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The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

# Diasporic Longing and Rhizomatic Belonging: Art, Objects, Memory, and the Queer Diasporic Experience

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the imbrications of queer identity, diasporic belonging, and memory through the lens of material objects and art practice. Focusing on queer immigrant and refugee narratives in Scotland, this research examines how objects, such as a great-grandmother's ring and a rice bowl, become conduits for negotiating diasporic identity and reimagining belonging in the face of cultural displacement. Central to this inquiry is the concept of "diasporic longing," a sensuous ache of partiality and incompleteness that permeates my interlocutor's experiences of frayed histories and ephemeral homes. To capture the complexity of belonging, this research draws from two ecological metaphorical frameworks: the "rhizome," which symbolises a flexible, multi-rooted identity that resists traditional inert categories, and the "siphonophore," an oceanic organism composed of interdependent parts that create a unified whole. This research seeks to contribute to discourse surrounding the role of material culture in queer diasporic communities, offering insights into how objects facilitate the process of self-making and the articulation of home, identity, and desire in diaspora communities.

**Keywords:** diasporic longing, post-memory, belonging, sensory ethnography, queer studies, Scotland

*Twisting, contorting, suffusing a deep orange in  
the blue expanse.*

*It is strange, compelling, almost amorphous,  
not bending to a rigid form but stretching  
across the ocean.*

*It often finds itself in a spiral coil, or emulating  
that of a long chain:*

*a feeding posture, a way to best occlude  
its prey.*

*The orange, red, green, blue hues emanate  
from its body,  
spilling colour.*

This study is concerned with belonging and the sensuous “diasporic longing,” a phrase uttered by participant Madura, one of many first and second-generation immigrant and refugee people of colour (POC) in Scotland. I analyse these experiences through the optics of assemblages proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Through the notion of an assemblage, they envision a form of subjectivity that constitutes a “multiplicity [...] made up of many heterogeneous terms [...] which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages, sexes and reigns –different natures” (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 69). An assemblage is thus predicated on a relation constituted by multiple, heterogeneous parts linked together to form an agentic whole (Müller 2015). Due to their heterogeneous modality, there are no preconceptions of what is constructed to form a whole—be it humans, animals, objects, ideas—nor is there a dominant entity constructing a



Figure 1. Praya Dubia, Giant Siphonophore. (c) October 2018 Wikimedia Commons

non-hierarchical assemblage (Bennett 2010; Müller 2015). They are productive, producing new “territorial organisations, [...] actors, and new realities” (Müller 2015, 29).

In tandem, the notions of “rhizome” and “siphonophore” will be introduced as accompaniment to provide a conceptual and visual framework for my argument, wherein my interlocutors in the research workshops I conducted are observed as they reconstitute themselves, resisting static or cohesive belonging or identity formations. I work through this claim by deploying sensory ethnography through a series of workshops I facilitated as my ethnographic research. The workshops were initially guided by insights learned from object-oriented ontology and art practice, which elucidated a heterogeneous assemblage of sorts. This is not to say that the complexity of belonging can be neatly packaged into a cohesive whole and that this whole is closed. Rather, I posit that, just as the rhizome and siphonophore embody a state of continuously becoming, my participants also emulate this. Here, I turn to my first visual companion, the rhizome. Though a tree’s form may suggest complexity, it ultimately reinforces rootedness and singularity. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 25) offer the rhizome as a model of multiplicity:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and...and...”

The tree is individuated through a linear and vertical structure with a ‘fixed root;’ it imposes a “to be.” On the contrary, the rhizome, inspired by the complex structure of a stem, is a horizontal system not bound to a specific plant or tree, nor do they resolve neatly into singular points or traceable trajectories, but, alternatively, embrace multiplicity. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 25) assert, the rhizome is the conjunction “and...and...and,” privileging becoming over being, a continuous and ongoing movement. Here, the use of such a polysyndeton cogently delineates the rhizome

as a dynamic system that continues to evolve and contort. By referring to the rhizome, I consider how my participants are not bound to a single tree but a multitude, growing and thriving within a fractured understanding of their own belonging and somewhat entropically branching out in a constant state of “and...and...and.”

In the poem that sits above the introduction, I write on the siphonophore (Figure 1), an oceanic animal, visually akin to a jellyfish (Wilson 1975). To an observer, the siphonophore can be perceived as a “tangled, confused mass of tentacles and appendages” (Winsor 1976, 61). Yet, siphonophores are complex and highly polymorphic creatures, whose colonies are composed of many “polypoid and medusoid” individuals, often referred to as “zooids” (Mackie, Pugh, and Purcell 1988, 98). Each zooid fulfils a role that distinguishes it in its colony: some catch prey, while others digest it, and others may propel the colony forward (Ocean Twilight Zone 2014). Thus, while all elements are heterogeneous, they are simultaneously interdependent, with each organism contributing to form a cohesive body, working together towards a common goal of survival.

The siphonophore, I propose, is a visual cue to think through the elusive concept of belonging among the diasporic immigrant and refugee community in Scotland. I work with the siphonophore within a triptych form. First, I consider the siphonophore as utopic: a model for belonging where distinct individuals with varied roles and experiences work together to form a heterogeneous body. Second, I consider how each organism and participant is critical to the collective; everyone contributes uniquely to the broader diasporic identity. Last, despite forming a collective identity, the siphonophore’s components retain their unique roles. Similarly, my participants retain their individuality but rest on one another for support and survival amid the current politically fraught landscape in the UK. I entwine both these metaphorical frameworks in hopes that they enable us to think differently about “belonging.”

In the following section, I begin by delineating my methodology and ethics,

explaining my rationale for employing object-oriented and art practice-centred workshops. Next, I draw on perennial grief and “diasporic longing,” how home and belonging are encountered through heirlooms and partly fabulated storytelling, experientially felt through touch, smell, and sound. Here, I pose that these narratives need not be predicated upon an objective reality to be meaningful. After, I use an object brought by a participant as a conduit to articulate the political context of the period when the research took place. This coincided with a time of far-right riots in England and Northern Ireland in 2024, which is particularly relevant in understanding how POC immigrants and refugees view their bodies as sites of political contestation. Further, I explore how my interlocutors were able to find refuge and ground their feelings and experiences of alterity in objects and art. Finally, I touch on competing elements of my interlocutors’ queerness and ethnicity that struggle to co-exist, one must pick to “belong.” Yet, my participants transcend ossified understandings of what it means to exist as both an ethnic minority and queer subject, subverting traditional judgements. All sections of this paper begin with an ethnographic vignette and use the participant’s object to guide the reader through each discussion. Through this research, I ask how art and objects, particularly those embroiled in diasporic and queer identities, uproot traditional narratives, serving as conduits of negotiation and reimagining of belonging, identity, and cultural memory?

## Methodology and Ethics

It is a July evening in Edinburgh. Light pours in through my windows; a small flock of clouds kneel above us. My room, temporarily transformed into the site of my ethnographic research, is filled with sound. The sounds can be attributed to my music speaker and my participants that are now sprawled across my carpet, unwilling to let conversation drop by introducing themselves or, if having met prior, catching up and sharing musings. My desk that sits in the alcove carved out by my bay windows is populated with food. *Khaliyat nahal* (honeycomb bread), half filled with saffron and cream, and the other half cheese, jollof rice,



Figure 2: Commissioned Poster by Yennis Begar. Shared on Instagram and WhatsApp for Participant Recruitment.

plantain, *cong yau mien* (spring onion oil noodles), soya devil (Sri Lankan-Chinese fusion curry), *gỏi cuốn* (summer rolls), coupled with a peanut sauce, a coconut pineapple cake, milk tea, and tahini cookies; a combined effort of my participants and me (see Figure 3). This informal introductory meeting is a potluck designed to help my participants and me get a sense of one another and familiarise ourselves with the experience of collectively participating in the workshops to come. We introduced ourselves and got to know one another over commensality, an act that softened the experience of strangeness (Carsten 1995; Vanderslice 2017). After filling our plates and informally chatting, Abbas, one of my participants, halts the conversation. Abbas suggests we all introduce ourselves formally, going around what was now a concentric

formation on my floor: stating our name, pronouns, where we grew up, our ethnicity and how many languages we speak. This formula of introducing ourselves became something of a ritual in each workshop as new people joined.

This research spans June to September 2024 in Edinburgh, Scotland. It draws on multi-sensory and embodied ethnography (Pink 2015; Culhane and Elliott 2016; Howes 2019) and arts-based methods (O'Neill 2008; Raw 2014; Imran 2021) as both theoretical frameworks and concrete methodological tools. These methods were implemented predominantly through collective workshops, with one one-on-one workshop. In these sessions, I prioritised participants' sensory engagement with the group environment and the objects they brought. Participants were encouraged to attend to how objects felt in the hand, the feelings they elicited, and the objects' own sensory qualities, independent of their mediation. Activities included writing, drawing, and engaging with objects tactilely and imaginatively. These practices enabled me to capture feelings that might not emerge through structured interviews alone, particularly those that are difficult to put into words.

Art was positioned as a central tool within this methodology, following principles articulated by O'Neill (2008) and others in arts-based and sensory ethnography (Raw 2014; Culhane and Elliott 2016). In my own ethnography, employing art as method felt axiomatic in engaging participants in ways that could not be captured through standard interviews alone. Artistic and mimetic practices imbued a safe space for complex and non-verbal narratives to emerge, particularly in relation to transnational identities, home, and belonging.

To garner interest and recruit participants, I sought out community groups I was already integrated into, namely Saffron Cherry, a queer POC community group in Edinburgh, and ESEA Outdoors, an East and Southeast Asian outdoors community group that has various branches across England and Scotland. I sent out messages asking whether anyone was interested, supplemented by commissioning my friend to produce a poster (see Figure 2). This poster was initially posted solely on Instagram,

which some community organisers I knew reposted. In turn, friends I had made through community groups asked for my permission to share the poster with other communities they were a part of, effectively invoking a form of snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). My interlocutors' ages range from 21 to 35 and were a mix of students and workers. They are partly friends, yet the majority strangers, and are thus a sample reflection of the worldviews and groups I engage and participate in, producing a sense of intersubjectivity.

Following this intersubjectivity, David Morley (2000, 1) posits that "all theory has roots in autobiography," thus, while this work is grounded in theoretical frameworks, it is crucial that I reckon with my positionality within my writing. Ontologically, I hold an insider positionality to the culture of investigation as a queer Japanese and German second-generation immigrant (Fetterman 2008; Miled 2017; Holmes 2020). I strongly insist upon the excerpt, "we cannot be separated from our biographies," a claim which continues to be rendered veridic throughout my work (Lumsden et al. 2019, 16). As such, both my participants and I occupy a similar demographic as 'queer,' 'POC,' immigrants and refugees.

The etymology of the word "queer" comes from the Greek meaning, "cross, oblique, adverse" (Ahmed 2006, 161). Throughout my work, I slide between meanings, but I primarily denote it to be a sexual orientation or gender expression that "disturbs the order of things," that is, oblique and asymptotic (Ahmed 2006, 161). It is a disturbance of hegemonic heterosexuality; yet, it is also a reclaimed and joyful term that both my participants and I embrace under its umbrella. Additionally, the term 'POC' is deployed throughout my writing, a term that is rightfully contested due to its monolithic, reductionist connotations. Here, I find the siphonophore a beneficial companion in contesting the term and what constitutes an individual. The siphonophore is a kind of holobiont: an "assemblage of different organisms that behaves as a unit" that can visually be placed under the category of a singular animal, yet it is composed of many different organisms that hold unique roles (Sheldrake 2020, 103). Therefore, I use this term

“POC” with caution, acknowledging that while my participants fall under this umbrella term, their experiences are vast and unique.



Figure 3: Food brought by my participants and me for the introductory potluck. Photograph by author.

I facilitated an “object-embodiment workshop,” premised in actor network theory (Latour 2005), object-oriented ontology (Harman 2018) and onticology (Bryant 2011). These frameworks advocate for a widening of human ontology, to interpolate not in our presuppositions about what entities are most valuable or useful, but to find an ontology capacious enough to accommodate all entities on their own terms. Graham Harman (2018), for instance, critiques anthropocentrism by arguing that human access to objects does not exhaust their being. In other words, objects have a reality that exceeds their utility, symbolism, or availability to human perception. This presents a conceptual challenge: if objects exceed human access, how do we engage them meaningfully in practice? I intended to have my workshop work within this tension; rather than fully decentering the human, I began with familiar, emotionally charged human-object relationships. While this foregrounds the human perspective, it also acts as a point of departure — a way to destabilise anthropocentric thinking from within. Participants were then invited to imagine their objects as possessing their own perspectives and agencies, gesturing beyond the human without negating the importance of embodied experience. In this way, the workshop did not attempt to resolve the tension between relationality and autonomy, but to inhabit it,

borrowing from sensory ethnography. In turn, challenging anthropocentric ontology not by denying human-object entanglements, but by reconfiguring and reimagining them. This theoretical grounding inspired the methodological design of my first workshop. To implement this, I took inspiration from Ian Chillag’s podcast *Everything is Alive*, which anthropomorphises everyday objects, collapsing humour and profundity to explore how objects mediate human relationships with the world. Listening to an episode where a shirt and trousers converse, it conjured memories of childhood — when a tree was not simply a tree but a body that contorted to satiate its craving for sunlight, to feel a bird taking refuge on its branches, feeling the weight of a human press against its bark to rest.

For this workshop, I had asked participants to bring an object that reminded them of home, evoked belonging, or connected them to their cultural heritage. It could be old, new or borrowed, passed down through generations. I introduced an episode, “Sal, Sock”, in which “Sal” humorously narrates his everyday life and relationships (Chillag 2021). Participants were encouraged to imagine their chosen object’s perspective and document thoughts, sketches, or observations. This workshop was conducted both individually and in group format, where each participant introduced their object, what it meant to them, why they picked it and passed it around.

My second workshop design was a collective workshop grounded in art practice, wherein I provided my participants with a breadth of materials (see figures 4 and 5). I prompted participants to create an artwork on ‘What is belonging to you? How has your sense of belonging been affected by the current political climate in the UK?’ Interlocutors were given an option of creating collective/shared pieces; however, each participant opted to create their own piece. Although many participants found commonalities in their experiences, each experience remained unique to the individual. My rationale for engaging with this praxis was to go beyond the standard interview: understood here as a structured or semi-structured, researcher-led format in which participants respond to questions in a formal, one-to-one setting, and to invite participants to

express themselves through a less formal medium. Using arts-based methods better equipped me and my interlocutors to capture emotional and sensorial experiences and to infuse inquiry with visual representation (Cole and Knowles 2007; Gauntlett 2007; Eisner 2008; Bagnoli 2009; Rutten 2016; Goopy and Kassan 2019; Jeffery et al. 2019). This approach also enabled participants to dip in and out of conversation, facilitating a more relaxed environment.



Figure 4 & 5: Art materials laid out on a desk in preparation for the workshop. Photographs by author.

Finally, I employed ‘intimacy as method’ (Shah 2017; Cîrstea and Pescinski 2024) that, while fraught with blurring the boundaries between researcher and participants, led to real and genuine relationships with my interlocutors, now friends. To echo Ana-Maria Cîrstea and Janina Pescinski (2024, 3), building intimate relationships in the field is a “contingent and organic process rather than a strategic

objective.” In line with this, each aspect of my research organically became deeply predicated in an intersubjectivity not just between myself and an individual participant, but as a collective. Referring to the siphonophore, my participants, in addition to their art and objects brought, cultivated a common subjectivity and shared consciousness. Like the siphonophore, their contributions remained individual yet interdependent, collectively forming an assemblage of perspectives that deepened our collective understanding.

Outside the context of the workshops wherein I bore witness to what objects participants held dear and their engagement with art practices and dialogue, I draw on a post-research example to illustrate how intimacy as method stretched beyond my expectations. Shortly after the workshops, one of my participants was evicted from their long-term flat due to their landlord selling the property. Through connections fostered during my research, another participant opened their home, providing them a space to stay for some time. I received a voice note from my participant thanking me for the space I had created. I think this example epitomises my gladness in employing such a method and, in turn, creating a space for connection.

### “Diasporic Longing:” Perennial Grief as a Quiet Elegy

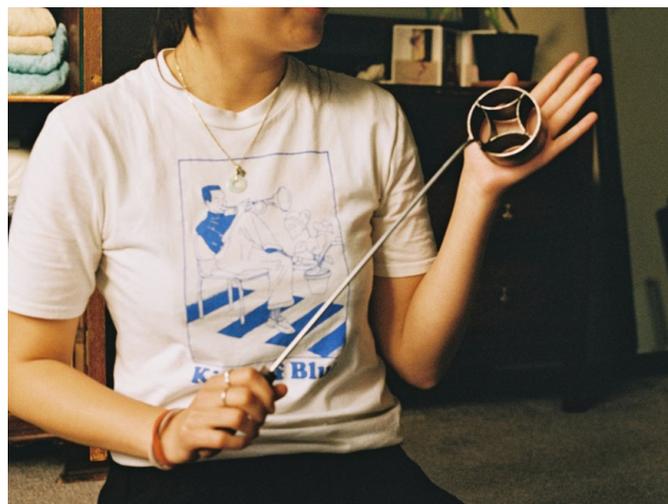


Figure 6: Alix’s Object: Rosette Iron used for Chinese New Year. Photograph by author.

It was just Alix and me; the rest of the participants who were supposed to show today had cancelled. Alix and I had met twice before for ESEA outdoors community hikes, so I felt more comfortable conveying my embarrassment at her having been the only one to show. I offer tea and cookies I had baked in preparation, a small offering to apologise for having to indulge in strange exercises with me, alone. We sit on my floor, and I play music to ease the environment. Alix is softly spoken with short, dark hair. She grew up in Hong Kong but moved to Scotland as a child and now lives in Glasgow's suburbs with her brother. Alix presents me with her object (see figure 6), which is steel with a wooden handle, and Alix explains to me that by dipping the mould into batter and frying it in oil, it forms light, crispy biscuits for Chinese New Year (CNY). This rosette iron used to belong to Alix's mum, and it was only used once a year for CNY. Alix had received this object after her mum had passed away. We begin, reflecting on what memories it conjures up.

The rosette iron stirs up memories of being used in her childhood kitchen in Hong Kong. Alix remembers this object being solely Alix's mum's role when preparing for CNY festivities. Her childhood kitchen would be replete with streams of laughter and gossip. I imagine an abundance of Alix's mum's friends in their kitchen, a cacophony of excited chatter. We try to sit with the perspective of the rosette iron together. I imagine the object sitting in a miscellaneous drawer, waiting for its moment once a year. It does not often see the light, unless it is rifled and pushed past when looking for another object. It sits obediently waiting for its turn. I imagine it knowing the contours of Alix's mum's hands well. It nestles into the familiarity; it recognises her face and the sound of her friends talking. It can sense the heat of the oil before it is submerged, it is CNY. After Alix's mum passed away, I imagine it sitting in its designated drawer and, when it is reached for, it feels a different hand, it sees a different face. It is not Alix's mum but her daughter.

Alix tells me that now she uses the object just as her mum did, in the kitchen with her friends, with similar cacophonies and streams of laughter. Alix tells me that she associates food with home, and this object feels like an

entryway into the past. Grief is often treated as an aberration, lacking a cantabile melody, without metaphor or redeeming symbol. Grief is instead something of a discordant rhythm; not always sitting at the surface but wedged in the creases. In this chapter, I consider how my participants feel a "sensuous absence" (Billie, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010), a yearning for an ephemeral home or home never visited that is supplemented by narrativising and storytelling: felt as "phantom pains" (Meyer 2012). Here, I argue that grief and absence are translated through objects and art practices. Regarding materiality, the objects brought and the art produced lend themselves to malleability: they transcend what the authentic object's purpose is and take the form of, to borrow from my participant Madura's words, "diasporic longing." In this section, I work with grief as "adjusting to a new reality," requiring modification of one's usual life (Brison and Leavitt 1995, 396; see also Hertz 1960). I ask: Can grief, like the rhizome, move in nonlinear and unexpected directions - emerging through sensory memory, material practices, and shared rituals - rather than following a fixed trajectory or resolution? Does the diasporic community, in particular, feel a connection to objects and materiality?

It is an August evening, the sky is stained blue, and the streetlights are on. My room is flooded with a red hue emanating from my red lamp and paper lantern. Candles populate the space, lodged into wine bottles that harvest dried wax. My participants and I are once again sitting in a concentric formation on the floor, with my music speaker placed in the middle. It is the group object-embodiment workshop. Some of us are lying on our front, some cross-legged. When I stop the podcast, I ask if anybody is comfortable going first to "embody their object." Madura offers to go first. Madura shows us a few rings; she fiddles with them as she speaks. The silver rings are slightly misshapen and beautiful. Everyone touches the rings carefully. I feel in the ridges. My thumb hesitates at the jewel, feeling its texture. It is smooth and cold.

Madura states that they are, in some ways, redundant and obsolete as they do not fit her fingers, but, alternatively, exist as pieces of art that she exhibits in her room. She describes the



Figure 7 & 8: Madura's Great-Grandmothers Rings.

tradition of brushing the rings with toothpaste to clean them, adding that they probably have residual toothpaste wedged in them. We laugh. I imagine what it is like to be worn on different generations of women's fingers — pressing, adjusting and contorting its body to wrap around a new finger. It is silver and elegant with curving protruding lines that wrap around its body, framing a turquoise jewel in the middle. She passes it around while telling us of its history. This was supposedly her great-grandmother's ring, and, despite being contested by Madura's mother, Madura likes to imagine it to be so regardless of the veridical story. It is elegant, and she thinks it harbours an accurate representation of her great-grandmother. In her own words, perhaps the insistence of it being her great-grandmother's pays ode to the projection of "diasporic longing" onto objects passed down, whereas for our parents' generation, "it's not that deep."

Figure 7 elicits a constructed nostalgia for Madura; it is a sentiment of loss yet also a "romance of one's own fantasy" (Boym 2001, 19). Here, Madura lingers in longing; despite the factual lineage of the ring contested by her mother, this ring draws the nexus between her and the loss of her great-grandmother. Heirlooms and relics are often cast to the inside of a glass cabinet, a mantelpiece, and they are to be displayed as a museum might do — a predication upon a "distal" form of knowing (Hetherington 2003, 1934–1935). They "privilege the disembodied gaze of the observer," participating in the notion that objects are to be abstracted from an embodied part of the world (Harries 2017, 115). Madura espouses both a disembodied gaze, by displaying the ring and not wearing it, yet breaching the boundary of a dispassionate display by passing the ring around, fiddling with it, and in so doing, 'touching the past.' Here, touch inaugurates a proximal way of knowing; we attain a kind of *ichi una*, "skin knowledge," allowing participants who have no knowledge of Madura's family to encounter a history, a past through tactility (Howes 2005, 27).

Following this, Marianne Hirsch (2012) ruminates on why she could recall such moments from her parents' wartime lives in great detail, "the textures, smells, and tastes of the urban and domestic spaces" (2012, 4). Hirsch, citing Young (1997), reflects on how, increasingly so, she has inherited a "postmemory," a "received history," in which Hirsch bears the personal and collective experiences of her parents (2012, 5). Analogously, the patina of the ring evinces a "postmemory" of sorts, its markings reflect Madura's matrilineal predecessors' wear, and its veridical history does not have to be real to be meaningful. The tactile memories of both Madura and Hirsch enable the skin of memory to be permeable, not encasing the past but "breaching boundaries of skin in such imagery that memory continues to be felt ... rather than seen as contained other" (Bennett 2005, 41–42). Therefore, in sense memory, "the past seeps back into the present, as a sensation," collapsing the boundaries between memory and imagination (Bennett 2005, 42). However, why does she feel, in Madura's own words, a

“diasporic longing,” a preoccupation with the ring, whereas her mother does not?

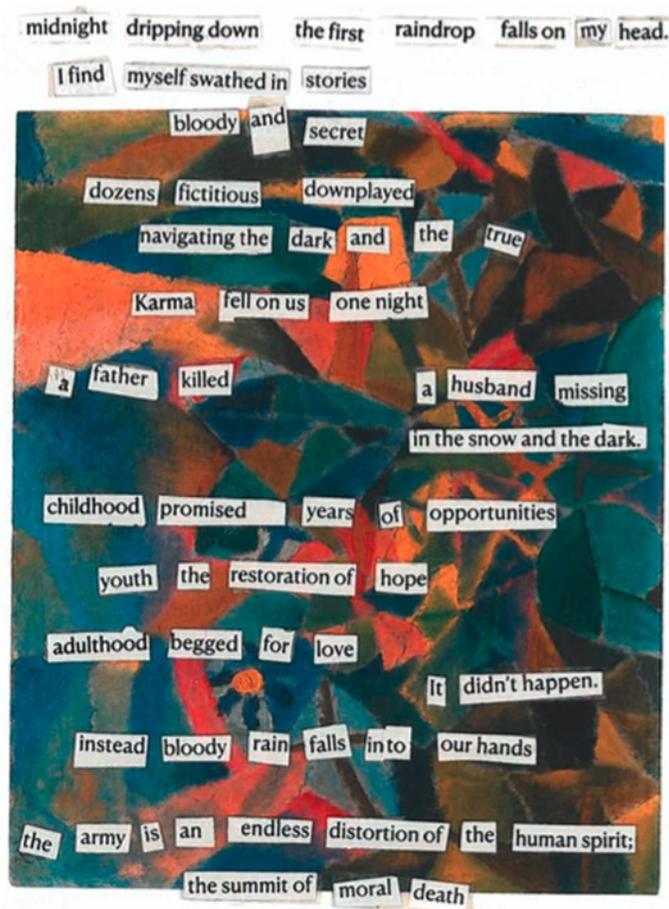
Madura here is perhaps touching on what Kumarini Silva (2009) elucidates, in which immigrants pastoralise a homeland that stays “frozen in time — the time they left it” (2009, 700). The ring is then perhaps more meaningful or “deeper” to Madura, having immigrated from India to England at a young age, because her experience of living in India was characterised by an ephemerality as opposed to her mother’s. Madura “wants to be affected” (Runia 2006, 309). She wants to be brought closer to the everyday rhythms of life in a former time, as though “no time has elapsed between then and now” (Edgeworth 2012, 81). She desires an intimacy, to capture the essence of somebody no longer here. Thus, the ring transcends its tangibility, symbolic of the interstitial moment between the past and present, “concretising the past as a nostalgic and unchanging place” (Silva 2009, 700). Subsequently, there is refuge to be found in the ring, as it captures a “discursive emplacement” (Naficy 1998, 4), a way in which Madura can proximately contain the loss in her own possession, a piece of home and her matrilineal family on her bedside table.

Next, I turn to Madura’s art produced during the art workshop, which perhaps speaks to *why* Madura may feel a preoccupation with tangible tactile pieces of her family history as a form of “sensemaking” (Brooker 2010), a way in which the past becomes “accessible in the present” (Katsi et al. 2024, 2).

Sat in a booth at a cinema cafe, Madura passed me her artwork in a white envelope: it had been incomplete during the workshop, and she had asked to finish it at home. She had picked a postcard by Paul Klee (1913) from the art supplies I had provided during one of my workshops. The postcard swirls in a deluge of form and colour; it is fragmented and composed of geometric shapes that amalgamate to form a cohesive abstract piece. I feel almost obliged to spin the great spirals of shapes that sit behind the words, but I read the words first while she sits across from me. I am struck by how visceral the experience is when I finish reading. I tell her which particular words stand out to me and ask whether picking the postcard and words was intuitive or carefully

curated. Madura says it was mostly intuitive, but what largely imbued the art was thinking of a piece of her family history, something that has been occupying her thoughts for a while.

Madura proceeds to tell me the story of her grandad when he tragically passed away in the



During this night of violence, the wheels of justice grind exceedingly slow.

Figure 9: Madura’s collage on a postcard, composed of cut-out words. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

air force in the Himalayas. Having flown with a small group of other men on a particularly stormy evening, they had crashed. Strangely, Madura’s grandad was the only one not found; there were no traces of his body, nor his belongings. At the time, Madura’s *nani* (grandma) was in her early twenties and pregnant with Madura’s mother; the loss of her husband was devastating. He was never found and, by law in India, Madura’s *nani* was required to wait eleven years to get remarried as he was not officially dead. Her next husband was much later revealed to have been the man who signed off on the flight Madura’s grandad had crashed. This tragic portion of Madura’s

family history thus sets the tone for the framework of the piece.

Consequently, Madura finds herself “swathed in stories,” and the disquieting nature of this piece of her family's history remains open-ended. Having only been articulated during COVID-19, it stands partially fractured and incoherent—a seemingly embedded condition of the immigrant experience. This is a story untold yet finally revealed, elucidating how diasporic POC are often left to live through fragmented oral histories sought out from older generations (Buccitelli 2016). The “always incomplete” partiality of Madura’s rings and the story behind the artwork is perhaps the very source of their power: they must remain impoverished and undetermined to be supplemented by a narrative discourse, one that fills in the gaps, the inconsistencies (Stewart 1993). There is an ache for the unattainable, the partial story that requires salve to fill in the gaps. The rhizome is useful here to consider how Madura’s family history is neither rooted nor sedentary, but fractured, just as Klee’s (1913) painting is, in a perpetual state of “and... and... and.” Histories being unearthed as time passes form a rhizomatic sense of belonging: non-linear and adapting, growing in complex, interconnected ways.

### Fabulations of Inherited Memory? The Evanescence of a Constructed and Imagined Home

Shola tells me, “I lost my nana and grandad when I was quite young, and they were the main sort of people that connected me to Jamaica and would tell a lot of stories and cook Jamaican food.” Shola wears an afro paired with silver hoops that hang from their ears. They wear a dark green jumper that sits beneath denim dungarees. Shola laughs loudly and smiles often. She is kind, incredibly warm, and speaks with a Liverpool accent. Shola is in their final year of undergrad but grew up in Liverpool with a Northern Irish mum and a Jamaican dad. Shola often feels the weight of “grief and sadness” because they feel “a disconnect from my roots because I’ve never been to Jamaica,” and, with the loss of their nana and grandad, their thread to Jamaica is frayed. This is particularly difficult as Shola’s

father struggles to speak openly about Jamaica, making the deaths of both grandparents even more impactful. The thread of discourse that has emerged from Shola’s nana, grandad, and father has constructed an image, authentic or fabricated, of Jamaica. Shola does not draw on their own memories, nor does Jamaica tell her



Figure 10: Shola’s artwork (A3, mixed media). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

of its past or present; rather, the stories received from family constitute a form of anemoia: a felt connection to a past one has not personally experienced (Koenig 2021), containing its image like the lines of a hand, written in the sounds of “Peter Tosh and Bob Marley” and the “ocean” reminding Shola “what it would be like to be on the beaches of Jamaica” and the smells of “curry goat, plantain.”

Revisiting Hirsch’s (1997, 111) “postmemory” experientially felt by Madura, Shola also conveys how memories can be experienced through mediation, reactivating and re-embodiment of the history of one’s family (Dragojlovic 2014). Shola quite literally embodies this legacy by paying homage to their blackness through fashion, “dressing in patterns, colours,” music, “ska, reggae, rock steady,” and tragedies experienced by ancestors such as “Windrush.” In line with this, Hirsch (1997, 106–7) writes that “postmemory’s connection to the past is not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.” Inexorably, as Shola puts it, despite being “more connected to my whiteness and those parts of my identity” are “labelled and

present as a black person” with their “afro being a huge part of that.” Shola perhaps feels a greater desire for an “inherited knowledge” for the homeland they are compartmentalised into (Baser and Toivanen 2023, 306; see also Weldon 2015). Thus, there is a pull to “imaginatively invest, project, and create” a connection to a homeland they are perceived in the UK to belong to, only truly encountered through smell and song.

Shola’s desire to engage in narratives of stories about Jamaica perhaps reflects, in Deleuze’s (1998) terms, a yearning not for a singular thing or place, but for an assemblage. Deleuze propounds that desire extends beyond a single object to encompass a multiplicity. For instance, one does not desire a woman, but a landscape enveloped within her, an unfamiliar terrain. Similarly, Shola does not yearn for Jamaica as a singular, fixed entity, but as an assemblage, a composite of inherited memories and smells. Thus, Jamaica becomes a place of multiplicity: an ideological construction where Shola would feel at “home.” I draw on Chrisyl Wong-Hang-Sun’s (2024, 13) conception of “home” here, in which she writes of the Mauritian and Chaggosian kreol for “home,” translated not into a singular word but a short sentence, “*kot mo mem*” (“at me myself”). There is, to both the Mauritian and Chaggosian peoples, an implausibility of identifying a single location of “home” as a member of the diaspora, but rather home is the “ability to *feel* at home in oneself” (Wong-Hang-Sun 2024, 13). Jamaica, similarly, is captured only within the oral archives of Shola’s family, not simply a ‘root’ for Shola, but an ability to *feel* at home in herself, an inseparable continuation of her family biographies and diasporic experiences (Baser and Toivanen 2023).

## Politicising Bodies and Bowls: The Object and “Care”

We are listening to the podcast *Everything is Alive*, which feels like an exercise wherein one is reminded to extend care to what we may consider quotidian, disposable, or abject. I stop the podcast and ask who would like to try embodying their object: what would their object say? What journey has this object had? The

awkwardness and embarrassment of leaning into such an exercise are acknowledged, and we giggle.

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This chapter is shaped by my participant Vi’s bowl (see Figure 11). This bowl anchors the ethnographic and theoretical discourse



Figure 11: Vi’s Rice Bowl brought to the object workshop. Photograph by author.

throughout this section, serving as a conduit for both Vi and the chapter it shapes. As immigration constitutes an “especially unsettled condition” (Mehta and Belk 1991, 400), a comfort can be found in objects that feel familiar. These objects often serve as anchors for continuity, enabling individuals to maintain behavioural rituals that preserve a coherent model of the self (Swidler 1986). In this way, material familiarity offers both emotional comfort and an entryway into a past self, allowing one to resume, on a small scale, a life that was left behind. This diasporic self is, however, in the case of my participants, observed through objects representative of a transition that reflect ‘multiple

belonging' (Pechurina 2020; Boym 2001). Thus, during periods of unsettled conditions, material objects become permeated with meaning to help organise experience and, by transporting and keeping objects, individuals can "transport" and "preserve" these identities in a new home country (Mehta and Belk 1991, 398–400; Swidler 1986). A previously ephemeral established identity can, therefore, be drawn on to reconstruct and reckon with the self that exists as immigrated or displaced through objects that retain memories.

I met Vi for the first time at my door. They had been the first to arrive. Despite being strangers, I had felt an instant warmth from them. They have on black trousers that fall elegantly, paired with a tucked-in white shirt. They wear round, rimmed glasses that complement the dark hair that falls around their face. During the workshop, we go around the circle one by one. It is Vi's turn. Vi grew up in Hong Kong but immigrated with their parents as a child to England. Now, they live in Edinburgh, soon to move to Glasgow. Vi holds up their bowl (Figure 11). They describe it as "cheap," "simple," "factory-made," "not ornate and not pretty." Vi reflects on the bowl, telling us, "...nobody's ever looked at this bowl and thought this was meaningful to me. This is just a bowl that we pass around and put hot rice in and throw in the sink without thinking about it." This bowl to Vi has never required much thought or reflection. It exists in Vi's home to fulfil its role, a vessel for food, rinse and repeat. Its ceramic shell is familiar with the sensation of the sink, lying lopsided with residual rice grains glued to its body. It is not perceived as ornate, but as something disposable and replaceable. Figure 11 constitutes little monetary value yet, when realised as a promise of visual intimacy, the bowl validates the experience of Vi's own biography and notion of the self (Stewart 1993).

The iconography of Figure 12 depicts the ceramic bowl drawn in pencil and fine liner with letters cut out spelling, "Are you Chinese Enough?" The bowl is delicately drawn; there is a consistency to the design of the rim, a repetitive intentionality. Comparatively, the lettering strikes a bold contrast to the rest of the bowl; the letters protrude, and some show residual snippets of other letters. An imperfection bleeds in, augmented by the

cracks that are visible underneath the lettering. Vi reflects on the common experience of a "diasporic identity crisis," in which one is neither "quite British enough to be in the UK nor quite Chinese enough to go to China or Hong Kong." A tension arises here where Vi must, just as their bowl is, reckon with feelings of displacement from two "homes." Both Vi and their bowl find themselves in "transit," existing in a liminality where they now stand out in both homes—in the UK and Hong Kong—occupying an interstice where the diasporic identity lies (Bhabha 1994).



Figure 12: Vi's artwork produced in the workshop (A4). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Vi tells me that this artwork was inspired by Catalina Cheung's ceramics, which blend bold identity statements with the delicateness of traditional Chinese ceramics. One piece, which reads "You are gay and Chinese," resonates deeply with Vi, particularly because it juxtaposes this message with the quiet beauty of a traditional Chinese vase. Similarly, figure 12 reveals the interstices where the diasporic identity converges, collapsing in on itself, producing a "crisis." By subverting the bowl as Cheung does, Vi indexes a terrain for initiating and contesting what it means to be queer and Chinese living in Scotland. The bowl taken from its set now stands alone and must forge a new identity where it may not look like the others, where it may move through social landscapes differently. Vi, here, is reckoning with this "third space" where they do not feel enough to belong in either homeland (Bhabha 1994). Yet, Homi Bhabha's (1994) model is limited as it seeks resolution between thesis and antithesis,

offering a synthesis that may oversimplify Vi's experience. Comparatively, Deleuze's (1988) rhizome helps better understand Vi's identity as something that cannot be neatly compartmentalised. This "identity crisis" is particularly exacerbated by the UK's hostile political climate, where migrant bodies become sites of contestation (Ahmed 2000). Vi expands on incurring racial and nativist narratives, notably exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, stating,

I think this justification of identity and belonging has become magnified by the current political climate, where immigrants and people of global majority are increasingly ostracised and reduced to their (perceived) ethnicity, such as statements like 'go back to China' particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statements such as "go back to China" were a particularly prolific utterance aimed at East and Southeast Asian individuals throughout the pandemic. First identified in Wuhan, China, the rampant spread of COVID-19 (Chung et al. 2020) and the UK government's negligence congealed, increasing infections and, consequently, deaths. Social distancing, restrictions on time spent outside, and being confined to one's home propagated fear. This fear propelled racist sentiments in which COVID-19 was referred to as the "Chinese virus" (Xue 2021; Devakumar et al. 2020). East and Southeast Asian individuals quickly became the targets of an onslaught of racism and xenophobic rhetoric due to the perception that they are attacking the purported homogeneity and cleanliness of the state, becoming symbols of a disease. The ostracisation Vi describes and embodies through their object positions them as a defiling presence, as matter out of place, countering the "normative" landscape (Douglas 1966; Foucault 1986). These experiences can be interpreted through the lens of Julia Kristeva's (1982) "abjection."

Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) abjection, I evince how the identification with my participants' objects and the art they produce unfolds broader discussions on how the queer POC diasporic community in Scotland reckon with the UK's hostile political landscape. Vi's

bowl specifically enables me to consider how quotidian objects, often rendered disposable, become increasingly meaningful objects, fostering resonance and empathy. This process can enact catharsis as reflected in processual art practices. Here, I ask how quotidian objects serve as conduits to navigate and articulate one's experience of belonging or alterity. How do these objects and art practices contribute to the political discourse around immigration and racialisation in the UK? Furthermore, I consider how material objects ground belonging and function as tools for understanding how belonging is constituted through an assemblage of things. While I use the term "abject," I do so with caution. My participants did not explicitly use it to describe their experiences, and it does not wholly capture their feelings. Nonetheless, I adopt it to engage with the far-right narrative of othering and the way this narrative impacts my participants' sense of safety and belonging.

Using Kristeva (1982)'s notion of abjection, we can articulate how the contemporary political landscape in the UK and increasing nativism and far-right populism contest my participants' feelings of belonging and home as evinced by Vi's bowl. When skin on the surface of milk is presented to the eyes or touches the lips, an affective disgust is produced; it stiffens the body, our lips curl, crinkling the brows. One protests its unfamiliar texture, its departure from the mundane. According to Kristeva (1982), abjection provokes such a response, an affective convulsion. It is a defilement from the quotidian, the pure, the homogenous, begging the question of what sits inside and outside our sense of order.

### Dissonant Touch: Guanyin and the Politics of Belonging in an Era of Far-Right Resurgence

After the art workshop, I am looking at Sophie's artwork. Sophie was born and raised in Singapore and now lives in Glasgow. Her art piece is imbued by the body: hands, arms, and feet contort and stretch across the work. A figure that sits on the right side of the collage is standing on a platform, its arms outstretched, reaching for a larger hand that sits above the figure. Despite reaching, the figure's hands cannot reach the hand it seeks to touch. A small

distance remains. They are out of sync, their hands both directed slightly off one another.

When interpreting the artwork to me, Sophie states, "it's like a Guanyin imagery ... and then the whole reaching out thing, not feeling I belong anywhere, because Singapore's rejected me for citizenship. Feeling unwanted in any part of the world." The name Guanyin is a short form of Guan-shi-yin, "the one who listens to the cries of the world" (Reis-Habito 1993, 62). Guanyin is a deity often called upon by worshippers in times of 'uncertainty, despair, and fear' and is believed to offer relief through healing powers that emanate from the 'tips of her fingers' (Reis-Habito 1993, 66).



Figure 13: Sophie's artwork produced in the workshop. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Guanyin's invocation in this context is unsurprising, as my workshops coincided with the rise of violent far-right riots that began in the North of England, quickly spreading across England, also stretching to Northern Ireland. These riots were provoked by the murder of three girls in Southport, where limited

information was released about the suspect due to their status as minors. Despite the absence of information, these murders became a spectacle online. The perpetrator was posited to be an "undocumented migrant," having arrived on a "small boat" (Reilly 2024). Comments such as these incited a greater onslaught of anti-immigration rhetoric, with an estimated twenty-seven million impressions for posts claiming the attacker was Muslim, a migrant or a refugee (Reilly 2024). Images circulate of a hotel in Rotherham housing asylum seekers attacked by over seven hundred far-right rioters, engulfed by flames. Rocks, fireworks, and missiles are hurled at the hotel. Bins fly in the air. Windows are smashed. Libraries are burned down.

One participant decided not to attend my workshop, feeling debilitated by the escalating violence; they are fearful of the response they might provoke. It is immigrants and refugees like them that they see on the news and that are incurring violence, perceived as abject, as "other." Vi's bowl as an object siloed within the context of burgeoning xenophobia reflects the visceral feelings of displacement, of not being enough. Yet, Vi's bowl is increasingly recognised as a meaningful object, an object that can embody resilience, resistance, and rejection to the abject.

## Conclusion

The rhizome moves through soil, forges new territories and finds new nodes, countering the teleological. It meets nodes that whisper and unveil new histories, adapting to new paths and comprehension of the self, forming an assemblage. The siphonophore occludes its prey by behaving as a collective. It coils protectively; it is not an individual, yet it is working together to survive, leaning on each heterogeneous element. These unlikely companions have aided me in providing cogent starting points to hold the complexity of belonging amongst the queer diasporic community as something incoherent and open-ended, yet finding a belonging in one another. However, as the rhizome flits and the siphonophore is carried by the current, my participants transcend these metaphorical

frameworks. Here, I am impelled to return to my initial question: how do art and objects, particularly those embroiled in diasporic and queer identities, serve as conduits of negotiation and reimagining of belonging,



Figure 14: Counter far-right protest, London. Photo: taken by Zoë Ito

identity, and cultural memory, while uprooting traditional narratives and providing new ways to reimagine and perform selfhood?

As conveyed in the work of Vi, their family rice bowl was reimagined with the inclusion of the statement, “Are you Chinese enough?” As evident in this statement, there is a sense of incompleteness, of being partial and, in turn, Vi’s own experience of being excluded. Indeed, there is a yearning to be found in Vi’s bowl: a congealing of an elegy, an ache to fill in a sensuous partiality that seems to inhibit and occupy them. The complexity of this felt insufficiency is captured by interlocutor Madura’s poignant phrase, “diasporic longing,” conveying the perennial desire to fill in this

partial incompleteness, to contain, to possess, to trace a transient home and history and to make it proximate. It is, from my own understanding, a visceral ache and preoccupation for what cannot quite be remembered or captured, a nostalgic torment. To satiate this ache, as conveyed by both Madura and Shola, a “postmemory” is invoked. By capitulating to contested and perhaps fabulist narratives of heirlooms and their family histories, they can bridge frayed connections to home and, in turn, their selfhood. Thus, narratives espoused of an ephemeral home, whether pastoralised or only encountered through smell and song, are malleable; they need not be veridical to hold value.

Conclusively, just as the siphonophore does not bend to a rigid form, neither do my participants nor I. In turn, there is belonging to be found in one another by embracing each other’s incompleteness and prolific unfurling.

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# This is Our Place: An Ethnographic Study on the Reclamation of Public Urban Spaces by Young Skateboarders across European Cities

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary cities are complex hotspots of people with different interests. Especially in times of rapid urbanisation, cities can be sites of conflict over the use of the scarce urban space, as well as sites of resistance to assert claims on said space. This ethnographic research accompanies young skateboarders (aged 18-28) across various European cities and towns, including Madrid, Berlin, Paris, Dortmund, Maastricht, Heerlen, Freising, and Radolfzell. Using auto-photography and interviews, their experiences *with* and reactions *to* conflicts in different urban places are explored. The study finds that participants show a general desire to avoid conflict. Yet, when being excluded from public urban spaces, they feel they have a right to defend their access. In their claim on using public urban spaces for sport, the skateboarders fall back on a variety of means of resistance and formally or informally protest urban policy. This study is an exploration of how Henri Lefebvre's right to the city manifests in the praxis of modern urban life and provides a much-needed platform for young people to communicate their demands for more inclusive urban policy.

**Keywords:** urban visual ethnography, skateboarding, resistance, generational urban dynamics, urban anthropology

## A Battle for the Right to the City

“Who owns [the city]?” is written on the banner of a protest in Berlin in 2014 (Weißmüller 2014). “The city belongs to the people!” states another banner at a protest in the same city eight years later (Tip Berlin 2022). Both protests took place in Berlin, where inhabitants, united in their dissatisfaction with urban policy, protested against private real-estate investors and the increasing commercialisation of the city. As early as 1968, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, in the context of his work *The Right to the City*, drew attention to the fact that urban space is permeated by different political and social claims to ownership, creating conflict. Since Lefebvre's claim over 50 years ago, cities have undergone rapid change, characterised by population growth. While only 36% of the world's population lived in urban areas in 1968, this figure had risen to 57% by 2022 (The World Bank 2022). By 2050, this figure is expected to rise to 68% (United Nations 2018). This increasing urbanisation is accompanied by an increased demand and a simultaneous shortage of urban space. This shortage harbours even more potential for conflict, as can be seen, for example, in the recent protests mentioned at the beginning.

In this context, it is relevant to investigate the dynamics of diverging interests in urban spaces. More specifically, we aim to shed light on the perspectives of young people to further contribute to discourses surrounding urban places, spaces, and policies. To narrow down the dimension of ‘young perspectives,’ we decided to use skateboarders as our subject of investigation. While we acknowledge that not all young individuals share the same experiences as young skateboarders, we view this

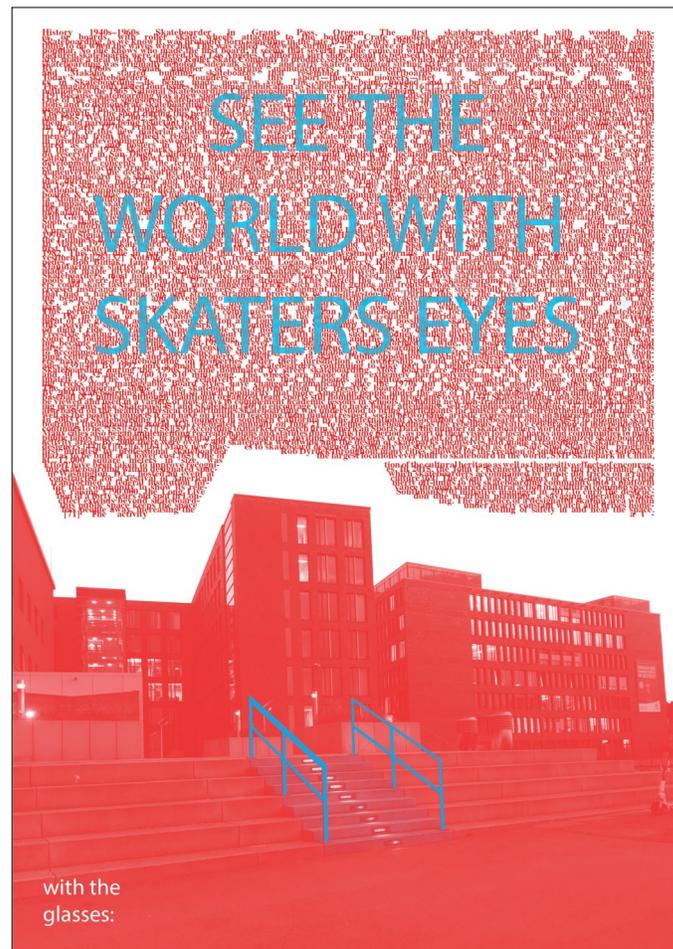


Figure 1: "SEE THE WORLD WITH SKATERS' EYES," 2020. Image by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

subculture as a relevant case study that may resonate with broader youth demands.

Against this background, this ethnographic study investigates young skateboarders' (age 18-28) experiences and demands in different European cities and towns, including Madrid, Berlin, Paris, Dortmund, Maastricht, Heerlen, Freising, and Radolfzell. This not only provides insights into experiences of the past but ultimately contributes perspectives for a more inclusive city for the future. In particular, we want to shed light on their reactions to conflicts, since this emphasises the bottom-up agency of urban inhabitants, crucial to fully understand the power dynamics of urban conflict from young peoples' point of view.

To answer the question of how young skateboarders react to conflicts in public urban spaces, this paper is structured as follows: providing insights into the aforementioned right to the city and additions to this concept, the first section will present a theoretical framework. The subsequent Methodology

section will explain the qualitative and auto-photographic methods used. Then, we will present our results and discuss our findings with the help of quotes and auto-photographic support. Finally, the paper concludes by stating that our participants, next to a general and preliminary avoidance, make use of different formal and informal means of resistance to claim their right to the city.

## Literature Review

Existing qualitative research on conflict in urban spaces often deals with intergenerational differences. This is relevant to our study as well, as skateboarders tend to represent a comparatively young age group within a city's population. The intergenerational lens provides interesting material on power relations created and perpetuated through urban design. In this context, Natalie Davet (2021) finds that urban design in Gothenburg, Sweden, reinforces power relations by either excluding or including different age groups from certain usages of urban space, focusing specifically on children and the elderly. Another author, Lefort (2020), finds that younger generations have different perceptions and usages of the urban space in Beirut, Lebanon, from older generations, moving the focus onto the individual's navigation of urban space. Other researchers have concentrated on means to overcome these generational differences in an urban context. Results include the importance of engaging in participatory design across different generational groups in Portsmouth, England and community-based projects that further intergenerational discourse in Ontario, Canada (Leddy-Owen, Robazza, and Scherer 2018; Parker 2018).

Qualitative research has also dealt with skateboarders or the culture of skateboarding in particular, relating it to conflicts in an urban context. Bäckström and Sand (2019) explore skateboarders' desire for using public urban spaces as opposed to skateboarding parks in Scandinavia, emphasising how the improvisation and exploration of unknown spaces is valuable for the sport and culture. Arising conflicts are implied yet not further explored. Karsten and Pel (2000) dig deeper

into this issue and find that skateboarders in Amsterdam, Netherlands, are in constant conflict with other residents of a city through the appropriation of public spaces for their sport, a practice which they call the "colonising of urban spaces." Similarly, Németh (2006), in a qualitative study conducted in Los Angeles, finds that skateboarders are excluded from certain public urban spaces by policymakers due to a perceived negative image of skateboard culture. Furthermore, the author explores the reclamation of these spaces through organised protests and marches.

Our study will build on this existing research, especially on the notion of conflict in an urban context and the exclusion of certain groups—in this case, young skateboarders—through spatial design and urban governance. Through participative research design, we aim to account for skateboarders' experiences in their respective cities and provide a space to voice their concerns and demands. Furthermore, we are interested in addressing a research gap by focusing on the reactions of young people to the conflicts experienced. Building on Németh's (2006) idea of reclaiming space through organised protest, we find it interesting to consider how simple everyday practices can serve the same purpose. Independent of legal restrictions and their protest, we want to find out whether and how the everyday experiences of young skateboarders could serve as a claim on public space, and how they navigate backlash from different parties.

## Theoretical Framework - The Right to the City in Today's World

In his work *Le Droit à la Ville*, Henri Lefebvre (1968) argues for cities that are inclusive, democratic, and socially just, and establishes the idea of the 'right to the city,' a concept that has become famous within urban studies and is referred to by urban resistance movements all over the world (Domaradzka 2018). With this concept, Lefebvre (1968) provides a valuable tool for rethinking what makes *the urban*. He maintains that the inhabitant does not only have a right to the city in its material form, but more importantly, to the city as a space for interaction, exchange, and encounter—a right

to *urban life*. This approach sees the city through a practical-material lens; the right to the city entails the practical use of urban spaces in their material form. The main agent in creating the city, therefore, is the inhabitant who contributes to establishing social relations. The inhabitant is also the subject of Lefebvre's (1968) right to the city, which is directed at the belief that the city should serve the same people who contribute to urban life.

Lefebvre (1968) criticises how cities are generally ruled by market forces on the one hand and policymakers on the other. The right to the city opposes these circumstances and emphasises the interests of the inhabitants, an essentially democratic idea. For Lefebvre (1968), the city should become an ephemeral city, a space in which there are no fixed structures, but the city becomes the *oeuvre* — a work of art created by the inhabitants through participation in urban life and the appropriation of the materiality of the city, constantly recreating and reinterpreting public urban space. Lefebvre's (1968) concept essentially advocates for the right of the inhabitants to make the city their own and emphasises the value this holds for democratic and inclusive urban life.

This idea resonates with more recent literature, too, as can be seen in Ian Borden's (2001) work. Borden (2001) considers skateboarding a valuable tool for participatory and democratic urban life; based on Lefebvre's (1968) idea that urban space is actively *produced*, dominantly by political and market forces, Borden argues for skateboarding's transformative potential. By changing the experience and purpose of urban spaces, for example, appropriating handrails for creative bodily expression, the traditional use of the built environment is challenged, and a new space is produced. As in Lefebvre's (1968) ephemeral city, Borden (2001) positions the transformative nature of skateboarding as a counterforce to capitalist and exclusionary mechanisms—representing urban life as a power struggle for the right to the city. This is similar to the reading of skateboarding at the basis of this paper: as an inherently political practice that reclaims urban space and, at

times, presents active resistance to the exclusionary nature of the city.

Missing in both Lefebvre's (1968) and Borden's (2001) arguments is a critical examination of the reality of the ephemeral city. A space that is actively contested by different interest groups does not necessarily entail the freedom that is the right to the city for everyone, but can easily fall victim to the processes contested in the first place. Howell (2005) explores this phenomenon with the case study of 'Love Park' in Philadelphia, USA, a public plaza that in the 1980s became popular as a global skateboarding landmark. Skaters reappropriated the design and challenged the intended purpose until city officials banned skateboarding, and the architecture was redesigned to appeal to tourists and citizens of high socioeconomic status. Howell (2005, 40) argues that the Love Park presents a history of repeated gentrification, which ends not only with skateboarders losing their right to the city to a higher socioeconomic class, but that skateboarders themselves have acted as "shock troops of gentrification." By claiming Love Park, skateboarders drove out the homeless population in the plaza, which earned them support from parts of the public and city officials. Howell's (2005) analysis serves as a reminder that the ephemeral city is multi-dimensional and the scene of a struggle for the right to the city, where access for one group often comes at the expense of another.

Despite the importance of the concept of the right to the city as a lens to analyse democratic cities, some aspects of it remain unclear and unsolved. Lefebvre neither mentions an instance to grant the inhabitants the right to the city nor specific instructions on how to attain it. It is therefore necessary to also consider more specific modern nuances of Lefebvre's concept, provided by Andy Merrifield's (2011) 'politics of encounter' and Simone's (2005) 'cityness.' With politics of encounter, Merrifield (2011) emphasises the notion that *the urban* as defined by Lefebvre (1968) does not apply to modern cities—globalised, digitalised, touristic, and decentralised urbanity that blurs the borders of the city and raises the question of who counts as an inhabitant. Instead, in the aim of

rendering the abstract more specific and the obsolete timeless, Merrifield (2011) builds on Lefebvre's idea of urban life as the defining element of the city and declares encounter between people the main mechanism for urban resistance, and the main source of political power. When people in a city come together and stand up for their rights, Merrifield claims, this is the moment that political potential to realise their right to the city arises.

Simone (2005) focuses on a different limitation of Lefebvre's concept, namely the impossibility of realising the right to the city in a holistic way. The city is hosting a vast heterogeneity of wishes and demands, some of them, as he claims, being inherently contradictory. Consequently, urban policy, according to Simone, is unable to include and provide for everybody. Simone recognises this as an explanation as to why people turn to informal means to realise their aspirations, or in other words, their right to the city. The narrative of a group of young skateboarders claiming the streets of their cities is heavily based on the belief that everybody possesses the right to the city, and that this right, as abstract as it might be, provides for a city that is democratic, inclusive and socially just. But it also paints the picture of oppression in public streets, neglect from urban policies, and an overall denial of the right to the city that our participants experience. Building on Lefebvre's (1968) original idea, and using Merrifield's (2011) and Simone's (2005) nuances, this research tells the story of how young skateboarders navigate conflicts over the right to the city and how they resist exclusion from the public urban sphere. This research lays bare the dynamics of urbanisation and the conflicts it entails, as well as makes tangible Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the right to the city in revealing everyday and bottom-up practices of resistance. And most importantly, this research aims to present young voices: the wishes and demands that the participants have for the urban sphere, and that are largely neglected by policymakers and their fellow residents of the city.

## Methodology: Interviews and Auto-photography

This explorative research for this article was conducted in November 2023 by combining two methods of data collection: auto-photography and interviews based on photo-elicitation. The sample spans eight participants aged 18 to 28, three identifying as female and five as male, with varied backgrounds in terms of nationality and occupation (see Table 1). Participant recruitment was conducted on various social media platforms. Most names appearing in this report are pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity (consensual exceptions are made to credit artworks used as photo-elicitation material). Our participants live in European cities, mostly in Germany and the Netherlands.

Auto-photography accounts for the ethnographic part of the research: the participants collected visual data relating to skateboarding and public space before the interviews. The photos provide a tool for us to see the city through a skateboarder's eye, rendering our participants central to the analysis (Thomas 2009). Furthermore, auto-photography allowed for the inclusion of ethnographic data from different cities.

The second stage of research consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews, either online or in person. The semi-structured interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were based on open-ended questions on the one hand, and photo-elicitation on the other, exposing the participants to the visual data previously collected and asking them to recount the experience connected to the urban space or situation depicted. We made sure that all participants signed a consent form, and we have received permission to use their visual data for the report. The participants were given the liberty to determine the order and duration of the photo-elicitation, allowing them to set their own focus. This way, we as the researchers took a more passive role, allowing our participants to convey their experience the way they felt it was appropriate and accurate, in hopes of collecting data as authentic as possible.

Name	Age	Area	Skateboarding (years)	Occupation
Steven*	28	Madrid, Berlin	14	Recent Graduate
Julia*	18	Heerlen	3	Skateboard Collective Volunteer
Hailey*	24	Maas-tricht	3	Student, Head of Skateboard Collective
Louis*	19	Paris, Maas-tricht	16	Student
Nicole*	19	Berlin	1	Queer Skateboarding workshop
Gustav	21	Radolfzell	5	Videographer Apprenticeship
Liam*	25	Berlin, Freising	9	Student
Finnian	23	Dort-mund	7	Artist, Photographer

Table 1: List and demographics of our participants.  
\*Pseudonym.

The interviews were transcribed, and, since some were conducted in German, also translated. We made sure that the translation stayed as close as possible to the original to minimise bias. We then conducted thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006): the transcripts were coded with the software Atlas.ti looking for recurring patterns relating to the participants' reactions to conflicts.

It is important to note that we, as researchers, share several demographic characteristics with our participants. As two young German women living in the Netherlands, we are familiar with the types of urban environments most of our participants

live in. Additionally, being within the same age range as those we researched helped us build trust and better reflect their experiences in relation to our broader research focus on young people's experiences in urban contexts. However, neither of us is actively involved in the skateboarding scene, which may have somewhat distanced us from their lived experiences and the deeper meanings they attach to them. Yet, this distance allowed us to adopt a more analytical perspective on our participants' experiences in relation to urban environments.

## The Right to the City in Conflict

To understand how our participants navigate the everyday battles over the right to the city, it is useful to first draw a rough picture of the nature of the kinds of conflicts they encounter. These conflicts varied in kind as well as quantity and ranged from direct and sometimes physical conflicts with residents, police, and security to more abstract conflicts concerning urban policymaking and urban design. Broadly speaking, the conflicts can be divided into two relational forms: 1) the relationship of the skateboarders to the city as a whole, concerning urban policy as well as the city's physical infrastructure, and 2) a more spontaneous and situational relationship to local actors, such as other residents.

Regarding the relationship of the skateboarders to urban politics, one theme repeatedly emerged: the transformation and privatisation of urban space. Some participants reported gentrification processes in their cities and mentioned how former skateboard parks were demolished and privatised as office space or private residential areas, without offering any alternatives. In addition to the gentrification and privatisation of urban spaces to favour citizens with higher socioeconomic status, as it is explored in Howell's (2005) work, there are also green urban transformations that render former skateboard parks unusable. Participant Louis, for instance, explains how his hometown, Paris, in the course of its sustainable transformation, has altered a historically significant spot for skateboarders in front of the Eiffel Tower, making it no longer skateable. As a

student studying sustainability and sustainable development, he on the one hand praises the urban greening but also emphasises that it was unfortunate for the Parisian skateboarding community and mentions a petition against the green lawn that replaced the concrete, aimed at stopping this transformation. Some participants also reported that the urban design and the physical infrastructure of their cities make it hard for them to reclaim the public urban spaces for skateboarding from the outset. 24-year-old Hailey, for instance, talks several times about the physical infrastructure of Maastricht, Netherlands, her student city, where she regularly encounters a conflict with the nature and texture of the streets:

The city is a bit divided by the river. [...] So that means that in my head, that one whole half of the city drops out. Where you can still skate in the inner city, that's the ---, eh well when you walk in the inner city in the streets with all the shops, then on the one side of the street there is one part that does not have any cobblestones. And then, theoretically, you can go there at night. But then, often, when I, for example, would want to skate to the supermarket in the evening, I skate on this part and I have to jump off again and again, because then there are the cobblestones again.

In terms of the second kind of conflict, all participants mentioned that they have sooner or later encountered direct verbal and sometimes physical conflicts with local residents, security, or the police. For example, 25-year-old Liam reports skating at a popular skateboard park in Berlin where aggressive confrontations with passerby and residents occurred:

We were just skating there. Just doing our thing. Suddenly, someone starts throwing potatoes out the window at us. And such situations, flying potatoes? Right? I don't know. You're just out there doing your thing and suddenly people come up to you and start yelling 'You can't do that' and 'Piss off' or 'Asshole.' I mean, really, people just completely lose their temper. I mean really. So, it goes in

that direction? These confrontations come out of nowhere.

Other participants reported being repeatedly chased away from public urban spaces by the police and security forces. Due to the lack of alternatives, they find themselves faced with constant potential for conflict, rendering street skateboarding a risky business that can escalate towards verbal or physical conflict at any time.

In summary, it can be said that the conflicts experienced vary widely in scope and form and do not necessarily only refer to conflicts in the form of direct confrontations with other people. Instead, they also address the participants' perceptions of either not being considered in the design of urban spaces from the outset or of transformation processes in urban areas. These experiences did not leave the participants without a reaction. Instead, they adopted forms of resistance to assert what they believe to be their right to the city. Our analysis identified three broader thematic areas: Avoidance, Formal Resistance, and Informal Resistance. These provide an image of how skateboarders react to conflicts that arise when using the urban sphere and are visualised in grey below (see Figure 2).

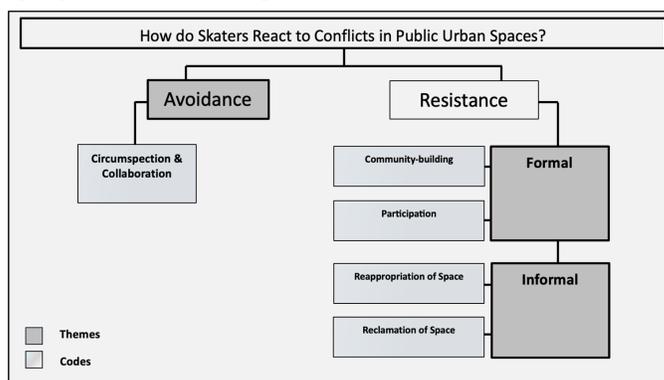


Figure 2: Visualisation of the analysed themes and codes.

### Avoidance - Sometimes it is just Peace and Love

When asked how the participants deal with conflicts, one answer emerged from all the interviews: they often avoid them. Contrary to the socially prevalent conception of skateboarders as violent, they largely try to avoid conflict and instead strive for harmony, as the 28-year-old Steven puts it: "We need to just find peace and love [...], you know?" Steven, who is originally from Ecuador, moved to Berlin

(Germany) two years ago, where he still lives. He describes his perception that skateboarders are wrongly stigmatised by society as follows:

So that also brings me to the conclusion that the society [...], they are seeing us as if we are, kind of, something not good in general. You know, they immediately connect you with drugs, immediately connect you with violence, immediately connect you with alcohol, with all these kinds of situations. And it's like, okay, you know, I'm an athlete.

Steven repeatedly emphasises that "they," the society, would not do skateboarders justice with prevalent stereotypes. Contrary to associations with "drugs," "violence", and "alcohol," he emphasises that he is an "athlete," and that his focus is on athletic performance and social harmony rather than violence and conflict. In particular, his impression of the skateboarding scene as a group striving for "peace and love" stresses this avoidance of conflict.

Similarly, other participants repeatedly pointed out that they try to avoid conflicts and behave "collaboratively," "considerately," and "carefully" when skating. Among them is Gustav, a 21-year-old film-making student who

started skating in his hometown Radolfzell, Germany, five years ago. He reports that there was a lack of skateparks in the small town. Instead, he would go out with his friend searching for public places that met their requirements: A smooth surface, plenty of space, and a few obstacles for tricks. The front yard of a conference centre seemed a perfect fit for that, deemed by Gustav and his friends the perfect place to improve their skating (Figure 3).

The more regularly Gustav and his friends skateboarded there, the more often security personnel would come to complain about the loud noise, as people had to work in the building. Gustav reacted to the complaints in an understanding and cooperative manner instead of fighting back and entering into conflict, "It's kind of understandable when you realise, okay, they've got a really important conference right above us. Then you just go somewhere else, have a good time and then come back." Other participants were equally collaborative, emphasising that they were not necessarily interested in entering into conflict, but rather in exercising their passion for sports.

Our participants' behaviour acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of the ephemeral city, lending consideration to the fact that

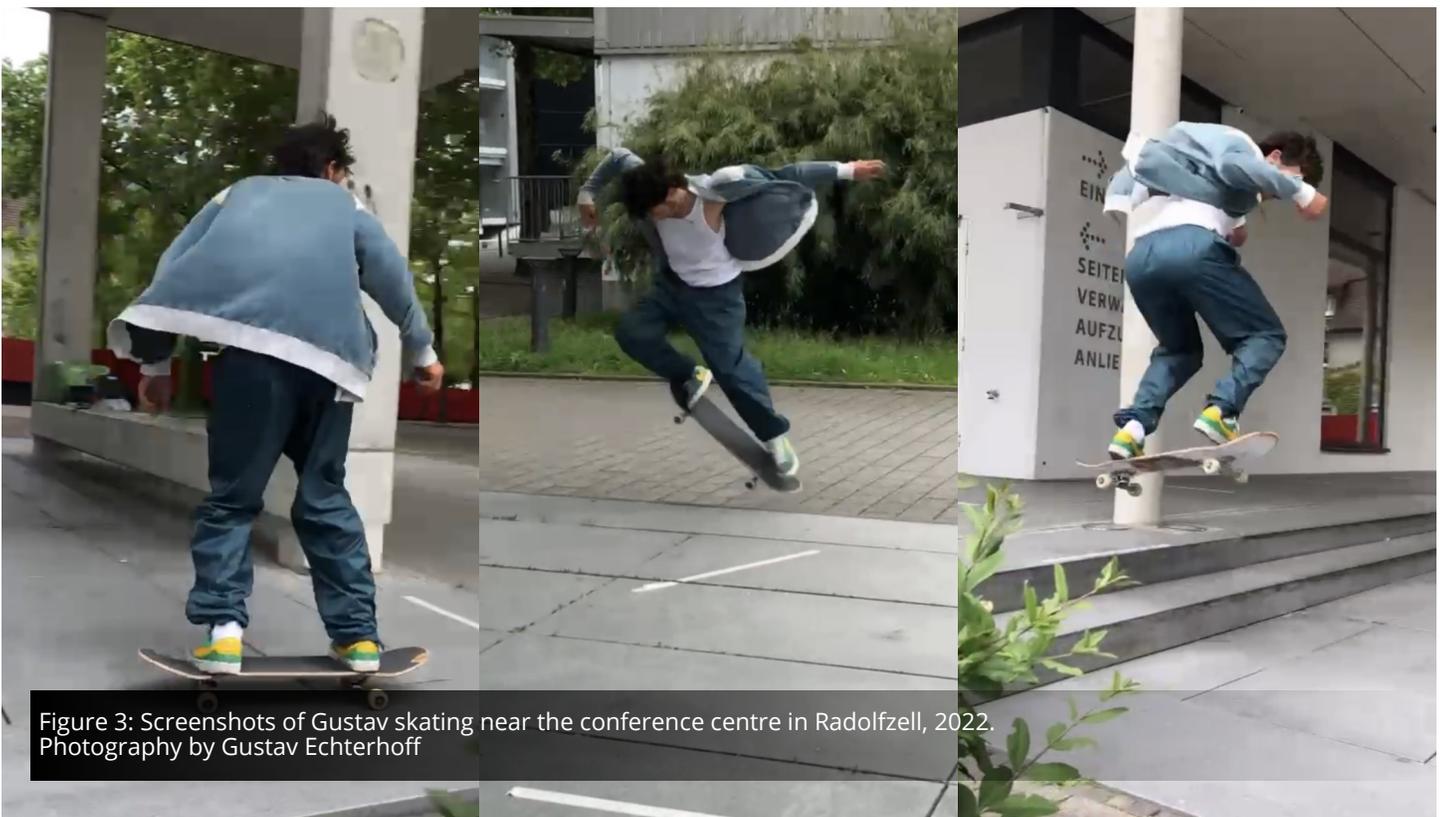


Figure 3: Screenshots of Gustav skating near the conference centre in Radolfzell, 2022. Photography by Gustav Echterhoff

asserting their right to the city can mean taking someone else's away (Howell 2005). To do justice to our participants and counteract the harmful stereotyping, it is important to emphasise that avoidance was prevalent throughout the interviews, and that codes relating to resistance appear only when they feel unfairly treated—when they feel like their right to the city is being taken away from them.

### Resistance - Sometimes it is Active Protest

Many places are taken away [...]. My favourite bar had to move for a motorway [...], lots of clubs had to close [...], and my favourite skate park was also demolished. At first, I had hoped they would renovate it, but they tore it down [...]. We're also having discussions at the youth club and skatehall in the RWE area where I work at the moment. The RWE area will maybe also be demolished for an office building or something. Although there are so many cultural venues and this skate hall on this site.

The 19-year-old Nicole reports here that her hometown, Berlin, has undergone rapid change and the displacement of many residents in recent years. On the one hand, places that are important to her are increasingly being demolished or moved away, while on the other hand, top-down policy processes or private companies want to use these spaces to build motorways, office space or "luxury apartments," as she reports. The skateboarding hall where she is currently doing voluntary work for women skateboarders is also under threat of demolition. The 23-year-old skateboarder and artist Finnian from Dortmund (Germany) reports similar experiences. He notes that this development of urban spaces, characterised by commercialisation and displacement, has recently led to young people in several cities increasingly demanding their rights. According to Finnian, active resistance rather than avoidance is playing an increasingly important role in how young skateboarders respond to conflict. Throughout the interviews, terms such as "protest," "appropriation," or "reclamation" were used, which again point to a form of active

resistance in the skateboarding scene. We were able to distinguish between two forms of resistance based on the participants' experiences: *Formal Resistance*, which utilises the official tools and means of participatory societies, and *Informal Resistance*, which expresses an autonomous form of resistance, often performed by unofficial means.

### Formal Resistance - You Should Speak Up for It

The concept of the right to the city, with its focus on creating an inclusive and participatory city for all inhabitants, represents a democratic idea at its core. The attempt to make use of this right is also partly undertaken with the given formal, systemic and grassroots democratic tools. This includes formalising an informal community by setting up institutionalised collectives. Several participants reported that they had either joined existing skateboarding communities or founded new ones. Hailey, for example, founded a collective in Maastricht, Netherlands, two years ago. She moved there five years ago for her education, where she continued to pursue her passion for skating alongside her global health studies. The collective tackles the feeling of a lack of social and political visibility of the skateboarding scene and aims to unite and support specifically queer and female skateboarders (Figure 4). In addition to creating a sense of community, the collective also serves to organise events and educational workshops. When we asked Hailey what the collective and the workshops mean to her, she answered:

So, I think in terms of the workshops, simply to be seen. This, but also being told: Hey you, you have the opportunity to make a change. [...]. And in general collectives, simply to know that you are not alone. Because I think all of us have these ideas, but no space for them to be heard. [...]. In a more political sense, it means resistance, active resistance. Especially in such an important sport or culture, because it is not always easy for us. That means it is an active resistance, actively having to dare and take a stand

again and again. This makes you much stronger.

This quote shows in many ways the empowerment in collectives, as Hailey perceives it. Not only does Hailey specifically use the word “resistance” to describe the effect that collectives have on her experienced conflicts, but she also considers the encounter itself an empowering act to resist invisibility - “to be seen.” This empowerment that Hailey feels, being able to “make a change,” strongly links to Merrifield’s (2011) emphasis on the ability to “overcome the inertia of mass powerlessness” (478) through encounter. Merrifield’s concept, ‘the politics of encounter,’ locates the power to reclaim the right to the city in social interaction. He points out that it is the act of encounter that unites people and motivates them to show solidarity with one another. It is the act of encounter that encourages them to form social movements. And it is the act of encounter that, according to Merrifield, contributes to people striving for

democratic values and ultimately claiming them for themselves: It is where Merrifield locates the democratic reclamation of one’s right to the city.

Not only community-building but also other formal democratic tools, such as citizen participation, were used by our interviewees. Here, especially petitions and dialogue with policymakers were crucial means. Finnian and Louis, for example, reported that they had used petitions to actively participate in the use and design of urban space. Finnian talked about how Dortmund’s skateboarding scene worked closely with the city council to create one of the “most important” cultural centres for young people. The DIY skateboarding spot ‘DIY Utopia,’ which was originally planned for three months, had been turned into a youth cultural centre lasting for several years and attracted a wide variety of young people. However, the place was threatened with demolition, and its organisers initiated a petition aiming to preserve the cultural venue. Louis from Paris



Figure 4: Collective for skateboarders in Maastricht, 2022. Photograph by Hailey.

(France) reported similar experiences, and a petition was initiated to preserve the historically important skateboarding venue at the 'Place du Trocadero' in Paris. The use of petitions can be seen as a bottom-up attempt to make use of the right to the city and democratically participate in the urban decision-making processes in an institutionalised way. However, in both cases, the petitions were unsuccessful, and the skateboarding spots had to give way to the top-down plans of urban councils or private owners, as the participants reported.

18-year-old Julia from Heerlen, Netherlands, provides another example of democratic citizen participation to resist exclusion from urban policy. Julia reported that she tried to enter into a dialogue with the head of the city. She told us, "If you want something in the city, you should speak up for it because if you don't, nothing's happening." Based on this conviction, she contacted Heerlen's policymakers to ask about the skateboarding park, which she and other skateboarders in Heerlen were promised would be completed by the beginning of 2024, but whose construction had not even begun at the time of the interview (December 2023). This attempt at democratic citizen participation and dialogue with policymakers also failed, as Julia reported. The only response to her enquiry was further promises about efforts to complete the skateboarding park, which still have not been put into action. She comments on her experience of failed political participation: "They make plans, but they don't make them come true. And that was the part that I am frustrated about." Both the petitions and Julia's frustrating experience in dialogue with political institutions demonstrated that attempts to achieve the right to the city through formal institutionalised and grassroots democratic means have failed in these cases. When we asked how Julia deals with these experiences, she smiled and said something that she had emphasised several times in the interview: "We're teenagers...if someone tells us not to do anything, then we're actually going to do it even harder...."

### Informal Resistance - This is Our Place

As a result of the frustration with formal means of resistance, the feeling of not being heard by policymakers and being excluded from urban

politics, what Simone (2005) explains with cityness becomes true: our participants turn to Informal Resistance. They claim their right to the city, whether consciously or unconsciously, using unofficial methods that are often prohibited. One code arising from this is the *Reappropriation of Space*, something that Liam, a skateboarder living in Berlin, where he is currently studying Fine Arts, puts nicely into words: "That's how I see it. Wherever I can skate, wherever I can see it, I simply skate. I just don't limit myself to the skatepark; the city is my playground." This reappropriation of urban space for the sport's purpose can be considered an informal way of making use of the right to the city, self-directedly using urban elements to improvise and perform tricks. It is a reappropriation that happens in Borden's (2001) terms, through creative bodily expression, and that is reflected in a new view of the city, seen with special eyes viewing the architecture as an opportunity for movement. Finnian sent us an artwork he created to visualise the skateboarders' unique view, "See the world with skater's eyes." (Figure 5a & 5b).

The first set of designs shows a public urban space without the skateboarders' glasses (Figure 5a). The idea is to put on 3D glasses, and then the skateboarders' view (Figure 5b) appears, highlighting certain architectural elements. The text on the far-right image of Figure 5b says: "Skaters by their very nature are urban guerrillas: they make everyday use of the useless artefacts of the technological burden and employ the handiwork of the government/corporate structure in a thousand ways that the architects could never dream of. Finnian, as did Liam, wants to convey that skating ascribes a new purpose to urban architecture, resisting the conventional, narrow and static interpretations of what urban elements are made for. Finnian's choice of words, "urban guerrillas," highlights in an admittedly exaggerated way that the *Reappropriation of Space* is inherently political, somewhat participating in a battle for the right to the city. Other participants expressed a more innocent approach to street skating, with resistance often merely happening unconsciously or symbolically, but either way, the *Reappropriation of Space* represents an active usage of the right to the city. This happens, for



Figure 5a: City from 'normal' perspective, 2020. Photography by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

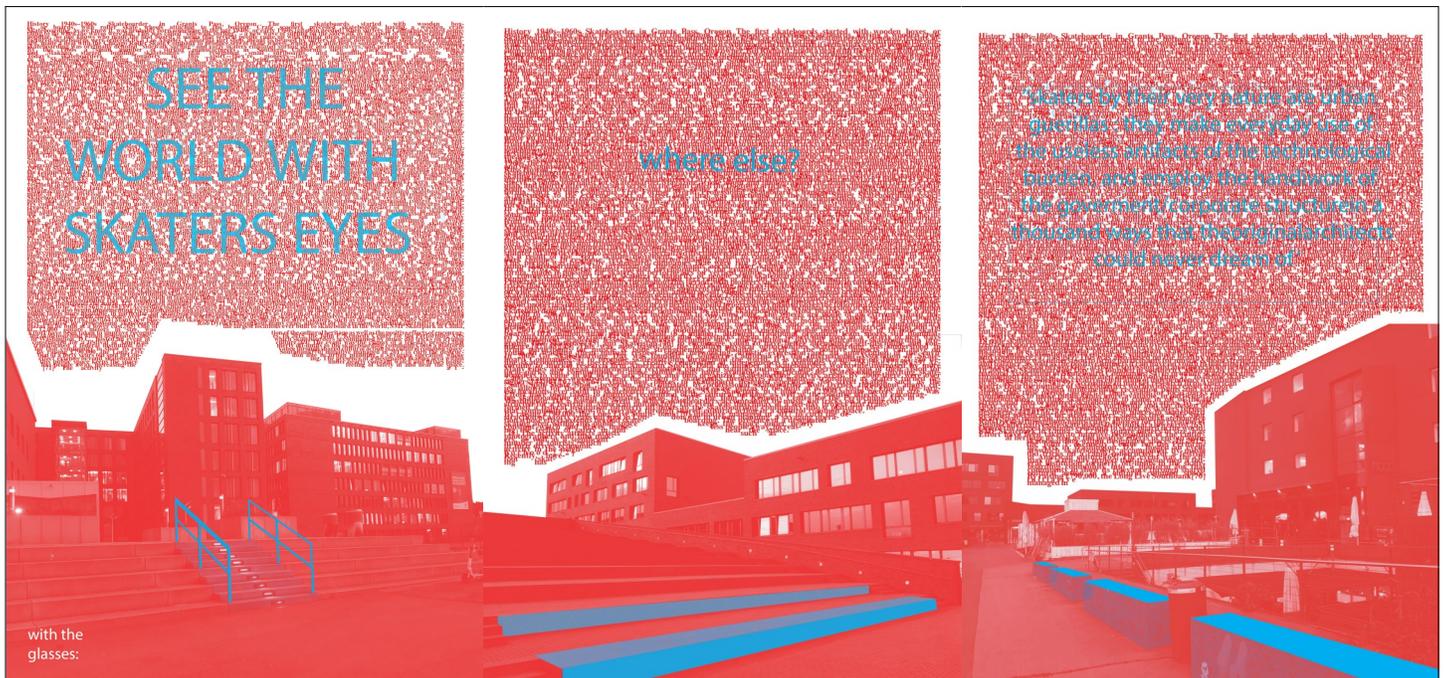


Figure 5b: City from a skater's perspective, 2020. Photography by Finnian Lodey-Grevel.

example, by alienating the stairs' railings from their purpose to provide stability and instead being used to perform a boardslide, a trick where the skateboarders slide down a kind of ledge at high speed. And even though this street skating is where most conflicts with other residents of the city arise, our participants express that they prefer the streets over skateparks, since this improvisation and creativity are an essential part of their sport. This puts into action what Lefebvre means by the ephemeral city, a city without fixed structures, in a playful and creative way. The structures of a city are reappropriated and reinterpreted from the bottom up. The skateboarders' view turns urban public space into an artwork, resonating with Lefebvre's idea of the oeuvre and Borden's exploration of the nature of skateboarding; a city that is being recreated with every new skateboarding spot that is discovered, and every new trick that is performed.

Julia's story reveals another means of informally resisting, another way of putting a claim on the right to the city in an informal way. She has been encountering the problem of not being able to skateboard the streets or skateparks during rainy weather, and since she lives in the Netherlands and the rainy season often stretches over the whole year, she expressed the need for appropriate indoor spaces to continue practising her sport. Gustav, who in the meantime moved to Berlin, similarly encounters a lack of alternative indoor spaces in his new hometown, which is why he and his friends resorted to claiming a pedestrian tunnel, and Julia and her friends have chosen a parking garage in Heerlen as their refuge (Figures 6 & 7). However, since these spaces are not made for skating, both have encountered trouble with security forces. Julia told us:

The thing is that if people keep sending us away and keep making trouble for us, it's almost this thing in our head, like: [...] this is our place. We need to send the security away instead of the security sending us away, you know? So, it's really like making a statement that we all agree on.

This quote emphasises a claim on the right to the city that goes beyond the reappropriation

of urban space: the demand to own it. Within this code, the *Reclamation of Space*, our participants express that they feel they have a right to use certain spaces even though they are officially prohibited from skating there. Part of this is also an escape to non-public spaces like the parking garage, once the public spaces do not provide for them. Steven doubles Julia's attitude, telling us about a conflict with the



Figure 6: Gustav reclaiming the pedestrian tunnel in Berlin, 2021. Photography by Gustav Echterhoff.

police that he encountered when he was living in Madrid, Spain:

So, I remember once [...] in Madrid, like we were in this specific spot, and they were having also a demonstration outside of the Congress. [...]. But we were skating, trying to skate the place. And the police just arrived and started to take our skateboards and put gas in our faces and stuff. As if we were there for the demonstration or something. So that was super crazy because like we didn't do anything, just using public spaces, you know, we are part of the society, of the community.

Julia's words, "this is our place," maintain a claim on the right to the city, and so do Steven's words, when he justifies his access to skating in public urban space by being a "part of the society," an inhabitant of the city. But this not only proves a general mindset and the skateboarders' demands to be included in the public urban sphere. The *Reclamation of Space* also exemplifies the dynamics of conflict and resistance that skateboarders experience in the

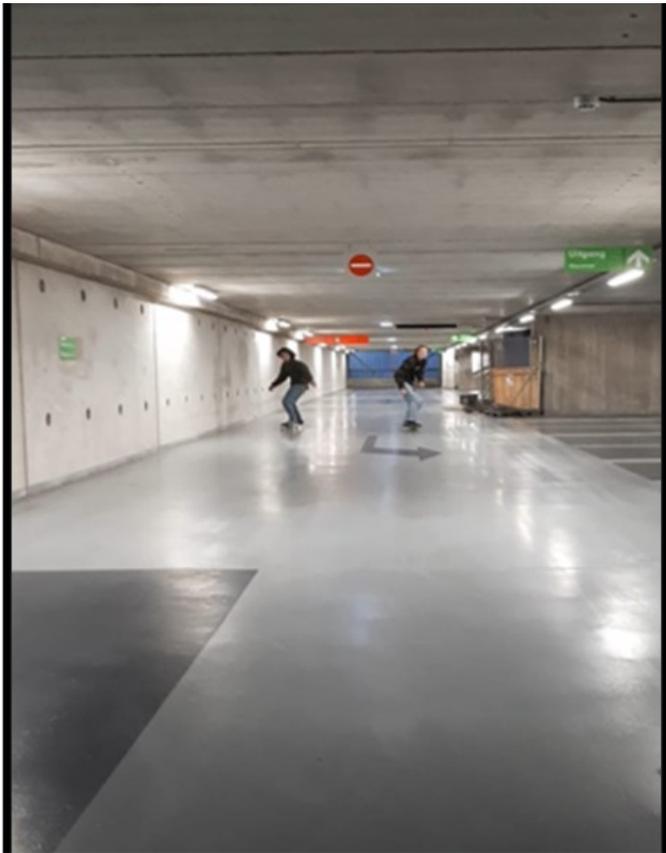


Figure 7: Julia and her friends reclaiming the parking garage in Heerlen, 2020. Photography by Julia.

urban sphere. Based on a lack of representation and the possibility of participating in urban policy, our participants turn to informal means to resist their exclusion from the public urban sphere and realise their right to the city. Furthermore, the use of first-person plural pronouns when talking about these acts of resistance stands out — "this is our place" — showing that community and collectively form the basis for the skateboarders' battle for their right to the city.

## Conclusion - A Battle for the Right to the City

Modern cities are a complex hotspot of different people with different, and sometimes outright opposed, interests. Cities also host increased potential for conflict, especially in contemporary times of rapid urbanisation. Within the layered dynamics of conflict, the city can also serve as a site of resistance, with different interest groups asserting their ideas and demands for a more inclusive city of the future. This research has taken a group of young skateboarders as an example to lay bare the generational dynamics of conflict that they experience in urban spheres across European cities, investigating skateboarders' reactions to conflicts that arise in public urban spaces. Next to a general and preliminary avoidance of conflicts, this research has shown how, in the belief of possessing an inherent right to the city, these young skateboarders fall back on a variety of means of resistance, in formal or informal ways. It happens as a reaction to different circumstances that are deemed unfair, mostly relating to exclusion from urban policy and a lack of appropriate skateboarding spots to use.

With this explorative study, we have investigated how Lefebvre's (1968) theory of the right to the city manifests in the praxis of everyday life. But this study is also, and maybe more importantly, a platform for these young voices to tell their story and make their wishes and demands for future urban design and policy heard. However, it has to be said that this research presents the battle for the right to the city in a very specific and narrow light, which imposes certain limitations. It is a one-sided exploration of the urban dynamics of conflict and resistance, with the skateboarders playing the main part, whereas other perspectives are not taken into account. Furthermore, the cities that are being explored cannot be considered representative of the great diversity in European cities. In order to do justice to the multi-faceted and complex nature of the dynamics of urban conflict and resistance, further research is encouraged to widen the geographical scope, as well as to explore further interest groups, especially those that might suffer from the skater's reclamation of

urban space. Additionally, it is strongly recommended to apply a more intersectional focus in further research. Even though we were able to include women and queer participants in our study on this still cis-male-dominated sport, the limited scope did not allow us to investigate additional power imbalances. The implementation of a more intersectional lens could further contribute to achieving what Lefebvre calls for: A right to the city for everyone.

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# The Morality of Losing Yourself on a Dance Floor: How a Rave Scene Delineates Belonging based on Intention

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## ABSTRACT

When raving emerged in the early 1990s, it promoted a clear ethos: peace, love, unity and respect. Raving soon entered a decline when the parties became commercialized and governments took various measures to quell unlicensed events, losing their original ethos. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, in Atlantic Canada, has experienced a rebirth: an emerging rave scene appears to be reconnecting to this original ethos, which many thought was dissolved when the unlicensed rave scene largely merged with the licensed, commercialized club scene in the 2000s. Following ethnographic research, participant observation and interviews with participants in this local, underground party scene, this paper traces how these events differentiate themselves from the commercial nightlife scene through a unique set of intentions, and how participants' attitudes, drug selection, and behaviour illustrate a choice to pursue these intentions. I introduce the concepts of “moral” and “immoral” ravers as models for understanding these differences, and ultimately argue that raving has anti-fascist potential in certain moments of collective forgetting on the dance floor, by allowing a momentary glimpse of a subjectivity outside dominant systems of power.

**Keywords:** raving, nightlife, leisure, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Atlantic Canada.

*The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to “de-individualize” by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization.*

*– Foucault (1983)*

## Fieldnote: The Pre-Game

**A**s I look around, outfits are being finalized, and decisions regarding transportation are being made, occasionally interrupted by a completely unrelated question from someone or another. The hostess is frantically trying to sort out details of the night’s plan, running from room to room while trying to socialize, a nervous laugh giving away her tension. This is juxtaposed with people melting into sofas, deep smiles relaxing across their faces. I can’t follow the number of conversations that are going on simultaneously. It’s a small apartment in the North End of the city, and my group of four friends soon decides to leave; it’s a 45-minute walk to the rave. We leave the chaotic mass in the living room and welcome the contrasting frigid winter air as we begin our walk.

Raves emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and were characterized as “grassroots organized, antiestablishment, unlicensed all-night dance parties, featuring electronically produced music (EDM)” (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2007, 500). These early raves defined their identity on an MDMA-induced ethos of “PLUR,” which stands for “Peace, Love, Unity and Respect” (Hutson 2000; Reynolds 1999; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003). This ethos was, in some cases, viewed as an

approximation of an ideal society and suggested that raves should be unconditionally accepting spaces. Increasing commercialization of these parties, for example, licensed clubs hosting them or the emergence of mainstream, EDM mega-festivals, has led to the decline of this original PLUR ethos and the notion that rave is “over” or has merged with clubbing culture (Anderson 2009; Bennet 2001; Bennet and Peterson 2004; Bennett 1999; Malbon 1999; Thornton 1996). Many scholars now use the term “post-rave party” (St. John 2004a ; 2009) to demarcate events that follow similar physical and sonic forms to raves, but that are commercialized and no longer fit the bill for an ‘authentic’ rave. In this article, inspired by Tammy Anderson (2009), Graham St John (2004a; 2009) and Andy Bennet (2001), the commercialization of raves understands the rave as an anarchic party. While typically held in abandoned buildings, warehouses or outdoors, raves are increasingly brought under control by moving them to official, licensed or permitted night club venues or festival grounds. As such, they are subject to by-laws on nightlife and are no longer events that exist between or outside of the law. Commercialization often has the intentional side-effect of rendering an event accessible, advertised and pre-planned. Consequently, attendance numbers can increase, along with profits for both establishments and promoters.

Halifax had a thriving rave scene in the 90s, which went into decline in the early 2000s following commercialization and police crackdown efforts in reaction to race-related deaths (Weir 2000). After this decline, most EDM-centered events in Halifax took place at licensed establishments such as nightclubs. A raver and DJ in his early 40s, Caleb, described these bar and club events as “soulless,” driven by financial motivations and often sacrificing the music and the culture in favour of alcohol and profit. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Halifax’s underground rave scene has seen a resurgence. Halifax once again has a consistent roster of grassroots dance parties, focusing on house and techno music, which emulate the raves of the 1990s (Anderson 2009). The promoters and creators of these raves, situating themselves on both the physical and cultural periphery of the mainstream

nightlife culture, appear to be motivated by musical culture rather than profit, creating a possibility for the PLUR ethos to return. It was to one of these raves that we were headed on this bitterly cold New Year's Eve. My research centers on these raves and the people who frequent them. I ask the question: what role do these events, which now exist in a completely different world from their predecessors, play for their attendees today?

### Fieldnote: Temperature and Walking

*For me, living in a city with deep, snowy winters, raving has always been deeply intertwined with temperature. Cold walks and hot dance floors, warm skin, sticky from sweat, emerging into a snowy parking lot. We are passing from residential into more industrial areas of the city. We bounce along, laughing at each other's jokes and at the excitement of welcoming a new year on the dance floor surrounded by music.*

Scholars have shown how the history of raving in Canada differs from that of the UK or the USA, where most of the raving literature discussed in this paper is from (Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Wilson 2002; Wilson 2006). Brian Wilson (2006, 19–20) notes that this different history may mean we need to conceptualize raves differently in Canada, where they emerged in different relationships to power and culture. The literature on Canadian raving is decidedly sparse and limited to the larger cities, such as Toronto (Wilson 2002; Wilson 2006), Montreal, and Ottawa (Olaveson 2004b; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003). This is a gap in the literature to which I mean to attend.

### Fieldnote: Entering the venue

*We pick up to a brisk walk as we see the small office building in the distance. Conscious of the time and wanting to be on the dance floor for the countdown into the new year, we begin, somewhat frantically, half-jogging. As we cross the parking lot, some friends from the pre-game exit an Uber and together we walk past the side of the building, glancing up at the single, rectangular window, a glowing beacon in the otherwise desolate parking lot.*

*We shimmy between air conditioning condenser units and a metal fence topped with barbed wire. The door is heavy metal; the group of us pushes in, showing our bags to the bouncer (a small man dressed in a security guard costume he bought on Amazon, according to the rumours). He barely looks at them and ushers us towards a man who is checking tickets. I begin to move through the empty hallway towards the countdown, towards the dance floor, towards the warmth that my numb ears and fingers are craving.*

Ethnographic and interview methods have been widely used by researchers studying raving (Anderson 2009; Fritz 1999; Malbon 1999; Olaveson 2004a; St. John 2009; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Wilson 2006). In addition to attending this rave and five others, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants, allowing me to better understand not only my own experience of raving but also other participants' experiences at raves. I interviewed "regular ravers," that is, anyone who self-identified as such and had attended more than one of the raves on which this project is focused. Four of my participants were also involved in the promotion and organization of raves. Recruitment for interviews was done through posts on the social media account of a rave organizer. Interviews focused on many topics surrounding the rave experience, for example, how the participant began raving, what keeps them coming back, and their experience on the dance floor. Ages ranged from early twenties to early forties. Two were women, seven were men, and one person was non-binary; four participants identified as part of the queer community. While the quotes used in this article come predominantly from these interviews, my findings are also informed by informal conversations I had during rave observations.

I used observation at raves as a method, following the experiential anthropology outlined by Melanie Takahashi and Tim Olaveson (2003), who argue it is crucial to understand what raves mean to their interlocutors. They argue this method is critical in part because the activity of raving is a highly embodied one; therefore, understanding raving cannot be done by merely speaking about it.

Scholars of raves understand that trying to comprehend it “vicariously” is ineffective (Fritz 1999, 199). My ethnographic methods can be further specified as sensory ethnography in that I sought “to know places in other people’s worlds that are similar to how they are known by those people” (Pink 2015, 26). By raving myself, I pursued a clearer knowledge of “what [participants’] sensory and embodied experience involves” (Pink 2015, 26). Following the example set by Tammy Anderson (2009) in her long-term ethnographic study of raving, during observation at raves, I paid particular attention to the setting, the demographics and behaviors of those present.

I analyzed my data in NVIVO, using an inductive coding method, allowing themes to emerge from an in-depth reading of my transcripts and notes. These codes emerged when I reached a point where I was seeing similar things in all my interviews (Luker 2008). From there, I developed sub-codes and built my analysis from these, using a grounded theory approach (Bloor and Wood 2006). Since raves are often spaces where illicit drug use is present, and many attendees appreciate the anonymity that those spaces provide, I intentionally designed the research methods to protect interviewees from any potential harm. The interviews posed less risk since they were completely anonymized, and I did not collect names or identifiable information from participants, asking for verbal consent rather than written consent to this same end. Although illicit drug use came up in interviews, this focused on the experience of *being on* the drug, which is not illegal. I never raised drug use in the interviews; in each case, the participants brought it up independently.

### Fieldnote: First Moments on the Dance Floor

*My first moments on the dance floor feel chaotic. Immediately upon entering the room, I'm hot. The beat is taking me away, and I'm loving it, but I'm also slightly overwhelmed. The smoke and the lights make it hard to make out what's going on; these visual distortions of the physical space make me feel like I'm floating. The dance floor is full of people I know. I can't tell who they are until they're right in front of*

*me, due to the lights and the smoke. They all want hugs and to dance together for a few moments before disappearing back into the abyss of the dance floor. The music rings in my ears, creating a mental landscape for my experience. My body moves along the curves of the sound. The lack of clarity regarding my physical environment causes me to spend more time in my mental one. The environment is encouraging me to use specific senses more than others, to feel rather than to analyze, something I'm typically not very good at.*

*The smoke blurs my ability to pay attention to anything but my own physical and mental experience. Am I losing myself in it too much? I look around, but all I can make out are other silhouettes dancing as hard as I am. My skin is hot, the warmth of movement, and so many bodies in a room. With the shared heat giving me permission, I let go again. I'm likely sweating, but my skin feels light. The joyful collision of movement and sound in my own body is thrilling. I'm experiencing my body for what it is more than I ever knew possible. I feel like a vessel for the pounding beat and repetitive vocals. I feel them in my chest, in my heart, in my feet and in my head. The sonic saturation of the room, the way it's filled with sound, doesn't leave space for thought. For those brief moments of ecstasy, of physical replacing cerebral, I'm released from my constantly racing, analyzing mind and it's... Euphoric.*

Many scholars have written on raves as resistance or at the very least, political participation (Bennet 2001; Bennet and Peterson 2004; Bennett 1999; 2002; Greener and Hollands, 2006). Most of them draw on Michel De Certeau (1984), who argues that popular culture, formed in resistance to power, is continually changing to avoid being engulfed by elites, but also that this resistance is rarely overt. A crucial element of de Certeau’s (1984) thinking for following scholars is that place is critical to resistance, finding space “outside of the practices of domination” (Pile 1997, 15) is, in itself, resistance.

Angela McRobbie (1994) applied De Certeau’s ideas to rave dance floors in Britain, looking at resistance as enacted through a mundane level of everyday practices. McRobbie (1994) notes,

for example, the explicit lack of an aggressive political agenda, such as those that could be seen in earlier punk subcultures. This lack of explicit political agenda in the rave scene has been criticized by some scholars (Thornton 1996) as proof of the rave scene's mindlessness and lack of meaning. However, McRobbie (1994,192) argued that we might "reinsert resistance at the more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices," ergo that the lack of a defined political agenda may not preclude raving as a form of resistance. Maria Pini (1997) posited raves as spaces where typical social norms and patterns are subverted, a notion other scholars support (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010; St. John 2004c; 2004b; St. John 2009). If raves are indeed a place of escaping dominant norms, they could well be deemed resistance. Resistance on a micro-scale, on the scale of the self, the everyday, and the mundane, seems justified, even to be encouraged, in the face of oppressive forces that worm their way into our own subjectivities. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 215) argue that fascism, as a desire for order, purity, hierarchy and sameness, can exist on the individual level just as it can exist on the state-level, claiming that "what makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power." They write that it is only too easy to be antifascist on a macro scale, "and not even see the fascist inside you." When we consider raving's potential for political resistance, it is on this scale that I imagine it, raving as a counter to the microfascisms present in one's own subjectivities. If microfascisms tempt the individuals' subjectivity towards order, purity and hierarchy, then perhaps raving might tug the individual subjectivities into chaos, difference and heterarchy.

Ben Malbon (1999), despite adopting De Certeau's ideas of resistance as possibly covert, rejects this dualism of power and resistance or less powerful vs. more powerful in his ethnography on clubbing. Malbon (1999) instead builds on Steve Pile's conceptions of power. In this theory, the resistance we are discussing is in relationship not only with traditional authority, but also with a different, non-conventional conception of power, one which sees power in experience, perhaps even elements of participants' own identities (Pile

1997). Michel Maffesoli's (1996) theory of neo-tribal sociality also provides an important base for Malbon's thinking. Maffesoli's (1996) theory posits how social identities have changed in our post-modern reality: whereas previously people identified with larger meta-identities such as nationality, occupation and gender, these are rapidly losing sway as a basis upon which to build a social identity. "We are now far, to be sure, from the unity that has been, from the dawn of modernity, the goal of Western rationalism" (1996,105), writes Maffesoli, explaining that we are now dispersed into micro-groups he calls "neo-tribes," which are significantly more fluid than the traditional notion of a tribe. Maffesoli writes that "any unified entity is temporary" (1996, 105), referring to the futility of coercing people into groups and definitions intended to be permanent. The notion of a neotribe refers more to a temporarily unified group of people. This temporary unity of a neo-tribe is achieved by collective rituals and mutual affect. Here, we can understand the Dionysian Principle to be at play. The 'Dionysian Principle' posits that ecstatic, communal celebrations create a quasi-sacred aura around the temporary neo-tribe (Maffesoli 1996; Gardiner 1997). The energy, micro-power and vitality that this experience brings forth are referred to by Maffesoli (1996) as *puissance*, and it is from this notion of *puissance* that Malbon's (1999) more specific and applicable concept of *playful vitality* emerges.

Malbon's (1999) notion of *playful vitality* combines the celebration of the joy that collectivity can create with a temporary disruption of the everyday. The clubbers that Malbon studied construct alternative imagined worlds around themselves on their nights out, within which they might experience this playful vitality. He posits that playful vitality is not resistance in the conventional understanding of it, because it is not resisting a dominant culture (1999, 164). The prescribed aim of a particular future is not a prerequisite for Malbon to imagine playful vitality as resistance, and as such, we can place his perceptions of resistance in line with thinkers such as Angela McRobbie and Maria Pini.

Others have followed similar lines of thinking to Malbon, but conclude that these world imaginings are a group experience, a potential group utopian imagining. Graham St. John (2004c, 24; 40) describes the “rave imaginary” as discourses of consciousness expansion and metamorphosis, which take place in the (hetero) utopian space that St. John (2004c) conceptualized the rave to be, describing this as “catalyzing new self and social fictions.” That is, raves can be seen as a “difference engine,” enticing the imagining of alternatives to current hegemonic structures and discourses (St. John 2004c).

Wilson (2002; 2006) draws from Malbon and Maffesoli to investigate the political potential of rave, specifically in the Canadian context. Through his ethnographic work on raves in Toronto, he concluded raves weren’t political, noting that they don’t have a social change agenda. This contrasted Greener and Hollands’ work around the same time. Through a qualitative survey of “psy-trance” (a subgenre of electronic dance music) enthusiasts, they concluded that living the lifestyle surrounding psy-trance has a social change agenda, the lifestyle itself being a potential tool for social change (2006).

Leaning heavily on Maffesoli’s theory, Riley, Griffin and Morey argue that Wilson’s insufficient application of the theory of neo-tribal sociality is why he concludes that raving cannot be seen as political (2010). They contest the idea that having a political change agenda is a critical element of political participation, drawing on scholars who have argued for leisure as political participation (Giddens, 1964, 1991; Harris, 2001; Harris et al., 2001). Through a two-year study on social and political identities related to electronic dance music, they argue that by engaging directly with institutions of power, we run into the problem of not only validating the existence of such institutions but also ordering ourselves into a subordinate position to them (Harris, 2001, quoted in Riley et al., 2010, 347). A solution that they propose to this problem is to “create one’s own spaces in which to live out alternative values, shifting political participation to the ‘everyday’ individual or informal group level” (Riley et al., 2010, 347). We can hear the

echoes of De Certeau (1984), McRobbie (1993, 1994), Malbon (1999) and St. John (2004c) in this assertion. It is along these lines that leisure and raving are argued to become political participation, through existence outside of the dominant systems of power.

Those moments on the dance floor in which I can lose myself are the ways in which dancing at a rave can be resistance. The moments in which my mind is able to forget what I need to be pursuing in life, forget the drive to economic stability, academic achievement, performing a role in society that was written by a capitalist ethos, forget it all and be focussed on the experience in that very moment, surrounded by people who are flickering in and out of those moments of forgetting in the same way I am. It’s the experience of true presence. It is the magic of that one moment when we all flicker into forgetfulness at precisely the same second, perhaps we only align for a sub-perceptual amount of time, over almost before it begins. That moment is true existence outside a dominant system of power. A moment in which I, as a molecule, the micro, can be free from the pressures of the macro. In which the microfascisms within me, of which I am not even aware, can be rewritten. Losing oneself in that moment is like a fresh snow on a ski slope, erasing the imprints of society, those seeds of oppression, on my mind. Freeing my mind to momentarily be free of those shackles. That is what I am experiencing now, on this dance floor. As the beat pulses and the sweat drips, my eyes close. Sound washing over me in pulsing waves of base. This resistance is personal, it is embodied, and it relies on the altered subjectivity that this environment invites.

The people I interviewed seem to have these experiences as well. This connection through simultaneous presence was described directly by two of my interviewees: “It allows me to feel free and like nothing else is going on. I have a very scatter-brained brain, but when I’m there, like nothing else matters. Except for the art that I’m experiencing and the connection that I have with the other people there,” followed later in the interview by “I feel at one with myself, and I feel I’m in the moment where so many times if I would go to another place, like go to another

club, I would be thinking about everybody around me. I'm thinking about [hookups and drinking], but [at the raves] it's not about that, it's about being, it's about like feeling literally connected with the spiritual aspect, the high energy. That really is on everyone else and feeling connected to that" (Quinn), and "It frees up your mind to fully experience what you're doing rather than thinking about the next thing" (Nyx). Study participants had experiences dancing that were comparable to my own. Whether you understand it as Maffesoli's puissance, Malbon's playful vitality or even Durkheim's collective effervescence, it's the same moment, the same jolt of collective energy and has the same subversive potential. A fleeting moment of existence outside the dominant system of power, never to be found in the exact same way again. That's what you can find on a rave dance floor, what keeps bringing people back. The *potential* for those moments. And at the same time, as there is a euphoria in those moments, there's also an important concurrent subversion of capitalism.



Figure 1: "It is the magic of that one moment when we all flicker into forgetfulness at precisely the same second." Image by @disposableravers, Copyright 2024.

### Fieldnote: Hallway

*The dance floor was getting overwhelming, so I retreated for a water break and to the hallway. I stand by the coat stand, catching my breath. People pass me, smiling, grabbing coats for a smoke break or rubbing my shoulder and checking if I'm okay. I smile and let them know I'm just catching my breath. They smile back knowingly; they've been experiencing a similar euphoria on the dance floor.*

*I lean against the wall for a few moments and watch the different people pass by. Some in black pants and black hoodies, some in incredibly flamboyant or extremely risqué rave outfits, some in wigs and some in scissor-cropped shirts. No outfit is too wild or too basic; it all just is. Some people in hoodies and jeans compliment my outfit (a red mesh ensemble that allows some temperature control on the dance floor) as they walk by, and I offer them a genuine smile.*

*Standing by the door, my attention falls on the coat rack. It's nothing more than a few metal clothing racks, placed in the hall right before the door to the dance floor. Unlike the downtown venues, which turn a profit by charging for coat check, this system (or perhaps lack thereof) allows ravers a freedom of movement that a coat check inhibits. People can come and grab their coats to spend more time outside, whether that be for smoking, socializing or just taking a break from the music and dancing. They don't need to interact with anyone or wait in line. This facilitates freedom of movement and allows for more connection between people, warm coats allowing them to spend more time outside in the cold, where conversations are easier in the absence of deafening music.*

This is all possible due to the organizers of the events prioritizing the experience, the music and the culture over making a profit for themselves, not caring to charge for coat check. Every event organizer I spoke to over the course of my research reiterated to me that their goal is simply to break even when they plan these events (Caleb, Blaine, David). In other words, they are prioritizing facilitating the connection of the participants (both to the music and to each other) over profit. Another example of existing outside dominant structures of power.

The culture of collective care at raves was touched on by all of my participants. The idea that "people are extra caring for one another at raves more than just a normal show" (Julie, raver in her late 20s) is widespread throughout the Halifax rave community. Nine of my participants explicitly noted how people at raves are more likely to stop and help someone "having a bad time" at a rave. Blaine spoke at length about how his events have been set up

to create feelings of collectivity. The goal isn't that the DJ is the centre of attention. Instead, he wants dancers' attention to be on each other and the collective they create.

I think that's kind of what separates [Halifax's] underground raves from more commercial and mainstream stuff. [Downtown] you'll see a DJ on a big stage at some events, and you know, it's almost like all the attention has to be on them. I really don't think that that matters, like at all.

In contrast to these big commercial events, which are almost more like concerts, in that the crowd is facing the DJ and watching the whole time, Blaine is a fan of a more "minimalist" setup. Some coloured lights, a disco ball, and the DJ booth on the same level as the dancers, so that they can focus on each other rather than on a show at the front of the room.

Blaine's efforts to create a more collective experience have not been in vain. Caleb said about the raves, "I would say that that room, its music is the first most important thing there. I would say to most people. And then community would be the second most important thing to most people that are there." This is an element that distinguishes Halifax's underground raves from commercial and downtown events: culture and music are paramount. In comparison to the financial motivations behind commercial events, these grass-roots raves are motivated by a love and respect for EDM music and culture. Caleb told me, "All of us are doing the work to do these shows from a place of music. Like just a, like a cultural place. If we don't lose money, that's good, but nobody's trying to make it like their main job, I guess."

This distinguishes these events clearly from larger commercialized events. Clearly, the motivations of the promoters and the DJs impact the experience of the dancers and the culture of the scene. This can be seen in elements as small as the coat rack or accessibility of water, to larger elements such as the positioning of the DJ on the dance floor. Another key element of Halifax's underground rave culture, for those I interviewed at least, is its accepting nature. Quinn is a queer man who

has experienced discrimination when attending events downtown. Consider his comment:

For the first time, I felt I was in the space where I was accepted, and I didn't have to be concerned about discrimination. I wasn't hearing about judgement [...] and I felt like everyone else cared about each other like everyone else around you. Like we all sort of... we're here for each other. Like we all have had this sort of collective idea and understanding that this is a safe space.

This awareness of the acceptance and welcoming nature of the underground rave scene was echoed by all my participants. All identities are welcome, and the culture that exists is one of care: caring for one another and for yourself. This acceptance is also exceptional when compared to downtown nightlife, which several noted was often punctuated by discriminatory bouncers or spaces that felt unsafe for queer folks.

Halifax's underground rave scene was actively created by several people who sought to find an alternative to the dominant downtown clubbing culture and large-scale, commercialized EDM events. This creation was inherently political, crafting a music-centric scene where an ethos of collectivity and acceptance was encouraged by promoters who prioritized culture over profit. In the following section, I will analyze how this culture was maintained by ravers who valued this ethos.



Figure 2: "This creation was inherently political, crafting a music-centric scene where an ethos of collectivity and acceptance was encouraged by promoters who prioritized culture over profit." Image by Brody Reid, Copyright 2024.

### Fieldnote: By the Barbed Wire

*A group of us are standing around outside the door by the barbed wire fence. Some of us smoking and some of us simply there for the fresh air. My friends' eyes are glowing, bodies still warm from the dance floor and excited for the rest of the night. "It's only 1:30," one of them giggles. "We have, like, four more hours of this!" I look around at the other groups taking smoke breaks around us. There are some who are holding each other, resting heads on each other's shoulders. Friends hugging and standing close to one another. Interactions between strangers are mostly ones of warmth. Complimenting someone's energy on the dance floor here, checking in on someone there.*

*I take a second to think about what makes this different. I think back to some of the scenes I have seen standing outside bars downtown. The safety that I feel here is markedly different from a bar-front moment, punctuated by the occasional drunk man approaching me in an unwanted way or some pair getting into an alcohol-fueled fistfight.*

Throughout my research, the topic of drug selection and its impact on the culture of an event repeatedly came up for my participants and in my observations. Four of my participants explicitly devalued cocaine as a rave drug. This might come as a surprise to those who view raves as spaces of purely hedonistic drug consumption, but the sentiment is logical when placed within the wider ethos of contributing to the collective, combined with a knowledge of the outcomes of taking different drugs. Consider Sam's opinions on using cocaine at raves, "Coke makes you completely unempathetic. And you can't think about another person's experience if you're on coke because you're just [...] in a world where no one else exists, and other people's experiences are so, like, inferior to yours."

Cocaine and those who take it were not considered to be in line with the values and ethos of the community. Rather, drugs such as "Molly" (MDMA) were more highly valued because of their ability to make their consumers more likely to contribute to the collective. After explaining how alcohol makes people more aggressive, Peter used MDMA as an example of the kind of substance that fits

better at a rave, "And the effects that it has on you are very different from alcohol and usually in a much more positive way. I've never known anyone who beat the shit out of anybody when they were high on M. I don't think it's ever happened... at least not on my watch."

There appeared to be a hierarchy of acceptability of drugs based on how much they would make the user feel connected to the collective. MDMA and psilocybin (magic mushrooms) usually topped the hierarchy, their effects being such that they allow users to feel a general empathy and connection. Alcohol and cocaine were the most dismissed by my participants as not eliciting the "correct" behaviour or mindset for raves. Indeed, Weir (2000) and Weber (1999) both similarly found that alcohol use at Canadian raves is low, generally because of the aggression it can create.

In the case of the Halifax underground rave scene, we can place this hierarchy of substances within the context of my participants valuing an intention to contribute to the collective over an intention to privilege the self.

### Fieldnote: Back on the Dance Floor

*The music seems to be getting better and better. The smoke has died down a bit, and the dance floor has become more social. Acquaintances from earlier in the night are meeting my eyes, and we knowingly share a few beats of the music together, nodding in time or making a face to communicate that we like what we're hearing. We don't even know each other's names, but we shake our shoulders and bounce around in a momentary harmony of intention, lacking any intention of a sexual future.*

The ravers I spoke with agreed that sexual conquest was not a part of rave culture in the same way it is in other nightlife scenes. People whose intentions were sexual in any way were disparaged as having "the wrong intentions." This ranged from those committing sexual assault to those simply trying to 'find someone to go home with,' "Like, you definitely see people are out there just to hook up or whatever. And it's like, I've got nothing against

wanting to hook up. It's just to me, that's not really what the rave scene is about. Like it's not about like ogling people on the dance floor." Eight out of the ten participants independently brought up a lack of courting culture in the rave scene. Noting that while such behaviour wasn't entirely absent at raves, they didn't view people with those intentions as there for the right reasons, implicitly creating a moral judgement that this behaviour was wrong at raves.

### Fieldnote: Hallway

*I'm sitting cross-legged, leaning against the wall between the two bathrooms. My back is sore, and I think my dancing hours are over. I sit there feeling the wall support me, and the distant reverberations of the beat arrive on my spine. Someone I've been seeing around the rave but not spoken to sits next to me. I noticed him earlier, seemingly a little too high on something. We strike up a conversation, and it flows easily. I'm grateful that there's no intention from his side that I have to guard against. We're just two exhausted people who have had an intense night of dancing and whose energy is fading, chatting about how great it was. There's something that we share, just from having been at this event. We share that silent knowledge of how special it can be to offer up your essence to sound, to give up your body to vibrations flitting through the air.*

*I see my friends walking towards me, energy still high, but a few of them beginning to wind down. We rest for a bit before looking around at each other. "One more push, and then we go?" someone throws out. "One more push," we all agree, and head back to the dance floor.*

### Fieldnote: Downtown Event

*I am at a large, commercialized EDM event in Halifax. To get in, we lined up for 15 minutes, had our bags checked, bought \$80 tickets, and walked past seven police officers who were at the ready. We tried to find water and discovered that, unlike at the underground events in Halifax, you must buy bottled water. The stage is large, looming over the crowd, affecting how the crowd moves. Instead of focusing on one another, bouncing energy off each other and building a sense of collectivity,*

*dancers focus on the bright, shining screens that surround the DJ booth and the two dance performers who flank it. I have barely been there 10 minutes, and already a stranger has attempted to molest me. The music is interesting, but very different from the music I heard during my fieldwork. Rap songs and popular music are colliding with house beats; not entirely unappealing, but not the subtle EDM I became accustomed to during my fieldwork.*

*The most interesting thing is the people. Groups of white men with snap-back caps, white t-shirts and Bud Lights in hand, stand on the dance floor and watch the DJ, barely moving. People I recognize from the rave scene don crazy outfits and outlandish makeup. Others are in sundresses, while still others are in club-style mini-dresses. The difference feels jarring. I stand in the middle of the dance floor and dance as I have at countless raves, allowing the music to control my body. After a few minutes, however, I notice I am the only one in the vicinity doing so. I leave the dance floor to walk around. There is a discordance at this event. So many people with different intentions that they all seem to collide. The ravers dance hard at the front, trying to build energy with one another while being distracted by the dystopian screens in front of them. Boys trying to be men drink themselves silly and become menaces. People who love to dance drop acid and immediately become overwhelmed. People who love to love drop Molly and disappear into each other.*

*Some friends come over to join me and lament about the number of predatory men on the dance floor, the lack of collective joy, and the increasingly bad music. One of them moans, "I hate dancing when I have to push a guy off me every two minutes." I decide it is time for me to leave. On my way out, I run into a couple I have seen at countless raves but never spoken to. After introductions, I asked them what they thought about the event. "Makes me grateful for our little rave community, to be honest."*

Only a few months after my fieldwork did I viscerally understand why my participants had made implicit moral judgements about ravers with the so-called "wrong intentions." The event

described above was a large part of it. Going into my fieldwork, I was aware that in previous anthropological works on raving, attention has been paid to “insiders” and “outsiders” of a particular scene. Based on her long-term ethnographic study of rave culture in Philadelphia, Tammy Anderson (2009, 51) offers a typology of “modern-day party people” in which she outlines six groups, divided into either an “insider” category or an “outsider” category. In general, all the types within the “insider” category were deeply committed to music and the unique collective identity of the scene. Insiders were also more likely to be clear about the separation between their scene and more commercialized events at clubs or bars (Anderson, 2009). On the other hand, types within the outsider category were less likely to view the raves they attended as part of a specific cultural entity and were generally not especially committed to EDM music. Outsiders are less likely to experience the feelings of collective solidarity that raving can illicit for insiders and are more likely to engage in common club activities such as heavy drinking and sexual conquest (Anderson 2009).

McKenzie Wark (2023, 91-93) recently presents a different typology: “raver,” “co-workers,” and “punishers.” For all intents and purposes, a “raver” is considered an insider who has some deeper need to engage in the practice of raving and the whole emotional experience that entails. While “co-workers” enjoy the experience, they do not *need* it in the same way and are likely to use the experience to gain some form of social capital amongst their peers. Finally, Wark’s (2023) “punisher” is someone who exploits the scene for their own enjoyment, not contributing to the collective in any way.

An immediate typology of this complexity was not evident in my fieldwork observations. All participants interviewed in this study referred to raves as spaces of acceptance, modelled after the PLUR-ethos. Interviewees described the rave scene in Halifax as “free of any sort of judgement” (Blaine), “a place to just be free and be a freak [...] a safe haven” (Caleb), or “a radically inclusive environment” (Julie), “a place for your expression and acceptance” (Peter). They cited this acceptance

as one of the core reasons they engaged with the rave scene. Despite this acceptance, however, there were ways that my participants delineated what was acceptable and what was not. This section focuses on the disconnect between the participants’ belief that the rave scene is a completely accepting space and the specific intentions or behaviours that were deemed unacceptable. As I will argue further below, these judgements served to protect from suffering a similar fate to the raves of the 90s, which were commercialized, made mainstream and subsequently lost their unique culture, to protect the scene from co-optation.

This distinction between those who engage in acceptable practices and intentions at raves (moral ravers) and those who do not (immoral ravers) was made implicitly by the people I interviewed. When this theme emerged in the data, my first instinct was that interviewees were indirectly defining the basis for community membership, implying that those who engaged in the practices of an immoral raver were not part of the rave community. However, none of my participants sought to actively exclude those who engaged in these practices. Indeed, in the field, I did not observe anyone policing any of the behaviours that were deemed unacceptable. People who engaged in the practices of the immoral raver appeared not to be ostracized from the rave community or actively made unwelcome at raves, despite participants making clear moral judgements in our interviews. I offer the types below to help us understand the complex webs of morality that my participants understood to surround the practice of raving. Max Weber (2012, 265) wrote that ideal types as analytical tools in the social sciences “are neither empirical reality, nor reproductions of empirical reality, but [...] allow empirical reality to be ordered intellectually.” That is to say, there would likely not be a completely “moral raver” or a completely “immoral raver;” these are merely ideal types that help us understand the morality at work more broadly.

Moral ravers were defined by an accepting attitude, an intention to contribute to the collective experience and their main motivation for attending the rave being a deep enjoyment of dancing and listening to EDM music. This was

reflected in practices such as choosing drugs which increased empathy, caring for other ravers, prioritizing dancing over any kind of “hook up,” and generally seeking to contribute to the energy of the collective. Immoral ravers’ intentions were implied to be more self-centred. Not recognizing the need to contribute to the collective experience, and prioritizing their own experience over that of others, feeding their ego. In general, their intention in attending was seen to be personal gain, whether that be a sexual partner or status. Observing this in the field was more difficult. Theoretically, based on study participants’ comments, the intentions of an immoral raver could be observed based on factors such as selecting drugs that boosted the ego and centrality of the self, not showing care for other ravers or actively pursuing someone on the dance floor instead of submitting oneself to the music. But in my observations, these practices were not unobservable at raves, even by those who would otherwise be deemed completely moral ravers.

The key distinction here, though, is not in behaviour but *in intention*. No one at a rave would deem someone ill-intentioned simply because they are choosing cocaine over MDMA or end up finding a romantic connection at a rave. Concrete *actions, characteristics, or identities* were not, in isolation, what would deem someone a moral or immoral raver; rather, it was the *intention* they had in attending the event. This perhaps explains my difficulty in observing this framework in action during my fieldwork. This distinction made on intention and not on any one observable characteristic is summarized well by Blaine:

I don't think it's more so the right type of person, I think it's more of a mindset or just like a person has to be kind of accepting of others and non-judgmental. I think you can run into people who might at first glance you might be like, “Oh, this guy is like a gym bro” or something, or you know, this other person looks super alternative [...] but if they bring the same thing to the table mentally and their vibe you know, I think that's the most important thing.

People who rave to appreciate the music, dance, and connect with a collective, while accepting all types of identities, were considered moral ravers. On the contrary, those who were there for personal gain, for sexual conquest, or for the inflation of their own ego were immoral ravers. And yet, due to this distinction being based on mostly invisible elements such as intention and acceptance of others, an immoral raver is not ostracized from the rave community. Raves are still inclusive because anyone can, in theory, adopt and maintain the ‘right’ intentions.

This finding echoes Anderson’s (2009) typology of ‘outsiders’ to the rave community. The common thread between her types is the intention behind them, each type relating differently to ideas of loyalty, social status, and more commercial club scenes. While Wark’s (2023) “punisher” seems the most similar to my participants’ idea of an immoral raver as someone who “treats the space as a spectacle for their entertainment, contributes nothing,” my experiences in the field led me to believe that my participants’ perceptions of rave-insiders and outsiders deviated from the clear-cut typology put forward by both Anderson (2009) and Wark (2023). My participants did not deem anyone participating in these practices as an outsider of the scene per se, merely labelled them as having the “wrong intentions” (Sam).

A mutual focus of attention is a key factor contributing to the creation of collective effervescence (Collins 2004). Perhaps this is why the morality of ravers was so present in my interviews. The more ravers are present with similar intentions and ideas of morality, the more likely collective effervescence is to emerge. Indeed, Sebastian Tutenges (2023) explicitly states that collective effervescence can be exclusive, accessible only to a distinct in-group. While my participants do not actively exclude those who engage in perceived immoral raving practices in any way, they may think them as less likely to have access to the experience of collective effervescence analyzed in my forthcoming work.

The event I attended in July 2024 is an example of what rave culture becomes when the process of commercialization is uninhibited. Events more accessible to the mainstream, that

is, both physically through location and in terms of musical content being aimed at a popular audience, naturally attract people unversed in the subtle courtesies that rave culture welcomes. The trend towards events such as this is what some scholars call “the decline” of the rave scene (Anderson 2009; St John 2009). Despite often being marketed as raves, these large-scale events rarely display the cultural dynamics and expectations of an “authentic rave.” This hyper-commercialized, club-like event was an example of what the new underground rave scene in Halifax was created to provide an alternative to.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 29) see *everything* as a continual process of flows of desire; “There is only desire and the social and nothing else.” Capitalism is a machine that orders these flows, and should a flow begin to exist outside of it (deterritorialization), it will reshape itself so that this *line of flight* once again exists within its grasp (reterritorialization). It is a process through which a spontaneous, uncontrolled flow of desire, underground raves, is brought under control and then made available for consumption, commercialized raves. The origin of raves in the 1980s was a form of covert resistance, an indirect resistance simply by means of existing outside the grasp of commercialization, institutions, and regulation. With their unpredictable locations and illegality motivated literally by the desire to dance and connect over a specific kind of music, the original raves were a line of flight. As raves were commercialized, policed, and turned mainstream — the decline of the “authentic” rave — the desire that led to this existence outside the reach of domination by social institutions and capitalism ultimately became commodified and engulfed by capitalism. Having been engulfed by capitalism, attendees were now led to seek the joy of the rave through consumption rather than affect.

Dissatisfied with this, Halifax’s rebirth of underground raves was initiated by those desiring a new, rejuvenated form of the original line of flight. Having observed the rave’s co-optation, interviewees were guarding against a repetition of this co-optation by subtly defining the acceptable and unacceptable. To protect from co-optation, ravers deemed those who bring the mainstream (egotistic, sexually

motivated, judgmental, and lacking acceptance towards difference) too close to their precious cultural moment as *having the wrong intentions*. The subtle hint that “that’s not really what the rave scene is about” (Noah) is an active resistance to capitalist co-optation.

Despite this resistance to protect the culture and experience of the raves, it is important to note that they are not utopian spaces. Despite the lack of a pervasive hook-up culture at the raves, some still cross boundaries without consent, as I have unfortunately observed during my fieldwork. Just because the rave scene’s goals and intentions differ from those of the commercialized scene does not mean it is devoid of problems, such as racism and sexual assault (Palamar and Griffin 2020; Saldanha 2007). Further research on the Halifax rave scene could therefore focus on the lived reality of moral and immoral ravers and whether this intention-dependent acceptance extends along any boundaries of inequality. Are all skin colours and cultural backgrounds equally welcomed in the scene? Further, does this conceptual differentiation between moral and immoral ravers have any sway in attendees’ behaviour at raves? I did not observe anyone directly telling someone that what they were doing was unacceptable, so how exactly is this theoretical distinction lived or communicated to those who may be immoral ravers? How is this concept enacted and this guarding against co-optation physically lived out, both at raves and beyond? Is the judgement of other ravers another way that microfascisms have wormed their way into our psyches? If the euphoria of a rave can allow momentary release from oppressive forces, a temporary deconstruction of microfascisms, what is the relationship between that moment and the delineation of morality in that space, which some might argue is that same inner drive towards order that is the micro seed of fascism?

This study is limited in that, by chance, half of my interviews were with people involved in the organization of the raves. This meant that my perspective on rave culture was necessarily one closer to what the organizers were specifically trying to elicit; that is, their own idea of what they were creating. Despite this, the other interviewees confirmed that the

organizers' philosophy and ideals were achieved in their experiences; more research focused solely on participants would be required to see how the ideals described in this article are lived by attendees. Undoubtedly, Halifax's new rave scene is something special. Whether it is in the intentional nature of its revival or the aligned intentions of its ravers, it deserves to be seen and understood as something unique within raving history, both in Halifax and beyond. Working on this article in late January 2025, after Trump's inauguration for a second term and the various changes put in place in the weeks following, many of us are considering how the current trend towards fascism might be meaningfully disrupted. While raving is not going to do the work of protesting or actively fighting fascism globally, it is still seen as a threat to far-right regimes. Giorgia Meloni, the new prime minister of Italy and descendant of the fascist leader Mussolini, proved this beyond doubt when the first decree-law she put into place upon entering office outlawed raving in Italy (Musacchio Strigone 2022). Foucault, in his preface to a 1983 translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, affectionately dubbed the book "An Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life." Considering that the relationship between raving and power can be so well tracked with the ideas put forward in *Anti-Oedipus*, it is fair to say that raving can offer us, at the very least, a moment of non-fascist living.

## Author's Note

Since writing this thesis in 2024, I have had the pleasure of seeing its findings in a new context. In light of this, I would like to point out some contradictions in the article. Above I propose that a moment of anti-fascist resistance is possible on the dance floor, but in the same article I observe that ravers distinguished between correct intentions and incorrect intentions, that they thought certain intentions belonged at a rave and certain intentions did not. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari (1987), upon whose work I base my anti-fascist argument, note that a desire for sameness or purity of any kind—on any scale—is an example of a micro-fascism, I hope that readers can see the contradiction that I did not at the time of

writing the article. I would direct readers to Arun Saldanha's *Psychedelic White* (2007) for an exceptionally well argued and accessible example of this reasoning in a rave context, and encourage anyone interested to email me for further discussion.

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# Sharing Meals, Making Meanings: Foodways among 2nd and 1.5 Generation Immigrants

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## ABSTRACT

Second- and 1.5-generation immigrants must negotiate multiple cultures: the culture(s) of their parents and the dominant culture where they grow up. Foodways, then, play a critical role in the construction of cultural identity, marking group inclusion and/or exclusion. This study explores how people with inherited in-between identities construct meaning in their everyday lives through food. It examines the intersections of diaspora, acculturation, and food in Halifax, Nova Scotia—a small city with historically low immigrant retention rates. Through sharing meaningful meals with eight participants and supplementing these insights with semi-structured interviews, I find that foodways act as sensory, material, and symbolic markers of belonging and difference for second- and 1.5-generation immigrants. Participants constructed connections to and were ascribed different from peers, family, and heritage through the relational and multisensory nature of food. This study shows how living together with difference can manifest through meal sharing, which helps create a sense of community for those whose identities are rooted in culturally in-between spaces.

**Keywords:** foodways, second- and 1.5-generation immigrants, selective acculturation, cultural identity, Nova Scotia

## Food as narratives of family and belonging

When I showed up at Daisy's house on a dark, cold January evening, I had not anticipated how warm I would feel when I left three hours later. Daisy welcomed me with yuzu tea and taught me how to make *kimchi-jjigae*, a Korean stew that was hot, sour, and hearty. Kimchi hit the oiled pot with a sizzle and slowly softened as we sautéed pork belly, canned tuna, and tofu. Then went in a gochujang sauce mixture that stained the stew red. Once ready, dinner was punctured by slurps and metal spoons scraping ceramic bowls when we mixed stew with rice. While her roommates washing dishes provided background noise for our conversation, I learned that Daisy's relationship with her cultural identity was complicated, much like my own. I wondered why we had never talked about our shared experiences before, despite being acquainted during high school. I thought to myself, "Perhaps it's because we had never shared a meal."

Eating stew and drinking tea are gateways to immigration stories and childhood memories. They also bring us to discussions of parental hardships, assimilative sacrifices, and the question, "Where does this situate me?" The formation and maintenance of identity are processes that every individual grapples with throughout their life. Cultural identity is of particular significance for members of diaspora groups who are physically separated from the locus of their cultural background or heritage. By coming of age in a different cultural context than their parents, second- and 1.5-generation immigrants go through unique processes of identity construction (Rowe 2012; Somerville 2008). This paper focuses on adults who were

either born in Canada to immigrant parents (second-generation immigrants) or who immigrated to Canada when they were children (1.5 generation immigrants). Both second-generation and 1.5-generation immigrants (Rumbaut and Rumbaut 1976) must negotiate the heritage culture(s) of their parents and the dominant culture where they are born or raised.

Simultaneously, food plays an essential role in the social construction of identity (Guptill et al. 2016). Encompassing what we eat, how we eat, and under what circumstances, the concept of foodways refers to the cultural, social, and economic practices related to food production and consumption (Guptill et al. 2016). Moreover, foodways mark inclusion and exclusion, representing membership (or a lack thereof) to nations and ethnic groups (Guptill et al. 2016). Framing this project through foodways, rather than just food, allows me to explore its social, cultural, and sensory significance. For first- and second-generation immigrants, heritage foodways, or the food practices inherited from past generations, are particularly important because they act as a tangible link to the diaspora's culture of origin. However, cultures and the foods that represent them are not clear-cut entities. This leads to my research question: What role do foodways play in the construction of cultural identity among adult children of immigrants?

To explore this, I refer to theories related to ethnic boundaries and acculturation (Barth 1969; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). I situate my study in an era of 'multiculturalism,' where the co-existence of transnationalism, globalization, and white hegemony complicate all facets of life, from governmental policies to the intimate relationship between food and cultural identity (Gabaccia 1998; Duruz 2005; Sigrist and Michaud 2023). Using participant observation to capture the multi-sensory and embodied elements of food preparation, consumption, and commensality, I cooked and ate meals with participants and supplemented these insights with semi-structured interviews. My lived experience as a child of Chinese immigrants is central to my data collection and analysis as well. Through this work, I seek to understand how a sense of community can be fostered

between diasporic communities and amplify the narratives of a growing portion of the population of Canada.

## Literature review: Scanning the recipe

### Roughly chop ethnic boundaries, identity, and place

Anthropological understandings of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries are both reinforced and complicated through globalization and transnationalism. Barth's (1969) work on ethnicity rejects the notion that ethnic groups are static and ascribed with inherent differences. Instead, Barth (1969) argues that they are constructed and maintained through ethnic boundaries. The cultural features within these boundaries may change, but what matters to an ethnic group is the "continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders" (Barth 1969, 14). Ethnicity is thus a social process that is made and remade through internal and external constructions of difference. According to Barth (1969, 15), what defines the group is the ethnic boundary itself and "not the cultural stuff that it encloses." However, as boundaries blur through transnationalism, it is worth critically examining what this "cultural stuff" entails and how it changes or persists throughout generations.

A globalized world characterized by migration and mobility complicates the notion of boundaries. Today, the relationship between ethnic identity and place is no longer taken for granted (Wimmer 2008; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities is a helpful way of framing ethnicity for second- and 1.5-generation immigrant heritage identity. Originally describing the rise of nationalism, Anderson (1983) argues that a single group, consisting of too many members to know personally, must imagine connections to each other to feel part of a community. Extrapolating this concept beyond imagined connections to *each other*, second- and 1.5-generation immigrants might imagine connections to a *place* they, in many cases, have never lived, to solidify heritage group identity. Scholars like Rios and Watkins

(2015), for example, find that members of the Hmong diaspora in the United States maintain trans-local relationships through photographs of imagined landscapes of their homeland. Exploring the mechanisms diasporas use to construct connections to place, such as sensory processes like foodways, is therefore crucial for a more nuanced understanding of ethnic heritage identity.

Similar to Anderson's (1983) idea of imagined belonging, Wimmer (2008, 973) defines ethnicity as detached from place and rather "a subjectively felt sense of belonging based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry." In the context of multicultural societies, Wimmer (2008) writes that some individuals aim to overcome ethnic boundaries by boundary blurring; some may even embrace cosmopolitan identities in which they perceive all individuals as part of a single, global community. This agency to shift and blur ethnic boundaries is significant because ethnic identity may have command over other personal statuses (Barth 1969). Accordingly, some first- and second-generation immigrants may prefer to change their position within the existing ethnic boundary hierarchy. This repositioning can be done through assimilation into the dominant society in hopes of escaping minority stigma or gaining power or prestige (Wimmer 2008). Although geographic place becomes less relevant to ethnicity in multicultural societies, diasporic populations must strategically situate themselves within ethnic boundaries.

Lamphere (2007, 1134) suggests we pay attention to how this "cultural construction of difference" changes intergenerationally, between first-generation immigrants and third- or fourth-generation immigrants. Whereas new immigrants typically maintain cultural traditions, later generations may have what Waters (1999) calls ethnic options. Writing about descendants of white European immigrants to the United States, Waters describes their ethnic identity as flexible and optional rather than ascribed. Commonly associated with the concept of ethnic options is symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979), in which ethnic identity can be deprioritized and expressed through symbols when desired rather than integrated into everyday life. My project seeks

to understand where second- and 1.5-generations fall on this spectrum. To what extent do they express pride in their heritage, and how? How much of their cultural identity is voluntary rather than ascribed? Acculturation and identity in children of immigrants, and the dance between maintaining one's heritage culture and adapting to dominant society, is a subject of debate in the literature. Most sociological and anthropological theories examine assimilation in its intersection with race and class. In segmented assimilation theory, Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that, depending on structural barriers, some children of immigrants may be successful in assimilating into the dominant society and others will be blocked, in part due to racialization. Within segmented assimilation theory are three possible outcomes, which Portes and Rumbaut (2001) empirically test. The first is consonant acculturation, in which parents and children absorb mainstream culture at an equal rate. The second is dissonant acculturation, in which children's adaptation to mainstream society greatly outpaced that of their parents. Lastly, selective acculturation describes when children maintain core elements of their home culture while gaining key elements of mainstream society.

Overall, current scholarly conversations focus on acculturation and ethnic identity as a means to examine economic and social outcomes for second- and 1.5-generation immigrants (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). I argue that it is important to examine second- and 1.5-generation identity as an end in itself because of its critical role in perceptions of self-worth and belonging. Further, studies examine acculturation in large, Western cities that are ethnically diverse, such as New York and Los Angeles (Luthra et al. 2018). My project examines the acculturation of 1.5- and second-generation immigrants in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a smaller Canadian city where immigrant retention rates have historically been low (Ramos and Yoshida 2011), and where 83 percent of residents are white (Statistics Canada 2023).

## Drizzle in foodways

Food is an important marker of inclusion and exclusion within group membership (Mintz and Du Bois 2003). Maintaining culinary distinctions fosters a sense of personal belonging to groups, and the ways that we prepare, consume, and share food allow us to define for ourselves and others who we are (Guptill et al. 2016). Walker (2012, 204) writes that "choices about what is eaten, and with whom, are part of a range of strategies available to groups that may wish to either differentiate or align themselves with other groups, both in response to and in initiation of intergroup interactions." The element of choice in foodways means that commensal code-switching may be a strategy for assimilation, especially given that food is a marker of social and economic distinction (Walker 2012; Bourdieu 1984; Goffman 1959). Compared to other cultural symbols of identity, food's unique significance comes from its "indispensability and polysensorial character," as well as its embodied nature as a form of identity work (Walker 2012, 191; see also Guptill et al. 2016). The food preferences and dining practices of children of immigrants are thus a powerful lens through which we can understand ethnic identity and acculturation.

Although acculturation theories depict the efforts of second-generation immigrants to assimilate despite ethnic othering in mainstream society, it is possible that food is an exception in individuals' desires to cross boundaries. Gabaccia (1998) writes about the role of ethnic foods and immigration in the construction of American identity. She argues that immigrants may want to maintain familiar foodways for multiple reasons: to keep social connections with others from the same country of origin, or to signify cultural values, for instance (Gabaccia 1998). In discussing Italian immigration to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gabaccia (1998, 54) says, "to abandon immigrant food traditions for the foods of Americans was to abandon community, family, and religion." In this sense, food provides a sense of pride and identity, enabling immigrants to separate themselves from Americans, who, in the words of one Italian boy, "were people who ate peanut butter and jelly on mushy white bread that came out of a plastic package" (Gabaccia 1998,

55). It is unclear whether second- and 1.5-generation immigrants would experience cultural pride to the same extent or desire such differentiation from the dominant population, given their upbringing within mainstream society.

In an ethnographic study of the assimilated Lebanese diaspora in New England, Rowe (2012) finds that informants generally did identify as American, only identifying as Lebanese when discussing, preparing, and enjoying food. Moreover, their maintenance of Lebanese foods did not conflict with their assimilation into mainstream American society. Rather, it allowed second- and third-generation immigrants to construct *parallel* Lebanese and American identities (Rowe 2012). In line with past scholarship (Joseph 1999; Shokeid 1988), food was seen by the dominant population as the least offensive and threatening aspect of ethnic identity. In this sense, heritage foodways allow diasporic populations to maintain their heritage identity in a low-profile manner (Rowe 2012). Here, the maintenance of cultural foods represents selective acculturation for diaspora groups, who may alter their lifestyles in other ways to achieve assimilation.

### Let marinate in the rise of multicultural foodscapes

Many immigrants desire to maintain authenticity in their foodways. Others have created “westernized” versions of their heritage foods that make them accessible to the dominant society. The rise of fusion foods and the accessibility of various cuisines in Halifax complicates the binary notion of heritage food versus western food, warranting exploration in relation to cultural identity construction for second- and 1.5-generation immigrants. A qualitative study in France found that Brazilian immigrant entrepreneurs hybridize their heritage food with French food to appeal to a mainstream audience (Sigrist and Michaud 2023). They use this in-betweenness in cuisine to ensure their economic survival, protect themselves from exclusion and marginalization, and ensure the continuity of Brazilian identity in the diaspora (Sigrist and Michaud 2023). This is another example of selective acculturation in which a fusion of heritage and host cultures

acts as a means of economic empowerment and ascension into the middle class (Portes and Zhou 1993). Although some studies see this as ethnic erasure, others state that “creolized” versions of cuisine developed as a “creative response to expectations of assimilation” or to avoid stigma (Rowe 2012, 227).

Globalization, which has made way for multiculturalism, manifests in Western cities’ diversifying foodscapes. Now, the ‘cultural stuff’ of an ethnic group is no longer confined to that group. Ortiz’s (1940) concept of transculturation, which asserts that cultures merge and converge during encounters, is particularly salient in the study of multicultural foodscapes on second-generation immigrant identity. A “day-to-day confrontation with cultural diversity” through food points to intercultural interaction between ethnic minorities and dominant society as an exchange rather than as a unidirectional attempt for ethnic minorities to assimilate (Gabaccia 1998, 105). That said, the creation of fusion foods by immigrants in the first place implies that, on a group level, ethnic minorities must compromise aspects of their heritage to accommodate the dominant population, making the process involuntary. The extent to which a dish’s ‘authenticity’ to its cultural origin matters to second- and 1.5-generation diasporas has not been thoroughly explored, especially in a city like Halifax that does not have large ethnic enclaves.

## Methods: Collecting ingredients

### In a skillet, conduct participant observation; transfer to the oven for interviews

The population for this study is second- and 1.5-generation immigrants living in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). Using posters and social media posts, I recruited five participants who were second generation and three who were 1.5 generation, having immigrated to Canada between the ages of two and seven. Ages ranged from 20 to 55. Ethnic backgrounds were diverse, with participants having family ties to East Asia, South Asia, North Africa, West Asia, the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, and the British Isles.

## Sharing a meal as method

There were three components to data collection: cooking, eating, and semi-structured interviews. I asked participants to cook and eat a meal with me that was meaningful to them at their homes. All participants opted for a meal and interview, and all but two also opted to cook together. Most hosted me at their homes; however, one prepared their dish at a university office, and another met me at a restaurant. During this process, I conducted informal, semi-structured interviews as they guided me through meal preparations. Both cooking and eating are all-encompassing, sensory, material, and social processes that are best explored through participant observation (Adapon 2008). Broadly paying attention to modes of cooking, use of ingredients, and food and table etiquette, participant observation allowed me to gain an embodied understanding of the multisensory elements of cooking, eating, and commensality. Instead of being told that making biryani is a time-consuming process, I stood at a stovetop sauteing onions, rummaging through cupboards, and chatting between sips of SodaStream water until my legs and voice grew tired.

Relatedly, I used senses as both objects of study and means of inquiry (Howes 2019). Particularly during participant observation in the kitchen, attending to the instructional elements of cooking and the senses participants evoke is crucial. Harris (2021, 103) writes that sensory education is “a complex negotiation between explicit instruction and embodied learning,” which, during cooking, relies on the researcher focusing on sensory directions related to taste, appearance, texture, and smell. My task was to interpret both the sense-evoking instructions given by my participants and my own sensory experience in the kitchen and dining room. As an outside guest to the private sphere of participants’ homes, I acknowledge that my presence may have influenced the domestic food production processes participants chose to share. However, participant observation still helped me understand the hands-on nature of food that other methods would not allow. I then thematically coded this data using NVivo for analysis; here, I refer to each participant using a

pseudonym and have edited their quotes for clarity.

## **Analysis: Tasting the flavours of research**

### **Plate, serve, and dig in**

The ambiguous cultural and ethnic boundary lines that second- and 1.5-generation populations living in multicultural societies experience are reflected in participants’ self-perceptions of cultural identity. Nearly all participants alluded to or explicitly articulated feelings of ‘in-betweenness’ growing up. This ‘in-betweenness’ was marked by a tension between not fitting in with peers because of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, yet not fully identifying with what one participant referred to as the “cultural script” of their parents’ heritage. I therefore argue that second- and 1.5-generation immigrants have distinctly hybridized cultural identities, characterized by both adaptability (a “best of both worlds” feeling) and alienation (an “in between worlds” feeling). This hybridization experienced by participants is in line with Bhabha’s (1994) and Pieterse’s (1994) arguments that globalization and transnationalism create cultural hybridization rather than homogenization. Moreover, I argue that the foodways of second- and 1.5-generation immigrants are a material representation of their hybridized cultural identities. For participants, foodways acted as sensory and material markers of belonging to Canadian multiculturalism but difference from peers. Heritage foodways marked a connection to family through commensality and memory, but were limited by second- and 1.5-generations’ geographical distance from their parents’ homelands.

### **The Appetizer: Difference from, and belonging to, ‘mainstream’ culture**

#### Foodways and difference from peers

Many participants described their cultural identities as being rooted in difference due to interactions with peers that created a sense of otherness — the feeling of being excluded and reductively labelled as belonging to an outsider

group. For all, the local context of school or neighbourhood was instrumental in their experiences of not “fitting in,” showing that perceptions of self are place-based and relational. Food played an imperative role in constructing participants’ notions of difference. Heritage foodways prevented most participants from gaining “full access” to mainstream society, pointing to their acculturation as selective but involuntary. All participants, except Milo (Greek, Montreal, 2nd gen.), spoke about how food amplified their differences from peers. Four of eight participants described experiencing what is anecdotally dubbed a “lunchbox moment” in school—when those around them expressed distaste for their food or repulsion by its “stench.” Ahmed (Irish Bengali, HRM, 2nd gen.) said,

When I had friends come over, they’re like, “What is that? Yeah, it stinks.” Or, they would say my house smelled funny. Or, that I smelled funny, because eating a lot of curry, the spices come out of your skin. So, I remember being very, very conscious of food the whole time I was growing up. It had a lot to do with my identity. I just knew, okay, not only am I different, *I even bloody smell different*. I eat different. I have different tastes from everybody. Everything just seemed different.



Figure 1: Ahmed's chicken curry with potatoes. Photo by author.

Although participants like Rebecca (Eastern European, Toronto, 1.5 gen.) and Natasha

(Lebanese, HRM, 2nd gen.) brushed these experiences off, others found that food-related experiences with peers impacted their cultural identities.

Conversely, this alienation can serve to enact ethnic pride. Sam (Libyan, HRM, 1.5 gen.) was relatively unbothered when people sneered at her food, saying, “It just brings a good sense of pride. I’m like, ‘Yeah, you think it smells stinky? But listen, it tastes good, OK?’” According to AJ (Pakistani, HRM, 2nd gen.), who loved the South Asian food his mom made growing up, “no one ever really complained” about his lunches. Still, his mother told him not to microwave his food at school as to not disturb people with the smell. At home, he said his mother would fry onions in the garage, because she was “really self-conscious” about making people uncomfortable with the smell of the food, even in their own home. For Sam and AJ, food was a positive marker of difference that reflected a hybrid cultural identity, in the “best of both worlds” sense of it, allowing them to maintain desired aspects of their heritage culture while otherwise integrating into the mainstream. However, the consumption and production of their preferred cuisine came with a constant acknowledgement (either from them or their parents) that it set them apart from their peers.

### Heritage foodways and the journey of acceptance

For other participants, heritage foodways were stark markers of difference that took them on a journey from rejecting to embracing their heritage cultures. Daisy (Half Korean, HRM, 1.5 gen.) said food was an “insecurity for a bit” as she was growing up, questioning “why am I getting this food for lunch when the other kids are getting Lunchables?” She added that it was not until she made friends who accepted her as a person that she felt comfortable eating Korean food around others.

I remember all through junior high, basically, I told my mom to stop packing lunches... That was something I brought up, being like, “The kids think it smells bad.” Or they think it’s weird.

... But now I go into high school,

university, and I'm like [to friends], "You'll be better if you drink this tea with me, take my word for it!" "You'll really like this soup!" I'm trying to share as much as I can. I really like cooking for people in the house and I'm always offering.



Figure 2: Daisy's kimchi jjigae. Photo by author.

As Daisy's story illustrates, the smell of Korean food involuntarily set her apart from her peers growing up, which othered her. However, she now expresses that sharing food with friends "who are outside of the Korean community" makes her "so proud to be Korean" and "so excited to share my Korean-ness." By sharing heritage foods, Daisy both dissolves the boundary between 'us' and 'them' and solidifies her Korean identity. Through her hybrid 1.5-generation positionality, she reframes the dichotomization between ethnic insiders and outsiders as something that can bring people together when both parties embrace this difference through sharing rather than one-way assimilation (Barth 1969).

Edward's (Chinese-Hong Konger, Richmond, 2nd gen.) rejection of the "Asian part" of himself materially played out through a refusal to use chopsticks, even at home, during secondary school. However, he came to realize the importance of Chinese food when he moved to Halifax for university, saying that the move pushed him to "miss that Asian part of me," because he "felt like a minority for once" and the food "felt too Western." Today, Edward says that Asian food is "part of my happiness." Yet, he said he "only really brings Asians" to dim sum, because "dim sum's so important to me,

that if I brought people who aren't familiar with dim sum or don't really do certain dishes that they don't like, it affects me." Whereas Daisy's acceptance of the Korean part of her identity was constructed alongside a desire to share Korean foods, Edward's experience with peers who have rejected the foods important to his heritage identity led him to become protective of it. By only sharing dim sum with other Asians, Edward maintains an ethnic boundary and ascribes his own difference, giving himself the agency to internally construct a boundary between insiders and outsiders rather than allowing external voices to ascribe him an Other identity.

For second- and 1.5-generation participants, particularly those who are racialized, heritage foodways were a symbol of everyday 'us versus them' otherness (Said 1978). Second- and 1.5-generation immigrants are uniquely placed to challenge this dichotomization because they exist with hybrid identities. My participants' experiences with food and peers show that the ascriptions of their identity as 'exotic' by the mainstream act as a barrier to Portes and Zhou's (1993) selective acculturation. Without mainstream acceptance, it is difficult for the second- and 1.5-generations to gain upward socioeconomic mobility while maintaining bicultural identities (Portes and Zhou 1993). In response to Othering, these participants create strategies, such as finding the peers that do accept them and sharing with them important dishes, to 'gain access' to belonging in the mainstream society where they live, while maintaining heritage foodways.

### Celebrating Canadian multiculturalism

Despite food setting them apart from peers, nearly all participants felt comfortable with what they referred to as a 'Canadian' way of life, associating it with multiculturalism and diversity. Participants' identities are thus characterized both by feelings of difference from peers and belonging to a ubiquitous Canadian culture. For instance, all participants expressed an adaptability with food, enjoying cooking and eating cuisines from around the globe. AJ said he mainly eats lentils and curries for dinner but has burrito potlucks and crêpe lunches with friends. AJ felt his cultural identity

was distinct from both his parents' and from "the predominant Western culture" because "it's just like a hybrid; I feel right in between." Sam believes that living in Canada has exposed her to foods she otherwise would not have tried while living in Libya:

I would have never tried ramen [or] butter chicken. I've only ever eaten [Libyan food], or pizza or hamburgers, so it's either very cultural or a very basic idea of what North Americans eat... [The diversity of food here] forces you to not stay in your little box; you can try new stuff, and you don't have to be afraid.

It is therefore important to note that although all participants have experienced assimilation to Western lifestyles, the contents of Canadian culture are dynamic and transcultural, characterized in this historical moment not just by "pizza or hamburgers." Instead, the growing accessibility of various types of heritage foodways to various demographics has become symbolic of Canada's multiculturalism. While no participant discussed fusion foods or hybrid cuisines as being influential to their cultural identities, most celebrated the wide range of cuisines at their disposal by way of living in a Canadian city, acknowledging that the importance of commensality extended beyond the sharing of their heritage cuisine.

Overall, participants' relationships with cuisines other than their own show that multicultural Canadian foodways also influence cultural identity. At the same time, participants' commensality and crossing of ethnic boundaries through sharing different types of foods is changing the nature of what is considered 'mainstream' in the first place, evincing foodways to be a transcultural process (Ortiz 1940). The notion of Canadian identity is constantly being renegotiated due to the multicultural, mosaic nature of Canadian culture, and the social and dynamic nature of sharing food. In other words, mainstream foodways influence identity for second- and 1.5-generation participants, and their identities and backgrounds are influencing mainstream foodways. That said, most participants chose to make dishes from their heritage cultures for me. While participants' choices may have been influenced by the nature of this project, it is also

possible that heritage foodways hold greater significance to participants' cultural identities than what they perceived to be Canadian foodways.



Figure 3: Natasha's gochujang crispy tofu with broccoli and rice. Photo by author.

### The Entree: Difference from, and belonging to, 'heritage' culture

Despite participants rejecting many parts of their parents' cultures, everyone acknowledged that having a connection to their heritage cultures was important to them. AJ's thoughts on Pakistani culture sum up the feelings of all participants: "There's a lot of good in it. The aggressive hospitality. Sharing your home and what you have with people. That part of that particular culture, it's a source of joy and happiness, and so, I kind of kept it."

Largely, food and commensality were the "good" symbols of heritage culture that participants wanted to maintain. All participants, except Natasha, shared with me a dish from their parents' culture that they ate growing up, and when discussing the ways that food is meaningful to identity, everyone referred to experiences from their childhood, connections to family, and memories of home.

Sutton (2010, 217–218) writes that the “union of the senses” is key to food memories, “through the notion that memory has multiple interacting sensory registers.” While I will not delve into psychosensory explanations for the importance of food, it is worth noting that the unique experience of food-making and consumption is what makes food such a strong point of memory, nostalgia, and transnational connection.

### Heritage foodways as a connection to family

Seven of eight participants chose to share with me a dish that evoked in them feelings of joy and comfort. Each dish had sensory, ritual, or social significance, pointing to heritage foodways as a material and symbolic mechanism through which second- and 1.5-generation immigrants validate connections to immediate family. For Sam, Rebecca, and Edward, commensality played a key role in the cultural transmission of heritage foodways. Sam chose to share with me zumeeta, a Libyan dish that is communal in nature:

We eat [zumeeta] at home for my family. Everyone eats it at home... You can eat it in big groups... we'll do a big bowl, and we'll sit around and eat it. You all just put your hand in there and go for it... When I eat stuff like this, I feel clean, just because everything there's just stripped to basics, like you saw: sugar, olive oil, some mysterious powder, and that's it. It feels clean, it feels good, I feel connected.



Figure 4: Sam's zumeeta. "it smells like olive oil and my grandma." Photo by author.

Sam later told me the “mysterious powder” in zumeeta was ground barley, after asking her family. Sam further said that, when it comes to eating Libyan food with her family, “I won't have to explain myself. They just get it.” Heritage foodways thus allow her to “feel like I have in common something with my family,” which is important to her, given that “I live a very different lifestyle [from them].”

Rebecca shared similar sentiments, saying that “I definitely start to feel like I'm losing [the Eastern European] part of myself” when she is not around family and not eating that food. Rebecca's meal included a set dining table with a pot of tea ready upon my arrival, and she articulated that the social act of eating brings her family together:

I think food is the primary way we connect. Because whenever I'm at home, if we're not going for walks, we're eating. That's just what we do; we spend time together by eating. You might not even be talking to each other, but you're at least sitting together and sharing, which is nice...You don't just show up to spend time with someone without the pinnacle of it being food.

While participants' identities were uniquely hybridized, numerous participants said their parents' cultural identities were more heavily influenced by their home countries. Given these differences in lifestyle and knowledge across cultures and generations, commensality and food's indispensability acted as a crucial bridge between second- and 1.5-generation immigrants and their parents. Heritage foodways allowed parents and children to connect despite other differences.

Alongside commensality and domestic food production, the sensory nature of food was important for memory and connections to family. Ahmed, who prepared his father's curry, described it as “very, very down-home” and “earthy,” walking me through the process of how his father would prepare it. Moreover, preparing the curry with me evoked specific, visceral memories of his father from childhood. While sweating the onions with a blend of garlic, ginger, and warm spices, Ahmed told me he would routinely hang around the kitchen



Figure 5: Rebecca's pelmeni. "When I am just feeling down, it's what I go for; if I just want something that's warm and filling, that's what I go for. It reminds me of being a kid, it reminds me of being at my parents' house." Photo by author.

while his father cooked dinner, and that he "would always be over his shoulder, smelling the curry coming out." Twenty minutes later, Ahmed peered over the stove and said, "That is literally what I grew up on, right there in that pot." The multisensory nature of foodways also came up with Edward, who described dim sum as an all-encompassing ritual that connects him to this Asian identity:

I really like the etiquette in enjoying dim sum, and the atmosphere of all the people serving dim sum and pushing the carts... And I really like the way they communicate. It's very nice and friendly if you speak their language... It's kind of like a networking event. And one of the social etiquettes is calling them beautiful and handsome. ... And the etiquette of pouring tea for other people, I really like that. And, instead of saying thank you, my dad taught me that you could use the gesture of tapping your fingers...

For Edward and Ahmed, the atmosphere associated with dim sum, or the smell and visual of curry in a pot, were crucial connections to their fathers and to childhood memories that they made a concerted effort to maintain. Again, the sensory nature of foodways made these dishes into mechanisms through which participants connected with family and cultural identity.



Figure 6: Edward's dim sum. "I also really like dim sum because it's also my origin, half of my origin. It's nice, even though I haven't been to Hong Kong or China for like 13 years, I'd say. So being able to have this makes me feel like I'm back there." Photo by author.

At the same time, most participants were not too concerned with 'authentically' preparing dishes. AJ used an online recipe for biryani instead of preparing the day-long, layered version his mother made growing up. Ahmed took great inspiration from his father's curry and felt that he was "honouring" his father's memory by making it, but made slight alterations, such as marinating the chicken overnight or using a teaspoon instead of measuring by eye. Most participants, except Edward, were not bothered by preparing and eating heritage foods that they did not perceive to be fully authentic if they were similar enough to spark a memory or foster a connection.

Participants' lack of concern with exact meal replication demonstrates that heritage foodways are not static objects to be preserved. Rather, more important to participants was reproducing the dish in some form as a symbolic connection to heritage. Adapting heritage foodways, which are grounded in parents' cultures, to participants' own lifestyles and to the mainstream context where they grew up shows that heritage foodways are both dynamic and have *symbolic* importance to second- and 1.5-generation immigrants' cultural identities.

### Heritage foodways as connections to imagined geographies

Heritage foodways were not only a connection to participants' parents, they also acted as transnational connections to generations past and to heritage countries. Milo pointed out that "so much of identity is place-based." When breaking down their identity as a Greek Montrealer, they said that, "it feels like [Montreal] is very much a part of me." However, they added that their Greek identity "comes from my parents and comes from people in my own community." As explored above, place plays a strong role in the construction of cultural identity because the local neighbourhood or school shapes values and lifestyles. But, for those raised in a separate environment from their parents, the "heritage" aspect of cultural identity has less of an opportunity to be directly influenced by parents' countries, cities or villages. Instead, that part of participants' cultural identities is largely shaped by what Milo referred to as imagined geographies:

So much of how we define ourselves is based, on the one hand, on the physical places that we live and that we encounter every day, but also the imagined geographies of where other people are; where we've thought about. Greece is a real place I've been to. But Greece is also more than that. It's the place where my father was. And in a way, there are parts of it that are utterly inaccessible to me.

Since the physical places that shaped their parents are inaccessible to second- and 1.5-generation immigrants, heritage foodways become an especially significant connection to their cultural backgrounds, contributing to an imagined placemaking of heritage.



Figure 7: Milo's yemista. "It takes a lot of effort to make, and I associate it with feelings of home, feelings of relaxation, feelings of comfort." Photo by author.

Apart from discussions of immediate family, Daisy, Sam, Natasha, and Edward all alluded to the idea of "feeling connected" to their heritage culture in a more ambiguous sense through food. When putting together a mixture of *gochujang*, *gochugaru*, soy sauce, kimchi and tuna brine for a stew, Daisy explained that she had not done it according to any recipe and joked that "I feel like I'm just guided by my ancestors." Sam said she recently bought a mortar and pestle to grind her own spices because it helps her feel closer to Libya, which she considers home:

You feel so disconnected, and you're like, I want whatever, anything, that will connect me back. And just the grinding motion, I'm like, this is very similar. ... At least for me [food is] a constant

connection back home. Back home, I *would* do this.

Through physical separation from place, food preparation became a sensory and material symbol of not just family, but of 'heritage culture' more broadly for participants. Once again, the all-encompassing nature of foodways meant it allowed participants to construct connections to heritage places, despite not being immersed in their everyday environment.

### **For Dessert: Barriers to heritage foodways Domestic food production & distance from parents' homelands**

Although participants attributed food to be an important part of their cultural identities, five participants expressed barriers to recreating dishes they ate growing up, limiting their connections to their heritage cultures. This was largely because they did not grow up learning to cook from their parents, due to not living in the same context in which their parents grew up, difficulty with recipe translation, or priorities outside the kitchen. Only Daisy described actively helping cook family meals while growing up, but even so, said, "I haven't learned, like, 90 percent of my mom's recipes."

Sam attributed her lack of intrinsic ability to replicate her parents' dishes to a physical separation from the environment in which her parents grew up, limiting intergenerational skill transmission. For example, she said she had trouble making Libyan foods because she did not have the repetition and practice that people who grew up in Libya, surrounded by family would have, "Because they did it when they were young. Everyone's like, "here, do this, I can't do it anymore because I'm old," and then you'd start doing it and it becomes your responsibility. Similarly, Rebecca said her grandmother's cooking knowledge was simply a result of "having done it for however many years," and AJ said his aunts would have learned to cook "just by watching [their] mom" back in Pakistan. Not having domestic food production skills transmitted intergenerationally has implications for cultural identity, given its commensal significance. Rebecca continued:

I really fear losing that connection to my family and my culture by not having that food. Literally all I need to do is just learn

how to make it, but it's one of those things that I feel like is passed down through your family.

While the nature of the home economy is changing for everyone as social norms shift (Short 2007), participants expressed that they would have learned recipes more naturally had they grown up in their parents' homelands.

By way of growing up in Canada and assimilating into 'mainstream' culture, another barrier some participants faced was only knowing how to cook using measurements, when their family's recipes were often based on approximation. Sam, AJ, and Natasha all said they learned to cook from online sources such as YouTube, following recipes with measurements. The dishes Sam and Natasha learned from the internet were ones their parents did not cook. Sam expressed difficulty learning how to make her family's Libyan food, when she was used to cooking in units:

[Zumeeta] also has no rhyme or reason. My mom will pour, and I'm like, "How many grams is that?" She's like, "What do you mean? Put stuff in!" ... It makes it so much harder to cook this when you've learned in a way that you can't translate it to this. So like, you can't translate measurements to this because nobody can tell you a measurement. They're like, "Just look with your eye." I'm like, I can't look with my eye, because when I learned, I wasn't trained like that.

Rebecca, AJ, and Ahmed told similar stories of asking parents or grandparents to teach them to make their favourite dishes without much luck, because of their lack of measurements. In Ahmed's words, learning to make his dad's curry "was a nightmare" because of his father's lack of precision. AJ was given measurements in units that, to him, carried no weight.

We all make fun of my mom for 'two sips of vinegar...' Like when she describes recipes, she's like, 'oh yeah, just do it a little bit of this, a little bit of that, two sips of vinegar.' And it's just like, how am I supposed to replicate that?

The dissonance between participants' tendencies to cook quantitatively in measures

and parents' habits of cooking by eye reflects a lack of physical immersion in their heritage communities. Consequently, participants lack access to family and community members who would otherwise be present to constantly reinforce their food practices. Using measurements is not necessarily incompatible with heritage food production. Nonetheless, the difficulty of recipe replication for participants shows that second- and 1.5-generation immigrants must negotiate the desire to maintain heritage foodways while lacking the material skills to make this food. This tension points again to the in-between state in which this group often finds itself, as well as the symbolic importance heritage foodways often take on as a consequence.



Figure 8: Aj's chicken biryani. "Biryani was always the special dish. It's the one food, with biryani, that I could eat every day for the rest of my life and never get sick of it. ... It embodies hospitality and celebration and all that stuff." Photo by author.

The specific techniques of cooking are not the only barrier. Aj and Edward said the primary reason they did not cook growing up was because of parental and/or self-imposed pressures to spend that time studying.

Because [my parents] were also very much like, 'oh you gotta focus on school, so don't worry about any of the cooking or any of that stuff.' Which in retrospect, I feel like I lost out on being able to hang out and cook with my mom. Because she was very much focused on trying to help us be the best we could be at school ... but as a consequence, we never really got to spend time in the kitchen (Aj).

The high value placed on education in Edward's and Aj's households reflects, broadly speaking, assimilation efforts for upward socioeconomic mobility and increased prestige. Although the desired assimilation outcome is selective acculturation or a 'best of both worlds,' this example shows that some immigrant households may see successful integration and the maintenance of heritage food traditions as a trade-off, where a stronger cultural connection may be sacrificed. Assimilative pressures therefore exist not only externally from peers, but also internally from the household, limiting second- and 1.5-generation immigrants' heritage identities.

## Conclusion: Foodways as togetherness

### After a big meal, sit and digest

Being a second- or 1.5-generation immigrant is full of contradictions. You are not fully entrenched in your parents' cultures, nor are you fully embedded in a dominant norm; mechanisms like food simultaneously mitigate and accentuate cultural difference. Returning to my research question of 'what role do foodways play in the construction of cultural identity among adult children of immigrants?' I found that foodways are sensory, material, and symbolic markers of belonging and difference that ultimately strengthen the notions of self that are otherwise rooted in in-between spaces.

Heritage foodways mark a difference from peers, but food adaptability marks belonging to Canadian 'multiculturalism.' Most participants expressed a rejection of heritage foodways due to a feeling of othering from peers that stemmed from the smell or appearance of their food. However, they found an eventual acceptance of heritage foods and heritage identity through a strategic reframing of ethnic boundaries and group inclusion/exclusion (Barth 1969; Mintz and DuBois 2002). Participants also celebrated their belonging to multiculturalism in Canada through eating various cuisines and contributed to multicultural foodscapes themselves by maintaining heritage foodways. Accordingly, second- and 1.5-generation immigrants' participation in Canada's multicultural

foodscapes shows that foodways influence the co-construction of culture and identity. The “cultural stuff” that characterizes belonging indeed changes, but the boundaries between second-generation, first-generation, and ‘full Canadian’ remain (Barth 1969).

Heritage foodways also connect second- and 1.5-generation immigrants to their families through the sensorial, commensal, and ritual nature of food. Participants chose to share dishes that reminded them of home comfort, and the multisensory process of cooking and eating provoked memories of childhood and the people they care about. Further, participants’ geographical distance from their parents’ home countries amplified the importance of heritage foodways, connecting participants to the “imagined geographies” that held significance to them, but that they otherwise had limited access to.

Finally, participants faced various barriers to having full access to heritage foodways, particularly those related to food production. While distance from parents’ homelands emphasized the importance of heritage foods, it simultaneously made it more difficult for participants to make their cuisine. The dissonance between parents’ and participants’ cooking techniques, along with assimilative pressures, created a disconnect between the desire to strengthen connections to heritage culture and the skills and resources to do so, showing the difficulty of achieving selective acculturation (Portes and Zhou 1993).

The main limitation of this study is that second and 1.5 generation immigrants are combined into one sample, as are people of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Future studies may wish to focus on the second-generation immigrants of one ethnic group, allowing for a deeper dive into group histories, collective memory, and the geopolitical context of immigration. However, including participants with an array of lived experiences allowed me to understand commonalities based on generational status. To gain a more robust understanding of foodways, cultural identity, and cultural transmission, future studies should more critically examine the relationship between second- and 1.5-generation immigrants and their parents. A gendered

analysis of domestic food production among second-generation immigrants and how it influences connections to heritage would also offer intersectional nuance to the topic.

By having “feet in both doorways,” as Sam put it, the second- and 1.5-generation cultural identities are not defined by a single culture; they are in-between, here and there, and neither nor, all at once. Despite foodways reflecting intergenerational, interpersonal, and internal tensions, food remains a central way for second- and 1.5-generation immigrants to create belonging to the people that hold significance to them.

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# Hors Place: Discursive Identities of the Modern Franco Kabyle

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses the ethnographic experiences of myself and other transnational individuals to ground an understanding of identity affiliation among the French *Kabyle* (a group of Algerian Berbers) diaspora. The analysis starts by abridging the sociohistorical dynamics of France and Algeria's complex colonial and postcolonial relationship as it contributes to producing narratives of paradigmatic Franco-*Kabylité* (being-of Kabyle, or "Kabyleness"). I then turn to how individuals contend these influences and express their Franco-Kabyle particularities through negotiation—a conscious street-level process of navigating the friction imposed by Franco-Kabylité—and how/where it manifests, including ethnographic promenades through two Franco-Kabyle neighborhoods in Paris: Barbès and Belleville. Supplemented by a series of autoethnographically rich encounters with a particular fieldwork correspondent, I conclude by analyzing how negotiating Franco-*Kabylité* fosters community bonds and consider the evolution of my own identity over the course of my research.

**Keywords:** identity negotiation, French-Kabyle, French Studies, Paris

*“Avec l’espoir que notre effort n’ait pas été vain,  
que l’élève n’ait pas été trop indigne du maître,  
et que soit entendue enfin cette parole que  
tu ne cesses de psalmodier en pensant à moi,  
cette parole que les vieilles femmes de  
chez nous ont lancée vers le ciel, à ton  
intention, comme une graine de bonheur”*

(“With the hope that our effort wasn’t in vain,  
that my child hasn’t failed her progenitor, and  
that she will have finally heard the words you  
do not cease to sing in thinking of me, the  
words that the old women of our land shout at  
the sky for you, like the fruiting of joy.”)

- Taos Amrouche (1966, 7)

This, an address to her mother on the hope for her daughter, is how Francophone Kabyle novelist Taos Amrouche prefaces *Le Grain magique*, a 1966 French-language anthology of Kabyle tales, poems, and sayings—the literary preservation of centuries of oral tradition whose craft was guided by the voice of her mother. Born in 1916 in Tunis to a family in exile hundreds of miles from the native beaches and mountains of northeastern Algeria due to their Catholic faith, Amrouche nevertheless remained closely tied to her ancestral home through the stories of her mother; as adults, she and her brothers would make frequent visits back to Béjaïa to reclaim their cultural patrimony (Sadouni 2017). She interrogated the troubled relationships of belonging to and estrangement from her Kabyle roots through the corpus of her autobiographical narratives wherein, caught between multiple cultures, Amrouche explores her dual allegiances to the traditionalism of the Kabyle she knew of through her mother and the worldliness she found in Tunis and later in France; as most purposefully explored in *Rue*

*des Tambourins*, she finds no satisfaction in either identity beyond its negotiation, a fact affirmed until her death in 1976 (Sadouni 2017). Ultimately, then, her eminence as a Kabyle writer was not garnered through her inherent *Kabylité*—a being-of Kabyle, “Kabyleness”—but rather by how she negotiates and documents it (Sadouni 2017).

I see myself within the work of Taos Amrouche. French-born yet American-raised, I was regaled with tales of my homeland and of the country we had immigrated from—the snowcapped peaks and verdant valleys of the Tell Atlas Mountains, afternoons spent in the garden of our quaint residence in the Parisian banlieues and visits to family up north in Nancy—in central Texas in the southern United States. Equally the child of a German-American mother and Kabyle father, I fought to maintain a connection with my Kabyle roots despite my distance from them; I appreciated its potency in my upbringing—in the blessings we performed monthly, the language spoken to me and on the phone, and the food whose ingredients we could only source from a small store tucked away downtown—whose resultant difference I believed could explain the estrangement I felt from others around me. Thus, and with no other outstanding Kabyle influences in my life, I sourced its nascent awareness from the reproductions of my father: a strictly stoic, stubborn, and practical man. Consequently, my conception of *Kabylité* was entirely dependent on our interpersonal relationship, including its strain: my inability to speak our native language remains a tense spot in my self-identification for us, and my coming out was, according to him, the “worst thing to have happened to [him],” as “there are no gays in Algeria!” Though our relationship has thankfully since mended and he remains proud of my decision to reconnect with the culture, he denies my capacity to embody any valid Kabyle identity—to him, I will always be American. I still felt *hors place*—out of place.

Evidently, although I had little idea to what extent, the basis of my Kabyle identity was informed by my relationship with my father, whom I conflated *Kabylité* with what he embodied; alongside being my father the Kabyle, he epitomized what every other Kabyle must look, be, and think. However, my father’s

*Kabylité* was as subjectively influenced by his relationships as mine was, borne from his experiences growing up in post-war Algeria and as a first-generation student and professional in France during the 1990s and 2000s. His, like mine and like Amrouche's, was wrought from the intersection of overarching societal contexts and his experiences relationally to them. It is from this realization that I seek to understand definitions and expressions of identity in the modern French Kabyle/Franco-Kabyle diaspora and its contexts—circumstances with which I identify and that encompass a larger community to which I can relate myself and my father. Starting by abridging the sociohistorical dynamics of France and Algeria's complex colonial and postcolonial relationship as it pertains to the Kabyle, I find that lived expressions of Franco-*Kabylité* are consciously mediated primarily through individual negotiations within its contexts—explored here as a collection of sites—and its multifaceted reproductions by other Franco-Kabyles.

To produce this research, I lived and conducted ethnographic fieldwork of Franco-Kabyle communities and community spaces in the Paris metropole, primarily the neighborhoods of Barbès and Belleville in the city's northeastern eighteenth and twentieth subdivisional *arrondissements* respectively, from September to December 2023. My fieldwork employed urban participant observation, informal recorded interviews, continual online ethnography of Franco-Kabyle influencers, autoethnographic reflection, and amateur videography as qualitative research methods.

## Franco-Kabyle Sociohistorical Context

The Kabyle are native to the politically undefined nation of *Kabylia*, geographically defined by the Tell Atlas mountain range of northeastern Algeria. Due to the obstructive limitations of its mountainous terrain, Kabylia's settlement landscape mostly consists of collections of isolated pastoral villages spread across mountain valleys and ridges. Beyond the Tell Atlases, the Kabyle are one of many Amazigh groups present in Algeria: the

endonym for the group of non-Arab Berber peoples residing across North Africa prior to Arab migration into the region. As such, many militant Amazigh and Kabyle nationalists construct a national mythology of cultural perseverance in the face of colonial erasure—territorial, artifactual, and linguistic (Anderson 2006; Harris 2022b; Tabti Kouidri 2011).

Following France's colonial expansion into Algeria from the early to mid-nineteenth century, one early external logic undergirding the institutions of its occupying military and civil domination was the Kabyle Myth, a racial project informed by early French ethnologies of Kabylia and their implicit colonial-era racial ideologies (Hanoune 2016; Martel 2012). By virtue of their perceived assimilability to (but not submissiveness under) French systems of value and work, the idea of the paradigmatic eastern "*Montagnard*" was constructed as the noble savage relative to the western Arab plain peoples, whose bloody subjugation and economic nomadism were in opposition to Kabyle civility, due to their nature as a not easily subjugated, trade-based, non-religious, and hardworking people living in sedentary pastoral homes (Fois 2016; Martel 2012; Sayad 1994). Additionally, historian Philippe Martel (2012, 174–75) posits the project as rooted in phenotypic prejudice: the Kabyle possessing ..."*l'aspect somme toute bien Européen, voire bien nordique,*" [an entirely European appearance, seen as Nordic] as contrasted to the Arab, "... (*qui*) *est brun de poil et de peau,*" [with brown hair and skin].

When Kabylia eventually fell to French domination in 1852, this colonially imposed distinction between eastern Kabyles and western Arabs facilitated preferential French infrastructural investment into Kabylia (Sayad 1994). Another informing logic was of the *indigène*, assigned to native peoples inhabiting the land before French conquest, the censal classification conferred the status of a French national legally distinct from a citizen (*Français*) within its colonial acquisitions and thus susceptible to administrative oppression (Blevis 2003; Thénault 2017). Under the Judicial Statute of Algeria's Indigènes, both Arab and Kabyle subjects were legally recognized as *indigènes* until the last vestiges of French control over Algeria, thus both were denied the legitimacy of

full citizenship (Silverstein 2008; Thil and Moulin 2023). The legacy of these foundational colonial logics and their intersection influenced the dynamics of French Kabyle migration and how its history is contended (Harris 2022b; Khellil 1994; Sayad 1994).

The earliest Kabyle immigrants were young blue-collar workers and soldiers mobilized to fulfil the demands of a modernizing, early twentieth-century France, settling predominantly amongst themselves in the urban peripheries of Paris and the industrialized Northeast (Beaman 2019; Hamid 2022; Sayad 1994). This initial population of Franco-Kabyles, though small in number, comprised most Algerians in France (Khellil 1994; Sayad 1994). The migratory flow intensified during and after the Algerian War of Independence in the 1950s–60s, primarily comprising young workers seeking economic stability but including many Kabyle intellectuals and activists fleeing political suppression in a post-independence Arabist Algeria (Collyer 2008; Hamid 2022; Khellil 1994). The increasing salience of this diaspora spurred the onset of cultural *associations* as community-oriented centers of knowledge production, consumption, and solidarity from which *Kabylité* could be articulated, both across the developing scholar-activist network of Kabyle academics at French universities and among local communities of blue-collar workers (Anderson 2006; Collyer 2008; Hamid 2022; Harris 2022a).

In 1974, the French government issued an ordinance restricting non-European worker migration partially in an effort to stem the flow of Maghrebi immigration; however, contrary to its underlying intent, the passage of this ordinance encouraged resident Franco-Kabyles to bring over families and settle permanently in France, many of whom resided in mass-produced apartments and public housing in ill-serviced and overpoliced suburbs sequestered from city centers (Beaman 2017; 2019; Hamid 2022; Sayad 1995). Heightening tensions between this marginally situated suburban populace and hostile French institutions sparked the nationally evocative 1983 March for Equality and against Racism, through which its participants, notably second-generation French-Maghrebis, demanded legitimacy in French political discourse and, from the myth reified in

its aftermath, consciously affirmed a uniquely French racialized '*beur*' identity (Hadj-Belgacem and Nasri 2018a; 2018b). As political unrest emerged in Kabylia and Algeria at large between the 1980s–early 2000s, nationalist Kabyle activists sought refuge along pre-existing transnational networks with France, sharing political thought on Kabyle revindication within its diasporic spaces (Collyer 2008; Tabti Kouidri 2011). In the twenty-first century, the Franco-Kabyle diaspora is characterized by its multiplicity, encompassing individuals across gender, age, class, and migrant status spectrums who reside diffusely in France (Hamid 2022). Moreover, Franco-*Kabylité* is acknowledged as distinct within both contemporary French and Algerian racial schemas through socio-historical attachments, articulated both in and outside its own terms (Collyer 2008; Silverstein 2008).

## Lived Kabylité and Questions of Identity

The overarching context of the Franco-Kabyle sociohistorical relationship betrays the complexity of Franco-*Kabylité*. Simultaneously integral to France's Algerian projects yet unable to escape its marginalizing effects, disinherited by Algeria while core to its diaspora's makeup, comprised in a larger French-Maghrebi moment yet distinguished in the reproduction of uniquely ethnic knowledge—Franco-*Kabylité* cannot entirely relate to either Frenchness or Algerianness. The role of *Kabylité* as a contested intermediary produces a uniquely unacknowledgeable marginality within the French racial schema; the Franco-Kabyle exist hors place.

However, people do not wholly embody Franco-*Kabylité* nor the socio-history that informs it. Rather, personal expressions of Franco-Kabyle identity are more adequately explored as how individuals navigate the friction of larger influences while retaining a sense of integrity to oneself. Thus, I argue here that although the realities of their postcolonial context do dispose broader affiliations, the expression of individual Franco-Kabyle identities is rather best understood as processes of street-level negotiation with these

influences: what they define, how they are expressed, and who they implicate.

### What does it mean to be Kabyle?

*Kabylité* is self-evidently central to Franco-Kabyles; however, it cannot be universalized. The apparent diversity of those who identify with it on a street level challenges even the idea of a singular *Kabylité* around which to orient. Rather, I noticed that multiple interrelated discourses articulate a constructed knowledge system from which abstract definitions of a particular *Kabylité* contextually coalesce. Thus, and especially to the transnational community that must directly navigate it, conceptions of Franco-*Kabylité* and its practice remain disparate.

Late September—informed by an errant flyer online, I found myself at the Open House of Kabylia [*Journée des Portes Ouvertes de la Kabylie*] exposition in Châtillon, a banlieue southeast of Paris; passing under the elevated Châtillon-Montrouge terminus station, I emerged on the arterial *Avenue de Paris*, walking past new high-rise buildings—with façades of both imposing glass and contrived imitations of Haussmann—and mathematically equidistant tree canopies along well-kept streets. The open house was held in the *Espace Maison Blanche*, the municipal exposition hall not far from the metro station. Along the outer vitrines, impossible to miss, hung calls to all curious passers-by: two vibrantly colored Amazigh flags (a blue, green, and yellow tricolor overlaid by a red letter *yaz* (ⵝ)) from the open doors, hastily taped-up showing times, alongside several printed copies of the aforementioned flyer in strict succession.

Venturing beyond the doors and into the hall, I was confronted immediately by the diversity of offerings available to peruse. Most of the exposition was dedicated to vendor tables: artisans selling all manner of hand-crafted jewelry, clothing, fabrics, weaves, and pottery, local booksellers and well-renowned authors poised among stacks of books, art—both in the style of traditional embroidery patterns and modern representationalist expressions—hung from wire displays, and a small canteen in the back with cloth-covered

and plastic-wrapped bundles of homemade food for purchase. People bustled through the stalls and conversed amongst themselves, exchanging heartfelt *bises* and how-are-yous in Tamazight Taqbaylit, the Kabyle language, introducing compatriots and shepherded children. Among the attendees drifted a small news crew for the online publication *BerbèreTV*, occasionally interviewing bejeweled vendors or event personnel for their affiliations with and aspirations for the event. The front of the hall was dedicated to performances and showings, occurring on an elevated stage before rows of seating inadequately accommodating a now perched audience. I joined the growing crowd to see the next performer take the stage: an *acewiq* singer, a middle-aged woman sporting short blonde hair, a sharp white blazer, and a cloth of intricate weave draped around her throat. She stood to sing, an outpour of earthy tones confident enough to project beyond the microphone, the Tamazight on her tongue fluid as if it were always meant to be music and not language. As she progressed, she was joined by an entourage of *bendir*-drummers, draped in traditional Kabyle dresses mirroring the performative attire of many of the women in the hall, with the large frame-drums propped confidently on their shoulders; they sounded the beat and we reciprocated, clapping hands and clapping feet as the *acewiq* rolled on. When the performance finished, applause swelled from the audience, accompanying radiant smiles and smartphone cameras.

She again took the microphone. Hand poised pinning the cloth around her throat, she evocatively set forth a reminder that the Kabyle are of its continually threatened Tamazight, of the struggle and fortitude of its speakers to keep it alive in the face of ongoing colonialism, suppression, and displacement, and why “... *notre langue, notre tradition, c’est important de les préserver*” [“... our language, our *tradition*, are important to preserve”]. Though I did not disagree with the sentiment, her assertions read as if she had somehow missed the event: overlooked the vendors, the authors, the canteen and its home-cooked food, the interactions happening right in front of her, even the patterned weave she held at her throat. How could she, in her devotion to Tamazight, disregard the assemblage of diverse

expressions of living *Kabylité* all around her? What must our shared identity—our *Kabylité*—look like when she can only see it in the words we may or may not speak?

Most Kabyles I talked to see the national language as core to the Kabyle identity. I first met “S,” a second-generation Kabyle graduate student studying sociolinguistics, in the crowded classroom of a Tamazight language workshop when she figured out I was part American; we met after class and, circled under a streetlight and dolled up in our autumn coats, we talked about the workshop, our research (we were coincidentally both doing ethnographies on Franco-Kabyles at the same time), and, ultimately, ourselves. When asked about her *Kabylité*, she plainly affirmed that “(être) Kabyle, c’est la langue pour moi” [(being) Kabyle, for me, is its language]. For S, the acewiq singer, and others, the retention and preservation of Tamazight represent the maintenance of a metaphysical connection with the homeland and preserve *Kabylité* in the face of transnational pressures to assimilate (Ammouden 2018). The transmission of Tamazight amongst Kabyles also evokes community-esteemed traditional values—often explicitly, through performances of music and poetry: pride in our heritage, our connection to nature, and the valor of persevering and uplifting a living Kabyle culture (Ammouden 2018; Lafkioui 2013). Singers often employ *axxam* [home] to refer to family in Tamazight as opposed to the more literal *tawacult*; this embeds Kabyle social relationships as the social order of ethnic space (Ammouden 2018, 21; Harris 2022b; Silverstein 2004). The eminence of Tamazight-as-*Kabylité* is due to the perceived value of intra-community language reclamation in facilitating a communicable nation, wherein a legacy of documentation and propagation affirms its salience (Anderson 2006, 70; Berdous and Cortier 2020; Lafkioui 2013).

This particular emphasis on linguistic self-definition is thus nested within a broader political notion of *Kabylité* articulated through the replication and embodiment of interrelated ethnic paradigms. This political *Kabylité* is loosely derived from a claimed heritage of works from generations of transnational Kabyle scholar-activists and thinkers, including didactic

linguist Salem Chaker, wartime activist and singer-poet Matoub Lounès, and the literary corpus of Taos Amrouche (Harris 2022a, 2022b, Sadouni 2017, Tabti Kouidri 2011). Its disposition is rooted in its shared national mythology as anterior and continually suppressed in the Algerian homeland, manufacturing inherent distinction between Kabyles and Arabs and asserting that the Kabyle remain indigènes under Algeria’s Arabist state order (Harris 2022b; Oulebsir-Oukil 2023). As such, the Kabyle nation is unjustly deprived of a full collective conscience and thus of national sovereignty and power (Anderson 2006; Oulebsir-Oukil 2023).

Conceived in these terms, *Kabylité* is the awareness of this subjectivity and its nationalist narratives, framed as a reclamation of its cultural consciousness for greater political sovereignty in Algeria (Harris 2022b). This is expressed by outwardly fostering a presumed authentic culture: performing dance and music, exhibiting Kabyle aesthetics, disseminating knowledge through association activity, speaking Tamazight and using the language in lieu of Arabic to reclaim culturally contested referents (Harris 2022b). Arabic *couscous*—whose Algerian variant traditionally comprises fine semolina grains topped by a hearty stew, chickpeas, and beef or lamb meat—is instead Tamazight *seksu*, Arabic *kesra*—a round semolina flatbread often served with olive oil or *ifelfel* pepper sauce—is *aghrum*, and so on. Additionally, this expression exists alongside the propagation of overtly political ideologies: pro-democracy, Kabyle regional autonomy, secularism, and an ascriptive feminism. The latter’s conception, as delineated by popular narratives, valorizes the role of the woman, the mother, and the grandmother in embodying and propagating *Kabylité*. Women are demonstrate the collective virtues of family loyalty, austerity and perseverance through her character and labor: donning traditional attire and tattoos, performing traditional song and dance, producing art and literature, imparting knowledge through language, and cooking traditional meals—which all operate oppositional to a figured subjugation of Arab Muslim women (Sabatier 2008; Béji-Bécheur, Ourahmoune, and Özçağlar-Toulouse 2014; Ammouden 2018; Harris 2022).

These positionalities derive from the politics Algerian Kabyles—as victims of rampant political corruption, cultural suppression, and endemic poverty—maintain in the historic struggle for national sovereignty; adopting these positionalities internationally thus expatriates and distances them from their sociopolitical condition, and necessarily conflates its material plights as abstract and ideological (Collyer 2008; Harris 2022b). This metamorphosis also shifts the rhetorical and historiographical narratives of these politics; for example, I suggest that geographer Johnathan Harris's (2022a; 2022b) work among Franco-Kabyle political and associative entities uncritically reflects an over-emphasis on scholar-activists in defining the diaspora's presence to the contributions of working-class and refugee Kabyles.

Moreover in France, instead of positioning the Kabyle as underdogs in a fight for national sovereignty as in Algeria, the functional oppositionality embedded in its rhetoric rather contributes to the harmful racial logic of the Kabyle myth, whose hegemonic operation along lines of prejudice favor the Kabyle at the expense of Arab Algerians and a larger *beur* solidarity (Collyer 2008; Hadj-Belgacem 2018b; Harris 2022b). Early in my fieldwork, I became a regular at *La Fa Brick*, a hole-in-the-wall Algerian street-food restaurant just north of Barbès co-owned and run by a Franco-Kabyle mother-daughter team, each manning the store alone on alternating shifts throughout my research. During one visit with its matriarchal owner, she spoke to me about the degradation of *Kabylité* in the local community—one she called home; "*Ici, il y a trop de monde. Nous sommes [...] avec des Arabes. Même ici, les panneaux sont en arabe: égyptiens!*" ["Here, there's too much of everybody. We're together with Arabs. Even here (in the restaurant) the poster prints are in Arabic: Egyptian!"]

Not dissimilarly, over the course of my interview with a retired white bourgeoisie—whose trust I had earned through her resident exchange-student—at her bohemian residence in the southwestern 16th arrondissement, she venerated the Kabyle, empathizing with us as a fellow (Basque) Montagnard and glad that "*des jeunes commencent à réaliser que les Kabyles ne sont pas forcément Musulmans!*" ["young

people are starting to realize that Kabyles aren't necessarily Arab"] in a context where "the term '*algérien*' has—" she corrects, "had a bad reputation." This baggage is difficult to even unpack transparently in the language of the French racial schema; the discourse of colorblindness in French Republican nationality obfuscates its racial poles of power, mirroring the country's cosmopolitan population without acknowledging the fact or cause of its diversity (Beaman 2019). Its rhetoric of national equality denies any institutionally sanctioned lens through which to process this Franco-*Kabylité* as a byproduct of the Kabyle myth, nor formulate a new French-ethnic consciousness that moves beyond it (Beaman 2017; 2019). Extending the politics of a nationalist in-group *Kabylité* from Algerian socio-history inadvertently runs alongside a disparate French abstraction of *Kabylité* rooted in imperial-age logics of racism (Harris 2022b; Sayad 1994). However, even in acknowledging its benefit to Franco-Kabyles, the supposition of French *Kabylité* is still a hegemonizing and exploitative force, mapping an othering system of knowledge and value on a population often unwitting in their complicity.

In defining *Kabylité*, the unacknowledgeable marginality of the Franco-Kabyle identity can be variously manipulated, associated and dissociated relationally to perceived forms of Frenchness and Algerianness—the cue ball in a game of power amongst abstracted mythological, political, and racist narratives. Thus, I reassert that there is no definition of *Kabylité* that is universal or extricable. I posit that *Kabylité* is defined instead by its transitivity, realized contextually through the intent and use of overarching knowledge systems, glimpsed in the lived expressions and projections that hail it.

### How do Franco-Kabyles directly navigate and negotiate Franco-Kabylité?

Though Franco-*Kabylité* emerges partially as the contest between abstracted, superimposing knowledges, I importantly discern that individual Franco-Kabyles exist as the *friction*, not the embodiment, of these influences. Identity is rather consciously mediated through negotiations—as the interrogative micro-level

counterpoint to macro-level articulation—of Franco-*Kabylité*, a conduit through which to reclaim agency and position oneself in relation to it (Harris 2022b). This process often occurs through expressions of colloquially understood culture, which necessitates reconsidering what an authentic practice of Franco-*Kabylité* can look like; through ethnographic promenades in three of Paris' Franco-Kabyle sites, I aim to exhibit the discursivity of expression reflected in literally navigating its inhabited spaces.

I disembark the 2 line at the elevated Barbès-Rochechouart station, an infamous stop serving one of Paris' most infamous neighborhoods: Barbès. I file down the wrought-iron stairs and out the exit doors—holding them open, as others in front and behind me do, for people skimming the entry turnstiles—into the intersection of Boulevard de la Chapelle and Boulevard Barbès, ignoring the loitering cigarette dealers and their entrepreneurial promises of “*marques bleds*” [“brands from the homeland”]. I comingle in its cacophony—groups of dark-haired men and boys loiter and disperse from doorways and café terraces with the synchrony of clouds, engaged in multilingual conversations accented by the harsh glottals of Semitic inflections. Navigating its arterial boulevards demands contesting a spatial anarchy: weaving between exchanges held in passing across sidewalks and terraces, around trucks and traffic, away from passing scooters and motorbikes, and out unflinchingly onto the street. At this corner, directly north across from the metro's exit, is the incongruously bohemian and moderately overpriced Brasserie Barbès, around which the crowds pass like ships in the night; I do not remember it being here the last time I visited. Walking along Boulevard de la Chapelle, the neighborhood's southern commercial heart proves more familiar: Algerian street food shops and bakeries, groceries, halal butcheries, cafés, clothes shops and tailors, hashish joints, and telecommunications stores advertising money-transfer services alongside new and refurbished iPhones—all in the shadow of what once was the lauded Tunisian-founded Tati department store, shuttered during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Along this very street, I recognize a cinemographic shot from the music video for *Barbès*, a bilingual ode to the neighborhood by

the Franco-Kabyle new-wave musician Rachid Taha in an acoustic fusion of rock and rai.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, around 400 meters of the boulevard's median—above which runs the section of metro rail I had arrived on—is transformed into an open-air market, flanked by a gallery of stalls selling fresh meat, fish, produce, artisanal goods, and clothes for which prices per kilogram or liter are scrawled on hung chalkboards. Cries of “*cousin.e!*” and “*allez, venez!*” [“come, come!”] ring out over the bustling market, sales transactions held in spontaneous pidgins finalized and emphasized to flaunt their bargains—muffled occasionally by the soft rumble of a train passing overhead. Its transactional exchanges are additionally carried intimately through hands: vendors wave to market their selections to the crowd, customers converse the process of selection through touch and gesture, chosen bulk is delicately weighed on hand scales, money in bills and change pass directly from palm to palm. Parisians of all sorts—young and old, men and women, Maghrebi, African, Asian, and white alike—wade the market and sample the products, in search of its characteristically ‘other’ ‘*marque Barbès*’ (Lallement 1998, 70).

Traversing north through Barbès and into Goutte d'Or, the density of its winding streets thins, though never completely. Shops and enterprises à ‘*Orientale*’ line ground-floor real estate below curtains billowing from open windows. From some streets, the shops frame the Sacré-Coeur basilica on top of Montmartre hill, the contrast of its tourist-addled bohemian lushness just one kilometer away. Along these streets, however, local patrimony is not as guaranteed; I pass under a message blocked in paint on a building façade, “*MADAME LA MINISTRE DE LA CULTURE/PROTEGEZ LE THEATRE* [sic]” [“TO THE MINISTER OF CULTURE/ PROTECT THE THEATRE”], a plea to the government to restore Barbès' Cinema Luxor, a deteriorating icon of Paris' Art Nouveau architecture. I stop in at *La Fa Brück* for one of my habitual visits, its floor-to-ceiling windows illuminating the colorful menagerie of mid-century Arabic movie posters and Kabyle tapestries adorning the walls surrounding either mother or daughter—always sporting a colorful *amendil* [foulard] and wearing a

traditional Kabyle dress under her apron, people-watching while hard at work baking. She smiles as I step in; I take my normal order, "*Aghrum vousoufer aux épinards, txil-ik*" ["Spinach-stuffed aghrum, please"], for three euros, and she asks how my studies are coming along, how I like Paris, about family while we wait. Our conversations, though brief, are meaningful to me. We exchange goodbyes, "*Ar-tufat!*" and as I leave, she waves.

Aghrum in hand, I pause along a walled bridge that would overlook tracks extending from the nearby Gare du Nord train terminus. The entirety of the wall's length is tagged, replete with works whose artists I could not at-a-glance identify in the rest of the city. One, however, stands out to me: written in a simple script, "*Octobre 1961...2020/Union pour l'Algérie*" ["October 1961...2020/Union for Algeria"]. Two Octobers, sixty years apart: the first homage to the massacre of October 17th wherein, protesting an institutional encroachment of liberty in the vestiges of the Algerian War of Independence, many of the thousands of demonstrating Franco-Algerians were arrested, brutalized, and killed at the hands of Parisian gendarmes; the second being the final month of the national Hirak peaceful protest movement in Algeria, which sought constitutional reform against the corrupt regime of five-time incumbent president and vocal Berber oppositionist Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Thil and Moulin 2023, Zerrouky 2020). Two dates, within living memory for many people, that document the transnational strife of Algerians for dignity and justice, many among them Kabyles. But why documented here? Though shifting migration patterns have brought increasing Maghrebi and African diversity to Barbès, it retains a Franco-Kabyle/Algerian disposition through the fluid character of its establishments, use of language, and patterns of movement and conglomeration in space (Hamid 2022; Lallement 1998). The particularities of this disposition engender one landscape against which people embody, reference, and contest various Franco-Kabylités.

Only ten minutes east along the 2 line from Barbès-Rochechouart is Belleville in the twentieth arrondissement, a neighborhood that, though not as reputed as Barbès, has its own Kabyle presence. Historically linked with

the movement of Sephardic Jews in the early-mid twentieth century, it now hosts a diversity of other populations. Emerging onto the bustling Boulevard de Belleville, I notice the scent of halal African fusion in the air, jabs between employees in a Guadalupian grocery closing up shop, young punks sat at terrasses of communist and anarchist cafés, signs in Chinese and Vietnamese contesting for legibility against voraciously tagged façades. One, scrawled along the back of a street sign, reads simply "Algiria [sic]."

Situated humbly in a meagre storefront on one of many lonely residential detours is the *Association culturelle berbère*, the ACB, one of the city's older eminent associations, founded in 1979 and distinctly of its era (Harris 2022a). Posters affixed against its vitrines detail the scope and schedule of its services: language, music, and dance classes, exhibitions and seminars in its dedicated downstairs performance space, panels of invited authors and artists, bureaucratic and legal aide services, and after-school hours. In the small foyer beyond, framed newspapers from both sides of the Mediterranean collage transnational stories of Kabyle accomplishment and adversity—from reporting on Algeria's civil war to laudous celebrations of Zinedine Zidane's 1998 World Cup win—set on a wall tiled in Kabyle aesthetic tradition. Just down the street lies another self-evidently Kabyle enterprise, *le Cantine des Hommes libres* [The Free People's Canteen], who's symbolic yaz illuminated on its sign winks at me from across the road; I stop in, tracing more posters of performances and exhibitions crowding the valuable window space.

Regardless of its homages outside, the canteen is emblematic of the traditional Parisian *brasserie*: dim yellow lighting accentuates the rich hardwood finish of the bar and cabinetry, subtly styled in French art nouveau, cracked black leather barstools sprout from linoleum floors, various alcohols sit available on tap or among crystal glassware in displays, the week's "*plats de bled*" ["specials from the homeland"] scrawled on a hanging chalkboard, the air hangs still in repose. The bartender chats with the kitchen staff and the middle-aged clientele—equal parts men and women, in groups or alone—rub shoulders in Tamazight and French, soft in conjunction with the ambience of Edith

Piaf or Kabyle guitar. Le Cantine des Hommes libres—translated idiomatically from the Tamazight *Imazghren*, the plural of Amazigh—is one of the last of Belleville’s Kabyle brasseries, an institutional model of diasporic enterprise emergent from the earliest days of Franco-Kabyle expatriation. However, its space does not evoke the pretense of *Kabyliité* as a stark other—its mediation rather occurs non-consumptively, its fluidity more viscous (Steiner 1999; Béji-Bécheur, Ourahmoune, and Özçağlar-Toulouse 2014; Hamid 2022).

On April 20, 2024, Place de Ménilmontant—only three blocks away from the ACB and the brasserie—was officially renamed by the government of Paris to Square Idir in honor of the legacy of the nominal Idir, pseudonym of late Franco-Kabyle singer-poet Hamid Cheriet. A contemporary of Matoub Lounès, Idir had settled in Paris at Ménilmontant, a small neighborhood immediately south of Belleville, where he produced music and worked extensively with ACB in his transnational political activism (Sadouni 2017). At the inauguration ceremony, Éric Pliez, mayor of the twentieth arrondissement, expressed, “*je crois qu’il correspond à notre arrondissement ce transnationalité, une arrondissement multiculturelle... et pour cette arrondissement, c’est une fierté d’avoir créé cette place aujourd’hui*” [“I believe that he corresponds with this transnationality, the multiculturalism of our arrondissement... and for [us], it’s an honor to have created this square today.”]

Beyond the contours of strictly physical space, the internet provides a shared medium within which Franco-Kabyles mediate and disseminate cultural knowledge. The diversity of *Kabyliités* negotiated within and beyond Paris’ diasporic communities communes through a multipolar mediascape, in expression and documentary. Village or community-based groups on Facebook share material—textpost updates on village and community life, photos of spaces and events, videos of performances, and so on—that reinforce nationalist narratives of both its particularities and a broader *Kabyliité*. Content created for Tamazight language propagation exists across numerous platforms, to varying degrees of didactic utility (Lafkioui 2013). Kabyle activists, artists, and artisans freely share their works and the

perspectives that engender them amongst international audiences on Instagram and Twitter. BerbèreTV, a French-based news broadcast network founded in 2000, uploads daily video segments to YouTube in Tamazight and French, reporting from Kabylia and across its diasporas in France, Europe, and beyond (Hamid 2022). The possibilities of online infrastructure extend the means through which negotiating *Kabyliité* can be perceived and mediated expressively (Lafkioui 2013).

Moreover, the popular use and accessibility of social media foster novel ways for young Franco-Kabyles to engage and map Franco-*Kabyliité*. Another stage in the evolution of Kabyle associations, online associations—as either an influential digital extension of a local institution or entirely virtual endeavors—leverage cultural community to cultivate audiences across social media platforms. More than their precursors, online associations actualize through congregating along networks of Franco-Kabyle influencers, hosting popular figures to produce content. Interestingly, this materializes not infrequently through hosting local soirees. Early October—a joint festival and fundraiser set up by a group of Paris-based artists, *la Nuit étoilée* [the starry night] was hosted in and as a collaboration with Les Amarres, an indie-chic event venue in the thirteenth arrondissement overlooking the promenades along the eastern Seine.

In typical fashion, the event started at 18:00 but did not get underway until much later, the initial trickle growing into a lively bustle as hours passed. Along a central atrium lined fairy lights above displays from featured visual artists—including millennial first-generation feminist and print artist Sarah Hand, whose Instagram account @berberewoman had led me here—below an elevated platform upon which rested the venue’s refreshment window, some lined bar seating, and a small stage with insufficient standing area; a multi-story glass façade separated the interior from exterior balcony seating, the open and amicable ambiance of the arrangement matching the brilliant winks of outer Paris’ contemporary skyline. As the crowd materialized, the invited setlist rotated the stage, producing club sound and samples with raï mixes and guitar. Most of the crowd appeared to be younger adults,

perhaps in their twenties or thirties, contributing to the vociferous atmosphere of *la Nuit*. Escaping to the balcony for a reprieve from the volume inside, casual conversation crowds the tables, coalescing yet fluid like the drinks many tended to. I am caught in a conversation between a man and woman leaning on the balcony railing: the brother of the event's principal organizer, a fashion photographer, and their guest, a non-Kabyle visitor from Vancouver. I am clocked as Kabyle by the former, introduced as such, "...also [coming] from Algeria," to the latter, and we chat over shared drinks. It is a spontaneous, infinitesimal interaction—that ends with me getting a note to the host's online garment shop—but a connection nonetheless.

When I leave, well past nightfall, the festival still roars behind me. Les Amarres has since collaborated with other actors for other diaspora events, and more still are arranged by other online associations: Kif-Kif Bledi, a dance company with a strong social media arm, ran a three-day cultural exposition in Paris in March 2024, and DayZ, an online collective for diasporic Algerians in general, organizes semiannual group return trips to Algeria. Moreover, as networks of online associations and Franco-Kabyle influencers gain cohesion, it becomes refracted in the repertoire of older institutions: one of many round-tables I attended hosted by the ACB concerned the impact and feminism of @berberewoman's work.

The internet transgresses physical boundaries to facilitate participation in its expressive spaces; it is how I, along with many others, maintain connections to otherwise inaccessible fields of Franco-Kabylité—and stave off feeling *hors place*. Notably, as the limits of its language support necessitate exchanges in French, Arabic, English, or a variety of graphemically diverse romanized Tamazight, its infrastructure functionally embodies transnationality within the diaspora. The vivacity of these online netscapes, regardless of age, social, and national borders, supposes a multiplicity of ever-evolving Kabylités reinforced by the diversity inherent among its multimodal discourses (Lafkioui 2013).

Expressing identity within these sites occurs through how people can or choose to directly engage them—the friction between the particular Franco-Kabylités embedded in space mediated by how individuals see themselves within it (Beaman 2017; Silverstein 2004). The range of conscious expressions that arise from busy streets, quiet brasseries, or bumping soirees thus collectively reflects valid negotiations of Franco-Kabylité, motivated by patterns of navigation.

### How do Franco-Kabyle relationships negotiate and extend Franco-Kabylité?

However, individuals do not Pollock these canvases individually. Negotiation is more expressly realized in myriad personal exchanges that engage or interrogate Franco-Kabyle particularities — after all, no singular identity can alone rectify the total range of realized Franco-Kabylités. On the contrary, the processes of identity formation are collaborative; dialogue that demonstrates and acknowledges this discursivity becomes the medium by which we can posit our own. My relationships with other Franco-Kabyles reaffirm my identity, steeped in difference though it is. I contend that any unifying character of the Franco-Kabyle diaspora is ironically constituted by its diversity and how connection arises within it.

Sitting in the plaza of a public park during my final week in Paris, reminded of my father's stifling Kabylité I would soon have to confront, I could only mull over the following: how can I reconcile the hardships my family went through with my disconnection from their experiences in defining my own identity? The question reflected a feeling of inadequacy, the failure to meaningfully understand or channel my Kabyle heritage, and whether that invalidated any negotiated hyphenated Kabyle self-identification. Though the intricacies of the question are mine alone, the underlying sentiment of disconnect is familiarly evident in negotiations of Franco-Kabylité among its second generation. When prompted during one of our many conversations about "real" Kabyles at *La Fa Brick*, its filial owner refused to ascribe validity to her Kabylité, despite possessing what I presumed to be near-native fluency: "*Ma*

*mère, oui—elle est une vraie Kabyle. Mais moi, je ne suis pas*” [My mother, yes—she’s a real Kabyle. But me, I’m not”].

After our initial encounter at the ACB, S and I arranged subsequent meetings at a small bistro overlooking Place Gambetta, further south in the twentieth arrondissement, where we sat down and quizzed each other for hours; when asked if she felt as if she had “found her place” anywhere, she responded that, “*je me suis jamais reconnue ni en France ni en Algérie [...] en Kabylie, ça serait pas chez moi, quoi; il y aura un truc où même si j’avais la langue, je ne me verrais pas du tout légitime* [sic]” [I’ve never really recognized myself in France or in Algeria [...] in Kabylia, that wouldn’t be home for me either; there’d be a thing where even if I spoke the language, I wouldn’t see myself as belonging.”] I realize that this affiliative tension arises from a perceived inability to fluidly navigate the friction of Franco-Kabylité, a condition Franco-Kabyle sociologist Abdemalik Sayad (1994), as a companion to W. E. B. Du Bois’ double consciousness, coined as double *absence*: a sense of alienation both in France and from Kabylia, embodying too much of one for the other (see also Harris 2022b). Though originally identified in reference to the isolation felt by first-generation Franco-Kabyles in the twentieth century, its particular legacy is universalized in the broader struggles of estrangement across its diaspora.

Late October—I am drawn once again to the ACB, this time to follow a panel with the artist of their current exposition, “*entre Montagne, Peuple, et terre (Terre)*” [“between Mountain, People, and earth (Country)]: a journey into the heart of pastoral Kabylia through its quotidian ephemera, documented through filmmaking and photography. One of the association’s classrooms has been vacated and turned into an art gallery, prints of photos delicately displayed on its walls, punctuated by the poetic reflections of their documentarian; one in particular—of a man posed in front of a traditional olive oil press, a craft the placard denotes that he, the photographer’s old primary school instructor, pursues in retirement—calls to the recollections of my own ancestral village, the slick grinding of machines worked by kin at the top of our mountainous olive groves. An accompanying video

documentary plays on a mounted TV in the corner, a voice-over in subtitles narrating the snapshots of rural practice that dance around the room.

The exhibit transfixes me, losing myself for several long minutes until the audience is summoned downstairs for the start of the panel. I, huddled alongside a group who had been politely parlaying in the lobby, shuffled downstairs and sat; I chose consciously to sit in a lonely seat, positioned in the back corner by the door—I tell myself it was to get unobtrusive video footage, but its distance is more than incidental. Among the panelists conversing onstage was the invited documentarian, ‘Ly,’ a young twenty-something wearing jeans, Converse shoes, and a sweater, mousy black hair and a small Kabyle ‘fly’ face tattoo on their right cheek, their reservation on stage unable to mask the radiant jubilation of their presence. Over the panel’s hour and thirty minutes, Ly relayed the role of their oeuvre as a personal conduit; far more than a nationalist vindication of rural Kabylia, the journey it documented was reconciliatory, a videographic mediation of the complicated relationship they held to their native landscape—a relationship they discovered still held love for its nature and the practices it holds.

Ly described how that appreciation and the values that it inspires are what inspire them in turn, elucidating a newfound acceptance of their Kabyle origins. Adrift in this narrative, I see myself vividly in Ly: in the experiences of estrangement in what should have been home, their identity as non-binary, the work of identarian reconciliation—what else is this ethnography? I realize that in attendance at this exposition, the audience, with hooked noses, curly hair, and olive skin like my own, is equally capable of engaging and understanding its narrative. I am moved almost to tears by the conscious revelation that I am in a room of people who are *like me*. After the panel, crowded upstairs in the exhibition room, I catch Ly; I tell them about my research and confess my affinity for their work. They reciprocate and we exchange contact information, inviting me for a chat whenever I feel.

November—I have taken them up on their offer, embarking by train to their campus at the

University of Paris-Saclay, southwest of the city in Orsay. The trip, comprising multiple train changes, unanticipated delays, and wind chills in the negatives of degrees, has exhausted me long before we meet; still, in the controlled chaos of their studio lab surrounded by countless potted plants and sticky notes, sitting across from each other, I am reinvigorated by the growing comity of our interview. They elaborate on their journey of reconciliation: they emigrated from Kabylia in 2017 to pursue higher education and were neither compelled nor able to return until December 2022. In Algeria, they felt *hors place*, consciously choosing to reject “traditional” cultural influences and its imposed closed-mindedness—initially in favor of France until they migrated and again felt alien, “*chez moi nulle part*” [“home nowhere”]; this sparked a period of profound reflection from which they were able to consciously untangle their affiliative attachments to Kabylia and cultivate their *Kabylité*. Ly’s process of disidentification, familiar among queer French-Maghrebis, is central to their self-definition (Provencher 2017). They do not define themselves existentially as Kabyle and, though they align with Kabylia, feel discomfort in conflating attachment with identity:

I say without hesitation that I come from Kabylia, but [...] I still feel this heaviness in my chest when I say that because there are things that I do not support still going on in Algeria, so it’s complicated. [...] When I say that I’m Kabyle and from Algeria, and just that—not prefacing anything else—it’s like I support what’s going on over there; that doesn’t sit with me, right?

As the interview wound through the night, we strayed from keeping it ‘one-sided,’ instead letting its questions elevate our mutual experiences and insights. They detailed their apprehension about the potential for closed-mindedness in Franco-Kabyle relationships, a sentiment that I intimately knew and felt had prevented me from engaging with the broader community to the extent I had wanted.

We commiserated on the strain that simply being ourselves had on our kin relationships—during their time in Algeria, they had gone out

of their way to spend as little time with their parents as possible: “...*déjà vers un demi-jour j’ai commencé dire ‘Ah ouais, heureusement que je bientôt partir!’ [sic]*” [Half a day in and I already started saying ‘Okay, thankfully I’m leaving soon!'] We derailed on the struggles of encultured gender performance, the nature of our documentary methodologies, the realities and consequences of negotiating *Kabylité*; the interrogative format of our interview had morphed from a simple analytical tool into a collaborative conduit through which we shared and compared our experiences and formed a bond. By the end of the night, saying our goodbyes on the platform I had come in on, we had made a thousand different promises to keep in touch, to see each other again, to plan a trip to Kabylia together someday, each flush with a deeply held sincerity.

However, one line amidst our banter stands out as being more profoundly implicative. They recollected how after their panel, “*Tous les gens sont revenus vers moi [...] pour me dire, ‘Oui, j’ai ressenti ça aussi quand j’étais là-bas.’ [...] c’est vraiment trop chouette, je me suis senti.e vraiment, pour une fois, compris.e, en fait*” [“Everybody [in the audience] came up to me to say, ‘Yeah, I felt that too when I was there.’ It was really very cool, I really felt understood, actually.”] Much like for me, Ly’s act of publicly interrogating their *Kabylité* and acknowledging its heavy emotional toll had bonded the audience within the ephemeral site of the exposition; I note how we afterwards commingled, animated in independent mediations buttressed by “When you were back...,” “Did you ever...?,” “Thank you for saying that...” Within these diasporic spaces, the isolation of estrangement is transgressed through an acknowledgement of its presence, visible displays negotiating Franco-*Kabylité* provoke constructive exchanges of personal knowledge that constitute its discursive identities. To this end, Ly is not alone; works and directors from across diasporas—though Franco-Kabyles more prolifically—have contributed their voices to an emergent Kabyle film scene, spanning a vast corpus of auto/ethnographically salient works that explore Kabyle subjectivities and relationships. These films screen at associations and film festivals, each garnering audiences who see themselves

in the stories told and contribute to a conversation. Franco-*Kabylité* is neither static nor inherent in a person; it breathes, a product of engaging lived experience and malleable and responsive to negotiatory input.

Leaving for France to conduct my ethnography—the first time I had gone in six years—I was nervous about the perceived validity of my Franco-*Kabylité* and its potential impact on the salience of my research, especially as a queer, neurodivergent, American and non-speaking Franco-Kabyle; instead, I found solidarity in the creative, queer, mixed, and uncertain Franco-Kabyles I acquainted myself with. The introspective interactions I had with these people not only informed me of their Franco-Kabyle identities but also gave me the understanding to process my own. Having immigrated to and grown up in the United States as *moitié-moitié* [mixed, literally “half-half”], I realize an unmistakably American Franco-Kabylité: I eat *seksu* and *aghrum* alongside breakfast cereal, learn shaky Tamazight with English translations, wear cowboy hats with Algerian club jerseys. However, like so many others, I still feel *hors place* in what should be home, disenfranchised from vocalizing my identity since the language that expresses it does not exist in English—“*Kabylité*” is a French word. Nor do I feel any less estranged in France or Kabylia; I rather anchor my affiliations to being *hors place*, this neither-intersection-nor-absence of cultural identities that both define my lived marginality and liberate its assignment. I feel resolute here—like Taos Amrouche, I find no satisfaction beyond negotiation.

## Conclusion

Frequently, when meeting or hearing about other Kabyles in out-of-the-way, unexpected locales, someone will inevitably affirm that “*nous sommes partout*” [“we are everywhere.”] Though far from hyperbolic, I believe the underlying sentiment extends beyond just geographic space; Franco-*Kabylité* and the diasporic identities that collaboratively constitute it exist diffusely across its contexts. The Franco-Kabyle, though subject to the overarching sociohistorical and nationalist

influences that their presence is steeped in, rather define and express their identities by critically and individually negotiating their various narratives: encompassing discourses on language, politics, race, place, enterprise, character, and belonging. These negotiations occur across the diaspora’s multipolar landscapes, communing with frictional articulations of Franco-Kabylité, other individual Franco-Kabyles, and institutions of Paris to realize thoroughly discursive identities. “*Nous sommes partout*” recognizes and reaches across this diversity, uniting Franco-Kabyles through our differences.

After our first interview at the bistro at Place Gambetta, an occasion that had stretched well into the afternoon, S and I exchanged cordial thank-you’s over WhatsApp as our metro cars sailed away in opposite directions. In one sentence, otherwise a blithe acknowledgement of the intensity of our conversation, she made an axiom of our lived Kabylité: “...” et pourtant notre experience est assez différente, c’est marrante, le metissage c’est la galère partout” [...] and even if our experience is pretty different, it’s funny, being mixed universally sucks.”]

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*U taggara—tannemirt-ik, ababa.*

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