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The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

The State of Creativity during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused a huge displacement for people globally. This displacement resulted in a shift in notions of personal reality and affective relationships. Creativity is a sensitive process that is impacted by one's physical, social, and cultural reality. In this paper, I understand creativity to encompass the process, experience, and feelings associated with the creation of new products and ideas, that are both novel and appropriate to a given situation or time-period (Amabile et al. 2005). This ethnography explores the impact of the pandemic on the creative processes of six Toronto-based artists. I explore the effects of decreased collaboration, decreased social interaction, and greater isolation, on the motivation for art creation, the content of art created and the overall affectual states of the artists. I consider how these changes were linked to the different layers of Hennessey and Amabile (2010)'s structural model of creativity and I posit why artists had different creative outcomes. Preference for alone time when creating art versus creating through collaboration impacted people's motivation for creativity during COVID-19 and the subsequent amount of art created. Preference for alone time was also linked to the affective results of different artists during the COVID-19 pandemic—those who previously collaborated during their artistic process suffered more than those who mostly created in solitude. The mediums different artists engaged with also impacted motivation and their ability to continue creating.

Keywords: creativity, COVID-19 pandemic, affect and art, ethnography, Toronto

"*I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination encircles the world.*"

Albert Einstein

My ethnography explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on six Toronto -based artists' creative processes. The impacts of social isolation, particularly loneliness on these artists' creative processes, is explored in this paper. Specifically, I analyze the effects of the pandemic through an engagement with the layers of Hennessey and Amabile's (2010) system of creativity. Specifically, creativity was impacted by the changes in affect of artists following the pandemic, personality differences between artists, the impact of and lack of access to social groups, the change in their daily routine, and the artists' experiences of the pandemic in relation to the rest of Toronto. The overall change in the number of creative activities is explored. That is, did the artists find themselves to have an increase or decrease in their motivation to create, ultimately leading to a change in the amount of art pieces produced? The effect of isolation from one's social group is explored in relation to how limited opportunities for collaboration impacted the artists' creative thoughts.

For this ethnography, I focused in on the impact of this shift on creative individuals who lived in Toronto, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was curious to see how the state of the world during COVID-19 impacted the affect of artists and if that carried over to their artwork; I also observed how this new way of life impacted creativity. I was keenly interested to see if creatives felt the urge to fill those gaps in relation to innovation and new ideas, as an antecedent for creativity, or if this disruption only caused further distress and halted their processes. To keep my analysis as objective as possible given I had preexisting relationships with the subjects, I relied upon methods of reflexivity and autoethnography

Context, Questions, and My Story

The first two weeks of the pandemic were especially scary for me as I happened to be living in a different city than the rest of my family. Like many, I was uncertain about the state of the world, and the stress of the pandemic caused me to feel on edge about almost every aspect of my life. The summer that followed was one of the most self-expanding ones of my entire life. I went through a period of personal development, which I believe was partially due to social isolation. This included my change daily routine – I was enrolled in an intense university program and prior to the lockdowns I spent every moment either completing an assignment, in a meeting, studying, or rushing to a class. With the emergence of COVID-19 my entire world was compressed into one household, where I lived with three other students. As such, my life went from involving many different physical and social spaces to one physical space and few social spaces. I should not discount the fact that many of these social spaces turned into cyber social spaces with the rise in Zoom meetings; however, in total, I found myself with an ease that I had not encountered for a long time. I had been living outside of myself, and now with much more time and space, I instinctively started to turn inwards. I created new routines and spaces of lonely walks and bedroom workouts and spent more time lingering on big and small questions and topics.

I gained a lot of mental clarity on issues I was facing in my personal life during this time due to the increased time I spent alone. Additionally, I found myself much more curious creatively and explored many new creative outlets I never had been interested in previously, including sculpting, singing, and water colour painting, to name a few. In hindsight, I do not think that it was just the pandemic that caused this growth, but,

anecdotally, I have come to hear many people tell me of similar experiences.

Art has always been a pillar in my life. My family is made up entirely of artists, both in the classical and non-classical sense. When I think about the word "art," it is nostalgic for me, bringing forward memories of clay workshops I went to as a child at the local pottery museum and the "art night" my elementary school would hold once a year to display students' artistic products. I went through long periods of looking for an art medium to master such that I could identify myself as a type of artist, a painter or a musician, for example. Though, at this point in my life I view art as functionally different for me. I use creativity in simple problem solving and, when I put solutions to work, I am normally attuning to the aesthetics of art. In fact, writing and putting together this research has been one of my favourite ways to be creative.

Given my experience of both personal and creative growth during — or perhaps due to — the pandemic, I was interested in exploring the impact of such isolation on creatives. I wanted to understand if this isolation would cause creatives to have deeper, internal creative experiences than they would experience outside of the pandemic, indicating the pandemic was a positive antecedent for creativity; or, if the forced isolation was so uncomfortable for the artists due to the lack of social connections, if it would cause a decrease in creative behaviours and, perhaps, a subjectively worse creative experience. I was curious to see if the pandemic — specifically the physical and social realities of it and the affective outcomes — impacted the art created and the creative processes of artists, given my personal experience and interest in creativity. And, if so, in what ways?

The Affective State of COVID-19

To explore the impacts of social isolation on the individual, literature surrounding affective theory and creativity were consulted. As cited in White (2017), Brian Massumi defines affect as "[an] epistemological gap between how bodies feel and how subjects make sense of how they feel" (177). Affect is comprised of the interaction of external context — events, places, and people as examples — and how we perceive of those contexts in the ways of thoughts and feelings. As affect is something that we are both experiencing and perceiving, it overlaps with one's creative process and products. The creative process is sometimes used by artists to understand their affect and experiences further. It is important to know the affect context of artists to understand their products; thus, discussing affect was an integral part of conversations that took place in this study as to understand the impact of the pandemic on artists and their products.

Lawrence-Zuniga (2017) defines places and spaces stating, "space is often defined by an abstract scientific, mathematical or measurable conception while place refers to the elaborated cultural meanings people invest in or attach to a specific site or locale." Our perception of passing life is made up of different physical places, flowing from one to the next, overlaid by both internal (affective) and external (social) spaces. Thus, affective reality can be described as a build up of different subjective and intersubjective spaces that make up daily life such as the intersubjective space of many workplace environments or social environments like having coffee with the same people every day (Skoggard and Waterston 2015). A subjective space is enclosed to the mind of one person, and encompasses one's thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Intersubjective spaces are ones that are created and shared between people under specific contexts. While characterizing intersubjective spaces of communal religious rituals, Emile Durkheim (1965) described these spaces as encompassing the inner worlds as well as "the subjective power of the collective moment" (52).

These different spaces impact our bodies to make up our overall affective state in each period and place in our lives. Social spaces are important intersubjective spaces and encompass relationships and their respective purposes (Coleman and Collins 2020). The intersections of individual worlds in different socio-cultural and political contexts create intersubjective spaces that carry a shared affective reality. In contrast, the experience and emotions associated with loneliness are part of an individual's current affective reality. As social isolation imposes a new physical and social

reality, affect is altered due to this shift (Navaro-Yashin 2009).

Loneliness is distinct from social isolation. Loneliness is an "affective and subjective reality" whereas social isolation is a "physical and social reality" (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020, 615). The experience of loneliness does not always cause the individual emotional pain, but it is a subjectively negative experience (de Jong-Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006). A high level of self-reported loneliness is correlated with debilitating mental health issues, such as depression, and consists of a multitude of negative emotions, two examples being emptiness and abandonment (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020). Emptiness, as it relates to loneliness, is a perceived lack of social connection and purpose; abandonment is a feeling of loss and longing for previously present social connections (de Jong-Gierveld, van Tilburg and Dykstra 2006). De Jong-Gierveld and van Tilburg and Dykstra (2006) outline two major types of loneliness, including *emotional loneliness*, which refers to the absence of intimate relationships (i.e., a best friend or spouse), and *social loneliness*, the absence of a wider social group such as a group of friends or family. Though most people have a great fear of loneliness, many desire freedom of the mind which is often unachievable when one is tied to others for stability (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 1999).

However, loneliness has arguably constructive facets to it as well. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999) argue that when one encounters physical or mental empty spaces of reality, one seeks to fill that space. Filling a space consists of creating newfound subjective and intersubjective spaces; for example, when a university student finishes a semester of school, many intersubjective and subjective spaces are removed from that reality, and one common "filler" to these spaces is a summer job. These empty spaces are also often the catalyst for creative thought. It is posited that, "[e]mpty spaces can be a kind of meditative freedom" allowing the freedom of creation and wander of the mind (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 1999, 7). In the contexts of imposed physical and social isolation, as was seen during the 2019–2023 COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals reported feeling very depressed and lonely, indicating an overall shift in affect due to this displacement of daily life.

Academic Studies of Creativity

Creativity has been studied in many academic contexts, ranging from analyses of neuro-psychological states to the socio-cultural contexts that invite creative experiences. Creativity, as broad and abstract a concept as it is, has been widely studied in anthropology and related disciplines (Amabile et al. 2005; Byron, Shalini, and Nazarian 2010; d'Azevado 1958; May 1959; Puryear, Kettler, and Parsons 2019). The definition of creativity employed here encompasses the creation of new products and ideas that are both novel and appropriate within a particular context (Amabile et al. 2005). Though creativity is seen as a core operative procedure for artists, it is an important process undertaken by people in all areas of life; it is an integral aspect of humanity that is the backbone of innovation and development.

In 2010, Beth Hennessey and Teresa Amabile attempted a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the theory, investigations and findings surrounding creativity in anthropology. They called for researchers to move forward with taking a systems approach to studies of creativity (Figure 1).

The structural model illustrated here posits

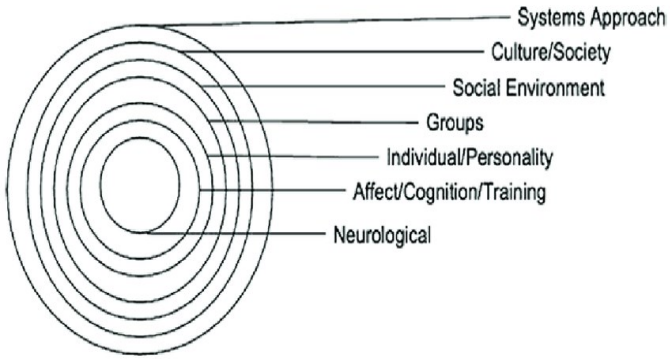

Figure 1: Integrative approach to creativity (Hennessey and Amabile 2010 , 571).

that creativity within a social context should be assessed at different levels and in an interdisciplinary fashion (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). Creative moments are separated between "big C" and "little c" moments; "big C" creativity being large, uncommon displays of creativity and "little c" being small everyday moments of creativity and

problem solving (Amabile et al. 2005). You can probably recall a recent "aha" moment of "little c" — perhaps where you figured out how to reformat a document to optimize space or a new way to make a sandwich. Conversely, there are many famous moments of "big C" which have resulted in massive contributions to humankind; Darwin's observations of animals in the Galapagos leading to his theories of natural selection being one example.

The debate surrounding the relationship between affect and creativity is highly nuanced; however, much of the literature suggests that positive affectual states result in more creative moments than negative affectual states (Amabile et al. 2005). Positive affect has been linked to intrinsic motivation, problem-solving, positive relationships, and safety all of which contribute positively to creativity. Negative affect has been linked to a decrease in creativity due to its association with a lack of safety and acceleration of mental health problems; it has also been linked with extrinsic motivation which is detrimental to creativity (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). Extrinsic motivation is incentivized by external rewards such as money and approval (Bénabou and Tirole 2003). External motivation encourages products based on outside interests, thus what is produced is not born of the artist's genuine creative interests and motivations, so is less authentic to true creativity. According to Maslow (1970), creativity should be present in scenarios where it does not impact early survivalist needs; however, negative affect has also been shown to increase creativity. George and Zhou (2007) found negative affect was associated with "clarity of feelings" which allow artists to express themselves clearly and some authors believe that attention to problems allows better problem-solving skills (Stickgold and Walker 2004).

A U-shaped relationship has also been postulated between creativity and affect, where high levels of positive and negative affect lead to high levels of creativity, and less intense affect states lead to less creativity (Amabile et al. 2005; Eisenberg and James 2005; Zhou 2007). Perhaps the relationship one artist has to creativity is dependent on their response to their affective states. Some individuals may be more prone to productive responses (such as creation), when faced with negative emotions, whereas others may be more likely to halt their daily activities.

As the creative process holds affective dimensions, it has both subjective and intersubjective spaces for the creator. Curiosity, excitation, exhilaration, and satisfaction are some of the many emotions associated with the creative state; the actions and bodily sensations further encompassed in creative states further complete it as a full physical and mental affective reality (White 2017). The amount to which one experiences creativity with others in an intersubjective collaborative space versus an individual subjective one varies by person. While some artists work alone, with their creative space existing solely in their heads, other artists flourish and grow their creativity with other creatives in artistic collectives. There appears to be benefits to working within a group creatively and working alone; when individuals who prefer working in groups can, they perform better than groups with individuals who prefer working alone (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). This preference for group work may be linked to individual personality differences such as those seen in studies indicating slight correlations between introversion and extroversion and preference for learning styles; extroverts have been shown to have a slight preference for group work and introverts have a slight preference for individual work (Murphy et al. 2017).

A widely accepted model of personality first developed by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae (1992), which has since been widely substantiated and expanded upon, states that all human personalities are composed of five, or sometimes six, personality factors. This is known as the HEXACO model of personality. The personality factors include extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, as well as the newly postulated humility factor (Lee and Ashton 2013). In relating personality factors to creativity, under the scope of the HEXACO model, it has been shown in the literature that individuals who score high on the "openness to experience" factor display higher levels of creativity versus those on the opposite end of the same factor (Puryear, Kettler and Rinn 2019). Both introverts and extroverts have been

shown to display high levels of creativity, albeit in different forms. However, as creativity is a deeply internal cognitive process, it is argued that most creative individuals possess some level of introversion (Roth, Conradty and Bogner 2022).

Psychological, cultural, and evolutionary origins of creativity

Art reflects the artist's social, cultural, and temporal context within which a piece is made (d'Azevedo 1958). According to d'Azevedo (1958, 702), art is "composed in a social setting and has a cultural context" that is only fully understood within this context, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Pablo Picasso's "The Tragedy." National Gallery of Art. Image courtesy of Creative Commons Zero (CCO).

Picasso's famous "The Tragedy" depicts the sex workers and homeless peoples he encountered in a destitute area of Barcelona. Though the painting is a scene Picasso may have actually come across, the colours and mood of the piece also reflect the pain Picasso felt during the time he created the piece due to the suicide of one of his best friends (Morse 2022).

The process of expression is to reflect one's inner world out towards the external world, which, here, is accomplished through artwork. Hospers (1971) posits that the need to create is born out of a need to express something internal to the world, sometimes a feeling that needs to be understood. When art is put out to the world it opens intersubjective spaces of interaction, discussion, and collaboration which are bridges of connection between people making up our social reality. This "need" Hospers (1971) refers to can be related to the highly supported psychological theory of human behaviour and motivation: that humans have an intrinsic motivation to express the self as one possesses it alike other survivalist motivations (Kovac 2016). This theory posts that we want to share our innermost selves with the world as a social reality as a total reality inclusive of both the physical manifestations of this expression (art), and self understanding and personal actualization (Kovac 2016).

Kovac (2016) argues that humans are often shown to act in ways that go against what would prove most beneficial towards their survivalist needs; for example, when people speak out against political regimes, and openly express sexuality in conservative cultures. Maslow's (1954) ground-breaking work "Personality and Motivation" introduced the theory of hierarchy of needs, which in summary, states that humans must fulfill basic survivalist needs before pursuing and achieving further psychological needs. The order in which these needs must be fulfilled is listed in the pyramid shown in Figure 3; hence, for a human to embark upon fulfilling higher-up needs of esteem and self-actualization, one must full-fill lower needs, such as physiological and safety needs first.

Kovac (2016) argues that because self-expression can undermine basic survivalist needs this indicates it is a motivational

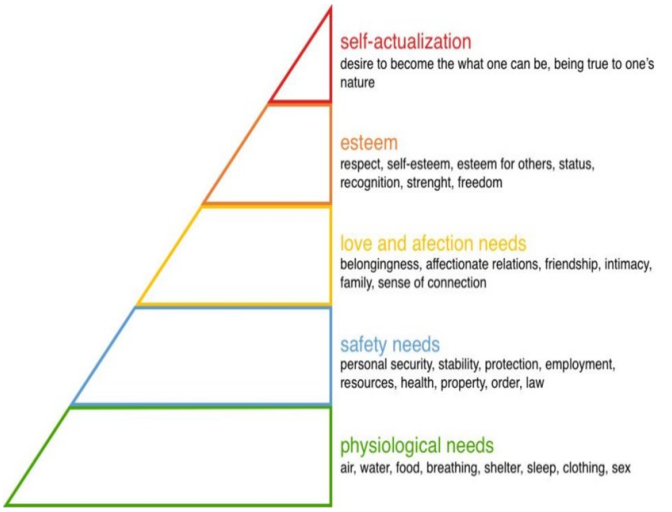

Figure 3: Maslow's hierarchy of needs adapted from Motivation and Personality (1970) (Regaldo 2021, 35).

necessity, otherwise, why would so many people take survivalist risks. The plethora of creativity in modern societies is reflective of changing survivalist needs; foraging for food today requires less energy and often less time compared to hunter-gatherer societies, so preserved energy and excess time can be partitioned to creative and more self-expanding activities. Maslow himself was quoted on the topic of self-expression in a way that further enforces that creativity is a process akin to breathing and eating stating, "a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization" (Maslow 1970, 46).

Fundamentally, when one is in a creative state, they may be closer to connecting with unconscious affect states, which may not be as accessible to the self otherwise (Byron, Khazanchi, and Nazarian 2010). When one is connected to their unconscious states, which is elicited through creative processes, they achieve a fuller understanding of the self, particularly those hidden parts, and contributes towards achieving self-actualization.

Setting the Context

Ethnographic Methodology

On March 11, 2020 the coronavirus outbreak was officially labeled a pandemic by the World Health Organization, ushering in a period of isolation and fear for many (Ducharme 2020). The pandemic necessitated extended lockdowns, confining individuals to smaller living spaces, and prohibiting social interaction beyond households in many countries like Canada. The lockdowns imposed drastic lifestyle changes and resulted in the loss of social and intersubjective spaces for many people.

The first method of data collection I relied upon for this ethnography was virtual semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length (Whitehead 2005). The nature of the coronavirus lockdowns in Canada necessitated a shift in methods from in-person interviews to virtual interviews facilitated through Zoom. As my interviews were all virtual, I attempted to keep the conversations fluid as to allow my subjects to attempt and create a friendly atmosphere that can be easier to facilitate when in person. I began by obtaining informed consent from participants and asking demographic questions. Broadly, I asked guiding questions about the participants' creative processes before and during the pandemic and if they found any differences. I asked about the nature of their creativity including, "what is your internal creative process?" and "do you use art to express emotions, or work to evoke emotions in others?" I then asked about their individual experiences and affective states during the pandemic and if these circumstances impacted their artwork in any way. As my conversations were all virtual, I made sure to be extra observant to how subjects reacted with visual and physical expressions on my computer screen, which is much easier to observe during in-person interviews. I was flexible on the time lengths based on the conversation flow and how open or not open the participant was; at the end, my shortest interview was 45 minutes and the longest was over 4 hours. With informed consent, I made audio recordings of the interviews which I coded for my analysis and referenced in this paper.

The second ethnographic method I relied upon was a process similar to photo-elicitation (Harper 2002), except with the artwork of participants which I refer to here as object elicitation. I undertook the same procedures used for ethnographic photo-elicitation, however, for these interviews I asked participants to bring in or refer to two art

pieces: one piece created before the pandemic, and one created during it. During photo-elicitation, the anthropologist asks their informants to bring photographs into an interview which are used to create conversation by evoking memories around the images (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). The photos can act as an "objective third (neutral) party" and a gateway to personal topics, they also allow informants to open up and lead the discussion (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). Photographs can also help informants make connections between interview topics and their own lives as well as bridge socio-cultural differences between the anthropologist and themselves (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). Photo-elicitation is seen as an effective method of framing a subject's social world and subjective state (Clark-Ibáñez 2016). Art is a product of the creative space which is a reality distorted and influenced by the artists' feelings and attitudes with care for aesthetics. I predicted using art to start conversations would elicit a more subjective recollection of memories compared to photographs which might elicit a more objective recollection. I did have reservations as I anticipated the memories accessed through an art piece would be more subjective and emotional than memories accessed through a photograph; I kept this in mind during my analysis and as this study is concerned with understanding the internal affective experience, which is subjective, I felt art would be a useful gateway to this experience (May 1959).

For my analysis, I used the method of coding to identify core themes related to the pandemic experience and creative process. I began with a broader process of open coding where I re-read and re-interpreted my notes with my core questions in mind (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Once I identified the themes, I felt were significant to my research questions, I went through the transcripts to identify words associated with those themes and compiled them into a list (Strauss and Corbin 1990). From the list, I created three broad umbrella themes which I further discussed in my analysis. I approached my interviews reflexively and relied upon the methods of autoethnography in my interviews and analysis; a method requiring the anthropologist to write in a self-reflexive manner in relation to their narratives and informants. I felt this method was important for my ethnography as I had pre-existing relationships with my informants, and I wanted to avoid representing my participants without acknowledging my emotional state and personal bias during the interview and analysis (Butz and Besio 2009).

Participant demographics

The participants in this ethnography all self-identify as artists and create art in the city of Toronto. Most artists chose to go by an alias name; however, one artist chose to go by their real name. The first participant, June, is a fashion student in her mid-20s at Toronto Metropolitan University who also paints in her spare time. Then we have James, a middle-aged sculptor and professional art teacher who lives in Toronto with his family. Leslie is a painter from Kelowna, British Columbia in her mid-60s who has been living in Toronto for the past few years. Daniella, originally from Italy, is a potter and graphic designer and has been living in Toronto for over 25 years. Angus, a friend of mine, is an engineer by trade who produces graphic artwork and music. The final participant, Benoit, is a professional opera singer who works around the world and lives with his wife and children in Toronto.

All participants posed different challenges for me when interviewing them as I recruited family members, friends, and family friends. I spent a lot of time at my desk drinking tea thinking about how to represent my subjects accurately and with a consistent lens. I was nervous embarking on writing the analysis portion of this paper, as I was aware I would be biased to represent certain artists very positively because of my personal relationships with them. I did not want to represent family members in a way that was reflective of my personal relationships. My approach to analysis was self-reflexive in my writing, through acknowledging the feelings and thoughts that came to me during the conversations. If my reaction to a subject was unique due to the pre-existing connection, I acknowledged it as such in my analysis.

Analysis

The Volume of and Motivation for Creative Work

The first measure I considered when distinguishing the effects of the pandemic on the artists' creativity was the amount of art created during the pandemic compared to the amount the artists created before. For this section, I also considered motivation for creativity; motivation is a key indicator of how much art can be made from creative thought and is an indicator of how the pandemic directly impacted artists' willingness to engage in creativity.

James and June both stressed that isolation had already been an important aspect of their creative processes before the pandemic, so the increase in alone time had a neutral-to-positive effect on their production. June emphasized in her interview a "need" to be alone to do her creative work; the isolation she experienced during the pandemic allowed her more time and space she could dedicate to creative activities and thinking and in total she found more opportunities to be creative. James indicated that he already prioritized blocking out alone time in his schedule and did not especially revel in the increased alone time during the pandemic. However, James was the only artist who described the effect of COVID-19 on his art production as having "accelerated" certain projects he had on the back burner before the pandemic.

Though Angus never mentioned isolation specifically in conjunction with creativity, he did stress the importance of the hours around midnight for sparking his creativity. "Covid let me be at home and for it to be acceptable for me to be me," he reflected speaking to the more indoor lifestyle many people took up during the pandemic. In the years leading up to the pandemic, Angus had dedicated his time to keeping up in a highly intense engineering program, with little time for other thought. Unlike James and June, external critique never impacted Angus's creative work and, apart from work meant for his online audience, the art he made during his spare time was completely for himself. He challenges himself to recreate effects he sees and hears in films and other art and then alters the result to reflect his personal preferences for both his professional and personal projects.

Angus enjoys producing videos which he disseminates to an audience on YouTube, Soundcloud, and Twitch using many software programs to make music, pictures, and video. For him, there were several reasons why he was able to produce more during the pandemic. He cited that people finding meaning in his artwork was a strong motivator for him creatively, especially when he would receive messages from people thanking him for putting out his work and explaining how it had impacted them. He was also able to channel difficult emotions he experienced during the pandemic, such as loneliness, through his art. "I feel like that feeling of being able to feel. it really hooks a lot of musicians onto the process," he reflected when speaking to the creative experience of saturating his music with his emotions. Angus felt satisfied being able to create authentic art through his experience in lockdown; with more time to do so, he had a large creative output.

Leslie, who is involved in the Women's Art Association of Canada, continued to access the collective's studio for her own personal use during the pandemic albeit with limited access and stringent measures in place to reduce Coronavirus transmission. Because her access was more limited, she was not able to access her creative space as liberally as she had before. She did not, however, experience a lack of creative ideas due to the circumstances.

Daniella initially thought that the pandemic would bring about a "renaissance of creativity" as artists would have all the time and space in the world to create. She remembered attending a conference of artists and discussing with other creatives how excited they all were for this period they were to embark on stating, "the first six months, we were planning. We were going to do this and that. And after six months in which we were more creative… after six months everyone was dead inside. Nobody could make anything anymore because every day was the same." As her income depends on her ability to create, not all artistic activities stopped for Daniella, though she encountered a period of fewer ideas. To reconcile this non-inspiration, she started dividing her day up

creatively by pursuing pottery in the morning and graphic design work in the afternoon.

The artist who noted the most dramatic decrease in creative activities during the pandemic was Benoit. He heaved a sigh, "I lost momentum" and he began with, "for a good six months there wasn't anything going on because no one knew what was going on." Benoit stressed how attached his creativity was to his medium, opera, throughout his interview. He continued to describe the significant difference in the niche of opera to just singing and acting, stating, "with opera, you have to be grand and exaggerated. So, you have to learn both aspects. You gotta learn how to act for the camera and you have to learn how to act for the stage." Benoit's opera is integrative; he takes time to fully understand and incorporate the conductor's orchestral score and the storyline into his acting and singing. His performance is also strongly impacted by the audience and his energy varies with theirs. With no orchestra, stage, or audience Benoit was lost creatively.

The motivation to continue creative work was dependent on multiple factors for these artists. The artists seemed to split into two groups, those who worked with others in creative spaces and those who pursued creative activities solo. This split was medium-dependent, the accessibility of their chosen medium during the pandemic, and personality/preference dependent. For Benoit, it was impossible for him to perform opera during the pandemic as, for a long time, lockdowns banned gatherings of more than five people and he was unable to find a replacement for his artistic medium. When the pandemic started, he was unable to shift his creative activities as easily as June, Angus, James, and Leslie, who already had mediums that they pursued independently.

The motivation to create also appeared to correlate with the artists who had more positive experiences during the pandemic which caused a generally more positive affect. James, June, and Angus felt that the circumstances of the pandemic were productive toward their creative habits and indicated positive and neutral feelings about their new routines. They positively saw opportunities to excel independently in their own creativity and were motivated to explore new and unique ideas — the excitement around this novelty and opportunity for them seemed to simultaneously result in an increased intrinsic motivation to create.

The Removal of Social Spaces

While none of my participants lived completely alone during the pandemic, they all appeared to experience de Jong-Gierveld's (2006) concept of *social loneliness* due to the lockdown measures. James and June specifically noted the absence of other creative people in their lives. James spoke about the loss of what he called a "vibrant" social life where he would connect with other artists and friends for social gatherings. At this moment in our conversation, he spoke slower and looked off from the camera, stating "our social life is often full of art-related relationships and activities, and all of those were postponed or disappeared with the pandemic. And then just continued to deteriorate with the overall duration of the pandemic." June spoke in a similar way about losing the collaborative element to her artistic process and noted that it was integral to her practice. June discussed the impact of less creative contact during the pandemic matter-of-factly stating, "without collaboration, we're really unable to move forward because everyone has their own perspective and you're just enhancing the work more as you collaborate and learn new things and try new things."

However, both James and June spoke fondly about receiving less external critique from others about their artwork. Less critique was beneficial for them in pursuing completely individual projects devoid of external impact. For James he was able to expand and go forth with ideas he had conceived of before the pandemic stating, "a lot of distractions and exterior noise fell to the wayside and gave me even more of an opportunity to focus on my studio work and push ideas forward that had been on the back burner or maybe I was hesitant or unsure or even insecure about."

June similarly indicated that the pandemic allowed her to pursue ideas she felt other artists would have been critical of and allowed her to create what she wanted for herself. June

was able to perceive of a new reality when it came to her art critique; one where she would only receive critique from herself. This allowed her to pursue creative ideas she preferred over ones that would have gained more positive external approval. The experiences of James and June are reminiscent of internal motivations to express ourselves genuinely to the world. Both artists spoke about their pandemic artwork excitedly and took pride in their abilities to overcome the judgments of others to pursue work that mattered to them most. Both stories also appeared to shed light on the number of critiques artists are subjected to and how over time this critique can cause one to be less genuinely expressive of the intrinsic self. This absence of external critique seemed to reaffirm Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999)'s notion of empty spaces being the breeding ground for new ideas. In this new space that was created without external critique for these two, it may have been the antecedent for creative thought.

As noted previously, Benoit's primary creative activities were halted during the pandemic due to quarantine measures as it is necessary for opera to be performed in-person. After those first six months of not performing, he was able to move forward by singing for old folks' homes at Christmas time and eventually began a teaching degree he had been holding off starting. However, he was never able to regain the creativity he normally felt through performing with the altered settings during the pandemic. Tired, Benoit described the lack of creativity he felt after not being able to perform reiterating, "I felt like I didn't have the momentum." Though he was able to relive some of the same satisfaction of having an audience while performing during Christmas, it was nothing nearly as energetic as the in-person audiences he had interacted with before the pandemic. Benoit's creative space completely overlaps with a social intersubjective one which could barely be replicated during the pandemic, in turn resulting in a decrease in creative activities.

Daniella emphasized the importance of her collaboration in helping move her ideas forward, an element that contributed to her lack of creativity during the pandemic. She spoke energetically about her circle of people whom she thought of her most brilliant ideas with, all open-minded, from various backgrounds, and of different ages stating, "I tend to be a little controversial in my ideas and I have a group of people with which I can talk about anything without judgement — these people feed my creativity… ideas freely flow from one place to the other, and that is how I feed myself and my ideas."

Her description of collaboration is reminiscent of how Kathleen Stewart describes the intersubjective component to affect as "the 'we' incites participation and takes on a life of its own, even reflecting its own presence." (cited in Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 2; Stewart 2007). Collectives have affects and the loss of Daniella's creative collective impacted her personal creative affect greatly as she was only able to take her ideas so far. As she maintained, "you are cutting yourself off from a discussion." Once COVID-19 hit, she described the feelings of her and her other artists as being "dead inside," as opposed to the liveliness she felt in her artistic world before the pandemic. The absence of this social space took away her ability to enrich her ideas through collaboration and she lacked the inspiration her people brought to her, resulting in less of an interest in art and life.

Finally, Angus spoke about finding more of a community and audience because of the pandemic. Because the mechanism for creating and sharing digital art is online, his audience grew during COVID-19 as people spent more time online with him producing more music and videos on YouTube and Soundcloud. Angus stated, "if I really like a type of media, I will try my best to recreate it in my own sense." By having more time online, he was able to get exposure to a larger creative network and expand his own projects. He also developed a stronger online following during COVID-19, something Angus contemplated may not have happened otherwise saying, "it is pretty crazy when you think about all the communities and people who have those interests who would be willing to follow your journey as an artist." Though Angus stated that he normally just makes art for himself, bringing people happiness through creating videos gave him purpose and inspiration to continue creating during the pandemic.

The art medium pursued was also a variable involved with the impact of social isolation. Apart from the factors discussed in the previous section, the artists interacted with their community audiences differently during the pandemic due to differences in medium. Angus was not isolated from his fellow creatives and gained more exposure, so he was able to thrive and grow creatively whereas artists such as Benoit and Daniella, whose mediums were dependent on an in-person element, suffered in these circumstances. The artists' preferences for collaboration and group work impacted the amount of creativity they experienced in the pandemic. Daniella, Benoit, and Leslie all spoke of a loss when without their artistic collectives and only Leslie spoke of continued creativity despite the lack of the previous intersubjective creative space. Benoit and Daniella encountered significantly less passion and intrinsic motivation to continue creating when those intersubjective creative spaces were taken away due to social isolation.

Addressing personality differences, some artists seemed to prefer working alone whereas others preferred working with others. Though the topic of the extroversion/introversion personality factor was not directly discussed in the interviews, it may have been associated with how well the different artists fared in quarantine as introverts prefer time spent alone versus extroverts who thrive off social interaction. Future areas of study into personality and creativity could sample and assess differences and similarities between introverted and extroverted creatives; how much of the creatives' time is spent alone, what mediums the creatives are drawn to, and what is the subject matter of their artwork?

The Impact of COVID-19 on Affective States

The events of the pandemic appeared to cause certain affective states in the artists which further impacted the content of their work. Leslie came into her interview with a piece she had created during the pandemic which she calls "The Closing of The Doors" (Figure 4). The painting immediately evoked a sense of loss in me when I looked at it. A set of blue-black barn doors with rusty orange beams are depicted mostly closed with a small opening on the middle-left-hand side of the painting where a small sliver of the forest is visible beneath a colourless sky. To me, the painting felt like it depicted late fall, with a slight redness to the sky showing signs of an early sunset; however, in my interview with Leslie when she spoke about her moment of inspiration for this piece, I now know that the painting portrays early spring. The doors are worn down and appear to be closing slowly. Leslie spoke slow, but her voice stayed in the almost rhythmic cadence I had gotten accustomed to since first meeting her. She spoke of the closings she encountered in her life which occurred at the same time of and some due to the pandemic stating, "there were closings and a lot of the restaurants, you know, I live right by Yonge street and you would see the restaurants closing down or, the merchants who had signs [saying] "buy local" or say[ing] "goodbye"...[E]verything was closing, all the doors were closing, including for my husband, the doors of his life, because he was becoming more and more incapacitated."

Figure 4: Leslie's piece, "The Closing of The Doors." Image courtesy of Leslie Savage.

She spoke more about moving from a spacious home in Revelstoke, British Columbia, with lots of outdoor space, to a small apartment in Toronto so that she and her husband could be close to a hospital. Due to her husband's degrading health, she was unable to access as much personal space as she had before the pandemic as she had taken on the role of his caretaker. For Leslie, the pandemic imposed new physical, social, and emotional realities which were very reflective in her most recent piece. Her piece is not only reflective of her own

experience, but of the broader pandemic experience, which makes it very relatable. I found myself overwhelmed with her story at this point in the interview, to which Leslie responded saying, “oh, don’t cry, I’m not crying.” Upon reflecting on this comment after our interview I wondered if part of Leslie’s ability to keep calm while recounting these heavy memories to me was due to the processing of emotions she had done through creating her artwork — and that “The Closing of The Doors” was as much an expression of herself as something she used to cope.

As Daniella experienced the severing of social ties, which were linked to her creativity, she experienced bleakness and boredom in everyday life voicing, “you were lonely even with the people you chose to share your life with. We all had absolutely nothing to say to each other.” She experienced a change in affect that coincided with that of her social groups; the more rigid the lockdown measures became, the more her pandemic life became a shell of her former one. Daniella created “Group Therapy” during the latter half of the pandemic, a title reflecting the bitter irony she spoke about from that period. A scrapbook-esque multimedia piece of tiles depicting the progression of human life throughout the pandemic. Victorian-era drawings of people, paying homage to the Spanish Flu, are strewn in a sickly journey throughout images of toilet paper, viruses, vaccines, socially distanced gatherings, and concerning news headlines. A brightly coloured world transforms over to a constricted one conveyed in a dull ill-green. The twisted and sparse journey the characters go through depicts our society’s journey of confusion, chaos, and resolution during 2020 and 2021. This piece is a real reflection of her understanding that “we all went through it together” (Figure 5).

Throughout his interview, Benoit described multiple positive affective benefits of opera. In recounting his career to me, he mentioned a formative experience performing the role of Alfredo in Giuseppe Verdi’s “La Traviata” where he used his performance to help channel difficult emotional experiences.

> I was very immersed and mesmerized by that story—she ends up dying of tuberculosis, it’s the most gut-wrenching thing… I was in my early twenties, and able to relate because there was heartbreak, I had broken up with my first real serious girlfriend. I channelled that energy and those emotions into that role… I think that’s such a strong connection and now more so because I lost my brother. There’s always that longing of wanting that person back and you know that they’re not gonna come back.

Figure 5: One of the 24 multimedia tiles from Daniella’s piece titled “Group Therapy” (Copyright Imaginis Design Studio).

Though Benoit was not isolated from his family, his creative state was strongly changed by not being around an audience and an orchestra. Because opera requires other performers, musicians, and an audience Benoit was stripped away completely creatively, “it was taxing on me. I was, I hate to use these words, depressed, but I was down.” He dove into working for his family construction company and caring for his family.

Throughout the interview, he described elements of his performance with excitement and with great depth using gestures to describe the movements on the stage between actors and where the conductor would be situated, stating that, “nothing is better than live feed or feeding off that energy that audience gives

you." He noted this with enthusiasm, shaking his head. When we spoke about the past two years when he was unable to perform, he did not elaborate on the subject and, when describing that time, he was somber. His reality changed from performing opera, an activity that made him feel energized, passionate, and happy, to one where he described his affect using the words "depressed," "lost," and "empty." Though Benoit kept busy, he was never able to fill the space left behind by opera during COVID-19; as the severity of the pandemic decreased, he immediately got in contact with his opera companies and is set to perform again.

Angus described feeling lonely and isolated as he completed his final year of an Engineering program in the fall of 2020. Instead of finding inspiration in the state of the world for his projects, he used art to distract himself from the worry he felt reading news headlines and the isolation he experienced while completing online school. When I asked if any of his artwork contained content that related to the pandemic, he shook his head, "I tried my hardest to avoid thinking about the pandemic right and that's part of why it seems like the last few years went so fast." Angus dedicated a lot of time to art during the pandemic, as it functioned to improve his affective state by providing satisfaction from sharing with an audience, as a distraction, and as a way to channel difficult emotions. "You really have a lot of inspiration for music at points where your emotions are really powerful." Angus takes pride in the music he made during the pandemic citing a large difference in the quality of work made when he was processing something emotionally through a song versus one he made for fun. Angus said that "the really funny contrast is the second track I have on SoundCloud is probably the shiniest and worst song I've ever made and releasing it- I just hated it. I just made it for fun and there was nothing happening in my life at the time when I did it." For James, regardless of his experience during the lockdowns, hearing the stories of others during the pandemic elicited a "broad empathy" in him, which brought about an overall atmosphere of loneliness and isolation. This atmosphere was the result of empathizing with the stories of people he was close to and engaging with the global community. This experience was reflected in several of his pieces, one he calls "Lost and Found" which is a sculpture series made up of gloves found on the streets of Toronto in the shape of different phrases in sign language including "feel better soon" (Figure 6).

Figure 6: James's piece titled "Lost and Found," inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic (Image courtesy of the artist).

This piece to me emulates James's simultaneous feelings of connectedness and loneliness during the pandemic, as well as his desire to reach out to others because of this experience. James also found himself "stimulated by the fact that [he] was creating in new ways" in lockdown due to the opportunity to pursue more extraordinary ideas. He noted that the pandemic helped him further enrich apocalyptic themes in his work which he had already been exploring before. These enriched themes are seen in his series "Paradise Lost" which is a group of sculptures that depict intertwined flamingos which are suggestive of suburban America and the emptiness, yet idealism, that comes along with it (Figure 7). Perhaps it was due to this increased passion for creating that he was able to cultivate ideas to produce such inventive pieces.

Figure 7: James's piece titled "Paradise Lost." Image courtesy of the artist.

When I asked June if she had any experiences in the pandemic that came through in her artwork, she shook her head saying that the main change she felt was the increased confidence she had in pursuing the ideas she had been afraid to before. June was able to develop a deeper appreciation for her own inventive art style which is reflected in her pieces as they are much more complicated and less subtle than her previous paintings and artwork. Her artwork has become a lot more surrealist recently. She held up an embroidered piece of fabric to the camera, where shiny black sequins and beads from different eras are strung together in spirals and columns. Some sequins are imported directly from the Couture house in Paris that makes clothing for Chanel, others are taken from a 1920s flapper dress she bought second-hand, and some are taken from a dress of her late grandmother's. She also recreates memories from her childhood of being in Northern Ontario during the summers where she played and explored alongside lakes and rivers. You can almost see June's childhood memories of waves — the thrashing and twisting knit ropes and the shining sequin crests reflecting the sun (Figure 8).

Figure 8: One section of June's surrealist bead project. Image courtesy of the artist.

The piece comes together to resemble a landscape photograph taken at her family's cottage that she abstracted through Photoshop to resemble her experience of retrieving a place through memory. As June's experience in the pandemic was her discovering her art style further as well as appreciating the historical

and environmental context of her materials, I would say this is completely reflected in the art she produced.

Conclusion

Overall, the relationship between affect and creativity seemed to corroborate with previous findings that positive affect is linked to creativity. Artists had different responses to the shift in place and space; some thriving during quarantine while others suffered, and the responses seemed to reflect in their creativity. Artists such as June felt more positive after being forced into having more social isolation —with increased confidence and satisfaction as she felt after being able to pursue her unique ideas without limit. James found himself stimulated in the moment when creating, indicating an in-the-moment relationship between his creativity and affect. Additionally, artists like Benoit and Angus related experiences that resemble the posited U-Shaped model for creativity both citing experiences of intense emotionality, some being very negative, resulting in moments of extreme creativity and expression. Leslie, found herself deeply immersed in intense emotions which can forward strongly in her artwork, indicating positive creativity.

The creative space is still a bit of a mystery, which is accessible for some and not others, and those times when it is accessible can seem random. For some, this space opens up in the presence of people, whereas for others it is when they are completely alone. This difference is still questioned and there is no clear answer as to why people have creativity under different social contexts. It is rare as to be able to test these contexts in such a scenario as a pandemic, where quarantines inherently mandated some social isolation, though even through this experience of exploration and interview this topic is still extremely nuanced.

Creativity transpires in people differently as it reflects one's uniqueness and experience and is impacted by the physical, social, and affect factors of one's reality. James described the process of creating as a need beyond his control, like sleeping or eating like Maslow. Similarly, June stated, "my creative process also involves me trying to figure out why create and why I need to create." Creating art is an embellishment of the day-to-day experience and a life raft during times of confusion and chaos. Art, being deeply contextual and inherently dynamic, serves as a conduit for people to connect across diverse experiences, forever resonating within the ever-evolving tapestry of our world.

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The Hmong Language as a Connection Between Past and Present in Rural Thailand

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ABSTRACT

My ethnographic research took place in Pa Klang in Thailand during a university field school from late May to early August 2022. The Hmong are an ethnic group who originally lived in Southeast Asia in mountainous regions, supported by an agrarian lifestyle. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Hmong language had no writing system and was based on oral traditions. The methods I used to gather data included observations of social interactions and participation in events, interviews, and surveys. Though most research about Hmong language maintenance has been done in the United States, diasporic Hmong communities exist in many parts of the world and assimilate into many different cultures while trying to sustain theirs. I focus my research on a Hmong community in Thailand. I argue that the younger Hmong generations have a different experience with language loss and maintenance in Thailand compared to the United States. I argue that Hmong youth in Thailand seek to learn more about their language in churches and university clubs to remain emotionally and linguistically connected to their friends and family, learn their roles in Hmong society, and pass the language on to future generations.

Keywords: Hmong language maintenance, Hmong literacy, Hmong diaspora, next-generation Hmong, Pa Klang, Thailand.

On a sweltering June day in northern Thailand, my classmates and I went into the mountains to observe a *pauj yeem* ('pow yang'), or an offering ceremony to the spirits for a great harvest season. The highlight of our trip was when my classmates and I performed a Hmong song for karaoke. For our Hmong 101 language class project before our study abroad, we learned a Hmong children's song about the Hmong writing system. No one expected us to sing in Hmong, as was evident by the fact that all the men and women in attendance jumped from their seats and pulled out their phones to record us. Their surprise was enhanced when someone shared their recording of us on Facebook with the translated caption, "I am Hmong, but I can't sing. [They are] American but [they] can sing Hmong songs." Further attesting to the novelty of our performance, to date the Facebook video has almost 70,000 views.

In front of this crowd, there were five white, young adult women singing about the basics of the Hmong writing system. They knew before we started singing that our Hmong was barely conversational, yet the energy on top of that mountain shifted after our musical number ended. People went up to our professor and exclaimed how brilliant the song choice was. They loved our dancing and how happy we looked as we sang for them. Later, more people came up to us commenting, "my kids do not even speak Hmong, so to have these foreigners sing in Hmong is cool," or, "Could you teach my kids this song?" For me, this primary school song I did not fully understand opened the door to discussing how children in Pa Klang lack proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing Hmong.

At the beginning of the trip, I had thought that literacy was the most crucial way to learn and maintain a language. Quickly, I learned that the Hmong language is more significant than words on a page or sounds I could not understand. Despite living lives using both Hmong and Thai languages, my interlocutors and my (host) family predominantly spoke Hmong. After four months of learning Hmong in a small classroom, I could recognize a few words here and there, but it took almost the whole three months in Thailand to start communicating with my family. This communication was based on more than just written words. While I did use Google Translate often with my host family, I started to pick up on mannerisms and gestures as well as vocal cues to understand my role as a member of the family. Being adopted into this family, I was the youngest which yielded me the opportunity to be more on the quiet side, but that did not stop my host mom and host siblings from interacting with me as much as they could in English, Hmong, and, infrequently, Thai. Still, I was perplexed by the relationship between my older siblings and their children. Why was everyone but the younger generation speaking Hmong?

While most research about Hmong language maintenance has been done in the United States, diasporic Hmong communities exist in many parts of the world and assimilate into many different cultures while trying to sustain theirs. I argue that the younger Hmong generations have a different experience with language loss and maintenance in Thailand compared to the United States. I argue that Hmong youth in Thailand seek to learn more about their language in churches and university clubs as a means to remain emotionally and linguistically connected to their friends and family, learn their roles in Hmong society, and pass the language on to future generations. For most Hmong people, literacy is not the goal for language ability; the ability to verbally communicate with loved ones, pass on traditions, and teach the next generation how to speak the Hmong language are the most important abilities for my interlocutors in Pa Klang. My interlocutors attain these goals in settings like churches and universities which stand as distinct sites of language revitalization among younger generations.

Background

The Hmong are an ethnic group who originally lived in mountainous regions of Southeast Asia supported by an agrarian lifestyle. Until the mid -nineteenth century, the Hmong language had no writing system; foreign missionaries created the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) in the early 1950s. This newly written script became the unofficial writing system for all Hmong dialects and became a way for Hmong speakers to record their wisdom in writing. Despite the emergence of a writing system, many of my Hmong interlocutors cannot read and write the Hmong RPA.

Pa Klang is divided into smaller villages with distinct names. I will focus on data gathered from Suan Sai, Kang Ho, and Nam Peun, referencing the area collectively as Pa Klang. The estimated population of Pa Klang is 12,000 people with about 7,000 ethnically Hmong individuals. Although Green Hmong and White Hmong are the primary ethnicities among the Hmong communities in the town and speak two different dialects, I will not make distinctions between them as they are mutually intelligible.

Language tensions in Pa Klang

I first want to address tensions between Hmong communities and Thai society to illustrate the effects on language acquisition in smaller villages like Pa Klang. In Thailand, Thai people refer to Hmong communities and other minority groups with the derogatory term “hill tribes'' which means tribes that originate from the mountains. The “hill tribes'' became a way for Thai officials to denote uplanders and lowlanders (Morton 2019, 1). The Thai government claimed superiority by controlling minority villages through police surveying and demarcations of upland regions by state agencies (Hickman 2011; Morton 2019). These demarcations forced Hmong refugees into the mountainous areas of Thailand, geographically separating them from Thai society.

Pa Klang became a resettlement village for the Thai government to supervise the Hmong people. Hmong immigrants began to relocate to Pa Klang in the late 1960s as a result of conflicts with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and other conflicts along the Lao border (Hickman 2011). In the process of warding off the CPT and allowing migrants to relocate to these controllable villages, the Thai government’s ‘concerns’ about national security facilitated the underdevelopment and marginalization of ethnic minorities (Morton 2019). The lack of resources put Hmong villages and other communities at the mercy of the Thai government which continued control by educating the children of the hill tribes in only the Thai language. A possibly detrimental exchange then began in the 1960s period of relocation: if minority groups pledged loyalty to the Thai government, then the government would provide educational opportunities to the children and thus make the minority people more compliant to Thai society (Ueda 2019, 48).

The Thai government has used education and schooling to control minority communities to acculturate into Thai citizens which would strip these minority groups of their language and culture (Ueda 2019, 50). Upon settling into Pa Klang, children immediately began school in the Thai language. Through education, the Thai government created an environment in which Hmong children were exposed to Thai ideologies linked to language, classroom etiquette, and social hierarchies. Classrooms in Thai schools have the national flag, a statue of Buddha, and a portrait of the king and teach compulsory lessons about Buddhism (Ueda 2019). The Thai government does not recognize shamanism as a religion, so practitioners of Hmong shamanism are registered as Buddhists (Hickman 2011), stripping the community of a primary time and place of Hmong language use and traditional instruction. Therefore, in the last fifty years, Hmong people have received their education in Thai, which has damaged the culture of Hmong peoples and their perception of identity as Hmong communities in Thai society, beginning with the parents of the current generation (Ueda 2019).

There are several hurdles associated with endangered language learning, including few opportunities to hear the language, little presence in media and literature, and large geographical areas where speakers are spread out. Much of learning a language is focused on the linguistic constructions of that language which requires individuals to focus on literacy (Hall 2018). However, written and spoken

language do not have to coincide; reading and speaking are very different. Hall (2018) posits that writing becomes a crutch for language learning as it is processed in the brain separately for a person already speaking the language.

Identifying Through Language

There are several ways identity can be understood in a Hmong context. I will be using the ideas of Norton (2005), who describes identity as relating to a person's understanding of their relationship to the world and their possibilities for the future, which stems from a connection to others and their perceived role in society. Language continuity is a concept that has emerged in linguistics of endangered languages as the first language "link[s] the present generation to past generations from whom the language is learned and with future generations now acquiring it" (Handman 2009, 637). More specifically, I focus on how Hmong youth in Thailand understand themselves as individuals and use that understanding to make decisions about their roles in Hmong and Thai society.

Handman (2009) writes about language ideologies, endangered linguistics, and the role Christianization has on endangered languages and their revitalization. One critical aspect of sustaining language has come from the concept of intangible heritage. Intangible heritage includes performing arts, rituals, festive events, mythology, and traditional craftsmanship (Handman 2009). Handman (2009) argues that when endangered language speakers begin to use a writing system, they do not form a connection with it and become passive learners. The continuity of the mother tongue is what links past and present generations, not just the written form of a language. For example, my interlocutors used Thai anytime they wrote something even when they predominantly spoke Hmong amongst each other.

The value of reading and writing as dominant forms of teaching has been a factor in the decline of traditional oral transference of Hmong knowledge which makes the transmission of Hmong oral culture difficult (Xiong 2018). The lack of reading and writing is not the cause of the decline because Hmong oral histories do not map onto Western idolization of literacy. While younger generations may not be literate in Hmong RPA, the ability to speak the language is more important for language continuity. The accepted Hmong RPA "gathers all the Hmong of the diaspora under the same coherent alphabet no matter the country they live in" (Ly 2020, 12). A written system for Hmong has only existed for the last seventy years and could be "a door for a journey to literacy and written communication." Maintaining one's language is central to perpetuating culture in the presence of another, more dominant culture and language (Xiong-Lor 2015, 2). While Western and Hmong linguistic values differ, my interlocutors demonstrated time and again that they value their Hmong language enough to find ways to interact with it and maintain speaking it in their capacity which is illustrated in the data examples below. Hall (2018) continues writing that someone acquiring a new skill must feel that skill has value; that person must also value the method used to teach that skill. The value of speaking and learning Hmong is demonstrated by most children speaking Hmong in the home, learning the Hmong RPA in churches, and joining culture clubs at universities.

The most common argument among previous research suggests that Hmong youth are giving up culture, language, and oral history to survive in different dominant cultures because a drive to be economically successful exists in developed societies (Xiong 2018). The desire to succeed in the dominant culture leads Hmong individuals to assimilate and reject their own culture, family, and selves at the cost of losing the ability to speak the Hmong language (Leonard, Vitrella, and Yang 2020). Hmong individuals first pursue mastery of the dominant language of their country and then return to the Hmong language in adulthood because "learning to read and write Hmong carries significant cultural capital, but does not necessarily help one economically" (Hickman 2011, 50). They seek to establish themselves economically and then continue learning Hmong by association with relatives who speak Hmong or participating in an organization where the Hmong RPA is taught.

Methods

My ethnographic research took place in a town in Northeastern Thailand called Pa Klang during a university field school from late May to early August 2022. Under the direction of Dr. Jacob Hickman, five white students, including myself, attended the field school as part of our undergraduate studies for the sociocultural anthropology major at Brigham Young University. In preparation for this trip, the five of us were required to take at least one Hmong language course. The Hmong we learned before our trip included basic conversational sentences with an emphasis on tonal pronunciation and spelling. I could briefly tell someone my name and simple statements about my American family in Hmong. None of us could speak Thai, so we relied heavily on our professor and an interpreter who lived in Pa Klang to translate. The methods I used to gather data included observations of social interactions and participation in events, interviews, and surveys.

Participation in Events

I spent a day at each of the following sites: a Hmong church service located in Pa Klang, a Hmong Christian Conference in Nan province, and the Hmong Culture Preservation Club's event at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok. I conducted participant observation and informal interviewing at the church in Pa Klang as a means to understand language use in Christian religious settings. Members of the congregation spoke only Hmong during the service, sang hymns in Hmong, and offered testimonies in Hmong after the main sermon. The larger Christian conference based in Nan actively promotes learning the Hmong RPA as part of a self-reliance program for their Hmong members. This conference is part of quarterly gatherings for church members in which members from other provinces can meet together. At Naresuan university, I conducted participant observation and informal interviewing of students as they rotated through activities focused on traditional Hmong practices, history, and language study. The language study portion was the most significant part of this site as the students in the club were all engaged in learning the Hmong RPA and practicing Hmong pronunciation.

Interviews

The second site is the town of Pa Klang where I lived and participated in interviews organized by an interpreter who is local to the main village. She is nineteen years old, currently enrolled in university, and fluent in Hmong, Thai, and English. She quickly became my main source of information about life in Pa Klang and Hmong traditional practices. After telling her about my project and my objectives, she invited community members to be interviewed. The people I interviewed were between the ages of sixteen and nineteen years old with a language ability range of fluent in both the Hmong and Thai languages to only fluent in Thai. These interviews lasted about an hour each and were recorded as a means to refer to specific interviews after I had left Thailand. The structure of the interviews started with me introducing myself in Hmong, stating my name and the purpose of interviews for my *wittiyanyppon brinyatree* or 'bachelor's thesis' in Thai (there is no Hmong equivalent to bachelor's thesis).

Surveys

Lastly, I implemented a survey with the help of my director and our interpreter to ask families about language use in their homes. We conducted a total of thirty-eight surveys in two weeks. Households were only interviewed if the members spoke Hmong in the home, therefore, all my respondents identified as ethnically Hmong. Each respondent was asked the same general questions with individual nuance based on each response. These questions focus on language use in the home, how often and when people switch between Hmong and Thai, how the respondent's personality changes when speaking certain languages, and advice the respondent has for younger generations. After the first five interviews, I added a new question asking why respondents think younger generations do not speak Hmong well.

Outcomes

Based on my interlocutors' responses, I have denoted three generational categories to show how each "generation" thinks about, talks about, and uses the Hmong language in their daily lives. I refer to these generations as younger, middle, and older. Older generations

are the "grandparent" generation, their children are the "middle" generation, and the "younger" generation is the young adults and adolescents. In the three following examples, I describe the scale of speaking ability that I found in Pa Klang. These examples show how family roles, possibilities of the future, and the influence of Thai language input affect a person's Hmong speaking ability. At the same time, the point of these stories is to also illustrate that these young people expressed that wherever their language ability is at now, they all said they want to improve their current language ability, learn the Hmong RPA, and share the language with future generations.

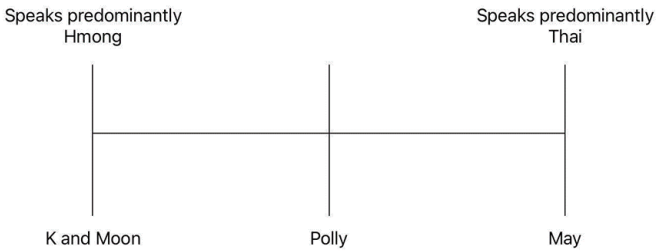

Figure 1: Scale used to illustrate the speaking ability of four participants.

Moon, K, and Gendered Familial Obligations

My first interview during my study abroad was with two teenage cousins three weeks after I arrived in Thailand. They are juniors at the high school located in Pa Klang studying math and science: Moon is female, K is male. They are on the left side of figure 1 because they speak both languages fluently and choose to speak Hmong more than Thai. We told Moon and K our names and then asked our interpreter to explain the goals of the interview. We then began our discussion about language, their roles in their families, and their thoughts about the future.

From the interview, I learned that women in the Hmong social hierarchy are not "responsible," per our interpreter's translation, for continuing Hmong surnames in their families, or the *dab qhuas* (dah kwah), which are the clan spirits that protect homes and are central pillars of Hmong religious practice. These spirits are protectors of the family physically and spiritually; If anything were to happen to the spirits, then ailments manifest amongst family members often in the form of an illness or misfortune. In Moon's case, she is not able to carry on the lineage of her clan spirits. When she marries, she is adopted into her husband's clan and receives protection from his family spirits. Although she cannot continue her family's spiritual lineage, she still wants to practice shamanism as an adult which means she will continue to participate in ceremonies organized by her family and thus continue to speak Hmong. The Hmong language will continue to be important to Moon as she fulfills her roles as a homemaker, mother, and supporter of her husband. To organize these ceremonies, build camaraderie with friends and family, and teach younger Hmong girls, she will continue to return home and participate in shamanic ceremonies and possibly start hosting ceremonies to honor her husband's spirits in their home.

K, as the oldest son, will inherit the duties and responsibilities of caring for the *dab qhuas* wherever he may be, which is customary to return to live at the family home. While he may be able to spend some time away from home studying and working, he will always be expected to return to fulfill clan duties. The only way his return would not happen is if he chose to no longer practice the Hmong religion nor honor the spirits. This decision is highly unlikely because Hmong people strongly believe that spirits can physically harm living people if they dishonor or forget about the spirits.

Several times, Moon and K mentioned that they would have to leave home to pursue education and work, and at the same time, said they would still assist in ritual ceremonies either with their parents or their future families. The overarching theme of the conversation was that while they are away, they will continue to learn and participate in Hmong customs. This theme presented itself in the way they talked about their roles in their families and their desires to learn the Hmong writing system to fortify their language skills. Although they had no specific reason for why they should know the Hmong RPA right now or later in life, they both knew that it was important for them to eventually know how to read and write it. Therefore, they recognize that they will continue to speak Hmong while also exploring

how they fit into Hmong society after succeeding economically.

Polly and the Future

Polly is in the middle of the language scale as she speaks Hmong and Thai, but she does not wish to continue traditional Hmong practices. She is nineteen years old and attends a university in Bangkok. I consider Polly an oddity in Pa Klang because she is open about her opinions about the Hmong religion, patriarchy, and Thai society in general. She is the oldest of three daughters with her parents spending their time selling meat in Bangkok. The quality that makes Polly different from other young adults her age is her ability to also speak English. She is well-informed about Western culture, especially through social media platforms and her university major, English Literature.

Because Polly believes everyone is equal and should have equal responsibility or power to govern a family, she dislikes that Hmong culture is patriarchal. She was the first one to tell me she would not be responsible for anything clan related as she is a female and is unable to care for the family's *dab qhuas*. She considers herself superstitious in that she wears a bracelet her mom said would protect her from COVID-19 and thinks bad spirits are real, but she does not believe in Hmong shamanism. Polly thinks ceremonies are too old-fashioned and unnecessary in a modern world with Western medicine available. In our interview, she said that the only thing she wants to keep from Hmong culture is the Hmong language. She said that language connects her to family, so she needs to know how to speak Hmong so that she can communicate with her parents, aunts and uncles, and her grandmother.

I had many conversations about the Hmong language with Polly, and we did an impromptu Hmong lesson where I showed her my Hmong RPA booklet. She mentioned a few times that her mom knows how to read and write in Hmong. Polly's mom tried to teach Polly the Hmong RPA when she was younger, but Polly said that trying to learn the writing systems for Hmong and Thai was too difficult as a child. After starting as our interpreter, Polly's interest in learning the Hmong RPA sparked as she had to learn new words for our projects. She started asking her mom about different words and phrases which had helped Polly to recognize and read some words. During our interview, Polly told me that she enjoys learning new Hmong words from her mom, and when Polly shows interest in learning from her mom, their relationship grows.

Despite Polly's current knowledge of Hmong cultural practices and the language, she still has more to learn. Some other classmates and I left Hmong language materials for Polly to use to learn the Hmong RPA. All her messaging (texts) communication with her mom and everyone else is in the Thai language; because she feels her relationship with her mom improves when her mom teaches her, their relationship could improve even more if they were able to message each other in the Hmong language.

May and Hmong Language Loss

May is sixteen years old and a sophomore in high school. She is the third of five daughters in her family. She is on the right side of the scale which represents the more Thai-influenced youth. She said that she can understand Hmong, but she no longer speaks Hmong. She attends the high school in the city of Pua about ten minutes outside of Pa Klang which is a more expensive school and has a Thai majority student body and faculty. The majority of her friends are Hmong, but they speak only Thai with each other mainly because May cannot speak Hmong. May hopes that when she is older, she will be able to learn to speak Hmong and learn the writing system because she wants to be able to pass the language on to her children.

Her family is Christian and does not participate in shaman ceremonies. The family attends a Christian church where the main service is in the Hmong language, but the classes for the youth are in the Thai language with Thai scriptures. The only time May and her siblings speak Hmong is when they address the elders of the congregation. However, during my interview with May, she did not seem to understand any Hmong. May's grandmother pulled up a stool a few minutes into the interview, sitting a few feet away from May. The grandmother loudly asked in Hmong, "Who are these people, and why are they here?" May looked at her grandmother confused as her

eyebrows scrunched and her mouth turned into a frown. She glanced back at Polly with wide eyes to which Polly said in Thai, “Can you understand?” Shaking her head, May said no and asked Polly to ask the grandmother to repeat the questions. We all awkwardly chuckled after Polly explained the interview to the grandmother and continued discussing why or how May “forgot” how to speak Hmong and what she recognized as Hmong culture. I say “forgot” because May told us that when she was younger, she could speak Hmong with her parents and grandparents, but when she started going to Thai school, she quickly adapted to Thai more than Hmong.

When asked why she no longer speaks Hmong, she said that she spends more time at school than at home, which increases her use of the Thai language. After a full day of speaking Thai at school during classes and with friends, May comes home and uses Thai again to speak to her parents. Despite her parents' and grandparents' fluency in Hmong and their desire for May to speak Hmong, May’s parents speak Thai to May and her siblings because the children cannot understand the Hmong language and only reply in Thai. Even though she does not speak or understand Hmong very well right now, she knows that she wants to learn to speak Hmong again and also be able to read and write. May said that her church has programs where members learn the Hmong writing system. Her parents do tell her to study Hmong and speak more Hmong so that she can pass down the language to her children. She still wants to learn the language eventually because it will always be part of her and her family.

One of the objectives of my interviews was to understand how language facilitates communication and self-expression; however, based on this research, the Western concept of internal identity is not a significant factor in how Hmong individuals in Pa Klang think about themselves. During May’s interview, I tried to ask her about her identity as a Hmong-born individual in Thailand, who only speaks Thai, specifically, if certain pieces of her routine or lifestyle are strictly Thai or Hmong. This question was difficult for May to answer because she does not think about her identity in ethnic categories. Instead, she told us about how she values being a good person and following what God says in the scriptures. She thinks of herself as Hmong because she was born to Hmong parents, and she also thinks of herself as Thai because she grew up in Thailand.

Why Their Stories Matter

Moon and K’s stories reflect Norton’s (2005) definition of identity, specifically relating to how they see themselves in the future and accept their familial roles in adulthood. Moon and K up to this point in their lives recognize the possibilities of their futures as ways to develop economically but also culturally. Their perceived roles as female and male members of a Hmong community are explicit from birth demonstrated by their sense of obligation to continue caring for their families and participating in shamanic ritual gatherings. While Xiong (2018) argues that Hmong youth are giving up culture, language, and Hmong history as a means to be successful. Moon and K's experiences show they are still connected to their culture, language, and history contradicts Xiong (2018). Moon and K demonstrate their connections to Hmong culture through their knowledge of shamanic practices and by speaking Hmong.

Polly is the inverse of Moon and K in that her identity is not guided by her role in a Hmong community as she feels no obligation to participate in ceremonies or traditional activities, such as New Year’s or rituals for family members. Her future is somewhat focused on economic prosperity but more for her to be alone and away from Hmong villages. She is definitive in her statements that her only connection to Hmong culture will be her ability to speak the language. In Polly’s case, as she moves away from Pa Klang and starts to speak Hmong less, she made her stance clear that she will always be connected to the Hmong language as a way to stay connected to her parents and other older relatives. Polly’s words suggest that she is assimilating or adopting the mindset of the dominant Thai society, yet her interactions with her mother specifically show that Polly is learning the importance of the Hmong language and the writing system. While Polly’s exposure to Western ideals through English has created a divergent attitude about

Hmong culture compared to other Hmong peoples her age, she still comes back to Hmong as her first language and Hmong roots.

May's story is evidence of the possibility of Hmong language loss among the youth as she currently does not speak any Hmong and has very little Hmong input in her day-to-day life. May shows considerable signs of Hmong language loss as she cannot speak and understands little Hmong. However, I propose that if May were to start learning the Hmong writing system right now, she would be able to recover her language skills more easily than someone learning Hmong outside of a Hmong village. May is still immersed in the Hmong language in Pa Klang and could regain her Hmong language skills, but if she continues to primarily speak, read, and write in Thai, she is likely to lose all linguistic connections with the Hmong language. While her parents desire for her and her siblings to speak Hmong, they continue to speak Thai with their children, limiting the amount of Hmong spoken between the middle and younger generations.

Having said that, despite the evidence of language attrition in Pa Klang, it is not caused solely by youth dismissing Hmong culture. Some of the factors that contribute to the loss of Hmong language fluency stem from the parents who do not use Hmong in the home, increased Thai input during school, and the general side effect of assimilating into a more dominant culture. Youth in the United States are surrounded by Western ideals of individualism and capitalism. Hmong and Thai cultures are somewhat similar, so the result of language loss is not due to giving up cultural identity but not having enough structured language exposure during childhood. The Hmong language continues to be an identifying marker for the Hmong people and a skill more people desire. I advance Hickman's (2011) cultural capital claim that if opportunities were available for people to be literate in Hmong during childhood and young adulthood, more people would likely maintain their language because of the increased connections to family and daily life.

Language Acquisition in Churches

On a hot Sunday morning in late July, two other students and I went to a local Hmong Christian church to observe their Sunday services. We did not know much about this particular place except that it is the only Christian church still active in Pa Klang. The building was across town, past the lake, nestled between houses and shops. The only sign I could use to identify it as a church is a cross painted on the wall near the roof. On days other than Sunday, I rarely saw anyone go in or out of the building. Sometimes, there was a pickup truck parked under the carport, but for the most part, it did not look like people visited often.

To our surprise, we walked up to the door and noticed the front patio adorned with shoes. As we walked in, a medium-sized room full of people turned to look at us, most likely an unconscious human behavior of looking towards noise but not acknowledging it. Our arrival had people doing double takes to process the new attendees of the meeting. I slipped into a pew with my classmate right as the pastor began addressing the congregation in the Hmong language. While the pastor talked, more people started to look at us in the small pew. After a few sentences, the pastor stopped and stared at us. He looked like he was waiting for a response, but neither my friend nor I understood all of what he was saying to know how to respond. Our response included awkward smiles and small waves because we assumed after a few minutes he had welcomed us or mentioned us as visitors like most other congregations do when new people participate in the services. He looked a little confused, so he turned to someone on the stage behind him. A man in the far-right corner of the stage, holding a guitar, looked up as someone else handed the man the microphone. In English, he welcomed us and asked us to introduce ourselves. He also mentioned that they do not receive visitors often, so everyone in the room was excited to see us. We briefly introduced ourselves in Hmong, including our names and that we were students writing our undergraduate theses, and sat down.

During the service, the hymns and testimonies were in the Hmong language. The main sermon was in Thai because, as I was later told by another church member, that particular preacher is ethnically Thai and does not speak Hmong. The lyrics for the hymns were displayed

on a TV so people could follow along reading the lyrics or memorize the lyrics without needing to read. A kind woman came and translated the meeting for us. We asked her if anyone could read the lyrics on the screen. She said that, over time, people get used to seeing the Hmong words on the screen, so they associate the words they sing with the words written on the screen.

From talking with our translator friend more, I found out that her family is responsible for the church. Her brother is the main director and the rest of her family participate in the music and teaching. She told us that she is a teacher and tutors her nieces and other kids to speak English. I thought that her teaching her nieces English was interesting as I knew English was already taught at the high school level. She commented that her English lessons were a way to supplement their English learned at school because the three of them already spoke Hmong and Thai fluently. To better understand this focus on English, we asked if children also learn to read and write in Hmong if they already know how to speak; she said yes. As part of the children's Sunday school activities, the teachers teach the children to read and write Hmong. This church is the only location in the village that I know of where the Hmong language is taught formally to younger people.

Similar to the events at the church in Pa Klang, we also attended a Hmong Christian conference in Nan. This specific church uses previously recorded sermons to teach its lessons. The original pastor of the church was from South Korea, and all of his sermons are in Korean. Now, there are numerous dubbed translations of these sermons, so virtually anyone can listen and attend. When we observed the room designated for Hmong individuals, some attendees had the Bible translated into Hmong and others had Thai translations. Throughout the video sermon, scriptural references appeared written in Hmong. Later, we spoke with two of the organizers of the conference, and they said that the leaders of the church have emphasized learning languages, martial arts, and self-sustaining practices in finances and gardening to support a self-sufficient lifestyle.

From my experiences at the church and the conference, I could see that while Hmong reading and writing are not necessarily focused on, there is a level of importance in learning the writing system. Because Thai is the economic language, my interlocutors in Thailand focus on fluency in Thai during their educational years to have higher education as well as participate in the workforce to grow wealth. For my older generation interlocutors, higher education is not the focus of their lives, but establishing income and working are important factors that often lead to fluency in Thai. Therefore, the church leadership is not teaching language for economic skills but rather increasing the number of people capable of reading and writing in their native language. Within the community, people are trying to expand literacy in a small and direct way, which seems like a way for the church to attract potential converts as more young people and anyone else benefit from literacy in Hmong in a religious setting.

Hmong Culture Preservation Club at Naresuan University

A few weeks before the end of the field school, the program director taught a brief session as part of a culture club activity at a university located in Phitsanulok, Thailand. This university is in a heavily Hmong-populated area and attracts Hmong students elsewhere in the country to attend. As such, Hmong university-aged youth feel more comfortable moving away from home if there are restaurants and people close by with similar backgrounds. Although the majority of the club members are ethnically Hmong, about 122, a few of the Thai students also participate. The event we attended included a section about Hmong culture taught by a Hmong shaman from Pa Klang and a brief history lesson taught by Dr. Hickman.

Following lunch, all the students returned to the long classroom. The club leaders handed out a pre-test as students walked through the doors and took a seat. Two of my classmates, a previous field school student living in Thailand, and I sat in the back of the long room. This third lecture was dedicated to teaching all of the club members the basics of the Hmong RPA. We each received a test that was about twenty questions to take before the lecture as a way to test what we already knew about the RPA. All of

the questions were written in the Thai language, so I used Google Translate to figure out the questions and answers, marking my answers as I went. After everyone took the first test, the first lecturer and shaman from before began teaching us the consonant sounds and examples of Hmong words. On a separate sheet, we had a chart with each consonant section and a vowel section. Going through the boxes, the shaman asked the students to write the closest Thai consonant or vowel sound beside the Hmong letter. My classmates and I answered each box with the English equivalents we learned in our Hmong classes.

At the end of the class, we retook the exam to see if we had improved. Many of the students exclaimed as the club leaders projected the correct answers on the televisions throughout the classroom. Some students jumped out of their seats when they got the answers right, other students sighed when they got the answers wrong. We all laughed when students would try to argue with the teacher about the right and wrong answers. From what I could understand through body language and comparisons of answer sheets to other students, it looked like the students had improved their scores compared to the pre-test. The students who were not satisfied with their scores started to ask more questions which prompted a discussion between the students and the teacher. One of the older club members would stand up when the students got too loud, which resulted in the older student writing new examples on the board, pronouncing the word, and having the students repeat. Through those simple clarifications, the class would quiet down and then the cycle would start again if they had more questions.

The participation of around one hundred students is evidence that younger generations in Thailand do want to learn more about the Hmong culture, history, and language compared to research in the United States (Leonard, Vitrella, and Yang 2020). It also demonstrates the younger generations are self-motivated to seek out opportunities to teach others and to continue to learn after leaving home. One of the students friended me on Facebook, so I asked him later why he chose this specific university. He told me that he knew about the Hmong Culture Preservation Club before applying, and it made him want to apply. In his own words, "I joined the club because it is a community of Hmong people and there are many activities that make us closer." He continued saying that other races of students join the club, so he can learn from them, too. Hmong youth are aware of and seek out opportunities to feel closer to their people which shows they value the skill (Hall 2018). This club creates a fun extracurricular for the students, promotes Hmong culture, and is an outlet for students to learn while at university, creating another door for Hmong literacy and written communication — something not often possible during primary school.

Language as a Connection to the Past

Polly, my classmate, and I biked around Pa Klang as we did surveys. We mostly focused on houses located in the town where it only took five minutes or less to travel. Upon reviewing the map and noticing we did not have many dots left in town, Polly suggested a house away from town and surrounded by fields. The concrete road turned into a gravel road and then turned into a muddy dirt road that went through two rectangular plots of land. In the corner of one of the plots was a concrete house behind a wire fence. An older gentleman was crouched down working in a garden. A middle-aged woman sat on the long porch with a little girl still in her school uniform. As we walked up the driveway, Polly politely announced our arrival and asked if either the man or the woman would like to participate in the survey.

Immediately, the woman welcomed us up onto the porch, giving us each a small chair to sit on. At the same time as she was welcoming us, she apologized because she does not speak the Hmong language very well, so she might not be able to answer all the questions. I understood that much because I often found myself saying something similar. We sat with her as she told us about her family and how she has been staying at her older brother's house for a few months. The man working in the yard is her father and the girl is her niece. She went through other members of the family living in the house and never faltered in her Hmong speaking as we transitioned to the survey questions. The background questions are

simple and repetitive, which may have eased our respondent's fears about answering the questions clearly in Hmong. Yet, the more telling part of our conversation came when she perfectly answered the free-response questions while speaking Hmong.

Four months after this interview, I finally found out what she was describing when answering language-specific questions. She said she most often lives in Thai cities away from the Hmong villages, and, when she comes home, she has to readjust to speaking Hmong. She said that even though it is difficult for her to adjust back to speaking Hmong, the language comes back quickly because her parents only speak Hmong. She described that her relationship with her parents specifically changes when she speaks Thai and when she speaks Hmong. If her parents cannot understand her while she speaks Thai, she feels distant and disconnected. Therefore, she has to speak Hmong to communicate with her parents. She said, "if you speak Thai to them and they do not understand it, then the relationship is not as good. You are not as close to them. But when you speak Hmong, then they will understand, and you are closer and more related." She continued saying that, during her childhood, if a person did not know something about the language or life, they could ask their parents. Nowadays, people rely on technology for answers, which has distanced older generations from younger generations.

At thirty-five years old, this woman recognizes that her ability to speak Hmong is intimately connected to her relationship with her parents. This idea came up in most of my other surveys as people often described needing to know how to speak Hmong to communicate with the elders. The theme of speaking Hmong as a necessity came up more often than reading and writing Hmong because if families can still speak to each other in the same language, then reading and writing are not always necessary. Many of the respondents advised the younger generation that they must learn to read and write the Hmong language because it connects younger and older people and helps solidify cultural teachings "because that is ours" and "if [we] do not study and practice, in the long run, we are going to lose [the language]. And this is very worrisome." Despite the threat of loss, people in Pa Klang are still capable of Hmong language acquisition because of relatives, places for Hmong language learning like the church, and a dedication to remembering the language which helps preserve traditions and culture for future generations.

As explained to me by my interlocutors, Hmong culture is defined as the language, playing the *qeej* ('gang') and the drum, *kwv txhiaj* ('kuh ts-e-ah'), ceremonies and rituals, such as *hu plig* ('who plea'), *ua neeb* ('oo-ah nang'), New Year's celebrations, and the care for the ancestors, especially during funerals. For the majority of my respondents, the ability to speak the Hmong language in the future is of utmost importance. The language advice was generally followed by knowing and understanding Hmong culture. One respondent said that if younger generations can adapt and adjust to preserve the Hmong language, then they will be prepared to survive and thrive in the future. Another respondent remarked, "it is okay to learn [the Thai] language and culture, but we still have to keep some of our language and culture, too. We have to remember that we are Hmong." The surveys reinforce that language is central to Hmong ethnic identity in Pa Klang because it connects the community's past, present, and future.

Conclusion

Several of my interlocutors expressed that because of modernity they feel like their traditional agrarian lifestyle is dying out because younger generations do not participate in farming or handmade embroideries, nor do they want to. It could be considered that the Hmong language is one of the only things still connecting younger generations to older generations because younger people tend to only know enough to speak politely with the elders. Younger people who are confident in their Hmong speaking abilities often have stricter Hmong-speaking households as well as a personal dedication to knowing the language for the future. While education is a factor that contributes to language attrition, it also pushes younger generations to seek higher education possibly as a return to their parents to earn more money, be independent, and be members

of Thai society. Once they achieve those goals, younger generations can return to their roots and begin immersing themselves in the Hmong language and religion.

The Hmong language connects my interlocutors in Pa Klang to each other and allows family members in other countries to continue to be connected through a shared language and culture. The Hmong language gathers the Hmong diaspora to understand a coherent alphabet (Ly 2012). Even if the older generations are not literate because the language is relatively new, all generations can be brought together through the Hmong RPA. The desire to continue speaking the language is motivated by their family ties as they want to speak with older members of the family as well as pass on the language to their children. Pa Klang in particular possibly has a higher chance of language development as it is a Hmong community where the Hmong language saturates daily life. Language maintenance and language loss differ in Thailand compared to the United States because Hmong-Thai do not need to reject their culture to be successful. Even though discrimination is present and a hindrance for Hmong people, my interlocutors are proud of their heritage and recognize the benefits of being bilingual, especially in economic settings. It is possible that, over time, sites for Hmong language acquisition will become more prevalent in Thailand and allow more people to become literate in Hmong. For now, those sites comprise small churches and university clubs.

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Half-Asian? Half-Valid?: An Autoethnographic Account of the Situational Mixed-race Experience

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study uses the researcher's personal racialized experiences to illuminate the complexities of being mixed-race. Understanding one's own identity is crucial to positioning oneself in the world and experiencing one's surroundings. For mixed-race individuals, understanding oneself becomes more difficult and nuanced as compared to monoracial groups. The mixed experience is marked with struggles with racial ambiguity, rejection from racial communities, and racial performativity. Feelings, including invalidation, self-doubt, discrimination, and longing for community often arise, prompting an investigation as to what it feels like to carry a mixed-race identity. This study contributes to the field of race and identity studies, exploring mixed-race identity from a first-hand perspective. Through three main frames of analysis: 1) perception of mixed-race by others, 2) internalization of invalidity, and 3) understanding the contextuality of the mixed identity, this paper delves into how identity is constructed uniquely for mixed-race individuals. Findings from this paper provide insight to the situational experience of mixed-race individuals.

Keywords: mixed-race, racial ambiguity, everyday racism, autoethnography

What are you? *A girl*. No, what are you? Uh, *I'm six years old*. No, what are you? *Asian and white?* Is that what you're asking? Yeah! But no, you *can't* be Asian. Your eyes aren't small enough. You look Mexican. *Well, my dad is from the Philippines and my mom is white, from Oklahoma.* No! You look Hispanic and your last name also sounds Mexican! Everyone, doesn't she look Hispanic? She can't be Asian!

From the age of six, I was already being questioned about my identity. My innocent kindergartener friends would notice that I did not 'look like anything' to them and would berate me with propositions of what my ethnic background appeared to be for them. I have stood on the sidelines of infinite debates about whether I look Asian or Hispanic (which people on either side feel oddly passionate about), not knowing what to say after my input about my true ethnic composition had been ignored.

Eventually, I made a game out of it myself. Asking people "where do you think I am from?" has almost become a fun party trick for me. I never really took offense to all the background murmur about my identity, and it seems as though I internalized my ambiguity enough to use it for clout. I guess if everyone else were going to make a joke about how I don't look like my ethnicity, I may as well be the one posing it.

As I grow older and have encountered more and more incidents of discrimination based on my racialized identity, I have grown tired of these games. It feels like there is no need to add another dimension of invalidation to my mixed-race experience—I can only hear "but you don't look Asian!" so many times. At different stages of my life, I have paused and looked inwards to hopefully reveal the answer to the looming question in the back of my mind: What are you? And honestly, many times I have come up short.

With people constantly in my ear telling me what I am and claiming I am not what I say, it becomes difficult to differentiate what my 'truth' really is. I question myself: Am I minimizing my Asian features with this makeup? Am I overcompensating for my 'lack of culture' by acting like I have more ties to Asian culture than I do? Does my background as an American with a white mom render me incompetent to speak on racial issues? These questions are a direct result of my identity as mixed-race—an identity that is almost contested by people constantly pushing me into boxes.

Being mixed-race comes with different struggles than those of monoracial people. Issues such as identity formation, feeling a sense of belonging in a community, and familial relations all become more difficult with a combination of ethnicities. Assumed safe havens for identity, such as family or ethnic student associations, become negotiated territory for mixed-race individuals, as their membership is always contingent. Thus, the idea for this research was sparked.

Purpose and Relevance

Through this paper, I present an autoethnographic case of first-hand experience of being a mixed-race Asian American living across two continents: North America and Europe. I aim to research the mixed experience through discussing prior theory and providing my own experiences. Seeing that mixed-race identity is relatively new and that in both of my countries of residence we are such a small minority, this topic feels incredibly important to shed light on. Self-identifying multiracial individuals make up only 6.9% of the U.S. population—a category which was not added to the census until 2000 (Parker et al. 2015; U.S. Census Bureau 2023). In the Netherlands, racial demographic information is not presently available—thus, mixed-race is not yet considered a racial category. Future generations are predicted to have higher demographics of multiracial-identifying individuals, making research on understanding the mixed experience increasingly important

(Parker et al. 2015).

While the literature on mixed-race identities is a rapidly growing field, autoethnographic studies remain few. Furthermore, being mixed-race and living across two continents provides new and valuable insight to the true contextuality of the mixed identity—something seldom researched. This study can be used to delve further into international comparisons of the treatment of racial differences, helping to obtain a proper understanding of a country's policies and attitudes towards race through understanding first-hand experiences.

More personally, writing a paper about the experiences of being mixed-race feels empowering and validating to the struggles that I (and other mixed-race people) have gone through. Hearing other stories from mixed-race authors or discovering research over mixed-race struggles has always felt comforting and made me feel seen. Representation, even in academia, can provide groups with feelings of validation. Moreover, writing from first-hand experience on a niche identity allows for those outside of the mixed-race identity to more deeply understand what it entails to be mixed. Therefore, through contributing to the pool of mixed-race literature, I aspire to change perspectives on mixed-race experiences and shed light on the complexities of such an identity.

Methodology

To conduct this research, autoethnographic methods were used. Autoethnography can be understood as a mix between traditional ethnography and narrative methods. It includes the researcher's feelings, experiences, and opinions in the scope of research, using this data to study and explain social phenomena (Cooper and Lilyea 2022; Poulos 2021). Through an analysis of self, autoethnographies illuminate societal practices and how they manifest on a micro level (Poulos 2021). Thus, autoethnography fosters a deeper cultural understanding of self and others (Chang 2008). In the context of this research, autoethnography was the most suitable method. An analysis of self translates to an analysis of the entire social group—illuminating the experiences of identity and struggles for mixed-race people in society.

For data collection, I primarily utilized self-written memos on my personal experiences with race and discrimination. Coincidentally, I have kept journals of my daily experiences since May 2019, providing raw data on my feelings and experiences in the moments of certain incidents with my racial identity. I was additionally able to retrieve raw data in the form of Instagram posts, where I detail my feelings regarding my identity following specific events or conversations on the topic. Through adopting the suggested method of Cooper and Lilyea (2022) to 'over-include' in the data collection process, I have not left out any feelings and allowed myself post-collection to sift through and pick out the most significant findings. Prior to the writing process, I began writing detailed memos covering my feelings and experiences at different stages of my life, which make up most of the data that is analyzed here.

Finally, the autoethnographic process can also be incredibly transformative for the author (Chang 2008). Autoethnography has offered me the opportunity to study and understand my own feelings. I could position myself and reassure my own identity throughout the writing process, changing my own life through conducting research. Reading and analyzing prior theory through the lens of my personal stories has both called my assumptions into question and affirmed my identity, making it so I am not only research*ing*, but *being* researched. Overall, the process of data collection, literature review, and data analysis has enabled me to reflect on and understand my racial identity on a level I had not yet achieved.

Theoretical Background

Understanding Identity

Identity and ethnicity are terms central to this research and thus warrant a definition and explanation of their significance. As explained by Lawler (2015), identity refers to a plethora of phenomena: how one sees themselves, how others perceive them, one's reactions to those perceptions, and one's relations to social categories. While all of these reflect one's

identity, they are not inherently the same; perceptions of self (personal identity) may be vastly different from perception by others (social identity). Thus, our social identity, or an identity one has via connections to social categories, is primarily positioned upon us based on our physical features (Lawler 2015). One component of one's social identity is their ethnic group, determined by perceived ethnicity.

Ethnicity, a component of our identities, relates to our cultural heritage or background. It can be defined as a "context-specific, social construct…that describes group characteristics (e.g., culture, nativity) and…indexes a group's location within a social hierarchy (e.g., minority vs. majority status)" (Ford and Harawa 2010, 1). Ethnicity differs from race in the different categories that can be embodied but is related in that ethnic groups are often perceived to fall under a few racial boxes including Black, White, Asian, Latino, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous. These categories differ depending on national contexts, but the present research focused on American racial differentiations.

Further, ethnicity is largely emotional. Understanding our identity allows us to understand ourselves, and ethnic background allows us to understand our cultural roots and what ties us to our family or cultural community (if applicable). This process of identity formation and understanding is a task we are met with starting in early childhood, as we subconsciously strive for cohesion and sense of self. Ethnic-racial identity, or ERI, has become an indicator of the strength of one's connection to their identity. It "encompasses the process and content that defines an individual's sense of self related to ethnic heritage and racial background, [including] labels individuals use to define themselves according to ethnicity/race; awareness, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge they have about their ethnic-racial background" (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). Several studies have looked at the impacts of high and low ERI, crystallizing the emotional impact of having a strong sense of ethnic identity. In a 2022 study, ERI was found to be a salient dimension of stable sense of self among adolescents (Booth et al. 2022). Further, high ERI was proven to moderate adolescents' self-esteem and reactions to (racial) discrimination (Marks et al 2015). Evidently, knowing where one belongs is a critical step in coming to terms with oneself.

Specifically, indications of a sense of belonging to a racial or ethnic group proved to be of great importance among youth of color (Lee et al. 2022). The positive impacts of belonging manifested themselves in higher academic achievements, greater self-worth, greater coping abilities with racial stress, and fewer depressive symptoms for college students of color (Lee et al. 2022). Moreover, Lardier (2018) analyzed the experiences of Black and Hispanic youth in their identities, finding that belonging in and participating in an identity-based community increased psychological empowerment. Thus, an understanding of oneself can influence belonging and community involvement, which is important in youth development and empowerment.

Questions of Mixed Identity and Belonging

Mixed-race individuals, or those with multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds, undergo different identity formation or understanding processes than monoracial groups. Due to racial ambiguity — one's appearance not adhering to the standards of any race completely — mixed-race people often have more difficulties grasping their ethnic identity. This lack of self-understanding coupled with possible rejection by their own in-groups creates an interesting space for mixed-race groups — one of negotiated territory. To understand the experiences of mixed-race individuals in coming to terms with their identities, the following section reviews prior literature and theory on mixed-race struggles.

Ambiguity

As previously discussed, physical appearances play a large role in how identity is interpreted (Lawler 2015). Thus, when physical appearances are *mis*interpreted, individuals' understanding of themselves may rupture. For mixed-race people specifically, phenotypic features can play an important role in identity, considering that 'what are you?' questions are commonplace in their everyday lives (Paragg 2017). With their ambiguous appearance, the ethnicity or race of mixed-race individuals may not be clear to onlookers. This is especially the

case considering many people may conceptualize race as an either/or dichotomy, rendering mixed faces as ambiguous or an outlier because they do not fit the norm (Chen and Hamilton 2012). Then, when such dichotomized racialized identities are projected onto such people, social identity may not align with personal or ego identity. Not only can this incompatibility create feelings of crisis within the individual, but the ambiguity of the individual causes them to be categorized as out -group members.

Willadsen-Jensen and Ito (2006) studied the social categorization of mixed-race Asian ambiguous faces by monoracial individuals. Findings indicated that in cases where social category membership was ambiguous, individuals were classified as out-group members (Willadsen-Jensen and Ito, 2006). Even in cases where faces were initially perceived as similar to white faces, they were not viewed as *explicitly* white and thus were differentiated from both Asian and white groups (Willadsen-Jensen and Ito 2006). Racially ambiguous faces were then categorized in neither group, but as some differentiated 'Other.'

Membership

Regarding belonging and positioning oneself in an ethnic community, it is not uncommon for mixed-race individuals to experience rejection. With racial ambiguity and standards of acceptance to an ethnic group, membership may be denied based on not being 'enough' of the ethnicity at hand. Racial community boundaries may be abstract and hard to define, but certainly mixed-race individuals have negotiated claims to these communities at best —often not being considered a part of the in-group at all (Campion 2019). This is what Campion (2019) referred to as 'horizontal hostility,' or the process of boundary making that places mixed-race individuals outside of the imagined racial space. Living without membership in a community then has negative impacts on individuals and their self-perception of identity, calling attention to another deep struggle of being mixed-race.

Within racial groups, certain standards are subconsciously in place that regulate who is considered an insider vs. outsider (Tate 2005). These standards can include linguistic background, cultural habits, religious affiliation, and physical traits. For example, Tate (2005) found that the Black community finds unification in mutuality, identification, and feeling. Further, admittance into this community relies on bearing the marks of the collective, being recognized and accepted by others, and surrendering oneself to the identity (Tate 2005). Therefore, membership into a community is largely dependent on the perceptions of and recognition by others. Here, issues may arise for mixed-race groups, as recognition is never guaranteed.

Phenotypic ambiguity is one of the primary predictors of rejection of membership to a racial community. Acceptance of ethnic authenticity may require certain physical features, such as hair type or skin color (Gilbert 2005). Evidently, these qualifications of membership are not accommodating to the visual spectrum of being mixed-race, leading to rejection of membership because of physical features. Mixed-race people's physical ambiguity may render them different from the rest of their ethnic in-group, giving the perception of allegiances or alignment to other out-groups more so than the in-group (Franco and Holmes 2017). Going further than ambiguity, mixed-race people are often also rejected because of not being 'enough' to be seen as an insider.

As proposed by Tate (2005), exclusionary practices by racial communities often leave mixed-race people to fend for themselves, without acceptance of their identity. Tate posed the question: "What could 'the Black community' be for those who are denied a place within it because of the exclusionary practices of a Black politics of skin?" (Tate 2005, 152). Interviewees in Tate's research also held that their 'in-group' has directly caused them feelings of alienation or self-doubt, vilifying racial communities for their exclusionary tendencies. The central question of membership seems to ask 'who is *really* x identity,' which can invalidate the identities of mixed-race individuals by assuming that being mixed is not enough (Tate 2005). It seems that the power is in the hands of the 'wholes' rather than the 'halves,' as the "declaration of one's ethnicity is an insufficient explanation to

resolve others' preconceived notions of racial phenotypes" (Asami Smith 2021, 1). Accepted members of an ethnic community are given the pedestal to deem one worthy (or not) of membership—causing mixed-race individuals to be left with no community.

Not only do mixed-race people experience rejection from their ethnic groups, but they also are forced to live in a gray area of being 'not enough.' Asami Smith (2021) wrote on her experiences discussing racial issues as a mixed-race Asian and white woman:

> I found myself in a double-bind: I was simultaneously perceived as too white to carry my own traumas surrounding racism, yet too yellow and too Other to explain racism without it coming off as an out-group accusation of wrongdoing. (42)

Neither community of Asami Smith's identity groups accepted her as their own, leading her to not be categorized as anything but othered, too much, or not enough. Therefore, Asami Smith found herself in a forcefully 'neutral' zone, not granted membership to her identity in-groups. This is what Franco and Holmes (2017) would refer to as racial homelessness, or the lack of a racial home. A racial home provides one with "belonging, identity development, and a place to cope with racial stressors," giving one an identity and community to feel at home with (Franco and Holmes 2017, 13). A lack of such racial home (or being in this gray area) then hampers mixed-race people's psychological well-being and hinders their racial identity development (Asami Smith 2021; Franco and Holmes 2017).

Evidently, lack of admittance of membership into racial communities leaves mixed-race people in a gray area, missing the sense of belonging that they crave (Asami Smith 2021; Tate 2005). Lacking a community and sense of belonging, it is also common for mixed-race people to overcompensate and perform their race while seeking validation by their respective in-groups.

Racial Performativity

Just as Judith Butler (1993) famously claimed that gender is performed, many authors have deduced that race or ethnicity are similarly performed rather than being natural. Racial performativity thus explains the phenomena in which race or ethnicity is "something that has to be acted out and constantly reproduced in everyday life" (Clammer 2015, 2159). Meaning is given to race through performances including clothing, hairstyles, accents, music taste, and even body language (Clammer 2015). These performances then grant one's membership into racial groups, as we subconsciously label others, categorizing them into racial categories. With this, we may perform (or over perform) our race in accordance with societal standards to conform or fit in.

Racial performativity is also highly contextual. Fitting into one's race may mean completely different things in different cultural contexts, meaning monoracial and multiracial people alike may have to adapt their performance to their settings. In a 2023 study on Black and mixed-Black women's hairstyling practices, it was found that women often changed their hairstyles in accordance with their ethnic surroundings (Lukate and Foster 2023). Hair proved itself to be a significant indicator of ethnic performance. For example, participant Kimberly explained how when she visited the United States, she began to straighten her hair regularly, whereas in her home country of Germany, she did not feel the pressure to keep her hair straight to fit in (Lukate and Foster 2023). So, based on the cultural context of one's surroundings, one performs their ethnicity differently to conform. For mixed-race groups, this is highly relevant, as there may be more pressure to perform to ameliorate chances of acceptance.

Conformation to the norms of a racial community determines how one experiences themselves as insiders or outsiders to the community (Tate 2005). As indicated in research by Tate (2005), Black biracial participants are rejected by or feel ostracized in the Black community because they lack 'complete conformity' to the group. Franco and Holmes (2017) suggested a complex relationship "whereby Biracial people may simultaneously be rejected as and pressured to be [more of their race]" (Franco and Holmes 2017, 13). This dynamic puts pressure on mixed-race people to prove their worth through presenting

themselves as 'more' of their own race(s). Therefore, racial performativity becomes over-performativity in a sense, as individuals overcompensate to seek validation.

Campion (2019) further reported on racial performativity through the example of interviewee Anthony, a biracial Black and white man. Within his (mostly Black) social circle, Anthony got teased for being mixed-race, as his friends would make negative comments about him being light-skin or having a white mom (Campion 2019). Due to his exclusion in Black circles growing up, Anthony decided, "From now on I'm only going out with Black or mixed girls—simple as that" (Campion 2019, 208). To gain full membership to the Black community, Anthony felt the need to alter his performance in whom he interacted with and dated, exemplifying the hoops that mixed people must jump through to be considered an insider.

Overcompensation, or actively trying to prove your ethnic identity through conforming to the norms of a community, proves to be a common experience for mixed-race individuals. The mixed experience is lived on negotiated territory, and acceptance into racial communities is dependent on recognition and validation by the in-group. Therefore, it only follows that a longing for belonging would result in racial performativity to finally be accepted into the desired community.

Through exploring the implications of identity and ethnicity on well-being and growth, it has been established that the feelings of self and others largely impact how individuals understand themselves. Following this, mixed-race people undergo different processes in forming their identities, as they are confronted with issues with racial ambiguity, membership, and racial performativity to experience belonging. Overall, identity is incredibly important for how individuals conduct their lives, making it crucial to understand what identity can mean for those with multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Through the process of researching this topic, my own experiences have been immensely relevant. The mixed-race experience is one that is my own—these struggles are not news to me but rather researched descriptions of my lived experiences. Thus, to provide insight into these experiences and illuminate the ins and outs of mixed-race life, the next section illustrates my personal experiences and how they can be applied to research on all mixed-race identifying individuals.

Self-Analysis

My father grew up in the Philippines, having 100% Filipino ancestry and cultural background. He moved to the United States when he was a 21-years-old on a scholarship to study in Washington, D.C. A couple of years later, he met my mother in Washington, D.C. My mother is fully White, having distant German and Irish ancestry but primarily identifying as a White American. I am the youngest of three kids and lived my entire life in Dallas, Texas, until moving to the Netherlands to attend university (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Family photo, 2004. Photo courtesy of the author.

To put my experiences into context, it is crucial to provide some background about my social situation. Growing up and throughout high school, I lived in an incredibly ethnically diverse area. My high school of almost 2,500 students had 88.4% minority enrollment, meaning I was always immersed in diversity (U.S. News & World Report 2022). I had only one or two white friends, and my closest friends were Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Indian, Thai, Mexican, and Indian-Mexican. At different points in my teenage years, I operated within primarily Asian spaces, as the program I was in at my school had a large Asian presence. This drastically changed when moving to the Netherlands. Here, I can count the number of

persons of color (POC) students I know on one hand, only really being close to two or three POC total (some of whom I specifically sought out because of their racial background). On a daily basis, I may not even speak to another POC, and I function in almost entirely white spaces.

My ethnic composition is half Filipino and half White (ethnically German and Irish, which I have no cultural connection to), thus making me biracial. I interpret my own identity primarily as a racialized one (Asian), but also feel connected to my Filipino ancestry because of my cultural experiences. I would not identify as White, because I feel that this is reductionist to my vast experiences as a POC. Being White is still a part of my identity, as it has defined my experiences, but I have never felt that I would identify as monoracially white. I would, however, consider myself Asian and would say that I fit in more with Asian groups (when accepted). Though at the forefront of my identity, I hold that I am mixed, feeling both Asian and white rather than exclusively one or the other.

Having a mixed-race identity means innumerable instances of questioning one's identity. From early childhood, questions of who I am have hovered over my consciousness. The perceptions of others have permeated my own sense of self, causing misunderstandings even internally. Following the misconstrued perceptions of others, I have internalized such inaccuracies, questioning my own membership in the communities I felt that I belonged to. With these feelings following me around throughout all stages of life, I have come to several realizations and have begun to understand my positioning in society. Thus, the following section discusses my own experience being mixed-race, providing an account of the struggles of mixed-race individuals.

I have chosen to discuss my experiences in three main parts: perception, internalization, and status. First, the gaze of the 'wholes' is discussed, or how monoracial people perceive my identity or who I am. Second, I write on the impact of such perceptions to my internal self-image, causing me to overperform my race. Finally, I note the contextual and situational status of mixed-race identities from my perspective, prompting a conclusion on how one can interpret the experiences of being mixed-race.

Perception: The Gaze of the 'Wholes'

My ethnicity has been a topic of debate for as long as I can remember. Whether it was at school, family gatherings, or in random public spaces, people around me always felt the need to discuss what I looked like. Indian? Mexican? Vietnamese? Brazilian? Thai? There was never an agreement on 'what I was,' and answers were seldom accurate. My racial ambiguity has subjected me to countless questions of 'what are you?,' with comments that I 'look more ___' and 'no, you can't be!' In fact, even when explicitly laying out my ethnic heritage, I was often told I was wrong, because my physical appearance did not fit what others thought it should have. I felt I was always under the jurisdiction of other people's power and gaze, them having the right to tell me who I am. I wanted to be able to define myself but was simultaneously denied this right, leading me to take the perceptions of others to heart. Thus, one of the most significant parts of the mixed experience is the lack of belonging prompted by rejections from in-groups.

Rejection from In-Groups

My claims to my identity seem to always be made on negotiated territory. Who I claim to be is almost never who others see me as, giving power to others to define my identity and categorize me accordingly. Not only were outsiders telling me what I was and was not, but those who I would consider insiders would do the same—rejecting me as one of them.

Though I tend to not even categorize myself as White, it is more than obvious that I am rejected by White communities. From childhood, I have felt odd when I did not racially fit into my surroundings — marking my difference from Whiteness. Within my own family, my grandmother has referred to my brothers and me as her 'exotic grandchildren,' evidently not grouping us as the same racially as she is. At my high school job, my White coworkers would constantly refer to me as the 'smart Asian girl'. Since moving to Europe, I have been stared at and pointed at without explanation, leaving me to believe I am noticed for my deviation from seemingly normative

White aesthetics. All throughout my existence, my Whiteness has been rejected.

Similarly, and more impactfully, I am also not admitted into the Asian communities around me. I see myself as Asian in that my life experiences have been racialized ones, and my ethnicity drives me to my Asian side. I even find comfort in Asian friends or groups based on our shared connection to Asian culture. However, through countless instances with 'wholly' Asian friends, families, and strangers, it is clear that my social identity does not permit me to fully belong in Asian circles. In middle and high school (ages 11-17), I coincidentally found myself in majority Asian friend groups. While I felt that I connected to these friends because of our shared racial backgrounds, I was often confronted with the fact that they did not consider me one of them. Once, while hanging out at an Asian bakery with two of my Vietnamese friends, I asked a question about one of the Taiwanese pastries, as it was not something I was familiar with considering my Filipino background. One friend turned to the other, laughed, and then told me, "No offense, Julia, but you're not *really* Asian". My two friends then proceeded to have a whole discussion on the different elements of Asian culture that I was lacking. That day, I came home raging — I couldn't understand why I was being ridiculed and excluded for not knowing something about Taiwanese pastries when I'm not even Taiwanese. I felt unrecognized and unvalued, and upset that it seemed that they did not see me the same way they saw each other.

The rejection from Asian communities hit even harder when it was Filipino communities that excluded me. When I visited my family in the Philippines at the age of 10, I experienced an immense feeling of being an outsider. The country and family I expected to find a home in considered me a foreigner, opening their arms to an 'other' rather than one of them. I was often praised by relatives for my light skin, larger eyes, and more Western nose, always being told I could be a celebrity with such features. I am American, of course, so I would interpret such comments as a sort of fawning over American *tourists* (which I was not) rather than a dig at my ethnic identity. However, the ethnic rejection did not stop with Filipinos living in the Philippines, as Filipino-Americans were seemingly crueler.

Figure 2: My family at a Filipino gathering, 2018.

Even visibly, it always seemed obvious that my brothers, mom, and I did not fit into gatherings with other Filipinos (Figure 2). While my dad would be mingling in Tagalog or Bicol with his Filipino friends and family, the rest of my family and I would be sitting at a separate table only chatting amongst ourselves. I would look around and see everyone else wearing barongs and filipinianas while my mom and I were wearing typically Western dresses instead. We were clearly separated from the rest of the group—ostracized for their perception that we lacked Filipino culture. Eventually, my mom stopped wanting to attend these events, so we would stay home and have even less of a chance at integrating into a Filipino community.

I also was directly confronted with my supposed lack of belonging when I gave a presentation on Filipino culture at my school's multicultural club. I made a joke about how I hoped no one would question my authority to speak on Filipino culture—and at that exact moment my Filipino friend chimed in and did exactly that. She laughed while saying that was more than likely to happen, because I "don't really know Filipino culture". It erupted into an argument, as I finally knew to stand up for myself after going through these situations countless times. Not only did it feel nonsensical to be called uncultured because I am not 100% Filipino, but it hurt to be confronted with all the ways I strayed from my own identity in her

eyes.

What was I expected to do to be considered Filipino? I grew up eating Filipino food multiple times a week. I've attended a debut (18th birthday celebration). I hear Bicol at home every day. I had gone to the Philippines as often as our family bank account allowed. I even met Sarah Geronimo. While I was aware that the Filipino community around me was small (due to my father and his brother being the only two of 11 siblings who immigrated to the United States), I still felt that I had solid grounding to claim my Filipinohood. Conversations like these triggered my emotions—and I could never comprehend my feelings or their causes. The parts of Filipino identity that I was 'lacking' were out of my control, and it seemed impossible to make the 'real' Filipinos accept me even when doing everything I could to fit in.

All of this goes to show that though I may have felt a part of certain communities, I have accumulated various experiences throughout my life that deny my perceived belonging to these groups. I was not considered White enough to be White, nor Asian enough to be Asian, leaving me racially homeless and confused since childhood. As to be expected, I have internalized the constant rejection. If all the people around me were telling me I did not fit in or I was misinterpreting my identity, I thought there must be some weight to what they were saying — maybe I was the problem.

Internalization: Overcompensating to Reach 'Whole'hood

At many points in my life—and still to this day—I have internalized the comments about my identity and begun to question my own belonging. Questions of my identity and membership have habited my consciousness: Am I always just pretending? Can I really be Filipino if I don't understand Tagalog? Am I overcompensating and acting more Asian than I really am? Absorbing the comments around me about my identity makes me cripplingly self-aware, constantly wondering if my racial positioning is accurate. Therefore, I have felt that part of the mixed experience involves racial performativity and overcompensation to fit into an identity.

Racial performativity ran rampant in my teenage years. In middle school, when I would feel left out of groups of my Asian friends who were mostly Vietnamese, I downloaded Duolingo. I learned how to say a few phrases in Vietnamese so I could fit in and impress my friends, and so maybe they would view me as more Asian (even though I have no Vietnamese cultural heritage). I had always been interested in culture and participating in cultural activities and felt like I could refer to the Philippines as my home culture in situations such as my high school's multicultural club events. Upon arriving at the multicultural club meetings and seeing the presentations and performances conducted by other students, I was quickly confronted with the reality that they would not consider me culturally Filipino with my present knowledge of Filipino culture. To remedy this and prove to others (and myself) that I had the authority to speak on Filipino culture, I started actively immersing myself as much as I could. I started baking Filipino pastries, learning Filipino geography, and teaching myself Bicol through listening *extra hard* whenever my dad would be on his daily phone call with his brother. Evidently, I was pretending to be someone I was not — these cultural quirks did not come naturally to me. The mixed experience entails feeling so lonely and denied that one is driven to overcompensate their ethnic identity to escape 'impostor' status (Tate 2005). After all, all I ever wanted to do was fit in.

The comments and perceptions of those around me penetrated my being, causing me to question my own claims to the identities I had every right to belong to. At times I have felt there were valid reasons for my own ostracization: maybe they were right, and I was not actually Filipino or Asian. I believed that my 'halfness' made it so I could never be whole, and who would accept just a half? This self-doubt has provided me with a constant feeling of being an impostor, never truly feeling safe or comfortable in my racial surroundings. I can feel unjustified in deeming myself Filipino, knowing that my Filipinoness can be rooted in my active searches for connection to my heritage rather than my natural accumulation

of cultural experiences. Knowing that the perceptions of others are internalized has been a major step in understanding another aspect of being mixed race: the contextuality of these perceptions and internalizations.

'Half'hood Across Contexts: Changing Situational Status

Despite having gone through a deeply reflective process of understanding who I am, a concrete answer of the mixed identity proves impossible to discover. Through my toughest efforts to be granted membership into Asian communities, I have realized that full membership will never be a reality for mixed-race individuals, as context, subjective perceptions, and self-image will always impact one's categorization. While I may have been submitting to the view of my Asian American friends for acceptance into their communities, being accepted would have meant nothing after moving to Europe, where perceptions of me differ entirely. Furthermore, the mixed experience is not standardized, and every mixed individual will picture their identity differently. With this, I have realized that the mixed experience is a vastly complex one relying on context and situation. In my experiences living across two continents, my identity has been contextually interpreted, changing my life as I step across borders.

Contextually Valid

All mixed people can experience their identity differently from one another — but also internally differently across contexts. For me, I view myself as less or more Asian depending on my present country of residence. Since moving to the Netherlands and traveling around Europe, I have felt more Asian or monoracial than ever. My racial otherness sticks out in the pool of homogenous White Europeans, shaping everyday attitudes towards me. Speaking from personal experience, I have also experienced more racism and discriminatory treatment living in the Netherlands. Whether it be microaggressions from professors asking where I am *really* from or being randomly stopped and checked time after time at airport security, it has felt like I have constantly been treated as lesser because of my social identity as a POC. I have felt the glances towards me from others in class as soon as racism or POC issues come up, and unintentionally taken on the role ascribed to me as the token POC. Evidently, when I live in Europe, I feel more Asian than ever, because of how obviously distinct my otherness is to the people around me.

My move to the Netherlands and experiences traveling in Europe have also led me to feel more invalidated and outcast than ever, as the culture of homogeneity and denial of race have revealed themselves to me over time. The lack of diversity where I reside (and within my university) has made me stick out to others; I feel recognizable because of my identity as the Asian girl with red hair. While at first, I saw this as a mere culture shock I needed to adjust to, I have since realized that a lack of diversity has changed how others perceive POC and thus treat non-White individuals. I had always felt extremely uncomfortable with the lack of diversity in my surroundings; I could not pinpoint why, but I always felt like I did not belong. Exemplifying the lack of exposure to POC, one of my closest friends here, a Spanish girl from Madrid, even told me that I was her "first friend that isn't White." Even someone who was taking the same courses as me in diversity or identity studies, someone from the capital (and largest) city of Spain, had not been exposed to enough diversity to have any friends of color until she was 18. Lack of diversity, lack of knowledge about the experiences of others, means an immense amount of misunderstanding and learning, making my existence a 'new experience' to those around me.

As a 17-year-old, I had also come to terms with a facet of my identity I had never seriously considered before: my Americanness. People began to categorize me as American for the first time in my life, and I started to notice all the ways in which I related to my nationality. However, with such a focus on nationality, it felt like my ethnic identity was being disregarded. As I shared these thoughts with my friends, I was confronted with the concept that 'race isn't important' to identity—an idea meant to be unifying but that felt more repressive than anything. The colorblindness and tendency to focus on nationality seemed to once again render me as only half of what I am, while ignoring the other parts of my identity.

With the apparent prominence of my American identity above my ethnic identity, White Europeans further excluded me from any racial group I would identify with. One of my closest friends jokingly texted me that I "rinse out my Filipino heritage just because [I] went to Jollibee once," denying that I have any real claim to my Filipino identity. In another instance, I was laughed at for mentioning wanting to form an Asian student association at my school because "of course the American girl who never even lived in Asia wants to start an Asian club." While feeling discriminated against with these comments that ignore who I am, I was simultaneously always told that I "don't actually experience racism or discrimination" here by other white friends. Despite my race sticking out more than ever in Europe, I was being denied membership into the Asian community even by White European outsiders because I am American.

Conversely, when I go back home to Texas, I feel much Whiter, prompting a focus on my multiracial identity. Surrounded by racial diversity, my Asianness is less apparent and pales in comparison to others' 'POC'ness. Going back to the United States and being rejected from Asian in-groups, I feel that I have less claim to being a POC. I am considered 'too White' to speak on POC issues with the vast diversity around me, and I no longer stick out for my ethnicity. I am merely one of many. Why would I stick out when 90% of those around me are also minorities? While fitting into the crowd can feel nice in terms of my racialized identity, I still suffer from a lack of recognition in that I do not fit in with Asian or Filipino communities, as previously discussed. Therefore, even when not being singled out for my race, I am left without a sense of belonging.

My own sense of self is extremely contextual, giving my mixedness a conditionality that is not present within other identities. A simple move across borders means my identity (and, thus, how I am treated) is completely different. In some situations, I am considered a token POC, while in others, I am almost disregarded as one.

Situationally Valid

Even within the same context, the mixed experience can differ from person to person based on their feelings and situation. This crystallized through recent conversations with my brothers, showing that even three people with the same genes had opposing conceptualizations of their identities. My oldest brother, Evan, revealed that he feels little to no connection with his Filipino identity, but rather has a more racialized identity experience than anything. Conversely, my other brother, Andrew, identifies with being Filipino more than anything, having the sense of a very strong tie to one part of his ethnicity. Within the conversation, they invalidated each other's connections to their identities, Evan arguing that we did not grow up immersed in Filipino culture enough to fully claim it, and Andrew clapping back that not identifying with ethnicity almost feels like a rejection of our culture.

Personally, I did not identify with either of my brothers' perceptions of their identities. I found myself to be in the middle of the two — I feel a connection to my ethnicity, but not to the extent of having a Filipino flag in every social media description as Andrew once did. I agreed with Evan that it felt phony to claim such a strong sense of Filipino pride, but I simultaneously thought that it was unfair to categorize us as unable to identify with the Philippines. I once again began to doubt where I stood, not understanding if my identity is more of a racialized one or one rooted in my Filipino cultural heritage. However, a red thread throughout our conversation was that we had all felt rejection at one point or another, contemplated our identities, and felt that being mixed was an important aspect of our identity.

Evidently, being mixed means different things for every mixed person, and even within one person can mean alternative identities depending on context. Part of understanding the mixed experience is comprehending that one may be considered half by some, whole by others, and the opposite may apply across alternative cultural contexts. It seems that no one can conclude 'what mixed people are,' as socially constructed racial boundaries permeate identity perceptions even among family members.

Conclusion

This research set out to understand the quirks and struggles of the mixed-race experience

through reviewing prior literature and analyzing my own experiences. Ethnicity and identity are immensely important to how we position ourselves in the world—and understanding such identity does not come as easily for mixed-race individuals. Involving struggles with racial ambiguity, rejection into racial communities, and racial performativity, the mixed experience is marked with a unique fight for belonging. Feelings of mixed-race groups are then tainted with invalidation, longing for community, and self-doubt. In reviewing such literature, my own experiences become relevant to grasping an in-depth account of what it is like to carry a mixed-race identity.

Following my reflections and realizations and relating them to the literature over mixed-race identities, I have come to feel attached to my identity as mixed. I have discovered the absurdities involved in forcing an identity into society's boxes, realizing how strict racial identification is and the negative impacts this has on myself and others. I do not want people to consider me just Asian or just white, just Filipino or just American—I want people to see me for who I am, which is a combination of all of the above. My truth is that I am mixed. I am Filipino, I am Asian, and I have every right to claim these identities. I am also American and white and equally have claims to this part of my being. To deny my mixedness is to reduce me to a social category—forcing me on a side of a line I will inevitably bleed over.

Having multiple ethnicities and races is something that has shaped all my day-to-day experiences, providing me with all my life views. For me, understanding my identity means understanding the rejection, discrimination, invalidation, and variation that may come with being mixed-race. Additionally, this understanding means having found a community in the shared identity of being mixed. Though I may not be admitted into Asian or White communities, I have found a home in mixed-race spaces. The few mixed-race friends I have —from home and university—have been able to relate to my experiences in ways I had always craved from other in-groups. Reflecting on my identity has not only shown my struggles to be real, but also provided me comfort in who I am. Identifying as mixed and reading literature over how there are shared struggles among mixed-race individuals has provided me with the community I have craved all along. In a world of being invalidated, the mixed community (and mixed-race academia) has given me a sense of true belonging and validation. I understand myself now to be wholly mixed-race, wholly half-and-half, and wholly valid.

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Synthesizing Cultural Competency and Reproductive Justice: A Case Study of Afghan, Refugee Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Cultural competency and reproductive justice are two popular frameworks by which medical anthropologists, public health experts, and social justice advocates understand minority women's health; however, both frameworks present shortcomings which limit holistic visualizations of wellness. I synthesize these frameworks in a case study of Afghan refugee mothers in North Carolina. My exploration of the composite framework uncovers significant factors affecting Afghan refugee mother's reproductive health, including the persisting effects of gender inequality in Afghanistan. History and health merge as I explore the lasting effects of the Taliban's gender apartheid on the reproductive health of Afghan women living in America. In Afghanistan, gender apartheid inhibits women from mastering the same abilities as men, namely driving and speaking English. In America, these different abilities precipitate deficits in social and mental health of Afghan women as compared to their husbands. Infrastructure in America reifies these deficits and further hinders the women's agency. Mapping powerlessness from Afghanistan to America, this framework illuminates the architecture of power that extends across the two countries.

Keywords: Afghan refugee mothers, gender, reproductive justice, healthcare, Afghanistan, United States

While many scholars have investigated the compatibility between Islamic beliefs and American healthcare practices, and others investigate the impact of minority identity on reproductive health, the disjuncture between these studies perpetuate a fragmented paradigm of health (CDC 2022; Hammoud et al. 2005; Padela & Curlin 2013). In this study, I synthesize reproductive justice and cultural competency frameworks to construct a holistic model of the factors affecting the reproductive health of Afghan refugee mothers in Winston Salem, North Carolina. To understand the body of forces pressing reproductive health and autonomy, I collected ethnographic data through three rounds of participant observation by volunteering with World Relief and by conducting one focus group interview. Building from a foundation of cultural competence and reproductive justice, I aimed to collect and present health data within the network of life history, culture, and society.

The reproductive justice framework (RJF), interrogates the health challenges of minority groups, drawing attention to factors perpetuating health inequalities within and beyond healthcare with an emphasis on individual and community lived experience (Ross 2017); however, RJF lacks ethnographic attention towards nodes of cultural friction between patients and systems (Macleod 2019). Though the traditional cultural competence framework (CCF), seeks to identify and regulate cultural barriers to healthcare, it generally lacks awareness of the health consequences arising from socio-cultural positionality and circumstance (Cross 1989). Therefore, a synthesis of both strategies would optimize understanding of health realities for immigrant women.

Bridging the Reproductive Justice and Cultural Competency Frameworks

Biomedical healthcare frameworks are restricted in scope to an exploration of the physical body of the patient entering a healthcare facility, foregoing the vital context of their lives and environments. Cultural factors must be implemented into clinical practices as the experience of health and illness are inevitably bound to cultural factors such as religion, gender, and ethnicity. These factors influence one's health in many ways such as lived experience, self-assessment of illness, or willingness to seek care. Arthur Kleinman (1981) urges for the redefinition of patients' and healers' social roles within a matrix that identifies the social realities of all parties. Therefore, this study presents individual narratives and community histories as a central vein connecting accounts of cultural barriers to healthcare, as per CCF, and social and environmental factors which affect health, as per RJF.

The reproductive justice framework considers the dimensions of women's lives that relate to wellbeing. These dimensions span from physical and mental health to political, social, and economic wellbeing (Onwuachi-Saunders 2019; Ross 2017). Reproductive justice is both a framework and a political movement. The term was coined by Black women in Chicago to capture the complex forces acting on persons-of-color (POC) women's health and autonomy (Onwuachi-Saunders 2019). It has since gained popularity in feminist studies due to its utility in analyzing what factors in a woman's identity, condition, community, and society affect her agency in determining her reproductive rights. RJF relates social inequalities to reproductive autonomy with an emphasis on the relationship between the present and the past as well as the community and the individual (Ross 2017). For example, Loretta Ross (2017), a reproductive justice pioneer, uses the framework to analyze the lasting impacts of reproductive violence against enslaved women on Black women's reproductive realities today. RJF is a feminist framework, not an anthropological framework. Therefore, it lacks the cultural emphasis that a study of Muslim, immigrant's reproductive health demands. The rich and complex religio-

cultural construct surrounding reproduction for Muslims from countries like Afghanistan requires a culture-oriented framework.

The cultural competency framework is a fruit of anthropology. It shares some similarities to reproductive justice in that it analyzes a wide spectrum of behaviors, attitudes, and politics but with the intent of maximizing effectiveness in cross-cultural situations and minimizing cultural barriers to healthcare (Cross 1989). In short, it acknowledges the cultural components of health. Terry Cross (1989) introduced the term in his seminal text "Towards a Culturally Competent System of Care" as a call to reduce health disparities through heightened understanding of patient circumstance. Cultural competency has since been integrated in medical curriculum and training. While cultural competency is the intersection of cultural pluralism and health, reproductive justice is the intersection of socio-cultural positionality and health.

Structural competency, a theoretical framework branched from CCF, seeks to transcend the bounds of culture and healthcare in centering social structures' production of health inequalities (Harvey et. al 2020). Structural competency aims to identify the modes by which structural inequalities are naturalized within health care, recognize the impact of social structures on the production and maintenance of health inequities, develop structural interventions for addressing global health inequities, and apply the concept of structural humility and collaboration between patients and healers (Harvey et. al 2020). Structural competency holds some of the cultural and positional awareness that cultural competency grants while expanding its scope to include social institutions. Additionally, structural competency and reproductive justice share bifunctionality as both an analytic lens and a political praxis.

What, then, is missing from the structural competency lens that still requires coalition with reproductive justice? Structural competency, as implied by the name, surveys the macrocosm and still holds the healthcare institution as the crux of health. The reproductive justice lens is dialectical in its analysis, weaving the individual, institutional, and socio-structural narratives, depolarizing health across nodes of wellbeing (Morison 2021). In bridging the discourses of reproductive justice, cultural competency, and structural competency, any analysis of healthcare must be multidimensional to identify the specific social factors and cultural forces which affect the reproductive health of Muslim Afghan women. Further, my analysis must dialectically analyze the network of individual narratives, community histories, cultural barriers, and socio-structural inequalities. This study identifies the ways in which life histories, cultural forces, and social inequities cause or compound each other, challenging the very distinctions between the three. It is important to note that I have loosely divided the results into components of cultural barriers and social and environmental factors for the sake of organization. The separation of these dimensions allows me to receive them in the context of our Western paradigm of health and wellness; however, the separation of these categories is nearly as arbitrary as the symbols on this page.

Afghan Refugee Crisis

Decades of conflict, political instability, and violence perpetrated by the Taliban have forced millions of Afghans to flee their homes and disperse across the world. In 2021, the number of Afghan immigrants in the United States skyrocketed. After twenty years of freedom from the Taliban's terrorist regime, Afghanistan was recaptured in August of 2021 following the withdrawal of American troops. As of the 31st of January 2022, the United States has accepted 68,000 Afghan refugees (PBS 2022). Refugees endure exceptional trauma at the hands of the terrorist organization before their escape, yet life after relocation presents new challenges. Refugees are initially housed in crowded military bases and camps then directed to refugee resettlement programs which aid in relocation to communities across the country. The women I interviewed had all arrived in the United States between August and September of 2021. They were initially housed in such refugee camps, before relocating to Winston Salem, North Carolina.

Methods

In *Writing Against Culture*, Abu-Lughod (1991) characterizes the position of the "halfie," which describes an individual with multiple cultural identities, whether by "migration, overseas education, or parentage" (466). I resent the term "halfie," because it reduces a cultural experience to a problematic dichotomy, a matter of matter wherefore each identity must be diminished to share space about the self. I resonate, instead, with Kiran Narayan's (1993) account of identity, "two halves cannot adequately account for the complexity of an identity in which multiple countries, regions, religions, and classes may come together" (673). However, Abu-Lughod's (1991) analysis of the positionality of "halfies" still has much to offer. I am one of these "halfies," half Persian and half American. About the dilemmas of halfie anthropologists, Abu-Lughod (1991) writes, "they position themselves within reference to two communities, but [also] when they present the Other they are presenting themselves, they speak with a complex awareness of and investment in reception" (469). Although Iran and Afghanistan are two distinct countries and cultures, the countries are intimately related and many Afghans, including the majority of my interlocutors, are considered ethnically Persian. Additionally, both countries are burdened by the same extremist theocracy and terroristic gender apartheid that produced the circumstances investigated in my research. When I first presented this research, my mom, my ever-supportive audience member, was deeply affected. The stories of Afghan women I reported echoed those of her mother's and her own. As I was explaining the women's social isolation and immobility, she could think only of my grandmother. Like the Afghan women, she cannot drive or speak English. Even after living in America for 20 years, she is still reliant on our family to take her to doctor appointments or social gatherings. In a non-walkable city, she is chained by immobility and largely socially isolated. It was these experiences of my family members' suspended lives post immigration which compelled me to study Muslim immigrants.

This emphasis on reflexivity imbues this study. Reflexivity is a post-modern anthropological movement intended to curb the bias inherent in any literature by taking the cloak off the ethnographer. Lila Abu-Lughod amends James Clifford (1986)'s characterization of ethnographic reports as "partial truths," by insisting the truths must be also acknowledged as "positional" truths (Fox 1991). I mark myself as the homodiegetic narrator of this ethnography to make clear the position of my interaction. Further, I mark the flaws in this ethnography, particularly in the disorganization of the focus group interview discussed above. This ethnography includes the entanglement of ethnographer and ethnography through honest inclusions of mistakes, emotions, and relationships with interlocutors for a non-estranged and non-subordinating ethnography.

I chose a case study of Afghan, refugee mothers because I came by the opportunity to work with them through a volunteer organization: World Relief. World Relief is a nonprofit, Christian, humanitarian organization which aims to help immigrants settle and assimilate in their new homes. Beyond helping the refugees with transportation, World Relief organizes weekly discussion groups with a cohort of Afghan, refugee mothers. The meetings ranged from helping the women sign up for ESL classes at a community college to recruiting reproductive health experts to lead discussions about contraceptive options. I registered as a volunteer and attended three of these meetings, conducting participant observation and a focus group interview with six of the refugee women.

Participant observation is regarded as the core 'tool' of the ethnographer (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Russel Bernard (2018) describes it as both a "humanistic method and a scientific one" (272). Participant observation gave insight into the daily lives of the women and some of their recurring challenges which informed my results as well as my topics for a focus group interview. It allowed me to observe topics which evoked emotion and discomfort and topics which resurfaced repeatedly. It also allowed me to experience the social dynamics produced among members of the group. For example, the women trusted me much more readily than the other American students volunteering with me because I am Persian, and I could speak with them in Farsi. Dari is

regarded as a dialect of Farsi and is commonly referred to as "Eastern Persian" or "Afghan Persian." Because Farsi is my second language, it was much more difficult for me to interpret Dari than it was for them to interpret Farsi, so, often, our communication was lopsided. Still, the women and the World Relief coordinators appreciated the little boost in communication between the organization and the women from my language contribution. There was also social separation between the Dari speakers from urban backgrounds and the Pashto speaker from rural Afghanistan in the third meeting. During the focus group interview, all the Dari speakers crowded on one end of the long table together, and the Pashto speaker sat on the other end between World Relief volunteers.

The first meeting I attended was held at a park where we discussed the women's difficulties navigating the American school system for their children. In the second meeting, we helped the women register for ESL classes at a local community college. Before the third meeting I attended, I drafted a letter requesting a focus group interview. In the letter, I explained my research and the various topics we would cover. I included a translation of the informed consent letter in Dari. My preference was to conduct a semi-structured focus group interview, as I hoped the women would feel more comfortable in each other's presence and build on each other's ideas, sentiments, emotions, and insights (Bernard 2018). I could also get a better sense of which experiences are common or unique amongst the women. Knowing that some of the topics could be sensitive, I asked if they would prefer individual interviews or to interview together; they unanimously agreed on a focus group. I told the group I would brew *gole gov zabon* (borage tea) for the interview. In our culture, serving tea is a charged offering; it is an extension of gratitude and it projects the intention of creating a meaningful connection. The choice of tea was intentional, signaling my position as a cultural insider. Borage tea is a lesser-known tea to Westerners and, within Persian culture, it is believed to have a calming effect.

A coordinator of the discussion group allowed me one meeting to conduct the interview. Five women attended this meeting, four of whom spoke Dari and one of whom spoke Pashto. The five women in the interview cohort, Kaameh, Moska, Nahal, Shandana, and Hajira had immigrated to the United States over a year ago and they were all mothers between the ages of 30 to 39 with their families ranging from one to seven children. Because the meeting was coordinated by World Relief, I had no prior knowledge of the turnout. The focus group interview happened to be the first meeting Hajira, the Pashto speaker, attended. One translator was physically present, translating the responses from Dari, and one translator was on speakerphone translating Pashto. The introduction of another language into the group heavily disrupted the flow of the interview. The environment was chaotic with multiple conversations in multiple languages pin-balling between the translators, the women, and me. The women would deliberate at great lengths, and then I would receive a few sentences of summary from the translator. Lost information is always a limit of working with translators, and the focus group setting only increased the ratio of words spoken to words translated. Because I was coordinating two simultaneous conversations, asking follow-up questions and prodding for greater explanation was difficult.

Having women from two different regions revealed differences in the lives of women from urban Afghanistan (the Dari speakers) and rural Afghanistan (the Pashto speaker). On several occasions, the Dari women disagreed with the Pashto woman's accounts of life in Afghanistan, and vice versa, which allowed me some insight into the reliability, accuracy, and generality of my results. I was reminded Afghanistan, like any country, is not a monolith and has variability across locations and subcultures. Further, the focus group was fruitful for my study and for the women, who professed afterwards they found it therapeutic to speak about their challenges as a group. Despite the chaos, I maintain the focus group interview was the best method for this ethnography as it invoked unexpected conversational directions, it illuminated regional differences, and it was constructive for all parties involved. However, if I were to continue this study I would group by language and conduct two interviews, one for Dari speakers and one for Pashto speakers. I

would also meet outside of World Relief to have more control over attendance. There were, however, benefits of working with World Relief: they provided the translators as well as the transportation. Additionally, the women were in a familiar context with familiar people.

During the focus group interview I used my phone to record audio of the conversation, with the participants' permission, and I took notes of any visual cues and other observations. I transcribed the audio and overlaid my written observations. I then coded all my notes from the participant observations and the transcription of the focus group interview by hand using a hybrid of deductive and inductive codes, the majority of which were descriptive. These codes allowed me to identify themes such as challenges to wellbeing and barriers to healthcare. Accompanied by a literature review, I synthesize my fieldwork with existing studies to present a comprehensive image of women's health.

Social and Mental health

The relationship between stress and reproductive health

Medical anthropologists and reproductive justice advocates point to stress as a leading cause of reproductive illness disparities among minority women (Guido et al. 2019; Suglia et al. 2010). One proposed link between social-environmental health and reproductive health is the stress-induced adrenal hormone cortisol. This stress-cortisol relationship explains higher levels of prenatal birth and birth complications among minority women as compared to national averages (Mustillo et al. 2004). As of 2021, the rate of preterm birth among Black women in the United States was 50% higher than the rate of preterm birth among white or Hispanic women (CDC 2021). Unfortunately, few studies investigate the reproductive health of Middle Eastern women or refugee women.

Harakow et al. (2021) sought to conduct a literature review to understand refugee women's vulnerability to pregnancy complication but reported,

> The small number of articles eligible for inclusion in the review highlights the lack of research and knowledge on refugee health during pregnancy. Further research is required to understand and reduce disparities in pregnancy outcomes between refugee and non-refugee women (649).

With their dataset from 19 sources, Harakow et al. (2021) found refugees had increased risk of stillbirth and spontaneous abortion compared to native women. One study they reference, Badshah et. al. (2011), found Afghan refugees in Pakistan report low birth weight 2.6 times higher than Pakistani mothers. Without the capabilities to measure cortisol levels in Afghan refugee mothers and their children, I aim only to identify stress causing agents and employ the accompanying literature to suggest their relation to reproductive health. The primary 'stress causing,' or cortisol producing agents I identify are categorized by social isolation, emotional distress, and psychological trauma which can be summarized under the larger categories of social and mental health.

Afghan Refugee Mothers' Social and Mental Health

The focus group interview was a balancing act I was not prepared for. I walked into the conference room of the Forsyth Community Central library with 5 cups for tea, expecting the familiar faces of Kaameh, Moska, and Nahal, and our translator Shahla. Kaameh, Moska, and Nahal are Afghan and speak Dari. Although Shahla is Iranian and speaks Farsi, they all converse with no difficulty. I was surprised to find two unfamiliar faces joining the usual crowd. There was a new Dari speaker, Shandana, and a Pashto speaker, Hajira. Shahla was seated at one end of the table, flanked by the four Dari speakers. On the other end, Hajira and the accompanying members of World Relief leaned over the iPhone connected to a Pashto translator.

After serving the borage tea, I settled in the middle of the table between the Pashto and Dari sides and prepared for the ethnographic circus that was to follow. Throughout the interview, I exercised conversational acrobatics, bending backwards towards the iPhone speaker to tune into the Pashto translation while keeping an ear hooked on the Dari conversation, I juggled the appropriate follow

up questions, and I often made a clown of myself. A total of four languages whirled around this phonic sensorium. While tuned into the Dari conversation, Donna, a World Relief volunteer, tapped my shoulder, "this is important," she lassoed my attention back to the iPhone on the tabletop. The Pashto translated relayed a sentiment from Hajira that cut through the cacophony: her life in America was really no different than her life in Afghanistan. I probed for elaboration, and she explained, "I stay at home all day with my children while my husband goes out and works, just as I did in Afghanistan." I turned this sentiment to the Dari women, who disagreed, saying they felt their lives were different in America, but not in the way I expected. Despite immigrating from the country ranked 170th in gender inequality to the country ranked 15th, the women proclaim they are *more* isolated in America than they were in Afghanistan (UN data 2024). They point to three main causes of their social isolation and frustration in America: transportation, language, and underlying it all, a gendered division of labor.

Gendered division of labor and ability, language, and transportation

As of 2021, only 14.85% of women in Afghanistan are employed, capturing the cultural division of domestic and wage labor (TheGlobalEconomy.com 2021). This is a sharp decline from 2019 which reported 21.51% engagement in wage labor for women, reflecting the Taliban's influence on women's rights and social positionality (TheGlobalEconomy.com 2021). During Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, women were restricted from working in public spaces, and women with children were prohibited from working altogether (PBS 2008). Though Afghanistan enjoyed freedom from Taliban rule between 2001 and 2021, these strict regulations had lasting imprints on the socio-cultural fabric of Afghanistan, imprinted in the shape of cultural taboos. Though women's employment increased steadily after the 2001 Taliban retreat, it never rose above 21.94%, and the economic sector itself remained heavily divided by gender (TheGlobalEconomy.com 2021).

Because different occupations engendered different abilities, this division of domestic and wage labor in Afghanistan causes unique challenges to the women that their husbands do not experience *after* immigration. The women will be the first to tell you immigrating is harder for them than it is for their spouses. When I asked, "what are the differences between your experiences and challenges and your husbands'?" they murmured for a moment and Shahla translated their response, "because they know the language, it is much easier for them than for us. It is more challenging [for the women]." The women hummed in agreement. Perplexed, I asked, "why are your husbands fluent in English, but you are not?" They explained that although they all learned English in high school, their husbands continued to use and practice English in Afghanistan in the workplace. Because of the American occupation, they explained, a lot of jobs required English proficiency, particularly those that worked with the government or American military. Most of their husbands' former jobs involved the military in some capacity and, as a result, most of their husbands came to the United States with high English proficiency. Meanwhile, the women either worked solely in the household or in jobs that did not require them to speak English — Shandana, for example, was a seamstress for an Afghan textile company.

The language barrier is no small adversity. I asked, "what are the greatest challenges in your day-to-day life?" Without hesitation, Nahal points to her open mouth, and responds "*zabon*," a homonym in Dari for tongue and language. I recalled the first group meeting I attended in Bolton Park where I first met Nahal and Moska. We pushed Nahal's son down the zipline and meandered to the other side to retrieve him. Attempting conversation, I asked Nahal if she was starting to feel settled here in Winston Salem. Her response, four weeks earlier, was the same: not really; this was because the language barrier was frustrating and debilitating. Now at the focus group interview, the other women had a chance to echo this sentiment. Shandana explained that she would like to work in the United States, just as she did in Afghanistan, but it is impossible without speaking much English. Despite

immigrating from a country with 14.85% women's labor force participation to a country with 57.4% women's labor force participation, most of these refugee households experience an increased wedge in division of labor between husband and wife (United States Department of Labor 2021). The barrier of social taboo was merely replaced by another, language proficiency. Further, comparing their employment opportunity to their husbands' reveals the first barrier induced the second. The language barrier impedes ability to work and, in conjunction with a transportation barrier, impedes socialization and enculturation.

A transportation deficit between husband and wife mirrors the language deficit; diverging occupations, cultural taboos, and Taliban influence in Afghanistan breed an enormous driving gap between men and women. Though no legislation directly outlawed women from driving before the Taliban's return in 2021, women drivers were perceived as subversive and were often subject to harassment. From 2005 to 2006, the license bureau of Kabul reported a total of over 17,000 licenses issued; of these 17,000, only 85 licenses, 0.5%, were awarded to women drivers (NBC 2006). Thankfully, mobility in urban areas is possible without a car. Kammeh, Moska, Nahal, and Shandana painted vibrantly populated illustrations of the streets of their hometowns. Merely walking out the door implants one in a social space. "When they go out [in Afghanistan], there's a lot going [on]. People are shopping, talking, all that. Versus here in this city, no one is out, no one is walking on the streets, no one is there to talk to them, no mingling," Shahla translates. The car-based infrastructure of Winston Salem leaves these unlicensed women stranded, physically and socially. Winston Salem has been listed among the least walkable cities in America (Thorn 2023). Without a license in Afghanistan, they could still walk to visit their friends, buy their groceries, or visit a doctor's office. in America, they are entirely immobile and reliant on their husbands. "Because the way here people live, they have to drive... For the ladies, because they don't drive, they are very, very dependent on their husband," Shahla translates.

While their husbands are at work, the women are bound to their houses. The language deficit compounds the mobility deficit, as the closest DMV which offers Dari translators for driving exams is forty minutes away, and drivers' education material in Dari is limited. The DMV in Winston Salem will permit a translator after the participant has failed the exam four or more times. Both options are highly inconvenient for the mothers who have the full-time responsibility of childcare. Additionally, they are entirely dependent on the schedule of their husbands or World Relief members to provide transportation to the DMV. En masse, the mobility deficit coupled with the language deficit has left these mothers feeling uncomfortably reliant on their husbands. In addition to mobility, these women have suffered a loss of independence and autonomy.

Another wrench complicates language proficiency and thus social integration: the responsibility of cultural preservation. While their children practice English at school, and their husbands practice English at work, the immobilized women have no opportunity to practice English unless the family speaks English at home. Moska tells the group she asks her husband and children to speak in English at home so that she, too, may practice, but her husband worries that if they do not speak Dari at home, the children will forget their native language, and their culture will be lost. Nahal and Kaameh echoed this experience. Learning a new culture while preserving an existing culture is a difficult balancing act and a heavily moral responsibility to bear. By nature of circumstance, the consequence of cultural preservation falls solely on the mothers, and the household is forced to privilege the preservation of Afghani culture over the mother's integration into American culture.

Motherhood—dual responsibility, dual experience

Motherhood is an integral component of these women's identities. Their emotional burden is twofold as they carry their children's tribulations as well as their own. The gendered division of domestic labor enlists the mothers as the primary caretakers of the children. As such, this disproportionately adds to their responsibility over their husbands for their childrens' integration. Language barriers add additional layers of frustration, impeding the

mothers' involvement in their childrens' new lives. During a weekly meeting at the park, Moska divulged, with a furrowed brow and worried eyes, that her son is performing poorly in school. She says she cannot get in touch with the teacher because of the language-based lapse in communication. Her fidgeting fingers, pushing playground turf in thoughtless clumps on the tabletop, betrayed the great deal of anxiety behind her admission. These World Relief meetings were designed to help these women integrate, not only by assisting in various stages of the process but also allowing a space to talk about problems they were facing. In the meetings, I observed that they brought up issues their children were facing as issues they themselves faced. The language barrier goes beyond occupational and social dissatisfaction, restricting their ability to help their children. The frustration and anxiety experienced by a loving mother feeling unable to help her children is inexpressible.

Trauma, Faith, and Counseling

"*It is important to understand the mental health of Afghans prior to their forced migration as their trauma is complex and multiple… Generations of Afghans have been born during the conflict and some have never known peace*."—Husna Safi

Near the end of the focus group interview, while I was deeply invested in Hajira's testimony, the Dari side conversed amongst themselves independently for a few minutes. Subconsciously detecting a change in the atmosphere, I shifted my attention back to the Dari-speaking women and noticed the dry eyes I left just a few minutes ago now glassy with tears. Sensing my confusion, Shahla relayed a synopsis of the conversation at hand,

> Prior to arrival to US, the experience they went through, the scenery they've seen of people being whipped by Taliban, being killed by Taliban, being tortured by Taliban, it's something that they can't forget. In the camp they were in a lot of stress, and they are still scared from that part… Still when they think about how they got out, and how horrible scenery they've seen, they are all in tears, even now, even now when they talk about it.

As the conversation continued, I learned the process of escaping the Taliban was just as harrowing as living with them. In the chaos of bodies clambering onto buses, Moska's daughter's little fingers slipped out of her husband's hands. "All of a sudden, they came to sit in a van, and they couldn't find their daughter." With their infant son and the threat of losing their spot on the bus, they were forced to make the decision to stay on the bus and leave without knowing where their daughter was. As Shahla was narrating her story, Moska wiped tears from her eyes. Thankfully, someone called them saying they had their daughter, and they were able to be reunited. These women were fortunate to make it on the bus with their families intact, but many Afghan refugee women are not. Some children were left orphaned in Afghanistan, some were separated from their parents and dispersed to different camps in the United States, and some were left dead, trampled by the swarm of frantic bodies seeking escape. Moska, attempting to illustrate the pure chaos of the affair, recalls children boarding the bus barefoot. Parents dragged their families through the turbulent crowds, weaving and jabbing their path to the bus. Their children's shoes would fall off in all the commotion, and there was no time to turn back for children who lost their parents' hands, let alone shoes who lost their children's feet. Those who secured a spot on the bus endured attacks from Taliban forces attempting to thwart the escape. The buses that successfully evaded Taliban attacks delivered those fearful, fortunate few to the airport where a US plane waited. An hour after the plane departed, Kabul international airport was bombed.

These near-death encounters, near-family losses, and exposure to the cruelest crimes against humanity weigh heavily on the mother's psyche, and in turn the women lean heavily on their faith. In the spirit of due diligence, I opened the interview by asking how they identified their religious beliefs. They unanimously responded, "we are all Muslim women" with a tone that practically inserted 'obviously,' as an introductory adverb. Their manner of response made me feel

embarrassed for even asking. Another anthropology student observing the interview asked Shahla to ask the women, "how important is their faith to them," and without hesitation, without relaying the question, she knew, and she responded, "their faith is everything." They made sure Shahla translated this distinction, "when the Taliban got to power, even though they are Muslim they are not true Muslim… They have their own rules and regulations that are not following our beliefs." The mothers' beliefs are not the same as those which persecuted and oppressed them, rather their belief empowers them in the wake of their many hardships. The women expressed that their faith has helped them through many of their endured traumas.

I asked if they would ever consider seeking counseling as an additional ally in processing trauma, but they rejected the notion on the grounds that God gives them strength, and they are now in a much better situation, so therapy is unnecessary. Mental healthcare seeking behavior varies by culture; reluctance to seek mental health care is common amongst Middle Eastern Muslims due to religious and cultural taboos. Many Muslims believe, if one is following the Islamic tenets dutifully, they cannot be depressed (Hammoud et al. 2005). This adds another level of complexity to the already complex mental health of Afghans who have endured decades of conflict and generational trauma. Husna Safi, an Afghan psychotherapist and social worker, addresses the Afghan mental health crisis, arguing that "generation of Afghans have been born during the conflict and some have never known peace" (Diwakar 2021). She explains Afghan's attitudes towards mental health care as inhibited by the normalization of their experiences, anxiety, and PTSD. "To Afghans, mental health is not just about mental well-being, it is a reflection of one's whole self. Most mental health experiences are normalized and viewed as everyday emotional experiences" (Diwakar 2021). This normalization of experience may explain why a study by Correa-Velez (2006) found that individuals from refugee backgrounds are 30% less likely to have mental or behavioral admissions than native born citizens.

Intersecting social and mental health with reproductive health

Medical anthropology informs us that stress causing factors in the social and political world manifest in the physiological world. In the context of reproductive justice frameworks, the merging of these domains involves investigation into the relationship between stress causing factors and reproductive illness. Studies suggest a pathophysiological relationship between maternal stress, elevated levels of cortisol, and increased risk of miscarriage and premature birth (Nepomnasch et al. 2006). Preterm birth is particularly dangerous as it is the most common cause of infant mortality in the United States. There is a significant body of literature which supports a relationship between elevated cortisol and preterm birth, such as Heckmann et al. (2005) who found postnatal plasma cortisol levels in preterm infants to be five to ten times higher than postnatal plasma cortisol levels of fetuses at the same gestational age.

Recent studies push further to suggest maternal stress prior to conception influences birth outcomes. A study by Wadhwa et. al (2011) postulates a cumulative pathway by which chronic exposure to stress results in elevated cortisol levels and dysregulated hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal response to stressors. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, or HPA, is a key axis in homeostatic response, as it regulates physiological processes to mediate the body's response to stress. These processes include metabolism, immune response, and the autonomic nervous system. Therefore, elevated cortisol levels and loss of HPA regulation led to immune suppression and immune inflammatory dysregulation, all of which increase vulnerability to preterm birth. Wadhwa et. al (2011) thus suggest a comprehensive life-course model of reproductive health,

> The life-course perspective conceptualizes reproductive and birth outcomes as the product of not only the nine months of pregnancy, but of the entire life course of the mother from her own conception onward (or even before her own conception), and leading up to the index pregnancy. The suggestion

> that maternal health prior to pregnancy may have important bearing on pregnancy outcomes is not new, but a growing body of evidence is beginning to shed light on the mechanisms by which life-course factors, including stress, might influence birth outcomes such as preterm birth (17).

For our Afghani mothers, these life-course factors include social isolation, emotional distress, and trauma. Emotional distress produces cortisol in an unsurprising fashion, but studies prove social isolation produces cortisol as well.

Through testing urine samples, studies have found patients experiencing loneliness have higher levels of cortisol than patients who have social support networks (Kiecolt-Glaser et al. 1984). Additional studies find elevated levels of cortisol are found in saliva samples of students experiencing chronic loneliness (Cacioppo et al. 2000). Further, Serra et al. (2005) report that social isolation impairs the negative feedback regulation of the HPA, which results in overproduction of stress-hormones. A history of trauma likewise produces cortisol elevation which may affect pregnancy. Exposure to trauma through life has been associated with impaired cortisol activity, increased risk of preterm birth, and increased risk of reproductive tract infection (Wadhwa 2011).

Barriers to Reproductive Healthcare

The primary barriers to reproductive healthcare should look familiar: transportation, language, and gendered division of labor. The same agents which perpetuate social isolation present barriers to healthcare, but with one new accompaniment: gender provider preference. The women offer experiences with each obstacle alongside examples of culturally competent care that alleviated some of these obstacles. Language barriers restrict communication between patient and provider, though luckily these women reported that a translator was provided for the majority of their healthcare experiences; the translators usually communicated remotely through tablets. They found these translator systems highly effective, providing an excellent example of culturally competent care enacted. Transportation, however, is more difficult to come by. The women are restricted by the schedules of their husbands or World Relief volunteers. In considering reproductive health, reliance on others for transportation robs the women of reproductive privacy and autonomy. Additionally, childcare responsibilities restrict autonomous movement.

Hajira's testimony perfectly illustrates the barriers to healthcare experienced by these women. Hajira has seven children, and, like the other women, she cannot drive. Earlier in the year, she was experiencing extreme leg pain. Days went by and this pain did not subside. Hajira, unable to drive, waited at home for relief. Eventually, weeks passed, and the pain only worsened. At a certain point, the pain had become so severe that her caseworker wanted to take her to the emergency room, but Hajira had to refuse. There was no one else who could look after her young children at home if she went to the hospital. In this case, the ailment was non-reproductive, but the anecdote raises reproductive health concerns. Hajira had just had a baby, putting her at high risk for postpartum complications. In fact, death due to postpartum complications is growing in frequency in the United States and can occur up until a year after pregnancy (Berg 2023). Further, the CDC (2022) reports higher rates of complications and deaths for minority women. If Hajira were to experience postpartum complications, she would have been unable to seek care due to her lack of transportation and her childcare responsibilities.

Provider gender preference presents additional barriers to reproductive healthcare for Afghan women. When I asked the women if they would see a male gynecologist, the response was a resounding, emphatic, and unanimous "no." Moska raised her hand to her heart and made a sweeping gesture downward, "below here," she said, "I need a female doctor." This preference is so strong that the word preference feels a misrepresentation. For these women, it is a necessity. Hajira recounted her experiences with reproductive health care in America during her pregnancy and delivery of her seventh child. She said that they offered her the option of an all-female provider team, which she accepted. I asked her what she would

have done if they were not able to offer an all women team. She said, "I would turn around, go back home, and give birth by myself in my house."

This gender requirement is cultural and religious in origin. In Afghanistan, all the gynecologists are women in accordance with Islamic codes of appropriate conduct. There are several commandments within the ethical-legal structure of Islam that regulate conditions for reproductive healthcare; modesty is of great moral importance. According to Malik's *Muwatta*, a collection of The Prophet Muhammad's saying and deeds and a bedrock treatise of Islamic law, Muhammad stated, "every *dīn* [religion/way of life] has an innate character, the character of Islam is modesty" (Abd al-Haiy, Book 47, Hadith 9 1967). Modesty is governed by the concept of *'awrah*, which denotes the parts of the body that must be clothed in various circumstances. For men, regulation of *'awrah* asks for the covering of the navel to the knees and recommends the covering of the shoulders. For women the regulation of *'awrah* receives more explicit instruction. There are three contexts in which regulation of *'awrah* for women has defined terms relevant to healthcare. These three contexts are defined by the gender composition of the social setting. In the company of other Muslim women, the only area that a Muslim woman must have covered is the region from her navel to her knees. In the company of non-Muslim women, there are conflicting opinions. Many scholars will allot the same restrictions for the company of non-Muslim women and as for the company of Muslim woman; however, other scholars believe that a non-Muslim woman equates to a non-*mahram* man. A non-mahram man describes a man not related by blood, by marriage, or by virtue of sharing the same wet-nurse. In the company of a non-*mahram* man, everything must be covered save the face, hands, and feet (Padela & Pozo 2011). In addition to modesty of covering, situational and exclusionary modesty are relevant conditions.

Khalwah describes the prohibition of situations in which a man and woman are alone in a closed space (Padela & Curlin 2013). Related is the prohibition of physical contact between members of the opposite sex. Within this prohibition, there are rules for permissible physical contact that do not fall within the *'awrah* regions of the body (Padela & Pozo 2011). Of course, engagement with these religious commandments varies by individual. Moska, for example, said she has a male dentist and is comfortable with having male doctors for non-reproductive health encounters. Additionally, though they all generally wear headscarves in observance of *'awrah*, some of the women will remove the scarf in public on occasion. When I first met with the World Relief coordinator to discuss my study, she said that these women were generally "more progressive" than many other Afghan immigrants she has worked with. She postulated this to be in retaliation to the Taliban's viciously radical religious crusades. Though engagement with and interpretation of *khalwah* and *'awrah* differ across the women, one boundary remains clear across the board, reproductive health care must be conducted in the company of women only.

Discussion

Immigration: not everything is left behind

Gender inequality in Afghanistan begets a network of interconnected factors combining to amplify ability deficits between genders in America. The language deficit, mobility deficit, and division of labor interact reciprocally such that each deficit compounds the others and all deficits influence social health. Gendered division of labor in Afghanistan results in language and mobility deficits, which in turn prevent the women from entering the workforce in America. Low language proficiency inhibits mobility as it creates additional barriers to receiving a driver's license. Further, the gendered division of labor in America contributes to the language and integration deficit as the husbands practice English and learn cultural customs at work while the wives have no exposure to language learning and enculturation at home. This is augmented by the responsibility of cultural preservation, which prevents English practice from occurring in the household. The accumulation of these interactions propagates troubles in social health, mental health, physical health and integration unique to the wives. The following

flowchart illustrates the relationship between the nodes.

Figure 1 illustrates the causal relationships between gender inequality in Afghanistan and the resulting gender deficits in America experienced by Afghani refugee wives. The dotted rectangles indicate the contextual realm of the variables. The variables in the top rectangle act on the women in Afghanistan, whereas the variables in the bottom rectangle on the women in America.

Power: dispersion, maintenance, and amplification

Power, like ethnography, can be visualized as a line rather than a dot. Power and powerlessness are two effects of the same force. The force of power is the oppositional relationship between power and powerlessness. It is not that there is not one without the other, but that one is simultaneously the other. Where this framework identifies structures that infringe the women's autonomy and agency, it identifies structures of power. This analysis of power as dispersed rather than discrete stands on Foucauldian scaffolding (Foucault 1990, 94). Foucault (1990) radically innovated the conception of power, identifying it not as a force the ruling party, imposed on the ruled in sovereign and episodic acts, but rather as a bottom-up force exercised from "innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (94). The machinery promulgating force relations range from the institutional, social, and familial (Foucault 1990, 94). Taking this approach to power uncovers forces of power/powerlessness hidden in plain sight. Following the thread of stifled agency from Afghanistan to America reveals the seemingly neutral structures in America, like car -based infrastructure, which perpetuate the

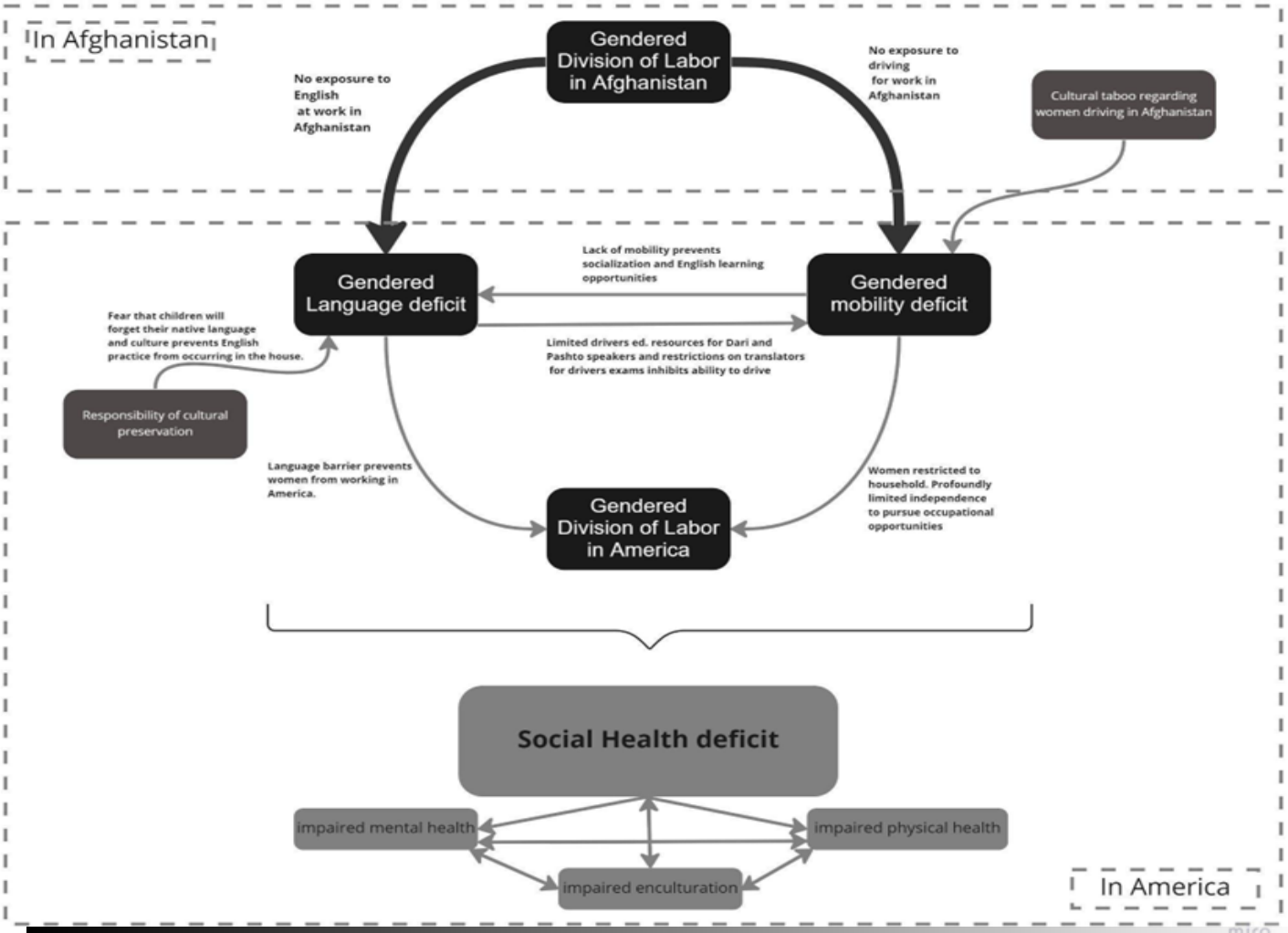

Figure 1: Matrix of factors affecting social wellbeing of Afghan Refugee Mothers

power/powerlessness force established by the gender-violent hegemony in Afghanistan.

Anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, is often misunderstood as the study of human differences, but it is equally the study of human sameness. Although this is a case study specific to Afghan, refugee women, the study reveals the mechanisms by which power/powerlessness disperses to create global networks of women's subjugation and subordination. Many sociologists and anthropologists interrogate gendered division of labor as principal machinery by which global subordination of women is produced and maintained (Epstein 2007; Kelly 1981). The results of this study not only support this assessment, but also identify the mechanisms of power/powerlessness diffusion, maintenance, and amplification. Recall, most of the women stated they are more isolated in America than they were in Afghanistan. The composite framework identifies systems that transport power/powerlessness forces from the gender-violent hegemony from Afghanistan to America, and the systems within America which maintain and amplify power/powerlessness in America.

Gendered division of labor continued conditions of power/powerlessness after immigration, through opportunity deficit and restricted movement, but also amplified the force, namely by the English acquisition deficient. Simultaneously, America's car-based infrastructure not only buttresses the force of Afghanistan's hegemony in isolating women from society, but it also amplifies it. According to Foucault (1990), exercised power requires "a series of aims and objectives" (95). In Afghanistan, the Taliban aims to socially isolate women by restricting access to public spaces through banning participation in waged labor, education, use of public parks and gyms, and public speaking (United States Institute of Peace, n.d). They exercised their force through violence and institutions. In America, the women are similarly isolated, inhibited from access to those same public spaces. This force is exercised not by discrete violence but by infrastructure. A structural force is not necessarily a neutral force, and a nonviolent force can be oppressive. There is even an argument that the American, car-based infrastructure is violent as it is a physical force which produces physiological harm.

Success in Framework Synergy: public health utility

My findings support the adoption of a model that merges the reproductive justice framework; which investigates, political, social, and emotional dimensions of a woman's life, with the cultural competency framework; which investigates the cultural dimensions that present barriers to health care. Unique outcomes of each framework advocate the utility of adopting a composite framework. The RJF and CCF each revealed detriments to wellbeing that the other framework neglected. RJF uncovered the role of cultural preservation preventing language acquisition for the mothers as well as the additional responsibility of children's cultural integration as a stress causing agent. The CCF provided insight into the cultural norms and religious values which demand women providers for reproductive care. Simultaneously, major overlaps in RJF and CCF outcomes illuminate significant problem areas: gendered division of labor, language proficiency, and immobility.

The results from this composite framework identify keystone issues for public health initiatives to target to reconcile deficits in health for Muslim refugee women. In the realm of healthcare infrastructure, offering childcare at hospitals and increasing public transportation to hospitals could increase accessibility for mothers. Additionally, the women indicated that translation services and options for female providers greatly alleviated potential barriers, so healthcare facilities should ensure these options are available. Beyond healthcare infrastructure, job training and driver's education incorporated with ESL classes would greatly improve the quality of life for these women and allow them to overcome transportation, mobility, and occupational barriers which would increase enculturation and alleviate social isolation. The results contribute to the body of discourse advocating for public transportation and walkable city design.

Besides its utility for medical anthropological and public health research, the synthesized framework presents a holistic representation of

health that can illuminate the connections between seemingly unrelated outcomes. This framework was able to identify a matrix of interactions relating conditions in America to conditions in Afghanistan, relating conditions of mental to physical wellbeing, and relating all conditions to reproductive health. The nodes of the matrix can be analyzed to reveal the architecture of power, decloaking seemingly neutral structures and institutions.

Conclusion

I have always believed medical anthropology to be at the intersection of cultural, biological, and archaeological anthropology. Archaeology studies material artifacts to understand culture and history. The human body likewise captures lived experience, history, and culture and materializes them into physical matter which can be studied by anthropologists. Gender apartheid, violent terrorism, relocation, and family dynamics all manifest physiologically. The embodied experience exists internally and perpetuates these experiences long after they are externally removed. It is crucial that medicine adopts life course models that decategorize experience, body, and self; these connections are often only made longitudinally. As we move forward in medical anthropology, we must adopt frameworks which treat health as a nonsecular subject, and as a multidimensional web without boundaries segregating aspects of wellbeing, segregating a patient's present and past, and segregating extra-hospital and intrahospital circumstances. This model of health radically resituates and redefines forces of oppression and evidences the interplay of institutional, structural, and cultural forces of oppression.

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Religion in a Time of Crisis: Pagan Experiences of Liminality and Communitas During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Calgary, Alberta

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted social norms and positioned people within a prolonged space of liminality wherein individuals experienced danger, vulnerability, and freedom due to an existence without associated social rules or taboos. A liminal existence, in Victor Turner's definition, means to be between social structure or to exist in a space of anti-structure—the middle stage of his explanation of the process of a religious/social rite of passage (1974). I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic represented an instance of Turner's (1974; 1997) anti-structure and that the resulting sensation of crisis communitas was a form of healing for some religious practitioners and communities. To investigate this hypothesis, I worked with a group of Pagan women in Calgary, Alberta, to inquire about their perceived shifts in the self and their community during the pandemic. This research explores the social experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for religious communities—namely the associated danger within liminality; the stage where practitioners began to feel unsteady in their lack of structure and identity, and the lifting of the veil; where the sensation of communitas brought together the Pagan community to use magic and ritual as a form of healing during mass crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, anti-structure, (neo-)paganism, crisis communitas

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global period of suspended social norms where governments instructed citizens not to socialize with people outside of their 'bubble' and to keep a social distance of six feet away from those not included in their households. People began working from home, socializing online, and attending school on virtual platforms. Masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer became fixtures of daily routines. In addition, there was a period of social change for the world, a period of existence between governmental mandates, vaccines, and a new sense of 'normal.' The world was temporarily bonded by a period of isolation and crisis, evoking Victor Turner (1974)'s concepts of anti-structure, liminality, and communitas. Turner's theories on human cultural experience, including rites of passage, ritual, and religion, all comment on groups of people coming together to participate in moments outside of society's structure, ultimately resulting in a sensation described as communitas (Turner 1974).

In short, communitas is a group experience created when social structure and norms are suspended. Communitas can be enacted through religious gatherings, global crises, or natural disasters where social structure is suspended, and individuals' bond over the lack of structure within the shared crisis. Within this experience, individuals often pass through liminal in-between stages of identity wherein they experience danger, vulnerability, and freedom due to their existence without associated social rules or taboos. In this paper, I view the COVID-19 pandemic as crisis communitas (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021), a form of anti-structure, which practising religious groups, in this case Pagan practitioners, experienced. Themes present within this work surround the danger associated with a liminal stage of existence — notably the danger between the practitioner and the self, practitioner and community, and practitioner and the changing of their ritual practice. Practitioners were also faced with realizations of deficiencies within the structure of their everyday lives and greater society; an awareness brought forth by their liminal existence within a space of anti-structure.

Theory

Anti-structure and Liminality

Influenced by the Enlightenment and the scientific study of human life, many early anthropologists turned to new theories of human change and diversity. This included structural functionalism, a theory popularized by Emile Durkheim (1960) and Radcliffe-Brown (Kuper and Radcliffe-Brown 1977). This theory conceptualized societies as organisms — a series of social structures working together to create a functioning system of human experience. Within this functionalist view, culture was seen as a by-product of the mechanics of social structure ultimately working to serve a purpose in maintaining social structure as a whole (Joseph 2003). Society was therefore viewed to be the manifestation of these cultural layers of social structure shaped by the social interaction between humans and the creation of symbols and vessels for culturally specific reasons. Structural functionalists posited that social structure within a given society must be based on communal institutional factors and a shared sense of morals which are socially acceptable. This is comparable to understanding themes of anti-structure and communitas within Turner (1974)'s works; where social structure occurs, there must also be space for social taboos to exist. While structural functionalism is now a theory of the past, many of the concepts that informed Turner (1974)'s anti-structure and communitas continue to influence anthropological thought today.

Within structural functionalism, social structure is a combination of norms and rules which govern interactions between people, such as their social status. These norms are culturally specific and maintained through social, political, and legal sanctions and taboos. Taboos or rules are present as social roles and

often interact together to either repress or elevate an individual's social standing. If an individual acts in a way that does not align with the taboos enforced by social structure, they are marked as deviant or dangerous. People can move between different social positions throughout their lifetime based on changes in their social status due to factors such as age, occupation, social rank, or income. Each social role has explicit expectations and rules for individuals to enact when transitioning to their new social standing. However, within these transitional spaces, it is possible to see where structure within society may become muddled through the shift in social processes accompanying this change. Turner (1974; 1997) notes that these disjuncture between roles and social expectations show a lack of agency represented on the individual level within this transitional space. This meant there was a period between social transitions where one does not hold any status within any given social structure. To explain what occurs in these in-between spaces, Turner (1974; 1997) studied the puberty rites of the Ndembu in Zambia where he observed a phenomenon described as *anti-structure*.

Anti-structure is described as the in-between spaces within social structure, where individuals enter a liminal space as they progress from one social role to the next. For example, anti-structure can be seen within the stages of a rite of passage as an individual's identity changes. Within Turner (1997)'s explanation of a rite of passage, ritual is contained in a three-stage process whereby the novice enters a space of anti-structure and is stripped of their current social identity to pass through the ritual to enter their new social identity. In this space within ritual or social transitions, they no longer socially exist as their previous identity but are not entirely aligned with their future identity (Turner 1997). When a person exists in a space of anti-structure, they are often regarded as dangerous or in danger as they are not required to follow any form of social rules or structures within greater society. Turner (1997) identifies that spaces of anti-structure are also opportunities for marginalized people to view and critique the inner workings of their society's social structure. Settings where individuals come together to engage in a collective experience without the presence of their structural identities is where anti-structure is identified.

Additionally, Turner (1974) identifies ritual practice as a central space of anti-structure where communities reflect and challenge the structural paradigms of society. Through ritual, neophytes often separate their everyday existence from the holy, creating a liminal and separate identity between them. Through this separate identity, the individual no longer interacts with the world through their social identity in public spaces. In a social identity, societal structures dictate social rules through which one can interact with society including sex/gender, income, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Inside a space of holy worship, separated from their structural public identity, the new ritual identity levels the neophyte to the same social status and role as the congregation. This can only occur in a liminal space.

As previously mentioned, many stages of human existence are marked with universal experiences of social change as rites of passage. These rites can accompany ritual transition or the societal transition of an individual from one social role to the next. This transition is marked by three phases: 1) the separation between the individual and general society; 2) the presence of a liminal existence; 3) the reintroduction of the individual into society and their new social status and role (Turner 1997; Kapferer 2019). During the first stage of a rite of passage, the neophyte is symbolically detached from their original placement within their cultural group or context. The second stage marks the neophyte as an ambiguous entity — passing through a period of existence where they are placed on the margins of society and in between social roles. At this stage, Turner (1997) was particularly interested in and expanded the idea of this marginality as *limen*, or liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. The final stage of a rite of passage involves the actualization the neophyte's passage into their new role and status. Once the neophyte has successfully moved through these three stages, they are more stable in their social roles; they are expected to engage with the world through their new structural position

and associated rules/taboos (Turner 1974; 1997).

Liminality accompanies the second stage of a rite of passage where an individual exists within the realm of anti-structure and between two social roles. This liminal existence is what describes an individual associated on the fringe of society as *in* danger. It marks the individual as socially *dangerous* since they are not expected to adhere to their associated social sanctions or taboos. In this stage, Turner (1974, 242) identifies individuals to hold a sense of power due to the freedom to explore the criteria for their existence within society and accompanying sanctions and roles.

Through the passing from structure to structure, rites of passage and instances of anti-structure are also equated to what Turner (1974) calls *communitas*, or the sensation of social togetherness, which appears when a group exists outside of the social structure. In this sense, communitas is equated to anti-structure, as it encompasses the sensations attached to the human emotions of belonging to a shared moment outside of social sanctions. Turner (1974) says that communitas is not a tangible object. Instead, communitas is a sensation resting in the chests of a group observing a Sunday sermon, beating in the hearts of a crowd watching live theatre, and is a moment that humanity flocks to for instances of peace and healing from the pressures of society. Communitas, within a ritual event, results from physical interactions between people within a shared ritual process. This means that within Turner's (1997) definition, communitas can only be enacted socially when a group is physically in the same space.

According to Turner (1997), instances of communitas and liminality are sought out by people due to an innate human need to experience the sensations of belonging. Communitas is a fleeting experience that cannot exist within social structure. However, the process of communitas moves through many modalities before returning to 'normal' as a social structure. Turner (1997) identifies three primary modalities through which communitas moves: 1) existential or spontaneous; 2) normative, and; 3) ideological. Existential communitas is representative of the Pagan experiences within this paper and occurs during counter-cultural movements within anti-structure. This is exemplified by the 'hippie' culture but can also be seen within liminal spaces such as music festivals or raves where individuals do not interact with the group through their regular structural identities (Turner 1997). When applying a Turnerian lens to the modern age, through the framework of existential communitas, we can see the creation of a specific form of a social and communal bond in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the pandemic is an example of *crisis communitas*, wherein a shared experience of an apocalyptic phenomenon, a form of anti-structure, bonded a group of people for a short period.

Communitas is created within a specific, socialized, bounded space (Jencson 2001, 48). Crises bond people as crises are examples of anti-structure. To cope with crisis, communitas emerges in moments of anti-structure within social breakdown, creating a suspension of hierarchy and social rules with the added phenomena of extraordinary togetherness, emergent social energy, coordination of thoughts and actions, and a shared sense of empowerment (Matthewman and Uekusa 2021; Turner 1997). As the COVID-19 pandemic isolated people under mandates and restrictions which dictated and re-framed day-to-day interactions, we can see a correlation between the ritual setting of communitas and the pandemic (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period of Turnerian anti-structure, through which people were suspended in a prolonged space of liminality. This was a period of anti-structure as people were separated from their previous daily structure and identities were levelled into a uniform human existence of following governmental mandates and instructions to terminate interactions with people outside their immediate homes. Many people lost their jobs and sources of income during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, additionally losing their social-structural identities. In applying a Turnerian lens, this means that there was a lack of social rules and taboos placed on people through the previous social structure enacted by their daily 9–5 existence. People were then suspended in a state of existing between social

mandates and rules, argued to be a state of prolonged liminality. I assert that within this anti-structure, the previous societal taboos or norms could no longer be enacted, thus meaning that society was resting betwixt a new social order — 'a new normal' as it became known within popular media.

Wicca & Neo-Paganism: A Brief Description

Applying Turner (1974; 1997)'s concepts of anti-structure and communitas, I explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a small Pagan community in Calgary, Alberta. Today, Neo-Paganism, sometimes shortened to just Paganism, is described as a religious identity in which practitioners recreate rituals of pre-Christian religions and create new rituals to connect with the spirit and cycles of the Earth (Zwissler 2018). Under this overarching descriptor, Wicca is an example of a Pagan religion that anthropologists have described as *New Age*; a religion that has grown in popularity since the 1970s, and which is esoteric and follows a nature based ritual practice (Neo-Paganism 2017).

Wicca draws inspiration from what early modern Christianity labelled as 'other' or taboo. Wicca is a duotheism—worshiping both the feminine in the form of the Goddess and the masculine in the form of the God with a higher importance placed on the feminine in connection to Mother Earth as the form of the Goddess (Zwissler 2018). Wicca traces its origins to Gerald B. Gardner, an Englishman who published works on the claim that he had discovered and joined a coven of witches in Hampshire, England, in the mid-19th century (Vance 2015). Gardner's publications attracted initiates to the religion during the mid-twentieth century, with the growth of the religion within the Western world during the 1970s–1980s credited to word of mouth. Most influenced by this religion were feminists, spiritualists, environmentalists, counter-culture movements, and believers in anti-authoritarianism in the United States (Vance 2015; Zwissler 2018).

There is overlap between New Age and Pagan religions with Wicca representing a specific form of contemporary Paganism (Zwissler 2018; Lunn-Rockliffe and Nicholson 2018). Paganism is a religious system which critiques the structural oppressors faced by practitioners, similar to the experiences within anti-structure brought forth by Turner's (1997) theories. For example, Lauran Vance (2015) writes that, through the lens of Wicca affected by second-wave feminism, women were instructed to become 'witches'—sexually free, independent, and assertive. Wicca was seen as a way to reclaim empowerment and access to the feminine divine. It was tied deeply to progressive politics, especially on topics of environmentalism, feminism, and anti-militarism (Vance 2015). Women's bodies and bodily processes are not sexualized or rendered impure within Wicca; instead, they are celebrated. Within Wicca and many other Goddess-centered Pagan religions, the feminine is privileged over the masculine due to the incorporation of valued qualities such as nurturement, connectivity, and care all personified within the maternal figure of "Mother Earth" (Vance 2015, 118). Through all these qualities and ideals represented within Wicca, it is no surprise that this religion developed in tandem with the effects of second -wave feminism, progressive politics, and environmentalism of the 20th century.

Methods

Within this study, I interviewed five practitioners of Paganism who borrow ritual practices specifically from Wiccan and other new religious doctrine. All the practitioners articulate their religious identity as fluid, taking part in rituals and practices from many different cultural and religious backgrounds. While they all do not identify with the term *witch*, all the practitioners engage in many Earth-based, Goddess-centered practices from both Paganism and Wicca.

To begin my project, I contacted a local occult bookshop in Calgary and asked for consent to use their location to source participants. After gaining consent from the shop's manager and owner, I was put into contact with an employee, Angel, who became my primary community liaison for this project. Through Angel, I connected with three of her practicing Pagan colleagues, and I was contacted by a fourth practitioner from posters hung within the shop. From there, I hosted a

casual meet and greet with the practitioners in the back room of the Bookstore. During this meet and greet, I introduced the practitioners to who I was; my intentions in talking to them; the goals and topics covered within the project; and the theories of Victor Turner (1974; 1997).

Based on this conversation, I created my list of interview questions for the recorded interviews. These questions included how they articulated their religious identity; how their craft changed during the pandemic; how they felt the Pagan community changed during the pandemic; and how they felt the use of the internet and restrictions affected their practice. After I completed the recorded interviews, I listened to the audio multiple times, taking notes and partial transcriptions. My decision to use a combination of group and personal interviews was intended to create a conversation on the topics of Turner's (1974; 1997) theories in relation to personal experiences. To explain these theories and to collaborate with the group, I felt it best to begin my study with a group interview to discuss shared experiences. From this shared conversation I was able to make meetings between each practitioner and myself, to dive into the personal experiences of the pandemic, aided by the background knowledge of our first group session.

Meet the Practitioners

Within this project, it is important to note that all five practitioners interviewed are connected to the Bookshop as either a customer or as staff and that all regard the shop as a community haven. All participants identify as women between the ages of 23–40. Four are white, and one is of mixed race. The topic of gender did not come up in conversation; however, all participants identified with the pronouns she/her. Three women worked steadily during the pandemic while two did not hold steady jobs during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns.

In the winter of 2021, after contacting the occult Bookshop within Calgary, I connected with Angel, a 28-year-old self-described "little hippie anthropologist" and spiritual practitioner. We met for coffee at the end of the winter semester to discuss how the pandemic affected the Pagan community. An alumna of the same anthropology program as myself, Angel was familiar with anthropological theory. Our conversation became centred on how to understand best the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic using anthropological ideas. Angel is a highly involved practitioner within her community who takes on the role of spiritual guide and healer for those who enter the Bookshop. Always open to a conversation and eager to give advice, Angel was the perfect choice to act as the community contact for this project, to connect me with other Pagan practitioners within Calgary.

Luna, a 35-year-old Pagan, works as what can be described as a "jack-of-all-trades" around the shop. Having been at the store since it opened in August of 2018, Luna has been working closely with the owner to create a welcoming space stocked with tools, books, and gifts for the beginning and advanced occult practitioner. Alice, a 36-year-old Pagan and recent immigrant to Canada from Ireland, lends a unique international perspective to this project. Alice works alongside Angel and Luna at the Bookshop, a welcome change from her previous job running an occult shop in Ireland during the pandemic. Through her experience in Ireland of managing staff and a back space within the shop for therapists and healers of many kinds to access, Alice managed to find creative ways to help people access her shop in relation to government restrictions and found pride in providing tools to people to aid in their spiritual healing.

Sappho, an incredibly accomplished 40-year-old mother and teacher, has numerous skills, including being a doula, Reiki worker, sound healer, and Witch. Sappho finds peace within her work of helping people heal through Earth-based practices, away from the influence of the medical system. Coming from a place of personal trauma from the Western medical system, she reflects on her personal health choices to remain unvaccinated and talks about a period of community turmoil and fear. Sappho is a regular at the Bookshop and contracts her healing services to those who may call upon her for help. Ray is a mixed-race 23-year-old Pagan practitioner who does not enjoy limiting her religious identity to labels. Currently working as a receptionist and aspiring to

become a forensic medical examine, Ray spent her pandemic studying at a university in Ontario before moving back to her home province of Alberta. Being the youngest practitioner within this study, Ray often turned to social media such as Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram to find a sense of community within isolation.

The Gathering

On a particularly snowy evening in February of 2023, I met with Angel, Luna, and Alice in person to discuss my project in detail. Aided by the slow burning of a stick of incense, a conversation developed around topics of isolation, fear, and confrontation, highlighting tales of resiliency and empathy from the greater Pagan community. According to the group, in the early months of 2020, there was an intense apprehension within the community regarding a negative shift in energy before the pandemic. Something intense was on the horizon, and the community braced for uncertainty. In March of 2020, apprehension transformed into the terrible reality of a viral global pandemic. This airborne infection caused the death of millions globally and spurred a new fear surrounding the dangers of everyday human interaction (Duffin 2022). Governments created mandates and regulations, reducing city streets to a dystopian landscape. Regulations included capacity maximums on group gatherings that severely impacted religious groups in many ways.

The two themes I identified from my conversations within this study included danger and vulnerability during a liminal period, and healing through communitas. The initial lockdowns of the pandemic caused an instance of anti-structure for the world, shutting down the institutions, norms, and routines through which people felt safe and understood their social-structural identities. This 'new normal' within anti-structure was therefore accompanied by a heightened sense of danger and vulnerability. Due to the lack of social-structural identities and rules that people were expected to adhere to, this danger was stressful yet liberating as people had no social rules or norms to follow. Within this chaos, many people lost their primary income sources and routines. In this context of upheaval, people's normalized social identities constructed through social structure became unsettled. This opened a liminal space of unknown opportunity and fear. This unsettling was not uniform or homogenous for society during the pandemic; but rather, different communities experienced these emotions affected by many factors such as race, class, gender etc. My research is looking at a community of Pagan women, who experienced the pandemic in relation to their personal identifiers and experiences.

Within the context of my research, this upheaval manifested itself into a movement within the Pagan community towards self-reflection and shadow work. Additionally, there was a theme of community growth towards empathy and a need to heal others mentioned throughout the pandemic. This caused a change from magical practices centred around the self, to practices devoted to community healing and protection. Many people clung to their religious practices, often holding onto physical tangible divination tools to remain grounded during crisis. Within this, communitas was an act of group healing for practitioners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Danger and Liminality

Liminal bodies are often associated with being both a danger and in danger as they drift between identities. Since COVID-19 is a form of anti-structure, as previously mentioned, all practitioners presented an overarching theme regarding this period in association with danger and fear. In the initial stages of lockdown, the world was told to disregard how social structures had affected their daily lives. New systems were rushed into place to protect public health, changing how people interacted. No longer able to return to work or the safety of the associated routine, people were drifting in a liminal existence, contemplating their place within society and how they value their time. This liminal existence was noted by every participant in this study, with the most common remark regarding the loss of work and the associated identity. In reflection on this phenomenon, Alice said,

> I found many people found who they were, because they weren't doing their 9 –5 job, they were actually allowed to connect to themselves… I am happy that

> people realized their value as a human being, that were not just supposed to do a 9–5 and then eat and drink and go to bed… They realized there's more to life than just that.

As liminal bodies are considered socially dangerous due to their lack of associated social norms, it is easy to notice fear in the personal reflections from this period of social crisis. This liminal existence within the pandemic created tension between the practitioner and the self, and between the practitioner and their community. The social norms in which people interacted within everyday life were suspended, and the fear of contracting or passing on a deadly virus began to dominate the community's thoughts. Danger was associated with the lack of social structure, accompanied by a liminal existence and the immediate threat of harm from the coronavirus. This fear is echoed in Luna's thoughts on the initial beginnings of the pandemic,

> I would say for the first while, it was really high stress. And I think even people were coming into the store stressed already because we're now existing in a way that we never have before, where there's rules and regulations, and you have to wear mask and sanitize your hands.

In addition to being regarded as dangerous, liminal bodies within Turner's (1974; 1997) theories are also seen to have an air of freedom. This freedom manifests within the lack of social rules associated with this in-between stage of identity, meaning that they can interact with the world without the labels of their social structural oppressors. Within this new sense of freedom, people began to re-evaluate how they were existing and contemplated if they were truly happy with how they were spending their time and energy. When asked about her initial reflections on personal change within the pandemic lockdowns, Angel said,

> Freedom was a big one for me. I think freedom after, like, a period of aimlessness. And kind of being like 'okay… What do I do?' Definitely entering that liminal space and being like, I don't have what I used to have, I'm not doing what I used to do, so I guess I have to figure out how I'm definitely entering that liminal space and being like, I don't have what I used to have, I'm not doing what I used to do, so I guess I have to figure out how to spend my time now.

This dangerous liminal period also revealed intense instances of personal change for all practitioners within this study. This is known within Turner's (1974; 1997) theory of liminality to be the associated stage where liminal bodies can see the flaws within their society's structure. Within the context of this study, it is noted that this liminal space can also bring to light the flaws within the structure of one's personal life or relationships. Many of the women said that personal relationships changed or ended for them during the pandemic. When asked about personal changes during the pandemic, Alice tilted her head back and reflected on the beginnings of running an occult shop during lockdown,

> I ran that place on my own for a few months, which was strange. Went through a lot of personal stuff myself, breakups, moving house.

With this realization of change from the community, there was also a noted movement towards the practice of shadow work and personal development within the practitioner's spiritual practice. Shadow work is considered one of the most personal and darkest parts of a practitioner's journey. In shadow work, one must turn inwards to face their darkness, to heal themselves before they can work to heal others or move forward with their practice. This process involves many ritual acts from mundane journaling and self-reflection to the ritual calling of spirit guides to help give clarity and guidance. Reflecting on the changes to the greater Pagan community, Angel said,

> The pandemic happened and it was like a coming-inward and then facing what is inside. And now that that has happened, I feel like there was definitely a lot of shadow work in the second half of the pandemic.

The ritual process of shadow work came through as a result of the temporary presence of a liminal existence. This movement was used to confront the realizations of the practitioners of where the structure of their everyday life was ineffective. This period of isolation within lockdowns united the community under a new space to explore their identities outside of their structural 9–5 status and taboos.

Continuing this reflection, Angel noted a personal realization that came from this period of shadow work for her,

> …The shadow work kind of- it's like… This is the path you're supposed to be on. And I was like 'oh, I haven't been thinking about that,' and now here I am! I am so pregnant! My shadow work involved a lot of realizations on, yeah, I want to have a family, and children. I had a relationship end during the pandemic, and another one start and- and I would say that this was all interwoven with the magical work that I was doing at the time.

When asked about changes within her practice during lockdown, Alice noted a change between who she was at the beginning of the pandemic and who she is now. Initially, she regarded her practice to be more aligned with the Irish store's atmosphere of Buddhist ideals and spiritual teachings. Now, working at the Bookshop in Calgary, she has noticed a change towards a practice that draws more so on the occult since restrictions were lifted. This represents a change in identities within Turner's (1974; 1997) concept of a liminal existence, between the stages of a rite of passage from one identity to the next. Alice continues,

> I feel my Buddhist love and light that I used to have in the Irish store is definitely not who I am anymore. So, I completely changed from love and light to the completely underground side of this work, which I know is more suited to me, which is a nice thing that happened for me.

This transition for Alice highlights the liminal existence that revealed to the practitioners where they needed to create personal change.

For this community, the pandemic was an extended period of a liminal existence where time seemingly slowed, and space opened for people to reflect on their identities and what they needed to change to become their highest selves. This was not only reflected within ritual practice but also in the changing of mindsets and understandings of the world for the practitioners. When reflecting on the notion of change within her personal practice, Luna had a similar awareness when asked about her thoughts,

> I think that was probably the biggest change for me… It wasn't so much in like ritual and things like that, and it was more… I don't want to move through the world like I'm everything, like I'm the best and everything should aspire to be as good as I am… nothing else matters because its consciousness isn't on the same level as mine or something like that. And instead, it was everything matters in some small way, everything serves its purpose, and I should be respectful of that. I'm not trying to leave this place worse than when I found it.

When discussing the change between herself and her relationships, Sappho found it increasingly difficult to find space within the Pagan/spiritual community where her health choices were as respected as her religious choices. Being shunned from her spiritual community due to her vaccination status, Sappho found a new sense of community with people whose health choices aligned with hers. Reflecting on these friendships, Sappho remarks,

> We aligned there, just on that one topic, but nothing else… What happened when everything opened up, we started to see each other in a different light. When everything opened up it was like 'these are not my people.'

When I questioned her further regarding this realization, I asked her if she saw her religion as separate from her personal opinions. Sappho replied,

> I do. I mean, I think religion or spiritual practice can inform your opinions I

> suppose. But I find that spirituality collides with values. I think people will join a church because you assume that these people will have the same values. You'll probably sit next to each other in the pews thinking they all have the same values.

It is hard to separate religion from politics and increasingly difficult to separate the political movement against vaccination from Christian protestors. In Sappho's case, her decision to remain unvaccinated was separate from her religious values despite restrictions that were consequently placed on her daily life. In this period of liminal change, it is apparent that the shift between health values versus religion briefly aligned her with a different community, separate from her religious values. In this experience, Sappho found herself separated from her religious community and aligned with what can be described as a community of sense.

A community of sense is formed based on the sensation of belonging and the fulfilment of needs from other people and does not take into account the social-structural formation of the group; meaning the particular histories between groups, social status, or economic conditions are not considered when forming a community of sense (Parmigiani 2021). In the example of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Age religions associated with naturopathic Earth-based lifestyles found themselves aligned with alt-right Christian protestors arguing against vaccinations. For some, these two groups are not thought of to have shared commonalities or values, as reflected by Sappho and her relationship with her blood family and Christian in-laws. However, during the pandemic, many people from different social groups found these communities of sense where they were able to connect over the shared value of remaining unvaccinated. Sappho remarked that she felt distanced from her spiritual community due to her health values and choice to remain unvaccinated. Specifically, she mentioned hurtful comments expressed by members of the Pagan community on social media when she spoke about her health values during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this experience, Sappho, scorned by her religious community, temporarily found a new sense of belonging in a group whose health choices aligned with her own. This new community of sense offered her temporary reprise; however, once the restrictions lifted, she quickly realized that the community of sense she gravitated towards did not align with her spiritual values. This thrusted her into a new space of anti-structure as she began to rebuild and connect with her spiritual community after the lockdowns and restrictions were lifted.

The Lifting of the Veil: Communitas and Healing

Crisis communitas is realized when a large group of people share in the experience of anti-structure, often due to some natural disaster. This disaster within the natural world has detrimental effects on our social world, often suspending social norms and structure. This is represented by the recurring theme I noticed during interviews around the "lifting of the veil," as mentioned by Luna and the initial group meeting. The phrase "lifting of the veil" is steeped in religious metaphor and is known as an imaginary veil floating between the heavens and the Earth within religious iconography. This metaphor was brought up repeatedly in reference to the noticed changes in identity and community. Reflecting on this phrase and experience, Luna says,

> I think that's what that was, the biggest change with COVID for me anyways, and for a lot of people. I think what I saw was a lot of stuff was revealed and a lot of stuff continues to be revealed with every year that passes since this happened. it was realizing...that the world as it functions is not how it's supposed to be. like this is not how it's supposed to actually work but this is where we are, and I think we're finally at a point where we're seeing things that are broken for the first time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, with ample free time and the absence of watchful eyes to enforce social norms, Pagan practitioners began to turn inwards to make changes within their lives through shadow work, before turning outwards to help send healing to the larger community. All the practitioners interviewed

showed a general recognition of a movement towards empathy for the larger community after the first initial wave of lockdowns. Angel remarks that this is an integral part of shadow work, that, once healing has been completed for the self, there is a call to heal others and the greater world,

> I also feel like, after the shadow work, once people find their place that they need to go, they start not only healing themselves but also others. There's a call to heal others and even the planet collectively.

During pandemic lockdowns, in response to government-mandated social distancing, a change was noticed on online forums and platforms such as Reddit and Instagram towards connecting with other practitioners for personal healing and health. Practitioners began to call out virtually for prayers and well wishes for themselves and their family members and to express the need to pray communally for global healing. This was described by Ray when asked about changes within the greater spiritual community during the pandemic restrictions,

> …A lot more healing, a lot more protection charms were going about almost begging for good vibes, you know, asking to pray for one another basically.

In both instances recounted by Angel and Ray, there was a general pull from the community to understand group pain, and an additional need to heal together in the collective sensation of communitas. Luna regards this pull as a move towards empathy within her practice as well,

> In the beginning, that's kind of where my head was at. Like, okay well, I can, like, use this to get things that I want, but thankfully that quickly changed to realizing that witchcraft was not about getting what I wanted. At least not my practice, it was about what I can do for others, what I can do to be a better person for those around me, how can I be better, how can I serve the world better.

Communitas is foraged in moments of anti-structure and is created from the collective emotion arising from ritual, rite, or crisis. Religion, in this case, can be seen as a form of communitas, relying on group values, empathy, and ritual sensation to create a moment of calm in a storm of uncertainty. Communitas offers a healing space, a break, outside of the pressures from social structural identities.

In a similar context, religion and religious communities can be a space for healing. When put into practice during a global pandemic, it is evident that the communal cries for protection and grounding bonded the Pagan community over the need for healing. In alignment with this understanding, Alice occasionally ran her shop in Ireland against the government's social distancing mandates. When reflecting on the changes noticed within her job due to the restrictions, Alice revealed,

> …For the government to tell me that I couldn't give someone their daily need? I was like 'good luck to ya,' I can't do this to people. So, if they really need their box of incense, or they really need or their sage to do their cleanse because they're in their house all day long with this anxiety going on amongst people, or they're unhappy… yes please, I says, message me! Here is the PayPal, pay for the items and come to the door!

Religion was also a personal tool used by many practitioners in the management of their mental health. Practitioners often used physical tools of divination as a way to keep themselves grounded and as a magical act to gain positive insight into their future outside of their liminal existence. Sappho reflected that within her practice, she felt that she was able to stay mentally stable during the pandemic while aided by tools of divination,

> I think Tarot was the one thing that got me through COVID I would say. Because the tool itself is physical, I can touch it. Energy work I can't touch it. I can feel it, I can experience it, but the cards anchored me here. Because I could touch them, I could shuffle them.

Laughing, Sappho remarked that she believes she paid the Bookshop's rent due to the many Tarot and oracle decks she purchased during the initial lockdown. Paganism, in the context of COVID-19, was used as an escape from the pain and chaos echoed across the globe. The ritual practices reflected by the five practitioners within this study offered space for personal emotional development, and to engage with the healing and comforting sensation of group communitas and understanding in a time of crisis.

When referring to the liminal period of realization around the reality of society's structure, the topic of the social justice movements that arose during the pandemic came up in many of the recorded interviews. For example, my participants raised social movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement as an example of communal realizations of injustices. These uprisings were an effort to change the future structure of society before the inevitable return to social rules and norms after a period of a liminal existence. Reflecting on this change and its effect on the Pagan community, Angel says,

> The bigger things that were happening in the world, all the other stuff that came out during the pandemic, that was happening in people's individual lives as well… Almost like an 'we're not going to stand for this anymore' type of thing? Now that people have done that everybody is getting right into their power. I'm seeing a lot of people coming in and doing just hefty spells. Now they say that they feel more confident, that they have found their place and their path.

Thoughtfully, Alice reflected on a similar theme she noticed within the larger social world stating,

> I find it's just weird, like, looking at it astrologically around the planet, how much stuff has erupted since the pandemic because we were told to be quiet and to go into our houses. People have decided 'actually, hold on a minute… We don't want to do this anymore.' So, people have started to stand up for themselves more.

Within Victor Turner's (1974; 1997) theories, Communitas is a physical sensation that arises from group experiences. Furthermore, the physical communion and bonding of humans is integral to the creation and experience of communitas. Within this study, it has become apparent that this definition of communitas must be re-examined for the digital age.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical group meetings were banned, and fear developed around being within six feet of a person outside of your social bubble. In the previous examples, crisis communitas speaks to the group emotions expressed virtually and physically because of forced isolation during a global pandemic. To cope with this emotional crisis, the community turned to connection through the joining of online groups, seeking and calling for community healing, and through the shared emotions of stepping into personal power. Within the testimonies given by these five women, we hear examples of shared community experiences during isolation. The community came together in many instances to support and share in religion, towards the goal of personal and greater community healing — the result of crisis communitas. While the community could not physically gather to support one another, the sensation of community support, of togetherness within religion, was felt between all five women.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual realm did not replace or equate to the experiences of communitas prior to lockdowns. Rather, virtual worship and interaction through an online community became a liminal space *within* liminality. The virtual experience of religion and community did not equate to the in-person experience, but acted as a metaphorical Band-Aid until restrictions were lifted and people were able to interact without fear. The importance of the in-person sensations of communitas were more organic, less sanctioned, and preferred, without interactions through a computer screen. This research demonstrated that during this time, virtual platforms held space for *parts* of the experience of communitas through religion until community could once again return to in-

person contact. Had the virtual space been as meaningful as the physical interactions of community, then perhaps the community may not have or felt the need to return to in person worship. The COVID-19 pandemic challenges Anthropologists' understanding of social theory, especially in the rapidly developing digital age. In this instance, it is the forced isolation and shared experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that bonded the Pagan community and forced practitioners into a space of liminality, where religion was used as medicine to heal.

Conclusion

Victor Turner's (1974; 1997) theories of anti-structure, communitas and liminality are representative of the Pagan religious experience of crisis communitas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Liminal existences allow people to experience freedom away from their social structural identities but also harbours innate emotions of fear and vulnerability. This liminal period led to a turning point for the practitioners in re-evaluating how they spent their time and energy. All practitioners that I interviewed felt that they had noticed changes in their relationships, religious practices, and understanding of the world. This was a confrontational part of the pandemic which showed these liminal individuals where contention hid within their everyday lives and society. This led to intensive shadow work followed by the group instance of communitas and empathy for other Pagans within their community. Many people began supporting each other through this period of communal healing, sometimes going against social distancing mandates and regulations. Many people also used their religious rituals and divination tools as medicine to stay grounded and sane during such an intense period of crisis. Through instances of crisis comes a sensation of community, and through community comes empathy and belonging.

The stories from the Pagan practitioners within this study offer an understanding of human coping through crisis. In this context, religion was used as medicine and as an act of self-care and healing for all five of these women. Turner (1974; 1997) argues that communitas is a powerful emotion that leaves humans searching for the feeling until they can find their fix again. This 'fix' exists within the community, within the gathering of groups undergoing a shared experience adapting and reacting to social change. Coming from the understanding of the emotion of communitas being created from these spaces of anti-structure, I argue that it is an innate human need to chase after the feeling of support and understanding from their social peers as they experience a form of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pagan practitioners worked to heal their inner selves before feeling drawn to heal their community. Therefore, the combination of religion, support, and community-built resilience within these women and helped them survive one of the greatest viral crises of their generation.

In such a turbulent emotional time in human history, the theories of Victor Turner (1974; 1997), when applied to religious groups operating under crisis, represent the innate human need to return to belonging within a greater community and social structure. While the initial COVID-19 lockdowns harboured emotions of deep fear and panic in reaction to the reality of a deadly airborne virus, developing instances of communitas provided a safe space for healing. This healing is represented within the accounts of these five practicing Pagans from Alberta. The stories these women share represent a tale of resilience and kindness within communities during an incredibly dark time of human history, a testament to the power of community and emotions of belonging during crisis.

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