

FALL 2025
VOL. 2, NO. 1

WUJUR

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH





December 2025

To the WashU Community,

Last year, the *Washington University Journal of Undergraduate Research* was founded to promote student research and the discovery of knowledge across all fields. We released our first edition last spring with outstanding reception and promised to continue expanding. Now, we are excited to share *Vol. 2 No. 1*. This second edition improves on all facets of our previous work. Inside, you will find beautiful spreads, a greater quantity of enhanced illustrations, our revamped Features initiative, and rigorous, remarkable research spanning fields from biology to sociology and history to computer science. We are proud to serve as a platform for these ten outstanding student works found within, which we believe are truly reflective of our values of excellence, passion, and curiosity.

I would like to extend particular thanks to my brilliant and talented team of Managing Editors and Directors on the Editorial Board who made this outstanding effort possible. This edition, we comprehensively overhauled our review and production workflows, giving student members the opportunity to directly manage manuscripts and get more involved in our processes. Our improvements here will ensure a system that ushers great impact for many more years to come.

Thank you to the WashU Library Scholarly Communication & Digital Publishing Services (ScholPub) and Micah Zeller for their continued support as we expand our publication scope and impact. Together, we are adopting new methods to promote the reach and visibility of our articles. In the future, authors can expect individual archived pages for their works, persistent identifiers, greater search engine reach, and enhanced discoverability.

Finally, thank you to all of the members of the *WUJUR* General Board—our Peer and Senior Reviewers, Handling and Production Editors, and Illustrators—for your selfless commitment. This journal was created to support students like you, and our mission would not be possible without you.

Together, we are pursuing our vision for *WUJUR* and realizing its greatest potential. More than 90 students, a doubling from last edition, have been involved in the creation of this work. Our readership now exceeds 1000 individuals. We print in increasing quantity, achieve first-item search results, and span departments and offices across the university. Now, we are enacting significant initiatives to support our authors and core mission. I am excited to share them with you soon. Thank you once again, and enjoy!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cedric Bruges'.

Cedric Bruges
Co-Founder, Editor-in-Chief

The Washington University Journal of Undergraduate Research
Vol. 2 No. 1 | Fall 2025

WUJUR (the Washington University Journal of Undergraduate Research) is a student-run organization and peer-reviewed journal dedicated to student research and the discovery of knowledge across all disciplines at WashU.

Cover image: Minglei Zhao, PhD | Williams Lab | WashU

Retinal ganglion cell neurons and their associated nerve fiber layer astrocytes in the retina

Glial cells called astrocytes (green) form a dense scaffold in the retina and provide crucial support to retinal ganglion cell (magenta) axons that relay all information about the visual world to the brain. Retinal ganglion cells and their axons are susceptible to degeneration that leads to vision loss in common conditions like glaucoma and head injury. The Williams Lab studies retinal ganglion cell and glial responses to degeneration in the retina with the goal of developing new therapeutics to preserve vision. Image used with permission and modified from original.

A note from the WashU School of Medicine Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences:

Get involved in Vision Science research! The WashU vision science community is interdisciplinary, spanning both departments and campuses. We take a collaborative approach to study the biology of vision from the front of the eye to the back of the brain, and to advance our capabilities to do so. Supported in part by the Bright Center for Human Vision, we innovate strategies to translate our discoveries and to understand, preserve, and restore vision in cases of blinding diseases. We encourage motivated undergraduates who are interested in research to visit <https://sites.wustl.edu/visionscience/> to learn more.

For inquiries contact: wujur@su.wustl.edu

Copyright © 2025. *Washington University Journal of Undergraduate Research*. All rights reserved for compilation, design, and editorial content.

Individual articles © 2025 by their respective authors. Illustrations and images remain the property of their respective authors or rights holders and are reproduced here with permission or under fair use.

Any field, any discipline, any WashU student.
wujur.org



General Board

Production Editors

Sama Daham
Sara Izhar
Hannah Kim
Bera Koklu
Ivana Kolev
Anitra Krishnan
Jacqueline Lee
Sophia Mikhail
Evelyn Nedelciuc
Anna Piasecki
Selena Zou

Illustrators

Sean Joyce
Jacqueline Lee
Chelsea Lim
Margaret Susovica
Lucy Wei

Handling Editors

Lucy Chen
Kate Hemsworth
Julia Claire Johnson
Anika Kothari
Ellie Lu
Ashwin Nair
Jaden Sanders
Nour Abou Shousha
Nikhita Varma
Ethan Wong

Senior Reviewers

Maggie Chen
Rohan Krishnamoorthi
Vyapti Shahani Subramaniam

Features Writers

Tali Ben-Yehuda
Julia Claire Johnson
Kefan Cui

Peer Reviewers

Cherish Amby-Okolo
Nigina Aripova
Evelyn Bekker
Tali Ben-Yehuda
Kyle Chen
Elina Deshpande
Nyrach Dhariwal
Charlie Doehring
Andrea Gabriel
Nishanth Gaddam
Dhruv Goyal
Namya Gupta
Roxana Hernandez
Joao-Cameron Hopkinson
Kaho Hoshi
Ethan Hou
Arnav Ajay Jadav
Anastasia Jones
Rohan Kondapalli
Ansley Lee
Claire Lu
Ezra Miller
Bilal Mir
Maya Mohanty
George Naismith
Jennifer Ong
Jay Pallepatti
Joleen Pan
Sophia Park
Melissa Parkinson
Ishan Patel
Haniah Peracha
Yashika Raja
Rosa Sahandi
Rahel Samantrai
Cole Smith
Caden Stockwill
Alex Suski
Margaret Susovica
Andrew Tang
Steven Tao
Dev Tarwala
Marisa Uttamchandani
Blair Wagner
Arya Waza
Jules Wolff-Merovick
Shirley Xi
Jodie Xiao
Yiran (Khloe) Zhong

Editorial Board

Editor-in-Chief
Cedric Bruges

Managing Editor of
Operations
Serina Cao

Managing Editor of Content
Geneva Burkitt

Managing Editor of Peer
Review
Lidiia Volkova

Managing Editor of
Production
Mimi Zhou

Managing Editor of Design
Leah Hulvershorn

Managing Editor of
Features
Kefan Cui

Directors of Administration
Abby Tang
Tali Jarmond

Director of Student
Engagement
Astrid Burns

Director of Professional
Outreach
Nayeon Kim

Faculty Advisors

Dr. Lori Markson
Dr. Diana José-Edwards

With Help From

Micah Zeller
WashU Libraries
ScholPub

Funded By

WashU Student Union

Outstanding
Impact Award

For research with demonstrated potential for societal or disciplinary impact

WUJUR is pleased to present the Vol. 2 No. 1 Outstanding Impact
Award to Jane Leavitt ‘27 for her manuscript titled:

*Icelandic Identity and Landscape: The Effect of Modernization and
Climate Change on Icelandic Folklore and Supernatural Beliefs*

Awarded for demonstrating exceptional potential to make a meaningful impact outside the university
setting, Leavitt exemplifies how undergraduate research can connect disciplines, inspire change, and drive
innovation at WashU and beyond.

Call for Submissions

Spring 2026

Looking to publish your own work?

WUJUR will open submissions for its next edition, Vol. 2 No. 2, at the beginning of the Spring 2026 semester. Eligible materials include original research publications, poster, theses, and review articles.

We invite you to take this exciting opportunity to share your work with the broader WashU community and beyond. By submitting to WUJUR, you will gain recognition and valuable experience, while contributing to a longstanding tradition of undergraduate research at our university.

Any field, any discipline, any WashU student.
wujur.org



Table of Contents

FEATURES	
An Interview with Shawn Syed	JULIA CLAIRE JOHNSON '28 07
A Spotlight on Dr. E.A. Quinn	KEFAN CUI '29 08
What's on Your Desk with Professor Joe Steensma	KEFAN CUI '29 10
NATURAL SCIENCES, MATHEMATICS, AND ENGINEERING	
High-Frame-Rate Doppler Ultrasound with Contrast Agents Enables Deep Vein Thrombosis Delineation	JIAMING SUN '27 12
Restoring Resolution in Accelerated FLAIR MRI via U-Net Super-Resolution	EUGENE JOO '27 16
The Role of Active Vitamin D on Reserved Intestinal Stem Cells	JUN RU CHEN '29 20
SOCIAL SCIENCES	
Communicating with the Masses: The Impact of Bureaucratic Autonomy on Integrative Propaganda	CAROLINE FONG '25 24
Too Many or Not Enough: Reproductive Labor and the Hui Minority in Post-One-Child Policy China	WILEY LUAN '26 37
The Necessity of Cultural Consciousness in Grief Counseling	HANNAH DORVAL '29 43
Unveiling Masculinity: A Critical Analysis of Racial Representation in Men's Health Covers	JORDAN KIM '27 54
ARTS AND HUMANITIES	
From Barrie to Branding: The Rewriting of Tinker Bell in the Disney Fairies Franchise	SOPHIA GARTHE '27 58
Icelandic Identity and Landscape: The Effect of Modernization and Climate Change on Icelandic Folklore and Supernatural Beliefs	JANE LEAVITT '27 63
From Community to Self-Ownership: Black Power, Gangsta Rap, and the Neoliberal 80s	SHAWN SYED '28 71



Photo by | Mimi Zhou '28

Features

RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT | ARTS AND HUMANITIES

“Straight Outta Compton” and Continuity: An Interview with Shawn Syed

Written by Julia Claire Johnson '28
Washington University in St. Louis

The driving beats, the controversial lyrics, the ensuing “moral panic” of the 1980s and 90s, and the undeniably controversial artists are just a few reasons why Gangsta rap is such an enduring cultural phenomenon. Rising to prominence in the late 1980s, the genre defined a generation and sparked national debates about the glorification of violence versus a harsh form of social commentary on inner-city life. But what connects this new wave of individualism and ideas of self-ownership seen in Gangsta rap to the collective social movements that came just a decade before?

This was the question that Shawn Syed sought to answer. Syed, a current WashU history major from the class of 2028, has always been interested in modern American politics and culture as well as 19th-century Europe and Asia. In high school, in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, his teacher commented on “this element of Gangsta rap, about having total control of yourself and being able to fend off anything in your environment and how people should read more socially into that.” This one-off comment inspired Syed to look into the literature surrounding gangsta rap and decide to use the topic for his College Writing final project.

“I want to understand things that we traditionally think are irrational or have no social explanation,” Syed said. “I want to sort of dig into the underlying social structure...to put it in context. And one way to put it in context is continuity.”

Syed found that previous scholars have said that there’s little to no continuity between the ideas of Gangsta rap and the ideas of collective Black social movements, like the Black Power movement. However, he argued that “the focus on defining the boundaries of your community...the possessiveness of your own community, shifts to a focus on self-owner-

ship.” This shift can happen due to a variety of changes, such as the war on crime and decreased resources for urban communities. As communities fragmented, people were drawn toward individualism and self-ownership as a way to assert power, which aligned with the neoliberal political culture that was sweeping the United States at the time.

“In the Black Power movement, community ownership is connoted by defense from over-policing and this military ideal of masculinity that persists in these discourses of self-ownership,” Syed explained. “Self-ownership is also defined by those same concepts, but in this case, it can now map onto these more right-wing free market policies.” This synthesis of left-wing aesthetics from the Black Power movement with right-wing values from neoliberalism is something that scholars call “fusionism,” which is what Syed argues is the connection between the seemingly disconnected transition between collective ideologies and the individualism in Gangsta rap.

One challenge Syed faced during the research process was differentiating between ideological references and realism in NWA’s song lyrics, such as their frequent mentions of Soviet weaponry. He found that rappers at the time wouldn’t ordinarily have access to these types of firearms, which meant that they were likely referring to these weapons due to their use in revolutions, especially in South America. He was able to turn this difficulty into an example to further strengthen his argument that “this revolutionary military masculinity is a continuity between the left-wing vision of Black Power and the individualistic right-wing vision in NWA.”

“The historical field is a lot broader than people think it is,” Syed said when asked about his thoughts on his field of

study and its future trajectory. “It’s not just politics. It can be culture, religion, food, or economics...all kinds of things. And because it studies structures that both constrain and enable our possibilities today, it’s important to examine. And anytime you learn the history of something, you’ll come away with a totally different understanding...especially when considering politics today.”

Syed advised students and new researchers that “if it seems like your research is tearing open the entire edifice of everything, all the scholarship that had been done before, I would say keep doing it. Just keep doing that and be original.” Over the course of his research, he had realized that he needed to invent new concepts and new vocabulary to describe the concepts of self-ownership and the boundaries around communities, because those topics had been overlooked by academia and the examination of them in detail was novel. But working straight up from the primary elements rather than extending or building upon other research is sometimes needed, he emphasized. “We need in the humanities and the historical discipline more projects that are really willing to construct a totally different framework of things. It can be scary to invent your own interpretations of everything... but keep doing that, and just make sure it’s rigorous, and something beautiful can come out of that.”

“We’re entering a strange new era with new factors and new variables,” Syed said. It’s important to look at the past to understand the forces that shape our future. ■

Read “From Community to Self-Ownership: Black Power, Gangsta Rap, and the Neoliberal 80s” on Page 71

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT | SOCIAL SCIENCES

Mysteries of Human Milk: A Spotlight on Dr. E.A. Quinn

Written by Kefan Cui '29
Washington University in St. Louis



Nearly every baby in the world receives breastmilk at some point in their early development. Yet, as Dr. E.A. Quinn points out, “We don’t know that much about it. There’s only probably about 20,000 articles ever published on breast milk, and there’s over a million published on HIV. It really just speaks to the huge gap...and an incredible need for research.”

Quinn, an Associate Professor of Biological Anthropology at WashU, is determined to close that knowledge gap. There are the applied questions,” she remarks, “how do we help premature babies grow with milk? How do we increase access to milk for all babies? How do we improve nutrition for all babies?” Then, there are the bigger evolutionary questions: “How does milk allow us to adapt?... I want to know how our babies and their unusual biology of big brains and high body fat evolved. And how does that co-evolve with our milk? Like, what are the signals...and hormones and the nutrients and the microbes in our milk that are supporting [our significantly larger brains and higher body fat at birth]?”

“

I want to know how our babies and their unusual biology of big brains and high body fat evolved. And how does that co-evolve with our milk?

These are just some of the evolutionary and applied questions that drive Quinn’s research. In fact, her quest for answers has taken her across the world, from high-altitude communities in Nepal

to cohorts of mothers in the Philippines, and even to the National Zoo in D.C.

Recently, however, Quinn has shifted her focus closer to home. “I have a three-year-old and a six-year-old. So that makes traveling halfway around the world and being about 30 hours away from home kind of difficult right now.” Currently, she collaborates with the NICU at St. Louis Children’s Hospital, leading breast milk assay development—a project she’s been involved in since 2008.

Quinn’s fascination with human milk traces back to her senior honors thesis research on the Kulubnarti cemetery in the Batn el-Hagar region, an area of Southern Sudan. There, she analyzed “the third rib on 300 children’s mummies from the cemetery to do dietary reconstruction and understand infant weaning age.” Spending much of her senior year of college “cutting ribs out of mummies” and digesting them into collagen for stable isotope analysis, Quinn reflected that she “walked out of that experience knowing I loved it. I loved research.” Yet, Quinn sought to move beyond bones. “I didn’t want to work with mummies anymore...But I wanted to keep working with kids, and I wanted to work with living adults.”

Taking a gap year after graduation, Quinn did just that. She transitioned to work with a graduate student mentor as a research assistant, exploring “how kids grew...extracting growth hormones from their feces.” However, Quinn began to think “that maybe [her mentor] only had half the story if she was only looking at what was going on with the babies, and not looking at what was going on with the milk” in relation to infant development.

“So, I decided that that was the direction I wanted to go in,” Quinn said with conviction, detailing the decision that would define her career in human milk research. By the end of her gap year, she carried that conviction into graduate

school at Northwestern, where she began studying variation in breastfeeding behaviors and human milk composition.

For her dissertation, Quinn took a longitudinal approach to these questions on Cebu Island in the Philippines. There she spent six months living and working with the community, as well as studying three generations of mothers from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutritional Survey. She “collected breast milk samples and analyzed them for their nutritional and fatty acid composition.” Quinn’s work yielded a remarkable pattern and novel results: mothers of low-birth-weight babies produced breast milk with a completely different nutritional and fatty acid composition than mothers of full-term infants. “We’re actually detecting a maternal effect of birth size on milk composition,” she explained. “In fact, we’re the first group to describe it in humans.”

Upon returning to the U.S., Quinn spent three months at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., where she turned her attention to evolutionary questions in milk: another area she’s deeply passionate about. Quinn’s work consisted of analyzing primate milk samples, occasionally working with the primates themselves. In fact, she returned the summer after graduating to continue analyzing additional samples.

Beginning in 2020, Quinn has continued this comparative research at WashU, holding a grant from The Smithsonian Institution to study “brain development and milk composition” across 144 samples from 14 different species of primates. “We’ve had a lot of Orangutan milk and a lot of Gorilla milk,” she notes, “we haven’t had any chimp milk...but we got chimps coming, so we’re excited.” Through their work, Quinn and her colleagues highlight some fascinating evolutionary patterns. Humans, for example,

“have a whole lot more sugar in their milk,” as well as “slightly higher milk fat than other primates.” Quinn hypothesizes that this extra milk fat is actually protective. “We’re putting more fat in our milk so that we can protect long-chain fatty acids for inclusion in brain and eye tissue and nervous tissue. And so we produce more of the unsaturated fatty acids that are cheap to burn so that they can be metabolized, and those longer specialized fatty acids can be incorporated into our neural tissue and our nervous system.” In fact, this hypothesis aligns with the relatively rapid postnatal brain development seen in human infants compared to other primates.

“

We’re putting more fat in our milk so that we can protect long-chain fatty acids for inclusion in brain and eye tissue and nervous tissue.

Since 2013, Quinn has conducted fieldwork in the Nubri Valley, a remote high-altitude region within Nepal’s Manaslu mountain range. There, Quinn studies “infant growth, infant health, and breast milk composition” among ethnic Tibetan communities that live between 8000 and 13000 feet above sea level. Her findings are striking. “We have found very high concentrations of milk fat among ethnic Tibetans compared to other human populations,” she explains. Quinn hypothesizes that this difference in milk fat “is related to the hypoxia inducible factor one gene HIF-1,” which is thought to regulate oxygen, hypoxia, and fat regulation in the mammary gland in Tibetan populations.

Carrying out this research, however, is no easy feat. “There are no roads, only footpaths where we work,” Quinn says. “There were footpaths up and down the sides of mountains. There were landslides. We had an earthquake—we’ve had a couple of earthquakes while we were there. Parts of the trail can collapse. We’ve had some very scary bridge crossings, that kind of stuff.” To make science possible in such conditions, her team brings the lab with them...literally. Their entire operation is portable, carried from

village to village with human power. “We have two highly trained porters whose entire job is to move the lab...they are fantastic...some of the cornerstones of our project,” Quinn shares. Porters Shaum and Gautum also shoulder tanks of liquid nitrogen as the team travels from community to community, ensuring milk samples are frozen within hours of collection on site. “Sometimes we also fly it up in a helicopter,” she admits, laughing, “which is completely and utterly terrifying because liquid nitrogen boils at altitude. So as you go up, it starts boiling faster and faster, and it effectively becomes a bomb.”

Innovative discoveries, just like ones she made in Nepal, are what captivate Quinn. “You know, it’s just, it’s so exciting what we’re actually learning,” she raves. “We’re learning all this cool new stuff in all these new ways.” Nevertheless, between these breakthroughs, Quinn is still keenly aware of the barriers facing her field. She points out that human milk research is still severely underfunded relative to its importance and subsumed under “pediatric growth” at the NIH: “The usual budget for human milk research from the NIH is like \$6 million a year. That’s nothing. If you think about the budget of the NIH being in the billions, it’s a rounding error.” Furthermore, Quinn described times where she “submitted grant proposals to study aspects of human milk,” but “got comments back from reviewers that nobody cares about this, or that this isn’t an important question.” Yet, when she “read those reviews to moms...they’re shocked, because these are things that really matter and really impact their health.”

These obstacles make Quinn more determined to highlight the tangible public health implications of her research. To her, the best choice for infants is “the birthing parent’s milk,” with donor milk a close second. However, ready access to donor milk for same sex or adoptive couples is a huge concern. “We can donate milk and it’s sent to Ohio or Indiana, but we don’t have a donor milk bank in St. Louis,” Quinn says, noting the lack of better alternatives to the third-best option, baby formula.

In fact, her research is vital for infants who only have access to formula, since the more we know about what’s in human milk through research like Quinn’s, “the better we can understand how to design formulas that maximally support infant growth...and make evidence-based decisions for all infants.”

Though Quinn advocates breastfeeding or donor milk as the best options for infant nutrition, she recognizes the complex social and economic barriers many parents face in taking unpaid maternity leave to nurse an infant. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees job protection during leave, but not pay. Consequently, without a federal mandate for paid maternity leave, the majority of employers simply don’t offer it. Quinn echoes this point, stating that, even now, many parents (including WashU staff fourteen years ago) don’t get paid time off for the birth or adoption of a child. “They have to take accumulated leave, or unpaid FMLA.” As a result, many parents who don’t have the financial privilege to forgo income for long periods make the choice to return to work immediately, making breastfeeding at home impossible.

For Quinn, this stark reality underscores the broader point that scientific efforts promoting breastfeeding or designing better alternatives must go hand in hand with broader social support for families. She also sees this as an opportunity to push back against the narrative that you have to breastfeed as an expression of love. “No, the people that go to work two days after having a baby to keep a roof over their heads—that’s an incredible amount of love...but they also shouldn’t be in that position, right? We can’t advocate for breastfeeding without advocating for more support and more paid family leave.”

“

We can’t advocate for breastfeeding without advocating for more support and more paid family leave.

Even if large-scale policies are slow to shift, Quinn’s role as a breast milk researcher is equally powerful. Her research generates the knowledge needed to guide the design of better formula for infants. This means that families who rely on formula aren’t left behind. Instead, they’ll benefit from science that directly informs their infant’s nutrition. Through her work, Quinn is able to bridge the gap between her lab’s results and the real-world impact on infants and parents. ■

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT | SOCIAL SCIENCES

What's on Your Desk?

A look at the desk of Public Health Professor Joe Steensma

Story by Kefan Cui '29
Washington University in St. Louis

Photo by | Mimi Zhou '28



“

On my desk is everything that really has ever mattered to me. Just students, family, nature. That's it.

“

I believe the people who I mentor are really good people and I'm just there to help reflect the best of themselves back onto them.

“

A couple years ago, I had a really serious injury and my students got me a care package, including that candle. It was just a beautiful reminder of how kind and nice people are.

“

My brothers liked different football teams, but I wanted to be different so I became a Colts fan. I have all these helmets and different autographs, just a bunch of memorabilia from [the] Colts.

“

What [these books] really represent is a life well lived and a determination to turn my fiction into a reality.

“

Those books filled my life, they filled my dreams, they filled my aspirations. They filled all parts of my existence that were not things I could touch.

“A couple of them I wrote or edited: *Field Guide to Hot Spots and Birds of Illinois*, *A Guide to Finding Birds Along the Illinois River Flyway*, and *A Field Guide to the Birds of North Andros Island*. I actually have a few more books coming out, all on birds. One is *A Guide to Missouri Birds and Their Hotspots*, where I'm the author with my colleague, Colin Dobson; another is about biodiversity in Forest Park that I wrote with a students from WashU.

Before I was anything, I was a naturalist, and it's still a really big part of my life. There's sort of a reflection there with all those places I've been... I'm just a kid from a small town in Northern Indiana, and I hadn't been outside of four states until I was 22 years old.

But I had books, and some of these exact books were the books that I would read. I would see these creatures that were so exotic to me and I thought to myself: one day I'm going to see that bird, one day I want to see that frog, one day I want to see that snake.

Those books filled my life, they filled my dreams, they filled my aspirations, they filled all parts of my existence that were not things I could touch. In other words, as a poor kid from rural Indiana, these books represented places that were just as fictional in my mind as Narnia and Hogwarts.

I imagined the places that these books represented. But I couldn't picture them, there was no internet. So I had to

build these worlds of what Australia or Cuba looked like based upon the mammals and birds that were there.

So then, once I graduated from college, I got my first job and as soon as I was able to, I just got around the world as much as I could.

I just started ticking off those places. All these imaginary places I had built in my mind from these books were real and every single one was more magical and more spiritually deep than what I imagined.

I use them as references now to keep fresh with all my stuff, but what they really represent is, honestly, a life well lived and a determination to turn my fiction into a reality.”

Read more online at wujur.org

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

High-Frame-Rate Doppler Ultrasound with Contrast Agents Enables Deep Vein Thrombosis Delineation

Jiaming Sun '27, Jacob Elliot Ph.D., Julianna Simon Ph.D.
Washington University in St. Louis

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) affects approximately 1 to 2 per 1,000 individuals each year and remains a leading cause of pulmonary embolism-related deaths. Conventional ultrasound imaging is widely used for DVT detection but often fails to precisely delineate thrombus boundaries, limiting diagnostic confidence. High-frame-rate (HFR) Doppler ultrasound, built on plane-wave transmissions rather than sequential focused beams, enables ultrafast acquisition and improved sensitivity to subtle and transient blood flow signals, providing sharper definition of clot–lumen interfaces than standard color Doppler.

In this study, a DVT flow phantom was constructed from a silicone vessel embedded in a 2% agar block with an attached 3D-printed clot. A dual-channel peristaltic pump generated continuous physiologic circulation, while sodium dodecyl sulfate-stabilized perfluoropentane (SDS-PFP) nanoemulsions were introduced as ultrasound contrast agents. These droplets vaporize under acoustic excitation to form microbubbles that act as strong backscatterers, enhancing Doppler signal intensity and flow visualization. Imaging was conducted on a Verasonics NXT® research platform using an L7-4 linear probe (center frequency approximately 5 MHz). Plane-wave flash Doppler sequences with in-phase/quadrature (IQ) acquisition were implemented through MATLAB-controlled scripts on the system's PC interface, capturing 1,134 frames over 120 seconds at an effective frame rate of approximately 9.5 fps. The acquired IQ data were reconstructed into Doppler power maps to visualize flow disruption and clot boundaries.

Compared with conventional B-mode and color Doppler imaging, HFR Doppler produced crisper transitions between perfused and occluded regions and revealed localized flow disturbances around the thrombus. This work establishes a proof of concept that plane-wave HFR Doppler ultrasound combined with SDS-PFP contrast agents enhances delineation of thrombus boundaries in a DVT phantom model. Future studies will quantify contrast-to-noise and boundary-sharpness metrics and explore in vivo validation toward clinical translation.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a vascular disorder in which thrombi form in deep veins, most commonly in the lower extremities. DVT and pulmonary embolism (PE) together constitute venous thromboembolism, with an incidence of about 1 to 2 per 1,000 person-years in Western countries and substantial morbidity and mortality worldwide [1, 2]. PE occurs when a thrombus or thrombus fragment travels to and obstructs branches of the pulmonary artery, which can be rapidly fatal without timely diagnosis and treatment [2].

High-frame-rate (HFR) Doppler based on plane-wave transmissions acquires unfocused insonifications of the whole field of view and reconstructs images from all receive channels. This ultrafast strategy improves temporal sampling and the quality of the slow-time ensemble for Doppler estimation, increasing sensitivity to low or transient velocities near thrombus margins compared with conventional color Doppler [3]. Acoustic backscatter refers to echo energy returned to the transducer by tissues or particles; higher backscatter and a better signal-to-noise ratio improve the detectability of weak blood-flow signals along boundary layers.

Recent super-resolution methods, such as ultrasound localization microscopy (ULM) further demonstrate the value of ultrafast acquisitions by mapping microvasculature beyond the diffraction limit using tracked microbubbles [4, 5]. These advances motivate

evaluating HFR Doppler for sharper delineation of the clot–lumen transition in DVT models.

As shown in Figure 1, a conventional color Doppler example depicts macroscopic flow disruption near a thrombus but provides limited definition at the clot boundary. In contrast, Figure 2 illus

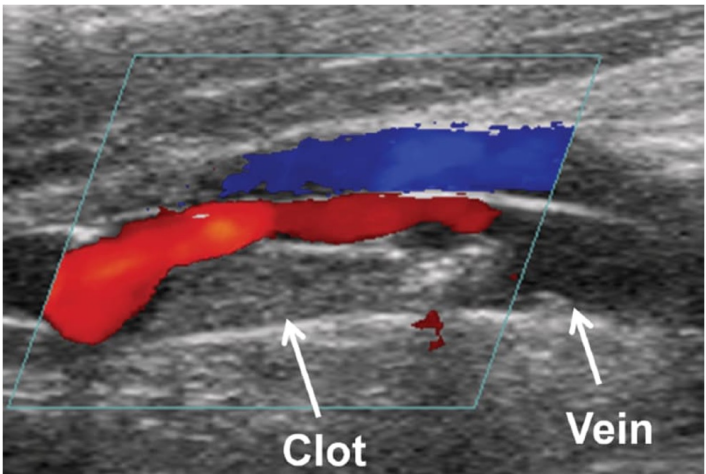


Fig. 1

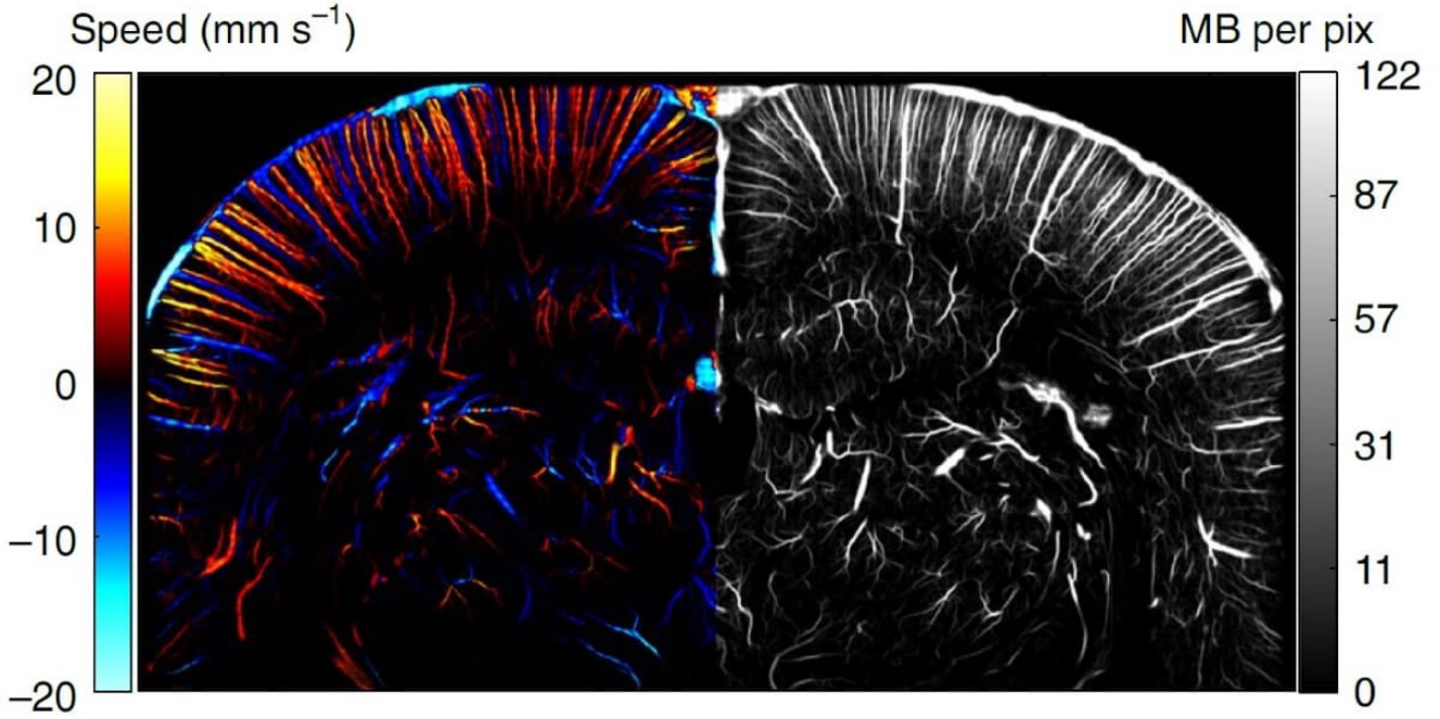


Fig. 2

trates an ultrafast ULM result (6.5 μm resolution in rat brain), highlighting how ultrafast acquisitions enable fine vascular detail. Building on these ideas, we investigated whether HFR Doppler combined with sodium dodecyl sulfate–stabilized perfluoropentane (SDS-PFP) nanoemulsions—nanodroplets that vaporize into highly scattering microbubbles under acoustic excitation—can enhance thrombus boundary delineation in a controlled DVT flow phantom.

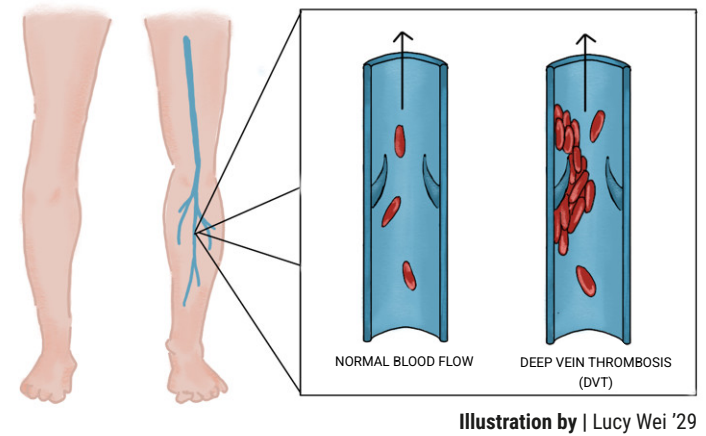


Illustration by | Lucy Wei '29

Materials and Methods

Phantom Fabrication

A deep vein thrombosis (DVT) flow phantom was constructed to emulate a partially occluded vessel. An 8 mm inner-diameter silicone tube was embedded horizontally in a 2% agar hydrogel block. A 4 mm diameter 3D-printed clot, fabricated from the same silicone material compatible with the Formlabs 3B Plus printer, was affixed to the inner wall to mimic a wall-adherent thrombus. Using the same material for both components minimized acoustic

impedance mismatch and ensured consistent elastic properties throughout the model. The 4 mm size was selected to represent a moderate obstruction that preserved some flow for Doppler visualization while maintaining stability during repeated scans. A thin neoprene acoustic absorber was placed beneath the phantom to suppress reflections from the container base and prevent imaging artifacts.

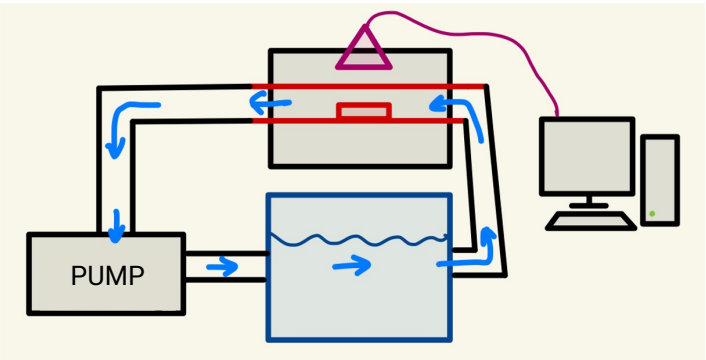


Fig. 3

Flow System

The phantom was connected in series with a dual-channel peristaltic pump and a fluid reservoir to establish a closed-loop circulation (Figure 1). A peristaltic pump transports liquid by sequential compression of flexible tubing, thereby generating smooth, controllable flow without exposing the working fluid to moving mechanical parts. This mechanism replicates low-pulsatility physiologic venous flow while maintaining sterility and consistency across runs. The system operated at the pump's minimum calibrated setting, producing steady laminar circulation through the phantom. The circulating fluid consisted of deionized water containing 2.1% sodium dodecyl sulfate–perfluoropentane (SDS-PFP) nanoemulsions, which served as ultrasound contrast agents. Under acoustic excitation, these droplets underwent acoustic droplet vaporization, forming transient microbubbles that acted as

strong backscatterers and markedly enhanced Doppler signal intensity. Figure 3 illustrates the closed-loop circuit, including the reservoir, pump tubing, and contrast flow path.

Imaging Setup and Acquisition

Ultrasound imaging was performed using a Verasonics® Vantage NXT research platform controlled via MATLAB R2022b and equipped with an L7-4 linear array probe (center frequency $\approx$ 5 MHz). The probe was positioned perpendicular to the phantom surface, with the imaging plane orthogonal to the vessel axis. Flash plane-wave Doppler sequences with in-phase/quadrature (I/Q) acquisition were executed through MATLAB scripts on the system’s PC interface. The acquisition captured 1,134 frames over 120 seconds, which were later beamformed and reconstructed into Doppler power maps for quantitative flow analysis. The B-mode image was grayscale inverted and resized to align with the Doppler -power map, producing a composite overlay that emphasized vessel boundaries and thrombus margins. All post-processing, including quadratic filtering, ensemble summation, thresholding, and morphological smoothing, was conducted in MATLAB to derive the final clot mask. Figure 4 shows the complete experimental setup, including the probe, vessel phantom, contrast reservoir, and peristaltic pump.

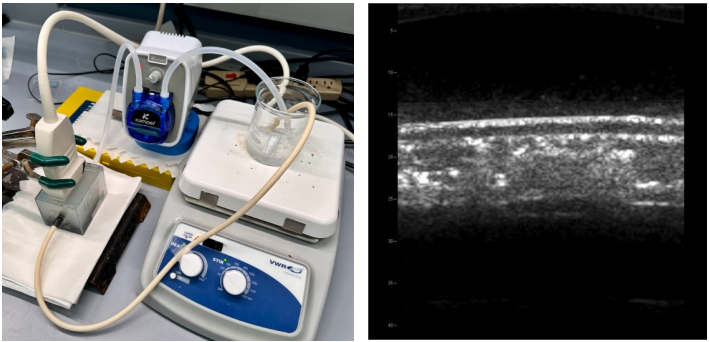


Fig. 4

Results

Conventional B-mode (brightness mode) imaging, which displays echo amplitude from stationary tissue, provided limited structural detail in this phantom. Only faint reflections were visible near the clot, and the thrombus–lumen interface was indistinct. Figure 5 shows the B-mode appearance of the vessel phantom.

Applying standard color Doppler revealed macroscopic flow disruption at the thrombus site. Regions occupied by the 3D-printed clot exhibited reduced or absent Doppler signal, while surrounding lumen showed persistent flow. The introduction of SDS-PFP nanoemulsions increased acoustic backscatter by vaporizing into microbubbles under ultrasound excitation, which acted as strong moving scatterers and thereby improve flow detectability. With contrast present, Doppler imaging captured motion more sensitively, delineating flow over and around the clot, while the clot itself remained a signal void. Figure 6 shows the same imaging plane with standard color Doppler rendering that outlines the intraluminal clot.

To more robustly separate moving from stationary regions, we reconstructed Doppler power maps from the acquired I/Q ensembles. Doppler power integrates the magnitude of slow-time fluctuations independent of flow direction, which is advantageous in this geometry where recirculation and complex angles can cause direc-

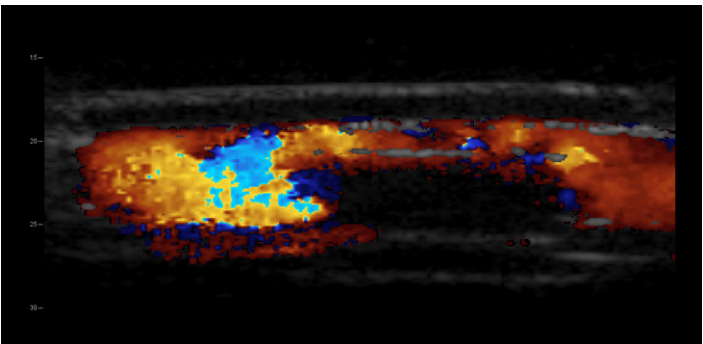


Fig. 6

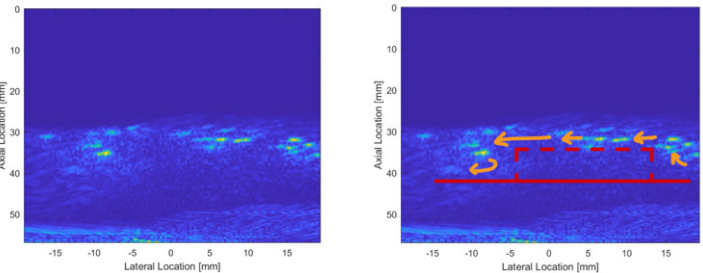


Fig. 7

tional velocity estimates to cancel or alias. Figure 7 presents the HFR Doppler-power reconstruction, in which brighter clusters correspond to stronger motion of contrast agents and luminal blood.

Compared with the corresponding conventional Doppler frames, the high frame rate (HFR) Doppler reconstructions provided crisper transitions between perfused and occluded regions. Stationary and moving areas were separated more cleanly, allowing clearer identification of the clot boundary within the phantom. Figure 8 annotates the HFR Doppler pattern that completes an outline of the thrombus. Overlaying the Doppler-power maps on grayscale inverted B-mode images further confirmed that flow signals terminated at the clot interface, producing a composite that localized the thrombus and emphasized its margins. Figure 9 shows the I/Q-based B-mode and HFR Doppler overlay.

Discussion

These experiments demonstrate that high frame rate (HFR) Doppler ultrasound with vaporized SDS-PFP nanoemulsions enhances thrombus boundary delineation in a DVT phantom. Conventional bright mode imaging failed to resolve clot margins, and standard Doppler showed only coarse flow disruption. In contrast, HFR Doppler produced clearer spatial separation between occluded and perfused regions. The IQ-based overlays measured clot lengths of 13.6–14.2 mm versus 11.6 mm from standard Doppler, representing an approximately 17–20% improvement in boundary accuracy.

HFR Doppler outperformed conventional imaging because its rapid plane wave acquisitions increased temporal sampling and ensemble size, improving sensitivity to low-velocity flows and reducing aliasing.

When combined with the strong acoustic backscatter of vaporized SDS-PFP droplets, this produced superior contrast-to-noise ratios and sharper clot outlines.

Limitations include the idealized phantom environment, absence of tissue heterogeneity or motion, and the instability of SDS-

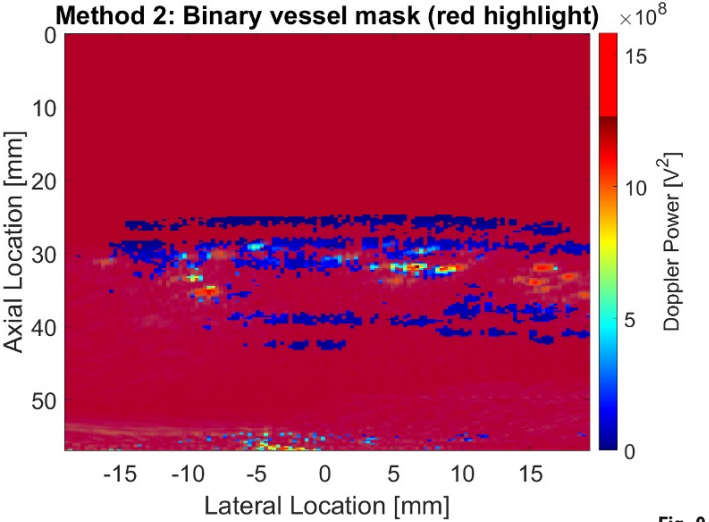


Fig. 9

PFP nanoemulsions, which may coalesce or recondense over time. Translating this technique in vivo will require optimizing droplet formulation, dosing, and acoustic parameters to balance stability and activation efficiency.

Overall, this study provides a proof of concept that contrast enhanced HFR Doppler imaging improves thrombus visualization beyond conventional Doppler. Future work should quantify edge sharpness and contrast-to-noise ratios under pulsatile and in vivo conditions to refine its diagnostic potential.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that high-frame-rate Doppler ultrasound, augmented with SDS-PFP nanoemulsions, improves delineation of thrombus boundaries in a DVT phantom relative to conventional Doppler. The approach yielded sharper separation of perfused and occluded regions and more accurate boundary measurements under controlled conditions. These findings suggest potential clinical value for refining thrombus assessment, risk stratification, and treatment planning, contingent on validation in pulsatile and in vivo settings. Looking ahead, integrating this acquisition and processing pipeline with ultrasound localization microscopy (ULM) could enable super-resolution mapping of clot morphology by localizing and tracking contrast microbubbles beyond the diffraction limit, thereby providing quantitative metrics such as edge sharpness, contrast-to-noise ratio, and microvascular flow patterns that are not accessible with standard methods. Future work will evaluate these metrics in more physiologic models and establish parameter choices that balance contrast stability, activation efficiency, and acquisition time for practical clinical use.

References

[1] Lutsey, P. L., & Zakai, N. A. (2022). Epidemiology and prevention of venous thromboembolism. *Nature Reviews Cardiology*, 20(4), 248–262. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41569-022-00787-6>

[2] Farmakis, I. T., Valerio, L., Bikkeli, B., Connors, J. M., Giannakoulas, G., Goldhaber, S. Z., Hobbom, L., Hunt, B. J., Keller, K., Spyropoulos, A. C., & Barco, S. (2022). Annual mortality related to pulmonary embolism in the U.S. before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, 80(16), 1579–1581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2022.08.721>

[3] Dong, Z., Li, S., Duan, X., Lowerison, M. R., Huang, C., You, Q., Chen, S., Zou, J., & Song, P. (2023). High volume rate 3-D ultrasound imaging using fast-tilting and redirecting reflectors. *IEEE Transactions on Ultrasonics, Ferroelectrics, and Frequency Control*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TUFFC.2023.3282949>

[4] Renaudin, N., Demené, C., Dizeux, A., Ialy-Radio, N., Pezet, S., & Tanter, M. (2022). Functional ultrasound localization microscopy reveals brain-wide neurovascular activity on a microscopic scale. *Nature Methods*, 19, 1004–1012. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41592-022-01549-5>

[5] Opacic, T., Dencks, S., Theek, B., Piepenbrock, M., Ackermann, D., Rix, A., Lammers, T., Stickeler, E., Delorme, S., Schmitz, G., & Kiessling, F. (2018). Motion model ultrasound localization microscopy for preclinical and clinical multiparametric tumor characterization. *Nature Communications*, 9, 1527. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-03973-8>

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Restoring Resolution in Accelerated FLAIR MRI via U-Net Super-Resolution

Eugene Joo '27

Washington University in St. Louis

Accelerated MRI scanning often results in lower resolution, introducing image distortions and loss of critical details. This study explores the application of machine learning to super-resolve Fluid-Attenuated Inversion Recovery Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FLAIR MRI) scans and restore those missing details. Specifically, we test models based on the U-Net architecture trained with two down sampling methods: removing two out of every 3 slices and linearly interpolating in image space and cropping the top and bottom thirds slices in k-space, the raw frequency data. Our experiments demonstrate that k-space down sampling consistently outperforms image-space methods in both Structural Similarity Index (SSIM) and Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio (PSNR) metrics, while also achieving superior reconstruction of fine details. Additionally, a multi-slice input approach using three adjacent slices was shown to further improve results by providing additional spatial context. This work allows for the restoration of MRI scans collected in an accelerated manner, significantly enhancing image quality and detail for improved diagnostic confidence.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is a critical method in the non-invasive detection and diagnosis of degenerative diseases in the brain. The precision of a diagnosis using MRI scans is highly dependent on their spatial resolution, with higher spatial resolution providing a greater level of detail in the final image. However, achieving this higher resolution requires prolonged scan times, which is sometimes not an option in time-sensitive scenarios.

Scan times can be reduced by collecting less data in k-space, which is the frequency domain where raw MRI data is collected and stored [1]. However, this reduction in data lowers the spatial resolution and can lead to a low-resolution final image containing artifacts such as blurring.

This work attempts to address these issues by applying machine learning to enhance and super-resolve the MRI images after their acquisition. Specifically, we will focus on super-resolving Fluid Attenuated Inversion Recovery (FLAIR) MRI scans using the U-Net architecture.

Originally developed for biomedical image segmentation, the process of identifying and labeling structures within medical images, U-Net's encoder-decoder structure with skip connections makes it well suited for reconstructing high-resolution images from low-resolution inputs (Figure 1). This capability makes it an ideal choice for restoring fine structural details lost during accelerated scanning [3].

The FLAIR MRI dataset used in this study consists of volumetric scans, which are each stored as a three-dimensional array of voxels (three-dimension pixels). Because the data was collected using an accelerated protocol, two out of every three slices are missing, meaning the images retain only one-third of the original spatial information.

Methods

To reconstruct the missing information in super-resolution, a model needs to be trained using a simulated data set created from MRI scans at the desired resolution. We experimented with two

downsampling methods: one in image space and one in k-space.

The image space downsampling is performed by removing two out of every three slices using linear interpolation on the original high-resolution MRI scan to match the dimensions of the real data. Then, to feed the image into the model, every voxel was tripled, matching the dimensions of the ground truth image. Since the real data was already missing two out of every three slices, feeding it into the model only required each of the voxels to be tripled along the axis with missing data.

The k-space downsampling for the simulated data set involved taking the high-resolution image and converting the image to k-space using a Fourier Transform [1]. By removing information from the domain where raw MRI data is initially collected, we hope to create a more accurate simulated downsampling process. Then, to match the amount of missing information from the real data, the first and last third of the k-space images were masked out. Afterward, an inverse Fourier Transform was applied for the final downsampled image. To replicate this process on the real data, the k-space image in the frequency domain was padded on the left and right sides with rectangles of equal dimensions to the original image to triple the width. After an inverse Fourier Transform, an image that matches the dimensions of the simulated data set was obtained. This dimension matching step is critical in getting the expected behavior from the super-resolution model that was trained on the simulated data set.

Since MRI scans include 3D data, two separate models were trained for two different views of the volume: coronal and sagittal, the terms used to describe different planes of the brain. This approach allowed the model to learn patterns specific to each view, improving reconstruction accuracy.

We were also able to take advantage of the data's 3D nature by implementing a modified version of the U-Net model. This worked by allowing the initial downsampling block to accept multiple input channels, each of which was fed with adjacent slices of the MRI. Then, the output of the final upblock was validated against the ground truth of the middle of the input slices. To ensure

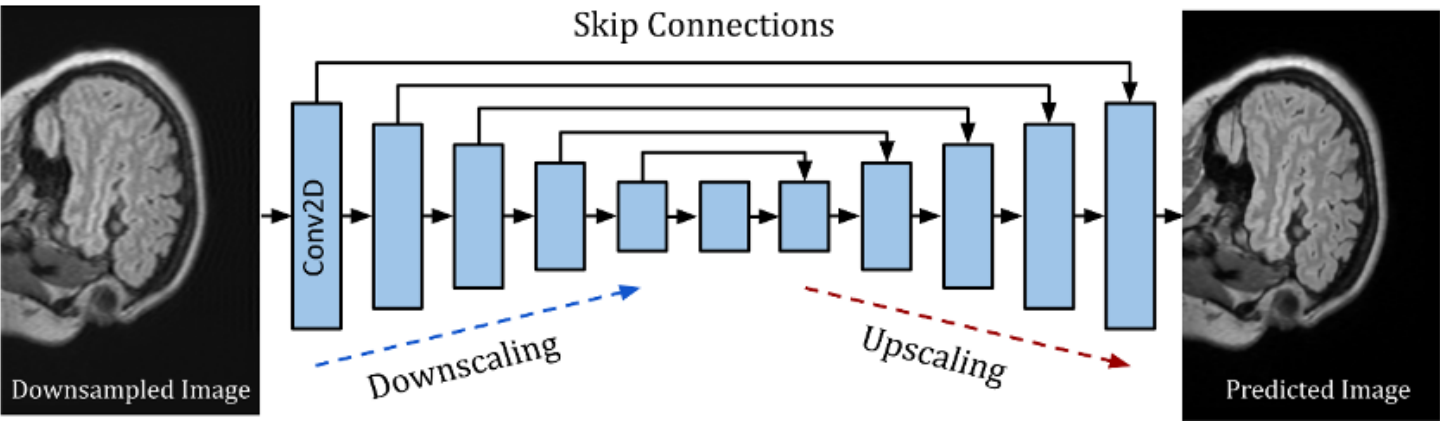


Fig. 1 | Diagram of the U-Net architecture used in the model.

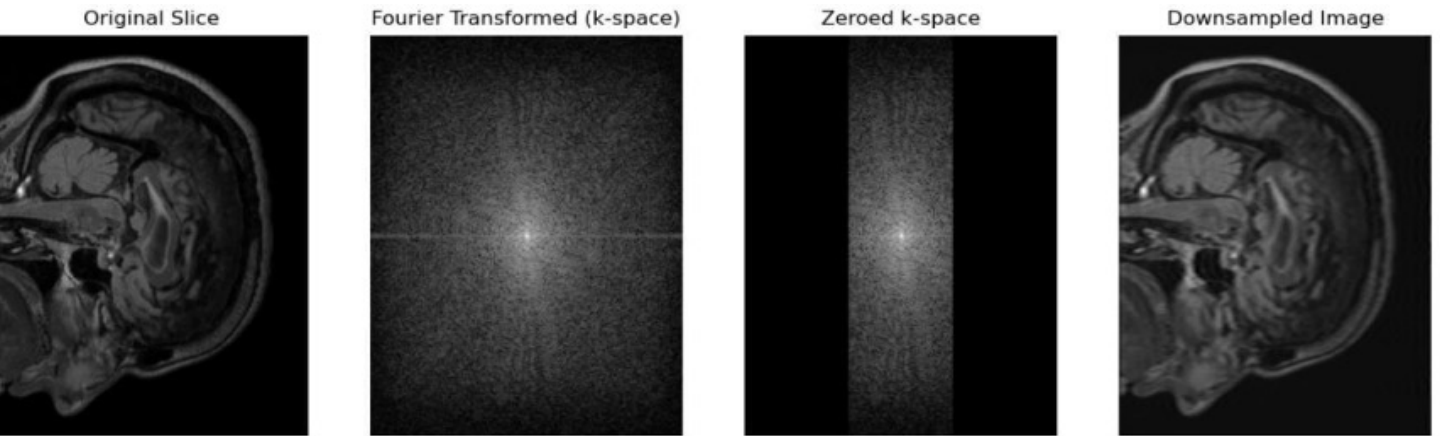


Fig. 2 | An example of the k-space downsampling performed for the simulated dataset.

we found the correct balance between giving the model critical extra information and distracting it with irrelevant data, versions of the model accepting one, three, and five input slices were attempted.

Because our model was trained on multiple MRI slices, voxel intensities were normalized to a range of 0–1. This normalization helps the model focus on structural details rather than variations in intensity.

To evaluate the model's performance, we calculated two common image quality metrics: structural similarity index (SSIM) and peak signal-to-noise ratio (PSNR). SSIM measures the perceptual similarity between two images, while PSNR measures how much signal there is compared to noise. For both SSIM and PSNR, a higher value indicates better image quality.

Both metrics were evaluated for input (downsampled and ground truth) and output (predicted and ground truth) and averaged across the validation dataset.

Results

When applied to their respective downsampling methods, the k-space model consistently outperformed the image-space model in terms of SSIM and PSNR (Table 1). Visual inspection shows that the K-space model preserves finer anatomical details than the image space model (Fig. 3). Thin structures are notably degraded or lost in the image-space model, likely due to the greater informa-

tion loss introduced by its downsampling method.

We also evaluated configurations of 1, 3, or 5 adjacent MRI slices in addition to the downsampling comparison. Among the tested slice configurations, the 3-slice model achieved the highest SSIM and PSNR scores, outperforming both the 1-slice and 5-slice models. These findings suggest that the 3-slice configuration strikes a balance between providing sufficient contextual information and avoiding overfitting. The 3-slice configuration likely benefits from incorporating sufficient spatial context without overwhelming the model, which might occur with the 5-slice variant. Conversely, the 1-slice model likely lacks adequate contextual information for robust reconstruction.

The models show promising results with both simulated and real-world data. Specifically, the k-space model shows qualitatively better performance when applied to real MRI data. This performance disparity suggests that the k-space approach generalizes more effectively to natural noise and variations found in real-world scenarios, whereas the image space super-resolution process appears more sensitive to these inconsistencies. However, the distribution of the super-resolved data still closely resembles that of the low-resolution data instead of the high-resolution data we are attempting to match (Fig. 6). Additionally, the distribution of the k-space downsampled data more closely matches the high-resolution distribution, revealing an imperfect simulation of the real data.

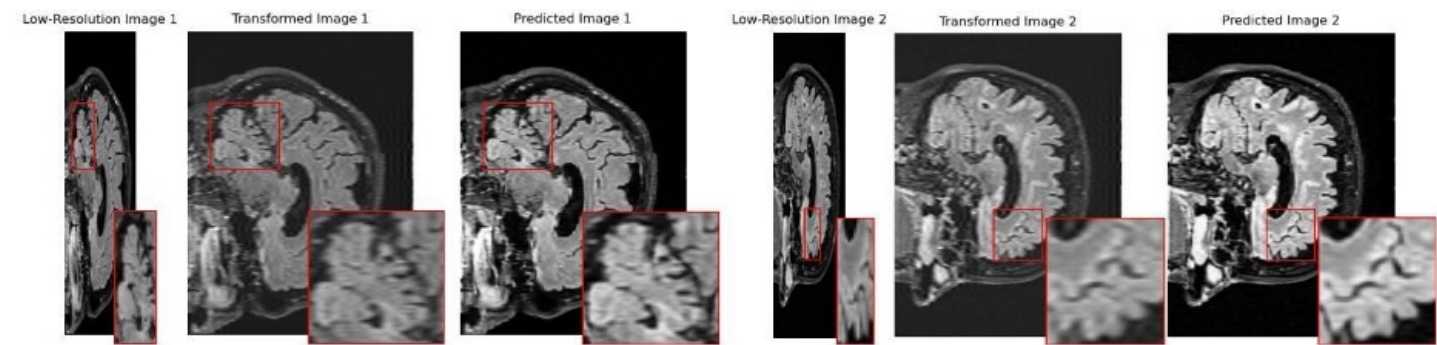


Fig. 3 | Two examples of the k-space model with three input slices applied to the real data set. As can be seen in the highlighted areas, the model is qualitatively able to sharpen the images substantially.

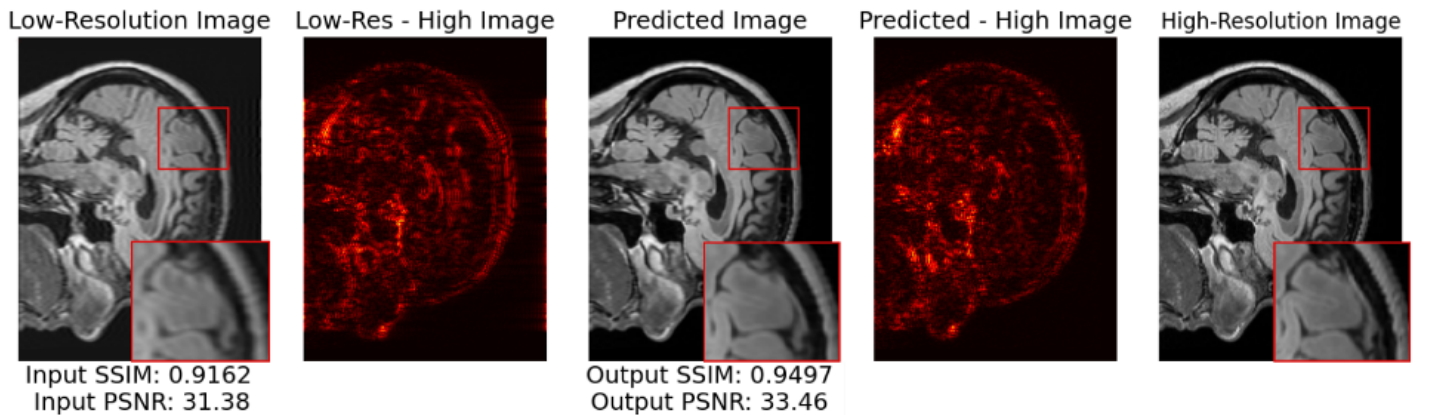


Fig. 4 | An example of the output of a model trained with three input channels and data downsampled with the k-space method.

	Image Space Downsampling SSIM	Image Space Downsampling PSNR	K-space Downsampling SSIM	K-space Downsampling PSNR
Input	0.8367	29.0960	0.9420	35.1550
Image Space Model	0.9168	33.5757	0.8856	31.3039
K-space One Slice Model	0.8056	27.0096	0.9580	37.0127
K-space Three Slice Model	0.8277	28.1409	0.9640	37.2131
K-space Five Slice Model	0.8213	28.0856	0.9633	37.1335

Table 1 | Comparison of SSIM and PSNR for all variations of models trained as applied to both image space downsampling done with linear interpolation and k-space downsampling. Input metrics quantify the difference between the downsampled data and the original high-resolution data. For all metrics, a higher value is better.

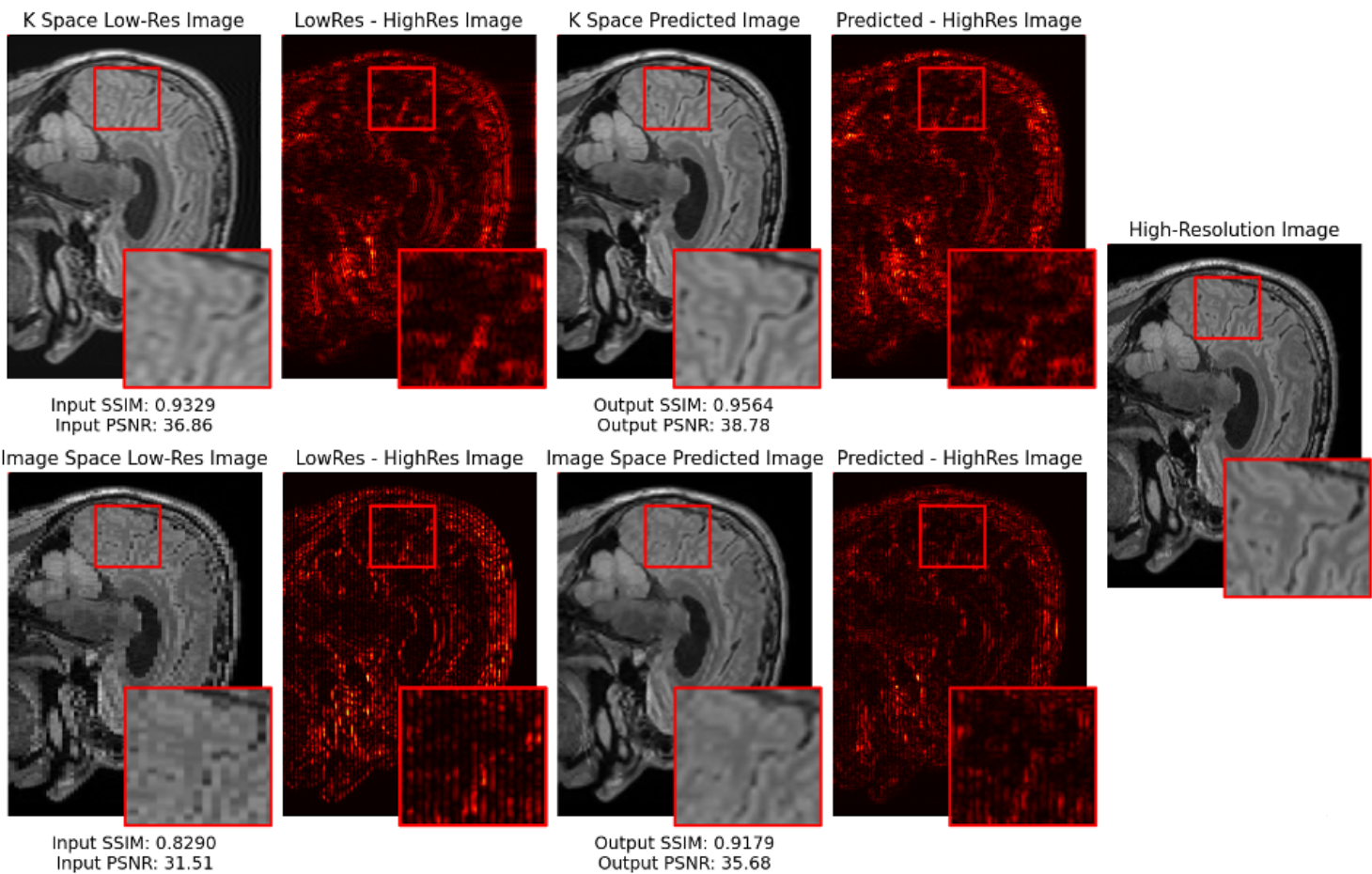


Fig. 5 | Comparison between the performance of the K-space and Image-Space models. The K-space model (top) performs much better and can create smooth lines like the ground truth. Meanwhile, the Image-Space model, as featured on the bottom, still carries some artifacts from the downsampling method.

Conclusions

This project demonstrates the use of the U-Net model architecture, a convolutional neural network (CNN) designed for fast and precise image segmentation, to restore image data lost from accelerated MRI scanning. By comparing downsampling methods performed in image space and k-space, we found that k-space downsampling consistently outperforms image space downsampling in both quantitative metrics (SSIM and PSNR) and qualitative reconstruction of fine anatomical details. Furthermore, experiments with different slice configurations revealed that a 3-slice input strikes an optimal balance between spatial context and model complexity, outperforming 1-slice and 5-slice configurations.

While we were able to achieve relatively high quantitative metrics, the model could be improved by better utilizing the k-space data through deep unfolding, which could be used for additional validation during training [4]. Another limitation lies in the reliance on simulated downsampling, which may not fully reflect real-world MRI conditions. Analysis of the super-resolved data reveals that the distribution still matches the low-resolution data, rather than the desired high-resolution data. While qualitative analysis is still possible with our super-resolved data, this distribution issue could cause problems for certain quantitative pipelines where data fidelity is crucial. Future experiments should be conducted to refine the simulated downsampling process in order to improve our results.

Acknowledgments

We thank Edward Chandler, Dr. Ulugbek Kamilov, and the rest of the Washington University Computational Imaging Group for providing mentorship and resources essential to this project. We also thank Dr. Matthew R. Brier and Bradley Judge at the Washington University School of Medicine for providing the data that the project was based on.

References

[1] Allen D. Elster. What is k-space?, 2024.

[2] Michael Lustig, David L. Donoho, and John M. Pauly. Sparse mri: The application of compressed sensing for rapid mr imaging. *Magnetic Resonance in Medicine*, 58(6):1182–1195, 2007.

[3] Philipp Fischer Olaf Ronneberger and Thomas Brox. U-net: Convolutional networks for biomedical image segmentation. *Medical Image Computing and Computer-Assisted Intervention (MICCAI)*, 9351:234–241, 2015.

[4] Kai Zhang, Luc Van Gool, and Radu Timofte. Deep unfolding network for image super-resolution, 2020.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Role of Active Vitamin D on Reserved Intestinal Stem Cells

Jun Ru Chen '29

Washington University in St. Louis

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), a key risk factor for colorectal cancer, affects 2.39 million Americans and has no effective treatment. Current attempts include steroidal immunosuppressants, an inhibitor of immune trafficking to the gut, and therapies that aim to block gut-specific antigens. However, IBD patients often either do not respond or develop tolerance to these treatments. These limitations leave IBD patients in a cruel dilemma: either to pursue more aggressive and taxing therapies or suffer under IBD and risk further intestinal damage or the progression to colorectal cancer. A hopeful alternative to these immunosuppressive treatments is regenerative medicine. When the epithelium fails to regenerate due to inflammation, luminal bacteria infiltrate the epithelial barrier and exacerbate disease. Regenerative therapies aid regeneration to prevent progression of the disease. Recently, a novel therapy with calcitriol (an active metabolite of Vitamin D) has shown promising results for ameliorating symptoms within a murine model of IBD. However, calcitriol is known to promote the differentiation of putative *LGR5+* intestinal stem cells (*LGR5+* ISCs), which are essential to long term-intestinal homeostasis, leaving the broader impact on cell populations unclear. This study focused on the marker genes of reserve ISC populations (*Mex3a*, *Tert*, *Hopx*, *Bmi1*) and mature epithelial cells (*Alpi*, *Chga*, *Lyz1*, *Muc2*). After a meta-analysis of bulk RNA-seq datasets of calcitriol-treated mice, this project found significant upregulation of the reserve ISC markers *Mex3a*, *Tert*, and *Hopx* and observed a non-significant increase for *Bmi1* after treatment. After independent validation of *Bmi1* *in vivo* in mice, an *in vitro* arm tested dose-dependent effects of calcitriol in intestinal organoids and concluded that high concentrations were needed to activate *Mex3a*. These results on reserve stem cells suggest that calcitriol's ameliorative effects in IBD may rely on reserve stem cells instead of *LGR5+* ISCs. Future research on treatments for IBD could target reserve ISCs instead.

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), estimated to affect 2.39 million Americans, is a chronic condition that significantly increases the risk of colorectal cancer (CRC), and it remains without a permanent cure [1–4]. IBD also aggravates established CRC tumors and is implicated in 15% of all CRC-related mortalities in the U.S. during 2020 [5]. Current therapeutic regimes for IBD aim to suppress the abnormal immune response in patients' intestines, but fail to address the repair of pre-existing damage [6,7]. The pathological failure of damage repair characterizes the progression of IBD, allowing a breach of luminal bacteria and toxins into intestinal tissues via a compromised epithelial barrier, further exacerbating the abnormal immune response [8]. This additional inflammation can trigger even more epithelial barrier damage, forming a positive feedback loop that can have disastrous consequences for the patient. As both epithelial barrier damage [9,10] and inflammation [11] can initiate this cycle, implementing epithelial repair treatments may be essential in new interventions that aim to break the cycle and target the root causes of IBD.

Timely repair of damaged intestinal epithelia requires healthy, functional intestinal stem cells (ISCs), which have been shown in previous studies to be either severely compromised or fully ablated in patients suffering from IBD [12–14]. When *Lgr5*⁺ ISCs are experimentally depleted, IBD progression is exacerbated in the colon [15] and regeneration after damage [16] is impaired in the small intestine. The intestines have one of the highest tissue turnover rates in the body; in the gut lining, mature intestinal epithelial cells (IECs) are frequently lost due to homeostatic shedding and injury [17]. To maintain this epithelial lining, ISCs are essential, working to replenish all mature cells in the intestinal epithelium every 3–5 days [18]. IBD manifests when inflammation impairs ISCs' homeostasis of maintaining the intestinal lining [12]. Regenerative therapies aim to enhance the ability of ISCs to

heal and finally resolve the inflammatory stimulus.

Although recent papers have questioned the boundaries and markers that define actively cycling ISCs (aISCs) and reserve ISCs (rISC), it has been accepted that both rISCs and ISCs have the ability to produce progeny that populate the intestines in times of injury [15,19–30]. The aISC population is believed to be located at the bottom of the intestinal crypts, and is a type of crypt base columnar (CBC) cells [31]. To isolate which cells located at the bottom of the intestinal crypts had aISC function, Barker et al. found that LGR5 (leucine-rich-repeat-containing G-protein-coupled receptor 5) accurately marked CBC cells with aISC function [31]. Lineage tracing revealed that upon exiting the crypt base, they differentiated into progenitor cells that could create more mature epithelial cells [32]. This paper was one of the first to assign a marker gene to describe aISCs in the intestines accurately. However, it is prudent to consider that not all *LGR5*⁺ cells possess aISC activity [24], and not all cells that possess aISC activity express LGR5 [25,28,33].

Separate from *LGR5*⁺ ISCs are reserve ISCs [31]. First described as label-retaining stem cells in the +4 position from above the columnar base, rISCs are damage-resistant and exit quiescence to actively cycle and produce de novo *LGR5*⁺ ISCs after injury [24,34,35]. One marker of rISCs specific to the small intestines is the gene *BMI1* (B cell-specific Moloney murine leukemia virus integration site 1) [32,36]. Beyond the small intestines, another rISC population is a subset of the *LGR5*⁺ ISC population marked by expression of the gene *Mex3a* (mex-3 RNA binding family member A). Notably, unlike *BMI1*⁺ rISCs, these *Mex3a*⁺ *LGR5*⁺ rISCs are not entirely quiescent and are instead slowly proliferating, consistently generating multi-lineage progeny and even directly producing actively cycling *LGR5*⁺ ISCs [24]. However, current methods to specifically identify these

rISCs are limited: marker genes are expressed across functionally heterogeneous cell populations [14], marked cells are localized at varying positions [24], and slow cell kinetics make lineage tracing and RNA-velocity studies difficult [37].

One promising drug candidate is calcitriol or 1,25-dihydroxycholecalciferol ($1,25(\text{OH})_2\text{D}_3$), the active metabolite of Vitamin D3 [38]. While in the context of IBD, it is mainly studied for its immunoregulatory effects [38,39], it also has effects in situations such as radiation-induced injury models [40], where the immunoregulatory function of calcitriol alone could not fully explain its regenerative effect. The mechanisms by which calcitriol activates to promote intestinal regeneration are still unclear [41,42]. Considering the known effect of calcitriol to induce intestinal stem cell differentiation, it becomes pertinent to determine if calcitriol treatment for IBD would inadvertently lead to ISC depletion in the context of actively cycling putative ISC populations and rISCs [41,43].

Another important consideration is the tight physiological regulation of calcitriol levels and its loose correlation with Vitamin D3 supplementation [38,44]. Due to the risk of hypercalcemia, a potential therapy would be to locally deliver high calcitriol levels without perturbing serum levels. Recently, this was achieved using transgenic inflammation and gut-homing macrophages to locally synthesize calcitriol [39]. This technique will be used within the in vivo arm of this study.

Methods

Bioinformatics

Differential gene expression results or raw counts were accessed from bulk RNA-seq datasets in the Gene Expression Omnibus for in vivo murine models of calcitriol treatment (Table 1).

ACCESSION	TIME	DOSE	TISSUE
GSE69170 [45]	6 h	2ng/g BW IP	SI Duodenum
GSE133949 [46]	4 h	10ng/g BW IP	Colon / SI Duodenum
GSE144978 [47]	4, 24, 48h	1ng/g BW IP	Colon / SI Ileum

Table 1 | Studies chosen to incorporate meta-analysis.

Datasets were selected to be included in the meta-analysis through searching on the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO), then manually curated to datasets with an accompanying paper relevant to calcitriol treatment of the intestines (Fig. 1).

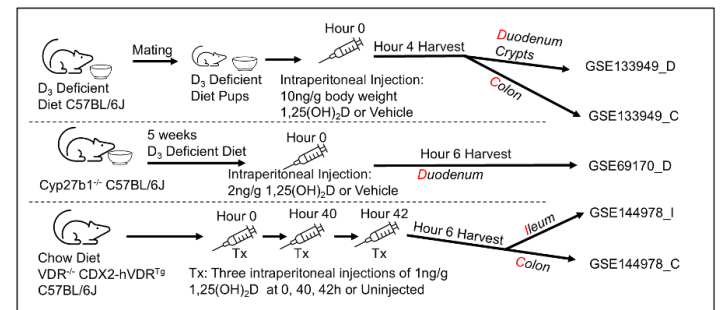
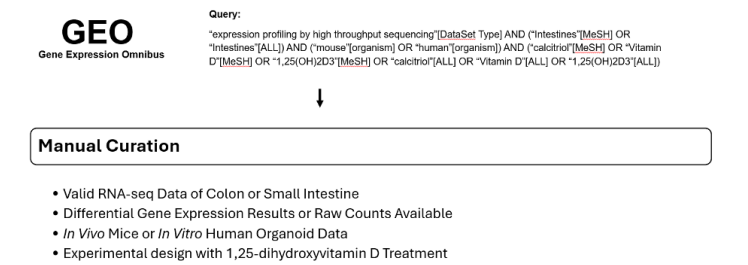


Fig. 1

The process of curating these datasets is shown in Fig. 2. For datasets that did not provide pre-processed differential gene expression results, reads were pseudo-aligned with kallisto

(0.50.1) according to the Ensembl GRCm39 reference genome (release 110). In R (4.41), counts were processed into gene-level with tximport (1.30.0) and filtered for low counts in edgeR (4.0.16) before being analyzed for differential expression with DESeq2 (1.42.1). The package RecordTest (2.20) was used to perform Fischer's method for the overall effect, and forest plots were generated through ggplot2 (3.5.1) and ggrepel (0.9.5). See (Sup. Fig. 1) for experimental outline. (*Find supplemental figures at WUJUR.org*)



In Vivo Experiment

Determining the effect of local calcitriol *in vivo* was carried out through similar methods as previously described [29,39]. Epithelial cells were isolated from small intestinal tissue by inversion followed by inflation and deflation in cell recovery solution [29,39]. Then, the cells were lysed and processed into cDNA for RT-qPCR [29,39]. From the experimental groups of NO DSS, DSS, DSS MAC, and DSS MAC-CYP in the ongoing experiment IACUC: #2022-017 in the lab, this cDNA was provided to the author. On day 1 in IACUC: #2022-017, C57BL/6J mice were split, with NO DSS mice receiving normal water *ad libitum* while DSS, DSS MAC, and DSS MAC-CYP received water containing 3% 36–50 kDa dextran sulfate sodium (DSS) to induce colitis. Groups of CD11b+Gr1+ macrophages transfected with GFP only (MAC) and with the human *CYP27B1* gene (MAC-CYP) were obtained from the Tang lab. On day 7, 2x10⁶ MAC and MAC-CYP cells were injected into mice in DSS MAC and DSS MAC-CYP groups, respectively; DSS treatment was stopped, and DSS, DSS MAC, and DSS MAC-CYP groups started receiving normal water. On day 12, among the other tissues harvested, small intestinal duodenal tissue was processed into cDNA and protein lysate as previously described [29].

The genes *MSH1*, *LGR5*, *Mex3a*, *Bmi1*, *Hopx*, *Cyp24a1*, and *Fgfbp1* were identified as genes of interest by the meta-analysis and relevance in literature [18,23,24,29,36,48–50] for their role in regeneration. They were then assayed via RT-qPCR as previously described [29]. Primer sequences are in (Sup. Table 1).

In Vitro Experiment

Small intestinal organoids from C57BL/6J mice at the Tang lab were thawed from storage and passaged until 90% viability. Culture media was made with L-WRN conditioned X-Vivo 15 media (Lonza). Cold 150µL Matrigel was prepared for each of 12 wells of the 24-well plate with the suspended organoid solution mixed such that each well was plated with 5 x 10⁴ Cells of Organoids. After the Matrigel solidified at room temperature, 300µL of L-WRN conditioned media was added to each well. The wells were split into 0, 10, 50, and 100nM groups and dosed with calcitriol to reach the desired concentration; the dose would be readministered every other day, with an additional media change on day 4. The same genes of *MSH1*, *LGR5*, *Mex3a*, *Bmi1*, *Hopx*, *Cyp24a1*, and *Fgfbp1* were run for qPCR as previously described [29].

Results

Meta-Analysis

To reconcile the observed effects of calcitriol from individual studies, this project combined publicly available GEO datasets to perform a meta-analysis (Table 1). These results confirmed previous studies that suggested calcitriol induced differentiation of actively cycling LGR5+ ISCs (Figure 2A) [29,41] and upregulation of the cycling cell marker *MSI1* (Figure 2B) [25,42,49].

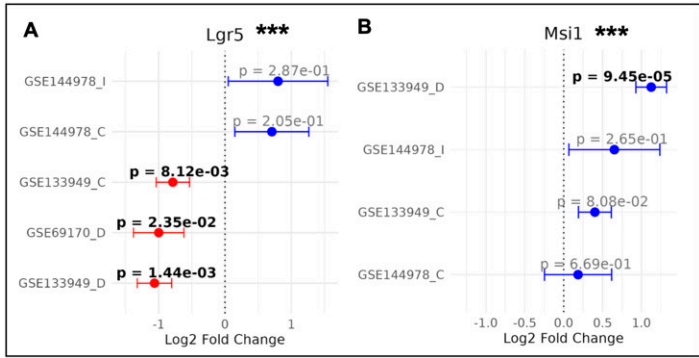


Fig. 2

Following the loss of *LGR5*+ ISCs, this project examined rISC markers to determine the overall effect on the stem cell compartment. The *Bmi1* gene, known to mark a duodenal rISC population [36], had a nonsignificant upward trend after calcitriol in all studies analyzed (Figure 3D).

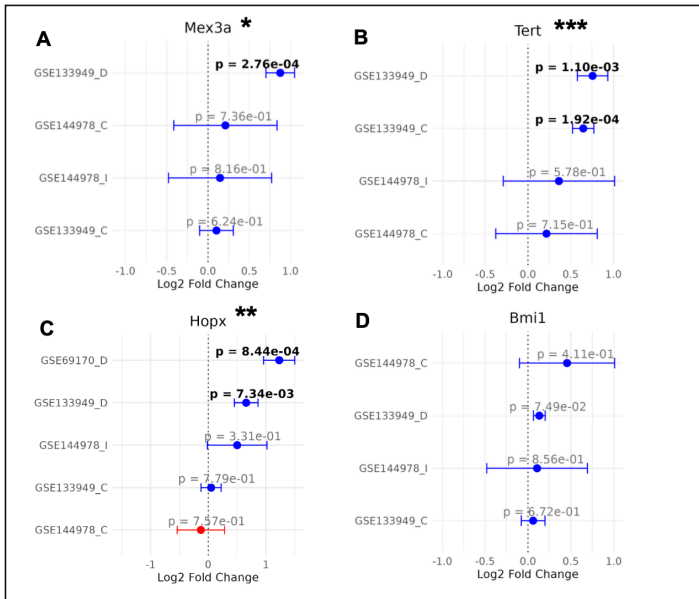


Fig. 3

Additional markers of reserve stem cell populations, *Mex3a* [24], *Tert* [34], and *Hopx* [50], were significantly upregulated in both individual studies and after calculating the overall effect from calcitriol (Figure 3A, B, C). To determine if these reserve stem cells were forming as the main lineages from differentiating *LGR5*+ ISCs or from dedifferentiation of mature epithelial cells, this project examined the effect of calcitriol on mature epithelial cell markers.

This meta-analysis did not find any significant overall effects from calcitriol treatment on the mature epithelial markers *Muc2* of goblet cells [51], *Lyz1* of paneth cells [52], *Chga* of

enteroendocrine cells [53], or *Alpi* of enterocytes ([54] (Figure 4A, B, C, D).

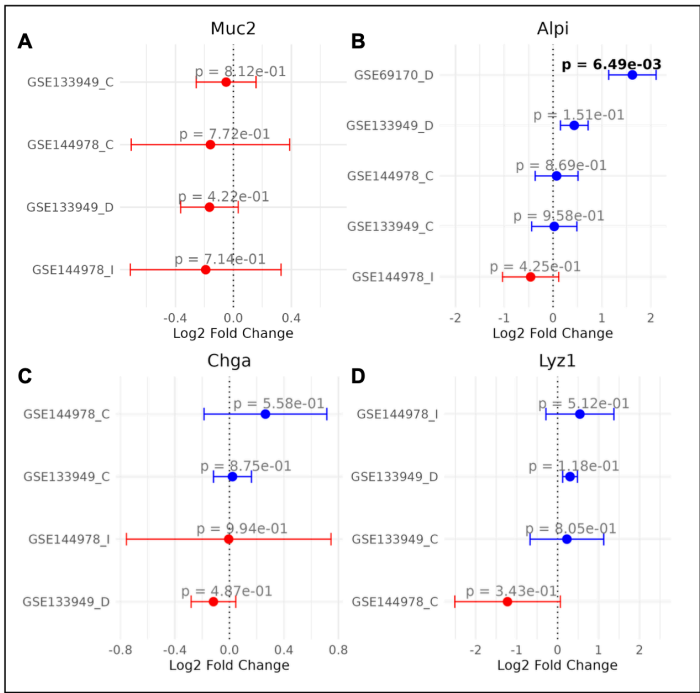


Fig. 4

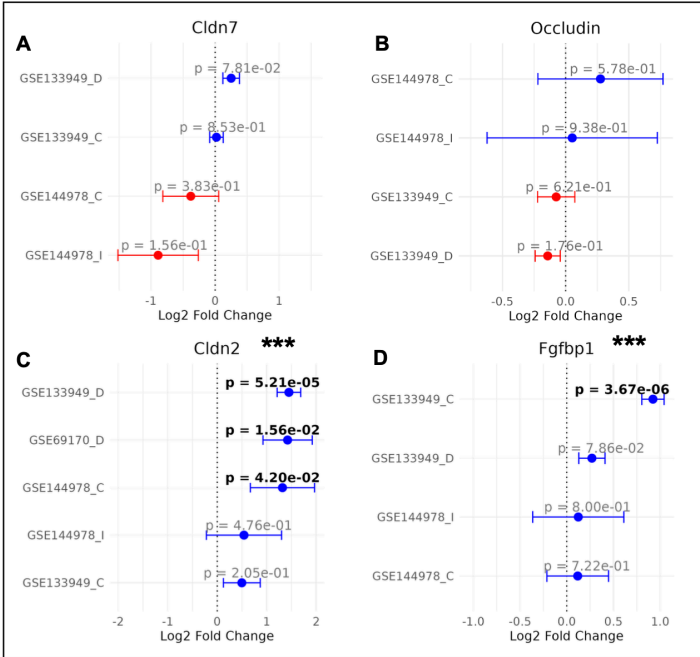


Fig. 5

Beyond mature epithelial cells themselves, their tight junction proteins are essential to barrier integrity. Of which, *Cldn2*, a known target of calcitriol [55,56], was observed to be upregulated (Figure 5C). Moreover, *Fgfbp1*, a gene implicated in the blood-brain barrier [57] and as a maker of a newly proposed stem cell population in the upper crypt [23], was also significantly upregulated overall (Figure 5D).

Outcome from Murine Small Intestinal Duodenal Samples

Quantitative PCR from duodenal sample cDNA revealed a

significant increase in gene *Bmi1* in the presence of calcitriol compared to both the WT macrophage control (MAC-CYP) and the colitis control (DSS) (Figure 6C).

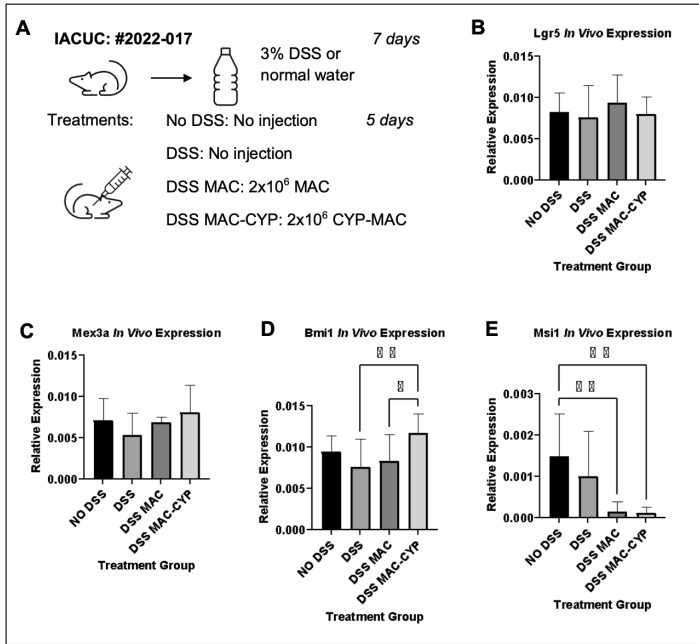


Fig. 6

However, *Hopx* was under the detection range in samples by qPCR, and results for *LGR5* and *Mex3a* showed no significant differences between groups (Figure 6A, B). For *MSI1*, there was a significant downregulation of transcripts in the MAC and MAC-CYP groups compared to DSS alone (Figure 6B).

Outcome from Murine Small Intestinal Organoid Cultures

An organoid model was chosen to validate the results on *Bmi1* and determine if the trend for *Mex3a* would be clearer under more direct treatment. qPCR RNA qualification revealed a significant increase of *Bmi1* and *Mex3a* at the highest dose of 100nM but not at any other treatment level (Figure 7A, B). However, *Hopx* and *MSI1* were under the detection range in samples by qPCR, and results for *LGR5* (Figure 7C) showed no significant differences.

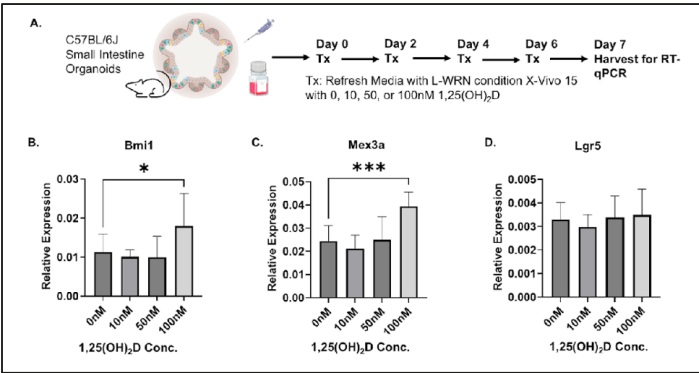


Fig. 7

Discussion (Meta-Analysis)

This project's meta-analysis shows differential gene regulation in murine datasets, specifically the markers of reserve stem cells *Mex3a*, *Hopx*, and *Tert*. In contrast with meta-analysis results, *MSI1*, a well-known direct VDR target [4, 5], was not significantly regulated in vivo and in vitro. However, the

upregulation of *MSI1* is seen in several other human studies [42,44]. These results raise the question of whether calcitriol induces differential transcriptional regulation through differential binding of ligand-activated VDR or if the same cellular signals regulate differing species-dependent populations [30]. *Mex3a*, *Tert*, and *Hopx* are known to associate with VDR in CHIP-seq data in murine duodenal tissue, but only *Mex3a* and *Tert* have a similar relation in an existing human dataset of any cell type (leukocytes) [58,59]. Future analysis of human duodenal or colon CHIP-seq for VDR target sites could elucidate the source of this differential regulation.

Discussion (MAC-CYP)

With the delivery vector of CD11b+Gr1+ macrophages, there was no significant difference between MAC and MAC-CYP groups, suggesting the need for further investigation between the effects of CD11b+Gr1+ macrophages alone and the potential of calcitriol regeneration-specific effects versus homeostasis in a manner similar to cancer [42].

Despite existing studies of similar cultures of intestinal organoids in media with calcitriol [47,60,61], this design utilizes longer-term treatments and variable concentrations of calcitriol. With the most prominent in vitro activity from 100nM calcitriol, the exploration of methods to deliver sufficiently high doses of calcitriol locally without inducing hypercalcemia needs future study [39]. The in vivo results demonstrate the utility of previously developed engineered macrophage systems [39]. Previous concerns regarding exhaustion of the ISC pool from long-term calcitriol therapy induced ISC differentiation [18,29,41] could be addressed through the expansion of rISCs, which were revealed to have their markers, including *Mex3a* and *Bmi1*, upregulated in the in vivo and in vitro models in this study.

Discussion (Translational Applications)

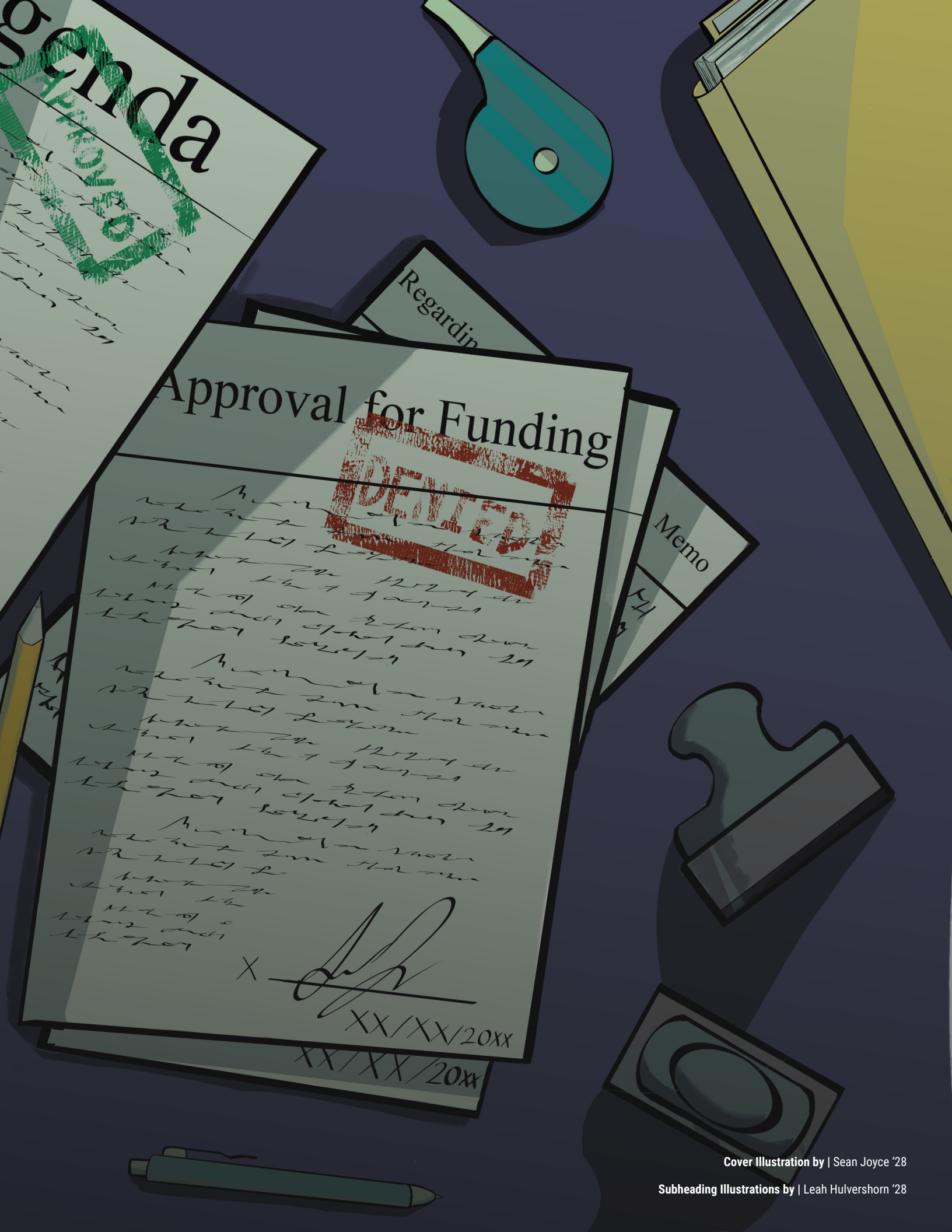
While this project focuses on rISC in the intestines and calcitriol, research has shown the role of calcitriol in microglia with neurodegeneration [62], *Mex3a* and neurogenesis [63], and *Msi1* in neurons interacting with the same p21^{Waf1/Cip1} as *Bmi1* rISC activation [64–66]. Transgenic Treg cells could similarly deliver calcitriol past the blood-brain barrier to promote neuron function in Alzheimer's disease [67]. Future research is needed to investigate how secondary effects from calcitriol regulation affect initial VDR target genes in a species and tissue-dependent manner before the transition to human studies. Moreover, validation of these results on the protein level through Western blot or novel single-cell resolution data would be invaluable for incorporating these results into recent data [23,48] and known regulatory pathways [43,49,66,68].

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the mentorship of Dr. Xiaolei Tang and Dr. Nisar Ali Shaikh. Equipment and existing mice samples were provided by the Tang Lab at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Long Island University. I am deeply thankful for the patience of Dr. Shaikh, for all the hours we spent together in the lab, teaching me procedures and practical insight, and for Dr. Tang with our ever-evolving discussions of unexpected results and potential implications for directions for future research.

References

For a full list of references, visit WUJUR.org.



Cover Illustration by | Sean Joyce '28

Subheading Illustrations by | Leah Hulvershorn '28

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Communicating with the Masses: The Impact of Bureaucratic Autonomy on Integrative Propaganda

Caroline Fong '25
Washington University in St. Louis

Art as a tool in service of the State is by no means a modern practice. Ancient civilizations had long established the utility of controlling public opinion and image. Take the Cleopatra VII and Caesarion relief on the Temple of Hathor in Dendera, Egypt for example (Ashton, 2011). Through a visual medium, Cleopatra VII and her son legitimize themselves as the heirs of the Ptolemaic dynasty using the goddess Isis’ crown and the pharaonic double crown. These practices extend well into the modern and contemporary periods. Art continues to be central to both the politics and culture of the State, embracing its ideology. Modern political art often reflected the concerns of an industrial society and responded to the upending of social, economic, and political orders in the West (MoMA, n.d.). Thus, modern political art and propaganda must be conceived of in the context of the major events of the early twentieth century, specifically World War I (WWI). WWI marked the beginning of the current global power dynamics with the fall of mercantile colonialism. As the 20th century progressed, the world faced various destabilizing events through which democratic States often needed to act to bolster themselves by drawing on tradition.

“

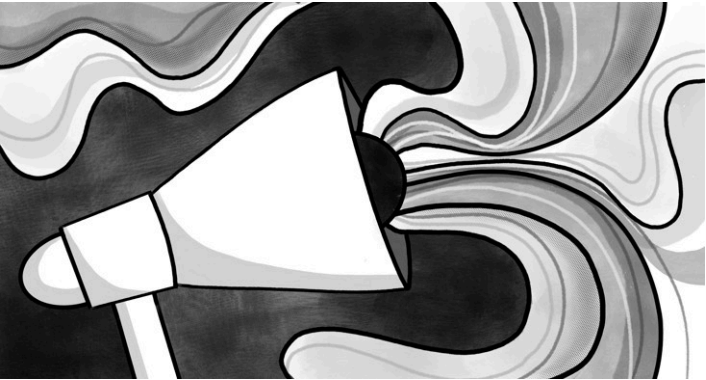
Are bureaucracies with less autonomy more likely to produce integrative propaganda?

During these crises, nations often created federal bureaucracies devoted to sustaining their people ideologically through art. The bureaucracy describes a type of large organization that coordinates activities towards a specific goal and implements policies designed by elected officials (Constas, 1958). The art programs were produced under the conditions and aims of the bureaucracy. They engaged shared values and tradition as a call to action in the ever-changing world that they lived in. Amongst these pressing changes was the rise of the welfare state in various nations, which renegotiated the relationship between the State and its citizens. The variation of the propaganda produced can be explained by artists’ response to the uniqueness of their sociopolitical context as well as the bureaucratic design and behaviors of the programs themselves.

This line of inquiry leads to the question: *Are bureaucracies with less autonomy more likely to produce integrative propaganda?* Through this investigation, I reveal the ways the State

aims to maintain socially cohesive citizenry during periods of national unrest.

My framework is built on the vital role of visual culture in shaping and sustaining national identity. Through the evidence provided by propaganda, I will test the hypothesis: *propaganda produced through bureaucracies with less autonomy are more integrative*. The test will be applied through a comparative study made within periods of social, economic, and political instability in the Weimar Republic—a German State—and the United States in the period between the World Wars. Both States create agencies to produce government sponsored art. However, they diverge because of their bureaucratic differences and consequently impact the integrativeness of the propaganda. In the United States, artists created content at the direction of bureaucrats presenting a vastly different image of democratic ideals, favoring the social welfare state. The behavior of the American bureaucrats supports the hypothesis, whereas the German bureaucratic experience suggests that autonomy leads to less integrative propaganda. Further, the Weimar Republic case study sheds light on how artists as bureaucrats contend with the imperial past. Each respective country’s values are reflected in their communication strategy to reinforce a national identity. The level of integrativeness in the State’s propaganda during these periods is key to understanding how one State was able to succeed in stabilizing a nation, whereas the other fell further into fascist ideals.



Propaganda

Propaganda can be defined as the use of persuasive techniques—oral, visual, or written—by an agent with the intent to modify the audience’s behavior (Adam-Troian, 2024). Propaganda is produced and sponsored by a political institution, cause, or organization (Ross, 2002). This research is primarily concerned with State sponsored propaganda, specifically that which is integrative and produced by bureaucrats.

Since the 20th century, the study of propaganda has focused on the psychological and behavioral impact of media on audiences (Abhishek, 2021). This attention to social psychological research has been largely focused on attitude change, behaviors, and its moderators to produce effective propaganda and solve social issues (Adam-Troian, 2024). There is a rich research history on social influence (Lewin, 1947), norm formation (Sherif, 1936), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), social representations (Moscovici, 1981) and social identity (Tajfel, 1974) (Adam-Troian, 2024). Notably, there has been a lack of investigation into the role of the bureaucracy in State produced propaganda and the present role of media, providing the motivation for this research.

Propaganda is an increasingly pressing issue with the invention of the Internet (Pearson, 2021). The rate of the news cycle has led to an “information surplus” with one news outlet producing

over 200 stories a day (Pearson, 2021). On top of the pressure to produce more stories, there is also a lower cost for people to publish online (Pearson, 2021). With the increasing number of stories being made available from a variety of outlets, journalists no longer serve as information “gatekeepers” with the ability to control the information and its delivery to its audience (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). A lack of gatekeepers allows for an extensive distribution of propaganda. This influx of information, as well as the evolution of its sources, makes an investigation of the foundation and nuances of propaganda necessary.

Integrative – Agitation Propaganda

While not all political art is propaganda, all propaganda art is political (Ross, 2002). This distinction makes differentiating between the two valuable. The following provides definitions and

	Definitions	Relation to Propaganda Art	Areas of Overlap
Theory of Ideology	Ideology is a belief system that explains the ways people in a society should be organized and behave (Zmigrod, 2022, p. 1073).	Ideologies are communicated in art works through content and associated symbols.	Ideology and an agreed upon set of values lay the framework of a State.
Social Identity Theory	Identities are formed through the need for positive association. Consequently, the in-group distinguishes themselves from the out-group (Huddy, 2001, pp. 134-5).	Depictions of people through stylistic choices are the result of conscious inclusion and exclusion.	Ideology plays a key role in the formation of social identity. Oftentimes, social identity has been based on certain ideologies of hierarchy, highlighted in Edward Said’s <i>Orientalism</i> (1978).
Social Cohesion Theory	Social cohesion describes the connections or forces that have “direct or indirect effects on persons’ membership attitudes and behaviors” (Friedkin, 2004, p. 411).	Often, common ideals will be impressed upon the viewer to increase social cohesion. This can be through various symbols.	Scholars debate ideology’s role in social cohesion, some saying it is necessary. Regardless, the two theories intersect in the formation of social identity.

Fig. 1 | Foundations of Social Theory in Relation to State and Propaganda.



Image 1 | Nina Vatolina. (1941). Fascism - The Most Evil Enemy of Women, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom.

categorizations within the study of propaganda that must be considered. Agitation and integration propaganda are the two main categories key to this research.

Agitation propaganda art is subversive and must attempt to disrupt the existing order in some capacity (Ellul, 1973). It is found during periods of social unrest, often using stereotypes and discriminatory rhetoric to distinguish certain groups. This type of propaganda is seen in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which embodies the idea of the propaganda State with their use of agitprop—agitation and propaganda (Hass, 2018). Agitprop was used to uphold the Soviet social order and mobilize Communist Party members to overthrow the capitalist system through world revolution (Hass, 2018). The agitprop poster depicts a woman wearing red, and the poster reads “Fascism is women’s worst enemy. Everyone to the fight against fascism.” The poster is an explicit call to action, targeting women to join in on the fight. This revolutionary focus takes a far more action-oriented approach than integration propaganda.

Integration propaganda art must attempt to reinforce the values to stabilize the social body (Ellul, 1973). It is found largely in developed and stable nations. Integration propaganda is successful because of its omnipresence, stretching for an indefinite period. It remains undetectable due to the influx of information available to consumers. Scholar David Welch argues:

[P]ropaganda is most effective when it is less noticeable. In a



Image 2 | John Gast. (1872). American Progress, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, United States.

totalitarian regime – indeed in any closed society – propaganda is more obvious and visible and largely tolerated for fear of the consequences of objecting to or questioning the ‘message’. In a so-called open society, propaganda is much more problematic when it is hidden and integrated into the political culture. Once exposed, people feel duped and betrayed, and this serves only to reinforce the pejorative association with the practice of propaganda, deemed to be at odds with that open society (2019, p. 321).

Integration propaganda presents a unique set of challenges that reinforce already present ideologies, making it difficult to identify. John Gast’s American Progress exemplifies integration propaganda, which depicts the personification of the Manifest Destiny. It draws on and reproduces American ideals and mythology of nation building. The content of integration propaganda is often subtle and is disseminated through avenues outside of leaflets and posters.

The relevant propaganda will fall under these characteristics, aimed to distinguish propaganda from political or protest art. If the art is propaganda:

- The message communicated must be false, inappropriate for the context, or misleading.
- The art must attempt to persuade the intended audience.
- The intended audience must be a socially significant group of people.
- The art is created or used on behalf of a political institution, cause, or organization (Ross, 2002).

These qualities serve to identify art through its content and context, such as the actors involved in creating the art.

This study will focus on propaganda during the interwar period that is expressed vertically through a top-down approach. The period of interest marks an intersection between sociological and political types of propaganda. Sociological propaganda describes the integrating of ideology in the sociological context while the political focuses exclusively on achieving political means (Tal & Gordon, 2016). The sociological context is understood as a way of life that is presented in culture seen through mediums, such as entertainment and art. In return, the projection of a certain way of life can be influenced by a variety of values and belief systems.

Social Theory and the Incentives of Propaganda

While a variety of political actors produce propaganda, government actors are highly motivated to influence public opinion. Despite high-ranking government actors synthesizing these larger ideas to produce propaganda, it is the lower-level bureaucrats who create and carry out these policies in a bureaucracy. The State is rewarded and incentivized to act through social theory to maintain identity formation. Actions within the context of propaganda can be understood through three areas of study: the psychology of ideology, social identity theory, and social cohesion theory. These three foci overlap and share many similarities, which provide an explanation for the functionality of propaganda.

At its core, much of social theory relies upon ideology to conceive the nation-state (Fuchs, 2020). Ideology, a set of beliefs, prescribes how society should be structured and how individuals operate, which can be weaponized by the government to set a standard behavior. Ideology operates with two major components: doctrinal and relational (Zmigrod, 2022). The doctrinal component describes the explanation for existing conditions and expectations for how individuals should think and behave (i.e. religion and its role in creating a shared belief system). The relational component explains social relations and categorizes social groups into hierarchies (i.e. class structures and distinctions). Thus, these relations create in-group favoritism and out-group hostility in addition to dictating groups’ functions in society (Zmigrod, 2022).

While there are concrete elements to national identity, like rights inherent to citizens, it is simultaneously composed of intangible shared social beliefs. Within a nation and amongst nations, social identity continues to be driven through the need for positive association, meaning that social identity is likely to originate in high-status groups to distinguish themselves from others (Huddy, 2001). On the other hand, the low-status group must then create an identity through an alternative group characteristic to create a different identity (Huddy, 2001). The salience of group membership is the determinant of identity, which means that identity is often driven by the visibility or invisibility of the in-group versus out-group membership. This characteristic is apparent with race, which is used as a visual determinant of group identity. In the example of the United States, there is a lack of a cohesive American ethnicity. Thus, Americanness is complex as different ethnic groups have varying views on the ways in which race shapes their lives (Cox et al., 2019). This diversity in nations creates the need to then uphold a shared set of values or an ideology through beliefs rather than visual membership. These values create a distinction between different countries, who develop their own ideologies to distinguish themselves.

Scholars have differing views on the necessity of ideology in society. Some in the field believe that it creates social cohesion through a shared set of beliefs (Zmigrod, 2022). Social cohesion is understood as the “direct or indirect effects on persons’ membership attitudes and behaviors” (Friedkin, 2004). Conversely, other scholars believe that it is a means of control and to “induce false consciousness thinking”—a failure of citizens to recognize their exploitation (Zmigrod, 2022). Regardless of one’s view on the necessity of ideology, social cohesion and collective identity are critical to the success of a nation, which often employs ideology (Oliphant, 2014). Ideologies use these doctrinal and relational mechanisms to instill shared beliefs in hopes of achieving collective action (Zmigrod, 2022). Thus, it is in the government’s best interest to create a shared ideology on how people should operate. These social theories are then used to create propaganda, depend-

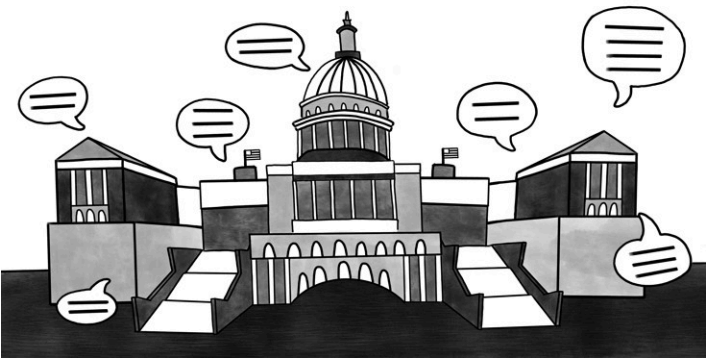
ing upon pre-existing national values to deepen these ideals (Figure 1). The repetition of these beliefs entrenches these in and out groups for the sake of forming a national identity. Thus, ideology plays a significant role in propaganda and its persuasive nature.



The Role of National Identity in Propaganda Production

Integrative propaganda aims to stabilize a nation by drawing on State traditions and ideologies to reinforce national identity. Forming and maintaining a national identity requires a standardized narrative that can be communicated to the public. Nations in periods of instability may be understood as those in ongoing internal social, economic, and political conflict. This conflict may look like an economic depression, a civil war, or nation building. A shared national identity means the adoption of a “common identity of language, culture, social and political systems,” vital for maintaining nationhood (Grotenhuis, 2016).

Integrative propaganda is particularly useful in forming national identity. This power was exemplified in Rwanda when the regime, post-genocide, focused on emphasizing “the unifying aspects of Rwandan history, such as our shared culture and language and de-emphasizing divisive ones in all activities in the public sphere” (Blouin & Mukand, 2019). The Rwandan government utilized integration propaganda to create a cohesive national identity. This cohesive national identity was achieved through the State radio system, Radio Rwanda, which serves to disseminate State policy. According to the Rwandan government, the broadcast has increased national unity by decreasing inter-ethnic divides (Blouin & Mukand, 2019). The results suggest that ethnic identity can be shifted through propaganda spread via radio (Blouin & Mukand, 2019). This study highlights the effectiveness of propaganda at increasing social cohesion.



Bureaucrats

Within bureaucracies, these actors may choose to perform and

behave in certain ways, often according to bureaucratic structures. In the bureaucracy, differing structures play a vital role in outcomes, like public policy, its implementation, and related socioeconomic results (Suzuki & Hur, 2020). Additionally, individual bureaucrats’ attitudes and organizational commitment are vital components of an organization’s success (Suzuki & Hur, 2020). The relative amount of autonomy bureaucrats are granted within their operations underlies the implementation of policy (Suzuki & Hur, 2020).

Foundational to my efforts is the work of Bersch and Fukuyama (2023). They define bureaucratic autonomy “as the ability of executive agencies to use their own discretionary authority to implement policies made by political principals, as well as to make policy according to their own wishes when mandates are ambiguous, incomplete, corrupt, or contrary to their perception of national interest” (Bersch & Fukuyama, 2023). The level of bureaucratic autonomy has implications for the ending product and its alignment with the official policy.

Within bureaucracies, there can be a disconnect between the preferences of the highest-ranking officials and the average bureaucrats. This latter group is often called street-level bureaucrats (Wilson, 1989). These are the actors making individual decisions with relatively high levels of discretion and autonomy outside of organizational authority (Lipsky, 1980). Through these decisions, the official policy is implemented through practice, which leads to a disconnect between the one in practice and the official. To address these problems with implementation, a strong bureaucratic culture is beneficial. Scholar James Wilson states that:

Every organization has a culture, many have several. When a single culture is broadly shared and warmly endorsed it is a mission. The great advantage of the mission is that it permits the head of the agency to be more confident that operators [street-level bureaucrats] will act in particular cases in ways that the head would have acted had he or she been in their shoes (1989, p. 109).

The well-developed culture ensures that there is alignment between purpose and implementation. While a strong culture does not eliminate the ambiguity of the official policies, it decreases confusion around the agency’s overall goals. When bureaucrats are politically aligned with the elected principals, administrators tend to feel more constrained in their policy decisions due to in group pressures to conform to partisanship (Palus & Yackee, 2016). This phenomenon further highlights the awareness that agents have over expectations. Applying these bureaucratic theories, Weimar Germany and the United States represent different organizational ideas about how to construct the bureaucracy to effectively produce integration propaganda. While this outcome may have been an unconscious goal, the results can be extrapolated to understand the benefits of less autonomy in bureaucratic structures. Weimar chose to operate with artists positioned into the bureaucracy as bureaucrats, whereas the United States organized the bureaucrats as overseeing the artists and the artistic visions.

Argument for the Connection between Autonomy and Integrativeness

Above, I have laid out several reasons why we may expect more constrained bureaucrats to produce propaganda in adherence to the official policies of the government. When there is a strong culture and expectations set for bureaucrats, the actors are under pressure to fall in line. Conversely, when working with unclear expectations, one can conclude that bureaucrats will produce less integrative propaganda, favoring violence and call to action-oriented

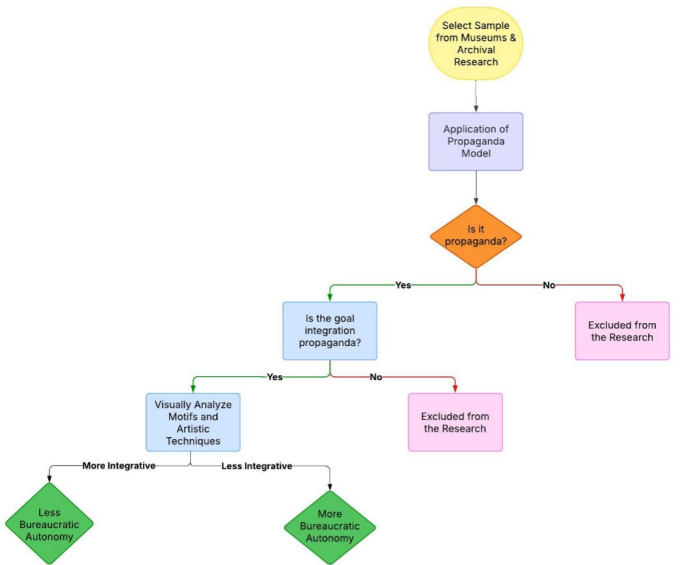


Fig. 2 | Flowchart of Hypothesis Testing.

imagery. Furthermore, there are several social incentives to produce integrative propaganda, concerning the upholding of social cohesion through shared ideologies. The desired social cohesion is obtained through these strict expectations of the bureaucracy. Specifically, I hypothesize that: *Propaganda produced through bureaucracies with less autonomy are more integrative.* I will be testing this hypothesis through the propaganda produced by the United States and the Weimar Republic.

Methods

I am testing my hypothesis through States that sponsor propaganda during periods of internal instability, relating to the construction of the welfare states and economic crises. The research of the art was conducted through mixed methods: digitally through museum archives and on-site at museums like the National Museum of American History, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery of Art, the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Kemper Art Museum, and the International Museum of Propaganda. After selecting the art, I applied the model of propaganda art. First, the art must meet the characteristics of propaganda, such as a false message that is communicated to a socially significant group of people from a political institution. After determining that the art is propaganda, the next step is to analyze the intent of the propaganda to establish the category: integration or agitation. After being categorized, the motifs and techniques employed by bureaucrats will be analyzed for ways they communicate a shared national identity. To test if less bureaucratic autonomy produces more integrative propaganda, I have adopted a comparative design between Weimar and the United States. As a Western power, the United States’ visual culture and political communications have been shaped by its colonial past. At its founding, the United States was influenced by European iconography and in return, it has globally shaped visual traditions. Placing each country of interest within the context of propaganda art is necessary. To fully investigate the propaganda, I root my comparative methods in Caterina Preda’s (2017) research—*Art and Politics Under Modern Dictatorships: A Comparison of Chile and Romania*. To provide a roadmap, I lay out an introduction to the relationship between democracy and art writ large. Then, I move to two democracies, where there is a development of different aesthetics that are used in State sponsored art.

My research is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining theories of political science and art history. Both fields offer a unique perspective of propaganda — specifically political art as propaganda. Art history acts as a primary source and a testament to the design of the artist, their patrons, and their audience. There is “a type of ‘mnemonic energy’ to the objectification of culture, pointing not only to works of high art, but also to posters,” which can be used to access the past (Aby Warburg, cited in Assman, 1995). Subsequently, the methods employed by art historians, like visual analysis, lend themselves well to the study of propaganda and its sociocultural context.

I am tracing the connection between the political ideology that appears in propaganda art of specific artistic styles through cultural connections. Oftentimes, these ideologies are mirrored in the formal qualities of the art, which create an aggressive or emotional experience for the audience. Through the analysis of the context and content of the propaganda art, I investigate the intention of specifically integration propaganda, using social identity theory and social cohesion theory to understand the State’s motivations. Through these theories, I connect the mechanism of action and the intended impact of integration propaganda. These differences in mechanisms can be explained by the bureaucratic organization. Ultimately, art serves as the evidence through which the mechanism is realized, intertwining ideology and practice.

In the context of propaganda, the iconography and details present in the art are especially important as they reveal the creator’s intended message. Throughout the United States and Europe, the repetitive use of allegories became ingrained in the visual political language of societies. Despite this prevalence, “[i]mages such as those mentioned could only be read and understood by an educated audience, and if they were to be useful for both propaganda and legitimation, the audience had to be kept in mind” (Fröschl, 1998). For the propaganda to be effective, the audience must be reached and understand the information that is being disseminated. If not, the propaganda is rendered ineffective. The success of each work relies upon its relative ability to communicate to its audience using these formal qualities: form, function, content, materials, and context (Heck et al., 1999). Artistic choices are vital to understanding the ways in which the bureaucracy shapes a nation through integrative propaganda art.

Case Selection

The United States and Weimar present two cases of nations that produce propaganda through bureaucratic means. This research aims to highlight the relationship between propaganda production and bureaucratic autonomy. The United States serves to demonstrate the theory: propaganda produced through bureaucracies with less autonomy are more integrative. The Weimar Republic supports the hypothesis as it presents contrary evidence: greater autonomy leads to less integrative propaganda.

The Weimar Republic at its founding and the United States during the era of the New Deal respectively present salient examples of two democracies. As democracies, the nations can gain the socio-cultural benefits from integration propaganda, outlined in the previous social theory section. While situated in their unique historical contexts, both nations faced similar instances of internal instability from World War I and economic challenges. During this period, nations were developing their welfare states. The development of the welfare state relies on the process of bureaucratization to increase the State’s capacity to provide services to citizens (Hong, 1998). Through bureaucratization, the States began to produce propaganda art, while simultaneously differing in their bu-

reaucratic structures in the organization and therefore the implementation. Essentially, faced with social and economic instability, the nations deemed it necessary to fund a bureaucracy to produce art. These similarities and differences make them ideal candidates to analyze the impact of bureaucratic autonomy on propaganda production.

Additionally, the democratic trajectory of the nations diverged after this period. The Weimar Republic would transform into fascist Germany, and the United States espoused even more democratic principles after the establishment of the social welfare state. These two nations provide a fascinating comparative study of the implementation, motivation, and usage of integration propaganda to create a socially cohesive democratic nation.

Welfare State and the Bureaucratization of Government

Scholar Anne Long White’s *Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State* (2000) defines welfare as “interventions in the form of public social provision aimed at modifying the play of social or market forces and justified by reference to the ‘welfare’ of recipients” (White, 2000). Before the construction of the modern welfare state, care—“the practice of meeting needs”—was posited as a private practice with autonomy from the State linked to ideas of self-sufficiency and freedom (White, 2000). However, care is intrinsically intertwined with public practice, as care is necessary to create good citizens (White, 2000). Nevertheless, the construction of the public and private spheres had placed care as a private activity rooting itself in Western perceptions of the nuclear family and nation-state (White, 2000). The modern welfare state challenges the association of care in the private sphere, renegotiating the role of the government in its citizens’ lives. The development of the State’s role required an increasing level of bureaucratization to meet the demands of the growing welfare state. During the early 20th century, Weimar and the United States underwent the construction of their welfare states.

The expansion of the American welfare state was precipitated by the unprecedented economic crisis of the Great Depression (1929-39), which impacted every aspect of the United States economy (Manza, 2000). The economic crash resulted in mass job loss and homelessness, resulting in many Americans living in poverty (Manza, 2000). The economic downturn resulted in the beginnings of several social movements, targeting the unemployed and the industry sector (Manza, 2000). In a landslide election, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) initiated the series of policies, which would become known as the New Deal in the first “Hundred Days” of March through June in 1933 (Manza, 2000). In the following months work and emergency relief programs were adopted, like the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By the midterm elections, there was a second phase, initiating the Second New Deal and including the Social Security Act (Manza, 2000). This period of important legislative acts formed the modern American social welfare state, transforming the relationship between State and citizen with the establishment of the State’s responsibility to care for its citizens.

In addition to the increase of social welfare policies, FDR’s career and presidency were framed around supporting a reform agenda (Tarbert, 2019). While in office, this agenda manifested in the restructuring of the federal executive to maximize efficiency. These proposed changes allowed the president to have better managerial control over the federal bureaucracy (Tarbert, 2019). He established the Committee of Administrative Management in 1936. In 1939, the Reorganization Act created the Executive Office of the President of the United States—one of the most impor-

tant developments of the modern American administrative State (Tarbert, 2019). As FDR sought to increase presidential oversight, it would stand to reason that there would be a subsequent decrease in bureaucratic autonomy. FDR’s presidency represents a period of increasing formalized administrative responsibilities in the United States.

Like the United States, the German welfare state was founded on the growing need of the people in economic distress. The very origins of the welfare state as well as the German welfare state began before WWI in Imperial Germany. Before its dissolution after WWI, Imperial Germany operated for a brief period starting in 1871. The Empire was united by Prussia, a German state. Otto von Bismarck, the prime minister of Prussia, is often credited with the invention of the social welfare state (Ocampo & Stiglitz, 2018). In 1881 with the encouragement of von Bismarck, Emperor Wilhelm I wrote “those who are disabled from work by age and invalidity have a well-grounded claim to care from the state” to the German Parliament (Ocampo & Stiglitz, 2018). Von Bismarck was working under the assumption that the State’s concern with its citizens’ welfare would result in a more productive work force and reduce the chances of revolt (Ocampo & Stiglitz, 2018). However, the implementation of these social programs had a limited impact on municipal relief for the poor (Hong, 1998). During this period, the internal political turmoil increased. While the German industrial based economy was robust, an authoritarian political system caused growing calls for political freedom, especially in concern to the poor representation of the lower and middle classes in government (McHale & Johnson, 1976). During WWI, the belief that the public had a responsibility for an individual’s welfare gained traction, but it was carried out through authoritarian policies (Hong, 1998). In the post WWI era, the November Revolution and the founding of the Weimar Republic ushered in, a belief concerned with the economic relief of its people. On August 11, 1919, the new constitution declared the fundamental social rights of Weimar citizens, granting the Reich government legislative powers over social welfare policies (Hong, 1998). The formation of the social welfare state had implications for its involvement in citizens’ lives and an increase in the bureaucratization of State practices.



Case: The United States

Overview of American Visual Political Culture Before WWI

Since the founding of the United States, State sponsored art and architecture aligned the nation with a set of classical ideals. For instance, the European Grand Manner style was employed in the early phase of the United States to align the new nation with the European tradition (Craven, 1979). By aligning the new nation’s art with the canon, American artists sought to legitimize their work and country. During this period, another style emerged in American art. Neoclassical art draws on Greco-Roman visual traditions. Neoclassicism is marked by balance, idealized naturalism, and restraint of color (Charles, 2019). The style’s subject includes moral themes and patriotism, gaining popularity throughout the West (Charles, 2019). This proximity worked to create a na-

tional identity, which is especially valuable during periods of national instability. By borrowing these elements, the United States reasserts itself as the inheritor of democracy. In the modern art period, the divergence, and the call back to these artistic origins highlight the attempt to offer an evolving set of communal ideals during a period of instability— such as the Great Depression.

The New Deal and the Origins of the Federal Art Project

The Federal Art Project (FAP) arose during the Great Depression to provide jobs to American artists. At its core, the FAP can be understood as a stimulus program, aimed at improving the American economy by employing artists. The New Deal was cemented as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which the FAP resided within (Mavigliano, 1984).

Holger Cahill, educated in social research, was the FAP’s architect. Cahill advocated for subsidizing the American art scene, believing that American industrialism had “unlovely things, and this in turn has resulted in a degradation of popular taste” (Mavigliano, 1984). In 1935, Cahill was appointed to the FAP. For the FAP, he based his practice on John Dewey’s philosophy of *Art as Experience*, which argues for integration between the high and low arts as an extension of culture. Cahill and Dewey’s philosophy supported the New Deal agenda. Art was touted as universal communication and instruction.

The arts resurgence in the post-Great Depression era was a result of increased time for leisure activities—art being one of them (Mavigliano, 1984). Cahill was focused on building the relationship between the public and the artist, which the United States government stimulated through the establishment of a series of art projects. There was a desire to bring art to Americans—especially those living in marginalized communities. Art occupied a space deemed exclusively for the elite. The most influential iteration was the FAP, established in May of 1935 with four distinct divisions: fine arts, practical arts, technical and coordinating personnel, and educational services (Mavigliano, 1984).

On paper, the artists were free to create whatever works they wanted; however, in practice, the artists faced restrictions on the content of their art (Harris, 1995). There were controls over the subject and style throughout the FAP and during the 1930s. The FAP bureaucrats favored styles of representational art rather than abstract art. This favoritism towards representational art conflicted with their own desire to steer away from communist implications (Harris, 1995). In general, artists claimed that the administration feared anything too controversial or experimental, which could be viewed as a communist threat (Harris, 1995). This rejection of communism was established through the first Red Scare of 1919-20 (Goldstein, 2014). The following years were mired with political repression, justified by anti-communist sentiments (Goldstein, 2014). Art with communist influences is seen in the popularity of the USSR’s social realism and Mexican muralism, which increased concerns that the art would highlight unsavory parts of American life. When Clifford Whyte’s mural at Coit Tower in San Francisco was unveiled, a controversy arose. He created three panels: *Rugged Individualism*, *The New Deal*, and *Communism* (Harris, 1995). His work was not well received, as they drew from the social realist styles of his contemporaries. Claims of censorship were not exclusive to Whyte; artists, Burgoyne and Isamu Noguchi, lodged similar claims. The State had control over the production of art; “the plans and the sketches were supposed to receive complete approval from the project’s own local review board as well as from the cooperating sponsor” (Harris, 1995). Consequently, artists were subject to limited creative control. Fur-



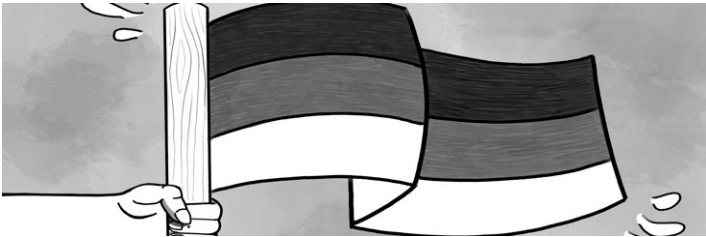
Image 3 | Philip Guston. (1940). *Work and Play*, Queensbridge Housing Mural Project, New York City, United States.

ther, all art created under the FAP was the property of the federal State and could not be sold (Harris, 1995).

The FAP is not the first of its kind in terms of State sponsored art in the United States. However, this case is uniquely emblematic of New Deal policy and a specific “expression of Rooseveltian idealism” (Harris, 1995). Ultimately, the FAP worked to establish a national art consciousness. The FAP had an overarching goal of creating an American visual identity and democratizing art. Before the Project, American visual culture was based on the European canon. There was a desire to reject these external cultural influences in hopes of forging their own independent style, which was uniquely American (Harris, 1995). FDR aimed to create pride in American culture and democracy. The FAP laid claim to the role of the State in Americans’ lives. Scholar Jonathan Harris declares:

The function of the state must be, paradoxically, both visible and invisible. It must be visible because Cahill’s aim was for the state to constitute the American people as citizens through diverse regional cultural activities. It must be invisible because there must never be any sense of ‘superimposed’ or ‘arty’ subject matter in these events. The nation-state should simply be recognized to exist, not to have been made. Similarly, the citizen should be recognized as axiomatic, not subject to debate or denial. The cultural activities of regional America were, for Cahill, the grounds and the guarantee of the myth of cultural identity. (1995, p. 114)

The FAP had to embrace a level of assuredness in the rendering of the State. During an unstable time, any hint of questioning would have led to a weakening of the project’s objectives. Additionally, Harris remarks upon the balance that the State must strike in order to be most effective. This discussion of the aim and context behind the creation of the FAP art works provide an integral foundation to the analysis that will follow after a brief context of Weimar’s unique concerns in constructing a federal art program.



Case: Weimar Republic

Overview of German Visual Political Culture

The Wilhelmine Empire had a complex artistic vision, made up of competing interests of the central bureaucracy and Kaiser Wilhelm II. The bureaucracy favored a variety of arts, including modernist arts; however, the Kaiser feared aesthetic innovation for

its possibility to create political change (Paret, 1983). Imperial German artistic culture was seen as industrial and materialist with a repressive government structure (Riggs, 1993). Despite these complaints, there were a variety of styles that appeared through the artistic production of Max Liebermann, who championed internationalism—a style which drew upon techniques rooted in other countries’ histories (Deshmukh, 1998). Oftentimes, artistic styles that lacked roots in German tradition were looked down upon. The arts were an important way to display the prowess of German arts, which State sponsored artists tended to utilize. Simultaneously, Wilhelmine artists idealized the pre-industrial age, where people were free from the problems of modern life. Throughout the industrialized world, these sentiments were shared with the idealization of the country and peasants. It was from this desire that German Expressionism was born.

Overview of German Empire to Republic Politics

At the beginning of the War, many Germans were enthusiastic in their support; however, this enthusiasm soon faded when its realities became apparent. Industrial unrest had started at the beginning of 1918, and by August, WWI was effectively lost. Despite publicly promising peace, German leadership continued to fight through the end of October (Jones, 2016). Rather than admitting defeat, the navy planned an attack on the British fleet (Jones, 2016). The sailors refused to carry out this plan and were arrested, inciting more protests. From there, the November Revolution spread to urban workers, soldiers, and women (Jones, 2016). By November 9th, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader, Friedrich Ebert, was appointed to the imperial chancellorship for a few short hours, and Germany was declared a republic against his will (Jones, 2016). The government shortly resigned, and Wilhelm II abdicated the throne. The SPD broke into two parties: the SPD (the majority) and the Independent Socialists (the minority). In addition, a new party called Group International was founded by the Spartacus League. In the following months, the construction of Weimar proved to be unstable.

Weimar’s leadership possessed an intense fear of the communist threat, believed to cause the breakdown of the social and political order (Jones, 2016). Their fears seemingly came to fruition when Spartacus League revolutionaries, led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, tried to launch a communist revolution in the style of the Bolsheviks in Russia (Jones, 2016). However, the attempt failed and the revolutionaries were executed in mid-January 1919 (Jones, 2016). Nevertheless, the fear of communism persisted, resulting in State sponsored violence, and driven by fear, rumors, and self-generated beliefs (Jones, 2016). There was a fear of losing control to more radical groups. Simultaneously, there was a distinct desire to maintain order through the creation of a new State while simultaneously undergoing an era of great change.



Image 4 | Philip Guston. (1940). Detail of *Work and Play*.

In the post-revolutionary era, Ebert, a member of the SPD, created a provisional social republic to gain the cooperation of Independent Socialists. The Independent Socialists and the Majority Socialists made up the six-person provisional government and bureaucratic administrator (Jones, 2016). In January of 1919, citizens voted for members of a national constituent assembly that was charged with creating a constitution (Jones, 2016). The government began meeting in Weimar, and by August, the constitution was ratified (Jones, 2016). In a matter of a year, the country transformed from an empire to a republic, an extensive change for the German people. German society reacted to these drastic changes in the dramatically shifting conceptions of man’s power and economic realities.

Throughout the world, especially in Europe, there was a reckoning with the reality of modern warfare. The invention of weapons, like gas and artillery, allowed for mass casualties that had not been possible before. The war was particularly devastating for the Germans and other Central Powers. In 1919, the conditions laid out in the Treaty of Versailles were particularly extreme, impacting the new government, its economy, and its people. Further, the Treaty of Versailles and the effects of modern warfare resulted in radically new political ideals and art movements in Germany.

Overview of Weimar Republic’s Visual Political Culture

German Expressionism describes experimental art in Germany, which began before WWI. Expressionism was associated with “antinaturalism to communicate their critiques of social materialism and their utopian visions” (Riggs, 1993). Artists were at the forefront of political change. Early expressionists during this period welcomed the war because it was seen as a revolution to



Image 5 | Stuart Davis. (1938). *Swing Landscape*, Indiana University, Bloomington, United States.

overthrow the monarchy and the bourgeoisie (Figura and Jelavich, 2011). This idealism quickly ended as many artists took part in the war effort, which changed them forever. These artists’ pre- and post-war art styles starkly contrast each other, as seen through the work of Ernest Ludwig Kirchner and Max Beckmann. These artistic transformations are emblematic of the larger shifts that were occurring throughout Europe. People were grappling with the brutality of war and manufactured weapons of mass destruction, making way for the popularity of German Expressionism. The Weimar Republic sought to build on this innovative art style (Riggs, 1993). The style served as a unique vehicle to support the new republic. Abstraction, as an art form, had a unique draw, viewed as free from nationality, race, or religion (Riggs, 1993). German Expressionism would evolve into an artistic movement that attached itself to socialism and became further popularized through political posters (Chapman, 2010).

During the formation of the Weimar Republic, propaganda was produced in the initial stage of a socialist government to support the free democratic election in January 1919. The Werbedienst der deutschen Republik, the transitional State’s publicity office, had Novembergruppe members within their staff. The bureau was made up of three Social Democrats and three Independents (Rigby, 1983). Before commissioning members of the Novembergruppe, posters mostly containing ecclesiastical script were produced and written in flaming letters to prompt the ideals and programs of the new republic (Rigby, 1983). The poor reception of the script centered posters led the bureau to involve the Novembergruppe to produce posters that aligned with their ideals (Chapman, 2010). The group changed the style of the posters with colors and imagery to appeal to the public socialist cause. There was a collection of notable artists that were most responsive to the commission: Heinz Fuchs, Cesar Klein, Max Pechstein, Heinrich Richter-Berline and Georg Tappert (Rigby, 1983). These artists believed that the new SPD regime would support their artistic freedoms. Through the political lens, the Novembergruppe artists drafted a manifesto proclaiming their revolutionary focus to support the new republic (Rigby, 1983). The group closely aligned themselves to the politics of the State and sought to produce art that served to damper the volatile environment.

History of the Novembergruppe

The Novembergruppe was founded in December 1918, established in response to the November Revolution (Riggs, 1993). They were one of many artist groups that were established with an explicitly political agenda. Their goals remained oriented toward expanding art to the masses and supporting the socialist revolution through establishing institutions and policies that supported more

artistic freedoms. The desire to institute free artistic policies was in response to the ways the Wilhelmine era was restrictive for artists. The Novembergruppe’s motto was “liberty, equality, frater-



Image 6 | Max Pechstein. (1919). *Erwürgt nicht die junge Freiheit durch Unordnung und Brudermord, sonst verhungern Eure Kinder*, LACMA, Los Angeles, United States.

Image 7 | Max Pechstein. (1919). *An die Laterne*, MoMA, New York City, United States.

nity!” In the group’s manifesto written from 1918-1919, they wrote extensively about their political aspirations: “[w]e consider it our

noblest duty to dedicate our best energies to the moral reconstruction of a new free Germany” (Riggs, 1993). They aimed to influence the visual culture and program of the new Republic. The group planned to maintain an active role in public architectural projects, art schools and curricula, museums, exhibition spaces, and arts legislation (Riggs, 1993). The Novembergruppe held public exhibitions, which aimed to bring art to the people. Democratizing art and freedom to make artistic choices was of the utmost importance to the group. They published catalogs and periodicals called *Der Kunststopf* (*Artificial Material*) and *Novembergruppe* (*November Group*), culminating in their book—*An alle Künstler* (*To All Artists*) (Riggs, 1983). The group can be characterized by their desire for artistic freedom and exploration of avant-garde styles.

Like many other Weimar political groups at the time, the group had a short-lived political career. By 1920 and 1921, the Novembergruppe’s exhibitions had lost their political overtones, which was mirrored by other propagandists at the time (Riggs, 1993). Their depoliticization was increased by the “worker’s repudiation of abstraction and resentment of them” (Riggs, 1993). The motivations behind their art did not resonate with the audience that the group hoped to find support in. By playing bureaucrats and artists, they found little success. The innovation and creativity of artists are not advantageous in a political system, such as the bureaucracy. Innovation of artists can misalign the goals of producing propaganda art and its content.

Analysis

Analysis of the United States through the Federal Art Project

Despite the popularity of murals in Europe and later Mexico, the tradition of murals in the United States did not fully develop until the 20th century under the FAP. It was through this project that 1,400 murals were created (O’Connor, 1973). Philip Evergood (cited in O’Connor), a FAP artist, credits Mexican influences, saying:

[T]he economic depression and the consequent birth of the WPA/FAP has done more in five years for mural painting, and more for the closer understanding between the American artist and his public through the medium of the mural than any individual efforts could have accomplished during a much longer period. (1973, p. 49)

In addition to raising the status of murals in the United States, “It [the FAP] placed painting on a level with the millions of passersby who had never thought about it before, but now began to pay attention, because it was there for them to see. Today a new type of artist has developed who thinks and paints naturally in terms of this new public” (O’Connor, 1973). The FAP transformed the landscape of American art, and murals were particularly effective in democratizing art. Murals are intrinsically tied to place, fully informed by their location and audience. Oftentimes, the content of the murals will follow the location. The artist would have taken the audience and location into consideration in the work (O’Connor, 1973). More so than other mediums, there is a precise space that artists must fill.

Murals induce a form of social cohesion, bridging the ideals of the State and its citizens. Art, as a cultural product, is specific to society, shaped and informed by it. Specifically, “art was seen as having the capacity to unify both individuals and groups, not only because art was how one could imagine (literally, ‘give image to’) a future society of social and political harmony” (Harris, 1995). Muralism is no exception. Unlike high art of the past, murals are a constant in public life, allowing for a more significant role in social cohesion. Large in scale and ever present, a mural’s role “is ideologi-

cal: it must reach many people of various views, differing social concepts, and political outlooks” (O’Connor, 1973). As murals aim to communicate with a diverse audience, they must depict unifying themes to reach across differences. Unifying themes can be identified through everyday objects, family life, and industrial or agricultural scenes. FAP artist Walter Quirt remarked, “[o]ur real job, of course, is to take common experiences and make them articulate in emotional terms, not exclusively intellectual ones” (O’Connor, 1973). While people have differing views on policies and their implementation, unity is easier to achieve when making a claim to how one wants to feel.

The FAP murals were used to promote New Deal policies, often decorating the walls of government funded initiatives. Specifically, “[t]hrough the mural program, FAP policies and values became interactive with other state activities, in particular those involving institutions and the operation of state power” (Harris, 1995). This interaction is made clear through the public housing initiatives that took place under President FDR. It was through these policies that murals and the State’s agenda are most clear. Public housing fell under the Public Works Administration Housing Division, which was funded under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (Patterson, 2020). FDR sought to make New York City the blueprint for increasing the standards of working-class housing for the nation (Patterson, 2020). The creation of housing projects and consequent murals decorated the interiors of the space like the Queensbridge Housing Project. This project was built by the New York City Housing Authority (Harris, 1995).

In these buildings, social family roles are often depicted, illustrated through Philip Guston’s *Work and Play*. This work is indicative of the prevalence of familial and traditional themes throughout the FAP sponsored works. *Work and Play* depicts, as the scene suggests, work and play. There is a clear attempt to persuade the occupants of the housing projects to look favorably upon the State. The depiction of everyday people seen on one side of the mural working and the other playing creates a utopia. A family of three is seen gathered together in the kitchen with the father physically supporting his wife and child. In another panel, some are putting objects together while a doctor is positioned centrally checking a child’s heart (Image 5). The colors are muted, and the figures are not highly individualized. The aim is to perhaps imagine oneself as one of these figures, peacefully coexisting with one another. This projection of a utopia that the housing project aimed to accomplish as a part of the broader New Deal. The figural paintings were a convenient means through which the State was able to convey its intended future. While most of the murals produced during this period were narrative driven and illustrated in accordance with how people and objects appear realistically, the Williamsburg murals, like the *Swing Landscape*, departed from this tradition in favor of abstraction which discards reality. The use of abstraction highlights the tension between communist ideals and artistic innovation, which was much debated at the time. Stuart Davis, one of the artists contracted to create murals for communal areas at the Williamsburg project argued abstract art was more accessible and allowed people in the public housing projects to be freed from the “reminders of their miserable conditions” (Patterson, 2020). The use of common everyday objects allowed for a more approachable form of art. It did not require the audience to understand references to the European canon, which remained accessible only to the elite. The possibilities of abstract art is seen through Stuart Davis’ *Swing Landscape*. With vivid tones and unmodulated blocks of color, Davis creates a bold design with objects and architecture from the world around. The emphasis is placed on the urban land-

scape with buildings, removing the focus from people and placing it on the space in which they collectively occupy. The content of the painting directly interacts with its role in the public space. The direct engagement with the current world and people through a modern art form and policy was incredibly innovative. While void of narrative elements, the accessibility of the subject is persuasive, proposing a new inviting type of world.

The FAP’s murals explicitly aim to include the audience’s perspective through content. While the murals range from communal scenes to everyday objects, the intention of appealing to viewers’ commonalities is clear. The ease at which the murals communicated these shared experiences can be attributed to the bureaucratization of the FAP and expectations for the artists. This message is refined through the constraining of the artists by bureaucrats. In this case, the restrictions of the artists result in an appeal for the audience to come together during a period of economic and social instability in the United States.

“

The restrictions of the artists result in an appeal for the audience to come together during a period of economic and social instability in the United States.

Analysis of Weimar Germany through the Werbedienst Office

The propaganda of the Weimar Republic was produced to nation-build with existing artistic tradition in mind. German Expressionism became identifiable as the dominant art style of the new Republic. It is characterized by harsh dark lines with little blending occurring. Oftentimes, there is a high visual contrast between values. The color palette for prints was often reduced and limited to a few colors. The aesthetics of the style create the feeling of assertiveness and assuredness in the message of the art. This result can consequently be helpful for propaganda to persuade the masses. A clear connection between form and content assists with such a task. Identifying features are crucial for State propaganda, lending a level of legitimacy. These features can be produced through symbols and the establishment of State colors. Weimar Republic’s colors are black, red, and gold. Additionally, the lit torch became the symbol of Werbedienst visible on State sponsored posters (Rigby, 1983). The use of the color palette and associated symbols made the poster’s origins clear. These posters served as utilitarian public art, through their medium and content. Paper posters were easily distributed, resulting in the rapid spread of messages and information throughout cities. State propaganda is a combination of expressing the cultural impulses of the current time in part as a necessity to reach the public during a critical time for the new nation.

Death, violence, and chaos were a hallmark of the Novembergruppe’s Werbedienst posters. As members of the bureaucracy, they were provided with artistic freedom when producing the posters. The content and style of the artists served to create aggressive and more dramatic appearances of the subjects’ appearances. The State produced posters had clear objectives to persuade citizens to act in support of the new Republic. Of particular interest is Pechstein’s lithograph titled *Don’t Strangle the Newborn Freedom through Disorder and Fratricide, Otherwise Your Children Will Starve* (Image

6). The poster depicts a naked boy child standing embracing a red flag. Black and red are employed here in the print to symbolize the birth of the new nation, represented by the newborn child. Pechstein and by extension the Werbedienst Office aim to create a socially cohesive State and end any remaining public discord. Similarly, in Pechstein's *To the Lantern* (Image 7), a mob of indistinguishable men are moving in droves holding red flags, representing Communists. A man hanged in a noose is tied to the lamp post in the foreground of the print—an unmistakable violent message. This print too serves as a warning about disrupting the new republic. Political fragmentation is dangerous in a fledgling democracy. The goal of the new government is to create a unified people and remove any threats. Both posters do not construct an ideal republic where everyone is happy and fulfilled. Rather, these posters attempt to show the consequences of a lack of participation, as everyone has their tasks to complete. The stakes are death if there is non-compliance. These posters are stark contrasts in comparison to the utopia that the FAP constructed.

The posters of the Werbedienst Office are distinctly violent in imagery and through the qualities of the art. The Office is directly identifying the threat as the impending communist invasion or the looming threat of social disorder. These posters are indicative of the organization that produced this propaganda, which anointed artists as bureaucrats. The Novembergruppe had a revolutionary purpose, which was utilized during this provisional era in Weimar. While they were attempting to maintain order, they did so through evocative imagery, which more closely falls near agitation rather than integrative propaganda. Agitation propaganda attempts to disrupt the current order rather than maintain it. The difference in production and content is one of the differences between the two cases.

“

Agitation propaganda attempts to disrupt the current order rather than maintain it.

Bureaucratic Differences in the Two Interwar Democracies

The programs' differences in direction can be understood by the bureaucratic administrations that oversaw the respective programs. The FAP gives a clear image of what the New Deal is working towards achieving. However, the Weimar Republic is presented as an alternative vision to the destruction represented in the posters. The two programs have chosen different tactics to achieve a similar goal. The Weimar Republic is representative of artists as bureaucrats. In this position, they are given more artistic leniency, allowing for a representation more in line with the original artistic intent. Placing the artistic vision over the political aims, the artistic created a vision that was less conducive to State values.

In contrast, the United States' FPA in the WPA was overseen by strict bureaucrats, who had an overall vision for the mission of the FPA. The bureaucrats were conditioned by professional incentives to achieve outcomes closer to the federal governments. Their conformity is helped by a strong organizational culture. This alignment with a larger vision, produced by artists throughout the country, created more restrictions on artists. In some cases, the restrictions can be considered outright censorship. These differences created a vision to support the goal of democratizing art and stabilizing people after the Great Depression. Some of the decisions between these

two State's approaches are the political context in which each of them was situated. The United States was a fully established country that had been suffering economically. However, the Weimar Republic was struggling to create a distinct identity, facing more political and economic obstacles. In other words, the United States benefited from the previous bureaucratic infrastructure and established national values. The United States had long been established as a unified State after the American Civil War. Being in different stages of statehood impacts the organizational abilities of the bureaucrats. Further, the ability to construct a socially cohesive State had larger implications for each of the States. The economic depression in Weimar set the stage for the rise of fascism and the Third Reich. Conversely, the United States' New Deal allowed for the establishment of the social welfare state, in an effort to care for the common man.

Conclusion

In closing, I have laid out two cases that provide insight into the relationship between bureaucratic autonomy and the production of integration propaganda. The cases represent a period of increasing bureaucratization in both States with the formation of their respective social welfare states. The interwar period coincided with a period of instability, necessitating the use of ideology to maintain a socially cohesive State. The United States' FAP provides a compelling case of a State that produced integration propaganda through a bureaucratized federal agency. The artists were under the guidance of bureaucrats, who were informed by New Deal ideologies. The FAP propaganda produced utopian visions of familial scenes and social harmony. Providing contrary evidence, the propaganda produced by the Weimar Republic's Werbedienst Office was less integrative and used blunt messaging to address potential threats to the new State. The provisional government feared the threat to the social order and what they believed to be anarchy. To communicate the desperation of the situation, artists as bureaucrats favored more aggressive and violent imagery. The outcomes of the propaganda can be understood through the structuring of the Werbedienst Office, as the Novembergruppe had primary artist control, in other words more bureaucratic autonomy. My findings suggest that agencies with less bureaucratic autonomy produce more integrative propaganda.

While these cases make an ideal comparison, there are some limitations. For instance, Weimar and the United States are in two distinct stages of nationhood. Weimar was just barely in its infancy and does not have the same baseline bureaucratic capacity that the United States possesses. In comparison, the United States is a relatively stable democracy despite facing economic difficulties during the Great Depression. Despite these obstacles, I argue that these cases are still worth studying in connection with one another, as they are undergoing periods of instability and bureaucratization. Future studies may examine bureaucratic autonomy and propaganda production in different State contexts with special attention paid to the uniqueness of national contexts. Relatedly, I suggest efforts to standardize the range of integrativeness through artificial intelligence (AI). The use of AI in art historical methods has begun to take hold in recent years. Notably, these methods have been used to study Vincent Van Gogh's painting technique in comparison to his contemporaries and have shown great promise (Li et al., 2012).

References

For a full list of references, visit WUJUR.org.

Too Many or Not Enough:

Reproductive Labor and the Hui Minority in Post-One-Child Policy China

计划生育



Illustration by | Lucy Wei '29

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Too Many or Not Enough: Reproductive Labor and the Hui Minority in Post-One-Child Policy China

Wiley Luan ‘26

Washington University in St. Louis

This paper examines the overlooked reproductive experiences of Hui women, China’s second-largest ethnic minority, under the One-Child Policy (1979–2016). Many ethnic minorities were formally exempt from birth quotas, creating complex pressures that disproportionately shaped Hui women’s lives. The existing literature focuses on numerical measures such as population growth, poverty, and educational attainment from national census measures, which tend to have limited scope. As a result, ethnic minorities are often described as monolithic, grouped into the “other,” while the Han are the focus. Using demographic data, policy analysis, and a transnational feminist lens, I place a new focus on the differential experiences of ethnic-minority women. I argue that exemptions to the One-Child Policy for Hui women did not grant them reproductive freedom but instead intensified gendered burdens by linking women’s reproductive labor to state economic logics and community strategies of ethnic preservation. I expand the reproductive justice framework by challenging the preconception that freedoms from coercive population control measures are inherently freeing. Furthermore, I propose a new lens to view cultural and religious traditions as a resource for empowerment rather than a barrier for Hui women. Drawing on cases from the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, I show how Islam-based economic initiatives open pathways for Hui women’s public participation. These cases illustrate that reproductive justice in China cannot be measured merely by exemptions from state control, but must instead account for the broader cultural and economic structures that shape women’s reproductive lives.

The One-Child Policy is one of the most significant population control efforts in modern history, particularly in its impact on Han families, the dominant ethnic group in China. However, the experiences of ethnic-minority women during this period of population control, and its lingering effects, are often overlooked. China’s family planning laws aimed to regulate birth rates through measures such as child limits and financial penalties. Among these, the One-Child Policy emerged as the most far-reaching, continuing to impact gender ratios today (Pletcher, 2025). While ethnic minority groups are given exemptions to family planning laws, a misconception that this “preferential treatment” greatly benefits ethnic-minority women and families continues to circulate in scholarly discourse. This paper focuses on the Hui, China’s second-largest minority group, with approximately 11 million members and a unique status as an Islamic minority.

I examine how Hui women navigate both state policies and community expectations, which pressure them to have more children to preserve ethnic identity and “keep up” with the Han majority. The lack of government support in educational and economic spheres in underprivileged communities exacerbates the problems of inequality in combination with reproductive pressures. I further this argument by exploring a new framework that allows tradition to become an essential part of economic empowerment for women. The paper argues that a new reproductive justice paradigm must recognize that neither state-granted reproductive freedom nor adherence to tradition is inherently oppressive or liberatory; their impact depends on context.

Literature Review

Scholars have extensively examined the economic and social consequences of the One-Child Policy, but few have explored its impact on ethnic-minority women. Most discussions of the One-Child Policy, or any family planning policy that accompanied it, operate at a macro level, focusing on national averages of birth rates and fertility. Scholarship on ethnic minorities emphasizes static indicators like poverty, inter-ethnic marriage, and cultural practices. These discussions treat minority communities as timeless or ahistorical. Marginalized communities are seen as culturally different, permitting shallow analysis of uncommon practices as mere reflections of this cultural difference and stripping historical pasts from cultural practices (Nnaemeka, 2005). This mentality neglects the fact that tradition has the dynamic capacity to respond to structural change. This creates two key gaps in the literature:

- 1) The overlooked consequences of family planning policy exemptions on minority women, and
- 2) The tendency to use ethnic minority tradition as a catch-all explanation for poverty and patriarchy, which obscures its potential for feminist and economic progress.

The One-Child Policy

Introduced in 1979, the One-Child Policy was designed to curb China’s rapidly growing population (Kane, 1999). While its impacts are hard to measure as they continue to shape reproductive norms, research shows that, in 1990, the total fertility rate for most ethnic minority groups ranged from 3 to 4.1, while the Han fertility rate was 2.1 (Jin, 2023). By 2020, the fertility gap had narrowed but persisted; ethnic groups such as the Miao, Zhuang, Bai, Tujia, and Hui had fertility rates ranging from 1.5 to 1.8, while the Han stood at 1.27. This consistent fertility gap illustrates that ethnic-minority women, on average, have more children than their Han counterparts. This paper operates within the demographic and policy context where reproductive patterns are deeply stratified along ethnic lines. Focusing on the period from 1979 to 2016, during which the One-Child Policy was fully enforced, this paper highlights a contrast in its application to the Han majority versus the Hui ethnic minority.

China’s Minzu system classifies its population by ethnicity, playing a crucial role in shaping this dynamic. Initially developed in the 1930s, the Minzu system was designed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to gain political legitimacy by fostering alliances with marginalized groups (Dillon, 2018). After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the CCP further solidified its power by recognizing certain ethnic groups’ rights within the socialist state structure (Dillon, 2018). However, the Minzu system also compelled individuals to choose a single ethnic identity, erasing mixed or multiethnic heritage (Stroup, 2022). This classification system serves a dual function: formally recognizing diversity while confining it within state-sanctioned boundaries.

Perceptions of Birth Planning Policies and Their Exemptions

It is difficult to obtain an accurate gauge of Chinese citizens’ opinions of the One-Child Policy, as any study would likely be impacted by social desirability bias, post-hoc reasoning, or censorship. Reports by the Human Rights Watch describe China as one of the world’s most severe censorship regimes. The Chinese government uses tactics such as firewalls and business regulations to prevent information that perpetuates any views of the CCP as anything other than benevolent and uncorrupt (Human Rights Watch, 2024). As discussed later in this paper, ethnic minorities experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment compared to their Han counterparts—findings that may be interpreted as critical of the government. Still, scholars have managed to trace general attitudes of the Han majority toward ethnic minorities, especially regarding exemptions to population control policies, as these studies tend to emphasize sociocultural perspectives rather than overt political criticism, allowing them to avoid political scrutiny. In *Lesser Dragons*, Michael Dillon notes that many Han Chinese, including educated elites, perceive ethnic minorities as recipients of “preferential treatment.” He writes that Han citizens often point to policies such as lower university entrance requirements and exemptions from the One-Child Policy as evidence that minorities benefit at the expense of the Han majority (Dillon, 2018). Xing’s study of China’s most ethnically diverse province, titled “Prevalence of Ethnic Inter-marriage in Kunming,”

outlines how these “privileges” extend to fewer taxes, greater access to education for children, more lenient employment and promotion opportunities, and protections for religious and linguistic expression (Xing, 2007). It is worth noting that some of these perceived preferential treatments can hardly be recognized as such when using a dominant Western framework of civil rights. Well-established human rights conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights recognize the freedom of expression, the right to education, and the right to use one’s minority language freely (Council of Europe, 1950; Council of Europe, 1995). In China, the right to self-expression, religious freedoms, and employment equality are so seldom granted in ethnic minority communities that they are perceived as luxuries. Yet, the belief that exemptions to population control measures and policies like entrance exam score boosts are viewed as preferential treatments by ethnic minority groups themselves.

In his book *Changing Ethnicity*, Guo examines how ethnic identity and hierarchy are socially constructed and redefined through the One-Child Policy. Among the Yi people of Liangshan, for example, some express pride in their bloodline and view their ability to have more children as symbolic of ethnic superiority. Guo writes that “preferential policies are to some extent making matters even worse”, including the “birth-planning policy that allows Yi couples to have two children” (Guo, 2020). By calling it a “preferential policy”, the author indicates that allowing more children per household is indeed a “preference” as decided by the state, which is later reinterpreted and internalized by ethnic minorities as a sign of their superiority over the Han majority as a result of increased freedoms.

These examples piece together a general view of One-Child Policy exemptions as positive. In other words, the Chinese perceive having more children, or at least the option to, as inherently good. At face value, they are giving more autonomy back to ethnic minority regions to decide for themselves how many children each household would like to have. The higher birth rates among ethnic minority groups, as outlined in the earlier section, are evidence of this attitude. However, the rest of my paper is aimed at uncovering what this positive perception misses: the impact of these exemptions that are disproportionately felt by lower-class ethnic-minority women and the use of an economic framework by the Chinese government to obscure their manipulation of reproductive labor in a way that advances their population control agendas.

Religion and Endogamy

Religious identity and state policy converge to create additional reproductive pressures on Hui women. In the book *Pure and True*, Stroup details the everyday politics of Hui people, which points to the rarity of inter-ethnic marriages between Hui people and the Han. Hui men and women maintain endogamy—the practice of marrying within one’s ethnic or religious groups, as opposed to exogamy, or marriage outside of it—due to religious customs, with women expected to convert to Islam before marrying into Hui families (Stroup, 2022). This expectation of religious conversion is both a personal spiritual decision and a mechanism of ethnic preservation. The official categorization of ethnicity in China, coupled with the Hui people being devoutly Muslim, has encouraged China’s ethnic minority communities to “engage in endogamy and [have] additional children as attempts at ethnic preservation” (Stroup, 2022). Ethnic preservation becomes a compelling rhetoric and collective strategy that can only be accomplished with religious conversion. While conversion may appear as a personal choice, it also serves as a gatekeeping mechanism.

“

A new reproductive justice paradigm must recognize that neither state-granted reproductive freedom nor adherence to tradition is inherently oppressive or liberatory; their impact depends on context.

Illustration by | Jacqueline Lee '29



The logic follows that a woman willing to accept the religious and cultural norms of a new community for the sake of ethnic preservation is also likely to accept childbirth as part of her new social role. With exemptions to the One-Child Policy, Hui women face additional pressure to give birth to two or more children.

The asymmetrical pressure on women is further evidenced by Xing’s observation that “Hui and Bai men were more likely to marry with other minority women” while their female counterparts were more likely to marry Han (Xing, 2007). This contrast suggests that women face greater social and religious consequences in the case of exogamy. Stroup reinforces this point by noting that even in urban areas with fewer Hui, endogamy is still preferred, and “religion and ethnic differences put up barriers that make exogamy difficult, if not undesirable” (Stroup, 2022). In this context, Hui women carry the dual burden of embodying religious identity and producing children in the service of ethnic continuity. Fertility becomes not just a personal or familial concern, but a religious obligation and a political tool.

Economic Development and Education

The second way Hui women face reproductive pressures as an ethnic minority is through the societal belief that the best way to catch up to the Han majority is by giving birth to more children. Scholars note that ethnic minority groups face higher levels of poverty, lack of access to necessities, food shortages, etc. This is closely linked to the geographical concentration of ethnic minori-

ties on the West side of China, which is less economically developed (Isaksson, 2020). Ethnic minorities are generally less educated and more occupationally concentrated in agriculture than the majority Han (Xing, 2007). With fewer economic opportunities, families need to make a difficult trade-off between sending their children to school and pushing them into the labor market. In their IZA World of Labor article, “The Quantity-Quality Fertility-Education Trade-Off”, Liu and Li note that in countries where education is costly and child labor contributes to household income, the child quantity-quality trade-off becomes especially pronounced, with family size directly shaping opportunities for education and economic survival (Liu & Li, 2022). This disparity in socioeconomic opportunities is compounded by the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in higher education. As of 2012, only 7.05% of ethnic minority students were enrolled in higher education, a figure that had slightly declined after the expansion of the one-child policy to a two-child policy (Xiong, 2020). Despite policies that grant priority admission and tuition waivers to ethnic minority students, these students face significant challenges in gaining meaningful employment due to the culturally specific nature of the education they receive and because their curricula may be taught in ethnic minority languages (Xiong, 2020). In a study on the Gaokao college entrance exam, Zhang and Chen write that although ethnic minority groups are given extra points as a “compensatory” mechanism to the disadvantaged, when ethnicity is used as the sole basis for awarding extra points, the policy obscures more significant social inequalities such as regional, socioeconomic, and urban–rural

disparities, ultimately undermining its goal of promoting educational justice (Zhang & Chen, 2025; Zhang, 2010; Si & Lu, 2013; Huang, Qin, & Zhou, 2013). This shows how higher education has not successfully equalized access to future opportunities like higher-paying jobs, as systemic barriers continue to limit the economic returns of education. For many Hui families, having more children serves as both an economic safety net – since the likelihood of any single child lifting the family out of poverty is low – and a practical strategy to increase the household income. In this context, ethnic minority communities may view having more children not only as a way of preserving their cultural identity but also as a means of economic survival. The lack of viable educational or career paths further strengthens the notion that increased fertility is an economically feasible solution to the pressures of catching up to the Han majority, both in terms of economic development and social mobility.

“

These opportunities can increase women's visibility and value in the public sphere while remaining anchored in community values, combating the view of tradition as inherently backward.

Economic Justifications of Reproductive Policies

A transnational feminist lens reveals how economic justifications for reproductive governance are manipulated to mask state control over women’s bodies. As Sreenivas explains, post-colonial governments often framed reproductive policies through the lens of development and economic productivity. In her analysis of family planning policies in India, she writes that “the economy was assumed to be a public and thus legitimate site of state governance” (Sreenivas, 2021). This allowed intrusive reproductive policies to appear rational or even benevolent. Similarly, in China, state discourse on population control and minority fertility uses economic rhetoric by linking reproduction to modernization, legitimizing interventions into women’s reproductive lives for the sake of national development. However, this framework inherently devalues reproductive labor unless it can be tied to formal economic growth. Economic indicators such as GDP do not consider the informal economy, or essential labor such as childrearing, housework, cooking, etc. (Sreenivas, 2021). As a result, critiques of women being undervalued and overworked can be refuted by the paradigm that this labor is not an economic activity and thus cannot become a government priority.

The economic framing used to justify the One-Child Policy reveals dangerous contradictions when applied unevenly. Initially, the policy was introduced to curb the rapidly growing Chinese population (Kane & Choi, 1999). This goal is grounded in a Malthusian logic that framed population control as essential for economic stability, as there would be an upper limit to the reproductive capacity of the country. This rationale worked for the Han majority, who viewed restricting birth rates as necessary to prevent

overpopulation and economic strain. However, the logic does not hold when we examine the exemptions granted to many ethnic minority groups, who were allowed to have more children without financial penalties. Here, the Chinese government reversed its economic argument, shifting from limiting population growth to encouraging it in these communities. I posit that ethnic minority communities were not treated the same as the Han majority because they were perceived as less of a threat to reaching the economic upper limit. Many ethnic minority groups lived in rural areas, far from the urban centers driving China’s industrialization. As a result, they were not seen as contributing to the same economic pressures as the Han, who were concentrated in the cities and driving rapid economic growth. Furthermore, the view that housework and childbearing, which were disproportionately burdening ethnic-minority women, were not economic activities, reinforced this different treatment. The government’s frame shift reveals how political goals could easily manipulate economic reasoning at the cost of women’s reproductive freedoms.

Interestingly, the very existence of the One-Child Policy is internally contradictory. As García shows, the One-Child Policy “functioned less as a blanket restriction and more as an ‘individually tailored pricing system’” (García, 2024). Families with the financial means could afford the penalties for second or third children, effectively bypassing the policy. This exposes the deeply monetary nature of population control in China: birth limits were not enforced universally. Rather, they were commodified to reinforce class division. A better reproductive justice framework, as outlined by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, emphasizes three key tenets: the right not to have a child, the right to have a child, and the right to parent in a safe and healthy environment (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The One-Child Policy violated the second tenet by restricting Han women’s ability to have children, often through coercive measures like forced sterilization and abortion. Meanwhile, the exemptions for ethnic minority groups violated the first and third tenets. These women were pressured to have more children without the support necessary for their children’s well-being, thus infringing on their right not to have a child and the right to parent in a safe environment. The policy failed to provide the resources these women needed to thrive, reinforcing inequality rather than offering true reproductive freedom.

Reframing Tradition as Economically Empowering

Part of the transnational feminist approach to reproductive justice and female empowerment is the recognition that tradition does not necessarily stand in the way of progress. As mentioned earlier in my paper, tradition is sometimes used as a catch-all to explain things like higher birth rates, lower educational attainment, and lower female employment. Hence, through the example of Hui women, Islam may be easily seen as a barrier to women’s empowerment. This paper is guilty of that logic, especially in its analysis of how Islamic norms increased reproductive pressures on Hui women. However, I believe that a new framework that views tradition as capable of evolving in ways that support both community values and gender equity can apply to the example of Hui women and other communities as well. One illustration of this is found in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. In the South of the region, there is a higher concentration of Jahriyya, a Sufi order viewed as more “radical and aimed at a purer form of Islam.” Here, mosques have embraced market reforms and “developed business interests to fund their religious activities,” such as hotels and clinics operated by the Nanguan Mosque in Yinchuan (Dillon, 2018). This blending of religious life and economic strategy has even ex-

tended into Islamic financing. The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is viewed as a gateway to international commerce with the Middle East, and it has grown into “a fully-fledged Islamic capital market” through support from the Bank of China and e-commerce innovation (Dillon, 2018).

This shift towards market-oriented religious engagement not only strengthens institutional independence but also creates new avenues for Hui women to participate in the economy. Given the higher fertility rates and social expectation to adhere to Islamic traditions, Hui women may face challenges in employment that relate to religious piety; in particular, working for secular companies instead of being a stay-at-home parent carries social stigma, as it may be seen as incompatible with expectations of religious devotion. This tension can prevent women from pursuing work, even when they are willing and able. However, if the framework shifts and more Hui communities invest in Islam-based economic development and education, new pathways could emerge where women can participate in the economy without being viewed as transgressing religious norms. These opportunities can increase women's visibility and value in the public sphere while remaining anchored in community values, combating the view of tradition as inherently backward. While these changes may still occur within the bounds of Islamic custom, they offer a crucial first step in building overlap between tradition and empowerment, allowing women to engage in public life not despite religion, but through it.

Conclusion

This paper speaks only to the experiences of one minority group in one specific context. Other ethnic and religious communities in China are equally worthy of future research. By exposing the ways that reproductive policies differently impact minority women, this case offers a starting point for understanding how reproductive justice must include not only the right to give birth, but also the right not to. It challenges the assumption that tradition inherently hinders economic empowerment. In a world shaped by neoliberal economic demands, neither exemptions from population control nor adherence to tradition are inherently oppressive or empowering; their impact depends on whose voices define empowerment.

References

Bhalla, A. S., and Shufang Qiu. *Poverty and Inequality Among Chinese Minorities*. Routledge, 2006.

Council of Europe. European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Council of Europe, 1950.

Council of Europe. Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Council of Europe, 1995.

Dillon, Michael. *Lesser Dragons: Minority Peoples of China*. Reaktion Books Ltd, 2018.

García, Jorge Luis. “Pricing Children, Curbing Daughters: Fertility and the Sex Ratio during China’s One-Child Policy.” *The Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 59, no. 5, 2024, pp. 1319–52, <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.0820-11118R1>.

Goldstein, Melvyn C., et al. “Fertility and Family Planning in Rural Tibet.” *The China Journal (Canberra, A.C.T.)*, vol. 47, no. 47, 2002, pp. 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182072>.

Guo, Zhitian. *Changing Ethnicity: Contemporary Ethno-Politics in China*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Isaksson, Erik. “Ethnic Minorities and the Fight against Poverty in China: The Case of Yunnan.” *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, 22 Sept. 2020, www.isdp.eu/ethnic-minorities-and-the-fight-against-poverty-in-china-the-case-of-yunnan/.

Jin, Y., Hu, W., and Wang, D. “Fertility Transition of Han and Ethnic Minorities in China: A Tale of Convergence and Variation.” *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2023, pp. 522–552. SAGE Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057150X231207916>.

Kane, P., and C.Y. Choi. “China’s One-Child Family Policy.” *BMJ*, vol. 319, no. 7215, 1999, pp. 992-94. doi:10.1136/bmj.319.7215.992.

Liu, Haiyue, and Li Li. “The Quantity–Quality Fertility–Education Trade-Off.” *IZA World of Labor*, 2022, Article 143, <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.143.v2>

Nnaemeka, Obioma. *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*. Praeger, 2005.

Pletcher, Kenneth. “Consequences of China’s One-Child Policy.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 10 Oct. 2025, www.britannica.com/topic/one-child-policy/Consequences-of-Chinas-one-child-policy.

Ross, Loretta J., and Rickie Solinger. “The Right to Parent.” *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. University of California Press, 2017, pp. 115–146.

Sreenivas, Mytheli. *Reproductive Politics and the Making of Modern India*. 1st ed., University of Washington Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q3xffw>.

Stroup, David R., and Stevan Harrell. *Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China’s Hui Muslims*. 1st ed., University of Washington Press, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2br1029>.

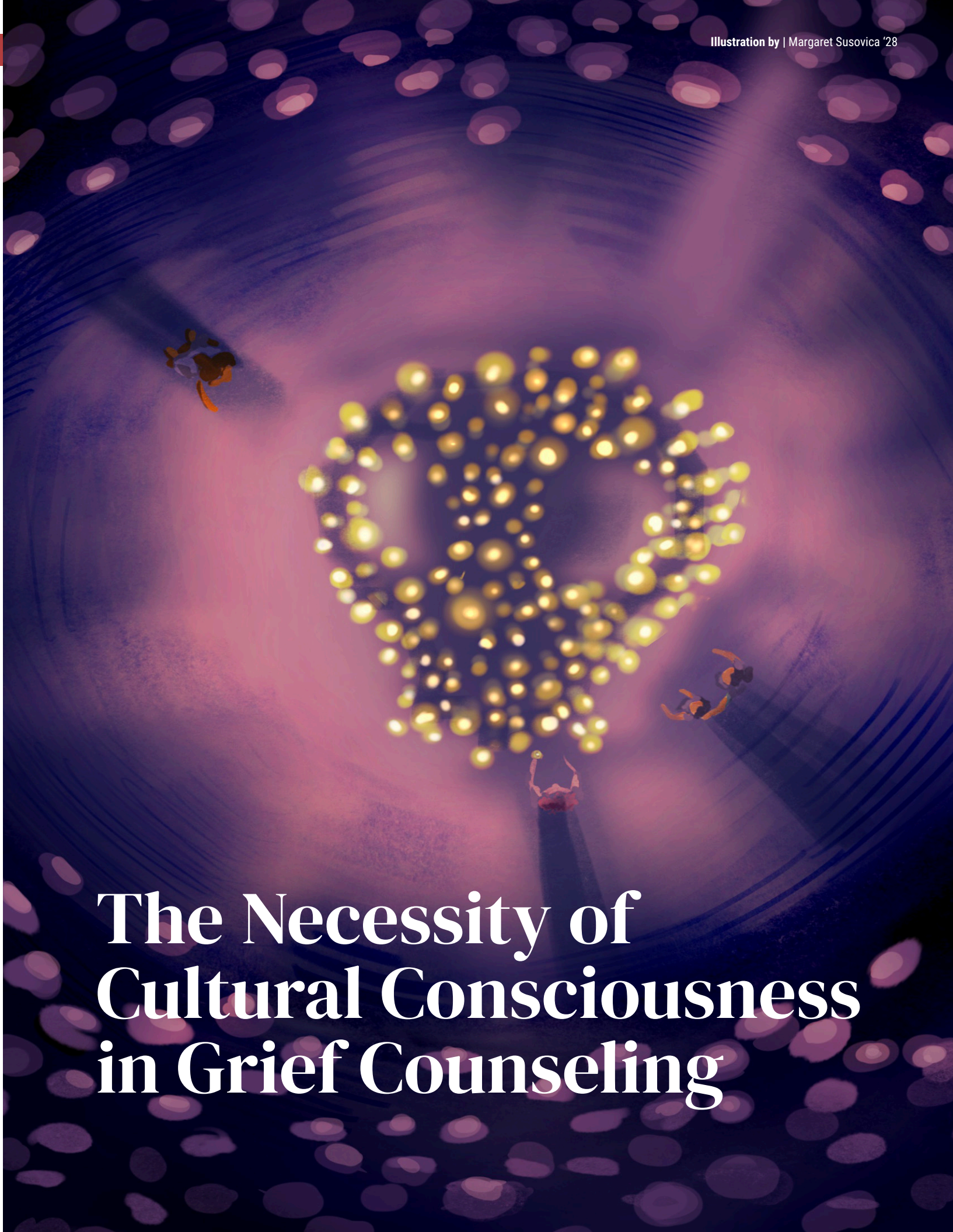
Stroup, David R., and Stevan Harrell. *Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China’s Hui Muslims*. 1st ed., University of Washington Press, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2br1029>.

“World Report 2024: Rights Trends in China.” Human Rights Watch, 11 Jan. 2024, www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/china.

Xing, Wei. “Prevalence of Ethnic Inter-marriage in Kunming: Social Exchange or Insignificance of Ethnicity?” *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 165–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360701406296>.

Xiong, Weiyang. *Ethnic Minority-Serving Institutions: Higher Education Case Studies from the United States and China*. 2020.

Zhang, Jie, and Xuanyu Chen. “Do ethnic minorities in China have higher accessibility to tertiary education with extra points awarded?” *US-China Education Review A*, vol. 15, no. 03, 28 Mar. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.17265/2161-623x/2025.03.004>.



The Necessity of Cultural Consciousness in Grief Counseling

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Necessity of Cultural Consciousness in Grief Counseling

Hannah Dorval ‘29

Washington University in St. Louis

This study explores the intersection of cultural traditions and grief counseling through a thorough examination of funerary practices and the psychology field’s current inclusion of culturally diverse coping mechanisms. Using an ethnographic approach, the research presented analyzes publicly available accounts of funerary rituals across various cultures. Recurring themes, such as communal versus individualistic grieving, religious coping mechanisms, and symbolic continuity with the deceased, are identified in these accounts to further understand the funerary practices’ effect on coping mechanisms. A secondary quantitative analysis assesses the extent to which widely used psychology textbooks incorporate cultural consciousness in grief counselor training. Findings reveal drastic differences in the coping mechanisms of various cultures, including that collectivist cultures often partake in communal mourning rituals that encourage social support, while individualistic societies typically prioritize private grieving. Additionally, many psychology textbooks dedicate less than 2% of their content to the cultural aspects of grief, highlighting a gap in psychological education. Challenges included limited access to primary ethnographic data, which was mitigated by a focus on documented ceremonies and scholarly accounts and limited access to textbooks used worldwide. The results of the thematic coding for the qualitative data and a statistical analysis for textbook representation highlighted a need for the psychology curricula to integrate cultural awareness in grief counseling teachings. This would not only improve therapeutic accuracy but make it a more just and effective practice. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that grief is not merely a psychological experience but one that is deeply influenced by culture, thus necessitating a more inclusive approach in both academic study and professional practice.

Throughout human history, grief has remained an indelible part of the human experience. And while extensively written about, explored, and described, it is without a doubt that this aspect of human emotion is yet to be fully disclosed. Historically, death and mourning have been marked by culturally specific rituals, funerary practices, and social norms varying greatly across cultures and regions. Grieving and bereavement practices are curated by beliefs, religions, and perspectives about the afterlife. In ancient Egypt, for example, elaborate burial rituals and mummification practices were designed to aid the deceased in the afterlife. In Mexico, Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, has been an honored tradition for centuries. These traditions around death and mourning often embody religious beliefs and social values that provide structure, meaning, and a sense of continuity for the bereaved. Considering this, the prevalence of various cultural practices is due to grief being undeniably universal. Psychology’s focus on grief, primarily emerging in Western contexts, diverts attention to foundational models such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief and John Bowlby’s attachment theory. These theories have greatly influenced our understanding of bereavement but have historically centered on individualistic perspectives, often overlooking the role of cultural beliefs and practices. As globalization has increased, individuals today are exposed to a wide range of culturally diverse traditions. This makes it essential to study how these practices influence the grieving process in various cultural contexts.

The field of psychology has begun to acknowledge the one-size-fits-all approach to grief and its limitations, recognizing that mourning and coping processes are deeply affected by cultural

background. While the factors of grief are vast and numerous, many of them can be attributed to culture as well. For instance, collective rituals, commonly found in collectivist cultures, often provide social support which are critical for the grieving process. On the other hand, cultures with more private mourning customs may emphasize personal reflection and solitary coping mechanisms. It’s important to realize that culture establishes the types of relationships we make, how we treat people, how we feel about certain people, and so on and so forth. Culture plays an enormous role in the way we process and express feelings. And even more so in the presence of expression or lack thereof that also influences grief processing.

With this in mind, there remains a gap in psychological research about how these culturally specific practices succeed or fail to improve coping outcomes and mental health. While there are some acknowledgements of a need for cultural competence, much of bereavement psychology still lacks a systematic approach to addressing diverse grief responses.

This leads to the center of my investigation: How do culturally diverse funerary practices influence the grieving process and coping mechanisms of individuals who have lost a family member, and to what extent does the field of psychology account or need to account for these cultural variations in grief responses?

Throughout this investigation, I will compare and analyze different cultural mourning practices across various societies, with emphasis on both collectivist and individualistic approaches to grief. This information will aid in my study of how cultural background influences grief expression and coping mechanisms, in order to thoroughly and appropriately research the effectiveness of

the inclusion of cultural consciousness on mental health outcomes. By the end of the investigation, it will be abundantly clear the success or failure of cultural approaches to grief and the determination of whether there is a need for more culturally competent frameworks in bereavement psychology.

Review of Literature

I. THE SEVERITY OF GRIEF AND ITS DETRIMENT

Many associate grief with the feeling of sadness. While this is true to a certain extent, grief holds very real implications, not only psychologically but somatically. Understanding grief’s effect on one’s psychological and physiological health was imperative to my research in order to demonstrate a need for effective treatment to bereaved individuals and therefore understanding cultural implications to the current study of grief and the adjustments needed to accommodate these implications. Taking this into account, I ini-

tially researched with the intent of adding the causes, effects, and severities of grief to my body of knowledge. In doing this, I found that extensive research has been done on the human psychological response to grief but finding somatic responses appeared to be more difficult. Mary Frances O’Connor, doctorate professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, thought this way as well and in her “Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind, and Brain Adapt”, she argues that there is not enough discussion within the psychology community to understand the body’s somatic response to psychological trauma. The author provides a thorough synopsis of what is known about the human reaction to grief, including the most influential research developments and the physiological changes that accompany severe grief.

The paper discusses how the loss of a close attachment figure will trigger physiological changes in the cardiovascular, endocrine, or immune systems. These changes are thought to contribute to elevated morbidity and mortality rates in bereaved individu-

	Origin	Explanation	Influence on Treatment
The Attachment Theory	Developed by John Bowlby in the mid-20th century, this theory originally aimed to explain the bonds between infants and their primary caregivers.	The quality and security of early attachments influence how individuals respond to loss. Those with secure attachments may adapt better while those with insecure attachments can lead to complicated grief reactions.	Treatment based on the theory involves understanding a person’s attachment style in order to predict their grief responses- helping clients process the feelings of loss by fostering secure connections, exploring relational patterns, and addressing attachment-related anxieties.
Dual Process Model	Developed by Stroebe and Schut in the 1990s, this model was designed to describe grief as a dynamic process.	This model describes grief as an oscillation between loss oriented and restoration-oriented stressors.	The model encourages clients to engage in both grief focused and restorative activities in order to recognize the need for both grieving and life adaptation. This could involve addressing loss-related feelings while also encouraging practical adjustments in daily routine.
Meaning Reconstruction	Developed by Robert Neimeyer, this approach emphasizes the personal creation of meaning as a response to loss. This holds bearings in constructivist psychology.	This approach suggests that grieving involves deriving a sense of meaning and purpose after a loss, as death can challenge previously held beliefs and values.	Therapists utilize this approach by focusing on helping clients reconstruct their understanding of the world and their place in it after a loss. This is supported by techniques like narrative therapy, a process in which individuals see themselves as the “author” of their own lives.
Adaptive Grieving Styles*	Developed by Martin and Doka, this model highlights the different ways individuals process grief based on personality and cultural influences.	This model identifies two grieving styles: <i>intuitive</i> which is emotionally expressive and <i>instrumental</i> which involves problem solving and is more cognitively focused. Some patience is categorized as having a mix of both.	The application of this in treatment involves identifying which the client is and adapting treatment based on these differences. Intuitive grievers would be encouraged to express their emotions freely while intuitive grievers would benefit from a discussion of practical adjustments.
*It is important to note that this is one of the only grief models that acknowledge a necessity to personalized grief counseling, proving to be something not well studied or accounted for.			

Table 1 | Theories, frameworks, and understandings identified by Doughty Horn [2].

als, known as the “broken heart phenomenon” or “widowhood effect” [6]. These rates have more specific bodily causes incited by grief’s effect on the various systems. The cardiovascular system, for instance, shows increased risk when encountered with bereavement and stressful situations as a whole. Research shows that grief can lead to increased heart rate and higher blood pressure. This is accompanied by reduced heart rate variability which is a measure of anatomic flexibility and resilience. These effects indicate how a heightened sympathetic nervous system response, such as the reaction to losing a loved one, can put considerable strain on the heart and blood vessels [6]. Specific studies demonstrate this excess morbidity and mortality as a result of grief. For example, a study of 1.5 million Finns showed that the risk of heart disease was two times higher than normal in men in the six months after the death of their wife [6]. Grief’s relation to the endocrine system is of great importance. The endocrine system is imperative to bodily function as it is a network of glands that create hormones that carry information to the cells in the body, holding great influence in every organ and organ system. Grief is known to dysregulate the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis. This causes an uncontrolled release of cortisol, a stress hormone. These levels, typically starting high and gradually decreasing, show irregular levels in those experiencing prolonged or complicated grief. These irregularities can contribute to various health issues and complications in the endocrine system, such as metabolic disturbances and immune suppression. In bereaved individuals, studies have observed two proinflammatory cytokines, characterized by the name Interleukin-1 and Interleukin-6. These inflammatory markers are commonly associated with increased risk of chronic illnesses like cancer. Interestingly and important to note for the purposes of this investigation, specific proinflammatory genetic variants show higher inflammatory responses during bereavement. This goes to show that there may be a distinct difference in the grief responses of some and the responses of others. Nonetheless, in a correlational study of bereavement and antibody response to influenza vaccination, it was found there was a lower lymphocyte proliferation and impaired antibody response in bereaved individuals [7]. This demonstrates how grief can impair the body’s ability to defend against pathogens, an important and necessary ability.

II. THEORIES, FRAMEWORKS, AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF GRIEF IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC COMMUNITY

My research requires a thorough understanding of the current body of knowledge to understand cultural applications to grief therapy. Luckily, Doughty Horn, a doctorate Department Associate Chair and Professor of Counseling at Idaho State University, details in her Recommendations for Curricular Inclusion, the current relevant theories and frameworks being taught and applied in therapeutic interventions. In reading, I’ve noticed a saturation of Western viewpoints and studies, without inclusion of their relevance in other societies. Rather than being a limitation, I’ve found this essential to identify my gap, as an overabundance of psychological study in the US without this inclusion may lead to misunderstandings in other societies. This is further explained by the failed humanitarian efforts of the US during the 2004 Tsunami in India, present in the Specific Representations of the Necessity of Cultural Consciousness.

III. THE NECESSITY OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN GENERAL THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

In the Case for Cultural Competence, Stanley Sue, founder of

the Asian American Psychological Association and receiver of a doctorate in Psychology at UCLA, advocates for cultural competence in psychotherapeutic interventions. He, with others, discusses the importance of cultural competence in mental health care, particularly for ethnic groups who face disparities in access and quality. Cultural competence is characterized by the appreciation, understanding, and incorporation of cultural backgrounds of clients into treatment. This has been identified as a way of improving therapeutic outcomes by addressing culturally specific needs. Cultural competency is argued as being ethically imperative in mitigating health disparities. Cultural competency is seen as an ethical responsibility to ensure fair access to quality care, regardless of cultural background. The paper argues that it is essential to include an awareness of one’s own cultural biases and an understanding of clients’ cultural backgrounds, values, and worldviews. These are recognized as skills that practitioners should work on and develop in order to work sensitively and effectively work with diverse cultural groups.

“

Cultural competence is characterized by the appreciation, understanding, and incorporation of cultural backgrounds of clients into treatment.

The paper discusses ways of cultural adaptations in therapy. One of relevance is the Method of Delivery, which includes using the client’s language and adapting communication styles. This is the start to integrating cultural practices in therapeutic methods. Content adaptation is another way to apply cultural competency. It involves the discussion of cultural patterns, immigration challenges and experiences with discrimination. This, however, has faced criticism. Some argue that this method can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or overlook individual differences within ethnic groups. Despite this, a few studies have shown there are moderate positive effects of culturally competent interventions on treatment outcomes. However, more thorough research is required to confirm its specific benefits and appropriate purposes.

IV. EXISTING DIRECT COMPARISONS OF CULTURALLY DISTINCT GRIEVING PRACTICES

These studies are thorough comparative ethnographic cases that provide distinctions between varied cultures and their grief practices and traditions. The incorporation of these specific cases give precedent to the idea that behaviors and factors surrounding grief vary by culture.

A. MAYAN AND SWEDISH [5]

This study explores the views and behaviors toward death of two separate cultures [5]. They interviewed 10 participants from each culture and determined based on the most prevalent themes, an overall view of each cultures’ approach to death.

In Mayan culture, death is a communal experience. Elders play an important role in mourning and guiding families. They believe in communication with the dead through rituals and dreams. In general, death is seen as a continuation rather than an end. Its funerary practices are a celebration, equipped with music, food,

and gatherings. It is viewed as an essential and non-fearful process. The Mayan people believe death is integrated into the natural life cycle.

In Swedish culture, on the other hand, death is largely seen as the end of existence, leading to feelings of uncertainty. There is a great emphasis on making life meaningful. Death is also considered taboo, serving as a private matter that is often avoided in conversations. It is only discussed in intimate or unavoidable situations. Few funerary traditions exist in Swedish society. It is said that death practices are more individualized. These cultural contrasts show a significant difference in grieving practices and approaches, hinting at a need to differentiate treatments for various cultures.

B. FRENCH AND TOGOLESE [4]

Upon an increase in Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), the author found a need to explore cultural differences in grief experiences. In a comparative study between French and Togolese widowed adults, 235 participants were derived from the two countries (73 French, 162 Togolese). Upon completing the Prolonged Grief Scale, it was found that French PGD prevalence ranged from 21.9% to 26% while Togolese PGD prevalence ranged from 15.4% to 17.3%. While there were not drastic differences in Prolonged Grief Disorder’s prevalence, the risk factors were found to be very different.

The severity of PGD among the French sample was linked to low education, unemployment, and traumatic death. While the Togolese sample’s higher PGD severity was attributed to being male and traumatic death. These risk factors differing culturally show implications for clinicians to consider cultural contexts in diagnosis and treatment.

V. SPECIFIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NECESSITY OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A. 2004 ASIAN TSUNAMI

Christopher et. al begin their argument advocating for critical cultural awareness by pointing attention to the humanitarian relief of the 2004 Asian Tsunami [39]. The tsunami in Sri Lanka caused massive destruction. This included over 36,000 deaths and 300,000 homes lost. Survivors prioritized securing basic needs and daily essentials whilst reuniting families and performing funeral rites. Western psychologists quickly arrived, assuming high levels of PTSD and mental health issues. However, Western interventions during relief efforts often conflicted with local norms, such as group-based therapy, which violated caste, religion, and gender norms. Practices like public emotional expression were culturally inappropriate but encouraged by the well-intentioned psychologists. The local customs emphasized maintaining dignity, communal support, and composure, rooted in Buddhist teachings. Local views on suffering were surrounded by bearing it gracefully as a path to peace.

Some interventions exacerbated stress rather than alleviated it. Some cultural missteps led to gossip, family conflicts, or inter-community tensions. It was clear that the Western approaches were not fit for this very distinct cultural society and yielded serious consequences. The foreign helpers were viewed as “the second tsunami” by local media, deemed as doing more harm than good [39].

This situation reflects a notable oversight. It is clear that psychologists could have benefited from collaborating with local experts to align efforts with community practices. This is a clear ex-

ample of the US psychology’s narrow perspective and insufficient inclusion of culturally specific understandings, calling for greater cultural sensitivity and integration.

VI. IDENTIFIED GAP

The research proposed here seeks to fill the gap of limited understanding in the utilization of cultural consciousness in psychological grief interventions. I seek to do this by investigating how different cultural mourning practices influence grief and coping processes and evaluating the extent to which current psychological models and interventions address these cultural distinctions. This is proved through recent literature for more culturally sensitive approaches in mental health care. For instance, Zane emphasizes the importance of cultural competence in therapeutic settings, while Bonanno and Kokou-Kpolou highlight cultural variances in grief expression that contradict a universal model [4,8,23].

Methods

The purpose of this study is to recognize the necessity of cultural competence in grief therapeutic practices. This aim requires a comprehensive review of existing scholarship and a thorough observation of the cultural differences in grieving/coping mechanisms. With this being said, I have chosen to utilize Ethnography and Quantitative Content Analysis in my study. The research question “How do culturally diverse funerary practices influence the grieving process and coping mechanisms of individuals who have lost a loved one, and to what extent does the field of psychology account or need to account for these cultural variations in grief responses?” contains sub questions that require a mixed methods approach in this study. The ethnographic aspect of this study sought to uncover exactly how culturally diverse funerary practices impact coping methods. The choice to use this research method lies in its comprehensive nature. Grief and coping methods are hard to observe on a generalized level as they are deeply complex and contains many layers. Ethnography provides a comprehensive understanding of a cultural practice and its meaning through direct observation, allowing researchers to observe cultural customs and tendencies authentically. Ethnography captures all aspects of cultural practices including unspoken rules, emotional expressions, etc.

“

Ethnography provides a comprehensive understanding of a cultural practice and its meaning through direct observation, allowing researchers to observe cultural customs and tendencies authentically.

For these reasons, I used ethnography to observe these culturally diverse funerary practices through videos, diary entries, interviews, and other primary sources. To evaluate the extent that the field of psychology accounts for this or should account for this, I gathered six psychology textbooks used by Florida accredited universities, counted the amount of pages that discussed any form of cultural consciousness, calculated its percentage within the textbook, and performed a statistical analysis to determine a trend.

Ethnographic Component

This ethnographic approach was essential to this study as it allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the cultural layers within grieving and coping practices.

Through ethnography, this study sought to capture the cultural variations in funerary rituals and their impact on grief. To select the cultural practices, I tried to obtain cultural practices from at least all seven continents. From this, I narrowed down my chosen practices through available resources.

Data Coding Analysis

A thematic analysis was used for the ethnographic component. The coding prioritizes identifying recurring patterns, symbols, and differences in emotional expressions. The data for this coding is derived from publicly available primary sources such as recorded rituals, funeral services, interviews, and written reflections. The collection of this data ensures variety for analysis of a broad spectrum of cultural practices. The thematic codes were established in advance, based on elements I anticipated encountering within funerary rituals.

Quantitative Study Component

This component involved examining the average proportion of cultural competency coverage in grief counseling materials. Additionally, Pearson’s R was applied to determine the correlation between textbook length and the percentage of content devoted to cultural considerations in grief counseling. This assessed whether longer textbooks dedicated more space to cultural perspectives or if cultural competency was consistently underrepresented, shining light on the degree to which cultural diversity is currently addressed in the field of psychology and identifying if and where there are areas of improvement.

Textbook	Total number of Pages	Number of Pages that mention the following: <i>cultural competence, grief, bereavement, mourning rituals, etc.</i>	%
"Psychology" by David G. Myers & C. Nathan DeWall	882	17	1.9%
"Psychology: Themes and Variations" by Wayne Weiten	567	7	1.2%
Introduction to Psychology" by James W. Kalat	608	6	0.9%
"Psychology" by Richard Gross	948	23	2.4%
Discovering Psychology by John Cacioppo and Richard E. Mayer	656	5	0.007%
Cognitive Psychology: Connecting Mind, Research, and Everyday Experience by E. Bruce Goldstein	496	13	0.026%

Table 2 | Coverage of Cultural Competence and Grief-Related Topics in Widely Used Psychology Textbooks.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the strict ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and general researching community. Precautions were created throughout this methodology in order to ensure utmost respect for cultural practices. For the ethnographic component, only publicly accessible materials were used to avoid intruding upon private rituals. It is also important to note that an open and understanding mind was used to examine these rituals. This study is not meant to disrespect or infringe upon funerary rituals that may be considered different. In the Qualitative Content Analysis, the aim was not to discredit any of the psychology materials used but rather provide quantitative evidence of an overall lack of awareness and teaching of culturally diverse funerary practices and their effects on coping mechanisms.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is limited to exploring a subset of culturally diverse funerary practices and may not represent all global traditions. The reliance on publicly available funerary rituals may limit the depth of the cultural insight of this study. The selection of textbooks was limited to those used in Florida accredited universities. It should also be considered that the study does not evaluate the percentage of content surrounding grief to the percentage of other psychological topics, discounting the possibility that the percentage is small because there is a lot of content to cover in a textbook. By combining the ethnographic and quantitative analysis methods, this study seeks to obtain a holistic understanding of how cultural variation impacts grief and the extent to which these variations are addressed within grief counseling and other psychological practices.

Results and Analysis

Analysis of Cultural Competence in Psychology Textbooks

The quantitative content analysis was selected to provide empiri-

cal evidence regarding the lack of cultural competency in mainstream psychological textbooks, resources, and curricula. The choice to calculate proportions and correlation coefficients allowed for an objective evaluation trend, which reinforced the idea that psychology as a discipline must improve its cultural inclusivity.

The data shows a significant underrepresentation of cultural considerations in grief counseling materials. The highest observed proportion of cultural competency discussion was 2/4% in a textbook spanning 948 pages, with one as low as 0.007%.

$$r = \frac{n(\sum xy) - (\sum x)(\sum y)}{\sqrt{[n \sum x^2 - (\sum x)^2][n \sum y^2 - (\sum y)^2]}}$$

Equation for Pearson's R Coefficient

x	y	(x - $\bar{x}$)	(y - $\bar{y}$)	(x - $\bar{x}$)(y - $\bar{y}$)	(x - $\bar{x}$) ²	(y - $\bar{y}$) ²
882	17	189.2	5.2	983.84	35797	27.04
567	7	-125.8	-4.8	603.84	15826	23.04
608	6	-84.8	-5.8	491.84	7191	33.64
948	23	255.2	11.2	2858.2	65127	125.44
656	5	-36.8	0.6	250.24	1354.2	46.24
496	13	-196.8	1.2	-236.2	38730	1.44
$\bar{x} = 692.8$	$\bar{y} = 11.8$	$\sum =$		4951.84	164024.84	256.84

Table 3 | Pearson's Correlation for Textbook Length and Percentage of Content Covering Cultural Perspectives in Grief Counseling.

$$r = \frac{4951.84}{(164024.84)(256.84)} = 0.763$$

Correlation Coefficient	Degree of Correlation
>0.8	Very high
0.6-0.8	High
0.4-0.6	Medium
0.2-0.4	Low
<0.2	Very low

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient Equation and Key for Determination

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between the textbook length and the percentage of content devoted to cultural perspectives in grief counseling, which revealed a strong relationship. This suggests that textbook length correlates with a lower incorporation of cultural competence teachings. Clearly, cultural perspectives remain an overlooked aspect of mainstream psychological education, despite increasing recognition of its necessity in clinical practice.

Findings from the Ethnographic Study

The ethnographic analysis of this study sought to capture the lived experiences of grief across cultures, which was necessary due to the qualitative nature of mourning practices. The use of thematic coding enabled the identification of recurring grief expressions and allowed for a specific categorization of coping mechanisms, ensuring a structured comparison across different cultural frameworks.

The ethnographic analysis of diverse funerary practices revealed recurring themes across cultural traditions. This study highlighted the profound impact of cultural mourning rituals on grief processing and coping mechanisms. A thematic coding of the ob-

served rituals identified seven major categories of grief expression:

- Religious and Spiritual Elements (RE)
- Emotional Expressions (EE)
- Ritual Practices (RP)
- Community and Social Roles (CS)
- Temporal Aspects (TA)
- Materials and Symbolic Objects (MS)
- Coping Mechanisms (CM)

See appendices for more information on constraints and qualifications (visit WUJUR.org).

One of the most prominent patterns that emerged from the study was the contrast between collectivist and individualistic mourning traditions. Cultures with collectivist values, like the Ashanti of Ghana or the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, exhibited features of communal grieving (EE4 and CS2), where extended families or entire communities participated in rituals that reinforced social bonds. Conversely, individualistic cultures, such as Sweden, demonstrated reserved mourning customs (EE2 and RP6) where grief was treated as a private experience.

Another notable distinction would be in the use of symbolic actions and post-funeral customs that served to aid emotional closure. New Orleans Jazz funerals and the Irish Wake emphasizes the role of celebration and communal support, in some cultures, as a way of facilitating the transition from mourning to acceptance. In contrast however, Japanese Kotsuage ceremonies, which involve carefully collecting the cremated remains of the deceased, highlights the symbolic continuity with the deceased.

The presence of religious and spiritual coping mechanisms is examined as a recurring pattern across cultures. Grief was often alleviated through religious practices, prayers, and rituals that facilitated meaning making. Meaning making being a prominent theory within the psychiatric community, serving as an understanding of how an individual understands and comprehends the events of their life, makes this observation vital to the understanding of culture’s role in coping mechanisms. The Hindu Cremation rites focus on releasing the soul while Mayan tradition encourages continued communication with the deceased through dreams and offerings.

“

These findings indicate that grief is not only a psychological experience but is also a deeply embedded cultural process.

These findings indicate that grief is not only a psychological experience but is also a deeply embedded cultural process. These specific practices associated with bereavement provide insights into the mechanisms that either facilitate or complicate coping depending on how well they align with an individual’s belief system and societal expectations.

Connections to Research Question

The research question “How do culturally diverse funerary

Case Study #1: Ghana	
Mediums: Videos, Online Exhibits, Personal Accounts Present Codes: RE1, RE2, EE4, RP2, RP4, CS2, MS1, CM2	 [9]
Case Study #2: The Ashanti People	
Mediums: Videos, Academic Journals, Personal Accounts Present Codes: RE3, EE3, RP1, RP4, CS4, MS1	 [14]
Case Study #3: Tibetan Funeral Rites	
Mediums: Videos, Video Documentaries, Personal Accounts, Academic Journals Present Codes: RE1, RE2, RE4, RP1, RP7, CM1	 [17]
Case Study #4: The Iris Wake	
Mediums: Audio Documentaries, Academic Journals, Personal Accounts Present Codes: EE1, EE3, RP5, MS2, CM3	 [21]
Case Study #5: New Orleans Funerals	
Mediums: Online Exhibits, Videos, Video Documentaries Present Codes: RE1, EE4, RP3, CS5, MS3, CM2	 [25]
Case Study #6: Brazilian Finados Rituals	
Mediums: Personal Accounts Present Codes: RE3, RP4, CS2, TA1, MS3	 [26]
Case Study #7: Yanomami Death Rituals	
Mediums: Academic Journals, Personal Accounts, Videos Present Codes: RE3, RE4, EE4, RP1, RP4, MS2	 [30]
Case Study #8: Aboriginal/Yolngu Mourning Rituals	
Mediums: Personal Accounts, Academic Journals, News Reports, Videos Present Codes: RE3, EE4, RP3, RP6, CS4, CM1	 [31]
Case Study #9: Hindu Cremation Rituals	
Mediums: Personal Accounts, Academic Journals, Images Present Codes: RE1, RE2, RE4, RP1, RP3, RP3, MS4, CM3	 [36]
Case Study #10: Japanese Kotsuage and Butsidam	
Mediums: Academic Journals, Images, Videos Present Codes: RE1, RE2, RP1, RP3, RP4, TA1, MS3	 [40]

Table 4 | The details of each case study, including mediums, present codes, and visual examples.

Religious and Spiritual Elements (RE)	Frequency	Ritual Practices (RP)	Frequency
RE1	7	RP1	9
RE2	7	RP2	2
RE3	5	RP3	6
RE4	6	RP4	7
Emotional Expressions (EE)		RP5	2
EE1	2	RP6	1
EE2	1	RP7	2
EE3	2	Community and Social Roles (CS)	
EE4	6	CS1	2
EE5	1	CS2	4
Temporal Aspects (TA)		CS3	1
TA1	3	CS4	2
TA2	0	CS5	2
TA3	1	Coping Mechanisms (CM)	
TA4	2	CM1	4
TA5	3	CM2	4
Material and Symbolic Objects (MS)		CM3	5
MS1	3	CM4	1
MS2	3	Meanings and descriptions can be found in the appendices at WUJUR.org	
MS3	4		
MS4	2		
MS5	1		

Table 5 | The frequency of each code found in the case studies examined.

practices influence the grieving process and coping mechanisms of individuals who have lost a loved one, and to what extent does the field of psychology account for these cultural variations in grief responses?” is addressed through two key insights from these findings: The first being that cultural funerary practices significantly shape grief processing- with communal traditions often fostering social support, while individualistic mourning customs may emphasize personal resilience and introspection is just one example of these practices having a profound impact on the way individuals cope. The second being that current psychological education largely neglects cultural nuances in grief counseling, indicating a shortcoming that if addressed could improve therapeutic interventions for diverse populations.

Challenges and Adaptations

One of the initial challenges encountered was the limited availability of firsthand ethnographic data due to privacy concerns surrounding funerary rituals. To address this, publicly available resources such as recorded funeral ceremonies and ethnographic documentaries were prioritized. Additionally, the original research scope aimed to analyze a broader range of psychology textbooks but was later refined to focus on those used in Florida-accredited universities to ensure feasibility.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study sought to evaluate how well cultural competency

is integrated into grief counseling education and practice. Through a mixed methods approach, a qualitative thematic coding of funerary rituals and quantitative textbook analysis, it was revealed that there is a clear impact on coping mechanisms from cultural funerary practices and psychological education severely underrepresents cultural considerations in grief work.

The ethnographic content analysis of funerary traditions across diverse cultures demonstrated that grief is not a universal, linear experience but a culturally embedded process shaped by symbolism, rituals, and collective meaning-making. The textbook review found that on average, only 1.07% of pages in core psychology texts referenced cultural competence, with even fewer offering in-depth applications or case studies. These findings highlight a troubling disconnect: while mourning is a profoundly cultural act, educational foundations in grief often reflect Western, individualistic models. This aligns with the research question, showing that without integrating cultural consciousness, current models risk pathologizing or misinterpreting non-Western grieving practices.

However, the study faced notable limitations. Ethnographic data was drawn from secondary sources like videos and documented accounts rather than direct field interviews, which may have limited the contextual depth of these practices. Additionally, the small sample size of textbooks analyzed restricts this research from resulting in a broader generalization of the inclusion of cultural consciousness. Despite these challenges, the research fills a

critical gap in existing literature by quantifying the neglect of cultural education in psychology and highlighting its real-world implications. In doing so, this research has emphasized an ethical responsibility of mental health practitioners and educators to embrace pluralistic approaches to grief that affirm diverse cultural realities.

This has direct implications for the community of practice: training programs should move beyond token mentions of culture to embedding it within theoretical frameworks and therapeutic techniques. Culturally sensitive grief counseling should be considered the norm rather than the exception.

“

Culturally sensitive grief counseling should be considered the norm rather than the exception.

For future research, this study encourages broader analysis of psychology syllabi across institutions to assess curriculum-wide attention to cultural grieving. Additionally, interviewing practitioners and patients about their experiences with culturally mismatched or aligned grief support would provide further insight. A longitudinal study examining the outcomes of culturally conscious therapy versus traditional models could also offer valuable experience for reform. Another beneficial addition to this research project would be the addition of inter-rater reliability measures in the data coding to ensure consistency and validity.

In conclusion, this research reveals that without cultural consciousness, grief counseling remains incomplete. A more inclusive, responsive approach to attending to grief is essential for healing in a globalized, multicultural world.

References

[1] Anaïs Aeschlimann, Eva Heim, Clare Killikelly, Mariam Arafa, Andreas Maercker, Culturally sensitive grief treatment and support: A scoping review, *SSM - Mental Health*, Volume 5, 2024, 100325, ISSN 2666-5603, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2024.100325>.

[2] Doughty Horn, E. A., Crews, J. A., & Harrawood, L. K. (2013). Grief and loss education: Recommendations for curricular inclusion. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 52(1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6978.2013.00029.x>

[3] Edge, D., & Lemetyinen, H. (2019). Psychology across cultures: Challenges and opportunities. *Psychology and psychotherapy*, 92(2), 261–276. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12229>

[4] Kokou-Kpolou, C. K., Cénat, J. M., Noorishad, P.-G., Park, S., & Bacqué, M.-F. (2020). A comparison of prevalence and risk factor profiles of prolonged grief disorder among French and Togolese bereaved adults. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 55(6), 757–764. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01840-w>

[5] López, M., & Cardaña, E. (2022). Mayan & Swedish attitudes and practices toward death. *Death Studies*, 46(8), 1909–1922. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1867253>

[6] O'Connor M. F. (2019). Grief: A Brief History of Research on How Body, Mind, and Brain Adapt. *Psychosomatic medicine*, 81(8), 731–738. <https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000717>

[7] Phillips AC, Carroll D, Burns VE, Ring C, Macleod J, Drayson M. Bereavement

and marriage are associated with antibody response to influenza vaccination in the elderly. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. 2006;20:279–89.

[8] Sue, S., Zane, N., Nagayama Hall, G. C., & Berger, L. K. (2009). The case for cultural competency in psychotherapeutic interventions. *Annual review of psychology*, 60, 525–548. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163651>

Case Study #1: Ghana

[9] A LIFE WELL LIVED: FANTASY COFFINS FROM GHANA. (2025). Retrieved from Nmfh.org website: <https://nmfh.org/portfolio-item/a-life-well-lived-fantasy-coffins-from-ghana/>

[10] Ghana’s Unique Coffin Tradition- On Assignment [Youtube Video]. (2025). Retrieved from https://youtu.be/nw3C_f2A-F8?si=rKvhkUvJDsFtDuIQ

[11] Thomson, E., & Alamy. (2021, January 13). Meet the fantasy coffin-designers of Accra, Ghana. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from Travel website: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/meet-the-fantasy-coffin-designers-acra-ghana?>

Case Study #2: The Ashanti People

[12] Agyekum, M. (2024). Transition’s Heritage Funeral Series: A peek into Ashanti funeral rites for a mother-law. [Youtube Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5CApUNuDZo>

[13] Ghana Funeral Traditions (the case of the Ashantis) [Youtube Video]. (2022). Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/VdHeowNSFyU?si=1wzbm1Xly1abv3Qz>

[14] McCaskie, T. C. (2011). Local Knowledge: An Akuapem Twi History of Asante. *History in Africa*, 38, 169–192. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2011.0003>

Case Study #3: Tibetan Funeral Rites

[15] Coberly, M., & Shapiro, S. I. (1993). Death and Dying in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 12(3), 2. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol12/iss3/2/>

[16] Hanging the bodies of passed-away people in trees: a funeral even more mysterious than sky burials. [YouTube Video]. (2024). Retrieved from https://youtu.be/6hFmDlG3QyI?si=Wm_zf5PHka-rulzG

[17] The secret rites of sky burials - Global Times. (2015, October 9). Retrieved March 30, 2025, from Globaltimes.cn website: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/galleries/203.html>

[18] Tibetan Sky Burial: How does it Work? A Window to the Tibetan Culture [Youtube Video]. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je8cGS1JCaI>

Case Study #4: The Irish Wake

[19] House Strictly Private. (1975, January 26). Retrieved April 30, 2025, from RTE Radio website: <https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/646810-radio-documentary-house-strictly-private-irish-wake>

[20] McLaughlin, M. (2019). Keening the Dead: Ancient History or a Ritual for Today? *Religions*, 10(4), 235. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10040235>

[21] Why Irish people are so fascinated by deaths, wakes and funerals. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2023/0118/1346067-ireland-death-rituals-funerals-wakes/>

Case Study #5: New Orleans Funerals

[22] JAZZ FUNERALS OF NEW ORLEANS. (2025). Retrieved from Nmfh.org website: <https://nmfh.org/portfolio-item/jazz-funerals-of-new-orleans/>

[23] New Orleans Jazz Funeral and Rebirth [VIDEO]. (2005). Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-new-orleans-jazz-funeral-and-rebirth/>

[24] New Orleans Jazz funeral demonstration I [Youtube Vidéo]. (2022). Retrieved

from https://youtu.be/alzPbV61sOM?si=SqG5EvthUg4s_777

[25] The Jazz Funeral | New Orleans. (2017). Retrieved from Neworleans.com website: <https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/music/history-and-traditions/jazz-funeral/>

Case Study #6: Brazilian Finados Rituals

[26] Bond, K. (2019, December 2). All Souls Day in a small town of Paraíba, Brazil. Retrieved from Maryknoll Lay Missioners website: <https://mklm.org/brazil/dia-de-finados-paraiba/>

[27] Celebrations of Life & Death: Examining Colonial Influence and Cultural Variations Throughout Latin America – Crow. (2021). Retrieved from Writecrow.org website: <https://writecrow.org/crow-writing-contest/celebrations-garduno/>

Case Study #7: Yanomami Death rituals

[28] CONKLIN, B. A. (1995). “thus are our bodies, thus was our custom”: mortuary cannibalism in an Amazonian society. *American Ethnologist*, 22(1), 75–101. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1995.22.1.02a00040>

[29] Jacob, F. (2013, May 30). They Eat Your Ash to Save Your Soul – Yanomami Death Culture. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from Academia.edu website: https://www.academia.edu/3632663/They_Eat_Your_Ash_to_Save_Your_Soul_Yanomami_Death_Culture?source=swp_share

[30] The Yanomami people: a life of beliefs | SLICE [YouTube Video]. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX7LpUEnOBM>

Case Study #8: Aboriginal/Yolngu Mourning rituals

[31] Bāpurru - Death in Yolngu Culture. (2017, May 23). Retrieved from YidakiStory.com website: <https://yidakistory.com/bapurru/>

[32] Glynn-McDonald, R. (2022, October 25). Death and Sorry Business | Common Ground. Retrieved from www.commonground.org.au website: <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/death-and-sorry-business>

[33] MARCELINO, U. (2021, October 20). Rare access captures Amazonian chief’s funeral ritual. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/brazil-indigenous-kuarup/>

[34] National Gallery of Australia. (n.d.). Burial Ceremonies. Retrieved from National Gallery of Australia website: <https://nga.gov.au/first-nations/the-aboriginal-memorial/burial-ceremonies/>

[35] Reid, J. (1979). A time to live, a time to grieve: Patterns and processes of mourning among the Yolngu of Australia. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 3(4), 319–346. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00051462>

Case Study #9: Hindu Cremation rituals

[36] H.Parsons. (2024, March 26). An Easy Guide to Hindu Funeral Traditions. Retrieved from H.Parsons website: <https://www.hparsons.com.au/post/hindu-funeral-traditions>

[37] Liu, M. (2023, August 28). Death and religion intertwine in India. Retrieved from News and Events website: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/death-on-the-ganges/>

[38] McBride, P. (2014, August 7). The Pyres of Varanasi: Breaking the Cycle of Death and Rebirth. Retrieved from National Geographic website: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/article/the-pyres-of-varanasi-breaking-the-cycle-of-death-and-rebirth>

Case Study #10: Japanese Kostuage and Butsudan

[39] Christopher, John Chambers, et al. “Critical Cultural Awareness: Contributions to a Globalizing Psychology.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 69, no. 7, 2014, pp. 645–655, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036851>.

[40] Deague, T. (2023, December 21). Kotsuage – TerryDeague.com. Retrieved

from terrydeague.com website: <https://terrydeague.com/kotsuage/>

[41] Martin, R. (2013, June 21). Japanese cremation ashes rituals: Kotsuage and Bunkotsu. Retrieved from Scattering Ashes website: <https://scattering-ashes.co.uk/different-cultures/japanese-cremation-ashes-rituals-kotsuage-bunkotsu/>

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Unveiling Masculinity: A Critical Analysis of Racial Representation in *Men's Health* Covers

Jordan Kim '27
Washington University in St. Louis

From fitness magazines to blockbuster films, American media has long celebrated the ideal of the “strong man”—disciplined, confident, and in control. Yet who gets to embody that ideal has never been equal. *Men's Health* magazine, one of the most widely circulated fitness and lifestyle publications for men, serves as a prime example of this cultural sculpting. Through its covers, workout advice, and celebrity features, the magazine promotes an image of masculinity that merges physical perfection with social success. It showcases a wide range of hypermasculine ideals that intersect markedly with racial identities. This paper aims to dissect these intersections, particularly focusing on how the magazine's portrayal of masculinity differs across racial groups and reinforces specific hierarchies of desirability. The narrative surrounding white men typically upholds and defends traditional masculine norms, presenting white masculinity as both aspirational and attainable. In stark contrast, African American men are often pigeonholed into roles that highlight physicality over intellect, reinforcing outdated and monolithic stereotypes of primal masculinity. Meanwhile, Asian men encounter a different sort of marginalization characterized by underrepresentation and invisibility; when they are featured, they are often subjected to prevailing stereotypes that commodify their identities while positioning them in opposition to hypermasculine norms, feminizing their identities. *Men's Health* magazine not only upholds hypermasculinity within the framework of whiteness by depicting white men as both paragons and relatable exemplars of traditional masculine norms but also systematically commodifies African American and Asian men, reinforcing enduring racial stereotypes and subtly perpetuating white supremacy.

The Idealized White Male: Portrayals of Mental and Physical Discipline

In *Men's Health*, portrayals of white hypermasculinity often align with traditional masculine norms, presenting white men as paragons of control, endurance, and desirability while subtly reinforcing racial hierarchies. The magazine repeatedly idealizes the white male body as both disciplined and transcendent—a site where physical mastery becomes a marker of moral and social superiority. Sociologist John Preston, whose research explores race, masculinity, and education, defines hypermasculinity as “a conception that the body itself might be transcended and that corporeal categories may be surpassed”. In his essay “Prosthetic White Hyper-Masculinities and ‘Disaster Education’” (2010), Preston argues that whiteness operates as a prosthetic—a flexible form of privilege that can be “attached and detached” from the body, allowing white men to appear as if they exist beyond racial identity.

This idea reframes whiteness not as an inherent trait but as an aspirational state achieved through bodily control and self-discipline. Within this framework, *Men's Health* participates in what Preston calls a “hyper-masculine, white supremacist project” that seeks to transcend the physical limits of the body while simultaneously reaffirming racial dominance. The magazine's visual language of fitness, transformation, and endurance turns whiteness into a performative ideal—an embodiment of perfection that claims universality while depending on its racialized visibility for power (Krasinski; Renner; McElhenney).



Fig. 1 | John Krasinski

Fig. 2 | Jeremy Renner

This transition is exemplified on the January 2016 *Men's Health* cover featuring actor John Krasinski, which advertises “Age erasers: 5 quick fixes she'll notice,” suggesting that maintaining a youthful appearance is crucial for social and romantic success. The imperative to appear young and the tactics provided to achieve this not only cater to societal standards of attractiveness but also echo the broader theme of transcending bodily limitations. Similarly, the magazine's portrayal of sexual intercourse illustrates a distinct framing of sexual activity not just as an aspect of intimate relationships but as a realm of competition and achievement where bodily limits are challenges to be surpassed. The coupling of the phrases “Lean muscle fast! Results in 9 days” with “Sex Tonight—Instant Action” on actor Jeremy Renner's cover intertwines physical fitness with sexual availability and prowess, reinforcing the notion that the male body must be constantly honed to remain sexually desirable and capable. This narrative implies that sexual satisfaction for both the self and the partner is directly correlated with physical appearance and stamina. Collectively, these covers characterize aging as a controllable challenge and sexual

prowess as an arena of competition, casting white hypermasculinity as an ideal that champions perpetual youth and dominant sexuality as benchmarks of a man's value and success.

Following the portrayal of hypermasculinity as a transcendence over bodily limitations, *Men's Health* further constructs the idealized white male body as not only physically superior but mentally virtuous, framing that such virtues are self-achieved through discipline and intellect. As cultural sociologist Stefan Lawrence, whose research examines race, sport, and masculinity in media, phrases it, “They are depicted as possessing the virtues of both mind and body,” leading to what he calls a “miraculous-ordinary” and “average-exceptional” paradox. This paradox involves depicting the white male body in a way that simultaneously normalizes and idolizes it, setting up a discourse that both deifies and makes accessible the ideals of physical and mental virtue. The magazine covers often showcase stories like those of John Krasinski, who shared his “How I Lost 50 Lb” alongside mental health and stress management tips such as “Strike Out Stress” in a comprehensive “Get Back in Shape 21-Day Plan.” Such covers suggest that the idealized body is not only about physical appearance but also about mental resilience and intelligence, achieved through self-discipline and careful planning. Similarly, actor Rob McElhenney's feature in *Men's Health*'s May 2021 edition, “Ab Blasters, Memory Boosters, and 257 Ways to Power Up Your Life,” exemplifies this paradox. The coverage implies that while the tips are accessible and ordinary, their effects are exceptional, thus maintaining an allure of attainability while promoting a model of superiority. These covers collectively work to reinforce the notion that the pinnacle of masculinity, achievable through personal effort and intellectual commitment, is not merely a physical state but a complex, holistic form of personal development.



Fig. 3 | Rob McElhenney

This not only upholds traditional masculine and racial hierarchies by idealizing a narrowly defined body type and intellectual capability associated with white men but also marginalizes those who fall outside its reach. By intertwining physical prowess with mental discipline, *Men's Health* positions the white male as the apex of desirability and achievement, reinforcing a standard that masquerades as universally attainable while remaining racially exclusive.

The Narrow Portrayal of African American Men: Physicality Over Complexity

A stark contrast emerges between the treatment of white and African American men. While white masculinity is elevated through narratives that emphasize mental and physical discipline, African American masculinity is often confined to depictions that focus almost solely on physicality, reinforcing long-standing racial stereotypes. In contrast to the nuanced portrayal of white men that Preston and Lawrence describe—where hypermasculinity involves transcending both bodily and mental limits to achieve a blend of physical and intellectual supremacy—black hypermasculinity in *Men's Health* is often not afforded such complexity.

African American men like Durang Atembe and Michael B.



Fig. 4 | Durang Atembe



Fig. 5 | Michael B. Jordan

Jordan is predominantly showcased in contexts that emphasize their physical attributes over any intellectual or emotional depth. For instance, fitness trainer Durang Atembe is featured with phrases like “Muscle Made Easy” and “The Best Body Hacks—Plus: The New Rules of Testosterone,” which not only trivialize the effort required to achieve such a physique but also suggest that these physical traits are easily attainable for men like him, possibly due to innate physical qualities rather than hard work or intellectual engagement. Similarly, actor Michael B. Jordan's portrayal under headlines like “Beach Muscle Right Now!” and “Protein Up Your Diet” focuses on immediate physical gratification and aesthetic standards rather than any long-term personal growth or discipline. This framing sharply contrasts with the covers featuring white men, such as John Krasinski's or Rob McElhenney's, which emphasize long-term transformation and the fusion of mental discipline with physical fitness. Together, these portrayals reveal a racial divide in how *Men's Health* constructs masculinity: while white men are depicted as thoughtful architects of their strength, black men are presented as naturally powerful but intellectually absent. This disparity simplifies African American masculinity and reinforces the magazine's broader hierarchy of who is permitted to embody a complete, disciplined ideal.

The visual representation of Black men in *Men's Health* also reinforces racialized stereotypes by situating them within narrowly defined images of physicality and strength. Contrasting with the magazine's usual style—which often features white male models against clean, neutral backgrounds and in relaxed stances—African American cover models are frequently shown in more dynamic and visually charged poses. The cover featuring Durang Atembe depicts him with outdoor lighting, his body angled mid-stride and his expression joyful, accentuating motion and vitality. His bare torso and the headline “Muscle Made Easy” link his physique to effortlessness, implying that strength is an innate quality rather than the product of discipline or intellect. This visual framing transforms vitality into stereotype: it celebrates athleticism while reinforcing the idea that Black masculinity exists primarily within the realm of the physical. In contrast, Michael B. Jordan's cover places him before a dark studio backdrop overlaid with faint words like “stamina,” “speed,” and “strength.” His raised fists and direct gaze project focus and control, while headlines such as “Get Black Panther Fit” and “Beach Muscle Right Now” merge the language of cinematic heroism with commodified fitness culture. The stark lighting emphasizes his musculature and intensity, coding Black masculinity as powerful yet contained within bodily performance. Across these covers, men of color are

consistently framed through movement, muscle, and readiness—visual tropes that differ from the balanced, lifestyle-oriented depictions of white men in the same publication. While both Atembe and Jordan are portrayed as strong and successful, their representation remains confined to a physical register, limiting Black masculinity to athleticism and bodily achievement.

The Commodification of Black Masculinity: Selling Superhero Fitness

Moreover, covers on *Men's Health* not only perpetuate a hypermasculine ideal focused on physicality but also commodify the racial identity of African American men. Sociologists Eric Primm, Summer DuBois, and Robert M. Regoli, whose research examines media representation, race, and criminal justice, argue in their analysis of *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers that this portrayal of African American models is “not the liberation and enhancement of an oppressed minority, but the commodification and expropriation of their difference and resistance”. This observation is parallel to the trends seen in *Men's Health*, where the physicality of African American men is not only highlighted but also part of its marketing strategy. Much like the feats of athleticism in *Sports Illustrated*, *Men's Health* covers featuring black men often market their racial identity as a unique selling point, capitalizing on their roles in culturally significant films to attract attention and sell issues. For instance, Michael B. Jordan (Figure 5) is showcased with the tagline “Get Black Panther Fit—Billion Dollar Man Michael B. Jordan,” leveraging his role in a blockbuster film that holds significant weight in African American culture. The phrase “Billion Dollar Man” not only alludes to the commercial success of "Black Panther" but also implies that Jordan's physique and fitness regime are intrinsically linked to the commodified success of his film character. This reduces his identity and hard work to a product that can be consumed by the reader, suggesting that with the right workout, anyone can “acquire” a body like that of an African American superhero. In contrast, *Men's Health* often frames white male bodies through narratives of discipline and self-determination, presenting their physiques as reflections of inner virtue rather than spectacle.is commodified and aestheticized for its physicality and market appeal.



Fig. 6 | Anthony Mackie Fig. 7 | Jonathan Majors

This pattern of commodification extends beyond Black Panther to other representations of Black heroism in *Men's Health*. Actor Anthony Mackie's cover with "Who is the New Captain America?" and "Anthony Mackie on The Endgame Shocker + The Future of Marvel" centers on his role in the Marvel Cinematic Uni-

verse, highlighting a transition of symbolic American heroism from a white to a black actor. While seemingly empowering, this rhetoric primarily benefits the magazine's appeal and sales, banking on the fame and intrigue surrounding the Marvel franchise. The "Endgame Shocker" and "Future of Marvel" taglines tantalize the reader with insider knowledge, but the underlying intent is to commodify Mackie's racial identity as part of a broader commercial narrative. His ascension to a traditionally white heroic role is used as a selling point, commodifying the significance of a black man's portrayal of Captain America as a novelty rather than a substantive step towards diversity.

The phrasing, "How Marvel's Baddest Villain Yet Built This Body", on actor Jonathan Majors' *Men's Health* cover further encapsulates the magazine's approach to commodification. This headline does more than highlight a rigorous training regime; it transforms Majors' physical transformation for his role into a blueprint for physical success that can ostensibly be replicated by the magazine's readership. By doing so, it commodifies not just Majors' image but also the idea of physical fitness as an attainable commodity, packaged and sold through the appeal of a culturally significant film role. In the case of *Sports Illustrated*, the individual narratives of African American models and the broader cultural significance of their roles are overshadowed by the commodification process (Primm et al.). The same pattern can be seen in *Men's Health*: Their presence on the cover is less about celebrating African American success and more about exploiting their current popularity for commercial gain. In contrast, white actors featured in the magazine—such as John Krasinski or Jeremy Renner—are rarely framed as commodities. Instead, their appearances often center on narratives of personal discipline, self-improvement, and authenticity. The titles chosen by *Men's Health* do not just promote a film or a celebrity; they market a lifestyle product that is intertwined with the commercial success of blockbuster cinema, reducing the actors' embodiments of their characters to mere fitness milestones for the consumer. This commodification risks undermining the potential for genuine representation by prioritizing marketability over the celebration of racial diversity and personal achievement.

The Stereotyped Portrayal of Asian Masculinity: Invisibility and Singularity

In contrast to the extensive and multifaceted portrayal of white and African American masculinities, Asian men encounter a markedly different representation in *Men's Health* magazine. Their visibility is not only rare but also lacks the depth and focus afforded to their counterparts. This pattern of underrepresentation and superficiality is supported by research from Joanna Schug and her colleagues, psychologists whose work examines racialized perceptions of gender in media and social cognition (Schug et al.). Their study highlights the dual invisibility Asian men face due to prevailing gendered race stereotypes. These stereotypes often depict Asian men as less masculine, positioning them opposite to the hypermasculine norms celebrated in Western media (Schug et al.). *Men's Health's* exclusion of Asian men can be seen as part of a broader issue in which Asian identities are often feminized or desexualized in popular media, contradicting the typical hypermasculine archetype. Communication scholar Chiung Hwang Chen, in her analysis of Asian American male representation in U.S. film and television, traces how media narratives have historically portrayed Asian men as submissive, asexual, or effeminate figures. This portrayal has significant implications, as it not only marginalizes but also simplifies the complex identities of Asian men, reduc-

ing their presence to occasional features rather than regular, in-depth explorations of their lives and challenges. An example of this can be seen in the rare cover featuring actor Simu Liu in May 2021, which was the magazine's first cover featuring an Asian man since Jet Li in 2004. Headlining "Every Body is Strong—Skinny! Stocky! Short! Tall!" and "Unlock Your Power No Matter What Your Size," Liu's cover attempts to be inclusive and empowering. However, this singular portrayal does not compensate for years of underrepresentation. The message, while positive, still marks a significant departure from the typical narrative arcs given to white or black cover models, who are often depicted with stories of overcoming personal or physical challenges that highlight their robust masculinity and mental toughness. Moreover, Primm's analysis of the commodification of minority bodies provides a critical lens through which to view this representation. Like African American and other minority models, the inclusion of Simu Liu coincides with commercial imperatives rather than a genuine commitment to diversity. Liu's cover, branded with "Simu Liu is Action's Next Superstar, Hollywood's New Changemaker, The Future of Marvel," leverages his role in a blockbuster franchise to attract readership. This commercial angle can overshadow the potential to explore deeper narratives related to Asian masculinity, reinforcing the notion that minority figures are often valued more for their marketability than for their actual experiences or achievements.

Furthermore, the quality of representation, such as the alleged poor quality of photoshopping noted on some covers, can subtly imply a lack of care or importance given to these models, further enhancing the sense of marginalization. In the *Men's Health* cover featuring Simu Liu, the lighting and editing appear unusually harsh, creating an artificial gloss that flattens his features and washes out the texture of his skin. These aesthetic choices differ from the smoother, more balanced tones typically applied to white male celebrities, where attention to detail conveys polish and prestige. High-quality imagery is often associated with importance and value. By allowing lower standards of production for covers featuring Asian men, the publication may unconsciously convey that these subjects are less important or less appealing to their audience. This reinforces invisibility by obscuring the individuality and complexity of Asian men, reducing them to symbolic figures of diversity rather than multidimensional subjects worthy of the same care and presentation as their white or Black counterparts. It also suggests that the magazine does not view uplifting or accurately portraying Asian masculinity as a priority, thus contributing to the ongoing marginalization of Asian men in media narratives. The quality of presentation in Simu Liu's cover serves as a metaphor for the broader issues of visibility, representation, and respect for Asian men in media. The quality of presentation in Simu Liu's cover encapsulates this contradiction: while intended as an act of inclusion, it ultimately reveals how visibility can coexist with inequality, where representation signifies presence but not parity.

Conclusion

The exploration of hypermasculinity in *Men's Health* magazine reveals a complex interplay of racial narratives that both uphold and challenge traditional gender norms. White men are often portrayed as paragons of both physical and intellectual achievement, embodying an aspirational and holistic ideal of masculinity that transcends mere physical prowess. In stark contrast, African American men are frequently depicted in ways that emphasize physicality over intellect, reinforcing historical stereotypes of primal masculinity. This reductionist portrayal not only diminishes

their personal achievements but also serves to commodify their identities in the context of popular culture, particularly in roles associated with cinematic heroism. Similarly, the treatment of Asian men in the magazine underscores a pervasive invisibility and marginalization of this racial group, with their singular representation failing to break free from the confines of stereotypes that see them as less inherently masculine. This selective visibility and the qualitative disparity in how these identities are presented not only perpetuate existing racial and gender stereotypes but also underscore the need for a more inclusive and nuanced representation in media. By critically examining these portrayals, this paper highlights the role of popular media in shaping societal perceptions of race and masculinity, calling for a conscientious reevaluation of how these identities are constructed and understood in the public sphere. This reevaluation is essential not only for the sake of fairness and accuracy in representation but also for the broader societal project of dismantling longstanding racial and gender hierarchies. Exposing and critiquing these normative portrayals encourages media producers to adopt more responsible practices that reflect and respect the complexity of all identities, thereby contributing to a more equitable society.



Fig. 8 | Simu Liu

References

Atembe, Durang. *Men's Health*, Mar. 2020.

Chen, Chiung Hwang. “Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media: An Analysis of The Ballad of Little Jo.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1996, pp. 57–71. *Sage Journals*, doi:10.1177/019685999602000204.

Jordan, Michael B. *Men's Health*, May 2018.

Krasinski, John. *Men's Health*, Dec. 2015.

Lawrence, Stefan. "Racialising the “great man”: A Critical Race study of idealised male athletic bodies in Men's Health magazine." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 51, no. 7, 2016, pp. 777-799. *Sage Journals*, doi:10.1177/1012690214555347.

Liu, Simu. *Men's Health*, May 2021.

Mackie, Anthony. *Men's Health*, July 2019.

Majors, Jonathan. *Men's Health*, Oct. 2022.

McElhenney, Rob. *Men's Health*, May 2021.

Preston, John. "Prosthetic White Hyper-Masculinities and ‘Disaster Education’." *Ethnicities*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 331-343. *Sage Journals*, doi:10.1177/1468796810372299.

Primm, Eric, et al. “An Exercise in Subtleties and the Transmission of Racism: An Analysis of ‘Sports Illustrated’ Covers.” *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3/4, 2007, pp. 239–50. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819152>.

Renner, Jeremy. *Men's Health*, Sept. 2010.

Schug, Joanna, et al. "Gendered race in mass media: Invisibility of Asian men and Black women in popular magazines." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2017, pp. 222-236. APA PsycNet, doi:10.1037/ppm0000096.

Illustration by | Chelsea Lim '29 and Jacqueline Lee '29

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

From Barrie to Branding: The Rewriting of Tinker Bell in the Disney Fairies Franchise

Sophia Garthe '27
Washington University in St. Louis

Few characters can be as synonymous with The Walt Disney Company as Mickey Mouse himself; however, Tinker Bell comes strategically close. Introduced in 1904 through J. M. Barrie's stage play, *Peter Pan*, and later recognized in his 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy*, the character has since evolved into a Disney entity. Tinker Bell's debut in Disney's animated film *Peter Pan* (1953) launched her career as a marketing tool for the corporation, meant to associate the character's wonder and magic with Disney's core values. Eventually, Tinker Bell and a cohort of other Neverland fairies were given their own franchise, the *Disney Fairies*. This paper will analyze how Disney, as a conglomerate, has claimed ownership over the originally licensed character Tinker Bell through in-house literary publications, animated films, and the online video game *Pixie Hollow*. I argue that these media platforms helped develop a cultural rebranding of Tinker Bell and the Neverland Fairies, redefining their identities around the *Disney Fairies* installations rather than J.M. Barrie's 1904 play, *Peter Pan*.

Disney has never shied away from using licensed properties, notably drawing on fairy tales and existing literature to influence its projects. Yet, Tinker Bell offers a unique opportunity to understand how the Walt Disney Company integrates the public domain into its enterprise. In Barrie's stage play, Tinker Bell consists of a rapidly moving speck of light with no auditory role. Disney contrasts this version by characterizing the fairy as a "jealous pixie who glows brightest for *Peter Pan*" (Tinker Bell Character Archive). She is identified by her spiteful nature, tinkling sound, and curvaceous appearance. In the wake of the animated film's success, Tinker Bell was promoted to feature as a hostess for several of Disney's live-action television programs, where her character greets the viewer with a wave of her wand and a sprinkling of pixie dust. Additionally, Tinker Bell has been referenced in Disney's opening logo since the company's 50th anniversary in 1973 (Tinker Bell Character Archive) and is the fifth Disney character to have received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, alongside Mickey Mouse, Snow White, Donald Duck, and Winnie the Pooh (Walk of Fame). Her integration into Disney's iconic images over the decades has made Tinker Bell a representative character for the company, casting a cross-generational nostalgia for the fairy.

Nonetheless, even though she's been thoroughly merged into Disney's media network, the push for a Tinker Bell-inspired franchise only came on the heels of the *Disney Princesses* franchise establishment in the early 2000s. Lead heroines like Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), and Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), among several other characters, were recruited to form a marketing brand that unifies the Disney princesses into a cohesive merchandise line. Disney's Consumer Products Chairman, Andy Mooney, constructed the *Disney Princesses* using a ca-

sual storytelling strategy designed to engage with the franchise's young audience, along with a "highly selective and tightly managed" membership (Kunze 125). Tinker Bell didn't fit the ideal princess persona; she wasn't the main protagonist of her film, and she didn't possess the kindness, generosity, and wisdom that are typical of other princesses. Instead, her characteristic sass and attitude were maintained within the independent *Disney Fairies* franchise (Orenstein). The fairies franchise was built on Disney's release of *Return to Neverland* (2002) and theatrical re-release of *Peter Pan* in 2003, as well as the Universal Pictures-produced biopic *Finding Neverland* (Mark Forster 2004). These films reinvigorated the cultural appeal of Tinker Bell and Neverland's story world in the early 2000s, motivating Disney to create a series of best-selling chapter books, several direct-to-DVD animated films, and various media outlets centered on the *Disney Fairies*.

“

These media platforms helped develop a cultural rebranding of Tinker Bell and the Neverland Fairies, redefining their identities around the Disney Fairies installations.

At the same time, The Walt Disney Company was undergoing significant leadership changes. In "The Disney Empire" (2020), Janet Wasko describes the period as a state of unrest, where "The Disney brand was suffering, stock prices were down, and Disney's corporate structure was at a low point" (Wasko 38). A heavy mix of internal and external pressures, with Chief Executive Officer Michael Eisner at the root, led to a tumultuous power clash for the outwardly wholesome brand. The climax came in 2005, when Eisner stepped down as CEO and board member; Robert Iger immediately took his place and developed a technological expansion-focused branding strategy (Wasko 38-40). Disney shifted to computer animation and new forms of distribution and strengthened its online presence through franchise-based sites, social media, and mobile gaming (Wasko 39). Tinker Bell was given her own animated film series that Disney could easily market across and integrate with various media platforms, synthesizing her image into a merchandisable network. Consequently, the *Disney Fairies* emerged at the inception of Iger's takeover and demonstrates how Disney used Tinker Bell's celebrity to facilitate their new franchising approach.

The franchise was officially launched in 2005 with the illustrated novel *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg*, published by Disney Publishing Worldwide and written by Newbery Honor-winning author Gail Carson Levine (Disney Wiki). Levine, who was already famed through her work *Ella Enchanted* (1997), would later continue the *Disney Fairies* novels with *Fairy Haven and the Quest for the Wand* (2007) and *Fairies and the Quest for Neverland* (2010). The stories follow the adventures of various Neverland fairies as they navigate themes of friendship, adventure, and finding one’s true talent. On Levine’s personal page, she states that “[her] job was to invent the island’s fairies (other than Tinker Bell), to expand Tinker Bell’s character, and to figure out where and how the fairies lived” (Levine). Within Levine’s texts, the targeted audience of girls aged six to nine (Disney Wiki) can explore a world intended for them, contrasting with the typical male-driven franchises available in the early 2000s (Kunze 124-126). *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg* spent eighteen weeks on the New York Times children’s best-sellers list, showcased alongside works like *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince* (J.K. Rowling, 2005) and *Eldest* (Christopher Paolini, 2005; Orenstein). Its success can be attributed to a one-million-dollar marketing and publicity campaign by Disney (Disney Wiki), which effectively directed young girls to the novels and the world of Tinker Bell through repetitive advertisements and product output. Additionally, Disney licensed the franchise to Random House and later Little, Brown Books for Young Readers to amass a collection of literary additions to the series that expand the fairies’ story world (Raugust).

“

This strategy for the Disney Fairies is not an isolated case, but rather an example of a broader pattern in which Disney uses literature to expand and rebrand existing intellectual property under its corporate identity.

Levine’s trilogy builds on Disney’s reimagination of Tinker Bell, allowing the corporation to use its own publishing division to shape how Tinker Bell and her fairy friends are represented to a new generation of young readers. This strategy for the *Disney Fairies* is not an isolated case, but rather an example of a broader pattern in which Disney uses literature to expand and rebrand existing intellectual property under its corporate identity. A similar instance exists within the *Kingdom Keepers* (Ridley Pearson) franchise. Created in 2005, the same year as *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg*, and published by Disney-Hyperion, the series follows several teen protagonists as they fight iconic Disney villains within the theme parks after dark (Disney Wiki). Pearson uses his stories to reimagine the Disney parks and characters within a new narrative, consequently sustaining the company’s cultural ownership over the properties for younger audiences. Similarly, the *Disney Fairies* novels serve as foundational world-building texts for the franchise, creating new storylines and identities for pre-existing characters. By comparing the two series, it is evident that Disney’s publishing efforts were a deliberate strategy to assert narrative

control over competing iterations of licensed properties.

The *Disney Fairies* franchise is unique as well because it includes several animated straight-to-DVD films that focus on Tinker Bell and her group of friends. The film series (2008-2015) consists of six movies and two television specials produced in-house by DisneyToon Studios, all of which feature popular actresses such as Mae Whitman, Raven-Symoné, Kristin Chenoweth, and America Ferrara as the fairies’ voices (Disney Wiki). They offer new narratives within the setting established through Levine’s novels, with Tinker Bell being “true to the likeness of the palm-sized fairy in the 1953 *Peter Pan*—blonde bun, green dress, slightly voluptuous. But her fellow fairies are ethnically diverse and have empowering skills” (McClintock). Tinker Bell is pictured similarly to her previous Disney appearances to inspire familiarity among viewers. Yet, the cast around her is developed to address the company’s lack of diversity and agency in its other media. Disney uses the film series to curate what Rebecca Rowe calls a legacy retelling: a narrative that “draws on animated classics to tell a completely new story, often by focusing on a different perspective or continuing the story beyond the animated classic” (Rowe 99). By shifting from *Peter Pan*’s perspective to Tinker Bell’s through the films’ retelling strategy, Disney affirms that it has “grown as a company, both venerating the original texts and intentionally pointing to their flaws in order to make Disney seem even better today” (Rowe 99). The result was successful, considering how the first four films were each made for under \$35 million and together generated over \$335 million for DisneyToon Studios (McClintock). The film series has therefore largely influenced Tinker Bell’s cultural status among newer generations, especially for young girls.

Disney’s rebranding of Tinker Bell through the *Disney Fairies* franchise mirrors its approach to live-action remakes, such as *The Jungle Book* (Jon Favreau, 2016), where the corporation claims public domain property and revitalizes it through narrative and aesthetic modifications that reinforce Disney’s version as the dominant one. In *The Jungle Book*, these changes include reintroducing musical numbers like “The Bare Necessities” and the use of realistic CGI to recall the 1967 animated version. Similarly, the *Disney Fairies* franchise expands Tink’s story world to establish new social frameworks and relationships that are absent from Barrie’s play. In a similar fashion to Tinker Bell, Disney used the public domain literary work *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling, 1894) to build its generational legacy. By first creating the 1967 animated *The Jungle Book* cartoon, then referencing it through sequels and adaptations, the corporation cements its place as a creative authority in public memory. Favreau’s 2016 film “takes every opportunity to resurrect and canonize the animated version, assuring that it is read as the source text rather than the Kipling stories” (Benson 35). Narratively, the live-action film reworks Kipling’s themes to fit Disney’s family-friendly style by incorporating songs and characters that enhance and reference the brand (Benson 35). Likewise, the *Disney Fairies* franchise creates a new society for Tinker Bell and her friends that doesn’t exist in Barrie’s novel, leading fans to associate the characters with Disney’s model. Aesthetically, Disney uses media saturation and style cohesion to overwrite the original texts of the two franchises; their distinct CGI and animated representations sustain Disney’s cultural dominance. In this fashion, the Tinker Bell films and the live-action *The Jungle Book* help reposition the hierarchy of power between Disney and the properties’ original sources.

The *Disney Fairies* franchise is also distinctive due to its online presence. In 2005, as part of the million-dollar campaign for

Pixie Dust and the Quest for the Egg, Disney launched the website disneyfairies.com, where fans can explore and learn about Tinker Bell and the other Neverland fairies (Disney Publishing Worldwide 2005). The site has also hosted the massively multiplayer online role-playing video game *Pixie Hollow* since its inception in 2008 until the game’s closure in 2013. While playing, fans can customize their personal avatars, play mini games, collect points and artifacts, interact with other players, and create a digital fairy life (Maplesden). The effect of playing is that fans may experience the fairies’ fantasy both physically and imaginatively; their bodies hear and see features on the site and respond by making decisions and clicking buttons on their screens. This call-to-action interactivity intensifies the audience’s connection with the franchise and upholds consumerist ideals that promote fan participation in other media within the franchise, such as books, films, and toyetic products (Maplesden).

Today, the *Disney Fairies* franchise lies mostly dormant. To understand why, it’s essential to consider the state of the *Disney Princesses* franchise as an explanation for the industrial and viewer biases that often prejudice female-dominated media. The princesses and the fairies are almost exclusively directed towards young female audiences: the main cast, if not the entire ensemble, is made up of women, and the properties defend traditional gendered ideologies, such as female characters being primarily nurturing and affectionate. While this does promote effective demographic appeal, “franchises designed for girls are especially devalued and neglected by mainstream society... because of their intended audience and profit centers” (Kunze 122). The princesses are a highly successful example of an overwhelmingly female franchise. However, even their popularity is not liberated from the restrictions of gender within the media. Many of the stories are labeled “regressive, in part because the fairy tale itself is fundamentally flawed” (Kunze 121). Disney has aimed to remedy this perception within the past two decades through live-action remakes and retellings of its iconic animated princess films. They concentrate on correcting the cultural representations in their classic stories as a strategy for bridging the gap between audiences who grew up with the cartoons and new generations (Rowe). Part of the strategy consists of moving away from gender-specific tropes and movie titles, as well as alluding to socially conscious themes. The extent to which these endeavors are successful is highly debated, but Disney clearly has been aware of the necessity for a diverse, cross-generational audience for some time.

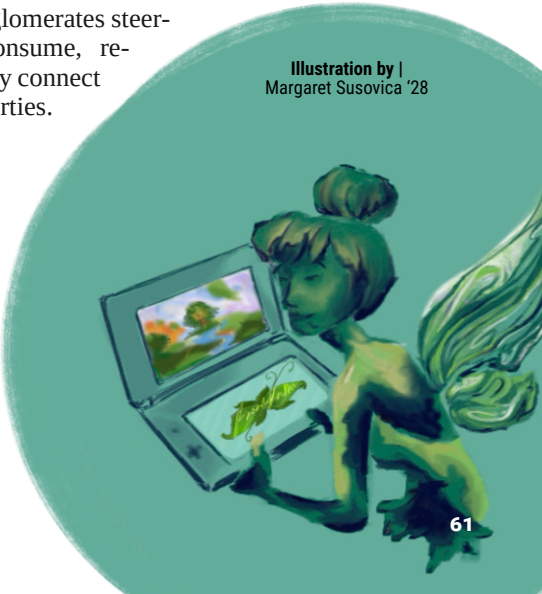
The *Disney Fairies* franchise gained popularity between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s and draws inspiration from the animated film *Peter Pan*, made over fifty years prior. In *Peter Pan*, Tinker Bell is characterized by her jealous attachment to Peter and her unrealistic body type. Disney attempted to develop the character more within the *Disney Fairies* franchise by fleshing out her backstory and fairy culture, in addition to providing an assembly of other fairies with individual ambitions and talents. However, the corporation was challenged with the task of translating its empowerment themes across media, especially while maintaining a profit-centered attitude. In the *Pixie Hollow* game, players are “‘make-believing’ the caring role of a Fairy who contributes to the orderly scheme of the Pixie Hollow world” (Maplesden). The effect of this gameplay is that “when playing the game, the subject position they are called into is that of a girl-consumer who is civilized, feminine, and domesticated” (Maplesden). Likewise, the Tinker Bell films depict the characters with highly feminine proportions and accessories and use their narratives to reinforce the orderly element of the brand. Furthermore, throughout all of its media, the *Disney*

Fairies franchise includes a minimal number of male representations. These components reflect the franchise’s success in attracting its key demographic while at the same time failing to access a broader audience, particularly as society and media evolved to include more diverse portrayals in the 2010s.

The fairies, rather than evolving with new screen iterations and expansions, are now constrained to Disney parks and online fan labor. Tinker Bell is featured in several park events, most prominently in the nighttime fireworks show. The company also still sells various merchandise with the *Disney Fairies* image, including a Tinker Bell-inspired collection that launched in park stores in March 2025 (Disney Store). Furthermore, the franchise is invigorated through fan-created discourse on engagement platforms like Reddit or Twitch, as well as through references on contemporary sites such as *Roblox* (Carapelloti). While connecting to the property, audiences almost always assume Disney’s version of Tinker Bell and the other Neverland fairies to frame their fan extensions. The legacy of the *Disney Fairies*, therefore, lies in Disney’s consumer-based approach; new fans’ primary entry points are either through physical merchandise or references to the Disney image within other media.

In 2025, twenty years after the initial launch of the franchise, it is essential to reflect on the *Disney Fairies*’ rise and decline to understand how Disney has manipulated and implemented intertextual relationships in targeted ways to reaffirm its corporate authorship over public domain properties (Benson 26). The company first adapted J.M. Barrie’s 1904 stage play *Peter Pan* into its 1953 animated film, adopting Tinker Bell in the process. Over time, Disney transformed her from a secondary, jealous character to a leading figure for the media empire through live-action programs, advertisements, novels, films, and an online game, reframing her as kind, ambitious, and independent. This rebranding paralleled the company’s efforts to appeal to young girls and to modernize its representation of femininity. As a result, audiences today routinely associate Tinker Bell with Disney’s glossy, marketable character rather than Barrie’s cynical fairy. Tinker Bell’s reimagined persona demonstrates how corporate storytelling can overwrite literary origins, thereby shaping cultural memory through specific brand identity. This procedure transcends creative redesigning; Tinker Bell’s evolution is an example of Disney’s broader capitalistic transformations of public domain works into symbols of the corporation’s values and ambitions. When audiences are continually met with reinterpreted characters like Tinker Bell, they inherit a mediated account of cultural history that blurs nostalgia with corporate ownership. Disney’s control over Tinker Bell and the *Disney Fairies* franchise demonstrates the cultural outcomes of media conglomerates steering how audiences consume, remember, and emotionally connect with iconic media properties.

Illustration by |
Margaret Susovica '28



References

Benson, Nicholas. “All Hail Disney: Establishing Corporate Authorship Through Industrial Intertextuality.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 25-47, doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2019.1593032

Carapelloti, Hannah. ““We the Pixies’ is Bringing the World of Pixie Hollow Back to Life.” *The Michigan Daily*, 2023, <https://www.michigandaily.com/arts/digital-culture/we-the-pixies-is-bringing-the-world-of-pixie-hollow-back-to-life/>

“Disney Fairies.” *Disney Wiki*, Fandom. disney.fandom.com/wiki/Disney_Fairies#Online_game

Disney Publishing Worldwide. “Cornerstone of New Disney Fairies Franchise Which Builds Upon Tinker Bell’s Enormous Popularity is Launched with a One Million Book Launch in 45 Countries.” *Disney Publishing Worldwide*, 2005, web.archive.org/web/20061027020931/https://licensing.disney.com/Login/displayContent.do?layout=pressreleasedetail&contentId=281221&returnLayout=pressReleaseArchives&year=2005&articleSort=date

Disney Store. “Tinker Bell.” www.disneystore.com/characters/disney/tinker-bell/

Hollywood Walk of Fame. “Tinker Bell.” walkoffame.com/tinker-bell/

Kelly, Heather. “Coping with the Loss of an Online World.” *CNN Business*, 2013, www.cnn.com/2013/tech/gaming-gadgets/closing-toontown/index.html

“Kingdom Keepers.” *Disney Wiki*, Fandom. disney.fandom.com/wiki/Kingdom_Keepers

Kunze, Peter C. “Revise and Resubmit: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), Live-Action Remakes, and the Disney Princess Franchise.” *Feminist Media Studies*, 23.1, 2023, 121-136

Levine, Gail Carson. “Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg.” gailcarsonlevine.com/egg.html

Maplesden, Allison. “Pixie Dust: Gender, Embodiment and Consumer Identities in disney.go.com/fairies and Pixie Hollow MMOG.” *Sense of Cinema*, Issue 57, 2010, www.sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/pixie-dust-gender-embodiment-and-consumer-identities-in-disney-go-comfairies-and-pixie-hollow-mmog

McClintock, Pamela. “How Tinker Bell Became Disney’s Stealthy \$300 Million Franchise.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2014, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-tinker-bell-became-disneys-692559/

Orenstein, Peggy. “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?” *The New York Times Magazine*, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html

Raugust, Karen. “Disney Fairies Fly to Little, Brown.” *Publisher’s Weekly*, 2014, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/60748-disney-fairies-fly-to-little-brown.html

Reuters Fact Check. “Fact Check: Disney Has Not Removed Tinker Bell from Its Parks.”

Reuters, 2024, www.reuters.com/fact-check/disney-has-not-removed-tinker-bell-its-parks-2024-05-30/

Rowe, Rebecca. “Disney Does Disney: Re-Releasing, Remaking, and Retelling Animated Films for a New Generation.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 50.3, 2022, 98-111

“Tinker Bell Character Archive.” Disney Online. web.archive.org/web/20070105003150/http://disney.go.com/vault/archives/characters/tinker/tinker.html

Wasko, Janet. “The Disney Empire.” *Understanding Disney*, 2nd ed. Polity Press, 2020, 31-70

Icelandic Identity and Landscape:

The Effect of Modernization and Climate Change on Icelandic Folklore and Supernatural Beliefs

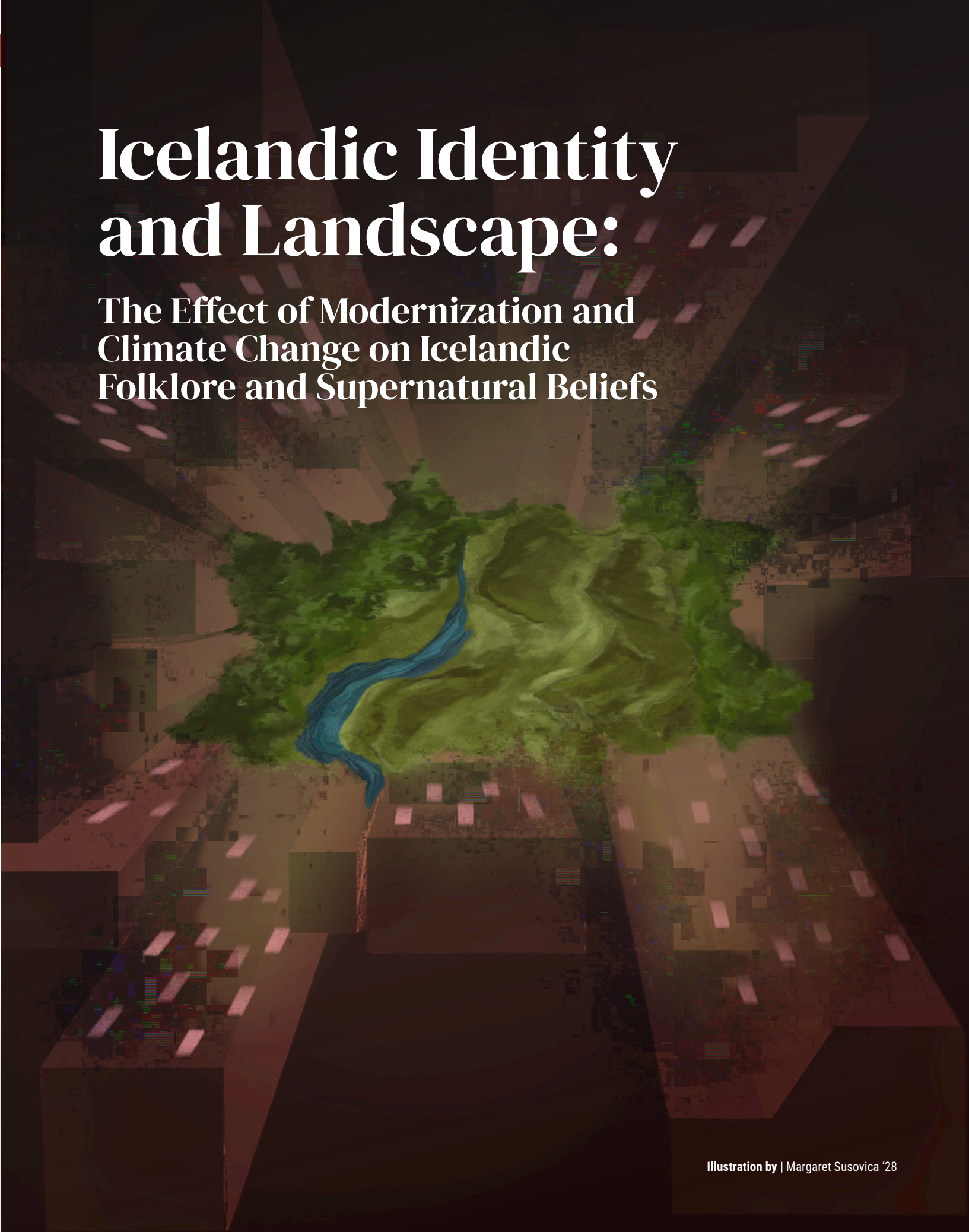


Illustration by | Margaret Susovica '28

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Icelandic Identity and Landscape: The Effect of Modernization and Climate Change on Icelandic Folklore and Supernatural Beliefs

Jane Leavitt ‘27
Washington University in St. Louis

This paper focuses on the vast mythological landscape of Icelandic folklore and Sagas, with a specific focus on trolls, Elves, and civil war Sagas. It highlights common themes, historical reception, and their impact on current Icelandic identity. It then claims through survey data, population demographics, and climate projections that modernization, urbanization, and climate change will erase or permanently change the fundamental purpose of these traditional stories and beliefs. This paper focuses on Iceland throughout its entire existence as a settled nation (874 CE - present).

In the modern day, civilizations rely on ancient cultural traditions to underscore and support social and political decisions through providing a moral roadmap for individuals to follow. However, countless civilizations have seen their ancient cultural traditions and beliefs slip away. This can be due to internal pressures from urbanization or governance changes, external pressures from colonization or war, or environmental changes resulting from warming temperatures or natural disasters. Despite many countries in this modern age abandoning their traditional ideologies through choice or force, a few countries still garner great respect for their belief in their mythology and folklore. Such examples include Greece and Italy, which are exemplary cases of cultural preservation. However, despite their historically strong connection to folklore, Iceland is currently balancing on the delicate edge of either forsaking its deep-rooted folklore in favor of the outward perception of cultural modernization or continuing to regard folklore and the sagas as a part of everyday life.

“

Iceland is currently balancing on the delicate edge of either forsaking its deep-rooted folklore in favor of the outward perception of cultural modernization or continuing to regard folklore and the sagas as a part of everyday life.

In the face of Iceland’s late development and accelerated modernization, it remains to be seen how Icelanders’ identity will evolve in the face of urbanization and environmental change. Through primary and secondary scholarship, interviews, survey

data, and climate projections, this paper will explore the importance of the Icelandic landscape and its impact on native culture and folklore, how locals’ perceptions of history and mythology have evolved, and why traditional customs are at risk in the future due to environmental shifts.

Background and Literature Review

Throughout human history, people have woven rich mythscapes representing their customs, beliefs, and troubles facing their people. Despite the great importance these stories have historically held, many fail to maintain relevance in modern times due to various complications. Some of these are internal conflicts, such as ideological changes or governance shifts; external conflicts, such as colonization or warfare; and environmental strains, such as natural disasters. Internal changes can occur within the span of one ruler or across multiple generations. In Ancient Egypt, internal shifts were more gradual; as Christianity grew, Egyptians slowly started rejecting polytheistic traditions, leaving myths such as those of Ra and Osiris as symbols of the past (Bárta 25). Shifts impacting the Babylonian Empire in Iraq were more accelerated. This was due to the last Neo-Babylonian ruler, King Nabonidus, who removed key religious statues and disrupted temple operations (Zawadzki 51). The Babylonian Empire also faced external pressures to adopt Persian customs and release the exiled Jewish population following the strategic and swift invasion led by Cyrus the Great. This left their mythology as a subject of archaeological study rather than a living culture (Sandowicz 197). Native American Tribes faced external conflict through colonization and mandatory assimilation, which displaced them from their ancestral lands and forced them to adopt Christianity and European customs (Widmer 113). Following cultural decimation, Indigenous people also faced environmental changes due to industrialization, further severing their access to sacred sites (120). Although these scenarios from antiquity do not perfectly reflect modern threats to cultural loss, societies still face internal shifts in ideology, external

pressures, and environmental changes that risk separating people from the culture and traditions that shaped them.

Although similar to the aforementioned challenges that other civilizations face, Iceland’s issues are unique due to the lack of purposeful or violent outside pressure. This is further differentiated due to the separation of Iceland from others, geographically and temporally. This is perhaps the greatest difference—Iceland is grappling with its evolving identity far later than other places. Because of the country’s rapid modernization in the mid-twentieth century, Iceland faces different threats to tradition, including ur-



Bromr, Troll Wife’s Leap

banization, climate change, and foreign perception (Wyatt 60). Urbanization and climate change in Iceland have a critical influence on place attachment, the emotional bond that is formed through experiences in a specific location. Due to Iceland’s geographic position just outside of the Arctic Circle, the harsh environment forced inhabitants to adapt to the isolation and extreme weather in different ways. As people lacked human interaction, the landscape was a living thing in and of itself, so to explain the wildness of their surroundings, they created fantastical and supernatural stories, such as the pantheon of Norse Gods like Óðinn and Þórr (Gísladóttir et al. 25). These stories were carried down through oral tradition for generations. Because of this, the landscape gives locals a strong sense of pride and belonging—it not only represents their heritage, but also their ability to survive in such a harsh environment. This is seen in traditional literature through the connection to natural landmarks, such as Óðinn’s Eye or the broader genre of *Goðfræðisögur*, the tales of spiritual beings (Gunnell). Since folklore and sagas are rooted in specific environmental features that still exist, they do not become abstract ideas from the past; they are anchored in current reality.

Supernatural Beings

This is especially common in *Goðfræðisögur*, which often describe natural Icelandic landscapes in terms of their supernatural qualities. For example, Elves are said to inhabit large rock formations and grassy hills, while trolls dwell in mountains and less majestic rock formations, like stout boulders or craggy mountains (Benedikz 3). This can be explained through the differing etiology of these creatures and who was originally telling these stories. Troll stories come from Norwegian roots and were often passed

down by the fathers in families, who came primarily from Norway in the Viking Age (Hallmundsdóttir). In this era, men were often out of the house hunting or dealing with interpersonal matters, so they spent less time around their children telling their native tales. As a result, troll stories are less common and often more violent because they mirror the everyday lives of male settlers (Hallmundsdóttir). These creatures are portrayed as frightening and disgusting, often the opposite of humans and the parallel of Elves—similar in the overall basics, yet so vastly different (Benedikz 5).

In the Troll stories *Drangey Consecrated* and *Gissur of Botnar* in Appendices A and B, they are shown as different from humans, but the stories also educate about the origins of specific locations. In the first story, we are told about the indiscriminate cruelty of Trolls when they massacre large numbers of explorers and missionaries on the island of Drangey; any time someone rappelled down the cliff, a hand would cut the rope and send the man to his death (Sveinsson 31). *Drangey Consecrated* also serves as a link to the Sagas through topographic references to the *Saga of Grettir*, putting the place into context for Icelanders, before explaining the reasoning behind the names Lambhöfði and Uppgönguvík, which helps anchor and preserve the historic place names (32). In *Gissur of Botnar*, we get an even more detailed explanation for a natural landmark, Trollwife’s Leap, citing the Troll Wife from Búrfell as the creator of the huge stepping stones (32).

The Troll Wife of Búrfell was known to communicate with her sister in Bjólfell across Tröllkonugil—Troll Wife’s Canyon—to plot against any wandering travelers (33). This tale details the chase of Gissur of Botnar, who scarcely avoided being cooked and eaten by the Troll Wife of Búrfell (34). Gissur obtains assistance from a nearby village, which rings their church bells to drive the Troll mad—she is later found dead in the canyon named for herself and her sister (36). These stories serve as cautionary tales against



Bauer, Icelandic Trolls

the terrifying race of Trolls that dwell in the countryside. However, there are other beings to be wary of in the vast landscape of Iceland.

To parallel the Trolls, Iceland has a deep-rooted culture sur-



rounding Elves. Unlike their Norwegian counterparts, Elves have Celtic roots, and their stories were passed down from the Celtic women taken as slaves in the settlement of Iceland to their children (Hallmundsdóttir). Their homes are sacred spaces that “represent nature in the heart of culture; the places attributed to them are wilderness in the midst of cultivation” (Hafstein 89). In Elf stories, there is a greater emphasis on how Elves interact with their human neighbors because they parallel each other in place and lifestyle:

The meaning attached to Elves and all things Elven depends on their counterparts in narratives; this other half of the oppositional pair has changed. Elf Hills are no longer contrasted with cultivated fields and farmland. Instead, their opposite number is the urban, concrete landscape. Therefore, they are no longer as useful to represent the wild in the cultivated, but rather the rural in an urbanized society, countrified ideals and traditional values—that is to say, the Elves are used to represent authentic Icelanders. (99)

Traditional Elves are reflections of humans at that time—they live in small towns with churches, are Christian, and survive by farming (Benedikz 3). But they also depict the malicious side of man. They are vindictive and cunning, often violent against their own kind if it benefits them (4). These overarching character traits of vengeance and spite further emphasize the similarities between their species and the most primal aspects of ours, something that has been lost today due to their ethereal representation in main-

stream media and tourism (4).

However, in *The Magistrate’s Wife of Burstarfell* and *Father of Eighteen in Elfland*, in appendices C and D, we see two different types of interactions that show the true nature of Icelandic Elves. The first shows an instance of a human woman—the Magistrate’s wife—helping an Elf give birth (Sveinsson 18). She then takes advantage of the Elf’s hospitality by stealing an ointment from their home that allows her to see the Elvish society nearby (19). When the Elf discovers what the Magistrate’s wife did, she removes her ability to see their hidden civilization by spitting in her eye (19). In *Father of Eighteen in Elfland*, we see a different, more comedic interaction where an Elf steals a young human boy—a common literary trope in Elvish literature and something they were known to go to extremes for—in exchange for her Elf husband (20; Benedikz 3). The mother of the boy eventually manages to get her son back through consultation with a spiritual woman, and the whole interaction is rather light-hearted and funny as opposed to tense and frightening (Sveinsson 21-23). Both stories highlight in-



Pearson, *Icelandic Elves*

ter-species interactions, which extend into how they shared the land—something of incredible importance to early Icelanders as seen in the epic collection of the Sagas.

The Sagas

Icelandic culture is historically and spiritually tied to its landscape; myths are not abstract but embedded in specific geographic features. In the Sagas, a collection of prose narratives from the 13th and 14th centuries detailing Icelandic history, there are many references to specific landmarks that still exist today (Gunnell, *On the Border* 12). Many Sagas incorporate volcanic eruptions and glacial floods as pivotal events—things that have impacted and will continue to impact the landscape for centuries (Halink 209). Sagas such as *Íslendingasögur*, the family Sagas, and *Sturlunga*, the civil war Saga, were considered history, not fiction, by academics until well into the twentieth century (Wyatt 56). This was largely due to Icelandic belief in the validity of oral tradition and the ability to keep accounts accurate without writing them down (Hallmundsdóttir). In scholarship, belief stemmed from Denmark’s king commissioning *The Reise igiennem Island* by Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson in 1772 to document the landscape of Iceland, so in turn, “the land becomes a means of validating the text” (Wyatt 56). Nearly a century later, Frederick Metcalfe, a British travel writer, called upon foreigners to “see with your own eyes the spots we have been reading of in the Sagas” (Metcalfe 3). In that time, the correlation between the landscape in the Sagas and the physical landscape was enough to confirm the validity of the stories (Wyatt 57). This belief was widely held by not just Icelanders but historians worldwide for another two centuries.

“
Urbanization and migration to cities from rural areas like the West Fjords best correlate with the decline in belief because Icelanders are removing themselves from the places where these stories hold the most weight.

However, around the time of Iceland’s industrialization, this belief evolved, largely due to the opinion of Sigurður Nordal, who claimed that the locations described in the Sagas were inaccurate and possibly nonexistent. This was specifically in Freysgoða, with Nordal saying, “much of the belief in the truthfulness of the Icelandic Sagas is based on reasons which, if closely scrutinized, would turn out to be untenable” (60). This was controversial at the time because questioning the legitimacy of the Sagas was a direct attack on Icelandic nationalism and environmentalism (Lindow 455; Sigurðsson 43). Gísli Sigurðsson later landed on a more moderate take that “the events of many of the medieval Sagas take place in Iceland, and are thus set in the same landscape as that which people still have before their eyes today. Sagas were (and still are) linked to the land in the minds of people” (43). This combined the ideas of both Metcalfe and Nordal by stating the importance of these places in Icelandic culture, while addressing that geographic correlation does not necessarily prove that the event happened. Today, scholars are trying to balance the entanglement of

myth, history, and identity to honor the past without ignoring physical evidence (Olwig 1). However, due to the tension between stories and science (the very fundamentals of supernatural beings directly contradict science), it is unclear what the prevailing current belief in Icelandic mythology is (Gunnell, *Narratives Across Space* 338).

The effect of globalization and modernization on folklore beliefs is also sparsely researched, leading to a limited understanding of how traditional customs may erode in the coming years. A useful but unexplored way to measure these effects would be through a factorial ANOVA test to see if there is a statistically relevant influence of one dataset of independent variables, like age, education, and gender on the dependent variables, like different beliefs; however, there is not currently enough sample data on this subject to complete this test in an accurate manner, due to skewed samples and a disproportionate amount of urban responses (Lakens et al.). Another gap is the role of environmental degradation in disrupting the place attachment and interconnectedness of mythology and landscape. Although Icelandic stories have been researched since the 1700s and landscape change has been studied for even longer, there is very little work done at the intersection of these two disciplines. This multidisciplinary research is especially timely due to the accelerated loss of natural landscape through melting glaciers and urbanization, which pose a threat to historical and mythological landmarks (Jónsdóttir et al. 393). Additionally, Iceland has been undergoing a social transformation as more of the population gains access to global media, technology, and beliefs, exposing them to foreign ideological pressures. Because of the disappearing environment and the fading aspects of identity, it is important to be aware of the threats and preserve Icelandic heritage as much as possible (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 9).

Methods and Data

This paper draws on traditional Icelandic folklore with a specific focus on trolls and Elves, the Sagas, and historical travel accounts written by antiquarians in the 18th and 19th centuries. These are examined in combination with peer-reviewed articles written by locals and specialists in Icelandic folklore to understand the cultural implications and deep roots of their identity. Then, survey data collected in 1974, 2006, 2007, and 2023 by the Social Sciences Institute at the University of Iceland were analyzed with a specific focus on changes in Elf, Troll, and mythological ideologies within demographics to see how public perception of supernatural beings and occurrences has changed over the past half-century. Next, I compared various climate projections for Iceland as a whole to coastal and glacial mythological and supernatural sites to see how place attachment will be affected in the near future by sea level rise and glacial melt. Lastly, interviews on supernatural attitude and the origins of these beliefs were conducted with Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, a professor of Medieval Icelandic Literature at the University of Iceland, and Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir, an archaeologist in the Westfjords, to gain firsthand knowledge from experts in the field (see Appendices E and F for specifics).

Analysis

Icelanders tend to err on the side of caution when stating their opinions on the supernatural, as demonstrated in an interview with Margrét Hrönn Hallmundsdóttir. She shared a personal experience about a time when she proclaimed her disbelief in Elves—something she now has physical trouble saying out loud—and was met

with a small unexplained fire in her bathroom less than an hour later. She thinks it was a sign from the Elves; from then on, she said, “I believe— I will not say no. I will never refuse their existence again, ever” (Hallmundsdóttir). Although there are still Icelanders like Margrét who hold deep beliefs in the supernatural world, through experience or reverence for tradition, survey data from the Social Science Institute indicates a decline in supernatural beliefs in Iceland from 1974 to 2023. The most recent survey questioned 2792 Icelanders on 74 different supernatural-related questions (Gunnell, *Survey of Icelandic* 2). Results show that sightings of Elves and Hiddenfolk, which are the nonpejorative version of Elves, have remained stable at 6% since 1974, see Appendix G, Figure 2 (2). However, the majority of findings showed a sharp decrease in belief, with typically less than 5% being certain about the existence of anything supernatural by 2023. In 1974, only 12% of the population thought Elves and Hiddenfolk to be unlikely or impossible; by 2023, that number grew to 50%; see Appendix G, Figure 1 (2). This percentage threatens to rise with continued rural flight, foreign influence, and climate change (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 9).

“

Icelandic folklore faces dual threats: social disconnection and environmental degradation.

Icelandic folklore faces dual threats: social disconnection and environmental degradation. Urbanization and migration to cities from rural areas like the West Fjörds best correlate with the decline in belief because Icelanders are removing themselves from the place where these stories hold the most weight. This is something that was highlighted in both interviews:

In the countryside, say, you would say this is a Noon Hill, because the sun is there at noon. This is this hill, and you would tell everything according to this hill and this hill. And now we are losing that because people don't use this anymore, they don't use place names. And the same is with stories, we have phones, we have other means, we don't have to recite it. And as you take yourself out of the environment, you lose the story. You know that the cliff, this is an Elf church, then when you move away, nobody is to tell you it is an Elf church, it just becomes a rock. So I think definitely we are losing that. Both place names and beliefs, and in the past, we didn't have anything except the environment, we look at this hill, and yes, this could be an Elf church there or something. There's a stone up there, and it is just like a face. It's a troll that saw the light of day and was— all kinds of that. We lose that, I think, definitely. I am afraid of it. (Hallmundsdóttir)

With fewer people living in these places, cultural transmission occurs less because there is no one to explain natural phenomena. This correlates to statistics found on population demographic shift in Iceland, see Appendix H (Helniak 10). From 1901 to 1960, the population in Reykjavík rose from 12% of the country's population to just over 50%; by the year 2023, 65% of people were concentrated in the capital (12). Because the majority of people are living in an urban setting and have greater access to modern technologies and luxuries, there are fewer locals carrying on the traditional stories and ways of life. However, emigration has also impacted the legacy of traditional

practices. Locals have not only moved out of the rural areas, but some have left Iceland altogether. This was especially seen after the 2008 financial crash, which “led to many Icelanders moving away; both the rise of tourism and increasing access to international media were leading to an influx of ideas from abroad” (Gunnell, *Contact with the Dead* 5). This removed a key component for passing down traditional folklore. It also exposed Icelanders to heavier international criticism, and in turn, they ‘commodified’ their folklore and history, something that is blatantly seen through the rampant inaccurate portrayal of Vikings, the original Icelandic settlers (Warren). We see this not only in Icelandic tourism, where the Elves and Trolls have been made comedic, but also in mainstream media, where Icelandic Elves have morphed into kinder beings—specifically in *The Lord of the Rings* series. They have caught the attention of foreign news sources many times, and the tone of the articles frequently conveys a sort of condescending disbelief that a modern country could believe in such a thing (Warren). The disapproval typically heightens whenever Elvish matters, like landscape disturbance, are cited as a reason to halt political or developmental decisions—something fairly common up until the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century (Kirby). This has been exacerbated by the percentage of foreigners living in Iceland, which has increased exponentially since 2000—once only accounting for 2%, foreigners now make up 17% of the population (Helniak 12). This can introduce new ideological beliefs and apply pressure on traditional customs by making locals feel embarrassed to celebrate this aspect of culture that was once so important to them.



Kristinsson, *The Entrance to the Center of the Earth*

Another major threat is anthropogenic climate change, specifically glacial melt and sea level rise. According to the Icelandic Meteorological Office, two glaciers, Langjökull and Hofsjökull, are expected to melt completely by 2100 and 2200, respectively (*Climate Report*). This will cause glacial flooding in surrounding areas, wiping out the sites of Óðinn's Eye and the entrance to the center of the Earth (*Entrance to the Centre*).

Sea level rise poses a similar threat to the supposed dwellings of supernatural beings. In the figure in Appendix I, the locations of eight known Elf hills are marked along the coast between Steingrimsfjörður and Bjarnarfjörður. SSP scenarios 2-4.5, 3-7.0, and 5-8.5, with the most conservative projection of one meter of sea level rise, place six of the eight Elf hills underwater (Jónsdóttir et al. 407; *Sea Level Projection Tool*). This greatly threatens the direct relationship between the Icelandic landscape and folklore. In a conversation with Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, she shed light on just how deep the root of environmental attachment is in Iceland:

Even if the first settlers came from countries where the landscape was not so different from the Icelandic landscape, they probably had to adjust to even worse weather, darker winters and what we might call "a living landscape," where they had to be prepared for volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, snow floods, water floods, rough sea and so on. The landscape itself was wild with big mountain areas and glaciers. Because of the harsh winters, it also became very cold, for example, the high and rocky sea cliffs, and the volcanic landscape, the lava, that is made from endless natural stone sculptures, with lots of shadows that probably encouraged people's imagination. In this big island and overwhelming, difficult landscape, people lived in small farmsteads along the coastal area and could easily become very isolated during the winter. Furthermore, the regular natural disasters could ruin land and livestock that was necessary for people to survive. All this is bound to influence everyone who lives here – the weather is constantly changing, and the landscape itself is extremely dangerous and variable. We can see how this is reflected in the saga literature, and specifically in the folktales, e.g., in the various supernatural beings. (Guðmundsdóttir)

Without these coastal areas and similar landscapes to old Iceland, the connection is going to be lost.

Implications and Discussion

We have seen similar cultural disconnection in other civilizations from antiquity; however, because we have these case studies, Iceland can reference those successful and unsuccessful in saving traditions. Greece is a prime example of preservation. Ancient Greece fell due to a combination of internal and external factors, including transitioning from worshipping the Olympian pantheon to practicing Christianity, military defeats to Macedon and Rome, and the fragmentation of the poleis, the Greek city-state (Carugati et al. 1138). Unlike other civilizations that lost cultural connections, modern Greece honors its mythology through tourism at historical places like the Acropolis in Athens, as well as the education of its population and foreigners (Mackridge 41). Although the beliefs are no longer widely held, Iceland can still apply the educational aspect of preservation to its own culture. Italy has also maintained its connection following the fall of the Roman Empire. Rome's fall is agreed to have been due to a combination of corrupt politics and the Late Antique Little Ice Age, a period in the 6th and 7th century CE when global temperatures dropped approximately 2 °C (Piganiol 69; Harper 145). Ancient Roman culture is a special case of preservation because it not only promotes historical tourism and education, but many of the core institutions are the basis for modern law and politics—especially in the United States (Olivadese et al. 7-8, 13). Iceland can learn from Greece and Rome in many ways; however, what makes this case so uniquely challenging is the timing—the shift is still underway, and we do not know what the outcome will be.

To mimic the success of its European neighbors and limit culture loss, Iceland should institute educational programs for Icelandic children to instill a balance between scientific knowledge and cultural heritage from a young age, in hopes of overcoming the separation from rural Icelandic life. In the surveys from the Social Science Institute, the age group that believed in the supernatural the least in 2023 were those in the 18-25 range (Gunnell, *Survey of Icelandic* 77). Younger generations are already exhibiting a steep drop-off in folklore faith, and it must be addressed before this extends to new generations.

Iceland should also continue to invest in cultural institutions as well as the environment to preserve and share folklore with future generations in more purposeful ways. While the public has shown

great support for nationalist environmentalism, as seen through civilian-supported government policies, there has been a less prevalent movement to protect traditional identity in the same way. Iceland is the leading country in habitat conservation and sustainability. Not only are there extensive policies to evaluate environmental impact for large construction projects, but they also promote innovation clusters to elevate their sustainable fishing industry and cause minimal impacts on the aquatic ecosystem. Furthermore, Iceland is almost entirely powered by renewable energy, primarily geothermal, while still providing a high quality of life through massive energy consumption. Although Iceland is taking strides, there is still work to be done. For example, while the Settlement Museum in Reykjavík does a thorough job of explaining the founding of Iceland through a political and domestic lens, it lacks an explanation of Icelandic folklore, especially when compared to the Athens Living Museum, which immersively exposes visitors to the ins and outs of Greek mythology and its impacts (*Athens Living Museum*). Considering its vast importance in the early days, the absence of any mention of folklore in the exhibits implies to visitors that this is insignificant to the foundation of Icelandic society. By educating the younger generations, immigrants, and tourists as well as investing in cultural institutions and preservation projects, the stories and folklore of traditional Icelanders can be more effectively protected.

“

To preserve their old identity, more effort will be needed to further the folklore and saga narrative.

Conclusion

Icelanders are becoming disconnected from traditional customs and stories, partly due to changing beliefs and modernization, and partly due to the loss of physical sites tethered to mythology and folklore. While Icelanders should not have to sacrifice the comforts of living in an urbanized city, it is essential to recognize that change is underway. To preserve their old identity, more effort will be needed to further the folklore and saga narrative.

Great strides have already been made by incorporating these stories into tourism; however, it is not the foreign population that needs convincing of the importance of Icelandic tradition.

Iceland can and should look to Greece's approach to cultural preservation. Not only have they gained cultural admiration and respect, but by speaking to locals, it is easily communicated by them that they believe in the epic myths, and they even talk about events like the Trojan War or the journey of Aeneas as if it were not an outlandish tale, because to them, that is their history.

They do not shy away from criticism, but rather have trust that their ancestors accurately carried down these stories for generations as a living history of their nation, and who are we to decide that what they experienced and lived did not happen? By losing connection to the supernatural aspects of their identity, Icelanders will risk losing attachment to their ancestors, the land, and all that makes Iceland so unique.

References

Bárta, Miroslav. *Analyzing Collapse: The Rise and Fall of the Old Kingdom*. The America University in Cairo Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2s71gr>.

Bauer, John. *The Trolls of Norse Mythology*. https://vikingr.org/other-beings/trolls?srsltid=AfmBOooICvCrR0C-ZhPS_rB0Vt6p3x1SeKKiIAQV_1d3gorTxDGYyn0. Digital.

Benedikz, B. S. “Basic Themes in Icelandic Folklore.” *Taylor & Francis*, Folklore, vol. 84, no. 1, Spring 1973, p. 26.

Bromr. *Tröllafossar*. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tr%C3%B6llafossar.jpg>. Photography.

Carugati, Federica, et al. “Review: The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece: A Discussion of Josiah Ober’s “The Rise and “Fall of Classical Greece.” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 14, Dec. 2016, pp. 1138–46.

“Climate Report.” *Icelandic Meteorological Office*, <https://www.government.is/topics/environment-climate-and-nature-protection/climate-change/#::~:~:text=Of%20particular%20concern%20is%20ocean,More>. Accessed 12 Jun. 2025.

Egeler, Matthias, et al. “Patterns in Icelandic Elf Hills.” *Folklore*, vol. 135, no. 3, Jul. 2024, pp. 388–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2024.2359778>.

Guðmundsdóttir, Aðalheiður. “Interview on Icelandic Identity and Environment.” 20 Jun. 2025.

Gunnell, Terry. “Contact with the Dead in Iceland Past and Present: The Findings of a New Survey of Folk Belief and Experiences of the Supernatural in Iceland.” *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 6, May 2024, p. 661. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060661>.

Gunnell, Terry. “Narratives Across Space and Time: Transmissions and Adaptations.” *Academy of Athens, Publications of the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre*, vol. 1, Jun. 2009, p. 13.

Gunnell, Terry. “On the Border: The Liminality of the Seashore in Icelandic Folk Legends.” *Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea: Seascapes and Dreamscapes*, 1st ed., vol. 11, Northern Scotland, 2020, pp. 10–27.

Gunnell, Terry. “Survey of Icelandic Folk Belief and Folk Attitudes.” Social Sciences Institute, Sep. 2023.

Gunnell, Terry. “The Power in the Place: Icelandic Álagablettir Legends in a Comparative Context.” *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2018, pp. 27–41.

Hafstein, Valdimar Tr. “The Elves’ Point of View: Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Tradition.” *Fabula*, vol. 41, nos. 1–2, Jan. 2000, pp. 87–104. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fabl.2000.41.1-2.87>.

Halink, Simon. “The Icelandic Mythscape: Sagas, Landscapes and National Identity.” *National Identities*, vol. 16, no. 3, Jul. 2014, pp. 209–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2014.935310>.

Hallmundsdóttir, Margrét Hrönn. “Interview on Icelandic Sagas and Folklore.” 3 Jul. 2025.

Haraldsson, Erlendur. “Survey of Psychic Experiences.” Department of Psychology, Jun. 1975.

Harper, Kyle. “The Environmental Fall of the Roman Empire.” *Daedalus*, vol. 145, no. 2, Apr. 2016, pp. 101–11. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00380.

Heleniak, Timothy. “Iceland’s Demographic Transition: From Turf Houses to Too Many Tourists.” *Polar Record*, vol. 61, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003224742400038x>.

Heleniak, Timothy. “Iceland’s Demographic Transition: From Turf Houses to Too Many Tourists.” *Polar Record*, vol. 61, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003224742400038x>.

Kirby, Emma Jane. “Why Icelanders Are Wary of Elves Living beneath the Rocks.” *British Broadcasting Company*, 20 Jun. 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27907358#::~:~:text=Plans%20to%20build%20a%20new,while%20a%20solution%20was%20found>.

Kristinnsson, Axel. *Snæfellsjökull*. <https://unric.org/en/the-glaciers-in-iceland-may-disappear-within-decades/#::~:~:text=The%20entrance%20to%20the%20%E2%80%9Ccentre,earth%E2%80%9D%20may%20disappear%20within%20decades>. Photography. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>

Lakens, Daniël, and Aaron R. Caldwell. “Simulation-Based Power Analysis for Factorial Analysis of Variance Designs.” *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, vol. 4, no. 1, Jan. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245920951503>.

Lindow, John. “Íslendingabok and Myth.” *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 69, no. 4, Fall 1997, pp.

454–65.

Lyons, Aine, et al. “Using Photovoice to Investigate the Impact of Place Attachment on Community Resilience in Iceland.” *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1, Mar. 2025, pp. 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-01-2024-0030>.

Mackridge, Peter. “The Heritages of the Modern Greeks.” *British Academy Review*, no. 19, Jan. 2012.

Metcalfe, Frederick. *The Oxonian in Iceland; or, Notes of Travel in That Island in the Summer of 1860*. Oxford, 1861.

Nordal, Sigurður. *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða; a Study*. University of Wales Press, 1958.

Olivadese, Marianna, and Maria Luisa Dindo. “Ancient Wisdom in Modern Tourism: Sustainable Solutions from Greek and Roman Literature.” *Land*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 2025, p. 109. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14010109>.

Olivadese, Marianna, and Maria Luisa Dindo. “Cultural Landscapes: Exploring the Imprint of the Roman Empire on Modern Identities.” *Land*, vol. 13, no. 5, Apr. 2024, p. 605. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land13050605>.

Olwig, Kenneth R. “Nationalist Heritage, Sublime Affect and the Anomalous Icelandic Landscape Concept.” *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography*, vol. 69, no. 5, Oct. 2015, pp. 277–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2015.1062045>.

Piganiol, André. “The Causes of the Fall of the Roman Empire.” *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 5, Oct. 1950, pp. 62–69.

Power, Rosemary. ““Those Truthful in All Else Have Said’: Tales of the Supernatural in an Icelandic Valley.” *Folk Life*, vol. 63, no. 1, Jan. 2025, pp. 48–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2025.2455849>.

Ragnarsdóttir, Regina Hrönn. *A Wonderful Stay at Fossatún amongst the Trolls of West Iceland*. <https://guidetoiceland.is/connect-with-locals/regina/a-wonderful-stay-at-fossatun-amongst-the-trolls-of-west-iceland-4>. Photography.

Sandowicz, Małgorzata. “More on the End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 74, Oct. 2015, pp. 197–210.

“Sea Level Projection Tool.” *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*, <https://sealevel.nasa.gov/ipcc-ar6-sea-level-projection-tool?type=global>.

Sigurðsson, Gísli. “Icelandic National Identity from Romanticism to Tourism.” *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1996, pp. 41–75.

Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur, et al. *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*. Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003.

The Athens Living Museum. <https://athenslivingmuseum.com/>.

“The Entrance to the ‘Centre of the Earth’ May Disappear within Decades.” *The United Nations*, 2 Oct. 2023, <https://unric.org/en/the-glaciers-in-iceland-may-disappear-within-decades/#::~:~:text=The%20entrance%20to%20the%20%E2%80%9Ccentre,earth%E2%80%9D%20may%20disappear%20within%20decades>.

Warren, Rich. “More Than Half of This Country Believes in Elves.” *National Geographic*, 1 Dec. 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/believes-elves-exist-mythology>.

Widmer, Randolph J. “The Rise, Fall, and Transformation of Native American Cultures in the Southeastern United States.” *Reviews in Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 108–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00938151003772850>.

Wyatt, Ian. “The Landscape of the Icelandic Sagas: Text, Place and National Identity.” *Landscapes*, vol. 5, no. 1, Apr. 2004, pp. 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.1179/lan.2004.5.1.55>.

Zawadzki, Stefan. “The End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire: New Data Concerning Nabonidus’s Order to Send the Statues of Gods to Babylon.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 71, pp. 47–52.

Appendix

Find the full appendix at WUJUR.org.

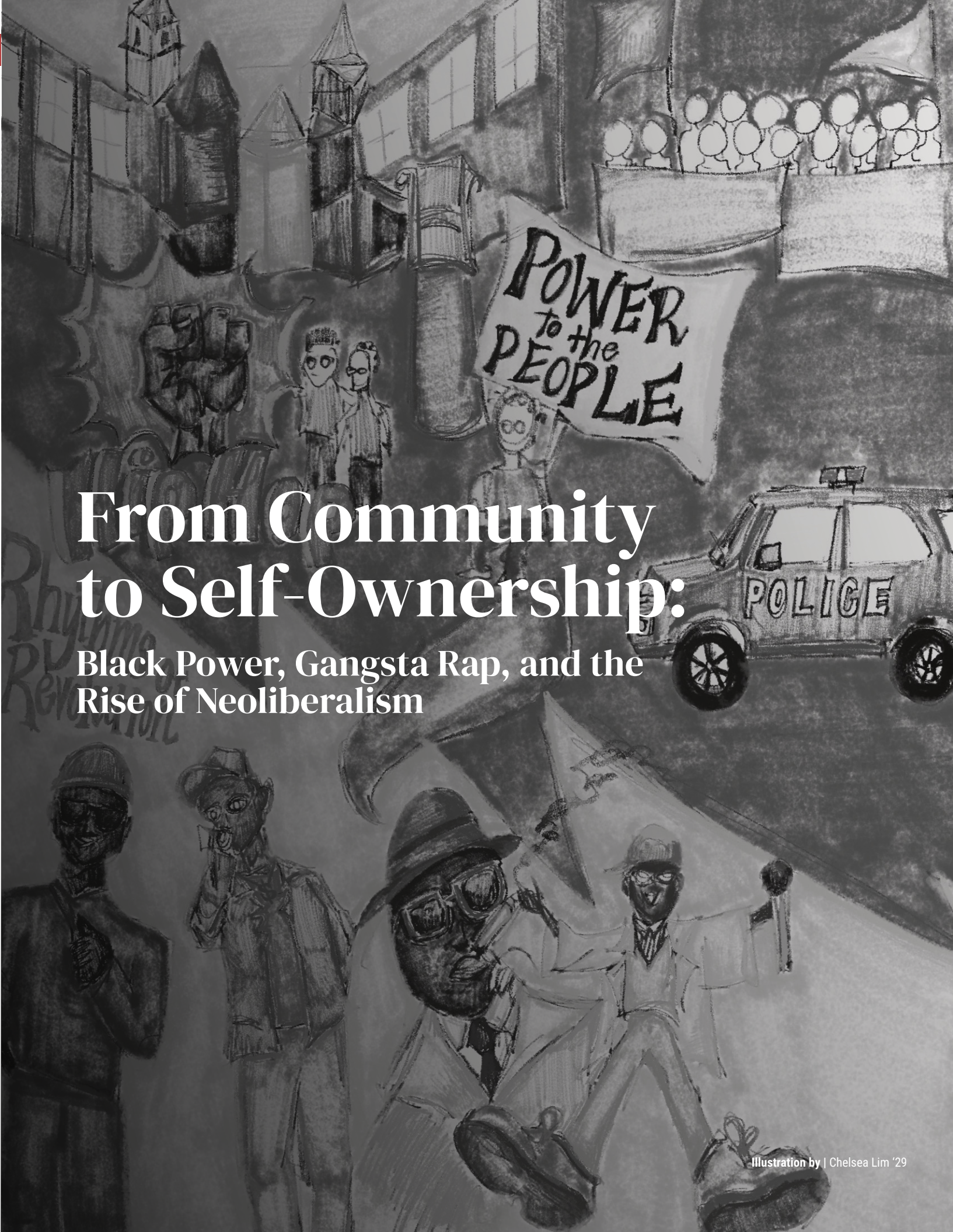


Illustration by | Chelsea Lim '29

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

From Community to Self-Ownership: Black Power, Gangsta Rap, and the Rise of Neoliberalism

Shawn Syed ‘28

Washington University in St. Louis

How should we think of the relationship between Black Power and Gangsta rap? Scholars have long debated the relations between the two, largely dividing into two extremes: one faction positions both as generally progressive experiments that sought to spatially reclaim their communities from neglect and over-policing, while the other presents Black Power as a collective progressive movement and Gangsta rap as one focused on neoliberal entrepreneurialism. This paper seeks to address the tension between these two schools and articulate a more nuanced viewpoint, focusing on the Black Panthers of Oakland, California (1966-1982) as a representative of Black Power, and the music group NWA of Compton, California (1988-1991) as a representative of Gangsta rap, deploying a narrative analysis within the same region. In comparing the two, a shift is observed from Black Power's vision of communal ownership to ownership of oneself in the streets in Gangsta rap. Ownership, in this paper, is articulated in spatial terms, referring to control of the boundaries of a thing as well as possession of the thing itself. The transition from visions of communal ownership to self-ownership occurred as deindustrialization eroded the economic infrastructure of the Black community and evolving policing practices undermined its spatial autonomy, rendering its physical borders porous. Both frameworks retained a militarized logic, focused on protecting territorial boundaries and waging continual battles with the police. Thus, the convergence of self-ownership with entrepreneurial values in Gangsta rap—as seen in both the conduct of its rap stars as well as the genre's more materialistic lyrics—allowed for a synthesis of Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future. Ultimately, this analysis positions Gangsta rap within the broader category of fusionism—a label applied by historians to describe movements that reconciled pre-neoliberal structures with free-market values and paved the way for a neoliberal age.

What is the relationship between Black Power and Gangsta rap? The Black Power movement flourished in the 1960s and 1970s amid ongoing issues in Black communities following the passage of civil rights legislation, including urban deprivation due to unequal housing policies and over-policing in response to poverty. Channeling a Black nationalist vision, it focused on building community-directed social programs and self-defense forces against the police within Black communities (Joseph). Gangsta rap emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, celebrating the “gangster” archetype that emerged in the context of rising crime due to deindustrialization and austerity (Quinn). Scholars have long debated the relations between the two and largely sorted themselves into two extremes: one camp positions both as generally progressive experiments that sought to spatially reclaim their communities in order to address neglect and over-policing, while the other presents Black Power as a more collective progressive movement in stark contrast to gangsta rap’s focus on individualistic entrepreneurialism.

Bryan J. McCann, author of *The Mark of Criminality: Rhetoric, Race, and Gangsta Rap in the War-on-Crime Era* (2017), is one such scholar who points out parallels between Black Power and Gangsta rap. In particular, McCann explores Gangsta rap through NWA, the group from Compton, Los Angeles that produced the first music of the genre in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while analyzing Black Power through the Black Panthers of Oakland, California. This local Black Power organization provided

community defense forces and self-directed community programs, including food aid and medical clinics, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. According to McCann, both employed the “mark of criminality” as a form of resistance.

The “mark of criminality” was a hegemonic discourse that broadly framed the Black body as inherently criminal using three central ideas: “(1) privileging masculinity as an essential characteristic of blackness, (2) portraying Black masculinity as inherently violent, and (3) portraying Black masculinity as hypersexual” (McCann). In particular, both movements reclaimed and played up “the mark of criminality” as a means of reclaiming space and ownership within their communities in response to economic deprivation and over-policing. McCann describes how the Black Panthers’ vision of communal development and community patrols that combated over-policing employed the “mark of criminality”: “highly circulated images of primarily Black masculine bodies taking up arms and confronting law enforcement constituted a distinctly activist version of the mark of criminality, for they deployed discourses of Black masculinity that remained deeply tethered to violence and, as evident in such organizations’ investment in normative gender roles, sexual virility” (24). Similarly, NWA, as a pioneer of Gangsta rap, embraced the mark of criminality by celebrating Compton’s criminal culture, which undermined the ideological legitimacy of police in the hood and reclaimed space from their influence. According to McCann, “To celebrate Compton because of its status as the single most feared

urban space in America was an unavoidably political provocation” (46), and doing so allowed NWA to engage in a “reconfiguration of the mark of criminality as a viable threat to [police] monopoly over space and violence in the inner city” (7). For McCann, Black Power and Gangsta rap like NWA are part of one tradition of embracing the “mark of criminality” to undermine the legitimacy of policing and reclaim one’s neighborhood in the process.

In *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang* (2005), cultural studies scholar Eithne Quinn advances a vision very different from McCann’s, arguing that Gangsta rap had an individualistic rather than communal orientation. Quinn situates Gangsta rap as a genre that embraced an entrepreneurial, individualistic framework in response to the collapse of publicly funded opportunity in the ghetto: “For young Black men and women, the meanings of creative industry cut very deep, addressing vital issues of self-determination, achievement, income, and respect in an era that all but excluded them from jobs and resources. In the mixed-up, no-guarantees world of neoliberal America, then, Gangsta rap was energized politically by the rejection of collective protest strategies and the embrace of a ruthless drive for profit” (12). Although she does not explicitly define neoliberalism, Quinn’s apparent agreement with David Harvey—who defines neoliberalism as a specific policy agenda that gained hegemony throughout the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s—helps clarify her viewpoint. According to Harvey, neoliberalism centers on the belief that individual wealth accumulation is a positive good, and thus advocates for the state to solely protect private property rights in lieu of investing in social programs available to the public at large (Harvey). Quinn discusses how this neoliberal ethos increasingly manifested, both in the behavior of Gangsta rap stars, who aligned themselves with advertisers and Republican candidates, as well as in later genres of Gangsta rap, such as g-funk, which dominated 1990s Los Angeles and explicitly celebrated bling and leisure (Quinn). Thus, for Quinn, neoliberalism is central to the story of Gangsta rap; Black communities experienced neoliberal policies and, in response, adopted the neoliberal ethos of individual advancement.

This paper seeks to resolve the tensions between scholars like McCann, who emphasize Gangsta rap’s continuities with Black Power, focusing on a communal vision of self-defense, and scholars like Quinn, who situate Gangsta rap as a genre that privileged neoliberal ambition and rejected the collective goals of the Black Power movement. Like McCann, I will focus on the NWA and the Black Panthers of Oakland as representatives of these two movements, utilizing a narrative framework within a specific region (the Black West Coast) and placing them within their historical context. McCann is correct that both the Black Power movement and Gangsta rap advanced a spatial politics of ownership, but his argument requires more nuance—what were the sizes of the spaces that these movements claimed ownership of? Comparing the two, one sees a transition from visions of ownership of one’s community in Black Power to ownership of oneself on the streets in Gangsta rap. Ownership, in this paper, is defined in spatial terms as the capacity to control the boundaries of a thing along with the thing itself. The shift towards self-ownership occurred as visions of communal ownership retreated as deindustrialization increasingly sapped the resources of the Black community, while more authoritarian forms of policing allowed authorities to embed themselves into the ghetto, rendering its previously solid boundaries more porous. However, there was continuity in terms of ownership being articulated through Black Power motifs, such as a military perimeter and self-defense against over-policing. Thus, as the self-ownership articulated by Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto entrepreneurial

values, as seen in both the behavior of Gangsta rap stars and more wealth-focused lyrics, it fostered a new synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future.

“

Thus, as the self-ownership articulated by Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto entrepreneurial values, it fostered a new synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future.

Black Power advanced a vision of ownership of one’s community, while Gangsta rap narrowed the focus to owning oneself on the streets. The postwar dynamic that catalyzed Black Power was especially prominent in Oakland, California, where the Black Panthers originated in the 60s and were most deeply rooted, despite having branches in other cities. The Black Power ethos of community ownership is immediately visible in the Oakland Black Panthers’ 10 Point Program (1966), which articulated various demands of the federal government on behalf of the organization. Although these demands were never met, they constantly guided its vision. The program includes demands for employment, housing, and education, but it also articulates a vision of ownership of one’s community by emphasizing that such resources should ideally be in the hands of and administered by historically deprived Black neighborhoods themselves. The risks of such resources remaining in the hands of wealthy white elites were that such power elites might have no economic interest in providing them to Black communities or might insidiously use them to pacify such communities and limit their aspirations. The first of these concerns is present in the demand for full employment among others where the program clarifies, “We believe that if the White American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living” (Newton). Exemplifying the second concern was the demand for a specific type of education, “We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else” (Newton). Education might be provided to the Black community, but if it did not provide them with knowledge of the structures causing their deprivation, it was a tool of pacification instead of empowerment. Concerns about the powerful, particularly white elites, not being willing to invest in or trying to dupe Black communities animated the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement’s focus on ownership of their own communities.

The Panthers’ broader embrace of military masculinity was part and parcel of this vision of ownership of one’s community in the Black Power movement. Their vision of community ownership appeared almost like a state within a state, and the community patrols organized by the Black Panthers to defend Black communities from over-policing were designed to parallel a state’s own mil-

itary. Historian Jessica C. Harris emphasizes that the Black Panthers viewed the police's relationship to the Black community as one similar to the educational establishment, which was present in the community but did not prioritize the interests of its inhabitants because it was not controlled by the community itself. She cites stories of the "failure of Southern policemen" to protect Civil Rights protestors seen on the news and "police brutalizing Oakland residents" as primary causes of the creation of the Black Panther Party (Harris). Embracing a vision of sovereignty, the Black Panther community patrols were organized similarly to a state's military, with a standardized uniform consisting of black leather and a black beret, weapons training, and an abstinence from narcotics, with orders to point only at the external enemy, the police (413). This insight will later prove important for understanding continuities between Black Power and Gangsta rap.

Although cast as a celebration of communal sovereignty by McCann, "Straight Outta Compton," the titular song of NWA's 1988 breakout album, showcases a decisive shift away from ownership of one's community and towards an individualistic concept of ownership over oneself. McCann makes his argument for the song being about reclaiming the community primarily by employing visual evidence. He focuses on how the music video is framed around a narrative of members of NWA strutting through the streets of Compton, being captured by the police, and eventually freeing themselves. At the end of the video, the police drive off, solidifying that they are not welcome in the community: "The episode comes to a close as the oblivious police drive their wagon out of the area and the posse proceeds to patrol their streets" (McCann). In focusing solely on the narrative, however, McCann overlooks the deeper structure of the song's music video. Conscious hip hop groups associated with Black Power, like Public Enemy, made videos with a lead rapper accompanied by crowds singing, chanting, and dancing, but "Straight Outta Compton" departs from that model; the track features solos by each of the group's three rappers, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy E. The majority of the video focuses on the camera panning to each rapper, with the shot centered on them, and the narrative is highlighted by McCann only occurring on the sidelines (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). In each section of the video that focuses on an individual member, they pose and strut confidently amidst a dangerous environment of decaying infrastructure and fires, showcasing their ability to hold their own in such conditions, as well as an individualistic sense of ownership over themselves (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). The underlying departures of the "Straight Outta Compton" music video and its structure showcase a shift toward a sense of individualistic self-ownership.

An idea of ownership over the self also emerges in the altercations that members of NWA describe engaging in. They highlight the idea of an individual holding their own against the masses, who are generally described in pejorative terms. Ice Cube, for example, relates how he routinely fights off masses of opponents who pettily resort to starting fights with him, "[They] start to mumble, they wanna rumble, Mix 'em and cook 'em in a pot like gumbo" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). The act of mixing one's opponents in a stew highlights the contrast between an individual with ownership of himself and a morally inferior mass of enemies. However, from Ice Cube's braggadocio, it remains unclear whether the masses are exclusively Black or include the police, a question especially pertinent given the way in which Black Power erected a clear perimeter between the two groups. Eazy-E provides an answer, making clear that the mass of enemies includes both fellow members of the hood ("punk[s]") as well as police officers ("cop[s]") (NWA, "Straight Outta..."). Then, as if to emphasize that these enemies

are part of the same group, he merely dives into the same formula as Ice Cube of individually confronting a morally inferior mass. He describes single-handedly evading and eliminating those who threaten him, but first he mocks their inability to locate him: "To me it's kinda funny, the attitude showing [him] driving / But don't know where the fuck he's going, just rolling" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). He contrasts their ineptitude with his stealth and skill, "Never seen like a shadow in the dark, Except when I unload" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). Departing from the barrier that the Black Panthers set around the Black community to defend the collective from over policing, NWA emphasizes a boundary around the individual, separating them from a morally inferior mass, including both police and members of the ghetto, part of a broader transition from visions of communal to individual ownership.

McCann is particularly keen to frame the lyrics of NWA through the prism of masculinity, but examining the misogyny in their lyrics also allows us to see how they use such rhetoric towards the end of articulating a concept of self-ownership instead of ownership of one's community. In particular, they do this by emphasizing how they can abuse and demean women with no consequences from the community. For example, MC Ren addresses a love interested at a show: "So if you're at a show in the front row I'ma call you a bitch or dirty-ass ho, You'll probably get mad like a bitch is supposed to, But that shows me, slut, you're composed to, A crazy motherfucker from the street" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). To be "a crazy motherfucker from the street" is to be irreproachable for misogynistic speech and MC Ren seeks a woman who will help him live out this ideal. Eazy-E also seeks a similar vision of irreproachability in abusing women, even those with families who might retaliate. He describes himself as "a brotha that'll smother yo' mother and make ya sister think I love her" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). By situating the women he is abusing in terms of family relations, Eazy-E jettisons an earlier conception of patriarchy which might have involved communal aspirations of caring for and protecting women. Instead, both he and Ren deploy the patriarchy to buttress a vision of self-ownership, using it as a tool to evade these communal relations and abuse women without consequences from the community.

What's fascinating about NWA's deployment of self-ownership in "Straight Outta Compton" is that it is articulated using language similar to that of the Black Power movement, with ownership represented by a notion of military masculinity and a military perimeter. The members of NWA fashion themselves as one-man armies by depicting themselves using weapons traditionally used in group battles to settle individual disputes and articulate a sense of self-ownership. For example, Ice Cube associates an AK, an automatic rifle traditionally used in group shoot-outs, with settling individual scores. He raps, "AK-47 is the tool" before describing how he is not to be messed with, cautioning others, "Don't make me act the motherfuckin' fool, Me you can go toe to toe, no maybe, I'm knockin' [them] out tha box daily" (NWA, "Straight Outta Compton"). MC Ren also frames his use of the AK as part of an individual sense of ownership, noting that he "controls the automatic [AK]" for "[f]or any dumb motherfucker that starts static [anyone who picks a fight with him]" (NWA, "Straight Outta Compton"). In particular, the repeated mentions of the AK-47 are interesting because of the weapon's ideological associations. The creators of the music video appear to have been unable to procure one, instead displaying a handgun, lending credence to the idea that the mention of the AK is indeed an ideological one, as one could easily find one in Compton (NWA, "Straight Outta. . .").

The AK-47, produced by the Soviet Union, was, of course, a weapon designed for battle and not individual shoot-outs, but it

also symbolized popular insurgencies in the Global South, a tradition that the Black Power movement aligned itself with. Military historian Victor Davis Hanson notes, "many of the terrorist movements and insurgencies in Asia, Latin America, and especially Africa would have been impossible without the widespread dispersion of the AK-47, the ideal weapon for impoverished, poorly trained mercenaries" (Hanson). Fashioning themselves as one-man armies using revolutionary weapons, the members of NWA appropriate a motif of military masculinity and perimeter associated with Black Power and signifying ownership, this time of oneself instead of one's community. This is more complex than McCann's idea of the "mark of criminality," always including a focus on masculinity. Instead, we see the creative re-fashioning of ideas from the Black Power movement on a more individualistic basis.

"Fuck Tha Police," another song on *Straight Outta Compton*, also re-fashions Black Power rhetoric to articulate a sense of ownership over the self. McCann positions it as a song centered on communal ownership and self-defense in which "deploys the mark of criminality in ways that resonate strongly with the currents of Black and pan-African nationalisms that circulated in many activist communities during the postwar era" (McCann). And indeed, NWA frames police as invaders in the community, with NWA members detailing how police persecute minorities and lyrically staging their own mock courtroom proceedings that undermine outside authority in the community (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). However, we must also pay attention to departures from Black Power's earlier ideals of confronting the police through solidarity. Instead, the members of NWA synthesize confronting the police with an ideal of individualistic ownership of the self by challenging the police to one-on-one fights. A great example of this is MC Ren's verse, where he challenges officers harassing him to individually confront him, rapping, "But take off the gun so you can see what's up, And we'll go at it, punk, I'ma fuck you up" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). For MC Ren, resistance to police comes in goading them to abandon their collective identity and privilege, shedding their guns and badges to engage in an individual contest.

McCann frames this breaking up of police into individuals as inspiring collective resistance, alluding to Ren's statement that "[Those] on the street are the majority" (McCann, NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). However, this remark is a one-off threat. MC Ren situates his battles with the police as being motivated by a sense of self-ownership, not wanting them to "step in [his] path" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). Then, immediately after the description of the imagined fight, Ren elucidates a general principle, of holding one's own on the streets that does not even specifically mention police: "Smoke any motherfucker that sweats me, or any asshole that threatens me, I'm a sniper with a hell of a scope" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). Similarly, Ice Cube connects his fights against the police to being on an individual "warpath" and single-handedly causing a "bloodbath" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). Overall, NWA once again borrows a discourse associated with ownership from the Black Power movement, namely resistance against the police, but fashions that motif into advocating ownership of oneself on the streets, rather than the community as a whole.

So, what sparked the shift from ownership of the community to self-ownership? The answer lies in the economic and institutional changes that occurred in Black communities between the 1970s and the 1990s. The Black Panthers formulated their vision during a period when the ideas of public and community ownership were very possible, with the legacies of postwar prosperity and President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty Programs still fresh in the minds of Americans from all walks of life. The War on Poverty was a slew of social programs championed by the then

president in the 60s to reduce the nation's poverty rate; a central component of the initiative was the creation of Community Action Agencies, organizations that administered services like educational support, job training, and food assistance and crucially were both partially run and staffed by members of the impoverished communities that they served (Torstensson). The Black Panthers and the broader Black Power movement adopted this emphasis on community direction and input; notably, the 10 Point Program advocates for government investment to establish community self-sufficiency (Newton).

However, the 1970s and 1980s brought deindustrialization, which dried up both jobs and the tax base in Black communities, thereby hampering funds for either self-directed or state-funded communal projects (Bound and Freedman; Bound and Holzer). In the same time period, the federal government pioneered increasingly punitive forms of policing as part of the closely related War on Drugs and War on Crime under various presidential administrations. These initiatives increased police budgets and powers, but they also fundamentally altered the spatiality of the ghetto, transforming it from a region with clear boundaries to a porous space that police power could constantly penetrate and appear within. Police embedded themselves deeper into communities and began subjecting residents to random searches, employing bias and disproportionately targeting minorities. In the 1980s, Los Angeles's first Black mayor, Tom Bradley, ordered the LAPD to use SWAT teams and anti-riot squads to round up thousands of Black and Latino males at the same time and search them. Even those without any substances were entered into a gang database for further surveillance (Balto and Felke-Kantor).

“

In an environment in which the boundaries of the community were made porous by more authoritarian policing, and deindustrialization exhausted community resources, it is no wonder that the concept of sovereignty and ownership was pushed back and remapped onto the self instead of the community.

The neoliberal shift identified by Quinn can be better understood by noting how Gangsta rap repurposed the aesthetics of Black Power. Quinn speaks of creative industry and Gangsta rap's entrepreneurial turn as "addressing vital issues of self-determination, achievement, income, and respect," but doesn't necessarily place its appeal in the context of past ideologies that captured the imagination of the Black community. Instead, she highlights a binary wherein "collective protest strategies" like Black Power were rejected in favor of "a ruthless drive for profit." However, the music of NWA shows a mutation of the Black Power ethos that could align with neoliberalism. Both NWA and Black Power articulated a sense of ownership based on a military perimeter and resistance to the police; however, Black Power grounded this concept of ownership in the community, whereas NWA grounded it in the self. NWA's concept of self-ownership, grounded in ideas shared with Black Power like resistance to the police and military mas-

culinity, could easily align with neoliberal individualism. In particular, it offered the promise of a fluid synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a free-market neoliberal future, which might help explain the entrepreneurial turn that Quinn identifies.

In fact, in the song "Alwayz Into Somethin'," released as a single in 1991 by NWA, as part of their last wave of releases, we see exactly that. There's a focus on self-ownership, which is articulated in the Black Power discourse of resistance to police brutality. Dre describes how the individual prowess of him and Ren allows him to evade the police: "And as we roll on, I seen the patrol on creep, so we got ghost before they peeped," and throughout the song, the featured DJ Admiral Bailey repeatedly rails against the police, highlighting the indignity of being mistreated by them and implicitly calling for resistance. He repeatedly chimes, "Fuck the mothafuckin' police 'cause they see a dreadlocks down, And they kick him in his mothafuckin' balls, Goddamn police, fuck them!" (NWA, "Alwayz. . ."). The concept of self-ownership, realized through resistance against the police, coexists with a more neoliberal emphasis on accumulating and displaying wealth. The song mentions that Ren is driving around in a Mercedes-Benz, and Dr. Dre emphasizes how the Gangsta lifestyle is about receiving a steady dream of cash, rapping, "I gotta get paid / Paid in a hurry, see" and noting that he will switch to another more lucrative criminal venture if he is not making enough (NWA, "Alwayz..."). In "Alwayz into Something," we see an idea of self-ownership grounded in resistance to the police align with a neoliberal idea of wealth accumulation; it is a clear illustration of how Gangsta rap's articulation of a concept of self-ownership grounded in themes from the Black Power movement allowed for the synthesis of Black Power aesthetics and neoliberal values.

Amidst deindustrialization and the War on Crime, the vision of community ownership offered by the Black Power movement spatially narrowed to become the vision of self-ownership on the streets advanced in Gangsta rap. However, ownership always remained articulated through the same Black Power themes of resistance against the police and military masculinity. Thus, as the self-ownership of Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto neoliberal possibilities, it offered the prospects of a synthesis between Black Power themes and free market values, easing the transition towards neoliberalism among the Black community. Historians baffled by the recent rightward shift in the United States have embraced a concept called "fusionism"—the syncretization of pre-neoliberal ideologies and systems of thought with the new free-market order (Rothfeld). Examples theorized have been the conflation of evangelical religious responsibility with economic responsibility, the natural workings of the family with the natural workings of the economy, and the neoliberal rhetoric of promoting the worthy with a new type of eugenics (Cooper; McGirr; Slobodian). By offering a sense of self-ownership infused with discourses from Black Power that can be synthesized with a free-market vision, Gangsta rap points us to a new type of fusionism that ultimately contributes to the story of how a neoliberal ethos has become hegemonic in our society.

References

- Balto, Simon, and Max Felker-Kantor. "Police and Crime in the American City, 1800–2020." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. May 18, 2022. Oxford University Press. Date of access 20 Apr. 2025, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-56>
- Bound, John, and Harry J. Holzer. "Industrial Shifts, Skills Levels, and the Labor Market for White and Black Males." *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1993, pp. 387–96. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2109452>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2025.
- Bound, John, and Richard B. Freeman. "What Went Wrong? The Erosion of Relative Earnings and Employment among Young Black Men in the United States." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 107, no. 1, 1992, pp. 201–32.
- Cooper, Melinda. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. Zone Books, 2017. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1qft0n6>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Hanson, Victor Davis. "The World's Most Popular Gun: The Long Road to the AK-47." *The New Atlantis*, no. 32, 2011, pp. 140–47. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43152665>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Harris, Jessica C. "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2001, pp. 409–21. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1562458>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Joseph, Peniel E. "Rethinking the Black Power Era." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2009, pp. 707–16. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27779034>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Levenstein, Lisa. "Revisiting the Roots of 1960s Civil Rights Activism: Class and Gender in 'Up South.'" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 130, no. 4, 2006, pp. 388–92. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20093893>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Lilley, Sasha; Harvey, David. "On Neoliberalism: An Interview with David Harvey." *MR Online*, 19 June 2006, <https://mronline.org/2006/06/19/on-neoliberalism-an-interview-with-david-harvey/>.
- McCann, Bryan J. *The Mark of Criminality: Rhetoric, Race, and Gangsta Rap in the War-on-Crime Era*. 1st ed., The University of Alabama Press, 2017.
- McGirr, Lisa. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right - Updated Edition*. Revised, Princeton University Press, 2001. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc7756q>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2025.
- Newton, Huey. "The Ten-Point Program," 15 October, 1966. *Marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>
- NWA. "Alwayz Into Something." Ruthless Records, 1991, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5n8Aro6j1bEGIy7Tpo7FV7>.
- NWA. "F*ck tha Police." *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 1988, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5n8Aro6j1bEGIy7Tpo7FV7>.
- NWA. "Straight Outta Compton (Official Music Video)." *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 1988, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMZ-i25Pq3T8>.
- Public Enemy. "Fight the Power (Official Music Video)." *Fear of a Black Planet*, Columbia Records, 1989. Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-mo3HFa2vjg>
- Quinn, Eithne. *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. Columbia University Press, 2005. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/quinn12408>.
- Rothfeld, Becca. "Rethinking the Roots and Contradictions of Trumpism." *The Washington Post*, 4 Apr. 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/books/2025/04/04/hayeks-bastards-quinn-slobodian-review/.
- Slobodian, Quinn. *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right*. Princeton University Press, 2025. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/135098>.
- Torstenonson, David. "America's Wars on Poverty and the Building of the Welfare State." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. March 03, 2016. Oxford University Press. Date of access 20 Apr. 2025, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-276>