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The Amsterdam University College (AUC) Undergraduate Journal of Liberal Arts and Sciences is a biannual, interdisciplinary publication showcasing outstanding undergraduate academic papers. The Journal aims to demonstrate the strength of undergraduate scholarship at AUC, reflect the intellectual diversity of its academic programme, and encourage the development of research and writing skills. As an AUC committee, the editorial board of InPrint strives to facilitate collaboration between students and faculty across the curriculum, and provide students with opportunities to gain experience in academic reviewing, editing and publishing.

Foreword

I am pleased to present the 26th Volume of Amsterdam University College's *Undergraduate Journal of Liberal Arts and Sciences*!

Throughout their time at AUC, students write a variety of compelling papers that often go unnoticed beyond the context of the classroom. InPrint's Open Issue provides students with the opportunity to collaborate with a diverse editorial team and present the best of their academic work to a broader audience. It is our privilege to be able to publish the work of these passionate authors and I hope you enjoy reading these papers as much as we enjoyed working on them.

This issue begins with a unique Science paper by Seoin Kim, which explores the importance of antifungal drug discovery in combatting fungal infections by targeting G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) with computational methods.

In the Social Sciences, Sofija Stefaṇenkova's paper discusses the radical potential for Black Feminist Theory to foster social transformation and collective action within higher education. This is followed by an Stella D'Arcy's analysis using Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics to explore the gendered dimensions of Boko Haram's control and violence against women.

The Humanities open with a paper by Edward Humphries that sets up a dialogue between Camus' concept of the Absurd and his ideas of freedom, and Buber's philosophy of happiness and fulfillment. Next, Eve Young's paper creates a new category, E, of cinematic responses to dominant ideologies, grounding it in Comolli and Narboni's theory and demonstrating how it can be reparative.

Last, but certainly not least, Camille de Ripainsel's interdisciplinary paper explores Mahdi Amel's poetry as an alternative medium for understanding Lebanon's revolutionary struggles of the 1980s.

I want to thank all the authors for their hard work and commitment throughout the editing process. I hope you are all as proud of this issue as the board and I are!

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to the InPrint Board, who worked hard to make this publication possible. Thank you to Natalie, Elena, Bahar and Lara, who stood reliably by my side and approached their responsibilities with deep passion. I am equally grateful to all the editors, old and new, who stepped up, asked questions and contributed to the success of InPrint. None of this would have been possible without the team's excellent editing skills and enthusiasm. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the peer reviewers and the sensitivity readers, Dr. Nadira Ismail Omarjee, Dr. Nosa Imaghodoto, Emma Feimatha Fatoma and Manaar El Sharif, who meticulously assessed each paper to make sure that everything was perfect. I would also like to thank our faculty advisors, Dr. Joost Krijnen and Dr. Luis Aguilar Suarez, for their continuous support and for creating opportunities to extend the reach of our journal. I also want to thank the former Editors-in-Chief, Basia Haber and Polina Smirnova, for their constant support.

Finally, thank you to our readers, who are the reason that we publish!

On a personal note, this issue marks the end of my tenure at InPrint. I am deeply grateful for the all the incredible people I have met, the skills I have developed and the wonderful experiences I have gained through this journal. It has been an honour to contribute to this incredible student initiative—it was by no means easy, but entirely worthwhile. I look forward to seeing InPrint publish many more wonderful papers for years to come!

Malavika Libish, Editor-in-Chief

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From humans to fungi:

Computational strategies for targeting fungal GPCRs in antifungal drug discovery

Seoin Kim

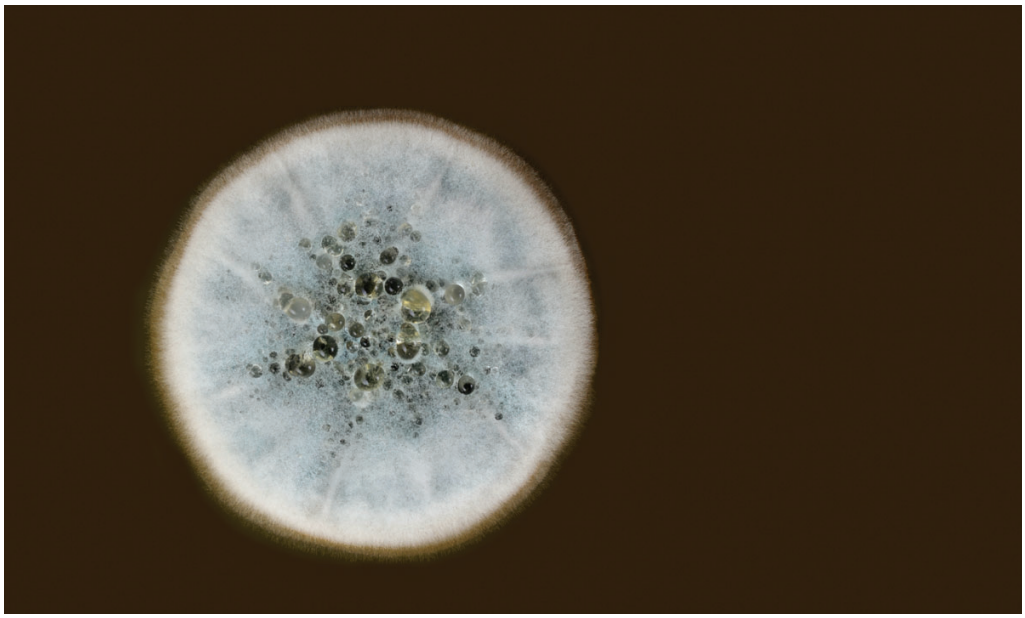

Image by Win van Egmond

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imprint.

1 Introduction

Fungi have long been and will be affecting our lives in numerous ways not visible to us, manipulating ants and even our behaviour, in making bread we eat and beer we drink, to causing deadly diseases in organisms and being the medicine to cure them. Specifically, fungal infections cause more than 2 million deaths every year from life-threatening invasive infections, such as invasive aspergillosis and candidiasis (Denning, 2024). These infections became increasingly difficult to treat with the emergence of antimicrobial resistance in microorganisms, as one of the biggest rising challenges highlighted by global health organisations. With certain fungal species now resistant to all available antifungals on the market, there is an urgent need for new and more effective therapies for fungal-borne diseases. However, the current classes of antifungal and their drug discovery research pipelines remain limited.

G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) are the largest family of cell-surface receptors that, upon activation by external signalling molecules, such as light, hormones, neurotransmitters, or small chemicals (Wacker et al., 2017), trigger internal pathways that regulate essential physiological processes, including sensory, metabolic, behavioural, and immune system activities (Rehman et al., 2023). Since their discovery and structural elucidation, human GPCRs have become one of the most successful targets in modern medicine, with nearly 40% of Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved drugs acting on them (Sriram & Insel, 2018). While GPCRs have been extensively characterised in humans, their fungal counterparts remain far less understood, with just one resolved cryo-EM structure (Velazhahan et al., 2021). Yet, fungi rely on these receptors for many of the similar signalling processes, including nutrient sensing, mating, and stress responses (Van Dijck, 2017), which makes them promising candidates for identifying new antifungal targets.

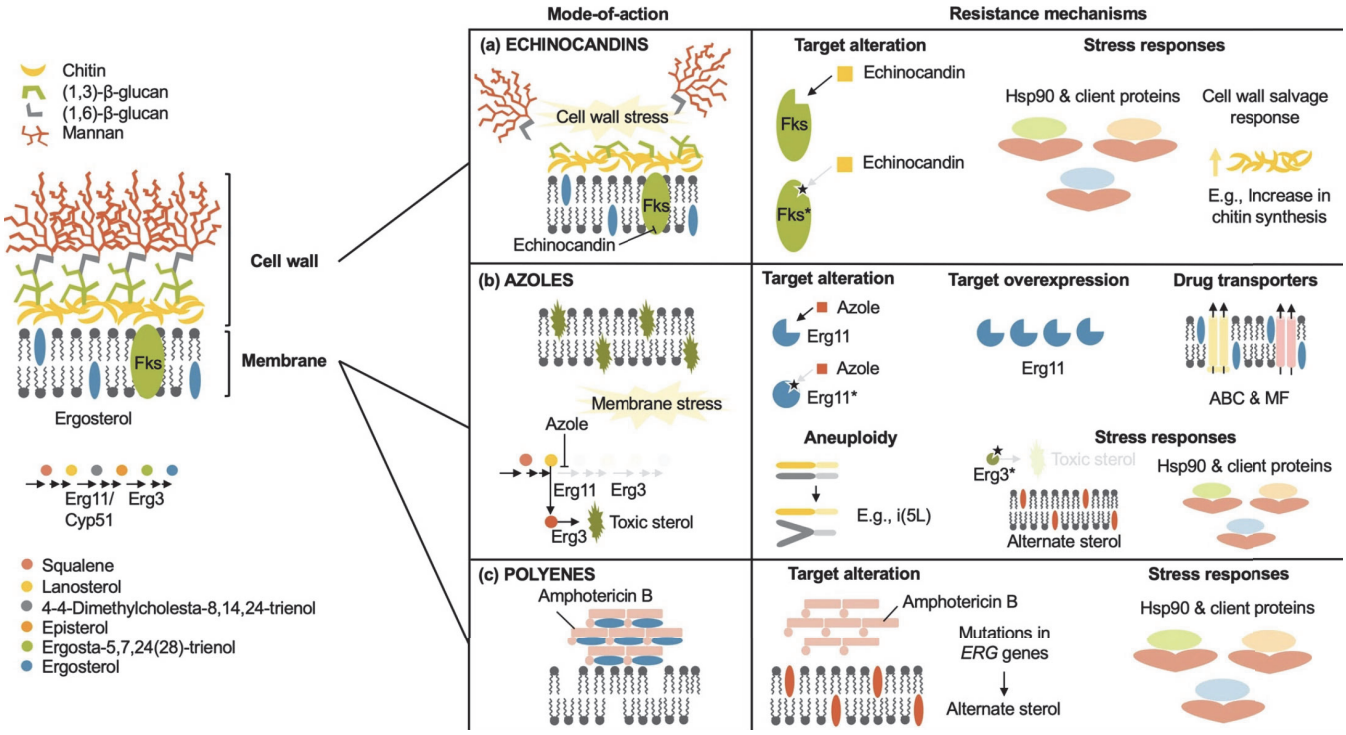
Computer-aided drug design has become an integral part of modern drug discovery, serving as a powerful tool to predict molecular interactions and reduce experimental time and costs (Sliwoski et al., 2014). Computational methods, such as structure-based and ligand-based drug design, analyse the three-dimensional structures of target proteins or known ligands to identify key interactions and guide the design of new compounds that can effectively bind to those targets (Yu & MacKerell, 2016). These allow for predicting GPCR conformational changes and ligand-binding using structural and chemical data, even when experimental data is scarce (Wei & McCammon, 2024). Although fungal GPCRs are of a different class than existing mammalian GPCR classifications, computational approaches can address key limitations in antifungal drug development by helping characterise their functions and structures and narrow down potential drug-binding sites (Heinen et al., 2025).

This review, therefore, aims to evaluate whether computational drug design methods developed for human GPCRs can be meaningfully adapted to accelerate antifungal discovery, given the structural divergence of fungal class D receptors and the limited experimental data available. To address this, a targeted literature review was conducted using PubMed, Google Scholar, and the Nature Portfolio, focused on three core themes: fungal GPCR biology, antifungal drug development, and computational drug design. Initial seed papers were selected based on their direct relevance to these themes, with citation tracking used to identify earlier foundational studies and related work that contrasts human GPCR research to fungal class D receptors. Priority was given to peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2025 to reflect recent scientific advances, with selected studies from before this period included where they provided original mechanistic or conceptual insights that remain relevant.

2 Addressing antifungal drug development challenges

Despite the urgent need for new antifungal agents, progress in bringing them to market has remained limited. Unlike antibacterial drugs, which have seen significant development in recent decades (McCarty & Pappas, 2021), there are only four major classes of currently available antifungals: polyenes, azoles, echinocandins, and flucytosine. Each of these classes targets a distinct aspect of fungal physiology, such as ergosterol biosynthesis, β-glucan synthesis, or membrane integrity, showing effectiveness against specific fungal species. However, resistance to

Figure 1: Mechanisms of different classes of antifungal drugs and how fungi develop resistance to them.



Note. The left column shows the mechanism of action of three major antifungal classes, and the right column shows the resistance mechanisms that can arise against each. (a) Echinocandins block the construction of the fungal cell wall by inhibiting an essential enzyme, causing lethal stress on structural integrity. Resistance arises mainly through mutations in the gene encoding that enzyme (FKS1), or through stress-response pathways that compensate for the wall damage. (b) Azoles inhibit ergosterol biosynthesis in the fungal membrane by targeting the enzyme Erg11, leading to the toxic accumulation of a sterol intermediate. Resistance can develop through mutations in ERG11, overproduction of the target enzyme, increased efflux of the drug out of the cell, or chromosomal duplications that amplify resistance genes. (c) Polyenes such as amphotericin B extract ergosterol directly from the fungal membrane. Resistance, though rare, occurs when fungi reduce their ergosterol content through mutations in biosynthesis genes. Lee et al. (2023), "Molecular mechanisms governing antifungal drug resistance." *npj Antimicrobials and Resistance*, 1, 5.

these agents has increasingly been reported due to their extensive overuse (Saini et al., 2025). Some species belonging to the genera Candida, Aspergillus, Cryptococcus, and Pneumocystis are highly resistant to all available antifungal classes (Arastehfar et al., 2020).

The scarcity of antifungal therapeutics reflects fundamental challenges inherent in targeting fungal pathogens. Fungi share extensive biochemical and cellular processes with humans, making selective toxicity more difficult to achieve (Roemer & Krysan, 2014). Antimicrobial drugs are designed to selectively target essential cellular processes in microorganisms. Fungicidal drugs, such as polyenes, kill fungal cells directly by binding ergosterol and disrupting membrane integrity, while fungistatic drugs, such as azoles, inhibit growth by blocking ergosterol biosynthesis without directly killing the organism, which allows surviving cells to persist and potentially acquire resistance mutations. These mechanisms exert strong selection pressure on fungal populations. Fungicidal agents eliminate susceptible cells and enrich for pre-existing resistant variants (Fisher et al., 2022), while fungistatic agents expose subpopulations to sublethal conditions that can drive adaptive resistance through mechanisms such as target-site mutations in ERG11 (Fig.

1b), which encodes an enzyme essential for ergosterol in fungal cell membranes, that prevents azole drugs from binding to the target enzyme (Sanglard & Odds, 2002). Unlike drugs that target such essential biosynthetic pathways, compounds targeting GPCRs and their subsequent inhibition could modulate pathogenic traits without killing the organism, a potentially advantageous approach that may reduce selection pressure for resistance (Brown et al., 2018).

Beyond biological constraints, antifungal development is further limited by economic and logistical barriers. Antimicrobial resistance has been repeatedly highlighted as a global health priority by multiple health organisations (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2024; World Health Organisation, 2025), yet traditional diagnostic and drug discovery approaches have struggled to deliver novel antifungal agents to keep up with the unmet clinical need. High development costs, long timelines for target validation and clinical trials, toxicity concerns, and the difficulty of recruiting special patient populations for clinical trials make antifungal research commercially unattractive (Schinas et al., 2024). As a result, there is a need for innovative strategies that reduce cost, accelerate the discovery process, and enable rational and efficient target prioritisation.

3 GPCRs in Humans and Fungi

GPCRs form the largest family of cell-surface receptors in eukaryotes. They have a membrane-bound, seven-transmembrane structure that allows them to be readily accessible to external ligands, as well as the ability to activate diverse crucial regulatory downstream signalling through G protein coupling inside the cell, which makes them attractive targets for drug development (Hauser et al., 2017). The human GPCR family is divided into classes A (Rhodopsin), B (Secretin and Adhesion), C (Glutamate), and F (Frizzled) according to their amino acid sequences, with approximately 165 of them validated as drug targets (Yang et al., 2021).

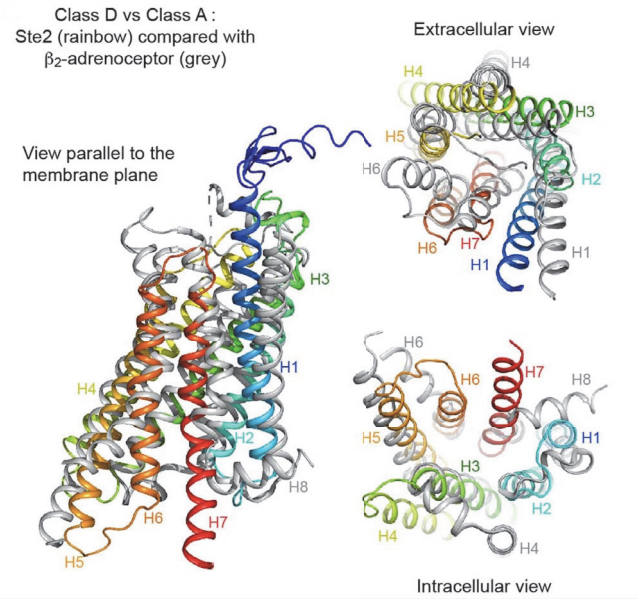
Fungal GPCRs regulate processes critical for pathogenesis. They detect host surfaces and promote invasion, guide pathogens to infection sites, and enable immune evasion (Brown et al., 2018). Disruption of CaGPR1 in *Candida albicans*, for instance, leads to clear virulence defects in mouse infection models (Maidan et al., 2005), indicating that CaGPR1 could be exploited as a target. Furthermore, fungal GPCRs regulate sexual reproduction, which promotes genetic diversity and accelerates the evolution of drug resistance. Targeting these glucose or mating pathways could protect the efficacy of existing antifungals (Brown et al., 2018).

Among human GPCRs, class A receptors are the most extensively characterised. In the inactive state, structural elements of the receptor occlude the G protein binding site. Ligand binding induces conformational changes that expose this site and allow G protein coupling, thereby initiating downstream signalling (Garcia-Nafria & Tate, 2019). As this mechanism is well-defined, class A receptors have become a popular model for structure-based drug design.

In contrast, fungal GPCRs remain poorly characterised despite their involvement in the regulation of critical processes such as nutrient sensing, mating, and stress responses (Van Dijck, 2017), which in turn affect fungal development, metabolism, virulence, and mycotoxin biosynthesis (Brown et al., 2018). Fungal receptors that fall within class D differ substantially from mammalian GPCR classes. Class D receptors lack several conserved motifs typical of human GPCRs, indicating that fungi employ distinct structural strategies to achieve receptor activation, as shown in Fig 2 (Velazhahan et al., 2021). These differences suggest that fungal GPCR signalling operates through activation mechanisms that are fundamentally divergent from those of the mammalian receptors, which can be exploited to achieve specificity in antifungal drug design.

The best-studied fungal GPCR is Ste2 from *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, a pheromone receptor that binds the peptide ligand α-factor to initiate the mating response. Ste2 functions as a homodimer capable of coupling simultaneously to two heterotrimeric G proteins crucial for its signalling. It also lacks the conserved activation motifs found in class A GPCRs such as DRY, PIF, and NPXXY. Its activation mechanism is correspondingly distinct: in the inactive state, the cytoplasmic end of TM7 adopts an unstructured conformation that sterically blocks the G protein coupling site. Upon agonist binding, TM7 undergoes a 20 Å outward movement that unblocks this site while H6 moves

Figure 2: Comparison of class D Saccharomyces cerevisiae Ste2 with class A β2-adrenoceptor.

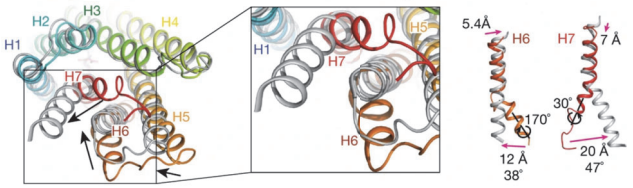


Note. Ste2 (rainbow colouration; class D) is structurally aligned with the β2-adrenoceptor (grey; class A; PDB ID: 3SN6), viewed parallel to the membrane plane, from the extracellular side, and from the intracellular side. Helices H1–H8 are labelled. While the overall seven-transmembrane helix architecture is conserved between the two receptors, notable differences are observed in the position of H4, which is shifted outward in Ste2 relative to the β2-adrenoceptor. In H8 of β2-adrenoceptor, it is kinked outward at the conserved NPxxY motif that behaves like a hinge. Additional divergence is seen in the N-termini, extracellular loops and helix orientations. Adapted from Velazhahan et al. (2021), "Structure of the class D GPCR Ste2 dimer coupled to two G proteins." *Nature*. Copyright © 2020, The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature. Reproduced with permission from Springer Nature. Figure cropped from original.

inward by 12 Å to form it (Fig. 3), a mechanism that differs fundamentally from the outward movement of TM6 that drives G protein coupling in class A and B GPCRs (Velazhahan et al., 2022).

Despite these structural and mechanistic differences, comparative analysis suggests that some functional principles are conserved. Key regions on helices 3, 6, and 7 contribute to activation in both fungal and mammalian GPCRs, even

Figure 3: Conformational changes in Ste2 upon activation.



Note. Superposition of Ste2 in the antagonist-bound inactive state (Ste2–Ant; rainbow colouration) and agonist-bound active state coupled to G protein (Ste2–Ag–G; grey), shown from the intracellular view. Major helix displacements upon activation are indicated by arrows. Cropped and adapted from Velazhahan et al. (2022), " Activation mechanism of the class D fungal GPCR dimer Ste2", *Nature*. © The Author(s) 2022. Licensed under CC BY 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

though the specific residues involved differ (Eilers et al., 2005). These conserved microdomains likely reflect shared evolutionary pressures. This suggests that although fungal GPCRs do not follow the same rules as mammalian receptors, they may still be understood through adapted versions of the frameworks developed for human GPCRs.

4 Computational Methods for Drug Discovery

Drug discovery has traditionally been slow, costly, and limited by the need for extensive experimental testing. Recent advances in structural biology, data availability, and computing power have transformed this process, making computational methods an indispensable component of early-stage discovery. High-resolution structures are now available for many major protein families, including an increasing number of GPCRs, and tools such as cryo-electron microscopy, X-ray crystallography, and predictive modelling have expanded the number of targets that can be studied in structural detail (Sadybekov & Katritch, 2023). Computational approaches represent the most tractable routes to studying fungal GPCRs, given the near-total absence of experimentally resolved structures for this receptor class. However,

the majority of validated applications of these methods in fungal systems remain limited, and their utility for divergent class D receptors is yet to be established.

Structure-based drug design (SBDD) relies on three-dimensional information about a target protein to identify potential binding pockets and predict how small molecules may interact with them. The SBDD pipeline begins with structure determination or prediction of the target, followed by computational identification of druggable binding cavities using energy-based methods that map favourable interaction sites on the receptor surface (Yu & MacKerell, 2016). Compound libraries are then docked into these cavities, and scoring functions that incorporate electrostatic interactions, van der Waals forces, and hydrogen bonding rank and filter ligands by predicted binding affinity (Batool et al., 2019). The most promising candidates proceed to in vitro validation and optimisation processes. Among the techniques employed within this framework, molecular docking predicts how a ligand fits into the binding cavity and scores its affinity based on complementarity to the receptor site (Agu et al., 2023). Molecular dynamics (MD) simulations can extend this by modelling the receptor as a dynamic system by solving Newton's law of motion and defining the forces acting on atoms, rather than a rigid structure (Frenkel & Smit, 2002). These simulations generate conformational ensembles that capture receptor flexibility, the movement of loops and helices, often bound to the membrane in case of membrane proteins such as GPCRs, and the transient binding pockets that become accessible during activation (Feixas et al., 2014; Preininger et al, 2013). Free-energy calculations can then quantify the thermodynamic cost of ligand binding with greater accuracy than docking alone (Malmstrom & Watowich, 2011), though at substantially higher computational expense.

Ste2 from *S. cerevisiae* remains the only class D receptor resolved to high resolution (Velazhahan et al., 2021), making it the sole structural template available for structure prediction, such as homology modelling of related fungal receptors. In homology modelling, the target sequence is computationally threaded onto the Ste2 scaffold to generate a predicted approximate three-dimensional model (Waterhouse et al., 2018). The reliability of these models depends heavily on sequence identity between the target and template, with the threshold generally cited at above 30% (Xiang, 2006). For divergent fungal GPCRs from other species, where sequence identity to Ste2 can fall well below this, the resulting models may be too inaccurate to yield meaningful structural predictions. Comparative models are therefore most informative for closely related receptors and should not be treated as substitutes for experimentally resolved structures when making scientific decisions. Nonetheless, such homology models can provide a starting point for identifying candidate binding pockets, and MD simulations can equilibrate to generate ensembles that partially compensate for the inaccuracies inherent in the template-based approach. In an example of initial structural and activation studies of Ste2, they were implemented by simulating four cryo-EM structures spanning inactive to active states as a starting point. They then helped understand and characterise how the Ste2 dimer switches into an active signalling state, which is an insight that resolved static structures alone could not provide (Velazhahan et al., 2021; Velazhahan et al., 2022).

On the other hand, ligand-based drug design (LBDD) does not require a three-dimensional receptor structure. Instead, it infers chemical features necessary for receptor binding by analysing collections of known active ligands. Quantitative structure–activity relationship (QSAR) modelling works by establishing a mathematical relationship between the physicochemical descriptors of a series of compounds, such as molecular weight, hydrophobicity, hydrogen-bonding capacity, electronic properties, and their measured biological activity, and then using that relationship to predict the activity of new compounds (Acharya et al., 2011). Pharmacophore modelling identifies the specific three-dimensional arrangement of functional features, hydrogen bond donors and acceptors, hydrophobic groups, charged groups, and aromatic rings that are necessary for binding to a given target (Schaller et al., 2020). Because neither approach requires structural knowledge of the receptor, LBDD methods are also relevant in contexts where experimental structures are unavailable, which is the situation for most fungal GPCRs beyond Ste2 of S. cerevisiae. If the strain of interest does not have a good sequence identity when aligned with Saccharomyces Ste2, LBDD, it could be a better starting point. The major limita-

tion for fungal GPCR drug discovery could be that few characterised ligands exist for most receptors in this class, with available bioactivity data largely confined to native pheromones and nutrient sensors (Gao et al., 2021). This sparse training data is a constraint on the predictive power of LBDD models. One strategy to address this would be the use of initial broad chemical library screens to generate hit compounds that can then serve as a training set for receptor-specific QSAR models. Furthermore, since fungal GPCRs regulate pathogenesis-associated processes such as host surface sensing and immune evasion, phenotypic screening, which allows for systematic testing of compounds in experimental assays to identify observable changes in cellular behaviour or phenotype, may provide a practical way to identify modulators of these processes (Louie & Cockerill, 2001). Although the direct molecular mechanism of receptor engagement is often unknown at this stage, genetic validation using receptor knockout or overexpression to confirm the involvement of a specific gene or protein can link observed phenotypes to GPCRs (Wise et al., 2002). Compounds identified through these approaches can therefore serve as valuable training data for LBDD models, even in the absence of fully resolved receptor–ligand interactions.

The emergence of artificial intelligence and machine learning has substantially changed the possibilities available within both SBDD and LBDD and has introduced new approaches that reduce dependence on experimental structures. Machine learning methods that include deep neural networks, support vector machines, random forests and decision trees that can be trained on large chemical datasets to identify patterns that correlate with biological activity and have been shown to outperform and complement classical QSAR approaches on multiple drug discovery benchmarks, namely absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion, and toxicity (ADMET) (Paul et al., 2021). With the emergence of structure prediction tools, such as AlphaFold 3, which employs a diffusion-based deep learning architecture capable of predicting the joint three-dimensional structure of complexes containing proteins, nucleic acids, small molecules, ions, and modified residues within a single unified framework, with accuracy that substantially outperforms multiple classical docking tools on several benchmarks (Abramson et al., 2024). For fungal GPCRs, advancements in such tools offer a route to generating structural models that are not constrained by the availability of a single homologous template. However, AlphaFold-generated models are mere predictions, not experimentally verified structures, and their accuracy for understudied classes of membrane receptors has not been systematically assessed. AI-based structure prediction, therefore, may lower the barrier to generating hypotheses about the receptor, but it does not fully substitute for experimental validation yet.

The optimal strategy for fungal GPCR drug discovery likely involves integrating both structure-based and ligand-based methods, with AI tools used to reduce dependence on the sparse experimental data that currently limits both approaches. A practical pipeline for a receptor would proceed with AlphaFold 3 or homology modelling to generate a structural model of the receptor, and molecular docking of the ligand of interest, which is then equilibrated with MD simulations to verify and produce a probable binding position that captures the relevant activation states identified in class D receptors by Velazhahan et al. (2022). Virtual screening of compound libraries against these models identifies candidate hits, and QSAR or pharmacophore models trained on the resulting bioactivity data refine subsequent compound design. The degree to which this pipeline could accelerate discovery relative to purely experimental approaches depends on the accuracy of the initial structural models and on the availability of experimental data for iterative validation. Computational methods in this context are best understood as tools that generate testable hypotheses rather than as autonomous discovery pipelines, and their value for fungal GPCR drug discovery will ultimately be determined by the experimental work needed to validate their predictions.

5 Conclusion

This review set out to evaluate whether computational drug design methods developed for human GPCRs can be meaningfully adapted to accelerate antifungal discovery, given the structural divergence of fungal Class D receptors and the limited experimental data available. The evidence reviewed suggests this is possible in principle but

remains constrained in practice by several interconnected limitations.

The current antifungal pipeline faces both biological and economic barriers that make novel target classes urgently necessary. Resistance to all four major drug classes has been documented, and the selectivity challenge inherent in targeting eukaryotic pathogens has limited the development of new chemical scaffolds. Fungal GPCRs represent a structurally distinct and largely unexplored target class that regulates processes central to pathogenesis, and their divergence from mammalian receptors suggests that selective inhibition without off-target effects on human GPCRs is, in principle, achievable.

The structural biology of class D receptors, as in the example of the Ste2 cryo-EM structures from S. cerevisiae, reveals an activation mechanism different from mammalian classes, which involves inward movement of H6, outward displacement of H7, and a homodimer interface necessary for signalling (Velazhahan et al., 2022). It poses as both an opportunity and a complication for drug design, as they define fungal-specific structural features that could be exploited for selective targeting, but they also may imply that computational protocols validated on mammalian GPCRs cannot be directly applied to class D receptors without adaptation.

On the computational side, structure-based approaches relying on homology modelling and MD simulation offer a route to generating testable structural hypotheses for fungal receptors where no experimental structure exists, provided the target shares sufficient sequence identity with S. cerevisiae Ste2 to produce a reliable model. Ligand-based approaches and machine learning methods offer complementary routes that do not depend on structural knowledge, though their predictive power is currently limited by the lack of characterised ligand datasets for fungal GPCRs. AI-based structure prediction tools such as AlphaFold 3 can partially address this gap, but their accuracy for understudied membrane receptor classes has not been systematically validated, and their outputs remain hypotheses rather than verified structures.

Looking forward, the most important gap is experimental rather than computational. Expanding structural coverage of clinically relevant fungal GPCRs through cryo-EM or crystallography would simultaneously improve the accuracy of structure prediction models, provide benchmarks for validating computational predictions, and capture a more accurate binding mode. Development of an improved dataset of characterised ligands for fungal GPCRs beyond a single strain would substantially improve the predictive power of LBDD and machine learning models. Open-access databases compiling structural, biochemical, and pharmacological data across fungal species would further accelerate progress by allowing models to be trained on more diverse datasets.

Finally, developing and benchmarking computational protocols specifically for the class D dimeric architecture and activation mechanism would ensure that predictions reflect fungal receptor biology rather than artefacts of methods calibrated on mammalian systems. Doing so would lay the groundwork for the rational discovery of fungal-specific antifungal compounds, offering a mechanistically novel approach to addressing the growing clinical burden of invasive and drug-resistant fungal disease.

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Social Sciences

Reclaiming Higher Education’s Radical Potential Through Black Feminist Practice

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Person holding a protest sign. Adapted from a photograph by Jeremy Bishop (Unsplash).

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1 Introduction

For decades, higher education has been shaped by neoliberal paradigms as an individualistic, depoliticised space that erases individual positionality from scholarship and teaching. Universities claim to be spaces for critical knowledge production; yet, teaching in depersonalised ways that avoid personal reflexivity fails to address power dynamics within the classroom and in broader society. Within academia and the wider neoliberal context, Black feminist voices have historically been marginalised and appropriated as a diversity measure. Even as university curricula increasingly include Black feminist authors like Audre Lorde or Kimberle Crenshaw, their scholarship is presented as an object of study but is rarely applied to challenge and transform institutional and pedagogical practices. However, there is so much we, as Western university scholars, can learn from Black feminist practice on how to reimagine the spaces we inhabit. Therefore, I argue that reclaiming universities' radical potential as spaces for societal transformation and collective action requires centring Black feminist practice not just epistemologically but as an ontological, institutional, and classroom practice of collective self-reflexivity.

As a White European scholar, I acknowledge that my positionality shapes how I engage with Black feminist thought and that my understanding of Black women's experience is limited, thus I am committed to improving my knowledge and learning from Black feminists to uplift their scholarship and praxis through my writing. I cannot truthfully write about what this topic means for Black women, therefore I choose to write about what teaching and learning Black feminism means in predominantly White Western universities.

2 Intersectionality traveling

Intersectionality at its origins was a revolutionary idea, not only because it provided a novel framework to identify and analyse the interlocking systems of oppression faced by Black women, but simultaneously became a critical praxis that allowed Black women to situate their personal experiences in the wider context of oppression and White supremacy, enabling them to rise against systems of oppression. In fact, even before the concept was developed in academia, Black feminist activists of the Combahee River Collective practiced intersectionality in their work as activists and community organisers (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Structural power dynamics of White supremacy dispossess Black women by creating barriers to material and financial security, while ongoing cultural norms among Black people in the US tend to position feminism as a White women's issue, leading Black feminists to feel alienated among other Black women (Wallace, 1982). This is an illustration of how cultural, structural, and disciplinary domains of power materialise in the everyday lives of Black women, directly shaping the (lack of) connection they experience within their communities (Crenshaw, 1991). Understanding how these power dynamics shape their oppression was crucial for the Combahee River Collective in enabling consciousness-raising and community building among Black women, not just to strengthen their bonds over shared oppression but also to take meaningful action against it (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Acknowledging the personal reality of living under these systems of oppression and rejecting the narratives these systems impose is a deeply personal, yet collective practice that reclaims the intrinsic "self-validity of Black womanhood" (Flemming & Chamblee, 2025, p. 3). It is through this personal and political work that they resist the devaluation of Black womanhood—through reclaiming community and collective joy and through organizing against oppression collectively.

However, as intersectionality traveled over time (see Salem, 2016), its use in institutional spaces has constrained the revolutionary potential of intersectionality, also in educational spaces. It is used extensively in academic and corporate spaces as a marketable tool for diversity and inclusion policies (Bilge, 2013). Yet, it is precisely because it is no longer used to shed light on systems of oppression, nor to inform daily practices, that it no longer empowers collective action. While structural analysis of power dynamics initially constituted the core of intersectionality as a method, it has now become reduced to a metric of diversity and inclusion in neoliberal market-driven spaces that systematically erase the oppression and marginalisation of Black women by tokenising the few "successful" individuals (Alexander-Floyd, 2012). Intersectionality offers an invaluable cri-

tique of the power dynamics that inhibit critical engagement and personal awareness; yet instead of addressing structural issues that perpetuate inequality in academic institutions, intersectionality is depoliticised as a market tool to increase profit and prestige, clothed in superficial celebration of diversity (Salem, 2016). Furthermore, the same neoliberal discourse situates academia outside of political power relations, claiming to be a neutral space for open dialogue of diverse voices (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Framing universities this way ignores how power disciplines us into ways of being that not only reproduce White middle-class norms but also detach our existence from the systems we are part of and the people whose exploitation these systems depend on. Thus, by disregarding their role in upholding existing power dynamics, academic institutions fail to engage in critical reflexivity regarding their own institutional positionality.

Intersectionality is taught as an academic tool for analysis, but in practice, it has become no more than a cog in the neoliberal machine. Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) point out that when the political dimensions of intersectionality are brought up in classrooms, they are treated "as a topic of discussion, or as a silent background variable that has little influence on research design or on classroom practices" (p. 42). Seeing intersectionality as merely an object of study undermines the importance of pedagogy as critical praxis. By not engaging in an intersectional classroom practice, universities fail to teach students reflexivity about our individual and collective positionality. Crucially, not only it fails to teach a vital academic research skill, but, even more, students learn to see their privileges and marginality as isolated from greater societal structures, disregarding both our complicity and agency within them (Smele et al., 2017). The depersonalised classroom teaches White students to disconnect their privilege from the oppression of minoritised groups, at the same time, silencing the experiences of minoritised students while the neoliberal classroom practices perpetuate the same marginalisation. That way, students are drowning in theory, not realising the theory is alive right in front of us. Such teaching upholds the existing power hierarchies within the classroom, by erasing racialised students' lived experiences and failing to contextualise them within wider power relations. By detaching our personal lives and experiences from structural forces in this way, and failing to encompass the multidimensional psychological reality of our education, the university fails to fulfill its radical potential in inspiring collective action against structural power dynamics that perpetuate marginalisation and oppression.

Black feminist thought offers a crucial counter-narrative to dominant neoliberal paradigms present in academia. It subverts existing power dynamics not just epistemologically—by adding new knowledge and challenging existing ones—but also ontologically through ways of being which promote embodied, emotional connection and reflexivity in communities and classrooms. Thus, learning from Black feminist pedagogy can inspire new academic and pedagogical praxis that would transform our spaces and allow engaged action to flourish (Flemming & Chamblee, 2025). Despite Black feminist thinkers increasingly being included in curricula, we learn *about* Black feminism as an object of study and fail to learn *from* and *through* it as genuine everyday praxis.

Crucially, learning from Black feminist praxis offers invaluable insights into how learning spaces can be organised to empower engaged action. For example, the Combahee River Collective (1977) centered their personal experiences as political, acknowledging the psychological and emotional dimensions of resistance movements, thus focusing, at least initially, on consciousness-raising and emotional support for Black women. Combahee River Collective's work did not end with writing groups and emotional support circles. This work sustained mutual aid actions that advocated for those who are facing interlocking factors of oppression, such as initiating workplace organising, pickets and crisis centres. Thus, Black feminism's focus on solidarity-building through connecting the personal and the political is so revolutionary because it reclaims the collective power to take action that challenges the status quo. Similarly, embracing personal experiences in classrooms fosters connection among teachers and students reclaiming the sense of collectivity which often becomes dissolved in the depersonalised neoliberal classroom.

Yet, Mohanty (in Salem 2016, p. 413) asks: "What happens to the key feminist construct of 'the personal is political' when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to

the personal?". By focusing on individual identities instead of power relations, neoliberalism not only reduces the political to the personal, but also equates the personal to market metrics. Simply sharing personal experiences in predominantly White classrooms does not expose and disrupt normative assumptions of White supremacy. Rather it risks upholding the same power structures without questioning how the personal is situated within those same structures. The way these norms are internalised by White people too shows up in how classrooms are managed—by prioritising White comfort over critical reflexivity and engagement beyond theory. Therefore, the strength of the slogan "personal is political" lies in its illumination of the impact that structural forces have on individual and collective psyche. The personal work of unlearning these disciplinary norms is crucial to reshape our public engagement that exposes and challenges norms imposed by Whiteness. Still, personal work cannot happen in isolation; it needs community and collective reflexivity that neoliberal classrooms fail to create. Teaching Black feminism in classrooms helps students give personal meaning to the political and vice versa (Hull, 2023), contextualising their privilege and marginality within wider power relations.

3 Disorientation

The way personal experiences are approached in Black feminist pedagogy is very different from the neoliberal storyline that centres the individual experience with superficial diversity slogans and promotes profit and competition instead of advocating for structural change. Sara Ahmed (2017) argues that academic institutions uphold norms of being through the way people who do not fit them are treated—their presence and being are alienated in subtle ways that question their belonging within these spaces, rendering them hypervisible and invisible at the same time. Although this can be extremely harmful and disorienting for their sense of self, calling them to question their own being, Ahmed also stresses that "[s]o much political work begins with moments of disorientation" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 133). From this moment of disorientation, of looking for answers to these questions, so much critical new knowledge is born. Despite this, higher education classrooms avoid disorientation and conflict because neoliberal academia prides itself on being a safe space, avoiding triggers and discomfort for White students that may arise from conversation on systems of oppression (Smele et al., 2017). In avoiding conflict, the university does not keep its students safe but rather prioritises the comfort of the already privileged over the safety and belonging of the marginalised (Zembylas, 2018). Yet, it is precisely the moments of confrontation with our past and present when new knowledge is born (Appelbaum, 2017). Holding space for discomfort and vulnerability in classrooms is not a sign of weakness but instead an intentional openness to change and challenge.

Black feminist educators offer clear guidance on how classroom practice is turned into a practice of freedom and consciousness-raising, taking intersectionality beyond a theoretical analysis and engaging with it as a critical praxis that demands reflexivity. This kind of education subverts the norms built in educational institutions by becoming personal and reflective about our subjectivity and positionality, by sharing personal narratives with vulnerability and bravery, and building connections (Flemming & Chamblee, 2025; Smele et al., 2017). Unlike the neoliberal depersonalised classroom, a Black feminist classroom invites students to confront their own biases and discomfort through healthy conflict that does not recentre White students feelings but instead, allows us to question normative ways of being. Examining this discomfort collectively transforms education into a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). The classroom, then, becomes a site of resistance, one that rejects individualism and passivity. It is through this practice of freedom that new possibilities arise for what our present and future can look like.

4 Conclusion

Despite intersectionality and Black feminist thought being an object of study in universities, institutional and pedagogical practices still follow neoliberal paradigms without truly learning from Black feminist praxis. What was so radical about intersectionality at its origins was that it allowed Black feminists to reclaim their personhood, to foster connections with each other,

and resist structural power dynamics that perpetuate their oppression. Thus, learning from Black feminist teaching practice can inspire truly radical and transformative action that subverts the status quo. This transformation requires going beyond analysing Black feminism as an object of study—it requires critical reflection on the power dynamics at play within classrooms and institutions. Truly engaged teaching demands that we not only learn about systems of oppression but that we collectively reflect on our positionality within them and act on this knowledge, through building solidarity and dismantling the power hierarchies in our teaching and learning practices within our institutions.

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Social Sciences

Necropolitical Governance and Gendered Trauma under Boko Haram

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The Bakassi Internally Displaced People’s camp in Maiduguri, Nigeria, March 2020. Home of many Boko Haram Survivors and Refugees. © 2020 AUDU MARTE/AFP via Getty Images.

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1 Introduction

Armed conflicts justified or sustained through religious narratives often produce forms of violence that extend beyond the battlefield, shaping not only who is killed but how certain populations are made to live. In such conflicts, women frequently experience violence that is simultaneously physical, moral and symbolic, including abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage, and religious coercion. These harms are commonly addressed through psychological or gender-based violence frameworks, which tend to conceptualize trauma as an individual response to discrete acts of abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2014). While essential for documenting violations, such approaches often leave unexamined the broader structures of power that render women vulnerable and allow trauma to persist beyond the moment of violence.

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihan, known as "Boko Haram," is one of the most violent militant groups in Nigeria, responsible for famine, the deaths of tens of thousands and the displacement of millions of people, notably targeting women and school aged girls (Matfess, 2017). Despite a growing body of scholarship on Boko Haram and gendered violence, existing research has largely focused on cataloguing abuses or explaining them through extremism or security failure. Far less attention has been paid to how violence functions as a mode of governance, how religious narratives legitimate this governance, and how women's trauma is produced as an enduring condition rather than a temporary consequence of conflict. This paper addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from acts of violence to the political and moral orders that structure women's exposure to harm.

Accordingly, this paper asks: *How does Boko Haram exercise necropolitical control over abducted women's bodies, social existence, and futures?* Drawing on Achille Mbembe's revised 2019 theory of necropolitics, this theory-driven qualitative analysis examines how power operates through exposure to death and coercion as well as through forms of abandonment. While the theory of necropolitics traditionally focuses on the wielding of necropower by the sovereign state, this paper is premised upon the operation of Boko Haram as a form of de-facto government in its occupied regions. This is particularly motivated by the Nigerian government's institutional neglect and lack of protection in these regions, which has allowed Boko Haram to assume sovereignty over its occupied territories as a non-state power (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012). By incorporating insights from gendered necropolitics, this paper argues that women's trauma under Boko Haram is not only psychological but also embodied and social, with important spiritual dimensions shaped by sustained exposure to necropower. Focusing on both captivity and its aftermath, it will demonstrate how necropolitical control extends beyond physical confinement through stigma, institutional neglect, and moral regulation, producing conditions of living death that persist even after escape.

2 Theoretical Framework: Necropolitics

This paper draws on Achille Mbembe's (2019) theory of necropolitics to analyze women's trauma under Boko Haram. Necropolitics builds on Michel Foucault's 1976 theory of biopolitics by shifting attention from the management of life toward the exercise of power through death. While biopolitics focuses on the regulation and optimization of life, necropolitics emphasizes sovereignty as the power to "dictate who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66), and who is forced to exist in conditions of "living death"(Mbembe, 2019, p. 66). Crucially, Mbembe (2019) argues that modern political formations—particularly in colonial, postcolonial, and wartime contexts—operate through the creation of what he terms death–worlds: "that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (p. 92). In other words, these are spaces in which populations are subjected to extreme violence, coercion, and dehumanization, rendering life itself precarious and disposable.

Central to necropolitics is a redefinition of sovereignty that moves beyond formal state authority. Rather than being limited to juridical power, sovereignty is understood as the capacity to control mortality and to normalize exposure to death. This allows non-state actors, including militias and insurgent groups, to function as necrop-

olitical sovereigns. Mbembe conceptualizes such actors as "war machines" (pp. 85-86): self-sustaining systems that combine political, economic, and military power and govern populations through punishment and the constant threat of death. Violence in these contexts is not incidental but becomes a mode of governance, sustained through logics of exception and moral justification derived from ideology (Mbembe, 2019). With this in mind, this paper is premised upon the necropolitical governance of Boko Haram as a sovereign power, sustained by the occupation and control of its territories.

Although Mbembe's framework is particularly attentive to race and colonial histories, gender and sexuality remain undertheorized in his account. As Ege Selin Islekel (2022) argues, this omission is significant, since necropolitical power often operates through the regulation of gendered and sexualized bodies. Islekel introduces the concept of "gendered death" as "a large category to designate the ways in which gender and sexuality play decisive roles in the individual's and population's positioning with respect to death" (p. 2), a formulation that captures how exposure to death, disposability, and social erasure are unevenly distributed along gendered lines. Necropolitics, she suggests, is especially useful for understanding how contemporary political systems do not merely tolerate gendered violence but actively organize and optimize it, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and militarized conflict (Islekel, 2022). In such contexts, certain gendered bodies are rendered simultaneously exploitable and disposable, exposing them to heightened forms of violence and control.

Finally, Martin-Baron (2014) further illustrates how necropower operates through moral regulation and social exclusion. She shows that necropolitics does not function solely through physical killing, but also through forms of symbolic and social death, in which certain bodies are rendered suspect, unmournable, or morally contaminated. These processes are sustained through religious and normative frameworks that determine whose lives are considered valuable and whose suffering remains invisible. Such moral economies of life and death shape not only exposure to violence, but also the conditions under which survival and reintegration become possible.

Taken together, necropolitics provides a framework for understanding women's trauma under Boko Haram as a condition shaped by sustained exposure to necropower rather than as a temporary psychological consequence of violence. This perspective makes it possible to analyze how Boko Haram governs women's bodies and social existence through religiously legitimized violence, producing conditions of living death that may persist even beyond physical escape.

3 Boko Haram as a Necropolitical Sovereign

By drawing on this necropolitical framework, Boko Haram can be understood as a non-state actor that exercises power over life and death through violence, coercion, and religious authority. Emerging in northeastern Nigeria in 2002, the group developed from a localized religious movement into one of the region's most violent armed organizations, particularly following the 2009 uprising and the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf. In the years that followed, Boko Haram expanded its territorial reach and imposed its own moral codes, systems of punishment, and forms of social regulation in areas under its control (Matfess, 2017).

As Matfess (2017) suggests, Boko Haram's violence is an integral technique of governance. Executions, massacres, and abductions served to discipline populations and enforce compliance, normalizing exposure to death and insecurity and marking those deemed disobedient or illegitimate as killable. In this sense, Boko Haram produced spaces that closely resemble the death worlds that Mbembe describes: environments of permanent exposure to death and extreme domination (Mbembe, 2019).

Religion plays a central role in legitimizing this necropolitical order. As Alex Thurston (2016) shows, Boko Haram's worldview is grounded in an exclusivist interpretation of Islam that divides society into true believers and illegitimate others, including Muslims deemed insufficiently orthodox. Violence is framed as divinely sanctioned purification, retaliation, or moral correction, transforming killing and coercion into religious obligation and salvation rather than crime (Thurston, 2016). This theological framing allows necropower to appear

not only justified but necessary, sacralizing practices that expose civilians to death and disposability (Thurston, 2016; Mbembe, 2019).

Mbembe's (2019) notion of war machines further resembles Boko Haram's structure. The group functions as a self-sustaining system that combines military force and economic extraction with ideological discipline. Human Rights Watch (2014) documentation of mass abductions and forced conversion and labor demonstrates how captivity itself becomes a resource within this system, sustaining the group materially and symbolically. Within this necropolitical order, violence is not merely destructive but productive: it generates fear, leading to obedience and social reorganization.

Crucially, women's bodies and lives occupy a central place within this system of necropower. Through practices such as abduction and coerced marriage, often reinforced by forced conversion, Boko Haram extends its authority beyond territorial control into the regulation of social reproduction (Human Rights Watch, 2014). These practices show how gendered domination operates as a mechanism of governance rather than incidental violence, shaping the experiences of women examined in the following section.

4 Women's Experiences in Necropolitical Death-Worlds

4.1 Abduction as Entry into Necropolitical Space

Women's experiences under Boko Haram must be understood as encounters with necropolitical power rather than as isolated acts of gender-based violence. As shown in the preceding section, Boko Haram's exercise of sovereignty produces death-worlds marked by coercion and religious discipline, in which exposure to death becomes a normalized condition of life. For women, entry into these spaces often begins with abduction, which marks not only physical captivity but a rupture in autonomy and social identity.

Abduction functions as a primary mechanism through which women are inserted into Boko Haram's necropolitical order. Human Rights Watch (2014) documents how women and girls were systematically targeted in raids on schools and transit routes, often taken alongside children and other civilians. This initial act strips women of legal and social protection, and places them fully under the group's control. Within Mbembe's (2019) framework, abduction constitutes a transition from civilian life into a death world, where women's lives are preserved only insofar as they remain useful to the war machine.

A UNIDIR report written by Chitra Nagarajan et al. (2024) further emphasizes that women's ability to escape these spaces is structurally constrained by gendered conditions of captivity. Women were often confined to domestic spaces, made hyper-visible in public, and burdened with childcare, all of which limited opportunities for flight and increased dependence on captors. Survival thus becomes inseparable from submission, reinforcing conditions of living death rather than offering meaningful protection from harm.

4.2 Gendered Mechanisms of Control

Sexual violence under Boko Haram operates not as an incidental abuse but as a tool of necropower. As documented extensively by Human Rights Watch (2014), rape and threats of execution were routine features of captivity. These acts enforced obedience and asserted the group's sovereignty over women's bodies, leaving little room for resistance. Sexual violence is thus central to what Islekel (2022) terms "gendered death", in which women are kept alive while being systematically deprived of bodily autonomy and meaningful social recognition.

Crucially, Boko Haram framed sexual violence through religious narratives of marriage, purification, and salvation. Forced sexual relations were often legitimized as marital rights following coerced unions, transforming violence into a morally sanctioned obligation (Thurston, 2016). This framing intensifies trauma by collapsing the distinction between religious duty and bodily violation, embedding harm within a moral order that rendered resistance both sinful and punishable by death.

Forced marriage represents one of the most significant necropolitical mechanisms through which Boko Haram governed women's lives and futures. Both Human Rights Watch (2014) and Chitra Nagarajan et al. (2024) show that women and girls of all ages were compelled into marriages under threat of execution, often follow-

ing forced conversion. Marriage functioned not merely as a social arrangement, but as a mechanism through which sexual control, labor, and ideology were enforced.

Within Mbembe's (2019) conception of necropower, control over reproduction constitutes governance over the future. Pregnancy and childbirth under coercive conditions bind women more deeply to the group while simultaneously exposing them to intensified stigma and vulnerability. Women's lives become valued only insofar as they serve the group's reproductive and symbolic continuity. This dynamic exemplifies necropolitical life: survival without meaning or security.

4.3 Identity Transformation and Living Death

Beyond physical violence, necropolitical power reshapes women's identities, producing forms of social and symbolic death. Forced renaming, veiling, religious re-education, and isolation from prior communities eroded women's sense of self and moral standing (Chitra Nagarajan et al., 2024). As Martin-Baron (2014) argues, necropolitics operates through regimes of visibility and moral regulation that place certain bodies outside recognition and collective care. Women associated with Boko Haram were often marked as morally contaminated, even while still in captivity. The stigma that follows women during and after captivity ties their identity permanently to Boko Haram, leading to a form of social death and an identity transformation beyond repair.

The International Crisis Group (2019) highlights how this moral suspicion persists after women leave Boko Haram-controlled areas. Regardless of whether women were abducted or joined under coercive circumstances, association with the group frequently resulted in stigma and social exclusion, often accompanied by further exposure to abuse upon return. Trauma, therefore, extends beyond the period of captivity and continues to shape women's social existence after escape through forms of exclusion and insecurity.

5 Afterlives of Necropower: Trauma After Escape

While escape from Boko Haram may end physical confinement, the structures shaping women's trauma persist beyond captivity. Reintegration does not mark an exit from necropolitical power, but its reconfiguration. Post-captivity experiences are shaped by ongoing moral judgment and institutional neglect, extending these living death-conditions established under Boko Haram. These dynamics are reinforced by the Nigerian state's limited and uneven response to the insurgency. While a full analysis of state complicity falls beyond this paper's scope, this section focuses on how necropolitical power is reconfigured after captivity, particularly in regions where Boko Haram has exercised control.

From a necropolitical perspective, reintegration failures are not merely gaps in policy or in service delivery but expressions of how power differentiates between lives deemed worthy of restoration and those forced to remain precarious. Mbembe (2019) describes necropower as operating through abandonment as much as killing, producing populations whose survival is tolerated but not secured. Within this framework, survival does not guarantee recognition, protection or care, but instead entails continued exposure to insecurity.

This necropolitical logic becomes visible in the institutional treatment of girl and young women survivors. Amnesty International (2025) documents how state inaction leaves many without sustained access to education, healthcare, or psychosocial support, despite formal acknowledgment of their victimhood. Such abandonment does not represent a failure external to necropolitics but its concrete expression: women's lives are preserved biologically while remaining politically and socially disposable. Trauma thus persists not only because of past violence, but instead entails continued exposure to insecurity and abandonment.

Social and religious stigma further intensifies this necropolitical continuity. Women associated with Boko Haram, regardless of coercion, are often rendered morally suspect, reinforcing what Martin-Baron (2014) describes as symbolic and social death. These processes deny women full reintegration into community and religious life, undermining recognition and belonging. In Islekel's

(2022) terms, this reflects a gendered distribution of death, in which women's bodies and identities remain sites of suspicion and control even after captivity ends.

Ultimately, these dynamics suggest that women's trauma under Boko Haram cannot be temporally confined to the period of abduction. Instead, trauma emerges as an ongoing condition produced by necropolitical structures that persist across phases of conflict and post-conflict governance. Meaningful change therefore requires confronting not only past violence but the moral and political orders that continue to render women's lives precarious after survival.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that women's trauma under Boko Haram cannot be adequately understood through psychological or event-based frameworks alone. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's (2019) theory of necropolitics, it has shown that violence against women operates through sustained forms of power that govern life, death, and survival. Boko Haram's use of abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage, and religious coercion situates women within necropolitical deathworlds, where life is preserved only under conditions of extreme domination. Trauma, in this context, emerges not as a singular response to violence, but as an ongoing condition produced by prolonged exposure to necropower.

By integrating insights from gendered necropolitics, this analysis has further demonstrated how women's bodies and identities become central sites through which necropolitical sovereignty is enacted and maintained. Sexual violence and reproductive control function not merely as tools of terror but as mechanisms of governance, legitimized through religious narratives of purification and salvation. Additionally, the paper has shown that necropower does not end with physical escape. Instead, it persists through post-captivity stigma and institutional abandonment, producing what can be understood as the afterlives of necropower. These dynamics render women socially and spiritually precarious even after survival, extending conditions of living death into post-conflict life.

The implications of this analysis extend to debates on rehabilitation and reintegration. Efforts that treat reintegration as a technical or temporal phase risk overlooking the necropolitical structures that continue to shape women's lives. Addressing women's trauma, therefore, requires confronting not only past violence but the moral and political orders that determine whose lives are considered worthy of restoration. While this paper has focused on Boko Haram, its findings suggest the broader relevance of necropolitics for analyzing gendered trauma in contexts of religious violence and armed conflict. Future research could extend this framework to comparative cases or explore survivor-led religious and communal practices that challenge necropolitical exclusion.

AI Statment: AI was used strictly in the structuring and editing process of this paper.

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Humanities

One Must Imagine Buber Happy:

A Buberian reading of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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Nighthawks - Edward Hopper, 1942

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1 Introduction

> *'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'*
> (Camus, 2005, p. 119)

The question of what life is or what it should be has plagued human thought for millennia. From Ecclesiastes to Sartre, existential thought has been chipping away at man's resolve—creating such pessimistic schools of thought as solipsism, nihilism, and absurdism, to name a few. Thinkers' responses have come in myriad ways. Bronze and Iron Age thought found meaning in a single, omnipotent God who commands us from the heavens. Classical thinkers created teleological proofs that handed us meaning[1]. Nietzsche killed God. Levinas revived Him. One such response to the question of meaning is Albert Camus' Absurd. A centrepiece of his literature (both fiction and non-fiction), the Absurd, is an explanation of this existential condition, holding that existence itself, in any form, is absurd. When an individual settles into this disharmony, living unbound by it, the Absurd Man is born. To Camus, this is the only way of finding happiness in the universe. Martin Buber, on the other hand, has relation be his axiom (2010). Instead of giving up on seeking meaning, Buber implores us to seek connection with one another. To him, existence is not absurd but a quest to transcend the sensory (the *It*) and have moments with one another (the *Thou*). Meaning is created not through solitary reflection on one's condition, but through authentic relation. In doing so, subjects recognise one another's subjectivity and diverge from the objectification of the universe.

This paper will take Buber's It-Thou framework as set out in his foremost work *I and Thou*, and apply it to Meursault, the main character in Camus' seminal work *The Stranger* (taking him as the pre-eminent Absurd Man), with the aim of highlighting Buber's model as a remedy to the discomfort and hopelessness of Camus' absurd. This philosophical experiment aims to provide an alternative view of human existence and responsibility in a modern world that increasingly finds an existential threat in the other. In using Buber's thought as a philosophical counterproposal to Camus' Absurd, we can use relational responsibility as a tonic to existential emptiness. Moving away from the solitary I, the unbreakable notion of the self (whether individually or societally), and towards a more relational reason for existence may indeed be a remedy to this modern turn.

This experiment takes its texts as the epitomes of their thought. That is, Buber's *I and Thou*, and Camus' philosophical work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (the preeminent treatise on absurdism), as well as his fictional work *The Stranger* which provides us with a human embodiment of the absurd man and a created world in which to play out this experiment.

2 Camus' Absurd

Camus' Absurd is perhaps the most refreshingly simple philosophical state. At its core is the conflict between man's quest for meaning and the indifferent universe in which we live—a universe that, in all its beauty and complexity, provides nothing for us. Camus illustrates this conflict in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, using a tree as his example. One can 'know' the tree, you can 'feel its taste' (Camus, 2005, p. 18). We can 'enumerate' and 'classify' (p. 18) the world and 'admit' (2005, p. 18) that it is true. We have created laws of nature and rules of science that describe the universe, but to what end? We are existentially none the wiser. To Camus, this is the absurd. When we reach such small scales of the electron and such large scales of the cosmos, our ability to compute it ourselves is gone—we cannot *know*—the scientist 'has been reduced to poetry' (2005, p. 18). Our existence ultimately comes down to a choice between 'a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing' and 'hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure' (2005, p. 19). The description is our empirical knowledge, verifiable, but ultimately mere observations. The hypotheses are our religions and myths. They teach us of the genesis, of creation and destruction, of law, of purpose. Unfortunately, despite all their beauty and poetry, they are not sure. In the fullness of time, the hypotheses provide just as little as the descriptions—perhaps marginally more with their comfort and imagery. To Camus, this

[1] See Aristotle's function argument (*Nicomachean Ethics, 1.7*) for a full explanation of how a being's ability to carry out a function provides meaning.

comfort is ultimately false, and he cannot be satisfied with false comfort.

There is a relentlessly persistent self-awareness, throughout Camusian thought, of the limits of not just what we do know, but what we *can* know—we are ever bound by the irrational, apathetic universe. Indeed, the emphasis on knowledge is not merely a focus on our epistemological reality, but also a comment on our 'appetite for understanding' (2005, p. 34)—an understanding that we hope leads us to conclusions on our meaning. Camus rejects traditional mechanisms of meaning, such as religion, asserting that the absurd is the 'impossible' (2005, p. 28). By doing this, he can then assert that 'the absurd becomes God' (2005, p. 31). The interpretations of this are twofold. Firstly, God becomes a contradiction[2], something Camus sets out to do in his rejection of meaning. Secondly, if we take the Absurd to be the object (rather than the above-defined state of being [absurd]), the 'absurd' takes the place of God in satisfying our appetite for understanding and meaning. By accepting the absurd, it is possible to live unconsumed by the existential dread of the central conflict. Here, Camus argues, the Absurd Man is born.

3 The Absurd Man

The Absurd Man does not 'appeal to illusion' (2005, p. 39), taking comfort in God or morals, when answering the 'anxious question' (2005, p. 39) of what life would be. He instead merely 'appeals to Kierkegaard's despair'[3] (2005, p. 39). In recognising this absurdity and rejecting the human desire to *know* the 'ever resurgent irrational' (2005, p. 34), the Absurd Man admits the irrational and 'recognises the struggle' (2005, p. 35) of reconciling the fundamental contradiction. Only at this point can we relinquish hope and settle into our existence. In recognising the absurd, one accepts it. In accepting it, paradoxically, one revolts against it. Camus argues that revolt is the key to life. Without revolt, philosophy itself would fall short at suicide, which, at the very beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argues is the 'one truly serious philosophical problem' (2005, p. 1). Revolt brings the Absurd Man closer to unity in its acceptance of its own obscurity; it allows him to face the Absurd and, in renouncing false hope (God, society, etc.), find freedom, unshackled by existential dread.

4 Buber as a response

Buber's framework, on the other hand, provides us with a true comfort—one that does not force us to settle into an existence that 'has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to' (2005, p. 30)[4] Consent (and indeed willingness) is at the centre of Buber's I-Thou—'The Thou meets me through grace' (Buber, 2010, p. 11). Only through mutual presence and conversation can we really live. To Buber, 'all real living is meeting' (2010, p. 11). The thou is not set in the context of space (2010, p. 100) and time and thus not bound by cause and effect. This makes it incompatible/mutually exclusive with the *it*. At the heart of the *It* is a relational objectification—that is, by taking someone's subjectivity and placing it in relation to oneself or something else, one turns it into an object [5] (relative to what it was placed in relation to). Denying this subjectivity removes the relation from the *Thou*, cementing it in the transactional world. I-It relationships can be signified by (but not limited to) the simple syllogism 'You do

[2] Camus does not mean a logical contradiction here (e.g. God exists and God does not exist), he is instead arguing that once you take the Absurd seriously, the idea of God as a source of ultimate meaning becomes incompatible with the human condition. Camus asserts that if you acknowledge the Absurd, but turn to God in the face of it, you are committing philosophical suicide. It is not logically absurd, it is existentially evasive. God is the guarantor of meaning in a meaningless universe—it simply does not work.

[3] Kierkegaard's idea of despair goes further than mere sadness. It is a spiritual ailment that hits deep within the self. It is the moment where the self fails to be its true divinely grounded self. It is a uniquely human condition that is born out of our capacity to self-reflect and introspect.

[4] In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus sets out that the Absurd is, firstly, unconsensual and, secondly, has meaning because it is non-consensual. We did not agree to live in a meaningless universe and there is no common ground, so to say. We ask for and seek meaning but the universe remains silent and in doing so, forces the absurd upon us. The world does not play along. In a fitting irony, the Absurd gains some form of meaning because it is true tension. Because it is external to us, it has meaning, it is not a false escape like religion etc... Cont. Through acknowledging the absurd, through not denying it, we can be tragic but free—just as, Camus concludes, Sisyphus is.

[5] Think Camus'tree.

X for me'[6]. This can never be an I-Thou connection because you deny the individual's subjectivity and see them merely as a means to an end. Buber answers the question of what this 'end' is by asserting that the distinction between *It* and *Thou* is driven by 'the lust of the human race to whittle away the secret of death' (2010, p. 5). In a similar vein to Camus, Buber suggests that we are not trying to solve death but reduce it to a more manageable and palatable size, pruning the mystery to something we can own, objectifying it. This distinction of the *It*, however, does not bring comfort. *It* is a 'lust'—unholy, placed on the same level as Camus' fake comforts. Whittling down the greatest secret does not provide us a solution, it merely satisfies our drive to control. Instead, we must connect and become a part of the world, not merely experiencing it, but engaging in willing and deliberate relation in order to know the subject as it is, perhaps having parts remain unsaid and unknown. This, to Buber, is the beauty of the *Thou*. By honouring presence and calling us into a mutual and sincere relationship, the *Thou* ensures that we stand before something, even death and suffering, in reverence and love, mysteries and all. The *It* provides comfort by shielding us from the real. It lets us manipulate and define what we want. The *Thou* comforts us by calling us into the real, assuring that we are not alone. Not because we have solved the mystery, but because someone is there with us as their true subjective self. Indeed, Buber's and Camus' philosophies diverge here. Camus rejects the notion that we must submit to a God whose silence permits our suffering.

Buber's God is the 'eternal Thou' (2010, p. 75), who is ever present—ensuring we are not alone in facing the real. The rejection or embracing of God highlights both the solitary nature of Camus' thinking and the undying focus on relation for Buber. This begs the question of whether the Absurd Man can be confirmed (rather than just 'imagined') happy by partaking in the *Thou*.

[6]This can be anything from asking a favour of a friend (which is an I-It moment in the context of a broader relationship) or the connection between a waiter and his patron (a situation in which the two only know each other in that context).

5 Meursault as the 'It Man'

In *The Stranger*, the main character, Meursault, is perhaps *the* embodiment of the Absurd Man. The novel begins with the infamous line 'My mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know' (Camus, 2013, p. 3), acquainting the reader with Meursault's utter indifference. He coasts through life barely experiencing it, much of the time only noticing the sensory - a motif of his disdain for the sun and heat of Algiers[7] acts as an illustration. As the novel progresses, we learn of his relationships with his lover, friends, and colleagues, as well as his seemingly strange relationship with his late mother. Camus also provides an insight into his views on religion, morals, and wider society. This is why we must see Meursault as an embodiment of Camus' philosophy. Rather than only setting his thoughts out in the traditional form of a treatise (as Locke, Rousseau, Hobbes, etc. have done), Camus employs a literary experiment to illustrate his philosophy and the implications of his thought. Meursault embodies the Absurd Man in his refusal to feign meaning where meaning is not. He accepts the universe's indifference and his utterly apathetic embrace of death (the consequence of his actions at the climax of the novel) and dismisses false comforts and illusions.

It is deliberate that Meursault's two main relationships of the novel, with his mother and Marie (his lover), provide Camus with space to comment on the Absurd Man's attitude towards morals and love, and one of the most consequential conversations of the novel, with the chaplain, highlights his attitude towards faith and God. In the interest of conciseness, this paper will analyse just Meursault's relationship with his mother, Marie, and the chaplain, though this exercise can be extrapolated to the rest of Meursault's relationships, as well as to Camus' other characters (such as Dr Rieux in *The Plague*).

5.1 Mother

Despite being narrated almost entirely in the past tense, the opening line of *The Stranger* is in

[7]Phrases like 'It was very hot' (p.3) and 'The sun was now scorching hot' (p.50) - indeed his apparent reason for shooting a man was the sensation of the sun upon the top of his head (p.54).

the present tense. In *I and Thou*, Buber describes the *It* as 'the eternal chrysalis' (Buber, 2010, p. 17), something solid, almost sandboxed off from the real world, already formed and contained in the past. The *It* can be described as the modus of the past. By beginning in the present, Camus momentarily holds Meursault in a moment of direct encounter with the real—a Buberian reality that his mother is dead. The rest of the novel unfolds in the past—the *It*, reflecting Meursault's repulsion from immediacy into an observational and experiential existence. The Buberian consequences of Camus' choice is a momentary brush with the *Thou*, highlighting the importance of Meursault's mother to him, that is soon lost to the narrative modus of the *It*. Meursault does not cry, nor does he conform to societal norms of grief, he merely sits drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes at the funeral home (2013, Chapter 1). It can be argued that the relation between the two simply comes down to comfort. Meursault is briefly in the present, the *Thou*, but quickly retreats into the *It* where existence is more ordered and manageable. He can go about his day as he always has, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and conversing with those he briefly meets (such as the caretaker at the funeral home). Rather than encountering the real, Meursault would sooner fall into recollection, going through the motions of existence rather than tackling it head-on. Whilst this may satisfy Camus (Meursault does not seek meaning in false comforts, indeed he does not seek it at all), Buber would be left dissatisfied with the lack of authentic relation, especially concerning a connection as deep as mother and son. Camus may argue that Meursault's lack of emotion is a strength—by not conforming for the sake of conforming, Meursault settles into the absurdity of his existence (that he must have a connection with his mother, who, like everyone, will one day die). Buber would view this as a symptom of the loss of the *Thou*. It is not a rallying cry of nihilism; it is a tragic case of being existentially impoverished.

5.2 Marie

Perhaps the most upsetting of Meursault's I-It relationships is with his lover, Marie. On the surface, they seem infatuated with each other, going swimming, spending long mornings in bed together, taking trips into the city for coffee and lunch. In reality, Meursault is as emotionally detached from her as possible. He flattens her subjectivity to such an extent that it becomes unclear whether she is anything more to him than an alternative to being alone. When Marie asks Meursault if he would 'marry her' (Camus, 2013, p. 38), he replies that it is of little difference to him—he would marry her if it would please her. This relation is cemented in the *It*. There is no forthcomingness, there is no grace. It is purely transactional. If marrying her brings her pleasure, Meursault would marry Marie. Whether they marry or not, Meursault gets company and satisfaction. Their relationship is an inert object with no spark at its core. No mystery. He cannot fathom connecting with her subject as a platform for meeting. Buber would see Meursault as experiencing Marie, the role she plays, the sensations of her, but he does not *meet* her and there is no responsibility involved. She is lowered to a knowable object of function. For Buber, 'love is between I and Thou' (Buber, 2010, p. 14). Meursault's relationship with Marie is not mutual, it is not present, and it is not open. He does not affirm her full subjectivity; he does not know if he loves her (2013, p. 38), he is merely aware of her function and her effect on him. He receives sensation but does not offer presence.

This indifference resurfaces when Marie asks whether he will be moving to Paris as part of a promotion at work—she says she'd 'like to get to know Paris' (2013, p. 39). Meursault responds with a despondent description of a grimy and dark city, driven by his sensorial experience of visiting Paris, having responded in a similar way to his boss when being offered the job, claiming that he was not dissatisfied with his life in Algiers and thus had no reason to want to move. Whilst this may appear rather Stoic at first glance, a Buberian reading reveals a more flat, unengaged, and indifferent idea of a shared future. He does not acknowledge Marie's desire for a life together, nor does he open himself up to an encounter with her idealisation of the future. There is no meeting of desires; merely a static observation of his current state. He remains sealed in the I-It world of comparisons and preferences. Furthermore, his relationship with Marie highlights the question of whether an I-Thou moment *has* to be reciprocal. There are moments where in spite of

Meursault being cemented in the *It*, Marie is (or at least appears to be) in the *Thou*[8]. In refusing this reciprocity, Meursault reduces the relationship to sensation and routine, never allowing it to become a site of true meaning, pushing him further into the Absurd and away from true relation. In this way, Marie, like much of Meursault's absurd world, becomes a figure experienced but never truly encountered—an object one step removed.

6 The Chaplain

Meursault's interaction with the prison's Chaplain at the very end of the novel is Camus' dramatic playing out of the Absurd Man—it is an existentially charged scene, culminating in Meursault accepting that he was indeed happy all along. Meursault, after being docile and indifferent throughout, finally revolts—in this case against the chaplain (an embodiment of religion). This paper's Buberian reading, however, highlights a different angle, one that presents Meursault as tragic and in rejecting the *Thou* once and for all, responsible for his own pitiful and conflicted end.

In the final chapter, just before his execution, Meursault is visited by the prison Chaplain who seeks to comfort him by converting him and convincing him to repent[9]. Meursault refuses, initially calmly and in the expected indifferent and apathetic manner. Then, upon being asked again, he lashes out. Exploding in a fit of rage, he laments the priest for trying to impose meaning on his death, thinking to himself, 'I had only a little time left and I didn't want to waste it on God' (Camus, 2013, p. 108). Indeed, the chaplain's concern for Meursault and his attempts to bring him comfort and resolution ahead of his execution seem to be a *Thou* moment—one subject approaching another at the edge of death in an attempt to share meaning and connect. The chaplain desperately *wants* it to be a reciprocal moment but Meursault simply rejects it. Not only does he reject the theology on offer, but the mode of relation itself—he does not want to engage. For, as Meursault argues, what difference does it make? He could have died ten years ago, he could die tomorrow, he could die in 100 years. The condemned man is simply the condemned man. Whilst this seems to be an attempt at an I-Thou moment rejected by the Absurd Man, it is actually yet another I-It relation, disguised—thinly veiled by the desire for a *Thou*.

Much like Yoma 85b, 87a-87b of the Talmud[10] where a Rabbi attempts to force someone who has wronged him into asking for forgiveness, the Chaplain breaks the *Thou*, manipulating it, forcing it to the world of the *It*, into the indifferent world of the unconsensual absurd. According to Buber, true encounter requires mutual openness and thus the absence of agendas. The *Thou* cannot be forced. The chaplain, however, comes into the room already knowing what Meursault needs: faith and repentance. He enters with the agenda to convert, not to meet. In this sense, the chaplain offers not a *Thou*, but an *It* disguised as a *Thou*: a prefabricated, predetermined dynamic. A well worn ritual takes the guise of a forthcoming encounter — the chaplain does this for every condemned prisoner, hoping for the same outcome. Moreover, this is not a fresh and genuine experience of God, He is presented as a doctrine, as an object of belief that places one on a path of salvation, quite literally, away from the guillotine. Buber may claim this to be a God of the It-world, not his eternal *Thou*. Perhaps most interestingly for this reading, Meursault's reaction to the chaplain's arrival may be closer to the *Thou* than the

[8] 'She murmured that I was very strange, that she undoubtedly loved me for that very reason... then when she saw I was getting tied up in knots trying to explain, she laughed again...' (p.39). This passage in chapter five demonstrates Marie's awareness of Meursault's subjectivity - that he is rather odd, detached, abnormal. That he perhaps is not participating in the world so actively. Despite this, she still makes an effort to love him and be loved by him, striving to meet him and experience the real with him. This is the grace and willingness that Buber emphasises in the first part of *I and Thou*.

[9] See pages 105-110 (Camus, 2013) for the full passage.

[10] 'It is further related that **Rav had a complaint against a certain butcher** who insulted him. **The butcher did not come before him** to apologize. **On Yom Kippur eve**, Rav **said: I will go** and **appease him. He met** his student **Rav Huna**, who **said to him: Where is my Master going? He said to him:** I am going **to appease so-and-so**. Rav Huna called Rav by his name and **said: Abba is going to kill a person,** for surely that person's end will not be good. Rav **went and stood by him.** He found the butcher **sitting and splitting the head** of an animal. The butcher **raised his eyes and saw him. He said** to him: **Are you Abba? Go, I have nothing** to say **to you. While he was splitting the head, one of the bones** of the head **flew out and struck him in the throat and killed him**, thereby fulfilling Rav Huna's prediction.'

chaplain's attempt itself. Whilst his rejection is angry and final, it is arguably far more open than the chaplain. He is stripped bare of illusions, facing death directly, without appeal to myth or afterlife, confronting the message of the chaplain (a message built on, Camus would argue, illusion and myth). In Buber's terms, this radical openness to being, even without the comfort or guarantee of reconciliation, may indeed be closer to the *Thou* than the priest's dogma. It is hard to argue that Meursault's encounter with the priest is an authentic meeting of *I* and *Thou*, but it is a collision of incompatible worlds. Something, that is truer to the real than the performance of authenticity from the chaplain. The priest seeks to transform Meursault into a religious man, offering a prepackaged, predigested divine, ready for whomever he offers it to. There is no genuine connection here, it is scripted. Meursault refuses. From a Buberian perspective, the priest is doomed to fail in all cases. He fails to meet Meursault as he is — he tries to speak about God, rather than letting God present Himself through true conversation and presence. In his rejection, Meursault ironically preserves the space for the *Thou* — not in the chaplain's theology, but in his own unflinching connection to the Absurd. It is here that we can finally uncover the value in placing Buber and Camus in conversation. By applying the almost dogmatic emphasis on surrendering to the Absurd to Buberian relation[11], one can sift through the *It*, even if unintentionally. This paradox of intention arises rather beautifully.

By intentionally remaining within the Absurd, one unintentionally takes themself into the *Thou*. In his final solitude, his final rejection of the establishment, Meursault may come closer to a Buberian *Thou* — not through religion or another false comfort, but through a radical embrace of the real, a real that goes hand in hand with the Absurd culmination of Camus' experiment.

7 Conclusion

Camus' Absurd proves itself to be a useful line of thought in positioning ourselves in the universe. It highlights the contradiction of existence and the futility of our attempts to explain it. Meursault's embodiment of the Absurd Man serves as a unifying example of Camus' ideas, highlighting the consequences of such an existence. It sets out a life that, whilst not plagued with depression or angst, is ultimately indifferent to the deeper pleasures of life, concerned only with sensations and superficial impressions. Buber's framework would place this firmly in the world of the *It*. He lives without illusion and false comfort and finds apparent freedom in his revolt. He is not comforted, and indeed dies deeply uncomfortable - the novel closes with the line 'I could only hope there would be many, many spectators on the day of my execution and that they would greet me with cries of hatred' (Camus, 2013, p. 111). Even Meursault's consistent indifference is whittled away by the Absurd — one would assume he would have wanted a quiet execution away from the crowds and prying eyes of the public, a death as quiet and unobtrusive as the life he had led. Instead the void of surrendering to the Absurd created a need for his death to match the discomfort of an Absurd existence. This paper argues that, through a Buberian reading, we uncover an existential impoverishment in Camus' thinking—one in which relation is impossible, love is flattened into preference, and presence is avoided.

Throughout *The Stranger* Meursault fails to encounter others as *Thou*. His mother is a memory, Marie a pleasant companion, and the chaplain a nuisance. His world is one of *Its*. He is *the* Absurd man, but he is tragic. Buber offers an alternative. Instead of fleeing from meaning and surrendering to the Absurd, we must seek authentic relation, even amidst uncertainty and death. In a great irony, Meursault finds a moment of clarity with his mother and a moment of comfort before his death[12]—in that moment both he and his mother are beyond life. She is dead and he is to be dead, yet in opening himself to relation, if only to the idea of his mother, he finds a comfort. One the

[11] Much like the tolerance paradox of liberal thinking. In rejecting a disguised *it*, Meursault remains open to the *Thou*.

[12] "There at the home, where lives faded away, there as well, evening offered a wistful moment of peace. So close to death, Mama must have felt set free, ready to live once more. No one – no one – had the right to cry over her. And I as well, I too felt ready to start life all over again. As if this great release of anger had purged me of evil, emptied me of hope; and standing before this symbolic night bursting with stars, I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world. To feel it so like me, so like a brother, in fact, I understood that I had been happy, and I was still happy." (p.111).

Absurd could not provide him. While Camus asks us to imagine Sisyphus happy, in a rather boorish metaphor, Buber might ask us to connect to Sisyphus, relating to him on a subjective level, providing ourselves as an other for him, establishing a responsibility for each other. Sisyphus may turn to us, the stranger, if only for a moment, and see the *Thou*.

This reading contributes to ongoing debates surrounding the limits of existentialism. Meursault is frequently read as a model of lucid and courageous freedom and scholars of Camus treat the Absurd as a kind of existential honesty. This paper shows that this freedom may come at the cost of relational impoverishment. Yes, surrendering to the Absurd might be the most logical and sensible way to exist, but it robs us of the one thing that perhaps only humans have - the ability to connect to each other[13]. A Buberian reading of Camus reframes the Absurd as a limit condition, not a solution. This paper highlights that it is not a resolution to the problem of meaning, but as a condition that reveals the necessity of relation, with Meursault as the embodiment of this.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that Camus' Absurd Man may find freedom but not comfort or fulfilment. The lingering existential angst propels him to a breaking point. Buber, whilst being more idealistic in his thinking, offers a framework in which meaning is not constructed in spite of the void, nor is it outright rejected. It is born in relation through grace and encounter. Indeed what is rejected is the idea of a void in the first place—the other (in all senses) ensures that the 'void' is never truly empty.

In the end, perhaps the Absurd needs not to be imagined happy but instead met. Perhaps only then can we imagine Buber happy. Perhaps we need not to even imagine him happy, we ought just to connect with and simply ask him.

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[13] Indeed as far as we know, Earth is the only place in the universe where this happens.

Humanities

“Y’all have a lot of the same power E had”: Lynch’s *Wild At Heart* As a New Category of Cinematic Ideology

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Screenshot from David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*. 2:00:39

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1 Introduction

David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* (1990) is a rendition of the American Dream. The film follows Lula (Laura Dern), a young woman with a troubled past, and Sailor (Nicolas Cage), a reckless young man skipping out on parole, as they fall in love on the long road to New Orleans. Their adventure is slowly eroded by sobering moments of violence as Lula's controlling mother, Marietta (Diane Ladd), sends hitmen to bring Lula home. The couple must overcome cynicism in order to vanquish evil and commit to their love.

Typically under-represented in critical examinations of Lynch's filmography, *Wild At Heart*'s ideological stance confounds critics due to its simultaneous exposition of morally dubious characters and nostalgic positivity. This paper argues that *Wild At Heart* exists outside of Comolli and Narboni's (1969) categorization of cinematic ideology. The pair presents seven classifications of how films can treat dominant ideology (a–g), ranging from a full, unreflective embrace of it (a) to "live films" which explicitly confront and criticize it (g) (Comolli and Narboni 815–818). Category (e) stands out from the rest as its films have a complicated and concealed relationship to dominant ideology.

Wild At Heart creates a new category that I term category (E), which reverses the processes of Comolli and Narboni's category (e). The ideological difference between categories (e) and (E) can be best understood by comparing them to paranoid and reparative readings, respectively, as Eve Sedgwick (2002) theorizes them. *Wild At Heart*, as a category (E) film, attempts to repair American dominant ideology.

I will first define category (E) as the antithesis of category (e). I will then demonstrate their difference through *Wild At Heart*'s treatment of Elvis at the beginning and end of the film, specifically in how the initial and final ideological stances of category (e) are reversed in category (E). The process by which category (E) films arrive at their final ideological stance is comparable to Eve Sedgwick's concept of reparative readings, which holds implications for how category (E) could impact film theory.

2 Making the 'e' Uppercase

In their influential *Cahiers* article "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (1969), Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni categorize films' interactions with ideology in order to analyze the political capabilities and implications of filmmaking. The pair intended to bring a Marxist lens to the French film theory circle following the 1968 student revolutions. They argue that "every film is political" as they are created by and for socio-economic forces (Comolli and Narboni 814). This means that every film must have some relationship with dominant ideology. Although they do not concretely define 'dominant ideology', the term denotes those beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors represented and imposed by powerful economic and cultural structures onto mainstream society. In this paper, I will use the term to reference the values of the Christian, patriotic, heteronormative, capitalist, American patriarch. These values include strong familial bonds, an in-group consensus on moral behavior, and market-driven incentives.

There are seven categories (a–g) of these film-ideology relationships, which lie on a continuum of a positive to negative relationship with dominant ideology (Comolli and Narboni 815–818). This paper will not address the majority of these categories, as *Wild At Heart* is neither an unreflective embrace of dominant ideology and stylistically conventional, like category (a), nor explicitly political and documentary-adjacent, like category (g).

Wild At Heart bears the highest resemblance to category (e). Category (e) films are defined by a "noticeable gap" between the ideological stances of the beginning and end of the film (Comolli and Narboni 817). They first operate within the formal framework of dominant ideology, appealing to it economically and thematically, but slowly deconstruct it by exposing its inherent contradictions and harms (Comolli and Narboni 817). While it can sound theoretical, category (e) applies to many popular contemporary films, such as Boots Riley's *Sorry To Bother You* (2018).

One might be tempted to squeeze *Wild At Heart* into category (e) under the "restrictive" view of Lynch's films as a "product of postmodern times" (Favaro 56). Though most of his films—e.g., *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and *Lost Highway* (1996)—incorporate many features intrinsic to

postmodernism, such as intertextuality and surrealism, Lynch does not participate in postmodernism's ironic political attitude, as can be demonstrated through *Wild At Heart*. Alternatively, the film transforms and transcends category (e), becoming a category (E) film.

I define category (E) as the anti-category (e). It reverses the process: category (E) films are first formally and thematically subversive to dominant ideology but slowly erode their own alternativity to ultimately find and cultivate the positive aspects of dominant ideology. Category (E) can be best understood through its transformation of two criteria of category (e): the ideological gap between the beginning and end, and the process which forms this gap.

3 Category (E): The Gap Between Beginning and End

While category (E) films retain the "noticeable gap ... between the starting point and the finish product" (Comolli and Narboni 817) of category (e) films, they reverse the order of the ideological positions that the beginning and end of the film hold. This is demonstrated by how Elvis songs are utilized in the beginning and finale of *Wild At Heart*.

Category (e) films "seem at first to belong firmly within ideology and to be completely under its sway" (Comolli and Narboni 817), through both their studio-system technique (e.g., the 180-degree system, clear delineations between objectivity and subjectivity, and an unobstructed camera) and its focus on conventional stories and characters. In opposition, category (E) films seem at first to belong outside of the dominant ideology by using subversive filmic technique to depict settings and characters that lie outside of mainstream culture.

Elvis is first featured towards the beginning of the film when Sailor and Lula "go dancing" (*Wild* 00:18:08). This scene is both formally and thematically subversive to dominant ideology. Opening with a barrage of unconventional, rapid shots of Lula and Sailor dancing vigorously, the pair are revealed to be in an underground club among an alternative, punk crowd. Lula wears a revealing black leather outfit while Sailor sports his snakeskin jacket, which he identifies as a symbol of his "individuality" and "belief in personal freedom" (*Wild* 00:19:10). After another man dances with Lula, Sailor supernaturally stops the music and humbles him in an act of vigilante justice. While he participates in heternormative behavior, he does so outside of conventional judicial practices by governmental or religious structures. Sailor then tells the band that they have "a lot of the same power E had", and sings a cover of Elvis Presley's 1970 Las Vegas live performance of "Love Me". A red light floods the scene as he croons to Lula (Figure 1). The fangirls' screams in the background soon devolve into chilling shrieks of horror, adding a not-so-subtle critique of the worship of popular artists. Due to the camera's position at off-putting, low angles, Sailor's fantastical performance is riddled with sexual undertones, reinforced by a fade transition into the next scene where he and Lula are passionately having sex. With Sailor as a warped version of Elvis, the film unmasks the pop-culture relationship between the artist and fan as perverse.

Figure 1: Sailor sings to Lula at the nightclub (00:21:14)

The song choice "Love Me" accompanies this alternative scene well. It is subversive from its conception as a recording of a live performance rather than a studio release. The lyrics describe a dark and immoral relationship as Elvis sings "treat me mean and cruel" and "I would beg and steal" (*Wild* 00:20:30–00:22:36). Sailor inhabits many of the more sexual aspects of Elvis's public persona, as he dances sensually and faces a large crowd as he sings.

This scene is a rejection of dominant ideology. The main characters are sexual, violent, individualistic, and take justice and authority into their own hands instead of relying on an external social or moral force (i.e., religion or government). The cinematographic techniques used are highly unconventional when paired with this thematic rejec-

tion of dominant ideology. This is the ideological and stylistic stance that a category (E) film begins with but a category (e) film would end with.

Category (E)'s reversal of category (e) is further observed in the ending of *Wild of Heart*. In category (e), the ending should "corrode" dominant ideology by exposing it as harmful (Comolli & Narboni 817). The ending of *Wild At Heart*, as a category (E) film, however, delves "into the wreck of a happy ending to satisfy [Lynch's] all-American longing for a return to Edenic purity" (Johnson 10).

Leading up to the finale, Sailor is morally transformed. After being released from prison and meeting his son, Pace (Glenn Walker Harris Jr.), he decides that he cannot settle down. As he walks away, he encounters a cliché gang in an empty, unmarked street who knocks him unconscious (Figure 2). Dreaming, an apparition of Glinda the Good Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) tells him "if you're truly wild at heart, you'll fight for your dreams" (Figure 3). Sailor, convinced by Glinda, wakes up and tells the gang that they taught him an "important lesson" before yelling "LULA!" as romantic orchestral music suddenly booms (*Appendix*, Shots 1–5). Here begins Sailor's return to the nuclear family and dominant ideology. He runs away from the camera down a sun-soaked street as the camera cranes upwards, signalling his rejection of his original path and a transcendence into a higher moral realm (Shot 6).

Figure 2: The gang knocks Sailor out (01:57:07)

Sailor's moral transformation then vanquishes evil. As the film progresses, the characters "split starkly into black and white Manichean camps of goodness and evil" (Johnson 10). There is no longer any moral ambiguity: Sailor and Lula, as the protagonists, are on the side of good, while Marietta and her criminal associates remain on the side of evil. Once Sailor runs away, Marietta melts out of a photograph in a visual parallel to the Wicked Witch (from *The Wizard of Oz*). Only Pace's

Figure 3: Sailor is visited by Glinda (01:57:50)

baby portraits—the embodiment of the good, the child of Sailor and Lula—remain, signalling a moral triumph (Shot 8).

Evil now conquered, not by an individual act of violence but by a transcendent power, Sailor and Lula reunite. In a long take tracking shot, Sailor runs up and over cars accompanied by the triumphant score (Shot 10). The street, conveniently congested with unexplained traffic, enforces that they are no longer in reality, but a metaphorical, idealistic dream world: a utopia. Sailor and Lula reunite in a series of shots/reverse shots between the point of view of Pace watching them and the point of view of Lula, watching his overjoyed reaction (Shots 12–18). Through emphasizing Pace's perspective of total satisfaction with Sailor's return, the film overtly endorses the reformation of the quintessential American nuclear family: man, woman, and child. The cultural conception of the nuclear family is the pinnacle of dominant ideology, a strong social unit that maintains hierarchy and morality.

The sentiment of this ending is captured by the second usage of Elvis in the film. Another cover—this time, uncompromised by suggestions of horror—provides narrative closure. Sailor holds Lula romantically and tells her, "I just met the good witch", signalling that his change in behavior was directly inspired by his interaction with the 'good' (Shot 19). A light guitar strums as Sailor sings Elvis's "Love Me Tender" (1958), which prompts Lula to shriek in excitement as Sailor previously told her he would only sing this song to his wife (Shot 20). In comparison to the previous Elvis song, "Love Me", "Love Me Tender" is highly sentimental with lyrics like "Love me tender, love me sweet" and "All my dreams fulfilled" (Shot 20). Reinforced by its diegetic implication of a marriage proposal, the song expresses passionate commitment rather than lust.

The sun sets as the camera slowly tracks in and around the pair, highlighting the emotionality and fantasy of their unbounded romantic connection, as well as its stability: a perfect happy ending.

In contrast to category (e) films, *Wild At Heart*'s ending embraces dominant ideology as a positive force: an objective 'good' triumphs over evil, the nuclear family unit reunites, and hyper-popular cultural icons, like *The Wizard of Oz* and Elvis, are celebrated and re-entered into legitimate canon. This is solidified by the ending's formal qualities, which feature an unobstructed camera, symmetrical compositions, facial-heavy shots/reverse shots, and unambiguity of the setting's dream-status through its mise-en-scène. Thus, the category (E) film ends with a triumphant return to the conventional.

4 Category (E): The Reparative Process Which Forms This Gap

In category (e) films, an "internal criticism is taking place" which "partially dismantl[es] the system from within" (Comolli & Narboni 817). This approach is similar to that of paranoid reading, while category (E) is similar to that of reparative reading, as outlined by Eve Sedgwick (1997). Analyzing them through Sedgwick's framework helps provide a comprehensive difference between the two categories, their treatment of dominant ideology, and the possible consequences of their method.

Sedgwick describes paranoid reading as the main contemporary academic method. It is anticipatory, reflexive, and mimetic, a theory of negative affects, placing its faith in exposure (130). All of these requirements apply to category (e) films, which seek to pessimistically uncover the hidden violences of dominant ideology in order to dismantle it. In contrast to paranoid readings, Sedgwick proposes reparative readings, which are "additive and accretive" rather than destructive (149). Reparative readings rest on the hinges of hope and contingency, seeking to identify and cultivate the positive affects that come from an object over the negative (146). The practice of reparative reading is nearly identical to the method of category (E), which seeks to embrace the positive aspects of dominant ideology. Sedgwick writes that the practice of reparative reading is "extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture" (150–151). This is what *Wild At Heart*, as a category (E) film, aims to do as it repairs both the original novel and traditionally dominant American culture.

The original novel (*Wild At Heart: The Story of Sailor and Lula* (1989) by Barry Gifford) ends as Sailor "picked up his suitcase, kissed Lula lightly on the lips and walked away" (Gifford 159). Lynch disagreed with this ending, saying "Sailor and Lula had to be together" (Lynch & Rodley 198), demonstrating his insistence on his adaptation to repair the original. This narrative addendum is possible through the campy inclusion of popular culture iconography (*The Wizard of Oz* and Elvis), which "celebrates the collective unconscious that selects its own icons on its own terms from what the power structure of Hollywood proposes" (Nochimson 50). The film repairs the original novel through icons that are purposefully selected for their continued cultural value. Lynch's choices of *The Wizard of Oz* and Elvis are illuminating as they highlight two other aspects of dominant ideology that the film seeks to re-enter into intellectual and artistic conversation that had previously abandoned them: binary morality and the integration of the individual into society.

Operating with a "monological purity that mirrors his simplistic moral vision", Lynch believes good and evil to be objective and rewards and punishes them accordingly (Johnson 7). As Sailor and Lula travel through an American wasteland, morality contains little to no ambiguity. Every evil they encounter—i.e., Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe), Marietta (or, the Wicked Witch), and their own internal struggles—is destroyed by a strong force of good—i.e., Sailor and Lula, Glinda the Good Witch, and love. Evidenced by the binary oppositions of these characters, immorality lies in an American underground scene, like the nightclub at the beginning, with its hyper-sexuality, hyper-individualism, violence, and inauthenticity, while 'the good' resides in a "puritanical" understanding of innocence, traditional American family values, and genuine expressions of love beyond sex (Johnson 13).

This binary view of morality is reinforced by the ending's embrace of "icons of the 1950s and 1960s" such as Elvis, which indicate a sentimentality for "when the cold war demarcations of good and evil were clearly delineated" (Johnson

4). Lula, in her pin-up and mid-20th-century fashion, is a symbol of the "Reaganite myth" of the "story-book picture of glowing nuclear families and abiding values ... a shared trace of innocence" that works as the underpinnings of contemporary American culture and its dominant ideology (Hampton 38). The film breathes new life into the archetype of the house-wife. It suggests that Lula is not oppressed in this role, as a paranoid reading or category (e) film might, but she is far more fulfilled than she was previously in her hyper-individual, hedonistic lifestyle. Further, Lula retains her authenticity and passion, as seen in her sustained, unbridled love of Sailor and rebellious spirit, despite her new position. The reparative reading or category (E) method embraces multiplicity; Lula can simultaneously be a liberated, modern woman and a traditional housewife.

Similarly, Sailor enters into the nuclear family while wearing his snake-skin jacket, visually implying that he can retain his authenticity or perhaps become an even truer version of himself by embracing his role in a conventional, Reagan-era lifestyle. Sailor is ultimately a "faux rebel ... opting for the most conventional existence, one derived ... from a preexisting set of values, and very conventional ones at that" (Gaughran 149). These values are not forced upon Sailor by a violent social force, as a paranoid reading might suggest, but Sailor chooses this lifestyle out of his own will. Category (E) and reparative reading embrace contingency; Sailor has the will and ability to change.

While Sailor and Lula both begin as subversive, hyper-sexual, and criminal characters, the film demonstrates that they are "not morally lost" but "lack the taming whip of social restraint" that would allow them to be "honest, productive citizens" (Johnson 10). For the film, and for category (E) films in general, this "whip" is not a negative or violent influence but a positive, necessary one that generates fulfillment on the individual and societal level based on cohesion and clear delineations of morality.

Wild at Heart, as a Category (E) film, argues that dominant ideology is not composed of corruptions and harms that need to be exposed but it is the very origin of morality and authenticity from which humanity, hope, and happiness can flourish. Category (e) films aim to "crack the film apart at its seams" (Comolli & Narboni 817), but category (E) repairs these cracks with sentimentality, order, and moral certainty. This reparative method draws out positive effects of the dominant ideology that category (e) films would seek to define as inherently negative.

5 Conclusion

Category (E) films and reparative readings practice a method of hope. *Wild At Heart* ultimately expresses hope for dominant ideology and the potential of an American utopia. Category (e) films and paranoid readings, on the other hand, practice a method of pessimism. Sedgwick argues that current academic critics distance themselves from reparative theory because they consider it to be "anti-intellectual" (150). I posit that this manifests in film criticism, as well. It is far easier to analyze a film as critical, especially if it has an ambiguous relationship with social forces, than to make assertions about what it positively offers. In order to combat the overrepresentation of paranoid readings, Sedgwick proposes that we need new "theoretical vocabularies" to motivate and express our reparative tendencies (150). Category (E) can be added to film theory's new reparative language in order to better understand and speak about those films which transcend postmodern pessimism and embrace hope for dominant ideological structures and cultural traditions.

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A Appendix

1. (01:58:47–01:58:49)

2. (01:58:49–01:58:50)

3. (01:58:50–01:58:57)

4. (01:58:57–01:59:00)

5. (01:59:00–1:59:20)

6. (01:59:20–01:59:28)

7. (01:59:28–01:59:33)

8. (01:59:33–01:59:44)

9. (01:59:44–01:59:47)

10. (01:59:47–02:00:08)

11. (02:00:08–02:00:11)

12. (02:00:11–02:00:13)

13. (02:00:13–02:00:18)

14. (02:00:18–02:00:24)

15. (02:00:24–02:00:27)

16. (02:00:27–02:00:33)

17. (02:00:33–02:00:36)

18. (02:00:36–02:00:39)

19. (02:00:39–02:00:53)

20. (02:00:39–02:03:52)

Interdisciplinary

Verses of Resistance

The Lebanese Revolutionary Struggle in the 1980s Through Mahdi Amel's Poetry.

Camille de Ripainsel

Mahdi Amel (center in white) in a "Demonstration against the Israeli invasion". Retrieved from the IISG-Amsterdam. https://hdl.handle.net/10622/ARCH04869.148?locatt=view:manifest

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1 Introduction

In a quieter, perhaps lesser-explored section of the International Institute of Social History Archives (IISG) in Amsterdam lies the only recently made public (2022), yet once private, *Collection of Mahdi Amel Papers*. Remembered not only for his profound intellectual contributions but also for his commitment to the communist movement in Lebanon. Amel's archive offers a unique window into a period marked by civil war, resistance, and anti-imperialist struggles. Despite the collection spanning over decades of his writings, political analyses, and testimonies, one section stood out with unexpected intimacy: Mahdi Amel's poetry.

The carefully chosen words of poems stretch far beyond their literal sense; they reach into the silences, the unspoken, and the deeply human. Poetry captures raw honesty, transforming pain, hope, and uncertainty into verses that resonate long after being written, as they offer a personal and introspective lens through which individuals process meaning and understanding. Yet within the field of political science, poetry is frequently dismissed as too ambiguous or fragile ground for understanding the complexities of political and historical struggles. This paper challenges this intellectual paradigm by exploring the unique space that artistic expression, such as poetry, can occupy in the understanding of politics.

This project thus explores how Mahdi Amel's poetry offers an alternative lens through which to understand Lebanon's revolutionary struggles of the 1980s. Building on the premise that his work operates as a form of political testimony, this research argues that Amel's verses reveal the personal and emotional dimensions of insurgent experience. In doing so, it challenges dominant historiographies and broadens how resistance can be documented, experienced, and interpreted beyond traditional academic narratives.

2 Research Context

2.1 Lebanon in the 1980s

Understanding the period during which the analyzed documents were produced requires an approach that considers both Lebanon's internal dynamics and its regional entanglements during the 1980s. During that time, the Lebanese civil war (1975-90) unfolded, rooted in the country's struggles over national identity and social justice; while also shaped by broader external forces such as the rise of Arab nationalism, political Islam, and crucially, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Collelo, 2003). Lebanon during the period thus became both a battleground and a reflection of regional tensions (Makarem, 2025).

The descent into civil war was nevertheless not through a single rupture, but through the slow accumulation of unresolved sectarian, ideological, and geopolitical tensions that had been building for decades (Stoakes, 1976). At the heart of the conflict laid a fundamental contest over what Lebanon was and who it belonged to. It was a nation fractured along confessional lines, governed by a power-sharing arrangement that had intensified inequalities and resentments (el-Khazen, 2000).

Thus, while the civil war began, various Lebanese factions, among them the Lebanese Communist Party, the Lebanese National Movement, and a constellation of leftist and anti-Zionist militias, seized the moment to wage their own battle against the sectarian status quo. These revolutionaries, the 'Beirut radicals' and ideological insurgents dismissed by history as peripheral figures, were animated in their fight by genuinely human aspirations such as dignity, justice, and resistance (Baun, 2025). Their politics were shaped by a combination of revolutionary socialism, Arab nationalism, and anti-imperialism, and their emotional register moved between solidarity and grief. However, the conflict they were caught in was simultaneously their own and someone else's, as Lebanon became hostage to the conflicts of others, with external struggles projected onto internal divisions until the country's delicately balanced architecture imploded (Tuéni, 1982).Yet, while the conflict is often referred to as a proxy war, this understanding of history risks dismissing the agency of those who fought and died for the country's transformation. Hence, historical narratives have often reduced the war to a collision of outside forces, leaving marginalized the lives, sacrifices, and memories of those who actually lived through it.

2.2 Poetry in the Arab Tradition

Hence, while historiographies were, and remain, shaped by the ideological forces that fueled the conflict, artists and writers started to engage more explicitly with political themes (Al Jazeera, 2023), forced to navigate competing narratives, often under political pressure to conform to the dominant regimes' ideologies (Sune, 2011). In this context, art emerged as a vehicle for expressing lived realities and revealing truths that had been censored, banned, or deliberately silenced. While the knowledge production at the time was thus a source of ongoing tension and contradiction, artistic expression therefore became inherently political, as it offered an alternative form of testimony and memory.

Among these artistic expressions, poetry emerged as one of the most relevant forms of engagement, becoming, beyond art, a political statement. Poetry occupies a unique position, as it is not bound by institutional language, nor does it conform to the standards of academic or state discourse. Instead, it moves between the expressive and the performative, bridging the gap between what is said, what is felt, and what is possible. In this way, poetry resists the totalizing power of state discourse and offers openings for interpreting history's selective memory (Ghazoul, 1986). It challenges assumptions, inviting readers to engage with trauma, memory, and identity in new ways. It reveals how deeply knowledge is shaped by epistemic positionalities, language, upbringing, education, and inherited traditions. Far from undermining truth, poetry elevates the stories that people tell, creating an undisciplined, alternative literature that acknowledges the affective and symbolic dimensions of politics (Delatolla, 2023).

In the Arab tradition, poetry has historically functioned as the primary medium of collective memory, political speech, and moral authority, operating not only as testimony but also as cultural heritage with a powerful rhetorical impact (Mūsawī, 2006). From oral traditions to written anthologies, from calligraphy and music to meditative recitations, poetry has long held various social functions (Keshavarz, 2021). It serves as a space where silenced voices are recognized and shared, where personal pain becomes collective experience. It invites imagination, dissolves barriers, and counters the inequalities that divide people by speaking a universal language of vulnerability that can be felt as much as understood (Bush, 2015). In Lebanon, as across much of the Arab world, poetry has served as a platform for discontent, critique, and resistance. It has offered a means of expressing opposition at times when official narratives seek to separate, silence, or erase. In doing so, it helps foster a new language of revolution, one that breaks with imposed recollection and allows for collective imagination (Challand, 2013).

2.3 Who was Mahdi Amel?

This deep-rooted connection between poetry, politics, and social memory found powerful expression in the work of Mahdi Amel (otherwise known as Hassan Abdullah Hamdan), recognized as one of the most prominent intellectuals and activists of the Lebanese Communist Party and a leading figure in Marxist thought in the Arab world. Deeply shaped by his experience of conflict and imperialism, Amel combined rigorous theory with revolutionary praxis. His writings reflected not only his ideological commitment to the cause, but also the influence of his travels and personal encounters with anti-colonial struggles across the Global South and in France, where he lived for many years (Safieddine, 2021).

Amel's writings reveal the layers of experience that shaped him: from growing up in a politically fractured Lebanon to witnessing national liberation movements and the rise of Third Worldism. Charismatic and deeply committed, Amel was known as both a strict Marxist philosopher and an emotional, humorous character whose intellectual passion was inseparable from his political activism (Younes, 2016).

Central to Amel's thought was the critique of colonial epistemologies and the analysis of how imperialism produced distinct realities, both materially and ideologically. Amel (1989) argued that political identity in Lebanon, especially sectarianism, was not a culturally given tool, but a strategic one, mobilized by the colonial bourgeoisie to consolidate power through violence and division. For him, history is never neutral, but rather only seen and narrated through the lens of dominant classes. Therefore, he aimed for his intellectual work to perform as a revolutionary act, as a

means to expose the ideological mystifications in Lebanon and enable the imagination of emancipatory futures, seeing no separation between the life of the mind and the liberation of the struggle (Makarem, 2025). Mahdi Amel is thus an embodiment of an engaged thinker, one who did not merely interpret Lebanon's struggles but actively sought to transform them.

3 Methodology

The selection of materials for this research was curated by Evelyne Hamdan — Amel's wife, who dedicated herself to preserving his legacy and ensuring his writings endured long after his passing. From the 266 pages of Mahdi Amel's archived poetry, this paper chose to focus not on the published collections, but on a subset of 14 pieces of *"handwritten poems that were found between documents"* (ISSG Archive, File 54). Whether these poems were deemed unfinished, too personal, or simply not intended for publication remains unknown. Yet it is precisely this sense of secrecy that drew attention to them, as they appeared to reveal a potentially more intimate, perhaps kept secret, part of Amel's thought.

The archived poems were found written on loose paper, their Arabic scripts marked by time both physically and literally as the ink faded, the paper aged, and next to each poem appeared a date, which made them suitable for this paper selection. They span from 1984 to 1987, with one exception made: for a single poem (ibid. fol. 16), kept out of sequence for what it reveals, not of a period, but what the poem carries.

Followingly, the translation process of the poems by the author of this paper (*see Appendix-Translation*) from Arabic to English began with digital translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL to create rough drafts. The final versions were then developed in an attempt to preserve the tone and emotional core of each piece. The inherent challenge of translating poetry is the loss of linguistic and poetic texture; it must therefore be recognized and understood that some nuances inevitably remain untranslatable. Thus, to ensure greater fidelity, the translations were reviewed and discussed in a dedicated session with Dr. Mona Hegazy, a lecturer in Arabic language and culture at the University of Amsterdam, whose insights were essential for both linguistic accuracy and depth. Nonetheless, this research acknowledges its positionality and the limitations of interpreting poetry outside its original cultural and linguistic form. Therefore, it approaches the archived materials with care and treats them with historical and contextual sensitivity.

Consequently, rather than seeking definitive meanings, this research focuses on identifying recurring themes, images, and emotional patterns in the selected poems. This paper uses a *critical discourse analysis* as a research method to examine how language constructs meaning and reflects underlying ideological structures (Fairclough, 1995).

Therefore, a thematic analysis was employed to trace recurring linguistic and ideological motifs across the poems, allowing discourses to surface organically from the material itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, these were not treated as self-contained constructs, but understood as inseparable from the social practices and power relations in which they are embedded (Foucault, 1982). Accordingly, the analysis is followed by contextual and historical discussion, grounded in a careful literature review that situates the poems within the broader political and intellectual landscape of their production.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Poetic Thematic Analysis

The poems uncover a fragmented yet persistent thematic structure that conveys a poetics of resistance, mourning, and ideological disillusionment. The recurring themes identified within the texts reflect not only personal grief, but also the impact of the period, blending the private with the political.

Most recurring is the theme of *death*, which is not portrayed as an existential condition but as an active confrontation. Amel portrays ask: "What else but the answer to death" (ISSG Archive, File 54, fol. 25). The poet emphasizes here the refusal to accept passing merely as an inevitable end; instead, it becomes an assertive response, associating mortality with revolutionary agency. This alignment with resistance introduces an agency that both challenges and transcends the constraints of existence. It becomes clear that death,

rather than signaling the end, functions as a necessary call to action, an instrument of defiance, through sacrifice and martyrdom against the prevailing power structures (ibid, fol. 13). Amel's exploration of death is also influenced by the intertwining of personal grief. Indeed, it takes on a deeply personal and intimate dimension in the poems, blurring the lines between personal loss and a broader struggle (ibid, fol. 18–19).

The poet thus suggests that *love* is inseparable from loss, longing, and suffering, collapsing the boundaries between presence and absence. This is evident in how love is used as both an emotional and ideological language. The romantic imagery in Amel's poems serves as a metaphor in which love becomes an act of abandonment, demanding both personal and ideological reparation (ibid, fol. 10–11; 27). For instance, in a poem referencing a figure named "Amina", whose identity remains unspecified (ibid., fols. 5–6), the body and the image of the "shameless virgin" emerge as the symbol of desire and surrender. This simultaneously manifests the seductress and the betrayer in a profound compromise of ideals.

Another critical aspect of Amel's poetics is the *time* and the rejection of its linearity. In contrast to chronological representations, Amel's poems connect disillusionment to relentless temporality, as a "waste", yet inevitable (ibid, fol. 26). The refusal of closure and the embrace of repetition, ambiguity, and unfinished conversations with death, memory, and love emphasize a continuous, unresolved nature of struggle (ibid, fol. 18–19). In his poems, time is cyclical, constantly folding back upon itself, suggesting that resistance is never truly finished, wondering what will remain of it (ibid, fol. 3). This reflects the poet's claim that discourse must resist, avoiding becoming complicit (ibid, fol. 2; 22).

Moreover, recurring imagery through *symbols* such as the "night" (ibid, fol. 2; 10–11; 16; 18–19; 27; 28), or reference to the symbolic of "letters and words" (ibid, fol. 2; 3; 24; 26; 27) serve as key linguistic registers of instability, illusion, and expression. These symbols, beyond their metaphoric function, serve as devices that fragment meaning and expose the relationship between language and reality. The *night* in his poems represents both a literal and metaphorical space of uncertainty and secrecy, a time when clarity is obscured. Meanwhile, the *textual symbolic*, fundamental to communication and thought, becomes both the medium and the limitation of expression, underscoring the inadequacy of language in capturing the scope of his reflection.

The ideological tension throughout Amel's poetry finally finds its sharpest expression in Amel's use of *truth* as both a political and poetic claim (ibid, fol. 16; 26). Truth, in his poems, is not a stable concept but a site of struggle, claimed and contested. The paradox of his poetry is that the revolutionary subject seeks to uncover truth and fights for it, but is nonetheless at the end defeated by it (ibid, fol. 16). It appears less as certainty than as defiance, a declaration made because everything else has proven to be fleeting. It is this gap between conviction and the outcomes observed that makes Amel's poems neither in despair nor in hope but in a persisting resistance. Through this concept, Amel thus adopts a position of one who clearly recognizes the limits of his own words, yet continues to pursue resistance in his claims.

Therefore, through these themes, Amel crafts a discourse that resists closure and certainty. One where death is both a literal and figurative tool of resistance; love oscillates between empowerment and despair; time is a never-ending cycle of political and personal reckoning; and truth emerges not as a stable ground from which to resist, but as something perpetually invoked and out of reach. The poems thus uncover the poet's vulnerability, revealing a thinker who, despite being committed to revolutionary change, is haunted by losses, betrayals, and the scars of conflicting realities.

4.2 Discussion: Poetry as Counter-Archive

The complex interplay of themes in Amel's poetry cannot be fully apprehended without situating them within the broader political, intellectual, and existential conditions of its creation. Amel's poems are a form of committed literature, where words transcend their aesthetic function to take on political communication (Hassan, 2002). The poetry emerges not only as a site of personal expression but as a ground for ideological contestation with the mainstream narratives of the time in which his writing takes place. In the Arab intellectual landscape, particularly during the Lebanese

Civil War and its aftermath, poetry assumes the role of a counter-archive, a space for articulating memory, resistance, and subaltern subjectivity outside the dominant structures of historiographies (Delatolla, 2023).

Understanding the context in which the poems were written, during the 1980s, the Lebanese Communist Party, to which Amel was deeply committed, fought not only against government militias and Israeli incursions but also against the systematic erasure of leftist and anti-imperialist voices (el-Khazen, 2000). The years 1984 to 1987, during which the poems analyzed were composed, coincided with the collapse of the Lebanese left's political project: the Israeli invasion of 1982 devastated allied leftist forces, and by the mid-1980s, sectarian militias had largely undermined the movement (Yacoub, 2014). It is within this context that lines, such as "I am the one who is defeated / even in my letters" (ISSG Archive, File 54, fol. 16), show how the poetry collapses the distinction between Amel's intellect and his revolutionary practice, as writing itself became a form of struggle, also collapsing.

Hence, this skepticism toward language itself (ibid, fol. 2; 3; 16; 24) is simultaneously a field of resistance and a site of inevitable failure (Younes, 2016). The poem from the 7th June 1984 (ibid, fol. 22) enacts this tension formally: "find the beginning and the end / stays a white page." In this poem, while seeking resolution, Amel only finds a space that promises expression but remains blank. In the context of the Lebanese left's political fragmentation following 1982, the absence of a viable revolutionary program was also enacting the erasure of the political subjects who might write upon it, suggesting that their means of expression were being compromised and shaped by systems of power that constrained what could be said, if they were not to be actively confronted.

This reasoning is also found in Amel's broader theoretical contributions, where he argues that anti-colonial discourses reproduced epistemic violence if they failed to interrogate the material conditions of class struggle and the political influence of knowledge production (Amel, 1982). This caution thus reverberates through his poems, where romanticized symbols are meticulously deconstructed to highlight the resulting suffering and pain (ISSG Archive, File 54, fol. 10–11; 26). His poetry, in this sense, performs a dual function: it confesses the wounds of the struggle while simultaneously diagnosing its ideological failures.

Consequently, Amel further insists on the unfinished character of revolutionary struggle and the instability of any discourse that claims *truth* without situating itself within its historical and material determinations. As understood, truth in his poetry is not an absolute but a fractured, contingent construct (ibid, fol. 16; 26), always mediated by the positionality of the speaker. The poem "Pages are in the sand" (ibid, fol. 26), written in Baghdad, exemplifies this: "truth is what stays / but you are a waste of time." The juxtaposition here is structurally ironic: in the same breath, truth is proclaimed enduring, and the person, or perhaps the political project, is declared ephemeral. Written from a city that was itself a site of competing Arab nationalist projects, the poem registers the disillusionment of one who retains ideological conviction while watching it disappear around him. Here, the image of the "sand" is therefore significant: as sand erases and reshapes itself continuously, it offers no stable reflection. It portrays the image of an identity recognizable but always shifting, stressing Amel's awareness that any attempt to articulate truth is already implicated in the structures of power it seeks to dismantle.

This tension between the desire for truth and the impossibility of its full realization is further amplified by the affective registers of Amel's poetry. The devastation, polarization, and fractures inflicted by the tensions in Lebanon are not portrayed as abstract conditions but as intimate experiences. The verses render the collective catastrophe of war through the lens of personal loss (ibid, fol. 18–19; 23), sacrifice (ibid, fol. 3; 13; 25), romantic longing (ibid, fol. 5–6; 10–11; 18–19; 28), and ideological resistance (ibid, fol. 2; 16; 22; 24), bridging the boundaries between the privateness of the poem and the politics of the claim (Bush, 2015). This is particularly evident in the poem "I travel around with her whenever she loves me (ISSG Archive, File 54, fol. 18–19) as through, "she desires death only in my misery / whenever I miss her", the beloved who returns only in Amel suffering, reads not only as a romantic figure but as an analogy to the revolutionary movement itself, a cause that demands total sacrifice while offering no reciprocity.

In essence, Amel's poetry not only reflects a

revolutionary project of resistance but also invites us to question the way through which we understand history: what counts as testimony, whose suffering is archived, and what forms of knowledge only poetry can hold. The poems demand that readers engage not solely with the official recollection of the period but also with the fractured narratives and affective registers of those who endured it. By bridging the poetic and the political, Amel's work challenges us to rethink revolution and resistance as a lived, embodied, and perpetually unfinished process, one that is articulated not only in the available narratives but also in "the noise of silences / the chaos of time" (ISSG Archive, File 54, fol. 2).

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Mahdi Amel's poetry provides not only an engaged lens but an intimate testimony of Lebanon's revolutionary struggles of the 1980s, a radical rethinking of how resistance can be expressed, understood, and remembered. Through his verses, Amel offers alternative narratives that challenge the state's monopolization of memory. His poetry resists reducing revolutionary struggles to simplistic political understanding by capturing the emotional, affective, and often contradictory terrain of hope, disillusionment, and perseverance.

Amel's poetry becomes a form of quiet resistance, standing apart from the loud, public acts of revolution that have characterized the Arab World in the past decades (Gerges, 2014). Despite its seeming fragility, poetry holds the power to disrupt dominant discourses, assert its claims, and create spaces for interpretation. Through this, it establishes an intemporality of the claim, inviting personal meanings that transcend specific moments in time. This enduring quality is perhaps best captured in the words Amel himself left behind: "You are not defeated as long as you resist", a saying that, both during the Arab uprisings and today, continues to resonate as a powerful emblem of defiance, echoed across countless contemporary movements of resistance (Saad, 2024).

Amel's poems are not merely personal and artistic expressions; they are historical documents that capture the persistence of ideology, the resistance to political uncertainties, and the enduring search for truth. Their fractured poetic language mirrors the shattered realities of struggle, yet also leaves behind traces of resilience, defiance, and human dignity, showing that resistance is not always loud. Sometimes, it survives in quiet lines, waiting to be found.

5.1 Recommendations for Future Research

It must be acknowledged that this paper represents only one possible reading of Amel's poems. Poetry, by its very nature, resists closure; it does not yield a single, definitive meaning, nor was it the purpose of this analysis to produce one. The reading offered here is shaped by a particular positioning, and other encounters with these poems, from different moments or sensibilities, could inevitably surface other realities. This is perhaps not incidental but deeply reflective of Amel's own understanding of truth, not as an absolute, but as a fractured, contingent construct, always mediated by the positionality of the narrator. To read his poetry as a final, settled interpretation would thus betray the very instability Amel inscribed into it. The subjective interpretation of poetry is thus not a limitation, as the poems remain alive precisely because their meaning continues to vary across readings and times.

In this sense, this research has only scratched the surface of Amel's poetic archive, and much remains unexplored. Future scholarship could undertake a more comprehensive engagement with the full body of poems he left behind. These texts hold the potential to deepen our understanding of Amel not only as an intellectual and revolutionary but as a witness to the broader landscapes of struggles. The questions remain open, and perhaps that is precisely the point: on how Mahdi Amel's poetry continues to resonate, both in Lebanon and beyond, and what his verses might yet offer to ongoing reflections on memory and resistance.

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A Handwritten Poems Found Between Documents (ISSG, File 54)

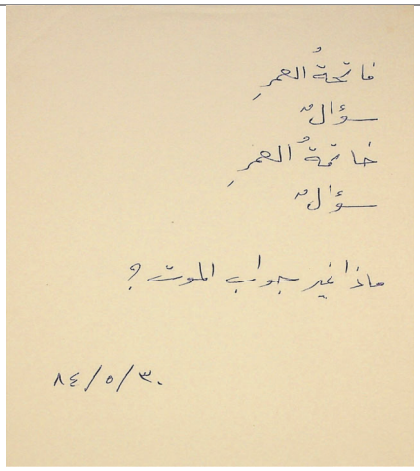
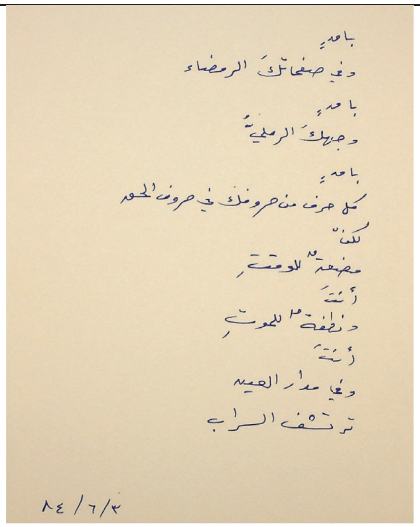
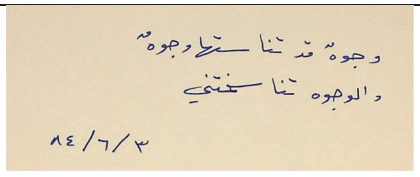
Thematic Overview:

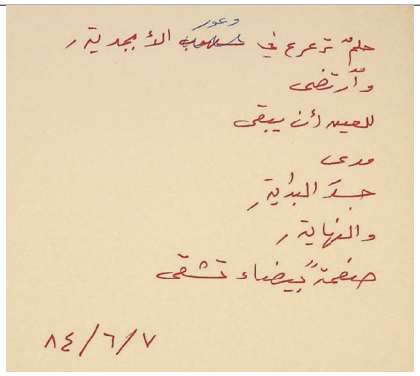
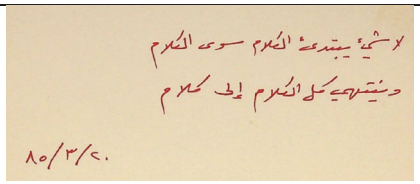
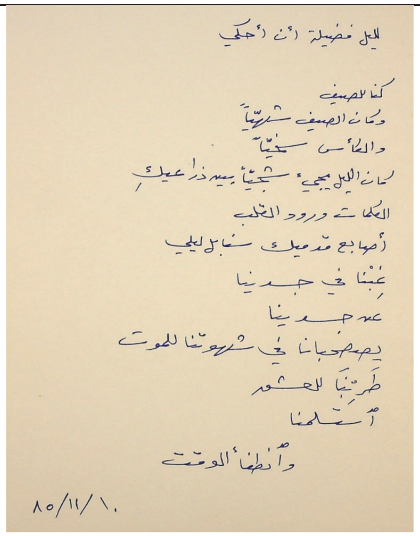
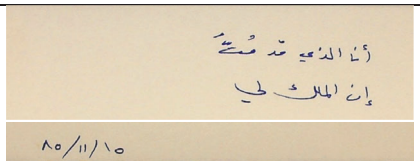
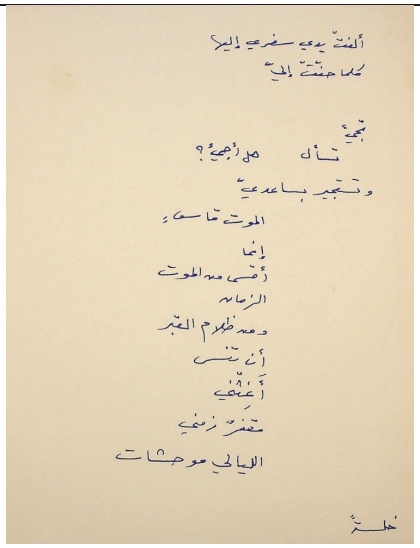
Death — Explored not merely as an existential condition but as an active confrontation deeply entangled with love, time, and suffering.

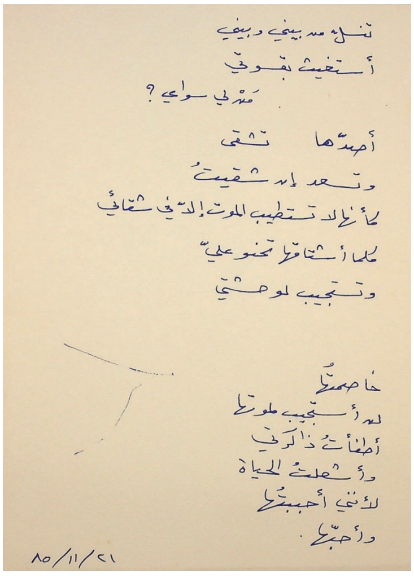
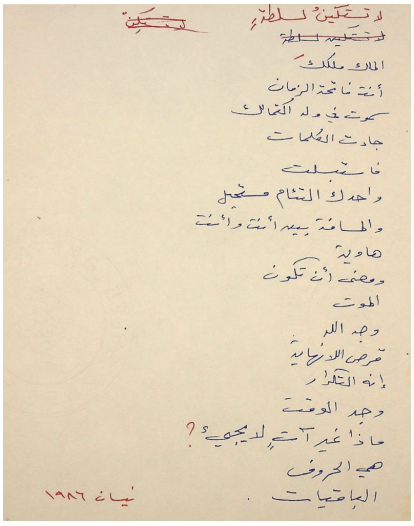
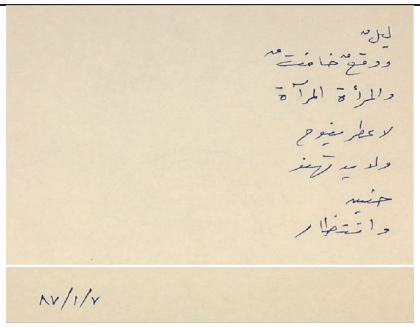
Time — Portrayed as cyclical, rejecting linear temporality.

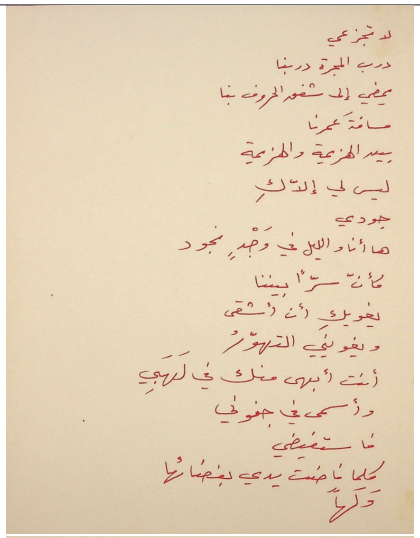
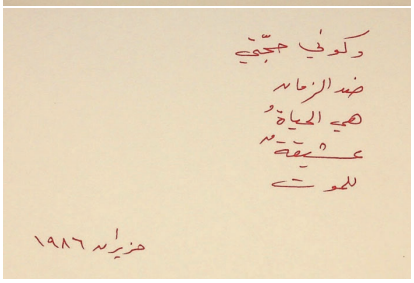
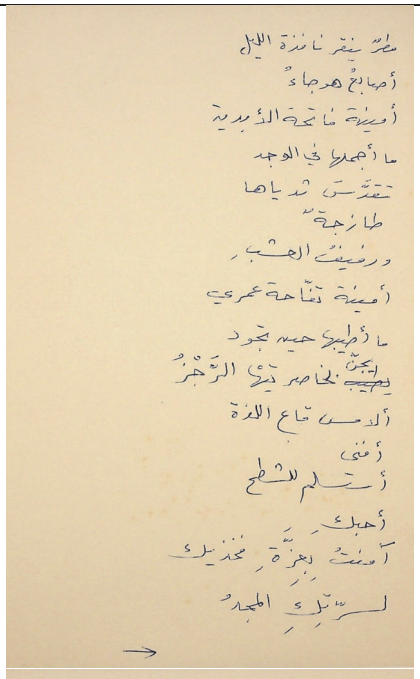
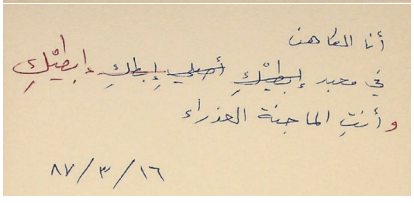
Love — Expressed through absence, loss, longing, and suffering.

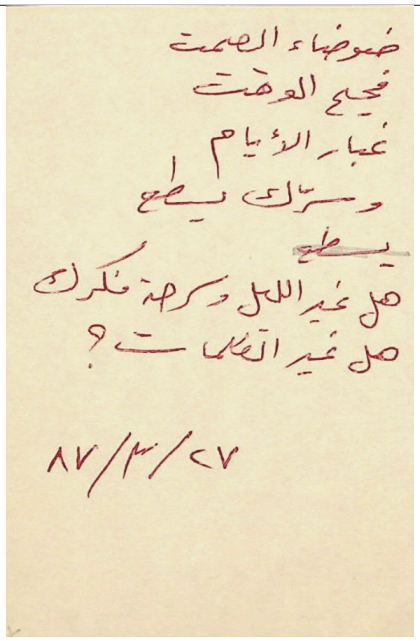
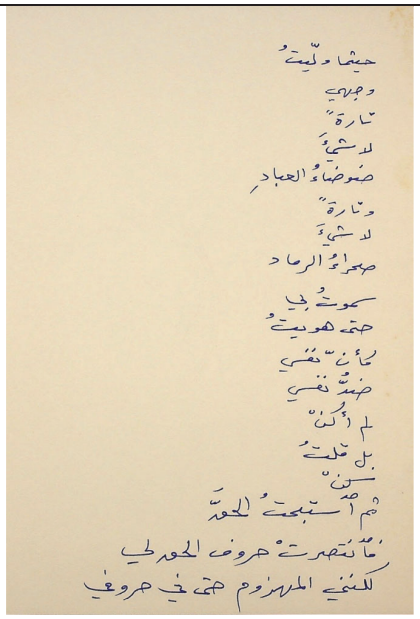
Symbol — Recurring imagery—such as nature, night, letters/words/alphabet—serves as a key symbolic register.

Fol. - Date - (*Title*)	**Poems (Scan-Original)**	**Translation**
Folder 25. 30th May 1984	 خاتمة العمر سؤال خاتمة العمر سؤال ماذا غير جواب الموت ؟ ٨٤/٥/٣٠	The *beginning/opening* of life A question The *conclusion/ending/closing* of life A question What else but the answer to/of death?
Folder 26. 3rd June 1984, Baghdad *Pages are in the sand*	 يا هذه وجهك الرملية يا هذه كل حرف من حروفك في حروف الحب لكنه صفحة للوقت أنت دقيقة للموت أنت وفي مدار العين ترتجف السراب ٨٤/٦/٣	What stays It's your sand face What is left behind Each one of your letters It is a letter of truth Truth is what stays But you are a Time waste of time For death, you are nothing You are the orbit of the eye You are the mirage
Folder 23. 3rd June 1984	 وجوه قد نسيها وجوه والوجوه نسيها ٨٤/٦/٣	Faces that were forgotten by faces The faces that reincarnated

Folder 22. 7th June 1984		A dream that grew up Within the difficulties of the– alphabet Is *destined/wanted to stay/remain* Find the beginning and the end Stays a white page Having a hard time
Folder 24. 20th March 1985		Nothing *creates/starts* speech but– speech All *speech/words* are words
Folder 27. 10th November 1985 *The Night has the virtue of telling*		We were for the summer And the summer is *intense/beautiful* The cup was generous The night came– melodious in your arms The words were the rose of the– heart Your toes are spikes of my night We played with our bodies became ab- sent from our bodies Taking in lust for death We received *adoration/love*– and the time extinguished
Folder 13. 15th November 1985		I am the one who died In the *kingdom/procession*
Folder 18-19. 21st November 1985 *I travel around with her whenever she loves/longs/misses me*		She seeks refuge in my harm I swear by the death of time and the– darkness of the grave That you will forget me My time is desolate The nights are lonely

		She slips *between/from* me I call my strength Who else is there for me? She is happy if I suffer/reject/close She desires death only in my misery Whenever I miss her She longs for me– and respond to my loneliness I will not *respond/talk/argue* about her death I extinguished my memories and– initiated life because I loved her and I love her
Folder 3. April 1986 *Do not yield/submit to authority*		The kingdom is yours You are the opener of time You have died in the making You are the sun of your completeness The words have made it impossible to *find/to fix things/to make it one* and the distance between you and us That is impossible The distance between you and the *abyss/round shape* It's painful to be dead that god has found the loan of infinity It is repetition, the limit of time What is the upcoming that doesn't come? It is the remaining *letters/words*
Folder 28. 7th January 1987		Night A faint footstep The mirror woman *(as)* is forbidden nostalgia longing and waiting

Folder 10-11. June 1986	 	Don't be alarmed The path of the galaxy is ours Our path goes to the letters between us The distance of our lives and– defeatism I have nothing but you *Judy* Here I am And the night is– *emotional/strong/ecstasy–* love secret between us I would be tempted to be miserable and seduced by recklessness You are more beautiful than you in my fire and higher in my frame You will overflow with a dream that my hands have been washed up in her space, and disbelief as be my stone against time Life is a mistress *for/of* death
Folder 5-6. 16th March 1987	 	Amina, the apple of my life Jumping out the window at night I wake up to the good morning of a– hurricane How beautiful she is when in love She sanctifies The opening of forever It becomes the holiness of her breast And the grass is watered Amina, the apple of my life How sweet when she gives– generously She offers her patience with her waist Yesterday was the bottom of pleasure I surrender to pleasure I love you I believe in your glory Glory be to your belly button I'm the priest of the temple of your– underworld And you are the shameless virgin

Folder 2. 27th March 1987		The *sound/noise* of silence The chaos of time The *passage/dust* of days That becomes *brighter/shinier* Is it other than the night? And the *journey/moving* of your mind Is it other than words?
Folder 16.		Wherever I turned my face, There is nothing The noise of the slaves and nothing The desert of ashes dies with me I inevitably *ascended/fall down* as if I myself were against myself But I said “I was not” Then I invoked the truth The letters of truth won But it did not triumph I am the one who is defeated even in my letters