

Biochar and affordability

Given that biochar is promoted as a land-based GGR technology with a significant emphasis on deployment in agricultural settings, those who are being asked to use it are either most likely to be excluded due to cost or are expected to carry the burden of its deployment. Interest in deploying biochar to agricultural land is largely driven by scientists and scientific organisations, biochar entrepreneurs, carbon trading companies, and some policy actors, who frame it as a promising climate mitigation tool. In the interviews conducted, there was an acknowledgement that the *what* of biochar being unaffordable for the *who* of many farmers was due to the *how* of biochar's (current) excessive cost. A farmer-focused (in terms of representation and advocacy) stakeholder observed that 'the problem is the price of biochar is high at the moment, and farmers don't have a lot of disposable income' (**R30, interview, 2022)**. Typically, biochar costs between £400 and £1,000 per tonne wholesale (**Biochar Demonstrator, n.d.**). Additionally, the documentary analysis indicated that industry and scientific organisations also perceived cost as one of the limiting factors in the application of biochar. This high cost was noted by the agri-tech organisation CIEL (**2021**), and The IPCC noted 'constraints on biochar adoption include: the high cost' (**2019: 399**). Similarly, the British Society of Soil Science argued, '[F]or the UK, the efficacy and GHG [greenhouse

gas] removal potential of biochar is limited by domestic biomass resource and prohibitively high costs' (**2021: 4**). Given that organisations such as these evaluate GGR technologies for their viability, the fact that cost has been identified as problematic should not be overlooked.

Biochar was not only viewed as costly to purchase; the equipment required to produce it was also considered prohibitively expensive. In this context, the *what* of pyrolysis machines being unaffordable to the *who* of many farmers was again linked to the *how* of excessive cost. Interviewees described a market in which the available machines were poorly matched to their needs: as one biochar producer (community) stakeholder explained, the options were 'all pretty much large-scale industrial units or really tiny batch retort processes' **(R8, interview, 2022)**. This mattered because the large units were far beyond the financial reach of most producers, while the very small units, although physically compact, did not offer the capacity required for meaningful or efficient biochar production. A farmer-led, small-scale biochar producer and stakeholder highlighted the financial barrier directly, stating, 'I've looked at getting help […] because the prices of the materials are just horrendous. It's probably about four thousand pounds for one of our units to buy the materials for' (**R25, interview, 2022)**.

Taken together, these issues show how cost and the limited suitability of available technologies restrict access to biochar production. When this is combined with the potential loss of agricultural residues that hold value beyond biochar, the high cost of purchasing biochar itself, and the expense of acquiring pyrolysis equipment, the result is a clear distributional injustice for agricultural communities. We now turn to potential multispecies injustices.

Multispecies injustices

Potential multispecies injustices were identified by stakeholders and in the document analysis; these may potentially occur to other-than-human living and non-living entities due to biochar production and deployment.

Soil and micro-biodiversity

The significance of soil to overall environmental health is now being recognised (**Krzywoszynska, 2019; Lyons, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017**). As an acknowledgment of its importance, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) declared 2015 the 'International Year of Soils'. Soils are not purely natural phenomena; their structures are manipulated via human labour (**Scoones, 2015**). Often, soil has been mistreated. According to the FAO, globally, '33 percent of soil is moderately to highly degraded due to erosion, nutrient depletion, acidification, salinization, compaction and chemical pollution' (**2015: 4**).

The application of biochar to soil and the potential injustices that may arise to both soil and its inhabitants was acknowledged by interviewees.

Many respondents acknowledged that the *what* of 'suffering harm' by the *who* of 'rhizosphere inhabitants' (such as micro-organisms, earthworms, nematodes and microarthropods), may be due to the *how* of 'biochar not naturally occurring in soils'. Once biochar is added, it cannot be removed, and this irreversibility could have far-reaching consequences. A government stakeholder stated they were

> *…thinking about micro-biodiversity to begin with […] [I]f you put material into an environment that's not from that environment originally then what are you doing to the microbial diversity of that area? You're affecting it in some way* (**R6, interview, 2022**).

Potential issues for biodiversity following biochar application to soil were also addressed by a farmer-focused (in terms of representation and advocacy) stakeholder, who explained,

> *[The] critical thing really is to demonstrate that this is not harmful in terms of the potential impact on the rhizosphere. You wouldn't want to be spreading biochar that killed earthworms to put it bluntly. But it's not just the earthworms, it will be all sorts of soil invertebrates, and other important soil microorganisms and so on* (**R13, interview, 2022**).

The second potential soil injustice related to the addition of biochar is the possibility of soil becoming contaminated. A farmer-focused (in terms of representation and advocacy) stakeholder stated how 'poorly made biochar could potentially be a source of contaminants' (**R13, interview, 2022**). Even the high temperatures used during the pyrolysis process will not destroy the toxic chemicals and heavy metals found in some feedstocks. Thus, if the *how* of 'low-quality feedstock containing toxic chemicals or heavy metals being turned into biochar' is applied to the *who* of 'soils' this may result in the *what* of 'contamination'. A (farmer-led) biochar producer pointed to the inconsistent quality of biochar production, explaining, 'There's going to be a lot of biochar about, and it's going to be [of] different qualities. There's a real danger that inappropriate stuff could be put into agricultural soils or spread on peoples' gardens' (**R15, interview, 2022**).

Some stakeholders view the soil itself, as having the capacity to suffer potential injustices. It is important to ensure these injustices do not arise, because if they do, there is the very real threat of the loss of a functioning soil ecosystem **(Ferguson and Northern Rivers Landed Histories Research Group, 2016; Krzywoszynska, 2019)**. In an agricultural setting, this ultimately impacts food crops.

Atmospheric injustices

Biochar is presented as a land-based GGR technology with the potential to address climate change, but there are possible injustices for the *who* of 'the atmosphere' that may arise from biochar production and deployment, which may further contribute to the *what* of 'a warming climate'.

The atmosphere is considered one of the global commons, along with oceans and the seabed, Antarctica, and outer space (**Nakicenovic et al., 2016; Soroos, 1998; Standing, 2019**). Commons are shared resources where each actor has an equal interest and right of access. However, the atmosphere has been enclosed, encroached, commodified, and commercialised through fossil fuel–driven industrialisation (**Palmer & Jackson, 2023; Shiva, 2016; Standing, 2019**). As a result, gases in the atmosphere are increasing (particularly carbon dioxide) resulting in climate change.

Transportation of organic residues

The first potential atmosphere-related injustice concerns the transportation of organic materials—such as straw, waste wood, and green waste—to be turned into biochar. In this case, the *what* is the movement of bulky, low-value organic materials leading to increased carbon emissions; the *how* is the need to transport them over long distances for commercial biochar production; and the *who* is the atmosphere exposed to the additional carbon emissions generated by this transport. Although these materials are relatively light, they are high-volume, meaning that transporting even modest quantities requires multiple journeys or large vehicles. This increases fuel use and associated emissions, potentially undermining the climate benefits that biochar is intended to deliver. A farmer-focused (in terms of provision of goods and services) stakeholder responded:

> *[L]ogic and gut feeling says we need to be producing them [feedstocks] here [in the UK] because it's going to be a low-value, light product. It's not heavy. It's going to be very high-volume. So, you've got transport issues. […] But I certainly think if we start carting it around the world, that's defeating the whole idea of the gains [from biochar]* (**R28, interview, 2022**).

This perspective underscores how the logistical realities of transporting bulky organic materials can generate additional emissions, thereby diminishing the environmental gains associated with biochar. As such, the movement of organic materials for biochar production presents a potential atmosphere-related injustice within emerging biochar systems.

Biochar-production emissions

The second potential atmosphere-related injustice concerns the emissions released during the biochar-production process itself. Here, the *what* is the amount of carbon emitted during pyrolysis; the *how* is the energy-intensive nature of biochar production; and the *who* is the atmosphere, which absorbs these emissions and therefore determines whether biochar delivers a net climate benefit. A farmer-focused (in terms of provision of goods and services) stakeholder argued:

> *The production of biochar itself is technically quite difficult…. [P]robably […] the biggest issue is the overall emissions associated with production of biochar. [...] [I]t's one thing to talk about its benefits […] in terms of reducing emissions. But if its [carbon] footprint […] is as great as its benefits […] then clearly it has no benefit* (**R18, interview, 2022**).

This concern is echoed in the wider scientific commentary. As the British Society of Soil Science notes:

> *It is possible that in some circumstances the natural SOC [soil organic carbon] store can be augmented to some extent through use of basalt minerals or biochar, which offer potential for longer term inorganic or organic C [carbon] storage—but the whole life cycle C [carbon] costs of such techniques need to be considered with care before genuine sequestration benefit can be claimed* (**2021: 6**).

Together, these perspectives highlight that if the emissions produced during pyrolysis approach or exceed the carbon stored in the resulting biochar, the climate benefits of the technology may be negated. This raises the possibility of an atmosphere-related injustice if biochar systems inadvertently contribute to, rather than mitigate, carbon emissions.

Decrease of surface reflexivity

The third potential atmosphere-related injustice concerns the effect of biochar on soil colour. In this case, the *what* is the darkening of soil surfaces after biochar is applied; the *how* is the reduction in surface albedo caused by the black colour of biochar; and the *who* is the atmosphere, which absorbs the additional heat retained by darker soils. When soil becomes darker, it reflects less sunlight and absorbs more heat, potentially counteracting some of the climate mitigation benefits attributed to biochar. The IPCC notes that the application 'of biochar to cultivated soils can darken the surface and reduce its mitigation potential via decreases in surface albedo' (**2019: 193**). (Albedo is the 'measure of the percentage of sunlight that a surface reflects away') (**NASA, n.d.**). Environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) Biofuelwatch

similarly argues that biochar 'darkens soils, reducing albedo, which could undermine proclaimed climate benefits' (**2020: 5**). An environmental advocacy stakeholder participating in our study also mentioned the potential impact on albedo, explaining:

> *[B]iochar is black carbon. […] One of the problems that's been identified is that if you put black stuff in the soil, the soil gets hotter because black absorbs heat. And that's something that hasn't been really explored well enough* (**R5, interview, 2022**).

If the additional heat absorbed by darkened soils offsets some of the carbon storage benefits attributed to biochar, the overall climate mitigation potential of the technology may be reduced. In such circumstances, the atmosphere bears the burden of this unintended warming effect, giving rise to a potential atmosphere-related injustice.

All three of these potential atmosphere injustices related to biochar contribute to climate change in one form or another. GGR technologies, including (but not limited to) biochar, have been identified as contributing to the phenomenon of 'mitigation deterrence'. Of McLaren's (**2020**) typology of mitigation deterrence, the potential injustices identified with biochar and the atmosphere tie in with the typology of 'rebounds'. With 'rebounds', the unintended consequences associated with GGR technologies may result in additional greenhouse gas emissions. In summary, biochar could have the potential to further damage the atmosphere.

Consequently, several multispecies justice concerns surrounding soil and the atmosphere were raised by study participants. It is worthwhile to remember that 'human agency is distributed through and made possible by the non-human world' (**Ferguson and Northern Rivers Landed Histories Research Group, 2016: 965**). Therefore, multispecies justice concerns need to be taken seriously.

Discussion

Proponents of GGR technologies often frame them as techno-fixes required to save the planet from impending climate catastrophe (**Celermajer et al., 2024; McLaren, 2016; Mclaren et al., 2016**). These innovations typically originate in universities, hi-tech laboratories of large organisations and technology start-ups based in the global north, or in the emerging economies of China, Brazil, or India (**Scoones et al., 2015**). Once a technological innovation is considered viable, the power to frame narratives surrounding it lies largely with technology experts, and consequently its social implications tend to be downplayed. In addition,

without adequate governance frameworks for GGR technologies, scientific research and intellectual-property acquisition dominate innovation and deployment **(Oldham et al., 2014**), which means that justice considerations are often sidelined (**McLaren, 2016; Sovacool et al., 2017**).

The diverse cohort of stakeholders we interviewed and documents we analysed identified several actors (both human and more-than-human) that could potentially suffer injustices, which suggests that issues of justice around biochar production and deployment should be, and are being, considered. Many of these injustices were not only identified by environmental advocacy stakeholders but also by scientific organisations and biochar producers. The unsettled nature of the biochar landscape could provide the opportunity for some of these potential injustices to be addressed in advance of the wider use of biochar being pervasively deployed as a GGR approach. Biochar producers themselves are key to ensuring biochar production and deployment is as just as possible.

However, if we are to take seriously the very real threat of system collapse caused by the climate crisis, justice cannot have an anthropocentric focus. Other living and non-living entities need to be considered if the climate crisis is to be tackled effectively. Land-based GGR technologies such as biochar are bringing the relationships between humans and more-than-humans to the fore, calling for a more diverse understanding of justice (**Newell et al., 2021**). Other living, and even non-living, entities deserve justice as well, despite the prevalent ideology of human exceptionalism (**Winter & Schlosberg, 2023**).

By using the multioptic vision of *who, what,* and *how* to explore the potential injustices of biochar production and deployment in the UK, multiple viewpoints around justice have been considered as a dimension of analysis. The use of multispecies justice in this study has enabled perspectives on more-than-human concerns to be considered that would otherwise be overlooked.

Procedural, recognition, and cosmopolitan injustices may be associated with biochar production and deployment, but these were not identified in large enough numbers by the stakeholders in our interviews or by the organisations in our document analysis to make an impact within our data. As biochar is an emerging GGR technology, its production and deployment are restricted to stakeholders with specialist expertise, which may have had an impact on the number and types of injustices identified. Given the significant emphasis on biochar deployment in agricultural settings, further collaborative research conducted with farmers and members of rural communities could help address the omission of possible injustices.

Finally, various scholars have argued that the current movement for climate justice is insufficient for addressing the climate crisis (**Celermajer et al., 2021; Chao, 2021; Tschakert, 2020; Tschakert et al., 2021**). To assist in transforming climate justice, Newell et al. (**2021**) propose three points of action:

1) Open up climate politics and policy to a broader range of actors and voices, especially those most affected by climate injustice.

2) Deepen climate justice by ensuring just responses to climate-related impacts on people and nature, and by addressing the structural drivers of vulnerability.

3) Transform governance by improving democratic access, strengthening representation of excluded voices, and opening up decision-making and access to justice in climate policy.

If climate justice is to be transformed in this manner, there needs to be an openness to the idea that the *who* which suffers injustices can be human or more-than-human. This is especially pertinent for land-based GGR technologies such as biochar, where the more-than-human is affected throughout the technology's entire lifecycle. As we have shown, by using multispecies justice as a dimension of analysis, it is possible to include the more-than-human in considerations of potential injustices around biochar production and deployment.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the emerging body of work on justice perspectives around land-based GGR technologies. To achieve this aim, we applied justice concepts to carbon removal as a distinct form of climate mitigation and tested the mettle of these concepts in a land-based context, where the relationship between the human and more-than-human comes strongly to the fore, therefore requiring the use of the novel concept of multispecies justice.

Whilst proponents of land-based GGR technologies make the case for their potential contributions to climate mitigation efforts, it would be unwise to accept these technologies unequivocally. Using the approach of 'multioptic vision', we have explored the potential injustices of biochar production and deployment in the UK, revealing potential distributive and multispecies injustices in the process.

We have shown that key stakeholders in biochar are aware of (at least some of) these potential injustices. These potential injustices should be addressed whilst biochar production and deployment are still nascent to

ensure that all concerned voices can contribute to it being a *just* land-based GGR technology. There is an opportunity to open up debate on biochar, considering a full range of perspectives from biochar stakeholders and thus providing an opportunity for procedural justice to be enacted.

Further research with other GGR technologies is needed to establish other potential more-than-human injustices. The urgent need to address the climate crisis requires all potential tools at our disposal, including GGR technologies such as biochar. However, these tools need to be considered under terms of *justice* for both humans and more-than-humans.

Finally, it is also important to note that this study did not involve direct interviews with farmers about their own experiences or perspectives on biochar. Instead, we interviewed representatives from the wider agricultural sector, who contributed insights based on their organisational and professional roles. While these stakeholders identified several potential distributional injustices for parts of the farming community, their views are not a substitute for the perspectives of farmers whose land may be used for biochar deployment. This remains an important area for further research.

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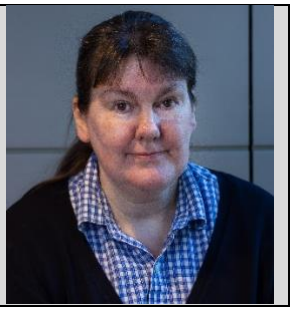

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Endnotes

[i] We acknowledge the critique within emerging social science literature on climate change that focuses on the risks of 'mitigation deterrence', that is, delays in reducing greenhouse gas emissions arising from the deployment of any form of GGR technology. These include **Carton et al., 2023; Markusson et al., 2022; McLaren et al., 2023; Price et al., 2024a** .

[ii] The term *non-human* is still widely used in the social sciences and humanities, but many scholars are turning towards using *more-than-human* instead since it pushes against binaries such as nature and culture (**Price and Chao, 2023**). We define the more-than-human as 'a holistic approach to acknowledge the intrinsic value of, and network of interdependencies between, all living and non-living things across all time' (**Price et al., 2024b**).

[iii] Soil fertility is the ability of soil to sustain plant growth and optimise crop yield through nutrient supply. A soil conditioner improves soil structure and texture but does not usually increase soil fertility.

Appendix 1

The 36 items identified in the document analysis include names of stakeholders, document details, document links, and how the documents were obtained.

Name of stakeholder	**Document and date published**	**Document link**	**Document Obtained From**
Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)	'Research Review 94: A high-level scoping review. Farming, greenhouse gas emissions and carbon storage: cereals and oilseeds' (November 2020)	https://projectblue.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/Research%20Papers/Cereals%20and%20Oilseed/2020/RR94%20-%20final%20report.pdf	Website
Biofuelwatch	'What we have learned about biochar since Biofuelwatch 2011 report was published' (January 2020)	https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/biochar-briefing-2020.pdf	Website
Biofuelwatch	'Biochar: A cause for concern?' (23 July 2013)	https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/biochar-ecologist-article-2013/	Website

Biofuelwatch	'Biochar: Black Gold or Just Another Snake Oil Scheme?' (18 September 2013)	https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/biochar-earthislandjournal-article/	Website
Biofuelwatch	'Biochar: A Critical Review of Science and Policy' (November 2011)	http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/files/Biochar-Report3.pdf	Website
CIEL	'Net Zero Carbon and UK Livestock' (October 2020)	https://ukagritechcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CIEL-Net-Zero-Carbon-UK-Livestock-FINAL-interactive-revised-May-2021.pdf	Website
Innovative Farmers	'Field lab: BioRich' (February 2020)	https://innovativefarmers.org/media/dvdhpub1/biochar-if-final-report-biorich-february-2020-pdf-1.pdf	Website
Innovation for Agriculture	'Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions at Farm Level' (January 2022)	https://vm-01-crm02.altido.com/clients/innovationforagriculture-d3eb0808ff1c2b63/uploads/documents/website-resource/the-go-to-guide-for-reducing-on-farm-ghg-emissions-resource-145.pdf	Website
National Farmers Union (NFU)	'Achieving Net Zero: Farming's 2040 Goal' (September 2019)	https://www.nfuonline.com/media/jq1b2nx5/achieving-net-zero-farming-s-2040-goal.pdf	Website

NFU	'Our Journey to Net Zero: Farming's 2040 Goal' (October 2021)	https://www.nfuonline.com/media/rwzkb3fc/our-journey-to-net-zero-2021.pdf	Website
NFU	'Net Zero Carbon and Agriculture: A Guide for Local Authorities' (February 2021)	https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Net-Zero-and-agriculture-A-guide-for-local-authorities.pdf	Website
Nature Friendly Farming Network	'Rethink Farming: A Practical Guide for Farming, Nature and Climate' (October 2021)	https://www.nffn.org.uk/assets/farm_practices_reports/nffn-rethink-farming-report_digital-final-release-2.pdf	Website
Nature Friendly Farming Network	'Net Zero Carbon in the UK Farming Sector: A Practical Guide' (October 2019)	https://www.farmingfornature.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NetZeroFarmingSectorFinal2.pdf	Website
Green Alliance	'Cutting the Climate Impact of Land Use' (April 2019)	https://green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Cutting_climate_impact_of_land_use.pdf	Website
Green Alliance	'The opportunities of agri-carbon markets: policy and practice' (January 2022)	https://green-alliance.org.uk/resources/The_opportunities_of_agri-carbon_markets.pdf	Website

World Wildlife Fund (WWF)	'Keeping it cool: How the UK can end its contribution to climate change' (November 2018)	https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-11/NetZeroReportART.pdf	Website
Farming Connect	'Biochar for climate change: Is it a viable strategy?' (27 August 2020)	Biochar for climate change: Is it a viable strategy	Website
Committee on Climate Change (CCC)	'Land use: Policies for a net zero UK' (January 2020)	https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-policies-for-a-net-zero-uk/	Website
Houses of Parliament Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology	'Biochar POSTNote' (July 2010)	https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-358/POST-PN-358.pdf	Website
The James Hutton Institute	'Climate-positive Farming Reviews: A review of pyrolysis and biochar as climate-positive biomass technologies for the Scottish	https://www.hutton.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/publications/ClimPosReview-Biochar-Msika2020.pdf	Website

	Uplands' (December 2020)		
The Royal Society	'Geoengineering the climate: science, governance and uncertainty' (September 2009)	https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2009/geoengineering-climate/	Website
The Royal Society	'Greenhouse gas removal' (September 2018)	https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/greenhouse-gas-removal/	Website
University College London (UCL)	'Towards Net Zero in UK Agriculture' (April 2021)	https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/sites/bartlett/files/towards-net-zero-in-uk-agriculture.pdf	Website
UK Biochar Research Centre	'An assessment of the benefits and issues associated with the application of biochar to soil' (February 2011)	https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/an-assessment-of-the-benefits-and-issues-associated-with-the-appl	Website
UK Biochar Research Centre	'Biochar in growing media: A sustainability and feasibility assessment' (May 2013)	https://www.biochar.ac.uk/abstract.php?id=68	Website

British Society of Soil Science	'Science Note: Soil Carbon' (October 2021)	https://soils.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/BSSS_Science-Note_Soil-Carbon_Final_May22_75YRS_DIGITAL.pdf	Website
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)	'Climate Change and Land: An IPCC Special Report' (2019)	https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/	Website
European Academies Science Advisory Council	'Negative emission technologies: What role in meeting Paris Agreement targets?' (February 2018)	https://easac.eu/fileadmin/PDF_s/reports_statements/Negative_Carbon/EASAC_Report_on_Negative_Emission_Technologies.pdf	Website
Royal Horticultural Society (RHS)	'Biochar' (2021)	https://www.rhs.org.uk/soil-composts-mulches/biochar	Website
TerrAffix	TerrAffix website (accessed January 2022)	https://terraffix.co.uk/	Website
SoilFixer	SoilFixer website (accessed January 2022)	https://www.soilfixer.co.uk/	Website
Carbon Gold	Carbon Gold website (accessed January 2022)	https://www.carbongold.com/	Website

Business Wales	Welsh Biochar Report (December 2017)	EIP Biochar Report - Executive Summary	Website
Biochar Wales (no longer in operation)	Biochar Wales (January 2022)	Website no longer available	Website
The Future Forest Company	The Future Forest Company (January 2022)	The company is no longer focusing on biochar, and as such the link no longer available.	Website
Bartlett Tree Experts	Biochar Soil Amendment: Frequently Asked Questions (n.d.)	https://www.bartlett.com/dynamic/pdf/technical-reports/BiocharFAQs.pdf	Website

Autoethnography: An apicultural journey with beekeepers and among honeybees

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Abstract

Understood as a form of reflexivity, autoethnography (AE) is a conscious practice of self-reflective evaluation within research. In this Critical Reflection, beekeepers, honeybees and myself (a novice PhD researcher and fellow beekeeper) intermingle in the exploration of various existential viewpoints and meanings that may have wider apicultural significance. Without forcing artificial generalisations, I consider whether, and how, an apiary of hives and a beekeeper's story intersect with local environmental and wider planetary challenges within the organic research process. At this stage of the iterative journey, I ask, 'What value could AE offer my research?' I reflexively grapple with the challenges of being an insider, developing a deeper research subjectivity and coping with the possibility of a fractured future for all lifeforms sharing many precarious ecologies at present. I argue that exploring the agency of honeybees and other lifeforms, whatever their distinct or shared evolutionary path, is a valid avenue of academic inquiry capable of embracing inconclusive findings that can be recorded, audited, and analysed. Like other academic methodologies of reflexive praxis, AE has the potential to become a self-reflective learning experience that fully acknowledges the evolving historical and social power dynamics embodied by both the researcher and research participant. In many respects, I lean into the realisation that there has been and will be multiple surprises along this particular road of inquiry.

Keywords: autoethnography; AE; reflexivity; apiculture; embodied knowledge

Introduction

I grew up beside a canal. As a boy, during the summer months I caught slippery eels, roach and perch and returned them to the water. I fed the swans all year round. Sometimes barges passed by, and occasionally, homemade rafts floated precariously against an eastern headwind with urban Huckleberry Finns aboard. As an adolescent, thoughts and feelings bubbled up inside me; I imagined the reflective depths of the water empathised with and talked back to me during evening walks with our dog. The engineered water course and all it supported became a living presence that was both a physical companion and discursive neighbour.

Having been introduced to Heraclitus (544–483 BCE) in my first undergraduate year, I was most taken with the wisdom of the philosopher's words, 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he is not the same man' (**Stern, 1991: 580**). More than forty years later, reflecting upon the first completed year of my PhD was akin to standing in a river of fast-flowing thoughts and feelings, while attempting to offer a simultaneous articulation of my unfolding and challenging research journey. I found myself wondering things like: *What theoretical frameworks are making sense to me? Is the concept of intersubjectivity or relationality suited to my area of sociological inquiry into apiculture*—the science and culture of beekeeping—*and the embodied entanglements of beekeepers and honeybees within it?* These questions touch on a growing tension with which I continued to grapple, eagerly searching for my theoretical grounding within a fluid process of inquiry wherein the slippery research question and I, the experienced beekeeper and novice researcher, will naturally evolve as the study inevitably runs its undulating course.

The fellow members of my three-person graduate research committee (GRC) suggested autoethnography as a companion on my journey, if I was willing to take on the extra journalling work it would necessitate. My supervisor explained that AE was a contemporaneous recording of feelings, events and encounters that could be revisited later when data analysis was underway'. Through my immersion in a variety of research moments, I would be challenged to source and show evidence from literature, online surveys, semi-structured interviews with beekeepers, and my own personal reflections within my academic journey. Merely relying on my ten years of practicing beekeeping to tell the reader what matters would be insufficient to the task. Following my reading of many AE-related articles, I wished to make sense of this key question: *What value and challenges could AE offer my research?* I have identified a range of relevant themes,

which I cover in the following sections, that attempt to plot a path of critical understanding. Related questions include:

- *What are the changing faces of autoethnography?*
- *How might different ways of knowing impact and change the social positionality of the research(er), if at all?*
- *How is power and agency experienced and negotiated for both interviewee and interviewer?*
- *How might the practice, process and product of AE be critiqued and evaluated?*

Shifting Reflexivities

Sikes (**2022**) defines autoethnography as an existential practice, one 'that offers a means of interrogating what being may involve as we live through particular contextualised experiences' (**2022: 24**). This I understand to mean examining, at appropriate times, how my previous experiences and values are shaping the thoughts, feelings and anxieties that inform the choices I make within the research process and its cultural context. Such an approach, according to Koopman et al. (**2020**), facilitates reflexivity, which for Berger (**2015**) demands an honest appraisal of how the researcher engages in knowledge creation while being attentive to personal biases and without diminishing or sidelining the primary data subjects. Far from being a self-indulgent exercise, Pillow proposes 'reflexivities of discomfort' (**2003: 187**), a call to engage in ethnographic research with a self-critical approach and a humility that upholds the integrity and ethical challenges of the collaborative research process (for example, acknowledging the limitations of language). Implicit to this position is the question of whether research is done 'to' or 'with' others and what such methodological approaches might look like (**Pillow, 2003: 185**). Going beyond the surface to profile the complex meanings of what lies beneath may inevitably reveal what Muncey calls 'disjunctions' of understandings and interpretations that might otherwise be (as they were in my case) 'missed-understandings', all of which legitimately deserve appropriate inclusion in storytelling and analysis (**Muncey 2005: 84**).

According to Pelias, this is no research country for 'ethnographic tourists' who wish to merely see the epistemological sights from a distance and acquire some digitally archived findings (**2003: 371**). For instance, Brown (**2019**) ethnographically researches a history of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster by officially visiting the present-day Exclusion Zone. Here, Brown, embodying the literal and metaphorical research journey, becomes a

'reflection-in-action' (**Duncan, 2004: 32**) who recognises and is open to encountering multiple viewpoints and different forms of knowledge from, for example, archival records, biologists, and landscape samples, as well as anecdotal evidence, such as the story of a 98-year-old woman resident whose nearby village was not evacuated after the meltdown. Unlike a neutral or detached observer, this is the proactive work of 'the insider' (**2004: 30**) who 'consciously interrogates the theories, assumptions, values and emotions they bring to the research' (**Collins & McNulty, 2020: 204**).

Official exclusion zones are intended to restrict access. However, the airborne contamination of such sites is borderless. Brown's research reached out to me with the shocking reality of lives lost and bodies contaminated, and the realisation that Brown potentially faced great danger and health risk in order to conduct it. Ethnographic roles are not fixed, as continual reflection is influenced and impacted by the historical and social contexts within which the research is being enacted (**Bruskin, 2019**), even though the search for meaning can be inconclusive, resulting in an experience of 'fractured reflexivity' (**Burkitt, 2015: 470**).

Many Ways of Knowing

Ethnographic research that is subject-focussed, context-specific and exploratory also requires in-depth analysis solidly underpinned by theoretical and methodological buoyancy (**Wall, 2006**). Akehurst & Scott argue that such autoethnographic roles 'cannot be acted with rational detachment, but rather must be lived, felt and embodied' (**2023: 436**). Unlike empirical positivism, which seeks out more solid terrain, the ethnographic research raft needs to be able to launch and travel in untested open waters. However, autoethnography invites the practitioner to become more sensitive to how personal identity and theoretical choices enable and constrain the 'nonlinear' and 'conscious effort to stand with instability' (**Rambo, 2011: 541**).

Paradoxically, 'both distance and involvement' are needed, demanding the emotional intelligence to meet the challenge of finding a balance between what the researcher discloses and what remains private (**Anteby, 2023: 1283**). In and of itself, the researcher's investment potentially becomes a 'relational, dialogic and emotional' resource of reflective data (**Burkitt, 2012: 471**), though 'experiences of emotive dissonance' may arise when access to the field of inquiry is temporarily denied or disrupted (**Bergman & Wettergren, 2015: 701**). The research road travelled potentially forms and re-forms the practitioner, who asks, 'Why? What if and So what?'

(**Gabriel, 2015: 334**). These are no small research demands, potentially eliciting feelings of risk and exposure at once daunting and enticing.

Deciding to undertake my PhD thesis was the result of much personal reflection and consultation with beekeepers and academics, including those known to me who had already completed a similar journey. A core challenge would be to find my personal voice and claim my distinctive authority within the field of apiculture. Engaging with my GRC prompted a further question: *How can my inner processes and reflections be articulated and recorded as a socio-cultural critique of both my apicultural and academic journeys?* It is important to view these as complementary learning paths: intertwining, mutually influencing thinking, learning and writing. I would have to assess whether and where an apiary (i.e., the physical location where beehives are placed) and a beekeeper's story intersect with wider planetary challenges within the organic research process (**Conrad, 2016**) without forcing artificial generalisations (**Ghobrial, 2019**).

The respective agency of both the honeybee and the beekeeper combined with the dynamics of the apiary and the climatic environment are 'co-constituted inside dense webs of lively exchanges' (**van Dooren et al., 2016: 14**) that require equal ethical attention to identify and acknowledge the varied ways each is known and understood. It strikes me that there is much for a researcher to discover, theorise, decipher and analyse here. One important underlying challenge is to humbly recognise the active roles of all the intermingling elements (**Cornips, 2024**) and co-influencing materialities (**Gibas et al., 2011**). Will this involve a voluntary and intentional process of unlearning to learn new perceptions and behaviours?

Mortan (**2009**) argues that to counter the objectification of nature and the corresponding detached positionality of humans, a more inclusive ecocentrism could motivate a political repositioning based on the idea that the 'only ethical option is to muck in' (**Morton, 2019: 13**). To re-negotiate power imbalances on the basis that all lifeforms have many shared ecologies (**Abram, 2010**) will first require, at a minimum, the dissolution and reframing of the normative divide between 'natural' and 'human' history (**Chakrabarty, 2009: 201**).

Balancing Power and Agency

Caven (**2012**) maintains that prior histories and social roles inevitably impact both interviewee and interviewer, with the former more in command, though not exclusively, of how the relationship develops and

what data is to be shared. However, nothing is pre-defined; respective identities and positionalities emerge via the dialectical process of the research encounter, and the knowledge elucidated is historically and politically contextualised (**Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014: 22**). Listening to interview 'pauses, hesitations, and silences' can be a rich source of 'knowledge production' compared to reading transcripts (**Koopman et al; 2024: 7**). Audio recordings are more impactful and lead to better understanding of the meanings and nuances shared within the encounter (**Clark et al., 2021**). Relational spaces locate the researcher and participants within 'hyphen-spaces' (**Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013: 370**) and 'the space between the insider and outsider' (**Greene, 2014: 11**). Both conceptualisations evoke a sense of the unknown, unsteadiness, trying to find one's footing and an impulsive desire to grasp for any form of security.

Such was my experience of engaging with Bernedette Kiely's exhibition 'Don't Need No Country, Don't Fly No Flag', held as part of the 2024 Galway International Arts Festival. The artist's childhood memories of her community being flooded by the river Nore in Carrick-on-Suir, South Tipperary, Ireland, left her with an abiding sense of 'uncertainty, instability and unknowing', which was reflected in the exhibition's paintings (**Printworks Gallery, 2024**: **2**). The greyish-whitish over-wash on each canvas blurs the images, leaving me within the exhibition space unsure of my footing and feeling a vertigo of sorts within my body.

Kiely's paintings strike me as both a mirror of the present and a harbinger of future climate catastrophe. The artist describes them as 'all together in a watery world which knows no boundaries—the earth wide open' (**Printworks Gallery, 2024: 2**). For Kiely, vivid personal memories and historically contextualised feelings inextricably mingle to 'become co-authors of the work' (**Printworks Gallery, 2024: 3**). In this instance, the artist's formative experiences are woven through the contemporaneous interpretations and meanings she expresses in each painting, making statements and posing questions about both our survival and legacy. While no face-to-face discussion took place between myself and Kiely, it seems self-evident that both she and I are 'toggling between our experiences and larger relational and social contexts' (**Adams et al., 2021: 5**).

What Value AE?

Who decides autoethnography's legitimacy, its relevancy to a research journey? Critical feminist theory demands an encounter with 'unfamiliar—and likely uncomfortable—tellings' (**Pillow, 2003: 197**). Darawsheh (**2014**) contends that the researcher's philosophical positionality is made clear

and is self-critiqued. Wall (**2006**) requires a profile and exegesis of multiple ways of inquiry while knowing they are inextricably bound up with *who* is inquiring and *how* and *what* is produced. Adams et al. (**2021**) acknowledge positivist and post-positivist tensions vis-à-vis interpretive paradigms on ethical, reliability and validity grounds, which I interpret as asking, *Is the inclusion of the researcher as a source of living data (among other sources) academically justified and trustworthy, and is the analysis recounted indicative of a shared or universal experience?* Such criticism is hampered by how different ontological and epistemological perspective view 'data': whether it pre-exists to be gathered, quantified, tested or proven. In contrast, Dickson-Swift et al., ask whether the 'embodied responses' of the researcher 'are markers of meaning from which researchers can learn' (**2009: 68**), that is, whether the bulk of data discoverable in the life experience of the informant can be recognised as a legitimate repository of meaning-making without having to empirically prove universal principles or truths.

For me, beekeeper and researcher are joined together symbiotically, for better or worse, in exploring the theoretical composition of my own shifting position and the embodied theorising of others regarding (api)cultural behaviours and meanings (**Rabb, 2013**). For Collins and McNulty, 'insiderness is not fixed' (**2020: 220**). Autoethnography, for Akehurst and Scott (**2023**), 'stands outside the mainstream, refusing to adhere to normative standards of objective, representative and data reliability' (**2023: 438–39**). Beyond the risk of AE becoming 'overly narcissistic and self-indulgent' (**Nicholas and Holt, 2003: 26**) lies the reflective engagement, or lack thereof, of the reader (**Ashley, 2014**). For Bocher and Ellis (**2016**), AE's true potency and value, though not exclusively, lies in the dialogue that flows out of and continues beyond the research work; the agency of the storyteller and the impact of the story travelling further than originally expected. Implicitly, such positions, happenings and encounters promote the belief that research informed by AE communicates and co-creates an affective reader experience.

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Conclusion

Writing this reflexive paper was not easy. I felt encouraged by my GRC to be more aware of my position and voice. Adopting AE as an ethnographic practice felt like having to carry more research equipment without being fully committed to its value. Research work was already demanding enough without needing to bare my 'insides' to the world. And yet, understood as a reflexive praxis, AE has the potential to become a self-reflective learning experience through evaluation (**Johnson, 2019**). Nevertheless, questioning the social and cultural positions embedded in personal narratives will neither produce absolute objectivity nor subjectivity (**Reed-Donaghty, 2017**). Bourdieu questions whether the researcher can effectively undertake a 'doubling of consciousness' (**2003: 281**), a legitimate critique should I, the researcher, be unaware of the past experiences and choices that have inevitably influenced my current anthropological research and reflexive endeavour. However, reflexivity can unsettle the researcher's subjectivity lest the importance of informants be diminished either by accident or design (**Prussing et al., 2024**).

What has become abundantly clear is that my philosophical worldviews, informed by my 'internal mythologies' (**Harvey, 2024: 1**) need to be made explicit. I need to ask and answer: *How and where am I theoretically grounded that you may find me or at least recognise the terrain of my inquiry? Am I willing and satisfied to work with the uncertainty of inconclusive findings?* There is nothing detached, disembodied or neutral about the beekeeper–researcher, for 'insiderness is historically and politically constituted' (**Voloder and Kirpitchenko, 2014: 6**). Consideration of the agency of honeybees (**Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010**) and other lifeforms, whatever their distinct or shared evolutionary path, is a valid avenue of academic inquiry capable of embracing inconclusive findings that can be recorded, audited, and analysed.

Generative and creative fluidity in various forms have imbued this writing. Having begun with childhood memories of water flowing towards Dublin

port and onward into the Irish Sea, I now have a new companion and neighbour on the western Atlantic seaboard, namely the breadth and depth of Galway Bay. This wider tidal expanse of water invites playfulness in its refreshing energy and calmness, stimulates anxiety in the human jetsam (as evidenced by its fractal shorelines) (**Robinson, 2003**) and demands profound respect in its unpredictability and damaging ferocity. These and other tidings of its multiple personalities constantly shift and change only a short distance from my apiary. The same, I believe, can be said of beekeepers, honeybees and researchers, all intermingling in potentially co-authored new and Heraclitean coherences.

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Dwelling in Transition: An autoethnographic reflection on researching internal migration while living it

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Abstract

This article explores the convergence of academic research and personal history through an autoethnographic account of conducting a PhD on internal migration and masculinity in India, while simultaneously navigating transnational academic migration as an Indian scholar based in the United Kingdom. Drawing on feminist and sensory methodologies, this article examines how the researcher's lived experiences of childhood mobility, linguistic fragmentation and cultural fluidity shaped her approach to fieldwork and interpretation. By reflecting on the embodied dimensions of researching masculinity within feminised domestic spaces and considering memory and displacement as both data and method, this article argues for a situated, affective epistemology of migration. It suggests that the act of researching migration in itself is a recursive, migratory process, one that blurs the lines between inquiry and inheritance, between distance and belonging.

Keywords: autoethnography; AE; internal migration; reflexivity; masculinity; embodied methodology; home; India; memory

Introduction

I have been migrating longer than I have been writing about migration.

To research migration in India is to trace movement through a landscape so vast, so internally diverse, that each relocation can feel like crossing into another country. India's 28 states and 8 union territories are marked by their own languages, dialects, scripts, culinary traditions, dress codes, religious practices, climate zones and rhythms of life. A train journey from Baramulla in Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu takes one not just across 3,000 kilometres, but across cultural worlds, from the Himalayan temperate air and pheran-clad winters to coastal humidity and the fragrance of sambar rising from kitchen courtyards.[i] These are not minor variations; they constitute shifts in embodied habitus, demanding recalibration of speech, gesture and sensory expectations each time one arrives in a new place.

Internal migration in India is often narrated through rural-to-urban economic movement, but there exists another, less examined form: the internal transfer system within Indian government sectors, particularly the armed forces, civil administration and public enterprises. In these systems, employees are periodically reassigned to new postings, often every two to three years, as part of institutional policy. For military families like mine, this meant an unbroken cycle of packing, moving and resettling across cantonments; planned, self-contained enclaves that replicate certain infrastructures but remain deeply inflected by the cultural, linguistic and ecological particularities of their host regions. A transfer from Ferozepur in Punjab to Tenga Valley in Arunachal Pradesh is more than just a change of address; it includes entering a new linguistic terrain, learning different modes of hospitality, adapting to altered notions of public space and encountering unfamiliar gender norms in everyday life.

Growing up within this cycle of transfers, I came to understand movement not as an exception but as a structuring principle of life. Homes were assembled and disassembled with military efficiency, yet each bore the trace of its provisionality; curtains hastily tailored for temporary windows, kitchens reorganised to suit regional vegetables, a checkered patterned sofa set in every new drawing/ dining room like a quiet witness to continuity. This lived experience forms the spine of my research: an exploration of internal migration as a layered, often invisible process of cultural negotiation, material improvisation and affective labour.

In this article, I focus on the lives of occupationally mobile Indian men (government officials, public sector workers, traditional sector workers and truck drivers) whose movements, like those of my own family, unfold within national borders yet demand continual acts of cultural translation.[ii]

By situating their narratives within feminist and sensory methodological frameworks, and by drawing on my autoethnographic positionality, I seek to examine how internal migration in India produces its own 'soft borders;' lines that are felt, navigated and redrawn through practices of everyday life.

Migration as Inheritance

I did not migrate for economic survival. I did not migrate due to conflict, nor in search of asylum. My migrations were state-sanctioned, cyclical and neatly scheduled. And yet, they were disorienting in ways that evade easy categorisation.

As the daughter of a military officer in India, I lived a life of constant relocation: every two or three years, a new posting, a new school, a new city. From Srinagar in the North to Arunachal Pradesh in the East, to Rajasthan in the West and from cantonments nestled in mountain mists to dusty barracks in the plains. We lived not on a map, but on a timeline of impermanence. In retrospect, it is no surprise that I now study migration. The question was never 'if' I would; it was 'when.'

Scholars of migration often reserve the term for transnational movement or large-scale displacement. But recent literature on internal migration has complicated these boundaries. In India alone, over 450 million people are estimated to be internal migrants according to the Census of India (**2011**), most of whom move for work, education or marriage. My own movement, while not precarious in material terms, bears emotional resemblance to these dislocations. I was uprooted from friends, languages, routines and cultures. I arrived again and again in new places where I had to relearn belonging. Each new home was both a repetition and a rupture.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (**1984**) concept of 'habitus,' the deeply ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by one's social environment, offers a useful lens here. My habitus was one of transition. I internalised a mode of adaptability that blurred the line between who I was and who I needed to become in each new city. There was no singular 'mother tongue,' no neighbourhood I could point to and say, 'I am from here.' Instead, there were cadences of speech that shifted subtly with each location, clothes that adapted to school codes, mannerisms that mirrored those around me.

This cultivated a form of 'translocal' sensibility, one that geographers like Brickell and Datta (**2011**) argue is often overlooked in urban migration discourse. Translocality acknowledges the layered, multi-sited nature of belonging, how identity is forged not in one place, but across the palimpsest of many. In this way, my earliest experiences with migration

were not marked by a single event, but by a slow sedimentation of minor departures.

I remember arriving in Punjab, aged 15, after leaving behind a school in Rajasthan. The new school had different greetings, colder mornings, girls who braided their hair differently. I did not yet have the vocabulary of a scholar, but I understood what Homi Bhabha (**1994**) would later describe as the 'in-between space,' a liminal zone where one is not quite here nor there. My childhood was an apprenticeship in that zone.

As I began formal research on migration and masculinity, I realised that these early displacements had trained me to notice the smallest shifts in space and gesture. I could read the discomfort in how a migrant worker folded his shawl before speaking or how he arranged his tiffin on the cement floor in his submitted photographs. My childhood migration had tuned me to material registers of survival where the way identity is not only spoken, but worn, held and folded.

My own family's material culture was also deeply mobile. My mother, whose ancestors migrated from Bengal but who was born in Uttar Pradesh, carried saris that no longer matched the climate we lived in. She kept prayer books in multiple scripts. My father, from Uttarakhand, did not teach us Kumaoni, his mother tongue. It was not practical, he expressed.[iii] We needed Hindi and English.[iv] Something portable, he argued. Something that travelled well. So we became fluent in forgetting, too.

Over time, each posting was marked not only by a change in residence but by a shift in textures, colours and domestic arrangements. A new rank for my father meant repainting the heavy wooden or metal trunks that carried our clothes, linens and winter blankets, their corners dented from decades of postings. The name, stencilled neatly in white paint, stayed the same; only the rank beside it was altered to match regulations, each update leaving faint brush marks over the ghost of the previous title. These trunks, stacked in corners of transient homes, were more than storage, they were travelling billboards of our movements, bearing the official traces of where we had been and who my father was at each stage.

Migration here was not only physical, but it was also intellectual, cultural and affective. It was a process of physically imbibing the environment, borrowing fragments of local culture from each place and absorbing them into our household routines. Objects were packed and unpacked with ritualistic precision, each carton a mental as well as material container, its labels silently mapping the country. By looking at a participant's domestic material objects (decorative wall pieces, a specific wooden furniture, a collection of seashells or pinecones), one could identify the region they had lived in. These belongings became quiet archives of migration, revealing

(sometimes more than words could) the routes taken and the cultures encountered. The household, in this case, functioned as a migratory platform (both physically mobile and mentally expansive) divulging our previous geographies whenever we met someone new. It is in this intimate layering of place into object and object into memory that my understanding of migration as a methodological condition began to take form.

Ahmed (**1999**) reminds us that migration is not only about movement, but about the affective economies that frame who belongs and who does not. Even as a child with privilege, I felt the sting of being an outsider in my own country, my accent too soft, my surname unfamiliar in the West, my skin too light in the South. Migration, I learned, is not always about geography. Sometimes, it is about the distance between selves. These distances return in the research I do now, but they also inhabit how I do it. As a scholar, I understand the literature: I can cite Castles and Miller (**2009**), Schiller (**2010**), Vertovec (**2007**), but as a woman who has lived through cumulative displacement, my tools are also intuition, memory, sight. I approach fieldwork with a sensorial attunement, what Pink (**2009**) calls 'sensory ethnography.' I note how a migrant arranges his bedroll. I watch for what is not said in interviews. I remember the embarrassment of being new and the burden of translation. These are not biases to be eliminated; they are epistemologies.

In this way, my migrations are not just prelude to my research, they are the method.

Language, Silence and Home Become Autoethnographic Fragments

I was not raised in a single language.

Hindi was spoken in school, shaped by the softness of hilly consonants and the formality of textbooks. English was the language of aspiration, taught, tested and tightly woven into the promise of upward mobility. Bengali, my mother tongue, came to me in threads: in lullabies, in anger, in half-remembered nursery rhymes my mother sang while doing laundry.[v] Kumaoni, my father's native tongue, never entered our house. These languages did not form a hierarchy. They formed a constellation, scattered, glowing, unevenly remembered. I learned early on to shift between them depending on where I was, who I was with and what I needed to conceal or reveal. This linguistic fluidity became a kind of armour, but also a haunting. What happens to a sense of home when the words for it are unstable?

This instability of language is more than an autobiographical quirk; it is an epistemic condition that shaped how data was collected, interpreted and remembered. Outlined in a later section expands on how linguistic flexibility sits alongside other embodied dispositions (sensory recall, spatial memory and migratory habitus) that informed the reflexive register of this research. My shifts between Hindi and English during fieldwork were not neutral translations but enactments of Bourdieu's (**1991**) claim that language is a form of symbolic capital, always already marked by histories of movement and structures of power. The pauses, tonal hesitations and even strategic silences in interviews were as much a part of this 'memory work' as the spoken word. Simply put, language instability became both data and method; an affective undercurrent that ran through the narratives I gathered and the ones I told about myself.

Language, as Bourdieu (**1991**) reminds us, is never neutral. It carries social capital, marks of origin and a traceable geography. In fieldwork, I was always aware of which version of Hindi I was using. My accent had been reshaped by years of movement. I did not sound 'purely' North Indian, nor did I reflect the inflections of those I interviewed (men whose regional dialects were thick with work, distance and memory). I was intelligible but recognisably not from here. In many ways, I never had a 'from here.'

Silence became its own strategy. Many of the men I spoke with, those who had left families behind, described home without naming it. They referred to it obliquely: '*Wahan jo tha*...' ('Over there it was…'), '*Jab chhoda tha tab*…' ('When I left…'). These silences were not absences; they were saturated with grief, resignation and longing. They reminded me of my own family's tendency to skip over what was left behind each time we moved, photographs that were never unpacked, names of neighbours never spoken again. I have come to understand silence as part of the methodology. It is, as Mazzei (**2007**) argues, not the opposite of voice, but a form of data in itself. What is not said and what resists articulation, often reveals the deepest fissures in experience. The home, as a concept, is often romanticised in migration research, yet for many of the men I interviewed, it was a site of nostalgia, incompleteness or strategic forgetting. For me too, it remains an idea rather than a location.

This autoethnographic fragmenting of language and home resists narrative closure. I cannot offer a tidy conclusion. What I can offer instead are traces, scattered across childhood houses, across rooms where fieldwork was conducted, across the long pauses between a question and an answer. These fragments do not reduce understanding; they demand a different kind of attention. Perhaps that is what the migratory life teaches us best, not how to find home, but how to notice when it briefly flickers into being, in a voice, in a gesture, in a silence you recognise as your own.

The Academic Gaze: Researching masculinity and migration in India

Conducting ethnographic research on male migrant workers in India as a woman researcher presents a complex interplay of gender dynamics, insider-outsider positionality and the embodiment of academic inquiry. This section explores my experiences of navigating male-dominated spaces, reflecting on how personal history and scholarly engagement intertwine.

My fieldwork often brought me into the homes of migrant men, spaces that, in much of the literature, have traditionally been understood as feminine domains. The home is commonly read as a site of care, emotion and reproduction, associated with women's labour and presence (**McDowell, 1999; Massey, 1994**). Yet, in the case of my own research on occupationally mobile men, it is often these men who temporarily inhabit these domestic spaces in the absence of their families, thereby reconstituting the home as a masculine space. Entering these rooms, rented tenements, makeshift shared dwellings, I became acutely aware of the layered spatial and gendered tensions. As a woman researcher stepping into what was once feminised space but is now reshaped through male use and presence, I had to negotiate my own positionality not by asserting my femininity, but by bracketed withdrawal.

To observe masculinity in this space, I often felt compelled to make myself marginal to it, to remove the interpretive lens of femininity and, instead, read the room as a domain of masculine negotiation. This was not about gender-neutrality, but about shifting perceptual modes where I was studying the arrangement of objects, the ways in which men carved privacy, asserted control or marked the domestic as transient. These interiors (modest, fluid, deeply lived) became stages for masculine identity performance. My presence did not disrupt a homosocial space as much as it observed the performance of masculinity within a space usually coded as 'female'. This inversion required methodological and emotional recalibration.

Drawing on Connell's (**1995**) concept of hegemonic masculinity, I observed how migrant men negotiated their identities through displays of strength, stoicism and economic provision. These performances were not monolithic; they varied across contexts and were often in flux, influenced by factors such as caste, class and regional backgrounds. For instance, a truck driver from Haryana (Central India) might emphasise his role as a provider, while a Textile worker from Jammu (Northern India) might highlight his technical skills, reflecting regional variations in masculine ideals.

My positionality as a woman researcher afforded me a unique vantage point. While it posed challenges in terms of access and trust-building, it also facilitated deeper conversations about vulnerabilities and aspirations. Men often shared narratives of longing, failure and hope; stories that might have been withheld from male researchers due to the pressures of conforming to masculine norms. This aligns with the insights of Pande (**2017**), who emphasises the relational performances of masculinities in migratory contexts.

However, this positionality was not without its complexities. There were moments when my presence was met with suspicion or misinterpretation. Navigating these situations required reflexivity and adaptability and acknowledging the power dynamics at play and striving to mitigate them through ethical research practices. This echoes the views of England (**1994**), who reflects on the challenges of conducting fieldwork in gendered and racialised contexts. Moreover, my own experiences of internal migration during childhood informed my empathetic engagement with participants. Having navigated multiple cultural landscapes, I could relate to feelings of displacement and the quest for belonging. This personal history supplemented my understanding of the emotional dimensions of migration, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of participants' narratives.

In synthesising these experiences, it becomes evident that the researcher's identity is not a detached backdrop but an active component of the research process. Embracing this reflexivity enhances the depth and authenticity of ethnographic inquiry, particularly in studies of migration and masculinity where personal and collective identities are continually negotiated.

Researching masculinity and migration in India as an autoethnographic project requires confronting the intersecting asymmetries of gender, mobility and academic authority (**Connell, 1995; Datta, 2016**). My position as a researcher (marked by my own history of internal mobility through my father's government transfers) allowed an embodied sensitivity to the rhythms of relocation, yet also positioned me as an outsider to the intensely gendered experiences of male migrants whose leisure, work and domestic practices unfolded in spaces not designed for permanence (**Silvey, 2004; Ahmed, 2004**).

The 'academic gaze' in this context is not neutral; it is entangled in the social scripts of respectability, protection and observation, particularly when interviewing truckers in roadside dhabas, government clerks in temporary quarters or potters in makeshift settlements.[vi] While migration theory has often privileged transnational movements (**Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Brettell, 2003**), the layered complexities of internal migration

(negotiating linguistic boundaries, caste geographies, state bureaucracies and urban-rural tensions) remain under-acknowledged in masculinity studies.

In the Indian context, internal migration carries many of the dislocations and negotiations seen in cross-border migration but without the same legal or scholarly recognition. In my fieldwork, the truck driver's cabin became both workplace and home; the railway clerk's quarters bore traces of three different cities in its furnishings; the tailor's rented room in a bustee housed religious objects from his natal village alongside new urban purchases.

To situate these experiences in dialogue with broader migration and masculinity literature, the following masculinity and migration matrix (**Table 1**) maps key theoretical and empirical contributions, distinguishing between international and internal migration scholarship. This mapping clarifies where my work is positioned by also highlighting how the Indian internal migration context adds layers of cultural negotiation and masculine identity-making absent from much of the global literature.

By juxtaposing international and internal migration scholarship, the matrix clarifies how the Indian internal migration experience both 'converges with' and 'departs from' existing masculinities literature. The absence of legal border crossings does not diminish the intensity of cultural, linguistic and bureaucratic negotiations, nor the reshaping of masculine identity that occurs in these spaces.

In my fieldwork, internal migrants navigated what could be called 'invisible borders,' each demanding affective labour and social performance. This positioning also invites a reframing of masculinity in migration research: rather than viewing men solely as economic actors or patriarchal beneficiaries, my data reveals them as constantly recalibrating selves, managing vulnerability and care under conditions of structural dislocation.

The academic gaze, when turned upon this internal migration context, must therefore be attuned to both the 'macro-structures' of labour, state policy and caste-geography, and the 'micro-practices' of everyday life including, the rearranging of belongings, the sharing of leisure moments in tea stalls and the quiet preservation of natal languages in conversation. Moving forward, this framework will connect into the next section's discussion of 'Methodology as Memory', linking theoretical debates to the lived, sensory and mnemonic textures of my own field encounters.

Migration Type	Author and Work	Geographic Focus	Core Focus	Masculinity Lens	Relevance to This Study
International	Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994) *Gendered Transitions*	Mexico-USA	How migration reshapes family roles and gender dynamics	Migration destabilises male authority, demands renegotiation of care and labour	Offers comparative grounding for understanding shifts in Indian men's familial roles
	Connell, R. W. (1995) *Masculinities*	Global (Theoretical)	Hegemonic masculinity and its relational hierarchy	Masculinities are contingent on context, power and mobility	Anchors theoretical framing of masculine identity shifts under mobility
	Ticktin, M., & Ong, A. (2005) in *Global Assemblages*	Transnational, refugees, borders	Governance, ethics and embodied politics	State regulation intersects with masculinity and bodily control	Useful for parallels between state-mediated migration regimes internationally and within India
Internal	Brettell, C. B. (2003) *Anthropology and Migration*	Rural-to-urban, intra-national	Cultural identity, labour and kinship in internal moves	Men reconstruct identity in response to urban marginality	Provides precedent for reading internal migration as culturally transformative
	Evans, T., & Thomas, R. (2020)	India, China, Africa	Social mobility, masculinity and patriarchy under rural-urban migration	Loss of control, insecurity and renegotiated norms	Strong alignment with my data on precarity and masculine vulnerability
	Silvey, R. (2004) *Power, Difference and Mobility*	Indonesia, South Asia	Gendered geographies of labour and displacement	Masculinity in informal sectors and shifting domestic roles	Informs spatial and emotional negotiations in informal housing and labour
	Still, C. (2017) *Dalit Women: Honour and Patriarchy in South India*	Intra-state migration, caste contexts	Patriarchy's spatial and cultural expressions	Though centred on women, offers insight into caste-gender dynamics shaping male mobility	Deepens intersectional analysis in Indian internal migration

Table 1: Mapping Masculinity and Migration: Comparative Insights from International and Internal Scholarship

Reflexivity in the Field on Using Methodology as Memory

It took me a while to realise that I was not simply collecting data, I was rehearsing memory.

As a material culture researcher working within the field of migration studies, I approached my doctoral fieldwork with a clear conceptual framework. I knew the value of oral histories, the ethics of positionality and the protocols of observation. But what no manual had prepared me for was the moment when the smell of damp cement in a bank worker's rented room would remind me of an army quarter, we [my family and I] had once lived in. Or how an Airforce Officer's confession about sleeping with one eye open in a new city would echo my own childhood insomnia after every relocation. In these moments, fieldwork stopped being fieldwork. It became a mirror.

Autoethnography reminds us that 'research is not just a way of knowing the world, but also a way of being in it' (**Ellis et al., 2011**). This is true for researchers like me, whose personal histories are entangled with their research themes. My ongoing experience of internal migration, layered through childhood relocations and now intensified by international academic mobility, shaped not only what I observed but how I interpreted it. I carried a sensitivity for small things; the arrangement of toiletries on narrow bathroom ledges, the presence or absence of a curtain separating a kitchen from a dining area, the chipped Godrej almirahs that followed men across states.[vii] These were not just observed fieldnotes, they were codes of settlement and impermanence. They were mnemonic cues, what anthropologist Paul Connerton (**1989**) might call 'habitual memory.' I noticed them not because I was trained to, but because I had lived them.

In many ways, my methodology began to resemble my own migrations: partial, adaptive, intuitive. Feminist scholars have long argued for the legitimacy of embodied knowledge in research (**Haraway, 1988; Skeggs, 1997**). Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledge' insists that objectivity is not a detached view from nowhere, but rather a recognition of one's place within the matrix of observation. My place was never neutral, it was shaped by years of shifting schools, dialects and routines. I was, to borrow Sara Ahmed's (**1999**) phrasing, a 'stranger within,' always proximate, never quite settled.

This reflexive position did not simplify my fieldwork. If anything, it complicated it. I had to learn how to make space for both proximity and distance. For instance, when a young male migrant in Delhi described how he tried to recreate 'a sense of his village' by placing a framed photo of his parents above his bed, an earthen pot on his bed side table and jars of spices in his kitchen cupboard. I recognised the gesture intimately. My own

parents had done something similar, placing a calendar of India Gate in every house we moved into, regardless of the city. Yet, I could not allow my own memory to overwrite his. I had to let his story breathe its own air. This balancing act, between resonance and restraint, is at the heart of reflexive ethnography. It expands on what England (**1994**) identifies as the paradox of researcher presence; 'being both insider and outsider simultaneously.' This duality can be destabilising, but it also opens up richer analytical pathways. When one is attuned to one's own affective responses, one becomes more receptive to the silences, pauses and deflections in others' narratives.

There were times when I instinctively wanted to comfort a participant, to say, 'I know what you mean'. But I did not. This was because I did not, not really. His journey was not mine. His train routes, payment slips, fractured friendships, these were his alone. What I shared was not the content of his experience, but the contour of dislocation. The familiarity of not belonging.

One particularly telling moment came during an interview in a narrow room off a busy industrial alleyway. A man from Himachal Pradesh described how he could no longer remember the layout of his home village. 'It's blurred now,' he said, 'like the ink on a cheap receipt.' That phrase sat with me for days. I realised I, too, have stopped remembering certain houses we lived in. I remember the names of cities, the school uniforms, the colours of the gates.

But the interiors (where we kept the glasses and what direction the bed faced) have vanished. My memory is partial and selective. So is my method. What emerges, then, is a methodological approach grounded in intimacy and instability. I do not pretend to offer a universal theory of migration. Rather, I offer a lens forged in motion, a way of seeing, shaped by having always arrived from elsewhere.

While I have woven these theoretical threads into my reflections, it became evident that the complexity of reflexivity in this study (particularly when it is rooted in embodied memory and situated cultural knowledge) benefits from a more schematic synthesis. The methodology as memory matrix (**Table 2**) integrates the theories that most directly shaped my approach, mapping their conceptual foundations onto the methodological stance of memory as method that underpins this work.

Situating these theories in the Indian context underscores how internal migration is not a homogenous phenomenon but a continual negotiation of difference (linguistic, culinary, sartorial and spatial). The reflexive sociological stance makes visible how the researcher's own habitus, formed through repeated exposure to such cultural multiplicity, becomes an epistemological resource. Haraway's (**1988**) insistence on partial

perspectives is salient in a country where even 'internal' borders often involve profound cultural translation. Autoethnographic reflexivity here is not simply about self-disclosure; it is about tracing the continuities between the affective geographies of my own movements and those of the men whose narratives populate this study. In recognising these convergences, the act of research itself becomes a re-inhabitation of mobile life, blurring the line between memory-work and fieldwork. Following the integration of these theoretical perspectives in the matrix below, the conceptual model (**Figure 1**) visualises their intersection as a dynamic and iterative process**.**

Theory	Key Proponent(s)	Core Concept	Connection to 'Methodology as Memory'	Reflections from Narrative
Reflexive Sociology	Pierre Bourdieu	Researchers must interrogate their own habitus, positionality and the structural contexts that shape knowledge production.	Memory is socially situated; the researcher's trajectory shapes perception and interpretation.	My repeated relocations within India's culturally diverse regions (across languages, foods and domestic routines) structure what I notice (from the texture of cement walls to the arrangement of kitchen utensils) embedding habitus in observation.
Situated Knowledges	Donna Haraway	All knowledge is partial, embodied and accountable to location; objectivity is positional transparency.	Fieldwork is shaped by lived histories of moving between regions with different dialects, cuisines and gender norms.	My recall of bathroom ledges, school transfers and railway station snack stalls is not neutral data, but the embodied imprint of my social and cultural mobility.
Autoethnographic Reflexivity	Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner	Researcher's own life is a source of data; affect and personal memory guide interpretation.	Method and memory are intertwined; the sensory recall of space and objects is both personal and analytical.	Fieldwork became an act of re-inhabiting my own migrations; memories of government transfer orders and improvised domestic setups mirrored participants' experiences.

Table 2: Integrating Reflexive, Situated and Autoethnographic Frameworks in Researching Internal Migration

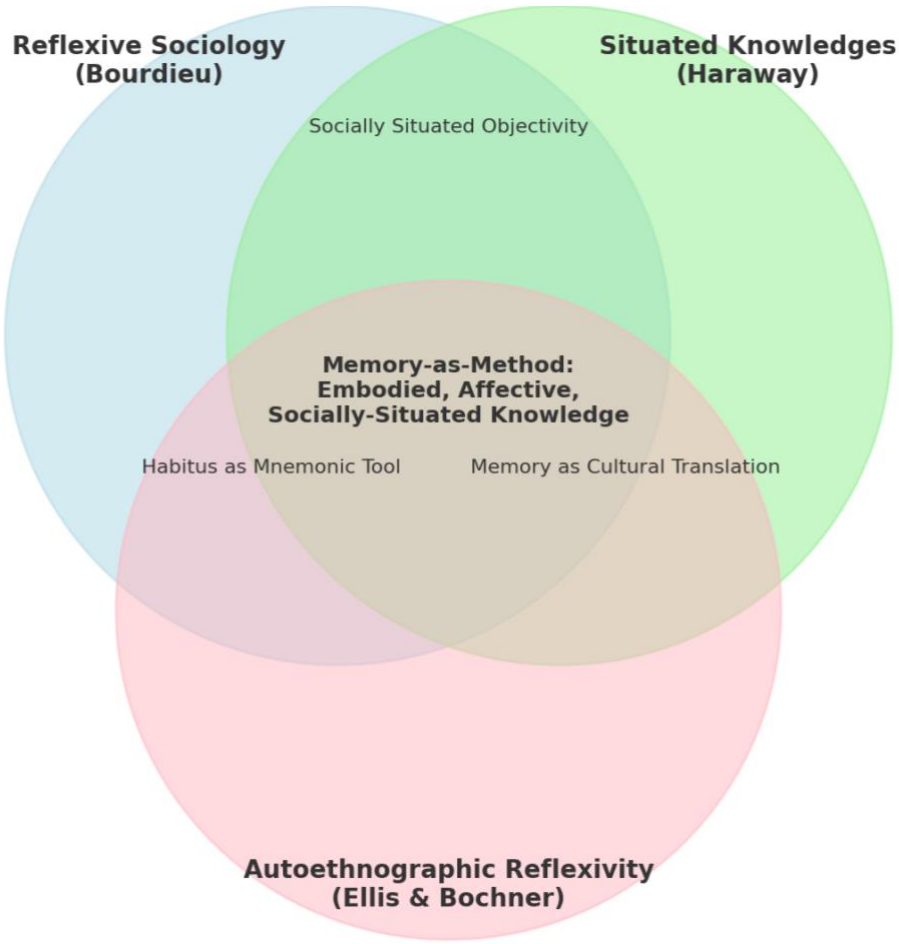

Figure 1: Conceptual Model: Memory-as-Method in Internal Migration Research

Rather than positioning reflexive sociology (**Bourdieu, 1984**), situated knowledge (**Haraway, 1988**) and autoethnographic reflexivity (**Ellis and Bochner, 2011**) as a discrete or sequential stage, the model renders them as overlapping and mutually constitutive domains, each informing and reshaping the others through the embodied act of remembering. This interrelation is culturally embedded: for migrant Indian men, the smell of damp cement, terrazzo tiled floors[viii] or the practice of unpacking a brass lota [ix] are not simply mnemonic triggers, but situated epistemologies rooted in postcolonial geographies and classed histories of movement.

In the model, the central zone (labelled Memory-as-Method) marks the site where theory and lived experience are inseparable. Here, my positionality, sensory recall and cultural familiarity function as active instruments of knowledge production. This is important in the Indian internal migration context, where state transfers, occupational dislocation and linguistic border-crossings produce what might be termed 'soft borders' (fluid but socially significant boundaries that shape identity and belonging). The model thus makes explicit that reflexivity in such research

is a cultural necessity and to work within these mobilities requires inhabiting the third space between observation and participation, and between documentation and re-creation.

Researching While Migrating Again

The irony of researching migration while migrating again is not lost on me.

When I began my PhD in the United Kingdom, I did not anticipate the dissonance that would emerge between my scholarly inquiry and my daily lived experience. I had once been the child of internal migrants within India, now I was a transnational academic migrant, negotiating new bureaucracies, currencies and silences. My visa status, housing contracts and NHS registrations became as much a part of my intellectual formation as Postgraduate conferences or literature reviews.

Diaspora, as Hall (**1990**) reminds us, is about the continual negotiation of identity across spaces that are never wholly yours. This Doctoral research became a second diaspora. Not in the literal sense of exile, but as a state of epistemic and emotional dislocation. I was researching the lives of migrant men from a distance (temporal, spatial and affective) and yet, I was also living a version of that narrative myself (marked by separation, shaped by memory, haunted by simultaneity).

In this dual role, my work mirrored the layered typologies of migration outlined in the masculinity and migration matrix (**Table 1**), a convergence of internal displacement, as experienced in my early life within India and transnational academic migration in the present. This positioning sharpened my awareness of how internal migration in India, while lacking the passport-stamped drama of international borders, can demand equivalent forms of cultural, linguistic and gendered renegotiation.

My own shifting between contexts became a methodological resource; a way to see how domestic objects, everyday routines and even modes of leisure function differently under conditions of temporary settlement and administrative precarity. In critically reading my own mobility alongside that of my participants, I could better situate these movements within broader debates on postcolonial mobility regimes (**Silvey, 2004; Brettell, 2014**) and the embodied labour of crossing 'soft borders' within the nation-state.

I conducted data collection in India and its analysis in England. I translated speech across continents, crossing not only languages but affective terrains. In many ways, I was both researcher and migrant, navigating institutional alienation and cultural recalibration. What Clifford (**1994**) refers to as the 'dwelling-in-travel' became my daily condition. There is a subtle violence to intellectual migration. The sense that you are always

slightly mispronouncing yourself. That your methods must always be explained twice. That your research must justify itself in global terms, even when it emerges from deeply local soil. Spivak's (**1988**) call to interrogate who can speak and who gets heard, echoes in how I presented my work; always positioned and always negotiated, and yet, it is precisely this unsettledness that gives my research its depth. The diaspora of doing a PhD, of being split across geographies and epistemologies, enabled a layered seeing. I do not claim objectivity, I claim presence.

I write this from a small room that smells nothing like my childhood dwellings. But when I close my eyes, I can still hear the train announcements in Hindi. Still feel the impermanence beneath my feet. Still understand that to study migration is to live its aftermath, again and again.

Conclusion

To research migration is to live with a certain kind of ache. Not always sharp, not always named, but persistent. It settles into the body like dust in a suitcase you never fully unpack. This PhD, for me, has not been a linear journey of knowledge acquisition, it has been a circling, a returning, a lingering in the in-between. In following the lives of occupationally mobile men, I set out to examine how masculinities are performed and remade within transitory domestic spaces. The reflexive frameworks mapped in the methodology as memory matrix were the methodological tools, making visible how my own embodied history of repeated relocations and shifting home-making rituals intersected with the stories I documented. In each narrative, there was a choreography of adjustment; beds placed in corners to create an illusion of privacy, utensils arranged to reconstitute a taste of origin, photographs tucked into wallets for decades. These were not marginal details but the grammar of survival.

The theories in the masculinity and migration matrix, situated this study within migration-masculinity scholarship, making clear the distinctiveness of India's internal migration regimes. These movements were not border crossings in the international sense, yet they carried all the textures of cultural negotiation; linguistic recalibration, administrative reclassification, shifts in gendered labour. They operated within what I call 'soft borders,' mutable zones where the official line between origin and destination blurs, but where everyday practices continue to reproduce difference. In such spaces, leisure emerged more than the discretionary 'free time.' It was the small acts of self-making embedded in the rhythms of work like, brewing tea in a familiar vessel, re-tying the same laces on boots carried for twenty years, reciting mantras to quiet the uncertainty of place.

This research underscores that internal migration cannot be fully understood without attending to its affective and material dimensions,

without recognising that home-making, object improvisation and embodied memory are as politically charged as wage remittances or census statistics. By holding theory and narrative together (by making the implicit frameworks visible through the matrices and conceptual model), the study offers a lens that does not separate knowledge from the body that produces it.

Bhabha's (**1994**) 'unhomely' is not a metaphor here but a lived condition, one that I now understand as generative rather than disruptive. The act of returning, of revisiting objects, smells and silences across time and space, is itself a form of scholarship. What I carry forward from this work is not a fixed conclusion, but a mobile lens; one that sees the entanglement of rupture and continuity, theory and biography, data and memory. To inhabit this mobility is not to abandon rigour, but to practise a form of knowing that moves, lingers and returns.

I came to study migration. I leave having remembered it.

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Endnotes

[i] Pheran is a traditional Kashmiri garment, a loose-fitting gown worn by both men and women in the region.

[ii] In the context of India, "traditional workers" primarily refers to individuals engaged in occupations passed down through generations, often linked to caste and social structures. Examples of traditional occupations in India might include potters, weavers, barbers, priests and various forms of agricultural labour, where these roles are often linked to specific castes and family lineages.

[iii] Kumaoni is a language of the Kumaon region in Uttarakhand, India.

[iv] Hindi is a major Indo-Aryan language, primarily spoken in India. It is one of the official languages of India and is also widely understood and spoken by the Indian diaspora.

[v]Bengali, also known as Bangla, is an Indo-Aryan language spoken by an estimated 250 million people, primarily in the Bengal region of South Asia.

[vi] Dhabas are roadside restaurants in the Indian subcontinent. They are on highways, generally serve local cuisine and also serve as truck stops.

[vii] A steel cupboard or wardrobe manufactured by the Godrej company. The term "almirah" is an Anglo-Indian word derived from Portuguese, meaning a wardrobe or cupboard. Godrej & Boyce introduced the steel almirah to India in 1923 and it quickly became a staple in Indian homes.

[viii] Terrazzo floor tiles are a composite material that is made by combining a cement base with an array of ground materials such as granite, quartz and marble.

[ix] A traditional Indian vessel, typically made of brass, used for various purposes, including religious rituals and as a decorative item.

The Pillars of Privilege: A decolonial framework for understanding power, positionality, and (un)belonging in higher education

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Abstract

This article explores the enduring influence of colonial power structures in higher education through the development and application of the Pillars of Privilege framework. Grounded in decolonial theory and intersectional analysis, the framework identifies capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism as interlocking systems that shape who belongs in the academy and whose knowledge is legitimised. While recent calls to decolonise higher education have gained prominence, many remain confined to surface-level reforms that fail to address the deeper epistemic and structural foundations of exclusion. This article argues for a more critical, reflective, and praxis-oriented approach that foregrounds educator positionality and responsibility in challenging these intersecting hierarchies. By synthesising theoretical insights with lived realities, the Pillars of Privilege offer a tool for understanding the relational nature of power in academic spaces and for reimagining institutions as sites of collective justice, belonging, and epistemic plurality. The article concludes by identifying future directions for research and institutional transformation, with particular emphasis on the roles of digital technologies, inclusive pedagogy, and reimagined models of leadership and learning.

Keywords: decoloniality; intersectionality; privilege; higher education; belonging

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is currently at a transformative crossroads. Global calls to decolonise universities have gained momentum, compelling institutions to confront their enduring ties to colonialism, racial capitalism, and systemic exclusion. While student activism, sector reforms, and institutional statements have amplified the term decolonisation in educational discourse, its uptake has often been superficial reduced to diversity and inclusion policies that fail to address the deeper epistemic and ontological legacies of empire (**Mbembe, 2016; Bhopal, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018).** These critiques highlight the necessity of moving beyond representational politics and toward meaningful structural and epistemological transformation.

This article introduces the *Pillars of Privilege* framework (Figure 1) as a conceptual and reflective tool to bridge decolonial theory with pedagogical practice. Drawing on Quijano's (**2000**) *coloniality of power* and Crenshaw's (**1989**) theory of intersectionality, the framework identifies four interlocking structures—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism—that shape (un)belonging within HE. These pillars illuminate how exclusion is perpetuated not only through institutional policies but also through the embodied and epistemic norms that determine whose knowledge and identities are deemed legitimate. The framework offers a means for educators to engage in critical reflexivity and systemic analysis—highlighting their own positionality within these intersecting systems.

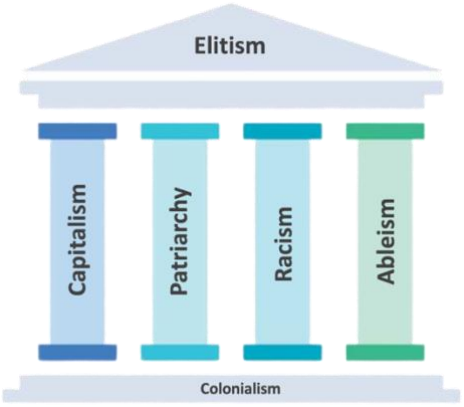

Figure 1: The four Pillars of Privilege which outline colonialism as the underlying root cause of elitism and privilege. The four pillars are capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism.

Quijano's (**2000**) analysis of the colonial matrix of power reveals how colonialism continues to shape global structures through racial, gendered, and economic hierarchies. While formal colonialism may have ended, its epistemic and material legacies persist, particularly in knowledge

production systems that privilege Eurocentric paradigms while marginalising Indigenous, Black, and Global South epistemologies. Eurocentrism, as Quijano argues, is more than a bias—it is a global ordering logic that deems Western ways of knowing as universal and others as deviant.

Building on this, de Sousa Santos (**2018**) critiques the cognitive empire of universities, where Northern epistemologies dominate curricula, research, and academic authority. He advocates for the recognition of epistemologies of the South, promoting a pluralist knowledge ecology. Mignolo and Walsh (**2018**) frame decoloniality as an epistemic disobedience—a refusal to accept Western modernity's claims to universality and objectivity. Decolonisation, in this context, is not simply about inclusion but a radical unsettling of knowledge hierarchies.

Crenshaw's (**1989**) intersectionality framework enhances this analysis by offering a lens to examine how systems of oppression (race, gender, class, ability) intersect to produce compounded forms of marginalisation. Originally focused on the invisibility of Black women within feminist and antiracist movements, intersectionality is now central to educational theory, emphasising the relational dynamics of oppression. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (**2013**) describe this as intersectional invisibility, a condition in which those at the intersections of multiple marginalities are erased or misrecognised within dominant inclusion frameworks.

Despite rich theoretical scholarship, there remains a significant gap in tools that support educators in applying these ideas to their everyday practices. Most decolonial efforts in HE has concentrated on institutional policy or student-led reform, often neglecting the role of educators themselves as both agents and beneficiaries of institutional culture (**Sian, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018**). As Ahmed (**2012; 2017**) notes, the language of diversity is frequently mobilised to mask deeper structures of epistemic violence, allowing universities to appear progressive while maintaining established power dynamics.

The *Pillars of Privilege* framework addresses this gap by providing a structure for interrogating privilege within the academy. Each of the four pillars—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism—represents a system of exclusion that shapes academic life both visibly and invisibly. Their interconnection allows for a more systemic analysis of how marginalisation is reproduced.

Capitalism, the first pillar, highlights the neoliberal transformation of HE into a market-oriented sector. Knowledge is commodified, and students are framed as consumers. Connell (**2007**) critiques the global academic economy for privileging the Global North as the source of theory while

relegating the Global South to the periphery of application and data extraction. As universities increasingly prioritise metrics, performance, and competition, students from working-class, migrant, and racialised backgrounds face both financial and cultural barriers to participation (**Rizvi, 2022**).

Patriarchy, the second pillar, underscores how gendered and heteronormative norms persist in academic culture. Ahmed (**2017**) discusses the figure of the feminist killjoy—those who challenge institutional sexism and are punished for disrupting normative behaviour. Trans, queer, and non-binary scholars often face invisibility in policy and erasure in institutional life (**Phipps & Young, 2015; Savigny, 2021**). Gender equity strategies that fail to address racial or class-based disparities risk reproducing white, cis-normative feminism.

Racism remains deeply embedded in the architecture of the university. Bhopal (**2018**) and Arday, Belluigi and Thomas (**2020**) highlight how racially minoritised scholars experience epistemic invalidation and institutional exclusion despite commitments to equality. Rollock's (**2019**) research on Black female professors exposes the concrete ceiling that limits advancement while demanding disproportionate emotional and diversity labour. Colourism, as Hunter (**2007**) argues, further stratifies opportunity within minoritised communities, often privileging those with lighter skin tones within the academy.

The final pillar, ableism, draws attention to the normativity of able-bodied and neurotypical experiences in educational spaces. Goodley (**2014**) and Kerschbaum et al. (**2017**) argue that higher education is structured around a narrow definition of academic ability—rewarding speed, verbal fluency, and linear reasoning. Disability is treated as a problem to be accommodated rather than a system to be restructured. Inclusive pedagogy must move beyond compliance to reimagine assessment, participation, and knowledge itself.

Together, these pillars enable a more holistic analysis of structural inequality in higher education. Rather than treating issues such as race, gender, class, and disability as separate domains, the framework shows how they operate interdependently to define who belongs—and who is marginalised—in academic spaces. It also highlights the importance of educator reflexivity—not as a one-time activity but as an ongoing practice of questioning, accountability, and change.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for theoretical frameworks

In developing the *Pillars of Privilege* framework, this article draws on specific strands of decolonial and intersectional theory that focus on relational systems of oppression within higher education. Foundational

thinkers such as Quijano (**2000**), de Sousa Santos (**2018**), and Crenshaw (**1989**) were selected for their influence on global discussions around coloniality, epistemic violence, and intersecting power structures. However, the scope of this article necessitated selective engagement. For instance, Wallerstein's world-systems theory (**2004**) offers an important macro-economic analysis of global inequality but was not directly incorporated as the framework emphasises micro-level institutional and pedagogical reflexivity. Similarly, the exclusion of hooks (**1984; 1994**) and Freire was not due to their lack of relevance—in fact, hooks' intersectional feminist critiques and Freire's radical pedagogy deeply inform the spirit of this work. Given the focus on structural pillars of power rather than pedagogical method alone, these scholars were referenced implicitly rather than explicitly. Future work may build on this foundation by integrating their praxis-focused approaches into operational models for classroom and curriculum transformation.

Theory/Author	Relevance	Reason for Inclusion or Exclusion
Aníbal Quijano	Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism	Central to identifying colonial structures in HE
Kimberlé Crenshaw	Intersectionality, structural marginalisation	Core to analysing co-constitutive systems of exclusion
Boaventura de Sousa Santos	Epistemologies of the South, knowledge pluralism	Supports epistemic transformation within HE
Immanuel Wallerstein	World-systems theory, global capitalist hierarchies	Important macro-level frame, excluded due to institutional-level focus
bell hooks	Intersectional feminism, pedagogy of care and resistance	Relevant to praxis; omitted for space but acknowledged as foundational
Paulo Freire	Critical pedagogy, conscientisation	Deeply influential; future work can integrate Freirean approaches

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria of key theories and authors

Capitalism: Knowledge, commodification, and global inequality in Higher Education

As the first pillar of the *Pillars of Privilege* framework, capitalism is not merely an economic system but a historical structure of power, deeply entwined with colonial conquest and contemporary neoliberalism. The modern university, particularly in the Global North, has been shaped and sustained by the exploitative logics of colonial capitalism, which extracted resources, labour, and knowledge from the Global South while centralising prestige and authority in Western institutions.

Historically, the emergence of modern universities in Europe coincided with the expansion of colonial empires and capitalist economies. The extraction of wealth from colonised nations—through slavery, resource exploitation, and land dispossession—financed the intellectual and infrastructural growth of elite institutions. Bhambra et al. (**2018**) argue that this economic foundation is not merely historical; it continues to define global academic hierarchies today. Universities in the Global North command disproportionate access to research funding, publication outlets, and knowledge production networks, reinforcing a global division of labour in which institutions from the Global South are often relegated to the role of data suppliers rather than theory producers (**Connell, 2007; Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016**).

The entanglement of capitalism and coloniality also becomes evident in the commodification of education itself. The neoliberal turn in higher education has transformed universities into market-driven enterprises, wherein knowledge is framed as a private good rather than a public one. This shift has resulted in rising tuition fees, the expansion of student debt, increased managerialism, and a competitive emphasis on rankings and 'impact.' For many students, particularly those from working-class, racially minoritised, or migrant backgrounds, access to higher education is not only economically burdensome but also culturally alienating as the values of individualism, competition, and instrumentalism dominate institutional logics.

Decolonial theorists have warned against the alignment of decolonial agendas with neoliberal policy goals (**Mignolo and Walsh 2018**). When decolonisation is reduced to metrics (e.g., targets for "diverse" recruitment or superficial curriculum reform), it risks being co-opted by the same market logics it seeks to dismantle. This is especially evident in the rise of corporate diversity strategies and the use of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as a form of reputational management rather than substantive institutional change (**Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018**). Within such contexts, knowledge from the Global South may be included in curricula, but only in ways that are legible, consumable, and unthreatening to dominant paradigms.

Moreover, capitalism shapes the epistemological boundaries of academic disciplines. As Connell (**2007**) notes, mainstream social theory is largely built on European intellectual traditions while systematically ignoring or marginalising knowledge emerging from colonised or Indigenous contexts. The result is a Eurocentric canon that not only excludes but often devalues alternative epistemologies. This epistemic hierarchy reproduces a form of intellectual colonialism, wherein Western modes of knowing—often framed as rational, objective, and scientific—are treated as universal,

while others are deemed particular, subjective, or anecdotal (**de Sousa Santos, 2018**).

The consequences of this dynamic are felt most acutely by students and academics from the Global South. Their contributions are often undervalued, their knowledge systems misrecognised, and their labour exploited through precarious contracts, international tuition fees, and expectations to internationalise the curriculum without meaningful power or voice. As Stein (**2020**) argues, the decolonial challenge must go beyond inclusion to question the very terms of participation—who defines what knowledge counts, how it is validated, and to what ends it is mobilised.

Patriarchy: Gender, coloniality, and the politics of belonging in the academy

Patriarchy, understood not merely as the dominance of men over women, but as a broader structure of gendered, sexualised, and embodied hierarchy, shapes who feels welcome, safe, and seen in academic spaces. Decoloniality invites us to interrogate how colonial modernity not only imposed racial hierarchies but also inscribed Western gender binaries, heteronormativity, and misogynistic ideologies into institutional life (**Lugones, 2010; Oyěwùmí, 1997**). Within this context, the university emerges not as a neutral space of knowledge, but as a gendered and racialised structure that privileges certain bodies, voices, and ways of knowing over others.

Lugones (**2010**), in her theory of the coloniality of gender, asserts that colonial projects violently imposed a Western, binary gender system onto colonised peoples, erasing Indigenous understandings of gender as fluid and communal. This restructuring of gender relations through colonialism created new hierarchies that privileged white, cisgender, heterosexual men as normative, rational, and authoritative subjects. These logics endure in today's universities, where patriarchal norms still govern ideas of academic excellence, authority, and leadership.

In higher education, patriarchal structures manifest through gender disparities in pay, progression, and representation, particularly at senior levels. Although women now comprise the majority of undergraduate students in many countries, academic leadership remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. According to Advance HE (**2024**), women account for just over 30% of UK professors, and Black women make up 1 percent—a statistic that exemplifies the intersection of racism and sexism. Gender inequality in academia cannot therefore be understood in isolation from race, class, or coloniality. As Mirza (**2015**) notes, Black and minoritised women are often placed in positions of hyper-visibility, expected to serve

as representatives of diversity while simultaneously being excluded from decision-making spaces.

Furthermore, the lived experience of women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and non-binary people in academia is shaped by institutional cultures of sexism, heteronormativity, and gendered violence. Ahmed (**2017**) draws attention to the ways universities absorb complaints of sexual harassment or discrimination without addressing the root causes, often framing complainants as 'troublemakers' or 'killjoys'. These institutional mechanisms preserve patriarchal order by neutralising dissent and enabling harm. Similarly, Phipps (**2021**) highlights the gendered affective labour required of marginalised staff—especially queer and trans academics—who are expected to 'perform inclusion' while navigating cultures of silence and surveillance.

Patriarchy also shapes the construction of knowledge itself. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the masculinisation of objectivity and the devaluation of relational, embodied, or affective forms of knowing (**Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991**). Within Eurocentric epistemologies, reason and rationality are often coded as masculine and white, while emotion and subjectivity are feminised and dismissed. This epistemic hierarchy has colonial roots and continues to marginalise feminist, Indigenous, queer, and embodied knowledges within the academy.

The implications for students and educators are profound. Curricula that exclude feminist, queer, or Indigenous perspectives deny students access to alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. For minoritised students, particularly those who do not conform to heteronormative or binary gender roles, this absence can contribute to deep feelings of unbelonging. A decolonial feminist pedagogy therefore demands not only the inclusion of diverse content, but the transformation of how knowledge is taught, who teaches it, and how authority is negotiated in the classroom.

Decolonising higher education must thus confront not only Eurocentrism but also androcentrism—the privileging of male experiences and voices as the default. Patriarchy is not peripheral to the colonial university; it is foundational. If educators are to challenge the epistemic and structural violence of the academy, they must engage with the gendered legacies of colonialism that continue to shape institutional norms and practices. This includes creating spaces where gender-diverse students and staff are not merely included but affirmed, where feminist and queer knowledges are valued, and where pedagogies centre relationality, care, and collectivity as radical acts of resistance.

Racism: Colonial hierarchies, whiteness, and the racialised academy

Racism constitutes a foundational structure in the formation of higher education and its operation within academic institutions is not an aberration, but a continuation of the racial logics embedded in colonial modernity. Through Eurocentric epistemologies, the architecture of whiteness, and the structural marginalisation of racially minoritised scholars and students, racism continues to shape who is seen as legitimate within knowledge systems and whose presence is considered anomalous or excessive. Decoloniality demands not only an interrogation of overt racism but a systemic analysis of how race and racialisation underpin the very foundations of the modern university.

Colonialism relied on the codification of racial hierarchies to justify conquest, enslavement, and the subjugation of peoples. These hierarchies were later embedded in scientific, cultural, and intellectual frameworks, positioning whiteness as superior and others as subordinate or deficient. As Quijano (**2000**) argues, the coloniality of power persists through a racialised division of labour and knowledge in which the Global North monopolises the production of universal truths, while the Global South and racially minoritised communities are relegated to the margins. Universities in the West, therefore, are not only shaped by colonial wealth and structures but also serve as custodians of these racialised knowledge regimes.

Whiteness in the academy functions not only as a demographic reality—reflected in the overrepresentation of white scholars in senior leadership and professorial roles—but also as an epistemic norm. Ahmed (**2012**) describes whiteness as an institutional habit, reproduced through policies, traditions, and curricula that privilege white ways of knowing. This normativity is rarely named but is constantly maintained through what Fanon (**1952**) described as the colonisation of the mind, wherein whiteness becomes the unmarked standard by which all else is measured. As Arday and Mirza (**2018**) argue, the university reproduces itself through racialised logics that maintain white epistemic authority and cultural dominance.

Empirical research continues to document the exclusionary dynamics of racism in higher education. Rollock's (**2019**) *Staying Power* report reveals the deep isolation, racial microaggressions, and strategic navigation required by Black female professors in the UK. Despite years of advocacy and institutional commitments to equality, Black academics remain significantly underrepresented in professorial roles and often encounter hostile or indifferent environments. Mirza (**2015**) further illustrates how

Black and Asian women are positioned as both hyper-visible and invisible: called upon to represent diversity yet excluded from the centres of academic power. Their intellectual contributions are often undervalued, policed, or appropriated, reflecting a broader pattern of epistemic violence within the university.

Racism also operates through the content and delivery of curricula. Eurocentric canons dominate most disciplines, with limited engagement with Indigenous, Black, or Global South scholarship. Where non-Western perspectives are included, they are often relegated to optional modules or tokenised. Sian (**2019**) critiques this performative inclusion, arguing that superficial changes to reading lists do little to challenge the deeper racial hierarchies within knowledge production. The decolonial imperative, therefore, is not just to diversify content but to restructure the epistemic assumptions of disciplines—to unlearn what has been naturalised as neutral, objective, or foundational.

In addition, racism intersects with other structures (such as capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism) to create compounded exclusions. Colourism, for example, functions as a colonial residue that privileges lighter skin tones within and across racially marginalised groups, reinforcing proximity to whiteness as a determinant of academic credibility and access (**Hunter**, **2007**). Racial capitalism, as theorised by Robinson (**2020**), exposes how economic systems and racial hierarchies are co-constitutive, determining who benefits from the neoliberal university and who is exploited within it.

For students, the effects of institutional racism are often acute. Numerous studies have reported racial attainment gaps, lack of culturally responsive teaching, and experiences of everyday racism on campus (**NUS/UUK, 2019; Bhopal, 2018**). These forms of exclusion are not isolated incidents but structural features of institutions that remain grounded in colonial histories.

Decolonising education requires not only addressing the symptoms of racism but dismantling the infrastructures—curricular, cultural, and administrative—that sustain it. Racism in higher education is not a remnant of a past era but a contemporary reality that continues to structure access, legitimacy, and power. Recognising this pillar demands a confrontation with whiteness, not only as an identity but as a system of dominance, and a commitment to transforming the racialised logics of the university. This transformation is central to any meaningful decolonial project.

Ableism: Normativity, neurodivergence, and the invisibility of disability in Higher Education

Ableism—systemic discrimination against disabled people and the privileging of able-bodied, neurotypical norms—in the context of higher education often operates silently, woven into institutional assumptions about productivity, intelligence, independence, and professionalism. Its colonial roots, like those of racism and patriarchy, remain embedded in the ways universities are structured, whom they are designed for, and whose ways of knowing are valued. Decoloniality demands that we not only recognise the marginalisation of disabled people in academia but also interrogate the ableist assumptions that underpin Eurocentric knowledge systems and institutional design.

Historically, colonial regimes categorised bodies according to their perceived utility and value to the colonial project, with able-bodiedness linked to rationality, strength, and superiority. Disabled, neurodivergent, and ill bodies were viewed through the lens of deficiency, degeneracy, and unfitness—concepts that were racialised, gendered, and used to justify eugenics, confinement, and exclusion (**Grech & Soldatic, 2016**). These logics persist in the contemporary academy, where students and staff who do not conform to normative expectations of communication, cognition, physical movement, or temporal organisation are frequently marginalised.

Goodley (**2014**) and Campbell (**2009**) argue that ableism is not simply a matter of discriminatory attitudes but an entire system of cultural values and institutional practices that construct disability as a deviation from the norm. This norm, of the rational, autonomous, efficient, and productive academic, is a deeply colonial and capitalist ideal, one that equates success with individualism and bodily control. The neoliberal university, with its emphasis on metrics, performance, and speed, reinforces these ideals by measuring success through outputs (publications, teaching evaluations, funding) that often disregard the different temporalities and needs of disabled and neurodivergent academics and students (**Brown & Leigh, 2020).**

Ableism also manifests through the physical and digital infrastructures of HE. University buildings may remain inaccessible, and online systems might be designed without attention to sensory or cognitive diversity. While legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 in the UK mandates 'reasonable adjustments', these are often framed as reactive accommodations rather than proactive, structural redesigns. This model places the burden on disabled individuals to disclose their needs and request modifications, often navigating bureaucracy, stigma, and scepticism in the process (**Kerschbaum et al., 2017**). Disclosure, moreover,

is not a neutral act—it requires weighing the risks of exposure against the potential benefits of access.

The epistemic dimensions of ableism are equally significant. Mainstream academic cultures prize particular forms of engagement (verbal fluency, written coherence, rational debate) while sidelining or dismissing other modes of expression, such as sensory learning, silence, visual communication, or repetition. Neurodivergent ways of knowing, including those associated with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or dyspraxia, are often seen as barriers rather than as valuable epistemologies in their own right (**Yergeau, 2017**). A decolonial approach to disability would not only expand access but challenge the very assumptions about what counts as knowledge, how it is produced, and by whom.

Moreover, the intersections of ableism with other pillars (particularly racism and capitalism) further compound exclusion. Disabled people of colour are more likely to face structural poverty, misdiagnosis, and neglect in education systems, and are underrepresented in academic leadership and policy making. These experiences cannot be disentangled from the legacies of colonialism, which constructed racialised and disabled bodies as sites of control, containment, and disposability (**Davis, 2016**).

Inclusive education must therefore be grounded in anti-ableist, anti-colonial praxis that refuses normative standards of ability and centres disability justice. This requires more than inclusion; it demands transformation: of pedagogy, infrastructure, curricula, and institutional culture. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), participatory pedagogy, and relational approaches to access are steps toward this transformation, but they must be accompanied by a deeper re-evaluation of the values embedded in academic life. Ableism, like the other pillars of privilege, sustains the illusion of a neutral, meritocratic university. Challenging it compels us to reimagine what education is for and who it is truly designed to serve. If decolonising the university means disrupting all systems of hierarchy and exclusion, then ableism must be recognised as not peripheral, but central, to that project.

Conclusion: From recognition to praxis—reimagining the decolonial university

This article has advanced a critical interrogation of privilege and (un)belonging in higher education through a decolonial lens, using the Pillars of Privilege framework to expose the intersecting systems of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism. These pillars are not isolated but foundational to the modern university, structuring access, knowledge, and institutional culture.

Capitalism commodifies education, privileges productivity, and maintains North–South hierarchies (**Connell, 2007**). Patriarchy embeds masculinist norms, marginalising feminist and queer epistemologies (**Ahmed, 2017; Phipps & Young, 2015**). Racism sustains Eurocentrism and whiteness in curricula and leadership, sidelining Global South and racially minoritised knowledges (**Bhopal, 2018; Rollock, 2019**). Ableism, often under-theorised in decolonial discourse, normalises able-bodied, neurotypical standards and excludes alternative embodiments of knowledge (**Goodley, 2014**).

Pillar	Key Theorists	Problematics in HE	Recommendations
Capitalism	Quijano, Connell, Bhambra et al., Stein & Andreotti	Neoliberalism, commodification, marketisation, Global North dominance	Revalue public knowledge, decommodify curricula, include Southern epistemologies
Patriarchy	Lugones, Ahmed, Mirza, hooks (noted), Oyěwùmí	Gendered leadership, heteronormativity, epistemic masculinism	Feminist pedagogy, representation of queer/trans/non-binary scholars, relational knowledge practices
Racism	Quijano, Bhopal, Rollock, Arday & Mirza, Fanon	Whiteness, Eurocentrism, underrepresentation of Global South and racially minoritised	Anti-racist curriculum reform, institutional power redistribution, culturally responsive pedagogy
Ableism	Goodley, Campbell, Brown & Leigh, Davis, Yergeau	Neurotypical norms, access barriers, epistemic exclusion of disability	Universal Design for Learning, anti-ableist teaching, disability justice in policy and pedagogy

Table 2: Summary Matrix: The four Pillars of Privilege in higher education

As Quijano (**2000**), de Sousa Santos (**2018**), and Mignolo and Walsh (**2018**) argue, universities remain embedded in the colonial matrix of power. Simply diversifying content or staff without challenging these epistemological foundations risks reproducing colonial harm. The Pillars of Privilege framework offers educators a scaffold for critical reflection—making power visible and inviting ethical responsibility. Decolonisation must move beyond performative inclusion toward institutional and pedagogical transformation: embedding non-Western epistemologies, designing inclusive assessment, valuing neurodivergent knowledges, and resisting neoliberal logics of speed and competition (**Stein, 2020; Ahmed, 2012**). It is a process marked by discomfort, resistance, and relational labour (**de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015**).

Future research should explore how intersecting structures of privilege operate across contexts, especially in the Global South. Greater attention must be paid to ableism's intersection with race and class, and to the role of digital platforms in reproducing or challenging colonial dynamics. We must also reimagine the university's purpose: centring relationality over competition, plurality over hierarchy, care over compliance. Alternative models from Indigenous, feminist, and abolitionist traditions offer pathways to a more just academy.

Educators have a critical role in this work. Decolonial praxis must begin with our syllabi, research, practices, and relationships. The Pillars of Privilege framework provides a foundation, but transformation depends on ongoing commitment and collective vision. To decolonise is to humanise higher education—to challenge exclusionary norms and co-create institutions grounded in justice, multiplicity, and belonging.

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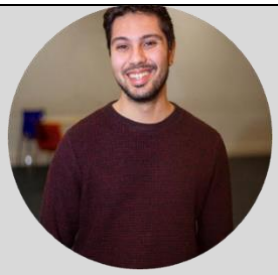
Figure 1: The four Pillars of Privilege which outline colonialism as the underlying root cause of elitism and privilege. The four pillars are capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria of key theories and authors

Table 2: Summary Matrix: The four Pillars of Privilege in higher education



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