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## Final Master's Portfolio

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Final Master's Portfolio

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English with a Specialization in Literary and Textual Studies

April 28th, 2023

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### Analytical Narrative

Whenever anyone questioned me about my area of interest or specialization in literature, I never had a concise answer. I was interested in a lot of things, but I could not simply point one out as my area of specialization. But as I reflected on my papers over the course of my Master's degree at BGSU, I found a common thread among them. I realized that the majority of my work deals with issues concerning marginalized communities in terms of race, gender, class, or religion. Even though all the projects in this portfolio are from diverse areas in literature—capitalism, women's studies, Indigenous studies, and medieval studies—they all address issues of the above-mentioned marginalized communities.

The first paper in my portfolio is "Looking at *The White Lotus* from the Vampire Castle." I wrote this paper for an English seminar, *ENG 6800: Eerie Capitalism*, with Dr. Phil Dickinson in Fall 2022. In this paper, I examine Mike White's TV series, *The White Lotus*, which brings to attention issues concerning class differences and white privilege. I use Mark Fisher's ideas of capitalist realism and the Vampire Castle to analyze this series which diagnoses the issue of reinforcement of capitalism through its disavowal by the elite. I do so by examining the show's characters, their ideologies, and their interaction with the hotel's employees. Through analyzing *The White Lotus* from these lenses, I arrive at the point that performative moralization, especially by the privileged class, promotes the perpetuation of capitalism by allowing them to consume without guilt. Simultaneously, it deflates class consciousness without dissolving class relations; that is, performative activism/moralization simply dissolves the idea that class difference exists without bringing about actual change in the class struggle, resulting in the continued exploitation of working-class people.

While revising this project, I realized it lacked a clear thesis and needed a lot of re-organization in general. For example, I have taken out the synopsis of the TV show from the second paragraph and have placed parts of it, whenever they were relevant, in distinct paragraphs. This made the paper flow better and brought my argument to the forefront. Secondly, I revisited some texts again, like Mark Fisher's "All of This is Temporary," to elaborate more on the topic of the deflating class consciousness and how it results in the perpetuation of class-based exploitation, which was missing earlier. In addition to this, Dr. Albertini's feedback on my paper further helped me in making my argument clearer. I gave more details on the terms and concepts that I had previously thought were easy to understand for a general audience. This made my paper stronger in terms of a clear argument that more effectively showcases my thesis.

The second paper in this portfolio is titled "David Lowery's *The Green Knight*: Decolonizing Medievalism." I wrote this in Fall 2022 for English Seminar, *ENG 6800: Getting Medieval: Medievalism, Politics, Aesthetics, and Visual Culture*, with Dr. Erin Labbie and Dr. Rachel Ann Walsh. This paper argues that David Lowery's 2021 adaptation of the medieval lay *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* can be seen as an attempt at decolonizing medievalism. Since many far-right groups have often appropriated medieval symbols and imagery (like the Knights Templar symbol) to propagate violence and hate against racialized others, it becomes critical to analyze why medievalism appeal to the far-right groups and how casting an actor of color in a canonical medieval text can challenge such appropriation. Many extremist groups invoke the medieval ideals of bravery, chivalry, and honor to legitimize their actions. However, the film undermines these fundamental ideals by giving Gawain a greater character arc by making him vulnerable and flawed.

The major revision Dr. Walsh asked me to do for this paper was to explain my thesis in more detail. She also advised me to situate my argument to the political context of the United Kingdom. Finally, there were minor suggestions concerning organization and syntax. During a peer review session, a classmate suggested that I offer details regarding the medieval symbols I mention in the introduction. She also advised me to situate the information about *Game of Thrones* in the beginning paragraphs rather than suddenly introducing a new text later in the paper without previously mentioning it.

During revision, I tried to accommodate all the feedback I received. First, I re-worded my thesis to make it clearer and more specific. Initially, my thesis was: “This paper draws upon the scholarly discourse that exists concerning the appearance of medieval imagery, symbols, and motifs in media and its socio-political implications. The use of this existing conversation helps in exploring how medieval symbolism can be decolonized. The present study also attempts to understand the rationale behind the use of such medieval symbols by racist right-wing groups to study how medievalism can be decolonized.” Now, I have changed it to: “The present study argues that David Lowery’s adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an attempt at decolonizing medievalism that has been appropriated by white supremacist far-right groups. By casting an actor of color in a canonical British text and subverting the traditional medieval notions of bravery, chivalry, and honor, Lowery’s *The Green Knight* challenges the fundamental beliefs about medievalism that far-right groups often draw upon to perpetuate hate and violence against racialized others.” Second, I have rearranged paragraphs so that the argument flows better. For example, I removed a section (“Film critic Alissa...whiteness in medievalism”) from page 5 and inserted it in page 4. Additionally, I have included new evidence that discusses the political discourse in the UK in relation to the use of medieval symbols by far-right movements

to justify their violence and policies against immigrants because they identify the middle ages with racial purity.

The third paper in this portfolio is titled “Visible Hijab, Invisible Voices: Exclusion of Muslim Women’s Experience, Voices, and Rights in the Socio-Political Sphere.” I wrote this paper for *ENG 6750: Raging Women* with Dr. Kim Coates in Spring 2022. This paper argues that, despite being a mere piece of cloth, hijab often becomes the focus of racism, hyper-nationalism, and sexism. It has become a signifier of the erasure of Muslim women’s identity. This erasure occurs due to the assumptions that Western society maps on hijab rather than what it actually stands for in Islam. Since hijab has become more than a mere piece of clothing and has spurred countless debates, this paper looks at various instances and reasons for hate-based violence and discrimination against hijabi Muslim and understand their anger. The paper also criticizes Western feminism and mainstream media that portray Muslim women as lacking autonomy and in need of White saviors.

The original draft of this paper received much criticism from Dr. Coates. She rightly pointed out that this paper was trying to cover a lot of ground in such a short space. As a result, the paper was all over the place. Considering her feedback, I have narrowed down the focus of this paper. Previously, I had also talked about how some countries were coming up with exclusionary policies against Muslim women. While it seemed necessary to talk about that originally, I realized while revising that it was actually taking me off-topic. Therefore, I have excluded that part from the revised version. Secondly, Dr. Coates advised me to fix my transitions. It was absolutely horrifying to realize how sudden and awkward my transitions were in the original draft. In the revised version, I have worked on correcting all the transitions and made sure the paper flows better. Working on transitions also helped me stay on topic. Finally,

besides a lot of sentence-level changes, I have majorly reorganized the paper. For example, in the original draft, it was toward the very end that I started talking about Muslim women's anger. In the revised version, I tried to introduce that part earlier in the paper. I have also reorganized paragraphs that were separate but seemed to go well together. Dr. Albertini's feedback further helped me to clarify my thesis and to execute it well throughout the paper. He raised thought-provoking questions about multiple claims in my paper that led me to rephrase my argument.

The final paper in this portfolio is titled "Intergenerational Trauma in Indigenous Films: Looking at Violence and Fractured Family Dynamics." I wrote this paper for *ENG 6800: Indigenous Films and Literature* with Dr. Khani Begum. This paper analyzes Indigenous films through the lens of intergenerational trauma. The paper argues that the violence and fractured family relations depicted in Indigenous films are a result of intergenerational trauma in the community, which in turn, is a result of the colonial settler practices. The paper acts as an intervention to prevent a misreading of those films and the Indigenous community by the audience.

The major change that I made in the paper is in the introduction. The revised version has a brief literature review. Initially, the paper did not attempt to place itself in the larger discourse on Indigenous films and studies. It was written solely for the class's professor. Now, the paper addresses the scholarly works that have been done in this field and can be read by a wider audience. The paper also has a revised thesis. Previously, the thesis was lost somewhere in the paper. Now, I have made the thesis more centrally located. Besides a lot of sentence-level changes, I have also tried to remove the repetitive ideas that were originally present in the paper. Dr. Albertini's feedback led me to do a close reading of films, and his comments also helped me to stay focused on my thesis.



Analyzing all these papers made me realize that I am drawn to the issues of minorities or the oppressed, and I try to address those issues through my research. As discussed above, my first paper dealt with the working-class people and capitalism; my second paper looked at a canonical British text from a postcolonial lens; my third paper was about the anger of Muslim women; and my final paper dealt with issues concerning the representation of the Indigenous Community. My time at BGSU helped me find my interest in marginalized communities, and I was able to explore this interest through a variety of areas like capitalism, Indigenous studies, feminist studies, and medievalism. If I return to academia for a Ph.D., I will continue to further explore other fields in Literature where I can apply my curiosity and parse issues of marginalized communities.

## Looking at *The White Lotus* from The Vampire Castle

In July 2021, HBO came out with an American mini-series named *The White Lotus*, written and directed by Mike White, consisting of 6 episodes. Even though the series falls under the category of comedy, it has a sobering commentary on various social issues like class, gender, race, and capitalism. This paper argues that season 1 of *The White Lotus* implies through its social commentary that the performed disavowal of capitalism and class issues does not result in their abolition. In fact, this disavowal only reinforces these systems. The elite continue to enjoy their privilege while pretending to be upholders of social justice, and the working class continues to suffer. To provide context to the above argument, the paper utilizes Mark Fisher's ideas of capitalist realism and the Vampires' Castle. In the book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, which came out in 2009, Mark Fisher argues that the gestural anti-capitalist sentiments, which can now be widely seen in young "wokesters," actually work toward reinforcing capitalism. "Wokester" refers to a person who holds a moral high ground regarding social justice and generally exhibits a left-wing attitude. The reason why Fisher's argument applies to these wokesters today is that they are often participants of the very thing they criticize, which in this case is capitalism. Along these lines, Mark Fisher wrote an article in 2013 named "Exiting the Vampire Castle," which advocates against the problematic moralizing and essentializing by leftists. Thus, these wokesters can often be said to be the denizens of the Vampires' Castle. These ideas developed by Fisher are highly relevant in today's late-capitalist era and are also reflected in Mike White's 2021 television series, *The White Lotus*. Thus, using Mark Fisher's theories on capitalism, the paper asserts that Mike White's series *The White Lotus* is a commentary on how performative activism by the elite works toward the reinforcement of

the very things they disavow. Through examining the show's characters, the present study also arrives at the point that performative moralization and essentialization, especially by the privileged class, promote the perpetuation of capitalism by allowing them to consume without guilt. Simultaneously, it deflates class consciousness without dissolving the class relations, which results in the continued exploitation of working-class people.

*The White Lotus* follows the story of eight hotel guests who arrive at the eponymous resort in Hawaii and their entanglement with the hotel staff and each other. Among these VIP guests are Shane and Rachel Patton, the Mossbacher family, Paula, and Tanya. In his article, Alex Hochuli writes that "What sets *The White Lotus* and its eponymous resort hotel apart is that it serves as a container for America's social antagonisms, its guests and staff playing out the drama of class society and its 21st-century delusions in a tropical idyll." As the series progresses, the drama intensifies through interactions and the collision between these VIP guests and the hotel employees. Eventually, the series reaches its climax with the murder of the hotel manager, Armond, at the hands of Shane. Armond was constantly struggling to handle all the little problems the guests had. He was especially hounded by Shane, who is an heir to a real estate business, and his wife, Rachel, who is a freelance journalist. As Shane slowly reveals his real side, that is, a spoilt man-child who constantly throws tantrums when he does not get what he wants, in this case, the prized Pineapple Suite, Rachel begins realizing that she has made a huge mistake in marrying him. Since Rachel is not from a rich family, she was initially charmed by Shane's wealth and looks. However, his wealth became the very thing that threatens her identity because Shane does not want her to continue her career as a journalist and only needs a beautiful trophy wife. Shane's obnoxious personality quickly shakes Rachel out of her honeymoon phase.

The series presents a compelling commentary on class difference and how capitalism undermines the identities of working-class people and how its disavowal works for its reinforcement. In the first episode, while preparing to welcome the above-mentioned VIP guests on the shore, the hotel manager, Armond, cautions a new employee, Lani, against too much self-disclosure. He says, “self-disclosure is discouraged. Especially with these VIPs who arrive on the boat. You know, you don’t wanna be too specific as a-as a presence, as an identity. You wanna be more generic” (“Arrivals” 6:18-6:39). This dehumanization of working-class people by stripping them of their identity while working them to the bone highlights the oppressive nature of deflating class consciousness in neoliberalism without the absence of class relations. This means that performative disavowal simply creates the idea in society that class issues are decreasing or that the class consciousness is deflating. When in reality, the pre-existing class relations and struggles continue to persist. When the elite engage in performative disavowal of these systems, they reinforce them by absolving themselves of guilt of being a participant. This allows them to continue doing so without feeling bad about themselves.

According to Fisher, the best way to think about capitalist realism is through what he called “consciousness deflation” (“All of This is Temporary”). Sarrita Hunn writes:

Through his reassessment of Western countercultures of the 1960s and 70s, Fisher identified three modes of consciousness that have been “deflated”: class, feminist, and psychedelic consciousnesses. In retrospect, he argues, we can see the social movements of that period as “consciousness-raising” efforts to develop expanded notions of the working class, pioneer new ways of living, bring awareness to the way structural problems are internalized as individual failings, and inspire collectivized action.

In “All of This is Temporary,” Fisher cites Wendy Brown’s phrase “class resentment without class consciousness” to explain consciousness deflation in neoliberalism. He further elucidates that we still have forms of class hierarchy, class humiliation, and class subordination, but without agencies (like trade unions) to combat them. Neoliberalism is deliberately structured around crushing class consciousness wherever it appears. Thus, the deflation of class consciousness in society makes it very difficult to expose those forms of class humiliation and subordination. However, the subtle social commentary in *The White Lotus* aims to expose those forms of class humiliation and subordination. In the show, Lani, the newly recruited hotel employee, goes into labor on her first day on the job. She had not informed anyone at the hotel of her pregnancy, mainly because she did not think she would have to give birth prematurely. When confronted by a distressed Armond about her lie, Lani apologizes between labor contractions that she kept her pregnancy a secret from the hotel because she desperately needed a job. Hochuli observes in his article that “Lani’s storyline reflects the reality of working women of color in the United States. Women of color are a large portion of the service industry, and thus are more likely to end up in precarious employment situations like Lani if they are pregnant.” Because of her financial situation, Lani is forced to work and carry heavy bags even during pregnancy. This scene highlights the issues of class difference by creating a contrast between the situations of hotel employees and the elite guests.

Belinda, the spa manager in the resort, also becomes a victim of the elite class. One of the guests, Tanya, is a rich and lonely woman who comes to Hawaii to grieve her mother’s death and spread her ashes in the ocean. After she arrives at the resort, Tanya latches on Belinda for emotional support and gets Belinda’s hopes high by dangling the possibility of a better financial opportunity in front of her. After Belinda helps Tanya process her grief for her dead mother,

Tanya becomes enamored with her skills. She claims that Belinda has a magical touch and should consider starting her own business. She invites Belinda to dine with her in the hotel and proposes that she will even be willing to invest in her business. When Belinda modestly dismisses the invitation citing hotel regulations for the employees against mixing with the guests, Tanya exclaims, “What do you mean? You can’t have dinner? Like some kind of *caste system*?” (“New Day” 20:03). This dialogue is again a subtle commentary on the class-based divisions. Nevertheless, ignoring the hotel regulations, Belinda decides to grow closer to a lonely Tanya, always helping and consoling her during nervous breakdowns, in the hopes that Tanya will finally decide to honor her promise to invest in her business. However, as soon as Tanya finds a partner in another hotel guest, Greg, she decides against the idea of funding Belinda’s business. She provides a sorry excuse to Belinda about not wanting to start another relationship where she could manipulate people with her money. Though, this does not stop Belinda from being heartbroken after her dreams were so casually crushed, especially when she had invested so much emotional energy in Tanya, helping her beyond her job description. But Tanya did not think twice about Belinda’s feelings, as though she was entitled to all the help she was given. Here too, a working-class person was dehumanized by an elitist who never even considered that these people have emotions too. Both Belinda’s and Lani’s storylines in the show display how working-class people are reduced to their services without any identity or human feelings.

By drawing attention to class-based exploitation, *The White Lotus* hints that the disavowal of capitalism works for its reinforcement. The show achieves this by creating a contrast in the living situations of the guests and the hotel employees. Before discussing how the portrayal of the guests showcases the reinforcement of capitalism through its disavowal, the paper will first focus on Mark Fisher’s ideas to establish a context to this argument. In his book,

*Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Fisher defines capitalist realism as the widespread belief that capitalism is the only conceivable option in economics and politics. Additionally, it is almost impossible to imagine an alternative system to capitalism (Fisher 2). Further, drawing inspiration from Zizek's works, Fisher proposes in the book that "capitalism in general relies on ... [the] structure of disavowal. We believe that money is only a meaningless token of no intrinsic worth, yet we *act* as if it has a holy value. Moreover, this behavior precisely depends upon prior disavowal – we are able to fetishize money in our actions only because we have already taken ironic distance towards money in our heads" (Fisher 13). This ironic repudiation of capitalism, which is only limited to an inner subjective attitude and not to externalized behavior, is keenly reflected in Olivia Mossbacher's character in the show.

The show utilizes Olivia's character as the primary example of how the elite's performed disavowal of capitalism works toward its reinforcement. The last of the eight VIP hotel guests is the ultra-rich and highly dysfunctional Mossbacher family. Nicole Mossbacher is the CFO of a famous search engine company and the matriarch of the family. Stressed and overworked, she has a weak relationship with her husband, Mark, and her teenage children, Olivia and Quinn. Worried about his masculinity and role in the family, Mark decides to strengthen his relationship with his son, Quinn, by revealing some scandalous family secrets. He rationalizes that he will be respected for his honesty, at least, if not for other things. Addicted to video games and porn and alienated by his sister, Quinn eventually finds solace in Hawaii's natural beauty and befriends some locals. Lastly, Olivia is a sophomore college student who brings her friend Paula, the only guest of color, along on vacation. Olivia and Paula are acrid "wokesters," and their usual target is the former's mother, Nicole. Olivia is a college sophomore who thinks she is better than everyone else because of her liberal views. She constantly puts her mother under attack because,

according to Olivia, "...her company is a part of the unraveling of the social fabric" and adds "should I be rooting for that just because it's run by a woman?" ("New Day" 39:56-40:02). She also labels her father as homophobic because he showed concern at finding out his late father was gay. However, according to her friend, Paula, Olivia is just like the rest of the privileged white people. While talking to her newfound love interest, Kai, who is a hotel employee, Paula admits that Olivia considers her a friend "as long as she has more of everything I do" ("Recentering" 4:54). She also reveals that Olivia had seduced Paula's boyfriend in the past and tried to steal him from her. That is why Paula keeps her relationship with Kai a secret from Olivia. This clearly shows Olivia's entitlement that comes because of white privilege. All of these scenes from the show reveal that Olivia's character is a perfect example of what Fisher was talking about, that is, the performative disavowal of capitalism. According to him, "Capitalist ideology in general...consists precisely in the overvaluing of belief – in the sense of inner subjective attitude – at the expense of beliefs we exhibit and externalize in our behavior. So as long we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange" (Fisher 13). Hence, Olivia's gestural anti-capitalist sentiment actually reinforces capitalism because her inner beliefs perform anti-capitalism for her, allowing her to consume without guilt. Even though she constantly berates people around her because of her liberal views, she still participates in the very systems (like capitalism) she condemns. Despite always criticizing her mother for her capitalist activities, Olivia still chooses to enjoy a luxury life that comes as a result of Nicole's work, which Nicole points out to her. The point of this paper is not to portray Olivia as a villain or an evil character. On the contrary, her character is very human, and one could easily find many people like her.



Another way in which Olivia's character as one performing gestural anti-capitalism can be understood is through Fisher's article, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," which came out in 2013. In this article, Fisher advocates for the need for class solidarity in order to resist capitalism. In his view, instead of moralizing and criticizing one another relentlessly, we should strive to create an environment where disagreement is allowed without the fear of being canceled. Fisher defines the concept of the Vampires' Castle as follows:

The Vampires' Castle specialises in propagating guilt. It is driven by a *priest's desire* to excommunicate and condemn, an *academic-pedant's desire* to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a *hipster's desire* to be one of the in-crowd. The danger in attacking the Vampires' Castle is that it can look as if – and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought – that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism. But, far from being the only legitimate expression of such struggles, the Vampires' Castle is best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements. ("Exiting the Vampire Castle")

This pervasiveness of moralism without class consciousness has only instigated fear and guilt and made class unity impossible. Olivia constantly berates her mother's actions and beliefs throughout the show. But, in the fourth episode, Nicole throws back, "My feeling is most of these activists, they don't really wanna dismantle the systems of economic exploitation, not the ones that benefit them, which are all global, by the way. They just want a better seat at the table of tyranny," to which Olivia replies, "No, that's just you mom." For once, Nicole had a fitting retort, "And what's your system of belief, Olivia? Not capitalism. Not socialism. So just cynicism?" ("Recentering" 47:07-47:33). Nicole's reply shuts Olivia up because it reveals her sanctimonious morality. What unites the members of the Vampires' Castle is not genuine

solidarity. Rather it is the dread that soon they, too, will be exposed and condemned. Thus, through their finger-wagging moralizing, the members of the Vampires' Castle ensure their safety.

An important feature of the Vampire Castle is the propagation of as much guilt as possible ("Exiting the Vampire Castle"). During one of their dinners, Olivia criticizes her family for enjoying the traditional Hulu dance performance put up by the native Hawai'ians and schools them on the topic of imperialism. While she was not wrong in pointing that out, it is her performative activism that is highlighted in the show. In the article, Fisher writes that the Vampires' Castle sustains itself by converting the misery of marginalized groups into academic capital. This is what Olivia seemed to be doing here. Fisher elaborates that "The most lauded figures in the Vampire's Castle are those who have spotted a new market in suffering – those who can find a group more oppressed and subjugated than any previously exploited will find themselves promoted through the ranks very quickly" ("Exiting the Vampire Castle"). This is what Olivia exhibits in the show and Paula, too, calls her out on that. After their fallout in the last episode, Paula finally gives Olivia a reality check. She says, "you think you're like this rebel, but in the end...this is your tribe. Your family, the people here" ("Departures" 32:40-32:50). Despite Olivia's acting as a moralizer and self-professed believer of social justice, she is just like the people she criticizes. Paula further berates her, saying, "Just stop pretending to be my friend. I'm just some prop you use for some weird cred" ("Departures" 33:14-33:19). Therefore, Olivia's gestural anti-capitalism and her performative activism makes her a denizen of the Vampire's Castle.

What is genius about this show is how White has not only addressed various social issues like class, race, and gender, but he has also highlighted the hypocrisies of the elite class like

Olivia, who often take shelter in the Vampires' Castle to absolve themselves of any guilt. As long as they are doing the job of moralizing to people on the gravity of these issues, it is okay for them to enjoy their privilege without impunity. One of the strongest remarks against Olivia's relentless moral criticism of people comes from her father, Mark. Unlike Olivia, he does not pretend to deny the privilege that his wealth allows. He says,

What are we gonna do, huh? Really. Nobody cedes their privilege. That's absurd. And it goes against human nature. We're all just trying to win the game of life. How are we gonna make it right? Hmm? Should we give away all our money? Would you like that, Liv? Hmm? Yeah that's what I thought. Maybe we should just feel shitty about ourselves all the time for the crimes of the past? Wear a hair shirt and not go on a vacation? ("The Lotus Eaters" 18:58-19:29).

This quote from Mark is critical to understanding the show's critique of Olivia and what she represents. He points out that even though Olivia claims to be against these systems, she will never cede her privilege. According to Mark, life is a capitalist competition, and he accepts his position in the system. He is not engaging in any performative activism that will appease his conscience. The series agrees with Mark's critique of Olivia but does not condone his views on privilege, which is proved by the various instances of direct critique of privilege that the show offers. What this series highlights is how the performative disavowal of capitalism by the elite strengthens the system. Thus, the show draws attention to the performative woke culture or the notion of the Vampire Castle, as Fisher puts it. *The White Lotus* achieves this through a comedic tone instead of a moralizing one.

As discussed earlier, the only people who suffer at the show's end were the hotel employees – the working-class people. Despite accidentally killing Armond, Shane leaves without

any consequences. Moreover, ignoring Shane's obnoxious behavior, Rachel decides against leaving him, and promises that she will always try to be happy with him. Tanya, too, happily leaves the resort with his new partner, Greg, after crushing Belinda's hopes so casually. Lastly, the dysfunctional Mossbacher family reconciles: Nicole and Mark become closer than before, Quinn decides to stay in Hawaii with the locals he has befriended, and Olivia and Paula become friends again. The only victim of the Mossbacher family was Paula's lover, Kai, who worked at the resort. Paula had convinced him to steal from the Mossbacher family to get back at Olivia. However, their plan failed, and he ends up in jail. While talking about the show's ending, author Michael J. Vowles writes:

In the end, the dark reveal isn't a singular horrifying act or twist. It's institutional in nature—a cold portrait of the bourgeois treatment of customer service in capitalist societies, as symbolized by Armond's death at the hands of a guest. This is the crux of the show that ties everything together. The hotel does indeed hide a secret. There *is* something sinister lurking beneath the humor. But it's subtle. Systemic. It's a self-perpetuating cycle of neoliberal and neocolonial exploitation. *The White Lotus* isn't about white supremacy—it's about white privilege, which is very different.

What *The White Lotus* hints at through its social commentary is that the disavowal of capitalism and class issues does not result in their abolition. In fact, this disavowal only reinforces these systems. The elite continues to enjoy their privilege while pretending to be upholders of social justice, and the working-class continues to suffer. What we need, according to Fisher, is to reclaim a real political agency, which means “first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital” (Fisher 15). This acceptance is usually lacking in the members of Vampire's Castle, like Olivia. Further, Fisher elaborates that in the

repudiation of capitalism, “What is being disavowed in the abjection of evil and ignorance onto fantasmatic Others is our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression. What needs to be kept in mind is *both* that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our cooperation” (Fisher 15). This is true in Olivia’s case as she fails to acknowledge her complicity in the system. Thus, performative moralization and essentializing, especially by privileged groups, ensure the perpetuation of capitalism. It absolves them of any guilt and allows them to participate in contributing to the system. At the same time, it deflates class consciousness in society without dissolving the class issues, which results in the never-ending exploitation of working-class people.

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David Lowery's *The Green Knight*: Decolonizing Medievalism

Over the years, much medieval imagery, and many medieval motifs like the Knights Templar symbol, Joan of Arc imagery, etc. have appeared in politics, mass media, and print. Many movies and TV shows have often found their inspiration in medieval poems, myths, legends, and art. One such legend is that of King Arthur, and his knights of Camelot, often referred to as Arthuriana. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the tales associated with Arthuriana and revolving around King Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain, has inspired multiple movie adaptations over the years. David Lowery's adaptation of this legend, titled *The Green Knight*, that came out in 2021, stands out because of its casting of Dev Patel, an actor of color, in the leading role of Gawain. In addition to the fact that in most contemporary representations of medieval works, such as HBO's *Game of Thrones*, mainly white actors continue to be cast in the lead roles, the primary reason why David Lowery's *The Green Knight* stands out is because it challenges the common imagery of medievalism that has been appropriated by far-right groups throughout the time. Considering all this, it is essential to talk about Lowery's adaptation and explore how this movie is an intervention in whiteness in medieval studies. This paper draws upon the works of Katherine M. Millar and Julia Costa Lopez, Andrew B. R. Elliot, Richard Utz, and others who discuss the representation of medieval imagery, symbols, and motifs in media and their socio-political implications. Thus, with the help of this existing discourse, the present study argues that David Lowery's adaptation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an attempt at decolonizing medievalism that has been appropriated by white supremacist far-right groups. Through casting an actor of color in a canonical British text and subverting the traditional medieval notions of bravery, chivalry, and honor, Lowery's *The Green Knight* challenges the fundamental beliefs of medievalism that far-right groups often draw upon to perpetuate hate and



violence against racialized others. Before diving into the central argument of this research, that is, the decolonization of medievalism through Lowery's adaptation, the paper will first analyze the differences between the medieval lay of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Lowery's *The Green Knight*. The paper will then move on to discuss the reception of the film to see whether the film was successful in narrating the Arthurian legend despite the differences.

The lay of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written in the 14th century by an anonymous writer. "Lay," also spelled as "lai" refers to a medieval lyric poem that is usually written in octosyllabic verse (Britannica). This epic poem begins with a Christmas celebration in King Arthur's court in Camelot. It is joyous occasion, "with all the feasting and merry-making that could be devised: Such sounds of revelry splendid to hear, Days full of uproar, dancing at night. Everywhere joy resounded in chambers and halls among lords and ladies, whatever pleased them the most" (Winny, lines 45-49). Unfortunately, this merry-making is stopped short when the eponymous Green Knight comes charging into the dining hall on a fearsome green horse. This inhuman green giant challenges the people gathered there to deal him a blow with any weapon of their choice. The Knight did so because he had heard a lot about the bravery of King Arthur's knights of Camelot. He also promises not to raise a hand against them in retaliation. However, there is a catch: anyone who accepts this challenge will have to seek the Green Knight out after a year, and he will deliver the same blow to them, no more and no less. After much hesitation, Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew, stands up to the challenge and slices the Green Knight's head off. Surprisingly, the Green Knight simply gathers his head and rides away laughing. When the following year's Christmas draws close, Gawain leaves Camelot to find the Green Knight to fulfill his promise. He experiences many adventures and challenges on his journey, the biggest one being tested by Lord Bertilak and his wife. Lord Bertilak had asked his

wife to seduce Gawain to test his honesty. He also demanded that Gawain return anything he receives in the household throughout the day to Bertilak in exchange for his stay there. Gawain succeeds in warding off Lady Bertilak's advances; however, he decides to keep the magical belt she had gifted him which would protect him from any danger. Eventually, Gawain finds the Green Knight, who turns out to be Lord Bertilak himself. The Green Knight lets Gawain go because of his honor and honesty, despite knowing that he kept the magical belt a secret. Gawain returns to Camelot alive; ashamed of his cowardice in keeping the belt a secret and not meeting his fate with the honor and bravery characteristic of a knight. In penance, he decides to keep wearing the green belt for the rest of his life as a reminder of his failure as a true knight.

While Lowery's adaptation closely adheres to the plot of the medieval lay, it deviates from the text in some key aspects. The first deviation is that the movie's overall tone is dark and grim, contrasting with the playful and joyous one in the text. Another aspect of the film that stands in stark contrast to the text is the characters' clothing. Unlike the elaborate and fancy attire described in the lay, the clothes in the movie are simple, dim, and drab. In the poem, the narrator spends excessive time delineating every aspect of the characters' clothing and appearance. Take, for instance, the elaborate top-to-toe description of the Green Knight when he first appears in Camelot. The narrator uses almost eighty-five lines to talk about the Green Knight's appearance, clothing, and even the adornments on his horse. Despite being a green and fearsome giant, it is clear from the description in the poem that the Green Knight is royalty and has abundant wealth. In contrast, the Green Knight in the movie is not actually green and resembles tree bark. There are other differences in the movie in terms of the narration of the plot. For instance, Gawain's mother, Morgan Le Fay, gives him the enchanted green belt first, but a group of thieves steal it from him during his journey to the green chapel. Later, Bertilak's wife

offers him the green belt again while seducing him, claiming she has made it herself using witchcraft. Magic and witchcraft loom heavily in the movie and are present from the very first scenes. In fact, it appears that Gawain's mother had summoned the Green Knight using magic at the beginning of the film. While the poem mostly skims over Gawain's many adventures on his journey to the green chapel, the film chooses to explore those adventures in detail. Despite the differences between the text and its adaptation, the movie succeeds in staying true to the Arthurian legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. There is a scene toward the movie's end where Gawain considers escaping the Green Knight for a moment. However, in that brief period, he visualizes what his life will look like if he dishonors his promise to the Green Knight. The life he imagines appears to be a desolate one, where he ends up disappointing everyone around him and eventually dies dishonorably. This is why he reveals the existence of the enchanted belt to the Green Knight, who then forgives him and spares his life. In this sense, Gawain has a more significant character arc in the movie than in the poem, where he fails to reveal the belt to the Green Knight and regrets not doing so for the rest of his life. One thing that places the movie Gawain at fault is that he ends up being seduced by Bertilak's wife. Overall, the movie has a darker and more solemn atmosphere than the playful tone of the poem. All these differences might appear insignificant, but they are critical in decolonizing medievalism because they make the character of Gawain more serious, yet vulnerable. Not only he is more humanized, but his vulnerability also challenges the medieval ideals of chivalry and bravery. Film critic Alissa Wilkinson writes, "while you couldn't call *The Green Knight* a 'faithful' adaptation of the poem, it might be a more faithful adaptation of the bigger legend around Gawain's adventure than a line-by-line recreation ever could have been." David Lowery's *The Green Knight* was successful

in portraying the legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* more poetically than other adaptations of the text.

Despite these differences, the film received much critical acclaim. According to the critic Brian Tallerico, President of the Chicago Film Critics Association, the movie undermines the traditional expectations of a brave knight. He says the movie “asks a lot of its viewers—to stay engaged with what could be called its slow pace, to consider its themes without them being underlined for easy consumption, to be willing to see a film about famous knight that contains very little in the way of traditional heroism” (Tallerico). He also praises the film’s cinematography and claims that it did justice to the poetic structure of the text. Similarly, Richard Fahey, in his article published in the *Medieval Studies Blog* by the University of Notre Dame, expresses that Lowery’s adaptation was unlike other modern adaptations because it represented the core aspect of the medieval poem. He adds:

The story is presented not as an action movie but as a psychological thriller. Emphasis on games, exchanges and hunts is embedded throughout the movie. The visual components from cinematography to mise-en-scène are eye-popping as the film frequently displays surreal imagery to create a psychedelic mysticism associated with the Green Knight as well as Morgan Le Fay and Gawain’s quest as a whole. Additionally King Arthur and Queen Guinevere are shown as diminished in their old age, and this generates a sort of magical realism within the film. (Fahey)

He further observes that the character of Gawain is more humanized in the film than in the original text. Gawain appeared vulnerable, uncertain, and not as brave or chivalrous as the poem’s Gawain. Since he was seduced by Lady Bertilak and almost considered dishonoring his promise to the Green Knight, his character depicts vulnerability and emotional intelligence.

Hence, in light of this observation, this paper addresses how David Lowery's adaptation acts as an intervention of whiteness in medievalism through the subversion of medieval motifs and ideals that have been appropriated by racist groups.

As mentioned in preceding paragraphs, modern media and far-right movements worldwide have often appropriated medieval imagery and symbols throughout the years. Andrew B.R. Elliot's book that came out in 2017, *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century*, talks about medieval symbols and concepts as a site of identification for the far right that are used as an ideological weapon to invoke the idea of a return to a time of greatness associated with whiteness and Christianity. Discussing Jean-Marie Le Pen's use of the image of Joan of Arc before the 2012 presidential elections in France, Elliot comments that there is nothing unusual in such political uses of medieval symbols because Joan of Arc has often been used to represent French national identity and unity. However, the truth behind this harmless invocation is that

The Front National regularly play on the historical significance of the Middle Ages to underpin their message that genuine 'Frenchness' has something to do with medieval origins. Like Jean-Marie Le Pen's 1995 use of Clovis as a marker of National identity, under Marine Le Pen's attempts to extend the party's appeal to mainstream voters the Front National habitually uses a mythical medieval past to disguise their overtly racist and exclusionary sentiments under the respectable cloak of an ostensibly inclusive sense of historical belonging. (Elliot 2)

Le Pen's use of medieval history to underscore her racist ideologies regarding national identity and immigration highlights how medieval imagery has become a synonym for whiteness for right-wing groups.

Along similar lines, Katharine M. Millar and Julia Costa Lopez's article "Conspiratorial Medievalism: History and Hyperagency in the Far-right's Knights of Templar Security Imaginary," published in 2021, also discusses the medieval symbolism existing in white supremacist discourse to understand racialized medievalism. The article deals with the imagery of the Knights Templar that had been cited by white supremacists, like the Norwegian mass murderer in 2011, the New Zealand shooter in 2019, and the 2017 Charlottesville rally in Virginia (Millar and Lopez 1): "The Templars were a medieval Christian monastic order founded in approximately 1119. Originally created to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land, the order represented a particular combination of piety and military knighthood ideals in the aftermath of the First Crusade" (Millar and Lopez 4). This notion of the Knights Templar creates a "security imaginary" in the white supremacists which leads them to think that they need to take the role of knighthood in this era. To further explain this "security imaginary" and how it instills the fantasy of protecting a racist idea of the nation today in far-right groups, Millar and Lopez state, "The Knights Templar imaginary blends a specific, racialised, and romanticised vision of history with the grammar of conspiracy theory. This is characterised by (a) a belief in the racialised decline and victimisation of a 'righteous' White Christendom; (b) a sense of threat posed by racialised Others and betrayal by insiders; and (c) an anachronistic view of near-omnipotent individual agency" (Millar and Lopez 1). Therefore, the article unpacks how the Knights Templar imagery, that is, the red cross on a white background, portrays White Christianity as constantly under threat from racialized Others and needing protection which only the White Knights can provide. Millar and Lopez discard the notion of the Knights Templar references as merely banal or playful practices. According to them, this reference has a long history of being used by racist right-wing groups. This includes Nazis, who employed various medieval symbols in their

ideologies, and the Ku Klux Klan, who always insisted upon the notion of medieval chivalry. Thus, this idea that right-wing groups all over the world have been using medievalism to propagate their racist ideologies leads to the question – why do medieval symbols and imagery appeal to such right-wing movements? Millar and Lopez have aptly given a reason behind the right wing’s fascination with medievalism. They write:

This continuity between right-wing and broader societal medievalisms is not happenstance. On the one hand, however obvious, supremacist groups are part of society and thus draw from and reproduce broader social imaginaries. On the other, the way in which right-wing medievalisms are embedded into these broader social discourses is crucial for their promotion and dissemination, in some cases as a deliberate strategy. The concept of *Selbstverharmlosung* – ‘making oneself appear harmless’ – for instance, has gained increasing purchase among German-speaking right-wing milieus [...] The idea is simple: by drawing on everyday, apparently harmless tropes, right-wing groups can present themselves as socially acceptable and mainstream, thus broadening their base. KT [Knights Templar] imagery conforms to this dynamic while at the same time putting forward a distinct, racialised security imaginary. (Millar and Lopez 4-5)

Thus, such white supremacist right-wing groups not only portray themselves as harmless and normal through the invocation of medievalism but also present themselves as victims of the racialized Others. This victimization not only draws them more supporters through the generation of anxiety in people who fear the decline of their belief system, but it also helps legitimize their violent actions against the racialized Others through the hyperagency of the “righteous” white saviors. In linking themselves to the traditional ideals of medievalism, that is,

bravery, chivalry, and honor, they display their violence as necessary and honorable tasks undertaken to preserve their threatened belief system.

Continuing a similar discourse, German medievalist Richard Utz's book *Medievalism: A Manifesto*, published in 2017, talks about how as an eighteen-year-old serving in the German army stationed in a garrison that protected German borders from Communist Czechoslovakia, Utz had participated in a play where they dressed up as medieval soldiers. He says, "The play itself features a romantic story of a brave knight who saves a damsel in distress by killing a dragon. This dragon, representing the incarnation of evil, is symbolic of a never-fully explained threat of ravaging war from the dark border forests of the east..." (Utz 44). Here, too, one can discern the alienation of the racialized others, but this Othering is presented through the invocation of harmless medieval themes of love and brave knights. Utz further talks about Eugen Hubrich, who was invited to write a play by the Nazi mayor of Amberg, Josef Filbig, in 1934. The play was titled *Amberger Blut* and revolved around the luxurious festivities of the daughter of Duke Ludwig IX of Bavaria, Margaret, with Philip Upright, the elector Palatine of the Rhine, in 1474. What is important to note about the play is that in the foreword, Hubrich presented Philip's adoptive father as "an indisputable allegorical predecessor of Adolf Hitler [...] so that everyone can see in these medieval historical events the prefiguration (in his own words, 'dawning') of Hitler's Germany" (Utz 46). Thus, here too, medievalism was used to evoke a sense of national identity and to justify violence against racialized Others. Additionally, referencing the violence against black Americans in the Southern United States in the 1900s, Utz talks about the strong medievalism present in the elite culture of southern parts of the United States. Utz suggests that the people there considered themselves more British than American and stated that:



Linking themselves to the closest contemporary archetype of the medieval knight, the British nobleman, the Southern aristocracy rebuked newer (and Northern) foreign ideologies of materialism, feminism, and pacifism because they seemed to be the antithesis of honour, valour, gentility, hospitality, and chivalry, and they celebrated their own scaled-down version of the medieval court, the Southern gentleman land and slave owner and his belle. (Utz 55)

Consequently, one can observe white supremacists' use of medieval aesthetics to propagate violence against racialized Others. Furthermore, Utz gave the example of Rhodes' Castle in Atlanta, which was built to resemble a medieval castle. In Utz's words, Rhodes "felt a deep yearning for a time when medieval knights and ladies, that is Southern gentlemen and their belles, when medieval peasants and slaves, that is African American Slaves, all knew their rightful place" (62). This shows that this was a common sentiment among white supremacists, which is another reason why medieval aesthetics appealed to them.

Considering how medieval symbols and imagery have been appropriated by far-right movements to propagate their racist ideologies, it is critical to talk about how David Lowery's adaptation, *The Green Knight*, functions as a way to decolonize medievalism, especially since other contemporary works depicting medieval times failed to do so. *Game of Thrones* is one of the most famous contemporary works that depicts medieval ideas and imagery, even though it is set in a fantasy world. Although there are actors of color in the TV series, their roles and storylines are far from ideal, like the Dothraki people in the show. In his article, Tyler Dean asserts that Dothraki are presented to the audience as violent savages who want to rape white women and steal from white people. This depiction implies that people of color are generally crude and uncivilized. Citing additional examples of racism in the show, Dean writes:

On a more subtle level, it's been dismaying to see the only two main-cast characters of color portrayed as incredibly subservient zealots who fall in love with one another, and that those few white characters from the novels who were portrayed by actors of color in the show included a shifty pirate (Lucian Msamati's Salladhor Saan), a largely silent and subservient retainer (DeObia Oparei's Areo Hotah), and a treacherous merchant prince who, contrary to both Martin's lore and the show's own understanding of cultures, self-describes as 'a savage from the Summer Isles' (Nonso Anozie's Xaro Xhoan Daxos). Then pair this with the cringe-worthy ending of season three where Daenerys is framed as an uncomplicated white-savior figure, hoisted aloft by adoring brown people literally calling her "mother"—well, "Mhysa." So yes: *Game of Thrones* has been pretty racist both in its scripting and in its casting. There is not a lot to argue with there.

This problematic representation of people of color and their cultures further instills the security imaginary narrative that Millar and Lopez mentioned in their article. This security imaginary narrative validates the fear of white victimization and leads to the justification for white violence. In addition to the problematic depiction of non-white races, the show also promotes a colonial mindset by depicting Daenerys as the civilized, white savior called the "breaker of chains." In order to deny such criticism about the lack of racial diversity, the show claims to depict the "real Middle Ages" (Young). However, Helen Young, an American medievalist, argues, "the idea that the 'real Middle Ages' was an all-white affair has more to do with modern fantasies about racial purity than it does with historical reality. If we're going to look to the Middle Ages to explain race relations in *Game of Thrones*, it's medieval literature not medieval history that we should read" (Young). She adds that such a mindset regarding the actual medieval age is not uncommon and is, in fact, reflective of society. She further states, "*Game of*

*Thrones* and Martin's novels aren't aberrations, they reflect a way of thinking about the world that centres on Europe and Europeans and sees Others as either tools to serve the needs of a white person and their power, or irrelevant. It's a way of thinking that is at least as old as the Middle Ages" (Young). Likewise, while analyzing the increase in far-right violence in the UK, Godwin and Trischler comment upon this mindset about the whiteness and purity of the Middle Ages. They state that "far right extremists are framing their extremist ideologies by appropriating medieval ethnonational symbolism to romanticise a time of perceived ethnonational purity, create a polarising, 'us-vs.-them' civilizational battle with roots in the Crusader period and to legitimise violence in a war of 'defence'" (Godwin and Trischler). Therefore, it is not surprising to see why many right-wing groups like English Defense League (EDL) turn to medievalism to justify their racist ideologies (Godwin and Trischler). It is important to point out that *Game of Thrones* is not the only contemporary work depicting a racist version of medieval history but merely one of the most famous ones. That is why, given the present context, David Lowery's adaptation of a canonical medieval text is crucial to discuss as a way to decolonize medievalism.

One of the ways in which Lowery's adaptation decolonizes medievalism is by undermining traditional notions of bravery, chivalry, and honor. Lowery's adaptation not only presents Gawain as more serious, but it also makes Gawain appear more human by portraying him as vulnerable. He is not the famous brave knight depicted in the original text. For example, in the movie, Gawain has an affair with a commoner and has no intention of marrying her. At the movie's beginning, Gawain is seen waking up next to his lover in a brothel. Moreover, Gawain is easily seduced by Lady Bertilak, thereby failing the test of honor and chivalry that are characteristic of a medieval knight. Additionally, Gawain, in David Lowery's adaptation, is not brave in the sense that a knight is supposed to be. He considers breaking his promise with the

Green Knight to bravely accept his fate. It was simply the fear of living with guilt and shame that would undoubtedly accompany his cowardly escape that stops him from running away. This challenge to the medieval ideals of bravery, honor, and chivalry in the movie humanized the character of Gawain, making him more realistic and relatable. The subversion of the traditional notions of medievalism is crucial because these are the ideals upon which the racist right-wing groups base their ideologies to further exclude and undermine people of color.

Even though Lowery's Gawain is not brave or chivalrous in the traditional sense, his bravery is more natural and real. It lacks the toxicity that often accompanies the constraining traditional medieval ideals that can be seen in Millar and Lopez's article. Throughout his journey to the Green Chapel, he is careful of his actions and does not feel the need to be recklessly courageous. He also helps the ghost of Winifred find peace. Thus, unlike other problematic contemporary adaptations of medieval work, Lowery's adaptation does not only cast an actor of color in the leading role, but it also develops the character more, offering a more nuanced depiction of masculinity. Some might point out that this depiction of Gawain was racist because the movie depicted his character as not traditionally brave. However, this depiction of Gawain decolonizes Euro-centered medievalism by presenting an actor of color whose character is not tokenized or is violent and savage. He begins his journey like an ordinary man but then makes decisions that help him achieve his character arc. This makes him a more relatable and memorable character.

As Young mentioned in her article, shows like *Game of Thrones* which use the idea of "the real Middle Ages" to justify racism and a colonial mindset are not aberrations in society because medievalism has been associated with all-white, Euro-centered, racial purity that is merely a modern fantasy and not a historical reality. However, there have been efforts to

decolonize such an understanding of medievalism. According to Matthew Vernon, “African-American intellectuals [...] frequently critiqued the notion of ‘pure blood’ deriving from the medieval period. They did this by pointing to the number of ethnic identities coexisting in medieval Britain. In 1859, the abolitionist and physician James McCune Smith argued that the meeting and cooperation of medieval people was a strength that contributed to Britain’s success” (Vernon). These efforts are critical in shifting society’s image of the Middle Ages because the actual knowledge of that period would prevent contemporary movies and TV shows from getting away with representing the racialized Others as violent and uncivilized people in need of white saviors. Moreover, it will prevent the far-right groups from masking their violent exclusionary practices because, then, they will not be able to invoke the idea of a white medieval past. Vernon clarifies in his article that

One might say that this reparative work—of creating an ever-expanding and inclusive Middle Ages—has been part of medieval studies since nearly the country’s founding. But this was not done by white people. It was done by African-American writers, poets, artists and intellectuals. With their groundbreaking work, these creative people tried to move the public imagination of the Middle Ages. They fought to shift it away from a model that assumes that European whiteness was the primary medieval identity categories. And more, they strove to forge a more comprehensive, difficult, and ultimately positive conception of the medieval world.

Therefore, to decolonize medievalism, it is imperative to bring out the real, inclusive medieval history and shift the grand narrative from the imagined Euro-centric medieval history, especially in the light of crimes against the racialized minorities at the hands of white supremacists like the Norwegian mass murderer and the New Zealand shooter, who invoked the medieval imagery of

the Knights Templar to justify their actions. As such, works like David Lowery's adaptation of the medieval text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are essential in decolonizing a white medieval narrative. Lowery's *The Green Knight* presents a poetic representation of the lay and subverts the traditional medieval ideals of bravery, honor, and chivalry, giving Gawain a more humanistic character. Even though it is naive to think that merely casting an actor of color in the lead role in a canonical medieval text would put an end to racism, nevertheless, it is a necessary step that aids in the reparation work of the Middle Ages that Vernon talked about in his article, especially given that other contemporary depictions of medieval works fail to do so. Finally, there is a need for more accurate accounts of medieval history that does not exclude people of color and highlights their culture and achievements.

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Visible Hijab, Invisible Voices: Exclusion of Muslim Women's Experiences, Voices, and Rights in the  
Socio-Political Sphere

Last year I had dinner with a friend who identifies as a white cis female. The topic of the hijab ban in France came up, and she declared that she supported France's decision as she was against all kinds of organized religions. She then went on to inform me that she does not want her children to be educated by any religious people, especially hijabi women because they will obviously try to impose their religion on the students.

I was stunned by her statement because she failed to see how problematic and insulting her comment was. It was marked by unacknowledged Islamophobia, and even misogyny. I remember her giving half-hearted excuses about how she was not against Islam in particular, but it was simply the fact that hijab is too visible. This conversation led me to think about how Muslim women's identity is always defined by a piece of cloth on their heads and their individuality is erased. Society cannot imagine Muslim women capable of forming coherent thoughts and ideas beyond their religion. Their hijab is too visible, too loud, unlike their voices and experiences, which have always been and continue to be excluded from the socio-political spheres. Hijab has become a signifier that erases the individuality and the autonomy of the women who wear it—but not because of what it symbolizes in Islam. Instead, that erasure happens based on the assumption Western people map onto the Muslim faith and what they assume to be a signifier thereof. Thus, this paper first examines the colonial context of society's discrimination against hijab-clad women to analyze why this hatred against Muslim women originated and persists. Moreover, the paper discusses society's need to control female bodies and take away their autonomy. The paper also addresses the new problems that Muslim women face today in some countries through objectification and how big brands capitalize on Muslim women's oppression under the guise of

inclusion which results in the prevention of actual actions. Finally, the paper argues why, despite being a mere piece of cloth, hijab often becomes the focus of racism, hyper-nationalism, and sexism.

Every human has the right to choose how they want to dress or express themselves. Yet, there have been countless debates and scholarly works about Muslim women's right to wear the hijab. According to Sabrina Alimahomed-Wilson, Muslim women face hate-based violence disproportionately more than Muslim men in public (77). Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand why such disparity exists because, clearly, Islamophobia alone is not the sole reason. She asserts that looking at the cultural stereotypes in the mainstream Western media and how these media channels portray Muslim women might provide an answer to the question of why Muslim women, especially those who wear hijabs, face greater discrimination. The West has mainly represented Muslim women in terms of men; they are either depicted as victims of violent Muslim men or as exotic and hypersexual women forced to be confined in harems. Either way, Muslim women have become passive subjects of male fantasies in need of white saviors. She points out that "The headscarf is viewed as a threatening signifier of difference. Moreover, these stereotypes position Muslim women's bodies as passive and incapable of resisting male dominance as evidenced by their presumed inferior position to Muslim men in their own 'backwards' Islamic culture" (Alimahomed-Wilson 78). The Western mainstream media perpetuate the stereotypes of Muslim women, especially those who don hijab, as both weak and sexually exotic. Thus, their identities are reduced to appeal to the male fantasies.

Alimahomed-Wilson further writes that the intersectional identities of women of color, that is, their gender, race, sexuality, class, and citizenship status, shapes their experiences with violence (76). She states that "research on discrimination and violence against U.S. Muslims and Arab

Americans over the past decade have typically relied on nonintersectional frames. That is, only racial and/or religious motivations of hate violence were given primacy, while gender (and, thus, U.S. Muslim women) remained invisible in many hate crime reports” (Alimahomed-Wilson 76). She cites studies that found that Muslim women, especially those who wear hijab, have more chances of experiencing hate-based violence in public spaces than Muslim men. This study shows that hijab-clad Muslim women are more likely to become scapegoats for Islamophobic discrimination and violence, and thus, it is imperative to apply an intersectional lens because traditional analyses of hate crimes cannot appropriately recognize intersecting identities of Muslim women. The lack of acknowledgment of intersectionality is one of the reasons for Muslim women’s anger concerning debates about the hijab.

Thus, when the patriarchal and Western societies muffle the voices of Muslim women, when they marginalize them and ignore their concerns, and when they exclude Muslim women’s voices from critical socio-political spheres, it should not be surprising to discover that these women are angry, and their rage cannot be dismissed any longer. In her article, Wati Rahmat expresses her anger and the collective anger of all the Muslim women who are persecuted for wearing the hijab. She says:

I am angry at the haters and xenophobes. I am angry at the apathetic ignorant people who sit on fences. I am angry at those who show up selectively as allies. I am angry at politicians who speak empty words of platitude with no real actions. I am angry because I keep having to spell out my dignity and humanity! I am angry because I don’t want someone who looks like me to be attacked anymore. (Rahmat)

It is critical to acknowledge the anger of Muslim women because it is a valid response to the violence arising out of sexist, Islamophobic, and imperialistic attitudes. Rahmat adds that Muslim

women and women of color have become weary of being tokenized and used by men to exert their power and influence. Furthermore, she emphasizes that their anger is not destructive or violent; rather, it is “a natural, authentic expression of our collective grief and trauma” (Rahmat).

As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, I want to inquire about the origin and persistence of hate against hijab, especially in Western countries, through a postcolonial lens. In order to map the colonial context to examine anger against hijabi women, I will turn to some studies by postcolonial writers such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. Said talks about how oriental women became the subject of male power-fantasy in the works of Western travelers and novelists. He writes that in the eyes of the Occident, “they [the veiled, oriental women] express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (Said 535). Their veiling becomes a signifier that erases their identity as rational humans by Westerners and makes them objects of male fantasy.

Frantz Fanon also wrote about Arab women and veiling. According to him, Europeans were frustrated by their inability to see and consequently fix the identities of Muslim women in Algeria. Thus, the veil became “a sign of failed European interpellation” (Lane 396). The colonizers also felt threatened by veiled women when they joined forces to combat the occupiers since they could not gauge the weapons hidden underneath the veil. The distrust and hate that mainly originated due to colonialism is still deeply entrenched today, especially in Western society. Mainstream Western media outlets like to focus on how Muslim women face violence at the hands of Muslim men in the Middle East. However, one can see the irony in America’s concern for Muslim women since its sympathy and concern is not extended to Palestinian women, who are termed terrorists for defending their occupied land. Their artificial concern for Muslim women “serves to buttress ongoing support for military campaigns and occupation, while undermining critical analyses of the ways the state perpetuates violence both domestically and abroad. The

United States deploys the framework of women's rights to justify the global War on Terror, highlighting the urgency to 'save Muslim women' abroad" (Al-Saji). Hence, it becomes critical to reject the Western countries' tendency to exploit Muslim women's bodies for the propagation of their imperialistic motives.

Along with the imperialistic impulse to unveil the oriental women, the discrimination against hijab-clad women is also entrenched in sexism. According to Faisal Al Yafai, there are other reasons for the hate against hijab. While some people associate it with a different culture, for some, it stands against their notions of gender equality. However, the desire to undress women comes from the desire to forcefully control women's existence in public spheres. Despite the progression of feminism over time, Muslim women continue to be excluded by Western feminists. Aqdas Aftab writes in her article that "the idea of the veiled Muslim woman was used to justify colonial missions. Shortly after 9/11, for instance, then-First Lady Laura Bush—a woman with no history of or interest in feminism—cited women's rights as the primary reason for the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, arguing that the "war on terror" was a "fight for the rights and dignity of women" that it aimed to liberate out of their veils" (Aftab). She adds that Western feminism continues to silence, invisibilize, and objectify Muslim women by reducing them to one-dimensional objects incapable of independent thoughts. Western feminism homogenizes the act of veiling when in fact, it is quite eclectic, "varying even within specific cultural groups" (Lane 396). Hijab means something different to every Muslim woman and reducing it to a singular idea is unjust. The figure of a hijabi woman becomes "appropriated for current liberal causes. This woman remains the person conjured by Bush—a symbol, an avatar, but never fully human. She's used only to exemplify a homogenized group, but never as someone with complex thoughts and feelings that transcend the meanings assigned to the hijab by the white gaze" (Aftab). Muslim women do

not fit into a neat category of liberated Western feminism because they seem to lack agency and are thought of as victims of oppressive religious traditions. Thus, it is not only white men who feel the need to save these veiled women through ridicule or intervention, but also Western feminists. This exclusion of Muslim women from feminist discourses is one of the major reasons for their rage. Not only do they have to combat men's desire to control their bodies, but they also cannot turn to other females, who are supposedly fighting for women's rights, for help.

Society everywhere constantly monitors how women dress in the public sphere. Women are seen as either too revealing or overly modest. They are either sluts or prudes. No matter how they wish to express themselves through their clothing, they are always judged by the patriarchal standards in society. As briefly mentioned above, the furious urge to unveil Muslim women lies in the individuals' desire to control how women dress and express themselves in public spaces. Al-Yafai suggests that after excluding all the elements that are associated with hijab, like religion, immigration, etc., the only reason that remains is the society's and government's need to decide what is acceptable for women to wear and what is not. The government exercises this desire to control what women should or should not wear by imposing oppressive laws like hijab bans. On the other hand, individuals employ means of violence and shame to regulate how much of their bodies women should expose.

The reason why hijab stirs up such hatred is that it subverts the societal expectations of how women should conduct themselves. According to Al Yafai, this subversion challenges the notion of the male gaze. The male gaze is the idea that the mainstream media and culture always view women from men's perspective, and these viewpoints become the standard norms. Thus, women are stripped of their identities and reduced to mere objects, existing for the scrutiny and

pleasure of men. Hijab gives Muslim women autonomy over their bodies, and they can decide how much of their bodies they wish to reveal. Al Yafai believes that

The anger against the hijab comes because some men – and, let’s be honest, some women – feel that Muslim women get to ‘opt out’ of the pressures and expectations western societies place on women. Women in hijab remove themselves from the beauty standards that apply to other women. They cannot be judged – and therefore celebrated or minimised – based on what they wear. This, for those who benefit from the system, is enraging.

Hence, they act out by using violence against the women who wear hijab. Al Yafai aptly explains the behavior of those who are enraged by the hijab. He writes that “when they feel their privilege is being eroded, they react the way people always react when their power over someone else is removed – with violence.”

Today Muslim women are routinely being excluded and silenced through governmental laws like hijab bans that seek to limit their freedom of expression. Such discriminatory policies have grave consequences that hinder Muslim women from achieving their professional and political goals. Things like “secularism, transparency, integration, security, or ideals of freedom, justice, and gender equality...are instrumentalised to justify the exclusion of Muslim women, and the differential treatment and domination of Muslims more generally” (Al-Saji). However, these are merely excuses to cover their exploitation of the Other. In India, Muslim minorities are facing one of the biggest persecutions through systematic exclusion and government-backed violence. Here too, Muslim women become the main target of hate-based violence. In July 2021, a group of Hindu men developed a derogatory app called “Sulli Deals” where pictures of Muslim women were “maliciously displayed for ‘auction’” (The Economic Times). This degradation and objectification of Muslim women did not stop there. In January 2022, another app called “Bulli

Bai” was created by some Hindu men for auctioning Muslim women. The Economic Times report that “‘Bulli Bai’ too had a number of pictures of women, including journalists, social workers, students, and famous personalities, accompanied by derogatory content. The app listed hundreds of Muslim women for ‘auction.’” In addition to this, the state of Karnataka in India recently banned Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in schools. They justified this outrageous law by saying that schools should be secular spaces. However, the state did not have any objection to other religious attire like Hindus wearing *kara* or *tilak* or Sikhs wearing turbans. In fact, the government of India is planning to introduce the Bhagavad Gita in schools, which is a religious book of Hindus (Murthi). One can clearly see the irony and open marginalization of Muslims in India, where Muslim women are primarily being targeted, degraded, and reduced to sexualized objects.

On the one hand, Muslim women are openly marginalized in the socio-political spheres; on the other, they are being used for capitalism under the guise of inclusion. Though the capitalization of the hijab may seem as if society is progressing through promoting the inclusion of hijab-wearing women, it should not be ignored that many of the brands that depend on this capitalization are exploiting the poor in the Global South. Aftab gives the example of Nike and states that,

Nike’s Pro Hijab is the most recent example of corporations adopting hijabs as commodities and creating a ruckus amongst the political right. According to the Islamophobes who have boycotted Nike over the new garment, the brand is promoting “oppression of women” by creating a hijab expressly for sports. While this conception of hijab-wearing women as inherently oppressed should be resisted, it is also strange that Nike—a corporation that has historically exploited working people in the Global South—is now championing its diversity by launching a pro-Muslim product. (Aftab)



The people benefitting from this capitalization of the hijab are the wealthy corporates and not the marginalized Muslim women. Such performative activism by these brands under the guise of inclusion prevents any real actions that can meet the actual needs and demands of Muslim women.

Considering all the above points, it is no surprise, then, that Muslim Women are angry about how a piece of cloth on their head is a target of such hatred and criticism. There can be multiple ways to understand this anger in order to find a possible way to channel it productively. One way is through reading bell hooks and Audre Lorde's texts on women's anger. Although bell hooks and Audre Lorde mostly talk about the anger of women of color, their argument can be applied to Muslim women too. Lorde writes that she has learned to express her anger for growth and remedy. According to her, all women have piled-up anger because of institutionalized oppression, which they can use to bring about change. The change which speaks of is not a flimsy, temporary change that will lessen their grief for a while; instead, it is a meaningful change that will inspire "basic and radical alteration" in all the institutions and beliefs that continuously exploit them (BlackPast). The change that Lorde is talking about is starkly different from the performative activism by wealthy corporates that prevent real actions. Hooks, too, points out that rage is critical in the resistance struggle (hooks 16). Consequently, it is essential that women, particularly women of color, learn to translate their rage into action.

One of the things Muslim women constantly struggle with is dispelling the widespread notion that they are victims. Artist Shirin Neshat says in an interview:

One of the things I battle with in the Western media is that no matter my work — whether the woman is protesting, is rebellious, is breaking the norms, whether it's through a state of madness or walking out, they have stood up against the system. Yes, there are

oppressions, but women have stood up. The biggest fighters in Iran today are the women.

The most unafraid people in Iran are women. I've always tried to say that. (Miranda)

bell hooks, too, counters the notion of being victimized by the West in her book *Killing Rage*.

She reveals that her rage intensifies because she is not a victim (hooks 18). The victimization of Muslim women and women of color bolsters the Western ideology of rescuing these women from their exploitative lives. And as was discussed earlier in this paper, this notion does not come from concern for Muslim women; rather, it propels the colonial agendas of Western countries.

To conclude, the discrimination and violence against hijab stem from multiple reasons, like the colonial attitudes of Western societies towards veiled women, society's need to control women's bodies, and the assumption of Western feminists that Muslim women are oppressed by their religion and are forced to wear veils. Mainstream Western media also plays a role in the oppression of Muslim women by mainly representing them from the perspective of the male gaze. They are either represented as victims of Muslim men's violence and religious traditions or as exotic hypersexual beings forced into confinement. This representation portrays Muslim women as passive subjects of male fantasies in need of white saviors. Since hijab subverts the expectations of society regarding how women should act and conduct themselves in public spaces, society finds it difficult to accept the fact that women can take control of their bodies and choose how much to reveal. Thus, hijabi Muslim women become victims of hate-based violence. Additionally, since Muslim Women cannot rely on Western feminism as it continues to exclude and objectify Muslim women by reducing them to one-dimensional objects incapable of autonomous thoughts, it becomes critical that society and mainstream media outlets learn to separate the existence of Muslim women from their hijab. The homogenization of Muslim women's different experiences

with the hijab diminishes their individual identities. Instead of looking at the hijab as oppressive or as a limitation to Muslim women's agency, society needs to accept it as a form of individual expression that some Muslim women choose to observe.

Therefore, several steps must be taken to prevent violence and discrimination against Muslim women. Firstly, Western mainstream media channels must stop the tokenization of Muslim women. Muslim women need authentic representation and inclusion of their voices in the socio-political spheres. Secondly, Muslim women's rage toward blatant discrimination should be acknowledged and addressed. Finally, Muslim women, too, must learn to channel their anger in a constructive way to bring about actual change. Since Muslim women who wear hijab are more likely to face discrimination and violence than Muslim men or other women, an intersectional lens is necessary to examine this oppression in order to take actual actions to address Muslim women's anger. Upon reflection, it is apparent that society always feels the need to debate Muslim women's right to wear the hijab when such a debate should not even exist. It is their fundamental right to wear whatever they want, and nobody except these women can decide otherwise. Western society, in particular, is incapable of imagining that Muslim women can form intelligent and independent thoughts which are separate from their religion. The hijab becomes too visible, too subversive, unlike the voices of Muslim women, which have been persistently silenced or marginalized in the social and political spheres.

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## Intergenerational Trauma in Indigenous Films: Looking at Violence and Fractured Family Dynamics

Indigenous films studies is a rapidly growing field. As such, there are multiple scholarly works that look at Indigenous films that represent Indigenous communities across the world. Most of these works analyze Indigenous films from a postcolonial lens and provide a counter-narrative to the stereotypical misrepresentation of the Indigenous Community in Hollywood. They discuss the enemy image of the Native Americans by the Hollywood as an ideological tool to construct the image of an “All American Hero.” In addition to the postcolonial scholarship on Indigenous films, there are also scholarly works that examine Indigenous films to strengthen people’s understanding of the Indigenous community and their representation in the media. Houston Wood’s *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World* (2008) presents a thorough analysis of many Indigenous films from different parts of the world. Despite there being numerous scholarly works on Indigenous films, not many address the issue of violence and fractured family dynamics depicted in those films, and still less trace the reason for its such prevalent presence in Indigenous films. Just like Wood, this paper uses the term “Indigenous” to refer to the world’s First Peoples (Wood 3).

As mentioned above, most often than not, many Indigenous films feature dysfunctional families, strained relationships, and even domestic violence. Therefore, it becomes imperative to understand the reason behind why such representation of Indigenous communities is so prevalent in Indigenous films. One reason that has been identified for the domestic violence and estranged relations in Indigenous families is that of intergenerational trauma. Many scholars, especially in the field of Psychology, have produced works on intergenerational trauma in the Indigenous communities. However, scholars and filmmakers have not yet investigated intergenerational

trauma from the perspective of films. Since many of the indigenous feature films portray violence and fragmented family relations, it is easy to misread them and make erroneous judgements about Indigenous community as a whole. Therefore, this paper analyzes some of the Indigenous feature films like *Smoke Signals*, *Once Were Warriors*, *Indian Horse*, *Skins*, and *Songs My Brother Taught Me* through the lens of intergenerational trauma. The paper examines the reasons for the intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities, studies how it is depicted in the films, and argues that it exists because of the settler colonial practices. The films that this paper analyzes features Indigenous communities from across the world like US, Canada, New Zealand, etc. Even though not all of these films are directed by Indigenous filmmakers, a common thread running through them is the unflinching depiction of violence and fractured families. Since these films do not provide an explicit commentary on the above-mentioned recurring themes, they can be easily misinterpreted by the viewers, especially non-Indigenous audience who lack the necessary context. As a result, the audience might inadvertently assume that these films depict some sort of innate pathology in Indigenous families. They might also interpret them as protest films that reinforce harmful stereotypes about Indigenous people. But these films have implicit commentaries that reveal much more than the events they depict. Each film grows out of and responds not just to the current circumstances of its characters, but to a history of living under settler colonization, a history marked by intergenerational trauma. Taken as a group, these films insist that the past is not truly past and depict the power that trauma exerts through multiple generations.

Knowing the horrors that Indigenous people had to face after settler colonization, it is not surprising to find that even after so many years, the native people are still affected by it. According to O'Neill et al., "Families who generations ago experienced traumatic upheaval

resulting from war, residential schooling, oppression and racism, natural disasters and other events, may experience various effects and enactments of the trauma passed on from parent to child.” It was not just the forced removal of Indigenous people from their land and the exploitation of their resources which they held sacred that led to intergenerational trauma; it was also the inhumane residential schools, the forced assimilation, and their dire consequences that resulted in the intergenerational trauma experienced by native communities.

First, it is essential to revisit the definition of trauma to understand the meaning of intergenerational trauma. Scholar Natalie Boone defines trauma as “an experience that happens in an individual’s life that creates serious harm, whether that’s physical, mental, or emotional.” She further elaborates that trauma can manifest in various ways in people’s behavior, such as anxiety, depression, disturbed sleep pattern, disassociation, etc. Consequently, intergenerational trauma occurs when trauma gets passed down in a generation of a family. According to O’Neill et al., “The assumption that parents transmit unresolved tension and feelings to their children, generated from their own families of origin, has been the basic construct underlying many theories of intergenerational trauma.” Moreover, the article elaborates that this transmission of trauma is not intentional. It manifests when the personal trauma remains unacknowledged or untreated for a long time. Additionally, the article talks about the difference between intergenerational trauma in Indigenous people and the survivors of war. In the latter case, the traumatic experience is often experienced by the first generation only. However, many generations are affected by the traumatic experiences caused by colonization and systemic genocide in Indigenous people.

Intergenerational trauma is also referred to as historical trauma. One of the most horrifying experiences that Indigenous people had to endure because of settler colonization was



the residential school system. In order to strengthen their hegemony and force the “Indian” out of the native people, the government started the residential schools to supposedly educate the Indigenous children:

The term *residential schools* refers to an extensive school system set up by the Canadian government and administered by churches that had the nominal objective of educating Indigenous children but also the more damaging and equally explicit objectives of indoctrinating them into Euro-Canadian and Christian ways of living and assimilating them into mainstream white Canadian society. (Hanson et al.)

The Canadian government believed that these schools would eradicate the traditional and cultural values in the Indigenous children. Moreover, when they return home, they will influence their family members and the others around them to adopt the western lifestyle too. These residential schools were one of the biggest reasons for intergenerational trauma in Indigenous people. Their children were taken away or kidnapped to be placed in such residential schools. There, these children faced inhumane treatment in order to make them forget their roots and culture. Their hair was cut short, they were forbidden to speak their own languages, and were harshly punished if they broke any rules. These residential schools had a lasting and devastating impact on the lives of Indigenous people. Not only innocent children were separated from their parents, but many of them were also victims of physical and sexual abuse. Moreover, one can only imagine the fear and anxiety of the parents who lost their children to the residential school system.

The movie, *Indian Horse*, directed by Stephen S. Campanelli in 2017 and based on the novel of the same name by Richard Wagamese, depicts the dark past of the Indian residential schools in Canada. It follows the life of an Indigenous boy named Saul Indian Horse. At the beginning of the film, Saul’s grandmother takes him away from his home to hide him from the

authorities. However, he is discovered on the way after his grandmother's death and is placed in a residential school where he experiences all kinds of humiliation and abuse. He sees his friends being locked up in a cage without food, and many of them commit suicide to escape their painful fates. He also witnesses young children being separated from their older siblings. In addition to this, they are physically punished by the nuns if they break any rules. Saul himself becomes a victim of sexual abuse by a priest. All these experiences and the racism he faces after he grows up to be famous hockey player results in him almost losing his life to alcohol and drugs.

Substance abuse becomes the only way for him to cope and live. There were hundreds of other children who had to face all that Saul's story depicted. An article in *The Guardian* recently reported that "In May, Canadians were shocked at the discovery of the remains of 215 children at the site of a former school in British Columbia. The bodies belonged to Indigenous children, some believed to be as young as three years old, who went through Canada's state-sponsored 'residential school' system" (Voce et al.). The trauma caused by the residential schools in Indigenous people went unresolved, and thus, it got passed down from generation to generation. The children who lost their parents and culture because of the residential schools did not have any example or model of family life. They had to figure out how to do parenting and navigate through the two cultures, Indigenous and western, on their own. O'Neill et al. further elaborate that,

The loss of parenting skills through forced attendance at residential schools and the resulting traumatic experiences is an example of indirect transmission. The absence of developmental skills assumed "normal" in interactions with the perpetrator social group then result in cascading consequences for both the parents who were originally traumatized by that same social group and their children.

This separation due to the residential schools is one of the reasons why many Indigenous families have dysfunctional or estranged relationships. Moreover, Aguiar and Halseth write that before the existence of the residential schools, Indigenous families had strong bonds with extended family relatives in addition to the immediate family members. Thus, when the children were removed from such a community of care and love and placed in the residential schools, it significantly disrupted the family structures and fractured the community cohesion. Since this is a prevalent issue in the Indigenous community, it is also reflected in many Indigenous films.

One of the main motives of the residential schools was to eradicate Indigenous culture through assimilating. In order to erase the existence of Indigenous people, many assimilating policies were adopted by the governments of Canada, Australia, and the USA. These policies were primarily aimed at children since they were seen as more adaptable than adults. In Australia, there were numerous cases of stolen “half-caste” children. The term “half-caste” was a derogatory way to refer to the children who had Indigenous and white parentage (“A White Australia”). The loss of identity and culture through forced assimilation, whether due to government policies or residential school system, was a major reason for the intergenerational trauma in the Indigenous community. In their study of intergenerational trauma in the Aboriginal people, O’Neill et al. state that “Aboriginal people with residential school experiences...often [come] into therapy with pervasive low self-worth, depression, feelings of powerlessness, and alienation, with many who feel abandoned and confused about family roots and who express concern with their need to parent - all issues related to attachment disruption and early trauma.” This alienation from their culture and the disruption of their family life robbed them of the essential experience of learning how to manage and raise their own family.

Alienation as a result of colonial practices resulted in intergenerational trauma in Indigenous community. Not only do they feel alienated by their own culture due to assimilation through residential schools etc., but they are also violently discriminated against by the settlers. In the movie *Indian Horse*, after enduring so much abuse at the residential school, it is the blatant and violent racism that finally tips Saul over the edge, and he resorts to alcohol and drugs to survive. Despite being a brilliant hockey player, he is constantly booed by the audience and is told to go back to where he came from. He is also frequently attacked by the players from the opposing team and is just expected to take it all without reacting. There is a scene where a group of white men corner Saul and his other Indian friends in a bar, and they urinate on the Indians after beating them bloody. Many Indigenous people faced such racism after colonization, which took a massive toll on their mental health. While discussing intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal people, Aguiar and Halseth talk about “race-based traumatic stress,” which is a trauma in a community caused by the hate against their race. They say that “race-based violations can add, and in some cases multiply, the traumatic stress of other stressors like living with violence, abuse, and disadvantage.” Thus, in addition to the trauma suffered by Indigenous people because of the atrocities committed against them, they also have to live with perpetual discrimination and hate because of their race. This instills a sense of shame, frustration, and self-hatred that eventually becomes the root cause of most addiction problems in Indigenous community as can be seen from Saul’s character (Aguiar and Halseth).

A common story in Indigenous films—and central to the plot of most of the films discussed in this paper—is that of a family struggling or falling apart due to alcohol and drugs. These depictions speak to real-world issues, but in ways that viewers might easily misunderstand without context. There are multiple reasons why drinking and drugs are such a common issue in

Indigenous films. One of the reasons was already discussed above, that is, the residential school system that took away children from their families and treated them inhumanly. Most of these children grew up and turned to alcohol and drugs as coping mechanisms, and this substance abuse is a big reason why Indigenous families are breaking apart.

A film where one can perceive the tragic consequences of alcohol is *Once Were Warriors* (1994) by Lee Tamahori. The movie revolves around a Māori family who struggle financially in the city of Auckland. Jake Heke, the father, has terrible anger issues which become even worse when he gets drunk. Initially, Jake seems to be a charmer, a loving husband, and a caring father, and the audience could feel pity for him when he gets laid off from work at the beginning of the film. However, whenever gets drunk, he almost always physically abuses his wife. His wild parties at his home are one of the reasons why his thirteen-year-old daughter, Grace, gets raped by his friend and then later commits suicide. The domestic violence in this movie is highly graphic, and the tragedy of Grace's death hits deep. According to his wife, he is a slave to alcohol. Jake's complex behavior could be identified as a result of intergenerational trauma. According to Aguiar and Halseth, one of the most significant manifestations of the historical trauma or the intergenerational trauma in the Indigenous community is "the high rates of family violence and abuse in the home." Jake always had a sense of inferiority and shame because he descended from a long line of slaves, and he thinks his wife considers herself better than him because she belonged to a warrior family. The fact that her family disapproves of her marriage with him and his failure to effectively provide for his family perpetuated the feeling of shame in him which manifested in violence and abuse. After putting up with her husband's domestic abuse for years, Beth finally leaves him after learning the reason behind her daughter's death.

Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* thus depicts the indirect but grave effects of intergenerational trauma and how it breaks apart families.

*Skins* (2002) by Chris Eyre tells the story of how alcoholism and abuse are repeated from father to son(s), and both sons are affected by that history, even though they appear to have lives that go in very different ways. The movie revolves around two brothers, Rudy and Mogie, who live on the Pine Ridge reservation. Rudy is a cop and looks after the law enforcement at the reservation, whereas Mogie is an alcoholic bent on self-destruction. The film highlights the poverty, unemployment, rampant alcoholism, and substandard living conditions at the Pine Ridge reservation and how they play a divisive role in family relationships. The film also portrays how the brothers, and their mother were physically abused by their alcoholic father when they were young. Rudy becomes a vengeful vigilante early in the movie after being possessed by a trickster spirit. However, angered by the news on television about the prevalence of alcoholism at the reservation, which features his brother, Rudy sets a liquor store in the town on fire. Unfortunately, he does not realize that Mogie is on the store's roof, trying to break in to steal more alcohol. Consequently, Mogie gets horribly burned, and Rudy is consumed by guilt. Throughout the film, Rudy tries his best to get his brother to quit drinking. However, toward the movie's end, Mogie gets diagnosed with terminal liver conditions and eventually dies. The film also shows how Mogie's son and wife were neglected by him because of his alcoholism, and it was Rudy who often ended up taking care of them financially. This film is an important example of how trauma is transmitted through generations and negatively affects family dynamics.

*Smoke Signals* (1998) by Chris Eyre is one of the most famous Indigenous films. A critical aspect of this movie's plot is how one can find a way out of a life that has been irreparably affected by alcoholism. The movie is about two Indian boys, Victor Joseph and

Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, living on the Coeur d'Alene reservation. When news of Victor's father's (Arnold Joseph) death reaches him, Victor's mother persuades him to go collect his ashes from Phoenix. However, running short of funds to make this trip, Victor gets an offer of financial help from Thomas on the condition that Thomas will be allowed to accompany him on this trip. Victor is hesitant because Thomas' idolized stories of Arnold annoys him greatly as they contrast with his own views about his alcoholic and absentee father. Even though Arnold turned to alcohol and left his family out of the guilt for being responsible for Thomas' parents' deaths, his choices in life still deeply affected his son. Growing up, Victor had a loving family, and he seemed very close to his father. However, Arnold could never get over how he made Thomas an orphan. His drinking problem was the main reason why Thomas' parents died. At a party one night, Arnold got very drunk and accidentally set fire to Thomas' house, killing his parents. Thomas only survived because his parents threw him out of the burning building, where Arnold ran and caught him in his arms. This guilt was choking him, and he again turned to the very thing that was responsible for his unhappiness, that is, alcohol. And under the influence of alcohol, Arnold even abused his wife and his son. Eventually, he runs away from his family to escape all the guilt. Even though he loved his son very much, his alcohol addiction destroyed his life and that of others around him. Victor was never the same after his father left him, and one can observe the emotional baggage that he carries throughout the movie due to his father's actions. At the end of the film, a poem by Dick Lourie is read by Thomas, which aptly sums up the emotions of many Indigenous children like Victor who experienced intergenerational trauma:

How do we forgive our fathers?

Maybe in a dream.

Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often, or forever, when we were little?

Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage,

or making us nervous because there never seemed to be any rage there at all?

Do we forgive our fathers for marrying, or not marrying, our mothers?

Or divorcing, or not divorcing, our mothers?

And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness?

Shall we forgive them for pushing, or leaning?

For shutting doors or speaking through walls?

For never speaking, or never being silent?

Do we forgive our fathers in our age, or in theirs?

Or in their deaths, saying it to them or not saying it.

If we forgive our fathers, what is left? (*Smoke Signals* 1:21:12 – 1:23:02)

This poem speaks to many Indigenous children who struggle to forgive their parents for putting them through the emotional trauma caused by their negligence, alcoholism, abuse, etc.

*Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2015) by Chloé Zhao is a film about Indigenous children navigating through life on the reservation with an absent father and an alcoholic parent which, in this case, is their mother. Johnny and Jashaun are siblings who live with their alcoholic mother at a reservation in South Dakota. After their father died and Jashaun discovered her brother's plan to leave the reservation to go to L.A. with his girlfriend, she begins to find new connections and relationships with her stepbrothers for emotional support. Although the movie ends on a



promising note, with a better hope for these children, it still portrays the emotional trauma many Indigenous children carry due to their parents' addictions. The film also has scenes where people protest against alcohol because of its detrimental effects on the community.

Thus, these films portray how alcohol and drug abuse play a critical role in tearing Indigenous families and relationships apart, and can even lead to more tragic events like death, as seen in some of the movies mentioned above. However, it is easy to misread these representations of Indigenous communities as being savages as depicted in many mainstream Hollywood films. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that “this high degree of trauma exposure, mortality rates, and substance abuse may be connected to internalized ancestral trauma carried by many Aboriginal people” (O’Neill et al.). It is imperative to keep in mind that the primary reason for such a prevalence of alcoholism which furthers intergenerational trauma in Indigenous community, is colonization and the atrocities faced by the Indigenous community, which is especially seen through films like *Indian Horse* and *Once Were Warriors*. Thus, substance abuse became the only coping mechanism most Indigenous people turned to in the light of these traumas.

Another factor that results in intergenerational trauma among Indigenous people is social amnesia or the silence at the injustices faced by them. “The silencing of experience by the oppressors’ punishments was in strong contrast to societies where knowledge was transferred through storytelling” (O’Neill et al.). This silence was one of the main reasons why the trauma experienced by the victims was passed down in the generation. When a traumatic experience of a parent remains unresolved or even unacknowledged for a long time, it often gets transferred to the children. It was only in 2008 that the government of Canada released an apology for the deaths of hundreds of children who died because of the residential schools (“Government

Apologizes for Residential Schools”). Before that, the Indigenous families and the survivors were alone in their grief and remained (and still remain) uncompensated for their loss. O’Neill et al. stated that:

The silencing of many Indigenous families through traumatic experiences has contributed to both the transmission of trauma effects, and the silencing of cultural traditions. Living in silence caused by imminent punishment for speaking, and the resulting fear and shame was often a significant part of life for a child experiencing abuse in residential school and this ingrained state of being is often carried on in survivors’ lives.

Thus, not only did silencing Indigenous community for the atrocities committed against them causes intergenerational trauma among them, but it also made expressing normal emotions difficult for them. In the movie *Indian Horse*, Saul becomes more reclusive and reticent as he grows up. At first, it appears as if witnessing the death of his friends made him so quiet.

However, it is later revealed in the film that he was routinely sexually abused by a priest at the residential school when he was young. Initially seeming kind and different than his colleagues at the residential school, Father Gaston was one of the reasons why Saul could play hockey and how he became such a famous player. However, his kindness and favor came at a horrible price, that is, sexual gratification. Saul had kept this trauma so hidden that he only re-visioned it when he visits the residential school as an adult. He could only cope with his past through alcohol and drugs. Aguiar and Halseth report that “The schools left a historical and emotional legacy of shame, loss, and self-hatred that is the root cause of addiction and many of the associated social problems facing the Aboriginal community today. Along the similar lines, O’Neill et al. write that:

The Assembly of First Nations (1994) recounts how many former students face difficulties with expressing emotion. Former students characterize these difficulties as being unable to express feelings, either positive or negative, resulting in depression, inappropriate responses to situations, running away from situations, and substance abuse. This inability to linguistically express emotions first experienced in a punitive, powerless context gives rise to anger and frustration that sometimes manifests itself in forms of violence.

As a result, the survivors, especially those who had witnessed abuse or were victims themselves of such abuse at the residential schools, admitted to having trouble with re-establishing family relationships because of the anger they constantly feel and have gotten used to. This shows that it was challenging for them to live in a healthy adult relationship and care for their children effectively (Aguiar and Halseth). However, one significant caveat to keep in mind is that intergenerational trauma in the parents does not always result in neglect or abusive behavior towards children. Despite hardships and insurmountable trauma, some parents display resilience by trying to do everything in their power to protect their children from what they went through and try to give the children the best life they can (O'Neill et al.). Even though it is a high possibility in a community that has faced so many atrocities and systemic genocide, one cannot make generalized statements for a community as a whole regarding such a complex issue.

In conclusion, the fractured or dysfunctional family relations and domestic violence portrayed in many Indigenous films are a result of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous people after settler colonization. This intergenerational trauma among Indigenous community results from the decades of genocidal government policies that aimed to eradicate or assimilate the Indigenous people. Since their trauma remained unacknowledged and untreated for a long time,

it unconsciously got transmitted to the subsequent generations of the survivors in Indigenous community and became intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma can manifest in various forms, such as behavioral disassociation, guilt, self-harm, substance addictions, and the inability to function in a healthy adult relationship. Consequently, this often results in strained family relationships where children face negligence and sometimes even abuse.

One of the main causes of intergenerational trauma among Indigenous people was the residential schools aimed at stripping the children of their native identity and assimilating them into the western culture. Indigenous children experienced inhumane treatment at these schools, including physical, mental, and sexual abuse, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Indigenous children. The movie *Indian Horse* reveals the horrifying details of the residential schools and how they deeply scarred the survivors who turned to substance abuse as a coping mechanism. Furthermore, it depicts how these survivors faced issues such as difficulty expressing emotions when they grew up and functioning in a healthy adult relationship. The residential schools also robbed Indigenous children of the crucial years where they could have learned parenting skills. Moreover, the continuous racism faced by the Indigenous people exacerbates the existing traumas.

The chief and most prevalent consequences of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous community is substance abuse. Many Indigenous films such as *Once Were Warriors*, *Skins*, *Smoke Signals*, and *Songs My Brother Taught Me* portray the rampant alcoholism in the Indigenous community and how it contributes to breaking apart families and perpetuating intergenerational trauma. Films such as *Once Were Warriors* also depict how alcoholism can result in violence and domestic abuse. Additionally, these films show how the children have to carry emotional baggage throughout their lives due to their parents' addictions, negligence, or

abandonment. Thus, the violence, alcoholism, and disturbed family dynamics seen in many Indigenous films could be associated with intergenerational trauma in Indigenous community caused by the injustices and the years of atrocities inflicted on them by the dominant settler cultures. Since there are not many Indigenous films, especially compared to Hollywood films, the audience could misread the effects of intergenerational trauma depicted in Indigenous films as Indigenous community being violent and backward. Therefore, this paper is an intervention to prevent such misreading and present and analysis of the violence depicted in Indigenous films.

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